

# A New Space for Political Behavior: Political Social Networking and its Democratic Consequences

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*Social networking sites (SNS) currently boast more than half a billion active users worldwide, the majority of which are young people. With notable exceptions, few studies have ventured into the growing political realm that exists on these sites. This study expands research on SNS by examining both what encourages people to express themselves politically in this realm, and what effects such expression may have on classic questions of political participation. We test the proposition that political use of SNS among teens offers a new pathway to their political participation using hierarchical linear regression and panel data analysis. Results demonstrate that political SNS use strongly impacted both levels of and growth in traditional political participation during the 2008 election.*

**Key words:** Political expression, Social Networking Sites, Political Participation, 2008 Presidential election, Adolescents

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## A New Space for Political Behavior: Political Social Networking and its Democratic Consequences

Recent years have witnessed a boom in the use of social networking sites. Most prominently, Facebook is now equivalent to the third most populous country in the world, numbering over 750 million members from around the globe (Facebook.com). Although social networking sites were not originally conceived of as political tools, politicians have quickly adapted to use them as such. Obama's utilization of social networking in the 2008 election is often credited for his appeal among America's youth – even among those not yet old enough to vote (Dalton, 2009; Nagourney, 2008) – and other politicians have caught on as well. However, a nonpartisan study released in August of 2010 suggests that Republicans are making more effective inroads into social media use – not just Facebook, but Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and candidate websites (Galloway & Guthrie, 2010) – and people who reported voted for Republican

candidates were more likely to be online political users (Smith, 2011). However, for social networking sites to truly realize their political potential, their audiences must be engaging with them for political purposes as well.

While some studies have begun to consider the political impact of social networking sites (Williams & Gulati, 2008, Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard 2010), more research must venture into the growing political realm that exists within these popular websites, focusing particularly on the political effects among a central demographic: teenagers. This study expands the research on social networking to provide a better understanding both of what encourages young people to express themselves politically on social networking sites (SNSs), as well as what effects the political use of social networking sites may have on classic questions of participation.

Specifically, we develop the concept of “political SNS use,” which can be defined as using a social networking site for explicitly political purposes, like displaying a political preference on one’s profile page, or becoming a “fan” of a politician. We situate political SNS use among a range of other political behaviors, including expression and participation, and differentiate its implications. We conceptualize political SNS use as a new form of online political expression – but rather than emphasizing the interpersonal discussion often tapped by previous measures of online expression (Gil de Zuniga, 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak, 2005; Shah, Cho, Nah, Gotlieb, Hwang, Lee, Scholl, and McLeod, 2007), the location of these interactions on social networking sites incorporates a more public element. Thus, political SNS use is unique to social networking sites, and meaningfully different from generic online political participation, in that it captures the ability of individuals to not only exchange information about politics but also to publically affiliate themselves with a group.

Further, while political SNS use may carry elements of participation – including heightened commitment and public endorsement – the lower barriers and cost of performing these behaviors, as well as their location on a social networking site, suggest political SNS use must be distinguished from traditional participation. However, the very characteristics that distinguish this concept from other political behaviors may contribute to building a habit of participation that should spill over into other participatory activities.

While some might argue that time spent on social networking sites could displace the formation of social capital and discourage youth from participation (Putnam, 2000), we argue political SNS use should encourage youth to increase their participation in politics more broadly. Political SNS use, in and of itself important, becomes especially consequential if it is providing new ways for adolescents to get involved politically, or conversely, if it is hindering a process better served through face-to-face communication. Research suggests that both online and offline forms of communication still matter for encouraging participation. For example, blog readers have not turned away from traditional political activities, but the pathways to engagement differ depending on the participatory outcome examined (i.e., online expressive vs. traditional offline participation), with the source of news becoming particularly consequential in different contexts (Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). Building on this framework, we anticipate that the political opportunities on social networking sites represent a distinct pathway through which teens can get involved, resulting in positive effects on political participation.

