THESIS

NEW PARTICIPATION, NEW PERSPECTIVES?

YOUNG ADULTS' POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT USING FACEBOOK

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis was designed to explore how young adults understand and experience political engagement on Facebook. Some scholars suggest that traditional, active forms of political participation may be declining, creating an uncertain future for democracy. However, other findings suggest that young adults may be choosing to engage in politics through non-traditional avenues, including social networking websites. To explore this possibility, this thesis used 20 in-depth interviews to investigate the nature of youth's political participation on Facebook.

The data suggest that Facebook is a meaningful space for political engagement among youth, but that engagement on Facebook is not necessarily comparable to traditional definitions of participation. Rather, it is helpful to think about Facebook as a place for political expression and talk. In addition, the data suggest that scholars should not assume study participants share the same definition of politics with each other or with researchers. As a result, this study argues that scholars should adjust their measures of political engagement on Facebook to account for its features that make political participation unique, rather than assuming that non-traditional participation via social networking websites has limited value or meaning.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, scholars of political participation have emphasized the importance of certain kinds of political activities. Voting, campaigning, and donating money are central to many traditional measures of political participation, and are seen by many scholars as the foundation of successful democracy (Barber, 1984; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Dahl, 1989; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Putnam, 2000; Verba & Nie, 1972). Recently, however, studies have demonstrated that these types of political participation seem to be declining, especially among younger individuals (Delli Carpini, 2000; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Putnam, 1995; 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

But how much do we really know about these declines in participation? Is it possible that traditional measures of political participation do not capture all of the ways that citizens are participating today? Perhaps this measured decline results not from a less active and interested citizenry, but instead represents a shift in how and where people participate that is not captured by traditional measures. Scholars such as Bang (2005) and Bang and Sørensen (1999) have argued that political participation is not declining, but rather is being carried out in different ways. They suggest that citizens are finding more practical, flexible, and individual ways to address causes or issues that they find meaningful. Other scholars have found evidence that youth are using social networking websites such as Facebook to address political and social concerns (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010).Young internet users ages 18-

24 are more likely to post political content on social networking sites like Facebook than any other age group, and are least likely to use the internet for more traditional political activities, such as donating money (Smith et al., 2009).

If new forms of political participation are taking place on social networking sites, what do they look like? Recently, many Facebook users found that the familiar faces of their friends had been replaced with profile pictures of Rainbow Brite, Bart Simpson, Bugs Bunny, and other cartoon characters. Status updates accompanying the pictures proclaimed that the images were meant to raise awareness about child abuse. Several months earlier, Facebook users posted their bra colors to raise awareness about breast cancer. What do these trends mean? Is there anything meaningful about them? Are these activities signs of new types of political engagement? Or are these simply empty gestures of "slacktivism" that have no political meaning or impact?

Although many scholars would dismiss such Facebook activities as unimportant, others suggest that Facebook and other social networking sites provide an important public space for youth to address and talk about issues they find meaningful and relevant (boyd, 2007b; 2010). As some individuals are uninterested in participation through traditional political parties or systems (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999), online spaces may be important for explorations of youth's political participation. However, few existing measures of political participation include everyday forms of participation that may be taking place among youth.

To help address this problem, this thesis used 20 in-depth qualitative interviews to examine the meaning of political participation on Facebook among Facebook users ages 18-24. Rather than assuming that traditional measures or definitions of political

participation apply to youth's activities in online spaces, this thesis asked youth to share

their views and experiences of political participation on Facebook. In particular, this

project sought to examine youths' own definitions of what makes something political – or

not – in this medium. Importantly, the results of these interviews and subsequent data

analysis include practical suggestions to help researchers create better measures of young

people's political participation using Facebook and other social media.

Research Questions

To explore youth's political participation on Facebook, this project examines the

following research questions:

RQ1: How do youth define and describe political participation on Facebook?

RQ1.A. What topics do youth include and exclude from the definition of

meaningful political participation on Facebook?

RQ1.B. What actions do youth include and exclude from the definition of

meaningful political participation on Facebook?

RQ1.C. What functions do youth include or exclude as a part of meaningful

political participation on Facebook?

RQ1.D. What phrases or language do youth use to describe political participation

on Facebook?

RQ2: How do social norms affect youth's political participation on Facebook?

RQ2.A. What topics do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.B. What actions do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.C. What functions or purposes for participation do youth consider

acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.D. What ways of talking about political participation do youth consider

acceptable or unacceptable?

Organization of Thesis

Chapter 2 in this thesis discusses traditional definitions of political participation,

and reviews findings that suggest traditional forms of participation are decreasing,

especially among youth. It then presents alternative perspectives that suggest that

political participation is not disappearing, but rather that social and economic shifts have

led younger generations to participate in new ways, including using social networks such

as Facebook for political purposes (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Bennett, 1998;

Dalton, 2006; 2008). Because such newer forms of participation are not captured by

traditional measures, such as those used by the American National Election Studies

(ANES), it argues that updated measures are needed in order to be more inclusive to

youth's preferences for participation.

Chapter 3 turns to ways that the internet and social networking sites are affecting

political participation. It summarizes research about who is using the internet and

Facebook for political participation, how the internet is being used for political

participation, and how specific features of the internet are changing participation. Then,

the chapter applies these questions to Facebook, in order to demonstrate why Facebook is

an important space for an exploration of youth's everyday political participation.

Furthermore, it asserts that the norms surrounding political participation and social

engagement on Facebook have an important impact on participation in that space, and a

study about participation on Facebook is incomplete without a consideration of such

norms. Theoretical perspectives such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), models

of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980), and the influence of perceived opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) provide insight into youth's everyday political engagement on Facebook. Chapter 3 also presents the research questions and objectives for this thesis.

Chapter 4, Methods, explains how in-depth, qualitative interviews were used to gather data to explore the research questions and objectives for this study. It demonstrates why qualitative interviews were a useful approach to gather data for this particular project, and explains the process that was used to analyze interview data.

Chapter 5, Results, discusses the findings from this thesis project, providing support for the idea that Facebook is an important and relevant space for the study of political participation and political talk. The chapter also provides evidence that social norms do affect political participation on Facebook.

Chapter 6, Discussion, explains the implications of the study for future studies of political participation, and makes practical suggestions for ways that scholars can conduct further research about political participation and the social norms of political participation on social networking websites.

Finally, Chapter 7, Conclusions, reviews the reasons this study was conducted, recaps the research questions and processes that were used, and reviews the results and implications of the this thesis study. The chapter also lists the limitations of this study, and gives suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2. TRADITIONAL AND EVERYDAY PARTICIPATION: NEW MODES, NEW MEASURES

Traditional acts of political participation, such as voting or volunteering for political campaigns, have been the subject of a long tradition of scholarship that identifies these acts as a prerequisite for effective democracy (Barber, 1984; Berelson et al., 1954; Dahl, 1989; Habermas, 1984; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Putnam, 1995; 2000; Verba & Nie, 1972). Participation is the main way citizens can express their needs and desires and influence the distribution of important resources (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989; Fishkin, 1995; Habermas, 1996; Verba & Nie, 1972). However, a number of scholars have recently drawn attention to apparent declines in these forms of political participation, particularly among youth[1] (Bennett, 2008; Delli Carpini, 2000; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Putnam, 1995; 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Although these patterns are worth studying, scholars have also begun to debate the possibility that current patterns of political engagement are different from those of previous generations and thus not always captured in the measures currently used (Bennett, 1998; Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Dalton, 2006; 2008).

This chapter discusses political participation as it has been traditionally defined, including findings about decreasing participation, and examines ways in which new forms of political and civic participation have begun to emerge. It argues that political

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[1] The term youth is used frequently in the political participation literature, but does not always refer to the same age group. For example, Delli Carpini (2000) uses youth to refer to individuals between the ages of 15-30. Harris, Wyn, & Younes (2010) refer to youth as those between 15-18, and Bennett (2008) refers to those ages 15-25. In general, the studies cited here refer to individuals somewhere between the ages of 15-25. In Chapter 4, I use the term youth to refer to individuals who are 18-24 years old.

participation is manifested in new or less recognized forms such as social media, which may mean that declines in participation are not as great as some studies suggest. Many newer forms of engagement are not identified as political participation in traditional surveys such as those of the American National Election Studies (ANES). Evidence suggests, however, that the internet is being used as a space for engaging in different types of political talk and activity, especially among youth who may feel unwelcome in more traditional political spaces (Schlozman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). This chapter argues that these types of engagement are important and worthy of attention, requiring scholars to reconsider the meaning and definition of political participation as well as the measures used to examine it.

Traditional Political Participation

Traditional forms of political participation have been the subject of a great deal of research (e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Although there are a number of definitions, political participation is frequently described as the activities that allow individuals to express their needs and desires and in some way influence the selection of public officials and the creation of public policy (Norris, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). Van Deth (2001) observed that definitions of political participation make the following four assumptions: Political participation: a) involves action, not merely expression of interest or sideline observation, b) is undertaken by citizens rather than elected officials, c) is undertaken freely, and d) takes place in a variety of contexts and times; it is not limited to local or national activities, nor is it limited to actions during a campaign or election year. Often, such definitions lead scholars to focus on political activities with established

measures, such as voting, donating money, or working for a political campaign (e.g.

Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972).

A main reason scholars have focused so extensively on traditional political

participation is that such participation is an important prerequisite for effective

democracy (Barber, 1984; Berelson et al., 1954; Dahl, 1989; Habermas, 1984; Lazarsfeld

et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Putnam, 1995; 2000; Verba & Nie, 1972). Theorists of

participatory democracy have argued that citizens should have equal and sufficient

opportunities to influence each stage of the political process, from the creation of the

issue agenda to the policy decisions that are ultimately made (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989).

Political talk is central to this process of influence (Barber, 1984; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz,

1999). Within homogeneous groups, political talk spurs participants to engage in other

political activities (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2006). Within more diverse

groups, conversation helps participants develop their own opinions (Delli Carpini et al.,

2004; Jang, 2009; Min, 2007), understand alternative perspectives, and become more

accepting of political differences (Mutz, 2002). Without such dialogue and participation,

citizens' voices would be ignored or misunderstood, and decisions made by political

leaders would be unlikely to reflect the will of the people (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989;

Fishkin, 1995; Habermas, 1996).

Declines in Traditional Political Participation

Despite extensive research documenting the importance of traditional political

participation, such participation seems to be declining. Studies have identified decreases

in nearly all traditional political activities, ranging from voting, to joining community

organizations, to talking about politics (Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2004;

Eliasoph, 1998; Phelps, 2004; Putnam, 1995; 2000; Skocpol, 2003; Whiteley & Seyd, 2002). For example, based on data from the Roper Center, Putnam (1995) noted that the number of Americans who attended community meetings declined from 22% to 13% between 1973 and 1993. Based on the Canadian Election Studies conducted between 1968 and 2000, Blais et al. (2004) found a relative 10% decline in voting turnout over time. Some scholars have argued that these declines are related to low levels of social trust, satisfaction, and trust in government (Capella & Jamieson, 1997; Lopez et al., 2006; Putnam, 1995; 2000; Rahn & Transue, 1998).

Youth are frequently the subject of studies about declining traditional political participation, as the trend of disengagement seems more pronounced among young people. Research across numerous democracies has documented that youth, compared to other age groups, are less likely to vote or express an interest in elections, and less likely to show interest in political parties or organizations. Youth are less satisfied with government than older citizens, and less trusting of other individuals (Bennett, 2008; Blais et al., 2004; Delli Carpini, 2000; Harris et al., 2010; Lopez et al., 2006). These findings about youth are certainly worthy of attention, as they do not appear to be part of a life cycle pattern, but seem to be a more stable characteristic of younger generations (Putnam, 1995; 2000).

An Alternative Perspective: Everyday Political Participation

Although it may be accurate to say that individuals are engaging in fewer *traditional* forms of political participation, it is also possible that youth and other citizens are choosing to participate in ways that are less obviously recognized and less frequently measured. In fact, many scholars have already recognized the need for an increased focus

on alternative forms of political participation that are more difficult to quantify (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2006; 2008; Milbrath & Goel, 1977). In response to earlier studies that mainly focused on voting and traditional participation, Milbrath and Goel (1977) and Barnes and Kaase (1979) call for a greater focus on acts such as protesting, signing petitions, or striking. More recently, some scholars suggest that economic and social changes are leading to shifting norms of citizenship and participation, creating an even greater need to study alternative forms of engagement, and to update definitions of political participation accordingly (Bennett, 1998; Bang; 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Dalton, 2006; 2008; Harris, 2008; Harris et al., 2010).

A number of studies support the assertion that political participation is not disappearing, but rather is being redirected toward different arenas. Bang (2005) and Bang and Sørensen (1999) challenge Putnam's (1995; 2000) argument that overall civic and political engagement is declining. Bang and Sørensen (1999) argue that Putnam's separation of civic and political participation is problematic, as such a separation does not allow for the possibility that political participation may take place in non-political spaces. Putnam's conceptualization and others like it are restrictive, as they serve to "identify the political with central government and to empty social capital and civic democratic engagement of their political content" (Bang and Sørensen, 1999, p. 326). Instead, Bang and Sørensen suggest that scholars of political participation should examine the ways in which different groups and individuals work together across a variety of spaces and issues—both political and non-political. This call is similar to one from Verba et al. (1995), who challenge scholars to more carefully examine political activities that take

place in non-political spaces, or from Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000), who argue that political talk in casual spaces is an important part of the political process.

Bennett (1998) adds that concerns about declining traditional political participation cause scholars to overlook broader, more complicated factors that are altering patterns of participation. He argues that social and economic changes over the previous five decades have disrupted the ways that individuals work and spend their free time, and consequently, how they choose to participate. Based on evidence from Georgetown University's Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy Survey (Howard, Gibson, & Stolle, 2005) and the General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2004), Dalton (2008) similarly argues that changing social and economic patterns have led to an alternative norm of political participation called *engaged citizenship,* similar to Barber's (1984) description of strong democracy. In contrast to a citizen who feels obligated to participate, an engaged citizen may act individually, hold independent beliefs and opinions, and engage in political activity to address his or her own concerns and needs. Although such actions may serve as a form of self-expression, engaged citizens also place great emphasis on addressing social needs through political action (Dalton, 2006; 2008). Bennett (2008) similarly describes these types of citizens as *actualizing citizens*, or those who want to be involved in immediate ways. This preference for engaged citizenship may lead individuals to participate in an expanded range of political activities beyond voting or campaigning (Dalton, 2006; 2008).

Everyday Makers

In keeping with the idea that patterns and norms of political participation are changing, Bang (2005) and Bang and Sørensen (1999) also identify what they call a new

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type of political citizen. *Everyday makers* are those individuals who do not view politics as being distinctly tied to traditional political institutions, systems, or parties. Rather, everyday makers view political participation as a part of daily life, something that coexists comfortably with social interaction in a variety of spaces. While traditional definitions of political participation might suggest that these citizens are apathetic, in reality, they are frequently engaged with issues and concerns that matter to them. Rather than focusing exclusively on broad political problems or working through traditional organizations, however, everyday makers "want to act locally, because they want to do things by themselves, where they are, on their own terms, and for their own purposes" (Bang, 2005, p. 169). This preference is similar to what Bennett (1998) defines as *lifestyle politics*, citizens responding to issues that affect them in very personal, relevant ways, or to the *micro political participation* described by Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (2004), who discuss participation that influences local schools or businesses. Thus, everyday makers are uninterested in ideological debates or partisan politics, which may seem like wasted efforts, and they would rather engage in activities that have obvious, direct results. Although everyday makers are not necessarily opposed to traditional participation (Bang, 2005), their preference for concrete results may help explain why some citizens forgo working through traditional avenues, where the consequences of action may seem less personal and more difficult to observe (Harris, 2008; Harris et al., 2010).

Everyday makers also depart from traditional norms of citizenship because they are not ongoing, lifelong participants in the sense of committing to a particular organization or political party. Traditional definitions of participation that differentiate

only between engaged and apathetic citizens are unable to account for the seemingly

unpredictable participation patterns of everyday makers. Such individuals may participate

whenever is convenient, or they may exert great effort on one project only to later refrain

from participating at all. Even though everyday makers may not identify with political

organizations or volunteer with the same regularity as other participants, they view their

projects and causes as meaningful, important ones (Bang, 2005).

Bang (2005) summarizes these observations about everyday makers by stating

that the "credo of everyday making is:

- do it yourself;

- do it where you are;

- do it for fun, but also because you find it necessary;

- do it ad hoc or part-time;

- do it concretely, instead of ideologically;

- do it self-confidentially and show trust in yourself;

- do it with the system, if need be" (pp. 171-172).

Although Bang (2005) and Bang and Sørensen (1999) do not examine the

demographic characteristics of everyday makers, at least one related study suggests that

individuals between the ages of 16-24 are the most likely to be everyday makers (Li &

Marsh, 2008), and Dalton (2008) also finds that younger individuals are more likely to

value engaged citizenship than duty-based citizenship. Other related evidence supports

the generational shift hypothesis, and hints that youth may fit Bang's (2005) and Bang

and Sørensen's (1999) descriptions. Youth are often uninterested in working through

traditional political institutions or parties, and may instead choose to engage with issues

that are relevant to them or their friends, schools, neighborhoods, and larger communities (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, Scarrow, & Cain, 2004; Harris, 2008; Harris et al., 2010; Li & Marsh, 2008). Longo and Meyer (2006) also note that young adults desire alternatives to traditional forms of political participation, including more community-based engagement. As one example, Kiesa et al. (2007) found that 18-25 year old participants are more interested in volunteering locally than in participating through formal political institutions, as they wanted to take more immediate action. Lopez et al. (2006) add that youth and young adults prefer to volunteer through civic, community, or religious organizations. The authors also note that youth and young adults engage in a variety of other activities beyond electoral participation: raising money for charity, contacting print or broadcast media, protesting, signing petitions, boycotting products, and purchasing products for ethical reasons.

Smith et al. (2009) find evidence that individuals in the same group are going online to participate in alternative ways: Youth are posting political content in social networks or blogs more often than they are using the internet to engage in activities with offline counterparts, such as e-mailing a candidate or making an online donation.

Importantly, youth may understand their activities to be politically meaningful even when they do not define them in traditional terms used by researchers (Harris, 2008; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003). Although youth who talk about traditional political participation often seem indifferent, youth who are asked to share their views about issues they find important display great interest in a wide variety of topics and activities (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; Kirshner et al., 2003). Recent work by Morey (unpublished manuscript) supports the contention that different ideas about

political participation may affect how youth describe participation. Using open-ended survey questions, Morey prompts 500 participants to first define politics in their own words, and then describe the content of a recent political conversation in which they participated. While Morey finds that approximately 83% of participants equated politics with government, slightly less than half (43.9%) did not think all government issues were political, and over half of participants (53.9%) included issues in addition to government matters. Morey also notes that participants who saw conflict as part of politics were more likely to recall conversations that included such conflict.

Although scholars such as van Deth (2001) have criticized definitions of political participation for being too broad, Morey (unpublished manuscript), Harris (2008), and Kirshner, et al. (2003) demonstrate that some definitions may also be too narrow. Scholars should not assume that they share the same conception of politics as their study participants. If such definitions are different, scholars decrying declines in engagement may be using limited measures to examine participation from an outdated perspective. If youth are engaging in alternative, more everyday forms of political participation, including online forms of participation, it is important to find ways to examine and measure these types of engagement—according to youth's own definitions.

