The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

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presented by

Youth &
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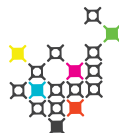
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Paper under review

ABSTRACT //

Most existing scholarship that measures the impact of the Internet on civic or political engagement focuses on political uses of new media. Drawing on two large panel studies, we find that youth engagement in nonpolitical online participatory cultures may serve as a gateway to participation in important aspects of civic and political life, including volunteering, community problem-solving, protest activities, and political voice. These relationships remain statistically significant for both datasets, even with controls for prior levels of civic and political participation and a full range of demographic variables. While politically driven online participation is clearly worthy of attention, these findings indicate that it should not be seen as the only relevant bridge from online activity to civic and political engagement.

Keywords: Participatory Culture, Youth Civic Engagement, New Media, Digital Media, Political Engagement, Interest-driven Online Participation

The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

Is the Internet good for democracy? This has proven to be a challenging question to answer, given that online engagement and democratic practices take a wide variety of forms. Scholars have examined the influence of Internet access, as well as more explicitly political uses such as accessing political information online (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Much of this research also examines how civic and political online engagement can influence offline behaviors such as voting or engagement with community issues (Bimber, 2003; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

Much less is known about the influence of nonpolitical online engagement on democratic practices. Several qualitative studies indicate that the online participatory cultures that form around shared interests in hobbies, games, and varied aspects of popular culture may develop an individual's civic skills, sense of agency, social networks, and appreciation of desirable norms for social interaction (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2007). Furthermore, the online discussion that takes place in relation to these activities may also provide unintended exposure to political discussions (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Our study is the first broad-based quantitative panel study of the influence of nonpolitical online participatory cultures on youth civic and political participation. To measure this relationship, we use two data sets: a two-wave, purposive panel study of youth transitioning from high school to

early adulthood and a nationally representative panel study of 18–35-year-olds. We focus on whether interest-driven and friendship-driven nonpolitical online participation, as well as politically driven activity, foster online and offline civic and political engagement.

Three Forms of Online Participatory Culture

In online participatory cultures, participants create and share with others; experienced participants help less experienced ones acquire knowledge and solve problems; participants may also develop a sense of connection with one another and come to understand functional community norms (Jenkins et al., 2007). Individuals blog, start or join groups, participate in networks, share links, and interact regularly through new media.

We examine three domains of online participatory culture: interest-driven, friendship-driven, and politically driven. Our interest in this topic stems from qualitative studies that highlight ways membership in participatory cultures can promote civic and political engagement.   These cultures have been found to provide young people with opportunities to discuss political topics, to learn about different societal issues, values, and life experiences, and to develop relevant skills and appreciation of norms for group interaction that may facilitate participation in civic and political life (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2007). Indeed, some forms of online participatory culture may function as extracurricular activities do (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Smith, 1999) and enhance social capital and democratic engagement.

Politically driven online participation. Online civic and political participation (hereafter, *politically driven participation*) occupies a complex position within our conceptual framework. On one hand, politically driven participation (discussing civic or political issues, identifying and producing information about issues, and communicating with others online about issues) is a prominent form of political engagement. For this reason, we view politically driven participation as an outcome or dependent variable. At the same time, one may view politically driven participation as an independent variable that may influence offline civic and political behavior. Evidence suggests that seeking political information through online media outlets is related to increased political activism (Mossberger et al., 2008; Shah et al., 2005; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). Additionally, new digital media— especially networked digital media, such as instant messaging, blogs, and social networking websites—have emerged as tools for political discussion and expression (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

Interest-driven online participation. While much scholarship has examined politically driven participation, little has focused on the civic and political significance of nonpolitical, interest-driven online participation (hereafter, *interest-driven participation*). These online activities enable youth to pursue interests in hobbies, popular culture, new technology, games, and sports (Ito et al., 2009). Rather than passively consuming content, participants produce online materials, generate ideas, provide feedback, and participate in online communities. Because such online activities are driven by specialized interests, participants tend to interact with a network of

geographically dispersed people that goes beyond the immediate circle of their local communities (Ito et al., 2009).

In framing the value of such opportunities, it is worth considering research on youth extracurricular activities. Scholars find that these offline interest-driven activities provide opportunities to develop civic skills and productive norms of behavior within organizations, agency, and social networks. Panel studies indicate that extracurricular activities foster social capital and later civic and political engagement (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Smith, 1999).

