Social Science Computer Review

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>> Version of Record - Jan 21, 2010

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Jun 12, 2009

What is This?

The Revolution Will be Networked

The Influence of Social Networking Sites on Political Attitudes and Behavior

Weiwu Zhang
Thomas J. Johnson
Trent Seltzer
Shannon L. Bichard
Texas Tech University

Social networking is a phenomenon of interest to many scholars. While most of the recent research on social networking sites has focused on user characteristics, very few studies have examined their roles in engaging people in the democratic process. This paper relies on a telephone survey of Southwest residents to examine the extent to which reliance on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube has engaged citizens in civic and political activities. More specifically, this study looks at the extent to which social networking sites influence political attitudes and democratic participation after controlling for demographic variables and the role of interpersonal political discussion in stimulating citizen participation. The findings indicate that reliance on social networking sites is significantly related to increased civic participation, but not political participation. Interpersonal discussion fosters both civic participation and political activity. Implications of the results for democratic governance will be discussed.

Keywords: *social networking; Internet; Facebook; MySpace; YouTube; political attitudes; civic activities; democratic participation; democratic governance*

Just before the 2004 presidential election, The *New York Times* (2004) wrote an op-ed article declaring "the revolution will be posted." The piece discussed how blogs transformed the 2004 presidential race. For the 2008 presidential campaign, the *Times* could have easily done a follow-up piece declaring "the revolution will be networked," given the role of social networking sites in the 2008 presidential campaign and how they have affected users' political attitudes and behaviors.

A survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered that of those who connect to social network sites, 40% had used them to engage in some political activity, from getting information or signing up as a friend of the candidate to discovering a friend's political interests or affiliations during the 2008 primary season (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Although political web sites and blogs attract those who are already politically active, social

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network sites may be bringing in new voters, particularly the young, to get involved in the political process (Toronto Star, 2008).

Most of the work on social network sites has focused on user characteristics and motives (Boyd, 2004; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2008; Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007, 2008; Royal, 2008; Sweetser & Weaver-Lariscy, 2007), whereas a few studies have examined their roles in earlier campaigns (Gueorguieva, 2007; Williams & Gulati, 2007). Little attention has been paid as to how social network sites affect social capital measures such as political participation, civic participation and confidence in government, even though it seems clear that social networks are engaging people in the democratic process.

This study uses a telephone survey of Southwest residents to examine the extent to which reliance on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube has increased users' confidence in government and political and civic participation. More specifically, this study examines the extent to which social networking sites influences political confidence, political participation, and civic participation after controlling for demographic variables.

Social Capital and Civic and Political Participation

Social capital represents social resources that facilitate social action to produce desirable benefits (Coleman, 1990) and is inherent in long-lasting social relations as potential energy in a society (Paxton, 1999).

Civic and political participations, in this article, are viewed as the consequences of social capital. Civic participation refers to activities that address community concerns through non-governmental or non-electoral means, such as volunteering for building a homeless shelter or working on a community project. Political participation concerns the activities that aim at directly or indirectly influencing the selection of elected officials and/or the development and implementation of public policy (Delli Carpini, 2004). Both civic participation and political participation play an important role in building a community. Empirical studies argue that the two types of participation are related in some ways. For instance, Wilkins (2000) found civic participation a significant positive predictor of political participation. Even as Putnam (1995a) argued the two are different concepts, he included political activities in his examples of civic engagement. If one shifts the focus from examining ways of participating to make government work to ways of working together outside of government citizens can make their community a better place to live, then both forms of participation become important. Contract democracy theorists also argued that the purpose of government is to improve the welfare of its citizens. In this study, we will examine the distinctions and connections between civic and political participation.

Trust is defined as expectations that "people have of each other, of the organizations and institutions in which they live, and of the natural and moral social orders, that set the fundamental understandings for their lives" (Barber, 1983, p. 165). High trust indicates feelings of connectedness to one another in a community and a "standing decision" to give most people—even acquaintances or complete strangers—the benefit of the doubt (Delli Carpini, 2004). Individuals with higher trust expect others to follow the same rules or beliefs and are more likely to belong to community groups, socialize with others informally,

volunteer, and cooperate with others to solve community problems (Orbell & Dawes, 1991; Levi, 1996). This expectation occurs among individuals or between an individual and social and political institutions.

