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ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee

Brandon Cordell Waite
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Abstract

The optimistic vision of the Internet as an “electronic agora” has been a common theme of discourse among scholars studying the impacts of computer technology on everyday life. In opposition to this view stand pessimistic scholars who insist that meaningful democratic discourse must be direct and claim that the Internet, like television, is reshaping our lives in decidedly antidemocratic and asocial ways. The present study contributes to this debate by examining online social networks to better understand their potential impact on society. Data were collected via a web-based survey using a convenience sample of 170 students from the University of Tennessee. The results of this study suggest that through their socializing efforts, members of online social networks have the potential to enrich their lives by connecting to society, increasing the diversity of their friendships, and collecting and disseminating political information. The findings herein are likely to be of particular interest to 1) academics studying the effects of Web 2.0 technologies on society, 2) political activists and strategists interested in using such technologies to communicate with and mobilize young adults, and 3) social scientists studying political socialization.

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Terms, Abbreviations and Definitions

Blog

- An abridgment of web log, or a website maintained by an individual that typically contains text, images and links to other blogs.

Civic Political Participation

- This form of political participation rests on the activities and responsibilities of citizenship including voting, taking part in political associations, and taking political actions.

Cognitive Political Participation

- The attempt to make sense of political life. This includes taking an interest in politics, considering the obligations of citizens to each other and the government, and evaluating the government.

Expressive Political Participation

- The public expression and discussion of one's political orientation.

Facebook

- An OSN predominantly populated by university students, including those at the University of Tennessee from which the sample population was obtained.

Internet Paradox

- When Internet technologies that have the potential to connect citizens actually reduce offline interactions.

MySpace

- The most populated OSN in the United States. Many Facebook members also maintain MySpace accounts in order to keep in touch with friends who didn't go to college (and thus are unlikely to maintain an account on Facebook).

Online Social Networks (OSN)

- A web-based Internet software application that enables registered members to 1) personalize a profile page with pictures, videos and text; 2) find and link to other members' profile pages on the network; and 3) send and receive communications on the network. It is hypothesized that OSN's exercise network users' mental "muscles" that support the formation and expression of political habits and values.

Online Social Networking

- The process of engaging in the aforementioned network activities by OSN members/users.

OSN Members

- The term member and user are used interchangeably. One must register with the website and become, free of charge, a member of the network in order to establish a profile page and use the functions of the OSN. The essence of OSN's is participation, rather than simple membership.

Political Capital

- This term refers to the skills individuals obtain from reciprocal discourse involving political information essential to the cognitive, expressive and civic participation of citizens in democratic societies.

Social Capital

- L.J. Hanifan coined this term referring to "those tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people; namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit" (Putnam, 2000).

Web 2.0

- A term used to describe Web-based Internet technologies that act as a platform, enabling users to generate content (e.g., disseminate information) and collaborate with other users. Examples include blogs, OSN's and wikis.

Wiki

- Collaborative websites that enable users to modify content. Wikipedia.com is a popular example of a wiki.

Introduction

The Agora of ancient Athens was a political, commercial, administrative, religious, social, and cultural marketplace of ideas and information. Originating from this birthplace of ancient Greek democracy, the term "agora" refers to a particular kind of social place where certain democratic practices, namely discussion and deliberation, take place. Such practices produce norms like goodwill, sympathy and fellowship that are widely believed to benefit democratic states.

The optimistic vision of the Internet as an "electronic agora" has been a common theme of discourse among scholars studying the impacts of computer technology on everyday life. These scholars argue that meaningful democratic participation does not have to be direct (face-to-face), but rather that the Internet is *itself* a democratic institution. This theme has become more popular after the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, including online social networks (OSN's), wikis, and blogs, enabling collaboration between Internet users.

In opposition to this view stand pessimistic scholars who insist that meaningful democratic discourse must be direct and claim that the Internet, like television, is reshaping our lives in decidedly antidemocratic and asocial ways. However, by neglecting questions of agency these scholars have been criticized for failing to examine the ways in which Internet users might realize more progressive uses of technology.

Profile-based OSN's like MySpace and Facebook have become immensely popular in tens of millions of American homes, and are growing in popularity abroad. As this occurs, it becomes increasingly important for political scientists, sociologists and

network analysts to examine whether OSN's contribute to, or hinder, the development of social capital. The present study contributes to this debate by examining OSN's to better understand their potential impact on society by answering three broad sets of questions. The initial questions are systematic. The sub-questions deal with OSN members' uses of the networks.

First, this study seeks to determine the extent to which OSN's function as "communities" that contain networks of reciprocal social relations. How are OSN members using the networks to socialize with each other? What drives Internet users to join an OSN? What OSN's are they drawn to and why? How much time do members spend on OSN's and how is that time spent? Are OSN members using their networks to connect to their friends, family and community? Are they bridging disparate segments of society or merely bonding homogenous groups?

Second, this study seeks to determine the extent to which online social networks are being used to gather and disseminate political information. What topics do OSN members discuss on the networks? Do OSN members visit, or link to, the profile pages of political actors? Do they display their support for politicians on their own profile page? Do OSN's affect their members' interest in politics?

Third, this study seeks to determine whether network norms are likely to foster OSN members' civic engagement? What political values and habits do OSN network members have? What political or social actions do network members participate in? Are OSN members likely to vote?

The findings herein suggest that many of the same basic qualities associated with geographic (face-to-face) communities can be found on OSN's, including dense and

demanding ties. Rather than alienating their members from society, as many fear Internet technologies might do, it appears that OSN's enable their members to increase their social connections. While homophily appears to exist on OSN's, in similar ways as offline social networks, it appears that after joining an OSN members tend to increase the diversity of their friendships. The data suggest that those who increase their connections to society as a result of their OSN membership, as well as those who discuss politics on their networks, are the most likely to increase their friendship diversity.

My findings also suggest that OSN members are using their networks to collect and disseminate political information. A significant number of OSN members surveyed reported that they discuss several political topics including American politics, world news, political activism, and religion. This was particularly true of respondents who displayed political cues on their profile, who increased the diversity of their friendships after joining an OSN, and who visited political actors' profiles.

In some cases, my findings cause me to temper my optimism. For example, on the whole it cannot be said that OSN's are increasing their members' interest in politics. While this is true for some members, particularly those with the lowest levels of political interest, it does not hold true across a majority of the sampled population. Likewise, it cannot be said that OSN's increase their members' participation in associations. However, the data suggest that, with the exception of religious organizations, more individuals join associations than quit them after becoming a member of an OSN.

In other cases, my findings give rise for optimism. For example, it appears that respondents, on the whole, tended to increase their occurrence of taking political actions after joining an OSN. Based on survey responses, it appears that those who discuss

politics on their networks, those who display political cues on their profile, those who have visited a political actors' profile page, those who belong to more than one OSN and older members are most likely to increase their occurrence of taking political actions. Finally, I was pleased to find out that 99% of the respondents surveyed in this study planned on voting in the upcoming presidential election.

These findings will be particularly interesting to political scientists trying to understand the role of technology in the political socialization of American youth. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the concept of social capital and its importance in democratic societies. Chapter 2 focuses on the emergence of online communities, particularly OSN's like MySpace and Facebook, and outlines the author's research expectations. Chapter 3 presents the research method and describes the sample of OSN members surveyed for this study. Chapter 4 contains study's results and the author's analysis followed by a conclusion that illuminates several paths for future research.

Chapter 1: Social Capital Research

Communities

Scholars from across a wide range of disciplines have found useful the concept of "community." However, the treatment of the term has not been consistent. Cohen (1985) suggests that members of a community must be able to distinguish themselves from non-members. This implies that boundaries exist. Geographic (e.g., able to be marked on a map), administrative and legal boundaries are the easiest to identify. Other boundaries "may be thought of, rather, as existing in the minds of the beholders" (Cohen 1985, 12). The emphasis on subjectivity, in which individual members' (and non-members') perceptions of community may differ, highlights the symbolic aspect of community.

Others focus less on boundaries and more on interactions. Individuals within a defined boundary may have very little to do with each other. Conversely, individuals who work together, but reside in different locals, may form very tight relationships. Lee and Newby (1983) argue that the relationships between individuals and the social networks in which they belong are more important than merely their inclusion in a defined population. Scholars who take this approach often focus on network size and density in their examinations of community.

Finally, there are scholars who emphasize the expectations and obligations of those in a social network that lead to the "integration and fulfillment of needs" among those in a social network (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Networks that form as a result of individuals interacting with other individuals not only build a sense of self and individuality, but also assist us in meeting the demands and contingencies of everyday

living (Allan 1996). For the purpose of this study, I shall use Bender's definition of community that accounts for boundaries, social interactions and obligations: "A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation" (Bender 1982). These traits are important for generating "social capital" among members of a society.

"Social Capital" as a Concept

By the end of the nineteenth century, theorists like Tönnies (1887), Durkheim (1893, 1897) and Weber (1958) began to notice the erosion of traditional social ties and questioned how Western societies undergoing political and economic modernization could maintain social order and cohesion. Changes in the nature of sexual relationships, parenting and female labor force participation that accompany industrialization are believed to threaten the salience of the family and other "primordial" institutions as important features of social organization (Coleman 1993). Many scholars suggest that a number of postindustrial societies are suffering as a result of inferior social support networks that link individuals to one another and to their communities (Lane 2000; Cox 2002; Hall 2002; Rothstein 2002; Worms 2002).

Interest in developing social networks that enrich communities has grown dramatically in recent years, following the works of prominent scholars like Robert Bellah and Robert Putnam. In *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Bellah and his associates argue that the rise of a new, utilitarian type of individualism is threatening traditional forms of interaction based on co-operation and close-knit social ties, or 'habits of the heart', within

small communities. This thesis was systematically tested in Putnam's (2000) academic best-seller, *Bowling Alone*. In it, Putnam argues that social capital and civic engagement in America are in decline. To buttress his argument, the author points to a wide variety of indicators including measures for voter turnout, general feelings of trust amongst citizens, attendance of club meetings, and of course, the number of individuals joining bowling leagues. All of which, he points out, are in decline.

As Karl van Meter points out, the cognitive mapping of social capital reveals "little coherence and few clear divisions" (van Meter 1999). However, variations in the definition of social capital almost always include connections among people and organizations, or networks. Putnam traces the notion of social capital back to Lyda Hanifan's examination of rural school community centers (1916; 1920). According to Hanifan, social capital amounts to "those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people" (1916, pp. 130). Likewise, Bourdieu (1983) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (pp. 249). Coleman (1988, 1993) stresses that social capital is defined by its function. "Like other forms of capital," he states, "social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (1988, pp. 96). But by far the most quoted scholar on the subject of social capital is Harvard professor Robert Putnam, who emphasizes the moral underpinning of how one interacts with others in a society.

> In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue.' The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense of

> network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (Putnam 2000, pp. 19).

The central thesis of social capital theory is that individuals and societies benefit from the sense of belonging, and the concrete experiences of trust and tolerance, found in social networks. Many of the authors developing early measures of social capital were, indeed, network analysts (Frank and Yasumoto 1998; Lin 1999; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Rose 1999; Snijders 1999; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). However, scholars from a diverse and growing range of fields have found the notion of social capital useful in their academic pursuits.

Networks that facilitate individual and collective action have been linked to economic opportunities (Aguilera 2003, 2005; Baron and Markman 2003; Eby 2001; Fafchamps and Minten 2002; Granovetter 1973; White 1991), healthy business relationships (Wilson 2000), and strong economies (Fukuyama 1995a,b; Whiteley 1997). Research also suggests that strong social networks benefit one's mental health (Baum et al 2000; Brown and Harris 1978; Durkheim 1897; Easterlin 1974; Helliwell 2003, 2006; Kawachi and Berkman 2000; Rose 2000; Sherbourne et al 1995; Williams et al 1981; Veenstra 2000). Likewise, studies suggest that social networks can impact an individual's physical health (Avlund et al 1998, Berkman and Glass 2000; Vogt et al 1992). These studies suggest that going to church or being a member of some other voluntary association is likely to result in positive, subjective well-being (Argyle 1987; Putnam 2000).

Criminologists have begun to focus on social capital because "it ties together a thread of causal explanations across existing theories, and potentially bridges a long-

standing division in criminology between micro- (psychological) and macro- (sociological) approaches" (Halpern 2005, 114). Studies suggest that one's environment and networks have a substantial effect on their offending behavior (Sampson and Laub 1993; Leffert and Peterson 1995). Shared in these networks are norms that have both a direct and an indirect effect on the occurrence of crime (Gilligan 1996; Berkman and Kawachi 2000; Galea, Karpati and Kennedy 2002). As Halpern (2005) explains, "pro-social behavior or offending emerges not just from an individual but from a whole fabric of actions, relationships and shared understandings" (140).

The concept of social capital has become particularly salient within the field of political science. Classic communitarian theorists have long argued that vibrant communities are essential for individual and collective well-being in a society (Almond and Verba 1963; Etzioni 1993; Walzer 1990). The support one gains from their social networks decreases the amount of formal support needed from the state, which is costly and typically less effective. Scholars have also shown great interest in linking social capital with the performance of local and regional government (Cusack 1999; Knack 2002; Krishna 2002; O'Brien et al 1998; Putnam 1993; Schafft and Brown 2000). Despite making decision processes more time-consuming, increased public input and participation are typically seen as positive forces in local democratic governance. But citizens must not be threatened by each other if they are to be tolerant of others' efforts to participate in politics (Sullivan and Transue 1999). Decreasing levels of social trust increase the importance of trust in government leaders and institutions as a means of facilitating compromises (Halpern 2005). Not surprisingly, there is strong evidence that certain measures of social capital, namely social trust (trust between strangers), are

associated with more effective and less corrupt government (Inkeles 2000). For example, nations with high social trust typically have lower rates of corruption, higher tax compliance and better bureaucratic performance (La Porta et al 1997).

The Creation and Destruction of Social Capital

Psychologists have found very little evidence that social traits central to the concept of social capital, such as agreeableness and trust, are a product of our genes (Halpern 2005). Rather, it is generally believed that such traits are mainly a product of learning and socialization. Levels of social and civic engagement have been linked to a number of environmental factors including education, family structure, residential trends, age and generation characteristics, as well as the consumption of technology and mass media (Costa and McRae 1988).

Education and social capital are inextricably linked (Field et al 2000). On the one hand, formal educational attainment is the number one predictor of virtually all forms of civic engagement. As an individual achieves more years of education, they tend to maintain more diverse social networks, be more trusting of their fellow citizens, and be more involved in their community (Bynner and Egerton 2001; Hall 1999; Putnam 2000). Attending college is associated with a particularly strong boost in social trust, tolerance, and civic engagement in individuals (Halpern 2005). On the other hand, people's networks likely affect their opportunities for informal education. For example, those with stronger and more extensive network ties are more likely to have the ability to create and exchange skills, knowledge and attitudes than those with weaker and less extensive network ties (Field 2003, 2005; Green *et al* 2003). Likewise, research suggests that

parents' social activities promote children's school attainments (Büchel and Duncan 1998; Crosnoe 2004). It is important for those researching networking and adult education to note that the key actors—enterprises, workers, and civil society—remain outside the direct control of government, which must act as a facilitator rather than solely a vehicle of service delivery (Field 2000).

Family characteristics are also important given that they form the context within which individuals first learn to trust others. According to attachment theory (Bowlby 1988), trusting relationships extend from the family into wider circles of life. Conversely, disrupted, or abusive family relationships early in one's life tend to lead to negative effects later in life (Hall 1999; Sampson and Laub 1993). Evidence suggests that levels of social capital tend to be lower for children from single-parent families, given that the loss or withdrawal of a parent—often the father—deprives the child of their emotional presence (Jonsson and Gahler 1997). Furthermore, teenage mothers, whose partners tend to be less reliable and more abusive, typically have smaller and more impoverished social networks for their child to be socialized in (Moffitt 2002). On the other hand, parents who provide a loving home, and who are politically and socially engaged, tend to raise children with higher levels of civic engagement, social trust, and political knowledge (Halpern et al 2002).

Scholars also suggest that trends in habitation impact one's networks. For example, residential mobility is negatively correlated with social capital (Crutchfield et al 1982; Kang and Kwak 2003; Lindstrom et al 2002; Sampson et al 1997; Sampson et al 1999; Teachman et al 1996). When individuals do not live in an area for any significant length of time, they tend not to get to know their neighbors. This same scenario can

emerge as a result of the alienation and loneliness of large cities as well. Likewise, when urban sprawl forces people to have to commute long distances to work, shop and enjoy leisure opportunities, they have less time to become involved in voluntary associations within their communities (Duany et al 2000). This is particularly true for dual-income families.

Different age groups also show unique patterns of social and civic engagement. Putnam (2000) found that older individuals are "typically more active in more organizations, attend church more often, vote more regularly, both read and watch the news more frequently, are less misanthropic and more philanthropic, are more interested in politics, work on more community projects, and volunteer more" (pp. 248) than do younger individuals. One reason suggested for these differences is that older individuals tend to have stronger ties to their neighborhood, whereas younger people tend to have larger networks of friends that experience greater turnover (Halpern 2005). Implicit in these findings are that individuals change, but societies as a whole do not. In other words, "if successive cohorts generally retrace the same ups and downs as they age, we can be reasonably sure that we are observing a life cycle pattern" (Putnam 2000, 248).

However, Putnam suggests that this is not the case. Baby boomers and their successors have not followed the same ascending civic path traced by previous generations. Rather, Putnam suggests that the decline of civic engagement in America is attributable to the replacement of an unusually civic generation by successive generations that are less embedded in community life. These successive generations are more likely to feel the pressures of time and money that accompany two-career families, as well as the potentially devastating effects of such pressures like divorce. Successive generations

are also more likely to be affected by suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl. Finally, the effect of electronic entertainment, particularly television, has privatized the leisure time of younger adults.

According to Putnam (2000), Americans who watch a lot of television are less likely to read newspapers, trust their neighbors less and are less engaged in their communities. The marked increase in television watching since the late 1950s helps to explain generational differences in social capital. According to Halpern (2005), television may be problematic for social capital, "because there is so much of it; or because having so many channels undermines its character as a collective experience; or because of the high volume of commercials" (pp. 256). Some have suggested that channel-surfing induces one to maintain superficial friendships (Putnam 2000) and may even cause individuals to fail in distinguishing between real friends and the fictitious ones they see on their favorite television shows (Kanazawa 2002). At the very least, these scholars agree that television brings us home, decreasing our social interactions with friends and neighbors. One could argue that television strengthens families by providing a common source of entertainment, but given the amount of graphic sex and violence on television, families cannot even watch the medium together, resulting in even greater alienation. Many believe that Internet use exacerbates these impediments to social cohesion.

Reactions to the Decline Thesis

The decline thesis has sparked fierce academic opposition from a number of scholars. On one side are the 'modernists' who are often accused of being nostalgic for the 1950s and 1960s, and the traditional forms of sociability and political behavior of the

era. On the other side stand 'postmodernists' who are typically more optimistic about the prospects for creating new opportunities and possibilities for civic engagement. As Stolle and Hooghe (2004) explain, "the 'modernists' seem to perceive the rise of a new generation of 'critical citizens' as a threat to democratic stability, the 'postmodernists' see them as an indication of the maturity of our political system" (pp. 150).

Some scholars question the data and methods to support the decline thesis (Schudson 1996). For example, Ladd (1996, 1999) and Paxton (1999) found that while generalized trust has been eroding, levels of trust in institutions and associational membership have remained steady. In another critique, McDonald and Popkin (2001) point out that the U.S. Bureau of the Census calculates voter turnout by comparing the number of cast votes with the total number of residents in the voting age population. Given that the percentage of non-citizens has been growing faster than the eligible voting population, scholars may be left with the false impression that voter participation is declining. Another problem, acknowledged by Norris (2002), is that scholars typically assume that social capital functions as a conglomerate of behaviors and attitudes, despite the fact that all social capital indicators are not diminishing in the same way. Some argue that the various aspects of social interactions, civic attitudes and engagement, do not necessarily form a "syndrome" (Stolle and Hughe 2003, 2004).

Other scholars accept the decline thesis, but unlike Putnam they do not believe that the decline is a threat to the viability of democratic systems (Welzel et al 2003). Namely, they reject the normative assumptions of communitarian scholars who claim that face-to-face interactions are necessary for political stability and a well-functioning democracy. Rather, they argue that the political system has learned to function despite the

scrutiny of critical citizens (Inglehart 1997; Norris 2002). For example, Inglehart (1999) argues that the shift from values like trust and obedience to more self-expressive and post-materialist values such as tolerance, freedom and individuality among younger generations actually makes those generations democratic in a new way.

Replacement, Not Disengagement

By the turn of the century, a great deal of debate had centered around the effect of Internet use on interpersonal connectivity (DiMaggio et al 2001; Etzioni, 2001; Katz and Rice, 2002 Sproull and Keisler, 1991; Uslaner, 2000). Three contradictory findings were reported: 1) Social ties decrease with Internet use, 2) Social ties increase with Internet use, and 3) Social ties neither increase nor decrease with Internet use (Wellman et al 2001).

Kraut et al. (1998) described an "Internet paradox" whereby the Internet, a technology for social contact, actually led to the reduction of offline social ties. According to the authors, "greater use of the Internet was associated with subsequent declines in the size of both the local social circle and, marginally, the size of the distant social circle" (p. 1025). This notion was later supported by Nie's (et al 2002) time diary study wherein "on average, the more time spent on the Internet, the less time spent [offline] with friends, family, and colleagues" (p. 238).

Interestingly, in a follow-up study of their earlier sample, Kraut (et al 2002) found the exact opposite of what they had previously reported. Rather, Internet use strengthened immediate and distant ties. These findings complemented research done by Robinson (et al 2002) who found that Internet users were likely to spend more time communicating

face-to-face and over the phone with family and friends compared to those who did not use the Internet.

Sandwiched between these contradictory findings are those of scholars who found that "Internet contact neither increases nor decreases contact with people in person or on the telephone" (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002, p. 28). Their study suggests that the Internet is supplementing traditional forms of communication rather than threatening communication itself. Likewise, Koku (et al 2001) concluded that much like the telephone the Internet is more useful for maintaining existing ties than for creating new ones.

These contradictory findings led to the examination of differential impacts of different types of Internet usage on social connectivity. Research has demonstrated that solitary activities, like Web surfing or music downloading, are negatively associated with social ties. On the other hand, social activities that involve direct contact with other people, like email and chat, are positively correlated with social ties (Zhao 2006). The nature of civic engagement is shaped by these new social activities on the Internet.

There are four basic models of individual civic engagement (Kearns, 2005). The first consists of *direct engagement* whereby an individual acts alone to influence society and government. Their influence is limited by their capacity. The second consists of *grassroots engagement* whereby individuals act as part of a loose coalition that collects the necessary resources to implement action. This model typically lacks a top-down hierarchical structure and is usually localized. The third model is one of *organizational advocacy* whereby a particular organization serves as a conduit for engagement between individuals and policy-making entities. These organizations recruit and manage

volunteers and leaders while at the same time developing governance structures to manage resources like staff, reputation, political access, and funds.

Web 2.0 technologies have the potential to foster a fourth kind of individual civic engagement consisting of *network-centric advocacy*. This hybrid model combines the individual determination and participation of direct and grassroots models with the efficiency of the organizational model. It is characterized by communications technologies that allow dense social ties to "provide the synchronizing effects, prioritization and deployment roles of the organization" (Kearns, 2005).

Such forms of participation and interaction appear to be replacing traditional forms of cohesion and engagement that Putnam found to be in decline. Theda Skocpol (2003) argues that a shift, rather than simply a decline, has taken place from membership mobilization to managerial forms of civic organizing. As she explains:

> After 1960 epochal changes in racial ideals and gender relationships delegitimated old-line U.S. membership associations and pushed male and female leaders in new directions. New political opportunities and challenges drew resources and civic activists toward centrally managed lobbying. Innovative technologies and sources of financial support enabled new, memberless models of association building to take hold. And finally, shifts in American class structure and elite careers created a broad constituency for professionally managed organizing…The most privileged Americans can now organize and contend largely among themselves, without regularly engaging the majority of citizens (pp. 178).

As technology blurs the distinction between citizen as a lone individual and citizen as a joiner, scholars have pressed for an alternative analytical framework for civic engagement based on small-group interactions. This micro-level approach emphasizes local interaction contexts by treating small groups as a cause, context, and consequence of civic engagement. As Fine and Harrington (2004) explain,

> First, through framing and motivating, groups encourage individuals to participate in public discourse and civic projects. Second, they provide the place and support for that involvement. Third, civic engagement feeds back into the creation of additional groups. A small-groups perspective suggests how civil society can thrive even if formal and institutional associations decline. Instead of indicating a decline in civil society, a proliferation of small groups represents a healthy development in democratic societies, creating cross-cutting networks of affiliation (p. 341).

Thus, communitarians who merely focus on the disappearance of traditional mechanisms may be neglecting emerging participation styles and methods (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003). Whereas individualism has been described as isolation and alienation by some observers (Kraut et al 1998; Nie, 2001), it may be that the projects and desires of the individual have created a pattern of self-directed networking that actually *reduce* feelings of isolation and alienation. When making utopian or dystopian claims about technology scholars often fail to specify the kind of technology (e.g., automation, transportation, or communication), the specific modes (e.g., broadcast or interpersonal), and specific practices (e.g., email, messaging, or voice chat) that they refer to. Furthermore, scholars often treat such technologies as either completely neutral (apolitical) tools controlled by humans or as completely autonomous machines reshaping human activity whilst we remain helpless. The relationship between humans and technology, however, is far more complex.

Technology has increasingly enabled Americans from all backgrounds to organize among themselves without the help of old-line U.S. membership associations. Examples include massively distributed collaboration (electronic mailing lists and blogs), webrings (collections of websites organized around a specific theme), and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs; for example, online Dungeons and Dragons or

World of Warcraft). These new mechanisms for social interaction share a number of common characteristics. First, they tend to rely less on structured ideologies and more on emotional and personal motivations (Goodwin et al 2002). They also favor horizontal and flexible organizational structures rather than hierarchical and bureaucratic ones (Wuthnow 1998). As Castells (2000) points out, such structures tend to be better adapted to the needs of information-driven societies. Also, life-style issues, rather than institutional affairs, like party politics, are being politicized by these new mechanisms (Bennett 1998). Referred to as "sub-politics" by some, daily life decisions, including consumer habits, are increasingly taking on a strong political meaning (Beck 1996; Eliasoph 1998).

