

**Diversity in Social Media: The Impact of Social Identities on Social Media and Engagement
with Social Issues**

Kyle Absten, Juan J. Gutiérrez and Brandon Hazelton

School of Computing and Design, California State University Monterey Bay

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Cassandra Eccles, Brian Robertson and Bude Su

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Online social media platforms have increasingly become a primary source of news for the public (Mitchell et al., 2016 as cited in Wohn et al., 2023, p. 286). Within the last ten years, the availability of the internet, a portable computer, and social applications that connect you to the world has grown exponentially, allowing almost everyone to connect and speak with each other. With the growth of these advancements brings both positive and negative aspects. Social media has connected billions of people, allowing people to communicate with each other easily than ever before. Whether you know it or not, you may be consuming news from social media as well. You or your friends may have posted a link to a particular news article or even just a funny meme that happens to have some sort of agenda attached to it inconspicuously. It's not just news, certain social issues have also been gaining attention recently on social media. This is all contributing to how people converse and who they converse with. It's human nature to want to be a part of a group that has similar ideology, but this kind of thinking can also be very damaging to a person's well being. It is limiting people's views on certain topics, narrowing critical thinking down to a minimum.

A society without critical thinking is a recipe for disaster, and history has shown us some prime examples of that. So as more and more people gather news from social media, it's important to study how people engage with social issues on social media. Negative news is shared faster and more readily than positive news, regardless of ideological bent (Bellovary et al., 2020), making it easy to inflame tensions by spreading further misinformation or expanding

on a complex or nuanced topic that needs to be addressed carefully. Ignoring information is also another valid response; arguably one that should be used more often. Research conducted by Wohn et al. (2023) suggests that more diversity in terms of ethnicity, class, sexuality and gender in someone's social network leads to greater engagement on social issues, and there are indications that the particular social media platform they use and therefore which algorithm is selecting the news stories that appear on someone's feed will also affect how informed a user may be about any given social issue, as certain social media platforms cater to different groups.

Literature Review

Online Social Network Diversity and Civic Participation

Study 1

The article summarizing the research conducted by Wohn et al. analyzes the impact of online social network diversity on individuals' engagement with social issues, focusing on the Black Lives Matter movement, Dakota Access Pipeline protests, and Muslim immigration. For the Black Lives Matter and Dakota Access Pipeline issues, the results show that a racially and ethnically diverse online social network is associated with increased familiarity and engagement with these topics on Facebook. This suggests that having a diverse online network contributes to awareness and activism regarding race and ethnicity-related social issues. However, in the case of Muslim immigration, religious network diversity did not predict familiarity with the issue. The study suggests that the complexity of categorizing Muslims and Islam, along with the political and racialized nature of the debate, may have influenced the results. Despite this, religious network diversity was associated with online engagement with news about Muslim immigration. The article emphasizes that the diversity within one's online social network matters

more than the size of that network. It supports the idea that an individual's social network composition contributes to the construction of a shared reality, particularly for recent social events. The findings underscore the importance of online network diversity in the age of social media and its implications for news familiarity and engagement with social issues.

Study 2

The paper by Ibrahim (2021) discusses the significant role of social media networks – particularly in Iraqi society – in shaping public opinion and fostering political awareness, especially among the youth. The author emphasizes the impact of social networks on political participation and the formation of a conscious generation capable of addressing societal issues. The objectives include understanding social networks, examining their role in political awareness and youth participation, and exploring their benefits and drawbacks. The article concludes by emphasizing the role of social networks in mobilizing and empowering young Iraqis, urging responsible political engagement, critical thought, and the use of social media for positive and enlightening purposes.

Study 3

Zhang et al. (2018) investigates the impact of social media on individual and collective political participation, considering the role of organizational membership. Comparative surveys in Hong Kong and Taipei suggest that social media use, particularly in information sharing and virtual political engagement, mobilizes users for collective political actions. The study explores the conditional influence of social media on individual-based participation, depending on the number of organizations individuals are members of. The research suggests that social media's political impact is more significant for those already politically active, proposing that social

media can mobilize collective action without reliance on existing social organizations. The study categorizes political participation into individual and collective actions, highlighting differences in social interaction, costs, and resources required for each type. It identifies four dimensions of social media use and analyzes their impact on political engagement. The findings indicate that social media-based political activities, such as information sharing, mobilize younger generations for both individual and collective political actions. Additionally, the study reveals the moderating role of organizational membership in shaping the relationship between social media use and political participation. The article concludes by discussing the political potential of social media.

