Social Media and Civic Participation: A Gendered Approach

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Abstract

Empowering women to become active in civic participation has become a core focus of international policy in science, politics and economics. In the present study we examine the link between social media and civic participation. We employ data released from the PEW Internet and American Life Project including women (N = 2304) and men (N = 2290). Focusing on women's empowerment and gendered perspectives of technology we show that 1) social media effect on civic participation differs by gender and 2) women's positive attitudes regarding personal, but not social, benefits from using social media are a strong predictor of civic participation. The results indicate that women's social media affordances play a moderating role in predicting civic participation and differ from those of men. We conclude that the gendered approach considering gender variations in technology and women's selectivity of social media is a significant aspect in predicting women's empowerment in society.

Keywords

Gender, Social Media, Civic Participation, Empowerment, Affordances

1. Introduction

Social media provide a collective forum to discuss, deliberate and decide on actions for activists using digital technology (Graham & Dutton, 2014) that overcomes barriers of distance and time, enabling individuals to connect and reconnect with others and thereby expand and strengthen their networks and interactions. Social media information and opinions about social issues are likely to setting the stage for users to actually become involved and participate in civic subjects that increase empowerment (Hibbs, 2022) thus increasing individuals' po-

tential for sharing updated content reflecting different perspectives and opinions of common interest and voicing individual and group opinions about social issues, thereby giving a significant channel for civic participation (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019).

Social media refer to the collective use of online communication channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Since SM captures the symbiotic relationship between producing and consuming online content it often reflects the combined outcomes of globalization and networking. SM includes a large variety of digital platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and more. As a result, s*ocial media (hereafter SM)* appear to generate a social environment that can instigate extended interactivity and exposure to new ideas aimed at fostering *civic participation (hereafter CP)*. Almost 4.3 billion individuals, constituting 55% of the world population, are now connected to digital technologies (OECD, 2019), and 2.3 billion individuals use social media (Wearesocial, 2016). In the United States, about seven out of ten individuals use social media for social contacts, news content and entertainment (Pew Research Center, 2018). This may be why Volkmer (2015) claimed that virtual global communicative spheres and networks "have become platforms for subjectively 'lived' public spaces" (2014: 1) that necessitate to increase our understanding of the relationship between social media use and civic empowerment (Zhang et al., 2022). However, gender disparities in both social media use and civic participation are often reported. For example, gender differences were found among 21,706,806 Facebook users in Africa, USA and Europe revealing that women are more likely than men to update civic information on Facebook but less on Instagram and Twitter (Laor, 2022). This is why in order to empower women and increase their civic participation we need to examine to what extent SM, online platforms and social networks generate gender differences in CP.

CP is often seen in terms of a general orientation towards community and societal issues but this encompassing definition has been not sufficient to capture individual-level variations in CP (Glas et al., 2019). In fact, CP encompasses a wide range of behaviours, including face-to-face interactions aimed at assisting others, participation in local community groups, charitable fundraising, participation in cause-related events and community projects, disseminating virtual petitions, sharing resources, and coordinating people online to take part in off-line actions, such as boycotts, protests, and sit-ins (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). When, SM transformed our communication patterns the use of SM has been regarded as a powerful source of "playful" engagement with information and knowledge (Glas et al., 2019). It is only recently that some studies indicate that SM mechanisms disregard existing social relationships between social groups (Boy & Uitermark, 2020: pp. 2-3) and cause a process of selectivity in SM use (Ngai et al., 2015; Shareef et al., 2019) that may affect members' attitudes (Greenaway et al., 2015) and behaviors (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2018; Khobzi et al., 2019).

