U.S. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND THEIR POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

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ABSTRACT:

Effective representative democracy requires citizens to be informed and to engage in political discourse. Social media presents new opportunities for students to acquire, share, and comment on civic issues. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways students at one U.S. high school use social media to learn about politics and contribute to civil discourse. A sequential explanatory mixed methods approach was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data from a cross-sectional survey of 195 U.S. high school students. While the vast majority of students used social media multiple times daily, only 17% of students share political content, and 9% post original political content on social media, due primarily to fear of negative responses. Nearly 15% of students revealed they have additional secret (spam or 'finsta') accounts, through which they are more comfortable posting and sharing political content. Findings are limited to a single school U.S. district; however, implications suggest that spam accounts may offer a safer medium for students to engage in political discourse.

KEY WORDS:

'Finstagram', high school students, political socialization, social media, spam accounts, teenagers

Introduction

Effective representative democracy requires citizens not only to be informed but also to engage in political discourse.[1] While only approximately half of eligible voters in the US vote in each national election, civic participation among adolescents is even lower. The younger a person is, the less likely they are to be interested in or knowledgeable about politics.[2] However, the more exposure children have to civics and

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1 See: BARBER, B.: *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age.* Berkeley : University of California Press, 2003; DEWEY, J.: *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education.* New York : Macmillan, 1923.
2 See also: DALTON, R. J.: *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics.* Washington, D.C. : CQ Press, 2009.

politics, the more interested they become,[3] and the more interested students become, the more likely they are to be politically active.[4] Students' interest in civics increases when they engage in discussions over political topics.[5] Effective youth civic engagement typically includes defining and addressing issues of public concern in conjunction with other citizens. Middaugh noted that public discourse requires *"exchanges of information and perspectives with those beyond immediate friends and family"*.[6] Furthermore, students should develop the capacity to present and defend a position with the intent of influencing others.

Civic engagement today is vastly different from a couple of decades ago, primarily due to the digital media culture.[7] Effective democratic citizenship in the digital age requires students to learn new skills and approaches because the contexts are fundamentally different from those in which most teachers were taught.[8] Social media presents new opportunities for students to acquire information about current political events and to engage in dialog.[9] By all accounts, social media provides students with exponentially more opportunities to acquire, share, and comment on civic issues.

Purpose of the Study

Limited research on students' use of social media for civic engagement revealed that students had not taken advantage of these opportunities. Data collected five or more years ago suggests few students shared or generated political content.[10] Use of social media among youth has greatly increased over the past five years, however.[11] In 2015, *Instagram* had 400 million users, and *Snapchat* had 80 million; today there are one billion *Instagram* users and 190 million *Snapchat* users.[12] With more than 90% of teenagers using social media daily,[13] students' use of social media may have changed from studies conducted a few years earlier. It is important to learn more about adolescents' social media habits and the role social media plays in their civic engagement. Accordingly, the purpose of the study was to investigate the following questions:

RQ1: To what extent do 10th-grade students at one U.S. high school use social media to learn about politics?
RQ2: In what ways do 10th-grade students at one U.S. high school use social media to contribute to civic discourse and why?

Political Socialization

Foundational research on effective citizenship includes both participatory and deliberative theories, which suggest that citizens should seek and share information, as well as convey their opinions publicly.[14] The process by which individuals learn social patterns and agencies, and develop their political attitudes and behaviours is called "political socialization".[15] Political socialization requires agency and critical thinking. Bandura's social cognitive theory suggests that when students have agency, such as in selecting from whom and where they receive their news, their quality of life and sphere of influence increases.[16] Guyton's critical thinking and political participation model suggests that critical thinking yields increased political participation and civic efficacy, particularly because students feel some sense of control. Social media provides today's students with control over the news they receive, share, and comment on.[17]

The role social media plays in the political socialization and civic efficacy development of adolescents should be examined through the lens of digital literacy[18] and digital nativism.[19] Martin defined digital literacy as *"the awareness, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse, and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process"*.[20]