Interest-driven participation may well develop civically relevant skills, norms, and networks in a similar way. Young people are journaling about topics of local concern, organizing gaming clans, and remixing and sharing music online. Free software makes it easier than ever for youth to practice video production, share their creations with others, and receive feedback from other community members; this interaction helps to improve their technical skills as well as their communication skills. It is also argued that these participatory cultures aid in developing youth understandings of norms of community membership and an appreciation of the possibilities and rewards of collective undertakings (Jenkins et al., 2007). Moreover, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that 53% of adults encounter political topics when engaged in online chat rooms and message boards related to nonpolitical leisure activities that include hobbies and fan sites. If interest-driven participation among youth also leads to unintended exposure to political topics, it may well activate youth involvement. In summary, such activities may function like Robert Putnam's (2000) voluntary associations.

Though not focused on politics, these activities can result in bonding and bridging relationships, skills, agency, and valuable norms for group action which in turn can facilitate other kinds of public participation.

Although we hypothesize that interest-driven participation promotes civic and political engagement, a counterhypothesis also exists. Several studies show that the more one uses the Internet, the less connected one will be in face-to-face communities (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001). Most of this work examines time spent online as the independent variable, and suggests that time spent online displaces time spent in face-to-face interaction.

Friendship-driven online participation. Friendship-driven online participation (hereafter, *friendship-driven participation*) is the most common form of online participation among youth (Ito et al., 2009). It centers on day-to-day interactions with peers who youth see at school, in their neighborhood, or through participation in various clubs, groups, and organizations. Such online activity often takes place through social media such as MySpace and Facebook. It is unclear whether friendship-driven participation will promote civic or political engagement. Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000), for example, found that personal conversations in public and private spaces often contain civic and political content. Likewise, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that online socializing and flirting in chat rooms and message boards do as well. Such exposure could activate civic and political engagement. On the other hand, since civic and political topics are not the focus of most socializing among youth, it may be that this friendship-driven participation is a distraction or becomes an alternative to civic and political engagement.

Why Focus on Youth?

We focus on youth and young adults (ages 18–35) for several reasons. First, youth and young adults are heavy users and early adopters of new media (Krueger, 2002; Mossberger et al., 2008). They also frequently embrace the kind of participatory culture that can be facilitated by new media. For example, a survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 64% of teenage Internet users engage in online content creation and that 28% have created an online journal or blog (Lenhart et al., 2007). Moreover, when it comes to Internet use, there is a generational divide in many respects. While 37% of those aged 18–24 obtained campaign information from social networking sites in 2008 (more than did so from newspapers), only 4% aged 30–39 did so. For older citizens, these numbers drop further (Kohut, 2008). Thus, studying youth and young adult practices is a logical starting-point from which to assess the civic and political significance of new media and the nature of future engagement in this fast-changing domain. This focus also makes sense because adolescence and early adulthood are times of significant civic and political identity development, and this development has been shown to have lasting effects (Erikson, 1968; Smith, 1999; Jennings & Niemi, 1981).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS //

As a first step, we examine whether politically driven, interest-driven, and friendship-driven online participation are distinct dimensions of online activity. We then examine whether these three forms of online participation promote varied forms of civic and political participation. We are especially

interested in how interest-driven and friendship-driven online participation compare with more commonly studied, politically driven online participation.

METHOD //

Data. To answer our research questions, we draw on two sets of panel data collected around the 2008 presidential election.

Panel Survey 1: California Civic Survey (CCS). In the springs of 2005, 2006, and 2007, we surveyed 5,505 junior- and senior-level high school students. This was a cross-sectional survey and was not initially designed as a panel study. Students in this sample came from 21 high schools, each from a different school district in California. The schools were purposively selected to ensure a diverse range of demographic and academic characteristics. The sample includes schools that enroll mostly white students (19.0%), mostly students of color (42.9%), and schools that are racially mixed (38.1%). The percentages of students receiving a free or reduced-price lunch ranged from 0% to 92%. To minimize selection bias, we surveyed entire classes of juniors and seniors.

To hold open the possibility of a follow-up survey, in our initial survey we asked about students' willingness to be contacted in the future, to which 23.8% consented (n = 1,305). Our follow-up survey was conducted after the 2008 election (December 2008–March 2009) and was administered to a total of 435 respondents. This represents a panel retention rate of 33.3% against the baseline sample, and 7.9% against the initial pool of survey respondents.

