The Writing on the Wall: A Content Analysis of College Students’ Facebook Groups for the 2008 Presidential Election

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This study looks at student Facebook groups supporting the 2008 presidential candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, from largest land-grant universities in seven battleground states. The findings of a content analysis of wall posts show that students are using Facebook to facilitate dialog and civic political involvement. In opposition to pro-McCain groups, pro-Obama groups have wider time frame coverage and demonstrate substantively higher site activity. Political discussions related to the political civic process, policy issues, campaign information, candidate issues, and acquisition of campaign products dominate across groups and election seasons. An examination of the content of wall posts based on the four categories of the Michigan Model of voting behavior (partisanship, group affiliation, candidate image, and political/campaign issues) reveals that in the primary season, pro-Obama groups focus mostly on short-term topics (candidate image and campaign issues), whereas pro-McCain groups focus mostly on long-term topics (partisanship and group affiliation). The overall findings of this study suggest that youth online communities actively follow campaigns and post comments that foster the political dialog and civic engagement.

In recent years, scholars started to focus their attention on understanding the role of online political communication (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Endres & Warnick, 2004; Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007a, 2007b; Shah et al., 2007; Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Trammell, 2007; Wells & Dudash, 2007). In a political campaign environment, the Internet proved to be an excellent medium for dissemination of information, mobilization, social interaction, and even entertainment (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). Historically used for the first time in a campaign context in 1996, the Internet played a major role in the 2004 presidential election when campaigns made a strategic move and began writing blogs (Trammell, 2007). The Internet played a similar role in the 2006 midterm Congressional elections when candidates for U.S. Senate and House of Representatives were invited by Facebook, a student-originated site used primarily by a younger-than-29 age demographic, to participate and host profiles like other users (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). At least one third of the candidates running for U.S. Senate seats responded to the invitation and posted their profiles on Facebook (Williams & Gulati, 2007). Moreover, in the 2008 presidential election, all Democratic and Republican candidates established Facebook and MySpace profiles, and hundreds of thousands of social network sites (SNSs) users added them as “friends” (Ancu & Cozma, 2009).

The use of the Internet to develop election-oriented Web sites (e.g., candidate/campaign Web sites and Facebook and MySpace profiles) is praised in the literature on political communication as the “greatest dialog move” (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008, p. 176) because it allows for open
and active political dialog between candidates or representatives of the campaign and voters or among constituents themselves. However, despite this possibility for two-way communication and active human interaction between politicians and voters, previous studies document that this potential is not being actualized (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). From the constituents’ perspective, such Web sites are appreciated for their depth of political information and accessibility as opposed to other sources of political information (e.g., debates, news on television, or candidate ads). From the candidates’ perspective, the exchange of political ideas in a conversational style is burdensome (Endres & Warnick, 2004) because it involves the risk of losing control over what is said (Postelniciu & Cozma, 2007a; Stromer-Galley, 2000). As a result, only a few candidates actually engage in dialogic communication with their constituents on Facebook (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Moreover, citizens themselves do not demand greater exchanges of policy opinions from politicians (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002), and comments posted on candidates’ walls are frequently personal in content, whereas comments addressed to other voters are richer in political content (Postelniciu & Cozma, 2007b).

The purpose of this study is to analyze how one such SNS, Facebook, facilitated political dialog and civic engagement in the context of the 2008 presidential election. In contrast to other studies that focused on SNSs and candidate-to-voter interactions, this research builds on the empirical evidence of wall post discussions among voters themselves. In a nutshell, it looks for political dialog in places where, based on previous research, it is more likely to be found, in voter-to-voter online interactions. Such SNSs are, however, mostly popular among young people, a demographic that is not necessarily actively involved in politics. Youth voters have been underrepresented since 1976 when 18- to 21-year-olds were given the right to vote (Iyengar & Jackman, 2004), and in general, voter turnout among this age group has constantly declined (Levine & Lopez, 2002). Despite the documented apathy among youth, the 2008 presidential election registered a big surge in voters ages 18 to 29 (CIRCLE, 2008). In addition, the youth supported Barack Obama, regardless of their political affiliation, crossing both partisan and racial lines (CIRCLE, 2008). Getting insights into youth conversations on social network Web sites for political purposes certainly deserves attention, especially in the context of both a recent turnout surge and a particular candidate’s overwhelming popularity.