Today, responsible citizenship is inextricably connected to digital literacy.[21] Srivastava presciently warned that digital connectivity would become ubiquitous and indispensable.[22] The high school students in this study are among the first group of people to not know life without a smartphone. These digital natives have not only grown up in a world with constant access to information, they have lived in a media-saturated world that neuro scientists suggest affects teens' cognitive and socio-affective neural development.[23]

Methods

Using a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach,[24] we collected quantitative and qualitative data from a cross-sectional survey, which allowed us to study the politics-oriented social media behaviours of all 10th-grade high school students in a single community. We did not collect student ages, but in the U.S., nearly all students turn 16 years old during their 10th-grade school year. Integration of quantitative and qualitative survey data allowed for triangulation and more in-depth understanding of their behaviours.

We (and the classroom teachers) developed a survey with two classes of 11th-grade students. Through small- and whole-group discussions with the students, we wrote questions related to students accessing, sharing, and creating political content online. After piloting and revising the survey with the 11th-grade students, we administered the survey to all 195 10th-grade students at the school.

3   Compare to: COHEN, C. J., KAHNE, J.: *Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action, Youth & Participatory Politics*. Chicago, IL : MacArthur Foundation, 2012.
4   LEVY, B. L., SOLOMON, B. G., COLLET-GILDARD, L.: Fostering Political Interest among Youth during the 2012 Presidential Election: Instructional Opportunities and Challenges in a Swing State. In *Educational Researcher*, 2016, Vol. 45, No. 9, p. 483-495.
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6   MIDDAUGH, E.: More Than Just Facts: Promoting Civic Media Literacy in the Era of Outrage. In *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2019, Vol. 94, No. 1, p. 17-19.
7   VODANOVICH, S., SUNDDARAM, D., MYERS, M.: Research Commentary – Digital Natives and Ubiquitous Information Systems. In *Information Systems Research*, 2010, Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 711-723.
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9   See: KAHNE, J., MIDDAUGH, E., ALLEN, D.: Youth, New Media, and the Rise of Participatory Politics. In ALLEN, D., LIGHT, J. S. (eds.): *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*. Chicago, IL : Chicago University Press, 2015, p. 35-58; MIDDAUGH, E.: More Than Just Facts: Promoting Civic Media Literacy in the Era of Outrage. In *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2019, Vol. 94, No. 1, p. 17-31.
10   See also: COHEN, C. J., KAHNE, J.: *Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action, Youth & Participatory politics*. Chicago, IL : MacArthur Foundation, 2012; RIDEOUT, V.: Measuring Time Spent with Media: The Common Sense Census of Media Use by US 8- to 18-Year-Olds. In *Journal of Children and Media*, 2016, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 138-144; THORSON, K.: Facing an Uncertain Reception: Young Citizens and Political Interaction on Facebook. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 203-216.
11   RICHTER, F.: *Teens' Social Media Use Is Drastically Increasing*. [online]. [2019-06-18]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/chart/15720/frequency-of-teenagers-social-media-use/>.
12   See: CLEMENT, J.: *Number of Daily Active Instagram Users from January 2013 to June 2018*. [online]. [2019-06-18]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>.; CLEMENT, J.: *Number of Daily Active Snapchat Users from 1st Quarter 2014 to 1st Quarter 2019*. [online]. [2019-06-18]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/545967/snapchat-app-dau/>.
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Demographics

The student population came from a convenience sample of one large, rural high school in the upper-Midwest and were 90% White, 6% Native American, and 3% Black. Accordingly, demographic subgroups of the student population were not large enough to measure differences statistically.

Far below the national average of 52% of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch prices,[25] which is a proxy for determining low-socioeconomic status in the U.S., 26.8% of the students in this study qualified for subsidized lunches. Graduation rates average 95%, and students in the district consistently score well above the state average on standardized tests. In short, the high school students in this study are not representative of U.S. students overall, but rather were predominantly White, middle- and upper-middle-class, and high-achieving.