When people are tightly bound to an association, their trust for their fellow members usually grows and the aggregate social capital increases. As a result, people are more likely to participate in civic or political activities (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Putnam, 1995a; Sullivan & Transue, 1999; Uslaner, 1998). The relationships among trust and civic engagement have formed a "virtuous circle" (Putnam, 1995b; Shah, 1998); that is, they are tightly reciprocal and mutually causal.

Mass Media and Civic and Political Participation

In addition to social capital, mass media use is another determinant of civic and political participation. One of the enduring questions about the relationship between media use and political or civic participation is whether attitudes and norms such as trust and reciprocity that emanate from media use stand alongside social networks as ingredients enabling a society to solve problems. Putnam argued (1995a, 1995b) that media, particularly television, actually saps time that people would otherwise spend engaging in political or civic activities. He also argued that media create distrust of others, which in turn, depress civic or political activities.

However, these arguments for adverse media effects on civic engagement have been criticized as "intuitively appealing yet simplistic" (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001, p. 465). More importantly, scholars have maintained that it is not time spent with television that matters but the specific types of media content that influence citizens' civic and political participation (e.g., McLeod, 2000). They also advocate that the varied functions media serve and multiple motives of media users should be considered in accounting for media influence on civic and political participation (Shah, McLeod, and Yoon, 2001). To date, no single theory of mass communication can yet incorporate all these factors together and provide a sound explanation for the correlation between media use and civic and political participation. The existing findings, however, suggest at least two directions.

First, research illustrates that media consumption does not necessarily impede individuals' civic and political activities. For instance, television viewing (Putnam, 1995a, 1995b) and Internet use (Kraut et al., 1998) have been accused of being the culprits for civic disengagement, whereas newspaper reading has been consistently found to increase civic and political participation. Both cross-sectional surveys (McLeod et al., 1996, McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Norris, 1996; Shah et al., 2001) and longitudinal studies (Smith, 1986) have demonstrated a positive relationship between newspaper reading and political participation. Furthermore, Shah et al. (2001) found this positive relationship to hold across all generations, including young people who are much less likely to read newspapers.

Second, variations in content exert different influences on civic and political participation. For instance, although viewing TV programs that provide diversion from mundane daily life such as science fictions and reality shows has been found to be negatively related to civic participation, long hours of exposure and attention to public affairs programs on television have actually been found to enhance political participation (McLeod et al., 1996, 1999; Norris, 1996; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001).

The Internet has been criticized for undermining face-to-face social interaction since it became popular more than a decade ago (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000; Vitalari, Venkatech, & Gronhaug, 1985;), although it has been found to enhance civic participation sometimes (Shah et al., 2001; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donavan, 2002; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Recent work on civic participation (e.g., Davis, Elin, & Reeher, 2004) concluded that the Internet's greatest impact lied in social and civic but not on the electoral or governmental arena. The Internet sometimes serves as a catalyst for building civic communities and as a networking tool for civic participation. In essence, the effect of the Internet on civic participation is contingent upon how individuals use the Internet. Information-oriented use such as information acquiring and exchange on the Internet provides users with opportunities for civic recruitment and further encourages political participation. However, recreation-oriented use like playing online games, visiting chat rooms, and exploring multiuser dungeons tends to establish users' social interaction online and make them alienated from strong interpersonal ties in the off-line community, all of which eventually erodes civic engagement (Shah et al., 2001, 2002).

Interpersonal Discussion and Social Capital

Interpersonal discussion is a topic of interest for many mass communication researchers because varied discussion plays a distinct role in creating the dialogue necessary for sound political deliberation (Brundidge, 2006, 2008; de Tocqueville, 1965). Political information can be transmitted and exchanged through social interaction. Such discussion plays a major role in political learning, attitude formation, and behavior (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987). Studies have revealed that interpersonal discussion about politics leads to an increase in political involvement (Calhoun, 1988; McLeod et al., 1999) as well as factual knowledge about politics (Eveland & Scheufele, 1998; Scheufele, 1999, 2000). McLeod et al. (1999) found that people who participated in frequent issue-specific political discussion had a better understanding of politics and were more politically sophisticated.

