

THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF INTEREST-DRIVEN ONLINE ACTIVITIES AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THESE OPPORTUNITIES

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black youth project™



The Civic and Political Significance of Interest-Driven Online Activities and The Distribution of These Opportunities

We have been investigating ways that nonpolitical interest-driven participation can foster civic and political life among youth and young adults.

Many youth and young adults are engaged in interest-driven online participatory cultures (see Jenkins et al. 2007; Ito et al. 2009). Rather than passively consuming content circulated online, participants produce online materials, generate ideas, provide feedback to one another, and participate in online communities. Such online activities enable participants to pursue interests in hobbies, popular culture, new technology, games, and sports (Ito et al. 2009). For example, many youth and young adults create and share personal profiles through social networking sites or fan communities. Free software makes it easier than ever for them to practice the art of video production, share their creations with others over the Web, and receive feedback from other community members.

Some scholars believe that these forms of participation will improve their technical and communication skills. In addition, Jenkins and colleagues (2007) argue that these activities have supported the development of a participatory culture that provides youth with multiple opportunities to develop civically relevant skills, an understanding

of norms of community membership, and an appreciation of the possibilities and rewards of collective undertakings. These opportunities in turn may foster a range of civic and political outcomes. Furthermore, interest-driven online participation may well expand or deepen the social networks of youth and young adults—leading them to learn about and be recruited into civic and political life (Middaugh, Kahne, and Evans 2008). To assess such possibilities quantitatively, we examined data from two panel surveys: the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey ($n = 1,938$; $n = 586$ for ages 18–35) and the California Civic Survey ($n = 435$). We assessed whether nonpolitical interest-driven online participation promoted a range of civic and political outcomes even when one controls for prior levels of civic and political activity, other forms of engagement online, and a range of demographic and family characteristics. Specifically, we assessed how often youth and young adults ages 18–35 took part in the following online activities: (a) used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion, or Web site (b) went online to participate in a special interest community, such as a fan



site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sport, or special interest

(c) gave someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online

(d) was a leader in an online community

We used their responses to construct an overall measure of their level of interest-driven online participation. We also asked about their participation in various aspects of civic and political life. We found that youth who engaged in interest-driven online activity increased (1) their involvement in civic activities like community problem solving and volunteerism and (2) their frequency of political action and expression (expressing a view at a community forum, working to change a law at the national or local level, and/or protesting). We did not find that these activities influenced the likelihood that they would vote (see Kahne, Lee, and Freezell 2010).

DISTRIBUTION OF INTEREST-DRIVEN PARTICIPATION

Given the impact of nonpolitical interest-driven participation on civic and political engagement, it makes sense to examine the distribution of interest-driven practices among varied demographic categories, as this distribution may impact the quantity

and equality of civic and political voice. The importance of examining this distribution is heightened by prior research, which demonstrates that those from demographic groups with the least political voice often also have the fewest of civically and politically oriented opportunities online that foster civic and political participation (Smith et al. 2009).

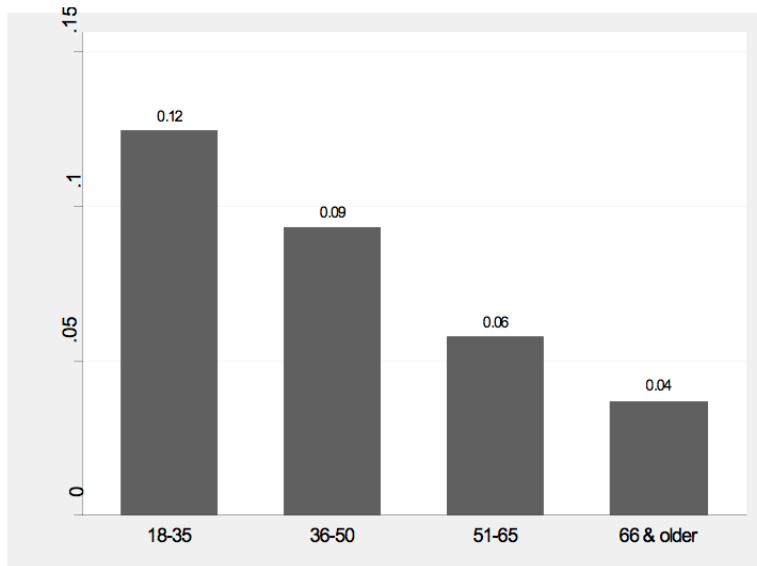
Our findings regarding the distribution of these activities draw on the Election 2008 and Beyond Survey. The data on interest-driven participation was collected in the fall of 2009. This survey is well suited for examination of the distribution of interest-driven activities, as it is nationally representative and contains an oversample of blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. We found the following:

