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Social Network Dependency and Intended Political Participation

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**Abstract**

As more political campaigns turn to social networking sites on the Internet to reach out to young voters, it has become clear that there are gaps in research that show if these efforts are having any significant effect. Based on a survey of young adults, the study found that individuals who depend on social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace for information tend to have a likelihood of intended political participation. In addition, political knowledge, political interest, political talk also lead to political participation. Limitation and suggestions for future research are provided.

The Obama Presidential Campaign and the Scott Brown Massachusetts Senator races indicate that the Internet, and more specifically social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, are perceived as game changers when it comes to reaching young voters and gaining momentum to win a political race (Riley, 2010). Several recent campaigns operated on the idea that the politicians with the most followers on Facebook and Twitter would win, based on the assumption that such political outreach motivates those who normally would not participate in a campaign to take action (Douthat, 2010). But do social networking sites (SNS) motivate young people to participate in elections?

For one thing, it is clear that the traditional mass media is not stimulating young voters. Research indicated that traditional media had a limited effect on increasing their political interests (Acar, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2004). The young viewed “mass media coverage of the political campaigns as relatively less engaging than other mediated and interpersonal communication” (p. 98). Instead, Grabowski (2008) found that young adults responded positively to non-traditional methods of raising political interest. Additionally, Klotz (2008) suggested that new communication technologies have created an atmosphere where young adults tend to look for political information that comes from popular culture. Klotz argued that young adults’ use of “technology reflects a desire for different kind of politics” (p. 37), a politics that moves away from the mainstream. This was reinforced by a study issued by Pew foundation that suggested that Internet and social networking users are more likely to engage in civic activities including showing support to candidates, joining a political group, or posting comments in support of a candidate or an issue (Smith, Schlozan, Verba, & Brady, 2009). The study indicated that “those with high levels of income and education are the most active in civic and political affairs” (p. 2).

The SNS most likely to attract these motivated users are MySpace and Facebook, the two SNS with the largest user groups on the Internet (Dong, Day & Deol, 2008). These social media empower young adults and encourages them to take the advantages of the new media’s interactivity, digital content, wide distribution and universal access. Not surprisingly, politicians have been quick to find these new audiences, with many in the political arena using social media to post their profiles (Kann, Berry, Gant, & Zager, 2007), enhance their political campaigns (Dong, Day, Deol, 2008), sharing information and gaining support from the public in an effort to reach these motivated young voters. Research shows that these social networking sites frequently “host advocacy and issue-oriented groups for discussion, organization and mobilization,” merging social networking channels with online politics and integrating “political discourse into youth’ everyday lives” (Kann, Berry, Gant, & Zager, 2007).

Yet, despite these efforts and the overwhelming amount of political rhetoric online, a review of literature shows that there are very limited studies in assessing the impact of social networking usage on political participation. In other words, it’s not clear if the efforts of politicians to engage young viewers is having a significant impact, or if all this attention to politics online is simply a distraction. The purpose of this study is to fill in the gap in the literature of social media and political communication and to explore how young adults’ dependency on social networking sites affects their political participation.

#### Review of Literature

##### Mass media effects on political participation

Research showed that there is a positive relationship between Internet use and political knowledge, political efficacy and political participation (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). By using the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), the two researchers however found no

strong support to declare that the Internet would contribute significantly to the political process. A study, which focused on the effects of Internet use on college students' political efficacy, conceptualized political efficacy as internal and external (Lee, 2006). The study indicated that there is a mixed effect of Internet use on young adults. Though young adults tend to be informed of politics quickly by the Internet, the medium did not make them feel like the government would be effective. The mixed feelings increased the unlikelihood of political participation. The study suggested that online campaigning and online news may not motivate the young to participate in political behaviors such as voting.