This study investigates wall post content of nine college student Facebook groups in seven battleground states, supporting either one of the Democratic and Republican candidates for U.S. president—Barack Obama and John McCain. The research questions investigate: How are students
using this forum for political civic involvement? Do voter-to-voter conversations suggest that SNSs are mainly sources for social interaction with other like-minded supporters as previous research supports (Ancu & Cozma, 2009), or are the SNSs used to facilitate political dialog and civic involvement? If political discussions dominate, are they reflecting more the long-term influences of party and group allegiances, or are discussions mostly concerned with short-term aspects of political behavior such as issues and candidates’ images? Are comments mostly positive toward the candidate they support, as previous studies attest in candidate-to-voter interactions (Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007b; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008) or are they mostly negative when referring to either the supported candidate or the opponent?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

SNSs offer an entirely new way for people to be involved with the political process, and their popularity among youth suggests that SNSs may be a powerful tool for bringing young voters back into the political process. Such participatory media provide voters, and youth in particular, with an opportunity to be directly involved in the political process without leaving their homes or offices (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). SNSs allow for discussions, debates, and grassroot mobilizations for issues that young voters care about (Rheingold, 2008), encouraging participatory behaviors (Shah et al., 2007). Through online conversations, youth can speak on their own behalf about their unique concerns and positions regarding policies and can organize themselves for defending such positions. Because discussions with others and the Internet are the main sources youth utilize to gain political knowledge (Wells & Dudash, 2007), SNSs seem to be the optimal environment for promoting youth political involvement.

What type of conversations do youth display on Facebook? Building on research that documents political conversations among voters themselves rather than between voters and politicians (Ancu & Cozma, 2009), the researchers hypothesized that Facebook groups would display voter-to-voter conversations that are mainly political in nature, rather than simply reflecting social interaction or entertainment needs. In addition, the researchers hypothesized that Barack Obama’s supporting groups would show higher site activity and membership than John McCain’s groups. Besides young voters’ overwhelming support for Barack Obama reported by surveys (Kanel & Quinley, 2008; Keeter, Horowitz, & Tyson, 2008), news reports suggested that Barack Obama was far more effective than his opponent in tapping into the power of
SNSs (Carr, 2008). Barack Obama’s integration of SNSs into his campaign is said to have given his supporters a sense of involvement and gave his campaign organizers a direct line of contact with the constituents (“McCain vs. Obama,” 2008). Thus, the first two hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Facebook groups supporting Barack Obama will show a higher level of site activity and membership than Facebook groups supporting John McCain.

H2: Content on Facebook groups supporting one of the two major candidates of the 2008 U.S. presidential election will focus more on political discussions than on social interaction.

If these conversations are primarily political in content, what aspects of the voting behavior model, also known as the Michigan Model, are dominant? Do topics reflect more long-term allegiances of partisanship and primary group associations, or are topics more concerned with short-term influences of policy issues and candidates’ images? The Michigan Model explains political behavior during elections and has been extensively used in classifying political communication (Joslyn, 1980; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). Using data from political surveys conducted from 1948 through 1958, The American Voter, the breakthrough work that introduced the Michigan Model, established four categories of factors that influence the public’s attitude toward politics and thus influence its decisions when going to the polls (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1964).

The most important category of the Michigan Model and the starting point of Campbell et al.’s (1964) analysis is partisanship. Partisan orientation and a sense of party identification are recognized as having an enduring effect on the public’s attitude toward politics, and partisanship loyalty is provided as a plausible explanation for why American politics is dominated by only two parties. However, the stability of a person’s perceptions of political events and even his partisan allegiance expressed at the polls depends also on the enduring social groupings that divide the electorate. That is, group opinion serves as a reference point and reinforces the individual’s perception of what his political stance should be based on irrespective of party affiliation. Campbell and associates (1964) suggested that primary group associations, such as family, work, or even friendship, with the high degree of homogeneity built into them, can surpass and contradict partisan attitudes. However, due to the decrease in the people in the electorate who identify themselves as Democrats or Republicans and the increase in the number of
Independents registered in the 1970s, some scholars have promoted the "partisan decline thesis" (Bartels, 2000) and asserted that partisanship and group memberships are not the sole influences on how voters practice politics.

Short-term aspects of politics, such as candidate image and policy issues, have become critical components in explaining political attitudes and behavior (Boyd, 1972; Joslyn, 1980). As a result, the impact of party allegiance expressed at the polls is much more variable than previously admitted. A candidate’s appeal as a person has shown to play a major role in voters reaching a final decision. Specifically, aspects of a candidate’s personal life, such as record of leadership, reputation, personal integrity, and charisma, can easily disturb long-term commitments. Finally, even though one of the greatest limitations for civic participation is a general lack of public awareness of major social and economic problems, issues and specific policy matters do play an important role in explaining voting behavior. Thus, knowledge of party positions on specific policy issues will influence voting behavior, even though such concerns apply only to a minority of the population (Campbell et al., 1964). In sum, four categories affect political behavior: two concerned with long-term loyalties, partisan or primary groupings, and two concerned with short-term influences, candidate image and policy issues.

