

Kids These Days: Examining Differences in Political Uses and Gratifications, Internet Political Participation, Political Information Efficacy, and Cynicism on the Basis of Age

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Abstract

Using a telephone survey of randomly selected voters from the general population, the authors sought to understand the interrelatedness of the use of the Internet as a political information source with perception of political participation, political information efficacy, and cynicism. Guided by the uses and gratifications theory and employing the Political Media Gratifications Scale, the authors examine these constructs in terms of emergent generational differences. Findings indicate that digital natives differ from their older voting counterparts, and the researchers conclude more research must investigate further to accurately determine meaning.

Keywords

uses and gratifications, political cynicism, political information efficacy, Internet political participation, political communication

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With each election cycle, more people have been found to turn to the Internet for political information. Indeed, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (hereafter Pew; 2008) recently reported that more than twice as many people—now nearly a quarter of all Americans online (24%)—are using the Internet as an information source as those who did in the 2004 election. With this increase, there has been a media shift from reliance on newspapers and television to an adoption of the Internet as a political source (Pew, 2008). Given the more two-way, conversational, and social capabilities of the Internet, it is apparent that online communication is more than a one-way broadcast of political information and is much more interactive. As a result, some might assume that many people could become more engaged in the political process (now socialized online rather than face to face); yet it could also be argued that people might want to avoid the Internet and its potential exposure to the “armchair analyst” political discourse that advances in personal publishing have fostered (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Given these options, it seems only fitting that a modern study of the use or possible avoidance of the Internet as a political source would touch on concepts of cynicism (which might be felt by those who avoid the Internet) or political information efficacy (which might be felt by those who approach the Internet).

Voters of all ages acquire political information from traditional advertising, news outlets, events, and increasingly from Internet sources (Pew, 2008). Such acquired information plays an integral role in citizens’ development of trust or mistrust in political leaders, in determination of how much or how little citizens believe they can make a difference, and in citizens’ decision making regarding their personal participation in political processes and the voting decisions they make. It is widely known and accepted that the youngest citizens are the most Internet-literate generation (Pew, 2008). More needs to be known, however, about how their use of the Internet influences their sense of personal political efficacy and their levels of political cynicism.

Youngest citizens are generally regarded as the least knowledgeable and least interested in public affairs and politics of all age groups (Breakthrough Thinking, 2006; Rahn & Transue, 1998); they are known to vote and register with less frequency (Osegueda, 2004) and are often more cynical than their older counterparts (Delli Carpini, 2000). In spite of efforts to politically engage this age demographic (particularly noteworthy in the recent presidential campaign), more than 50% of eligible young people actually voted in 2008 (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; NonprofitVOTE, 2008).

This study seeks to partially fill this void. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between political web use and both political information efficacy (empowerment) and political cynicism. Employing the uses and gratifications theory and the Political Media Gratifications Scale, this study examines how use of specific political Internet tools relates to one’s approach or avoidance of political information on the web for several age groupings.

Uses and Gratifications

As one of the longer lasting and more developed theories in communication, uses and gratifications plays an important role in the field, as it outlines motivations for

information acquisition via media. Although the term *uses and gratifications* has been more recently applied to entertainment media, the theory's origin is a history of investigating political information-seeking motivations (Blumler & McQuail, 1969; McLeod & Becker, 1974). Blumler and McQuail (1969) created the Political Media Gratifications Scale, containing eight items to measure reasons to watch political broadcasts and nine items to measure the reasons people avoid such broadcasts. This simple approach of examining why one would adopt an information source (approach) or why one might shun another (avoid) is particularly helpful when examining a medium with such clear advantages and disadvantages regarding appropriateness as a political information source.

In the original studies, the gratifications sought from watching political broadcasts clustered into three constructs: political reasons, such as reinforcement or vote guidance; surveillance for keeping up with the issues; and excitement, such as seeing which party would win (Blumler & McQuail, 1969; Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). These collectively became known as "approaches" to political communication, among other variables. This research also uncovered countervailing tendencies that have become "avoidances," or reasons one might avoid political information on certain media (McLeod & Becker, 1974; Rubin et al., 1994).

During the 1972 presidential election, McLeod and Becker (1974) reported surveillance as the dominant gratification for seeking political information. Surveillance remains high among political information-seeking motivations (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). In spite of this, there are clearly other motivations for approaching or avoiding political communication that researchers continue to explore.