The present study tests these questions among a national random sample of American adolescents. We find it particularly pertinent to consider young people, as we know that political habits are formed early in life and particularly during election contexts, so the behaviors we see among these adolescents are likely to persist over their lifetimes (Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003; Valentino & Sears, 1998). Specifically, we first examine what factors encourage teenagers ages 12–17 to use social networking sites for political activities, including posting their political affiliations or becoming a fan of a politician – activities which 15% of people ages 18–24 reported doing in the 2008 election (Pew, 2008). We further argue that political SNS is not a dead-end, but instead a method by which teens

may become interested in participating in politics. We thus examine how political SNS use contributes to growth in political participation among these teens during the campaign – above and beyond the more traditional factors predicting participation – to provide a deeper understanding of the relevance of social networking sites in a new political world. We expect that the hybrid nature of political SNS use – between a form of expression, a public affiliation, and even a somewhat participatory activity in itself – will offer a new pathway for youth to get involved with politics, without necessarily displacing any of the traditional pushes into the political arena.

## **Social Networking in Context**

### **Social Networks as a Location for Political Behavior**

Thus far, few studies have examined social networking sites – generally defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” – in a political light (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The majority of extant research on SNSs focuses on issues of privacy and self-presentation, such as the likelihood of users to post private information on SNSs, potential implications of such displays, and self-presentation and identity formation and dissemination online (see for example, Utz, 2010; Debatin & Lovejoy, 2009). Other research examines the networked structure of SNSs like Facebook (Hamatake, Lifson, & Navlakha, 2005), who uses social network sites (Hargittai, 2007; boyd, 2007), and how Facebook may benefit its users by allowing them to build social capital and connect with others (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008, Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

While some researchers have begun to ponder the motivations users have when spending time on social networking sites from a uses and gratifications perspective (studies have found that uses of online media satisfy entertainment, information, and social interaction needs), few have considered the political implications from such use (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Moreover, the studies that have sought to examine the political side of social networking sites have concentrated on their use by politicians seeking or once in office, on their potential to serve as an indicator for electoral enthusiasm, or on how social networking sites are being used, rather than their implications (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2004; Williams & Gulati, 2008; Utz, 2009). And while we acknowledge the importance of identity formation and expression as a potential mechanism for generating political SNS use (Walsh, 2004), these commonly studied uses of social networking sites are not their only contribution. In the most recent election cycle, a third of young people reported using social networking sites as a source of political information (Pew, 2008), suggesting these sites may influence political behaviors in multiple ways – both from identity formation and expression as well as informational exchange. Despite these expectations, however, initial attempts to study this potential have found little to no effect on political behavior outcomes (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

### **Predicting Political Use of Social Networks**

While many have heralded the rise of social networking sites as a location of social and political interaction, little is yet known about the factors that promote their use in a more political sense. The mass media has long been recognized for its socializing influence: For example, media consumption contributes to political knowledge and opinion formation in adolescents (Arnett, 1995; McLeod, 2000),

and serves as a gateway to participation, especially among younger teens (Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). As McLeod (2000) notes, exposure and attention to news media – whether print, broadcast, or online – are critical in distinguishing adolescents who become active citizens from those who remain disengaged from public life.

The interpersonal habits of adolescents could also predict their use of social networking sites for political purposes. Discussion is a fundamental way that adolescents can express and develop their interest in politics. Scholars have often associated interpersonal communication with democratically valuable outcomes such as growth in knowledge, efficacy, and participation (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak, 2005; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Moy & Gastil, 2006). Moreover, interpersonal communication often mediates the relationship between media exposure and these democratic outcomes (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). We suggest the same relationship may extend to political SNS use. Prior studies also indicate that interpersonal communication can moderate these benefits, such that individuals high on the spectrum of discussion and media use also exhibit greater political knowledge and participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2002). Thus, interpersonal communication plays an important role in the political arena, and one that may be particularly influential for youth, as they tend to rely less on traditional media as a source of information (John S. & James L. Knight Foundation, 2007).

H1: Political SNS use will be higher among adolescents who have greater exposure to news media.

H2: Political SNS use will be higher among adolescents who engage in higher levels of interpersonal communication.