Ogan, Ozakca and Groshek (2006) reached a similar conclusion and suggested that college students who used interactive media do not lead to high political engagement. In addition, the study showed that most of the subjects believe that communication technology is less likely to help generate meaningful conversation with others. The findings also indicated that while college students may use the Internet more often for gathering information purposes, it does not encourage students to engage in political communication. While Watson (2008) argued that the Internet has an ability to reach out to a large number of individuals, offering a new way of political involvement, the Internet has its limitation in becoming the main source for political information due to the fact that socioeconomics may be the key factor to determine who take advantage of using it.

Xenos and Moy (2007) explored the relationship between individuals who turn to the Internet to receive their political information and how that effects their political and civic engagement during the 2004 U.S. elections. What Xenos and Moy found is that the Internet has diverse effects on individuals depending on their motivations. First, Xenos and Moy identified two different theoretical approaches, instrumental and psychological. The instrumental approach indicated that individuals turn to the internet to reduce their information uncertainty about politics. These findings included simple searches of relevant political information on Google. The Pew Research Center found that 56% of individuals reported using some kind of search engine to gather political information (Fallows, 2005). Second, the psychological approach yielded interesting results indicating that there is no significant difference between individuals' interest in politics and their internet use, political knowledge, opinions, and preferences about the political world (Xenos & Moy, 2007). This suggests that there is no difference between Internet and non-internet user's political awareness. Kim and Kim (2007) supported the current research (Xenos & Moy, 2007; Xenos & Bennet 2007), arguing that new media is attracting younger individuals to the political sphere.

However; Kim and Kim (2007) stated "there is a difference among media types in influencing political engagement" (p 342). Their study focused on the relationship between, newspapers, radio, television, Internet, and political engagement among the youth. As Xenos and Moy (2007) pointed out there are different motivations behind what drives individuals' media preference. Kim and Kim (2007) utilized this same idea, but applied it to four different types of media. In order to determine what motivates an individual to use a particular type of media, the uses and gratifications approach was applied, using the concepts of guidance, surveillance, social utility, and entertainment from Kay and Johnson (2002) and McLeod and Becker (1981) to determine four reasons why people utilize media for political information. Guidance is when individuals use political information to direct them towards a specific political action like voting (p 343). Surveillance refers to individuals using political information to stay informed. Social utility refers to individuals seeking political information in order to communicate with others. Entertainment refers to individuals who consume political

information for relaxations, like watching political gossip (p. 343). Political engagement was broken down into four categories: political interest, political knowledge, political discussion, and political participation. Results indicated that TV and the Internet were the most useful, when individuals were looking for guidance and social utility. Guidance was also positively related to political interest and political talk, and social utility was positively related to political knowledge and political discussion. There was no relationship found between political engagement and entertainment.

Tewksbury (2006) was interested in the effect that highly contended political events had on individuals media use. The research found a significant relationship between major political events, such as Super Tuesday, cable news and the Internet. This phenomenon may best be explained as individuals attempt to reduce uncertainty. Because the Internet provides a fast and quick access to political news, individuals were motivated by the need to reduce uncertainty used the Internet to seek information faster than from other forms of traditional media (newspapers, or broadcast news). In addition, Tewsbury reflected upon previous work by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) which stated that individual perceive cable news to be more credible than broadcast news (p. 316), thus, individuals may turn to cable news during highly contended political events because they have the desire to find the most credible news. Furthermore, individuals tend to have constant access to cable news channels, since these news organizations are dedicated to news only and do not normally offer other forms of programming such as fictional drama or sitcoms. Nonetheless, this study revealed two important ideas: first, people prefer to have multiple outlets for political information. Tewsbury found that individuals still viewed there local broadcast news outlets consistently, but would change either to more national news outlets or to the Internet during time of big political events. Second, while individuals can develop particular loyalties to one media outlet over another, it supports the idea that “people are purposive in their selection of media, eschewing otherwise popular network coverage in certain circumstances” (p. 327).