Some political effects researchers assert that groups most able to be influenced are those that have the highest degree of apathy. Indeed, Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) note a high degree of inattention during the 1940 presidential election, and this trend continues today (Wells, 2003). However, when exposed to campaign events (such as political rallies) voters can become more interested in the election and more knowledgeable about the campaign (Mulder, 1978). Sanders and Kaid (1977) found most people attend a political rally to find out what a candidate is "really like" or to help them decide what the candidate would do if elected.

In the past two decades, research regarding online political information seeking has advanced. Specifically, Garramone, Harris, and Anderson (1986) found surveillance to be the key motivation for using computer bulletin board systems. Kaye and Johnson (2002) later examined gratifications for seeking political information online and found the primary motivations to be guidance, information seeking and surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. They also linked media use to political attitudes and behaviors. Kaye and Johnson reported that information seeking and surveillance are associated with higher interest in politics.

Political Cynicism

Political cynicism is often studied, as it is influenced by mediated messages, particularly in advertising and news reports. Extending the standardized polling operational

definition beyond lack of “trust in government,” cynicism has been defined in communication literature as a “sense of powerlessness” (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman 1998) and as “a feeling that government in general and political leaders in particular do not care about the public’s opinions and are not acting in the best interest of the people” (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000).

Historically, political cynicism has been studied primarily as an outcome of either exposure to political advertising, especially negative attack ads, or consumption of high quantities of news (or a combination of these). Several studies have documented increased levels of cynicism among potential voters as a result of negative political ads (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Kaid et al., 2000; Rahn & Hirshorn, 1999). They advance that voters get “fed up with” animosity and “mudslinging” and abandon the system, withdrawing their involvement and ultimately their voting participation. Such findings are not entirely consistent, however. Other studies have found that cynicism is a relatively enduring, stable construct that is little influenced by advertising and news messages (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2004; Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Yun, & LeGrange, 2007; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin 2002). Some positive impact of negative messages is also demonstrated.

Cynicism may also be related to high amounts of television viewing (Putnam, 1995) filtering through both content and presentation of news. From the video malaise hypothesis (Robinson, 1976), several studies have shown how news actually creates a distance between media and potential voters (Hart, 1994; Patterson, 1993). How media news organizations frame campaign coverage has also been found to increase cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Their findings suggest that when news coverage focuses on the election “game,” and candidate strategies, rather than on substantive issues, voters become more cynical. As with political advertising’s role in creating cynicism, however, there is a differing perspective on news as well. At least one researcher suggests that the sometimes argumentative, critical relationship between the public and the news media is positive in that challenges contribute to knowledge and enhance political participation (Norris, 2000). Other studies counter the Cappella and Jamieson (1997) findings with results that suggest that the “ad watch” (where newscasters examine the veracity of claims made in campaign ads) and other concentrations by news media on electoral strategies (such as the mandated “stand by your ad” provision) provide useful information to voters, particularly, those who are less involved overall in politics and more uncertain about what to believe (Kim, Tinkham, & Weaver Lariscy, 2007; Tinkham, Weaver Lariscy, Sung, & Hall, 2002; Weaver Lariscy & Tinkham, 1999b).

Spiral of cynicism is the term used to describe the destructive, spiraling effect of negativity in campaign information that is accused of fueling cynicism and distrust that in turn lead to erosion of civic engagement and political participation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hibbing & Theiss-Moore, 1995). Although conducted outside the United States and outside the context of an election, findings from one recent study indicate that the relationship between news media and political cynicism is contingent on many factors and that cynicism has a negligible impact on citizen participation (de Vreese, 2005). This study also found that persons higher in efficacy were less

cynical than persons low in efficacy and that high political sophistication contributes to heightened cynicism. This suggests that cynicism is not always a “bad” thing, that it may in fact be an indication of “an interested and critical citizenry” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 294). This highly heuristic suggestion is one that motivates examination in this study.

Political Information Efficacy

Another internal voting deterrent scholars have reported among the electorate is caused by the lack of political information efficacy. The term *political information efficacy* refers to the feeling that one has enough information about politics to make a difference. Theoretically, political information efficacy posits that exposure to specific types of political information leads to different levels of information processing (Kaid et al., 2007). Information source and medium, then, play a key role in determining one’s feeling of efficaciousness. For example, Pew found that Internet users were among a group of noticeably more informed voters (Kaid, McKinney, et al., 2007). Although a hotly debated topic in political communication research (see Kaid, McKinney, et al., 2007), campaign sources, such as advertisements and debates, have also been found to increase political information efficacy (Kaid, Landreville, Postelnicu, & Martin, 2005).