Many of these new mechanisms for sub-political participation tend to rely on technologies that enable apparently spontaneous and irregular mobilization with no leadership or membership. This amounts to something akin to organized coincidence. Timothy Mack, managing editor of *Futures Research Quarterly*, explains:

> Some of the expressions of this capability have been of a rather frivolous nature, such as the Flash Mob fad in the summer of 2003, i.e., group "performance art" displays in public places characterized by sudden gatherings, random orchestrated acts and equally sudden dispersal—all coordinated on the Internet. A more serious example is the coordination of political civil disobedience against WTO and globalization in 1999, now known as the "Battle in Seattle," which used cell phones and Web sites to coordinate swarming attacks on specified sites around that city (2004, pp. 63).

The disorganized nature of such events free the movement from the structural costs associated with a centralized, hierarchical organization. The only requirement is a sufficient turnout to create a "critical mass" of individuals capable of raising awareness of their inherently political issues. Despite the lack of formal structure, the emphasis is

still on direct, collective action. Perhaps the most infamous critical mass events are held by bicyclists who, on the last Friday of every month in cities around the world, spontaneously take to the streets *en masse* to draw attention to how unfriendly many cities are to those not traveling by automobile. Rather than obtaining permits and official sanction from municipal authorities, the riders simply take to the streets in peaceful, two-wheeled protest. Due to the lack of leadership, authorities and policymakers have been frustrated in their attempts to coordinate with these critical mass participants.

Other forms of neo-participation may be less collective and group-oriented than traditional forms. For example, passing along an email about genocide in Darfur or buying local products rather than those that have been imported can be performed alone in front of a computer screen, or in a supermarket. Likewise, the number of self-help and checkbook-based social movements has increased (Halpern 2005).

In *Being Digital* (1995), Nicholas Negroponte characterizes four elements of personal computing and the Internet. The first is decentralization. Management information systems are no longer controlled by managers and bureaucratic gatekeepers, but rather give way to means of direct access.

The second is that globalization is making it increasingly difficult for nation states to prevent the incursion of unwanted outside influences. Technologies like personal computers and the Internet are reaching every corner of the globe. While a digital divide still exists between the rich and poor, urban and rural, as well as developed and undeveloped nations, enormous efforts at diminishing this divide are being undertaken. For example, a nonprofit project called One Laptop Per Child has made tentative agreements with Argentina, Brazil, Libya, Nigeria and Thailand to put computers into the

hands of millions of students. Loans and grants provided by partners like the Inter-American Development Bank allow these computers, which cost only $150, to become widely available (Markoff, 2006). As this happens, the economic and cultural landscapes of these countries are likely to change.

A third characteristic identified by Negroponte is the growing harmony among new generations raised with a borderless Internet. Not only are they comfortable with multiple viewpoints and lifestyles, they also have a new sense of community. This characteristic is particularly salient given the challenges that affect the entire world such as global warming, food and water shortages and ethnic strife.

Together, these traits promote the fourth characteristic of personal computing and the Internet: empowerment. It is this sense of empowerment that has many scholars optimistic about the role of Web 2.0 technologies in participatory democracies. As the Internet becomes an increasingly accessible social sphere, it has the potential to change the nature of democratic space.

Democratic Space on the Internet

In their discussions of *democratic space*, scholars routinely address issues of size and typically fall into one of two broad camps: those "that spatialize elite variants of a representative form of democracy in large-scale societies" and "those that spatialize a more egalitarian notion of direct democracy in local communities" (Saco 2002, 41). Both presuppose that physical space and political agency are separate, but correlated, dimensions fixed to each other. "Physical space (large or small) simply confronts political agents (individual or communal), whose own natures are shaped by whether or

not the size of the polity affords them the opportunity to meet face-to-face…" (Saco 2002, 41). What isn't clear is whether or not meeting face-to-face *itself* is the issue or if the issue is a problem of communication in a broader sense. If the latter, citizens and policymakers are likely to welcome the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies that facilitate the exchange of information and ideas.

In *Strong Democracy*, Benjamin Barber (1984) argues that political size is relative both to psychology and to technology given that political community is a human network rooted in communication. Barber went so far as to argue that television could be adopted as a civic medium that could be used to mediate democratic politics. While such a claim may have seemed far-fetched at one time, recent user-generated content sites like YouTube.com are changing the nature of television news programming. For example, in 2006 CNN launched iReport, allowing viewers to submit their own video footage, pictures, and comments. Likewise, in 2007 YouTube sponsored televised Republican and Democratic debates wherein ordinary people submitted questions via video through YouTube. Facebook sponsored similar Democratic and Republican debates. As Katharine Q. Seelye (2007) of the *New York Times* explains,

> Through the viral nature of the Web, highlights from the debate are likely to get deep penetration in cyberspace. And videos being aired during this debate will likely magnify the audience because some of them will be picked up, linked to, replayed and commented upon by the mainstream media.

Not everyone has embraced technology as a means of facilitating democratic ideals. Some, such as Masciulli (et al 1988), have challenged Barber claiming that he substitutes "mere familiarity" with the kind of "rooted intimacy and transparency" necessitated in Rousseau's ideal of democracy (157). The question at hand is how

individuals can develop a stake in solidarity and collective action given a pluralist context in which individuality is fostered.

Communitarians, such as Barber, emphasize intimacy, empathy, kinship, and community as the basis for democratic politics. However, other scholars argue that such notions of empathy do not promote a plurality of different perspectives, but rather lead to an effort to embrace the singular perspective of an "Other" through a process of empathy. (Saco, 2002) For example, in *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt argues that the Greeks were not concerned with bodily necessity, or what she calls a "prepolitical phenomenon" (31), but rather distinguished themselves as unique individuals by publicly taking a stand on the issues of the day. In other words, Arendt posits that political space is independent of the body and its necessities. The point here is that self-disclusure, or *who* we are, is more important to democratic theory than assertions of *what* we are. Thus, speech and action, not physical presence, are necessary for political deliberation. As Arendt makes clear, "not Athens, but Athenians, were the *polis*" (195). Our physical bodies are important in that they provide the medium through which we speak and act. This is the assumption underlying Arendt's claim that "the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people" (201).

This point draws our attention to how we see ourselves as being "together" with others. Arendt makes an explicit connection between the spatial practice of distancing and the production of abstract knowledge. She explains, for example, that airplanes conquered the physical landscape, changing the way we think about (our place in) space, but in so doing alienated man from his immediate earthly surroundings (251). Our sense of self, and by extension our social and political relations, are altered when we

fundamentally change our ways of thinking about space. The invention of the telescope, perhaps more than any other invention, illustrates this point. Saco (2002) explains the importance of the telescope in Arendt's writing:

> [Arendt] understands… that technologies are not simply tools we can use to conquer space by extending practices initiated in one location across a wider area; rather, technologies are spatial practices themselves that engender new spaces (e.g., a distant, outer space), new knowledges (e.g., Archimedean vantage points), and new identities (e.g., world-alienated selves) (60).

According to Saco, the challenge is to examine how computer-based technologies open up public spaces for meaningful political speech and action. Determining the credibility of virtual communities as an instrument of democratic discourse requires further analysis of Arendt's paradox: *The body cannot be the basis for identity in democratic politics given that such politics are rooted in plurality, rather than commonality.* However, *democratic politics are only possible through speech and actions that require the medium of the body.* Remaining to be addressed is whether or not political speech and action do, in fact, require the medium of the body.

First, as explained above, the body is the medium through which we communicate and take actions. However, we must accept that this medium is not *necessary* unless we are to exclude others from the democratic process based on their physical handicaps. Enlightened democratic society holds such individuals to be "differently abled," not "disabled."

Second, the body manifests one's unique identity in the public realm. Upon seeing one's uniqueness, others realize that they are dealing with an individual whom must be taken into account when making decisions. However, as Arendt points out, the presence

of a body without speech or action merely presents one as a categorical *what* rather than a distinctive *who*. (Saco 2002, 57) Thus, while it is necessary for others to see one as unique, it is not mandatory and perhaps undesirable, that this uniqueness be manifested through the flesh of one's body.

Finally, the body provides a reference point to which others can affix words and deeds. It assures others that one's words and deeds are one's own, just as it assures one that others' words and deeds are their own. "Action without a name, a 'who' attached to it," Arendt insists, "is meaningless" (180-181). In other words, the body is necessary for recognition and response. Underlying this assumption is the idea that the body demonstrates attentiveness and responsibility, both of which are necessary for meaningful democratic discourse. It still remains unclear, however, whether or not a physical body is the *only* means through which words and deeds can be attached to an attentive, responsible identity. It appears that Arendt's ideal democratic forum would consist of a bodiless public space that still retained the characteristics— spontaneity, interaction, and publicity— associated with face-to-face interactions.

Arendt's analyses greatly influenced Jürgen Habermas. Following the notion that technology fundamentally changes our way of thinking, Habermas incorporates communication technology into his theory of the public sphere. He argues that as mass media has replaced public dialogue in salons, the bourgeois "culture-debating public" has degenerated into a "culture-consuming public" (Habermas 1989, 159). Social theorists such as Jean Leca (1992) and Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) continue to lament the loss of what Leca refers to as "reservoirs of citizenship" (Luca 1992, 21). They argue that as

face-to-face civic engagement has deteriorated, social administration has replaced democratic politics.

Common to these neo-Tocquevillean scholars is a unitary notion of society wherein there exists only a single socio-political space. This amounts to a normative claim about the kinds of relationships people should invest in to reach a participatory, democratic ideal. Rather than hopelessly pleading for the return of associational spaces on every block, social scientists would be better off examining the possibilities offered by new forms of social space being created by technology. The following chapter examines such an online social space that I believe will be important to the future of our democracy.

Chapter 2: Online Social Networking

Scholars have begun to explore the ways in which the Internet is changing personal relationships and social projects. However, the bulk of this research has been done prior to the explosion of OSN's like Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook. The fact that millions of subscribers, the majority of which are teenagers and college students who are in the process of political maturation, have joined these networking sites should not be ignored by social scientists. Examining whether or not, and how, these OSN's foster more political participation, more trust amongst citizens, and less cynicism towards government is key for understanding the challenges and opportunities that Americans will face in the future. If these online communities positively relate to indicators of social capital, then scholars' fears of increasing alienation may be ameliorated. Conversely, if online communities negatively relate to measures of social capital, then optimistic scholars would be wise to temper their outlook.

Communities in Cyberspace

The term "virtual" comes from the Latin *virtus*, meaning strength or power. The related term, "virtue," is an embodiment of such power. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by Trumble and Stevenson (2002), defines "virtual" as anything "that is so in essence or effect, although not formally, actually, or in strict definition as such." In line with its historical definitions, virtual communities have been portrayed as a means of enabling a human virtuosity beyond the limits of the body and physical space. As

Shields (2003) explains, "the virtual shifts commonsense notions of the real away from the material" (14).

Many social theorists remain pessimistic about virtual communities on the Internet. Some assume that because cyberspace is *virtual* it is not really a *space* at all. In their opinion, space is that physical field of experience that can be perceived through our senses. That which is not physical is not really space at all, but rather a mental construct. Others have taken the position that because all space is discursively constructed there can be no distinction between the physical and the virtual. This distinction between physical and virtual, however, is too often confused with the distinction between "real" and "not real" (Saco 2002).

From a technical standpoint, the term "virtual" refers to a process of representation, or modeling. In computers, this process of representation is performed by binary digits. The term "physical" typically refers to that which we can perceive through our senses. Binary digits can either represent something physical (tangible) or something nonphysical (that which exists solely in digital form like a program command). When speaking of social space, the *physical* refers to "a space for the body, perceived and occupied by the body, and in many respects directing the movements of the body" (Saco 2002, 25). The question that remains is whether or not cyberspace, which the novelist who coined the term, William Gibson (1984), called a "consensual hallucination," is a social space as well. In other words, is it possible to imagine a social world not rooted in face-to-face encounters? An affirmative answer challenges the traditional notion that participatory democratic politics requires that participants be physically co-present in a single space-time.

Previous literature has attempted to address whether or not "communities" can exist in virtual places given that such communities are by their very nature computational abstractions. At issue is whether or not one can have a living relationship within a virtual place. Do we have a mutual stake in each other's lives when the "other" is only a virtual presence or representation? Can we sustain the human virtue of neighborliness when the virtual medium permits anonymity and the possibility of continual disconnection? What trusted pattern of behaviors, or social norms, can conjointly be constructed with others in virtual communities? Scholars have attempted to answer these questions by studying email patterns, on-line gaming, listserves, chat rooms, and more recently, blogs.

The study of online communities can be traced back to the publication of Rheingold's (1993) book on "virtual community," where he paints a positive assessment of the Internet's ability to bring strangers together to form intimate online networks in which users have a shared sense of collective identity. According to Gervassis (2004), there are two core models of virtual communities:

> The first community, the intellectual virtual community, can be characterized on the basis of a shared (intellectual) interest, for example, members of a political organization, or a Lords of the Rings fan club. The second, the functional virtual community, can be defined as a group of users participating on a single application platform, for example, an online game such as Ultima Online. To understand the difference as well as the potential for operational conflict between the two, one might draw upon the contrast between nations and states. Where states constitute regionally limited legal formations, nations are broader in their geographical manifestations and are decided upon shared cultural characteristics that distinguish ethnical groups. Functional communities resemble states: pinpointing their online locus at specific IP addresses, they submit to fundamental operational rules, set in the launching software's computer code. Similarly, intellectual communities resemble nations. Although group members rely upon a functional community as a means of gaining network access (citizenship), they adhere to collective basic characteristics, tastes and intellectual qualities that define their shared

> bond beyond the procedural mechanisms of limited online geographies (nationality).

Given that online social structures can be closed, effective social norms can be established among Internet users (McLaughlin et al 1995; Resnick, 2002). Also, users can join communities that would otherwise remain inaccessible, thereby expanding their social networks (Wellman 1997). But not everyone shares this optimism. Some scholars were quick to criticize online social networks as "the illusion of community" (Parks and Floyd 1996) or "categorical identities" that don't live up to the "dense, multiplex, or systematic web of interpersonal relationships" formed in the real world (Calhoun 1998, 385).

After the invention of the Internet and cell phones, communication structures shifted from house-to-house to person-to-person. The result is what Wellman (1997) referred to as "networked individualism." Boase (2006) explains:

> Instead of disappearing, people's communities are transforming: The traditional human orientation to neighborhood- and village-based groups is moving towards communities that are oriented around geographically dispersed social networks. People communicate and maneuver in these networks rather than being bound up in one solidary community. Yet people's networks continue to have substantial numbers of relatives and neighbors — the traditional bases of community — as well as friends and workmates (1).

As access to the Internet grew, scholars began finding increasing amounts of evidence that the Internet is a vibrant social universe where users enjoy serious and satisfying contact with online communities. For example, Boase (2006) found that Internet users have somewhat larger social networks than non-users and nearly 60 million

Americans have used the Internet to assist them in making important life decisions. Horrigan (2001) explains:

> As the Internet disseminates more broadly throughout the population, there are signs that online groups may facilitate new connections across ethnic, economic, and generational categories. It is also worth underscoring that young people seem especially interested in taking advantage of the Internet's bridge building potential in online groups. As noted at the outset, there is pervasive worry that young people shy away from group activity and civic engagement. With the online groups drawing young people into groups involved with their local community, this survey suggests that the Internet may develop into an important new avenue for civic engagement among young people (19).

One Internet technology that has received a lot of attention in recent years is profile-based social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. In 2007, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 55% of online youth between 12-17 use OSN's. MySpace was the preferred network among 85% of this cohort, with only 7% maintaining a profile on Facebook. More than a quarter of these teens said they visit their OSN's once a day and 22% said they visit them multiple times a day. In the Pew study, 91% said they use their OSN's to keep in touch with friends they see frequently and 82% use the site to stay in touch with those they rarely see in person. Nearly half of respondents in their study reported making new friends on their OSN's. It appears that facilitate social interactions both online and off. For example, 72% of the teens in the Pew study said they use their OSN's to make plans with friends. These social activities are made possible by the various forms of online communication on the networks. For example, the Pew study found that 84% of networking teens have posted a public message on another networking teen's profile and 82% of those sampled said they have sent a private message to another OSN member. Furthermore, 61% of networking teens

said they have posted a bulletin that is viewable by all of their linked friends (Lenhart and Madden 2007).

These preliminary findings suggest OSN's contain structures identified by Durkheim as necessary for the survival of a community including 1) dense and demanding social ties, 2) social attachments to and involvements in institutions, 3) ritual occasions, and 4) group composition. Durkheim also draws our attention to cultural variables including perceptions of similarity with the physical characteristics, expressive style, way of life, or historical experience of others as well as common beliefs that exist, and are translated, in a group. One can find evidence of these structural and cultural variables in numerous virtual communities created by Internet users. This seems to be the case with OSN's like MySpace and Facebook where users create a custom profile complete with pictures, videos, a brief autobiography, blogs, bulletins, and publicly-viewable comments from the user's friends (see Figures 1 and 2). The effects of anonymity that many scholars lament in their studies of message boards, listserves, and chat rooms are likely to be less problematic in social networking sites given that most users have no intention of remaining anonymous. The literature on the effects of the Internet on participatory democracy has not adequately examined whether or not OSN's counteract forms of social disengagement derived from other causes, or whether they further contribute to social disengagement?

Figure 1: Example of a MySpace Profile Page

Figure 1 Key

1. The member's name, picture, geographic location and date of last login. Clicking on the profile picture enables one to view photos stored in separate albums created by the member.
2. Through the buttons contained in this box one can contact the member by sending them a message, add the member as a friend (they must confirm the friendship), instant message the member, add the member to a self-created group (the member must confirm), forward the member's profile to another friend, add the member to one's list of favorite friends, block them from viewing one's profile and rank them. These functions enable OSN members to contact and organize their network friendships.
3. This section contains information the member wishes to display regarding their interests. OSN members often times list their favorite books, movies, music, television shows, sports teams and political beliefs.
4. This section contains more personal information about the member. Some members choose to display their sexuality, their relationship status, their zodiac sign and other tidbits of information the member wishes to share.
5. Members can add schools that they have attended to this section. By clicking on the name of the school, one can see the profiles of other members who have added the school. This feature allows members to reconnect with friends that they might have lost and is very useful for coordinating reunions.

Figure 1 Key Continued

6. The navigation bar enables a user to return to their own profile page, browse and search the network using search criteria, search for blogs written by OSN members, search for musicians, artists and comedians, as well as join discussion forums.
7. By clicking on the titles one can read blogs written by the member (there are no blogs written by the member whose profile appears in Figure 1.
8. The "About Me" section typically contains autobiographical information about the member. Members can also add pictures, banners and videos to this section.
9. The "Friends Section" contains the profile pictures of the member's top friends (of their choosing) as well as a link to view all of their friends, their friends who are currently online, mutual friends (between the member and oneself) and friends recently added by the member. OSN members spend much of their time "surfing" the network by clicking on the profile pictures in this section.
10. The "Comments Section" displays comments left by the member's friends and allows one to post their own message on the member's profile. While only a handful of messages are displayed on the member's profile at one time (beginning with the most recent comment) one can click on a link to view all of the comments left on the member's page.

Figure 2: Example of a Facebook Profile Page

Figure 2 Key

1. This section contains the member's name, profile picture, geographic location and buttons that allow access to the member's list of network friends, networks and photo albums. This section also contains a search function that allows users to seek out other network members. Furthermore, there are functions that allow users to create groups that other network members can join, create events that other members can attend, and post items that users wish to sell to other members.
2. Advertisements often appear at the margins of members' profile pages. These advertisements create revenue for the OSN.
3. This section contains the member's friends, divided into two sections. The first section contains mutual friends, or those who are friends with the member whose profile is being viewed *and* the member who is doing the viewing. The second section contains non-mutual friends. In each case, only a handful of the member's friends show up on their page while the others can be accessed with the click of a button.
4. This section has the member's friends divided into networks (based on geographic location, universities and workplaces) that act as a filing system for organizing friendships.
5. This section displays the member's photo albums. Browsing through such albums and commenting on members' pictures is a popular activity on OSN's.

Figure 2 Key Continued

6. A list of groups to which the member belongs appears in this section. OSN members can create groups and then invite others to join. During the 2008 presidential primaries, many students used this function to organize rallies for the candidates.
7. The navigation bar contains buttons that allow members to return to their own profile page, check their messages and log off the network.
8. The member's name appears next to their profile picture.
9. This section contains personal information like relationship status, birthday, hometown and political views that the member wishes to display.
10. This section, called the Mini-feed, displays the actions the member has taken in the recent past. For example, if the member has commented on a picture or changed their profile information, a notice of the occurrence will appear in the Mini-feed. Members use this feature to keep track of each other's network activities.
11. Personal information the member wishes to use is displayed in this section. Members can list their interests, favorite music and books, support for presidential candidates, etc. By clicking on an entry, one can view a list of all other users who have displayed the same entry. For example, the Facebook member whose profile appears in Figure 2 has listed *Catcher in the Rye* as one of her favorite books. By clicking on "*Catcher in the Rye*" one can see others in the member's network that have also listed *Catcher in the Rye* as one of their favorite books.

Figure Key 2 Continued

12. Like MySpace, Facebook contains a section for members to list the schools they have attended and their employment. By clicking on the name of a school, or workplace, the member can see a list of other classmates and coworkers on the network.
13. The "Comment Box" is used to post public messages to members "Comment Section". Pictures and videos from popular hosting websites like Photobucket and YouTube can be included in posts.
14. Public comments from the member's friends are posted in this section.

The keys to Figures 1 and 2 outline the network functions that enable OSN users to engage in both social activities, such as posting comments on friends' pages, as well as the solitary practice of wandering from page to page out of curiosity. Furthermore, these networks provide a medium in which users can disseminate information found while surfing the Web, thus blurring the distinction between social and solitary activities. The essence of social networking is not only reaching those who are directly engaged in social and political activities, but also their network of friends who might not be immediately interested in politics and the obligations of living in a civil society.

The treatment of Internet technologies as potential treatments for the problem of politically disengaged youth has attracted considerable attention given that no other group is as disengaged from politics as those between the ages of 18 and 24. This has been the case ever since eighteen year olds were enfranchised in 1972 (Levine and Lopez

2002). Internet technologies that require an active, rather than passive, audience are likely to have important implications for only for the users' sense of community (see Putnam 2000, 411), but also for their own personal identity. According to the social psychological literature, powerful effects on beliefs about the self result from behavioral cues (see Ross and Nisbett 1991; Schneider et al 1979). In other words, those who encounter and interact with political information on their own may come to see themselves as interested in politics. Thus, the simple act of visiting a political website may lead to more significant political actions including voting or discussing campaign information with friends and family.

Evidence collected by Rainie and Horrigan (2007) suggests that the number of Americans using the Internet to collect political information is growing rapidly. During the 2006 mid-term elections, 15% of all American adults said the Internet was their primary source for campaign news, up from 7% in the mid-term election of 2002 and close to the 18% of Americans who said they relied on the Internet during the presidential campaign cycle in 2004. Altogether, more than 60 million Americans said they were online during the 2006 campaign season gathering information and exchanging views via email. Asked where they went online to get their political information, 60% said they went to news portals like Google News or Yahoo! News; 60% got their information from television network websites like CNN.com or NBCnews.com; 48% got their news from local news organization websites; only a third (31%) went to the websites of major national newspapers like the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*; 28% went to the websites of state or local governments to get information; 24% went to issue-oriented websites for political information; 20% got their campaign information from blogs; 20%

went to the websites of foreign press establishments like the BBC and Al Jazeera; 20% got their campaign information directly from candidates websites; 19% got their information from news satire websites like *The Daily Show* or *The Onion*; 19% got their information from the websites of radio news organizations like *National Public Radio*; 10% got their information from alternative news websites like Alternet.org and NewsMax.com; and 10% received campaign information from email listserves. Conspicuously absent from this list are OSN's like MySpace and Facebook, despite the fact that millions of Americans flock to these websites every day.

According to Rainie and Horrigan (2007), "a new online political elite is emerging as 23% of campaign Internet users became online political activists" during the 2006 election cycle. Asking whether or not respondents had created and shared political content on the Internet, the authors found that 8% of campaign Internet users had posted their own political commentary to a newsgroup, website or blog. Furthermore, 13% had forwarded or re-posted someone else's political commentary online. According to the authors, this amounts to nearly 14 million people using the Internet to contribute to political discussion and activity. Only recently has it become apparent that OSN's are an important part of online political discourse.

In January of 2008, during the hotly contested presidential primaries, the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that "the Internet has now become a leading source of campaign news for young people and the role of social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook is a notable part of the story. Nearly 42% of those ages 18 to 29 say they regularly learn about the campaign from the Internet, the highest percentage for any news source" (Kohut 2008).

Not surprisingly, it has become de rigueur for politicians to use the Internet, and OSN's in particular, for political purposes. In an unpublished study, Christine Williams and Jeff Gulati analyzed the way one online social network, Facebook, helps candidates reach college students in order to recruit supporters and campaign workers. In 2006, Facebook created a profile for every congressional and gubernatorial candidate, leaving it up to their campaigns to personalize the profiles with pictures, biographical information, and campaign information. According to the authors,

> Of those running for the Senate, 32% posted content to their Facebook profile, with the Democratic and Republican candidates attracting an average of 2,146 supporters. Of those running for the House, 13% posted profiles with an average of 125 supporters among Democratic and Republican candidates. Democrats were more likely to post a profile and had more supporters as well. For House candidates, challengers, better-financed candidates, and candidates running in competitive races were the most likely to update their Facebook profile. Competitiveness of the race was the only variable to have a significant effect on whether or not a Senate candidate campaigned on Facebook. The candidates' Facebook support had a significant effect on their final vote shares, particularly in the case of open-seat candidates. Given that Facebook supporters may not draw from a candidate's eligible and registered voters and tend to over-represent the 18 to 24 year old age demographic, we see this measure as a proxy for the underlying enthusiasm and intensity of support a candidate generates. In other words, the number of Facebook supporters is an indicator of a campaign resource that does matter, and is independent of the impact of other variables in our predictive model (Abstract).

It didn't take long for some pundits to start calling OSN's the key to the 2008 presidential race (Lovley, 2006). As a result, OSN's have begun to receive significantly more attention. On January 1 and 2, MySpace held a virtual polling booth attracting 150,000 users (presumably each with one ballot). The results were released the day of the Iowa caucuses. Facebook has also hosted polls to determine the candidate preferences of their members. It hasn't yet been suggested that a candidate's momentum online can

carry them to electoral victory, there is a growing recognition that OSN's, invested with the power of peer influence, are an important campaigning tool. Sarno (2008) explains that "when you begin to receive a steady stream of information about the developing political preferences of dozens of people you actually like or respect or both, you can feel yourself receiving some kind of signal—maybe even an important one—that you might otherwise have filtered out along with all the other cultural noise."