We compared the initial survey responses of those who took the follow-up survey (n = 435) with those who did not (n = 5,070). Those who took the

follow-up survey were more likely to be female (61% vs. 50%), have higher

GPAs (M = 3.35 vs. M = 3.15), and to be more politically interested (M = 3.8 vs.

M = 3.4) than those who did not. Significantly, those who took the follow-up

survey were not different in terms of their new media practices compared to

those who did not. While, with the proper controls, we see no reason to

believe that the differences between our Wave 1 and Wave 2 samples would

bias the observed relationships between online participation and political

engagement, as a safeguard, we are fortunate to be able to conduct similar

analysis on a nationally representative data set, described below.

Panel Survey 2: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic

Engagement Project. The second data set was collected as part of the

Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (MCPCE) Project at

the University of Chicago. This nationally representative sample was collected

in three waves by Knowledge Networks using an online computer

methodology. We analyzed the first wave (n = 3,181), which was collected just

prior to the 2008 election, and the third wave (n = 1,938), which was collected

one year later. Because we are primarily interested in new media

participation among young adults, we limited our analysis to the panel

respondents ages 18–35 (n = 586).

That the MCPCE Project is a nationally representative survey—including

an oversampling of people between the ages of 18 and 35 and an oversample

of African American, Latino, and Asian respondents—makes it a particularly

valuable compliment to the CCS.[1] This sample provides a valuable means of

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[1] Because of this oversampling, we weighted the sample in the subsequent analysis on the basis of the sample weights adjusting gender, race, education, and family income.

assessing the generalizability and consistency of our findings from the California sample. We constructed our measures from these two sets of panel data.

MEASUREMENT //

Three groups of variables were created from the two sets of panel data: (a) measures of new media participation; (b) indicators of civic and political engagement (outcome variables); and (c) control variables (see Table 1). Due to space constraints, we provide only the descriptive statistics of variables from the CCS. Interested readers can contact the authors for similar information on the MCPCE Project.

New Media Participation. Indicators from the CCS of politically driven, interest-driven, and friendship-driven online participation are listed in Table 2. The MCPCE was different in two respects. First, due to space constraints, we were not able to assess friendship-driven participation on the MCPCE. Second, politically driven participation was assessed by three yes/no items asking whether the respondents had: (a) written or forwarded an e-mail, signed an e-mail petition, or posted a comment to a blog about a political issue, candidate, elected official, or political party; (b) written a blog about a political issue, candidate, elected official, or political party; and (c) e-mailed the editor of a newspaper, a television station, magazine, or website manager about a political issue, candidate, political party, or elected official. We counted the number of "yes" responses to these three questions to construct a summary measure of politically driven participation (Kuder-Richardson formula 20 [KR-20] = .51).

Since interest-driven, politically driven, and friendship-driven participation had not been measured simultaneously in any prior surveys, we used factor analytic techniques to test whether these three forms of online participation represent distinct factors. Following conventional Eigen value-based criteria in exploratory factor analysis, we extracted factors whose Eigen values are greater than one. Using principle component factor estimation, we found that three factors had Eigen values greater than one and that the fourth and all subsequent factors accounted for a relatively small amount of variance. Thus, we extracted three factors using a principal axis factoring estimation and rotated this solution using a Promax (oblique) rotation procedure for clearer interpretation. Table 2 shows the factor pattern matrix from this rotated solution. Factor loadings were sorted by their size to facilitate differentiation between variables. The factor loadings indicate the presence of three distinct factors. These three factors together explained 64.4% of the item variance. Similarly, factor analysis of the items in online participation on the MCPCE Project formed two distinct factors that, together, explained 54.1% of the variance.

Outcome Variables. We examined civic, political, and expressive forms of participation to capture the multiple and overlapping ways youth engage with public issues. Attending to a broad range of outcomes is especially important in light of evidence that young people—and perhaps young people of color in particular—are drawn to community-based and -engaged forms of participation more than to participation in traditional civic and political life (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Our indicators were slightly modified versions of those used in prior research (e.g., Zukin,

Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Specifically, we included a measure of civic participation and two measures of electoral engagement (i.e., campaign participation and voting). In addition, we used one measure of action and expression that is political, but not part of the electoral process.

