

# The Role of Political Efficacy on the Relationship Between Facebook Use and Participatory Behaviors: A Comparative Study of Young American and Chinese Adults

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## Abstract

This comparative study of young adults in an established democracy (America) and transitional democracy (Hong Kong) analyzed the impact of political efficacy on the relationship between Internet/Facebook use on political and civic participation. Regression analyses in both samples showed that Facebook use consistently predicted both types of participation. Moreover, there were significant negative interaction effects of political efficacy and Facebook use on participation, such that the relationship between Facebook use and participation was stronger for those with lower levels of political efficacy. The findings provide cross-cultural support for the argument that social media use among youth can facilitate greater political and civic engagement, particularly for those who perceive that they have limited ability to participate and understand political affairs.

## Introduction

YOUNG ADULTS AROUND THE WORLD are increasingly turning to social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, to affect political and social change.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, research on this demographic and their SNS use is important as political attitudes and behaviors formulated at a young age generally persist into later stages of life.<sup>2</sup> Despite the worldwide popularity of Facebook use, research on its political implications has so far been limited to US samples and data, thereby leaving open the question of whether present theoretical assumptions can be applied to non-US contexts. To address this gap in the literature, this study examines these relationships through a comparative study of users in America and Hong Kong, two cultures with relatively high Internet penetration rates (78.6 percent and 68.7 percent) and Facebook usage (64 percent and 77 percent of Internet users).<sup>3–5</sup> Comparing cultures at different stages of political development can extend the external validity of findings and helps to identify similarities and idiosyncrasies that facilitate classification, hypothesis-testing, and prediction of phenomena within similar political systems.<sup>6</sup> External validity can be further enhanced by comparing the relationships between an individualist and collectivist culture.<sup>7</sup> If the findings do not vary across cultures, then the theoretical argument for the relationships is strengthened.

### *The Internet and SNSs in political and civic participation*

The instrumental explanation of Internet effects argues that particular characteristics of the technology, such as low cost,

easy accessibility, and quantity of information, provides instrumental advantages relative to other forms of media for obtaining information related to politics and current affairs.<sup>8,9</sup> Therefore, it is expected that

**H1a: Internet news use will predict political participation**  
**H1b: Internet news use will predict civic participation**

SNSs, such as Facebook, further facilitate linkages with other people with similar interests in an efficient and cost-effective way. Collective resources, such as social capital, can be accumulated over time as social connections expand, which can foster potential for political and civic engagement as well as mobilization of collective actions.<sup>10</sup> However, previous research on the effects of SNSs on political participation (e.g., campaign supporting activities) and civic participation (e.g., community-based activities) have been less conclusive.<sup>11–13</sup> Given the lack of consensus in the literature on measuring SNS use, a broader measure of general Facebook use is adopted for this study, and it is expected that

**H2a: Facebook use will predict political participation**  
**H2b: Facebook use will predict civic participation**

### *Political efficacy, media, and young adults*

Political efficacy refers to the degree in which an individual believes he or she has the ability to influence the political system.<sup>14</sup> Decades of political efficacy research and measurement has consistently shown a positive relationship with a variety of participatory behaviors.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, young

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adults typically lack the motivation and perceived ability to engage in politics and public affairs<sup>16</sup> and their limited formal learning opportunities in school and university mean that their “political experiences are typically left to happenstance and the influence of individual backgrounds”.<sup>17(p554)</sup> How young people use the media is important because it provides a symbolic environment that helps them “...process and transform transient experiences into cognitive models that serve as guides for judgment and action”.<sup>18(p267)</sup> Previous research in both American and Chinese contexts has shown that Internet use and political efficacy are related.<sup>19,20</sup> Given the media-rich and interactive features of SNSs, they are particularly suited to facilitate experiential learning and positive reinforcement for those who are politically efficacious.

