Stimulating citizenship or expanding entertainment? The effect of Facebook on adolescent participation

# Details

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2772 adolescents from 59 schools in the Flemish region of Belgium took part in both waves of the study. The average age of the adolescents was 15 years in the first wave and 16 years in the second wave

# Abstract

Over the past decade, Internet and politics scholarship has been concerned with the effects
of the Internet on forms of civic and political participation. Recent research has moved
on to examine the effects of social networking sites like Facebook. Although past studies
have generally found positive – albeit weak or moderate – relationships between social
networking sites use and civic and political participation, reliance on cross-sectional surveys
has not produced conclusive evidence of the direction of causality. We use a two-wave
panel survey of 15- and 16-year-olds to examine how Facebook use affects various forms
of political and non-political entertainment-oriented participation (both online and offline).
We find that Facebook use is positively related to civic and entertainment-oriented, but
not to online or offline political, participation. Further analysis using structural equation
modelling shows that prior levels of civic participation have a stronger effect on Facebook
use than Facebook use has on civic participation. Facebook use only leads clearly to
entertainment-oriented participation. The implications of these findings are discussed.

# Outcome

The study found a "positive relationship between Facebook use and civic and entertainment-oriented forms of participation, but not for online and offline political participation. The results also show that there is a positive relationship between the number of Facebook friends and civic participation and between the time one spends on Facebook and the use of entertainment-oriented participation. SNS have a much stronger civic than political effect on adolescent participatory behaviour. With respect to how SNS use and participation are intertwined, Facebook use does not lead to more civic participation over time, rather, civic particiation leads to Facebook use. Cautiousness is justified. One should be aware that despite positive correlations, causal relationships between participation and Facebook do not always run in the same direction and have the same significance. Indeed, although Facebook use is positively associated with civic engagement, it does not create it; rather, previous engagement patterns lead to more Facebook use. Yet, just because our analyses show that Facebook does not affect political and civic participation, this does not mean that Facebook, or SNS in general, is irrelevant for politics. Several studies have highlighted the importance of Facebook in election campaigns (Bond et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014), and have provided evidence that it may affect adults’ political knowledge, interest or other politically relevant attitudes." (Theocharis Quintelier, 2016, pp. 829-830)