Social Media and Online Political Communication: The Role of Interpersonal Informational Trust and Openness

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Social Media and Online Political Communication: The Role of Interpersonal Informational Trust and Openness

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This study examines relationships among interpersonal informational trust and openness with Internet-based political activities and attitudes. Conceptually, it proposes the categorization of online spaces and activities as consumption or interaction types, and classifies interpersonal informational trust within inner and outer circles. Interpersonal informational trust was found to be positively associated with perception of online activities as political participation. It also was associated with use of all types of online media for purposes of political communication, but mostly with online spaces that require interaction with others. Interpersonal political openness showed positive association with the use of interactive-type Web sites for purposes of political communication.

With decline in traditional media's reach and concurrent increase in Internet use, social media spaces are popular for political communication (Pew, 2007, 2009a, 2011). Citizens have new opportunities for political participation and communication by joining interest groups, interacting with political institutions and candidates, and exchanging and discussing political information with other citizens

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(Krueger, 2002). Scholars also report a decline in political participation (Putnam, 1995; Schudson, 1998). This incongruity may be the result of a gap between how scholars and citizens perceive political participation. This study suggests, therefore, examining perceptions of online activities, including via social media, as political participation.

Considering the importance of interpersonal interactions on social media, this study suggests that attitudes toward interpersonal political interaction outside the Internet can successfully predict attitudes toward online political activities and attitudes. Precedent exists for predicting communication relationships between offline and online attitudes and perceptions. Sample illustrations include predicting ''that online identity reflects offline identity'' (Baym, 2004, p. 42); that people bring their same personalities to their online relationships as they do their offline ones, (Wellman, 1997); and that ''online interpersonal relationships can be as fulfilling as offline ones in certain contexts'' (Baym, 2004, p. 52).

Specifically, interpersonal informational trust and openness are used to predict three aspects of use of the Internet for political communication purposes—perceptions of online activities as a valid form of political participation, media use for purposes of political information, and interest in behaviors related to political discourse. To examine these questions the authors propose to categorize online political activities as either interaction- or consumption-oriented. Data were drawn from a phone survey of 574 respondents randomly selected from the voting age population near a metropolitan area in the United States.

Literature Review

During the 2008 election just over 55% of the adult U.S. population sought some level of online involvement; 45% of Internet users watched videos online, a more traditional form of political content consumption (Pew, 2009a). In the months leading up to the November 2010 elections, 22% of adult Internet users engaged with a political campaign on Twitter or social networking sites (SNS); 8% of online adults posted political content, and 7% started or joined a political group on a social networking site (Pew, 2011). It increasingly is apparent that online social media is gaining popularity as a public forum for both public and personal political discussions.

These growing numbers of Internet uses for political communication contrast with reports of decline in political participation (Newman, 1986; Putnam, 1995; Schudson, 1998). Bennett and Iyengar indicated that, ''people have become increasingly detached from overarching institutions such as public schools, political parties and civic groups which at one time provided a shared context for receiving and interpreting messages'' (2008, p. 707). Political participation refers to activities performed by citizens who attempt to influence the structure and selection of government policies (Putnam, 1995). As such, this definition excludes many online political communication activities. Recent attempts to revisit traditional definitions of political par-

ticipation include more passive participation, such as supporting political activities and searching for and exchanging information, as political participation (Conway, 2000). Interpersonal activities such as talking face-to-face with family, friends, and strangers also are considered political participation (Delli-Carpini, 2004). The rising popularity of SNS, and social media more broadly, introduced more opportunities for individuals to maintain and expand existing circles of friends and search for information (boyd & Ellison, 2007). If an individual tweets about a candidate, and is retweeted thousands times more, the individual and other tweeters may consider this political participation. The gap between the growing popularity of the Internet as a platform for political communication and reports of decline in political participation may reflect a gap in perception between scholars and the public.

While reexamining these traditional definitions both conceptually and practically, it is important to examine what citizens perceive as political participation. Conceptually, by assessing perceptions of online activities as a form of political participation, one obtains evidence supporting this changing definition. In fact, the importance of identifying whether individuals perceive an activity in which they engage to be political participation or not was documented in one recent study (Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011). This has important implications: it is possible that political participation, based on these perceptual measures, is not declining at all, but that it may be increasing, particularly with young Americans. From a practical perspective there is an important measurement issue—if individuals think that what they are doing online is a form of political participation, in a survey or other assessment of their political activities, they will achieve a higher political participation score than if they do not believe the activity is political participation.

Considering recent suggestions to include information consumption-based activities (Conway, 2000) and face-to-face political conversations (Delli-Carpini, 2004) as political participation, the authors suggest focusing on the characteristics of online spaces. In particular, the differences between spaces of interpersonal interactions, such as social media, and more information-consumption type of spaces, such as Web sites of news media, have important theoretical implications for examining perceptions of online political participation. The different types of political communication, based on the spaces they take place in are discussed next.