Civic participation was measured on the CCS by asking how often respondents had: (a) volunteered in their community; (b) raised money for a charitable cause; and (c) worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community in which they live. All the three items were administered at T2 (α = .73). We administered the first two items at T1 (inter-item r = .47). The MCPCE Project asked whether respondents had volunteered and if they had worked with community members on a community issue or problem (inter-item r = .44).

Political action and expression assessed how often respondents participated in: (a) activities aimed at changing a policy or law at a local or national level; (b) a peaceful protest, march, or demonstration; and (c) a poetry slam, youth forum, musical performance, or other event where young people express their political views (α = .66 for T1; α = .69 for T2). This outcome was not assessed on the MCPCE Project.

Campaign participation was measured at T2 on the CCS by asking how frequently respondents: (a) tried to persuade anybody to vote for or against one of the parties or candidates; (b) wore buttons, used bumper stickers, or placed signs in front of their house during the campaign; and (c) contributed money to a candidate, political party, or organization that supported a candidate (α = .61). Campaign participation was measured by three items on the MCPCE Project, including: (a) contributing money for a candidate, political

party, or cause; (b) volunteering for a party, cause, or elected official; and (c) going to political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a particular candidate, political party, or elected official (KR-20 = .78).

Voting was assessed by asking if respondents voted in the 2008 presidential election. At T1, when most of our respondents were not eligible to vote, we used intention to vote as a surrogate measure. In a separate study (self-identification, 2010), we found that an individual's intention to vote, as expressed when a high school junior or senior, is a strong predictor of voting once that individual turns 18. Since the third wave of the MCPCE survey was given about a year after the election, we could not assess the impact of online participation on voting.

Control Variables. We employed extensive controls to isolate the effects stemming from factors that have previously been found to relate to our outcome variables. These included sex, ethnic identity, and race (see Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001; Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007), as well as parental political activity and political discussion with youth (see Jennings & Stoker, 2009; Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977; Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003). The parental involvement measure reflected the level of civic and political talk occurring at home and the level of parents' involvement in the community (inter-item r = .45).

In the CCS, we also controlled for respondents' GPAs in high school and for whether they were attending four-year colleges, since educational attainment is strongly related to voting, group membership, and civic and political involvement. The MCPCE Project asked about the highest degree

received. Finally, in both surveys we assessed *political ideology* ranging from "very liberal" (1) to "very conservative" (5). In the CCS, we also created a measure indicating the *strength of political ideology*—we folded over the political ideology measure and took the absolute value so our measure ranged from "middle of the road" (0) to "very liberal or very conservative" (2)—and *political interest.* Similarly, on the MCPCE Project there were measures of *the strength of party identification* and *news attention* (for related research, see Mutz & Martin, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Finally, on the CCS we included a measure of video-game play since other studies have found that video-game play may be related to civic outcomes and is correlated with other forms of new media participation (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2008; Williams, 2006).

Analytic Strategy. To take a full advantage of our panel data, we used lagged-dependent variable regression analysis that included prior values of the outcome variable as an independent control. The lagged-dependent variable model predicts the level of a given outcome at T2 while controlling for its value at T1. It provides unbiased estimates of the effects of digital media participation on civic and political engagement by adjusting any initial differences in the outcome variables that might exist between those who were already active in high school and those who were not (Finkel, 1995; Halaby, 2004). On the CCS, we did not have a T1 value for campaign participation, so could not perform a lagged-dependent variable regression for this outcome.

// RESULTS //

Our analysis focuses on the relationships of three different types of new media participation (friendship-driven, interest-driven, and politically driven) with varied civic and political outcomes. Each outcome variable—either friendship-driven participation, interest-driven participation, and politically driven participation—was entered together in the regression equations to estimate unique contributions of each type of online participatory culture to civic/political engagement (see Table 3 for the CCS panel results and Table 4 for the MCPCE panel results). The lagged values of each outcome variable were entered as an additional control.

Influences of three types of new media participation. The analysis indicates that politically driven participation was a strong and statistically significant predictor of two political outcomes: campaign participation and political action/expression. As shown in Table 3, politically driven participation was significantly associated with increased levels of political action and expression (B = .18, p < .001), and with increased campaign participation (B = .21, p < .001). Similarly, the models from the MCPCE data (see Table 4) indicate that politically driven participation is a robust predictor of increased campaign participation (B = 1.97, p < .001). Interestingly, however, we did not find statistically significant relationships between politically driven online participation and our two other outcome variables. Politically driven participation was not related to increased civic participation. Additionally, in the CCS, politically driven participation was not associated with higher voting rates once one controls for other factors such as college attendance and political interest.