Despite the growing importance of OSN's for campaign strategists, it appears that political actors may only be fair-weather friends on the networks. According to Haughney (2007), "a tour via the Internet shows that few of the 39 governors who joined the college Facebook craze, in which "friends" link to "friends" on the social networking site, have bothered to update their online buddies on post-election life. Fewer governors sought a presence on the alternative MySpace network, but most of those pages also have fallen into disuse since the election."

Do OSN's really have the potential to engage young adults in the political process in meaningful ways? By abandoning these websites, are politicians likely to miss out on opportunities to effectively use the networks to build a community that may contain future volunteers, voter and donors? Answers to these questions are predicated on the social and political habits of OSN members.

Chapter 3: Research Expectations

Previous chapters have addressed the treatment of social capital and virtual communities across several fields of literature. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, I explain how theories of capital, which emphasize the capture of surplus value, can be applied to OSN's. Second, I use these theoretical linkages to generate a series of hypotheses regarding the habits and perceptions of OSN members.

Theory

This study relies upon established theories of capital to call attention to the assets produced in OSN's. Tracing its theoretical lineage back to Marx (1849), capital is part of the surplus value captured by capitalists between modes of production and processes of consumption. Subsequent modifications of the concept retain the basic elements of surplus value and an investment with expected returns. For example, human capital theory (Johnson 1960; Schultz 1961) conceives capital as an investment (e.g., in skills and knowledge) for which returns (e.g., earnings) are expected and negotiated. According to cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), a dominated class may generate returns from the acquisition of symbols and meanings produced by the pedagogic actions of a dominant class. According to Lin (1999), "the distinctive feature of these theories resides in the potential investment and capture of surplus value by the laborers and masses" (30).

Like other forms of capital, social capital enables those who generate it to invest and capture surplus value. As Coleman (1988) explains, "social capital is productive,

making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (96). Social capital is not possible without personal capital, which is made up of two components: processing and leverage. Processing refers to the cognitive thinking that enables one to make sense of the world around them. Processing is likely to be shaped by many things including one's age, race and gender. Results become less dependent on resources as one's processing abilities increase. Leverage refers to the ability to raise the productivity of others by using one's own expertise. Producing new knowledge and sharing it with others increases one's leverage, and thus increases one's personal capital. As the personal capital of individuals increases, so does the social capital of the groups, or communities, those individuals belong to.

There are at least three explanations as to why embedded resources in social networks will enhance the outcomes of individuals' actions (Lin 1999). First, social networks facilitate the flow of information. According to Lin "social ties located in certain strategic locations and/or hierarchical positions (and thus better informed on market needs and demands) can provide an individual with useful information about opportunities and choices otherwise not available" (31). Conversely, information transactions can also provide a community or group with information about the interests of an otherwise unrecognized individual. Second, social networks facilitate the exertion of influence in the decision-making processes of individuals. This influence, which can be direct or indirect, has the potential to enhance the outcomes of actions taken by individuals. Third, resources in social networks have the potential to certify the social credentials of individuals. In other words, one's social networks ensure others that the individual can provide additional resources beyond their own personal capital.

The capture of these benefits, however, depends upon the socializing efforts of network members. Given that OSN's enable their members to increase their socialization efforts at relatively little cost (e.g., time and effort), I theorize that individuals use OSN's to 1) increase their ties to various levels of society; 2) increase the diversity of their friendships; 3) engage in political discourse on their networks; 4) visit the profiles of political actors; and 5) display political cues on their profiles. These actions increase the flow of information, facilitate the exertion of influence, and certify the social credentials of individuals on the networks. Thus, OSN membership is likely have a positive effect on individuals' self-reported interest in politics, participation in political associations, occurrence of taking political actions and intentions of voting.

Figure 3 displays the theoretical linkages associated with socializing efforts. By joining an OSN, individuals increase their opportunities to enhance their access to information by engaging in political discourse, increasing the diversity of their friendships, and visiting the profile pages of political actors. OSN members can also increase their influence by engaging in political discourse, diversifying their friendships and displaying their political cues on their profile. Finally, by increasing their ties to society, diversifying their friendships, gathering information from political actors' profiles, engaging in political discourse, and displaying political cues on their profile, OSN members can increase their social credentials. By facilitating these socializing efforts, I believe OSN's are likely to have a positive effect on their members' interest in politics. Furthermore, I believe members' socializing efforts online will likely produce positive externalities offline in their political activities and perception of government.

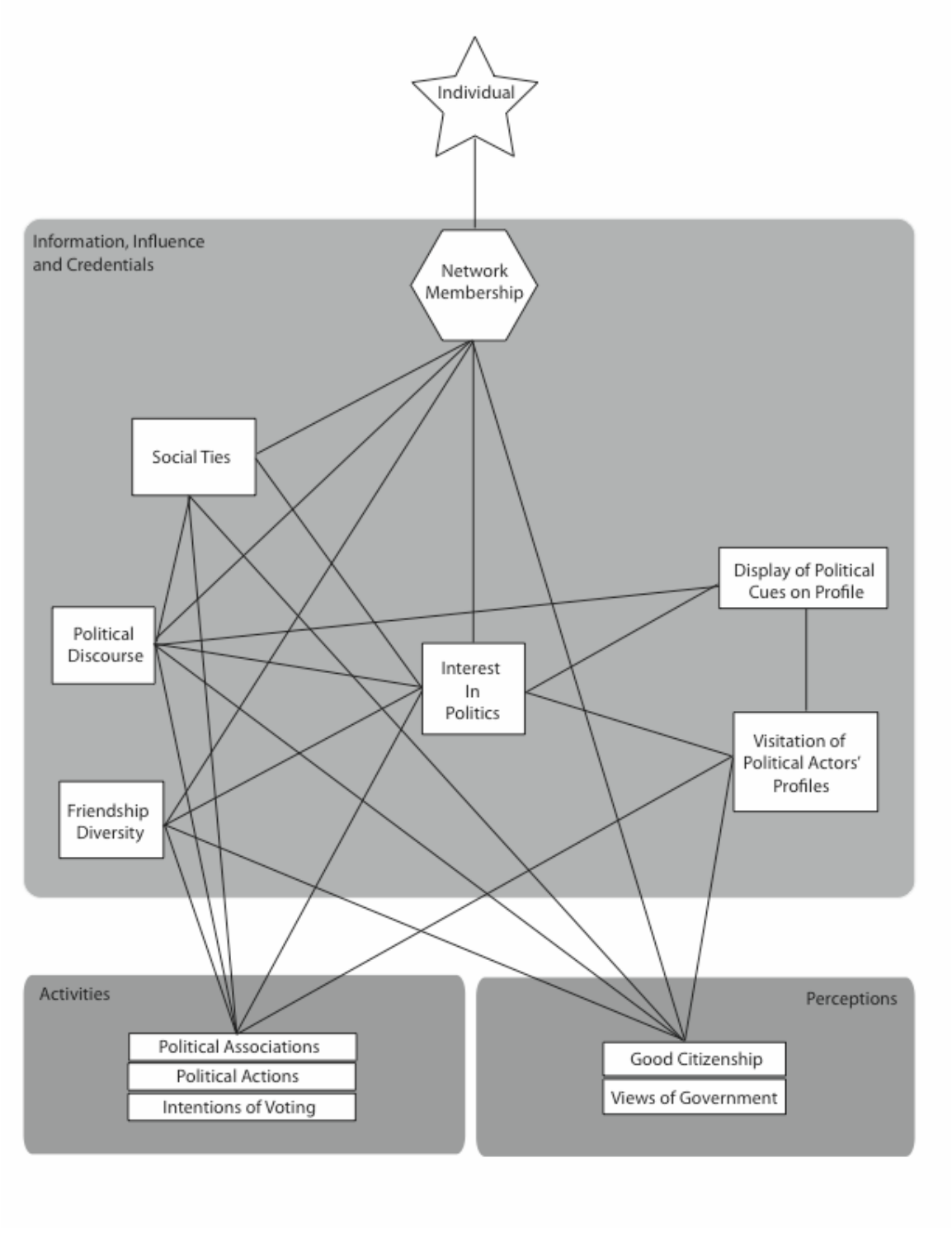


Figure 3: The Production of Social Capital on OSN's

Hypotheses

H1: Individuals will report that their feelings of connectedness to society have increased since joining an OSN.

Using data from the 1992 American study of the Cross National Election project, Lake and Huckfieldt (1998) found evidence that politically relevant social capital (e.g., that which facilitates political engagement) is "generated in personal networks, that it is a byproduct of the social interactions with a citizen's discussants, and that increasing levels of politically relevant social capital enhance the likelihood that a citizen will be engaged in politics" (567). The Internet has both the potential to connect users with one another as well as isolate them from one another. According to Zhao (2006), those who use the Internet for interpersonal contact are likely to have more social connections than those who use the Internet for solitary activities. The author stresses the importance of differentiating between institutionally-based social ties, the size of which is determined by the characteristics of the institutions one belongs to (e.g., the number of family members and coworkers), and voluntarily-based social ties, the size of which is determined by one's socializing efforts.

I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' feelings of connectedness to society: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 7) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they

discuss politics on their OSN's. The construction of these variables is discussed in the next chapter.

H2: Individuals will report that their friendships have become more diverse since joining an OSN.

Lazarfeld and Merton (1954) found "a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some designated respect," or homophily (23). According to McPherson et al. (2001) there are two types of homophily effects: 1) baseline homophily effects that are dependent on the make-up of the pool where potential ties can be formed, and 2) inbreeding homophily effects that result explicitly over and above the opportunity set, or the group of potential ties that could be formed with others. Patterns for the two are similar: individuals typically form friendships with people who are similar on certain characteristics such as race and ethnicity (Shrum et al. 1988), education level (Louch 2000), religious beliefs (Robicheaux 2003), etc. However, by creating "new, cross-cutting forms of social solidarity and more encompassing identities," Putnam (2007: 137) argues that such fragmentations can be overcome.

The Internet has the potential to facilitate these new forms of social solidarity given that online relationships are formed differently than those offline (Turchi 2007, Wellman and Gulia 1999). What bring people together online are not only demographic characteristics, such as age, race and religion, but also common interests. For example, Papacharissi (2002a, 2002b) argues that individuals design their web pages to paint a particular picture of their interests in order to attract others who are similar. Evidence collected by Turchi (2007) regarding the effects of homophily on the network density and

embeddedness of MySpace users reaffirms Papacharissi's conclusions. I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect individuals' post-membership friendship diversification: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 7) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

H3: Individuals will report that they discuss politics on their OSN's.

Some scholars have painted a rather gloomy picture of online political deliberation. For example, van Dijk (1996) argues that

> "virtual communities are unable to make up for a 'lost public debate.' They are still rather exclusive in social composition and the quality of discourse is poor because a real dialogue is missing. Most often, the discourse does not exceed the level of an exchange of separate distant voices on a central board" (p. 59).

We are rapidly reaching a point of near-equal access to the Internet in the United States. As this has occurred, the exchange of voices has become increasingly less distant. We now communicate with our friends, coworkers and like-minded individuals seamlessly across multiple modes of communication. Given these changes, scholars' (Bucy 2000; Davis and Owen 1998) skepticism about the ability of the medium to expand political

deliberation and participation to previously inactive individuals such as young adults, or those from a lower socioeconomic profile, should diminish. It is my belief that Web 2.0 technologies present a revolutionary way of socializing and engaging in politics.

On OSN's the voices, while separate, are not so distant. Given the overlap between users' offline social circles and their OSN friendships, I believe the networks have the potential to reinvigorate public discourse among their members. According to McGirt (2007), the utility of OSN's as an arena for communication is bolstered by the sheer fact that over half the student population at most universities belongs to one. While acknowledging that the diversity of political communication is a function of those who populate a community, not necessarily the structure of that community, Westling (2007) explains how OSN features facilitate political communication.

> Facebook combines the best features of local bulletin boards, newspapers, and town hall meetings and places them in one location that is available at any time in practically any location. Unlike a town hall meeting, Facebook allows all members of a geographic community to have input on a topic while giving them the flexibility of deciding when and how they contribute to the conversation. Politicians can use Facebook to communicate with community members who are willing to listen, but they cannot actively impose their messages on anyone. At the same time, community members have the means to express their opinions to political actors and organize to create their own voice if they feel no candidate yet represents their stance.

OSN members are able to engage in political discourse in a number of ways including posting bulletins, blogs and comments as well as sharing news stories, videos and websites with other members. Political actors have seized on these features to organize and inform grassroots activists. I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of engaging in political discourse: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the

number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 7) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships.

H4: Individuals will report that they have visited the OSN profiles of political actors.

According to the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) two out of five (42%) adults in the United States say they have seen or heard presidential campaign information on the Internet in the week prior to being interviewed. Ken Winneg, managing director of the NAES, explains. "In 2008, the Internet has become an integral part of the campaign," he says. "Prior to 2004, many of the activities associated with participation—such as discussing politics, persuading other people to support a candidate, watching political advertising and learning about the candidates—predominantly occurred offline. Now these activities can be done online" (NAES 2008: 1). According to the report, among 18-29-year-olds, 17 percent reported that they had discussed politics with people online in the past week. Twenty-six percent of 18- to 29-year-olds had viewed online video about the presidential candidates or campaigns on sites like YouTube in the week prior to being interviewed. Political strategists have taken note of these trends. In late 2007, political strategists filled a lecture room at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in the Capitol to hear

Facebook staff members explain how to leverage OSN's as part of a campaign strategy (Freire 2007).

In line with my theory, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of visiting the profile page of a political actor:1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

H5: Individuals will report that they display political cues on their OSN profiles.

Research has long shown that people do not act as isolated individuals when they confront the complex tasks of citizenship, but rather share information and viewpoints in arriving at individual decisions (Barelson 1954, Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). As Huckfeldt et al. (2005) explain, "citizens depend on one another for information and guidance, and this interdependence gives rise to persuasion and shared political preferences" (24). According to the authors, the heuristic utility of political attitudes and cues is that "they summarize an individual's political experience, as well as the lessons drawn from that experience" (27). OSN's present the capacity for individuals to be "heard" by other network members who care to listen. When an individual encounters another person with

whom they have political disagreements, they may find it hard to ignore the event. They may construct a counter argument, attempt to discredit the positions of their opponent, or reconsider their own positions. As this occurs on OSN's, I expect that members will use political cues to summarize their political experience. Thus, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of displaying political cues on their profile: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

H6: Individuals will report that their OSN membership has increased their interest in politics.

An individual's interest in politics is the single most important variable in explaining political knowledge (Luskin 1990), political participation and turnout (Verba et al 1995). Changes in media technologies have increased the importance of political interest since individuals can choose to seek out political information or avoid it (Prior 2007). Focusing on this variable is particularly important given that the American Political Science Association's task force on Civic Education and Engagement found that "it is perplexing that political scientists have not shown more recent interest, as it were, in political

interest" (Macedo 2005: 35). According to Shani (2007), social environments "influence our interest in politics by building resources, inculcating civic attitudes, forming habits of engagement, and introducing disruptions that could interfere with the development of political interest" (5). I believe the social environment created on OSN's has a similar influence on individuals' interest in politics. For example, individuals who strengthen their social ties and visit the OSN profile pages of political actors likely increase their resources. Likewise, individuals who increase the diversity of their friendships likely inculcate civic attitudes such as empathy. Finally, individuals who discuss politics on their OSN's and display political cues on their profiles likely form habits of engagement.

In line with my theory, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' perceptions of the effects of their OSN membership on their interest in politics: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 6) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 7) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

H7: Individuals will report that their participation in political associations has increased since joining an OSN.

The general concept of social capital is based on the idea that conversations that take place in social interactions that facilitate the exchange of information, potentially

affecting one's political preferences and tendencies to participate in politics. OSN's have the potential to positively affect this relationship in two ways. First, by enabling individuals to connect to one another and to political actors, OSN's decrease the costs of information gathering. Second, given the overlap in geographic and OSN social spaces, research suggests that such online networks could increase the intimacy of offline (geographic) community members. Taking into account the role of community contexts, such as neighborhood intimacy, Nah (2004) found that online civic engagement is positively related to offline civic engagement. Again, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' offline participation in associations: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 9) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 10) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

H8: Individuals will report that they have increased their occurrence of taking political actions since joining an OSN.

High expectations have emerged about the Internet's mobilization potential among young adults (Pasek et al. 2006). We can assume that young people are most likely to be

influenced by the Internet since older Americans developed their participation patterns in a pre-Internet period, and therefore are affected only marginally by the introduction of new forms of media. As Gibson et al. (2005) argue, the "Internet is expanding the numbers of the politically active, specifically in terms of reaching groups that are typically inactive or less active in conventional or offline forms of politics" (561). However, online participatory culture promoted by the Internet may not be very meaningful if it doesn't translate into offline participatory democracy. Preliminary evidence suggests that OSN-related variables, such as how often on updates their profile page and the extent to which one's OSN friends are also their friends offline, are significant in predicting political activities such as volunteering and signing petitions (Bode 2008). Thus, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of taking political actions: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 9) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 10) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

H9: Individuals will report that they intend on voting in the 2008 presidential election.

During election season, politicians engage in a relentless parade of stump speeches and town hall meetings. Unless the event draws the attention of the national media, their messages are likely to reach only a few individuals who are physically present. As a result, politicians are increasingly utilizing the Internet, with its limitless geographic scope and myriad of communication channels. The impact of the Internet on voting has received much attention by scholars. Research has shown that online activities have a general tendency to promote voter mobilization (Klotz 2005). In a study of the 2000 presidential election, Kopacz and Volgy (2005) found that exposure to campaign information online predicted voter turnout more strongly than exposure to any other medium. This was especially true for individuals with low political knowledge, low interest in the election, and weak party affiliations. Several studies suggest that college students, like the ones sampled in this study, exhibit many of these same traits (Bennett and Craig 1997; Keeter et al. 2002). I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' intentions of voting in the 2008 presidential election: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 9) whether or not they

display political cues on their profiles, and 10) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.

Chapter 4: Methods and Data

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the methods by which information for this study was collected. First, I explain how subjects were acquired for the study. Next, I explain the design of the survey used in my research. Finally, I discuss the construction of variables used to measure respondents' self-reported socializing habits and perceptions.

Subject Selection

Coverage error, or the mismatch between the target population and the frame population, is one of the biggest threats to inference from Web surveys. On the one hand, not everyone in the target population is in the frame population. On the other hand, it is seemingly impossible to construct a frame consisting of every person in the United States that has Internet access (Couper 2000). For the present study, the target population consisted of the tens of millions of members who belong to either Facebook or MySpace, or both. Regulatory and technical barriers made accessing this target population difficult.

While the findings in this study are an important step forward in the field of online social networking, the author encountered three obstacles that limit its scope. First, the federal law regulating the collection of data on the Internet differs from the federal law regulating academic research. Second, OSN's have taken steps to shield users from unwanted spam (e.g., electronic junk mail) that inadvertently make some kinds of academic research difficult. Third, Web-based surveys have unique technological, demographic and response rate characteristics that affect how they are used, designed and implemented.

According to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA), "the term 'child' means an individual under the age of 13." Given that MySpace and Facebook solicit personal information, including an email address and demographic information, they must establish a minimum age requirement of 13 to open an account. On the other hand, regulations governing research on human subjects, set forth in the human welfare section of the Code of Federal Regulations, define "children" as "persons who have not attained the legal age for consent to treatments or procedures involved in the research, under the applicable law of the jurisdiction in which the research will be conducted" (45 CFR 46.402). In Tennessee, the legal age of consent is 18. Parental consent, which is extremely difficult to procure online, is required to conduct research on individuals below that age. This law is primarily crafted to protect human subjects involved in medical and psychological studies, but applies uniformly to research in all fields of study. In my opinion, the law does not address the needs of social scientists.

Technical difficulties also presented obstacles to research. Despite repeated attempts to contact decision makers at Facebook and MySpace, I was ignored. This lack of cooperation greatly reduced the number of sampling options available. Two pilot surveys were conducted on the networks themselves, testing various sampling procedures. In one pilot survey, the hyperlink to the survey was posted on discussion groups and public forums within the Facebook and MySpace networks. Unfortunately, the number of respondents was dismal ($N<10$). In anther pilot survey, a random sample of MySpace members was generated using MySpace's browsing criteria (*age* and *most recently logged in*). Invitations were then sent to individual members using the networks' messaging system. Unfortunately, the barriers to spam that the networks have put in place

also prevent some forms of solicitation, making meaningful survey research difficult to conduct. In order to send messages to users, one must join the network. Any message that a network user receives can be opened, deleted or marked as spam by the recipient. If a user sends out more than a handful of messages or friend requests that get marked as spam, the sender's profile is suspended. Unfortunately, not everyone sees the value of academic surveys and the author's profile was shut down as a "spammer" before any data could be collected.

The extraordinary amount of commercial marketing campaigns directed at these networks goes far beyond placing banner ads on the site. Companies like Burger King, Apple and Wendy's maintain profiles on the networks hoping to build or keep relevancy among young people in what they hope will be a memorable way. These companies entice users to befriend them by giving away material benefits like episodes of *Fox* television shows including *24* and *American Dad*. On one hand, fictitious profiles set up by business mascots like "The King" and "Wendy", as well as those created by adult websites, may cheapen users' communal feelings on the network. On the other hand, befriending and displaying one's consumer preferences may be a part of identity production in a networked culture. Given that discerning users can easily mark messages from such profiles as spam, they might not present a formidable obstacle to social capital development. Regardless, the prevalence of such messages likely threatens scholarly research of these networks. As Couper (2000) explains,

> The value of surveys that could be done on the Web is limited—as with other approaches—by the willingness of people to do them. Thus, the whole enterprise may be brought down by its own weight if we get to a point where persons are so bombarded with survey (or other) requests that they either tune out completely or base their

> participation decisions on the content, topic, entertainment value, or other features of the survey (465).

Given the difficulties of conducting survey research on the networks, the study resorted to the use of a list-based convenience sample population with Web access. Students at The University of Tennessee automatically receive the Student@Tennessee email newsletter unless they unsubscribe to the weekly publication. According to the Office of Public Relations, less than 1% of students choose to unsubscribe leaving nearly 26,000 students, with a minority enrollment of 14%, who receive the newsletter. This included 21,126 undergraduates and 5,670 graduate students from all 50 states and more than 100 different countries.

Ideally, this study would be able to identify and analyze the differences between the effects of MySpace and the effects of Facebook on the political capital of their users. Unfortunately, by limiting my sample population to university students such comparisons became impossible. Among all the various online social networking sites on the Internet, Facebook is the overwhelming favorite among college students. While studying how teenagers socialize using online social networks, danah boyd (2007) began to notice that socio-economic patterns were causing a fragmentation in the market. Shortly after its launch in 2003, MySpace attempted to attract former Friendster users in their twenties and thirties by allowing bands to maintain profiles on their network with a built-in mp3 (audio file) player. As more and more bands populated the site, the average age of users began to decline. By 2005, MySpace was the central element in the socializing habits of American teens.

Facebook, on the other hand, began as an OSN solely for Harvard students and slowly spread to other campuses, requiring potential users to register with the proper .edu email accounts from those institutions. Even after opening their doors to those outside the halls of higher education, Facebook has remained the “in thing” for college students (and college-bound high school students as well). boyd (2007) explains the resulting socio-economic fragmentation of networking teens:

> The goodie two shoes, jocks, athletes, or other "good" kids are now going to Facebook. These kids tend to come from families who emphasize education and going to college. They are part of what we'd call hegemonic society. They are primarily white, but not exclusively. They are in honors classes, looking forward to the prom, and live in a world dictated by after school activities.
>
> MySpace is still home for Latino/Hispanic teens, immigrant teens, "burnouts," "alternative kids," "art fags," punks, emos, goths, gangstas, queer kids, and other kids who didn't play into the dominant high school popularity paradigm. These are kids whose parents didn't go to college, who are expected to get a job when they finish high school. These are the teens who plan to go into the military immediately after schools. Teens who are really into music or in a band are also on MySpace.

Although comparisons between the two networks were not feasible, the data did permit another interesting analysis. Many university students have friends from their home community that do not attend college, but with whom they would like to continue to socialize. In order to keep up with these friends, many Facebook members also maintain profiles on MySpace. I was able to distinguish between respondents who maintain a profile on only one OSN and those that maintain a profile on more than one OSN. Given that university students overwhelmingly occupy Facebook, while MySpace tends to be occupied more by non-college educated users, it is reasonable to expect that the quality and abundance of political information is greater on the former OSN. Network

co-habitation, so to speak, may be important because it allows political information transmitted on the higher-information network (Facebook) to be transferred and transmitted on the lower-information network (MySpace). As a result, political messages are more likely to reach a segment of the population (e.g., those less educated) that has historically been disinterested in politics. Likewise, co-habitation prevents those of a higher socio-economic status from losing touch with the values, aspirations and hardships of those of a lower socio-economic status.

Survey Design

Social scientists are beginning a new era in survey research. Scholars are increasingly substituting electronic surveys for paper-based formats in order to make impractical or financially burdensome research more feasible (Couper 2000; Sheehan and Hoy 1999; Weible and Wallace 1998). The current study utilizes the latest version of SPSS Dimensions' Mr. Interview, a comprehensive Web-based application for survey design, data collection and management, as well as analysis of survey results. Using simple HTML interview templates designed to support multiple platforms and browsers, question scales and multiple-choice answers were developed using clear, unambiguous and concise wording. Included were 1) questions designed to measure participants' socializing efforts on their OSN's, 2) questions designed to measure participants' political and civic activities before and after having joined an online social network; 3) questions regarding participants' trust in strangers and the government, adapted from the biennial General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center; and 4) demographic questions.

The survey began with a single introduction page that 1) established the authority and credibility of the researcher by identifying him as a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science, 2) provided open access to the researcher through an email address, 3) explained the purpose of the survey, and 4) established respondent confidentiality and privacy. Following this introduction, a page for "opt-in" informed consent was presented. Subsequent to these introductions, questions appeared on separate pages accessed by "next" and "back" buttons. These navigation buttons enabled participants to review all of their answers prior to final submission. Research suggests that attrition rates increase if respondents cannot inspect the survey prior to completing it, as can be done with a postal survey. Although Web-based surveys provide researchers with a wide range of fancy graphics and animation not attainable with other types of surveys, such images were not used given that they might confuse or distract respondents (Dillman et al. 1998). For example, inaccurate motivational techniques embedded in the survey, like progress indicators, may create distrust and subsequently increase abandonment (Crawford et al. 2001). Choosing an answer was as easy as clicking a computer mouse and using Mr. Interview enabled the transfer of survey responses directly into a database, eliminating transcription errors.