Political Information Spaces

Information flows in one direction via traditional media (newspapers, television), allowing audiences only to consume information. The Internet (and social media in particular) accommodates multi-directional information flow, allowing users to interact with one another. This classification of online interaction spaces based on direction of communication is well documented (Chung, 2008; Quandt, 2008). Literature about what constitutes political participation often revolves around how personally involving is a behavior (Conway, 2000), adding to the importance of the suggested categorization.

Media Use–Consumption.

Primarily unidirectional platforms, such as most Web sites, allow few opportunities to share information among users. This is similar to newspapers, television, and other traditional forms of media. Ideally, online newspapers could become spaces for interpersonal information and opinion interaction. In practice, they remain slow to take advantage of their interactive potential (Quandt, 2008).

Media Use–Interaction.

Social media platforms, however, next to serving entertainment and social surveillance needs (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006), provide spaces where individuals share political opinions and information (Pew, 2009a, 2011). Social media spaces include SNS, discussion forums and blogs, where individuals meet, share, and discuss a wide range of issues (Kapla & Haenlein, 2010). Whereas social media spaces can be exclusively used for unidirectional information flow, studies show they also serve social interaction needs, which require some level of information or opinion interaction (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2008; Sweetser & Weaver Lariscy, 2007).

The characterization of spaces based on uni- or multi-directional communication flow is important, as online interactions showed positive relations with political activities and attitudes. An earlier space where online interaction occurred, online political chat rooms serve both social and information-seeking needs (Atkin, Jeffres, Neuendorf, Lange, & Skalski, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 2003) and can influence political behaviors and attitudes (Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore, 2005). More recently, Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard (2010) observed that reliance on SNS is significantly related to increased civic participation. They did not find a relationship with political participation, which they explained in terms of the types of relationships on SNS. In the context of this study, another possible explanation is their conceptualization of political participation as traditional off-line activities only.

Interest in Political Discourse.

Another aspect of interaction with political information is the individual's interest in taking part in political conversations. Studies examining conversing off the Internet about political issues demonstrate that such conversations play a major role in political learning, attitude formation, and behavior (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; MacKuen & Brown, 1987), increase in political involvement (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999), and increased factual knowledge and understanding of politics (Eveland & Scheufele, 1998). More recently, Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) showed that informational uses of Internet and mobile phones are significantly related to expressive participation in the online domain, which in turn results in a host of offline civic and political participatory behaviors. Interests in interpersonal interactions about

politics and in consuming political content provide another level for understanding and predicting attitudes toward online political activities.

Different political activities on and off the Web require different types of interactions between users and content and among users, depending in part on the activity of choice. In some, users are expected to interact and share political opinions and attitudes, while on other spaces users are often limited to information search and consumption. Individual attributes of information sharing—interpersonal informational trust and openness—discussed next, can help shed light on attitudes toward online political activities and Internet use.

Interpersonal Political Openness and Informational Trust

Trust is described broadly as the expectation that ''people have of each other, of the organizations and institutions in which they live, and of the natural and moral social orders, that set the fundamental understandings for their lives'' (Barber, 1983, p. 165). Trust is described both in interpersonal and institutional terms (e.g., Soh, Reid, & King, 2009). Political trust, in contrast, traditionally was conceptualized mainly as institutional trust (Miller & Listhaug, 1990), including compliance with governmental authority (Scholz & Lubell, 1998), voting behaviors (Hetherington, 1998), and belief in governments' legitimate authority (Easton, 1965; Gershtenson, Ladewig, & Plane, 2006). Growing distrust of government, politicians, and political processes (Langer, 2002) alarmed scholars and concerned citizens who regard such distrust as damaging to the legitimacy of all public systems (Erber & Lau, 1990; *Gallup*, 2008; Putnam, 1995).

Putnam (1995) argued that media, particularly television, not only takes time that otherwise can be spent for political participation activities, but also creates distrust of others, which in turn, depresses civic or political activities. More recently, studies suggested mixed results regarding Internet use and informational trust. While Tedesco and Kaid (2000) showed that increased Internet use was associated with lower levels of political cynicism, Kaid (2002) could not support such a relationship.

A relationship was observed between institutional political trust and willingness to openly share ones political thoughts with others (Klaase, 1999). Considering the interpersonal nature of social media for exchanging opinions and information, this relationship between trust and openness may also be associated with willingness to share via social media.

Interpersonal trust was shown in prior research to be correlated with effective knowledge transfer (Andrews & Delahay, 2000; Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). High trust indicates feelings of connectedness to one another in a community and a ''standing decision'' to give most people—even acquaintances or complete strangers—the benefit of the doubt (Delli-Carpini, 2004). Individuals with higher trust expect others to follow the same rules or beliefs and are more likely to belong to community groups, socialize with others informally, volunteer, and cooperate with others to solve community problems (Levi, 1996; Orbell &

Dawes, 1991). When people are tightly bound to an association, their trust for their fellow members usually grows and the aggregate social capital increases. As a result, people are more likely to participate in political activities (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Putnam, 1995; Sullivan & Transue, 1999).