Political conversation often facilitates an increased desire to participate in political activities (Katz, 1992) because the very act of talking to one another helps to crystallize opinions. Deliberation also serves to empower citizens (Warren, 1992), which can lead to more political activity. Gastil and Dillard (1999) suggest a positive relationship between deliberative discussion and political knowledge. Political conversation contributes to the development of higher quality opinions because of the refinement inherent in back and forth dialogue (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Eliasoph (1998) noted that discussion about politics fostered a deeper understanding of political facts and thus had an impact on an individual's appreciation and desire to participate in the political process. This involvement may even lead to feelings of confidence in government policy.

Communication with others galvanizes political activity because citizens acquire information about issues and community problems from their face-to-face interaction. Through discussion, individuals learn about specific opportunities and ways to participate. This is especially true for local engagement efforts. Stamm, Emig, and Hesse (1997) suggest a key role of interpersonal discussion as "the primary mechanism for community

integration.'' Interpersonal communication networks serve to promote political participation by offering detailed information regarding how to get involved and by conveying a sense of duty and obligation to serve the local community (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1995).

Research asserts that with whom one has interpersonal discussion also has an impact on political variables (Brundidge, 2006; Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, & Nisbet, 2006). Discussion with likeminded individuals serves to solidify party affiliation and contributes to voting along party lines (Cho, 2005; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). The development of homogeneous social networks reinforces existing political dispositions often leading to more actively empowered political behavior (Carey, 1989; Walsh, 2003).

However, a more diverse social network stimulates discussion of controversial topics. Past analyses have found that citizens with more heterogeneous discussion networks are more likely to participate in community forums and assorted political activities (McLeod et al., 1999; Scheufele et al., 2006). Network heterogeneity appears to increase the need for information on a wider range of topics. Studies suggest that discussion of politics with those of different perspectives generates positive democratic outcomes such as increased political knowledge and tolerance (Brundidge, 2006, 2008; Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, and Kaye (2008) note that the personal nature of face-to-face discussion may contribute to the development of more politically tolerant attitudes. It is apparent that interpersonal discussion with those of similar and different viewpoints serves to stimulate political activity at many levels.

Social Networking Sites and Social Capital

Because studies suggest that people primarily use social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook to keep in contact with their existing groups of friends and acquaintances and that they use social network sites to learn more about individuals they meet offline (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006), studies examining whether social network sites boost social capital focus on their ability to enhance sense of community, specifically whether they can build bridging and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital is found between individuals in more tightly knit, homogeneous communities, such as family and friends, and may provide emotional support. Bridging social capital involves connecting more heterogeneous groups of people to bring about social and political change (Putnam, 2000).

Social networking sites may increase both bonding and bridging social capital. Studies find that social network users are significantly more likely to use the sites to connect with someone they know off-line than meeting new people and perceive that the primary audiences for their SNS profile are people who they are connected to off-line, suggesting that social networking sites increase bonding social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Social network sites also allow users to join groups and causes that could potentially bring them in contact with a diverse group of people. Nearly 80% of Facebook and MySpace users in one survey had joined a group (Royal, 2008), suggesting that social network sites can also create bridging capital. Indeed, studies suggest that intensity of social

network use is connected to both bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Royal, 2008). Relationships were stronger for bridging social capital, probably because social network sites easily allow individuals to join groups or causes (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007).

Less attention has been paid to whether social networking sites influence political attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, no studies could be found that have examined how social network sites are linked to civil and political participation and confidence in government. Postelnicu and Cozma (2008) provided mixed support for the notion that social networking use influences political attitudes. Their respondents reported high levels of political efficacy (4.6 on a 5-point scale) and campaign interest (3.96 on a 5-point scale). However, motivations had little influence on campaign involvement, interest, and efficacy. Indeed, relying on social network sites for social utility (e.g., to meet other supporters of the candidate, to find out what other people have to say about the candidate, and to engage in discussions with candidates) led to less online political activity. Relying on social networking sites for information seeking did not predict any of the political measures. The authors suggested that perhaps the relationship between media sources and political attitudes is not always a direct one as other factors such as a person's personality trait or affective state at the time of media consumption may serve as intervening variables (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1997).