Privacy and Confidentiality

The present study followed the suggestions of Cho and LaRose (1999) for improving response rates by using accepted privacy protection practices. On Monday, February 11, 2008, a separate invitation to participate in the study was sent to potential respondents via email. The unobtrusive invitation was contained in an established weekly online email

newsletter called Student@Tennessee that recipients have the option of unsubscribing from. The newsletter provides important information for students at The University of Tennessee. To participate in the study potential respondents simply clicked on a hyperlink that opened the survey in a new Web browser. The questions were presented on a Web page, rather than in an email, preventing survey alteration by the respondent.

In both the initial invitation and the opening page of the Web survey, complete disclosure was given:

> Dear Potential Survey Participant,
>
> I invite you to participate, at no cost, in an important study of online social networks. This study seeks to obtain the views of online social network (MySpace, Facebook, etc.) members who are above the age of **18**. The survey questionnaire consists of 35 questions and takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your confidential answers to the survey questionnaire will be combined with those of other respondents for statistical analysis. Aggregated data from this survey will be stored by Brandon C. Waite, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Tennessee, and used for scholarly research publications. You will not receive additional commercial promotions as a result of taking this survey (e.g., NO JUNK MAIL). However, at the end of the survey you will have the option of being entered into a random drawing for one of four $25 iTunes gift certificates.
>
> Please select the following hyperlink to take the survey:
>
> http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll?I.Project=FACESPACE SURVEY
> Thank you for your participation,
>
> Brandon C. Waite
> Department of Political Science
> The University of Tennessee
> bwaite1@utk.edu

To ensure anonymity, respondents were not required to enter any personally identifiable information. However, following the completion of the survey, respondents

had the option of entering their email address for the chance to win prizes in a lottery. Respondents also had the option to be contacted for future research on the topic at hand.

Response Rate Issues

Obtaining significant response rates with Web-based surveys is a challenge, just as it is with conventional postal surveys. According to Yun and Trumbo (2000), a Web-based survey supported with various forms of pre-notification is advisable if only one distribution method is available to an online population. In an attempt to increase the response rate, the author paid for an advertisement in the student newspaper, The Daily Beacon, directing students to the online survey link contained in the Student@Tennessee email newsletter. Given that response rates may be affected by some systematic judgment by a segment of the population being studied (Sheehan 2001; Kehoe and Pitkow 1996), the advertisement did not specifically identify civic and political attitudes as the focus of the study. As restitution for their time, respondents were offered the chance to win one of four $25 iTunes gift certificates for completing the survey. Offering material benefits has been shown to increase the number of responses twice as much as altruistic motives (Tuten, Bosnjak and Bandilla, 2000). The advertisement read as follows:

> We want to know! Online social networks, like MySpace and Facebook, have become a central element in many people's lives. What impact have online social networking sites had on your life? Survey participants have a chance of winning one of four $25 iTunes gift certificates.

While the current study suffers from some of the typical methodological drawbacks of online research, namely a non-probability sample with a high non-response rate, the quality of a particular survey must be judged within the context of its stated aims

and the claims it makes. The purpose of the present study is to examine an understudied phenomenon, and I readily admit its limitations. Regardless, the findings presented in this publication are critical to the advancement of the field in this area of research.

Models

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the measurement of both the dependent variables and the important network variables that inform this study. Likewise, the measurement of important demographic variables is discussed. Examples of individual questions are shown where appropriate. The entire survey is contained in Appendix A.

Post-Membership Connections to Society

Scholars have routinely found residential mobility to be negatively correlated with social capital (Kang and Kwak 2003; Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls 1997; Lindstrom, Merlo and Ostergren 2002). Such mobility decreases the extent to which individuals put down roots and connect with neighbors. As younger generations continue to be more mobile, OSN's have the potential to assist individuals in connecting with their communities. Conversely, these networks enable users to stay connected with close friends and family members thereby boosting their sense of security and confidence when interacting with others who seem different and unfamiliar (Kraemer and Roberts 1996). My first hypothesis states that individuals will report that their feelings of connectedness to society have increased since joining an OSN. In order to gauge respondents' perceptions of their "feelings of connectedness to society," survey participants were asked what effect joining an OSN had on their connectedness to their 1) friends, 2)

family, 3) neighborhood, 4) community, 5) state, 6) the United States, and 7) the global community. Response categories were coded as follows: 1= much less, 2= less, 3= no difference, 4= more and 5= much more (see Figure 4). I combined these into an index of post-OSN (e.g., occurring after having joined an OSN) societal connections that ranges from seven (much less connected to society overall) to thirty-five (much more connected to society overall). The reliability of the Social Connections Index was determined by computation of Chronbach's alpha. The standardized alpha for this scale was .656, indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

Post-Membership Friendship Diversification

Bridging relationships are more apt at producing positive social capital than bonding relationships given that they lead to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the groups (Allport 1954). My second hypothesis states that individuals will report that their friendships have become more diverse since joining an OSN. Survey participants were asked whether, after joining an OSN, they had increased or decreased the number of their friends who are of another 1) race, 2) religion, 3) nationality, 4) gender, 5) sexual orientation, 6) economic status, and 7) education level. Response categories were coded as follows: 1= decreased, 2= had no effect and 3= increased (see Figure 5). I combined these into an index of friendship diversity effects that ranges from seven (decreased overall diversity of friendships) to twenty-one (increased overall diversity of friendships). The reliability of the Friendship Diversification Index was determined by computation of Chronbach's alpha. The standardized alpha for this scale was .815, indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

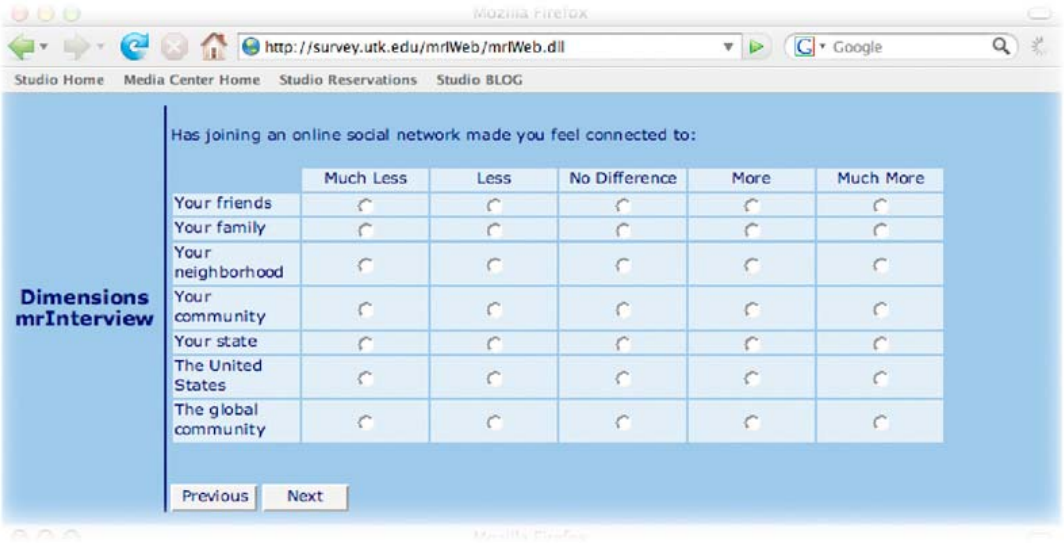


Figure 4: Survey Question - Individuals' Connections to Society

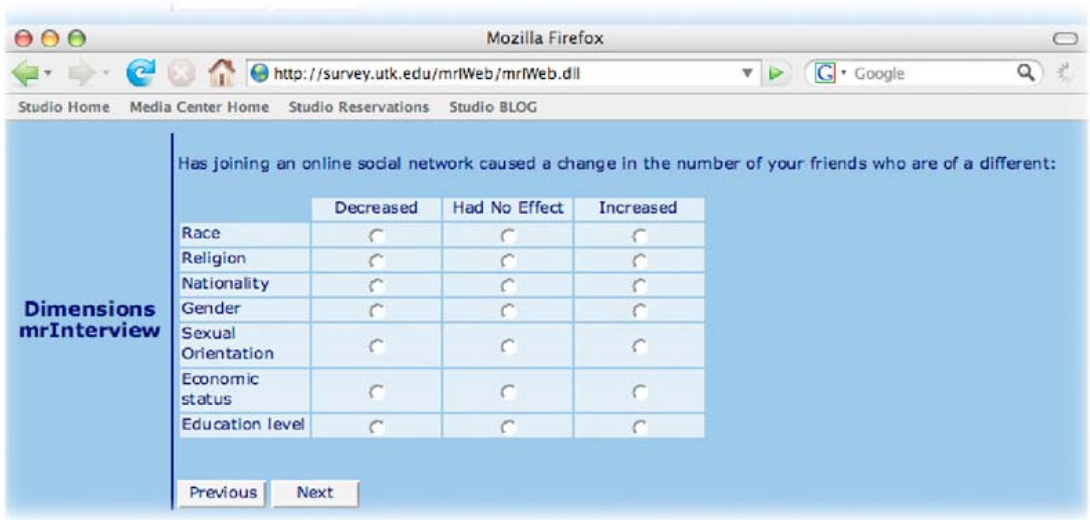


Figure 5: Survey Question - Individuals' Friendship Diversity

OSN Political Discourse

My third hypothesis states that individuals will report that they discuss politics on their OSN's. In order to gauge respondents' (self-reported) subject-matter of their network communications, survey participants were asked to identify the subjects they discuss on their OSN's with their friends. Response categories included 1) American politics, 2) gossip among friends, 3) music, 4) religion, 5) sports, 6) television and movies, 7) volunteering or political activism, and 8) world news. Respondents were asked to select all that apply (see Figure 6). They were coded as 0= no and 1= yes. I then omitted those variables with less explicit political relevance: gossip, music, sports, and television and movies and combined the remaining four response categories into an index of political discourse that ranges from zero (no discussion of politics) to four (discussion of all four types of political topics). The reliability of the Political Discourse Index was determined by computation of Chronbach's alpha. The standardized alpha for this scale was .675, indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

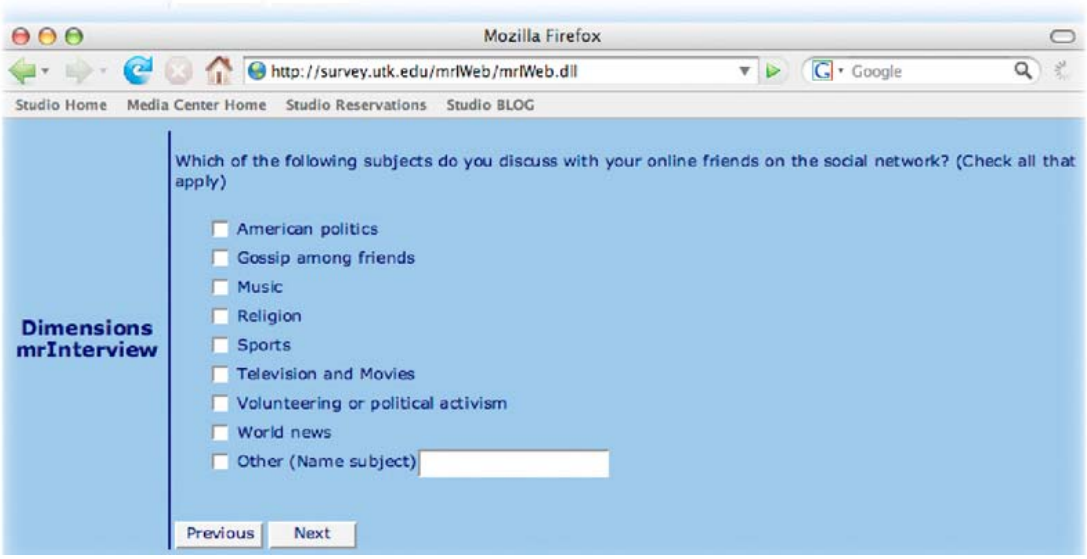


Figure 6: Survey Question – Topics of Discourse

Political Actor Profile Visitation

My fourth hypothesis states that individuals will report that they have visited the OSN profiles of political actors. In order to gauge respondents' self-reported visitations to political actors' OSN profiles, survey participants were asked if they had visited the profiles of any of the following: 1) a politician, 2) a political activist group, 3) another politically affiliated group, or 4) a religious organization. Respondents were asked to select all that apply (see Figure 7). These were coded as 0= no and 1= yes. I combined these into an index of political actor profile visitation that ranges from zero (no visits to political actors' profiles) to four (visits to all four types of political actors' profiles). The reliability of the Political Actor Profile Visitation Index was determined by computation of Chronbach's alpha. The standardized alpha for this seven item scale was .618, indicating an acceptable degree of internal consistency.

Displays of Political Cues on OSN Profiles

My fifth hypothesis states that individuals will report that they display political cues on their OSN profiles. In order to gauge respondents' self-reported display of political cues, survey participants were asked if they share any of the following personal information on their profiles: 1) political beliefs or positions, 2) political party affiliation, 3) support for a presidential candidate, and 4) support for another politician. Again, respondents were asked to choose all that apply (see Figure 8). Each was coded as 0= no and 1= yes. I combined these into an index of profile-based political cues from zero (no political information shared) to four (all four types of political cues shared). The reliability of the Profile Political Cue Index was determined by computation of Chronbach's alpha. The standardized alpha for this seven item scale was .666 , indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

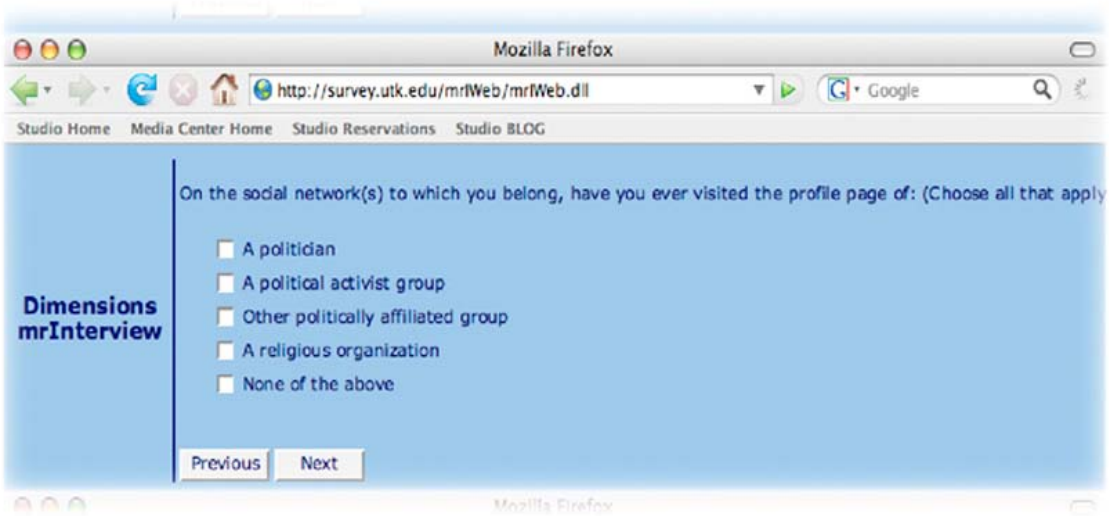


Figure 7: Survey Question – Political Actor Profile Visitation

Figure 8: Survey Question – Political Cues

Post-Membership Interest in Politics

My sixth hypothesis states that individuals will report that joining an OSN has made them more interested in politics. In order to gauge respondents' self-perceived effect of their OSN membership on their interest in politics, survey participants were asked what effect joining an OSN had on their interest in politics. Response categories were coded as follows: 1= made you less interested in politics, 2= had no effect of your interest in politics and 3= Made you more interested in politics (see Figure 9).

Post-Membership Participation in Associations

My seventh hypothesis states that individuals will report that their participation in associations has increased since joining an OSN. In order to gauge respondents' self-reported perceptions of the effects of OSN membership on their participation in political

associations, survey participants were asked if they had ever belonged to any of the following: 1) a political party, 2) a trade union, 3) a church or other religious organization, 4) a sports, leisure or cultural group, or 5) another voluntary organization (see Figure 10). Given that no respondents had belonged to a trade union, that variable was dropped from the list.

Those who reported that they had belonged to any of the other associations were asked about their self-perception of the effect of their OSN membership on their participation habits in those associations. Response categories were coded as follows: 1= used to belong but quit after joining an OSN, 2= belonged prior to joining an OSN and continue to belong, and 3= have begun taking part in such a group since joining an OSN (see Figure 11). From these questions, I created an index of post-OSN (e.g., occurring after having joined an OSN) association participation that ranges from one (overall disengagement from associations) to twelve (initiated participation in all associations).

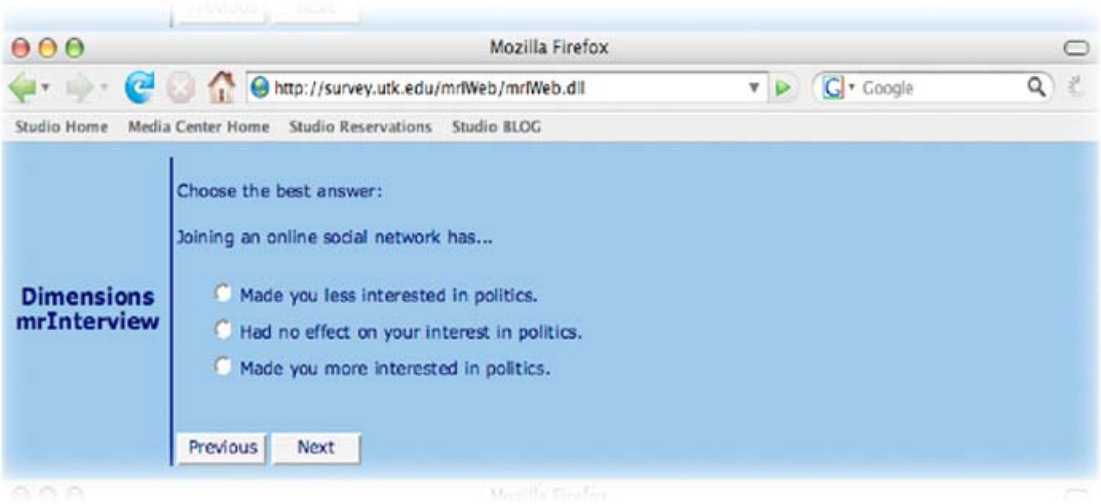


Figure 9: Survey Question – Effects of OSN Membership on Interest in Politics

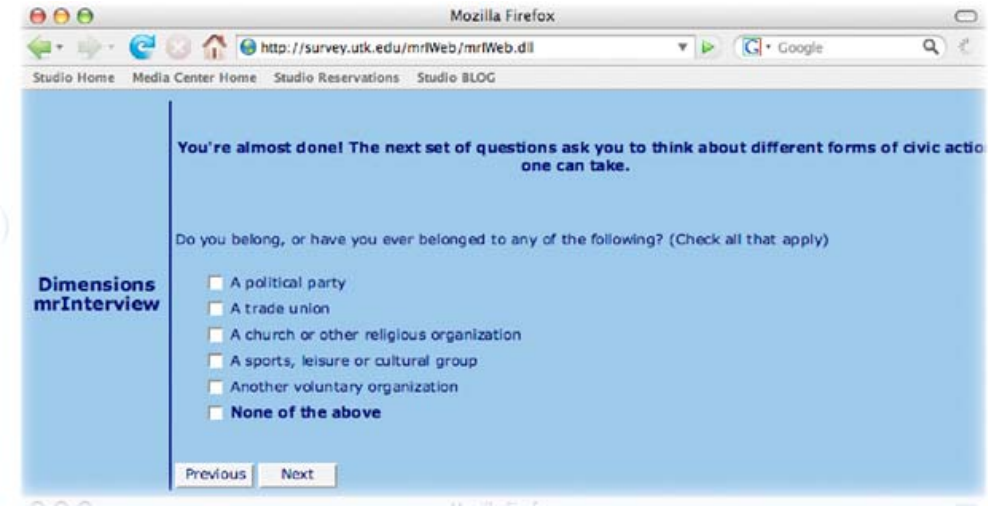


Figure 10 – Survey Question – Membership in Associations

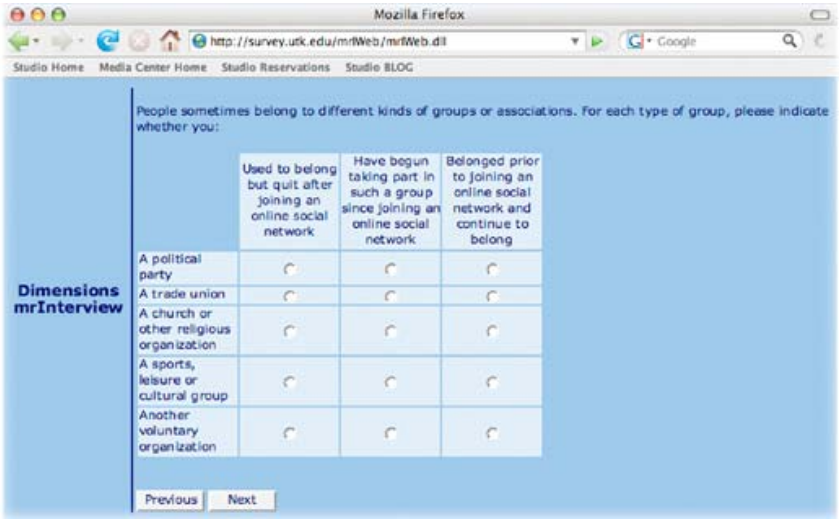


Figure 11: Survey Question – Post-OSN Association Activities

Post-Membership Political Actions

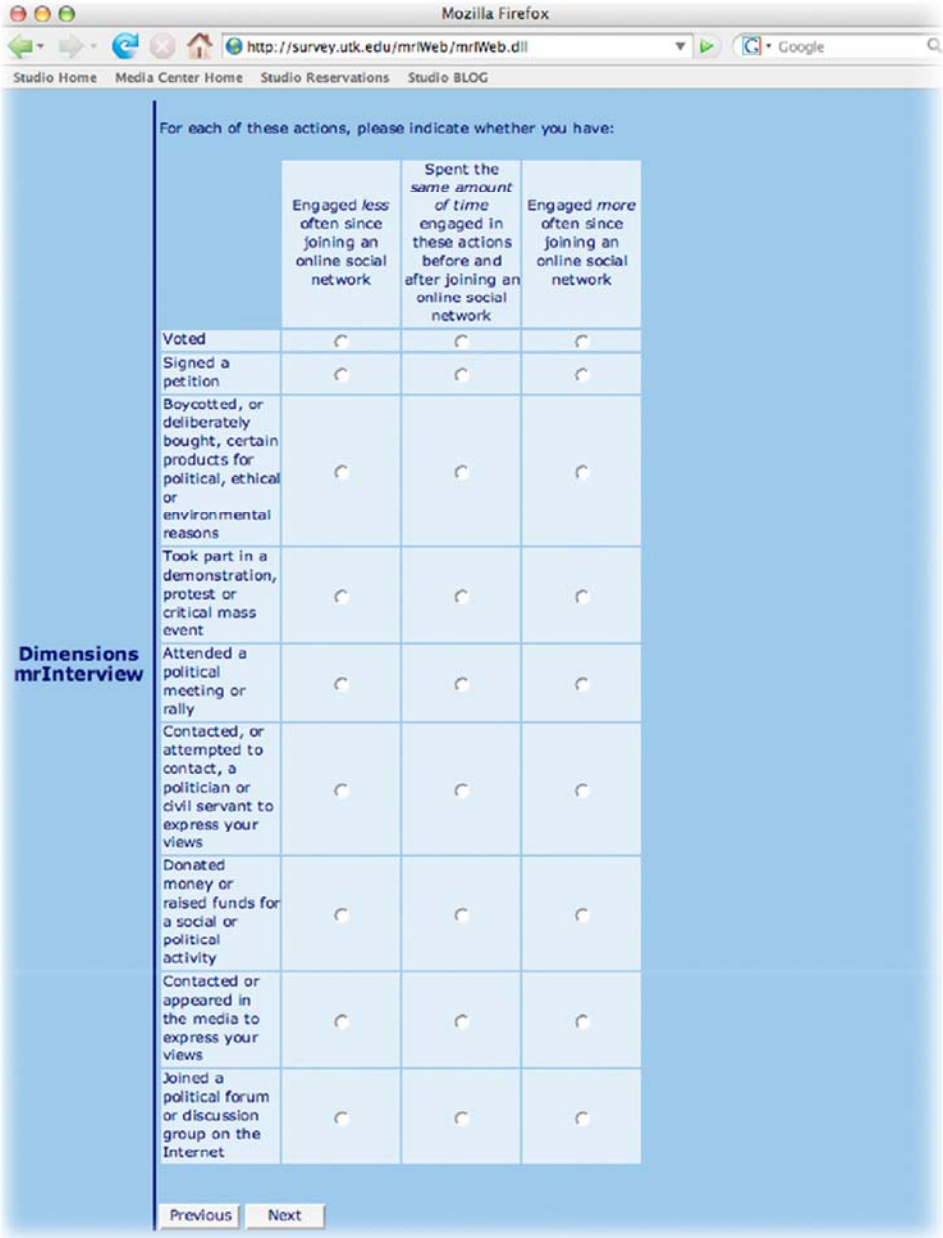
My eighth hypothesis states that individuals will report that they have increased their occurrence of taking political actions since joining an OSN. In order to gauge the self-reported political actions taken by respondents, survey participants were asked if they had ever done any of the following: 1) voted, 2) signed a petition, 3) boycotted (or deliberately bought) certain products for political (or ethical or environmental) reasons, 4) took part in a demonstration, protest or critical mass event, 5) attended a political meeting or rally, 6) contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or civil servant to express their views, 7) donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity, 8) contacted or appeared in the media to express their views, or 9) joined a political forum or discussion group on the Internet (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Survey Question – Political Actions

For each of these actions respondents reported they had taken, survey participants were asked what effect joining an OSN had on the frequency of their actions. Response categories were coded as follows: 1= engaged less often since joining an OSN, 2= spent the same amount of time engaged in these actions before and after joining an OSN, and 3= engaged more often since joining an OSN (see Figure 13). I combined these into an index of post-membership political activity that ranges from one (less overall engagement in fewest political activities) to twenty-seven (increased overall engagement in all political activities). The reliability of the post-membership political action index was determined by computation of Chronbach's alpha. The standardized alpha for this seven-item scale was .732, indicating a high degree of internal consistency.