Interest-driven participation was related to increased levels of civic participation in both the CCS (B = .12, p < .01), and MCPCE samples (B = .58, p < .01). This contrasts sharply with politically driven participation, which was unrelated to civic participation in both data sets. In the CCS, we also found a statistically significant relationship between interest-driven participation and our measure of political action and expression (B = .07, p < .05).

The relationship between interest-driven participation and campaign participation is not entirely clear. The relationship is statistically significant (B = .07, p < .05) in the CCS, but we were not able to control for prior levels of campaign participation in the CCS. In the MCPCE Project, the relationship is not statistically significant. Given our lack of a lagged value for campaign participation in the CCS, we give more credence to the finding from the MCPCE Project when it comes to this outcome. Interest-driven participation does not predict voting.

Finally, our two measures of friendship-driven participation appear to be less consequential than interest-driven participation and politically driven participation when it comes to civic and political behaviors (see Table 3). The use of blogs and social media to communicate with family and friends, for example, was unrelated to all civic and political outcomes when controls were included in the models. Friendship-driven use of e-mail and messaging was also unrelated to our measures of civic participation, political action and expression, and campaign participation. Interestingly, however, friendship-driven use of e-mail and messaging was the only online practice that was related, if modestly, to voting (B = .35, p < .05).

Interest-driven participation's relationship with politically driven participation. Since politically driven online activities can also be viewed as an indicator of political participation, we examined whether interest-driven activities, along with friendship-driven activities, predict this kind of online political activity. As shown in Table 5, Model 1 included only our control variables. Model 2 (second column) included interest-driven online participation as an additional predictor. Finally, Model 3 (third column) added the lagged value of politically driven participation as an additional control. Among all the predictors included, parental involvement, strength of ideology, college student status, and political interest were found to be strong and consistent predictors of increased politically driven online participation. Particularly strong, however, was interest-driven participation (B = .59, $p <$ .001). The entry of interest-based participation in Model 2 accounted for an additional 19.1% (= 48.2%–29.1%) of explained variance in politically driven participation. The strength of this relationship was only modestly reduced (B = .47, $p <$ .001) after the entry of politically driven participation measured at T1.

DISCUSSION //

Some pundits still make broad claims about the impact of the Internet on society. Most scholars who study the relationship between the Internet and democracy, however, focus on identifying consequential distinctions between varied forms of online activity. This study contributes to this dialog. First, it identifies survey measures that distinguish between three forms of online participatory culture: friendship-driven, interest-driven, and politically

driven. It then considers how these forms of participation relate to varied forms of civic and political activity. Overall, our results strongly suggest that the nature of online participation matters.

The importance of politically driven participation. Politically driven online participation appears to be an important bridge to broader civic and political participation and is also an important form of participation in its own right (see also Shah et al., 2009; Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). At the same time, these findings signal a need for caution. Politically driven participation may help promote increased campaign participation and varied forms of political action and expression, but politically driven participation is not associated with all civic or political outcomes. Once other forms of online activity and lagged values of outcome variables are included, politically driven participation does not appear to influence either civic engagement or voting. In addition, it seems quite plausible that politically driven online participation is a product of campaign work—to at least as great a degree as that it activates engagement with civic and political life. Thus, while politically driven online participation is clearly worthy of attention, these findings indicate that it should not be seen as the only relevant bridge from online activity to civic and political engagement.

When it comes to findings regarding friendship-driven participation, it is the lack of relationships that seems most intriguing. In particular, due to the newness and prevalence of social networking among youth and young adults, and due to the importance of social networks in civic and political life, some have posited that friendship-driven social networking might support civic and political engagement. Putting forward a less optimistic perspective, some

have raised concerns that engagement with new media will distract individuals from civic and political life (Nie, 2001). We found no support for either perspective. Indeed, no relationships (positive or negative) were found between friendship-driven use of blogs or social networking sites and any online or offline civic or political practice.

The importance of friendship-driven participation. Friendship-driven use of e-mail and messaging was modestly and positively related to voting. However, it was not related to civic activity, political action or expression, campaign activity, or politically driven online activity. Given that friendship-driven e-mail and messaging were only modestly related to one outcome and that friendship-driven use of blogs and social networking was not related to any outcomes, we do not see evidence that friendship-driven activity holds much promise as a support for civic and political life.