First, existing evidence points indeed to the fact that SM variations in use reflect differences in individuals' motivations stemming from belonging to specific social group (e.g., fan groups, brand communities). These motivations manifest in attitudes (Greenaway et al., 2015) as well as behaviours (Wojcieszak, 2021) that manifest in the way the interactive, networked and affordable technologies ultimately shape women's empowerment in society. Indeed, the motivations behind the use of different SM appear to be gendered. Women are shown to be less likely inclined to make financial contributions to political issues and campaigns following SM but more included to participate in voluntary organizations that are related to electoral and community activity and/or family related issues (Moore, 2018) such as consumer choices and climate change. In fact, recent studies focusing on women's political activity pointed to the existence of "selectivity" during exposure to online sources, reflecting social identity (Wojcieszak, 2021).

Second, accepting digital technology reflect a set of facilitating conditions, including expected effort, performance and social influence, such that perceived usefulness and ease of use contributes to individual goals and needs (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Bala, 2008). Some authors argue that this is probably the outcome women's life-cycle experiences and events such as having own family and the "idealized vision of a mother" (Valdini, 2019: p. 43). These are often considered as generating lower resources to engage in civic affairs (Rokito et al., 2016). Combining this evidence studies report that SM is often appealing to women when the content is emotional and philanthropic shaping women's motivations and choices in CP behavior (Peralta et al., 2017). Surprisingly, evidence of gender differences in SM/ CP remains controversial (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019; Twenge et al., 2018).

In order to unravel the significance of gender for SM, we examine three SM qualities: 1) SM centrality; 2) SM derived personal benefits; 3) SM derived social benefits. We then define three different aspects of CP: 1) Taking action to promote participation in a group that shares your interest in a particular issue or cause and encouraging others to take action on issues of importance to you; 2) Looking for information about rallies or protests happening in your area; 3) Undergoing a change in idea after receiving SM information. We address these levels not as exclusive forms of CP but rather as representing the diversity of CP related to SM use. We also control for a set of socioeconomic background reflecting the concept of affordances. We ask the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does SM shape CP?

RQ2: Does the effect of SM on CP reflect gender differences in SM use?

2. Literature Review

Early studies on technological determinism or the impact of technology on society identified technology or technological advances as the central causal element in processes of social change (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006). As a particular

technology becomes stable its design tends to dictate users' behaviors, consequently diminishing human agency. There are two types of technology determinism: hard determinism and soft determinism. According to the hard determinism perspective, technology emerges regardless of social concerns and creates an institutional force of its own that shapes social norms and behaviors. Its autonomous activation serves the interests of technology-oriented agents, and individuals cannot control its outcomes. This perspective, however, overlooks the social and cultural circumstances in which the technology was developed. In contrast, soft determinism in technology is a moderate perspective, which posits that technology agents leave enough space for individuals to decide how technology is used and how its outcomes are defined.

One form of technological determinism is media determinism, a philosophical and sociological standpoint according to which the media have the power to impact society. The theory of technological determinism in media gained attention when Marshall McLuhan's statement "the medium is the message" became a central theme in technology studies for describing the essence of civilization. McLuhan (1967) later claimed that not all types of technology matter and that in the area of communication only certain communication media can significantly affect social behaviors. Extending this line of thought, the media ecology perspective suggests that new forms of media communication technology may become the main framework that will facilitate implementation of a wide range of social norms and behaviours (Chipidza & Leidner, 2019; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

Original models of digital technology use and specifically the Technology Acceptance Model, TAM (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2008) explain the adoption of technology for specific purposes such as the intention to use e-government services (Carter & Belanger, 2005) and health purposes (Mano, 2021). According to TAM, several perceptions concerning the use of technology will predict its adoption. These predictors are perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness is a belief that the adopted technology will help in a better completing the task. Perceived ease of use is a belief that the use of technology will be without any effort (Davis, 1989). Another important construct in the extend TAM model relates to the perception of individuals concerning what significant others think about the adoption of technology (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). While this construct was dropped in the original model due to its negligible influence on behavior (Davis, 1989), Venkatesh & Davis (2000) in TAM2 reconsidered this decision and brought subjective norms back into the model. In this research, we suggest that these perceptions affect the way SM is used in relation to CP and we distinguish between use of SM for personal and social benefits as important factors that may affect the way SM users translate SM content into CP.