Intentions of Voting in 2008

My final hypothesis states that individuals will report that they intend on voting in the 2008 presidential election. To gauge respondents' self-reported intentions, survey participants were simply asked if they planned on voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Response categories included 1) yes, 2) no, 3) not a U.S. citizen, and 4) lost right to vote (see Figure 14).



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For each of these actions, please indicate whether you have:

	Engaged *less* often since joining an online social network	Spent the *same amount of time* engaged in these actions before and after joining an online social network	Engaged *more* often since joining an online social network
Voted			
Signed a petition			
Boycotted, or deliberately bought, certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons			
Took part in a demonstration, protest or critical mass event			
Attended a political meeting or rally			
Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or civil servant to express your views			
Donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity			
Contacted or appeared in the media to express your views			
Joined a political forum or discussion group on the Internet			

Previous | Next

Figure 13: Survey Question – Post-OSN Political Activities

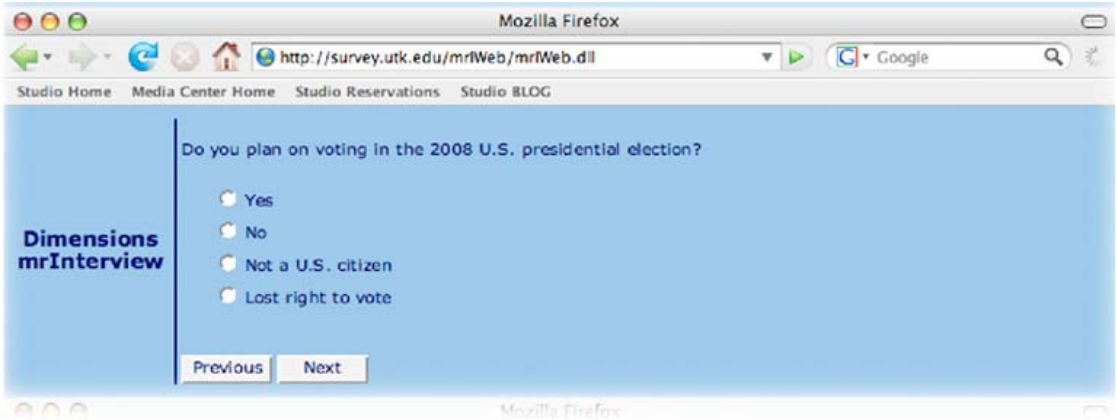

Figure 14: Survey Question – Intentions of Voting in the 2008 Presidential Election

Network Variables

Four important network variables were also measured. First, it was determined whether or not survey participants had one or more than one OSN account (see Figure 15). Responses were coded as follows: 1= single network and 2= multiple networks. Network co-habitation likely increases the sheer number of interactions that one has, thereby increasing the likelihood that users will receive political messages via an OSN. These messages provide the context in which network users take an interest in politics and learn to participate by voting, taking part in traditional voluntary associations, and engaging in political and social actions. Given that many political actors maintain profiles on more than one OSN, network co-habitation also increases the opportunity to visit (or be visited by) relevant political actors online.

I measured respondents' tenure on their networks by asking them how long they have maintained a profile on their OSN's. Responses included 1) less than 6 months, 2) 6 months to 12 months, 3) 13 months to 36 months, 4) 37 months to 48 months, and 5)

more than 48 months (see Figure 16). Respondents were also asked approximately how many hours they spent on OSN's each week (see Figure 17). Much like network cohabitation, I expect respondents' network tenure and weekly hours spent on their OSN's to positively affect their social and political habits due to increased access to information and an increase in the amount of time spent on social activities.

It was important to measure the number of online connections survey participants maintain on their OSN's. The basic theory guiding this study is that social connections enable the transfer of information and ideas that ultimately enhance the outcomes of individuals' actions. Social connections on OSN's take place through bulletins, personal messages and public comments on one's profile page. Respondents were asked approximately how many friends they had linked to their OSN profiles (see Figure 18). I expect the more individuals one has linked to on the network the more likely it is they will encounter political information via the network. I also asked respondents what percent of their OSN friends they see within different intervals of time (see Figure 19).

Figure 15: Survey Question – OSN Memberships

Figure 16: Survey Question – OSN Tenure

Demographic Variables

Survey participants' demographic information was also collected. Respondents were asked to identify their age, gender (1= male and 2= female) and race (0= white and 1= non-white). Unfortunately, two additional demographic questions suffered from structural failure. A question regarding the highest level of formal education completed by the respondent would have captured variation among high school students, undergraduate and graduate university students, but failed to capture variation solely among university students (see Figure 20). Likewise, another question asked respondents what type of community they lived in: urban, suburban or rural. This question was likely confusing to University of Tennessee students who were currently living in Knoxville to attend college, but grew up (and likely spend summers) elsewhere. Therefore, this variable was not used in the analysis.

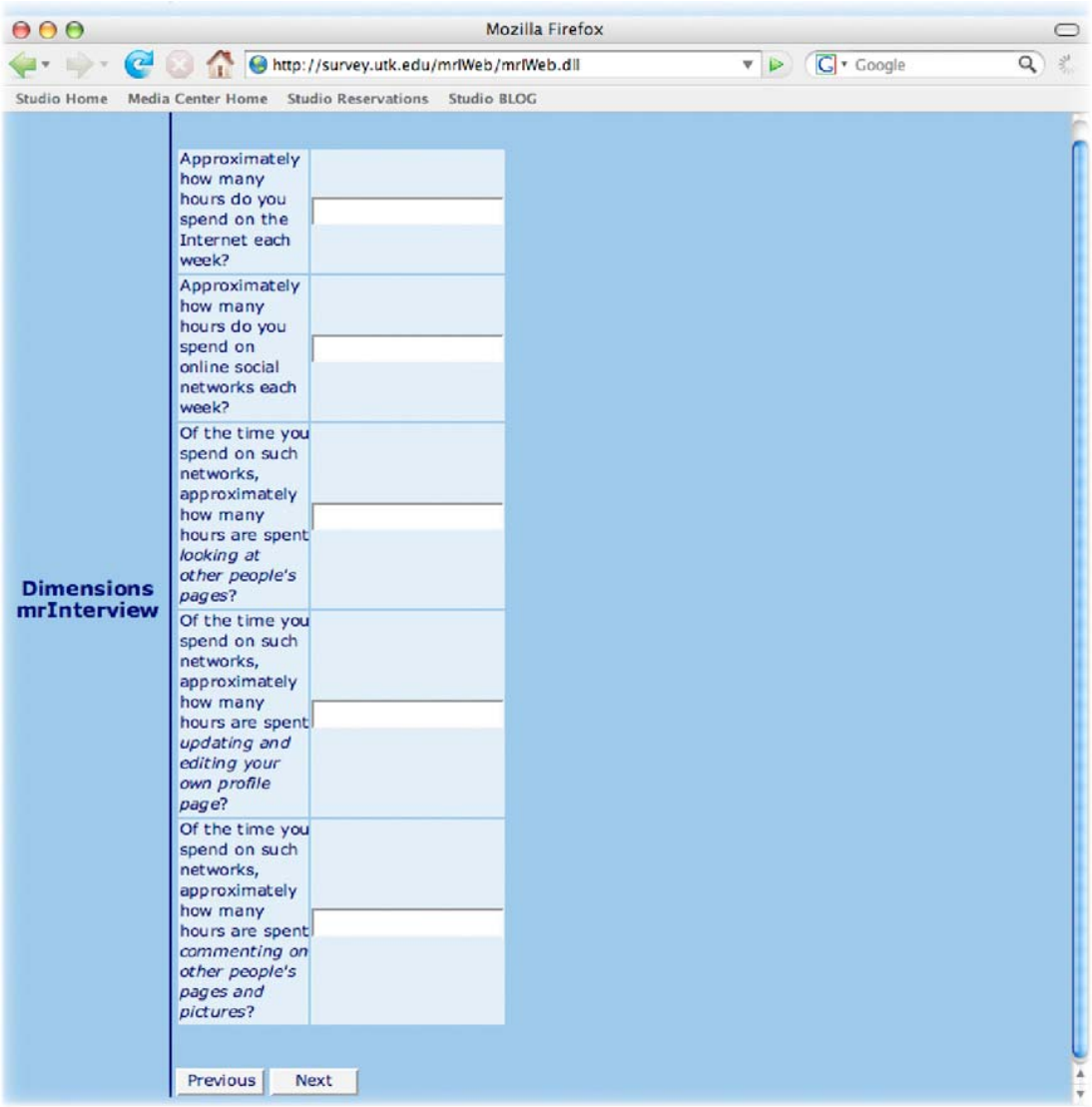

Figure 17: Survey Question – Hours Spent on OSN's

Figure 18: Survey Question – Linked Friends

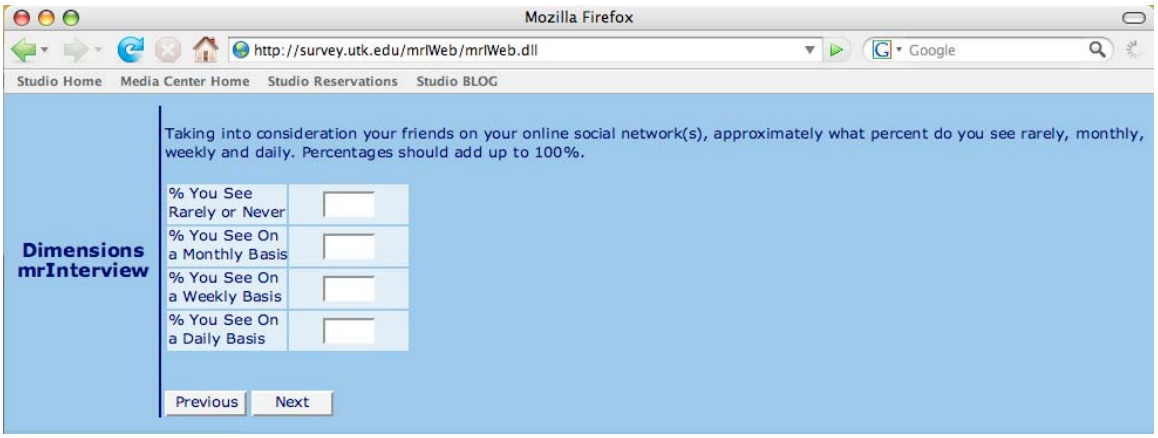

Figure 19: Survey Question - Face-to-Face Encounters with OSN Friends

Figure 20: Survey Question – Educational Attainment

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

The central thesis of social capital theory is that individuals and societies benefit from the sense of belonging, and the concrete experiences of trust and tolerance, found in social networks. The structures that foster these feelings are typically identified and examined in geographic communities. The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not such structures also exist on OSN's and, to the extent possible, offer clues to explaining the self-perceived effects of online social networking on members' political values and habits. Three broad research questions directed the investigation: 1) How do members of OSN's use their networks to socialize; 2) Are online social networks used to gather and disseminate political information; and 3) What are the self-perceived effects of OSN's on members' social and political habits. Table 1 outlines the construction of the major variables used in the analyses as well as their range, mean and standard deviation. The construction of these variables is discussed fully in previous chapter.

The extent to which the findings in this study are generalizable to the entire population of OSN users is severely limited due to factors beyond the author's control (see Chapter 4). Given the limited scope of the survey, some of the examined habits and values displayed little variation amongst respondents. In some cases, statistical analyses revealed less about the effects of network participation than the necessity of further research on a broader scale. In other cases, the findings present useful information to scholars studying the effect of Web 2.0 technologies on society and political strategists considering using such technologies to connect with and mobilize young voters. The findings herein serve as the basis of future research with proper funding and the cooperation of online social networking sites.

Table 1: Summary of Major Variables' Construction and Summary Statistics

Variable	Construction	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Post-Membership Social Connections Index	Scale Variable from 7 to 35 7= Much Less Connected to Society Overall 35= Much More Connected to Society Overall	17	32	23.78	2.39
Post-Membership Friendship Diversification Index	Scale Variable from 7 to 21 7= Decreased Overall Diversity of Friendships 21= Increased Overall Diversity of Friendships	13	21	15.19	1.87
OSN Political Discourse Index	Scale Variable from 0 to 4 0= No Types of Political Discourse 4= Four Types of Political Discourse	0	4	1.26	1.31
Political Actor Profile Visitation Index	Scale Variable from 0 to 4 0= No Visits to Political Actors' Profiles 4= Visits to 4 Types of Political Actors' Profiles	0	4	1.56	1.33
Profile Political Cue Index	Scale Variable from 0 to 4 0= No Political Cues Shared 4= Four Types of Political Cues Shared	0	4	1.44	1.29
Post-Membership Interest in Politics	1= Made You Less Interested 2= Had No Effect On Interest 3= Made You More Interested	2	3	2.19	0.39
Post-Membership Participation in Associations Index	Scale Variable from 1 to 12 1= Overall Disengagement in Least Number of Associations 12= Overall Continued Engagement in All Associations	1	12	5.89	2.34
Post-Membership Political Action Index	Scale Variable from 1 to 27 1= Less Overall Engagement in Fewest Activities 27= Greater Overall Engagement in All Activities	1	26	9.34	5.40
Network Cohabitation	1= Single OSN Membership 2= Multiple OSN Memberships	1	2	1.47	0.50
Network Tenure	1= Less Than 6 Months 2= 6 Months to 12 Months 3= 13 Months to 36 4= 37 Months to 48 Months 5= More than 48 Months	1	5	3.33	0.91
Linked Friends	Continuous Variable	8	2000	341.35	297.60
Gender	1= Male 2= Female	1	2	1.47	0.50
Race	0= White 1= Non-White	0	1	.1235	0.33
Marital Status	1= Married 2= Not Married	1	2	1.95	0.23

Respondent Demographics

This survey generated 177 respondents. Seven of these respondents reported that they did not maintain a profile on an OSN, thus relinquishing themselves from the survey. This left the study with a sample population of 170 respondents (N=170). All 170 respondents who reported maintaining an OSN profile completed the survey in its entirety. Nearly 88% of respondents were white (see Table 2). Respondents ranged between 18 and 54 years of age, with a mean of 21 and a standard deviation of 4.77 (see Table 3). Males accounted for 44.1% of the survey respondents. An overwhelming majority (98.2%) of respondents were U.S. residents. The remaining three students hailed from Mexico, Nicaragua and Romania. Nine of the respondents were married and three had children.

Table 2: Respondents by Race

Self-described Race	% of Sample
White	87.6
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.2
Asian	2.9
Black or African-American	3.5
Hispanic or Latino	1.8
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.6
Multiracial	2.4

N=170

Table 3: Respondents by Age

Age	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
18	28	15.8	15.8
19	53	29.9	45.8
20	34	19.2	65
21	15	8.5	73.4
22	15	8.5	81.9
23	4	2.3	84.2
24	3	1.7	85.9
25	4	2.3	88.1
26	7	4	92.1
27	3	1.7	93.8
28	2	1.1	94.9
29	1	0.6	95.5
31	1	0.6	96
32	2	1.1	97.2
39	1	0.6	97.7
40	1	0.6	98.3
41	1	0.6	98.9
42	1	0.6	99.4
54	1	0.6	100

N= 170

Socializing on the Network

Scholars have identified the types of social relationships that are most likely to produce positive externalities for social and political capital (see Chapter 1). The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which members of online social networks socialize with each other on the networks. In doing so, I hope to identify the potential benefits or drawbacks of online social network membership for these forms of capital.

Bender's definition of community accounts for boundaries, social interactions and obligations: "A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation" (Bender 1982). It appears that OSN users do invest a significant amount of time in their

networks. Whether or not they feel "obligated" to do so is unknown. Regardless, the data suggest that membership activities have become habitual for many OSN users. Most survey participants had belonged to an OSN for 13 to 48 months at the time of the survey (see Table 4). The amount of time respondents spend on the Internet each week ranges between 1 hour and 85 hours, with an average of 16 hours per week. The amount of time respondents spend on their OSN's each week ranges from 0 to 80, with an average of 6.26 hours per week. Figure 21 displays the amount of time respondents spent on an online social network in proportion to their total number of hours spent on the Internet. The data also suggest that many users invest time on more than one OSN, with 47% of survey respondents maintaining a profile on more than one network.

On average, respondents spend over a quarter of their time on the Internet using OSN's. This is not surprising given that an overwhelming number of respondents claimed that almost all of their friends belonged to an OSN (see Table 5). When asked how many friends they had linked to their profile(s) respondents reported a wide range of connections from 8 to 2000. On average, users had 341 linked friends. The mode response was 200 friends. The density of these ties may produce an online community that is capable of fostering social and political capital among its members.

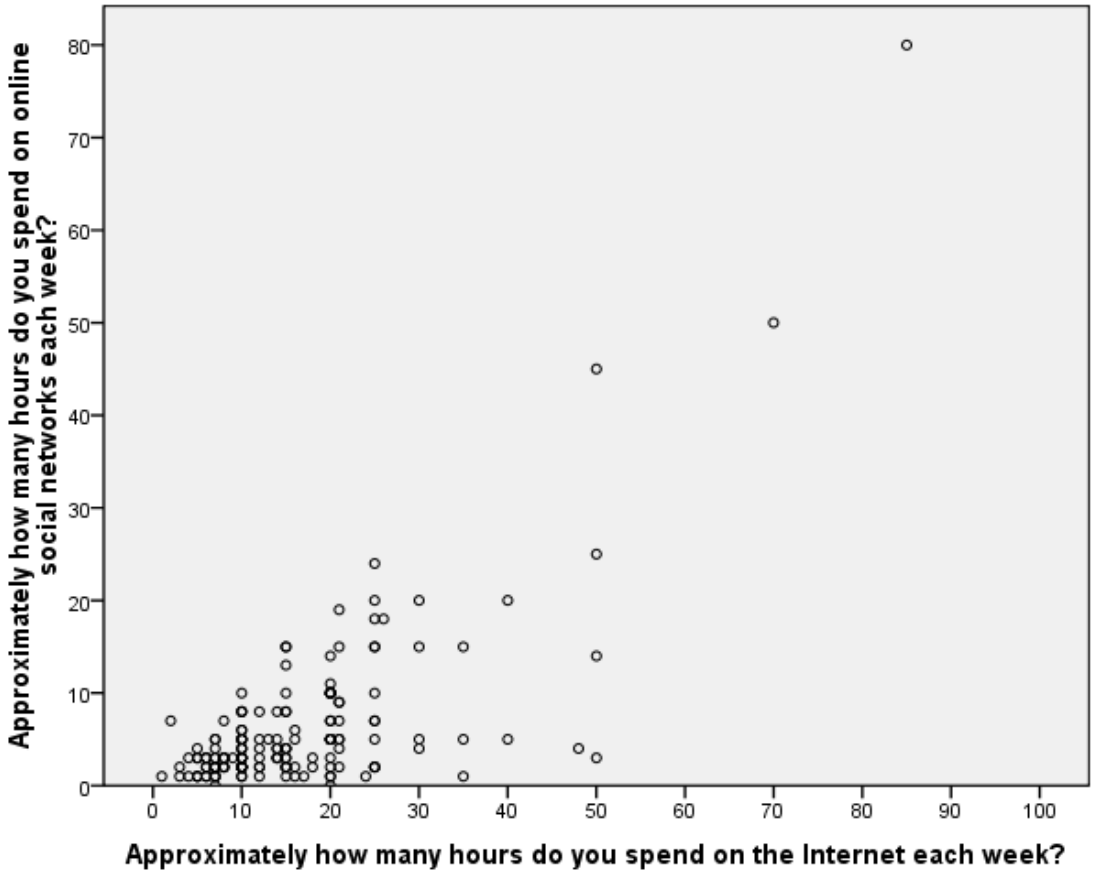

Figure 21: Time Spent on OSN's in Proportion to Time Spent on the Internet

Table 4: Respondents' Tenure on OSN's

Tenure	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 6 mo.	4	2.4	2.4
6 mo. to 12 mo.	20	11.8	14.1
13 mo. To 36 mo.	81	47.6	61.8
37 mo. To 48 mo.	46	27.1	88.8
More than 48 mo.	19	11.2	100

N= 170

Keeping in touch with current friends is the most cited incentive for individuals to join an OSN, although making new friends and simple curiosity also act as incentives for a number of users (see Table 6). It appears that online social networks are particularly useful in keeping up with friends rarely or never seen face-to-face by users, which account for half of users' OSN friendships. Joining an OSN makes it virtually effortless to maintain contact with these weak ties, as well as receive updates from these distant acquaintances through bulletins, blogs and photos.

Evidence (discussed below) suggests that many users seek out political information on the networks, though most users do not identify gathering political information as an *incentive for joining* an OSN. Most Web 2.0 applications, like blogs and forums, tend to draw an audience looking for a particular content (e.g., vegetarian cooking, backpacking, Washington politics, etc.). Unlike these Web-communities of narrow interest, OSN's are important because of their ability to distribute political information to those *not* seeking it, thereby increasing their interest and invigorating their civic spirit.

Table 5: Amount of Respondents' Friends Who Belong to an OSN

Amount	Frequency	Percent
Almost None	2	1.2
Some	8	4.7
Most	31	18.2
Almost All	127	74.7
Don't Know	2	1.2

N= 170

Table 6: Incentives for Joining an OSN

Incentive	Frequency	Percent
Curiosity	105	38.2
To Make New Friends	43	25.3
To Keep in Touch with Current Friends	160	94.1
To Find a Boyfriend/Girlfriend	4	2.4
To Get Political Information	4	2.4

N= 170

Some have argued that Web-based networks don't engender strong interpersonal relationships the way that real, geographic communities do (Calhoun 1998, Parks and Floyd 1996). However, two pieces of evidence obtained in this study suggest otherwise. First, it appears that OSN users are not merely using the networks as a platform for self-expression, but also as a means to invest themselves in others' lives. In this sample, the average user spends less than a quarter of their time on OSN's updating their own profile (illustrated by the partitioned area in Figure 22). Instead, users spend over 75% of their time on these networks looking at other people's pages and commenting on their friends' pictures. In other words, OSN users congregate in a virtual community because they are interested and involved in each other's lives. Second, it appears that at least some OSN users are strengthening their interpersonal connections to society as a result of their network memberships.

My first hypothesis states that individuals will report that their feelings of connectedness to society have increased since joining an OSN. If significant numbers (greater than 20%) of individuals had reported feeling less or much less connected to society, I would fail to reject my null hypothesis. However, the results of my survey (see Table 7) suggest that very few individuals perceive themselves as becoming more

isolated as a result of their use of OSN's, and many users are strengthening their connections to various levels of society including their 1) friends, 2) family, 3) neighborhood, 4) community, 5) state, 6) the United States, and 7) the global community. Figure 23 displays the distribution of respondents on the Social Connections Index. Discussed fully in the previous chapter, this index ranges from seven (much less connection at all levels) to 35 (much more connection at all levels). While a majority of respondents perceived no effect of their OSN membership on their connections to society, the fact that a significant proportion (< 20% at most connection levels) of survey respondents perceived positive effects on their societal connections leads me to reject my null hypothesis.

