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# The relationship between passive and active non-political social media use and political expression on Facebook and Twitter



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## ABSTRACT

Departing from the conventional approach that emphasizes civic and political motives for political engagement, this study investigates how political social media behaviors—political expression—might emerge out of everyday, non-political use of the sites from an interpersonal communication perspective. Using two separate adult samples of Facebook ( $n = 727$ ) and Twitter users ( $n = 663$ ), this study examines how non-political, passive (NPP, consuming non-political content) and non-political, active (NPA, producing non-political content) social media use relate to expression of political voice on the sites. Findings show that only NPA use is positively associated with increased political expression, and this relationship is partially explained by political efficacy. The patterns of findings are consistent across Facebook and Twitter.

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## 1. Introduction

From the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement to the Facebook campaign that led to millions of people changing their Facebook profiles to support gay rights, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have become increasingly important platforms that enable users to express their views. Following these developments, substantial research has explored the ways in which informational or political uses of social media relate to political participation (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Current research suggests that expressing political views is an important pathway to political participation beyond the web (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Vaccari et al., 2015).

However, using social media for informational or political purposes is less widespread than coverage of social media's role in major political events might suggest. Recent Pew Research Center data shows that about 30% of US adults report getting news from Facebook, and that 78% of these individuals are exposed to that news only incidentally—meaning they are on social media for other reasons (Matsa & Michell, 2014). Most people use social media to gratify social needs and pursue entertainment interests, rather than to access news or to pursue political ends explicitly or deliberately (e.g., Glynn, Huges, & Hoffman, 2012). Yet, little is known about whether (and, if so, how) such everyday, non-political use of social

media—that is, use characterized by personal-oriented entertainment and socializing activities—is related to political behaviors on such sites.

Alongside the rise of social media, a theoretical framework has emerged that posits that mundane, non-political practices on networked digital media platforms can cultivate civic bonds and collective identity, thus serving as the first step toward political engagement (Bakardjieva, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009). This study draws on this theoretical view and further distinguishes between non-political social media use that is “passive” (i.e., consuming content) versus “active” (i.e., producing content) based on prior work (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010) in order to understand how non-political activities relate to political behaviors on the sites. In particular, it is hypothesized that NPA (non-political, active) use that cultivates social bonds (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014) may foster a sense of political efficacy among users, which, in turn, facilitates political expression when opportunities arise. Conversely, these interaction-based experiences may be absent from NPP (non-political, passive) use.

Overall, this study advances existing literature on social media and political engagement by: (1) categorizing social media use as either passive consumption or active production in order to examine how forms of non-political use relates to political expression on social media; (2) examining the possible intervening role of political efficacy in the relationship between NPA use and political expression, thus further specifying the possible pathway from non-political social media use to political engagement; and

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(3) using two separate adult samples of Facebook and Twitter users to identify consistent patterns of results across the two sites, which can help to advance theory building regarding the uses and effects of social media.

## 2. Theoretical relationships between non-political and political social media use: differentiating non-political social media use into passive and active forms

The advent of social media has coincided with an important shift in conceptualizations of citizenship, moving from a “contrast” model that sees the personal and the political as two separate domains (e.g., Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001), to an “extension” model that identifies forms of political engagement in the mundane activities of everyday life (e.g., Bakardjieva, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009). Over the past decade, one prominent line of research on digital democracy has employed a “uses and gratification” approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974), suggesting that using media to gather news information leads to political or civic participation, while recreational-oriented use has insignificant or even negative impacts on political or civic engagement (e.g., Shah et al., 2001). By distinguishing sharply between personal versus political uses, however, the contrast model risks overlooking the extent to which political engagement may arise from the non-political, interpersonal communication process.

The “extension” model, on the other hand, conceptualizes political life as an extended terrain of everyday life and argues that social media-enabled practices in the personal domain of interests can bring citizens into contact with the political realm (e.g., Loader & Mercea, 2011). Dahlgren (2009) proposes the idea of “civic cultures” to capture the ways in which networked communicative practices in casual cultural spaces foster a shared sense of civic identity, which becomes, in turn, a basis for formal institutionalized political participation. Echoing this view, Bakardjieva's (2009) notion of “subactivism” posits that mundane, personal online interactions can cultivate collective identity and provide a reservoir of civic energy that can be potentially transformed into public activism. In essence, these perspectives understand the political as deeply embedded in everyday social media use, suggesting that social media use for entertainment and personal interests may lead to political use of the sites.