The Web is a valuable space for intergroup interaction. It has the potential to bridge group boundaries, facilitate intergroup communication and foster colla-

boration toward shared community goals. in accordance with the *contact hypothesis* under certain conditions—such as equal status and cooperation toward a common goal—intergroup interaction will increase in-groups as well as out-group personal and societal (Allport, 1954). The contact hypothesis manifests well in SM models. SM models emphasize the symbiotic relationship between producing and consuming online content. The concept of "presumption" captures this symbiotic relationship indicating that individuals with network access and skills can obtain a vast amount of informative content without leaving their homes. Indeed, when people go through the process of networking and social exchange, they talk to each more frequently to exchange information or opinions. Using these networks prompt spontaneous and intentional or accidental increase of influence on others seeking to increase and maintain high personal involvement. This is why findings of empirical studies indicate that when technology based social networks are effective, participants share stories and experiences in audio-visual formats, develop a sense of group inclusion and trust, and become committed to a cause (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017). Some studies show for example that Facebook is a prime environment for developing relationships and connectedness with others, e.g., (Tang et al., 2019). Howard & Parks (2012) differentiate between 1) The information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content; 2) The content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, ideas, and cultural products; 3) The people, organizations and industries that produce and consume digital content (p. 362). This content can offer different perspectives and opinions on the same topic (Riggare et al., 2017). Due to these features the expanded integration of SM into everyday communication, SM is considered as an effective means to amplify individuals' potential to capitalize on the resources of other network members (Zhang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Minocher, 2019) promoting those online and offline relationships that foster civic participation (Mano, 2014). However, SM also reflect differences in preferences and use that have been shown to be instrumental in exploring gender gaps in civic skills (Shorrocks & Grasso, 2020; Boy & Uitermark, 2020). Not surprisingly, the SM/CP relationship is clouded by conflicting evidence prompting the notion that social group identification and social identity differentiate between individuals possibly deriving from homophily effects (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017). Gender differences in motivations and attitudes may be evident then when/if SM pertains to the "masculine" nature of technology (Wajcman, 2004).

Indeed, considering female literature if technology is seen as a part of male culture that is closely tied to male concepts and state of mind focusing on machine-like efficiency SM that does not fit women's time and space affordances and will jeopardize their ability and potential to capitalize on the technological opportunities inherent in SM (Minocher, 2019). Literature in the field of marketing has reported trends showing that belonging to a social group (e.g., fan groups, brand communities) is significantly associated with members' attitudes

(Greenaway et al., 2015) and buying decisions (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2018; Khobzi et al., 2019). It is possible then that this selectivity process indicates the need to accommodate personal affordances, such as time allocation, distance considerations and expenses (Gibson, 1977) that shed doubt related to the universality of SM effects on CP. As a result, exposure to and awareness of social issues presented in SM will not automatically translate into behavior (Stringer et al., 2020).

Indeed, according to the techno-feminist approach, these selectivity differences indicate that technology-embedded communication may sustain gender differences in exposure to and use of technology-based devices (Shashaani, 1997; Wacjman, 2004). They may also indicate that specific group needs generate variations in SM-related attitudes and use (Dolan et al., 2016) and needs. These differences affect individuals' needs, motivations and behaviors, such that variations in SM use often find expression in differences in behavioral engagement (Mano, 2014), resulting in SM content that is emotional and philanthropic and thus shaping women's motivations and choices in CP behavior (Peralta et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, CP is reported to range from low to high CP engagement (Malthouse et al., 2013), passive to active engagement (Muntinga et al., 2011) and positive/negative valence in engagement levels reflecting a process of selectivity in SM choices and uses that farther manifest in shaping attitudes and behavior (Ngai et al., 2015; Shareef et al., 2019).