Synthesis

These three articles collectively explore the multifaceted impact of social media on contemporary society, revealing some common themes. They highlight the significance of online network diversity, emphasizing that the composition of networks matters more than the size alone. The first article delves into the varied effects of online social network diversity on individual's engagement with social issues, particularly focusing on race, ethnicity, and religion. The second article focuses on the positive role of social media networks in shaping political awareness and fostering responsible engagement. The third article extends the discussion to individual and collective political actions, considering the moderating influence of organizational membership on the relationship between social media use and political participation. All three articles stress the nuanced nature of social media's impact and acknowledge certain limitations, urging further research. Together they contribute to an understanding of how social media shapes perceptions, influences political engagement, and empowers diverse communities, emphasizing the need for responsible and critical use in an evolving digital landscape.

Research Question

Our research will aim to understand the social factors that have the greatest positive predictive correlation with a person's degree of engagement on social media and their choice of favorite social media platform. We will examine various social demographics like cultural heritage, religious background, age, gender, sexual preference and political affiliation among others, with the aim of establishing patterns that relate to social media engagement.

Research Design

The target interview audience for our research will consist of a diverse but representative sample of social media users from a wide variety of demographic categories. We will aim to acquire data from different age groups, political leanings, genders, socioeconomic standings, geographic locations and sexual preferences. Importantly, we will also seek to interview people across the spectrum of social media use, from those who don't use social media at all, to those who use social media heavily. By interviewing this diverse and broad population, our research will provide insights relevant to a wide spectrum of social media consumers.

With such a vast and easy to find audience, we will each be interviewing a member of our service organization as has been suggested. We will each email our interviewees a list of questions and allow them to answer them over the course of one week.

Interview Questions

Basic demographic markers

To get a sense of the respondent's identity across our categories of interest, the survey will begin with a series of short answer questions regarding their demographic makeup across the axes of gender, class, ethnicity, culture, religion, political orientation and sexual diversity.

Evaluation of social media environments and engagement with social issues.

- In what ways do you think social media platforms are more willing to connect and build communities within the BIPOC community? How does the sense of community influence your engagement on these platforms?
- How has your organization's interactions with community members, businesses and leaders influenced the digital presence of BIPOC communities? Are there observable changes in online engagement patterns or the use of social media platforms?
- To what extent do your friends, family, or colleagues influence your social media behaviors in terms of platform choice, duration of use, and engagement with socio political content?
- Describe an instance where you have modified your own behavior to suit their preferences. How significant is the role of peer influence in your online activities?
- What online communities have you interacted with, passively or actively? Does your personal identity impact the types of communities or online spaces you engage with, and does it influence your choice of a specific social media platform?

- How much time do you typically spend on social media each day, and how is this time distributed across different platforms? Can you describe specific times or situations where you are more likely to engage with social media?
- Can you think of and describe a situation in which your association with online communities has led to real-world engagement with a social issue, defined as taking action outside of the internet like marches, fundraising, or communication with or on behalf of public servants?

Description of Service Organizations

Glendale Unified School District is found in northern Los Angeles County and contains 34 schools, serving over 24,000 students. The district's minority enrollment is 40%, welcoming a large population of Hispanic, Armenian, and Korean families to their community, among others. 29.2% of enrolled students come from economically disadvantaged families. The service project at this site simplifies the work of the information services technicians who help these families access the increasingly important digital educational environments used to communicate with teachers and school administrators about their children's academic and socioemotional progress.

ASCENDtials was founded in 2014 by Mika Marzette. ASCENDtials is a 501(c)(3) non-profit company that offers services that help empower people in the black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) community. ASCENDtials runs on four principles: identify oppressive structures, bring awareness to oneself, create and maintain balance, and transform structures to ensure all are benefiting. These services allow people to transform their relationships and ways of thinking, which in turn allows them to run their life based on the principles mentioned above. This site's mission relates to our topic very closely as it has a goal to change people's view and transform their thinking so that it benefits everyone, especially on social media.

Walk With Sally was founded in 2005 by Nick Arquette. It is named after his mother, Sally, who passed away from cancer when Nick was sixteen. Nick is a 25-year veteran in the entertainment industry, and a successful businessman in multiple industries. When he tried to

volunteer and help some children who had lost their parents from cancer, he realized there was no organization providing any services to that population in Southern California, so he started Walk With Sally. Walk With Sally serves citizens in the Southern California community who have been affected by cancer in a multitude of ways. For their mentorship program, they work with volunteers and train them to be mentors for children who have been affected by a close family member having cancer. All the mentors are people who have also been affected by cancer in a similar manner. Alongside the mentorship program Walk With Sally offers various other events, workshops and resources like gathering donations, providing mental health support, and helping families financially.