Weaknesses of Traditional Political Participation Measures

Since scholars have observed that normative shifts are leading to expanded repertoires of political participation among youth, it seems logical that many studies such as the ANES would measure such activities. However, few measures are well-suited for capturing everyday forms of political activity. Instead, studies of political participation have long focused on a limited number of traditional political activities that are easier to

quantify. For example, in two early, seminal studies, Berelson et al. (1954) and Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) conducted face-to-face surveys with participants, asking about their voting intentions and actual voting behaviors. These studies identified relationships with family, friends, and members of a person's religious group as key factors that influenced voting. Importantly, studies like these ones also set the stage for voting to be a key measure of political participation in the decades to come.

Over time, scholars of political participation expanded their focus to include additional political activities. Milbrath (1965) described political participation as a hierarchy of acts requiring different levels of involvement. Voting, discussing politics, and wearing campaign buttons were labeled as *spectator activities*. Acts that required more involvement, *transitional activities*, included donating money, contacting a government official, and attending a political rally. Acts that demanded the greatest involvement, or *gladiatorial activities*, included working for a campaign, being an active party member, and campaigning for or holding office. Although Milbrath's definition moved beyond voting, his hierarchy still implied that the most important forms of participation required direct involvement with political parties or campaigns. In contrast, the literature about everyday forms of participation suggests that some individuals avoid parties or political organizations in a search for more direct influence (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999).

In their study of American political participation, Verba and Nie (1972) grouped 12 acts of participation into four distinct categories: V*oting* included regular voting in national elections and regular voting in local elections. *Campaign activity* encompassed working for parties or candidates during a campaign, donating to campaigns or

candidates, attending political meetings or rallies, and trying to affect others' voting intentions. *Citizen-initiated contacts* included sharing a concern with a local government official or sharing a concern with a state or national government official. *Cooperative group activity* consisted of working with others to address community issues, participating in an organization focused on community issues, forming a group to address local problems, or being a member of another political group. Verba and Nie's conception of participation was broader than Milbrath's (1965), particularly as it included activities that influenced more local and community issues. However, the authors intentionally limited their definition to activities that directly influenced elected officials or their decisions. As a result, even the cooperative group activity measures did not include issues outside of the traditional political realm, such as those that might be addressed by everyday participation (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999).

One of the most extensive ongoing studies of political opinion and behavior, the American National Election Studies (ANES), focuses on similar types of political participation: voting, wearing or displaying campaign buttons, stickers, or signs, volunteering for candidates or campaigns, attending political meetings, or attempting to influence others' votes. The ANES uses survey questions to capture each of these different dimensions of participation (Table 1). These questions are important, and an impressive number of political participation studies use ANES data to support their claims: The ANES bibliography cites over 5,700 of these studies (ANES, 2010a). Clearly, the ANES measures have great influence on how political participation is studied and understood. Like other important studies, however, the ANES measures do not capture any of the more individualized or fluid types of everyday participation that are becoming

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Table 1

Sample Political Participation Items from ANES Survey (ANES guide, n.d.)

Survey Topic	Question Text
Influencing others' votes	During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for (1984 and later: or against) one of the parties or candidates?
Attending political meetings	Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, (1984 and later: speeches) (1978, 1980, 1982: fund raising) dinners, or things like that (1984 and later: in support of a particular candidate)?
Working for parties or candidates	Did you do any (other) work for one of the parties or candidates?
Giving to campaigns	(1988 and later) During an election year people are often asked to make a contribution to support campaigns. Did you give money to an individual candidate running for public office? Did you give money to a political party during this election year?
Wearing button or displaying sticker	1984 and later: Did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your house?

increasingly important, so the ANES does not provide any evidence about everyday

participation (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999). Also, even though ANES measures

are used frequently, current ANES studies only ask two questions about internet use:

whether or not participants have internet access, and whether or not participants have

seen political information online (ANES, 2010b). Comparable surveys from other

countries ask more extensive questions about internet participation, including questions

about the use of social networking sites for political purposes. (e.g. Israel National

Election Study, 2009; New Zealand Election Study, 2008).

Table 2 lists the political activities that are measured in each of the previous

studies of political participation, in descending order according to how frequently each

Table 2

Traditionally Used Categories of Political Participation

Category/type of act	Measured by
Voting	ANES; Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Campaigning/volunteering for candidates	ANES; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Donating money	ANES; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Talking about politics/persuading others	ANES; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Working for a political party/other political group	ANES; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Attending rallies	Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Displaying button/sticker	ANES; Milbrath, 1965
Contacting officials	Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972
Attending meetings	ANES; Verba & Nie, 1972
Campaigning for/holding office	Milbrath, 1965
Joining/forming a group to address local/community issues	Verba & Nie, 1972

item is cited. As this list reemphasizes, the focus in many measures of political participation is largely on traditional activities such as voting, donating money, working for political candidates, or persuading others. Although these measures are important, they fail to capture changes in the ways that youth currently participate, including the ways that youth may be using the internet or social networking sites for political participation.

Some scholars have worked to develop appropriate measures to capture youth's alternative forms of political participation. In a study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002) developed a scale to measure three different types of political activity

taking place among young people ages 15-25: Electoral measures included the traditional

items of voting, persuading others, or wearing campaign buttons. Civic measures

included volunteering or working for a community organization, but also raising money

for charity. Political voice items included contacting officials, but also contacting the

media, protesting, petitioning online or offline, boycotting, buying products for ethical

reasons, or canvassing for social or political causes. In the 2006 version of the same study

(Lopez et al., 2006), youth were asked about participation in individual activities, such as

volunteering to assist a neighbor or a stranger. These measures serve as a useful example

of how political participation scales could be tailored to include more everyday activities.

However, the measures still give almost no attention to youth's online forms of

participation.

Studies by the PEW Internet and American Life Project do capture some of the

ways that youth are engaging in alternative political activities online. For example, Smith

et al. (2009) measured the percentage of youth internet users who used social networking

sites to post political content or comments, seek political information, or join a political

group. Although the authors note that such forms of engagement are different than other

offline and online political participation, they do not explicitly address what is different

about these forms of engagement. Also, they do not explore the meaning behind any of

these political activities.

Political Talk and the Challenge of Measuring Facebook Participation

Political dialogue and discussion are often measured as important factors related

to political participation (Barber, 1984, Chambers, 1996; 2003; Delli Carpini, Cook, &

Jacobs, 2004; Habermas, 1984). However, political talk is not only important as a

predictor of other forms of participation (Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Kim & Kim, 2008; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2006), it should also be understood as an important *form* of participation (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Hayes, Scheufele, & Huge, 2006). Dalton (2006) noted that engaged citizens often take a more deliberative view of citizenship than more duty-minded participants. In contrast to many of the more oppositional types of political involvement described in traditional studies of political participation (e.g. ANES; Milbrath, 1965), descriptions of everyday politics emphasize that citizens want to be more involved in meaningful discussions about issues that affect them (Dalton, 2006; 2008; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009). Such discussions encompass not only the persuasion measured in traditional studies (e.g. ANES, Milbrath, 1965), but also less formal talk about issues (Jacobs et al., 2009). Although scholars such as Schudson (1997) argued that political talk does not foster democracy unless it has a specific purpose and follows procedural rules, Delli Carpini et al. (2004) argued that casual talk at home, church, school, or other community gathering places should be included in measures of participation. Wyatt et al. (2000) similarly noted the importance of "ordinary political conversation," or casual political talk that takes place alongside non-political discussion. They argued that discussions about crime and education serve as a link between private and public matters (Wyatt et al., 2000; Wyatt, Katz, Levinson, & Al-Haj, 1996). Barber (1984) noted that informal talk about such issues helps citizens understand each other and make sense of their different political interests. Although some scholars would dismiss political talk on Facebook as unimportant, such talk may be comparable to the informal, casual political talk described by these scholars. In addition, such talk on Facebook may be understood as a public

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sphere-like space for conversation among youth (boyd, 2007).

Additionally, other forms of political participation involve an expression of opinion and a response to others' opinions (Hayes et al., 2006; Norris, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). Hayes et al. (2006) observed that nearly all forms of political participation, with the possible exception of voting, can be thought of as public expression, as they are to some extent visible to other individuals. Acts such as displaying a bumper sticker are more obviously public, but even writing a personal letter to candidate does not guarantee privacy. Even if such actions are not shared, they are still part of a dialogue, as they are performed in response to others' opinions or actions (Hayes et al., 2006). Consequently, political expression is not always easily separable from other forms of participation.

The distinction between political talk and other forms of participation is even less clear on Facebook, where users' activities are displayed to their friends through Facebook's news feed and on users' walls. The measures of youth participation developed by Keeter et al. (2002) illustrate the difficulty of applying offline measures to online spaces. If a Facebook user posts a picture of herself at a political rally, does this act count as political participation? If so, what kind of participation is it? Is it akin to wearing a campaign button - a more traditional act of participation? Or is she expressing her political voice, since so many friends can see her picture on Facebook? What about a user who starts a Facebook group to protest a company's use of child laborers? When a thousand people join his group, what does this mass expression mean? Is it a protest? A petition? Who is the audience of these activities? In a space like Facebook, political activity does not fit neatly into established categories of political participation.

How, then, should scholars measure youth's political participation using online spaces such as Facebook? Traditional measures of political participation do not adequately capture current forms of youth engagement. Measures that do try to capture alternative forms of youth participation are still not easily applied to Facebook.

Part of the answer is that scholars must talk to youth. Rather than attempting to translate current measures to online spaces, scholars should first ask youth what kind of Facebook activities they view as political or non-political, and explore how youth's definitions of political participation might be different than assumed. Although scholars can use established measures of political participation to guide their research, inquiries should also be based on the literature that suggests youth are choosing to engage in everyday forms of participation. Just as important, studies should account for the factors that may make Facebook participation unique from other forms of political engagement. Until scholars take time to identify what political participation on Facebook means to youth, they will continue to apply measures that may be irrelevant for studies of youth's participation in online spaces.

This chapter has discussed political participation as it has been traditionally defined, including findings about decreasing participation, and examined ways in which new forms of political and civic participation have begun to emerge. The chapter has argued that scholars must examine alternative forms of political engagement in the places they are occurring—spaces such as the social networking site, Facebook, which are unique from many of the traditional spaces where political activities occur.

In light of the evidence that youth are using the internet for non-traditional political activity, Chapter 3 in this thesis explores how the internet may change accepted

models and theories of political participation. It reviews the questions that scholars have already asked about the web's impact on participation, and details why Facebook is a logical space for an exploration of youth's everyday political participation. Furthermore, the chapter asserts that the norms surrounding political participation and social engagement on Facebook affect participation in the space. It discusses how social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), models of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980), and the influence of perceived opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) provide insight into youth everyday political engagement on Facebook. Chapter 3 examines these questions in light of traditional models and theories of political participation and its impact. It focuses on the implications of the internet for traditional models and theories of political participation.

CHAPTER 3. THE INTERNET, FACEBOOK, AND SOCIAL NORMS OF PARTICIPATION

As Chapter 2 has argued for the importance of measuring everyday forms of youth political participation, the current chapter turns in more detail to how scholars might examine Facebook as a space and tool that youth are using for such participation (boyd, 2007b). Chapter 3 explores the implications of the internet for traditional models and theories of political participation. It summarizes findings from three questions about the web and political participation, and applies these questions to Facebook, in order to demonstrate why it is an appropriate space for an exploration of youth everyday political participation. Furthermore, the chapter asserts that the norms surrounding political participation and social engagement on Facebook have an important impact on participation in the space, and a study about participation on Facebook is incomplete without a consideration of such norms. Theoretical perspectives such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), models of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980), and the influence of perceived opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), are applied to provide insight into youth everyday political engagement on Facebook.

Importance of the Internet for Political Participation

When considering youth's political activities, it becomes clear that the internet is an important part of such participation (Harris, 2008; Harris et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). However, some early findings suggested that internet use may be negatively

related to political participation and the creation of social capital (Kraut et al.,1998; Nie & Erbring, 2002). Kraut et al. (1998) reported that internet use was linked to diminished face-to-face sociability and psychological health. Sunstein (2001) and Negroponte (1995) argued that technologies like the internet are breaking down the public sphere, as citizens use the web to gather into smaller groups of like-minded individuals, rather than engaging in genuine political dialogue or considering information that contradicts their beliefs.

In contrast, other studies argued that the internet can help foster participation. Informational uses of online media and online news consumption are linked to increased political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003), and the internet provides additional ways for individuals to connect with friends or family, helping to create the social capital necessary for participation (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Kraut et al., 2002; Shah, Kwak & Holbert, 2001). In addition, there is evidence challenging Sunstein's (2001) contention that the internet gathers people into small, homogeneous interest groups. Garrett (2009) found that individuals do not avoid information that challenges their political beliefs, even if they prefer information that supports their perspectives. Stromer-Galley (2003) observed that participants in online political discussions generally enjoyed being exposed to different perspectives, and sometimes sought political conversations specifically for this exposure. Wojciezak and Mutz (2009) also noted that individuals who join leisure groups online may be unexpectedly exposed to political information that challenges their views, as groups that gather around leisure activities may be less homogeneous than religious or political groups.

Youth and Online Participation

Importantly, scholars have also found that a significant number of youth and other internet users have exploited the internet for political purposes. During the elections of 2008, 74% of American internet users accessed political information and news online; 38% of internet users talked with others about politics online, and 59% of internet users received or shared political information through email, Twitter, or other similar platforms (Smith, 2009). During the 2010 elections, 42% of social networking site users ages 18-29 used such sites to engage in political activities, including joining political groups, posting political information, and finding political news (Smith, 2011). Among the 90% of Americans ages 18-24 who use the internet, 33% have engaged in political activity on social networking websites, and 34% have shared political information online (Smith et al., 2009). Internet users also believe that social networking sites help raise awareness about political issues, and help solve or change national or local problems (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011).

The Internet and Political Participation: Three Important Questions

As the internet has clearly affected political participation, scholars have posed three important questions about the relationships between the internet and political activities: Who is participating using the internet? How is the internet being used for participation? What mechanisms and features of the internet affect political participation (Anduiza, Cantijoch, & Gallego, 2009)?

Who is participating using the internet? Scholars who ask this question are concerned about whether or not the internet involves new individuals in the political process (Anduiza et al., 2009). As Smith et al. (2009) demonstrated, a variety of age

groups, including youth, are engaging online. However, some research still suggests that the internet widens gaps in participation. According to the logic of the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970), citizens who are already politically active are also more likely to exploit the participatory opportunities offered by the internet. In many cases, both offline and online political participants are of high socioeconomic status (SES) and demonstrate great political interest, suggesting that the same citizens may be participating across these spaces. If this is the case, the internet simply provides political gains for the already advantaged (Min, 2010; Smith et al., 2009).

However, other findings hint that the internet may decrease participatory gaps for at least some types of engagement, particularly among youth. Posting political information in a blog and engaging in political activities on social networks are not as clearly linked to age or SES as other types of online and offline participation (Schlozman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). While 18% of internet users ages 18-24 have engaged in more traditional political activities online, such as emailing a senator or making an online donation, 33% have engaged in political activities on social networking sites, and 34% have posted political information. Interestingly, 18-24 year old internet users are the age group least likely to participate in traditional political activities online, but most likely to engage in nontraditional activities (Smith et al., 2009). While theories of participation often emphasize the role of age and of SES, these findings suggest that such links should be further explored for online activities among youth. However, Schlozman et al. (2010) cautioned that it is difficult to measure the role of SES in youth participation, as most youth lack stable incomes.

How is the internet being used for participation? Another important question is

how citizens are participating online, and whether or not they are engaging in new or

different forms of political participation. Certainly, there are parallels between online and

offline participation. For example, individuals can use the internet or traditional means to

contact political officials, sign petitions, send letters to newspapers, make political

donations, or talk with others about political issues. Even when these activities are

undertaken online, they are not qualitatively different than comparable offline activities

(Schlozman et al., 2010; Weare, 2002). However, the internet also provides new

opportunities for participation and communication through blogs, social networking sites,

instant messaging systems, and online forums (Price & Capella, 2002; Schlozman et al.,

2010). Participation in these spaces is unique in some ways. Theories of computer-

mediated communication suggest that asynchronous mediated interactions give

participants more time to plan thoughtful responses (Walther, 1995), and a lack of

immediate visual cues helps some individuals feel more comfortable sharing their

opinions (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004).

There are also cases where individuals who share political interests may not be

able to meet face-to-face. The internet helps these citizens collaborate and mobilize for

social and political causes, especially if they are otherwise geographically dispersed

(Anduiza et al., 2009). Youth, too, coordinate for causes and share information about

interests online (boyd, 2007b; Harris, 2008). For example, Harris (2008) found that

female youth were using the internet to protest growing consumerism in mainstream

culture.

What mechanisms and features of the internet affect participation? A final

important question asks how, specifically, the internet encourages or discourages participation. This question has led scholars to explore the specific features and mechanisms of the internet that affect engagement, including how the internet can provide resources for participation (Anduiza et al., 2009). Traditionally, the possession of time, skills, or money enables citizens to participate in political activities. Individuals with time are able to volunteer for campaigns, citizens with money can make donations, and those with political skills can navigate complex political systems (Verba et al., 1995). Some scholars have argued that the internet increases the number of skills citizens need to participate, noting that individuals do not have the same technology skills or use the internet for the same purposes, even when internet access is widespread (James, 2008; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2009). This idea, again, is supported by the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor et al., 1970). However, the skills required for online participation may be easier to obtain than those required for traditional participation, and resources that are important for traditional politics are not the same as those needed for internet engagement (Krueger, 2002). Also, skills for political participation are often developed in settings such as the workplace, school, churches, or other community organizations (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995; Putnam, 2000). The internet may provide additional opportunities for individuals to develop and practice such skills, especially for youth, who may encounter significant barriers to participation in offline spaces (boyd, 2007b; Harris, 2008). As one example, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2010) found that individuals with fewer educational achievements were actually more likely to express their political opinions online. Stromer-Galley (2002) also found that individuals with lower levels of political efficacy and political knowledge were more likely to enter political discussions

online. It is possible, then, that some individuals who avoid political participation offline feel empowered to participate via the internet (Gastil, 2000).

The internet alters how individuals can find and use political information as well. The web lowers the cost of obtaining political information (Schlozman et al., 2010; Shah et al., 2005), and enables individuals to share that information more easily (DiMaggio et al., 2001). These changes are important, since information-seeking online is linked to increased participation (Min, 2007; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Shah et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2001). The web helps individuals locate and share information that they find personally relevant, without the aid of traditional political organizations or media sources (di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Reese, & Zin, 2005; Kavanaugh, Kim, Perez-Quinones, Schmitz, & Isenhour, 2008; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003). These factors may be appealing to youth or everyday participants, who desire opportunities to address personally relevant political causes in ways they see as meaningful (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Harris et al., 2010). However, there is no guarantee that youth or other internet users will access more political information simply because it is available (Anduiza et al., 2009). Nevertheless, if the internet changes the types of resources needed for participation, or the way citizens can obtain such resources, then resource-based models of political participation should be updated to account for these changes.

What about the Internet and Everyday Participation?

However, there are still numerous questions about the relationship between the internet and less traditional or everyday forms of expression among youth. Although youth are engaging online, it is important to determine specifically how they are

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involved. Are youth using social networking sites to participate in ways that are comparable to offline participation, or is participation on these sites essentially different than traditional participation? How might everyday participation take place in such a space? What kinds of participation do youth find meaningful, and what issues concern them? These questions remain extremely important for scholars of political participation, who can no longer assume that traditional definitions capture political activity when the internet provides additional opportunities for engagement.

