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Michael Xenos[a]*, Ariadne Vromen[b] and Brian D Loader[c]

[a]Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 821 University Ave., Madison 53706, WI, USA; [b]Department of Government, University of Sydney, Sydney 2006, Australia; [c]Department of Sociology, University of York, York, UK

Recent developments suggest a strong relationship between social media use and political engagement and raise questions about the potential for social media to help stem or even reverse patterns of political inequality that have troubled scholars for years. In this paper, we articulate a model of social media and political engagement among young people, and test it using data from representative samples of young people in Australia, the USA, and the UK. Our results suggest a strong, positive relationship between social media use and political engagement among young people across all three countries, and provide additional insights regarding the role played by social media use in the processes by which young people become politically engaged. Notably, our results also provide reasons to be optimistic concerning the overall influence of this popular new form of digital media on longstanding patterns of political inequality.

Keywords: social media; political engagement; political participation; political socialization; citizenship norms; political inequality

Introduction

From the events of the Arab Spring to the occupation of Zuccotti Park, stories of mass protests saturated with the aura of young people's savvy use of social media platforms have produced headlines with growing regularity. It has also become conventional wisdom to attribute US President Barack Obama's initial and later re-election victories to his campaign's deft deployment of social media to mobilize the youth vote. In the USA and other advanced democracies, social media activity is disproportionately concentrated among young people (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2013; Brenner, 2013; Woollaston, 2013). As a result, there has been an explosive growth in studies examining relationships between social media use and political engagement, sometimes with a specific focus on young people (Bode, 2012; Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). These developments contribute to a growing popular understanding of social media as a potent tool for moving young people to political engagement.

Such developments are particularly significant for political communication research because they raise questions about the potential for social media to help stem or reverse patterns of political inequality that have troubled scholars for years (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995;

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*Corresponding author. Email: xenos@wisc.edu

Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Morris & Morris, 2013; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010). Underlying these studies is a belief that by lowering the costs of many different forms of engagement and providing new ways to discover and get involved with issues, social media may have great potential for not just mobilizing, but also broadening political participation. The optimistic tone of these studies echoes earlier waves of enthusiasm surrounding the potential impact of general internet use on political engagement and political equality. Indeed, after summarizing earlier scholarship, the authors of a recent study explain that they 'see social media as having the same influence but taking it one step further to provide the individual greater flexibility to actively engage in the public sphere' (Carlisle & Patton, 2013, p. 3). Just as first-generation studies of internet use and participation quickly seized on questions of whether that new technology would alter fundamental dynamics of political voice, contemporary political communication scholars have begun to ask similar questions regarding social media.

Prospects for significant progress on these questions, however, are limited by a number of factors. As we will explain in our review of the existing literature, these include a number of empirical, conceptual, and theoretical issues. In this paper we seek to overcome limitations in this literature by articulating a model of social media and political engagement among young people that draws on contemporary scholarship concerning the processes by which contemporary young people actively construct their roles as citizens. We test hypotheses derived from this model using data from nationally representative surveys of young people (aged 16–29) in three advanced democracies: Australia, the USA, and the UK. Our results suggest a strong, positive relationship between social media use and political engagement across all three countries, and suggest that social media may be helping to soften traditional patterns of political inequality.

Social media and political engagement

Social media and political engagement are both concepts that are subject to a variety of interpretations. We consider 'social media' to include a variety of internet-based tools that users engage with by maintaining an individual profile and interacting with others based on a network of connections. In an effort to better synthesize general patterns of relationships between social media use and political participation, we also adopt an expansive conception of 'political engagement.'

The rapidly growing literature on social media use and political engagement has so far produced mixed results. On the optimistic side, a number of studies have suggested a positive relationship between social media use and various indicators of political engagement (Bode, 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Zhang, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2013). Other studies report positive relationships between social media use and political engagement, but delimit those relationships to specific kinds of social media use or a circumscribed set of engagement outcomes (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). These studies suggest that the spread of social media among young people and the broader public has had salutary effects on political engagement, but at the same time suggest that the relationship between social media use and engagement may be limited to individuals who would likely be relatively engaged without social media. Still other studies suggest a very weak relationship between social media use and political engagement, or none at all (Baumgargner & Morris, 2009; Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013). Baumgartner and Morris (2009), for instance, found small and inconsistent effects of social networking site use on a range of engagement outcomes in their study of social networking site use surrounding the 2008 Iowa caucuses, ultimately concluding that 'the hyperbole surrounding new Web developments … as they relate to citizenship may be just that – hype' (p. 38).

Despite this mixed pattern of results, a few scholars have recently started to explore whether the mobilizing potential of social media is powerful enough to directly affect classic patterns of stratification by socioeconomic status and other factors in political engagement behaviors. Here

too, however, results have not been consistent. On the one hand, the venerable scholars of stratification and participation. Schlozman et al. (2010) ultimately found little evidence of 'counter-stratificational effects' with respect to social networking site use and socioeconomic status in their analysis of nationally representative Pew Internet and American Life Project survey data. They did, however, find that social networking site use was associated with countertrends to traditional disparities in participation based on age (Schlozman et al., 2010). In a similar study, however, Morris and Morris (2013) found patterns implicating internet use in the closing of traditional socioeconomic status gaps in participation, using a measure of internet use in which social media figured quite prominently. Thus in the emerging literature on the implications of social media use for patterns of stratification in political engagement, we find a much smaller, but similarly mixed set of results.

