

Assessing the Influences of Social Media on Youth Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Social media is a Web 2.0 platform that has become a permanent influence on the daily lives of adolescents, becoming one of the key influencers in crafting the thought processes, values, and beliefs of youth. One of the biggest influences social media plays on youth is guiding their level of civic engagement and their political values. This paper analyzed the current research published surrounding the topic of social media and youth civic engagement and examined the multitude of factors in which social media constituted either a positive or negative influence on youth civic engagement. Some major findings which highlight the positive effects of social media include increased civic engagement, voter turnout, and education in socio-political issues. Conversely, negative influences of social media on youth civic engagement include exposure to echo chambers which can deepen political polarization, proliferation of fake news, and increased feelings of stress and depression when encountering political media. Aside from the influences, the paper also presents solutions and suggestions to mitigate the issues of social media and brings to light multiple gaps and limitations within the research. By understanding how social media can shape youth's sense of political standings and obligations as a society we will be able to harness the positive connections to direct towards ensuring social media is an accessible and empowering tool for civic engagement simultaneously working to mitigate and subdue the negative aspects of technology on civic involvement to significantly improve civic participation.

Keywords: Social Media, Youth Civic Engagement, Positive Influences, Negative Influences, Web 2.0

1. Introduction

For a long time, the decline in voter turnout for youth was a key issue that worried not just political and social scientists, but also the general population. Youth were long accused of being politically apathetic and failing in their duty as a citizen to uphold democratic values. Research showed that young people were less likely to participate in politics than older people, with youth voting at a 25% lower frequency than the US population ages 65 and up. But emerging research has uncovered that this trend of insufficient youth civic engagement has long taken a turn. For example, the 2018 congressional

elections created headlines due to historic numbers of youth showing up to vote in the midterm elections (Table 1). Statistics show that youth voter turnout was the highest in four decades, with Minnesota and Montana having the highest voter percentage increase of 20.7% and 24.5% increase respectively, breaking records in many states (Ginsberg et.al, 2021). This trend in increased youth civic engagement was already beginning to grow prior to 2018, and since then has successfully sustained itself with continued high rates of young people showing up at voting polls and exercising their democratic rights in each election. So, then the question is, just what is contributing to this historical increase in youth civic

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engagement?

Research shows that in today’s day and age, youth are increasingly tapping into the power of new digital tools and social networks to merge their cultural interests to politics, express their perspective, and protest and influence issues of public concern (Chapman, 2019). The most popular digital technology utilized by youth (classified in our study as members of the population ages 13-24) to engage in civics and politics is social media. Social media is a Web 2.0 form of technology exclusively defined as interactive digital channels which facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (“Social Media Overview”, n.d.). The term Web 2.0 defines second generation web applications which facilitate interactive information, sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web (Kenton, 2022). Under this definition, social media encompasses social networking sites (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok), messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, WeChat, Kakao

Talk, etc), social gaming tools, YouTube, and more. Approximately 97% of youth use at least one platform of social media with the most popular sites currently being YouTube (85% frequency usage amongst teens), Instagram (72% frequency usage amongst teens), and Snapchat (69% frequency usage amongst teens). It’s also important to note that emerging platforms are frequently being introduced, with some (i.e., TikTok) quickly gaining worldwide traction among youth. For adolescents growing up today, exposure to screens begins early in life. US children under the age of two spend an average of 42 minutes per day with screen media. By the time youth reach adolescence, most are fully immersed in the world of technology. The latest national representative statistics suggest that 95% of adolescents ages 13-18 have access to a smartphone and 88% have access to a desktop or laptop at home. In 2018, a measure of 45% of adolescents reported that they were “almost constantly” online, a large percentage increase from just 24 per cent only three years prior (Nesi, 2020).

Table 1: During the 2018 Congressional Elections a record amount of youth turned up to the polls to vote (“2018 Youth”, 2019).

	State	▼ 2018 Youth Turnout Rate	2014 Youth Turnout Rate	Percentage Point Increase	Youth Turnout Increase Higher than All-Ages Turnout Increase?
1	Minnesota	43.7%	23.1%	20.7 pts	Yes
2	Montana	42.1%	17.6%	24.5 pts	Yes
3	Colorado	40.8%	27.6%	13.1 pts	Yes
4	Oregon	39.2%	27.4%	11.8 pts	Yes
5	Maine	36.4%	30.5%	5.8 pts	Yes
6	Washington	35.0%	16.4%	18.6 pts	Yes
7	Iowa	34.7%	22.1%	12.6 pts	Yes
8	Virginia	33.4%	13.1%	20.2 pts	Yes
9	Massachusetts <i>See notes below</i>	33.3%	16.0%	17.3 pts	Yes
10	Georgia	33.0%	13.3%	19.7 pts	Yes
11	New Jersey	32.8%	11.1%	21.8 pts	Yes
12	Michigan	32.7%	15.3%	17.4 pts	Yes
13	Florida	31.5%	18.3%	13.2 pts	Yes
14	Connecticut	30.6%	15.3%	15.4 pts	Yes
15	California	30.3%	10.3%	20.0 pts	Yes

On the other hand, civic engagement is broadly defined as participation in activities and discussions related to policy and politics. Oftentimes civic engagement is cited as an indication and attention toward improving the community; this effort may include electoral political acts— such as voting or contacting elected officials—but also fewer formal acts such as following politics (Middaugh et.al, 2019). However, in looking at civic engagement in youth today, it is not enough to simply assess youth’s civic engagement using traditional measurement scales. Rather, it is important to differentiate between traditional civic engagement and an emerging variant of civic engagement: digital civic engagement. Scholars have found that young people may be abandoning traditional forms of so-called ‘dutiful’ citizen participation (such as neighborhood policy meetings, party membership, newspaper reading, etc.), in favor of a more personalized politics of self-actualization and expressive engagement with greater emphasis on non-traditional modes of engagement such as digital networking, volunteering, and consumer activism (Kahne et.al, 2016). To address this gap in literature, I analyzed the civic engagement activity of youth mostly under the scope and context of the new variant of civic engagement, digital civic engagement but also keeping in mind traditional forms of civic engagement as well.

