

Proposal

Research Proposal

Title:

The effects of social media exposure on civic engagement of small liberal arts college (SLAC) students.

Abstract/ Summary:

Policy importance is heightened when bans on social media platforms such as TikTok have been discussed for years, and social media is increasingly viewed negatively in the media and policy spheres. Scholarly views about young adults' civic engagement are quite mixed. Some scholars argue that young people are politically apathetic and ignore their duty to participate in a democratic society (e.g., Loader, 2007), whereas other researchers highlight that digital media use encourages young adults to engage in civic activities (Loader et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2009). The literature suggests that many young adults find it difficult to directly participate in local community activities, but their interconnected relationships through digital media, especially social media, may encourage them to create opportunities for one another to engage in community activities. To build on this line of research, this study focuses on the relationship between college students' social media use and their civic engagement.

P.S. I love Robert Putman and how this research parallels his "Bowling Alone" theory

Research Question:

At what point does increased social media exposure among college students (SLACs) shift from being associated with higher civic engagement to lower civic engagement?

Hypothesis:

Social media exposure increases civic engagement up to a certain point, after which it shows diminishing returns. Social media exposure increases awareness of issues, which in turn increases civic engagement to some extent. However, once SLAC students enter what many would call the 'chronically online' threshold of social media use, civic engagement declines.

No hypothesis is provided for those who do not use social media.

How to get data:

- Data will be collected by distributing a survey to professors at various small liberal arts colleges and across disciplines. The survey will be made so that any college student can take it. A 'weed out question' will be asked at the beginning to ensure that the data coded and used in later regressions are limited to students who attend SLACs.
- The survey will begin with a series of demographic questions, including, but not limited to, race, sexuality, gender, age, socioeconomic status, major, and political leanings. These questions will be asked with dropdown options and an "other" option, allowing students to expand if their preferred answer is not included in the dropdown. A short-answer question will be allowed for participants to list their school. I am also planning to code and run regressions based on demographic identities (probably not all, but the ones that show high variation across groups).
- Quantitative data will be collected on the frequency of social media exposure and civic engagement over the past 6 months to ensure recent, relevant data.
- Participants will also be asked whether they were able to vote in their most recent election. If so, they will be asked whether they voted in the election and how politically engaged they were (the type of engagement and frequency). The type of engagement

will be offered via a dropdown menu (for example: political campaigning, political phone banking, canvassing), with a similar “other” option that allows a short answer. The frequency of civic engagement surrounding the election will also be measured.

- **Form of questions:**

- On a five-point scale from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“very frequently”), survey participants were asked to report their frequency of smartphone use for social media use in their everyday life with the following three items: “Use social media services such as defined above” (a proper definition as well as examples will be given), “Post information to social media,” “Update my social media content (e.g. feeds and tweets) as it happens.” Additionally, participants will be asked, “On an average day, how many hours do you spend on social media?” Given options will be “less than an hour a day,” “1-2 hours a day,” “2-3 hour a day,” so on and so fourth (the last question will probably be “more than 8 hours a day” (becuase if they’re spending more than that, they need help, not more time online taking my survey)).
 - These types of data will be used to quantify social media exposure.
- Additionally type of content engaged with on social media will be examined. A dropdown option will be provided to ask which kind of media participants engage with. Example, “skits,” “lifestyle content,” “fandom content,” “social justice content,” “political,” “other,” etc.
 - An additional question will be asked about how much time is spent engaging with “social justice” and “political” content
 - Given options will be “less than an hour a day,” “1-2 hours a week,” “2-3 hours a week,” etc.
- Civic engagement is conceptualized as participation in collective behavior and/or organized voluntary activity aimed at resolving community problems or helping other community members (Zukin et al., 2006) (in addition to the aforementioned

election engagement). Civic engagement in this study refers to the extent to which participants engage in a variety of civic activities.

- Survey respondents will be asked how often they have engaged in the following activities during the past 6 months by selecting a number from 1 to 4 (1 = “never”, 2 = “1–2 times”, 3 = “3–4 times”, 4 = “more than 5 times”): “doing voluntary work for a community or school activity,” “raising money for charity,” “attending a community meeting,” “attending a protest,” “working on a community project,” “voluntary work for environmental or other social issues,” “voluntary work for helping victims of disasters,” “donating money to charity,” “creating or signing petitions,” “contacting elected officials,” “mentoring youth” “reposted a fundraiser link”
- Short essay questions to get information for the qualitative part of the research. This question will ask which organizations or engagements the participant has been involved in in the past 6 months.

Control variables

- As previous literature has shown that demographic variables, news media use, and interest in local issues are associated with civic engagement (Xenos and Moy, 2007), these variables were measured and controlled in the analysis. In addition, the control variable news consumption will be measured on a seven-point **Likert scale** (1 = “never” to 7 = “everyday”) for how often participants watch, read, or listen to the following news media: national TV, radio, newspaper online/print, local TV, radio, and newspaper online/print. Furthermore, respondents' interest in local issues will be measured by asking them to report on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”) to what

extent they agree or disagree with the following two statements: “I am interested in (a) community issues and (b) local politics.”