#### Social Networking Sites Use and Political Participation

Social Networking Sites (SNS) are one of the new virtual spaces scholars are exploring to analyze the relationship between the Internet and young adults civic engagement (Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe, 2006; Hargittai, 2008; Cohen, 2008). SNSs like Facebook, MySpace, Xanga, and Friendster, are popular amongst young adults. Facebook, since its creation in 2004, has signed on more than 350 million active users (Facebook, 2010), and MySpace was sold in 2005 for \$580 million dollars to media mogul Rupert Murdoch (Cohen, 2008). The ability for SNSs to emulate other forms of media may account for its popularity among young adults, but it is important to note, that the number of registered users differ by SNS.

Hargittai (2008) examined the relationship between young adults and their preference for a particular SNS: Facebook, MySpace, Xanga, and Friendster. The study focused on five main characteristics: gender, age, race, and ethnicity, parent’s highest level of education, and living location. A large majority, 88%, of students reported using SNSs and 74% reported using at least one SNS often. Among the five variables, parent’s highest level of education and ethnicity had the most profound effect on an individual’s preference. The results indicated that when at least one parent had a college education, individuals were significantly more likely to be a Facebook user. Inversely, when parents had less than a high school education, individuals were significantly more likely to use MySpace.

The second major finding was the effect that race and ethnicity played on the type of SNS(s) an individual preferred. Hispanics were more likely to belong to MySpace, while Asians

were more likely to use Facebook. In addition, Asians were also more active on Xanga and Friendster than other groups in this study. The significance of Hargittai's research indicates that individuals may be interacting in the virtual world with the same social groups they would in the real world, and that the SNSs may serve as a place for young adults to reify their existence amongst their peer groups (Erikson, 2008; Stern & Taylor, 2007; Acar, 2008). In addition, this study may illustrate how SNSs are reflections of society, making them an excellent avenue to study political socialization in young adults.

Bers and Chau (2006) explored the use of virtual spaces and the development of civic engagement of the youth. A multiuser game, Zora, was used to analyze the communication between young participants with one another in a virtual world. These findings suggested that civic engagement can be fostered in virtual communities. Although, this study focused on individuals under the age of 18, it still provides evidence that individuals can engage in civic activities online.

Cohen (2008) argued that SNSs are the new frontier for exploitation. Specifically, Cohen warned of SNSs like Facebook being used to exploit the unknowing subscribers through what she calls "e-capitalism" (p 5). In her article, she argued that Facebook is driven from an individual's ability to gain "social knowledge and relationships, creativity, and human agency" (p 18), concepts that affirm Carpini (2000) motivations for political engagement. Unfortunately, Cohen suggested, SNSs have been recognized for their vast potential to extract profit out of its users. Cohen argued that the use of SNSs have to be reconceptualized as agents of political engagement so they can foster civic action.

Birnie and Horwath (2002) attempted to fill in the gap in the literature by exploring the differences between online social networks (OSN) and real life social networks (SN). The research suggested that there was no significant difference between OSN and SN. Despite Birnie and Horwath's findings, follow up studies found inverse effects (Acar, 2008). Kruat, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Hegeson, and Crawford (2002) found several differences between individuals' OSN and SN. Kruat et al conducted a study analyzing the relationship between Internet use and individuals' social behavior. The results showed a negative relationship between Internet use and, social involvement and psychological wellbeing. Three years later Kruat et al. conducted a follow up study and found opposite results. The results indicated that internet positively influenced social involvement and psychological wellbeing. Kruat et al argued that people "mingle their on-line and off-line worlds, using the Internet to keep up with people from their off-line lives and calling and visiting people they initially met on-line" (p 69). Additionally, findings suggested that the individuals use the Internet to maintain both their on-line and off-line networks.