Social trust, also called generalized trust, is another essential element of communities. The data suggest that a majority of OSN members guard their privacy. In fact, 76% of respondents established network privacy settings requiring others to be

Table 7: Self-Perceived Effect of OSN Membership on Users' Societal Connections

Level of Connection	Effect of Network Membership (% of Respondents)				
	Much Less	Less	No Difference	More	Much More
Friends	0.6	1.8	15.9	54.1	27.6
Family	0.0	2.4	74.7	21.2	1.8
Neighborhood	1.2	2.4	85.3	10.0	1.2
Community	0.0	2.4	67.1	26.5	4.1
State	0.0	1.2	75.9	21.8	1.2
United States	0.6	0.6	68.8	25.3	4.7
Global Community	0.6	0.6	55.9	31.2	11.8

N= 170

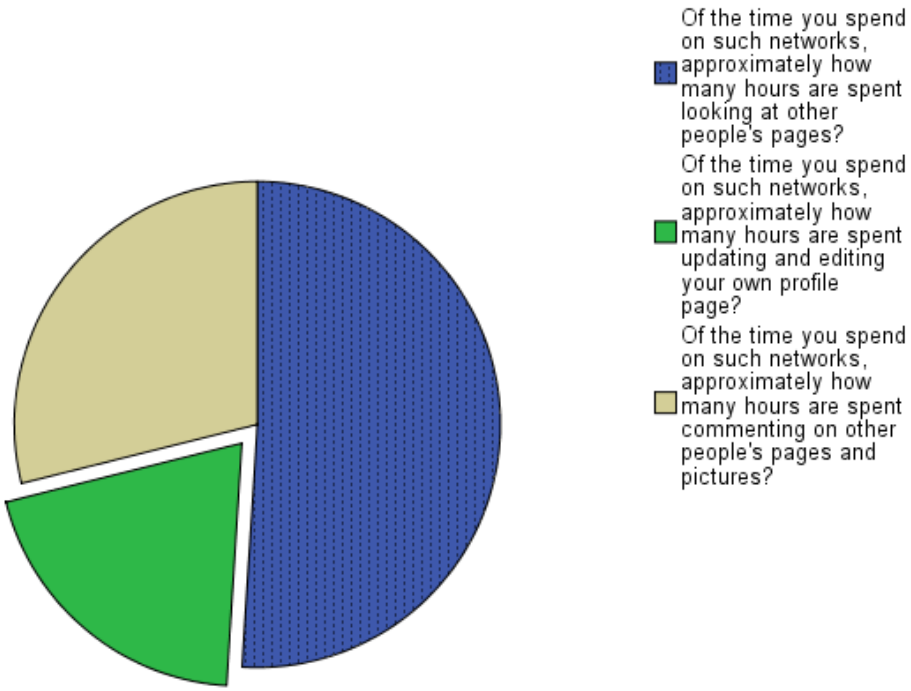

Figure 22: Allocation of OSN Members' Time on the Networks

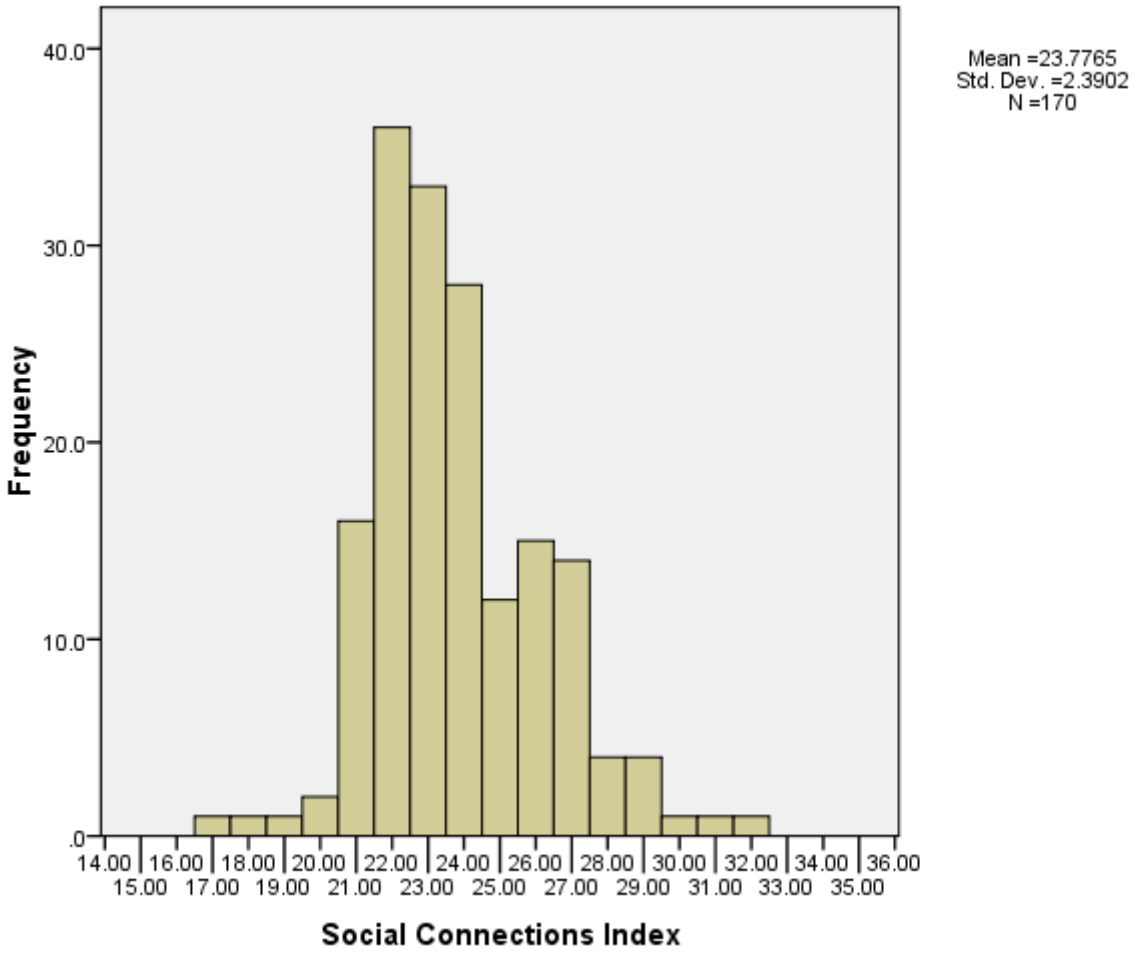

Figure 23: Distribution of Respondents on the Social Connections Index

added as a "friend" before being allowed to view their complete profile (the default setting is "publicly viewable"). There are at least two possible explanations for this. First, the practices of online sexual predators have received much negative attention by mass media including shows like Dateline's *To Catch a Predator* television series on NBC. Second, students have become wary of law enforcement officers, school officials and potential employers who might use the online social networks as a means of gathering information on them. Privacy settings represent a peephole, or safety measure, that can be used before allowing strangers into one's online home. As a result of this safety measure, one might suspect that OSN's are better at fostering bonding relationships among tightly woven friendships than bridging relationships between disparate segments of society. While this may be true, at least some users did report increasing the diversity of their social circles as a result of their OSN memberships.

My second hypothesis states that individuals will report that their friendships have become more diverse since joining an OSN. Respondents were asked if joining an OSN had increased, decreased, or had no effect on the number of their friends of a different race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, economic status and education level (see Table 8). While over 75% of respondents reported no effect of OSN membership on each category of diversity, there were far more individuals who increased rather than decreased the diversity of various types of friends. Based on their self-reported effects of OSN membership on friendship diversity, respondents were given a score on a Friendship Diversification Index from seven (decreased overall diversity of friendships) to 21 (increased overall diversity of friendships). Figure 24 displays the distribution of respondents on this index. If significant numbers of respondents have reported a decrease

Table 8: Self-Perceived Effect of OSN Membership on Respondents' Friendship Diversity

Characteristic	Effect	Percent
Race	Decreased	0.59
	Had No Effect	84.0
	Increased	16.0
Religion	Decreased	1.18
	Had No Effect	81.0
	Increased	18.0
Nationality	Had No Effect	79.0
	Increased	21.0
Gender	Decreased	0.59
	Had No Effect	79.0
	Increased	21.0
Sexual Orientation	Had No Effect	88.0
	Increased	12.0
Economic Status	Decreased	0.59
	Had No Effect	88.0
	Increased	11.0
Education Level	Decreased	0.59
	Had No Effect	75.0
	Increased	25.0

N= 170

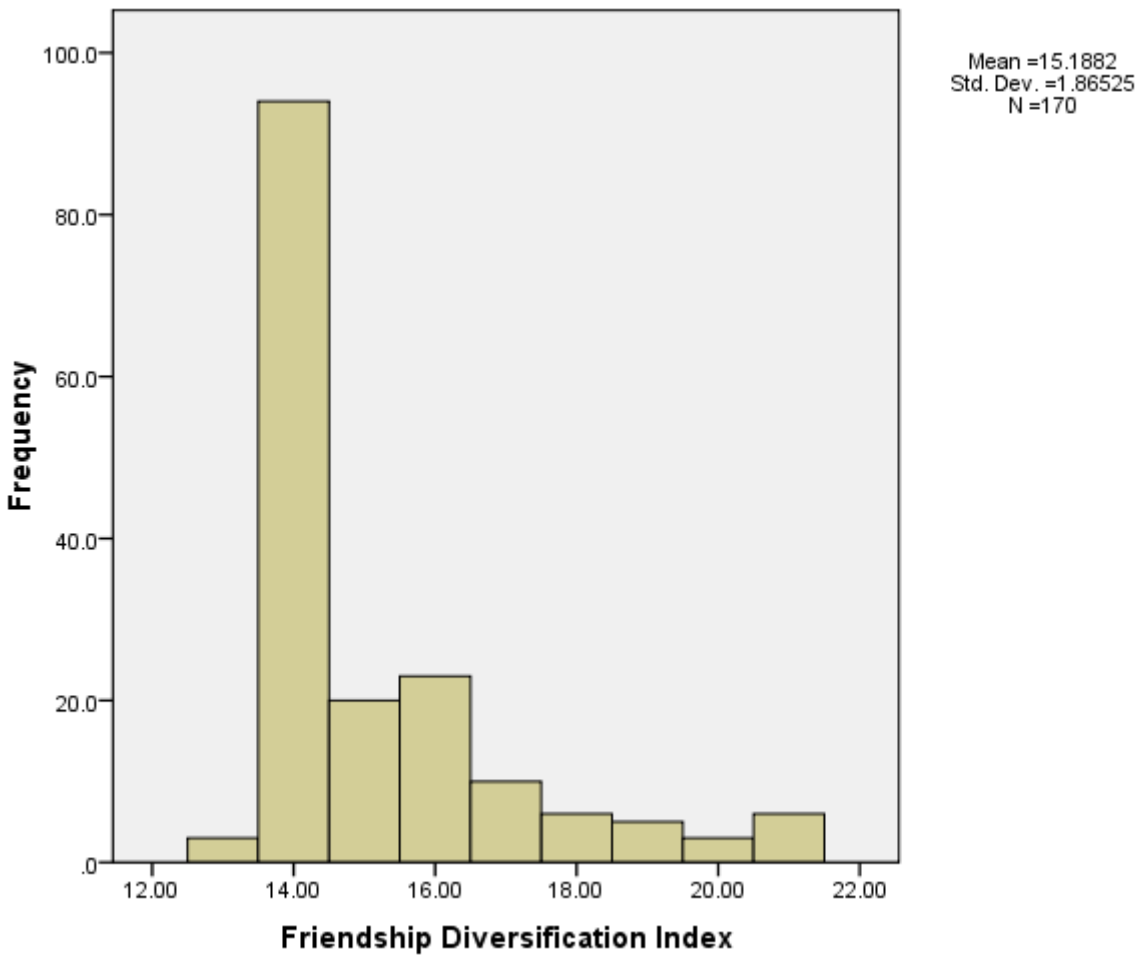

Figure 24: Distribution of Respondents on an Index of the Self-Perceived Effects of OSN Membership on Friendship Diversity

in the diversity of their friendships, I would fail to reject my null hypothesis. However, in this study at least 10% of respondents reported an increase in their friendships across every level of diversity leading me to reject my null hypothesis.

Political Information on the Networks

My third hypothesis states that individuals will report that they discuss politics on their OSN's. A lack of confidence often times prevents individuals from discussing certain subject matter. The data suggest, however, that respondents likely have enough confidence about their understanding of American politics to discuss the matter with others. When given the statement "I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing America," 78% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they did. Only 11% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Likewise, when given the statement "Most people in America are better informed about politics and government than I am," only 15% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. On the other hand, 62% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

When asked what topics they discuss with their friends on their OSN's, 42% of respondents said they discuss American politics (see Table 9). More than a third (34%) said they discuss world news and 25% said they discuss volunteering or political activism. Not surprisingly, the topics chosen most by respondents were gossip among friends (71%), television and movies (72%), music (66%) and sports (57%). Religion was chosen as a topic of discussion by a quarter of respondents. Figure 25 displays the distribution of respondents on a Political Discourse Index ranging from zero (no discussion of politics) to 4 (discussion of all four types of political topics). If the percent

of respondents who discussed each of the political topics was low, at perhaps less than 20%, I would fail to reject my null hypothesis. However, the data suggest that a significant percent of respondents, in some cases as many as 60-70%, discuss such topics leading me to reject the null of my third hypothesis.

Geographic space has long been a source of contention among scholars studying representative democracy. While OSN's do not negate the importance of face-to-face encounters between policymakers and citizens, they may nonetheless facilitate the exchange of information and ideas between these agents. My fourth hypothesis states that individuals will report that they have visited the OSN profiles of political actors. Respondents were asked whether or not they visited the profile page of various political actors, and whether or not they linked to these profiles by adding them as a friend. Again, if less than 20% of respondents had visited such profiles on their OSN's I would fail to reject my null hypothesis. However, the results (see Table 10) suggest this is not the case. Nearly half of respondents (41%) reported visits to a political activist group. Fewer had visited the profile page of another politically affiliated group (36%) or religious

Table 9: Topics Discussed by Respondents on OSN's

Topic	Percent of Respondents
American Politics	42
World News	34
Volunteering and Political Activism	25
Gossip Among Friends	71
Television and Movies	72
Music	66
Sports	57
Religion	25

N= 170

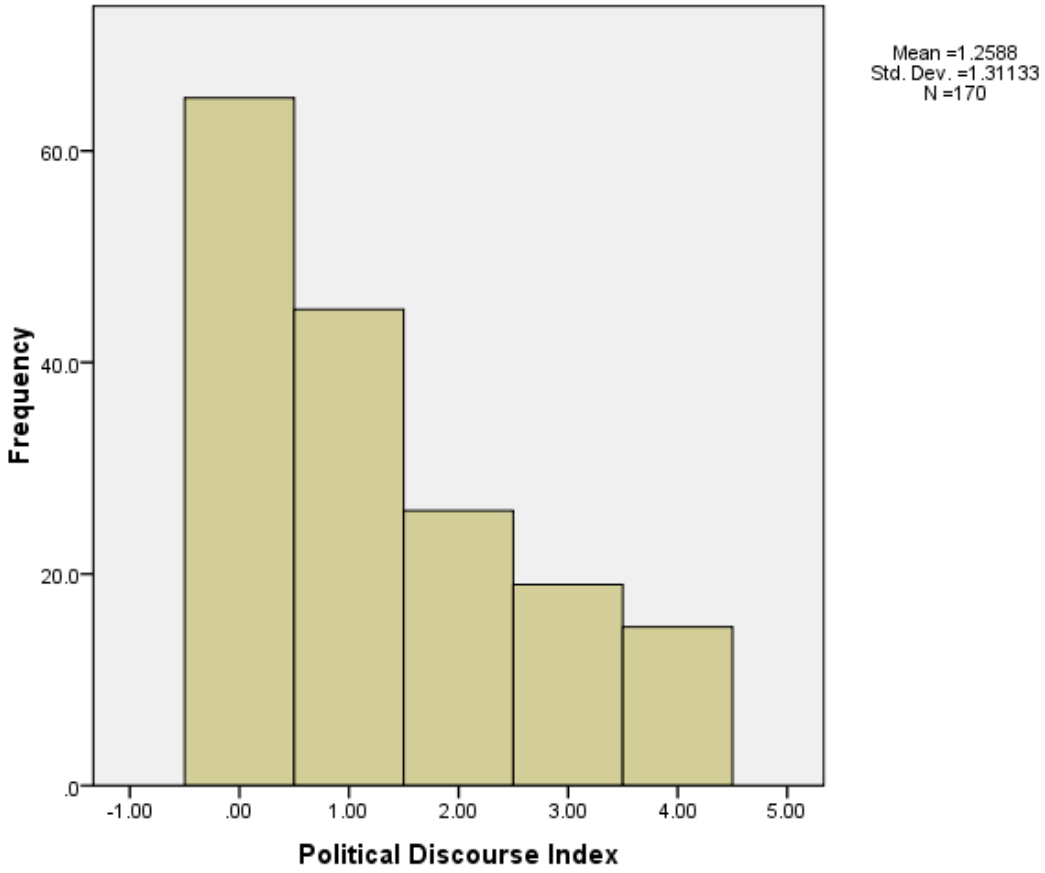

Figure 25: Distribution of OSN Members on an Index of OSN Political Discourse

Table 10: Respondents' Interactions with Political Actors on OSN's

Political Actor	Visit	Add
Politician	44%	28%
Activist Group	41%	21%
Other Politically Affiliated Group	36%	20%
Religious Organization	35%	21%

N= 170

organization (35%). Nearly half (44%) of the users surveyed reported that they had visited the profile page of a politician. Figure 26 displays the distribution of respondents on a Political Actor Profile Visitation Index ranging from zero (no visits to political actors' profiles) to 4 (visits to all four types of political actors' profiles). Based on the evidence, I reject the null of my fourth hypothesis.

Political information can be disseminated by political actors on the network in the form of comments left in linked friends' comment section or through bulletins dispatched to those linked to their profile. To receive such contacts, a user *must* add the political actor as a friend on the network. Nearly a third (28%) of respondents said they had added a politician as a friend on their online social network (see Table 10). Slightly less (21%) said they had added a political activist group as a friend. Fewer respondents reported adding another politically affiliated group (20%) or a religious organization (21%) as a friend on their networks. Thus, even if my fourth hypothesis had stated that individuals will report that they have added, rather than simply visited, the profiles of political actors I would still reject my null hypothesis.

My fifth hypothesis states that individuals will report that they display political cues on their profile. Respondents were asked about the information they share on their profiles (see Table 11). Again, if less than 20% of respondents had reported displaying such political cues on their profile I would reject my null hypothesis. However, this was not the case. In fact, more than half (57%) said their profiles contained information regarding their political beliefs or positions. More than a third (39%) of respondents reported sharing their support for a presidential candidate in the 2008 race. Likewise, 33% of respondents reported sharing their political party affiliation on their profile. In

hindsight, it would have been interesting to know which presidential candidate received the greatest share of support amongst these UT students. Other politicians, examples of which might include senators and congressmen, were supported on the profile pages of only 15% of respondents. Figure 27 displays the distribution of respondents on a Profile Political Cue Index ranging from zero (no political cues shared) to 4 (all four types of political cues shared). Based on the evidence, I reject the null of my fifth hypothesis.

It has become common for politicians and activist groups to use OSN's for political purposes. For example, in the 2008 Democratic primaries much of Barack Obama's success was attributed to the use of OSN's to generate financial and popular support (Dickinson 2008). Given the increasing presence of political actors on these networks, I examined the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on members' interest in politics. My sixth hypothesis states that individuals will report that their OSN membership has increased their interest in politics. The results are promising (see Table 12). Nearly 19% of all users reported that joining an OSN has increased their interest in politics. Based on the evidence collected on all respondents, I fail to reject my null hypothesis because the number of respondents reporting an increase in their political interest does not meet my 20% threshold.

Table 11: Political Cues Shared on Respondents' OSN Profiles

Type of Political Information	% of Respondents Sharing Information
Political Beliefs or Positions	57
Political Party Affiliation	33
Support for a Presidential Candidate	39
Support for Another Politician	15

N= 170

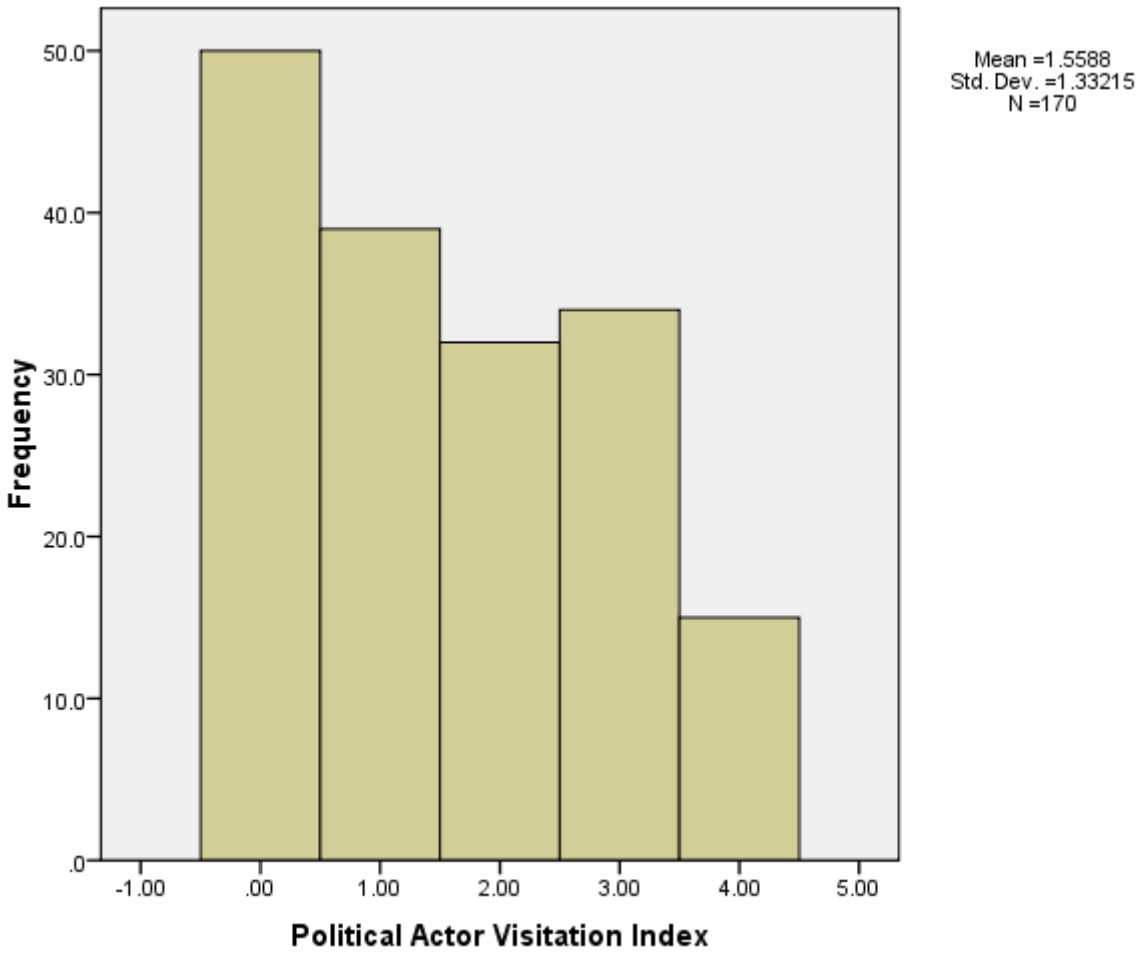

Figure 26: Distribution of OSN Members on an Index of Political Actors' Profile Visitation

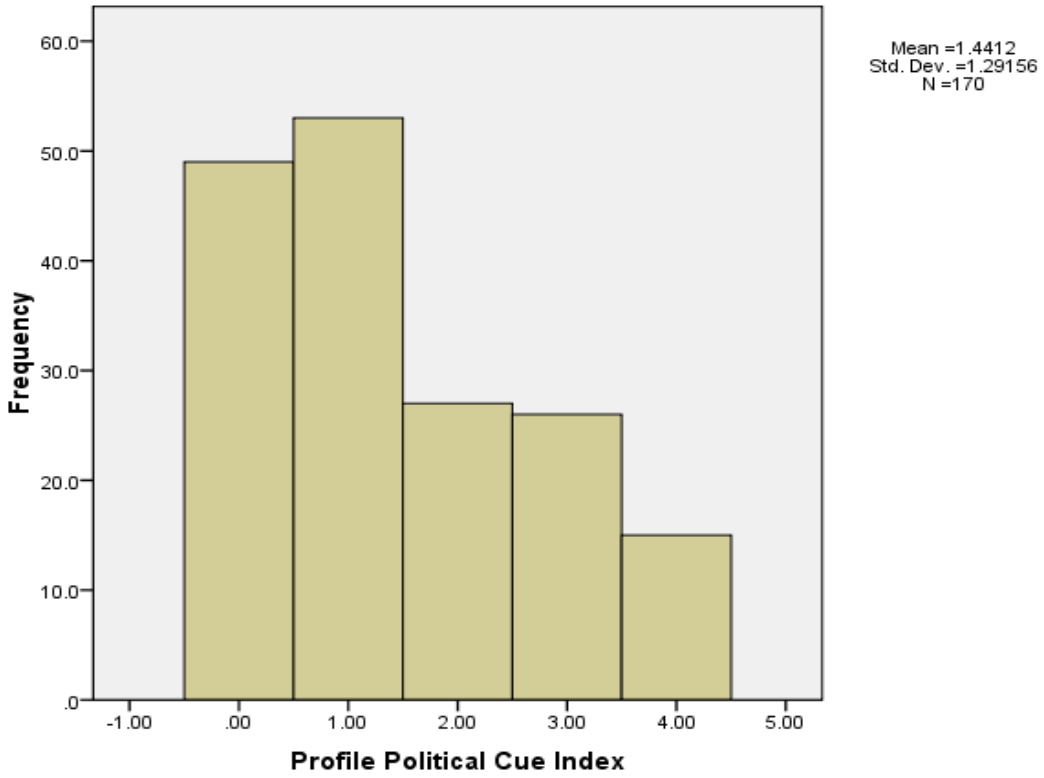

Figure 27: Distribution of OSN Members on an Index of Profile Political Cues

However, if I eliminate those respondents who reported being very interested in politics at the time of the survey, focusing instead on those who reported being only somewhat or not at all interested in the subject, I find evidence that would lead me to reject my null hypothesis. In this scenario, 44% of these politically-uninterested subjects perceived that their OSN membership increased their interest in politics. Of those who said they were not at all interested in politics, 30% reported that joining an OSN has increased their interest in politics. Likewise, of those who said they were somewhat interested in politics, 17% reported that network membership has increased their interest in the subject. An overwhelming number (94%) of respondents reported being either somewhat or very interested in politics at the time the survey was taken. These findings give scholars studying the political socialization of young Americans cause for optimism.

Table 12: Self-Perceived Effects of OSN Membership on Interest in Politics By Level of Self-Reported Interest

	Self-perceived Effect of OSN Membership On Interest in Politics		
Self-reported Level of Interest In Politics	Had No Effect	Increased Interest	Total Number of Respondents
Not at All Interested	7	3	10
Somewhat Interested	54	11	65
Very Interested	77	18	95
Total	138	32	170

N= 170

Civic Values and Participation Habits of Network Users

Finally, the civic beliefs and participation habits of OSN users were examined, as well as the self-perceived effects of network participation on those habits. I began by getting a feel for respondents' feelings toward the government (see Table 13). When given the statement, "the government doesn't care what people like me think," more than a third (34%) agreed or strongly agreed. Likewise, when given the statement, "most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally," 37% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. In another statement, "most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right," only 24% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Despite their pessimistic views of government, respondents showed an overwhelming tendency to place great importance on several civic responsibilities (see Table 14).

My seventh hypothesis states that individuals will report that their participation in political associations has increased since joining an OSN. I examined the types of groups that OSN users belonged to, as well as the self-perceived effects of network membership on users' participation in such groups (see Table 15). The findings do not support the notion that online social network users are growing increasingly isolated as a result of spending time on the networks. However, I fail to reject my null hypothesis given that

Table 13: Respondents' Views on Government

Statement (abbreviated)	% of Respondents Who Agree/Strongly Agree
Government Doesn't Care What I Think	34
Politicians Are Self-interested	37
Government Can be Trusted to Do What is Right	24

N= 170

Table 14: Respondents' Evaluation of Civic Responsibilities

Responsibility	% of Respondents Who Chose Somewhat or Very Important
Vote in Elections	95
Never Evade Taxes	91
Obey Laws and Regulations	86
Keep Watch on Government	94
Be Active in Social/Political Associations	79
Understand the Reasoning of People with Other Opinions	93
Ethical Shopping	76
Help Others Who Are Worse Off	84
Serve in the Military	60

less than 20% of respondents indicated that they have joined an association after having become a member of an OSN. The bulk of users who belong to associations prior to joining an OSN continue to belong and, with the exception of religious organizations, more individuals join associations than quit them after becoming a member of an OSN. Based on their self-perceived effect of OSN membership on their participatory habits in associations, respondents were given a score on a Post-Membership Participation in Associations Index measuring the from one (overall disengagement from the least number of associations) to 12 (overall continued engagement in all associations). Figure 28 displays the distribution of respondents on this index.