Indeed, for most people, engaging in politics is an incidental experience and “it is their social life as communicators that is more central and important than their lives as citizens” (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011, p. 1083). Thus, drawing on the extension model and interpersonal communication scholarship on social media (Burke et al., 2011, 2010; Ellison et al., 2014), this study differentiates non-political use into “passive” and “active” forms to advance our understanding of *how* non-political social media use is associated with political expression on the sites. Passive use involves consumption of content (e.g., viewing posts) without direct interactions of or exchanges among users, whereas active use refers to production of content (e.g., posting comments) that facilitates exchanges with others. Increasing evidence shows that the two forms of use lead to different outcomes; for example, in the case of studies looking at how social media use affects well-being, findings suggest that while active use facilitates well-being, passive use undermines it (e.g., Deters & Mehl, 2012; Verduyn et al., 2015).

The distinction between passive and active social media use can be mapped onto two theoretical paradigms, namely, reception- and expression-effect models in political communication research (Pingree, 2007). Reception-effect models address the effects of consuming media messages and are highly influential in political communication scholarship. However, because prior work often flattened passive and active non-political media use into the

singular uniform category of “recreational use,” relatively little is known about how *non-political, passive* media use (NPP; consuming non-political content), in particular, is associated with political outcomes.

Expression-effect models, on the other hand, emphasize the effects produced by expressing oneself—something that has been largely unexplored in the political communication literature (Pingree, 2007). Recently, scholars have begun to focus on generic active online media use (e.g., producing music videos) and found that such use is positively linked to political participation (e.g., Ekström & Östman, 2013; Östman, 2012). This line of research suggests that social media use that is not necessarily political in nature may, nonetheless, contribute to political engagement; still, it may be too soon to conclude that *non-political, active* (NPA; producing non-political content) use, in particular, contributes to political outcomes. Because the broad conceptualization and operationalization of active media use in prior work inevitably includes use that is both active *and* political, a focused investigation of how *non-political* active social media use relates to political outcomes is essential.

In the following sections, I draw on the interpersonal communication perspective to discuss how political expression may arise from NPA social media use and the possible intervening process underlying the relationships between NPA use and political expression across two of the most widely-used social media in the U.S., namely Facebook and Twitter (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

## 3. NPP and NPA use and political expression on social media

### 3.1. Political expression on social media

Before discussing how NPP and NPA use relate to political expression on social media, it is essential to understand the role of political expression in political participation processes and how characteristics of social media may shape political expression therein. Prior work suggests that political expression—the act of expressing political beliefs—on social media is a precursor to other forms of political participation (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). As social media allow expressed ideas to reach a wide audience instantly, political expression on social media can be intensified under certain circumstances, resulting in large-scale offline political participation (e.g., Bond et al., 2012).

However, people tend to be cautious about voicing their political views in their day-to-day use of social media like Facebook (Thorson, 2014) and Twitter (Jin, 2013). A recent Pew survey shows that 86% of US adults reported willingness to have in-person conversations about the US government's surveillance program, but only 42% of Facebook and Twitter users were willing to post information relevant to this issue on these platforms (Hampton et al., 2014). Impression management literature suggests that in order to achieve desired outcomes, people modify their self-presentation and actions depending on the social contexts (Goffman, 1959). Indeed, prior work has consistently shown that offline political talk is often bounded within a more closed and private context of intimate others because political expression tends to open up risks of disrupting social relationships, and revealing social identities (e.g., Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). As social media like Facebook and Twitter constitute a collapsed context that combines both intimate and distant others in one place (Marwick & boyd, 2011), users may experience intensified concerns about political expression given the difficulty of determining the potential audience of the expressed messages and the possibility of misinterpretation as messages are re-shared and searched over time (boyd, 2011). Given these uncertainties,

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