Considering this, which influences of the Michigan Model led to the election of Barack Obama in 2008? Are the identified influences for the entire population also applicable to young voters? In a retrospective of the 2008 campaign, Campbell (2008) suggested that the decisive factor in Obama’s victory was the mid-September Wall Street meltdown crisis in financial institutions. In many respects, the 2008 presidential election was exceptional (Campbell, 2008): a strong negative reaction against an incumbent president, an unpopular war, and a sluggish economy were announcing 2008 to be a Democratic year. However, the pre-election conditions were offset by a moderate conservative Republican candidate preferred by a center-right nation in opposition to a northern-liberal Democratic candidate, only to be overturned again by a Wall Street financial crisis. Partisan parity and ideological polarization, an open seat election, in addition to a protracted battle for the nomination process in the Democratic camp, transformed the 2008 election in a very tight race, such that in early September 2008 McCain was taking the lead in Gallup polls. By October 6, 2008, however, after the financial collapse, the battle was decided in favor of the Democratic candidate that promoted “change” (Campbell, 2008, pp. 15–16).

Although Campbell (2008) acknowledged the relevance of long-term influences such as partisanship and underscored as decisive short-term
factors such as candidates’ positions and economic issues, Martinez (2009), in a study of Floridians’ electoral behavior in the 2008 election, posited that the decisive factors in the 2008 presidential election for Florida were partisanship and a strong reaction against the incumbent Bush administration.

Thus, yet another question is raised: Which factors of the aforementioned possible explanations are relevant for youth? The researchers proposed that the content analysis of youth conversations in Facebook groups involved in the 2008 presidential campaign would shed light on this question. Previous research on political attitudes and campaigns has documented that people, in general, want substantive information about a candidate’s position on issues, followed by information on his experience, character, and intelligence (Lipsitz, Trost, Grossmann, & Sides, 2005). However, in a study on MySpace comments addressed to 2006 congressional candidates, Postelnicu and Cozma (2007b) found that most of the conversation focused on campaign events and candidates’ images, whereas policy issues were rarely addressed. In addition to the short-term focus during the campaigns, age tends to create fixed attitudes such that issue discussions are more useful for younger voters because it may enhance their understanding of the political process and acquisition of political knowledge (Lipsitz et al., 2005). Therefore, considering these previous findings, the researchers hypothesized the following:

H3: Facebook groups’ discussion will focus mostly on the short-term influences of candidate image and policy issues as identified by traditional voting behavior models, rather than on long-term influences of party identification and group affiliation.

The last question addressed in this study refers to the overall tone of the conversation in the Facebook groups. Previous studies on voter-to-candidate conversations on SNSs found that comments are generally, positive in tone, polite, highly civil, and supportive of candidates (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007b; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Given the tight race and the higher stakes of the presidential election compared to previous studies that researched online content for midterm congressional elections, the researchers expected the conversations to be mostly positive in content, but negative aspects are not necessarily excluded. Thus, the final hypotheses are as follows:

H4: Candidate mentions on Facebook groups will demonstrate praise for the group’s candidate rather than criticism for the respective candidate or the opposing candidate.
H4a: The overall tone of the wall posts on these Facebook groups will be positive as the focus will be in supporting the group’s candidate rather than negative.

METHOD

The researchers were looking to tap into youth political conversation in an online environment. Although young voters are comfortable using SNSs, they might not be as interested in displaying political conversations. Because previous research on political behavior attests that political interest increases with education, higher stakes, and uncertainty of the political outcome (Campbell, 1960; Tufte, 1975), the researchers optimized the sample by selecting Facebook groups with high values on two of the variables mentioned: education and uncertainty of the final outcome. A presidential election is already a high-stakes election as opposed to local or midterm congressional elections. Thus, this study used content analysis to examine student Facebook groups for the two main presidential candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, at land-grant universities in seven swing states during the 2008 presidential campaign. The analysis was limited to the front pages and wall posts of the selected universities and candidates. The Facebook groups selected in gathering the sample came from universities in states considered “swing” states by two of three major sources of election coverage: CNN, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. Each of these news organizations had a list of swing states, which was gathered from the election sections of their Web sites one week before the election. The final list of swing states listed by at least two of these three sources were Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, and Ohio (“CNN Electoral Map Calculator”, 2008; “The Electoral Map”, 2008; “2008 Political Landscape Map”, 2008). Searches of Facebook groups were then made using the state name, candidate name, and various forms of the largest land-grant university names as search terms. These universities were Colorado State University; University of Florida; Purdue University; University of Missouri; University of Nevada, Reno; North Carolina State University; and The Ohio State University. Facebook groups for John McCain were found at only three of the seven universities, and for Barack Obama at six of the seven universities. In cases where multiple student Facebook groups existed in support for the same candidate, the group with the largest membership was selected. The front page of each Facebook group in the sample was downloaded and archived one week before the election and resulted in nine Facebook groups between both presidential candidates.
The unit of analysis for this project was an individual wall post. The wall posts for each group were downloaded and archived after the election. All wall posts from the beginning of the Facebook group through November 4, 2008, were used for the analysis. This resulted in 562 wall posts (pro-Obama posts, \( n = 511 \); pro-McCain posts, \( n = 51 \)) from the nine Facebook groups selected.