A difficulty associated with assessing such relationships should also be noted, however. Participation in online social networks and e-mail is now ubiquitous. Thus, our inability to find relationships may have resulted from a lack of variation. Creating measures that better tap variations in youth friendship-driven practices would likely aid examination of this issue.

The importance of interest-driven participation. We believe that the most significant findings from this study surround the relationships between nonpolitical interest-driven online participation and varied forms of civic and political life. In particular, our analysis suggests that online, nonpolitical, interest-driven activities serve as a gateway to participation in

important aspects of civic and, at times, political life, including volunteering, engagement in community problem-solving, protest activities, and political voice. These relationships are robust. Statistically significant findings remain for both data sets, even with controls for prior levels of civic and political participation and a full range of demographic variables. In addition, given the significance of politically driven online participation for varied forms of activity, we place particular importance on strong connection between interest-driven participation and growth in politically driven online activity.

In short, the significance of nonpolitical, interest-driven online activity in relation to a range of civic and political behavior leads us to argue that those studying new media's influence on civic and political participation among youth and young adults need to broaden their focus, and also attend to nonpolitical, interest-driven online participation and distinguish between this and friendship-driven participation. Studies of the Internet and political participation that focus solely on politically driven forms of online participation may miss much that matters.

While these findings highlight some intriguing relationships, we wish to underscore that we view them as an important first step—but only a first step—in analyzing the civic and political significance of youth online participatory cultures. One limitation of our work is its reliance on self-reports; it would be ideal to collect and code data on actual online activity. In addition, while controls for prior levels of civic and political activity are helpful, being able to better control for prior levels of online activity would further strengthen our ability to make causal claims. In addition, experimental studies would strengthen our ability to test for causal relationships.

Despite these limitations, that our analysis yielded consistent results across both panel data sets—even with a wide range of relevant controls—gives us greater confidence in the strength of the relationships between three forms of online participation and offline youth activism, as does the fact that the MCPCE Project is both nationally representative and contains a sizable oversample of African American, Latino, and Asian youth.

Conceptualizing connections between online participatory culture with civic and political life. These findings highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the relationships between online activity and the civic and political sphere. There are many ways politically driven online participation, and political information more generally, can activate civic and political interest and engagement (e.g., Mossberger et al., 2008). In addition, drawing on theory and qualitative work by Jenkins et al. (2007) and Ito et al. (2009), we propose that online nonpolitical participatory activities can promote civic outcomes—just as offline extracurricular activities have been found to foster social capital by teaching skills, by developing a sense of agency and productive group norms, and by fostering an appreciation of the potential of collective action. Studies that further conceptualize and test these propositions are needed.

In undertaking this work, it is important to consider changes that may be occurring in youth and young-adult conceptions of civic and political life. Youth and young adults appear to grant significance to political expression and to enact it in ways that differ from earlier generations—placing less emphasis, for example, on influencing actions of elected officials and the

state, and more emphasis on lifestyle politics, on influencing business practices through boycotts and "buycotts," and on expressive acts tied to popular culture (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006). Many scholars have found that youth often doubt the efficacy and attractiveness of formal political life and often are oriented toward nongovernmental, informal, and small-scale responses to societal issues (Ginwright, 2009; Delgado & Staples, 2007).

This shift in politics does not require new media. However, the affordances of new media seem likely to make such changes easier to enact and may also orient youth toward valuing this form and focus of civic and political life. Indeed, while the content is generally different, many nonpolitical interest-driven practices—such as organizing online groups, providing leadership for group efforts, and participating in group discussions tied to particular interests—parallel practices employed in these new forms of civic and political activity.

In addition, part of what makes understanding the developmental and educative potential of interest-driven and politically driven online activities so important is that such studies may help us to understand the contexts in which the development of democratic habits, commitments, and skills currently occurs. There is a long tradition in the United States of viewing democratic development as largely a product of life within geographically proximate local communities. As Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*:

> The strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local
> institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put

it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty. (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 49)

The notion that geographic proximity and face-to-face interactions are vital for motivating participation and for developing democratic habits and skills has been a mainstay of theoretical and empirical work on democracy. New media, however, may be modifying the significance of geography in this regard. For example, Schrager (2002) suggested that high levels of mobility, shifting geographic boundaries, and competing factions within communities require new criteria for defining local communities, with an emphasis on defining community by shared interests rather than geographic proximity. Similarly, Delli Carpini (2000) concluded that the Internet is creating communities that are more interest-based than geographically based (see Middaugh & Kahne, 2009 for a review discussing the significance of online localism for youth). Findings from this study appear consistent with that logic.