Young people, especially, have been plagued by the negative effects of political information efficacy (Kaid, McKinney, et al., 2007), as Murphy (2000) reported when young voters replied that they avoided casting a ballot because they did not feel that they had “enough time or information” to make an informed decision. Kaid and colleagues continued to examine these phenomena and found further support that low levels of political information efficacy contribute significantly to young people’s not voting (Kaid et al., 2000; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2004). Later research revealed ways to reduce the negative impact of low political information efficacy in that young voters exposed to campaign-produced information (e.g., debates, ads) showed increased levels of political information efficacy (Kaid et al., 2005). Rahn and Hirshorn (1999) found that young people with relatively high levels of political efficacy feel stimulated and motivated as a result of negative ads; other studies document that such ads are often judged as entertaining, informative, and useful in making voting decisions (Weaver Lariscy & Tinkham, 1999a). Along these lines, men display higher levels of political information efficacy than women after viewing candidate materials (Kaid, Postelnicu, et al., 2007). Although political information efficacy increased, cynicism among participants in that experiment did not change (Kaid, Postelnicu, et al., 2007), suggesting that political information efficacy and cynicism operate independently.

Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed, this study is guided by two overarching research questions:

Research Question 1: How are approaching and avoiding the Internet for political information, Internet political participation, political information efficacy, and political cynicism related? How do these vary on the basis of age?

Research Question 2: What impact does approach or avoidance of political information on the Internet and Internet political participation have on political information efficacy and cynicism? How do these Internet motivations and behaviors interact to produce political information efficacy and political cynicism?

Method

A randomly selected sample of general population voters ages 18 or older in Georgia yielded 574 completed telephone interviews, conducted within 2 weeks of the 2008 election, representing a 40.1% response rate. Human participants procedures were followed and interviews were conducted by trained interviewers at a large survey research center. Data were electronically recorded and coded for analysis. After the elimination of persons who would not report their age and those who were screened from the sample because of no Internet access, the usable sample size was 350.

Instrument

There were three main measurements employed in this survey: a scale of political uses and avoidance, measuring political uses and gratifications; a political cynicism scale; and a political information efficacy scale. Additionally, respondents were asked to indicate the degree of political participation they perceived a series of named activities to be. Finally, demographic information was obtained.

The political media approach and avoidance scales were used in conjunction with one another to measure why someone uses a particular medium for political content and why one would avoid political content. Note that the political uses and gratifications scales, which measure approach and avoidance, are different than the standard scales for uses and gratifications, which typically factor into motivations of surveillance, diversion, social utility, and so on. Here, we focused on approach and avoidance motives toward the Internet as a political communication source. As is typical of these scales (Perse, 1994), each was indexed. All political approach items together yielded a Cronbach's interitem correlation coefficient alpha score of .788, and the alpha of the avoidance items was .791.

Some political cynicism questions on the survey were adapted from prior scales used in National Election Studies (Rosenstone et al., 1997), and the remainder were developed and used in the three previous presidential campaigns to measure levels of political cynicism (Kaid et al., 2000). The alpha for this index was .601. This alpha score is consistent with other uses of this scale, especially when measured in a pretest.

The three-item information efficacy index indicated to what extent the respondent feels he or she knows about politics. This index was reliable for those surveyed (Cronbach's $\alpha = .716$).

To measure the extent to which an activity represented *very little* or *a great deal* of political participation, 27 specific political activities were listed and rated on a 1-to-5 scale. Activities included traditional ones, such as attending a political rally, and contemporary Internet ones, such as “joining a political Facebook group.” All items were factor analyzed and one factor emerged containing high loadings for every Internet activity, nine total (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .878$).

Data Analysis

Scores were standardized, correlated, and subjected to a one-way MANOVA across age groups. Following this, a three-way MANCOVA was performed in which age in years served as a covariate. The three independent variables in this analysis were approach to the Internet for political information, avoidance of the Internet for political information, and Internet political participation. The dependent variables consisted of political information efficacy and political cynicism indices.