Interpersonal trust may depend on strength of relationships. Whether offline or online, one can interact with individuals with whom one has strong or weak relationships. Strong ties characterize one's *inner circle*, like family and friends with whom one feels close and interacts frequently; while weak ties, the *outer circle*, typically consist of co-workers and strangers (Hansen, 1999; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Literature suggests that individuals form strong relationships with those who are similar to them, and weak relationships are often characterized by connections with heterogeneous individuals, from which diversity of opinions and perspectives can originate (Granovetter, 1983). In the context of political communication, studies suggest that discussion of politics with those of different perspectives generates positive democratic outcomes such as increased political knowledge and tolerance (Brundidge, 2010; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). In the context of SNS, literature suggests that strength of relationships via social media vary (e.g., Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009), especially considering that some online relationships complement existing social relationships outside the web.

Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) found that strong relationships are more likely to be effective because they tend to be trusting ones. Strong ties were also associated with the receipt of useful knowledge (Levin & Cross, 2004). However, Levin and Cross showed that when controlling for trust, weaker ties led to the receipt of useful non-redundant knowledge, more than stronger ones. Trust in weak ties is also important as a weak tie provides knowledge from more socially distant regions of a network (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1983). Trust in *inner* and *outer* circles has different implications, as these two circles provide different types of knowledge.

Political Openness.

The last decade witnessed increasing interest by scholars and citizens in transparency, openness, and trust, not only in interpersonal relationships (Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006) but also in various types of organizations (Rawlins, 2008; Williams, 2005). When engaged in discourse about politics or sharing their thoughts about a political ad or news story, voters vary in their willingness to share their own political attitudes with others; that is, people vary on how ''open'' or ''truthful'' they are, how much candor they reveal (*Javnost-The Public*, 2002; Schiffman, Thelen, & Sherman, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2002). There is some evidence that persons with high openness are more willing to share their views and be honest even when in uncertain public opinion climates (Wright, 2008) than are persons with low openness.

In literature about organization-public relationships, openness and transparency are often considered synonymous (Rawlins, 2008, p. 6). Where trust is a multi-faceted construct, openness seems somewhat more straightforward: easy to see

through, easy to understand, not hiding secrets for example (Rawlins, 2008, p. 6). Secrecy is deliberately hiding one's real self, actions, and thoughts; transparency is consciously revealing them (Florini, 1998).

One factor that many individuals report liking about online disclosure of political beliefs is that they can remain anonymous (Stromer-Galley, 2002). If anonymity is selected in online discourse, openness and transparency are perhaps more easily achieved; there may be a more honest disclosure in political social media than face-to-face.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

This study suggested that the gap between reports of a decline in political partici- pation and a growing use of the Internet by citizens for purposes of political activities and communication may indicate a gap between scholars' definitions of political participations and citizens perceptions of online activities as participation. The authors attempt to measure and predict perceptions of online activities as political participation. Considering the strong interpersonal component in interaction-type spaces and activities compared to the consumption-type spaces, the authors sug- gest that specific interpersonal attitudes—openness and interpersonal informational trust—may be good predictors for two important aspects of political behaviors and attitudes: perception of online activities as political participation and preferred spaces for political communication (media use and interest in political discourse). Understanding how citizens perceive online activities as political participation and how these perceptions relate to their interpersonal attitudes, will help one under- stand the fluid definition of political participation and the relationships between offline and online attitudes.

Considering the interpersonal characteristics of many online spaces and the vi- tality of interpersonal interaction for many traditional acts of political participation, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H_1: Higher levels of interpersonal informational trust and political openness vari- ables will be associated with higher perceptions of online political activities as participation.

Drawing from the conceptual framework discussed above, the study also presents the following research questions:

RQ_1: Are the interpersonal informational trust and political openness variables associated with preferred spaces for political communication?

RQ_{1a}: Are the interpersonal informational trust and political openness variables associated with media use?

RQ_{1b}: Are the interpersonal informational trust and political openness variables associated with Interest in Political Discourse?

Method

A random sample phone survey was conducted in the days immediately following the 2008 presidential election in Athens, GA, and the neighboring counties (Barrow, Clarke, Madison, Oglethorpe, and Oconee). See Appendix A for survey items. Respondents were contacted via phone after random-digit dialing selection (Survey Sampling International's Random Digit Dial B sample), following a procedure in which the adult in the household with the most recent (or the next) birthday was interviewed, in an attempt to produce a more representative sample. No sub-sample of cell phone-only households was conducted because in 2008, only 16.6% of all households in Georgia were cell-phone only. Data were recorded through a CATI system by a university-based survey research center. The survey aimed at the metro area's population of voting-aged adults ($N = 574$). The overall cooperation rate—the proportion of all cases interviewed of all eligible units ever contacted—was 40.1%.

Respondent Profile

Of the 574 participants, mean age was 50.6 ($SD = 16.15$), ranging between18–93 years old (in the population, 26.3% were 18–24 years old, 34.4% were 25–44, 37.4% were 45–64, and 11.95% were 65 or older). About 83.4% described themselves as White (compared to 77.4% in the population in sampled counties), 9.9% as African American (17.7% in population), 3.7% Hispanic (7.3% in population), .7 as Asian (2.6% in population), .4 as multiracial or other, and 3.1% preferred not to say. The sample was slightly biased toward Whites. Nearly 64.3% of participants were female (51.5% in population) and 94.9% were registered (compared to 51.01% in population). All population data are based on the American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, and Georgia Voter Registration Statistics.