In order to create a stable foundation for cultivating the next generation’s civic actors, it is important to assess civic engagement and the prevalence of the topic amongst youth. Education and exposure to civic issues and topics from an early age is paramount for creating a generation of civic minded individuals. With increasing research pointing to social media as being a major source of this early education and exposure to civics, the aim of this study is to assess the overall influence of social media on youth, taking into consideration all positive and negative effects, present solutions and suggestions on how to mitigate the negative effects, and point out the gaps and limitations that need to be addressed.

2. Results and Discussion

Social media proves to have mixed results in

literature with regards to impact on youth civic engagement; there are several aspects of social media which showcase the beneficiaries of social media on youth political exposure and participation, but there are also aspects of social media in which a negative effect is also imminent. Through my literature review, I have compiled a descriptive list of the prominent aspects of social media that multiple researchers have repeatedly cited as effects of social media usage on youth civic engagement. In this review, the aspects are organized into two definitive categories: positive and negative consequences of social media usage on youth civic engagement. Using these two categories I evaluate the true effects of digital media upon youth civic involvement.

2.1 Positive consequences of social media usage on youth civic engagement

Social Media engages youth civic engagement

Multiple scientific studies show that social media activity promotes heightened participation in youth civic engagement (Cho et.al, n.d.; Kahne et.al, 2016; Middaugh et.al, 2017). It is believed that social media has become the most accessible hub of information available to youth, thus becoming a critical repertoire due to its ability to allow youth to find, discuss, and mobilize around political issues. To prove this statement, researchers have conducted multiple systematic analysis on a few different study pools to investigate just how thorough the effects of social media is on the frequency and distribution of participatory politics. Using the 2013 Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) Survey, one study used the data’s representative sample of 2,343 youth respondents (ages 15-27) and measured the conceptual understandings of youth civic engagement and how it was emerging with digital media. The study also supplemented the analysis with data for the Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey, which included 2,251 respondents, of which 125 were between ages 18-24, and 2,253 respondents, of which 232 were ages 18-24. The overall reports indicated that 67% of youth (ages 18-24) vs 39% of adults, were recorded having engaged in civic and political activities using social networking sites. The 2014 YPP Survey also found that 36% of youth in

between the ages of 15-18 engaged in at least one act of digital participatory politics within the previous year, with 6% choosing to work on an election campaign and 4% donating money (Kahne et.al, 2016). This indicates that social media is the main form in which youth connect to politics, and as social media usage grows so does the percentage of youth involved in civics. With the systematic analysis indicating just how powerful the influence of social media is upon youth civic engagement, it is easy to credit this heightened interest of civic engagement to increased proliferation of civic content online. However, it has been found that online youth participation, even when it is not explicitly political in nature, can correlate to higher political engagement in both online and offline circumstances. This is because youth digital participation is peer-centered, interest-driven spaces. For example, young people who connect over shared non-political interests such as fandom spaces and other ‘affinity networks’ are directly correlated to higher political engagement, online and off. In fact, a Swedish study of youth ages 13-17 discovered that participation in creating user-generated content were strong predictors of political participation (Cho et.al, n.d.). Humor, memes, satire, and other engaging pop culture practices are used by youth for digital civic engagement, facilitating mass participation in civics online. In fact, figure 1 highlights the main core practices of participatory politics which youth engage in to be more active on political society.

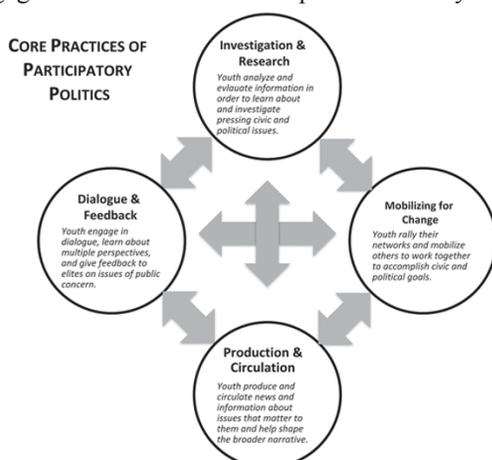


Figure 1. Core practices of participatory politics utilized by youth to increase civic engagement (Kahne et.al, 2016).

Social Media serves to rally youth together

For global scale movements of political protest to take place, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM), social media plays a crucial role in galvanizing youth together to affect these movements and grow them into world-wide events. In the first large-scale quantitative survey of adolescents’ exposure to BLM demonstrations, 4,970 youth across the country (mean age of 12.88) indicated that they were highly engaged in the social media movement of BLM. Social media was used 30% of the time to engage with the BLM movement, particularly during covid-19 when many people could not physically attend protests and social media became an indispensable tool to continue to hold people accountable. From July 2013 to March 2016, youth used 13.3 million tweets in total to show solidarity and involve themselves with the BLM movement. It is evident that social media has played a massive role in creating global participation of youth in political movements. It should be also noted that this massive collectivization does not go unnoticed by legislators and lawmakers. Groundbreaking legislative changes have been created to combat the issues that these massive political movements seek to address. For example, the shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, elicited a wave of protests which were tweeted about in the US more than any other major event in 2014. The result was forty policing laws in 24 states changing in the year following Michael Brown’s death (Tupper, 2014). Another example can be seen in the February 2018 institution of the #NeverAgain movement, where social media was used to organize and create the March for Our Lives in cities across the United States. Research shows that when it comes to developing a strong connection for youth to civics, it’s important to allow youth members to see that the challenges they face are collective problems (Middaugh, 2019). This is because when youth experience how they are not alone in the issues they face their participation in online public discourses and discussions serve the goal of democracy as they are able to find information and perspectives beyond what is deemed important by elites. This personalization of politics helps create an authentic interest in civics amongst youth, providing an