Results

This random-sample telephone survey was conducted on the general population in an effort to move beyond research solely focused on college students. As such, this sampling frame allows a more generalizable picture of “American voters” and the ability to make generational comparisons. The average age of respondents was 51 years old ($SD = 16$ years). These respondents ranged in age from 18 to 93 years old. Two thirds of the respondents were female (64.3%), with the remaining being male (35.7%). Gender was determined by the survey research center worker facilitating the survey on the basis of the respondent’s voice.

With regard to the respondents’ political beliefs and participation, an overwhelming majority of respondents were registered to vote (either in the state of the survey or another state; 94.9%), and only one in three were not (3.7%) registered to vote. This group tended to “early vote,” or vote absentee as it has been historically called (60.8%), and only a third voted on Election Day (33.3%). Support for political party was split rather equally among Democrat (31.5%), Republican (26.8%), those who do not align with a party (26.8%), and others. Although the political party identification formed into nearly equal groups, this sample cast more votes for the Republican candidate, senator John McCain (45.8%), than for the Democratic candidate, then-senator Barack Obama (37.3%).

We began our analyses with a series of explorations into the relationships between persons’ motivations for using or avoiding the Internet for political information. We were particularly interested in the relatively new notion of how voters of different ages view Internet activities as political participation. The first research exploratory area considers how these variables interrelate and how they are related to age.

As for the relationship between age and the five relevant scales related to Internet political activities (Internet approach, Internet avoidance, political cynicism, political

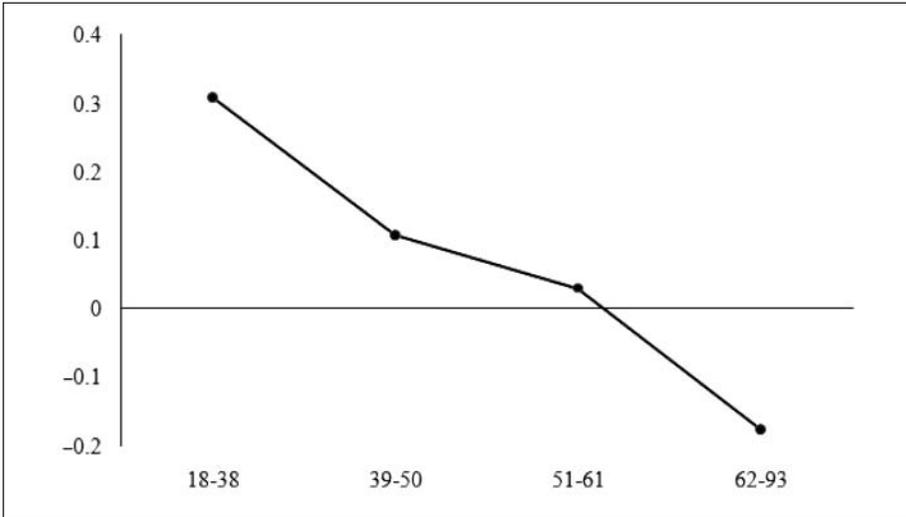


Figure 1. Standardized means of Internet political participation across four age cohorts

information efficacy, Internet political participation), bivariate correlations reveal that age is weakly but significantly and positively related to political information efficacy ($r^{\circ} = .12, p^{\circ} \leq .05$) and to political cynicism ($r^{\circ} = .10, p^{\circ} \leq .05$) and significantly and negatively related to Internet approach motivation ($r^{\circ} = -.03, p^{\circ} \leq .05$) and Internet political participation ($r^{\circ} = -.28, p^{\circ} \leq .01$). No significant correlation was observed with Internet avoidance motivation.

To examine these scales at the multivariate level, a one-way MANOVA was conducted with all five scales playing the role of dependent variate considered as a function of four age quartiles with ages ranging from 18 to 93 years.

Using the five standardized scores as dependent variables, this MANOVA produced a significant multivariate effect ($p^{\circ} < .05$). The overall effect, however, was accounted for primarily by the Internet political participation score ($p^{\circ} < .05$). Figure 1 portrays a negative relationship between age and perception of the Internet as a highly participatory political medium. Note that only the oldest age group exhibited a standardized score below the mean on this variable, whereas the youngest age cohort showed a standardized score well above the mean.

Although age was rather weakly predictive of the five scale scores composing the variate, its role was significant enough to justify statistically controlling for age in the next analysis.