Of the 195 students in the study, 86% had *Instagram* accounts, 78% had *Snapchat*, 59% had *Facebook*, and 27% had *Twitter* accounts. Forty-two percent of the *Instagram* users reported that they checked their accounts 10 or more times per day, with 21% checking *Instagram* 20 or more times per day. Of the *Snapchat* users, 66% checked their accounts 10 or more times per day, and 51% checked their accounts 20+ times daily.

Data

The survey contained a mix of short-answer and open-ended questions. We tabulated results from the quantifiable questions (such as, "How many times do you check *Snapchat* each day?") using simple descriptive statistical procedures. To analyse the students' responses to the extended response qualitative questions, we conducted several rounds of coding, eventually collapsing the codes into 3 - 5 themes for each question and several overarching themes for the entire data set.[26]

Results

Students' News Consumption

When asked in what ways they 'consume' (watch, read about, etc.) the news, students most commonly stated social media (26.5%), followed by national television (23.2%), local TV (22.3%) and online publications (16.5%). Nearly 70% of students reported that they spend less than an hour consuming the news per week, with 43% spending less than 30 minutes per week. Only 15% of the students spend two or more hours per week consuming news.

Student responses to questions about reliability and credibility of sources varied widely; however, a few themes emerged. Students trusted national sources, if for no other reason than those were well-known. For example, one student wrote: *"I trust HLN and NBC because it's what most people watch."* Students commonly stated that traditional national outlets were reliable but did not explain how or why. For example, one student wrote: *"CNN because they give accurate information."* Another student wrote: *"NBC Nightly News because I trust their sources."*

Students expressed great trust in local news sources, primarily because they saw no reason for them to have a bias. One student wrote: *"I mostly rely on local news, like TV6, because they don't have any projected bias to promote when regarding national politics."* Another said: *"Local news because I believe they don't have much of a slant."*

Of the high number of students who trusted a single source for their news, many valued how those sources provided a balanced view. Responses highlighting this theme include: *"Fox News because they show both sides of the story," "NPR because they give both sides of the story,"* and, *"The New York Times is probably the most reliable. They have stories from both conservative and liberal points of view."*

Despite a plurality of students reporting that they get their news from social media, largely, they were sceptical of social media for providing reliable news. For example, one student wrote: *"Social media twists events to make them more drama-filled."* Another student wrote: *"Many stories that are on social media could be very misleading and sometimes not true as we're not hearing it from a voice that millions watch during the week."* Nonetheless, some students recognized the limitations of 'traditional' media and how social media can provide depth and unique perspectives. For example, one student wrote: *"You don't always hear about injustices to minorities through most news sources. I've found out about many things on Twitter that I wouldn't have by reading news articles."*

A number of students explained how it is their responsibility to seek out multiple perspectives on currents events in order to make informed conclusions. For example, one student wrote: *"You need to have multiple sources. More left-wing news sources like CNN will often paint right-wing topics more negatively then they actually are. And more right-wing news sources like FOX will often paint left wing topics more negatively then they actually are. You need to hear all sides of the story to get the whole picture. So, I guess my answer would be a combination of both refutable left-wing and right-wing news. That way you get both sides of the story, and can hopefully put together the situation."* Another student wrote: *"I think it's important to observe the news and draw your own conclusions. I absorb a lot of stuff, and I make decisions based on the information I absorb. Also, it's really not hard to see when a news network is spewing bs. This happens on both sides. I can't take Tucker Carlson, Alex Jones, or Rachel Maddow seriously because I know they have agendas. Take everything with a grain of salt."*

Finally, a handful of students express outright cynicism of all news outlets, with comments like, *"I have not a clue in today's world. It's hard to know what's fake news or not."*

Following Politics on Social Media

When asked to what extent they use social media to follow politics, a vast majority responded that they only follow interesting political figures or do not use social media to follow politics at all. Only 14% said they use social media to search for or follow-up on news stories. Those few students, however, expressed active engagement. For example, one student wrote: *"I try to stay updated on the latest news, so I check my social media constantly to see the latest information."* Another student wrote: *"I have several political pages, blogs, and twitter feeds that I check regularly to stay informed about politics, since social justice and rights is a huge interest of mine."* Some went so far as to describe how they seek out multiple perspectives: *"Sometimes when I hear about something going on in the news, I'll go through social media and see what people are saying, so I can see both sides of the spectrum. I wanna (sic) know what everyone's opinions are about the matter and maybe I can learn more."*