increased chance of them participating in civics for a prolonged period. Research articles have also illuminated how when individuals speak up and combine their voices with those who have similar outlooks and thoughts, elected officials are pressured to be more responsive (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Ginwright et.al, 2006; Middaugh, 2019). When expressing concerns and perspectives in a collective manner, it can help for developing civic skills for future citizenship, influence public policy, and enhance one's own civic confidence and interest. This leads to more general positive developmental outcomes, especially amongst marginalized youth. As seen in previous examples, in both movements' youth used social media to circulate information and perspectives, mobilize others to get involved, apply pressure to elected officials, and change the conversation about fundamental societal issues. Social media has truly become an indispensable tool used to congregate people together to support political issues on a world stage.

Social Media can allow youth in developing countries to organize for mass protests and call for change

Building on the topic of social media allowing youth to rally together is the fact that, for youth in emerging countries, social media has provided a means for people to organize nationwide to conduct protests or fight against oppression. Countries such as Egypt, Iran, Tunisia, and Hong Kong have had research documenting the effectiveness of the usage of social media to discreetly fight against the government. The infamous 2011 Egyptian Arab Springs, or otherwise known as the January 25, 2011, revolutions provide plentiful research on the influence of social media on an actual nationwide protest. One study on the Egyptian Arab Springs found that in 2009, only half of the population in the Middle East and North Africa supported the fundamental democratic freedoms such as speech, assembly and religion, however in just two years' time there were emergences of mass uprisings against Egypt's authoritarian regimes that were calling for freedom of speech and religion that quickly became known as the Arab Springs. It was found that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played important roles in transforming organized

groups and informal networks, establishing external linkages, developing a sense of modernity and community, while simultaneously drawing global attention. The study also supplemented their understanding of social media relative to other factors facilitating the participation in the Arab Springs by analyzing data from the March-April 2011 Gallup poll of a representative sample of Egyptians over the age of 14. Results found that information sources such as the internet and social media were considered "New media sources of information" and they were favored by demonstrators more than by sympathetic onlookers, with 18% of demonstrators favoring text messages, 16 % favoring news websites, and 12% favoring Facebook/ Twitter. A sample of 800 social media posts were also uncovered over the period of January 25 - February 12 which emphasized the suffering and rage that were motivating the people to collectivize and rebel. As far as the popularity of which social media platform was used the most frequently by youth during the Arab Springs, Facebook and Twitter were the most popular, with 23.2% frequency usage rate and 13.4% usage rate respectively, and YouTube was the third leading popular platform with 11.2% usage (Brym et.al, 2014). Aside from the Arab Springs, similar trends can be seen in mass political protests galvanized in youth in other countries as well. The 2019 Hong Kong protests were grown largely by the galvanization of Hong Kong's youth population and spread globally by usage of social media. However, in Hong Kong, the emerging social media platforms were most notably Telegram and LIHKG, not Facebook or Twitter (Middaugh et.al, 2017). But aside from what social media platform was used, it is clear to see that social media is a powerful means for youth to fight against oppression in developing countries due to its ability to discreetly unite the oppressed together, fuel the beliefs of the demonstrators, and gain world-wide support and recognition.

For Youth who have been historically marginalized, social media allows for the resistance of oppression and injustice

Another subsection of how social media allows youth to rally together is the observation of how

those who are historically marginalized can be defined as groups of people who have been regulated to the lower or peripheral edge of society. Many groups are and continue to be denied full participation and representation in mainstream cultural, social, political, and economic activities (“Researching Historically”, n.d.). Social Media has become a useful tool for these groups, an inexpensive mechanism used to amplify their voices and highlight their historical narratives to build awareness of structural oppression and injustice. Roughly 80% of black survey participants in a study stated that social media highlights important issues that otherwise would not be as recognized and gives voice to gravely underrepresented groups and in 2016, African American youth were the most frequent youth group on social media, constituting about 68% of users, when compared to White and Hispanic groups. Research shows that black social media users are more likely than white users to view social media as partially or substantially important to them. 54% of black youth say that social media allows them to share their views about important issues, 52% say that social media allows them to get involved in issues which are important to them, and 53% of black youth say that social media is a venue to express their political opinions. Disaggregating this data upon the lines of gender reveal similar statistics in disparities. White college-aged women maintained higher rates of social media use ,72% usage rating, than their male peers, 66% usage rating. It’s also been found that black women regularly out consume their Black male peers by at least one hour of popular media intake a day. For civic agency and visibility, users from marginalized backgrounds overwhelmingly describe social media as being an invaluable political tool. Many global wide campaign movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement which focused on racial justice and equity, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy) which focused on immigrant reform, and the Me-Too movement which focused on fighting sexual abuse where mostly advocated by marginalized youth as they were directly affected. These marginalized groups utilize hashtags and search-bombing, a strategy of continued searching of a topic to allow it to trend on search engines and social media sites, in order to raise

awareness about any issue. For example, through the dynamic, user-generated hashtags such as #SayHerName, #TimesUp, #Justice4Nia, young black women were able to bring intersectional issues to the top of search engine results and trending topic lists on social media platforms like Twitter that otherwise would have been overlooked by mainstream media (Tanksley, 2020). All in all, it is evident that marginalized youth harness the power of social media to engage in civic action and discourse, challenge dominant narratives, and participate in intergroup dialogue in creative and subversive ways.