A number of factors may explain the elusiveness of clear patterns of findings within the emerging literature on social media and political engagement. First, as is understandable in early exploratory research, many existing studies have been relatively limited in empirical scope. Many rely on samples of college students, collected with varying degrees of sophistication (Baumgartner & Morris, 2009; Bode, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vitak et al., 2011). Others have used nationally representative samples of adults of varying sizes (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2013). Most are centered on a particular focusing event, such as the Iowa caucuses (Baumgartner & Morris, 2009; Bode, 2012; Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013; Zhang et al., 2013). A consistent pattern within the sets findings reported in this literature based on these variations could point the way toward an orderly synthesis of the mixed picture of results reported so far. Unfortunately, however, these methodological variations cut across the range of results found within this growing literature. A similar set of observations can be made regarding variations in conceptualization of the primary independent and dependent variables of social media use and political engagement. As noted earlier, both of these concepts enjoy a multifaceted existence within the broader literature. Once again, there appear to be no clear patterns based on these kinds of differences among existing findings on social media and political engagement. Indeed, while some studies suggest a direct relationship between the sheer time spent with social media and political engagement (Bode, 2012; Zhang et al., 2013), others suggest that such a relationship should only be expected with politically oriented activities in social media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). A few studies suggest a slight relationship between the kinds of political engagement examined and the strength of the relationship with social media use, such that mobilizing effects appear stronger for civic as opposed to political engagement, and so-called 'lightweight' or online forms of involvement versus their more complicated offline cousins (Baumgartner & Morris, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vitak et al., 2011). For each of these examples, however, there are studies in which such patterns are not readily apparent (Bode, 2012; Zhang et al., 2013). Thus as with the methodological differences, it appears that variations in the conceptualization of independent and dependent variables mainly contribute to a general shortage of clear and definitive patterns with respect to the relationship between social media use and political engagement.

In addition to these issues within the current literature on social media and political engagement, we would further identify an important substantive limitation. Specifically, given the well-known skew of social media use toward younger cohorts, and the veritable tradition of attending to issues related to youth in research on digital media and politics, it is surprising that the connection between social media use and youth has rarely been explicitly theorized in research focused on social media use and political engagement. To be sure, it is often mentioned that social media use is concentrated among young people; but typically this is discussed in passing or, more often, simply as a justification for using readily available samples of college students. This overlooks an important opportunity to directly incorporate valuable insights about a core element of the

principal user base of social media into efforts aimed at understanding its implications for patterns of political engagement. For example, a large amount of research on 'digital natives' and related concepts documents the sense in which contemporary young people have a unique relationship with digital media, particularly its newer features that are the heart of social media (Tapscott, 2008). Additionally, scholarship on youth and politics has shown that young people also have a distinct set of political interests and interactions with politics (Levine, 2007). Moreover, scholarship on political socialization and related concepts reminds us that many of the most avid users of social media have recently undergone, or are in the process of undergoing, important experiences that will powerfully shape their political engagement over time (Amna, Ekstrom, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012; McLeod & Shah, 2009; Sapiro, 2004; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009; Torney-Purta, 2000). As we will discuss in more detail shortly, attention to these youth-focused factors offers a useful set of concepts for understanding how social media use may be initiating new patterns of political engagement in the digital age.

Theoretical model, hypotheses, and research questions

In constructing a theoretical model of social media use and political engagement among young people, we draw from previous research on general internet use and political engagement. In concrete terms, we expect a mix of direct and differential relationships, with the latter conditioned by predispositions and individual characteristics independently associated with political engagement activities (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Along these lines, we expect that social media should be directly associated with political engagement, but we also assume that the mobilizing power of social media will not affect all young people in the same way. To elaborate on these expectations, we first consider the mobilizing properties of social media, and then explore how key characteristics and predispositions of social media users may interact with social media use to produce specific patterns of differential relationships between social media use and political engagement.

Perhaps the most basic argument for the mobilizing potential of social media use follows the sentiment expressed by Carlisle and Patton (2013) and cited in the introduction. By this logic, social media possess the same quintessential mobilizing features of the internet as a whole, but take them all 'one step further' by overcoming key limitations of the Web 1.0 world. Moreover, as quintessential examples of Web 2.0 functionalities, social media have the added qualities of making it much easier for individuals to engage in online versions of a number of traditional and nontraditional acts of political involvement, such as participating in political discussions, persuading others how to vote, as well as engaging in a variety of forms of online activism. In addition, we expect that the unique properties of social media could also directly stimulate political engagement through other pathways. Perhaps the most discussed in existing research literature flows through social media's fostering of social capital and informal discussions about politics, which have long been associated with higher levels of political engagement (Bode, 2012; Chong, Farquharson, Choy, Lukman, & Mokhtar, 2011; Conroy et al., 2012; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012). Another possible pathway stems from the unique sense in which social media depart from most other web experiences. Through habitual reviews of their 'news feeds', users are often presented with information that they may not have been originally seeking, creating rare opportunities for incidental exposure. This kind of dynamic has already been documented for likelihood of exposure to political content that runs counter to users' existing political ideologies (Messing & Westwood, 2012), and others have applied a similar logic to incidental exposure across lines of general interest in politics (Morris & Morris, 2013). Individuals who may be relatively uninterested or unengaged in politics need only 'know' a handful of interested and engaged others in order to be regularly presented with incidental cues and information about political issues that could result in greater engagement, especially during times of high political activity

such as a national election. Based on these considerations, we offer our first hypothesis. *H1*: Social media use will be positively related to political engagement.