Papacharissi and Mendelson (2008) found that expressive information seeking (a need to share both general and personal information with others) and relaxing entertainment correlated with bridging social capital, whereas relaxing entertainment was linked with bonding social capital. When the authors controlled for social and psychological measures, motives for using social networking sites dropped out as predictors of bonding social capital, although using social networking sites for relaxing entertainment significantly predicted bridging social capital.

Social Networking Sites in the 2008 Presidential Campaign

Although social networking sites may not appear to be a source of news because of their focus on connecting friends, 40% of all social networking users have used MySpace and Facebook for political information, with 20% using them to discover the political interests of their friends and 22% seeking campaign information from social networking sites. Young voters in particular rely on social network sites, with nearly half using them for political information. Young voters see themselves as more than consumers of news but conduits, emailing friends links and videos and receiving them in return (Stelter, 2008).

Political observers have credited Obama's understanding of social networking sites as one of the main reasons he succeeded in the election, using his own site, mybarackobama. com, as well as both mainstream (MySpace and Facebook) and niche sites (redandblueamerica) to raise funds, attract volunteers, and publicize campaign events (Cohen, 2008). Observers have also credited Obama's huge advantage in campaign fund-raising and organizing volunteers in the general election for helping defeat John McCain. Obama signed up 2.4 million Facebook users as supporters, compared with just 624,000 for McCain. A Facebook virtual ticker that recorded how many users actually voted clocked more than 5 million Facebook users by the time all the polls closed. Facebook helped bring in new

voters, which provided Obama with much of his margin of victory. The number of voters under 30 rose by 3.4 million compared with 2004 and about 66% of those voters supported Obama (Sanchez, 2008).

Individual Political Factors

A number of individual political variables exert influence not only on political and civic participation but also on citizen's trust and confidence in government. These factors include political interest, political efficacy, political trust, and party identification.

Lupia and Philpot (2005) defined political interest as ''a citizen's willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other topics'' (p. 112). A healthy democracy depends on an electorate that exhibits interest in the political process. Increased interest in politics has been linked to higher levels of political activity (Verba et al., 1995) and political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Political knowledge, in turn, is particularly important for promoting active participation in the political process (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Jennings, 1996). This political knowledge can be obtained through education, interpersonal discussion, and the news media (Kenski & Stroud, 2006).

Declining political interest, particularly among young people (Soule, 2001), is a concern. Delli Carpini (2000) proposed that traditional political institutions not only fail to engage younger citizens in a way that they can relate to but also ignore issues with which they are concerned. Instead, these institutions focus on communication with older citizens who are more likely to be politically active and whose actions consequently have greater implications for these institutions.

Lupia and Philpot (2005) argue that using online communication can help engage young adults by stimulating political interest. However, other scholars fear that the Internet will only increase the gap between those who are politically interested and those who are not. For example, Delli Carpini and Keeter (2003) proposed that those who would be most likely to use web sites to obtain political information would be individuals who already exhibit greater levels of political interest and knowledge.

In addition to political interest, political efficacy is an important political variable. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) define political efficacy as ''the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change'' (p. 187). Perceptions of political efficacy are a prerequisite for political participation because citizens must first believe that they are capable of affecting change before they are able to see the value of actively engaging in the political process (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982). Lee (2006) proposed that the Internet could potentially facilitate increased political efficacy by helping users interact with politically active social groups; additionally, the Internet could provide a relatively easy way for users to be involved in the political process by providing a channel for communicating with and applying pressure to political institutions. That being said, many studies have failed to find a connection between Internet use and political efficacy (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Lin & Lim, 2002).

Another important individual-level political factor is political trust. Political trust has been defined as a perception of ''whether or not political authorities and institutions are

performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public'' (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 358). Political trust affects compliance with governmental authority (Scholz & Lubell, 1998), voting behavior (Hetherington, 1998), and provides the legitimacy that the government needs to take action (Easton, 1965; Gershtenson, Ladewig, & Plane, 2006). Some recent studies have provided mixed results regarding Internet use and political trust, with some indicating that increased Internet use was related to lower levels of political cynicism (Tedesco & Kaid, 2000), whereas other studies failed to demonstrate a connection (Kaid, 2002).