Social Media enables youth to gain a lasting socio-political education

For many low-income and racial minority communities, there is a lack of proper education on civics and politics. In communities which do provide or require a socio-political education for youth, oftentimes the education is disengaging and fails to institute excitement or interest in participating in politics amongst youth. Social media engages youth in civics in a way that can deepen participants’ understanding of issues and ways to bring about change in areas of interest (Kahne et.al, 2016). One study conducted a cross-sectional survey method involving 508 undergraduate students in a distance learning program at a university in Indonesia. The purpose of the study was to examine the role of social media in facilitating political knowledge and through what means it can do this. Results showed that 32.25% of surveyed students did receive political information from politicians or parties via social media. But when analyzing the relationship between social media and political knowledge, the chi-square value result showed that the relation was not significant. Rather, the relationship with a chi square value that was significant was between social media and a phenomenon called online political talk (Figure 1). Political talk is any form of conversation online that is related to politics and policy. The study found that online political talk functions as a mediator variable between social media usage and student’s political knowledge (Intyaswati et.al, 2021). Therefore, social media can facilitate socio-political education through an indirect means of fostering interpersonal communication on social media networks.

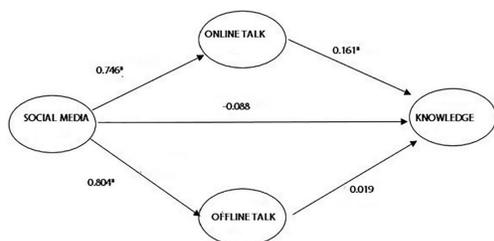


Figure 2. The relationship between Social Media and Political Knowledge does not have a significant value, however it is shown that the use of social media affects online political talk, which then directly results in increased political knowledge (Intyaswati et.al, 2021).

Social media influences youth to vote and get involved in elections

In terms of elections, social media has created a high-level impact in influencing the decisions of youth to participate in voting. One study conducted a survey asking youth participants who were eligible to vote the question: to what extent did the opportunity to participate and gain information through digital media, including mobile technology and Web 2.0, influence your decision to engage in the [2010 Calgary] elections? The participants could offer an answer on a Likert scale with 5 meaning “significant influence”, and 1 indicating “little influence”. The results indicated that 93 respondents answered the question with a 4 or a 5, meaning that digital opportunities were influential in their decision to exercising their democratic rights. Only about 19 respondents indicated that digital media carried little influence in their desire to engage (Munir, 2018). The reason as to why social media usage can lead to heightened civic engagement participation can be tied to the fact that the information available to youth online could lead to campaign knowledge and feeling of power in guiding decisions through voting. What’s even more is that not only does social media encourage youth to vote in elections, but social media also encourages youth to become involved in volunteering for election campaigns, such as volunteering in social media departments on campaign teams. The 2020 Democratic presidential primaries showcased the full scale of youth participation in political campaigns. Survey polls found that prior to the Iowa caucuses, it was found

that 44% of youth in Iowa knew of another young person working on a campaign. And it was estimated that more than 2 million youth volunteered for a campaign in the past two years (“Youth Volunteering”, n.d.). With youth increasing their presence at polls and showing up in millions to volunteer at campaigns, social media can now be linked as a potential explanation to this phenomenon.

Table 2. A comprehensive list of the positive influences of social media on youth civic engagement

Positives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media promotes heightened activity in civic engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media serves to rally youth together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For Youth who have been historically marginalized, social media allows for the resistance of oppression and injustice ○ Social Media can allow youth in developing countries to organize for mass protests and call for change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media enables youth to gain a lasting socio-political education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media influences youth to vote and get involved in elections

2.2 Negative consequences of social media usage on youth civic engagement

Social media may not sustain youth civic engagement

There is emerging research narrating the phenomenon of decreased youth civic engagement after a certain political event that had garnered a lot of media attention “blows over”. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement was a global movement which involved mass scales of youth in support right after the killings of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor. However, reports show that after a lapse of several months the majority of BLM support had decreased to 55% in September of 2020 from 67% in June of 2020, and those who shared that they were strongly in support of the movement stood at 29 %, down from 38% three months prior (Horowitz &

Thomas, 2020). While the reason for this decrease in support cannot be directly attributed to social media, it cannot be ignored that social media did fail to prolong the engagement in the BLM movement. One study specifically aiming to understand social media's ability to sustain activity conducted a survey asking youth voters what tools they used during the 2010 election to stay civically engaged and what they have since used to stay engaged. The goal of the research was to see that if successful in initiating engagement for civics amongst those aged 18-30, to what degree would the engagement be sustained? Survey participants indicated using tools such as social media, websites, smartphone applications, and other technological advances to keep up with the 2010 elections. The survey also asked what kind of civic engagement activities participants involved themselves in due to the influence of social media. Respondents could select from opportunities such as volunteering, attending or participating in council meetings, attending open houses or information sessions, etc. The results of the survey showed that since the end of the 2010 election, slightly more than 50% of the respondents indicated not engaging in civics online or in person despite still using the tools they used in the 2010 election to stay civically engaged. 86% of the respondents of the survey indicated that digital engagement opportunities would encourage them to sustain engagement, however with over half of respondents showing that they had disengaged from civic activity, there appears to be an incongruity to that statement in reality (Penney, 2019). These results show that while social media seems like a great tool to captivate and grow support for civic matters, it cannot seem to hold that interest and engagement for long. This is concerning as in order to have a strong democracy citizens must continuously engage themselves in civic matters but it appears that social media cannot fulfill that requirement.