Participation in interest-driven and politically driven online activities appears to provide generative contexts for civic and political development— roles traditionally played by geographically proximate communities. While those interacting in interest-driven and politically driven spaces may also see each other offline, it is notable that online activities appear to prompt both on- and offline civic and political engagement. Fine-grained studies are needed to teach us about the relationship of online participatory communities to geographically proximate offline communities. Moreover, such studies are

needed to deepen our understanding of the ways these participatory communities may be creating locations and mechanisms that shape youth's and young adults' developing civic and political behaviors.

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Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of key variables (California Civic Survey Panel)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	*N*
Outcome variables					
Civic participation, T2	2.45	0.80	1.00	4.00	435
Civic participation, T1	2.62	0.55	1.00	3.00	326
Political action and expression, T2	1.55	0.68	1.00	4.00	434
	1.59	0.61	1.00	3.00	326
Political action and expression, T1	2.02	0.71	1.00	4.00	435
Campaign participation, T2	0.68	0.47	0.00	1.00	430
	4.38	1.01	1.00	5.00	428
Voting in 2008, T2					
Voting intention, T1					
New media participation	5.70	0.81	1.00	6.00	435
Friendship-driven participation	4.87	1.52	1.00	6.00	435
Use of e-mail/messenger/messaging	1.52	1.20	0.00	5.00	435
Use of social media to socialize	3.08	1.41	1.00	6.00	436
Interest-driven online participation	0.62	0.49	0.00	1.00	435
Politically driven online participation	3.85	0.67	2.00	5.00	428
	3.19	1.12	1.00	5.00	434
	2.81	1.08	1.00	5.00	422
	0.85	0.70	0.00	2.00	422
Control variables	0.86	0.35	0.00	1.00	435
Female sex					
GPA in high school	0.03	0.18	0.00	1.00	435
Parental involvement	0.27	0.44	0.00	1.00	435
Conservatism	0.27	0.44	0.00	1.00	435
Strength of political ideology	3.91	1.04	1.00	5.00	435
College student	3.29	1.83	1.00	6.00	435
Ethnicity					
African American					
Asian					
Hispanic					
Political interest					
Frequency of video gaming					

Note. GPA, grade point average; T1, initial baseline survey**;** T2, follow-up survey.

Table 2.

Correlations between the digital media use items and the common factors (California Civic Survey Panel)

Items	Factors		
	Interest-driven participation	Politically driven participation	Friendship-driven participation
Interest-driven online activities			
Used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion, or website	**.83**	.03	-.02
Used the Internet to organize social or recreational events (games, concerts, dances, competitions, etc.)	**.70**	-.12	.17
Given someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online	**.69**	.09	-.10
Gone online to participate in a special-interest community, such as a fan site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sport, or special interest	**.58**	.01	-.04
I have been a leader in an online community	**.51**	.07	-.02
Politically driven online activities			
Used blogs or social networking sites to share or discuss perspectives on social and political issues	-.02	**.94**	-.03
Used e-mail to communicate with others who are working on a political or social issue	.01	**.80**	-.01
Used the Internet to get information about political or social issues	.03	**.54**	.11
Relationship-driven online activities			
Used e-mail, text messaging, or instant messenger to communicate with friends or family	-.04	-.09	**.62**
Used blogs, diary, or social networking sites (like MySpace) to socialize with people (friends, family, or people you've met online)	.06	.07	**.55**
Principal component Eigen value (before rotation)	4.18	1.22	1.05
Cronbach's alpha	.80	.81	.41

Table 3.