## Political SNS Use and Participation

Political expression, while itself important, is also considered a key component of political participation. Looking specifically at the Internet as a source of political information and public expression, online media use complements traditional media in influencing political discussion and expression, and these variables in turn increase behavioral outcomes such as civic participation (Shah et al., 2005). Online media, however, holds the edge in allowing individuals to expose themselves to like-minded commentary (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Sunstein, 2007; Stroud, 2008) – and embedding oneself in an echo chamber of homogeneous commentary has been shown to further encourage participation (Mutz, 2006). For example, during the 2003 Iraq war, people who felt their views differed from the mainstream media turned to the Internet for information and as a source of discussion and expression, which facilitated anti-war political activism (Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, Gil de Zuniga, and Shah, 2006). Thus, the Internet may be extending the influence of political expression in ways both novel and enduring – and especially may be an outlet for those in search of agreeable information (Sunstein 2007), and those with nowhere else to turn (Flanagan 2008), where it reinforces the ideals that spur participation.

More broadly, the communication mediation model suggests a clear theoretical basis for the relationship between political SNS use and political participation. The communication mediation model suggests that media use of various forms (television watching, newspaper reading, online news consumption) encourages some type of communication, which then leads to gains in political participation. Studies have shown the type of media use as well as the type of communication involved can be quite varied, while still leading to gains in political participation (Shah, et al., 2005; Shah, et al., 2007).

The communication pathways to participation are continually expanding to include new types of communication facilitated by technology, and social networking sites provide another potential

pathway (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2010). Yet political SNS use also differs from these traditional forms of expression in several key ways. In particular, political SNS use involves a more public avowal of political leaning than other forms of political expression, alerting supporters and opponents alike of an individual's position – unlike other forms of expression that may be more susceptible to selective exposure to like-minded discussion partners (Hwang et al., 2006; Mutz, 2006). Further, the nature of political SNS use does not privilege interaction to the same extent: While political SNS use can lead to interaction with others, it does not require it.

Thus, the practice of public expression of beliefs inherent in political SNS use may uniquely predispose youth to greater participation in more traditional political settings. Given our knowledge of a variety of factors that predict participation, including media use, interpersonal discussion, and exposure to homogeneous environments, it is now important to determine if political SNS use constitutes another type of communication with the ability to translate media use into political outcomes among teenagers, above and beyond the known predictors.

Thus we predict:

H3: Political SNS use will predict levels of and increases in political participation.

## Methods

### Survey design and sampling

To test our hypotheses and answer the research questions posed by this study, we employ data from a national survey of adolescents. These survey data were collected from a single panel of respondents in two waves during 2008.<sup>1</sup> The first wave was gathered between May 20 and June 25, 2008 by Synovate, a commercial survey research firm, using a four-page mailed questionnaire. The second wave was gathered from these same respondents between November 5 and December 10, 2008, again using a 4-page mailed questionnaire. Synovate employs a stratified quota sampling technique to recruit respondents. Rates of agreement vary widely across demographic categories, but it is from this prerecruited group of roughly 500,000 people that demographically balanced samples are constructed for collection. To achieve a representative pool of respondents, the initial sample is adjusted within a range of subcategories that include race, gender, and marital status in order to compensate for expected differences in return rates (see Shah, et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2007 for details).

For the purposes of this study, this technique was used to generate a sample of households with children age 12–17. A parent in each selected household was contacted via mail and asked to complete an introduction portion of the survey, and then to pass the survey to the 12–17 year old child in the household who most recently celebrated a birthday. This child answered a majority of the survey content and then returned the survey to the parents to complete. This sampling method was used to generate the initial sample of 4,000 respondents for the 2002 Life Style Study, from which 1,325 responses were received, representing a response rate of 33.1%. A small number of these responses were omitted due to incomplete or inconsistent information, resulting in a slightly smaller final sample.

As a result, 1,255 questionnaires were mailed out on November 4. Of the recontact surveys distributed, 738 were returned, for a panel retention rate of 55.7% and a response rate against the mailout of 60.4%. Due to some mismatches in the age of the child within the household that completed the second wave of the survey, a small subset of responses was dropped, resulting in a smaller final sample for the 12–17 panel. It is from these panel data that the measures constructed below were developed.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	Time 1	Time 2
Age	14.51 (1.62)	14.92 (1.68)
Gender (female)	0.50 (0.50)	*
Income	15.03 (6.04)	*
Party ID (Republican)	2.95 (0.94)	2.88 (1.05)
Partisan Strength	0.72 (0.61)	0.84 (0.63)
Black	0.08 (0.28)	*
Paper News	1.17 (1.43)	1.30 (1.46)
TV News Use	0.95 (1.10)	1.15 (1.26)
Internet News Use	0.51 (0.96)	0.57 (1.05)
Blog Use	0.10 (0.58)	0.17 (0.74)
Offline Talk	3.70 (1.89)	4.12 (1.93)
Online Expression	1.34 (0.91)	1.62 (1.20)
Political SNS Use	1.19 (0.43)	1.28 (0.53)
Political Participation	1.32 (0.84)	1.42 (0.98)