Such considerations, however, focus mainly on attributes of social media that might be equally experienced by any and all users. Young people are the heaviest users of social media, and are also in the process of forming norms and habits of citizen engagement that are typically stable across the life course (Amna et al., 2009; Sapiro, 2004). These factors are likely independently related to political engagement, but are also of additional theoretical interest based on their possible interactions with social media use in patterns of youth engagement. We now turn to two such factors: political socialization and newly emerging norms of citizenship believed to be concentrated among young people in advanced post-industrial democracies.

Research on political socialization suggests that young people who come from homes in which politics are regularly discussed among family members are significantly more likely to engage in a variety of political behaviors (Andolina & Jenkins, 2003; Lee et al., 2012). In addition, research has also highlighted the positive influence that school-based civic learning experiences can have on later patterns of political engagement (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003; Galston, 2004; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). Socialization is also likely to have effects on the relationship between social media and political engagement. Specifically, we posit that young people who might be stimulated to political involvement through incidental exposure or other political interactions facilitated by social media may be significantly more apt to express that involvement through various political activities, if they have already developed civic competencies through family and school experiences. Based on these considerations we thus offer two related hypotheses about social media use, political socialization and political engagement. *H2$_a$*: Political socialization experiences will be positively related to political engagement. And, *H2$_b$*: Political socialization experiences will significantly enhance the relationship between social media use and political engagement.

An additional factor that is vitally important for understanding the relationship between social media use and political engagement is the emergence of distinctly new norms of citizenship. Citing a variety of broader social and economic currents commonly experienced within advanced democracies, some have argued that contemporary youth are beginning to relate to politics and public life in ways that are distinctly different from the dutiful conception of political involvement dominant among previous generations (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2008). Work in this vein has suggested that young people may be abandoning traditional modes of so-called 'dutiful' citizen participation (voting, party membership, reading the newspaper), in favor of a more personalized politics of self-actualization and expressive engagement with greater emphasis on non-traditional modes of engagement such as digital networking, volunteering, and consumer activism (Loader, 2007; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011). Though this 'norm set for the next era' (Bennett, 2012, p. 30) involves both a turn away from more traditional forms of political engagement such as voting as well as a turn toward newer forms of political action such as political consumerism, we believe it is reasonable to treat 'actualizing citizenship' norms (Bennett, 2008) as a general predictor of political engagement for contemporary youth, all else equal.

As with political socialization, we further expect actualizing citizenship norms to be implicated in a set of contingent relationships involving social media use and political engagement among young people. Because such norms reflect a distinct expression of contemporary interest in politics among young people, we expect social media use to serve as a moderator for the relationship between norms and political engagement. Here, we emphasize the affordances and capabilities of social media for the particular kinds of political engagement scholars such as Bennett (2008, 2012) suggest are a natural outgrowth of the adoption of actualizing citizenship norms. We thus offer the following hypotheses concerning actualizing citizenship norms, social media use, and political engagement. *H3$_a$*: Actualizing norms of citizenship will be
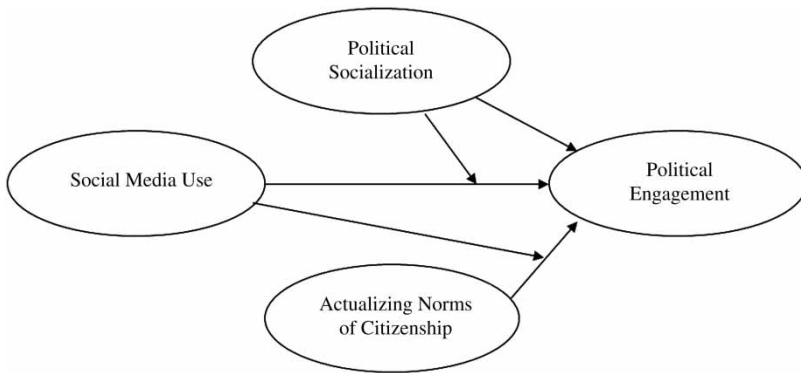
Figure 1.   Model of social media and political engagement (control variables omitted).

positively related to political engagement. And, *H3$_b$*: Social media use will significantly enhance the relationship between actualizing norms of citizenship and political engagement. Our general theoretical model encompassing each of these predictions is summarized in Figure 1.