Results of regression models predicting civic and political outcomes with lagged controls (California Civic Survey Panel)

	Civic participation[a]		Political action and expression[a]		Campaign participation[a]		Voting in 2008[b]	
Control variables	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Female sex	0.01	0.09	0.03	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.55	0.29
GPA in high school	0.07	0.06	0.02	0.05	-0.00	0.05	0.33	0.20
Parental involvement	0.09*	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.16	0.13
Conservatism	-0.01	0.03	-0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	-0.16	0.12
Strength of political ideology	-0.01	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.12**	0.04	0.11	0.18
College student	0.18	0.12	0.04	0.10	-0.03	0.09	1.12**	0.35
Race								
African American	-0.23	0.20	-0.13	0.17	-0.47**	0.16	-0.44	0.71
Hispanic	0.09	0.10	0.07	0.09	-0.04	0.07	0.30	0.35
Asian	-0.14	0.09	0.07	0.08	-0.12	0.07	-0.25	0.32
Political interest	-0.02	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.09**	0.03	0.52***	0.13
Frequency of video gaming	0.04	0.02	0.04*	0.02	0.03*	0.02	0.00	0.08
Lagged values of outcomes								
Civic participation, T1	0.39***	0.07						
Political action and expression, T1			0.25***	0.06				
Voting intention, T1							0.62***	0.13
New media participation								
Friendship-driven participation:								
Use of e-mail/messaging	0.08	0.05	-0.00	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.35*	0.17
Use of social media to socialize	0.04	0.03	-0.00	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.09	0.10
Interest-driven participation	0.12**	0.04	0.07*	0.03	0.07*	0.03	-0.03	0.14
Politically driven participation	0.05	0.04	0.18***	0.03	0.21***	0.03	0.04	0.12
Total R^2 (%)	31.6		36.4		37.8		21.2	
N of cases	321		321		423		417	

Note. GPA, grade point average; T1, initial baseline survey.
[a]OLS regression coefficients and standard errors
[b]Logistic regression estimates and standard errors
[c]McFadden's pseudo R^2
*$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$

Table 4.

Results of ordered logistic regression models predicting civic and campaign participation (MCPCE Panel)

	Civic participation		Campaign participation	
	B	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
Control variables				
Age	0.02	0.03	-0.23***	0.05
Female sex	0.38	0.32	-1.89*	0.82
Education	0.13	0.10	0.32*	0.16
Household income	0.01	0.04	-0.10	0.05
Race:				
African American	0.68	0.41	2.84***	0.68
Hispanic	0.57	0.32	2.67***	0.65
Asian	-0.01	0.66	-0.02	0.93
Conservatism	0.49***	0.10	-0.35	0.25
Strength of political ideology	-0.10	0.17	-0.00	0.25
Internet access at home	-0.59	0.46	-1.07	0.83
News attention	-0.21	0.19	0.48	0.30
Political discussion	1.48**	0.47	0.70	0.55
Lagged values of outcomes				
Civic participation, T1	1.67***	0.23		
Campaign participation, T1			1.21***	0.33
New media participation				
Interest-driven participation	0.58**	0.21	0.25	0.54
Politically driven participation	-0.00	0.23	1.97***	0.53
McFadden's pseudo R^2 (%)	28.3		54.4	
N of cases	527		527	

Note. OLS regression coefficients and standard errors; T1, initial baseline survey.

*p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001

Table 5.

Results of regression models predicting politically driven online participation (California Civic Survey Panel)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
Control variables						
Female sex	0.16	0.14	0.37**	0.12	0.46**	0.15
GPA in high school	0.19	0.10	0.16	0.08	0.00	0.11
Parental involvement	0.22***	0.06	0.11*	0.05	0.08	0.06
Conservatism	-0.08	0.06	-0.09	0.05	-0.07	0.06
Strength of political ideology	0.23**	0.09	0.15*	0.07	0.20*	0.09
College student	0.49**	0.18	0.32*	0.15	0.20	0.23
Race:						
African American	0.56	0.34	0.68*	0.29	0.60	0.34
Hispanic	0.39*	0.16	0.26*	0.13	0.34	0.18
Asian	0.22	0.15	0.02	0.13	0.20	0.17
Political interest	0.42***	0.06	0.34***	0.05	0.24***	0.07
Frequency of video gaming	0.12**	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.07	0.04
New media participation						
Friendship-driven participation:						
Use of e-mail/messaging	-0.07	0.08	-0.04	0.07	-0.01	0.11
Use of social media to socialize	0.22***	0.04	0.10**	0.04	0.05	0.05
Interest-driven participation			0.59***	0.05	0.47***	0.06
Lagged values of the outcome						
Politically driven participation, T1					0.25***	0.04
Total R^2 (%)	29.1		48.2		53.5	
N of cases	423		423		237	

Note. OLS regression coefficients and standard errors; GPA, grade point average; T1, initial baseline survey.

*p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001