The above reasoning would suggest that the relationship between Internet/SNS use and participatory behaviors will be stronger for those possessing already high levels of political efficacy. However, it is also possible that the relationship will be stronger for those with lower levels of political efficacy, especially in the youth context. This is because young adults with higher levels of political efficacy typically have greater civic resources that are independent of Internet use, such as learning and participatory opportunities provided by their families or organizational affiliations.<sup>21</sup> Their use of Internet and SNSs may not be as great as those with relatively fewer resources at their disposal and have less developed beliefs in their own abilities to influence and change the society, but are nevertheless motivated to engage in politics and public affairs. Greater Internet and SNS use among young adults with lower levels of political efficacy may be a way to compensate for the lack of political and civic learning opportunities available in their everyday lives. Therefore, the following research question is raised:

*RQ1: How do levels of political efficacy among youth affect the relationship between Internet news use/Facebook use and political/civic participation?*

## Method

### Sampling

Journalism and communication students from an American public university on the East Coast and a public university in Hong Kong completed an English online survey. The American sample yielded 168 respondents (61 percent female) with an average age of 20.6 years ( $SD=1.65$ ). The Hong Kong sample yielded 280 valid respondents (57 percent female) with an average age of 20.8 years ( $SD=1.37$ ).

### Operationalization of variables

**Political participation.** Respondents were asked to rank their likelihood to vote in the upcoming elections according to a 5-point Likert scale (1=highly unlikely and 5=very likely): (a) *I will vote in the next presidential election*, and (b) *I will vote in the next Senate/House election*. Hong Kong respondents were asked to indicate their likelihood to vote in the next Chief Executive Election and next Legislative election using the same scale. The items were correlated for both US ( $r=0.60$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Hong Kong ( $r=0.75$ ,

$p<0.001$ ) samples and were combined to form a single measure of political participation.

**Civic participation.** Respondents were asked whether they have participated in the following activities in the past year (Yes or No): (a) Engagement in volunteer work, (b) Participation in fundraising activities, (c) Donations to charities and causes, (d) Participation in professional organizations or associations, (e) Participation in political clubs or organizations, (f) Participation in sports and university clubs, and (g) Participation in religious groups. Affirmative answers were summed to form a composite index of civic participation.

**Political efficacy.** Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with the following according to a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree): (a) I have the ability to make a difference in society, and (b) I have the ability to talk about and participate in public affairs. The items were correlated for both US ( $r=0.39$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Hong Kong ( $r=0.41$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) samples and were combined to form a single measure of political efficacy.

**Discussion of current affairs.** Respondents were asked to indicate their frequency with the following questions according to a 5-point Likert scale (1=Never to 5=A lot):

(a) How often do you talk about current affairs on the news with your family? and (b) How often do you talk about current affairs on the news with your friends? The items were correlated for both US ( $r=0.38$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Hong Kong ( $r=0.46$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) samples and were combined to form a single measure of discussion.

**Media use.** Respondents were asked to indicate their frequency in which they use a variety of media to keep up with current affairs according to a 6-point Likert scale (0=Do not, 1=Less than 15 minutes, 2=15–30 minutes, 3=30–45 minutes, 4=45–60 minutes, 5=More than an hour): (a) On average, how much time each day do you spend reading newspapers? (b) On average, how much time each day do you spend watching TV news? (c) On average, how much time each day do you spend watching cable TV news? (d) On average, how much time each day do you spend following the news on the Internet? (e) On average, how much time each day do you spend on Facebook?

## Results

Table 1 summarizes the means and standard deviations of the variables for both samples. With the exception of TV use, the means for the American sample were higher than the Hong Kong sample. In terms of news exposure, the Internet was the media most often used to follow the news for both samples.

### Predicting political and civic participation

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted and the results are summarized in Table 2. The first block of predictors, comprising demographic, efficacy, discussion, and media use, significantly predicted political participation for the American ( $R=0.49$ ,  $R^2=0.24$ ,  $F(9,158)=5.39$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Hong Kong samples ( $R=0.41$ ,  $R^2=0.17$ ,  $F(9,271)=6.01$ ,

TABLE 1. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF AMERICAN AND HONG KONG SAMPLES

	US (n=168)		Hong Kong (n=280)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Political participation	4.25	1.03	3.52	1.19
Civic participation	3.75	1.84	3.07	1.18
Discuss politics	3.50	0.86	3.12	0.81
Political efficacy	3.28	0.88	2.53	0.74
TV use	2.65	1.59	2.93	1.17
Cable TV use	2.21	1.27	1.95	1.22
Newspaper use	2.40	1.14	2.25	0.80
Internet use	4.18	1.38	3.09	1.30
Facebook use	2.50	1.54	2.09	1.54

$p < 0.001$ ). They also significantly predicted civic participation ( $R = 0.53$ ,  $R^2 = 0.28$ ,  $F(9,158) = 6.93$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and  $R = 0.35$ ,  $R^2 = 0.12$ ,  $F(9,271) = 4.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , respectively). Hypotheses H1a and H1b proposed that Internet news use will predict political participation and civic participation, respectively. The American results were significant ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but the Hong Kong results were not ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.61$  and  $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.72$ ). Hypotheses H2a and H2b proposed that Facebook use will predict political participation and civic participation, respectively. Results were significant for both American ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and Hong Kong ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) samples.