Acar (2008) analyzed the differences between social networks in the real world and social networks online. He defined social networks as "maps of interconnections among socially related people" (p 64), and concluded that both online and real life social networks are influenced by internal and social factors. The results indicated that online networks were significantly larger than real world networks (p 78). Acar argued "perceived lower risk of accepting new members, easiness of requesting a membership, social desirability...and failing to exclude members who actually are no longer contacted, might have caused OSN to be larger than real networks" (p 77). Acar's findings indicated that the lack of social pressures online makes it easier for individuals to accept others into their networks. This may make it easier for individuals who have lower self-esteem and low rates of disclosure to participate in larger networks of individuals (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). However, individuals in the study

who have low self-esteem have smaller network sizes and lower levels of participation (Acar, 2008, p. 78).

In an effort to explore why young adults are attracted to SNS, Urista, Dong and Day (2007) conducted focus groups and found five primary reasons: 1) efficiency, 2) convenience, 3) curiosity of others, 4) popularity, and 5) relationship. Individuals explained that it was more efficient to communicate with their friends and family using SNSs in comparison to other forms of communication, especially in long distance relationships. SNSs were popular because they allow individuals who were curious about someone to view their profile to find out more information about them. Others use SNS because of they wanted to gain more popularity among their peer groups or social networks. Finally, individuals claimed to use SNSs to maintain and create relationships. This study suggested that individuals use SNSs because they are convenient and make it easier to manage communication among their social network.

The research on Internet use and political engagement is scarce (Kim & Kim, 2007), and contested (Kim & Kim, 2007, Banchen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008). Previous studies indicated that younger individuals have rarely used the internet to seek political information (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper 2004). However, Xenos and Bennett, (2007) argued that the internet, if used correctly, can create a space where young adults consume their political information.

#### Summary

The Internet is an emerging space where citizens can come together and discuss civic issues (Dahlgren, 2005). This is one of the new roles that the Internet is playing in the political socialization of individuals (Dahlgren, 2005; Vergeer & Hermans, 2008), where new Internet communication technologies have attracted more young adults into the political discussion (Metcalf, Blanchard, McCarthy, & Burns, 2008). As Coleman (2002) suggested, the Internet bridges the gap between the people and the governing bodies. SNSs, in effect, are a form of new media which have attracted large populations of young adults (Cohen, 2008). Tewksbury (2006) suggested that individuals are becoming dependent on the internet for political information and Kim and Kim (2007) indicated a positive relationship between young adults' Internet use and their political interest and knowledge. Thus the literature shows a positive relationship between young adults' dependency on new media, such as SNS, and their political engagement.

Finally, the literature also suggested that young adults are not interested in traditional forms of media (Grabowski, 2008). Urista, Dong and Day (2007) said that SNSs are a form of new media that is attracting young adults because it provides instant gratification. In addition, Park's (2002) research shows that young adults are more interested in mediums that provides more visual and stimulating messages that are customizable. Thus the literature suggests that young adults may actively seek political information from SNSs because SNSs provide a space where they can identify with other individuals who share their same beliefs and world view (Grabowski, 2008) and because SNSs provide a space where their voice can be heard (Caprini, 2000). Thus the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1: Social networking sites dependency leads to political participation.

In addition, the study also examines the relationship between political participation and political knowledge, political interests and political talk. Therefore, the following research question is proposed.

Research question: To what extent, political participation is affected by political interest and political knowledge?

## Method

### Sample

A convenience sample of undergraduate students (N = 355) was obtained from a small private university and public junior college located in the western United States. The age of participants ranged from 17 to years 58 of age, 87.7% ranging in the age of 18-27 years of age. The mean age of participants in the study was 22.72 years. There were 161 (46%) male participants and 188 (53%) female participants. Approximately, 120 (30%) of the participants defined themselves as Caucasian, 61 (17%) Asian, 39 (11%) African American, 62 (17%) Hispanic, 71 (20%) others and two participants identified themselves as Native American.

### Data Collection

The study utilized a self-administered questionnaire during regularly scheduled class session. The questionnaire consists of both Likert-like scale questions used to measure individuals' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors as well as demographic questions.