The final political variable we consider is party identification. Goren (2005) defines party identification as ''a sense of personal, affective attachment to a political party based on feelings of closeness to the social groups associated with the parties'' (p. 881); that is to say, social identification with a group exhibiting partisan leanings leads to identifying more closely with that party. Partisanship is important, in that it provides the basis for the formation of policy positions, evaluation of government officials, and voting behavior (Alvarez & Brehm, 2002; Feldman, 1988) and has been linked to political trust (Gershtenson et al., 2006). Party identification can lead to greater political trust and increased confidence in government when an individual's party is in power (Citrin, 1974; Citrin & Luks, 2001; Gershtenson et al., 2006; King, 1997; Schaffner & Clark, 2004).

Motivations and Political Attitudes

Research has suggested that the link between media use and political attitudes and behaviors is influenced by what motivates people to search out information. Specifically, studies have discovered a stronger link between information-oriented use and political attitudes and behaviors than entertainment-oriented use (Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore, 2005; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Wellman et al., 2001).

Although studies are mixed on whether social motivations in general have a strong political impact (Moy et al., 2005; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Wellman et al., 2001), it is clear that online political discussion influences political activities and cognitions (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Moy et al., 2005) and if social motivations are measured in terms of political uses of social media then social needs influence political cognitions and activities (Moy et al., 2005). For instance, studies indicate that political chat serves both social and information seeking needs (Atkin et al., 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2004, 2006; Moy et al., 2005) and that political chat influences political behaviors and attitudes (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Moy et al., 2005).

Not surprisingly, studies of motivations for visiting social network sites find they primarily serve social interaction needs (Boyd, 2004; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2008; Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007, 2008; Royal, 2008; Sweetser & Weaver-Lariscy, 2007). For instance, Postelnicu and Cozma (2008) discovered that those who visited candidate profiles on MySpace primarily did so to meet other supporters of the candidates, to find out what other people have to say about the candidates, and, to a lesser degree, to engage in discussion with the candidates.

People also rely on social networks to gratify informational needs such as finding out information about the candidate or even to help them decide whom to support (Papacharissi

& Mendelson, 2008; Postelnicu & Cozma, 2008). Postelnicu and Cozma argue that social network sites may be linked to information seeking, in that they provide a convenient way for voters to seek out information of a candidate.

Research Questions

This study attempts to understand some of the relationships among political variables, reliance on social networking sites, interpersonal political discussion, confidence in government, and civic and political participation, by seeking answers to the following questions:

Research Question 1: What are the effects of (a) political variables, (b) reliance on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube, and (c) interpersonal discussion of politics on political participation?

Research Question 2: What are the effects of (a) political variables, (b) reliance on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube, and (c) interpersonal discussion of politics on civic participation?

Research Question 3: What are the effects of (a) political variables, (b) reliance on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube, and (c) interpersonal discussion of politics on confidence in government?

Methodology

A telephone survey of 998 respondents residing in a midsized city and its surrounding county was conducted between February 27 and March 11, 2008, by trained interviewers in a research methods course at a major university in the southwestern United States. Respondents were selected randomly from a database of county residents. The response rate was 30.2%.

Dependent Variables

This study employed three measures of social capital: civic participation, political participation, and confidence in government.

Political participation items were adapted from the National Election Studies. It was measured by an index of six items (Cronbach's alpha = .64) where zero meant "*no*" and one meant "*yes*" so that the higher the number, the more citizens participated in politics. Respondents were asked whether in the past year they had (a) worked or volunteered for a political party or candidate, (b) worn a campaign button, put a bumper sticker on their car, or put up a campaign yard sign, (c) tried to persuade someone to vote for their preferred candidate, (d) attended a campaign function to support a candidate, (e) given money to a candidate or party, and (f) signed a petition for a cause or candidate.

Respondents' *civic participation* was the additive measure of five items (Cronbach's alpha = .63) where respondents were asked whether in the past year they (a) had volunteered for any local governmental board dealing with community issues, (b) went to see, spoke to, or wrote to members of local government about needs or problems, (c) had worked

with others in the community to solve community problems, (d) took part in a protest or demonstration on a local issue, and (e) took part in forming a group to solve community problems.

Confidence in government was the additive measure of three items using a 5-point scale where 1 meant "*lowest confidence*" and 5 meant "*highest confidence.*" Measures included (a) "how confident are you that political leaders are working in the best interest of the country," (b) "how confident are you in the government's ability to create jobs," and (c) "how confident are you that the government has made the country safer from terrorism since September 11, 2001?" (Cronbach's alpha = .70).