As noted earlier, our project of constructing a model explaining youth political engagement as a function of social media use and other factors is in many ways but a means to an end. Specifically, we are interested in the extent to which relationships between social media use and youth engagement may have implications for patterns of unequal political voice, primarily along the lines of socioeconomic status, but also along other dimensions such as age and race or ethnicity. There are at least two ways in which social media use could affect such patterns of inequality. First, as discussed earlier, social media use could result in direct 'counterstratificational' effects by raising political engagement among the previously uninvolved to levels that are much closer to those exhibited by the more involved. Another possibility is that the direct influence of widespread social media use on political engagement could serve to broaden the overall pool of young people engaged in politics, contributing to a less rapid, but no less significant softening of political inequality patterns over time, through generational replacement. Given the relative dearth of clear patterns in this literature, and an absence of strong theoretical expectations on this question, rather than formulating a clear hypothesis regarding patterns of political inequality, we simply offer the following research question to guide our analysis. *RQ1*: To what extent does social media use among young people affect patterns of political inequality?

As noted earlier, another impetus for our study is that existing research in this area includes few large-scale empirical investigations. It is thus important to explore the extent to which relationships between social media use and political engagement are stable or generalizeable across a broad array of advanced democracies. Though many factors in our model are believed to be consistent across advanced democracies, political socialization experiences and the institutional arrangements within which political engagement is practiced vary distinctly from country to country (Hahn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2000; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003). Our focus on these issues is expressed in our second research question: *RQ2*: To what extent do patterns of social media use and youth political engagement vary based on differences in national and political contexts among advanced democracies?

Data

To test our model and shed light on our research questions we analyze survey data collected in three advanced democracies, Australia, the USA, and the UK. These countries represent an

excellent set of cases for study in that they are all subject to the kinds of social and economic trends identified earlier as particularly salient to understanding contemporary patterns of youth engagement. They also share a common language and many cultural references, while offering a reasonable amount of variation in civic education contexts, political institutions, and other factors. As noted earlier, we chose to limit our survey populations to individuals aged 16–29, which includes the range of ages typically associated with contemporary individuals' experience of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000), as well as those age groups routinely identified as the heaviest users of social media. We contracted with a marketing firm to administer our survey to nationally representative samples of young people in each country. The surveys were identical, with the exception of minor modifications of some items to reflect differences in language usage or, in some cases, relevant options (e.g. educational levels). Participants were systematically recruited from online panels to create samples that mirrored census data in each country on key dimensions such as gender and age. Across all three countries, 3685 young people completed our surveys, between late March and early May of 2013, including 1216 in Australia, 1228 in the UK, and 1241 in the USA.

We constructed two distinct measures of our dependent variable, political engagement. The first, *individual engagement*, was based on questions involving 12 individual acts of civic or political engagement, modeled on items used by Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Carpini (2006). Given the age range of our sample and compulsory voting in Australia, we did not ask about voting. The otherwise inclusive list featured conventional political activities such as trying to influence how others might vote in an election, as well as more civic-oriented acts like raising money for charitable causes, and nontraditional political activities such as buying (or not buying) goods or services based on political or ethical reasons. Participants were asked whether they engaged in these activities in the past year, either online, offline, or in some combination of online or offline forms ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 3.88$). Our second political engagement variable, *collective political engagement*, was designed to capture activities that specifically involved working with others in organizations. Again, we sought to capture a wide array of different kinds of engagement, so we included items related to 'political groups or causes', 'nonpolitical or charitable groups', and groups associated with political candidates or parties. In all, we asked participants whether they joined, worked, or volunteered with five different kinds of groups, allowing them to count activities that may or may not have involved the internet to varying degrees ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 1.34$).

To capture social media use, we created an index of social media use based on the frequency with which participants used nine popular social media platforms. Respondents specified usage on an eight-point scale ranging from 'Never' (0) to 'Multiple times per day' (7). We combined responses to these items into a single scale of social media use ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.12$). Our index of frequency of use across the 10 platform options enjoys reasonable validity (Chronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

To represent the other major factors in our theoretical model, political socialization and actualizing citizenship norms, we created four distinct independent variables. Three of these were related to socialization. Political talk in the home was measured using responses to a series of survey items that asked participants to indicate the frequency with which their early family experiences included talking about news and political affairs using a five-point frequency scale ranging from 'Never' (0) to 'All the time' (4). Across the full sample this variable has a mean of 1.64 and a standard deviation of 0.89. We also created two measures of civic education experiences. Given the significant differences in the ways that civic education is handled in each of the study countries, our civic education items focused on general experiences involving teachers and political material. The first of these was intended to tap 'traditional' or 'general' civic education experiences and was based on three items that asked students to reflect on their secondary or

high-school experiences and express agreement or disagreement (on a standard five-point scale) with statements like 'When people had different opinions on political or social issues, teachers encouraged us to discuss things' (Chronbach's $\alpha = .80$, $M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.91$). We also created a variable that captured digital literacy as part of civics education. This variable was based on three items similar to those just described, but focused on the internet (e.g. 'Teachers provided instruction on how to assess the trustworthiness of information found on the internet' and 'Students were required to use the internet to learn about politics or political issues'). This variable allows us to distinguish between ordinary civic education experiences and those that might reasonably be expected to be particularly relevant to social media and political engagement (Chronbach's $\alpha = .76$, $M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.97$).