The gendered context of SM effects on CP

Women's empowerment following SM use reflects a combination between the individualistic process focusing on women's capacities and personal choices and the collectivistic process, addressing the importance of collective behavior and collective growth (Huis et al., 2017). The former encompasses women's need and inclination for promote personal goals whereas the collectivist process emphasizes the importance of the context variations that affect the way women's motivations for CP are shaped by SM use. First, SM operates on the basis of a concept of time that contrasts that of previous and even current communication forms (Kaun 2017; Khobzi et al., 2019). The instant flow of exchanges shortens the time-distance between stimulus and reaction that probably prevents women from getting involved in an online discussion when the topic is hot and relevant. Second, women as a social group have been traditionally engaged in meetings with a physical proximity in community, work or educational settings when most of the group members have been able to attend according to women's affordances in physical presence.

These gender-based distinctions are captured through the concept of affordances. According to Gibson (1977), the concept of affordances accounts for the different ways in which various users may perceive an object. Affordances refer to the notion that users perceive objects depending on the context and objectives of use. In ICT studies, the term "affordances" suggests that individuals using a device may think more about the uses it affords than about its objective qualities

that can possibly generate a lack of fir between the objects' SM features and functions and the users' needs. A low fit generates a lower level of affordances and hence a higher need to weigh "action possibilities" (Orban et al., 2021). As a result, different personal affordances, such as time allocation, distance considerations and expenses will influence individuals using SM to opt for different levels of CP. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H1: Women's attitudes towards SM will differ from those of men.

H2: Higher evaluations of the centrality of SM will increase CP among women.

An extension of the concept of affordances is presented in the lifestyle/exposure theoretical framework suggesting that the probability individuals will behave in a certain way is the result of their lifestyle and habits, which reflect their position and status in society (Dodel & Mesch, 2018). Extending the lifestyle perspective to CP suggests that group members will use SM according to what is personally important to relevant to their own situation and beliefs (Peralta et al., 2017). For some individuals, SM use will serve as a significant path to increase their CP, whereas for others SM will be avoided because they invade their free time. According to van Dijck & Poell (2015), for example, tags, citations and mentions may easily reduce women's limited space and lower their affordances due to the multiplicity of tasks and duties they must perform in real life situation (Henley, 1977). As a result, some platforms are based on written interaction (Twitter, Tumblr) are considered as being less effective. Comparing Facebook users and non-users show that while Facebook users had higher values of life satisfaction, happiness and social support, "passive" Facebook users are more likely to report lower well-being (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Indeed, access to SM reveals substantive differences in the particular devices men and women use reflecting personal limitations (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017; Courtemanche et al., 2020). This is why recent studies point that content and context variations are central factors in the prediction of resilience and vulnerability. Here we examine two types of SM use: for personal benefits and for social benefits. Based on these considerations, we hypothesize:

H3: A greater likelihood to endorse novel ideas presented on SM will increase CP among women.

H4: Women's positive attitudes toward the personal benefits of SM will increase CP.

H5: Women's positive attitudes toward the social benefits of SM will increase CP.

<u>Affordances and socioeconomic effects on CP</u>

Technology skills constitute a pivotal breakthrough in analyzing differences in access, adoption and specific usage patterns. The concepts of first-level and second-level digital divides have focused on the socioeconomic differences that generate differences in self-efficacy and the ability in participating in the SM. It is due to these differences that we can distinguish active content creators from passive consumers in SM use and identify user characteristics for specific social

media platforms, e.g. (Blank & Lutz, 2017; Hoffmann, Lutz, & Meckel, 2015). More important these differences have a spillover effect in individuals' capacity to translate SM access and use into favorable outcomes become evident. Some individuals may use it for personal benefits whereas others for social benefits, making SM a major source understanding CP differences between men and women (Van der Zeeuw, Van Deursen, & Jansen, 2019). Most studies show that age remains a strong predictor of online participation and SM use) especially due to the relationship between age and cognitive strength with the younger groups being more motivated to try novel ways of using SM (Mano, 2021). Moreover, in an international perspective education, and income were also significant predictors of online participation (Mano, 2021).