Social Media is biased

Politicians and political groups are known to experiment with strong language which is designed to catch attention and encourage shares and retweets. Therefore, oftentimes the media which is being proliferated on social media is user-generated or

accompanied by user commentary and bias (Middaugh, 2019). However, research has noted that it isn't entirely the politician or user's fault for spreading biasness and user-commentary posts. The design layout of social media and how it allows for like-minded people to congregate together, while simultaneously excluding all those who disagree with their point of view, seems to fuel the political bias running rampant on social media. In Facebook for example, users are allowed to create Facebook groups with regulations on who can join based on the discretion of the creator of the group. This can result in what researchers call "echo-chambers" which are groups of like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative without any exposure to any difference of opinions. In truth, social media echo chambers are a consequence of platforms' ideological sorting of users. To maximize engagement, platforms such as Facebook, tend to show their users content which aligns with their existing beliefs. And once these recommendation algorithms suggest a new group or a new video to watch, this often leads to progressively more extreme versions of these existing beliefs (Daskalopoulos et.al, 2021). One study specifically investigated the main social media platforms and how they are likely to influence information spreading and echo chambers' formation. They performed comparative analysis of more than 100 million pieces of content concerning several controversial topics (such as gun control, abortion, etc.) from Facebook, Twitter, Gab, and Reddit. They also quantified their definition of echo chambers over social media by two main ingredients: 1) homophily in the interaction networks and 2) bias in the information diffusion toward like-minded peers. Results of the study showed that for topics such as vaccines and abortion, Facebook and Twitter showed a strong correlation between the leaning of a user and the average leaning of their nearest neighbors. This meant that like-minded people on Facebook and Twitter tended to congregate together, resulting in two polarized groups clustered at the ends of each spectrum (Figure 2). Conversely, Reddit and Gab showed a different trend, users of those platforms did not split into groups with opposite leaning but formed a single community that were not at polarized ends of the spectrum but more centered and thus

moderate with their views (Figure 2). This shows that for social media platforms, there is a much higher prevalence of like-minded people associating with each other, whereas in website discussion platforms like Reddit, there is more conversation with those of different opinions which contributes to less extreme biasness. Furthermore, the presence of homophilic interactions can be confirmed by the community structure of the interaction networks. The study calculated each community's average leaning, determined as the average of individual leanings of its members. As shown in the provided figure number 3, the study arranged the communities for each social medium, presented by increasing average leaning on the x-axis (color coded from blue to red), with the y-axis informing the size of the community. Within the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, it was shown that communities tended to spread across the whole spectrum of possible leanings, however users with similar leanings form each community. For Facebook especially, it seems that there are communities which have a robust average leaning. The results of Facebook and twitter are directly in accordance with the observation of homophilic interactions, but the communities in Reddit and Gab don't cover the whole spectrum and in contrast to Facebook and Twitter only show similar average leanings (Cinelli et.al, 2021). The two main ingredients for echo chambers are first homophilic interactions and bias in information diffusion. Analyzing the data shown above it seems social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter show indicators of the two ingredients which make up the echo chambers, while open group discussion websites such as Reddit and Gab do not have those ingredients. This goes to show that social media is a strong breeding ground for echo-chambers which can facilitate extreme left or right political biasness in the information proliferated on that platform that is often left unchecked. One of the most dangerous connections echo chambers have towards civic engagement is its ability to increase political polarization amongst youth which can lead to voting behaviors characterized by extreme ideologies. One study analyzed data from the Swiss Election Study Selects 2019 to decipher whether echo-chambers affected people's political interests and how that may

play out come the 2019 Swiss Election. The study characterized political polarization through observing how many people choose to split their votes across political parties. In Switzerland, voters have the opportunity when voting to spread their votes across different political parties which indicates they have more open-mindedness and less feelings of animosity towards the other party. Thus vote-splitting can be considered a proxy for political open-mindedness.

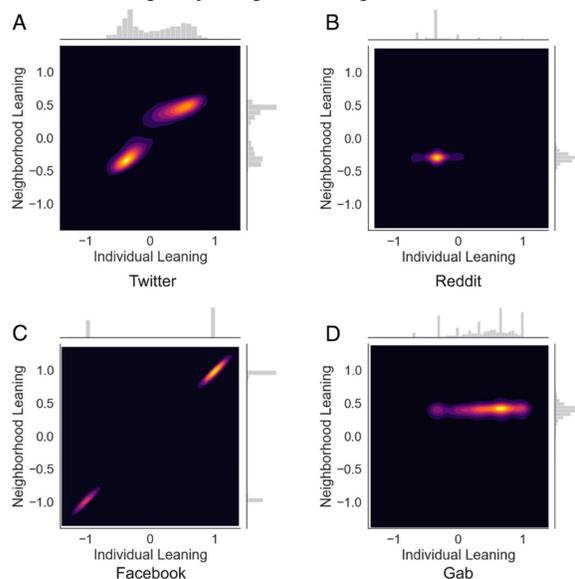


Figure 3. For Twitter and Facebook, there are stronger leanings towards the leaning of a user and the average leaning of their neighbor, meaning likeminded people tend to gravitate together on social media platforms. However, for platforms such as Gab and Reddit, users don't split into groups with opposite leanings but form communities (Cinelli et.al, 2021).

The study compared the likelihood of people being exposed to civics online and their tendency to split their votes versus those who did not engage in political online activities. For those who did not engage in political media activities, the likelihood to split their vote was around 40% and this was regardless of whether they were civically engaged. However, for social media users there was a discrepancy between those who had a level of political interest and those who did not. For users who were civically engaged the likelihood to split votes was significantly higher than those who were not civically engaged, 42% for rather politically

interested and 45% for very politically interested. But for social media users who were not civically engaged, they only had about a 26 % probability of splitting their votes. The study found that these individuals were more likely to find themselves in echo chambers providing them with one-sided information which thus decreases their likelihood to split votes among candidates from different parties. When compared to other political factors, the study also found that none other than political interest significantly moderated the patterns of online activities and vote splitting than political interest which indicates that the exposure to echo-chambers can have an unique effect that not much other influences can have on people’s voter behavior (Figure 4) (Ackermann et.al, 2022).