Content Categories

To group the wall posts, each post was coded for basic demographics of the commenter (gender, student affiliation), group-related information (the university the group represented, the candidate the group supported), and date. To determine the presence of political conversations, a similar set of content categories was created based on studies that addressed online media and youth conversation during campaigns on blogs (Trammell, 2007) and social media research (Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007b; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). The posts were then analyzed for the presence of a specified list of topics, which included political civic process (voter registration, volunteering, get out the vote, political meeting, rally, watch a debate/speech), policy discussions, horse race coverage, selling products/acquisition of campaign products, Web link, social related activities (social event, nonpolitical meeting), relationship building/interpersonal support, request to join another group, emotional expressions (positive emotional expression toward the candidates the group supports or negative emotional expression toward the candidates the group supports), and “other.”

Because the “other” category became dominant in our initial coding (i.e., 20% of the wall posts fitted in the other category), a qualitative analysis was performed to further investigate which topics were relevant in the wall posts. As a result of this analysis, four subcategories of topics were included: (a) candidate issues: topics related to the candidate supported by the group and his campaign, discussions about candidate’s preferences and appearances in the area; (b) negative statements about the opponents: opponents could be identified as Republicans, Hillary Clinton, John McCain and his supporters, Barack Obama and his supporters; (c) organizational/administrative activities for the group: inquiries about group’s meetings, Web design, future activities, group size, and notes praising the group members for their work; and (d) other. In addition, because some of the initial categories had only a minimal coverage (e.g., negative statements about the candidate the group supports, relationship building/interpersonal support, and request to join another group), the researchers decided to collapse some of these categories as follows: social related topics and relationship building became one category, labeled as social topics; negative emotional
expressions for opponents and for supported candidates became one category, labeled as negative expressions; and group organizational activities and request to join another group became also one category, labeled as group organizational activities.

To tap into the political content defined in terms of the Michigan Model, the four categories established by this model were used. These four categories were then divided into two subgroups. The first subgroup encompasses long-term influences, such as party affiliation (i.e., when the wall post clearly stated the political party to which the poster belongs to) and group preferences/affiliation (i.e., when the wall post mentioned the poster’s preference for a group (e.g., religious, labor unions, students, etc.) that is not the Facebook group). The following examples help illustrate each of these categories:

“Commenter A wrote on January 7, 2008: Congratulations to Jessica on becoming a Obama Delegate to the Democratic National Convention in August!” (example of party affiliation)

“Commenter B wrote on July 5, 2007: “...We are proud to announce that Senator Barack Obama will be in attendance at the NAACP convention, in Detroit, on July 12, 2007! During the days leading up to his arrival we will need volunteers at the convention to bring enthusiasm!” (example of group preferences/affiliation)

The second subgroup encompasses short-term influences, such as campaign/political issues (i.e., when the wall post mentioned campaign issues and/or political issues) and candidate image (i.e., when the wall post discussed candidate image, such as physical characteristics, personality characteristics, experience, biographic information, qualifications). The following examples illustrate the short-term influences:

“Commenter C wrote on October 17, 2008: “...I think high school students and college students should ask themselves and each other: How will we find a job after we finish HS or college if Obama is president? His tax plan will raise taxes on companies from 35% to 39%, when America has the highest taxes on companies in the world already.” (example of campaign/political issues)

“Commenter D wrote on February 12, 2008: Obama wrote about his drug use in 1995. It’s not really new news. I was surprised to see it in the Alligator. Big deal though. Show me a person that has never made a mistake and I’ll show you a liar.” (example of candidate image)

Finally, the tone of each wall post was considered in terms of positive, negative, equal mix of positive and negative, or neutral. Comments about

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1Commenters’ names were changed to letters (e.g., Commenter A, B, etc.) to preserve their anonymity.
presidential or vice-presidential candidates, John McCain, Sarah Palin, and Barack Obama (Joe Biden was never mentioned) were recorded and classified in terms of personal criticism, policy criticism, or positive statement.