3. Study Analysis

In the next sections we outline the methodology and then provide the descriptive analysis comparing men and women, followed by bivariate and multivariate results linking SM use and attitudes with CP among men and women. Finally, we discuss the results and offer the main conclusions. The use of this quantitative analysis enables to measure the exact contribution of the SM men/women affordances and uses in the prediction of CP. Hence, it enables the development of an interdisciplinary model that accounts for gender differences in both the use of SM and CP.

4. Methods

Sample: The present study is a secondary analysis based on the PEW Internet and American Life Project from Princeton Survey Research Associates, released in 2019. The sample consists of 4594 individuals residing in the USA. The sample is almost equally divided between women (N = 2304) and men (N = 2290).

Measures: *Dependent variable:* Civic participation (CP): Respondents were asked to rate the following statements on a two-point scale: 1 (yes) or 0 (no): Have you performed any of the following activities on social media in the past year? a) Used hashtags related to a political or social issue; b) Participated in a group that shares an interest in an issue or cause; c) Encouraged others to take action on issues that are important to you; d) Looked for information about rallies or protests happening in your area. The final dependent variable CP was determined by adding up the scores on the above items, such that the variable ranged from 1 (when respondents chose one CP aspect) to 4 (when respondents chose four CP items). *Independent variables:* 1) SM Centrality: How well do you think each of the following statements describes social media? a) Social media help give underrepresented groups a voice; b) Social media distract people from issues that are truly important; c) Social media highlight important issues that might not get much attention otherwise; d) Social media make it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their actions; e) Social media make people think they are making a difference when they really aren't (Cronbach's α = .856). Res-

pondents answered on a scale ranging from 1 (very well) to 5 (not at all). In this study, SM centrality was represented as a single measure of the above evaluations, ranging from 4 (agree) to 20 (disagree). 2) Personal benefits: Respondents were requested to rate the following statements on a scale ranging from 1 (agree) to 5 (do not agree at all): How important, if at all, are social media to you personally when it comes to the following things? a) Finding other people who share your views about important issues; b) Getting involved with political or social issues that are important to you; c) Giving you a venue to express your political opinions. The confirmatory factor analysis yielded an adequate level of reliability (Cronbach's α= .821). The item values are reversed. We therefore denote *Personal benefits* as a single measure of the above evaluations, ranging from 12 (agree) to 3 (disagree). 3) Social benefits: Respondents were requested to rate the following statements on a scale ranging from 1 (agree) to 4 (do not agree at all): In general, how important, if at all, do you think social media are today when it comes to the following factors? a) Getting elected officials to pay attention to issues; b) influencing policy decisions; c) creating sustained movements for social change. The confirmatory factor analysis yielded an adequate level of reliability (Cronbach's α= 0.847). The items values are reversed. Hence, we denote s*ocial benefits* as the single outcome on the above evaluations, ranging from 3 (disagree) to 12 (agree). 4) Idea change: Respondents were requested to rate the following statements: In the past year, have you changed your views about a political or social issue because of something you saw on social media? (1 = yes). Control variables: Age: (18 through 95 years); Gender: (1 = male); Marital status: (1 = married); Education: (1 = did not complete elementary school through 8 = completed university degree); Family income: 1 = $75,000; 2 = $35,000 - $75,000; 3 = lower than $35,000).

5. Results

First, we examined the extent to which group differences related to SM uses exist between men and women (Table 1).

The findings in the table show that SM uses do indeed differ between men and women, though not for all aspects examined in the study. First, SM use was found to induce a slightly higher change in ideas about some notions among men (Mean = .1262) than among women (Mean = .1159), and this difference is significant. In contrast, women reported a higher CP (Mean = 1.1732) than men (Mean = 1.0061), and this difference is also significant. These higher means indicate that we can expect that women's following SM will have a direct effect on CP. Next, we analyze the ANOVA results for gender differences relative to the degree to which SM affects CP. In the first step we introduce socioeconomic variables known to make a major contribution to SM use and CP (Mano, 2021). In the second step we used the model summary of the logistic regression to examine the variables associated with SM use, while controlling for the effect of socioeconomic variations.