The second broad research question considers the impact of motivations for seeking or avoiding Internet political media as well as perceptions of Internet political activities as a form of political participation on the important constructs of political information efficacy and political cynicism. Table 1 as well as Figures 2 and 3 summarize the

Table 1. Tests of Between-Subjects Main and Interaction Effects: Internet Political Participation (IPP) and Motivations as Predictors of Political Efficacy and Cynicism

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Type III SS	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	PIE index	19.012 ^a	8	2.377	2.658	.008**
	CYN index	38.643 ^b	8	4.830	5.638	.000**
Age in years (covariate)	PIE index	7.557	1	7.557	8.452	.004**
	CYN index	.477	1	.477	.557	.456
IPP index	PIE index	2.272	1	2.272	2.541	.112
	CYN index	.622	1	.622	.726	.395
Internet approach	PIE index	4.060	1	4.060	4.541	.034*
	CYN index	.269	1	.269	.314	.576
Internet avoidance	PIE index	1.810	1	1.810	2.025	.156
	CYN index	19.459	1	19.459	19.459	.000**
IPP × Approach	PIE index	.972	1	.972	.972	.298
	CYN index	.025	1	.025	.025	.866
IPP × Avoidance	PIE index	.342	1	.342	.342	.537
	CYN index	2.339	1	2.339	2.339	.100
Approach × Avoidance	PIE index	.985	1	.985	.985	.295
	CYN index	2.345	1	2.345	2.345	.099
IPP × Approach × Avoidance	PIE index	.988	1	.988	.988	.294
	CYN index	3.528	1	3.528	3.528	.043*

SS = sum of squares; PIE = political information efficacy; CYN = political cynicism.

^a $R^2 = .070$ (adjusted $R^2 = .044$).

^b $R^2 = .138$ (adjusted $R^2 = .114$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

results of a MANCOVA analysis in which Internet political participation and motives for approaching and/or avoiding the Internet for political information served as fixed factors predicting political efficacy and political cynicism, with age in years entered as a covariate. The full factorial model is a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ multivariate design. It is important to note that the covariate and the avoidance factor contribute additively ($p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively) to the dependent variate (efficacy + cynicism).

Table 1 reports the statistical univariate results. Note that the multivariate effect of age is accounted for only by its effect on efficacy ($p < .01$). Similarly, Internet approach motivations influenced only the level of political efficacy ($p < .05$). In contrast, the avoidance motivation significantly affected political cynicism ($p < .001$). However, interpretation of this main effect may be clouded by the fact that political cynicism