Because research has demonstrated that youth are using social networking sites for some forms of participation (Schlozman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009), Facebook is a highly appropriate space to explore the ways that youth are using social networks to engage in everyday political activities. With over 500 million users (Facebook.com, 2011), Facebook is currently the most popular social networking platform among online social network users ages 18-29, as 71% of those users have a Facebook profile (Lenhart et al., 2010). Consequently, this thesis now poses the same three questions about internet participation to Facebook participation: Who is participating using Facebook; how are they participating via Facebook, and what mechanism or features of Facebook affect their participation?

Who is Participating Using Facebook?

The answer to the question of who is participating comes again from Smith et al. (2009), who found that 18-24 year old internet users were the age group most likely to use social networking services to engage in political matters. Aside from this conclusion, however, there is little systematic research addressing the question of who engages via Facebook, although a number of studies have used young populations to test their

hypotheses (e.g. Bode, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe; 2007; Feezell, Conroy, & Guerrero, 2009), based on the observation that many social networking site users are college-aged (Lenhart et al., 2010). Although more research is needed, enough evidence exists to justify a focus on youth political participation using the site.

How is Facebook Being Used for Participation?

In response to this question, some studies have implied that participation on Facebook is not very important by itself, but rather more important if it can be linked to offline engagement. In other words, Facebook participation is mainly another mechanism that leads to traditional participation. Bode (2008) suggested that Facebook may be a tool for building social capital, as updating one's Facebook profile and having the same friends on Facebook and offline are related to the likelihood of voting or volunteering for a political cause. Using the Facebook intensity scale developed by Ellison et al. (2007), Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found a positive relationship between the intensity of Facebook use and life satisfaction, social trust, and civic participation. The authors also identified a link between intense use of Facebook groups and increased civic and political participation. Two studies examining participation during the 2008 political elections identified links between the use of Facebook political groups and offline political participation (Feezell et al., 2009), and between political participation on Facebook and signing petitions and volunteering offline (Vitak et al., 2011). These studies suggest that both traditionally political and less clearly political uses of Facebook are important factors for offline participation, although several of the studies use very general definitions of Facebook political participation.

However, a few studies have focused on how Facebook itself may be used for

online political participation, rather than on the relationship between Facebook use and offline participation. In addition to linking Facebook and more traditional political activity, Vitak et al. (2011) used a 14-item scale to measure specific acts of Facebook political participation. The authors asked 638 survey participants to indicate if they had engaged in each activity or seen another Facebook member perform an activity. The five most commonly performed behaviors were posting a wall comment about politics (20.4%), posting a status update that mentioned politics (18.4%), joining or leaving a group about politics (13.8%), RSVPing for a political event (13.8%), and posting a photo that had something to do with politics (10.0%). The five most commonly observed behaviors included posting a status update that mentioned politics (70.0%), joining or leaving a group about politics (51.2%), becoming a fan of a political candidate or group (51.0%), posting a photo that had something to do with politics (49.3%), and posting a photo of someone at a political event (48.4%). The authors concluded that most of these acts require little investment, and are therefore superficial. However, Vitak and colleagues did not explore the *meaning* behind any of these acts, or ask whether or not they are different from traditional forms of participation. Are these acts indeed superficial, or are they meaningful in some way? Is Facebook simply a space for "feel-good" participation, or are there costs involved in posting political content? How do such acts contribute to political discussion, since they can be viewed by so many individuals (boyd, 2010)?

Other scholars have suggested that Facebook and other social networking sites may be part of the public sphere (e.g. Bennett, 2008; boyd, 2007b; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2009). According to Habermas' (1989) theory, the

public sphere provided a physical or rhetorical space where citizens could discuss

political matters, argue their claims, and listen to the concerns of others (Chambers, 2003;

Dahlgren, 2005; Fishkin, 1995; Habermas, 1989). Fraser (1992) argued that some groups

have historically been excluded from the public sphere, and have created their own

spaces, or *counterpublics*, to discuss issues of concern. Youth are one such group that are

sometimes devalued in the traditional public sphere, a space where adults often set the

agenda (boyd, 2007b; 2010; Harris, 2008). As a result, spaces such as Facebook serve as

counterpublics, giving youth important access to public dialogue and discussions (boyd,

2007b, 2010). Boyd (2007b) and Harris (2008) argued that the ways youth use these

websites demonstrate their desire to be part of meaningful conversations. The process of

creating a site profile and communicating with other users allows youth to learn the rules

of social engagement, work out their identities, and create relevant dialogue (boyd,

2007b). In a broad sense, youth Facebook users are socialized into public life in a manner

similar to Habermas' (1989) suggestion.

Kushin and Kitchener (2009) and Robertson et al. (2009) focused on more

specific features of Facebook that may contribute to public dialogue. Kushin and

Kitchener (2009) analyzed all 176 posts found on one political Facebook group's wall:

Sixty-six of the 800 group members contributed to a discussion about state-sanctioned

torture; 73% of the postings supported the group's stance on torture; 17% opposed the

stance, and 10% were neutral in position. While noting the very limited sample for their

study, the authors took a positive view of Facebook's potential to support political debate.

Robertson et al. (2009) analyzed 39,782 links posted on the 2008 presidential

candidates' Facebook walls, and found that 6.7% of individuals who posted did so one

time, 13.6% posted 2-10 times, 18.6% posted 11-100 times, 35.9% posted 101-999 times, and 25.8% posted more than 1,000 times. Robertson and colleagues observed that the links were used for several different purposes: providing evidence for a position or refuting a position, appealing for action, joking or mocking a candidate, or directly addressing a candidate. Although the authors concluded that most of the links were partisan, they noted that links were sometimes used for discussion between citizens. For example, some participants addressed individuals they disagreed with, challenging them to provide more evidence for their claims.

These studies offer some preliminary evidence that Facebook is important both as a public space and a tool to foster political dialogue and participation among citizens, even when such discussions may not always meet the standards for formal political deliberation (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Habermas, 1989). These studies are also are important because they provide a partial answer to the next question: What mechanisms or features of Facebook create a space suited for explorations of political participation? For example, Robertson et al. (2009) suggested that online linking capabilities change the ways citizens are able to communicate about political matters. Other studies, too, have suggested that features of social networking sites like Facebook may create a unique environment for political and social interaction among youth (e.g. boyd, 2007b; 2010; Jenkins, 2006), but many of these features still require further exploration. While there are a number of communication features that affect participation on Facebook, three of the most important features include access to publishing tools that allow for simple broadcasting, a norm of many-to-many communication, and access to peer-recommended information (boyd, 2010).

What Mechanisms and Features of Facebook Affect Participation?

      Publishing. An important asset of sites like Facebook is the way in which they allow users to broadcast content (boyd, 2010). Simple publishing tools are a defining feature of the web; anyone with internet access and basic technology skills can post text, video, or photos online (Jenkins, 2006). Facebook users can post status updates, post comments or links on their walls, create and invite friends to events, write notes, create groups, share photos and videos, or display information about themselves such as their hometown, school, workplace, or political views. As more users post such content, they increase the value of the site for other users (Castells, 2000), and diversify the content available online (Levine, 2008). Facebook makes this publishing process especially simple by providing multiple publishing tools in one space (Westling, 2007). Publishing features are an important consideration for this thesis for several reasons. In contrast to the difficulty of developing offline skills (Verba et al., 1995), online skills may be easier to acquire for individuals who lack political experience (Krueger, 2002). Facebook's publishing features also allow youth to represent their views by addressing topics and issues they find important (boyd, 2007b), an opportunity could be appealing for everyday makers who seek meaningful forms of engagement (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999).

      Many-to-many dialogue. In addition to providing youth with tools and spaces for political talk and action, Facebook creates an environment where many-to-many communication and dialogue are the norm (boyd, 2010), and traditional hierarchies of communication are dismantled (Castells, 2000). Participation refers not only to producing content, but also to responding to each other's posts (boyd, 2007b; Castells, 2000;

Jenkins, 2006).The importance of dialogue is evident from the way Facebook is

structured. Once a user posts a comment, link, photo, video or status update, other users

are able to respond using the comment feature or click the *like* button attached to each of

these posts. Other individuals can further respond to the original content or comments,

creating a thread of responses which may be displayed in Facebook's news feed and on

the original user's wall (boyd, 2010). In addition, flexibility in production and

consumption allows individuals to craft their own messages rather than accepting others'

definitions (Jenkins, 2006), an exercise in creativity that may be important for everyday

political participation (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999).

Accessible information. Like many other websites, Facebook also makes

political information more accessible (boyd, 2010). Facebook users can provide their own

political opinions, and can link to outside sources of political information to support or

refute political arguments (Robertson et al., 2009). As online news and information

sources allow Facebook users to share content with their Facebook friends, these

individuals essentially become news recommenders who locate information for others

(Lerman, 2007).

Political information can also reach more people on Facebook than it can offline.

When political activities are performed offline, the audience is limited to a particular time

and place, but online, these activities can be reproduced and shared with audiences that

were not present during the original act (boyd, 2007b). These altered processes of

information seeking and sharing may help youth or everyday participants locate and

spread information about issues and causes that matter to them (Kavanaugh et al., 2005;

Kavanaugh et al., 2008) without the aid of traditional political organizations or media

sources (di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Kavanaugh et al., 2005; Kavanaugh et al., 2008; Weber et al., 2003).

Features of Facebook also challenge Sunstein's (2001) echo chamber theory. Because online social networks increase the number of loose or weak relational ties that an individual holds (Donath & boyd, 2004), they also increase the likelihood that users will be exposed to more diverse information and resources (Granovetter, 1973; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Facebook's news feed feature also pushes information to users, exposing them to political content they might not otherwise see while browsing the site (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Importantly, exposure to these diverse opinions may help citizens better understand and be more tolerant of alternative political perspectives (Mutz, 2002).

Overall, the literature about Facebook suggests that it may be an important space and tool for youth's everyday political participation. Particular features of Facebook, such as political groups, are perhaps more obviously connected to the public sphere (e.g. Kushin & Kitchener, 2009), but other features of Facebook also have implications for everyday youth political participation. Social networking sites can be understood as public spaces where youth participate in a dialogue and learn political skills (boyd, 2007b; 2010). This process of participation is supported by many-to-many communication, access to simple publishing tools, and access to peer-recommended information (boyd, 2010; Shah et al., 2005).

Social Space, Social Norms: The Appropriateness of Facebook Participation

Although Facebook users clearly participate in some political activities, a key point to remember is that Facebook is first of all a social space (boyd, 2010). Teens who

gather on social networking sites often use them to communicate with their friends

(Lenhart et al., 2010), and friends that interact on Facebook typically know each other

from other contexts (Ellison et al., 2007). These observations are important, both because

political talk is often embedded in social spaces (Verba et al., 1995; Wyatt et al., 2000),

and because everyday makers are comfortable combining social and political activities

(Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Bang, 2005). Even more important, however, is the fact that

political participation is strongly influenced by social relationships. Long before the

advent of social media, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) observed that personal conversations

increased the influence of political messages. Habermas (1989) made a related

observation about the influence of family on political participation. More recent studies

have shown that youth whose parents, teachers or friends talk about politics are more

likely to be interested in political events and activities (Dostie-Goulet, 2009), and

parental influence on political participation often extends into adulthood (Jennings, 1996;

Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). As Facebook users engage in political activities

alongside their peers online, it stands to reason that users influence each other's political

activities on the site (Robertson et al., 2009).

Norms of Facebook Political Participation

If Facebook users do impact each other's participation, a study of such

participation is incomplete without a consideration of the norms of political participation

in social spaces. Social norms, or the rules used to determine if particular actions are

appropriate in a given context, have great influence over individuals' behaviors (Asch,

1951; 1956; Sherif, 1936). While some social rules may be explicit, individuals also learn

which behaviors are acceptable by observing other people. Once individuals become

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aware of the social norms of a space, they often feel pressured to conform to them (Asch, 1951; 1956; Bandura, 1986). Early psychology experiments demonstrated that individuals conformed because they wanted to act appropriately (Sherif, 1936), or desired to be like their peers (Asch, 1956).

More recent studies of the internet and social behavior have found that those who participate in online spaces are also subject to norms and social rules that govern behavior (boyd, 2006; 2007b; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Martey & Stromer-Galley, 2007; Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, & Merget, 2007). A few studies have already examined which political behaviors may be considered inappropriate or appropriate by Facebook users. While Vitak et al. (2011) found that Facebook users are somewhat comfortable when friends share their political views, they also noted that users are less comfortable when being persuaded to vote or support a specific candidate. Based on an analysis of 690 surveys from Facebook users, Sibona & Walczak (2011) found that the second most common reason Facebook users remove individuals from their list of friends is because those individuals make too many controversial political posts. Less than half of the 905 young adult participants in a study by Watkins & Lee (2010) shared political views in their Facebook profiles. However, these studies imply a traditional definition of political participation and do not examine many differences in the acceptability of specific political acts. Therefore, it remains an important question whether there are any differences between the norms of traditional or everyday participation.

Self-presentation. The norms of participation on Facebook are an important consideration for studies of political participation and require more detailed attention from scholars. Several theoretical perspectives help clarify how norms may operate in the

space: self-presentation, social learning theory, and perceptions of opinion climate.

Concerns about self-presentation are noteworthy, as the desire to conform to social norms affects the way that individuals present themselves in online public spaces (boyd, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Studies of self-presentation and identity management suggest that individuals control their self-images by highlighting certain information about themselves for others to see (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980). Goffman (1959) used the analogy of a theatrical performance to describe the process of self-presentation. When people are on stage, or in the presence of others, they behave differently from place to place, controlling their behavior depending on their goals in each situation. Individuals on stage may be motivated by a desire to adhere to social norms and avoid embarrassment that results from violating those norms. While individuals are in private spaces or backstage, they are able to take a break from the concerns of the stage and prepare for future performances. Leary (1996) added that individuals manage self-presentation by sharing or withholding their opinions about different topics. When individuals do share their opinions and attitudes, others infer a great deal about them based on these opinions.

This process of selective self-presentation clearly takes place on Facebook, where individuals can choose to include or exclude information such as their political views from their profiles (DiMicco & Millen, 2007). Because social network users typically make these choices with a particular audience in mind (boyd, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2010), it seems likely that Facebook users will consider the reactions of their friends before choosing to post political material or engage in publicly viewable political conversations. It may also be that users reserve some of these conversations for private or

back stage communication via Facebook's email messaging system. In addition, Leary's (1996) perspective presents the possibility that Facebook users may have strong reactions to the expression of political opinions on Facebook. In light of these findings, it is important to determine whether self-presentational concerns are a salient part of the decision to post political content, and whether or not individuals form impressions of others based on their political posts.

Social learning theory. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory also offers insight into how social norms might affect political activities on Facebook. In contrast to traditional theories of behaviorism, Bandura argued that people rely partially on the experiences of others to determine whether or not they should engage in a particular behavior. As one person performs an action, others who see the action may respond positively or negatively. Those actions that receive positive responses are more likely to be repeated by observers, while actions that elicit negative reactions are likely to be avoided. However, individuals may also repeat a modeled behavior without the promise of positive reinforcement. Over time, observers develop schemas that are used to guide behavior in similar situations, allowing them to predict the results of a behavior. In the case of political participation, these findings mean that individuals who witness political activity on Facebook are more likely to engage in political behaviors. Indeed, Vitak et al. (2011) found that individuals who watch others engage in political activities on Facebook are more likely to join in these activities as well, suggesting that perceptions of political participation do influence behavior on the site. As a result, it is important for studies of political participation to consider how Facebook users' political activities—or lack thereof—influence others' participation.

Opinion climate: Perceptions of others' perspectives. Finally, social norms may keep individuals from expressing their political opinions for fear of upsetting others. Schudson (1997) and Eliasoph (1998) argued that conflict is an unavoidable part of public political talk, as people are generally uncomfortable sharing their opinions with others who disagree. In a study of three cultural groups, Wyatt et al. (1996) found that a main reason individuals refrain from sharing their opinions is to be polite and avoid hurting others' feelings. Noelle-Neumann (1974) argued that individuals are especially hesitant to share their political opinions when they sense that those opinions are unpopular and might cause a negative reaction from others. As individuals who identify themselves as a minority remain silent over time, their actions result in a spiral of silence in which similar individuals perceive a hostile opinion climate and withhold their opinions as well. This process becomes more pronounced when the media give only a few perspectives on issues, making individuals in the minority even more certain that their opinion is unpopular. It seems possible that this process might also take place on Facebook, as users may peruse others' status updates or links to gauge how their own perspectives might be received.

However, as Wyatt et al. (2000) and Wyatt et al. (1996) demonstrated, there are situations where people are comfortable discussing politics. As Facebook is a space that is both public (boyd, 2010), and a space where individuals gather with friends and acquaintances (Ellison et al., 2007), it is worth considering when or where users feel comfortable expressing political opinions on Facebook, and to whom they feel comfortable expressing those opinions.

So You Changed Your Profile Picture...So What?

Altogether, relevant theories and literature suggest that Facebook's communication features make it an important space to explore everyday political participation among youth. Facebook allows young users to engage in political activities in a public space, where they can share and find content and information that is meaningful, and potentially expose others to political information (boyd, 2010). As youth engage in political activities in a social space like Facebook, they are also subject to social norms that influence political participation (Vitak et al., 2011, Watkins & Lee, 2010). These social norms are an important factor to consider in any study of political participation.

However, there are still those who might suggest that political talk and participation on Facebook are not meaningful or important, as participation should have a clear impact on government matters. It is debatable whether activities on Facebook have any strong, direct effect on the election of government officials or the selection of public policy. However, even traditional definitions of political participation emphasize the importance of expression as a means of influence (Norris, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995). Since youth are using Facebook to express their political selves in front of an audience, then they are arguably influencing the public opinions and behavior of those who witness such public expressions, much in the way that traditional models of participation and the public sphere suggest (e.g. Habermas, 1989). As a result, scholars must put aside any preconceptions of Facebook as an irrelevant place for political inquiries, and follow the call to examine political interaction in social spaces (Verba et al., 1995). Doing so will provide a clearer picture of the normative shifts in youth

engagement, and will help scholars create useful definitions of political participation that can help explain patterns of participation among younger generations.

Ultimately, there are several gaps in current studies of the web and youth political participation. First, studies of online engagement frequently ignore or deemphasize the potential differences between online and offline participation. Much research compares participation on Facebook to traditional offline participation, emphasizing the links between the two (e.g. Bode, 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). While these studies are certainly valuable, they are limited for two reasons. First, they restrict the ways in which political participation on Facebook can be understood and described. By comparing Facebook participation to offline participation, such studies risk overlooking the features of Facebook that create a unique participatory environment, such as the linking capabilities studied by Robertson et al. (2009), or the visibility of such acts, as described by boyd (2010).

Second, the same studies do not account for the literature that suggests patterns and norms of political engagement might be changing. A focus on traditional participation measures, such as those used by the ANES, also overlooks the possibility that Facebook might be suited for additional types of participation. Studies such as one by Vitak et al. (2011) that conceptualize political participation on Facebook as "lightweight" imply that such participation is mainly important because it serves as practice for more meaningful participation. However, as other studies have noted, individuals who engage in non-traditional ways view their participation as meaningful (Bang, 2005; Harris, 2008). Thus, scholars should allow for the possibility that political activity on Facebook may be unique and important independent of any relationship

between such participation and offline or traditional forms of political participation.