Nearly 19.2% of respondent classified themselves as very conservative, 25.3% somewhat conservative, 28.0% moderate, 14.5% somewhat liberal, and 9.8% very liberal. Men were underrepresented, and thus gender was used as a covariate in subsequent analyses. Because no similar data were available regarding political orientation, it was decided to use this variable as covariate as well. The preponderance of registered voters in the sample means that in addition to using voting age as a criterion for selection, the target population might be more appropriately called "registered voters." This percentage may be due to an inflated response rate among registered voters.

Even so, political party support was remarkably evenly distributed: 31.5% reported they were Republicans, and 31.5% Democrats; About 26.8% claimed no party, and 10.2% preferred not to say. With regard to vote choice during the 2008 election, about 45.8% voted for McCain, 37.3% voted for Obama, 0.7% for someone else, and 16.2% preferred not to say. In the target population, about 43% voted for Obama, and 55% voted for McCain. Among voters, 60.8% voted

early or absentee, 33.3% voted at the polls on Election Day, and 5.9% preferred not to say.

Because of disproportionate representation of females and the lack of specific information about political leaning in the population, these variables were tested as potential covariates for methodological reasons. Regression analyses revealed that neither gender nor ideology was a significant covariate, so both were eliminated from the final predictive models. However, age (in years) of respondent proved to be a significant covariate for each set of dependent variables, accounting for considerable extraneous variance. Thus, it was entered as a covariate in the final analyses.

Measures

Independent Variables

A single principal component factor analysis was conducted for all items used as potential independent variables for generalized political openness and interpersonal informational trust (see Appendix A for a list of items). In order to assure discriminant validity across the predictors an orthogonal Varimax rotation was used (for further discussion see: Miller, Pedersen, & Pollock, 2000). The eigenvalue greater than 1 criterion resulted in a three factor solution explaining 57.8% of total variance, interpreted respectively as generalized political openness, outer interpersonal informational trust, and inner interpersonal informational trust. (Each of these independent variables is discussed below.) Due to sample size limitations, a median split of the three standardized scores was used to prepare these variables for MANCOVA analyses. Mean standardized openness, outer trust, and inner trust scores within cells were compared, and observed to differ significantly across cells using an independent-sample t-test ($p < .001$). However, Levene's test for equality of variances showed significant difference in variance across cells, a finding that further justifies their being recoded into broader categories. Despite the fact that some substantial cross loading was observed, the use of standardized factor scores for each factor accounted for the relative contribution of each item to the factor score.

Political Openness.

Researchers developed and piloted a 5-point Likert scale ''openness'' measure to explore how willing one was to share political information and behaviors (e.g., vote choice) during an election, for the purpose of measuring one's general openness to political self-disclosure as it relates to online political use and perceptions. The five items loading on factor 1 produced a single index (Cronbach's alpha = .75).

Interpersonal Informational Trust.

A set of five interpersonal sources resulted in two factors. The first factor was called ''*outer circle*'' (Cronbach's alpha = .66), as it includes trust in information

coming from people who may not be in one's immediate social circle (mainly, strangers and people one knows online only). The second factor was labeled "*inner circle*" (Cronbach's alpha = .62), as it includes members of one's immediate social circle (mainly family, friends, and acquaintances).

Dependent Variables

Three separate principal component factor analyses with Promax (oblique) rotations were conducted for each dependent variable (perception of online activities as political participation, media use, and interest in political discourse) in order to detect possible dimensionality of the constructs. The first showed no dimensionality, while media use resulted in three dimensions and interest in discourse in two dimensions.

Perception of Online Activities as Political Participation.

A set of eight specific online political activities were listed, and respondents were asked to rate each online tool based on its perceived level of political media participation on a 5-point Likert scale. This represented the online activity perception scale, which was employed in other studies (Sweetser, Lariscy, & Tinkham, 2008, Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011). The nine items loaded on a single factor (Cronbach's alpha = .87).

Information Source–Media Use.

Media use items included a series of ratio-level variables asking respondents to indicate how many days (0–7) during the 7 days prior to Election Day they used media sources for political engagement in or information about the 2008 election (see Appendix A). Each media using item was coded on an eight-unit 0 to 7 scale, resulting in a ratio-level measurement for composite media use mean scores.

A principal component analysis with Promax rotation was run, producing a three-component solution, explaining 63.54% of the total variance. The factors were meaningfully interpretable as: "Traditional media" (Cronbach's alpha = .61), namely newspapers and television; "institutional online platforms" (Cronbach's alpha = .65), namely online news Web sites and news aggregators; and "user-generated media" (Cronbach's alpha = .70), namely discussion forums and blogs. One item duality loaded on both factors (Web site affiliated with political candidates).

Information Sources–Interest in Political Discourse.

A set of five specific aspects of political campaigns were listed, and respondents were asked to rate their level of interest in each on a 5-point Likert scale. A principal component factor analysis with Promax rotation was run. The first solution, using

the Eigenvalue > 1 criterion, was bi-dimensional and explained 65.37% of total variance.