Approximately a quarter of the students said that they followed politicians or political stories, but passively. For example, students provided responses such as: *"I only follow politics on social media when people I follow post something about politics"* and, *"I don't search for it, but if an interesting story about Trump or China or North Korea comes up on my feed, I will watch it."*

Conversely, 63% of students explicitly stated that they do not use social media at all to follow politics. Some students were blunt about actively avoiding politics. For example, one student wrote: *"I don't care about what others think, and I won't try to convince them that they are wrong or right."* Many, however, revealed that avoiding politics online is impossible. For instance, one student said: *"I don't usually use social media to follow politics unless it automatically comes up into my feed."* Another wrote: *"I only see politics on Facebook when old people post about Trump."*

The students were acutely aware of political bias in social media, providing such comments as, *"I believe about 2% of what politics are put online. I chose not to follow politics through social media often, because the*

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25   NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS: *Number and Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-price Lunch*. [online]. [2019-05-23]. Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_204.10.asp?current=yes>.
26   See: SALDANA, J.: *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. New York : Sage, 2015.

posts tend to be very biased" and, *"The thing about politics on social media is that people will create their own little circles on the platform surrounding their points of view. They gather numbers of like-minded individuals, most of which are children since it is in-fact on social media, and they block out all information that disagrees with their point of view. So, they have created their own little bubble, where they only ever see one side of the story. It festers, the ideas becoming more extreme, the claims becoming more and more shotty, and they will still blindly believe everything that pops up in front of them. So, information that is spread through social media is most often heavily biased, hypocritical, blown out of proportion, and many times just a blatant lie."*

Sharing and Posting Political Content

While nearly 2/3 of the students did not use social media to follow politics, even more stated that they never post original content (91%) or share political content (83%) via social media. Students explained that posting political content was not worth the negative reaction it would likely receive. For example, one student wrote: *"I don't want to start a fight or judge me because of my political views,"* and another wrote: *"I don't want to be ridiculed for my stances."*

Some students simply did not want to be bothered or did not find it valuable to share their political beliefs. For example, one student wrote: *"My political stance is nobody else's business."* Another stated: *"I don't want to personally get involved with some else who wants to argue with me since that is just a waste of my time."* Several students made comments acknowledging the rigidity of people's beliefs: *"I usually don't because a lot of my friends don't agree with me politically, and I would not want to lose a friend over something neither of us are willing to change."*

Approximately 10% of students described how they seldom post about political topics, except for when an issue arises about which they feel strongly. For example, one student wrote: *"I rarely make original political posts, but I did during the Kavanaugh hearing."* A select few students described how they post regularly. For example, one student wrote: *"When rights are violated or threatened (such as the Internet lockdown, Black Lives Matter, #metoo, reproductive rights, Pride Month, etc.), I frequently share posts supporting their protection and support."*

Commonly students explained that while they do not post political content widely, they do share articles, links, and memes to select friends and family. Moreover, nearly 15% of students revealed that they have two *Instagram* accounts – their primary account and one 'secret account' (referred to as 'Spam' or 'Finsta' accounts) that is shared only with a select group of friends. One student wrote: *"I never post on my main Instagram account, but I always share political memes and stuff on my spam account."*

Teachers' Use of Social Media in the Classroom

Only 16% of the students reported that their teachers use social media in the classroom. Most of the students who did cite examples recognized the same teacher, an English teacher who taught about perspective and bias. Students highlighted how he showed students how different sources, including *Facebook* and *Twitter*, present political events in diametrically opposing ways. One student wrote: *"He really taught us how social media can affect our ability to discern between real and faux news."*

In their explanations for why their teachers do not use social media in the classroom, two primary themes emerged. First, students expressed that social media can be a distraction. For example, on student stated: *"It would be a great platform to connect with their students, but it hasn't been done with any teachers that I have had probably due to the distractions that social media can pose in the classroom."* Second, students proclaimed that teachers seek to remain neutral in their teaching and are not willing to upset parents. For example, one student wrote: *"In general teachers don't talk about politics because then a student will go home and tell their parents, and then the parent will complain about brainwashing."*