The questionnaire developed for the study was based on the literature. Scales that had high reliability ratings were used to measure the variables in eight different sections. The first four sections when combined make up the measurement of political engagement: political participation, political interest, political talk, and political talk. The other sections make up SNS usage, motivations for using SNSs, and demographic information.

### Measurement of Variables

Political participation scale consists of five-item section measuring how individuals will participate in the next election. This scale was adapted from Kim and Kim (2007) and each of the expected behavior was measured using a Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). An example of a question for political participation "I will necessarily vote for the general election." The sample for this group reported an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.76.

### Political Interest Scale

Political interest scale is comprised of four-items measuring how interested individuals where in their local and national politics. The scale employed a Likert scale ranging from one (not interested) to four (very interested). This scale was adapted from Kim and Kim (2007). An example of a question for political interest is "How interested are you in national politics and national affairs?" The reliability of this scale was 0.69.

### Political Talk Scale

Political talk scale consists of three-item section measuring how individuals discuss political issues with their (a) family members, (b) friends, (c) teachers. This was adapted from Kim and Kim (2007) and each item is measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (everyday) to 5 (never). An example of a question asked to determine how individuals' politically talk was, "How often do you talk about political issue with your friends?" The reliability of this scale was 0.71.

### Political Knowledge Scale

Political knowledge scale is based on Carpini and Keeter's (1993) conceptualization of political knowledge, and adapted from Kim and Kim (2007). This section utilized five items addressing individuals' political knowledge about national issues. An example of questions includes "Barrack Obama was the Democratic candidate for the last presidential election?" "The questions were true or false question. The reliability of this scale was 0.66.

### Social Networking Sites Dependency Scale

Motivations for using Social Networking Sites Scale consists 9 items measuring individuals’ social networking site dependency including “I depend on Social Networking Sites for a better understanding of political system,” “I depend on Social Networking Sites for a better understanding of political issues,” and “I depend on Social Networking Sites for a better understanding of politicians.b” The reliability of this scale was 0.97.

Results

The characteristics of the data in reference to social network site dependency for political information, political knowledge, political interest, and political participation are showed in Table 1. The table helps understand the results and will assist in explaining the value of each key variables.

Table 1  
Descriptive Analysis

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Range
Social Network Sites Dependency	351	2.01	0.94	3
Political Knowledge	347	0.77	0.23	.5
Political Interest	352	2.66	0.67	2.5
Political Participation	351	3.32	0.85	3

Table 1 shows that participants mean scores of 2.01 (SD = 0.94) meaning that they have a low level of dependency on social networking sites for political information. However, individuals show a mean score of .77 (SD = 0.23) indicating a higher than average levels of political knowledge. A mean score 2.66 (SD= .67) shows a slightly higher than average level for political interest. Finally, results show a score 3.32 (SD = .85) also indicating higher than average levels of political participation.

The correlation analysis (Table 2), show that two of the variables are significantly correlated with social network sites dependency for political information at the P < .05 level or greater. Social network sites dependency is positively correlated with political interest (r = .11, p < .05), and political participation (r = .27, p < .01). Political participation is also positively correlated with political talk (r = .17, p< .05), and political interest (r = .27, p < .01). This analysis provides some basic understanding of the relationship between the key variables and helps provide a base line for hypothesis testing.

Table 2  
Correlation Analysis

Variables	SNSD	PK	PT	PI	PP
Social Network Sites Dependency					
Political Knowledge	.14*				
Political Talk	.01	.17*			

Political Interest	.11*	.27**	.25**		
Political Participation	.27**	.21**	.26**	.47**	

\*\*Correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*Correlation is statistically significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

### Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis one stated, “Social networking sites dependency leads to political participation.” Stepwise regression analysis shows that the more an individual depends on social networking sites (including MySpace and Facebook) for information and understanding, the more likely that the individual intends to get involved in political participation (Beta = .25;  $p < .01$ ). As a result, the hypothesis 1 has been supported by the data.