Table 15: Respondents' Associations and Self-Perceived OSN Effect on Membership

Type of Association	Number of Respondents Who Have Ever Belonged	Since Joining an OSN		
		Number That Have Quit	Number That Have Joined	Number That Belonged Prior & Continue to Belong
Political Party	63	3	47	13
Church/Religious Org.	129	14	4	111
Sports/Leisure Group	121	9	12	100
Another Voluntary Org.	114	6	22	86

N= 170

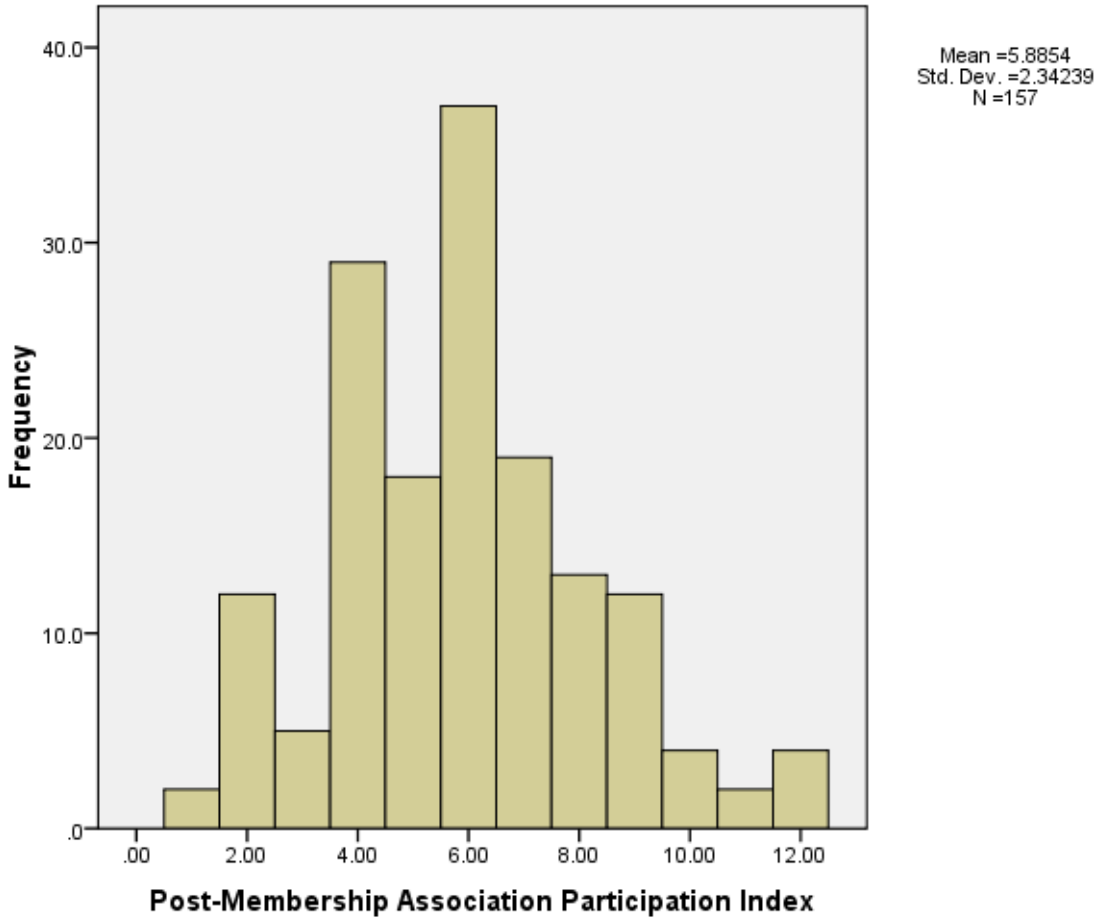

Figure 28: Distribution of OSN Members on an Index of the Self-Perceived Effects of OSN Membership on Group Participation

My eighth hypothesis states that individuals will report that they have increased their occurrence of taking political actions since joining an OSN. Respondents were asked about the types of political and social actions they had taken part in and the self-perceived effect of joining an OSN on the occurrence of these actions (see Table 16). A majority (64%) of respondents had voted. Likewise, 69% of respondents had signed a petition. Of those who had signed a petition, 22% increased the occurrence of the activity after joining an OSN. Fewer respondents engaged in ethical shopping. Regardless, of those who had, 28% increased the occurrence of ethical shopping after joining an OSN. Likewise, fewer respondents (19%) had attended a protest. Again, of those who had attended a protest, 42% increased the occurrence of the activity after joining an OSN. Far more respondents (41%) had attended a rally. Over a quarter (26%) of those who had rallied increased the occurrence of the activity after becoming a member of an OSN. When asked if they had ever contacted a politician, 41% said they had. Of those respondents that answered in the affirmative, 19% increased the occurrence of the activity after joining an OSN. The number of respondents (42%) who had donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity was surprising. Of those who had, 17% had increased the occurrence of the activity after joining an OSN. This finding suggests that OSN's could be an important platform for social and political groups trying to raise funds.

Fewer (18%) respondents had contacted the media. In this case, the effect of OSN membership is interesting. More users (19%) increased the occurrence of contacting the media after joining an OSN than decreased the occurrence of the activity (10%). The increase might be the result of increased interest in policy decisions, leading one to contact the media to express one's opinion. The decrease, on the other hand, is more difficult to explain. It may be that OSN's provide another avenue for editorializing, thus

lessening individuals' reliance on traditional media outlets to voice their opinions. A third of respondents visited Internet forums, 65% of which increased the occurrence of the activity after joining an OSN. These forums decrease individuals' reliance on formal media outlets by allowing users to disseminate and analyze information on their own. Given that the occurrence of five of the nine actions was increased by more than 20% of respondents, I reject the null of my eighth hypothesis. Based on their responses, respondents were given a score on a post-membership Political Activities Index (see Figure 29) measuring the effect of OSN membership on political activities ranging from one (decreased overall engagement in the least number of political activities) to twenty-seven (increased overall engagement in more political activities).

Table 16: Self-Perceived Effect of OSN Membership on Users' Political Activities

Action	% of Respondents Who Have Ever Taken the Action	% Who Have Decreased Occurrence of Activity After Joining an OSN	% Who Have Seen No Change in Occurrence of Activity After Joining an OSN	% Who Increased Occurrence of Activity After Joining an OSN
Vote	64	1	88	11
Sign a Petition	69	4	74	22
Ethical Shopping	51	2	70	28
Attend Protest	19	3	55	42
Attend Rally	41	1	73	26
Contact Politician	41	6	76	19
Donate Money	42	4	79	17
Contact Media	18	10	71	19
Join Internet Forum	30	0	35	65

N= 170

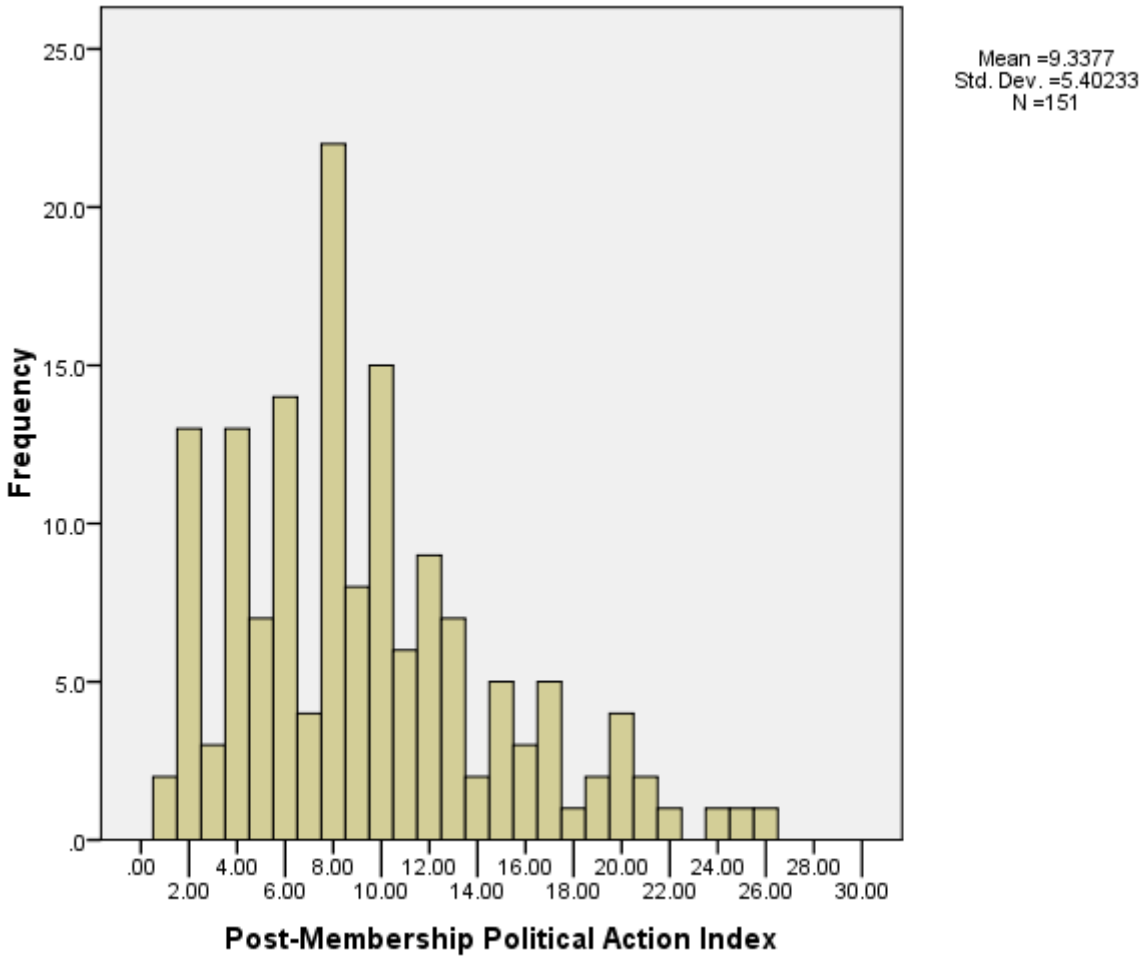

Figure 29: Distribution of Respondents on an Index of the Effects of OSN Membership on Political Actions

To gauge respondents' self-reported electoral intentions, survey participants were simply asked if they planned on voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Three of the respondents were not United States citizens, and thus removed from the analysis. After their removal, however, only two respondents remained who reported that they were not planning on voting in the 2008 presidential election. Given that far more than 20% of respondents reported that they intend on voting in the election, I reject my null hypothesis.

Regression Models

In this section, I attempt to explain variations among the data. With the exception of the fifth hypothesis regarding the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, relationships among the variables in the following hypotheses are tested using stepwise multiple regression models. If the probability associated with the test of significance is less than .05, the independent variable that has the highest correlation with the dependent variable is entered into the equation first. The variable with the next highest partial correlation is chosen second. Next, the variables already in the equation are examined for removal at .10. Variables not in the equation are re-examined for entry and elimination until no more variables meet the entry and removal criteria. The relationship between the variables in the fifth hypothesis, regarding the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, is tested using a binary logistic stepwise regression. In this case, the stepwise regression was run backward, beginning with a full model and eliminating variables at .10 in an iterative process. After the elimination of each variable, the fit of the model is tested to ensure the

model still adequately fits the data, until no more variables can be eliminated. In the remainder of this chapter, I illuminate the relationships revealed by these regression models.

H1: Individuals will report that their feelings of connectedness to society have increased since joining an OSN.

According to my theory (see Chapter 3), I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' feelings of connectedness to society: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 7) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Table 17 illustrates that only two of the variables, respondents' score on an index of post-membership friendship diversification and the self-perceived effects of their OSN membership on their interest in politics, are significant predictors of whether or not respondents felt that joining an OSN increased their feelings of connectedness to society. These two variables account for 19% of the variation among respondents' post-membership feelings of connectedness to society. The directions of these two variables' relationship with respondents' feelings of connectedness support my theory. The data suggest that increasing one's diversity of friendships has a strong positive relationship

with one's post-membership feelings of connectedness to society. In other words, individuals who diversify their friendships as a result of joining an OSN also tend to increase their feelings of connectedness to society. I suspect that this is the result of feelings of empathy that develop as individuals befriend those who are different from themselves. Also, the self-perceived effect of OSN membership on one's interest in politics is strongly positively associated with one's post-membership feelings of connectedness to society. This supports the notion that as one begins to pay attention to politics they also begin to see themselves as an integral part of society. I was somewhat surprised that other indications of socializing efforts, particularly the number of weekly hours one spends on their OSN's and the number of linked friends one has, were not significant predictors of feelings of connectedness to society. This may suggest that members do not need to invest an extraordinary amount of time, or befriend as many people as possible, on OSN's to reap their benefits.

Table 17: Dependent Variable – Post-Membership Self-Reported Feelings of Connectedness

Independent Variables	β	Beta	Sig.
Friendship Diversification Index	.409	.318	.000
Self-perceived Effects of OSN Membership on Interest in Politics	1.896	.302	.000

Adj. R^2= .191 F= 12.114 Significance Level< .05

H2: Individuals will report that their friendships have become more diverse since joining an OSN.

According to my theory, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect individuals' post-membership friendship diversification: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 7) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's. Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Table 18 illustrates that three variables are significant predictors of whether or not individuals report that their friendships have become more diverse since joining an OSN. Together, respondents' score on the Social Connections Index, race and score on the Political Discourse Index account for 18% of the variance in respondents' scores on the Friendship Diversification Index. The data suggest that one's score on the social connections index has a modest positive relationship with one's post-membership friendship diversification. In other words, as one increases their feelings of connectedness to society, they also tend to increase the diversity of their friendships. One way of looking at this is that as individuals feel more connected to society, individual differences diminish as barriers to social connections. Also, it appears that non-white respondents are far more likely to diversify their friendships after joining an OSN. Given that whites constitute a racial majority of the student body at The University of Tennessee, I suspect

this effect would likely be observed among non-white students regardless of their membership to an OSN. Finally, one's score on the Political Discourse Index has a modest positive relationship with one's score on the Friendship Diversification Index. In other words, individuals who discuss politics on their networks also tend to increase the diversity of their friendships as a result of their OSN memberships. This finding supports the notion that when political discourse takes place among individuals, bonding relationships can be built on common interests. I was surprised that network cohabitation was not a significant predictor of friendship diversification given my assumptions about the differences in the types of members that MySpace and Facebook attract. My findings suggest that homophily may be less dependent upon baseline effects, such as the make-up of the pool where potential ties can be formed, than on the socializing efforts of individuals such as their attempts to connect with society and discuss political topics with other network members.

Table 18: Dependent Variable – Post-Membership Self-Reposted Friendship Diversification

Independent Variables	β	Beta	Sig.
Social Connections Index	.207	.267	.001
Race	1.693	.254	.002
Political Discussion Index	.241	.169	.037

Adj. R^2= .181 F= 10.803 Significance Level< .05

H3: Individuals will report that they discuss politics on their OSN's.

Based on my theory, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of engaging in political discourse: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 7) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships. Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Table 19 illustrates that four variables are statistically significant in explaining whether or not respondents reported discussing politics on their OSN's. Together, one's score on the Political Actor Profile Visitation Index, ones' score on the Friendship Diversification Index, and one's gender explain 27% of the variation in respondents' scores on the Political Discourse Index. First, the data suggest that individuals who display political cues on their OSN profiles are more likely to discuss politics on their networks. This finding supports the notion that political cues generate political discourse. Next, one's score on the Friendship Diversification Index, has a modest positive relationship with the occurrence of one reporting that they have discussed politics on their OSN's. It may be that as individuals interact with others who are different than themselves they increase their awareness of policy issues that pertain to various segments of society, thus generating political discussions on their OSN's. Also, the data suggest

that one's score on the Political Actor Visitation Index has a modest positive relationship with the occurrence of one reporting that they have discussed politics on their OSN's. In other words, those who visit the profile pages of political actors are also likely to engage in political discourse on their networks. Skeptical politicians and their campaign managers should take these findings into consideration when considering whether or not to invest their resources in maintaining and advertising an OSN profile. The data suggest that OSN's may be useful in generating word-of-mouse (a play on "word-of-mouth," Sun et al. 2006) about a candidate. Surprisingly, the data suggest that those who have recently joined an OSN are slightly more likely to discuss politics on their networks than those who have maintained profiles for a longer period of time. I expected that as individuals become increasingly invested in their networks their opportunities to engage in political discourse increase. Rather, my findings may be an indication of an emerging trend of increased political awareness among the youngest Americans who occupy these networks.

Table 19: Dependent Variable – Discussing Politics on OSN's

Independent Variables	β	Beta	Sig.
Profile Political Cue Index	.366	.352	.000
Friendship Diversification Index	.116	.165	.029
Political Actor Visitation Index	.220	.222	.010
Tenure	-.238	-.159	.037

Adj. R^2= .270 F= 13.273 Significance Level< .05

H4: Individuals will report that they have visited the OSN profiles of political actors.

My theory suggests the following indications of one's socializing efforts will positively affect members' occurrence of visiting the profile page of a political actor:1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's.Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Table 20 illustrates that two variables are statistically significant predictors of whether or not respondents reported visiting political actors' profiles. Together, one's score on the Profile Political Cue Index and one's score on the Social Connections Index account for 26% of the variation among respondents' scores on the Political Actor Profile Visitation Index. First, one's score on the Profile Political Cue Index is positively related with one's score on the Political Actor Profile Visitation Index. In other words, those who display political information on their profile page also tend to seek out information by visiting the profile pages of political actors. One explanation for this is that political actors who maintain OSN profiles often include HTML codes for virtual banners and buttons that visiting users can copy and paste into their own profile (for example, inserting a "Rock the Vote" banner in one's "About Me" section). Individuals who display political cues are likely to be more interested in these HTML codes, and thus

more likely to visit political actors' profiles. Respondent's score on the Social Connections Scale is also positively related to their Political Actor Profile Visitation Index score. This finding supports the notion that as one becomes more connected to society, they find it more important to be involved in politics and thus seek out political information by visiting political actors' profiles on their OSN's. I was surprised, however, that other network variables such as respondents tenure and weekly hours invested on their OSN were not significant. I expected both of these variables to increase the opportunities for members to encounter, or seek out, political actors' profiles. Likewise, I expected whether or not one engaged in political discourse on their networks to be positively related to their occurrence of visiting a political actor's profile. My findings suggest that political actors' should actively seek out OSN members to get their messages across, rather than simply wait until members visit their profiles on their own accord.

Table 20: Dependent Variable – Political Actor Profile Visitation

Independent Variables	β	Beta	Sig.
Profile Political Cue Index	.477	.457	.000
Social Connections Index	.129	.236	.002

Adj. R^2= .258 F= 24.132 Significance Level< .05

H5: Individuals will report that they display political cues on their OSN profiles.

Based on my theory, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of displaying political cues on their profile: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's. Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Only two variables, one's score on the Political Actor Visitation Index and one's score on the Political Discourse Index, were statistically significant in predicting one's Political Cue Index score (see Table 21). Together, these two variables account for 29% of the variation among respondents' scores on the Profile Political Cues Index. The data suggest that visiting a political actor's OSN profile increases the likelihood that one displays political cues on their own profile. As I discussed above, this may be indicative of successful campaigning techniques that utilize HTML codes to allow visiting users to display political banners and buttons on their own profile. The data also suggest that discussing politics on one's OSN increases the likelihood that they will display political cues on their profile. This finding supports the notion that individuals are capitalizing on OSN's that present the capacity for them to be "heard" by other network members who care to listen.

Table 21: Dependent Variable – Political Cues Displayed on Profile Page

Independent Variables	β	Beta	Sig.
Political Actor Visitation Index	.329	.343	.000
Political Discussion Index	.305	.317	.000

Adj. R^2= .289 F= 28.063 Significance Level< .05

H6: Individuals will report that their OSN membership has increased their interest in politics.

Based on my theory, I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' perceptions of the effects of their OSN membership on their interest in politics: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 6) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 7) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 8) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 9) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's. Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Table 22 illustrates that two variables, one's score on the Social Connections Index and one's score on the Political Discourse Index, are statistically significant predictors of members' post-membership self-reported interest in politics. Each of these variables exhibits a weak positive relationship with the dependent variable. Taken together, these variables only explain 20% of the variation among respondents' levels of self-reported interest in politics. Both variables have a positive, although very weak,

Table 22: Dependent Variable –Self-Perceived Effects of OSN Membership on Interest in Politics

Independent Variables	Sig. of the Change if Variable is Removed	Beta	Sig.
Social Connections Index	.001	.305	.002
Political Discourse Index	.034	.358	.035

Nagelkerke R^2= .202 Significance Level< .05

relationship with the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics. Respondents who discuss politics on their OSN's and increase their feelings of connectedness with society as a result of their network memberships are more likely to feel the positive effects of their OSN membership on their interest in politics. I assumed that as one increases the diversity of their friendships they become empathetic to the political interests of others, thus increasing their own interest in politics. Surprisingly, however, respondents' friendship diversification efforts were not statistically significant predictors of their perceived effects of OSN membership on their political interest.

H7: Individuals will report that their participation in associations has increased since joining an OSN.

In order to gauge respondents' self-reported perceptions of the effects of OSN membership on their participation in political associations, survey participants were asked if they had ever belonged to any of the following: 1) a political party, 2) a trade union, 3) a church or other religious organization, 4) a sports, leisure or cultural group, or 5) another voluntary organization. Those who reported that they had belonged to any of these associations were asked about their self-perception of the effect of their OSN

membership on their participation habits in those associations and given a score from one to twelve on a post-membership Participation in Associations Index. I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' offline participation in associations: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 9) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 10) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's. Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Only one variable, one's score on the Political Actor Visitation Index, was statistically significant in explaining the variation in the dependent variable (see Table 23). This variable explained 12% of the variation in respondents' scores on the Participation in Associations Index. Those who had visited a political actor's profile were much more likely to have begun to participate in more associations. One plausible explanation for this is that individuals who seek out the policy positions of political actors to compare with their own are also likely to seek out organizations that promote their interests. I expected that as one's online activities increase their interest in politics, their interest would be carried over to offline activities. I was surprised to find that members' self-perceived effect of their OSN membership on their interest in politics was not a statistically significant predictor of their post-membership association participation. I also

Table 23: Dependent Variable – Post-Membership Association Participation Index

Independent Variable	β	Beta	Sig.
Political Actor Visitation Index	.63	.356	.000

Adj. R^2= .12 F= 17.888 Significance Level< .05

expected that as individuals become increasingly connected with society they would be more likely to become involved in political associations, particularly since many associations have local chapters. Surprisingly, however, members' scores on the Social Connections Index were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that political associations might benefit from OSN's more if they directly engage network members, by setting up their own profiles on the networks for example, than if they do not directly engage OSN members.

H8: Individuals will report that they have increased their occurrence of taking political actions since joining an OSN.

In order to gauge the self-reported political actions taken by respondents, survey participants were asked if they had ever done any of the following: 1) voted, 2) signed a petition, 3) boycotted (or deliberately bought) certain products for political (or ethical or environmental) reasons, 4) took part in a demonstration, protest or critical mass event, 5) attended a political meeting or rally, 6) contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or civil servant to express their views, 7) donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity, 8) contacted or appeared in the media to express their views, or 9) joined a political forum or discussion group on the Internet. For each of these actions respondents reported they had taken, survey participants were asked what effect

(increased, decreased, or none) joining an OSN had on the frequency of their actions. I expect the following indications of one's socializing efforts to positively affect members' occurrence of taking political actions: 1) whether they belong to more than one OSN, 2) their tenure on OSN's, 3) the number of weekly hours spent on their OSN's, 4) the number of linked friends they have, 5) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, 6) whether or not they feel more connected to society after having joined an OSN, 7) the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on respondents' interest in politics, 8) whether or not they have visited the profile pages of political actors, 9) whether or not they display political cues on their profiles, and 10) whether or not they discuss politics on their OSN's. Finally, I accounted for respondents' age, gender, race, and marital status.

Table 24 illustrates that five of these variables are statistically significant in explaining the variation among respondents' scores on the post-membership political action index. Together, these five variables explain 43% of the variation in the dependent variable. First, it appears that engaging in political discourse on one's OSN's greatly increases the likelihood that they will begin to engage in more post-membership political activities. This finding supports the notion that by facilitating the flow of political information, OSN's promote participating in our democracy. Likewise, it appears that displaying political cues on one's profile greatly increases the likelihood that one will begin to engage in more political activities after joining an OSN. Post-membership political activity is also more likely to occur as one ages. There is also a strong positive relationship between respondents' scores on the Political Actor Visitation Index and their scores on the Political Activity Index. In other words, visiting the profile page of a

Table 24: Independent Variable – Post-Membership Political Activities

Independent Variables	β	Beta	Sig.
Political Discourse Index	.948	.234	.004
Profile Political Cue Index	1.185	.280	.001
Age	.358	.312	.000
Political Actor Visitation Index	1.113	.273	.001
Network Cohabitation	-2.170	-.197	.006

Adj. R^2= .426 F= 18.968 Significance Level < .05

political actor greatly increases the likelihood that one will increase their occurrence of taking political activities after joining an OSN. This suggests that political actors can use OSN's to not only mobilize, but also activate potential supporters. Finally, it appears that maintaining more than one OSN account is strongly and negatively associated with the occurrence of engaging in post-membership political activities. Contradicting my theory, this finding supports the notion that online activities have the potential to decrease the amount of time individuals have to pursue other activities.

H9: Individuals will report that they intend on voting in the 2008 presidential election.

To gauge respondents' self-reported electoral intentions, survey participants were simply asked if they planned on voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Three of the respondents were not United States citizens, and thus removed from the analysis. After their removal, however, only two respondents remained who reported that they were not planning on voting in the 2008 presidential election. This extraordinary lack of variation

in the data prevented the author from conducting statistical analyses. However, it is a positive sign that young adults appear to be enthusiastic about engaging in electoral politics in such staggering numbers. Indeed, many of the findings in this study justify optimism among those worried about the decline of social capital in America and its effect on the democratic process.

Conclusions

This study investigated OSN's in order to determine their likely impact on members' political habits and social wellbeing. It is best categorized as exploratory due to both the limited sample population on which the data was collected as well as the rapid pace with which technologies are changing. This study attempts to answer three broad questions in order to better understand the potential impacts of OSN's on society. First, what do the socializing efforts of OSN members tell us about the ability of OSN's to replicate the qualities associated with social networks in geographic (or face-to-face) communities? Second, how do members' socializing efforts facilitate the flow of political information and what affect might this have on their interest in politics? Third, how do members' socializing efforts on OSN's affect their political habits offline? The findings herein are useful to 1) academics studying the effects of Web 2.0 technologies on society, 2) political activists and strategists interested in using such technologies to communicate with and mobilize young adults, and 3) social scientists studying political socialization.