Coding Process

The authors, who served as the coders, co-coded 60 random wall posts of the 562 total wall posts for an average percentage agreement of 94.9% and a range of agreement from 69.4% to 100%. Of all categories included in the analysis, only two of them had a percentage of agreement below 80%. Based on its use on similar studies, Scott’s Pi was used to determine reliability accounting for chance agreement and produced a reliability coefficient of 0.74 across all categories. Intercoder reliability was calculated using the software ReCal (Freelon, 2008). Because the level of agreement was considered satisfactory, the coders divided the entire sample for coding. The authors utilized a codebook that contained a detailed explanation of all content categories previously mentioned.

Sample Characteristics

Nine Facebook groups (pro-Obama, n = 6; pro-McCain, n = 3) were analyzed in this study. Among all nine groups, the University of Florida groups had the largest membership for both candidates. The “UF Students for Obama (Official Chapter)” had 1,861 members, and the “Gators for McCain” had 563 members. The most active groups in terms of number of wall posts were the pro-Obama groups at the University of Florida, followed by The Ohio State University, and North Carolina State University, whereas the pro-McCain groups were mainly represented by students at the University of Florida (see Table 1).

The demographics of the sample in the pro-Obama groups consisted of 48% male posters and 44% female posters. For pro-McCain groups, male posters represented 59% of the sample, while female posters covered 35% of the sample.

The researchers noticed that pro-Obama groups had a wider time frame than pro-McCain groups, with four out of five groups starting their activity in 2007 when the official primary season had not begun yet. Pro-McCain groups, on the other hand, posted their first comments only in February 2008. Considering the protracted intraparty battle for the Democratic nomination, we speculate that the wider time frame for pro-Obama groups might

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2 Coders indicated the dominant topic (see Table 2 for a list of topics) for each wall post and the percentage of agreement for this category was 69.4%. Overall tone of the wall post had a 73.8% percentage of agreement.
be related to a more disputed campaign environment. At the time when first pro-Obama wall posts appear, Hillary Clinton was generally perceived in the popular press as the preferred candidate (Balz & Johnson, 2009). To have a deeper perspective on political comments in a campaign environment, the researchers decided to divide the sample based on the two election seasons: (a) intraparty competition during the primary season (covering all wall posts before August 31, 2008) and (b) interparty competition during the general season (September 1, 2008, to November 4, 2008). Each hypothesis proposed in this study investigates differences between the two election seasons, in addition to trends for the entire election.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted that pro-Obama groups would be more active than the pro-McCain groups. The data easily confirm this hypothesis, as 91% of wall posts in the overall sample belong to the pro-Obama groups, whereas only 9% of wall posts represent the pro-McCain groups. A two-sample test of a proportion shows that the two groups are different in terms of wall post activity ($z = 27.44$, $p = .000$), with the qualification that pro-Obama groups are more active than the pro-McCain groups ($p < .05$, for one-sided hypothesis). A distribution of wall post activity across the
two election seasons for each group shows that more than half of all pro-Obama comments were posted during the primary season and only 38% during the general election season. The distribution of wall posts for McCain groups is reversed: 74% of all pro-McCain comments are posted during the general season. The researchers speculate that higher site activity for pro-Obama groups during the primary season was related to the tight intraparty race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