Finally, to capture actualizing norms of citizenship we used a series of items that asked participants to indicate the extent to which various kinds of political activities were personally important to them using a four-point scale ranging from 'Not important at all' (1) to 'Extremely important' (4). Items used here were constructed based on the explanations of actualizing citizenship norms elaborated in earlier theoretical work by Bennett (2008), which emphasize a personal as opposed to dutiful orientation toward politics, as well as a relatively broad conception of politics and a 'networked' view of social relations. They included the following statements: 'Volunteering your time or donating money to community organizations', 'Taking moral, ethical, or political considerations into account when buying products or services', and 'Communicating with others about social issues of personal concern' ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.76$).

We also include a number of additional variables in our analysis, including a range of demographic variables and other control variables that were selected based on their demonstrated relationships with political engagement in previous studies. In terms of demographics, we include measures of age ($M = 23$, $SD = 3.88$), gender (female = 1, 52% across the three samples), race (non-white = 1, 24% across the three samples), and a measure of parents' education. Parents' education was selected as our best proxy for socioeconomic status, given that our age range includes minor children, individuals at various stages of the normal course of educational attainment, and the difficulty of obtaining reliable estimates of household income from the youngest members of our target populations. Since educational levels are different across the three countries, we converted the raw measures of parental education to a zero-to-one scale and then mean-centered these within each country, creating a measure of parents' education across the comparative data set that ranges from –0.47 to 0.48, and has a standard deviation of 0.20. Additional control variables included a measure of attention to political news, which was based on standard four-point scales of attention paid to local, national, political, and international news (Chronbach's $\alpha = .80$, $M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.67$), a two-item measure of internal political efficacy ($r = .92$, $M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.00$), and a binary measure of whether participants identified with, or considered themselves members of, an identifiable political party (61.4% across the full data set).

Methods

Our analytic approach involved specifying a series of hierarchical ordinary least squares regression models, in which we entered blocks of variables based on their assumed causal order. Blocks were entered in the following order: demographics, media attention, efficacy, and partisanship, followed by a block including our socialization and norms variables (to test $H2_a$ and $H3_a$), a block for social media use (to test $H1$), and finally a block including interactions between social media use and demographic variables, as well as interactions between social media use and socialization experiences (to test $H2_b$), and between social media use and actualizing citizenship norms (to test $H3_b$). Whereas we report upon-entry coefficient estimates for the first four blocks, we report before-entry coefficient estimates in the final block to limit the

effects of multicollinearity on our evaluation of the interaction effects. The total adjusted R^2 reported in each column, however, is derived from a fully specified version of each model. To simplify our analysis, we estimated models separately for each country. Cases were deleted list-wise in the event of missing data. Finally, where relevant, we used the Clarify package in STATA to create plots of significant interactions, reflecting expected values on the dependent variables (and 95% confidence intervals) for various combinations of relevant independent variables (typically one standard deviation above or below each variable's appropriate country mean).

Findings

The results from our regression analyses across each of the three countries in which we collected data, and across our two indicators of political engagement, are reported in Tables 1 and 2. Overall, the models perform quite well, producing F values well within acceptable significance levels (in all cases $p < .000$), explaining roughly one-third of the variation in individual political

Table 1. Individual political engagement as explained by social media use, political socialization, and actualizing norms of citizenship.

	AUS	USA	UK
Demographics			
Age	.04	.00	.09**
Gender (female)	−.05	−.13***	−.10**
Race (non-white)	.17***	.04	.12
Parents' education	.20***	.13***	.15***
Incremental adjusted R^2	.08	.04	.05
Media use, efficacy, and partisanship			
Attention to political news	.08*	.25***	−.04
Internal political efficacy	.31***	.24***	.30***
Party identification/membership	.12***	.04	.09
Incremental adjusted R^2	.23	.21	.18
Political socialization and norms			
Political talk in home	.08*	.07***	.08*
Civic education (traditional)	−.02	−.05	−.04
Civic education (digital)	.13***	.05	.09*
Actualizing norms of citizenship	.20***	.25***	.25***
Incremental adjusted R^2	.29	.27	.23
Social media use			
Time spent with social media platforms	.28***	.30***	.33***
Incremental adjusted R^2	.36	.34	.32
Interactions			
Social media × Age	.27	.17	−.03
Social media × Parents' education	.00	.04	−.03
Social media × Race (non-white)	.09	.00	−.03
Social media × Political talk in home	.05	.07	−.06
Social media × Civic education (traditional)	.04	.15	−.02
Social media × Civic education (digital)	.11	.16	.17
Social media × Actualizing norms	.01	−.02	.01
Total adjusted R^2	.36	.34	.33
N	924	972	897

Note: Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .000$.

Table 2.   Group political engagement as explained by social media use, political socialization, and actualizing norms of citizenship.