My findings suggest that OSN's replicate many of the same basic qualities as geographic (face-to-face) communities. OSN members are heavily invested in their networks wherein they maintain dense and demanding social ties. Reciprocity is an essential aspect of online social networking given that the bulk of members' time is spent viewing other members' pages and commenting on their pictures and profiles. Scholars' fears of increasing alienation as a result of Web 2.0 technologies are, at least in this study, unfounded. Very few OSN members surveyed in this study decreased their connections to their friends, family, neighborhood, community, state, country or global community. In fact, many respondents *increased* their social connections after beginning

their OSN memberships. The data suggest that the best predictors of whether or not members feel more connected to society are 1) whether or not they have increased the diversity of their friendships, and 2) whether or not they perceive their interest in politics has increased as a result of joining an OSN. Both of these variables are positively related to members' feelings of social connectedness. I suspect that as individuals increase the diversity of their friendships feelings of empathy are extended to various segments and levels of society, resulting in a greater sense of connectedness among members. An increased interest in politics likely has the same effect.

Despite a popular safety measure that allows members to prevent strangers from viewing their profile, it appears that OSN's are enabling their members to bridge disparate segments of society and increase the diversity of their friendships across racial, religious, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, economic status and educational lines. The data suggest that the best predictors of whether or not individuals will report that their friendships have become more diverse are their feelings of connectedness with society, their race, and whether or not they discuss politics on their networks. The data show that as one increases their feelings of connectedness to society, they also tend to increase the diversity of their friendships. This finding suggests that as OSN members increase their feelings of connectedness to society, individual differences diminish as barriers to social connections. The data also show that non-white students are more likely to have diversified their friendships as a result of their OSN activities. However, I suspect this effect would likely be observed by non-whites in (predominantly white) university settings regardless of their OSN activities. Finally, individuals who discuss politics on their networks also tend to increase the diversity of their friendships after joining an

OSN. This suggests that bonding relationships can be built on common interests if members of OSN's are willing to discuss their positions on political subject-matter.

My findings also suggest that OSN's are being used to gather and disseminate political information. While most members do not identify gathering political information as an incentive for joining an OSN, once they have joined members do, in fact, encounter such information on their networks. Significant portions of survey participants reported that they discuss several political topics on their OSN's including American politics (42%), world news (34%) volunteering and political activism (25%), and religion (25%). Whether or not members engage in political discourse on their networks is best predicted by 1) whether or not they display political cues on their profile, 2) whether or not their friendships have become more diverse after joining an OSN, 3) whether or not they have visited the profile of a political actor, and 4) their tenure on the network. Those who display political cues on their profile are more likely to discuss politics on their OSN, suggesting that such political cues may stimulate political discourse. Those who have increased the diversity of their friendships after joining an OSN are also more likely to engage in political discourse on their networks. I suspect this is a function of the diversity of viewpoints individuals are subject to as they increase the diversity of their friendships. Those who have visited political actors' profiles are also more likely to engage in political discourse, likely due to the fact that such profiles are usually ripe with information and talking points. Somewhat surprisingly, the longer one has been a member of an OSN the *less* likely it is that they will engage in political discourse on their networks. I expected that the opportunities for individuals to discuss political topics would likely increase the longer they had been members of an OSN, but this does not

seem to be the case. Rather, the data seem to suggest an emerging trend of increased political discourse among newer members, who are typically younger, which may be an indication that young Americans are becoming more politically aware.

Political information is not only gathered by engaging in political discourse, but also by seeking out information from political actors. A significant portion of respondents had visited the profile page of a politician (44%), a political activist group (41%), or other politically affiliated group (36%). The data suggest that the best predictors of whether or not individuals report that they have visited the OSN profile of a political actor are 1) whether or not they display political cues on their profile, and 2) whether or not they feel more connected to society as a result of their OSN membership. Both of these variables are positively related to whether or not members visit political actors' profiles. I suspect that the HTML codes for virtual buttons and banners that many political actors allow visiting OSN members to copy and paste into their own profiles acts as an incentive for members who display political cues on their profile to visit political actors. Likewise, I suspect that as one becomes more connected to society, they find it more important to be involved in politics and thus seek out political information by visiting the profiles of political actors. These findings are important for political strategists and activist groups seeking to connect with young voters. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the importance of including Web 2.0 technologies when studying the ways in which individuals search for information about a candidate for political office.

Not only do respondents gather political information on OSN's, but they also appear to share such information on their profile pages. More than half of the respondents

surveyed reported that their profiles contained information regarding their political beliefs or positions and more than a third reported sharing their support for a presidential candidate in the 2008 race for the White House. The best predictors of whether or not individuals display political cues on their profile were 1) whether or not they had visited political actors', and 2) whether or not they engaged in political discussions on their networks. Both of these variables are positively related to the likelihood that individuals will display political cues on their profile. As previously discussed, I suspect the positive relationship between the visitation of political actors' profiles and the occurrence of displaying political cues on one's profile is likely due to successful campaigning techniques that utilize HTML codes allowing visitors to display virtual banners and buttons on their own profile. The data also suggest that individuals who discuss politics are more likely to display political cues on their profile, perhaps as an extension and affirmation of their beliefs.

Other findings give political scientists and communitarian scholars reason to temper their optimism. Only a fifth of all respondents reported that joining an OSN increased their interest in politics. This effect was particularly noticeable among those who said that they were not at all interested in politics, 30% of which said that joining an OSN had increased their interest in the subject. According to the data, the best predictors of the self-perceived effects of OSN membership on individuals' interest in politics are their feelings of connectedness to society and whether or not they engage in political discourse on their networks. Both variables exhibit a positive, although very weak, relationship with the dependent variable. On the whole, it cannot be said that OSN's are increasing their members' interest in politics. However, the essence of online social

networking is not merely facilitating the exchange of political information between those who are interested in such information, but rather extending political discourse to those who are not. To that end, OSN's appear to be having a positive effect.

On the one hand, the findings in this study contradict the bleak outlook of scholars who insist that Internet technologies are detrimental to users' participatory habits in offline groups. On the other hand, it cannot be said that OSN's are increasing their members' participation in associations. The bulk of users who were members of associations prior to joining an OSN continue to belong and, with the exception of religious organizations, more individuals join associations than quit them after becoming a member of an OSN. On the whole, however, OSN's have not been shown to have any effect on the majority of their members.

On a more positive note, significant numbers of respondents increased the occurrence of voting (11%), signing a petition (22%), ethical shopping (28%), protesting (42%), attending rallies (26%), contacting public servants (19%), raising funds for a social or political activity (17%), and joining Internet forums (65%) after joining an OSN. The most significant predictors of individuals' post-membership political activities are 1) whether or not they engage in political discourse, 2) whether or not they display political cues on their profile, 3) their age, 4) whether or not they visit political actors' profiles, and 5) whether or not they belong to more than one OSN. According to the data, engaging in political discourse greatly increases the likelihood that one will increase their occurrence of political activities. It also appears that displaying political cues on one's profile greatly increases their chance of engaging in more political activities after joining an OSN. By facilitating the flow of political information, it appears that OSN's are

promoting participatory democracy. Older members are slightly more likely to engage in post-membership political activities, which is not surprising. More interesting is that individuals who have visited the profile page of a political actor are far more likely to engage in political activities after joining an OSN. This suggests that political actors can use OSN's to not only mobilize, but also activate potential supporters.

Finally, a majority (64%) of respondents had voted in a previous election and a prodigious 99% of respondents said they were going to vote in the 2008 presidential election. It is unknown what effect online social networking has on their members' intentions of voting. Regardless, one might expect positive network norms to be established by what appears to be an overwhelming number of OSN members who plan on participating in the electoral process.

This study gives important clues to why, how and when OSN's impact the social and political lives of their users. The findings herein suggest that OSN's have the potential to become a significant force in electoral politics. However, there are a number of avenues for future research. First, this line of scholarship would benefit greatly from the cooperation of the OSN's. With the cooperation of MySpace and Facebook a much more representative sample could be obtained. It would be very interesting to compare the differences between the socializing efforts of MySpace and Facebook members, something this study did not accomplish. Likewise, it would be interesting to compare the socializing and participatory habits of OSN users with non-OSN users. Finally, this line of research would benefit from content analyses conducted on OSN profiles. Such research would have to take into consideration OSN members' privacy, but I believe

direct observation of OSN activities would add to the self-reported data contained in this study.

I am optimistic about the prospects for creating new opportunities and possibilities for civic engagement using OSN's. The key is to capitalize on individual determination and participation using the efficiency of their structures. Rather than mourning the decline of traditional, top-down membership associations, I believe social scientists should adopt an analytical framework for civic engagement based on small-group interactions like those that take place on OSN's. In short, I stand with those who believe that Web 2.0 technologies are going to be important to the future health of democratic societies.

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Appendix

The Online Survey Utilized For This Study

Mozilla Firefox

http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll

Studio Home | Media Center Home | Studio Reservations | Studio BLOG

Dimensions mrInterview

Online Social Networking Survey

Dear Prospective Survey Participant,

Thank you for participating, at no cost, in an important study of online social networks. This study seeks to obtain the views of online social network members who are above the age **18**. If you are under the age of **18** please do not participate in this study. The survey questionnaire consists of 36 questions and takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your confidential answers to the survey questionnaire will be combined with those of other respondents for statistical analysis. The collective results will serve as the basis for a Ph.D. dissertation, titled "Online Social Networks: Collaboration, Information and Networking."

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to end your participation in this study at any time by simply exiting the online survey. Your data will not be saved unless you complete the survey in its entirety. Your identity, email address and the information you provide in this survey will remain strictly confidential. Aggregated data from this survey will be stored by Brandon C. Waite, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Tennessee, and used for scholarly research publications. You will not receive additional commercial promotions as a result of taking this survey (e.g., NO JUNK MAIL). However, at the end of the survey you will have the option of being entered into a random drawing for one of three $25 iTunes gift certificates.

Sincerely,

Brandon C. Waite
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Political Science
University of Tennessee
bwaite1@utk.edu

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http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll

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Your completion of this survey constitutes your consent to participate in this study.

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What is your age?

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Dimensions mrInterview

Do you maintain a profile on... (choose all that apply)

- MySpace
- Facebook
- Another online social network (Please list)
- I do not maintain a profile on any online social network.

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http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll

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Dimensions mrInterview

The next few questions ask you to think about how you spend your time on the Internet and your reasons for joining an online social network(s).

How long have you maintained a profile on the online social network?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to 12 months
- 13 months to 36 months
- 37 months to 48 months
- More than 48 months

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Mozilla Firefox

http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Why did you join the online social network(s)? (Check all that apply)

- [ ] Out of curiosity
- [ ] To make new friends
- [ ] To keep in touch with current friends
- [ ] To find a boyfriend/girlfriend
- [ ] To get political information
- [ ] Other (please explain)

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Mozilla Firefox

http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Dimensions mrInterview

Is your profile page publicly viewable by anyone surfing the Internet, or must you add someone as a "friend" before they can see your profile?

- ( ) Publicly viewable by anyone surfing the Internet.
- ( ) Must add someone as a "friend" before they can see your profile.

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Mozilla Firefox

http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Approximately how many hours do you spend on the Internet each week?	
Approximately how many hours do you spend on online social networks each week?	
Of the time you spend on such networks, approximately how many hours are spent *looking at other people's pages*?	
Of the time you spend on such networks, approximately how many hours are spent *updating and editing your own profile page*?	
Of the time you spend on such networks, approximately how many hours are spent *commenting on other people's pages and pictures*?	

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http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll
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mrInterview
The next set of questions ask you to think about your political attitudes and behaviors.
How interested are you in politics?
Not at all interested
Somewhat interested
Very interested
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Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll
Google
Studio Home
Media Center Home
Studio Reservations
Studio BLOG
Dimensions
mrInterview
Choose the best answer:
Joining an online social network has...
Made you less interested in politics.
Had no effect on your interest in politics.
Made you more interested in politics.
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Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll
Google
Studio Home
Media Center Home
Studio Reservations
Studio BLOG
Dimensions
mrInterview
On the social network(s) to which you belong, have you ever visited the profile page of: (Choose all that apply
A politician
A political activist group
Other politically affiliated group
A religious organization
None of the above
Previous
Next

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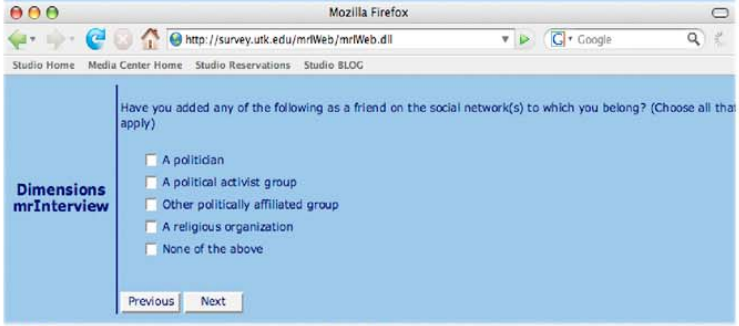
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll
Google
Studio Home
Media Center Home
Studio Reservations
Studio BLOG
Dimensions
mrInterview
Have you added any of the following as a friend on the social network(s) to which you belong? (Choose all tha
apply)
A politician
A political activist group
Other politically affiliated group
A religious organization
None of the above
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http://survey.utk.edu/mrlWeb/mrlWeb.dll
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mrInterview
Do you share any of the following on your profile page? (Choose all that apply)
Political beliefs or positions
Political party affiliation
Support for a presidential candidate
Support for another politician
None of the above
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http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
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Dimensions mrInterview
Did you vote in the 2004 U.S. presidential election?
Yes
No
Not a U.S. citizen
Not yet 18
Lost right to vote
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Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
Studio Home Media Center Home Studio Reservations Studio BLOG
Dimensions mrInterview
Do you plan on voting in the 2008 U.S. presidential election?
Yes
No
Not a U.S. citizen
Lost right to vote
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http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
Studio Home Media Center Home Studio Reservations Studio BLOG
Dimensions mrInterview
The next set of questions ask you to think about your friends.
Of all your friends, approximately how many belong to online social networks?
Almost none of my friends
Some of my friends
Most of my friends
Almost all of my friends
Don't know
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http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
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Dimensions mrInterview
Approximately how many "friends" do you have who are linked to your profile?
Don't know
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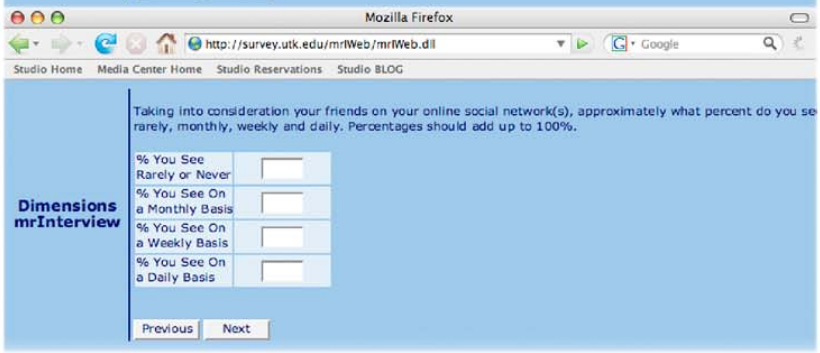
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
Studio Home Media Center Home Studio Reservations Studio BLOG
Dimensions mrInterview
Taking into consideration your friends on your online social network(s), approximately what percent do you se
rarely, monthly, weekly and daily. Percentages should add up to 100%.
% You See Rarely or Never
% You See On a Monthly Basis
% You See On a Weekly Basis
% You See On a Daily Basis
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Mozilla Firefox

http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Which response best completes the following statement?

I trust those who I've added as a "friend" on my online social network(s)...

- Less than my friends who do not belong to my online social network(s).
- The same amount as my friends who are not on my online social network(s).
- More than my friends who are not on my online social network(s).

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http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Dimensions mrInterview

Which of the following subjects do you discuss with your online friends on the social network? (Check all that apply)

- American politics
- Gossip among friends
- Music
- Religion
- Sports
- Television and Movies
- Volunteering or political activism
- World news
- Other (Name subject)

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Dimensions mrInterview

Has joining an online social network made you feel connected to:

	Much Less	Less	No Difference	More	Much More
Your friends					
Your family					
Your neighborhood					
Your community					
Your state					
The United States					
The global community					

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http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Dimensions mrInterview

Has joining an online social network caused a change in the number of your friends who are of a different:

	Decreased	Had No Effect	Increased
Race			
Religion			
Nationality			
Gender			
Sexual Orientation			
Economic status			
Education level			

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Mozilla Firefox

http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll

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Dimensions mrInterview

You're almost done! The next set of questions ask you to think about different forms of civic actio one can take.

Do you belong, or have you ever belonged to any of the following? (Check all that apply)

- [ ] A political party
- [ ] A trade union
- [ ] A church or other religious organization
- [ ] A sports, leisure or cultural group
- [ ] Another voluntary organization
- [ ] **None of the above**

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Dimensions mrInterview

People sometimes belong to different kinds of groups or associations. For each type of group, please indicate whether you:

	Used to belong but quit after joining an online social network	Have begun taking part in such a group since joining an online social network	Belonged prior to joining an online social network and continue to belong
A political party			
A trade union			
A church or other religious organization			
A sports, leisure or cultural group			
Another voluntary organization			

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Dimensions mrInterview

There are different opinions as to what it takes to be a good citizen. As far as you are concerned personally, how important is it...

	Not important at all	Not very important	Somewhat important	Very important
Always to vote in elections	○	○	○	○
Never to try to evade taxes	○	○	○	○
Always to obey laws and regulations	○	○	○	○
To keep watch on the actions of government	○	○	○	○
To be active in social or political associations	○	○	○	○
To try to understand the reasoning of people with other opinions	○	○	○	○
To choose products for political, ethical or environmental reasons, even if they cost a bit more	○	○	○	○
To help people in America who are worse off than yourself	○	○	○	○
To be willing to serve in the military at a time of need	○	○	○	○

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Have you ever taken part in any of the following political or social actions? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Voted
- ☐ Signed a petition
- ☐ Boycotted, or deliberately bought, certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons
- ☐ Took part in a demonstration, protest or critical mass event
- ☐ Attended a political meeting or rally
- ☐ Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or civil servant to express your views
- ☐ Donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity
- ☐ Contacted or appeared in the media to express your views
- ☐ Joined a political forum or discussion group on the Internet
- ☐ **None of the above**

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For each of these actions, please indicate whether you have:

	Engaged *less* often since joining an online social network	Spent the *same amount of time* engaged in these actions before and after joining an online social network	Engaged *more* often since joining an online social network
Voted			
Signed a petition			
Boycotted, or deliberately bought, certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons			
Took part in a demonstration, protest or critical mass event			
Attended a political meeting or rally			
Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or civil servant to express your views			
Donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity			
Contacted or appeared in the media to express your views			
Joined a political forum or discussion group on the Internet			

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To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The government doesn't care what people like me think					
I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing America					
Most people in America are better informed about politics and government than I am					
Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right					
Most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally					

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There are just a few more questions. I promise!

This last set of questions ask about your demographic characteristics.

What type of community do you live in?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

Are you a U.S. citizen?

- Yes
- No (please specify country)

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

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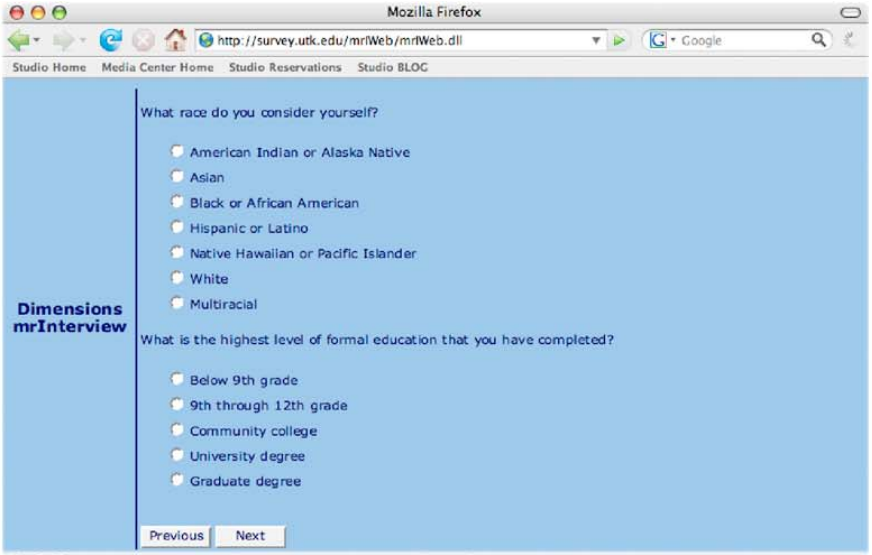
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
Google
Studio Home
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Dimensions mrInterview
What race do you consider yourself?
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic or Latino
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
White
Multiracial
What is the highest level of formal education that you have completed?
Below 9th grade
9th through 12th grade
Community college
University degree
Graduate degree
Previous
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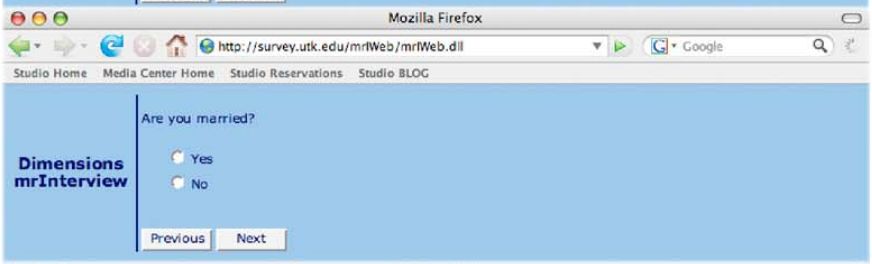
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
Google
Studio Home
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Dimensions mrInterview
Are you married?
Yes
No
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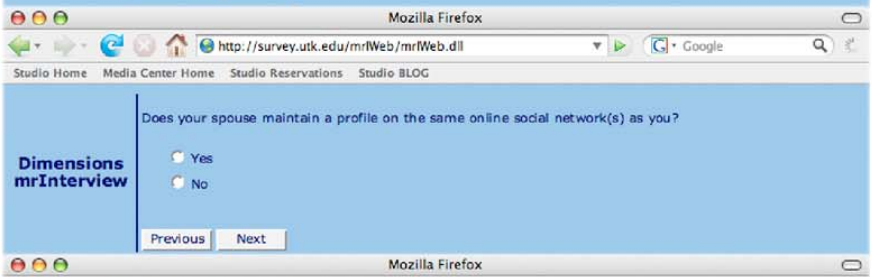
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
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Dimensions mrInterview
Does your spouse maintain a profile on the same online social network(s) as you?
Yes
No
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Google
Studio Home
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Studio BLOG
Dimensions mrInterview
Have you added your spouse as a "friend" on your online social network?
Yes
No
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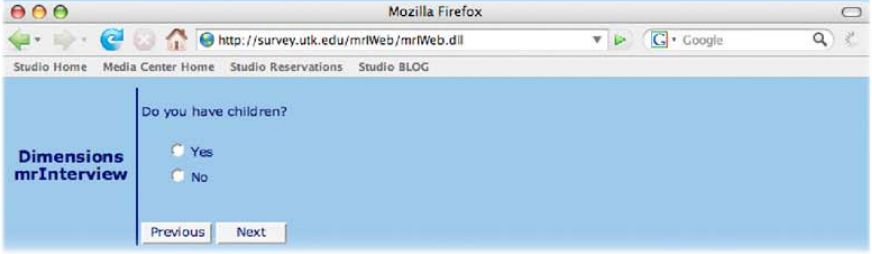
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
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Do you have children?
Yes
No
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http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
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Do any of your children maintain a profile on an online social network?
Yes
No
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Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
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Studio Home
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mrInterview
Have you added any of your children as a "friend" on an online social network?
Yes
No
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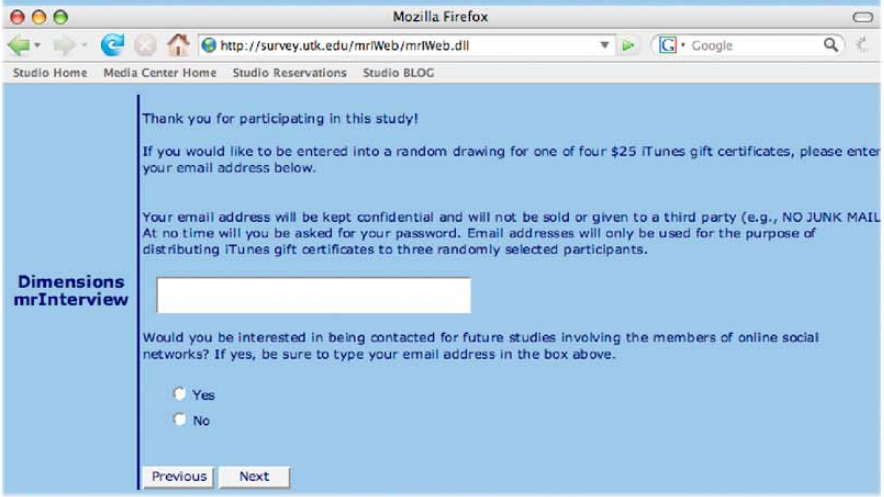
Mozilla Firefox
http://survey.utk.edu/mrIWeb/mrIWeb.dll
Google
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mrInterview
Thank you for participating in this study!
If you would like to be entered into a random drawing for one of four $25 iTunes gift certificates, please enter your email address below.
Your email address will be kept confidential and will not be sold or given to a third party (e.g., NO JUNK MAIL
At no time will you be asked for your password. Email addresses will only be used for the purpose of distributing iTunes gift certificates to three randomly selected participants.
Would you be interested in being contacted for future studies involving the members of online social networks? If yes, be sure to type your email address in the box above.
Yes
No
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Mozilla Firefox
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mrInterview
End of interview. Thank you for your participation.

Vita

Brandon Cordell Waite was born in St. Louis, MO on February 13, 1979. He was raised in DeSoto, MO and went to grade school at DeSoto Elementary School. He graduated from DeSoto Senior High School in 1997. From there, he went to Appalachian State University in Boone, NC and received a B.A. in English and a B.A. in political science in 2000 and a M.A. in political science in 2003. Brandon completed his Ph.D. at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville in 2008.