Reported values are means with standard deviations in parentheses. Asterisks indicate variables which were only measured in one wave.

## Measurement

Means and standard deviations of all measures are reported in Table 1.

## Predictor Variables

### *Interpersonal communication:*

The offline talk variable was formed by averaging three items, asking respondents how often they had talked about news and current events with family, with friends, and with adults outside the family. All three items were measured on an 8-point scale from (1) not at all to (8) very frequently (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 3.70$ ,  $S.D. = 1.89$ )<sup>2</sup>. Online expression was captured by a mean scale of 4 items, reflecting how often (in the last 3 months) respondents had posted comments on a news website or political blog, exchanged political e-mails with friends and family, forwarded the link to a political video or news article, or sent or received a text message about politics (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 1.34$ ,  $S.D. = .91$ ).

### *Media use variables*

We used four different media use variables—newspaper use, television use, Internet news use, and blog use. All news use items were measured on an 8-point scale indicating the number of days in which respondents had engaged in the behavior in an average week, ranging from 0 days to 7 days. Newspaper use was measured with two items asking participants to answer how often they consume a print copy of a national paper and of a local paper (interitem correlation = .30,  $M = 1.17$ ,  $S.D. = 1.43$ ). The measure of television news use was formed with a mean index of five items. Participants were asked to answer how often they watch national nightly news, local news, news magazine shows, and both CNN and FOX cable news (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = .95$ ,  $S.D. = 1.10$ ). Internet news use averaged three items, asking respondents how often they visited the websites of local papers, national papers, and television stations,

(Cronbach's  $\alpha = .65$ ,  $M = .51$ ,  $S.D. = .96$ ). Finally, blog use was captured by averaging how many days per week respondents read a conservative political blog or a liberal political blog (interitem correlation =  $.72$ ,  $M = 0.10$ ,  $S.D. = .58$ ). We expect online news use and blog use to be particularly relevant, given that we are focusing on other online behaviors in a generation that spends a great deal of time online.

### *Demographics*

Basic demographic variables such as age ( $M = 14.5$ ,  $S.D. = 1.61$ ), gender (49.5% females), and annual household income ( $M = 15.83$ ,  $S.D. = 6.04$ , on a scale of 1 to 27 where 1 is less than \$5,000 and 27 is greater than \$300,000 family income, as reported by the parent) were included as controls. Finally, African-American identification is controlled, using a single item that asked respondents their racial affiliation. We created a dummy variable for African-Americans, with all other racial affiliations coded as zero (8.4% identified as black).

### *Party ID and partisan strength*

To measure partisan strength, respondents were asked "of the two major political parties, which of the following best describes your party affiliation?" Responses are on a 5-point scale where (1) stood for strong Democrat to (5), strong Republican. Partisan strength (coded from 0 to 2,  $M = .72$ ,  $S.D. = .61$ ) was a folded measure so that larger values indicate stronger partisanship. Partisan identification ranged from strong Democrats coded 0 to Strong Republicans coded 5 ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $S.D. = .94$ ).

## **Political Behaviors**

### *Political SNS Use.*

The Political SNS Use variable was formed by averaging five items, asking how often users had engaged in the following activities or had the following experiences on Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking sites: displayed political preference on their profile, became a fan or a friend of a politician, joined a cause or political group, used a news or politics application, and were invited to a political event by a friend. All items were measured on a four-point scale from (1) Never to (4) Regularly (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 1.27$ ,  $S.D. = .55$ ).