	AUS	USA	UK
Demographics			
Age	−.04	−.10**	−.05
Gender (female)	−.01	−.10**	−.05
Race (non-white)	.09**	.06$^{\#}$	.13***
Parents' education	.16***	.13***	.18***
Incremental adjusted R^2	.04	.04	.06
Media use, efficacy, and partisanship			
Attention to political news	.14***	.25***	.09*
Internal political efficacy	.17***	.10**	.15***
Party identification/membership	.07*	.04	.11**
Incremental adjusted R^2	.11	.14	.12
Political socialization and norms			
Political talk in home	.07$^{\#}$	.08*	.06$^{\#}$
Civic education (traditional)	−.06	−.01	−.03
Civic education (digital)	.11**	.07$^{\#}$	.04
Actualizing norms of citizenship	.19***	.22***	.22***
Incremental adjusted R^2	.15	.19	.16
Social media use			
Time spent with social media platforms	.21***	.21***	.20***
Incremental adjusted R^2	.19	.23	.20
Interactions			
Social media × Age	.27	.11	−.10
Social media × Parents' education	.16**	.05	.03
Social media × Race (non-white)	−.01	.14*	.02
Social media × Political talk in home	.22*	.18*	.24*
Social media × Civic education (traditional)	.41**	.22	.16
Social media × Civic education (digital)	.50***	.27*	.28*
Social media × Actualizing norms	.16	.17	.50***
Total adjusted R^2	.21	.23	.21
N	924	972	897

Note: Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients.
$^{\#}p < .10$.
$^{*}p < .05$.
$^{**}p < .01$.
$^{***}p < .000$.

engagement, and explaining just over one-fifth of the variation in collective political engagement, across the three countries.

The clearest pattern in our data is unambiguous support for *H1* across all three countries and for both indicators of political engagement. The results reported in Table 1 indicate that social media use is significantly related to individual political engagement in Australia ($\beta = .28$, $p < .000$), the USA ($\beta = .30$, $p < .000$), and the UK ($\beta = .33$, $p < .000$). Similarly, the results summarized in Table 2 reflect the same pattern (Australia: $\beta = .21$, $p < .000$, USA: $\beta = .21$, $p < .000$, UK: $\beta = .20$, $p < .000$). To provide a more real-world sense of these results, on the basis of the unstandardized regression coefficients (not reported), movement of one standard deviation on the social media use scale is generally associated with one additional act of individual participation, and nearly a third of an act of collective participation, all else equal. These estimates hold equally across the advanced democracies included in our analysis. Considering that the mean number of individual acts of participation is four, and the mean number of collective acts is one, we interpret this as substantial demonstration of a direct relationship between social media use and political engagement.

Recall that $H2_a$ and $H2_b$ concerned the relationship between civic education experiences and interactions between these experiences and social media use. Results here were somewhat mixed, but ultimately fairly consistent with our expectations. Specifically, we found political talk in the home to be significantly associated with individual political engagement across the three country cases (Australia: $\beta = .08$, $p < .05$, USA: $\beta = .07$, $p < .000$, UK: $\beta = .08$, $p < .05$), and the corresponding results for collective political engagement were marginally or statistically significant (Australia: $\beta = .07$, $p < .10$, USA: $\beta = .08$, $p < .05$, UK: $\beta = .06$, $p < .10$). Traditional civic education experiences were not significantly associated with either form of political engagement. However, 'digital' civic education experiences, which mix digital media literacy with civic or political discussion topics, were found to be significantly and positively related to individual political engagement in Australia ($\beta = .13$, $p < .000$) and the UK ($\beta = .09$, $p < .05$), significantly and positively related to collective political engagement in Australia ($\beta = .11$, $p < .01$) and marginally and positively related to collective political engagement in the USA ($\beta = .07$, $p < .10$). Taken as a whole, we interpret these results as moderate support for $H2_a$.

With respect to the conditioning of the relationship between social media use and political engagement by political socialization ($H2_b$), we found little support with respect to individual political engagement, but considerable support when we turn to collective acts of political engagement. Specifically, we find robust positive and significant results for the interactive term 'Social media × Political talk in home' (Australia: $\beta = .22$, $p < .05$, USA: $\beta = .18$, $p < .05$, UK: $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$). We also find a similar result for the traditional civics education and social media use interaction in the Australian case ($\beta = .41$, $p < .01$). The strongest results here, however, concern the interaction between 'digital' civic education experiences and social media use, which again are positive and statistically significant across all three countries (Australia: $\beta = .50$, $p < .000$, USA: $\beta = .27$, $p < .05$, UK: $\beta = .28$, $p < .05$). Figure 2 illustrates this interaction within the Australian data.
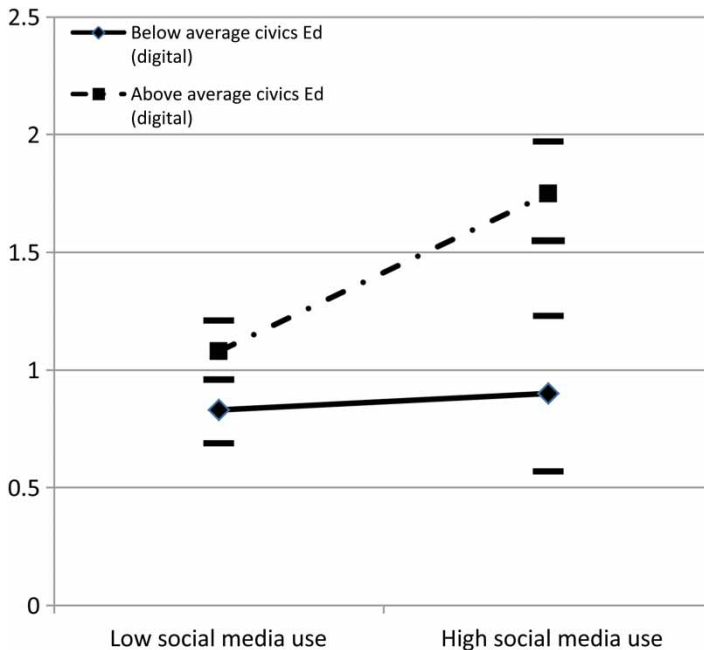

Figure 2.   Collective participation as a function of civics education and social media use (Australia).