The factors were meaningfully interpretable as "face-to-face" (Cronbach's alpha = .61), and included interest in discussing politics with friends, family, and strangers. The second factor, "online sources" (Cronbach's alpha = .71), included interest in reading political information in news blogs and personal blogs.

Data Analysis

In order to address the research questions, the authors employed a full factorial analysis of covariance using either MANCOVA or ANCOVA, depending on the dimensionality of the dependent variables. These statistical procedures permitted the examination of the mean differences across levels of the independent variables, while at the same time assessing the explanatory power of the model. Furthermore, when dealing with multiple dependent variables it was necessary to adjust for multiple testing effects and thus control for Type I error. This required that the independent variables be recoded into a discrete number of categories, potentially losing information. However, the study concluded that the advantages of a factorial model outweigh this disadvantage.

Findings

H_1: Higher levers of interpersonal informational trust and political openness variables will be associated with higher perceptions of online political activities as participation.

The items that indicated perception of online activities as political participation resulted in a single dimension. The full factorial ($2 \times 2 \times 2$) ANCOVA model explained 6.5% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .065$). The age covariate was a significant predictor of the dependent variate ($p < .01$); older respondents were less predisposed to perceive online political activities as a form of political participation than were younger respondents.

Findings provided partial support for H_1. Only one of the fixed factors—*outer circle* trust—produced a positive significant main effect ($p < .01$). Those who scored higher in the *outer circle* political trust-informational trust scale reported stronger perceptions of online activities as political participation. No two- or three-way interaction effects were observed. See Table 1 for a summary of the analysis and estimated dependent variable mean scores. Note that estimated marginal means are reported due to the presence of a covariate (Age) in the analyses.

RQ_{1a}: Are the interpersonal informational trust and political openness variables associated with media use?

Table 1
Summary of 3-Way ANCOVA Model for Perceptions
of Online Political Participation

	Perception of Online Activities as Political Participation[a]
Adjusted R^2	.065
Inner circle informational trust	
Low	$M = 2.314$ (.076)
High	$M = 2.361$ (.076)
Outer circle informational trust	
Low	**$M = 2.187$ (.077)
High	$M = 2.489$ (.074)
Political openness	
Low	$M = 2.256$ (.076)
High	$M = 2.420$ (.076)

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Significant univariate effects (in cells) are noted.
[a]M = estimated marginal means, based on a 5-unit composite scale, where ''1'' = *very little* and ''5'' = *a great deal*. Standard error values are reported in parentheses. The significant (***) covariate in the model is estimated at the following value: Age in Years = 45.14.
Note: Only main-effects are reported. No significant interaction effects were observed.

The full factorial MANCOVA model for media use explained 3.6% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .036$) for the traditional media use dimension (traditional-consuming), 6.2% (adjusted $R^2 = .062$) for the online unidirectional media use dimension (online-consuming), and 7.5% (adjusted $R^2 = .075$) for the online multidirectional media use (online-interaction) dependent variable. In this model the covariate age was observed to be a significant predictor (negative relationship) of the online-consuming dependent variable ($p < .001$).

Two of the fixed factors (*outer circle* trust and political openness) produced significant multivariate main effects ($p < .001$ and $p < .05$, respectively). For the *outer circle* informational trust, positive main effects were observed for online-consumption and online-interaction media use (respectively, $p < .05$; $p < .001$). High levels of *outer circle* trust were associated with greater levels on each of these two media use dimensions. With respect to openness, only one dimension of media use—online-interaction—accounted for the significant multi-variate main effect of political openness ($p < .01$). This relationship, too, was positive in direction, so more politically open respondents exhibited higher uses of multi-directional online media. No two- or three-way interactions were observed to be significant. See Table 2 for summary of analysis and mean scores.

Table 2
Summary of 3-Way MANCOVA Model for Media Use

	Traditional Media Use–Consumption[a]	Online Media Use–Consumption	Online Media Use–Interaction
Adjusted R^2	.036	.062	.075
Inner circle informational trust			
Low	$M = 4.496$ (.165)	$M = 2.813$ (.166)	$M = 1.194$ (.102)
High	$M = 4.431$ (.167)	$M = 2.646$ (.168)	$M = 1.045$ (.104)
Outer circle informational trust**			
Low	$M = 4.267$ (.165)[a]	*$M = 2.463$ (.167)	***$M = 0.850$ (.103)
High	$M = 4.660$ (.165)	$M = 2.996$ (.167)	$M = 1.390$ (.103)
Political openness*			
Low	$M = 4.400$ (.167)	$M = 2.547$ (.169)	**$M = 0.884$ (.104)
High	$M = 4.526$ (.166)	$M = 2.912$ (.168)	$M = 1.356$ (.103)

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Significant multivariate effects (in row labels) and univariate effects (in cells) are noted.
[a]M = estimated marginal mean, based on a composite 8-unit index of number of days in which a medium was accessed, where $0 = 0$ days and $7 = 7$ days. Standard error values are in parentheses. The significant (***) covariate in the model is estimated at the following value: Age in Years = 45.72.
Note: Only main-effects are reported. No significant multivariate Interaction effects were observed.