Independent Variables

Reliance on social networking sites and interpersonal discussion were the major independent variables employed in the study.

Reliance on social networking sites was a single-item measure using a 7-point scale where 1 meant "*don't rely on at all*" and 7 meant "*heavily rely on.*" Respondents were asked the degree to which they relied on such social networking sites as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube.

Interpersonal political discussion was the additive measure of three items on 4-point scales where 1 meant "*never*" and 4 meant "*frequently.*" Respondents were asked how often the respondent discusses political issues with (a) family, friends, and co-workers; (b) people with very conservative views; and (c) people with very liberal views (Cronbach's alpha = .76).

Control Variables

The study used three political measures (efficacy, ideology, and political interest) as control measures along with four demographic variables (age, gender, race, and education).

Efficacy was an additive measure of three Likert-type items adapted from the National Election Studies. Respondents were asked the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with three statements on a 5-point scale where 1 meant "*strongly disagree*" and 5 meant "*strongly agree*": (a) my representative cares about my opinion; (b) my vote will make a difference in the election; and (c) every vote counts in an election (Cronbach's alpha = .74).

Respondents were asked about their interest in politics in general on a 7-point scale where 1 meant "*not interested*" and 7 meant "*absolutely interested.*" They were also queried about their ideology and whether they considered themselves conservative, moderate, or liberal.

Data Analysis Strategies

Data analysis for this study proceeded in two steps. First, frequencies were run on demographic and political variables, reliance on social networking sites, and frequency of political discussion. Second, a hierarchical regression was conducted to answer the three research questions. Demographic variables were entered as the first block, and political variables were entered as the second block. Reliance on social networking sites was entered as the third, followed by interpersonal discussion of politics as the fourth block.

Results

Respondent Profile

The respondent pool was 64.8% female, and the median age was 52 years. Education was assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from "8th grade or less" to "graduate degree." The sample median was 4, which means "having attended some college." Respondents were 74.4% White, 15.8% Hispanic, 6.7% Black, 2.2% Native American, and 0.9% Asian. About 50% of respondents identified themselves as conservative, 37.2% as moderate, and 12.5% said they were liberal. The average score for political interest was about 5, indicating that respondents were quite interested in politics. Respondents were also asked about how much they discussed politics with different groups. Although 43.9% of respondents reported that they frequently discuss politics with their family, friends, and co-workers, 34.8% said sometimes, meanwhile, 32.2% said that they frequently discuss politics with conservative people, and 31.1% said sometimes. Only 18.2% reported that they frequently discuss politics with liberal people, 28.8% said sometimes, 31.2% answered rarely, and 21.8% said never. The mean for the index combing all three measures was 3, which means respondents sometimes discuss politics with their families, friends, co-workers, conservative, and liberal people ($SD = 0.83$).

Respondents were asked to what extent they relied on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube; 76.4% said that they do not rely on social networking sites at all, whereas only 3.8% said that they rely heavily on such sites ($M = 1.7$, $SD = 1.6$), meaning respondents rarely or never rely on social networking sites.

Predictors of Social Capital Measures

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to investigate the three research questions. The first research question examined the effects of (a) political variables, (b) reliance on social networking sites, and (c) interpersonal political discussion on political participation. As seen in Table 1, the more respondents discussed politics with others, the more they participated in politics ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$). Reliance on social networking sites was not significantly related to political participation. In terms of political variables, the more interest people had in politics, the more they would participate in politics ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$); the more people were politically efficacious, the more they would involve in politics ($\beta = .12$, $p < .001$). People with more education were more likely to participate in political activities ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$), so were elder people ($\beta = .11$, $p < .01$)

The second research question examined the effects of (a) political variables, (b) reliance on social networking sites, and (c) interpersonal political discussion on civic participation. Table 1 represents reliance on social networking sites was significantly related to civic participation ($\beta = .14$, $p < .001$); the more respondents discussed politics with others, the more they participated in civic activities ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$). People who were more interested in politics were more likely to participate in politics ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$). Male respondents were more likely to participate in civic activities ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$, female coded higher), and more educated people were also more likely to participate in civic activities ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$).