### Research question

The study proposed the following research question: “To what extent, political participation is affected by political interest, political knowledge and political talk?” Based on the regression analyses, the study shows that political interests, political knowledge and political talk each has the predicting power on political participation. That means, the more you have political interest, political knowledge and political talk, the more likely you have political participation (Please see Table 3 for details).

Table 3

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting “Political Participation”

Variables	B	SE	T	Beta
SNS dependency	.22	.04	5.38	.25**
Political interests	.48	.06	7.59	.37**
Political talks	.13	.05	2.71	.13*
Political knowledge	.47	.18	2.60	.13*

\*\* $p < .001$ ; \* $p < .01$

### Discussion

This study revealed several interesting findings in regard to the relationship between SNS dependency and political engagement. Specifically, results indicated a positive relationship between SNS dependency and political interest and political participation. Unfortunately, this research did not find a significant correlation between SNS dependency and political knowledge. This section will discuss the positive relationships between SNS and political interest and political participation. Then discuss the relationship between SNS dependency and political knowledge.

The first major finding was the positive correlation between SNS dependency and political interest. This demonstrated that individuals who depended on social networking sites for political information showed higher than average political interest. This is interesting because studies have shown that young adults have lower than average political interest (Carpini, 2000; Kim & Kim, 2007). Thus, young adults may be turning the SNSs to consume political information and in turn are increasing their political interest. Political interest in this study refers to how interested young adults were in both political and national issues. Therefore, SNSs provide a new medium for young adults to seek political information which in turn may foster political interest in young adults.

The second major finding was the positive relationship between SNS dependency and political participation. Results suggest that the more young adults seek political information on

SNS, the more they will politically participate. Respondents in the study reported slightly above average levels of political participation, indicating that they were, overall, marginally willing to politically participate. Meaning, individuals were slightly above a neutral disposition when asked if they were going to vote or work at a voting place during the next election. Nevertheless, SNS provide a space for young adults to discuss issues and increases the possibility for young adults to participate in the political process (Cohen, 2008).

This study revealed no significant correlation between SNS dependency and political knowledge. The results suggest that individuals do not depend on SNS to seek information and build political knowledge. The more individuals seek information from SNSs, the more they may show greater levels of political interest and participation, but their seeking of information on SNS will not display higher levels of political knowledge. These findings are contrary to Kim and Kim's (2007) research which showed a slight positive increase between Internet dependency for political information and political knowledge.

This study found through a correlation analysis that political engagement is influenced by an individual dependency of SNSs for political information. This information is important because it may help scholars and practitioners find ways to foster greater levels of political engagement in young adults. This is one step towards understanding how young adults consume political information in a world where new internet technologies are flourishing (Vergeer & Hermans, 2008; Metcalf, Blanchard, McCarthy, & Burns, 2008).

#### *Implications of Study*

This study uncovers a profusion of potential benefits of SNS and young adults' access to political information. The overall relationship between individuals' use of SNSs for political information may in part be due to a multitude of new internet technological features on SNSs like Facebook and MySpace (Acar, 2008). These features enable individuals to personalize their space on the internet so that they can portray an extension of their identity (Acar, 2008; Klotz, 2008), thus allowing young adults to create an area where they can feel comfortable with communicating with others and attracting more participation.

Ultimately, SNSs are becoming the new medium where young adults gather to indulge in information. Although participants in this study show low levels of using SNSs to seek political information, former studies suggest that this trend may be changing (Kruat, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Heneson, & Crawford, 2002; Kim & Kim, 2008). More importantly, individuals in this study who actually seek information on SNSs have high levels of political participation and interest. Although this study does not analyze individuals' familiarity with SNSs, an explanation as to why dependency rates are low is because individuals are still becoming familiar with SNSs. Hargattai (2008) suggest that individuals' low familiarity with Facebook was due in part because Facebook was exclusive to universities when it was initially founded. Thus, lack of familiarity may explain why individuals are not used to using SNSs to seek political information.