### *Participation.*

We were interested in one important dependent variable: political participation. Our measure of political participation is composed of a mean scale of 5 items, reflecting how often (in the last 3 months) respondents wrote a letter or e-mail to a news organization, contributed money to a political campaign, attended a political meeting, rally, or speech, worked for a political party or candidate, or displayed a campaign button, sticker or sign<sup>3</sup> (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 1.32$ ,  $S.D. = .84$ ). In the models in which the change was estimated, we simply subtracted the time-one measure from that of the time-two measure.

## **Results**

To test our first set of hypotheses, which examined the factors that predict political SNS use, we conducted a regression analysis with three blocks of variables, including demographics, media use, and expression variables (please see Table 2).

**Table 2** Regression Predicting Political SNS Use

	Political SNS Use
Age	0.065*
Gender	0.024
Income	0.011**
Republican	-0.100**
Partisan Strength	-0.080
Black	0.011
Paper News	0.014
TV News Use	0.007
Internet News Use	0.116**
Blog Use	0.085**
Offline Talk	0.039
Online Expression	0.438**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.344

Note. N = 1039. Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01

Turning first to the control variables, we see that Republican adolescents demonstrated less political SNS use than their Democratic counterparts, while partisan strength is positively related to political SNS use, regardless of party affiliation.

Television news use, Internet news use, and blog use are significantly linked to political SNS use among adolescents when first entered in the model, in line with our first hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> We also see a strong relationship between online expression and political SNS use, suggesting that online expression is an important factor in the relationship between media use and political SNS use, and supporting our second hypothesis.

In addition to determining what predicts political SNS use, we were interested in the impact of political SNS use on political participation. Political SNS use becomes particularly relevant for study if it also encourages broader behavioral patterns that push people either towards or away from politics. Of course, as media use and interpersonal communication are both linked to getting people involved in participation initially, (McLeod, *et al*, 1999; Mutz, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Shah *et al.*, 2005), they should also encourage greater growth in participation. Therefore, in examining the impact of political SNS use on growth in political participation, we control for media use and interpersonal communication, along with its modern component of online expression. We think it necessary to include these variables in our model specifications, but we are more interested in determining the impact of political SNS use among teens independent of these predictors. For comparative purposes, we keep the predictors of the dependent variables consistent across all models: predicting political SNS use, and levels and growth in political participation.<sup>5</sup>

We estimated three least squares regression models for our outcome variable, political participation. First, we examined a cross-section at time one (May 2008), then a cross-section at time two (November 2008), and finally we estimated a model predicting the change in the outcome between the two time periods using a subtractive measure (participation at time 1 subtracted from participation at time 2). Given the panel design of our data, we are fortunate to be able to consider how outcomes of interest change over time. While there is a debate in the literature as to the appropriate way

**Table 3** Regression Predicting Levels of Political Participation at Time 1 and Time 2, and Change Over Time

	Time 1	Time 2	Change
Time 1 level	–	–	–0.642**
Age	–0.029	–0.030	–0.030
Gender	0.008	–0.043	–0.055
Republican	–0.019	–0.063	–0.055
Partisan Strength	–0.062	0.024	0.025
Income	0.029	0.053	0.051
Black	0.054	0.000	–0.015
Paper News	0.065	0.019	0.019
TV News Use	0.029	0.019	0.003
Online News	0.035	0.055	0.033
Blog Use	0.072**	0.273**	0.252**
Offline Talk	0.089*	0.055	0.054
Online Expression	0.520**	0.320**	0.320**
Political SNS use	0.075**	0.191**	0.142**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.473	.471	.510
Cases	1039	627	627

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. Variables in time 1 model are from time 1. Variables in time 2 model are from time 2. Variables in the change model, except as noted, were measured at time 2.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

to go about constructing models to reflect such changes (see, for instance, Liker, 1995; Finkel, 1995), we felt comparing these three models provides a fairly straightforward method allowing for a clear understanding of the results. With our final model, we capture what factors predict *growth* in participation over the course of the election cycle, while also allowing comparison to cross-sectional models. We include our battery of independent variables as well as the time 1 value of our dependent variable to isolate the growth occurring over the length of the campaign, with the time 1 variable serving as the baseline level of participation. This mitigates the potential of a ceiling effect for those youth who were engaging in the political outcome heavily at time one and thus could not exhibit any growth.