Table 1
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Investigating RQ1 Through RQ3

	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
	Political Participation	Civic Participation	Confidence in Government
Demographics			
Age	.11**	.04	−.01
Gender (female coded higher)	−.05	−.12***	.17*
Education	.17***	.20***	−.21*
Race (dummy variable, White coded higher)	−.02	−.04	.04
R^2 (%)	7.9**	7.7***	5.1
Political variables			
Political interest	.20***	.07*	.18
Ideology	−.003	−.02	−.09
Efficacy	.12***	.04	.36***
Incremental R^2 (%)	10.6**	2.8**	17.8***
Reliance on social networking sites	.04	.14***	.14
Incremental R^2 (%)	.2	1.7***	1.5
Interpersonal discussion of politics	.18***	.17***	−.08
Incremental R^2 (%)	2.2**	2.2**	.4
Total R^2 (%)	20.8**	14.3***	24.9*

Note: RQ = research question.
*$p < .05$;
**$p < .01$;
***$p < .001$.

The third research question examined the effects between (a) political variables, (b) reliance on social networking sites, and (c) interpersonal political discussion on confidence in government. Neither reliance on social networking sites nor interpersonal political discussion was significantly related to confidence in government. However, people with higher political efficacy were more likely to have confidence in government ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). Females had higher confidence in government ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$), and people with more education had lower confidence in government ($\beta = −.21$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Contribution

The burgeoning research on social networking sites has focused on user characteristics and motivations for such use as evidenced in the uses and gratifications literature. This study is one of very few studies that have investigated the effects of reliance on social networking sites, interpersonal political discussion, efficacy, and ideology, on various forms of citizen participation and confidence in government. Results showed that reliance on social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace was positively related to civic

participation but not to political participation or confidence in government, which was not surprising, because these social networking sites are geared toward maintaining relationships with their friends and can have the potential for stimulating community involvement.

Interpersonal political discussion was significantly related to both civic and political participation, which reinforces findings of previous studies (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999) that interpersonal political discussion enhances the level of political participation and makes citizens better able to judge alternative policies. However, it did not have significant impact on confidence in government. It seemed that interpersonal political discussion influences political behavior but not necessarily political attitude (e.g., Zhang & Seltzer, 2008). It can be concluded that to stimulate civic and political participation, we need to focus on encouraging citizens to engage more interpersonal discussion about politics.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research is based on a survey of a community that is arguably more conservative than much of the nation. The extent to which residents rely on these social networking sites and the fact that this research was conducted during an election year had some bearing on the level of citizen participation and their political attitudes.

In addition, although the focus of this study is to examine the effects of social networking sites on political attitudes and behavior, future research can look at various forms of new media channels such as specific web sites, blogs, and social networking sites to delineate their differential effects on political attitudes and participation as the Internet has been touted as a powerful tool for enhancing citizen democratic participation.

The result that reliance on social networking sites was significantly related to civic participation but not political participation poses an interesting question of whether a distinction between civic and political participation is a useful endeavor. Schudson (1998) suggested that more than half of the typical private organizations' revenues come from federal, state, or local government. Because of the importance of government funding, these private associations behave more like interest groups that interact with the political system to obtain more funding. This argues for considering civic and political participation as two related dimensions of the underlying behavior of working to improve one's community. One might also examine more closely other aspects of participation: Putnam's (1995a) emphasis on group participation, Kim, Wyatt and Katz's (1997) focus on deliberative participation, focus of McLeod et al. (1999) on public forum participation, and Barnes, Kaase, et al's (1979) unconventional participation such as protests, boycotts, and unofficial strikes. It goes without saying, the investigation of the connections of and distinctions among multiple dimensions of citizen participation and their political and various media channel reliance will be a fruitful avenue for future research (Zhang & Chia, 2006).

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Weiwu Zhang is an assistant professor of mass communication at Texas Tech University and may be reached at `weiwu.zhang@ttu.edu`.

Thomas J. Johnson is Marshall and Sharleen Formby Regents professor of mass communication at Texas Tech University and may be contacted at `t,johnson@ttu.edu`.

Trent Seltzer is assistant professor of mass communication at Texas Tech University and may be contacted at `trent.seltzer@ttu.edu`.

Shannon L. Bichard is associate professor of mass communication at Texas Tech University and may be contacted at `shannon.bichard@ttu.edu`.