Methodology

- Regression analysis will be run first to examine social media exposure vs. civic engagement. This is the primary focus of this paper. Stata will be used to run these regressions.
- Second, regression analysis will be conducted using demographic data to identify groups that differ substantially from the remainder of the sample.
- Data will be weighted if needed based on participants' majors, if the majors of my collected sample are not very representative of the larger institutions.
 - I would not be surprised if more Political Science students participated in this survey and wanted to reduce bias in the results.

Timeline:

- End of Spring Break: Submit to IRB
- End of May (hopefully sooner, depending on when the survey is approved by IRB): send out survey to Colgate students and maybe other SLACs
- End of June: close survey
- Beginning of July: regressions on quantitative data
- End of July: format qualitative data to reduce human bias
- End of July: code qualitative data to reach additional conclusions
- Beginning of August: Complete written portion of research

Timeline may be moved forward depending on how long the IRB takes to approve the survey portion

Further Notes:

- If the allotted time isn't enough to satisfy my curiosity, I'll expand it into a senior thesis.
- I might want to conduct a comparative analysis of regional differences, but that may require more data than I can analyze within this time frame.

Measures and Data Collection

However, scholarly views about young adults' civic engagement are quite mixed. Some scholars argue that young people are politically apathetic and ignore their duty to participate in democratic society (e.g. Loader, 2007), whereas other researchers highlight that the use of digital media encourages young adults to engage in civic activities (Loader *et al.*, 2014; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009). The literature suggests that it is not easy for many young adults to directly participate in various local community activities, but their interconnected relationships via communication on digital media platforms, especially social media, may encourage them to provide opportunities for each other to engage in activities for the community. To build on this line of research, this study focuses on the relationship between young adults' digital media use and their civic engagement.

Possible methodology

Data were collected in an online survey at a public research university in a southeastern state of the United States. Prior to the data collection, the current study was approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB). The data collection was conducted through an online survey that was **posted in the university's participation pool system**. The survey respondents were undergraduate students who voluntarily participated in the survey. Undergraduate students who completed the survey received course extra credit. Among a total of 580 respondents, 76.4% were female ($n = 443$) and 23.6% were male ($n = 137$). The average age of the participants was 19.5 years ($SD = 1.78$).

Smartphone use for social media

We adopt the measurement items used in the literature (Chen, 2020; Fang, 2017; Sadeh *et al.*, 2009) and asked how frequently respondents use their smartphones to use social media platforms. On a five-point scale from 1 ("never") to 5 ("very frequently"), survey participants were asked to report their frequency of smartphone use for social media use in their everyday life with the following three items: "Use social media services such as Facebook and Twitter," "Post information to social media using mobile phone," "Update my social media content (e.g. feeds and tweets) as it happens via mobile phone." The three items formed a single factor on factor analysis. The items were averaged to create an index of smartphone use for social media (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.85$).

Social capital

To generate this variable, we adopted four items from prior measurement scales (Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009): “I feel intimate in the community,” “I share community values,” “I talk about community problems,” “I feel connected in this community.” All items were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The four items were combined as a single factor and averaged to formulate an index of social capital (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89, $M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.83$).

Civic engagement

Civic engagement is conceptualized as participation in **non-political collective behavior and/or organized voluntary activity aimed at resolving community problems or helping other community members** (Zukin *et al.*, 2006). We operationalized civic engagement in this study as the degree to which extent young adults engage in a variety of civic activities for their community. Survey respondents were asked how often they have engaged in the following activities during the **past 6 months** by selecting a number from 1 to 4 (1 = “never”, 2 = “1–2 times”, 3 = “3–4 times”, 4 = “more than 5 times”): “doing voluntary work for a community or school activity,” “raising money for charity,” “attending a community or neighborhood meeting,” “purchasing products for the social values advocated by the company,” “working on a community project,” “voluntary work for environmental or other social issues,” “voluntary work for helping victims of natural disasters (e.g. tornado, fire, etc.),” “donating money for victims of natural disasters.” We conducted a factor analysis, and these eight items were combined into a single factor and were averaged to create an index of civic engagement (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87, $M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.65$).

Control variables

As previous literature has shown that demographic variables, news media use and interest in local issues are associated with civic engagement (Xenos and Moy, 2007), these variables were measured and controlled in the analysis. Among 580 survey respondents, the percentage of female students (76.4%) was relatively higher than male (23.6%), and the average of age was 19.50 ($SD = 1.78$). In addition, the control variable news consumption was measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = “never” to 7 = “everyday”) for how often college students watch, read, or listen the following news media: national TV, radio, newspaper online/print, local TV, radio and newspaper online/print. The average score of news consumption was 2.60 ($SD = 0.95$). Furthermore, respondents' interest in local issues was measured by asking them to report on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”) to what extent they agree or disagree with the following two statements: “I am interested in

(a) community issues and (b) local politics.” The two items were averaged to create an index of interest in local issues ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.90$).