Conducted Research

Each team member gathered responses to the questions we developed from someone at our service site. Given the nature of our research questions, we have a broad range of eligible respondents, essentially any adult who uses social media. Our interviewees have a background in using social media for good, or using social media for change in societal behaviors, which makes them a perfect candidate for our questions. The demographics of our interviewees includes all middle-aged women with middle-class income levels. All interviewees have been working at or have owned their site for multiple years, making them experienced in their field.

At GUSD, the respondent was Tatevik Atalyan, an Armenian Translator for the Equity, Access, and Family Engagement Department. Melissa Ostrowski, Development Manager at Walk With Sally was our second respondent. Finally, Mika Marzette, Executive Director and Founder of ASCENDtials was the third respondent for our survey. Mika has been advocating for change in societal behaviors since 2014 with her non-profit company, ASCENDtials. She is

using this platform to overcome an oppressed model and standard of living for the BIPOC community. Mika and her community ASCENDtials offers yoga sessions, healing sessions, workshops, training, and education services to the BIPOC community. She is the perfect candidate for these lines of questioning as she has taken advantage of social media to advocate for change within the BIPOC community.

Findings

In reviewing the responses to our interviews, a few themes stood out as common in the experiences of our respondents on social media and the real-world effects of their participation. Each interviewee provided examples where their particular identities shaped their use of social media. For example, as an Armenian immigrant Tatevik belongs to a few online communities organized around that identity. Melissa recognized that her identity as a mother limits her use of social media to moments after her children have gone to bed. Mika identified her peers/partners her organization collaborates with as a driver of their engagement on social media. Additionally, every respondent gave an example of their engagement with social media resulting in real-world action. Tatevik mentioned the Armenian online communities she is a part of organizing freeway closures during the recent Azeri annexation of Artsakh to bring about more awareness about the issue. Melissa indicated that conversations she had with individuals over social media resulted in their becoming brand ambassadors in the real world. Mika stated that promoting on social media increased real-world engagement with her organization. There was also limited evidence that real-world experiences, when fed back into social media posts led to more engagement on those platforms. Indeed, the general takeaway from our responses is that friends/family/peer/identity groups influence a user's engagement in social media, which in turn increases their likelihood of

participating in real-world action, with the added possibility that this real-world activity may in turn drive social media engagement in a kind of virtuous cycle of civic participation. However, it is important to note that our sample size is quite small, and casting a wider net would be necessary to derive meaningful insights from the interviews. For a full reading of the interviews, please see Appendix A.

In examining the insights gathered from the interviews with Tatevik, Melissa and Mika, several common themes and distinctive perspectives emerged regarding the influence of social media on community engagement. All three respondents acknowledged the pivotal role of virtual movements and content quality in fostering connections within their respective communities. While Tatevik emphasized the profound impact of virtual movements during the pandemic, Mika underscored the significance of content quality for meaningful virtual engagement. The interviews also revealed the notable influence of friends, family, and colleagues on social media behaviors, with varying degrees of impact across respondents. Real-world engagement manifested differently for each participant, from freeway closures during a conflict (Tatevik) to ongoing fundraising efforts (Melissa). Despite these individual differences, shared themes included the positive impact of organizational interactions in the digital space and the acknowledgement of social media as a powerful tool for both virtual and real-world engagement. Collectively, these findings contribute to an understanding of the multifaceted dynamics shaping community engagement on social media within the context of social and civic participation.

Conclusions

After conducting our research, it is now clear that the diversity of a person's online social network has a real impact on their engagement with social issues. The research from Wohn et al. (2023) also shows that a socially diverse online network correlates with greater awareness of current social issues and one's willingness to participate and engage with those topics. While Wohn's findings suggest that a socially diverse network doesn't always translate to knowledge of all social issues, the research done by Ibrahim (2021) and Zhang et al. (2018) speak to the positive impact social networks have on political engagement and social awareness, especially in youth. Our interviewees have spent a great deal of time building and fostering a diverse community through the use of social media and other avenues. Through their answers from the questions, we have learned a great deal about a person's degree of engagement on social media and their choice of favorite social media platform. One interviewee mentioned they were more willing to choose a particular platform because their friends/family were already engaged on this platform. This isn't particularly surprising, however this information ties into our question about which particular platform people are more likely to engage in. As mentioned above, a diverse online network increases one's willingness to engage in social media, but this is only one aspect of the bigger picture. Throughout all of our interviewees' responses, one thing remained true: they weren't willing to engage on social media if they couldn't relate to the topic in some way. They would either ignore the content or find a way to not see this content again by unfriending or unfollowing. This along with the content used in a person's posts is the greatest contributor as to what drives people to make connections and affect change in the real world.