The second hypothesis suggested that content on Facebook groups supporting one of the major candidates of the 2008 U.S. presidential election would focus more on political civic participation than on social interaction. A summary of topics across all wall posts shows that these groups covered a wide array of categories, from political topics to social interactions, Web link, group organizational activities, and emotional expressions (see Table 2, Dominant topics). Political topics related to the political civic process, policy discussions, candidate issues, horse race coverage, and acquisition of campaign products represent more than half of wall posts for the overall election and for each season. At the same time, social-related activities reflect no more than 5% of wall posts, for the entire election coverage and for each election season. This finding suggests that when the online youth communities are formed with the goal of supporting a political candidate, social activities are relegated and the focus on the political process itself becomes more important. In addition, the distribution of dominant topics across the two election seasons is different, \( \chi^2(10) = 32.46, p = .000 \), such that group organizational activities decrease from 13.44% during the primary season to 4.87% in the general season. A similar decrease is noted for positive emotional expressions, from 9.69% to 4.87%, whereas the negative emotional expressions increase, from 2.5% to 6.19%. To understand these dynamics within each group, the researchers tabulated the percentage of dominant topic for each group during each season (see Table 3, Dominant topics). Overall, the statistical analyses show that Obama and McCain groups differ in terms of dominant topic distributions for each of the two seasons. However, despite significant statistical results, \( \chi^2(6) = 12.54, p = .051 \), and \( \chi^2(6) = 6.19, p = .002 \), due to the small sample size of pro-McCain groups, only the result for the general election season is reliable. The researchers noticed some major changes for McCain groups: During the primary season, these groups display 30.77% of political topics, 23.08% of social topics, 15.38% of positive emotional expressions, and 0% negative emotional expressions. During the general season, on the other hand, the political topics double, social topics disappear, positive emotional expressions decrease to 5%, and negative emotional expressions increase to 13.16%. The researchers considered that the increase in negativity for McCain groups was related to the tight race and to the negative prospects for McCain after mid-September. According to Campbell
(2008), the race between Obama and McCain was very tight during the general season up to the financial crisis meltdown, such that by October 6, the battle was already decided in Obama’s favor. In addition, The Ohio State University McCain group forms on October 5 and displays mainly negative comments toward Obama, his supporters, and his campaign. It is likely that the late formation of this group might have been triggered by the possible Obama win and the willingness of McCain supporters to try to undermine the opponent, thus increasing the amount of negative comments in the wall posts. In sum, considering the higher site activity for Obama groups during the primary season and the dominance of political topics across wall

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant topicsa (%)</th>
<th>Overall election</th>
<th>Primary election season</th>
<th>General election season</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political topics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political civic process</td>
<td>39.56</td>
<td>36.88</td>
<td>43.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy issues</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate issues</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse race</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition of campaign products</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>6.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social related topics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social interactions &amp; relationship building</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web link</td>
<td>13.74</td>
<td>10.31</td>
<td>18.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group organizational activities</td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>13.44</td>
<td>4.87</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional expressions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>9.69</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>6.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Michigan Modelb (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Long term</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>13.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>28.81</td>
<td>23.81</td>
<td>36.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short term</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>23.05</td>
<td>24.49</td>
<td>20.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campaign/Political issues</td>
<td>38.68</td>
<td>44.90</td>
<td>29.17</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tonec (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>42.70</td>
<td>47.11</td>
<td>36.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>8.72</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>11.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal mix</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>8.81</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>40.93</td>
<td>37.39</td>
<td>45.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Statistical tests for differences between the two seasons (all expected counts > 5).*

\[ \chi^2(10) = 32.46, \ p = .000, \ \text{Cramér's } V = 0.24. \]

\[ \chi^2(3) = 10.06, \ p = .018, \ \text{Cramér's } V = 0.20. \]

\[ \chi^2(3) = 11.20, \ p = .011, \ \text{Cramér's } V = 0.14. \]
comments, we posit that the quantitative and qualitative analyses show that tight races with high stakes, such as presidential elections, spur youth political involvement.

The third hypothesis predicted that the political discussions found in the wall posts would focus on short-term influences such as candidate image and political/campaign issues rather than on long-term influences such as party identification and group affiliation. As Table 2 (Michigan Model) shows, short-term topics cover more than 60% of political topics, most of them referring to campaign political issues (38.68%). If these results are disaggregated based on election seasons, we see that political topic distributions are statistically different, $\chi^2(3) = 10.06$, $p = .018$, such that in the...
primary campaign political issues dominate, whereas in the general season group related political topics dominate. To understand why in the general season there is an equal distribution of short- and long-term topics, the researchers present the Michigan Model topics across groups and seasons (see Table 3, Michigan Model). During the primary season, the pro-Obama groups are concerned mostly with the short-term influences of campaign issues (47%) and candidate image (25%), whereas the pro-McCain groups focus on the opposite, group affiliation (50%) and party (33%) discussions. During the general election season, short- and long-term political topics become somewhat evenly distributed among the two groups. Due to the small sample size for McCain groups, the statistical results presented in Table 3 are not reliable. However, two findings should be noticed: the competitive intraparty battle for the Democrats in the primary season tilted the discussions toward short-term topics, especially campaign-related issues. Second, for both seasons, young pro-Obama students, presumably Democrats, displayed significant lower percentages for partisanship as opposed to young Republicans (5.67 and 9.86 vs. 33.33 and 24.00). This finding, although not statistically significant, corroborates previous research that suggests that the pull of partisanship on voter choice is stronger for Republicans than for Democrats (Martinez, 2009).