Our remaining hypotheses, $H3_a$ and $H3_b$, pursue a similar set of predictions with respect to 'actualizing' norms of citizenship. Overall, our results lend considerable support to the notion that such norms are of critical importance to understanding contemporary youth engagement. The clearest pattern of findings here is robust support for $H3_a$. As seen in Table 1, the results here are positive, significant, and strikingly consistent across the country cases for individual political engagement (Australia: $\beta = .20$, $p < .000$, USA: $\beta = .25$, $p < .000$, UK: $\beta = .25$, $p < .000$). A similar pattern of findings for collective political engagement is clearly visible in Table 2 (Australia: $\beta = .19$, $p < .000$, USA: $\beta = .22$, $p < .000$, UK: $\beta = .22$, $p < .000$). Results associated with the interaction term between actualizing norms and social media use, however, lent little support for $H3_b$, except with respect to collective political engagement among British youth ($\beta = .50$, $p < .000$). We plot this interaction in Figure 3.

In addition to providing a comprehensive series of tests of our hypotheses, our results also shed considerable light on our two research questions. With respect to our primary research question, we identified two plausible outcomes. The interaction terms between social media use and demographic characteristics in each of the regression models provide direct leverage over the first, that of counterstratificational effects. These interaction terms enable us to explore the possibility that social media use may be directly associated with political inequality, either increasing or decreasing stratification. As a careful examination of the coefficients for the interaction terms reveals, in 16 out of 18 trials relevant to this question, we find no significant results. Aside from the two significant results, the overall pattern presents no clear implication regarding a direct relationship between social media use and political inequality.

The second plausible scenario related to *RQ1* was that reasonably strong and direct relationships between social media use and indicators of political engagement could signal the possibility of a generational softening of stratification in political engagement. Taken as a whole, our results are much more suggestive of this state of affairs. To be sure, consistent with the findings of Schlozman et al.'s analysis (2010), our models reveal a persistent, positive, and significant
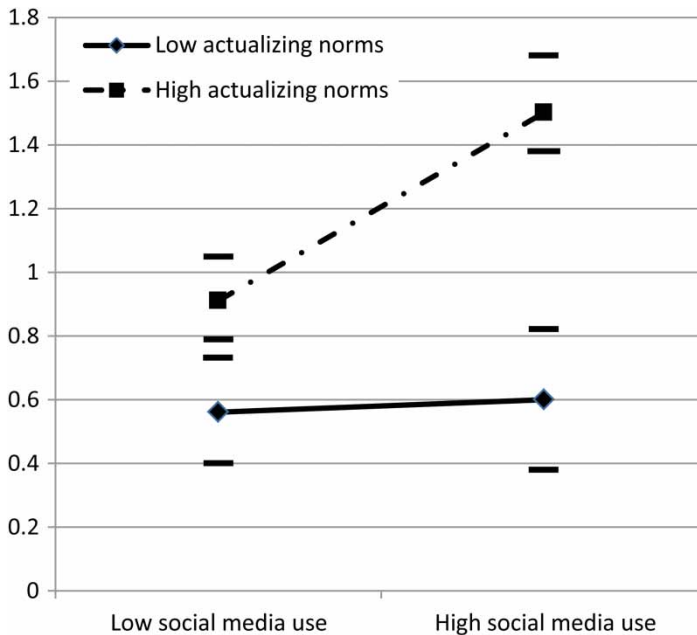

Figure 3.   Collective political engagement as a function of actualizing norms and social media use (UK).

relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and political engagement whether the dependent variable is individual (Australia: $\beta = .20$, $p < .000$, USA: $\beta = .13$, $p < .000$, UK: $\beta = .15$, $p < .000$) or collective (Australia: $\beta = .16$, $p < .000$, USA: $\beta = .13$, $p < .000$, UK: $\beta = .18$, $p < .000$) political activity. At the same time, however, a number of additional factors suggest that social media use may be indirectly related to softening patterns of political inequality. First, as noted earlier, we find a strong, significant, and robust positive relationship between social media use and political engagement. Perhaps more telling, however, is the pattern of explained variance across the various blocks in the six models. Though SES remains a significant predictor of political engagement, for instance, it is worth noting that the entire block of demographic variables explains no more than roughly 30% of the total explained variance in any of the models, and generally explains between 15% and 20% of the total explained variance across most of the models. Additionally, in four of the six models, social media use alone explains as much as or more total variance than the combined block of demographic variables. In two models, those for individual political engagement in the USA and the UK, the social media use variable explains nearly twice as much variance in the dependent variable as compared to demographic factors. Stated plainly, our results suggest that if one were seeking an efficient single indicator of political engagement among young people in the countries studied here, social media use would appear to be as good as, or better than, SES.