To examine the research question, two interaction terms were created to assess the moderating effects of political efficacy and entered as the second block of variables in each of the models. The combination of predictors significantly predicted political participation for the American ( $R = 0.56$ ,  $R^2 = 0.32$ ,  $F(11,156) = 6.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Hong Kong samples ( $R = 0.48$ ,  $R^2 = 0.23$ ,  $F(11,269) = 7.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). They also sig-

nificantly predicted civic participation ( $R = 0.57$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ ,  $F(11,156) = 6.98$ ,  $p < 0.001$  and  $R = 0.37$ ,  $R^2 = 0.14$ ,  $F(11,269) = 3.81$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , respectively). The efficacy  $\times$  Internet news interactions were significant for political participation in the American ( $\beta = -0.17$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and Hong Kong samples ( $\beta = -0.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but not for civic participation ( $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.12$  and  $\beta = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.90$ , respectively). The efficacy  $\times$  Facebook use interactions were significant for political participation in the American ( $\beta = -0.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and Hong Kong samples ( $\beta = -0.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and civic participation ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and  $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , respectively).

## Discussion

The rapid diffusion and use of Facebook worldwide has prompted scholars to question and explore how the technology can affect political and social changes in different countries and societies. However, much research has been based on US samples and data, which limited theoretical generalization to non-US cultures. This study addresses the gap through a cross-cultural comparison of an individualist and collectivist culture. In general, the results showed that the proposed relationships were consistent in the two cultures despite their different political systems.

The results showed that the use of SNSs (and Internet news use for political participation) can to some extent counter the lack of real-world civic resources available to young adults by providing an accessible source of information as well as a space for like-minded people to meet, discuss, or even coordinate on participatory actions. Such a conclusion is tentative and would require more research to ascertain what actual resources are available to such individuals. At the minimum, the findings demonstrate the importance of SNSs for youth participation in political and civic life relative to other media channels.

Of course, there were a few idiosyncratic differences between young students in America and Hong Kong. While

TABLE 2. PREDICTORS OF POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES AND HONG KONG

	Political Participation		Civic Participation	
	US	HK	US	HK
Block 1				
Age	-0.20**	0.04	-0.10	0.12*
Gender (1 = male)	-0.05	0.06	0.14*	0.11*
Discuss politics	0.24**	0.15*	0.18*	0.04
Political efficacy	0.12	0.02	0.31***	0.12*
TV news use	-0.13	0.11 <sup>#</sup>	-0.18 <sup>#</sup>	0.08
Cable TV news use	0.11	-0.01	-0.06	0.09
Newspaper use	0.07	0.21***	0.09	0.04
Internet news use	0.19*	0.03	0.23**	0.02
Facebook use	0.17*	0.16**	0.15*	0.16**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.14	0.24	0.09
Block 2				
Political efficacy $\times$ Internet news	-0.17*	-0.13*	-0.12	0.01
Political efficacy $\times$ Facebook use	-0.20**	-0.20***	-0.16*	-0.12*
R <sup>2</sup> change	0.08	0.06	0.04	0.01
Final adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.27	0.20	0.28	0.10
	N = 168	N = 280	N = 168	N = 280

<sup>#</sup> $p < 0.08$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

All betas are standardized coefficients.

both Internet news and Facebook use predicted political and civic participation in the American sample, only Facebook use predicted the behaviors in the Hong Kong sample. This can be due to their relatively lower use of Internet news and the availability of political content in the Hong Kong online news environment. These findings illustrate the importance of further cross-cultural research to test theories and assumptions on the effects of the Internet.

Several limitations and suggestions for further research should be noted. First, to get a greater understanding of how Facebook use influences participation, it is necessary to take into account the different kinds of uses of SNSs as well as types of participation. Second, more representative samples of the student population may provide further evidence of the relationships found in this study. Third, the cross-sectional nature of this study cannot account for causality among the variables. Panel or longitudinal studies will provide a clearer picture of the mutual influences between political efficacy and SNS use.

### Author Disclosure Statement

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