The fourth hypothesis proposed that mentions of the candidates, across all student Facebook groups examined, would mostly praise the candidate the groups supported rather than criticize (personal or policy criticism) the respective candidate or opposing candidates. As Table 4 shows, among pro-Obama groups, when Barack Obama is mentioned, less than 1% of the wall posts personally criticize him, 1% of the time his policies are criticized, and 57% of the mentions are positive. Among the pro-McCain groups,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates Mentioned in Wall Posts (%)</th>
<th>Personal criticism</th>
<th>Policy criticism</th>
<th>Positive mention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in Obama groups</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>56.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in McCain groups</td>
<td>23.07</td>
<td>46.15</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John McCain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in Obama groups</td>
<td>24.14</td>
<td>17.24</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in McCain groups</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>71.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Palin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in Obama groups</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>7.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioned in McCain groups</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>77.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage of wall posts that mention Obama and personally criticize him among Obama groups.*
McCain is praised on 71% of the wall posts, whereas Palin was positively mentioned on 78% of the pro-McCain wall posts. These high percentages confirm the initial hypothesis that support groups would mostly focus on praising the respective candidate rather than criticizing the group’s candidate or the opponents. However, wall post content engages in personal and policy criticisms for the opponents. Obama is personally criticized on 23% of all wall posts of pro-McCain groups and criticized for policies on 46% of wall posts. McCain is personally criticized on 24% of posts, and his policies are criticized on 17% of the wall posts in pro-Obama groups. Finally, Palin is personally criticized on both pro-Obama and pro-McCain wall posts. Therefore, H4 is confirmed. Within supporting groups, wall post content is mostly concerned with praising the supported candidates. At the same time, a considerable percentage of wall posts criticize the opponents, perhaps in an effort to reinforce allegiance from still unconvinced supporters.

The final hypothesis predicted that the overall tone of the wall posts on these Facebook groups would be mostly positive. As Table 2 (Tone) shows, most wall posts have a positive tone (42.7% for the entire election, 47% in the primary and somewhat less during the general season, 36.48%). In the general season, negativity increases and this finding has been already noted when discussing the negative emotional expressions. The increase in negativity is driven by The Ohio State University pro-McCain group, formed a month before Election Day. Indeed, tone wall topics tabulated by support groups and election seasons in Table 3 (Tone) show that tone distributions among pro-Obama and pro-McCain groups are statistically different for the general season, mainly because of the increase in negativity among pro-McCain comments, \( \chi^2(3) = 11.41, p = .01 \).

DISCUSSION

This study investigated how SNSs, such as Facebook, facilitate political dialog and civic engagement among youth voter-to-voter online interactions. A content analysis of nine student Facebook groups from seven universities located in swing states revealed that such SNSs have a positive impact on youth political involvement. Topics related to the political civic process dominated across comments for both candidates in the primary and general election seasons. This evidence is in agreement with previous research (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Rheingold, 2008; Shah et al., 2007; Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002) that looked at how SNSs provide a space for voters, particularly young voters, to participate in the
political process. In addition, this finding complements the literature on SNS as it uniquely reveals that the political discussion is dominant among voter-to-voter interactions. Indeed, young voters spend time online to network with other like-minded people (Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007b) but use the medium to transmit pertinent information related to candidates’ campaign, issues, and appearances in the area. By way of contrast, students rarely used the Facebook groups examined in this study for purely social purposes. Moreover, online conversations blend with offline participatory activities because comments on wall posts often refer to group organizational activities, meetings, watching debates, and active involvement in campaigns by tabling, or acquiring campaign products (e.g., T-shirts, pins, posters). One could argue, therefore, that the online community becomes a real community outside the SNS medium.

In addition to the increase in human interaction on the wall and off the wall, Facebook is a popular venue for students to promote other online resources, such as Web links, which confirms the media-related interactive potential of such SNSs (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). The researchers did not code for the Web link content, but in general, such links sent the group members to comments, Web sites, and press articles, all with a political content. This may lead younger voters to various sources of information they had not considered before, increasing their political knowledge.

One interesting aspect of the study was the overwhelming number of participants and wall post activity for Obama groups as opposed to McCain groups. This finding is congruent with expert analysis (Carr, 2008) that indicated a greater effort on Obama’s campaign to appeal both to a younger group of voters and to the use of social technology. It is likely that future campaigns will develop plans to incorporate the use of SNSs into their strategy to successfully reach and utilize an active portion of the voting population. The ability to use student’s social networks to discuss candidates and issues, as well as mobilize campaign efforts, gains greater significance as more Internet-savvy youth join the voting population and use the tools they are familiar with to gain access to the political process. However, we cannot establish a causal relationship for what triggered this high membership and online participation for one of the candidates. We can suggest that if one candidate is preferred by this demographic group, then young voters will use the medium that they feel more comfortable with to mobilize supporters and promote involvement.