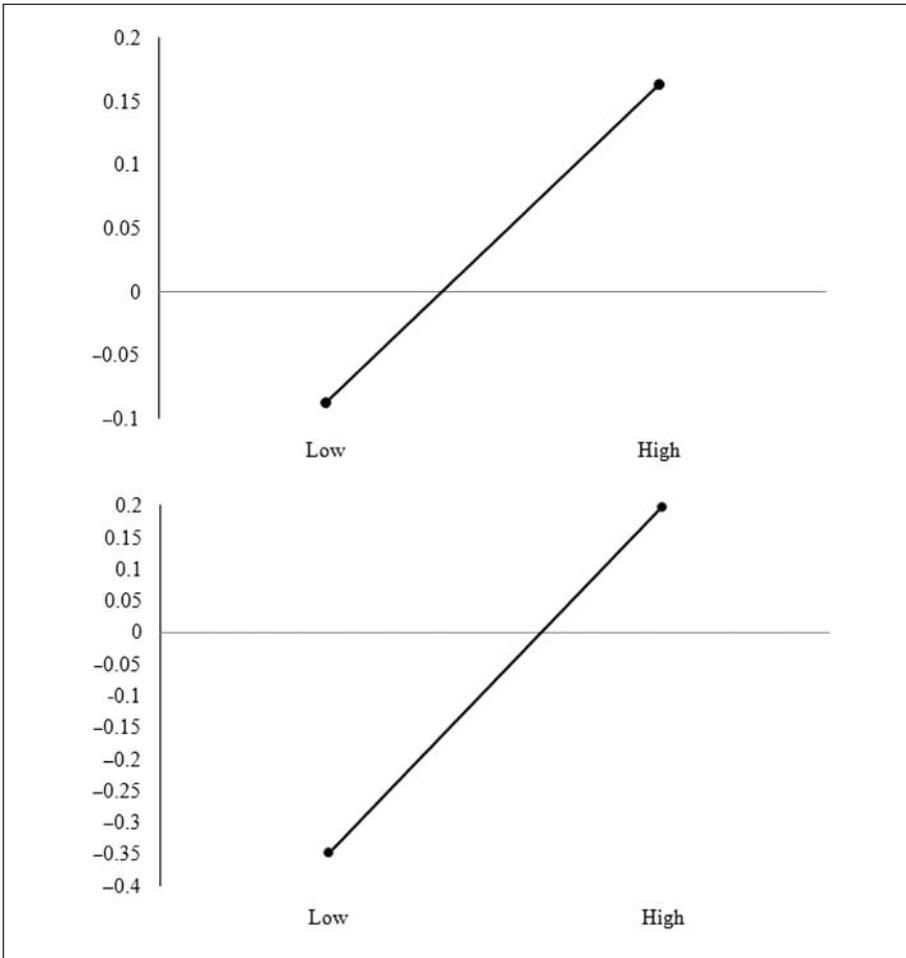


Figure 2. Main effects of Internet approach motivation on political information efficacy (PIE) and Internet avoidance motivation on political cynicism (CYN)

was also predicted by a three-way interaction ($p < .05$; Participation \times Approach \times Avoidance). The model accounts for more explained variance (11.4%) in cynicism than it does in explaining efficacy (4.4%).

Figure 2 presents the form of the significant main effects for efficacy involving approach and avoidance motivations. Note that those with high approach motivations exhibit generally higher levels of efficacy, and those with high avoidance motivations exhibit generally higher levels of political cynicism.

In Figure 3, the form of the three-way interaction between Internet political participation and approach and avoidance motivations is revealed. Note that the top graph summarizes the responsiveness of voters with low approach motivation to the Internet

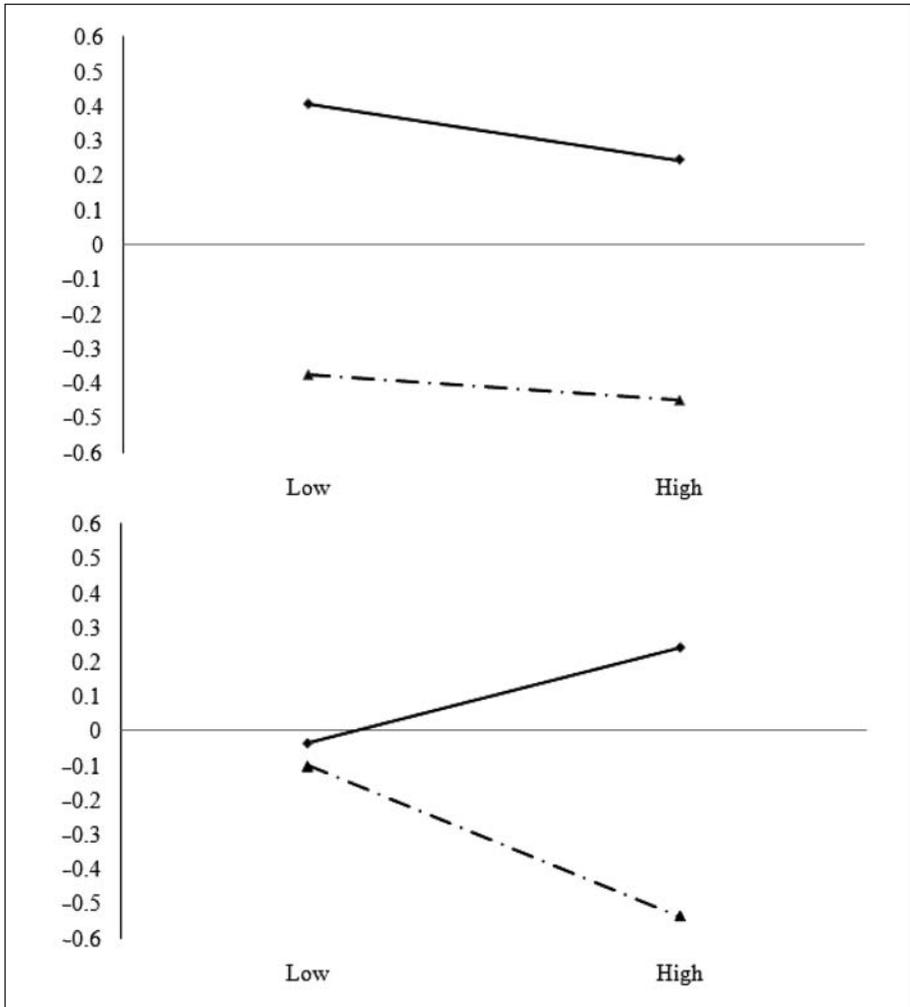


Figure 3. Three-way interaction of Internet political participation (IPP) as a predictor of political cynicism (CYN) among voters with low and high levels of Internet approach and avoidance motivations