Recommendations

Given the clear correlation between diverse social networks and users' engagement on social issues, social media platforms should strive to promote and build networks that are varied along all social measurables. All social networks employ some form of algorithm that decides what content to show a user. Computers will only do what they are told to do, so we need to ensure that there is absolutely no bias included when developing applications, websites, and algorithms. From our research, our recommendation would be to employ several different algorithms that test this research. Social media platforms could also connect with other social media platforms, allowing users to post on any platform they choose and distribute their ideas to all platforms. This idea may be far-fetched, but it would help establish more diverse social networks for users and also provide a rich environment for people with the same ideology to connect and share their ideas. However, even if social media platforms connected with each other, each platform would design their own content-picking algorithms in a way to keep the user on their website. These algorithms should be designed and implemented with the intention of expanding the diversity of users' networks, and ensuring there is no bias in what content is picked. It's unclear at this point to determine if a local government needs to step in and provide policy to regulate the algorithms and software these companies produce. At the very least there needs to be some transparency within these companies as to how they distribute content to users. While our research yielded invaluable results, further research should be conducted on a larger and empirically more diverse set of social media users to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the diversity of our social networks shapes our engagement with social and political issues.

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Appendix A

Interview Responses

The first respondent for our survey was Tatevik Atalyan from GUSD:

My name is Tatevik Atalyan, and I am female. My ethnicity is white, and I belong to the Armenian/American culture.

In what ways do you think social media platforms are more willing to connect and build communities within the BIPOC community? How does the sense of community influence your engagement on these platforms?

I think social media platforms built stronger bridges during 2019-2020 COVID-19 pandemic to connect diverse communities. One of the ways that social media platforms are willing to connect and build communities within the BIPOC community is advocating and creating virtual movements. For example, #BlackLivesMatter on Instagram had a significant influence and brought together so many different communities to support the BIPOC community. Another way to connect and build communities within the BIPOC community is giving the opportunity to share possibilities to attend free workshops, for example on Facebook, or express culture through posting and sharing educative videos. My engagement on these platforms increased because these approaches/ways provide visibility and deep understanding what is going on around and give an opportunity for your own say.

How has your organization's interactions with community members, businesses and leaders influenced the digital presence of BIPOC communities? Are there observable changes in online engagement patterns or the use of social media platforms?

I don't know.

To what extent do your friends, family, or colleagues influence your social media behaviors in terms of platform choice, duration of use, and engagement with socio political content?

My friends, family, and colleagues influence significantly my platform choices, duration of use, engagement because part of the reason I am on social media is them. So, which platform I am using longer depends where I have people who I want be connected with at that particular moment. Some of them have an account only on one platform, which becomes a reason for me to choose that platform and stay there longer depending on the actions which they have taken there. In terms of their influence on my engagement is also high because sometimes I want to support them and their actions, so I do get involved in their movements and contents.

Describe an instance where you have modified your own behavior to suit their preferences. How significant is the role of peer influence in your online activities?

Peer influence might be significant depending on my online activities. If it is just chatting with a group of people, so I consider which platform the majority is on or which one suits the purpose. For example, there was a school related announcement that I had to post for my peers from the university. There was only one platform that I could use because all of them were on that one. So, there was no any other choice left for, no matter I liked that platform or not, because if I posted on any other platform, some members could miss the follow up comments written by the rest of the group. However, if I need to spread out an individual thought, I will be the one who decides which platform is going to be used for that purpose.

What online communities have you interacted with, passively or actively? Does your personal identity impact the types of communities or online spaces you engage with, and does it influence your choice of a specific social media platform?

I actively interact with several online local communities on Facebook such as “Armenians in Glendale”, as well as some learning communities related to cooking, traveling, etc. My personal identity impacts the types of communities I engage with because I engage if I feel interested, which is closely related to who I am.

How much time do you typically spend on social media each day, and how is this time distributed across different platforms? Can you describe specific times or situations where you are more likely to engage with social media?

I spend approximately 3 hours on social media each day. Maybe 2 hours total, being on and off throughout the day, on Facebook and 1 hour or less on Instagram. I am more likely to engage with social media when there is a war going on in a country which is close to my heart. I check social media platforms every hour to read and analyze any piece of information I can find there.