Third, studies have only begun to focus on the norms of political participation in online spaces. The findings from Sibona and Walczak (2011), Vitak et al. (2011), and Watkins and Lee (2010) lay the groundwork for future studies to explore these norms in more detail. Because the literature suggests that patterns of political participation are changing (Bang, 2005), it is important for scholars to explore the possibility that different norms apply to different types of participation.

There are a variety of factors that are important for a study of political participation on Facebook. In order to capture a broad picture of the potential ways that youth give meaning to political issues on Facebook, this analysis uses the following four functional categories to guide the research questions:

- **Language**: Taylor (2001) suggested that the way people talk about concepts and ideas gives those concepts meaning and importance. This category refers to the ways youth talk about political issues on Facebook. Do they use the term *political* to describe the things they talk about? What phrases do they use to describe their posts or activities? This category also includes more symbolic and nonverbal expressions, such as posting a video or picture (not a profile picture).

- **Actions**: Many definitions of political participation emphasize that political participation is active, rather than passive (van Deth, 2001). To explore this notion on Facebook, this category refers to things individuals do on Facebook other than posting content. Examples include liking a political figure, joining a group, or making a donation through a Facebook link.

- **Functions**: Related to the idea that participation is active, this category focuses on

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examining what purpose posts or actions serve. For example, do Facebook users

post to express themselves, or do they also aim to accomplish other purposes

(Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999)?

- **Topics**: The literature about everyday political participation suggests that youth

  may be addressing different issues and causes than those that are typically defined

  as political (Bang, 2005). This category refers to the specific issues or topics

  youth include in their definitions of politics on Facebook. Do they talk about

  health care, civil rights, recycling, abortion, poverty, crime, or school policies?

Research Questions

To help explore the ways that youth describe and define political participation,

this thesis explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How do youth define and describe political participation on Facebook?

   RQ1.A. What topics do youth include and exclude from the definition of

   meaningful political participation on Facebook?

   RQ1.B. What actions do youth include and exclude from the definition of

   meaningful political participation on Facebook?

   RQ1.C. What functions do youth include or exclude as part of meaningful

   political participation on Facebook?

   RQ1.D. What phrases or language do youth use to describe political participation

   on Facebook?

RQ2: How do social norms affect youth's political participation on Facebook?

   RQ2.A. What topics do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

   RQ2.B. What actions do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.C. What functions or purposes for participation do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.D. What ways of talking about political participation do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

Research Objectives

In order to address the research questions about youth's everyday political participation and the norms of such participation on Facebook, this thesis has the following four objectives:

- To broadly define and describe what political participation on Facebook means to youth.

- To create descriptions of different types of Facebook political participation, including those that are meaningful and not meaningful to youth. Also, to determine whether any of these types fit with everyday or traditional categories of political participation.

- To identify social factors that influence youth's perceptions of whether or not political participation is acceptable on Facebook.

- To draw distinctions between political acts that are more or less socially acceptable among youth Facebook users.

In order to achieve these objectives, I conducted two qualitative interviews each with 10 young adult Facebook users between the ages of 18-24. The objectives helped identify the specific information sought through these interviews. In addition, the objectives guided the use of discourse analysis as the method to analyze interview data. Chapter 4, Methods, details the execution of the interview and data analysis processes.

CHAPTER 4. METHODS

In order to examine how youth define political acts and participation on Facebook and examine the role of social norms in their perceptions, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with 10 college-aged Facebook users. I used discourse analysis to identify patterns in definitions and norms from participant answers, and developed recommendations for crafting interview and survey questions that can measure political participation on social media such as Facebook with more depth and complexity.

Qualitative Interviews: Depth and Meaning

Kvale (1996) describes the qualitative interview as "literally an *inter view*, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (p. 2), and Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe an interview as a detailed conversation about a participant's thoughts and feelings about a particular subject. Qualitative interviews are designed to help participants tell stories about events they have experienced, and they result in personal, detailed descriptions that cannot be easily obtained by other methods of inquiry (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Such interviews capture both factual details and the meaning of events for participants (Kvale, 1996).

Although I selected qualitative interviews as the method for this project, other methods were considered. Several studies of political participation on Facebook have used surveys to test their hypotheses and research questions (e.g. Valenzuela et al., 2008; Vitak et al., 2011). A mail or web-based survey could have reduced the possibility of interviewer bias and ensure that questions were administered in a similar manner between

participants. Like interviews, a survey could have still included open-ended questions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). It could have also efficiently captured the views of a much larger and more diverse population. For example, Vitak et al. (2011) were able to include 683 participants in their survey, and still ask about both the norms of participation and the kinds of political activities participants witnessed. Other seminal studies of political participation have administered survey questionnaires face-to-face, but were still able to capture both closed and open-ended responses (e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

However, there are a number of important reasons why qualitative interviews were selected for this study. First, quantitative studies thus far have not been designed to explore the phenomena of interest for this thesis. Rather than focusing on the possibility that participatory patterns have shifted in recent decades, or the possibility that Facebook creates a unique space for political action, such research frequently compares participation on Facebook to traditional offline participation, emphasizing the similarities and links between the two (e.g. Bode, 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). There is also little research addressing the norms of political participation on Facebook, and the few studies that have been conducted do not differentiate between more than a few types of participation (e.g. Sibona & Walczak, 2011; Vitak et al., 2011).

Because the phenomenon of Facebook participation is still relatively new and unexplored, a qualitative approach helped provide rich data about the participation and norms of participation that operate in the space, providing what Geertz (1973) called "thick description." The ability to gather such data is one of the most important benefits of the qualitative interview process (Kvale, 1996), and one of the weaknesses of survey

studies like the one by Vitak et al. (2011), which are often unable to gather detail about the meaning of events, one of the goals of the current study.

At the same time, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to be open to new experiences that help describe the phenomena of interest (Kvale, 1996). Since this project aimed to explore ideas about political participation that may not fit with the traditional literature, the interview was a logical, flexible choice to capture such ideas. Allowing participants to actively shape the interview conversation also demonstrated respect and value for their thoughts, and gave them a chance to tell their stories in meaningful ways (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This demonstration of respect has added importance in a study involving young participants, as it creates an opportunity for them to have a public voice about issues of importance (boyd, 2007b; Harris, 2008).

A number of relevant studies have demonstrated the usefulness of a qualitative interview approach for the current study. In a study about political talk, Stromer-Galley (2002) interviewed online political discussion participants to find out how they experienced such conversations. Through the interviews, participants indicated that online discussion was meaningful because it allowed them to talk to individuals from diverse places, hear different perspectives, develop a sense of public opinion, and think about their own views on political issues.

Kavanaugh et al. (2008) used a combination of surveys and focus group interviews to explore participants' experiences using an electronic network intended to encourage community involvement. Interview participants, especially those who were typically uninvolved, revealed that the network helped them determine how to become active in their community. In addition, participants provided concrete examples of how

the internet increased their involvement: using a listserv to organize protests against a local development project, emailing other parent-teacher association members, contacting school officials, locating community events, or looking up alternative news sources.

In a study of urban youth's civic engagement, Kirshner et al. (2003) explored how youth ascribed meaning to their social surroundings and addressed concerns about social issues in their communities. Study participants were asked to create photo collages to describe their neighborhoods and to demonstrate what kinds of resources were important to youth. During the interview process, Kirshner and colleagues asked the youth to talk about the meaning of their photo collages. They found that participants identified both positive and negative features of their neighborhoods, and some participants focused on inequalities between different communities. The scholars then helped the youth organize their concerns into a presentation for the local city council.

These interview studies allowed researchers to explore a number of political issues: what kinds of issues were salient and important to youth (Kirschner et al., 2003), what participants found to be meaningful and enjoyable about political participation (Stromer-Galley, 2002), and how participants used an online platform to address relevant, meaningful concerns (Kavanaugh et al., 2008). Similar considerations were important for this thesis study.

Research Design

Participant Selection

In order to explore youth's experiences with political participation on Facebook, I conducted two rounds of in-depth qualitative interviews with a purposive convenience sample of 10 individuals, for a total of 20 interviews. Interviewees were selected from

among participants in a related campus-wide survey, conducted by Dr. Rosa Martey in the spring of 2011. The text of the invitation to participate is in Appendix A. At the conclusion of the survey, individuals who were willing to participate in the interviews entered their email addresses in a separate section of the survey. 178 participants were initially contacted via email. Approximately 30 potential interviewees were identified from the first email, and 10 were ultimately selected for inclusion in this thesis, and contacted via email, text, or phone to arrange the interviews.

All 10 interviewees in the sample were between the ages of 18 and 25, as these participants were able to participate in traditional political activities like voting, but also best fit the description of individuals who lacked a political voice and were most likely to engage in non-traditional forms of political participation (Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2006; 2008; Harris, 2008; Li & Marsh, 2008). Interviewees were selected based on a number of criteria. First, both male and female participants were selected, as the literature suggests that gender affects how people choose to participate (e.g. Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010). In addition, participants were included because they held a variety of political perspectives, since individuals with different ideologies may use technology for different political purposes (e.g. Benkler & Shaw, 2010; Best & Krueger, 2005). Finally, all participants were Facebook users who have engaged in or seen political things on Facebook. A description of each participant follows. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Participant MK, a 20-year-old female, described herself as a liberal and a Democrat who identified somewhat with the Democratic Party. She expressed strong interest in both local and national elections, and shared that she votes nearly all of the

time. During the interviews, she demonstrated that she was quite actively involved in addressing political issues through Facebook. Her definition of "political" also seemed to be the broadest among all the participants.

Interviewee NA is a 24-year-old female liberal Democrat who identifies strongly with her party. She is very interested in national elections, somewhat interested in local elections, and always votes. Among all the participants, she expressed the most critical view of Facebook's role in politics.

CW, an 18-year-old male participant, considers himself to be slightly liberal, but does not identify with any political party and has never voted. He is very interested in national elections, but not very interested in local elections. During the interviews, CW provided thoughtful explanations about why participation on Facebook is important to him and his friends.

Another male participant, LJ is 21 years old, very conservative, and identifies strongly with the Libertarian Party. He is very interested in national elections, somewhat interested in local elections, and always votes. LJ recalled a number of interesting Facebook exchanges that involved individuals with very different political opinions.

Interviewee SB is a 21-year-old female who is slightly liberal and identifies with the Democratic Party, but very little. Like many participants, she expressed very strong interest in national elections, and some interest in local elections. She votes some of the time. Although she is politically interested, she explained that Facebook is not the main place she chooses to engage in politics.

24-year-old male MR is a moderate independent who nearly always votes. He is very interested in national elections, and somewhat interested in local elections. MR

provided helpful insights about how Facebook users are strategic in their political participation.

Interviewee RS is a conservative 20-year-old female who identifies somewhat with the Republican Party. She is very interested in both national and local elections, and always votes. Among the interviewees, she spoke the most about engaging in traditional political activities, but also indicated that she engages in less traditional ways.

AS is a 22-year-old male who identifies as a slightly liberal independent. He is very interested in national elections, and not very interested in local ones. He indicated that he votes some of the time. The conversations with AS were some of the longest and most in depth of the interviews.

The final male interviewee, DA is 22 years old, moderate, and considers himself a Republican, but identifies very little with his party. He is very interested in national elections, somewhat interested in local elections, and always votes. Like RS, DA engages in both traditional and non-traditional political activities. He also expressed one of the most positive views of political participation via Facebook.

The final female interviewee, 20-year-old DB considered herself to be a slightly conservative independent. She indicated that she was very interested in national elections, somewhat interested in local elections, and always votes. She identified a number of examples of inappropriate political expression on Facebook.

Procedures

In order to explore youth's experiences with political participation on Facebook, I conducted two semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant, for a total of 20 interviews. The interviews took place during the summer of 2011 at Wild Boar Coffee

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Procedures

In order to explore youth's experiences with political participation on Facebook, I conducted two semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant, for a total of 20 interviews. The interviews took place during the summer of 2011 at Wild Boar Coffee

near Colorado State University's campus. Each interview was recorded and later professionally transcribed. The first round of interviews took place over a three week period, and each lasted approximately 45 minutes. This round of interviews included general questions about the definition of political participation and the appropriateness of political participation on Facebook. For example, participants were asked to describe what happened when they saw political things on Facebook, and whether or not they disagreed with friends' posts.

The second round of interviews was also scheduled over a three week period, and each interview lasted approximately 75 minutes. During the second interview, participants were asked more specific questions about the meaning and appropriateness of different political acts. For example, the students were asked to describe their first reactions to political posts, and to explain why they thought their friends posted political things. The remaining interview questions are located in the interview guides in Appendix C and Appendix D.

Participants were instructed to bring five screen shot examples of political participation on Facebook to the second interview. All interviewees except one were able to do so. I also provided 26 screen shots to prompt discussion during the second interviews. These screen shots are found in Appendix E.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data that are gathered, I used a form of discourse analysis. Generally, discourse analysis refers to the study of language as it is used to give meaning to concepts and ideas (Taylor, 2001). Rather than focusing on grammar or the individual parts of a sentence, discourse analysis explores broader patterns of language use

(Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2001). Although the term can encompass a variety of different analysis techniques, approaches to discourse analysis generally assume that ideas and concepts are socially constructed rather than naturally occurring, meaning that the way individuals talk about a topic shapes their understandings and beliefs about that topic. Thus, language does not simply carry meaning, it creates and changes meaning as it is used (Taylor, 2001).

Discourse analysis also recognizes that context is an important part of how participants think about their worlds. Individuals can use language in different ways for different goals. As a result, discourse analysis searches for shared patterns of meaning across different accounts, recognizing that people experience and describe phenomena in many different ways (Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

Discourse analysis has frequently been applied to a wide variety of interview texts (Potter, 1996; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Benneworth (2009) used discourse analysis to examine a police officer's interview of a criminal suspect, and found that the officer interrupted the suspect's narrative, making the interview process less fruitful. Carlisle (2007) conducted interviews with a purposive sample of university students, asking them to share their opinions about online music. Some students spoke about the cultural importance of music and musicians, and used this viewpoint as the basis for arguing against illegal downloads. Other participants discussed how commercialized music fostered passive listening. This negative view of commercialization was sometimes used to argue in favor of illegal downloads. Talja (1999) analyzed interviews about libraries in order to demonstrate how participants together created consistent pictures of the library, even when individual participants made inconsistent statements.

For the present study, discourse analysis helped identify what, in particular, was meaningful and relevant about political participation in the student interviewees' experiences. Discourse analysis identified similarities and differences between interview accounts, and helped create a broad picture of how interviewees viewed political participation on Facebook, The themes and ideas that emerged during the interview discussions and subsequent analysis are discussed in detail in Chapter 5, Results.

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS

Overall, the 20 interviews with students at CSU demonstrate that political participation on Facebook is not merely a substitute for genuine political action. Rather, the interviews reveal that Facebook is an important space for political expression, and participation has consequences for individuals, relationships, and future participation. In addition, the interviews revealed some unexpected ways that participants think about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of using Facebook for political purposes. As a result, scholars should rethink their current ideas about political participation via social networks, and also expand their approaches for studying such participation.

RQ1.A: Definitions of Politics on Facebook

Traditionally, political participation is described as the activities that allow individuals to express their needs and desires and in some way influence the selection of public officials and the creation of public policy. Such a definition emphasizes the importance of activities such as voting, contacting elected officials, or canvassing for political candidates, since such activities have a clear impact on government (Norris, 2001; Verba et al., 1995; Verba & Nie, 1972). However, the literature about everyday political participation suggests that youth may be addressing different issues and causes than those that are typically defined as political, and such causes may lack the same explicit ties to government activity (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999). As a result, RQ1.A was designed to explore how interview participants understand political issues and topics, and to identify the specific topics and issues that youth include in their

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discussions about political participation on Facebook:

RQ1.A. What topics do youth include and exclude from the definition of

meaningful political participation on Facebook?

Government

Interview participants frequently described political things as related to the

government, in line with many traditional definitions of politics (e.g. Berelson et al.,

1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972). Specifically,

participants included public figures and a variety of issues and topics addressed by

government as part of their definitions of what is political.

Public figures. For many participants, public figures such as President Obama,

members of congress, or individuals campaigning for public offices were an important

part of the realm of politics because of their role in government. For example, recent

congressional debates surrounding the national budget were a salient event for many

interviewees. Participants seemed to assume that there are clear reasons why such

individuals and events are political, often describing them as "obviously" political. For

example, one participant explained about a post he saw, "it was a video of a political

debate. You can't not put that in politics, if it is a video of politics" (CW). Another

participant argued that a post was "very blatantly political," because "they're basically

explaining why they don't think Obama should get any credit at all for the death of

Osama bin Laden" (MR). When participants elaborated, they explained that individuals

such as President Obama were an important part of government. Occasionally,

interviewees also apologized for not finding "better" examples of political things, such as

ones they saw during election seasons. It seems that political figures and their actions

were the core of most interviewees' definitions of politics.

Students also did not limit their comments to national political figures, but spoke extensively about state and local political figures, including state senators, local city council members, and individuals involved in student government on campus. These figures, too, were tied to government in the same way as national figures. For example, several of those I spoke with mentioned the work of student leaders and figures in student government. One observed that "[Member of student government] posts all the time about things that are going on at CSU, and controversial things that are going on in ASCSU. It's cool to see that, because it's a less formal outlet to reach students" (RS).

Topics. Topics and issues that interviewees noted included abortion, Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender (GLBT) rights, the economy, the environment, gun control, taxes, and the military. Participants also tied these topics to government. Generally, they explained that such issues should (or should not) be addressed by government action, or they noted that these topics were already being addressed by the government. For example, several individuals referred to debates about the role of the United States military in various conflicts. One participant explained that a Facebook friend was "trying to sway us to say that what we are doing in Libya is wrong. It grates on my nerves because I'm very much a support-the-troops guy…we are still out there to try and protect the innocent" (LJ).

As was the case with political figures, topics were mentioned in national, statewide, and local contexts. GLBT rights, for example, were described by various participants as a national concern, an issue for state legislatures, and a local concern. Similarly, the sale of marijuana was described as both a national and local political issue.

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In other cases, participants made connections between government actions at various

levels. For example, one student explained how fees for attending CSU were affected by

the amount of government funding provided by the state legislature.

Overall, the interviews provided significant support for the continued use of

traditional definitions of political participation, such as those offered by Berelson et al.

(1954) and Verba and Nie (1972). Public figures and topics that can be tied to

government are clearly an important part of politics on Facebook.

Everyday Participation

However, the interviews also provide evidence that some young adults define

politics in non-traditional ways, much as other scholars suggest (Bang, 2005; Bang &

Sørensen, 1999; Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2006; 2008). The importance of national political

figures and topics was evident across all interviewees' accounts, but the importance of

local figures and issues varied between interviewees. Although most participants made at

least passing reference to national, state, and local political concerns, a few consistently

stressed the importance of local political involvement, arguing that politics would be

"better" and have a greater impact if citizens took interest in issues that affected their own

communities. These participants also recognized the potential importance of Facebook to

address political concerns in non-traditional ways:

> I'm not necessarily going to post which mayor I would like everybody to vote for
>
> on Facebook…People are now reached in different ways that have to shift your
>
> ways of thinking. And that's not going to happen through a mayor or senator
>
> necessarily passing a law. I think Facebook enables you to create change in
>
> alternative ways from existing structure, and that happens though collaborative

communities, and creating spaces where what you want to be accomplished can

be accomplished. (MK)

Such statements support Bang (2005) and Bang and Sørensen's (1999) contention

that some citizens are engaged in important, relevant political causes, but they do not

work exclusively through traditional political avenues.