Significance and Implications

Dewey argued that effective democracy requires citizens to exchange ideas and perspectives freely, particularly with those whose perspectives differ from others.[27] In this study, the students were overwhelmingly unwilling to exchange ideas via social media, despite their use of social media as their primary source for news and politics. Previous research[28] revealed students seldom post political content online and tend to become less politically active on social media over time.[29]

Students avoid engaging in political discourse online because they are not willing to face the negative responses they receive from people with different perspectives. Often, the uncomfortable responses come from online 'friends' who are merely acquaintances or classmates, not actual friends. Vitak described the merging of true friends and mere acquaintances from the real world into one's online world as "content collapse".[30] Content collapse creates problems because people present themselves differently in different contexts.[31] Social media posts are self-representations.[32] These self-representations allow individuals to construct a visual or written interpretation of their beliefs and values to share with others. Individuals do not represent themselves the same way with all people, however.

Approximately 15% of the 10th-grade students in this study revealed that they keep a second account, usually an *Instagram* account, referred to as their 'Spam' or 'Finsta' accounts, which they use to share and post to a much smaller number of select friends. Previous research[33] has investigated how and why students use 'Finsta' accounts to post content about drug and alcohol use, explicit photos, and self-deprecating content. Kohler et al. determined that exclusivity and self-expression rather than escapism were the primary reasons teens kept 'Finsta' accounts,[34] and Abrashi determined that college students used 'Finsta' accounts because they could be more authentic, disclosing, and validated.[35]

Conclusion

Social media accounts generally, and 'Finsta' accounts specifically, present a unique juxtaposition: Users seek both privacy and a venue for authentic disclosure of their personal values and beliefs.[36] Befittingly, students can use 'Finsta' accounts as a safer medium to engage in political discourse. Ideally, students would be comfortable enough to share and create content broadly in order to match Dewey's ideals for civic engagement;[37] however, it is clear that the vast majority of adolescents are unwilling to take on that task. 'Finsta' accounts can provide students with opportunities for students to practice expressing and defending

27   See: DEWEY, J.: *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York : Macmillan, 1923.
28   See also: COHEN, C. J., KAHNE, J.: *Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action, Youth & Participatory Politics*. Chicago, IL : MacArthur Foundation, 2012; RIDEOUT, V.: Measuring Time Spent with Media: The Common Sense Census of Media Use by US 8- to 18-Year-Olds. In *Journal of Children and Media*, 2016, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 138-144; THORSON, K.: Facing an Uncertain Reception: Young Citizens and Political Interaction on Facebook. In *Information, Communication & Society*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 203-216.
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33   ANDERSON, D., KARL, I.: *Finstagram: High School Students and Their Private Instagram Accounts*. Paper presented at American Educational Research Association Annual Conference 2019. Toronto, presented on 5th April 2019.
34   KOHLER, B. et al.: *Instagram versus Finstagram: Possible Differences in Motivations and Personality*. Poster presentation at Susquehanna University 2018. Selinsgrove, presented on 4th April 2018.
35   ABRASHI, M.: *The Fake Account for the Real Self*. Poster presentation at Western Washington University 2018. Kalamazoo, presented on 16th May 2018.
36   SUJON, Z.: The Triumph of Social Privacy: Understanding the Privacy Logics of Sharing Behaviors across Social Media. In *International Journal of Communication*, 2018, Vol. 12, p. 3751-3771.
37   See: DEWEY, J.: *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York : Macmillan, 1923.

their ideas.[38] Flanagan et al. warned that standard instruction alone is not enough to advance the political socialization of students: *"Students also need opportunities to work together, to voice their views, and to hear those of fellow students."*[39] Perhaps traditional conceptions of political socialization and civic engagement are outmoded. Social media might provide students with the optimum context to voice and defend their views, find common ground, and respect well-reasoned opposing views of their fellow citizens.

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