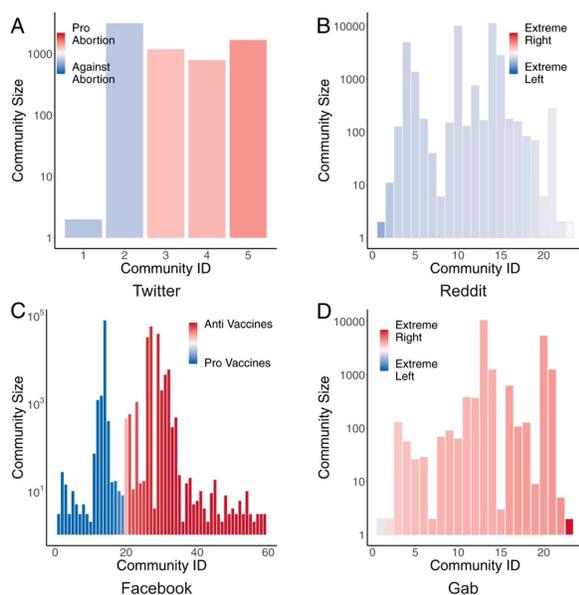


Figure 4. Facebook shows high levels of extreme positions on sensitive political topics versus online platforms which mostly show a very light shade with more spread out results (Cinelli et.al, 2021).

Social media inflames political polarization

Research shows that Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines - and partisan antipathy is growing deeper and more extensive- than ever before. A 2014 study of 10,000 people nationwide compared the political standpoints of Americans then to the political leanings of those prior to the digital age (around the late 1990s to early

2000s). Over the two decades that lapsed, survey results showed that the overall share of Americans who expressed consistently conservative or liberal opinions had doubled, jumping from 10% to 21%. As a result, the ideological overlap amongst the two parties greatly diminished, with 92% of Republicans to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats to the left of the median Republican (“Political Polarization”, 2014). Contrary to social media platform’s contentions, a range of experts have pointed to the use of social media as a major contribution to the growing partisan animosity in the U.S, even going as far as calling social media a “key facilitator” to the highly politically polarized climate of today. The US federal government has also begun investigating the role social media had in creating one of modern history's most violent displays of political animosity: the January 6th insurrection at the U.S capitol.

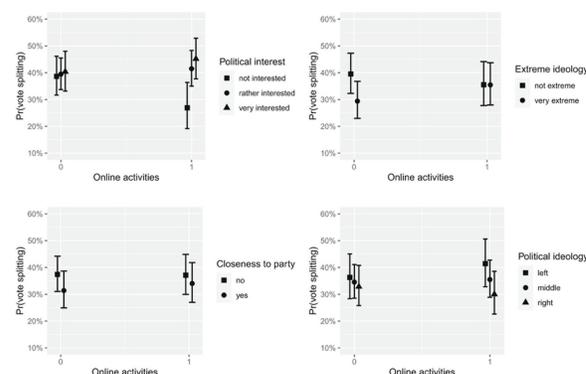


Figure 5. Political Interest indicates the highest discrepancy in likelihood to split votes, showing the large and unique impact echo-chambers may have on voting behavior (Ackerman et.al, 2022).

The House Select Committee has requested a wide range of social media and telecommunications companies to preserve records related to the investigation, specifically looking at how the false claims about the results of the 2020 election spread on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and how algorithms could have contributed to the promotion of disinformation and extremism (Barret et.al, 2021). However, the key concern that must addressed is how youth’s exposure to such political tensions can influence their political leanings and civic ideologies.

Increasingly, youth are gravitating towards media that uses incivility or extreme language, and research shows that exposure to this type of outrage language is associated with less-open minded and extreme positions (Middaugh, 2019). As youth are constantly being exposed to this type of media, social media then becomes a breeding ground for further hatred and antagonism for the opposing political party amongst the next generation's civic leaders.

Social media exposes youth to fake news

It's no secret that false information has become a defining feature of social media. With open access to express one's thoughts and minimal checks on accuracy of statements, false accusations and conspiracy theories have proliferated to stoke division. What's more is that research has also found that youth are more likely to share and be interested in news that is eye-catching or emotionally resonant rather than factually accurate. One study asked youth participants what they look for when choosing media sources to share with others to raise awareness or explain an issue, and it was found that the participant's main concerns tended to focus on whether the information was eye-catching or emotionally resonate (Middaugh, 2019). It was striking how little the youth participants factored in credibility of information or factual accuracy when considering what information to share. According to a 2018 study, it was found that falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter versus the truth, and these types of posts often reach their first 1,500 people approximately six times faster (Brown, 2020). When youth encounter media which is eye-catching and emotionally provocative, such as media postings with outrageous language, sharing it with others has the potential for spreading misinformation and impacting the tone of public discourse. One of the biggest concerns on how fake news can impact civic engagement today is through how fake news can destabilize political institutions and delegitimize media organizations through decreasing public trust in key social institutions. One study specifically investigated this phenomenon and reported how misinformation can alter people's trust. Through combining two-wave survey data with records of online political behavior they examined