Table 1. T-test group statistics for social media differences in use by gender.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means	
						F	Sig.	t	df
SM centrality	Men	2235	10.8931	2.34506	.04960	.374	.541	−1.688	4446
	Women	2213	11.0127	2.38076	.05061			−1.688	4443.223
SM use for personal benefits	Men	2129	10.2104	17.93141	.38862	1.329	.249	1.266	4314
	Women	2187	9.5761	14.87677	.31812			1.263	4130.084
SM use for social benefits	Men	2129	11.252	18.2345	.38862	1.029	.279	1.176	4314
	Women	2187	9.5761	17.86791	.3459			1.263	4130.084
SM changed idea	Men	2290	.1262	.33215	.00694	4.598	.032	1.072	4592
	Women	2304	.1159	.32016	.00667			1.072	4583.586

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 2. Model Summary predicting civic participation for men and women.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
				MEN						
Socio-economic	Regression	47.581	4	11.895	8.080	.000	.124	.015	.013	1.21336
	Residual	3053.454	2074	1.472						
	Total	3101.035	2078							
SM (centrality, uses and ideas)	Regression	275.358	8	34.420	25.215	.000	.298	.089	.085	1.16836
	Residual	2825.677	2070	1.365						
	Total	3101.035	2078							
				WOMEN						
Socio-economic	Regression	217.588	4	54.397	35.325	.000	.251	.063	.061	1.24092
	Residual	3232.229	2099	1.540						
	Total	3449.817	2103							
SM (centrality, uses and ideas)	Regression	428.338	8	53.542	37.125	.000	.352	.124	.121	1.20093
	Residual	3021.479	2095	1.442						
	Total	3449.817	2103							

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

The results show that the models predicting CP differ by gender. Among men, introducing SM increases the extent of the explained variance from R Square = .124 to R Square = .298, indicating that using SM triples the potential for predicting CP. This effect is lower among women, for whom the potential to explain

the variance in our model predicting CP increases from R Square = .251 to R Square = .352. These results indicate that differences in the use of SM among men as well as in CP. In order to provide a detailed analysis of the differential impact of SM uses on CP, we next discuss the direct effects of different SM uses on CP, while comparing men and women (Table 3).

Table 3. Regression coefficients predicting civic participation by gender.

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
MEN					
S	*Socioeconomic effects*				
(Constant)	2.471	.108		22.803	.000
Age category	1.990	.148	−.121	13.457	.000
Education	−.033	.029	−.027	−1.147	.251
Family income	−.067	.031	−.045	−2.127	.034
Married	.000	.002	.002	.113	.910
	SM effects				
SM Centrality	.140	.073	.044	1.921	.055
SM Personal benefits	.063	.011	.121	5.620	.000
SM Social benefits	.008	.002	.111	4.092	.000
SM changed idea	0006.619E −6	.002	.000	.004	.997
WOMEN					
	Socioeconomic effects				
(Constant)	2.738	.152		18.041	.000
Age category	−.196	.029	−.148	−6.671	.000
Education level category	−.181	.031	−.119	−5.764	.000
Family income	−.003	.001	−.050	−2.428	.015
Married	−.043	.075	−.012	−.570	.569
	SM effects				
SM centrality	.059	.011	.110	5.246	.000
SM Personal benefits	.009	.002	.107	4.339	.000
SM Social benefits	.001	.001	.027	1.092	.275
SM changed idea	.724	.083	.181	8.690	.000

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

The results reveal several interesting findings. Looking at the impact of SM on CP two different trends are revealed. First, using SM for personal benefits increases significantly CP for both women (B = .009) and for men (B = .063).