- 11.5 percent of those surveyed have used the Internet to organize online groups and discussions
- 20.6 percent have participated in special-interest communities online
- 23.8 percent have given others their feedback online
- 5.4 percent either strongly or somewhat agreed that they had been an online community leader

Table 1. Participants in Nonpolitical Interest-Driven Online Activities

Items	Age group, %		
	18–35	36–50	51–65
Used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion or Web site	20.9	11.9	5.5
Gone online to participate in a special interest community, such as a fan site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sport, or special interest	31.0	22.2	14.4
Given someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online	33.1	25.5	17.9
I have been a leader in an online community, "agree" & "strongly agree"	8.1	5.5	3.3

Figure 1. Average Scores on the Interest-Driven Online Participation Scale



GENERATIONAL DISTRIBUTION

Because young adults are often thought to be more engaged with new media than other generations, we analyzed rates of participation among four age groups. As shown in table 1, online interest-driven activities are more common among young adults than among their elders. Young people ages 18–35 participate most frequently in all four interest-driven activities.

Figure 1 displays the average scores on

this index broken down by age group. Young people ages 18–35 scored 0.12 on a 0-to-1 scale of interest-driven participation, followed by the 36–50 age group (0.09) and the 51–65 group (.06). The oldest age group (66 & older) scored only 0.04 on this scale. A statistical test, which compares the respondents ages 18–35 and those 36 and older in their respective average scores on this scale, indicates the difference is statistically significant. Thus, the younger generation embraces interest-driven online activities more actively than the older generations.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

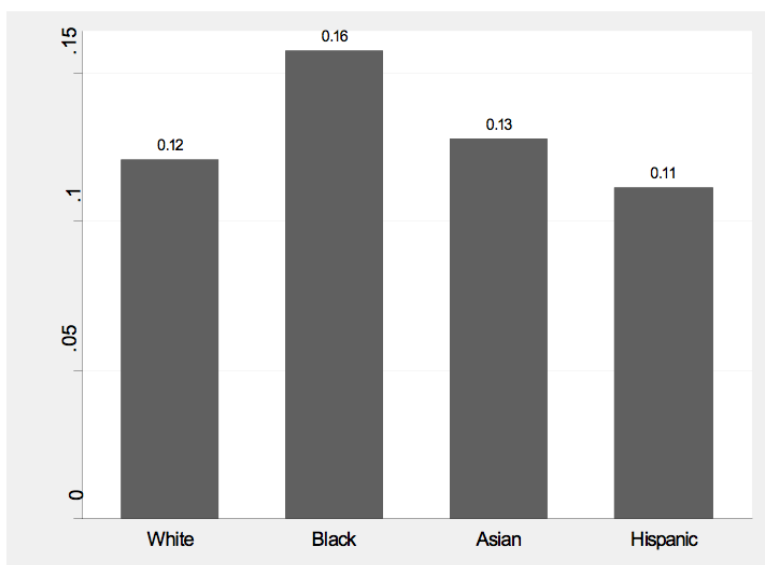
To further look at how the level of engagement in online interest-driven participation is different depending on racial or ethnic identification within the United States, we focus only on those ages 18–35, since this group showed the highest level of interest-driven participation.