the role of misinformation exposure as a predictor of trust in the media and political system. The findings found were split amongst political ideological groups. Fake news overall was associated with a general decrease in media trust. Misinformation exposure whilst the one-month period around the 2018 election predicted a 5% decrease in media trust among participants. Consuming fake news was also associated with lower mainstream media trust amongst all levels of political ideology. But in contrast to the negative association between news exposure and media trust, it was found that consuming misinformation was associated with an increase in political trust for those with far-right ideology. Fake news consumption was associated with a 4% increase in political trust and an 8% increase in trust for Congress for far-right leaners. This phenomenon can be explained through the fact that most fake news sources identified by scholars and fact-checking organizations produced content applicable to far-right ideology. And in late 2018, Republicans were in power in the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of government. With all branches of government under Republican control, it wasn't surprising that the predominately right-leaning content would bolster confidence in political institutions. However, the same did not hold true for those of liberal ideology. Those of liberal ideology when exposed to fake news reported less governmental trust this showing a linkage between fake news consumption and institutional trust (Ogyanova et.al, 2020). But fake news does more than just divide people's trusts in their government, research also shows that fake news corresponds with abilities to alter election results. One study conducted following the 2016 presidential election surveyed respondents 281 questions which included three fake news statements. Two of which were negative statements about Hillary Clinton and one being a positive endorsement involving Donald Trump. Results indicated that beliefs in the fake news stories were strongly linked to defection from the Democratic ticket. Among those who did not believe a single one of the three fake news statements, 89% cast ballots for Clinton; 61% of those who believed one news item voted for Clinton; but for those who believed two or three of the news statements resulted

in only 17% casting ballots for Clinton (Gunther et.al, 2018). Both studies indicate that the growing body of fake news can have large repercussions on civic events by both affecting the outcomes of national elections and growing either distrust or falsified confidence in key social institutions.

Political content on social media can become a source of fear, stress, and annoyance for youth

In a survey conducted to highlight the negative effects of social media interactions amongst an era of widespread polarization and partisan antipathy, it was found that for many social media users the influx of political content is a source of frustration and annoyance. A substantial population of youth users were found to be worn out by the tone and volume of political material in which they encountered upon social media platforms and viewed social media as an “inherently angry and disrespectful medium in comparison to other venues for discussing politics”. And though not the majority just yet, an expanding group of social media users express resignation versus excitement over the volume of political content in social media feeds. It was reported that by a roughly two-to-one margin, social media users express resignation over excitement on the volume of political content in their social feeds. One-in-five social media users (20%) indicated that they enjoyed seeing lots of posts about politics on social media, however nearly twice (37%) described themselves as feeling worn out by the exposure to political posts and discussions on social media. This feeling of being worn out or tired of political content can detach youth from being fully engaged or interested in civics, drawing them away from civic engagement. What’s more is that the survey also found evidence that political discussions and arguments on social media can be stressful to many people in ways that in-person arguments are not. The survey found that 59% of social media users indicated that they found it stressful and frustrating to discuss politics in social media with people they disagree with, while just 35% say that these discussions are generally interesting and informative. In addition to the weariness and stress that social media may inflict upon youth, an emerging body of youth are beginning to see social media as a place to also refrain from speaking their

minds about political issues for fear of criticism or losing friends: 64% of social media users feel as if that description of social media platforms describes them either very (14%) or somewhat (50%) well (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Though these viewpoints may not be the dominant opinions just yet, it’s clear to see that emerging research is suggesting that increase exposure to civic media on social media platforms, especially the type of media which espouses outrage language and extreme positions, is increasingly becoming a source of discomfort, fear, and stress for youth. Because of that, youth could be deterred from actively engaging in civics come their adulthood due to social media.

Table 3. A comprehensive list of the negative influences of social media on youth civic engagement

Negatives
● Social Media may not sustain youth civic engagement
● Social Media is biased
● Social Media inflames political polarization
● Social media exposes youth to fake news
● Political content on social media can become a source of fear, stress, and annoyance for youth

Gaps/inconsistencies in knowledge

To have an even better understanding of the influence of social media on youth civic engagement, it’s important to address the multiple gaps and inconsistencies in the literature that regard the connection and influences of social media on youth civic engagement. Mentioned earlier in the paper was the issue on how social media had the inability of prolonging youth civic engagement, however there is a gap in research to explain just why there is lower than anticipated sustained engagement levels (Dayton, 2012). One possible explanation could be that after a certain political goal has been achieved, i.e., the conclusion of an election, the political urgency that once engaged youth to using social media to participate in civics evaporates,

disentwining youth to their civic duties and their sense of interest. Another possible explanation could be that youth, being influenced by their peers to engage in sharing information and participating in digital space discussions on political phenomena, would lose their obligation to be engaged in these advocacy movements once they see their peers are no longer involved. In order to get to the bottom of just what the presiding reason is for the inconsistency in expression of continued civic engagement, both quantitative and qualitative research must be undertaken to uncover the reason behind this issue. Another thing that must consistently be considered and researched upon is the emerging ways in which young people express their political expressions on social media and the consequences of these emerging techniques. New social media platforms and digital spaces are being produced and released on the market every day. The rise of TikTok came during the unprecedented time of the global pandemic, quickly rising to become one of the world's leading social media platforms with more than 3 million people per day downloading this video-sharing app (Walker, 2020). With apps and new social media emerging, consistent research needs to be done to explore any possible changes these social media platforms may create in impacting youth civic engagement and subsequently provide new directions for future scholarly inquiry in digital political practices. Another gap which is prevalent in the research is looking into certain political expressions indicating civic engagement online and seeing the effects of them. For example, while sharing information has been discussed as an act of political expression indicating civic engagement, there has been little discussion about how the acts of circulation may harm or help the goals of representation and productive discourse. More research needs to be done to assess the small acts of political engagement on social media and what harms and benefits they specifically invest in youth civic engagement. Another topic of social media that researchers have investigated but have not reached a defined answer about is whether social media has the power to soften traditional patterns of inequality. Some journals have pointed to the open accessibility and free news services social media provides to people, thus helping to bridge the