Another important implication is how SNSs increase political engagement through the deliberative process. SNSs function to give individuals an equal voice among their peer groups. This versatility allows individuals to create personalized messages to selected audiences while at the same time allowing users to target massive audiences (Dahlgren, 2005). Dahlgren (2005) argues the internet's capability to provide individuals with a space of unregulated discussion, where they can represent themselves and interact with others, fosters political socialization. This may help explain why individuals who seek political information on the internet have high levels of political interest and participation. Since information is spread on SNSs through individual users, those messages can function as political discussion (Dahlgren, 2005; Cohen, 2008). When

an SNS user mentions the message to a friend or writes a response to a political message, it creates a political sphere because those messages and responses are automatically shared with the user's friends and followers.

This study indicates that young adults seek information from non traditional avenues such as SNS, opening the door to a new area of study. Since SNSs have large number of subscribers, they have become an ideal place for both practitioners and scholars to study the affects of political information on SNSs and individual behavior and attitudes. This study illustrates how political engagement may be fostered on SNSs, strengthening Cohen's (2008) claim that we should reinvasion SNSs as a space to practice democracy and discuss civic issues.

### Limitations of the Study

One of the major limitations of this study was the lack of previous literature predicting SNS usage (Hatgattai, 2008). Since the internet is relatively new, understanding how the internet affects an individual is challenging. As Hatgattai points out, "Because individual goals and activities on SNSs are extremely varied, investigating their usage through traditional survey instruments poses several new and distinct challenges" (p 278-279). Individual's usage may be varied; however, as more quantitative data is collected on this issue, we can take a closer step towards generating work that predicts SNS usage.

Another limitation of this study was the convenience sampling used to collect data. This suspends any benefits that would have been achieved by random sampling. Although data was collected at a university and a junior college, 60% of participants were between the ages of 18 to 21. If there had been a greater portion of older individuals, the results may have been different. In addition the population did not have an equal representation of ethnicity. There were more Caucasians (33.8%) than any other ethnicity. Since one third of the study was represented by one ethnicity, more diversity may have yielded different results.

### Suggestions for Future Research

More empirical research is needed on the uses of SNS for political information. Researchers should focus on the different type of motives behind individuals' consumption of political information on SNS, which may help explain what type of features that SNSs offer that are most likely to foster political information consumption. Furthermore, more sophisticated statistical analyses should be employed between SNS dependency and political engagement variables. A regression analysis, for example, would provide a more intricate explanation of the relationship between the variables, ultimately offering deeper understand between SNS dependency and political knowledge, political interest, and political participation.

Researchers should also look into the different types of political information on SNS. A categorization of political information SNS may open up a more detailed explanation of the relationship between political engagement variable and SNS dependency for political information. This can be achieved through an exploratory content analysis which can be used to count and categorize political information on SNS. Such a content analysis could also review the factual nature of some of the political rhetoric on SNS, which could help explore if an abundance of misinformation in the discourse could explain why an increase in political participation does not result in an increase in political knowledge.

### Conclusion

This study adds to the body of literature on SNSs and political engagement. This study focused on political engagement through three variables – political knowledge, political interest, and political participation – in relation to individual's dependency on SNSs for political information. Findings show that SNS dependency is ositively correlated to both political interest

and political participation, though there was no significant relationship between political knowledge and SNS dependency for political information. These results indicate political engagement can be fostered online and SNSs may be the new frontier for political discussion. This is important for scholars and practitioners who are interested in political engagement in young adults because studying SNSs may help explain how young adults consume political information. In order to increase political participation in young adults, we must first understand how they consume political information and study spaces where they discuss political information with one another.

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