Can you think of and describe a situation in which your association with online communities has led to real-world engagement with a social issue, defined as taking action outside of the internet like marches, fundraising, or communication with or on behalf of public servants?

When Azerbaijan began blockading Artsakh in December 2022 and started launching a large-scale military offensive, almost all Armenians in Los Angeles County were engaged on social media to find ways to bring the world’s attention to this violence. That strong engagement

took us to a real-world engagement to come together and close several freeways in LA to get people's and authorities' attention what was happening with a nation.

The second respondent for our survey was Melissa Ostrowski, Development Manager from Walk With Sally.

My name is Melissa Ostrowski, I am a married, mother of one. I am white and live in Redondo Beach California.

In what ways do you think social media platforms are more willing to connect and build communities within the BIPOC community? How does the sense of community influence your engagement on these platforms?

I follow a few lifestyle accounts that promote small business and promote BIPOC business equally. I don't know that it is a sense of community but with the recommendation I am more likely to shop or engage.

How has your organization's interactions with community members, businesses and leaders influenced the digital presence of BIPOC communities? Are there observable changes in online engagement patterns or the use of social media platforms?

We promote all partners equally. Whether it's a donor, sponsor, volunteer, or the families we serve. BIPOC is a part of our community and we will always promote our community. When we post more about the families we serve, there is more engagement.

To what extent do your friends, family, or colleagues influence your social media behaviors in terms of platform choice, duration of use, and engagement with socio political content?

I would say maybe 30% of the time. It depends on what it is. I could follow for a week but if I don't like the content or it doesn't pertain to me then I unfollow.

Describe an instance where you have modified your own behavior to suit their preferences. How significant is the role of peer influence in your online activities?

I don't know that I have modified my behavior to suit anyone else's preferences, but I can be persuaded to purchase or follow someone if it's a good recommendation .

What online communities have you interacted with, passively or actively? Does your personal identity impact the types of communities or online spaces you engage with, and does it influence your choice of a specific social media platform?

I, personally, follow more lifestyle and sports content, it depends how busy I am in my own life how active I am in the community.

How much time do you typically spend on social media each day, and how is this time distributed across different platforms? Can you describe specific times or situations where you are more likely to engage with social media?

Maybe an hour. I typically stay on Instagram. I think at night after I put my child down to sleep and my husband and I are just watching tv, I interact more.

Can you think of and describe a situation in which your association with online communities has led to real-world engagement with a social issue, defined as taking action outside of the internet like marches, fundraising, or communication with or on behalf of public servants?

Fundraising for sure. I have continued conversations with people on social to become ambassadors for our organization and fundraising efforts.

The third respondent for our survey was Mika Marzette, Executive Director and Founder of ASCENDtials. *In what ways do you think social media platforms are more willing to connect and build communities within the BIPOC community? How does the sense of community influence your engagement on these platforms?*

It's done wonders for a community that seeks more engagement virtually. The content is what's important though. I engage less I find

How has your organization's interactions with community members, businesses and leaders influenced the digital presence of BIPOC communities? Are there observable changes in online engagement patterns or the use of social media platforms?

I am aware the influence is definitely present. I do notice patterns and profit.

To what extent do your friends, family, or colleagues influence your social media behaviors in terms of platform choice, duration of use, and engagement with socio political content?

I think partners we collaborate influence greatly our engagement especially if promoting a joint project that relates to social issues.

Describe an instance where you have modified your own behavior to suit their preferences. How significant is the role of peer influence in your online activities?

If the message is relevant, unifies and is compelling , I share support.

What online communities have you interacted with, passively or actively? Does your personal identity impact the types of communities or online spaces you engage with, and does it influence your choice of a specific social media platform?

I don't engage long enough to support a particular community outside of the one I'm building, and that's always based on principles

How much time do you typically spend on social media each day, and how is this time distributed across different platforms? Can you describe specific times or situations where you are more likely to engage with social media?

I mostly am concerned with our promotion of events for engagement, so this priority involves having a great lead on the team that can make sure all is flowing.

Can you think of and describe a situation in which your association with online communities has led to real-world engagement with a social issue, defined as taking action outside of the internet like marches, fundraising, or communication with or on behalf of public servants?

I know the power of the social media, and I certainly want not to abuse but definitely use it to affect positive change. That involves educating myself first. Mobilizing and Fundraising online are very powerful, if used appropriately.