Limitations of the methodology

- Only college students
- Only a small age demographic

Literature Review

Kim, Y., & Chen, H.-T. (2015). Discussion Network Heterogeneity Matters: Examining a Moderated Mediation Model of Social Media Use and Civic Engagement. *International Journal of Communication (Online)*, 2344–2366.

- Civic participation plays a significant role in the functioning of a democratic society (Putnam, 2000; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). It includes voluntary activities related to social, community, or nonpolitical issues, such as raising money for charity, attending neighborhood meetings, and working for nonpolitical groups (Verba et al., 1995). Scholars have debated whether the Internet encourages or discourages participation in civic activities. Some researchers argue that more time spent online leads to less time spent participating in civic causes (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001) and that those who use the Internet as another platform for engagement are those who are already interested in politics (Norris, 2001). However, others contend that the Internet can mobilize inactive people to engage in civic and political activities. For example, online communication can enhance community engagement (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). As a result, with the increasing popularity of social media, the relationship between social media use and citizens' participatory behaviors has received a great deal of attention.
- A positive link between social media use (e.g., blogs, Facebook, and Twitter) and citizens' participatory behaviors has been consistently found in previous studies (e.g., Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013; Macafee & Simone, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The literature has demonstrated that overall use of social media platforms has a positive influence on civic and political participation (Kim et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2012). This is because social media provide people with news and mobilizing information and because users are able to exchange their opinions with many others, which may motivate them to engage in public activities.
- Acknowledging possible explanations for that relationship (e.g., social media as an information source), another line of research has started to map out how and why overall social media use can be associated with citizen participation by focusing on specific types of social media usages and analyzing mediating mechanisms. Noting the important role of informational media use in informing and mobilizing citizens, recent literature has focused on the effects of social media use for news and information and provided evidence that informational social media use has a significant and positive impact on individuals' civic participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012). Because individuals' networks or connections on social media are based on interpersonal relationships, people may be more interested in news and information, including public affairs and community events, that their friends share and post through social media (Kim et al., 2013) and thus be motivated to attend community events or civic activities.

Kim, Y., & Kim, B. (2022). Effects of young adults' smartphone use for social media on communication network heterogeneity, social capital and civic engagement. *Online Information Review*, 46(3), 616–638. <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-08-2020-0332>

Lee, S. (2019). Organizational Engagement, Social Media Use, and Protest Participation.

The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Civic and Political Studies, 14(1), 21–31.

<https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-0071/CGP/v14i01/21-31>

- [In South Korea](#)

Youth civic engagement through digital advocacy on social media: Practical implications for

platforms, educators and policymakers. (2024). *Annals in Social Responsibility*, 10(2),

32–34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ASR-08-2024-0074>

- Social media engagement is rapidly becoming an essential vehicle to become aware of critical underlying issues and become part of creating a solution. A more informed, politically engaged, and morally responsible generation has emerged as the presence of social media has only continued to grow. Youth feel they can have a voice on social media, and have created concrete change and accountability using that voice. While youth face some obstacles in expressing these opinions, overall significant presence and change has occurred thanks to these platforms.

Random notes

Notes:

Technology and political engagement

- Social media
- FaceBook
 - The merging of FB and Instagram
 - Ex, people on facebook can see
- In relation to Robert Putnam's theory on social capital
- In relation to Marc Dunklemen's theory on the "Vanishing Neighbor."
 - If the vanishing neighborhood is lessening familiar ties with those around us, social media is acting as a push back force
 - Example: Nicky going to protest (that he saw on IG)
 - Example: the "No Kings" decentralized protests having such a wide reach
 - These protests would not have the reach that they did/do without the social media platform
- Maybe make it protest-specific? More tangible
 - Volunteer hours
 - Campaign hours
 - Community engagement
 - Phone banking
 - How many protests have you attended in the past... based on information you found on social media
 - Might be autocorrelation because we're in a political volatile time
- Other Q:
 - Major
 - STEM or not
 - Student Athlete or not
 - Income
 - Use a check box for which social media these people use
 - Ex. Instagram, TikTok, FaceBook, LinkedIn, X
 - Followup
 - Do you post on x in the past 6 months
 - What kind of posts do you comment on most?
 - Person, getting people out to vote, campaigning
 - What do you do for civic engagement
 - What do you do on social media
 - Reweight results so it matches your population
 - IF we have TOO MANY polsc or ECON majors
 - Based on % of school population
 - Political Leaning

How to send out:

- Send to the class Google group
- Send out in GroupMe

- WONT BE RANDOM

How am I going to get data?

Do a lit review

See the gap in the data

- New demographic?

Will need IRB approval

- Do i only want Colgate Students
- Can group it based on type of shool
 - Public
 - Private
 - Private liberal arts
 - Etc

Group

- Based on income
- On major
 - Drop down
 - Maybe just list common majors
 - Give option to list second major
 - Other option