Each of the models of political participation tells a similar story. For every model we estimated, the two major types of significant predictors were measures reflecting online information seeking and expressive communication (see Table 3). In the former category, blogs are a consistently significant predictor of political participation ( $\beta$  ranges from 0.072 to 0.273,  $p < 0.001$  in each model). More interesting is the reliability of the various measures of expression, entered in the last block. In each model, both online expression ( $\beta$  ranges from 0.320 to 0.520,  $p < 0.001$ ) and political SNS use ( $\beta$  ranges from 0.075 to 0.191,  $p < 0.01$ ) are significant positive predictors of political participation (supporting our third hypothesis). Offline talk emerges as positive and significant only in the time one cross-sectional model ( $\beta = 0.089$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

It is also of note that the measure of early participation (in May of 2008) included in the model predicting change in participation over the course of the election is significant and has the largest

coefficient of any variable in the model ( $\beta = -0.642$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The fact that it is negative suggests that those with a high level of participation in May were less likely to experience growth over the course of the campaign, highlighting a ceiling effect in participation levels.

## Discussion

Predicting what motivates adolescents to use social networking sites politically is a particularly timely investigation, given its growth in importance and utility during the 2008 presidential election, especially among young adults. Our results confirm that both media use and interpersonal conversation about politics are important predictors of political use of social networking sites, particularly when those behaviors occur in the online realm. But more imperative is our conclusion that adolescents using these sites for political purposes are provided a new avenue into more traditional forms of political participation, even above and beyond the impact felt from traditional predictors of such activism. Our results confirm that political SNS use was strongly predictive of teens engaging in traditional political participation in 2008.

Of course, even though political SNS use has a strong impact on predicting growth in participation, this impact is currently limited to a small group of people. However, as more and more political activity goes online, this slice of the adolescent population will grow and become increasingly relevant. In the 2010 elections, for instance, over 12 million Facebook users reported that they voted via their Facebook profiles (Ostrow, 2010). Moreover, a lower level of SNS use within our sample should bias us against finding effects at all, and the small size of the participating group does not abate the importance of the patterns of political participation demonstrated in our study. Future research should examine whether political SNS use continues to have a substantial impact on growth in political activities as it becomes a more common activity for adolescents, as well as other cohorts.

Still, young people are using the Internet on a daily basis and social networking sites are becoming an important part of their everyday routine, with 46% of online young adults, ages 18–25, saying they visit their social networking profiles at least once a day (Pew, 2008). The incorporation of politics into this medium has the potential to affect not only the teen's engagement, but also his or her entire network of friends, thus reaching hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people with a single click. Indeed, exposure to political information within this venue may be the meaningful link between political use of social networking sites and political engagement in general, a relationship we hope to test in the future. Social networking sites offer a new political outlet to teens by seamlessly incorporating politics into their daily lives, making it a part of their lifestyle (Bennett, 1998). Having said that, most adolescents are not using these websites in an explicitly political manner, and if we expect such use to have broader implications, it becomes important to understand which individuals choose to do so.

An important distinction that arises when considering the factors that encourage political SNS use among teens is the contrast between online versus offline activities. The strong relationship between online expression and political SNS use, for example, demonstrates the importance of online expressive activities for this generation. While scholars have shown that interpersonal communication can influence a multitude of outcomes, including political participation (Eveland et al., 2005; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Moy & Gastil, 2006), for these teens, we see that it is online expression, but *not* offline political talk, that encourages using social networking for political purposes (Shah et al., 2005, 2007). This is not because teens are only engaging on political expression online – note in Table 1 that the mean for online expression is actually lower than that for offline political talk. However, online expression is strongly skewed to the right (that is, there are a large number of respondents who score zero on the measure), suggesting that fewer respondents are responsible for a greater proportion of the meaningful

variance. We think that because many more teens in our sample are engaging in offline political talk, it therefore has less explanatory power to predict the specific behavior of political use of SNS, whereas because online expression is a rarer behavior, it has greater predictive power – but this is an argument that future research needs to investigate.