However, different trends are evident regarding SM use of social benefits: the results show that while men's use for social benefits increase CP, whereas the effect is insignificant among women. The results indicate a lower interest of women to use SM for social purposes.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we examined the relationship between SM and CP by focusing on gender differences and considering the variety of SM use and CP forms available to individuals. We assumed that gendered affordances, including evaluations of SM use for personal and social benefits, shape gender variations in CP. In assessing H1, we showed that indeed SM uses differ between men and women. This is because, as hypothesized in H1 and H2, women's SM uses and attitudes towards SM differ from those of men. These differences find expression in women's higher reports of CP even though SM is higher among men than women. This finding indicates that women are apparently more selective about the information and messages or communications conveyed on SM and that basic differences between men and women in motivations and affordances that result in a lower impact on CP. Thus, we assumed (Hypotheses H3 and H4) that individuals' exposure to information and awareness of social issues do not automatically translate into behavior (Stringer et al., 2020). In fact, it appears that taking steps to become involved by means of CP highlights differences in individuals' motivations. These motivations reflect the way in which belonging to a social group (e.g., fan groups, brand communities) exposes members' attitudes and intentions in ways that shape social identity. Nonetheless, we assumed that in order to fully assess the effect of SM on CP we need to know more about specific affordances related to SM use.

We followed the theoretical path suggesting that the affordances underlying individual perceptions are changeable even though the features of SM are fairly stable. In hypotheses H5 and H6 we assess the extent that affordances are important for CP. We showed that distinguishing between personal and social benefits following SM is important since women's evaluation of SM use for personal benefits will decrease CP whereas SM use for social benefits will increase CP. Our results assess our hypotheses of the moderating and gendered role of SM affordances in the link between SM and CP. However, SM potential to present successfully novel ideas has a positive effect on women's (and men's) CP. As a result, we provide evidence for two major perspectives in SM use.

First, we confirm the potent effect of online platforms to effectively communicate novel ideas to increase CP for women (and men). Second, we provide support for the gendered hypothesis suggesting that women's motivations and affordances of SM differ from that of men and reflect their lifestyle, habits and position in the social system (Dodel & Mesch, 2018). These gendered effects indicate that using SM will not necessarily activate CP unless factors related to social realities are accounted for because social realities stemming from affiliation

to social groups alter the level of affordances that in turn may jeopardize and restrain members of social groups of capitalizing on the benefits inherent in digital technology.

The present study contributes therefore to expanding existing conceptual and empirical knowledge concerning prompting us to approach the gendered distinction in the SM/CP link in order to understand how 1) SM are indeed women-friendly; 2) Women perceive SM contribution to their personal and social life (Orban et al., 2021); 3) How SM fits their female way of living (Dodel & Mesch, 2018). This combination is necessary in order to capture women's CP behaviors.

7. Discussion

The global expansion of SM has placed individuals into a new reality where users' involvement increased their level of information and access to resources. It is now clear that SM use provides knowledge and exposure to a broad range of social issues and agendas. Some of them are closely related to the centrality of being involved in civic matters. We can often assign the exposure to social issues to attitudes and behaviors that prompt activity but more often than not SM has not been clear regarding men and women's CP. In fact, the existing bulk of studies has been controversial regarding gender effects as well as the way that being aware through SM generates differences in attitudes and behaviors. While it is clear that gender differences persist in the digital domain and technology, there is a substantial lacuna in our understanding of the multiple aspects of such differences and their outcomes. As the use of SM increases in everyday life the significance of such differences increases as well. As a result, we need to become aware of the way these differences manifest in men and women's everyday life choices of SM. This would promote our understanding of the limitations of digital platforms rather than relying on praising the overstated and generalized and misplaced importance for all aspects of life including our likelihood to become active citizens.

Limitations

The study's secondary analysis limits the study's potential to examine a larger number of variables related to the gender gap in use of SM and CP. While the study extends upon a large number of variables pertaining to objective and perceived aspects of women's use of technology and life styles it is important for future studies to opt for a mixed methods methodology in order to unravel a more in depth understanding of women's opinions and decision-making processes.

Recommendations for future studies

Moreover, future studies should examine a larger range of civic participation behaviors such as online support to social causes including contributions to crowd-sourcing data, volunteering within employing organizations, money donations and online tutoring. By doing so, it will be possible to establish a stronger link between SM and CP and support of gendered distinctions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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