Evidence from the interviews indicates that both traditional definitions of politics

(e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Verba & Nie, 1972) and less traditional definitions of politics

(e.g. Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999) may be useful for scholars who study political

participation and Facebook. However, scholars may need to give more consideration to

non-traditional aspects of such participation.

Definitional Disagreements: Political vs. Non-political

A few issues and topics were described as political by some participants and non-

political by others. Child abuse, for example, was classified differently by two

participants. A possible explanation for such differences is that participants have different

opinions about the role of government. One participant stated:

It's really hard for the government to mandate a lot of the stuff about preventing

child abuse…the only way that can happen is by getting at individuals and

families and just bringing light to the issue, as opposed to trying to get the

government involved. I think it's important, but I don't think it's a political issue.

(DA)

However, another interviewee explained that "[child abuse] is something that

affects our country, and the world, obviously. And that's what makes it political, because

it's a group of people that are actively trying to somehow fight that" (CW). In other cases,

participants agreed that an issue was political, but offered different explanations as to why. For example, several participants described race as a political issue, explaining that conversations about race were defining events during Obama's campaign and presidency. Other participants agreed that race was political, but explained that government action plays a role in remedying injustices based on race. These differences between the students' definitions bring attention to the validity problems scholars may encounter when they measure politics as government matters.

RQ2A: Social Norms and Political Topics

Not only is it important to look at the topics youth describe as political ones, it is also necessary to examine whether or not youth view such topics as acceptable ones to address on Facebook. A recent study by Sibona and Walczak (2011) found that the second most common reason Facebook users remove individuals from their list of friends is because those individuals make too many controversial political posts. However, it remains unclear *what* makes such posts controversial. Is the topic of such posts polarizing, or do other factors make political posts controversial? How do students define "controversial political posts?" To explore such issues, RQ2.A.asks:

RQ2.A. What topics do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

A key finding from RQ2.A is that in terms of whether political things are acceptable or unacceptable on Facebook, the topic of political posts matters less than other factors about political posts and activities. Although participants indicated that some topics are unacceptable to address on Facebook, those topics were not political, but personal topics. By itself, this finding raises more questions about what makes a political post acceptable or unacceptable. However, additional data and subsequent research

questions help clarify the reasons for this finding.

(Why) Are Political Topics Acceptable?

Almost all topics that participants identified as political during the interviews were labeled as okay to address on Facebook. In fact, the students never expressed outright that any political topic was inappropriate. To explain why these topics were okay, nearly all participants emphasized strongly that Facebook should be an "open forum" for free speech and expression. Even when participants disliked the topics others talked about on Facebook, they expressed tolerance for the "right" to address such topics. Several interviewees stated this explicitly. For example, one individual said:

> I'm a supporter of free speech…if you have the forum and you want to share, share…
>
> I'd rather be living in a country where you can write these things and people might not agree with them, but at least you've got that right, as opposed to somewhere you might be in trouble for writing that. (NA)

Given the findings from studies by Sibona and Walczak (2011) and Vitak et al. (2011), it seems curious that participants would unanimously agree that political topics are okay to address on Facebook. However, the interview accounts offer a number of possible explanations for this finding.

Culture of Sharing

One possible explanation for the acceptability of political topics is that younger generations are generally tolerant of public expression via the internet. Many interviewees suggested that youth are okay with sharing detailed information or opinions in online spaces. One student I spoke with noted:

It's our age group. They don't care that Facebook is so public; they're going to

say what they want to say. And we're used to sharing our opinions all the

time…that's why Facebook is so popular for saying anything you want, because

you'll be valued for what you say. (DB)

However, interview participants generally characterized such sharing as

something done by younger or "high school-aged" individuals, rather than individuals in

their age group. Also, in contrast to the neutral responses about political topics, many

participants demonstrated discomfort with other topics, such as relationships, sexuality,

health problems and drinking. In general, such topics were seen as too "personal," and

thus not appropriate for Facebook posts:

If somebody is dating…You're not official until you're Facebook official. That

kind of stuff crosses the line for me, because if you tell the world that you've

broken up with that person, you don't want your great uncle knowing that, you

know? I see family members responding to stuff like that all the time, and getting

really personal. 'Are you okay? Do you need me to drive up there and get you?'

All that kind of weird stuff. (RS)

There's a lot of stuff that people I'm friends with on Facebook post which I feel

are inappropriate…One of my best friends in high school…called me up and told

me he was gay…he ended up posting it on Facebook. I thought that was pretty

amazing that someone came out on Facebook. I would say that's about as personal

as it gets. (DA)

Participants also frequently complained about individuals who posted too often

about day-to-day events, such as what they were eating for breakfast, or where they were

spending an upcoming weekend. Such information was seen as trivial or unnecessary. These findings about mundane posts are similar to previous findings (e.g. Sibona & Walczak, 2011). However, the contrast between interviewees' comments about political topics and personal topics adds credibility to the claim that political topics, not all topics, are generally viewed as okay to address on Facebook.

A Space for Free Speech

Another possible explanation for participants' acceptance of political topics is that Facebook is an important space for free speech. As boyd (2007b) notes, many young individuals have been restricted from accessing public spaces where they can express their opinions. Both Harris (2008) and boyd (2007b) argue that youth have turned to the internet as a place to talk about important, relevant topics. One student stated:

> When I think of politics, I think of a group of 50 to 70-year-old people sitting in a room and thinking what's best for the country, and I think Facebook has opened up that arena to make sure that politicians are engaging a larger group of people, maybe not necessarily the most affluent or who have the most power or sway as far as different issue, so I think Facebook will bring to light a lot of issues that might not have been seen in the past. (DA)

Conceptualizing Facebook as an "arena" or "open forum" draws attention to its importance for politics. Interviewees' comments support the idea that spaces like Facebook help them practice political skills and develop a political voice (boyd, 2007b, Harris, 2008), potentially increasing the likelihood of other forms of political engagement (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2006). This process is similar to Habermas' (1989) description of socialization into the public sphere.

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RQ1.B: Political Action Definitions

Traditional definitions of political participation frequently emphasize that participation is active, rather than passive. Political participation requires more than observing political events from the sideline; it requires some level of involvement or an attempt at influencing political outcomes (van Deth, 2001). Based on this idea, Facebook has been criticized by scholars and the media for providing a "slacktivist" substitute for effective political action. Vitak et al. (2011), for example, argue that some forms of participation on Facebook are "lightweight," have little cost for participants, and few benefits for the political process. However, these arguments do not account for Facebook users' views of political action in the space. As a result, RQ1.B was designed to explore how young adults understand the idea of *political action* on Facebook:

> **RQ1.B.** What actions do youth include and exclude from the definition of meaningful political participation on Facebook?

To facilitate data analysis for this thesis, the category of *action* was initially defined as things that individuals do on Facebook other than posting content, such as *liking* political figures, joining political groups, or making donations. Interview questions were designed to explore these and other kinds of actions participants experienced in the space. For example, the students were initially asked to describe in general the kinds of political things they saw on Facebook, but were later given the opportunity to explain whether such things were active or not.

Political Actions on Facebook

Participants mentioned all of the aforementioned actions – *liking* political figures, joining political groups, and making donations – but characterized other things on

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Facebook as political action as well. Thus, participants' definitions of political action were broader than my initial definition. The interview conversations also imply that *action,* as conceptualized in the original definition, may not be the most important part of political participation on Facebook, in contrast to the emphasis traditionally placed on action in scholarly definitions of politics. The discussions with students also supported the idea that communication and political action are not easily separable (Hayes et al., 2006; Norris, 2001; Verba et al., 1995; Verba & Nie, 1972), and this seems to be particularly true on Facebook.

Joining and *Liking*

 Joining political groups and *liking* political figures were mentioned regularly by students, who did not seem to differentiate between the two ideas. Several individuals noted that they had *liked* political candidates during the last several election seasons, and others talked about *liking* political parties on Facebook. Again, the students indicated that these actions were political because of their tie to political actors and events. Still others joined groups that addressed local political concerns and encouraged local action. One interviewee shared:

> I'm a fan of their page [Be Local], and that page does so much more than a page about Obama's economic principles. Their page says 'buy from a local farmer; the local farmer's going to put that money back into your local economy.' (AS)

***Liking* Posts**

 In addition to *liking* a person or group, Facebook users can also click the *like* button in response to a post by an individual person or a group. Many of the participants who brought screenshots that included individual posts with *likes* were prompted to talk

about how the *like* button affected politics on Facebook. Several interview participants

pointed out that *liking* something could be problematic if it does become a substitute for

more traditional forms of participation, and some interviewees' comments support the

idea that *liking* can be a low-cost, "lightweight" activity:

> I think that people like how non-controversial it is just to *like* something. They
>
> don't have to actually give their opinion or state anything; they don't have to
>
> write it on their wall. They get to agree with something. They get to sort of voice
>
> their opinions, but don't have to worry about anyone questioning them about it.
>
> (MR)

However, participants also noted that the *like* button could have positive

functions. As boyd (2010) argues, social networking sites are essentially spaces for

conversation, where individuals make active choices about how to participate. A number

of interviewees reflected the perspective that *liking* is active. One participant observed

that *liking* a status is somewhat like voting for that status, implying the importance of

what is being said. Another suggested that:

> [*Liking*] brings credibility to a post like that, so in this case it isn't some crazy
>
> conservative on his wall that no one agrees with. The *likes* bring light to the fact
>
> that this is something that holds water according to a lot of people. (DA)

Participants' comments also suggest that withholding a *like* or comment from a

post can be an active decision. One participant noted he would be more likely to ignore a

political post he disagreed with than to respond to it, as responding to it would simply

make it appear in his news feed for a longer length of time. Another interviewee

explained that she would not respond to political posts she disagreed with to avoid giving

the original posters the satisfaction of a response. Such decisions seem just as strategic as responding to a post. The different goals for *liking* content on Facebook show why it may be difficult for scholars to create clear definitions of political action in the space.

Event Invitations

Participants also characterized posting and replying to Facebook event invitations as an action, partially because attending or organizing an event implied usually that they would participate in an activity outside of Facebook, such as a rally or political march. Participants liked that Facebook events allow them to immediately see others who are attending an event, and several participants indicated that they would be more likely to attend an event which their friends were attending. Others mentioned how Facebook events can help organize actions that do not take place in one physical location. For example, Facebook users can be asked to RSVP in order to indicate that they plan to vote a certain way or support a particular cause. One participant explained that "sometimes people use the invitation feature not necessarily to invite you to a physical place; it's more like, 'here's something I want you to know about, so I'm going to invite you to this idea'" (MR).

Donations

Very few interviewees mentioned anything about making political donations via Facebook. No students indicated that they had made a donation using Facebook, only that they had been presented with the opportunity, or knew of others who has posted requests for donations. Participants mentioned that they had seen requests to support candidates and political causes.

Signing Petitions

Similarly, signing petitions was mentioned mostly in passing, except when the researcher showed a screenshot of a petition to freeze Pakistan's debt to prompt discussion. No participants indicated that they had signed a petition via Facebook.

Overall, the data from RQ1.B indicate that the line between political action and political communication on Facebook is not clear cut, just as scholars have found in other political contexts (e.g. Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Hayes et al., 2006). Scholars who study Facebook should also expect to confront challenges when differentiating between these ideas.

RQ2.B: The Acceptability of Action

In addition to exploring what *kind* of actions participants included in their definitions of political participation on Facebook, the interview questions were also designed to explore which actions youth considered to be *acceptable* or *unacceptable* in the space. Findings from Vitak et al. (2011) and Sibona and Walczak (2011) suggest that there are times where Facebook users view political things as inappropriate, but studies have not specifically addressed the idea of political action on Facebook.

RQ2.B. What actions do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable as part of political participation on Facebook?

Actions Acceptable

As was the case with political topics, participants generally stated that political actions on Facebook are socially acceptable. Few interviewees expressed any outright disapproval of a particular action. They continued to emphasize strongly that Facebook

users could "do what they wanted" with Facebook, because Facebook "is their own space." Once again, they appealed to the idea of freedom of speech to explain why political actions were okay.

However, when students were asked whether actions were acceptable or unacceptable, some offered the opinion that certain actions were more or less effective as part of the political process. For example, several participants suggested that local events invitations were more relevant than invitations for larger or less local events. They stated that local events were easier to get to and had a greater impact on political causes. Interviewees also mentioned that they ignore event invitations because they receive too many. This was one of several times when they indicated that activities and posts on Facebook can become "white noise:"

> I haven't actually responded to the event yet, partly because it's in Denver, and that makes things harder…I get a lot of event invitations…so I think I read it, and then let it go into my inbox of events, and then went on to something else on Facebook. (MK)

Participants also expressed some reservations about making a donation. One participant noted that he would need an extremely close connection to another Facebook user to even consider giving him or her money via Facebook. Another participant stated that he would never use Facebook to make a political donation, because he would be unsure who was taking the money. Similarly, interviewees who talked about signing petitions had mixed reactions as to whether or not they would sign a petition. Several mentioned that they would need to research an issue through other trusted sources before signing a petition, or least find out "where a petition came from."

Although participants seemed hesitant to state that any political actions were unacceptable, their comments here may suggest that some of these more traditional activities are more socially acceptable to these students when conducted outside of Facebook. In addition, the interview comments imply that considering the effectiveness of actions may be a way that students determine whether or not an action is appropriate.

RQ1.C: Functions of Participation

As indicated by the previous research questions, another important part of political participation on Facebook is how participants explain their own motives for participation, and how they ascribe motives to other Facebook users. Although many studies look at the presence or absence of political actions or discussions on Facebook (e.g. Bode, 2008; Feezel et al., 2009; Kushin & Kitchener, 2009), there are fewer that explore the functions of political participation in this context. However, numerous communication scholars have demonstrated that communication is not always an end in itself, but rather has other goals and purposes (e.g. Berger, 1997; Waldron, 1997). If individuals who engage in political participation on Facebook are expressing themselves, are they trying to accomplish specific political goals with their posts and actions? What are they trying to do? RQ1.C. asks:

> **RQ1.C.** What functions do youth include or exclude as a part of meaningful
> political participation on Facebook?

Although participants came up with a variety of different purposes and goals for political engagement through Facebook, the following explanations recurred throughout the interviews: To express beliefs, to vent or release strong emotions, to start discussions or arguments, to provide information or raise awareness, and to organize or motivate

others. Expressing beliefs and starting discussions and arguments were the goals mentioned most frequently by interviewees, again suggesting the importance of Facebook for political communication and expression.

To Express Beliefs

Interview participants emphasized that one of the key functions of political participation on Facebook was the expression of beliefs and opinions. Participants repeatedly described this as the motive of other posters. Once again, they described Facebook as an important space to voice their beliefs and opinions about political issues, and to "show support" for political ideas or people.

To Release Strong Emotions

Often related to expressing beliefs and opinions, student interviewees stated that people posted because they wanted a place to release strong emotions. A number of interviewees brought examples that they identified as "angry," "ranting," or "spouting." In these cases, participants often suggested that the posts were composed hastily, in the heat of emotion, and without careful thought. Several students suggested that the ease of publishing on Facebook led to more impulsive, emotional posts. One participant stated, "I think more people spout first, and then they go, 'oh, I should probably not say stuff like that.'…They type something and send it away, and I don't think they realize the repercussions of it until later, when somebody else posts on it" (DB).

Participants did not indicate that angry posts were meant to facilitate any kind of discussion about political topics or issues, but rather suggested such posts were meant to release frustration or find a supportive audience. Several pointed out that these posts in particular seemed to lead likeminded others to express their agreement, either by

commenting or pressing the *like* button. One individual explained how a post was asking likeminded others to agree:

> We have a friend posting a video of Rosie O'Donnell saying she thinks Osama bin
> Laden should have had a fair trial. And [the poster's] comment to that is 'when
> will she shut the hell up?'…That was just a blatant, not trying to start a discussion
> with other people, but going to likeminded people and saying 'doesn't that make
> you mad, too?' (AS)

To Start a Discussion or Argument

Interviewees also suggested that many individuals post on Facebook in order to start a discussion or an argument. This is not surprising, as Facebook is meant for dialogue. As boyd (2010) points out, Facebook users are able to respond to comments, links, photos, videos, and status updates by using the comment feature, or clicking the *like* button attached to each of these posts, creating a thread of responses which may be displayed in both the news feed and on the original poster's wall. Participants also noted that Facebook encourages interaction:

> With status posts, you're posting something purposefully…the idea is that you
> want a response. You want it to show up in somebody's news feed, because you
> want them to comment on it and participate with you on it, because it's like
> validation for your thoughts. So it's almost like a vote when you get comments
> back, or a discussion forum as well...it's a form of communication that begs for a
> response. (MK)

Several individuals also pointed out that Facebook can be a space for individuals to engage in political attacks, free from the repercussions of face-to-face interaction.

However, participants emphasized that such attacks took place most often when Facebook users engaged in discussion with individuals they did not know, such as in a national political group.

To Provide Information/Raise Awareness

The students also suggested that Facebook users aim to provide information and raise awareness about political topics or issues, often by posting links to news articles or quoting other sources. In several cases, they noted that Facebook was a useful space to find or share political information. One participant noted that his Facebook friend gave him personalized recommendations for political videos to watch. Another talked about sharing a political news link with a friend to follow up on an earlier conversation. A third participant indicated that he learned from a Facebook friend that Florida was instituting drug tests for welfare recipients. Interpersonal relationships were a key factor that helped interviewees locate relevant political information on Facebook:

> Sometimes Facebook acts like a filter, in a way, because there's access to so many things online, you can browse the web for hours and hours. Or you can go in your Facebook, look at what other people like you are paying attention to on the web, and then pay attention to those things, too, rather than spend a lot of time searching by yourself. (MK)

The filtering effect described here is concerning if it means that individuals are only exposed to political information from like-minded individuals, as scholars such as Sunstein (2001) have suggested may be the case online. However, many interview participants noted that they use Facebook to maintain relationships with individuals from a variety of different social groups, ranging from close friends, to coworkers, to

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grandparents, to former high school classmates. This variety of social connections increases the chance that these Facebook users will be exposed to diverse information (Granovtter, 1973; Huckfeldt et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Interviewees' accounts certainly suggest that they are at least exposed to political perspectives that differ from their own.

In addition to sharing political information and learning political information from friends, interviewees indicated that they sought political information from candidates or campaigns on Facebook. Again, it was important for participants that Facebook helped them find political information in a centralized location:

> I liked that because it was an easy source that I could go to find quick, concise info, instead of having to search the entire web. I was able to go to Facebook and say '[Candidate's name], here's his page.' No, I'm not going to like his page or dislike it, but I'm able to get the information I need to make an informed decision on my vote. (LJ)

A number of interviewees also suggested that political information on Facebook is biased and posted to support a particular viewpoint, rather than to help readers make their own decisions about a particular issue. However, participants generally characterized themselves as savvy consumers of political information, noting that they were able to tell the difference between biased and unbiased sources and opinions, and interpret such information accordingly.

To Organize or Motivate Others

In relatively fewer cases, student participants thought that political things on Facebook were specifically designed to motivate or organize others for concrete action.