Furthermore, this pattern of the importance of online behaviors is replicated in our findings for the media consumption habits of teens. Among our media use variables, Internet news use and blog use, but not television or print news use, positively predicted the political use of SNSs. These patterns, while not a surprise, are important to note and lend credence to the validity of our model and data, as we would expect online behaviors to move together.<sup>6</sup> We might expect that sustained online political expression naturally encourages political use of social networking sites, as a mere extension of other online behaviors. Such a relationship is probable, but would likely depend on the nature and venue in which the online political expression took place. Thus, future research should further investigate the relationship between different types of political expression – which we argue political SNS use extends into new arenas and formats – as well as the influence of these various types of online expression and media use on teens' activism.

The effects of offline activities may also be mediated through online expression. For example, television news had an important effect on encouraging political SNS use, though this effect appears to be mediated by online expression.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, offline information sources appear important to encouraging political SNS use only when they can be translated online through expressive activities. This is reminiscent of relationships observed among adults under the rubric of the citizen communication mediation model and in studies among adolescents and young adults focusing on communicative competency (Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009).

We believe that the nature of social network sites represents a new type of space in which people, and especially youth, may practice politics. Social network sites are rapidly becoming an extension of everyday activities, particularly for the youth of America. This ease of use, paired with the extreme connectedness facilitated by SNS's, represents an important new space in which politics may occur – somewhere between communication and participation – while incorporating both. Political information in this venue is likely to be more relevant than that from traditional sources, given that it comes from trusted known others (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995). Political engagement is extremely low-cost, available at the click of an icon. Political identity formation occurs readily and easily, facilitated by the semipublic format provided by SNSs. For all these reasons, political engagement occurring on social network sites is an important new phenomenon to consider, as part of a broader metamorphosis of political engagement in general.

Determining what encourages adolescents to engage in SNSs politically is an important contribution, but the implications of this engagement for other forms of participation may prove to be of even greater consequence. If SNSs are simply providing a location where teens are expressing themselves politically, but limiting their participation in other contexts, the net outcome may not be democratically desirable. Our results indicate, however, that political SNS use, like other types of communication, promotes political behaviors, rather than inhibiting them.

Political SNS use is an extremely consistent predictor – in fact the most consistent predictor – of political participation in our sample of adolescents. In both May of 2008 and November of 2008, as well as over the course of the election, political SNS use significantly and positively predicts levels of and growth in political participation, even after controlling for the usual suspects related to those measures. Adolescents who use social networking sites as a political tool are more likely than their peers of equal motivation, information, and capacity, to engage with politics and participate in the 2008 election. While we are cautious to read too much into these results, the findings are potentially quite important. When adolescents use social networking sites – something many of them do in their daily lives – in

a new, politically oriented way, it may actually increase their likelihood of participating in politics in other ways. Even if this change is relatively small, and limited to only a subset of the population, it is still taking place above and beyond major predictors of political participation, including education, income, motivation, and media use. This gives youth a new means of participation and a new venue in which their voices may be heard, despite their nonvoting status as minors.

With an emphasis on political activities in which teens may engage, the timing of this study may both limit and contribute to our findings. This study was fielded during the 2008 presidential election, an intense campaign that captured a great deal of media attention and public interest, and one that proved especially interesting to youth, in part through the use of social networking sites by the candidates (Dalton, 2009). Growth in political involvement is thus especially likely during this period. As such, our results do not necessarily reflect an innate relationship between political SNS use and political behavior in general. At this point, we can only be confident of this relationship within the context of a single salient election cycle. Of course, if adolescents are being socialized into the participation patterns that they carry with them their entire lives (Plutzer, 2002; Valentino & Sears, 1998), the timing of this push may be less important than its occurrence. Replication in coming years, in which Republicans and members of the Tea Party are “catching up” and even surpassing Democrats in their utilization of social media will help to understand the extent to which our findings represent a broader phenomenon (Galloway & Guthrie, 2010).

In addition, the timing of the study raises the possibility that our findings are an artifact of the 2008 election campaign, and especially of the techniques of Barack Obama. Obama placed special emphasis on using new forms of media, including social networking websites, to connect with potential voters (Nagourney, 2008; Pilkington, 2008), and the strong effects of political SNS use may be in part driven by this concerted effort. Recall, for example, our finding that Democrats among our sample are more likely to report political SNS use, which may be in part because “their” candidate made more of an effort to encourage such behaviors (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Future research should examine political SNS use in other elections and in other contexts to determine how much of the observed effect is campaign- or 2008-specific. As Republican candidates continue to make inroads in their use of social media (Galloway & Guthrie, 2010), we might expect this partisan difference among engaged youth using SNSs for political purposes to disappear and a more equal discussion space – in terms of partisan affiliation at least – to emerge.