RQ$_{1b}$: Are the interpersonal informational trust and political openness variables associated with interest in political discourse?

The full factorial MANCOVA model for interest in political discourse explained 3.7% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .037$) for interest in online consuming-type political discourse and 21.7% (adjusted $R^2 = .217$) for interest in face-to-face interaction-type political discourse. In this model, the covariate age was a significant, positive predictor of interest in face-to-face (interaction) political discourse ($p < .01$) as part of the dependent variate.

All three fixed factors (*outer circle* trust, *inner circle* trust, and political openness) produced significant multivariate main effects ($p < .001$). For the *outer circle* informational trust, positive main effects were observed for interest for both face-to-face and online political discourse (respectively, $p < .001$; $p < .01$). Thus, high levels of *outer circle* trust were associated with greater interest in face-to-face and online political discourse. For the *inner circle* informational trust, a positive main effect was observed only for interest in the face-to-face (interaction) political discourse variable

($p < .001$). Lastly, openness also exhibited positive relationships with interest in both face-to-face ($p < .001$) and online-consumption ($p < .01$) political discourse. That is, the greater the political openness, the higher interest in political discourse. See Table 3 for summary of analysis and mean scores.

One significant multivariate interaction effect ($p < .05$) was observed: a two-way interaction between *inner* and *outer circle* interpersonal informational trust as predictors of interest in political discourse. This significant multivariate effect was accounted for solely by the impact of these two predictors on the face-to-face dimension of interest ($p < .05$). Figure 1 depicts the form of this two-way interaction. Note that when *inner circle* trust is low, interest in face-to-face political discourse is also relatively low and is not sensitive to variation in *outer circle* trust. However, when *inner circle* trust is high, interest in face-to-face political discourse is relatively high and is positively associated with the level of *outer circle* trust. Thus, it appears that the impact of *outer circle* trust on interest in face-to-face political discourse is premised on a high level of *inner circle* informational trust.

Table 3
Summary of Main Effects in 3-Way MANCOVA Model
for Interest in Political Discourse[b]

|	Face-to-Face (Interaction)	Online (Consumption)
Adjusted R^2	.217	.037
Inner circle informational trust***		
Low	***$M = 3.124$ (.061)[a]	$M = 2.304$ (.098)
High	$M = 3.597$ (.062)	$M = 2.529$ (.099)
Outer circle informational trust***		
Low	***$M = 3.175$ (.061)	**$M = 2.235$ (.098)
High	$M = 3.546$ (.062)	$M = 2.598$ (.099)
Political openness***		
Low	***$M = 3.098$ (.062)	**$M = 2.216$ (.099)
High	$M = 3.623$ (.062)	$M = 2.618$ (.099)

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Significant multivariate effects (in row labels) and univariate effects (in cells) are noted.
[a]$M =$ estimated marginal mean, based on a composite 5-unit itemized rating scale, where "1" = *not at all interested* and "5" = *very interested*. Standard error values are in parentheses. The significant (**) covariate in the model is estimated at the following value: Age in Years = 45.57.
Note: Only main-effects are reported in this table.
[b]One significant (*) 2-way multivariate interaction effect (*Inner Trust* × *Outer Trust*) was observed. It is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Two-way Interaction between *Outer* and *Inner* Circle Trust Predicting Interest
in Face-to-Face Political Discourse (color figure available online)
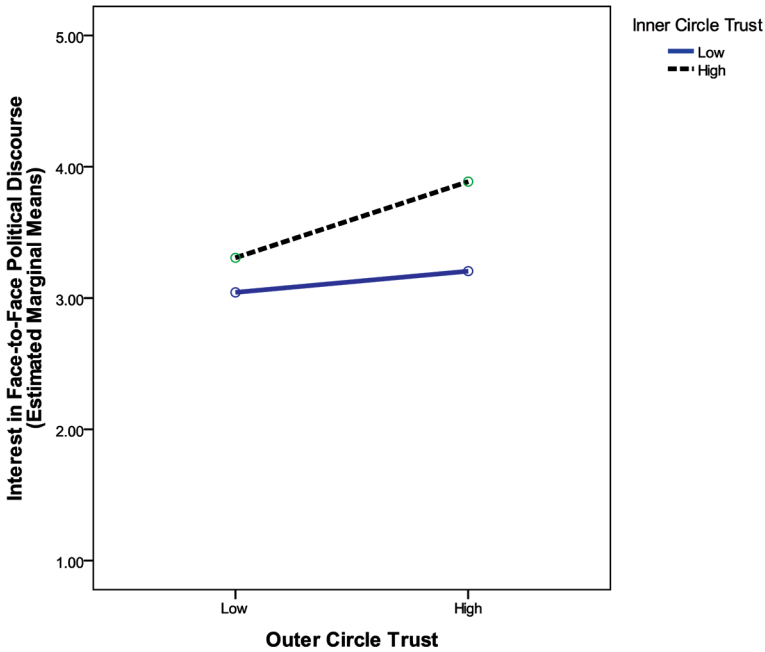
Although not part of the research questions, it is interesting to report that most users (61.6%) reported using user-generated online media for information related the elections (at least 1 day of the 7 days prior to the elections), with an average of 1.03 days ($SD = 1.32$). Regarding traditional media online, 80.9% used it at least 1 of the 7 days ($M = 2.20$ days; $SD = 1.8219$). Traditional media was used by 94.7% at least 1 day ($M = 4.59$ days; $SD = 2.1854$).