When interviewees talked about Facebook as an organizational or motivational tool, they most often referred to actions that took place in physical locations, rather than on Facebook. For example, one interviewee talked about his cousin using Facebook to raise money for political groups and invite people to attend a rally for a local political candidate's campaign. Participants also mentioned other more traditional political actions, such as signing petitions, contacting representatives, or committing to vote for particular candidates.

Although the students mentioned a number of different goals for political participation, they placed a great deal of emphasis on expressing beliefs and starting discussions and argument, again suggesting the importance of Facebook for political communication and expression.

RQ2.C: The Acceptability of Functions and Motives

Because participants indicated that there are a variety of motives for political participation on Facebook, and such participation is meant to accomplish a variety of things, RQ2.C next explores whether or not participants view such functions and motives as acceptable ones:

RQ2.C. What functions or purposes for participation do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

Although topics and actions did not seem to strongly affect whether or not interviewees thought political things on Facebook were okay, interviewees had stronger opinions about the reasons or goals for doing political things on Facebook. Although participants gave limited reactions to political topics and actions, they seemed more willing to suggest that certain reasons for doing political things on Facebook were

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appropriate or inappropriate. In general, participants accepted those motives that seemed "civil," such as starting a discussion or expressing beliefs. Such goals were seen as respectful to other Facebook users. They rejected goals that seemed less civil, such as starting arguments or making angry statements.

To Express Beliefs

It seems clear from the data that interviewees generally approved of expressing political opinions and beliefs via Facebook. As noted in section RQ2.A, participants expressed almost unanimously that those who wanted to share their political beliefs on Facebook should be allowed to do. A number of participants indicated that they disagreed with particular opinions or beliefs, but went on to indicate that they still thought the expressions were okay:

> I don't want to say what people can and cannot post…While I completely disagree with their beliefs, it's not my business to take that away from them, or think that's inappropriate, because I think I would do the exact same thing if I was super hardcore about my beliefs. (NA)

Again, the reasons for this acceptance seem to trace back to the value participants placed on Facebook as a space for free speech and expression.

Releasing Strong Emotion

Participants generally expressed disapproval of political posts or actions that seemed to be motivated by negative emotions. Releasing anger, in particular, was seen as an inappropriate goal for doing political things. Angry comments were called "not helpful," and people who posted such comments were accused of detracting from a fruitful political discussion. In addition, several participants identified their own emotions

as a reason they refrained from posting political things. For example, one participant commented, "I know when I'm emotional, I say things that the next day, I say, 'why would I ever say that? I don't believe that'" (SB). Another participant stated:

> I took offense to that, and I really did want to respond to it. But that's especially one of the times I wouldn't want to respond, when I did feel so passionately about something. I might overstep my boundary; I might say something I shouldn't say to that group of friends. (AS)

At the same time, expressing emotion seemed okay in some circumstances. Several interviewees characterized patriotism and pride as emotions that led people to post in the aftermath of Osama bin Laden's death. In this case, participants did not reject such a motivation, but rather marveled at how it led so many people to post about one event. In another case, a participant expressed sympathy for a poster who lamented the effects of war, noting that the poster seemed to have emotional ties to events taking place in the Middle East.

To Provide Political Info/Raise Awareness

In general, participants also thought it was okay for Facebook users to provide political information. Participants talked about the usefulness of "raising awareness" about political topics on Facebook, especially topics that were not receiving much attention in the political arena or coverage in traditional news sources. For example, one participant explained that he had posted a link about the Patriot Act in order to make people aware that it was up for renewal.

Interviewees also indicated that Facebook was a useful, legitimate place for them to gain political information. One participant stated:

My personal standpoint is that Facebook is a reliable source, just because it seems

as though there's security measures that somebody would have to go through to

be able to create a Facebook page…I believe that [political candidate] or one of

his campaign staff created the page, so that information is coming straight from

the horse's mouth. (LJ)

In addition, interviewees shared that they enjoyed learning about political events

that were not covered in their local or national news, such as local political events taking

place where friends lived. However, participants did not frequently note that they went to

Facebook specifically to seek political information; rather, their exposure seemed to be

incidental. One participant explained:

It's not in your face, political stuff. It's all the things that people have added into

their daily schedule…When you see political stuff on Facebook, you don't

consciously think, 'I'm reading political stuff.' I'm not sitting there reading an

Op-Ed article in a newspaper or something like that. It's all in people's opinions,

or videos. (CW)

This incidental exposure is important, particularly if it means that individuals who

might not otherwise seek political information receive some exposure (Kushin &

Kitchener, 2009).

Starting Discussions vs. Starting Arguments

In terms of acceptability, participants differentiated between posts that seemed to

be motivated by starting a discussion and those motivated by starting an argument.

Starting a discussion was generally viewed as an acceptable goal. Participants typically

described political discussions as more "civil" than political arguments. They praised

individuals who chose to engage in or start discussions, and particularly those who provided evidence and context for their claims. One participant described an example he brought to the second interview:

> He's taking a quote from a news source and then commenting on it. I'm sure if this kid wrote his essays this way, he'd probably do pretty well. Because a lot of kids don't realize they have to use evidence and then explain it in their own words. (CW)

In contrast, starting a political argument was described more as an attempt to dominate other individuals, score points, and promote one's own perspective as the correct one. Starting an argument implied less openness to responses from individuals with different opinions. Participants criticized other users for "baiting" each other into arguments, but also noted that people were responsible for taking that bait. Most often, participants suggested that they avoided participating in heated political arguments or political attacks, because they recognized Facebook as a space used to build and maintain relationships. This emphasizes the importance of the fact that most social network users know each other from some sort of face-to-face context (Ellison et al., 2007).

To Persuade

The concept of persuasion was also presented during conversations about political discussion and argument. Vitak et al. (2011) argue that Facebook users are somewhat uncomfortable with being asked to support a particular political viewpoint or a political candidate. The interviews provided mixed data about the appropriateness of such persuasion. Interviewees described dialogue about political issues as important and appropriate on Facebook, suggesting that they are somewhat open to the idea of

persuasion, or at least open to gaining an understanding of other political perspectives. Similarly, Stromer-Galley (2003) found that individuals who joined online political discussions generally enjoyed being exposed to different perspectives, and sometimes sought political conversations specifically for this exposure. Interview participants also had positive reactions to learning about political ideas that differed from their own through Facebook. However, they did seem bothered by individuals who tried to persuade people too often or too aggressively. In such cases, some students indicated that they tried to manage their exposure by ignoring posts or blocking posters from appearing in their news feeds. Several interviewees added that they were more likely to ignore or block posts than to unfriend other Facebook users, in part because they wanted to maintain relationships with those posters. One participant described a situation where he dealt with unwanted political posts:

> It was getting to the point where [the poster] was trying to push his political viewpoint via Facebook onto everybody else, and I just didn't agree with him, because I have my own viewpoints…That's why I blocked him, because you can only get used to so much and take so much of the opposition wearing you down. I just said, 'I still want to be friends with you, but I just don't want to see what you're posting.' (LJ)

Another interviewee who blocked a friend's post from appearing in his newsfeed explained, "I don't want the drama of actually [unfriending] him…If he noticed that I unfriended him, I wouldn't want to have to explain that if I run into him." (MR)

Interviewees showed the least tolerance for posts that made them feel like they were being intentionally misled, emotionally manipulated, or subjected to propaganda.

One student explained about an example he brought to the second interview, "It's propaganda to where you're not encouraging other beliefs. You're scaring people away from voicing what they actually believe" (AS). Participants suggested that posters should provide "good" or "correct" evidence, and check their posts for factual accuracy. In addition, they suggested that there were ways to share political opinions without being "pushy" about them:

> This was a video that was able to bring together everything I believe in and a way to share my beliefs without pushing it on anybody else. If they wanted to watch the video, they could. If they didn't want to, they could skip over it. (LJ)

To Organize and Raise Money

Participants also thought it was okay for Facebook users to try to organize various political actions, or coordinate for causes, candidates, or political events. A number of interviewees made positive statements about using Facebook used to organize political activity, calling it a "great idea," "versatile," and "convenient." Once again, however, it is important to note that the same individuals often ignored event invitations, and did not necessarily indicate that they used Facebook to engage in traditional political action.

Based on the data from RQ2.C, it seems that interview participants were most accepting of motives that seemed civil, and least accepting of posts and actions that seemed motivated by aggression, anger, or a desire to argue. This data also supports the idea that Facebook has a set of social rules, much like other online spaces do (boyd, 2010).

RQ1.D: Language and Political Participation

One of the final aspects of political participation explored in this thesis is

language. Taylor (2001) suggests that the ways youth think about and talk about ideas gives those concepts importance and meaning. In order to explore more specifically how youth talk about political participation and to examine what role language has in their political experiences on Facebook, the functional category of language was introduced in Chapter 3. This category refers to the ways youth talk about political issues on Facebook, and also includes more symbolic and nonverbal expressions, such as posting a video or picture. To the author's knowledge, no studies yet explore this role of language in political participation on Facebook. As a result, RQ1.D asks:

RQ1.D. What phrases or language do youth use to describe political participation on Facebook?

During the interviews, it became apparent that two different ways of looking at language were important. First, as Taylor (2001) suggests, the particular language interviewees used to describe their political experiences on Facebook provided important information about political participation. Second, the way language was used during that participation also provided important data, particularly when it came to the acceptability of political participation.

Expression

As noted throughout this thesis, a common theme that came up during the interviews was the idea of self-expression. Interviewees continually used the phrases "self-expression," "expressing a belief," "expressing an opinion," and "sharing views" when describing political participation on Facebook. Similarly, participants shared about the importance of having a political "voice" via Facebook:

It's [Facebook] allowing people who could never raise issues, didn't have the

ability to bring light to hundreds of issues, thousands, millions of issues, and now all of a sudden this is a community. Their voice sounds just as loud on Facebook as it does to campaign with money or organize on the street or do a rally. (DA)

Statements such as this one suggest that the importance of voice may be based on how interviewees felt able to express themselves on Facebook, rather than based on the concrete results of such expression. It is important for studies of political participation via social networks to not focus too exclusively on the results of participation, and risk overlooking the importance of expression itself.

Multiple students also emphasized that Facebook ought to be a "safe space" or "safe outlet" to express themselves politically. For example, one student explained that she felt safer talking about divisive political issues on Facebook than talking face-to-face with a coworker or friend. However, others noted that Facebook was not always a safe space. Another interviewee recalled what happened when a Facebook friend felt that her space had been used inappropriately:

E called her aunt up, had a talk with her, and said 'what I've created on Facebook I need to be a safe space for certain people. And you're free to have your opinions, but I can't have those opinions within that space, because I need this to be a safe space. (MK)

Participants also noted that Facebook can be a safe political space for some individuals, but less so for others, particularly if they sense a hostile opinion climate:

I feel like most of the people I would be friends with come from the same area I come from, and it's dominated by [political party]…If I were to comment on that, I would be the outsider...It's easy to team up on people if there's one person who

responds to five comments about one thing that they disagree. Then [Facebook]

sends an email to those five people who disagree with that one last comment. And

it's easy to be overwhelmed…You feel underrepresented. (AS)

However, even participants that did not experience Facebook as a safe space still

pointed out the importance and potential of such a space. In general, the language and

phrases offered by participants support boyd's (2007b, 2010) contention that youth may

have turned to the internet to find some spaces where they feel able to share their political

opinions.

Political Exchanges

Other phrases participants brought up frequently during the interviews were

"political discussion" and "political argument." For participants, these concepts implied a

move beyond political expression to an exchange between participants. Although

interviewees did not always use these exact terms, they generally differentiated between

two types of exchanges on Facebook. Political discussion, for example, is used here to

refer to exchanges that participants described as "positive," "open," allowing "room" for

different opinions, or exchanges where participants provided unbiased evidence for their

claims, and "truly listened" to each other. These descriptions fit closely with some of the

standards for political deliberation as described by Dahlberg (2001) and Habermas

(1989). Argument, in contrast, is used to highlight exchanges participants characterized as

"shut down," "strongly worded," or exchanges where individuals had such strong

opinions that they did not listen to each other or consider each other's viewpoints, but

rather focused on proving their own points. For example, one participant explained that

"debating is 'here's my opinion and here are the facts that support my opinion and this is

why I believe this.' An argument is 'you're wrong; you're wrong;' and back and forth head butting" (LJ).

The amount of time participants spent discussing such exchanges implies recognition that a democratic political process requires more than individuals voicing their opinions; it also requires a dialogue. However, participants' experiences on Facebook did not often seem to fulfill their desire for dialogue. In fact, the way participants framed discussion and argument suggests that political discussion was the ideal they hoped for, but political argument was the reality they experienced. Participants who brought examples of more positive dialogue often used them to exemplify how exchanges on Facebook ought to be:

> This one really caught my attention, because it was actually a discussion, and it was a video post originally about Herman Cain…It's not just between two people…there's some more, like five or six people in here, and so I was surprised that so many people jumped in and really responded to this video, and to the conversation that was carried on…honestly, this is probably the best post I've ever seen. (SB)

> I think this is inviting discussion, and I feel like the other [posts discussed] weren't actually inviting discussion, they were just posting 'this is my belief and that's it,' like that's the right way. This one made me feel more apt to respond to it. (NA)

Political argument, however, was much more common in participants' experiences:

> It's [Facebook] not a discussion starter, at least the things I've seen between friends. It's either everybody cheering for one side, or two extremes batting

heads…You never really see somebody say 'oh, that's interesting. Thank you for pointing that out to me.' (AS)

Despite the fact that participants saw little positive discussion on Facebook, it is still important to remember that they expressed desire for more discussion and emphasized the value of political expression. This evidence certainly does not seem to suggest a politically disengaged group of young adults, as scholars like Putnam (1995; 2000) have feared. However, it is also important to remember that all of the interviewees expressed at least some level of political interest in their survey responses, which may not be typical of average individuals in their age group.

Other Parts of Expression and Exchange

As part of participants' comments about expression and exchange on Facebook, they often mentioned factors about language beyond the text itself. Many interviewees highlighted the role of reposts, likes, and photos.

Reposts. Reposts, or copying and using another person's words or other content on Facebook, were described as a means of expression for Facebook users when they could not come up with the "right" words by themselves. In some cases, participants thought that reposts cheapened political participation:

I've gotten to the point where people who quote other people I don't see as original, and I want to know what their original thoughts are…My response would be, 'great, a quote from somebody famous…What do you believe about this quote? What are you trying to get across with this quote? (LJ)

In other cases, participants argued that reposts provide important evidence and credibility for political posts, increasing the transparency of political exchanges on

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Facebook:

> [A repost] brings more credibility to a quote than if someone had just posted their own thoughts on Facebook, because to some extent, I think it conveys the fact that it might be true or that it could be backed up by possible information. (DA)

Photos. Posting photos emerged as another important part of expression and exchange during interview conversations. Participants explained that they were part of a "visual" generation, and were "trained" to pay attention to photos or YouTube videos. This idea was also emphasized by the many participant examples that included some kind of photo or graphic. When participants were asked why they selected such examples, they often noted that a particular photo was "rich," "meaningful," or "powerful." Some suggested that some photos can break up the "white noise" of other political posts:

> I think people get so caught up in the internet age through text and through reading quick blurbs. When you bring it back to humanizing a statement through the picture, it really hits people in a different way. (DA)

Another individual explained, "I can look at the picture, analyze it, and make my determination: Do I agree or do I disagree? Had it all been in words, I probably would have skipped over it" (LJ).

Figure 1. A status update encouraging other Facebook users to change their profile pictures in order to fight child abuse.

However, interviewees did not always have a positive view of photos and graphics that were part of political posts. Some participants explained that the cartoon character graphics included in one of the interviewer's examples (Figure 1) were confusing and unhelpful. One individual criticized the way a Facebook friend used photos from a recent service learning trip to make a one-sided political point, explaining that the photos did not accurately represent the purpose of the trip.

Political actions. Participants also tied political actions on Facebook to the ideas of expression and exchange. When participants emphasized the importance of actions such as joining a group, they often noted that such actions gave participants a political voice or allowed them to be heard and express themselves. Again, this emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between communication and action.

RQ2.D: The Acceptability of Language

Another unexplored part of political participation on Facebook is how language reveals and affects participants' views of political participation. To the author's knowledge, there are no studies that address this specific issue. RQ2.D asks:

RQ2.D. What ways of talking about political participation do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

Participants' language and descriptions during the interviews provided some interesting indicators of what political things they viewed as acceptable or unacceptable on Facebook. However, the language used in political posts was arguably one of the most important factors determining whether interview participants viewed a particular post as acceptable or unacceptable. Conversations about how language should be used provoked strong reactions from students, even when discussing examples of participation that had

otherwise been considered acceptable.

Acceptable: Expression

In general, participants spoke positively about the idea of expression. Whether participants were asked whether political expression was "okay or not okay" or "appropriate or inappropriate," they were quick to affirm the value of political expression on Facebook. Again, this affirmation was linked to the idea of free speech. Interestingly, when asked about the appropriateness of expression, students often transitioned from talking about concrete examples of self-expression to talking about expression in broader terms. One individual stated, "I honestly believe that Facebook should be an open forum. It's just like any other conversation on the street. We should be able to express our beliefs and defend them" (LJ).

Similar to the way that participants talked about the idea of political discussion, this language and framing seems to suggest that some broader value is more important than participants' personal feelings or experiences with self-expression on Facebook. Indeed, many interviewees expressed negative feelings toward some forms of self-expression on Facebook, while still indicating that people should be allowed to express their opinions:

> I think it's sort of the idea that, 'I don't like what you say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it.' You know, I think it's a bad sort of way of seeing things, a bad sort of idea, and I don't want to see it, but I think it's still somebody expressing themselves, and I think that's important. (MR)

Another individual pointed out a potential implication of labeling some political expressions as unacceptable:

If I had answered that it's not okay, then the next question would be, what do we do about it? Do we have somebody that's filtering what we're putting up there? We start turning into other countries that certain people feel don't have as good of policies as we do. (AS)

Exchanges: Discussion Okay; Argument Less Okay

As suggested by the responses to RQ1.D, interviewees described political discussions on Facebook are a good thing, but described arguments somewhat less positively. In particular, the students noted some of the problems with "one-sided" exchanges:

So then they build their grievances with each other…it becomes almost a situation where you have people of like political mind, and it's really hard to say anything different…so you can't have a fruitful discussion about 'well, what are they possible influences here? And what's actually going on in this situation?' (MK)

You're scaring people away from voicing what you actually believe…It's just dangerous, because you're not encouraging a dialogue… it fires people up under that notion of 'there's only left or right; there's only right or wrong.' (AS)

Participants ultimately suggested that Facebook users should be aware of how their political discussions and arguments affected others:

I can talk politics with you and say 'this is what I believe,' and once you start to get uncomfortable, I should pick up on the cue that you are uncomfortable and switch to something else. It is the same idea with Facebook, that everything is free game, but if the people listening to you start to get uncomfortable, then you should move it off of the public forum and into a more private forum. (LJ)

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Humor

A number of participants spoke briefly about the appropriateness of humor in political things on Facebook, and during the second interview, some participants were asked to react to screenshots of link to an *Onion* article (Figure 2) and a video clip from *The Daily Show* (Figure 3). Participants had mixed but somewhat strong reactions to the appropriateness of humor in political things. Some participants suggested that using humor in political posts on Facebook detracted from users' ability to discuss political issues seriously. For example, one participant described a post about world hunger where other Facebook users responded by making fun of the spelling in the original post. Another participant expressed chagrin that television shows such as *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* were sometimes seen as sources for political information. However, other participants suggested that humor was an appropriate way to soften a political message or idea that could otherwise cause polarization and argument.