Considering the nature of participation, and of the always-online cohort we have sampled, our results are quite intuitive. Our measures of political SNS use include explicitly political activities, such as posting an ideology or becoming a fan of a politician. Particularly for a generation that has grown up online, these explicitly political activities on social networking sites are likely seen as a mere extension of offline political behavior. Qualitative research in the future should consider to what extent adolescents see a distinction between the venues in which they engage in political behaviors. If this generation treats all political behavior equally, despite its location, it is quite possible that research should move away from this place-based conceptualization of political behavior and toward a more holistic measure.

An additional fruitful possibility for continued research might be to consider social networking sites functioning as a communicative networking tool, as various types of interpersonal communication remain consistent predictors of political engagement and participation. The importance of interpersonal communication is hardly surprising: Previous research has suggested the strong role discussion plays in encouraging participation (Mutz, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Shah et al., 2005), and political SNS use is inherently communicative itself. Our results are consistent with this literature – among youth, interpersonal communication of all kinds plays a key role in getting politically involved. Political SNS use remains an important part of this equation, given its consistent effect above and beyond the influence of expression, both online and off.

Ultimately, our study provides an important step in understanding adolescent use of social networking sites for political expression, as well as the broader implications of such use for participatory patterns. The results are conclusive – political SNS use is not a dead-end, but instead provides an impetus for greater political participation. Therefore, political SNS use among teens may be a new socializing agent that allows them the encouragement needed to participate in political life, and to begin forming the life-long habits of engagement and political involvement likely to affect these citizens throughout their lives.

## Notes

- 1 The collection of the data presented here was undertaken by a consortium of communication and political science faculty from six major universities: University of Arkansas (Todd Shields and Robert Wicks), University of Kansas (David Perlmutter), University of Michigan (Erika Franklin Fowler) University of Missouri (Esther Thorson), University of Texas (Dustin Harp and Mark Tremayne), and University of Wisconsin (Barry Burden, Ken Goldstein, Hernando Rojas, and Dhavan Shah). Shah organized this team of scholars and served as the principal investigator for this survey panel. These researchers are grateful for the support received from the following sources: The Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics at the University of Arkansas; the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications and the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas; the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Scholars in Health Policy Research Program at the University of Michigan; the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri; the University of Texas Office of the Vice President for Research; and the Hamel Faculty Fellowship, the Graduate School, and the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting sources or participating faculty.
- 2 All the measures listed in the methods section include the descriptive statistics from the first wave of the survey to maintain consistency.
- 3 When considering a sample of American teenagers, careful attention must be paid to the way in which political participation is measured. Because we are interested in the political behavior of adolescents, some activities, like voting, are automatically disqualified. While these teens may not be able to participate in the full range of activities available to adults, they still can participate and influence the election in a variety of ways. Furthermore, because we know political participation is often habit-forming, it is important for adolescents to begin these behaviors even before they are allowed to vote, as it indicates a greater likelihood for lifelong political participation (Gerber et al., 2003).
- 4 Restricted model not reported, but available upon request from the authors.
- 5 Given the importance of using political interest and engagement in predicting political outcomes like social networking use and participation, we also estimated both models using political interest as a control. Including political interest did not substantially change any of the focal relationships noted in this paper, so it was excluded from the models for space and comparison purposes.
- 6 Having said that, online expression and political SNS use remain unique activities. Online expression measures a general tendency to express oneself politically while online, whereas SNS political use is a much more restricted set of behaviors, reflecting only activities in which users are engaged in particular behaviors in particular venues. While they are highly correlated (0.561 at time 1 and 0.56 at time 2), factor analysis confirms they are two distinct concepts (all online expression items load on one factor with loadings ranging from .753 to .867, and all political SNS items load on

a second factor with loadings ranging from .723 to .819). Therefore, both theoretically and empirically, it is important to study online expression and political SNS use as separate concepts.

7 Restricted model not reported but available from the authors upon request.

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