Table 2. Participants in Nonpolitical Interest-Driven Online Activities (Ages 18–35)

Items	Racial/ethnic group, %			
	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic
Used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion or Web site	22.1	21.6	30.6	14.5
Gone online to participate in a special interest community, such as a fan site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sport, or special interest	30.5	37.0	35.2	27.0
Given someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online	34.2	38.9	33.8	25.2
I have been a leader in an online community, "agree" & "strongly agree"	6.8	9.6	7.1	11.4

Figure 2. Average Scores on the Interest-Driven Online Participation Scale (Ages 18–35)



Overall, black youth are the most active participants in these types of online activities. They reported the highest levels of engagement in two out of the four activities:

- 37.0 percent have participated in special-interest communities online
- 38.9 percent have given feedback

Young people who identify as Asian are particularly active in organizing online groups and discussions (30.6 percent). In general, Hispanic youth reported lowest levels of interest-driven online

activities, but they reported the highest level of community leadership (11.4 percent). However, this was the only item where the overall difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 2 displays average scores for interest-driven participation for each racial/ethnic group on a 0-to-1 scale. Again, black youth scored the highest on the scale (0.16), followed by Asians (0.13) and whites (0.12). Hispanic youth reported the lowest score (0.11).

Our statistical test indicates that the differences across the four racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant. In other words, overall youth engagement with interest-driven activities is not equal across racial and ethnic groups. In particular, the subsequent comparisons of each pair of racial groups further suggest that black and Hispanic youth are statistically different in their levels of interest-driven participation.

Table 3. Participants in Nonpolitical Interest-Driven Online Activities (Ages 18–35)

Items	Gender, %	
	Male	Female
Used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion or Web site	23.8	18.3
Gone online to participate in a special interest community, such as a fan site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sport, or special interest	32.4	29.8
Given someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online	34.1	32.3
I have been a leader in an online community, "agree" & "strongly agree"	9.6	6.8

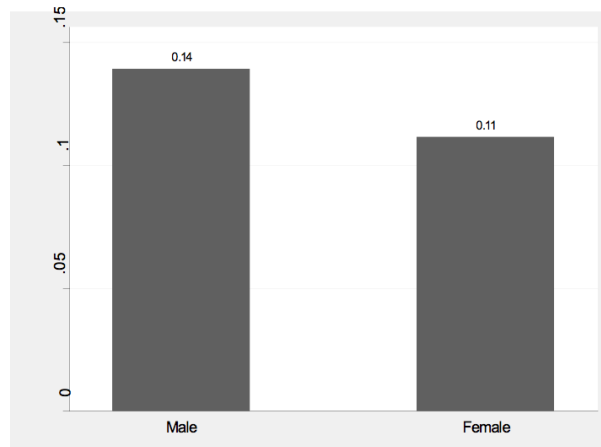
GENDER DISTRIBUTION

Finally, as shown in table 3, men are more active participants than women for all four activities. Likewise, on the standardized scale of 0 to 1 that summarizes all four interest-driven activities, male youth (0.14) scored higher than female (0.11) (see figure 3). However, neither the overall gender difference nor the differences we found for individual items were statistically significant.

SUMMARY

In a separate study (Kahne, Lee, and Freezell 2010), summarized here, we examined the hypothesis that nonpolitical interest-driven online activities can promote valued civic and political outcomes among youth and young adults. We found that interest-driven online opportunities promoted both involvement in civic activities like community problem solving and volunteerism and more frequent political action and expression (expressing a view at a community forum, working to change a law at the national or local level, and/or protesting). We

Figure 3. Average Scores on the Interest-Driven Online Participation Scale (Ages 18–29)



then examined how often members of differing demographic groups took part in these kinds of interest-driven activities. We found that those ages 18–35 did so more than older cohorts and that members of differing racial and ethnic groups also had varying rates of participation, depending on the particular form of activity. Males between 18 and 35 had more of these experiences than females of similar age, but the differences were not statistically significant.

For those concerned with the fostering of civic and political engagement among youth and young adults, these findings highlight the importance of attending to nonpolitical interest-driven forms of participation with digital media. In addition, they indicate that the distribution of these opportunities may not follow traditional patterns. Indeed, black youth appear to be more likely than their peers to have several of these potentially valuable opportunities. In this respect, online participation may not follow patterns that dominate in so many other societal contexts.



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