Figure 2. Link to an *Onion* article about Mitt Romney.

Figure 3. Link to a *Daily Show* video clip about Newt Gingrich.

Interviewees also indicated that political humor got their attention:

> I guess the best way to get my age group interested is to make it sarcastic.
> Because no one is going to sit down and read a bill. It's just bland; most anything
> in politics these days is all lawyer-ish talk. My age group doesn't want to deal
> with that, they just want to see it in plain words. (CW)

Crude, Rude, Inaccurate and Disrespectful Language

The students strongly rejected the use of language that was "disrespectful,"
"rude," "detrimental" "violent," or "racist," and also rejected "bashing," "profanity," and
"slander" in political exchanges. One participant talked about a Facebook user who used
rape analogies to describe taxation, and another described a Facebook group that featured
President Obama as the 40-year-old political virgin. Such language was seen as both
inappropriate and unhelpful in political exchanges:

> A lot of times, people would just bash Obama or McCain, and they things they
> said weren't necessarily political…I'm sure they do have a rationale, but if I were
> to see a post that's just bashing with no evidence, I get the impression that they
> don't necessarily know. Like putting 'F--- somebody' or 'screw you.' It's just like
> taking a short cut out. (SB)

In particular, participants expressed disapproved of language that attacked
individuals. Several participants spoke at length about how caricatures and name calling
affect political conversation and expression. One participant observed:

> He doesn't seem like he's trying to raise awareness about anything, it's more of an
> attack on this figure he doesn't like…He doesn't like Al Franken, so he calls him
> Al Frankenstein. So it's not like 'this is why Al Franken is bad'…it's more like,

'here's an insult.' (MR)

Another participant brought an example of an exchange where one Facebook user referred to Nancy Pelosi as "Skeletor" and another to John Boehner as an "Oompa Loompa." The interviewee also identified another form of language that seemed disrespectful:

> It was just him saying that 'the gavel is being taken away from Nancy because she's scary'…When I saw it, I felt like, would they have necessarily said that if the speaker of the house had been male? I felt like maybe there was a little bit of this sexist attitude toward it. (NA)

Interviewees also expressed disapproval of language that singled out or attacked a group of individuals:

> He posted a clip from an old Bob Hope movie, and the gist of the joke was basically that Democrats are zombies that don't think…I don't like generalizing any group like that, so it did bother me somewhat. (MR)

Participants also suggested that Facebook users employ certain mechanisms to make their language seem more appropriate or to and distance themselves from language that may seem inappropriate:

> The other thing I see is polls that people use to voice more scary, extreme opinions. I saw one that other day; the question was basically 'what should we do about illegal immigration?'…And there was about three people on my friends list that selected 'use them for sniping practice'…I just don't think that's something they even actually thought…they were just selecting something on a poll. I think they didn't feel like they owned that opinion. (MR)

Better Language

Participants also identified ways that language could contribute to a more productive political environment on Facebook. They noted the importance of using language in more accurate ways, such as directing accusations or claims toward specific individuals, rather than generalizing about groups of people, such as Republicans or Democrats. Instead of engaging in personal attacks, interviewees suggested that posters should base their arguments on relevant and substantial evidence. Finally, interviewees asserted that political posts are the most effective when they use language that allows other individuals to form their own opinions or contribute to the conversation:

As long as it's not showering me with whatever your political viewpoint is, if it's a little bit here and a little bit there, I'm fine with that…I'll look at it and say 'okay, that's an interesting viewpoint. I don't believe it, or yeah, I do believe in that, and I'll help you support this cause.' (LJ)

The data from the interviews reveals that political participation on Facebook is an important part of politics, particularly as Facebook may provide a space for political expression and talk among young adults. Although politics on Facebook may not fit neatly into established definitions of political participation and action, Facebook participation has consequences for participants both on and off Facebook. In addition, the interview conversations demonstrate that there are social norms that affect how individuals engage in politics on Facebook. Chapter 6, Discussion, turns to a more detailed discussion of what can be learned and applied from these interview conversations.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

This study presents a complex picture of political participation on Facebook, and the interviews suggest that both traditional and everyday types of participation are taking place there. Clearly, expression is an important part of political engagement for study participants, who valued the freedom and opportunity to share their political opinions via Facebook, and spoke positively about political discussions on Facebook. The interview transcripts also demonstrate that a variety of political actions are important not only in their own right, but perhaps even more so as a part of the expression that takes place.

There is also strong evidence that social norms affect political participation on Facebook. While emphasizing the importance of free speech, interviewees also indicated that certain types of disrespectful or inaccurate language are inappropriate as part of a political conversation. In addition, the interview comments suggest that some motives and functions, such as starting an argument, are not considered okay. The social nature of Facebook also affected how interviewees interacted with their friends and managed their identities, both on Facebook and in other spaces.

Such findings have two major implications for scholars who study political participation in the context of social networking sites such as Facebook. First, comparing political things on Facebook to traditional notions and measures of active political participation makes little theoretical sense, as participants do not construct notions of Facebook this way. Interviewees' comments demonstrate the difficulty of separating communication and action on Facebook. As a result, scholars need to adjust their

methods of measuring political participation, giving increased recognition to the importance of expression.

Second, the importance of Facebook as a social network cannot be overemphasized. The social norms of engagement on Facebook affect participants and their relationships both on and off Facebook. Because Facebook is a social networking website, political interactions on Facebook take place among friends in a familiar space, and this familiarity affects the nature of engagement. Scholars should place much more emphasis on how the social and political coexist on Facebook.

Facebook Participation: Difficulty of Defining Politics

At first glance, the interview data suggest that definitions of politics on Facebook should be equated with government, a traditional way of defining politics (e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965; Verba & Nie, 1972). In particular, the findings about political topics create a strong argument for the continued use of traditional definitions. Students unanimously included government in their descriptions of political things on Facebook. It is also revealing that interviewees linked politics to government issues with confidence and ease during the interviews, perhaps indicating that they felt government was a good, correct, or obvious answer. As a result, the interviews provide further evidence that scholars who study Facebook can continue to include certain concepts, like voting, in their definitions of politics, as voting has a direct, obvious impact on the government (Verba & Nie, 1972).

However, the interviews also demonstrate that scholars should not measure politics or government as if such concepts were limited to indicators like voting, campaigning, or politicians. Participants' understandings of politics are probably not

limited to government in this sense, nor do all participants agree on their explanations of why a given topic is political or non-political. As Morrey (unpublished manuscript) found in her study of political definitions, just under half of participants (43.9%) did not think all government issues were political, and over half of participants (53.9%) expanded their definitions beyond traditional government matters. Morrey (unpublished manuscript) recognizes that there is value in allowing individuals to articulate their definitions of politics. However, if a study participant mentions that politics has to do with government, how do scholars know what that means according to participants themselves? If an individual mentions a topic such as ethnicity, how do scholars know whether or not to code this as political, according to the government definition? What do people mean when they talk about political conversations they have experienced? Are these conversations about voting, or do they also include ethnicity and race? In many cases, scholars would be well served not only to make participants describe their definitions of government or politics, but to articulate *why or how* the elements of their definitions relate to government. This is true not only for interview studies, but for survey studies as well, as they may make the same definitional errors.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the interview conversations did not lead to distinct definitions of political action and political communication on Facebook. A number of scholars have already suggested that communicating about politics should be understood as a form of political action (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Hayes et al., 2006), and political actions should be understood as a form of expression and communication, as they are often publicly visible (Hayes et al., 2006) There are two important reasons why the data from this study support the idea that action and communication on Facebook are

also intertwined.

Expression or Action?

First, interviewees did not strongly differentiate between action and communication on Facebook. For example, their motives for joining and *liking* political groups and candidates seemed as much related to self-expression as to "doing" something in the traditional sense of political action. One participant explained that he joined a political group because "it's a great forum where people can get involved…and hopefully, collectively they can voice their opinion on how they feel about different issues" (DA). Another participant recalled, "I had a friend recently join or *like* the page 'I hate illegal immigrants.' So it's an opinion that they had, but they were just *liking* the page instead of posting it" (MR). Several participants who were asked if political posts "did something" or asked them to "do something" replied with answers are not easily categorized as action. For example, one participant explained that a post was asking people to continually question government actions, rather than accepting them without thinking. This is not "doing something" in the sense that traditional definitions of political participation refer to taking action.

Slacktivism or Activism?

Second, the interview transcripts demonstrate that things which initially appear inactive or "slacktivist" on Facebook may be active and strategic. Participants' comments about using the *like* button to provide or withhold credibility or support for posts are revealing. Not only can choosing to *like* something be a thoughtful, active choice, choosing to ignore a political post or action on Facebook or refraining from posting can also be an active choice (see Wyatt et al., 1996). Interestingly, participants' reactions to

the *like* button also seem to be based at least somewhat on their views of the *like* button's function. For example, several participants expressed concern than pressing the *like* button will become a replacement for "real" political action. This perspective implies that those who press the *like* button have the goal of accomplishing some sort of concrete action, or at least a goal of feeling like they have done so. In contrast, when participants placed more importance on the *like* button, they characterized *liking* as both communication and action. This perspective was taken by interviewees who emphasized that pressing the *like* button may express support or give legitimacy to a political opinion or post.

It is also worth noting that the student interviewees had limited reactions to many parts of the original definition of *action*, such as making donations or signing petitions on Facebook. This may suggest that other parts of participation on Facebook are more important in interviewees' minds. Interviewees spent significantly more time talking about ideas like opinion expression and discussion than attempts to accomplish a concrete action. This also indicates some overlap between the ideas of expression and action (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Hayes et al., 2006).

Social Norms of Participation

The students' comments also provide strong evidence that political posts and actions on Facebook are subject to social norms. Although interviewees were somewhat hesitant to suggest that particular political actions are inappropriate, a number of other factors determined whether or not they thought posts were okay: their own motives for participation, the motives of other posters, the potential reactions of audiences, and the tone or language of posts and exchanges. In particular, the language and functions of

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posts produced the strongest reactions in terms of acceptability, and interviewees were able to clearly identify words and motives that were not okay.

The Significance of Relationships

One of the ways interviewees determined whether or not an action or post was acceptable was by considering what they knew about another Facebook user. Participants sometimes framed the interview discussion by describing relevant background about their Facebook friends. For example, posters were described as "from military families," "from a very liberal background," "testosterone-driven," and as liking to "pick a good fight." These pieces of information helped interviewees interpret the functions and motives of many posts:

> I think he actually does like arguing with people, so I think when he posts things that are more emotional or possibly controversial, I think he does actually want people to disagree with him at times. I've seen that before. (MR)
>
> I know this one guy who's very Republican, and he would spit out every single fact that he knows about gun rights…So he's posting all this stuff, and people would just be like, "yes, we know you're passionate about the issue…" And I guess people do it because they want to make sure that other people know what they feel. (RS)

When participants did not know the posters, as was the case with the examples provided by the interviewer, they were more likely to turn to cues such as the wording or language of the post, to help judge the posters' motives.

Because Facebook friends typically know each other from other contexts (Ellison et al., 2007), it seems reasonable to suggest that political interaction on Facebook is more

like conversations that take place between friends or family than those that take place between anonymous individuals. Such casual conversations with friends and family are an important part of political participation (Kim et al., 1999; Wyatt et al., 2000). Scholars should recognize that this difference has important implications for the study of political participation on Facebook. Political conversations on Facebook may be different, for example, from those that might take place on a news website in response to an article.

Social Political Identities

The social nature of Facebook also means that political activity is part of strategic identity management. Scholars who study self-presentation and identity management suggest that individuals control the way others see them by highlighting certain information about themselves (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980). Scholars who study social networks suggest that the process of creating a site profile and communicating with other users is one way youth manage their identities, as they make active choices about what to include or exclude, typically with an audience in mind (boyd, 2007b; boyd, 2010; DiMicco & Millen, 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2010). The interview transcripts support the contention that political expression on Facebook is a part of identity management. Interviewees were careful and strategic about the ways they reacted to and responded to political content, recognizing that politics on Facebook had implications for relationships with friends, family, relatives, classmates, and coworkers. Several interviewees explicitly mentioned that some Facebook users express political things to "look good," but other comments also indicated that participants understood political expression on Facebook as a way to present important information about themselves:

If you're going into a political field, the more politically involved you're going to be, the more articles and things you're going to post…when election season comes around, I make sure everybody knows I want them to vote, and I do that through Facebook. If other people are considering other career fields, I don't really see them doing that. (RS)

I've posted three or four videos, and another one was because it shares a lot of the viewpoints I shared. In this video, [Red Skelton] goes through the Pledge of Allegiance…I'm very patriotic. I support the troops. I believe in what they're doing, and that's my viewpoint. (LJ)

Interviewees also expressed concern that their political posts and actions on Facebook might make identity management more difficult, as those actions could be misunderstood or taken out of context. Part of this concern was because interviewees realized that Facebook posts could reach unintended audiences, much as boyd (2007b) suggests:

Everything you say is going to be heard by a lot of people. In fact, it's going to be heard by more people than if you stood out on campus on the stump and said something on the bullhorn. You're not going to reach as many people as you would if you posted on Facebook. (CW)

I know that I'm always a little hesitant to post things on Facebook, just because it is an open space. And even though I keep it as private—you know, certain people can see it—it's still like you're putting your thoughts out there on the internet, and I think for some people that it's kind of scary. (SB)

In real life…if you say something, it's pretty much gone and only the person you

said it to hears it, and your grandma isn't going to hear it. So I think maybe it's

the permanency, that what you say will stick around. (MR)

Participants' comments also show that their perceptions of other Facebook users

are shaped by political participation:

I just found out one of my really good social friends, by looking at her

information page, is a hard core Libertarian...I didn't know that side of her, so that

changes things a bit. (RS)

Another individual explained how Facebook posts affected her face-to-face

interactions and relationships:

If somebody takes the time to write something political, but maybe I do actually

agree with it… I'm more likely to think about that person, to maybe connect with

that person in some way…I might be more comfortable in approaching them, and

talking about sharing beliefs with them, and just sharing general conversation

with them. (NA)

These observations demonstrate that interviewees did not experience Facebook as

a separate part of life. Rather, their political experiences on Facebook have social

meaning and importance for their experiences in other contexts. It is important for

scholars to recognize that political participation on Facebook is not an isolated

experience. Political conversations can transfer to other spaces or affect other political

conversations, and vice versa. Future studies should continue to explore this overlap,

asking how political engagement and conversation on Facebook affect political talk and

participation there and elsewhere.

It is also worth noting that interviewees likely learned and practiced rules of

political conversation and engagement throughout these participation processes on Facebook. The students clearly articulated some things that were socially appropriate and inappropriate as part of political participation on Facebook. They also identified effective and less effective ways of presenting a political opinion or argument. These are skills that have value for political participation in a variety of contexts, and may lead to additional political participation and engagement.

New Measurements

The broad definition of government, the unique social environment, and the complex relationships between communication and action on Facebook present dilemmas for scholars who must decide how to design, measure, and describe political action on Facebook. At the very least, scholars should acknowledge that traditional definitions of political action are not entirely useful for understanding politics on Facebook. Such definitions likely lead scholars to measure how many individuals participate in a given activity, such as voting, canvassing, or signing a petition. Although such measures could be applied to see how many Facebook users have signed a political petition, they are far less helpful in other cases. For example, individuals who join traditional political groups are probably involved in traditional political activity within that group. Perhaps they are canvassing for a political candidate or attending fundraising events. In contrast, individuals who join Facebook groups could actually be searching for information, or simply expressing their opinions. Measuring how many individuals sign a petition or join a group on Facebook does not reveal much about the meaning behind such actions.

As a result, comparing political things on Facebook to traditional notions and measures of active political participation makes little theoretical sense. Participants in the

interviews did not construct notions of Facebook this way. Rather, they talked about Facebook as a means of expression and interaction, even when discussing things that other definitions of politics conceptualize as action. Several students also pointed out that engaging in politics is not the primary reason they use Facebook. This makes sense, given that social networking sites are primarily used for social interaction (boyd, 2010; Lenhart et al., 2010).

As a result, Facebook may be better understood or measured as a part of *talking* about politics, than as a substitute for traditional actions such as canvassing or voting. Studies of action may be less relevant than studies that explore political expression and exchange. Rather than simply measuring the *presence* of a given political activity, scholars should look at the *function* of an activity, asking how posts and actions are part of a broader political dialogue in a social context. For example, some simple survey questions could be:

- Have you ever (joined a political group, posted political news, posted a status update about politics)?
- (If yes), think about one specific time when you (joined a political group, posted political news, posted a status update about politics). Briefly describe that (political group, political news, status update).
- Briefly describe why you (joined a political group, posted political news, posted a status update about politics).
- What, if anything, happened when you (joined a political group, posted political news, posted a status update about politics)?
- Who, if anyone, do you think noticed when you (joined a political group, posted

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political news, posted a status update about politics)?

- Was there ever a time where you thought about doing something political on Facebook, but decided not to?

- (If yes), why did you make that decision?

These questions could be open ended, or could include a list of possible responses. For example:

- Who, if anyone, do you think noticed when you posted political news? Select all that apply (friends, family, coworkers, classmates, people who share my political opinions, people who disagree with my political opinions).

If scholars adjust their measures of political participation on Facebook to focus on political expression and communication, does this mean that Facebook is less important as a part of political participation? Not necessarily. As numerous studies have demonstrated, political talk is an extremely important part of participation, both in its own right, and as it leads to other political involvement (Dostie-Goulet, 2009; Kim et al., 1999; Wyatt et al., 2000). In addition, it is worth noting that participants' rejection of argument and stress on positive expression and discussion does not suggest that interviewees were indifferent about politics or failed to recognize the importance of political dialogue. The fact that participants lamented a lack of discussion on Facebook suggests that they do understand the necessity of dialogue. Interviewees were also capable of defining and differentiating between "good" and "bad" political exchanges, and they repeatedly noted the importance of providing evidence, avoiding bias, and listening to each other.

This discussion suggests that measuring politics on Facebook is not a straightforward

process. Political posts and actions on Facebook are not necessarily comparable to traditional political activities, and may be better understood as a form of political expression, as many interview participants understood posts and actions in this way. At the same time, however, there are uses of Facebook that may be more like traditional political action, such as organizing for rallies or soliciting donations.

Social interaction is also a key part of the political landscape on Facebook. Interviewees indicated that their relationships with others affected the ways they participated or did not participate. Self-presentational concerns were an important part of decisions about posting. As a result, scholars may need new survey and interview questions that are better designed to explore the political environment on Facebook.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of this study challenge the view that political participation on Facebook is inconsequential. Although Facebook does not fit neatly with established definitions of political participation that focus on action, Facebook is an important place for political expression, and political expression in the space has consequences for individual Facebook users, their relationships, and future ways they may participate. Political participation on Facebook is greatly affected by the social nature of the site, and especially the norms that operate in the space. Any study of politics and Facebook must consider how the nature of social networking sites affects interaction in such a space. Scholars who recognize the need for improved definitions of political participation on Facebook will be able to improve upon current studies and find more useful ways to explore political participation via social networking sites.