Discussion

Within environments of declining traditional political participation (Putnam, 1995), increasing distrust in political institutions (Langer, 2002), and declining traditional media reach and public trust (Pew, 2009b), social media spaces increasingly are used by people for political interaction and information consumption (Pew, 2009a, 2011). As traditional definitions of political participation change and include more interpersonal activities (Baker & Stromer-Galley, 2006; Delli-Carpini, 2004), whether online activities are perceived by the public as political participation is vital to

forming a possibly more inclusive—and expanded—definition of the concept. Building upon the interpersonal characteristics of social media spaces, findings indicate that interpersonal informational trust and openness associated with perceptions of online activities as political participation, online media use for purposes of political information, and interest in political conversations.

Trust in one's *outer circle* was found to be a major predictor of perceptions of online political activities and behaviors. People who reported trusting people with whom they have weaker social ties, were more likely also to perceive online activities as political participation, use social media to interact with others about political issues, and consume political information online. They also report greater interest in the more traditional face-to-face political conversations. Trust in the *outer circle* is meaningful as weak ties often characterize relationships among heterogeneous individuals who are more likely to access, among other things, information that they or their immediate social network cannot provide (Granovetter, 1983).

One implication of these findings, therefore, is that those who already trust information from diverse sources also are heavier users of various media spaces for purposes of acquiring political information. These findings complement previous similarities found between online and offline behaviors, such as the relationship between online and offline political participation (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). Over time, however, social media may evolve in new ways that encourage broader involvement, and potentially attract less politically involved individuals. As trust in *inner circle* showed overall lower predictive power, another implication is that interpersonal trust as a whole is too broad a concept to distinguish between the use of social media and other platforms of political communication. The categorization of interpersonal informational trust into two types—*inner* and *outer*—makes a helpful conceptual contribution.

Whereas trust in one's *outer circle* was a good predictor for a variety of online behaviors and attitudes, political openness was found to be more sensitive to differences between types of spaces preferred for gaining political information. Trust in the *outer circle* predicted the use of all types of online media (consumption and interaction), where political openness successfully predicted only the use of social media. This finding is important for refining the differences between these two similar attitudes toward one's outer circle. Trust refers to information coming *from* others, which can explain the successful, but non-discriminatory, prediction of media use. Openness describes individuals' willingness to declare their political opinions *to* others, for example, by placing yard signs supporting their preferred presidential candidate. This distinction can explain why openness successfully predicted only the use of social media, which is based on individuals' willingness to declare their political opinions (for example, joining a political Facebook group).

Any discussion about future trends must be done with caution. On the one hand, traditional media were the most preferred source of political information, followed by consumption of online content, leaving behind spaces of online interactions, and social media in particular. On the other hand, the positive relationship between age and perceptions of online activities on social media as political communication may

suggest a future generational effect. Over time, these online interactive spaces may become more prevalent as online political information sources. Similar indications may be related to more inclusive definitions of political participation. As age is also associated with the perception of online activities as political participation, over time these activities may become more consensual forms of participation, not only by the general public but possibly by scholars.

Conceptual Implications

The growing use of the Internet for purposes of political activities and communication suggests that traditional definitions of political participation may need to be revisited. This study makes a contribution to political communication research by suggesting conceptual frameworks for understanding online activities as political participation. It proposes and provides evidence to support two helpful conceptual distinctions—(1) between consumption and interaction, and (2) between *outer circle* informational trust and openness. The former distinction addresses the direction of political communication channels (uni vs. multi-directional). The latter addresses political communication-related social relationships (trust vs. openness) mainly with people with whom one has no strong ties. These two distinctions were found to be very helpful in predicting, and thus understanding, perceptions constituting online activities as political participation. Stronger perceptions of interaction activities as constituting political participation, such as participating in political groups on Facebook, were associated with high personal openness toward people with whom one does not necessarily have strong relationships. Strong affirmations of consuming online activities—such as searching for political information on the Internet—as political participation, in contrast, were associated with informational trust in one's outer social circles.