In terms of our second research question concerning the extent to which our findings are consistent across the three advanced democracies in which we collected our survey data, the foregoing presentation of results has already revealed many of the relevant patterns. In addition to indicating widespread support for *H1*, findings were also consistent across the three countries in terms of support for *H3$_a$*, concerning actualizing norms of citizenship, and the persistent relationship between SES and political engagement just discussed. Though a number of variables performed differently across the models, two patterns of country-based variations are worth noting here. The first is civic education, particularly in 'digital' form, which overall appears to have the most explanatory power in Australia. The second is actualizing norms, which as mentioned earlier appears to only exhibit the kind of contingent relationship with social media use with respect to collective political engagement in the British case.

Discussion

In this paper we have advanced a theoretical model of social media use and political engagement, in an effort to understand the possible implications of increasingly widespread use of internet services with social media functionality for longstanding patterns of political inequality. Paying particular attention to the fact that social media are largely dominated by younger users, we have focused on theoretical concepts that are particularly relevant to contemporary youth in advanced democracies, and we have deliberately narrowed our empirical focus to users between the ages of 16 and 29. In search of broadly applicable findings and a parsimonious model, we have used particularly inclusive measures of our primary variables of interest. Our results lend strong support to our hypothesis that social media are positively related to political engagement, and suggest a number of patterns consistent with a flattening out of social asymmetries in political engagement over time, via a process of generational replacement. Though our principal findings are relatively consistent across the advanced democracies in which we conducted our research, we also identified a number of areas in which country-specific variations on these findings may deserve further inquiry.

Before discussing the implications of these findings for future research in the area of digital media use and political engagement, it is important to first acknowledge and discuss some limitations of the present study. First, as a cross-sectional design, the present study is inherently unable to provide any definitive conclusions regarding causal relationships. Even without clear leverage

over causal questions, however, the present investigation still offers the most comprehensive study of social media use and political engagement among contemporary youth to date. Whereas previous work has focused on convenience or otherwise limited samples of college students, or perhaps representative samples of a single country, the analyses presented here provide an unprecedented level of reach in terms of examining patterns of social media use, political engagement, and political equality across contemporary advanced democracies. Even with considerable support and advances in research infrastructure, conducting research in this area still involves a fundamental dilemma between an emphasis on internal versus external validity. Given the current state of research in this area, we made a calculated choice to emphasize the latter.

Additional limitations stem from issues related to the specific variables and measures included in our study. For example, while being the best available proxy, our measure of socioeconomic status is somewhat rough. However, we take our finding of a significant relationship between this indicator and political engagement as an indication that it nonetheless provides a useful measure of SES that behaves similarly to other measures used in the literature. Finally, it is undoubtedly a further limitation that our principal independent and dependent variables are more broadly cast than most others used in the literature. Prior studies in this area have demonstrated the value of attending to distinctions between various social media platforms (Pasek, more, & Romer, 2009), types of social media use (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), or forms of what we consider political engagement (Dalton, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006). As useful as the insights that flow from such distinctions may be, however, we believe there is also value in establishing a set of basic relationships between general versions of the variables explored in our analysis. Moreover, in the case of opting for a general (as opposed to a more politically focused) approach to social media use, such a tack preserves an important separation between independent and dependent variables. In a world in which most acts of political engagement can and are carried out within social media, a focus on general use behaviors as independent variables may be the only way to avoid measuring the same activity on both sides of the regression equation (Morris & Morris, 2013).

The aforementioned limitations of the present study notwithstanding, we believe the findings reported here offer a number of significant implications and questions for future research. Most important, the results of our inquiry offer a clear signal regarding the fundamental relationship between social media use and political engagement that is not provided by the existing body of research on these questions. On the basis of these findings, future studies can more confidently explore causal relationships between key variables of interest. Additionally, it is hoped that our results also contribute to research in this area by further demonstrating the importance of attending to variables particularly relevant to young people, such as political socialization and newly emerging norms of citizenship, in all areas of research on digital media and citizenship. Differences in their experiences with socialization, and their norms and attitudes toward politics and public affairs, are clearly relevant to understanding how young citizens interact with social media and the political world. Future research in this area should explore these contingent relationships in more detail.

A number of additional questions for future research are suggested by the country-specific findings we report on the roles played by 'digital' civic education experiences and actualizing norms of citizenship. Clearly, the results reported here suggest that there may be something particularly interesting happening with civics education in Australia. Indeed, readers familiar with comparative studies of civics education should find our results particularly interesting given that unlike the other two countries in our study, Australia lacks explicit and consistent civics curricula across all of its schools. At the same time, scholars interested in actualizing norms and forms of political engagement and organizing may take particular interest in British politics based on our findings.

As a final reflection, we believe the present study provides an important and unprecedented empirical validation of many claims regarding social media use and youth political engagement, while pointing the way toward critical areas for future scholarship. We hope that future studies will be able to build upon these findings to not only identify hyperbole and hype where appropriate, but move us ever closer to a more comprehensive understanding of how new information technologies affect our youngest political actors, and thus the shape of political engagement overall.

Notes on contributors

Michael Xenos is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. [email: xenos@wisc.edu]

Ariadne Vromen is an associate professor in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. [email: ariadne.vromen@sydney.edu.au]

Brian Loader is an associate director of the Science and Technology Studies Unit (SATSU), and senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of York. [email: brian.loader@york.ac.uk]

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