Many important definitions of political participation have been used for decades, and traditionally focus on clearly measurable outcomes, such as how many times people vote or volunteer for a campaign (e.g.Berelson et al., 1954; Dahl, 1989; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Milbrath, 1965). Recently, these definitions have led scholars to suggest that many young individuals are becoming less likely to engage in political activities such as voting, canvassing, or joining political parties (e.g. Delli Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 1995; 2000). As political participation is a prerequisite for effective democracy (Barber, 1984; Berelson et al., 1954; Verba & Nie, 1972), this possible generational shift has understandably caused some alarm about the future of democracy.

However, in contrast to this idea, other scholars suggest that individuals have not simply exited voting booths and campaign offices, but instead have shifted the focus and location of their engagement (Bang, 2005; Bang & Sørensen, 1999; Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2006; 2008). As young people sometimes feel unwelcome in more traditional political spaces, the internet has created havens for alternative conversations and engagement (Harris, 2008; Harris et al., 2010). However, these different forms of participation are not easily quantifiable, and are not included in widely-used measures such as those created by the American National Election Studies (ANES). In addition, many studies of the internet and political participation largely fail to consider the unique features of online spaces that may affect political participation. Social networking sites such as Facebook, in particular, enable many-to-many dialogue and easy publishing that make interaction in the space unique (boyd, 2010). Because the literature demonstrates that social networking sites like Facebook are used for political engagement (Smith, 2009; 2011), this thesis explored the ways that youth's definitions and experiences of political participation on Facebook are different than traditional understandings of participation. The following research questions explored these definitional issues:

RQ1: How do youth define and describe political participation on Facebook?

> **RQ1.A.** What topics do youth include and exclude from the definition of meaningful political participation on Facebook?

> **RQ1.B.** What actions do youth include and exclude from the definition of meaningful political participation on Facebook?

> **RQ1.C.** What functions do youth include or exclude as part of meaningful political participation on Facebook?

RQ1.D. What phrases or language do youth use to describe political participation on Facebook?

Other literature indicates that Facebook is mainly a social space, where individuals gather to talk with each other (Ellison et al., 2007). This thesis argued that social norms and relationships between Facebook users affect the ways people participate. Theoretical perspectives such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), models of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1980), and the influence of perceived opinion climate (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) provided insight into the strategic ways that youth participate in politics online. The following research questions were designed to address social norms:

RQ2: How do social norms affect youth's political participation on Facebook?

RQ2.A. What topics do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.B. What actions do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.C. What functions or purposes for participation do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

RQ2.D. What ways of talking about political participation do youth consider acceptable or unacceptable?

To explore these research questions, this study used 20 in-depth interviews with 10 different Facebook users from Colorado State University. Students were encouraged to talk in detail about how they and their Facebook friends experienced politics in the space. Participants shared about their own political participation, and political posts and actions among their Facebook friends. They recalled their reactions to political posts, and explained why they participated or chose not to participate. The interview accounts were

transcribed and analyzed using a form of discourse analysis.

Importantly, the interview accounts suggest that Facebook is a space for political participation, but engagement via Facebook should not first be thought of as a means of accomplishing concrete political action. Rather, the interviews suggest that the idea of political expression is key to understanding politics on Facebook. Participants did not talk about using politics on Facebook to reach concrete goals; instead, they explained how Facebook gives people opportunities to speak, to think through their political opinions, and to make those opinions known to a variety of audiences. Because Facebook is a space where users know each other from other contexts (Ellison et al., 2007), political participation on Facebook is often strategic, as individuals seek to build and maintain relationships. Social norms and concerns about identity presentations influence the choice to participate or refrain from participating. At first glance, participation on Facebook may seem low-cost or lightweight, but this study revealed that participation on Facebook is not as simple as the click of a button.

Future Projects

Although there may still be lessons learned from studies that focus on Facebook and traditional forms of participation, it makes little sense to compare Facebook to traditional definitions that are geared toward measuring traditional outcomes. Instead, exploring Facebook as a space for expression and talk will lead to more theoretically interesting and useful definitions and measures. Scholars should not overlook the unique ways that individuals can interact on Facebook, through joining groups, liking posts, and posting status updates, videos, or news links. A focus on such features will enable useful dialogue about the importance of social networking sites for political interaction.

The present thesis makes only a small contribution to the study of political participation and the norms of political participation on social networking sites, so additional research will be needed to validate any conclusions from this study. Future studies of political engagement via social networking sites could include larger scale interviews with more diverse groups of participants, including individuals of different ages and diverse cultural backgrounds, in order to help determine how different groups experience political participation on Facebook. Using the findings from this thesis, other scholars could also conduct surveys to search for factors that predict different types of political participation, much in the vein of Li and Marsh (2008). Scholars could also compare the norms and patterns of political participation on Facebook to those of other social networking sites, perhaps identifying the common factors that affect how people participate.

Limitations

There are a number of important factors to keep in mind when interpreting the results of this study. The death of Osama bin Laden and debates about the congressional budget both occurred shortly before the interviews began. Osama bin Laden's death, in particular, was mentioned by many interviewees. The students recognized that this event affected the political things they saw on Facebook, but they did not indicate how, exactly, Osama bin Laden's death changed their experiences with Facebook participation. Although this study does not aim to measure the impact of such events on political participation, any results should be interpreted with this event in mind. It is possible that Osama bin laden's death increased the number of political things participants experienced on Facebook. However, many studies of political participation take place during election

seasons. Because this study did not take place at such a time, it seems more likely that participants saw less political participation on Facebook than they otherwise might have.

It is also important to note that all of the students in this study all expressed some level of political interest, and most indicated that they participated in politics, at least by voting. Thus, the interviewees likely do not represent the average individuals in their age group. Also, each student participant had already completed a somewhat extensive online survey about political participation and Facebook prior to volunteering for the interviews, and so each one volunteered with some idea of what subjects the interviews would address. These factors should also be kept in mind when interpreting these findings.

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APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are also invited to participate in a second important study about Facebook and political participation.

For the second study, you will be asked to be part of two different interviews. During the interviews, you will discuss in more detail some of the things you have seen and been part of using Facebook. You will be asked to print and bring at least 5 examples of political things on Facebook to the second interview. There are no right or wrong examples! If you participate in the study, you will be entered into a drawing to win one of two $25 Target gift cards.

Your experiences and opinions are extremely important for this study! If you are interested in participating in this interview study, please click here (email link) to send an email to Kate Van Wyngarden, one of the study investigators. In the email, please provide your name, phone number, and gender, and in a brief sentence or two, mention your general political views and your amount of interest in politics. Volunteering right now does not commit you to participate, and you will be free to withdraw from the study at any point in time.

Thank you

APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Colorado State University

(Based on guidelines from CSU's Research Integrity and Compliance Review Board)

TITLE OF STUDY: Facebook: A Public Place in a Social Space

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Rosa Mikeal Martey, Ph.D, Journalism and Technical Communication Department, Rosa.Martey@colostate.edu

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Katharine Van Wyngarden, candidate for the Master's of Science degree, Journalism and Technical Communication Department, KateVW@rams.colostate.edu

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?
You are invited to be part of this study because you are a Facebook user. Your opinions and experiences are very important for this study.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?
The study will be conducted by Katharine Van Wyngarden, Master's student in the Journalism and Technical Communication Department.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that young adults are using Facebook.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?
The study will take place at Wild Boar Coffee near Colorado State University's campus. You will be asked to come to the library for two separate interviews during April and May. One interview will last for 45 minutes, and the other will last for 75 minutes.

Page 1 of 3   Participant's initials _____

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

During the first interview, you will simply be asked to talk about some of the different ways you use Facebook. Before the second interview, you will be asked to find and print out 5 or more examples of things that seem political on Facebook. During the second interview, you will be asked to discuss these examples and other examples of Facebook activities that the researcher will provide. During both interviews, your responses will be recorded to help the researcher remember your statements and ideas accurately.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you are less than 18 years old, you should not participate in this study. If you are uncomfortable talking about Facebook with a researcher, you should not participate in this study.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There are no known risks to participating in this study. If you become uncomfortable talking about your use of Facebook, you may stop participating at any time.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no known benefits to participating in this study.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You should not feel any pressure to be part of this study. If you decide to stop participating in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?

The information you give will be anonymized and never associated with your name. However, it will be seen in aggregated form and quotes in the thesis created from this research. Only the graduate student researcher will see your name or any other personally identifying information associated with that information. No one else will ever see your name associated with what you say or any other information you give. After the study is complete, the document containing your actual name and contact information will be permanently destroyed.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Dr. Rosa Martey, at Rosa.Martey@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

Page 2 of 3   Participant's initials _____

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will be entered into a drawing for one of two $25 Target gift cards.

This consent form was approved by the CSU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on (Approval Date).

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

_____   _____

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____   _____

Name of person providing information to participant   Date

_____

Signature of Research Staff

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: 1ST INTERVIEW

*1.Tell me about how you use Facebook.

- **PROBE:** How often do you use Facebook?

- **PROBE:** What kinds of things do you do?

- **PROBE:** What do you post?

*2. What about your friends? What kind of things do they post?

- **PROBE:** Do your friends ever post things that you disagree with?

3. What about political things? Do you see anything political on Facebook?

- **PROBE:** What kinds of things?

- **PROBE:** Tell me about when you saw _____ (political thing). What happened?

- **PROBE:** What makes that thing seem political to you?

*4. So, based on what we've talked about, if you were going to explain which things were political on Facebook, how would you do that?

- What kinds of topics or issues seem political?

- What kinds of actions seem political?

- What kind of purposes or reasons for doing or posting things seem political?

- What kinds of things that people say seem political?

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: 2ND INTERVIEW

(Individuals were given the following information at the conclusion of the first interview, and again via email or phone shortly prior to the second interview.)

"For your second interview, please look at Facebook and think about the online activities taking place among you and your Facebook friends. Find 5 or more examples of things on Facebook that seem political to you. If you can, try to choose examples that you think are especially typical of things that you usually see.

Take screen shots of these examples, print each one, and bring the paper copies to the next interview. Also, please use a black marker or white out to cover the names of your Facebook friends in the examples. Doing this will help us respect their privacy. Remember, bringing these examples to your interview is very important, because we will spend part of the next interview talking about these examples! To take a screen shot, use the print screen button to copy your screen to the clipboard. You can then paste the screen shot into a Word document or Paint file. For more detailed instructions and a diagram of how to take a screen shot, visit the website http://take-a-screenshot.org/. Click on the different tabs at the top of the page to see instructions for Windows or Mac."

*1. Tell me about finding your screen shots of political things.

- **PROBE:** How did it go?

- **PROBE:** Did you find what you wanted?

- **PROBE:** Was it easy, challenging, or somewhere in between?

(For non-personal examples) "Let's look at the examples you brought along for this

interview. Did you bring along any examples that of things your friends have done on Facebook?"

*1. Can you tell me how you decided to choose this example?

- **PROBE:** Was there any reason or reasons you chose this particular example?

- **PROBE:** What about this example is political to you?

*2. What did you think when you first saw this example? How did you feel about it?

3. Why do you think this person posted/did this?

- PROBE: Do you think this person was trying to look cool?

*4. Do you think it is OK or not OK for people to do/post things like this on Facebook?

- **PROBE:** What makes you think so?

(For personal examples) "Did you bring any examples of things you have done on Facebook?"

*1. Can you tell me the story about this example. How did you decide to post this or be part of this activity?

- **PROBE:** What about this example is political to you?

2. What, if anything, did you think about before you decided to do this/post this?

3. How did you feel when you did this? (Or, how do you feel about this example right now?)

*4. Did anyone else react to or respond to this example?

- **PROBE:** Can you describe what happened?

(For examples I bring) "I've also brought some examples of different things on Facebook. Let's talk about these examples now."

*1. What do you think when you see this picture?

- **PROBE:** How would you react if you saw this on Facebook?

*2. Would you describe this activity as political or non-political? Can you explain why?

- **PROBE:** (If not political) How would you describe this activity? What would you call it?

*3. Do you think it is OK/not OK for people to do/post things like this on Facebook?

- **PROBE:** What makes you think so?

4. Why do you think someone would post this?

*5. So, if you were going to explain what kinds of things were acceptable and unacceptable on Facebook, what would you say?

- What kinds of topics do you think are acceptable or unacceptable to address on Facebook?

- What kinds of activities/posts do you think are acceptable or unacceptable?

- What kinds of reasons for doing political things seem acceptable or unacceptable?

- What kinds of things that people say seem acceptable or unacceptable?

APPENDIX E: SCREENSHOTS OF FACEBOOK ACTIVITIES FOR THE SECOND INTERVIEWS

In addition to asking participants to bring their own examples of political posts on

Facebook, I provided a variety of examples to facilitate discussion with participants.

Most participants were shown only a few of these examples:

A. Profile picture and status update encouraging other Facebook users to change their profile pictures to cartoon characters, in order to fight child abuse.
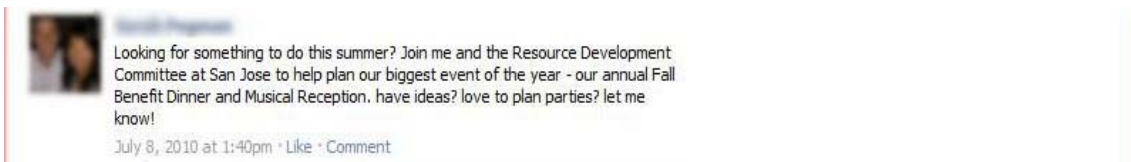
B. Status update requesting volunteers to plan a fundraiser for a not-for-profit organization.
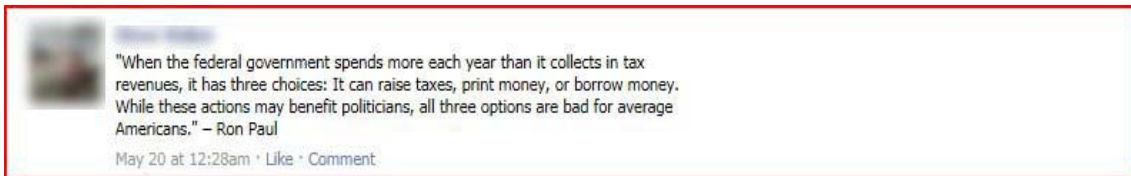
C. Ron Paul quote about spending and taxes, posted as a status update.

D. Political views as displayed in a Facebook user's profile.

E. Wall post linking to a petition to ban a chemical that kills honey bees.

F. Post linking to another blog post about how income tax is used.

G. Post from one friend to another friend using the Commit to Vote application, asking that friend to commit to voting for Obama.

This is where I get my news from

Daily Show: The NeverTrending Story
www.thedailyshow.com

Newt Gingrich panders to young people by
announcing his presidential candidacy on Twitter.

Monday at 3:41pm · ·

H. Wall post linking to a clip from the *Daily Show*.

Sympathize with the folks in Japan? I have been a volunteer with the Red
Cross for more than five years. I can't think of a better way to help. You
can donate directly to their fund to help the earthquake/tsunami victims.
www.redcross.org

March 12 at 10:22am · Like · Comment

I. Status update linking to the Red Cross website after the Japan earthquake.

Today I remember Vietnam veterans and their families: The divorce rate among
Vietnam veterans is over 90%; since 1975 nearly three times as many Vietnam
veterans have committed suicide than were killed in the war. I also remember the
soldiers of more recent conflicts and their families, and pray earnestly that these
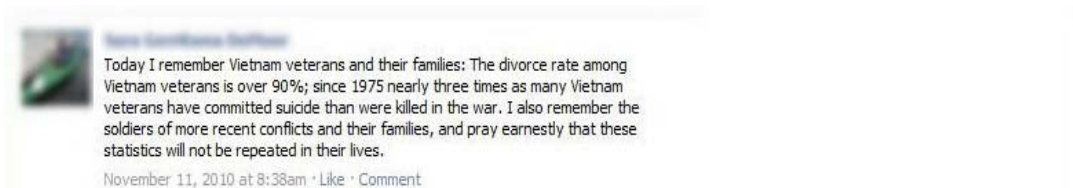statistics will not be repeated in their lives.

November 11, 2010 at 8:38am · Like · Comment

J. Status update reflecting on the effects of the Vietnam War.

likes a link.

**Mitt Romney Haunted By Past Of Trying To Help
Uninsured Sick People**
www.theonion.com

BELMONT, MA—Though Mitt Romney is considered to be a
frontrunner for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination,
the national spotlight has forced him to repeatedly confront a
major skeleton in his political closet: that as governor of
Massachusett...

April 22 at 8:10am · Like · Comment · Share

K. Post linking to an *Onion* article.

On CSPAN: the Ed Dept Asst Sec for Civil Rights is testifying to the Senate on
school bullying. Really? REALLY? While I'm sure bullying is a problem, should the
DOJ be getting involved on a local level when kids bully? Usually the parents are
really the determining factor in the kids' character - I'd rather call in Focus on the
Family than the Feds.

May 23 at 6:52am via iPhone · Like · Comment

149

L. Status update commenting on CSPAN testimony.

'If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." James Madison.

February 1 at 7:44pm · Like · Comment

M. Status update with a quote attributed to James Madison.

This saddens and angers me so much!!!!! Republicans, I am proud of you for doing the right thing....Demacrates...SHAME ON YOU....not a single one of you did anything respectful with regard to this vote.

Iowa Senate Democrats Vote to Keep Iowa Open for Late-Term Abortionists

DES MOINES, IA - Senate Republican Leader Paul McKinley (R-Chariton) released the following statement today after Iowa Senate Democrats voted unanimously to keep Iowa open to late-term abortions and allow providers like Dr. LeRoy Carhart and others to mak...

See More
By: Paul McKinley

May 16 at 7:22pm · Like · Comment · Share

N. Wall post with a comment and a link to a press release.

Why don't you...give back on Christmas Day?

http://www.spot.ph/shopping/47178/top-10-gifts-that-give-back

Spot.PH | Top 10 Gifts That Give Back | SHOPPING+SERVICES TOP LIST
www.spot.ph

December 13, 2010 at 4:25pm · Like · Comment · Share

O. Wall post with a link to suggestions for purchasing Christmas gifts that help other causes.
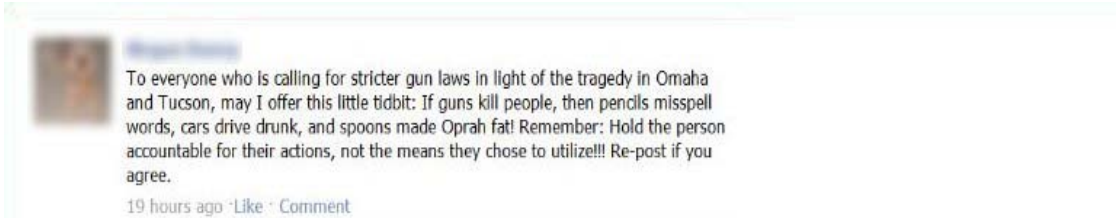
P. Status update commenting on funding for road construction and the price of gas.

Q. Link to a petition to freeze Pakistan's debt.'

R. Reposted link to video testimony from a public forum about civil union legislation in Iowa.

S. Status update about gun laws after the shooting of Congresswoman Giffords in Tucson.

T. Post with a link to the TOMS Shoes website.

U. Status update asking others to buy a t-shirt to raise funds for a child's chemotherapy.

V. Status update soliciting people's thoughts about bin Laden's burial.

W. Reposted link to an article from humantrafficking.change.org.

X. Wall post linking to a Fox News video of Representative Ryan's comments on President Obama's deficit plan.

Y. John McCain's Facebook page (used to illustrate *liking* a political candidate).

Z. Post linking a BBC article about water supply problems.