and the bottom graph plots the political cynicism of those with high approach. Among the low group, cynicism is primarily related to the level of avoidance and does not vary with level of perception of the Internet as a political medium. In other words, cynicism among low approach is driven primarily by level of avoidance motivation, characterized by high avoiders who are substantially more cynical than those with low avoidance of the Internet. This level of cynicism appears to be somewhat insensitive to how respondents evaluate Internet tools as forms of political participation.

The bottom graph in Figure 3 summarizes the response patterns for those with high approach motivation to the Internet. Consider that only one subgroup among the high-approach group is above the mean on political cynicism—the high-approach and high-avoidance subgroup. Those in this conflicted group both recognize strengths of the Internet for political information and evaluates its tools as highly participatory, yet they are cynical of politics and politicians generally and suspicious of the Internet in particular. They recognize its advantages for gaining political information; they just do not like to do so. The last group, those with high approach and low avoidance, are the least cynical of all, and their cynicism is sensitive to how they view the Internet as a political medium.

Discussion

This research advances uses and gratifications theory to a variety of Internet-based political communication activities. The most groundbreaking finding here is the empirical evidence that young people perceive political participation differently than their older counterparts. To this group, more solitary activities, such as searching for political information or reading blog content, do constitute political participation. Although some might find this grounds for concern about the future of civic participation, there are less pessimistic views possible. As campaigns engage more online with constituents and this group that sees political participation online as a legitimate form, the worldview may shift and tactics we considered tried and true today (e.g., attending a debate, posting a sign in the front yard) will no longer be relevant. The data presented here are not enough to fully argue that political participation has absolutely changed for young people who are digital natives. However, we believe this is an area that deserves further review to compare older and new generations' perception of political participation with regard to digital tools.

Moving back from possible future trends and focusing again clearly only on the data here, our research confirms that young people use the Internet more, and they use it for more diverse reasons than any other age group. We further confirm that age is not the only explanatory variable that influences political information efficacy. Our study contributes the additional variable of evaluation of Internet political activities as a dimension of political participation that had previously not been considered in research on political uses and gratifications. Only when we consider both motivations and perceptions of Internet behaviors do we see a truer picture of how uses and gratifications are related to political information efficacy and cynicism. That is, by focusing only on motivations underlying efficacy and cynicism, our perceptual participation index taps into the reported overt Internet behaviors.

Our findings further confirm what previous researchers found in that cynicism and political information efficacy operate relatively independently of one another. Much scholarship assumes that efficacy is a positive state and cynicism, on the other hand, is negative (Kaid et al., 2000; Robinson, 1976). Similarly, one might posit that approach motives are healthy, whereas avoidance motives are detrimental. Indeed, our findings indicate that high avoidance motivations are strongly related to cynicism, whereas individuals high in approach motivations are not necessarily low in cynicism.

Looking again at the Internet activity political participation index, we see these data are helpful in understanding this conundrum. For example, people with low approach (e.g., those who do not see value in seeking Internet information) do not necessarily avoid it either.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The survey method is inherently problematic, as it relies on self-report rather than actual observation. Along these lines, we did not consider vote intention, as we first wanted to understand use in relation to possible barrier variables (lack of political information efficacy or cynicism). Additionally, we did not fully examine information processing; rather, we concentrated on perceptions. Certainly more research in all of these areas must be conducted to more fully understand the concepts and connections discussed here. Although the study did survey a general population of voting-age people, rather than rely on a college sample, as frequently done in communication research, this sample was restricted to a single geographic area, which may be limiting in terms of generalizability to a greater national population.

Looking forward to next steps, we believe that these data are too focused on both a single geographic area and a point in time to provide definitive answers of a phenomenon for which we are able to see early signs. Much more research must be done in the next decade to determine whether this blip on the screen regarding the generational differences in political participation exists. Do young people grow out of such ideals as they become more experienced voters, or will these digital natives usher in a new acceptance of what it means to really participate in politics? Although these data do not provide definitive answers, they do allow us to see the legitimization of more solitary political activities among younger voters.

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