Our analysis revealed interesting differences in short-term and long-term influences across election seasons and candidates. Obama groups during the
primary season were more focused on the short-term influences, policy issues, and candidate image, whereas McCain groups were more focused on the long-term influences, partisanship, and group associations. The focus on short-term influences, at least in the Obama groups, corroborates Lipsitz et al.’s (2005) findings that voters want to learn about policy issues and candidate image during a political campaign. Linking this result to the 2008 presidential election scenario, the focus on short-term influences is not surprising when one considers the long and debated aspect of the democratic nomination. In 2007, Hillary Clinton was perceived as favorite in the nomination race, whereas Obama, although described as “smart,” “charismatic,” and “articulate,” lacked, at first, the experience of a prolonged and highly demanding contest (Balz & Johnson, 2009). For about a year, since June 2007, when first Obama groups appeared in our sample, until June 2008, when Clinton finally endorsed Obama’s democratic nomination, wall post content focused on contrasting candidates’ images and experiences. At the same time, much of the discussion in the press during the campaigns pointed to Obama’s “celebrity” status. Kellner (2009) suggested that Obama’s ultimate success in winning the presidency was in part due to his ability to capitalize on the media spectacle that characterizes modern news coverage of politics. In a media environment like the one Kellner described, where the lines between news and entertainment are blurred, Obama’s image as young, intelligent, and refreshingly different from the widely unpopular George W. Bush presidency were a strong selling point for Obama supporters. In contrast, much of the McCain campaign, particularly during the primary season, was focused on winning over the Republican Party base that was skeptical of the admittedly moderate candidate (Smerecnik & Dionisopoulos, 2009). This led to a focus on the long-term influences of the Michigan Model, partisanship, and group association. On the other hand, during the general election season, both Obama’s and McCain’s groups showed a balance of focus on short-term and long-term influences.

Finally, the overall positive tone of wall comments corroborates extant research (Aneu & Cozma, 2009; Postelnicu & Cozma, 2007b; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008) that suggests comments on SNSs are usually positive and civil. However, when the analysis is broken down by candidate’s mentions, a great percentage of negative comments regarding the opponent’s image and policies were observed. This finding indicates that Facebook is used as venue where supporters can organize on a local level and exhibit their support for their candidate as well as frustrations they have with the opposing candidate.

The overall findings of this study bode well for the potential of Facebook and similar SNSs to foster future political civic engagement among
young voters. As previous research has shown (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002), young people seem to find themselves naturally at home in an online environment and are particularly attracted to social media and the opportunity to contribute to the digital body of knowledge. Therefore, the effectiveness of SNSs as a forum for political activity, coupled with their natural appeal to youth, make them an optimal channel to breed political civic engagement among young voters. Furthermore, as political candidates design their campaigns, the implementation of SNSs as a campaign strategy should take center stage to reach and communicate with these young voters. More specifically, candidates and their campaign teams should take into consideration the types of discussions that these young voters are conducting to fully understand them and get their support.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study was that the sample size for Obama and McCain groups was different. This may have led to misrepresentation of McCain groups in the analysis as the overall sample was unbalanced. Although the sample size may have caused methodological and statistical shortcomings, the analysis of user-generated content does not afford the opportunity of a balanced sample. Because user-generated content is by definition generated by the user, the researchers had no control over how many people would join each candidate group or how many posts would be written during the period analyzed. This “unbalance,” therefore, might reveal the very nature (i.e., wall post activity, membership) of each candidate group.

Second, when coding for the group affiliation category of the Michigan Model, it is possible that the very fact that the Facebook groups were organized by and for students demonstrated implicit, latent evidence of group affiliation that was not recognized in the analysis. Coding for group preference in a way that recognized this implicit affiliation (i.e., students) may have demonstrated stronger support for this category of the Michigan Model.

The use of Facebook groups as a tool for political participation is a recent phenomenon and offers many opportunities for further research. This study looked at student Facebook groups from the largest land-grant universities in battleground states and showed that political conversations dominate among young, highly educated participants. Additional research is required to suggest that online social networks facilitate political involvement among young voters in general. Future studies may find that including more universities and states can provide a broader look at how Facebook is
being used by students in elections. Another interesting avenue of research would be to study whether this young population that is highly connected to the Internet and SNSs carries this behavior over the years. In other words, will these young adults continue to use the Internet and SNSs for political involvement when they grow older? Future research may also look to move outside of the student category to see how Facebook groups were used in the election among all participants. This may include the presidential candidates’ main Facebook groups as well as state groups that were not limited to students. In addition, scholars may look to investigate the motivations for posting to a SNS political group by conducting in-depth interviews, focus groups, or surveys.

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REFERENCES