inequity in engagement in politics, either it be based on socioeconomic status or other dimensions such as race or ethnicity. Social media use could result in direct 'counter stratification' effects by elevating political engagement among the previously uninvolved to levels that are much closer to those exhibited by the more involved. Another possibility is that the direct influence of widespread social media use upon political engagement could serve to broaden the overall pool of young people engaged in politics and thus creating a softening of political inequality patterns over time that can be carried through generations. However, these possibilities have not been confirmed by any empirical analysis or in-depth studies, so subsequent research needs to be conducted to see if social media truly does have the power to soften traditional patterns of inequality amongst youth. Upon reviewing the literature, it must also be mentioned that there are multiple limitations that can also be associated with the study. First and foremost, one of the leading limitations upon reviewing the literature was a finding that there were too many mixed results. Several factors can explain the elusiveness of clear patterns of findings within the emerging literature on social media and youth political engagement. First, many of the existing studies have been relatively limited in empirical scope. Many study samples rely on college students, which are collected with varying degrees of sophistication. Others have used nationally representative samples of samples of youth of varying sizes and the majority of studies are also only centered in a particular focusing event, such as elections or Caucasus (Xenos et.al, 2013). Another limitation to the information gathered in this study is that many studies assessing digital media and youth civic engagement are only representative of wealthy democratic countries. The literature of youth civic engagement is heavily concentrated upon wealthy democracies only and the fact that the narrative turns towards a politics of 'self-actualization' is not necessarily applicable to other countries. For example, researchers in Mexico had recently found that a history of extreme disenfranchisement from government, with a ranking at the bottom of 18 Latin American countries in terms of citizens' satisfaction with democracy, led to almost 87% of youth

conveying that they would never engage in political discussions on social media and only 36.4% reporting that they intentionally follow the news. On the contrary, researchers found that Egyptian youth's extreme disenfranchisement during Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian rule spurred the creation of robust, collective, youth-led alternative civic engagement organizations (Cho et.al, n.d). With the contradiction in results for developing countries, clearly there must be a more global perspective in research to flesh out the true narrative. Lastly, to be better understand the implications behind fake news and youth civic engagement, research needs to be conducted to fill in the missing literature regarding how disinformation versus misinformation can have of political society today. By filling this gap, it can better be understood how the types of fake news can impact the civic knowledge and standings of not just our current society, but the future generations as well.

Solutions/Suggestions

As technology continues to advance and humanity develops an ever-increasing dependency on digital media, it's important that we find ways to ensure that technology is used responsibly and effectively. We must find ways to mitigate the negative effects of digital media on youth civic engagement as much as possible while simultaneously actively growing the positive impacts. One of the first ways we can do this is by having youth educational facilities integrate digital media into the civic education curriculum. Examples can be drawn from the Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age (EDDA) project, which was a district-wide approach to re-envisioning civic education during the digital age characterized by creating professional learning communities at various school sites that worked together to integrate digital civic learning opportunities into the high school curriculum. Similar examples include the Black Youth Project's (BYP) New Media Research Program and the Media, Activism, and Participatory Politics (MAPP) Project partners at USC (Kahne et.al, 2016). Expanding more on having educational facilities introduce the effects of social media on youth civic engagement is having teacher-facilitated online peer-to-peer deliberation in the classrooms to identify public matters which may be of concern to

students, and negotiate the validity of and diverse perspectives upon related knowledge in digital spaces. This can give students formal and informal learning experiences in the creation and articulation of online public issues while simultaneously realizing the unpredictable nature of such publics. Teachers and educational facilities should also promote not just the creation and sharing of user-generated knowledge upon interest-driven social justice issues, but also the means to thoughtfully and purposefully act on such knowledge via online networked publics. This includes exploring the nascent yet ever changing social norms in online networked publics, remaining sensitive not just to the challenges of online interactions, but to the vitality of expressing and operationalizing the privileges and rights of young people in democratic and commercial digital places. Moving aside from considering what can be done in youth educational spaces to ensure social media has a positive impact on youth civic engagement is also looking into what can be done in technological platforms. To alleviate the stressors political discussion on social media can have on political polarization, one large thing that can be done is looking into these social media companies' ideological algorithms and altering them. Having come under hard public and governmental scrutiny in the past couple of years, social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter have already started making changes to their algorithms and news feeds. For example, in April 2021, Twitter announced its "Responsible Machines Learning Initiative", an enterprise that worked to scrutinize not only the algorithms which drive content recommendations but also the other ways in which algorithms contribute to bias and political polarization (Daskalopoulos, et.al. 2021). However, it remains to see whether these changes or heightened attention on the algorithms will actually enact any change or result in any tangible results in dismantling political polarization. Tech companies have generally withheld information in their algorithms despite multiple research findings pointing to these algorithms being the root cause of the polarization of users. Whether it is the role of the government and US lawmakers to force these tech companies to be transparent with their algorithms, or the agreement can be reached through negotiation,

one major step forward in ensuring the effects of social media on youth civic engagement is letting the algorithms of tech companies be made accessible to the public and altered to block ideological groupings together and less exposure to extreme political positions and topics. Lastly, the overall suggestion that must be considered as society evolves deeper into the world of social media and digital spaces, is to consistently assess the risks and negatives of social media on youth civic engagement.

3. Conclusion

Social media is an ever-growing phenomenon that increasingly has a strong prominence on the political culture and climate today. As the emerging generation steps up to continue the civic duties of upholding their countries' democracies or political regimes, it's important to assess the major influences present that are impacting youth's decisions. While there are a multitude of positive attributes of social media that point to a bright future of large-scale political engagement amongst youth and the improvement of human and social rights, there are also negative influences of social media that seem to be inflaming political polarization, hostility, and biases. Considerations must be taken to look at how youth can harness the power of social media effectively and use it to advance more engagement in politics while simultaneously not creating further divide and reproach amongst the political culture. Educating the public and youth as well as holding tech companies responsible for their algorithms should be enacted, while constant updates research must be conducted to fill gaps and mitigate limitations. Social media is an inevitably permanent part of life that will continue to make drastic changes to the political landscape of our society. It is up to use to ensure that social media is a positive and empowering influence for youth civic engagement so that each upcoming generation can continue to uphold the values of freedom, equality, and justice in their country.

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