Practical Implications

Establishing the relationship between openness and trust in *outer circles* with online political activities, interests, and perceptions, may have important implications for evaluating political campaigns in social media spaces, especially in terms of the potential voters these campaigns are likely to capture. Using social media, a political candidate may reach individuals who feel comfortable sharing their political views with almost anyone, who already are highly interested in political campaigns, whether via face-to-face discussions or online sources, and who are highly politically informed, across all platforms. Social media campaigns capture potential voters who already are highly involved and informed via all other communication channels, especially those online. Issues of efficiency of communication should be examined in further studies, but in terms of capturing new audiences, social media, just like other online and offline media, attract individuals who are already inclined to communicate their political opinions with almost anyone.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any survey-based study involving self-reports of socially acceptable behavior, this study perhaps suffers from inflated reports of political participation, political interests, and media exposure. However, because the emphasis was to examine patterns among these variables, rather than making univariate generalizations to any population, this phenomenon is of limited concern (see Vavreck, 2007 for a review of these concerns). Furthermore, to overcome the overrepresentation of female and conservative participants, gender and political orientation were used as covariates. The sample also poses limitations. The sampling resulted in a bias toward women respondents. To overcome this bias, the authors held gender as covariate in the analysis. Furthermore, they tested for association between gender and the key variables, and no significant associations were found. Another source of bias in the sample is the high percentage of registered voters. Registered voters may be more eager to participate, which can explain their overrepresentation. To address this bias, the authors limited implications of this study primarily to registered voters. Last, while the online spaces they addressed in the survey are frequently mentioned by popular media, it is possible that some items deal with activities that may not be understood by people who are not regular users of the Internet. This limitation could have affected the age differences.

Appendix A: Survey Items

Interpersonal Informational Trust

For each of the following, indicate how much you trust information from the following sources where ''1'' is *no trust* and ''5'' *great deal of trust*:

1. Family members
2. People you currently work with, or go to school with
3. People you know only online
4. People from organizations (such as church, sports leagues, business associations)
5. Strangers (such as people on a flight, bus, in a grocery line)

Generalized Political Openness

Now, think of the most recent election that just passed. Indicate your agreement with the following statements where ''1'' is *strongly disagree* and ''5'' is *strongly agree*.

1. If I were contacted by a pollster during the presidential election campaign, I would have told them openly who I intended to vote for.

2. I talked openly about my presidential voting intention during the campaign.
3. Voting decisions are private acts and should be kept private.
4. During the recent presidential campaign, I did not want people to know which candidate I preferred.
5. If I had been asked during the campaign to put a yard sign in my front yard supporting my preferred presidential candidate, I would have gladly done so.

Perception of Online Activities as Political Participation

I am going to list a series of political activities. I'd like you to indicate the degree of political participation you would assign each activity. If you think the activity has *very little political participation* then say ''1;'' if you feel the activity has a *great deal of political participation* then say ''5.''

1. E-mailing political or issue-orientated organizations
2. Searching for political information online
3. Sending political e-postcards
4. Reading a candidate's blog
5. Reading a blog (non-candidate) that talked about political issues
6. Joining a political FaceBook group
7. Listing your political ideology in an online social networking software system (FaceBook, MySpace)
8. Signing an e-petition

Spaces for Political Communication

I. Media use

In the seven days prior to Election Day, how many days did you access each of the following for information about the upcoming election: (0–7):

1. Newspapers
2. Television
3. Online news sites of Newspapers and/or TV
4. Discussion forums
5. Blogs
6. News aggregators (such as Yahoo news)
7. Social networking sites
8. Websites of organizations that are affiliated with political parties/candidates

II. Interest in Political Discourse

Please indicate your interest with the following items on a scale of 1–5 with ''1'' being *not at all interested* and ''5'' being *very interested*. When it came to the

campaigns part of this most recent election, how interested were you in. . . .

1. Discussing the political campaign with friends
2. Discussing the political campaign with family
3. Reading about the political campaign on news blogs
4. Reading about the political campaign on personal blogs
5. Striking up discourses about the campaign with strangers

Appendix B–Factor Analysis Loadings

Independent Variables (Rotated Component Matrix)

	Component		
	1	2	3
Talked openly about my voting intention during the campaign	.824		
I did not want people to know which candidate I preferred	−.752		
Would have told pollster who I would vote for	.733		
Would have put sign in my yard	.638		
Voting decisions are private*	−.557		
People you know online		.813	
Strangers		.763	
Family members			.869
People from organizations		.468	.589
People you work/go to school with		.477	.529

*Disagreeing with this statement is an indication of greater openness.

DV: Interest in Political Discourse (Pattern Matrix)

	Component	
	1	2
Discussing political campaign with family	.837	
Discussing political campaign with friends	.837	
Striking up conversations with strangers	.509	
Reading about the campaign on personal blogs		.888
Reading about the campaign on news blogs		.864

Appendix B–Factor Analysis Loadings

DV: Perception of Online Activities as Political Participation (Patterns Matrix)
(*Continued*)

	Component	
	1	2
Listing your political ideology in social networking system	.956	
Joining a political FaceBook group	.938	
Signing an e-petition	.486	.313
Reading a blog that talked about issues	.471	.357
Sending political e-postcards	.418	.352
Searching for political info online		.950
E-mailing political/issue-oriented organizations		.734
Reading a candidate's blog		.665

DV: Media Use (Pattern Matrix)

	Component		
	1	2	3
Discussion forums	.928		
Blogs	.787		
Social networking site	.548		
Websites affiliated with parties/candidates	.428	.330	
Online news sites		.867	
News aggregators		.817	
Television			.821
Newspapers			.814

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