Politics and Young Adults: The Effects of Facebook on Candidate Evaluation

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ABSTRACT
An increasing number of people are turning to social media to find political information and discuss politics, including the technologically savvy Millennial generation. Our study looks at how young voters use social media to evaluate political candidates. Subjects were shown the Facebook walls of two U.S. politicians running for the seat of governor in the 2011 Mississippi election. Exposure was followed by semi-structured interviews to discover what knowledge they found salient. Content analysis found evidence that the knowledge they gained from Facebook influenced their evaluation of the candidates. Further, we contrast this to a control group that was exposed to related news articles without a social media component. We found that social media produced the additional voting criterion of community, which extends beyond the traditional criteria in political science literature of issues and character. Community interaction influences the vote decision.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.4.1 [**Computers and Society**]: Public Policy Issues

General Terms
Experimentation, Human Factors.

Keywords
Social networking; social media; e-participation; e-citizenship; digital democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION
Social media, like Social Networking Sites (SNSs), blogs and YouTube, have become popular online destinations in recent years. Researchers in the human-computer interaction community have studied the use of social media, with recent emphasis on SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter, from a variety of perspectives, e.g. information seeking [17] and social capital [6].

Today, an increasing number of people are engaging in political activities on SNSs like Facebook and Twitter. From 2008 to 2012, the number of SNS users in the United States surged from 33 percent to 69 percent [30], with Facebook being the most popular. Thirty-nine percent of SNS users are now using media tools to engage in the political deliberation process [12, 30].

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Political deliberation is a process through which citizens voluntarily and freely participate in the sharing of information and opinions on public issues [9]. Through the interaction with others, citizens can make better-informed decisions on policy issues and/or candidates running for office. SNSs afford users the ability to interact with other citizens as well as to interact with politicians through the exchange of information and opinions in unprecedented ways.

Voters are now using SNSs to learn about candidates, make campaign donations, engage in political discussions and plan political activities such as rallies. Similarly, candidates are responding by campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites. We build on existing literature that has looked at the characteristics of the political deliberation emerging in social media [4,13]. Some studies have argued that social media can politically polarize people [4] or expose them to diverse ideas [13]. Much research has been dedicated to studying whether use of SNSs increases political efficacy [16,33], but few studies looked at how political information seeking and interaction on SNSs influence the way young people evaluate candidates.

This paper seeks to understand the role of SNSs in how younger people (Millennials) use online materials to make voting decisions. This paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we survey the literature on young voters and the influence of media on voting decisions. Secondly, we describe our methods. Thirdly, we report the results of our study. Lastly, we conclude by discussing how SNSs are contributing to the decisions young voters are making.

2. YOUNG VOTERS
In the future, Millennials (adults born after 1980) will comprise a significant share of the electorate, growing from 25.5 percent now to 36.5 percent in 2020 [34]. However, the voter turnout rate for 18 to 24 year olds declined from 2008 to 2012, from 48.5 to 41.2 percent [30]. Nonvoting among youth has often been attributed to feelings of political inefficacy [15]. But this may not always be the case. One study found that negativism and cynicism can translate to political participation if young voters feel they are less gullible than other voters [1]. While they tend to be less engaged, young people are also more impressionable about politics [10,14,19].

2.1 Media's influence on how voters decide
Research has shown that voters evaluate candidates based on two main criteria: personality and policies/issues [11]. In the political communication literature, personality has also been dubbed "candidate quality" [7] and "character" [22]. It is often

operationalized as integrity traits, such as “honest” or “friendly,” and competency traits, such as “hardworking” or “effective” [22].

Researchers have studied ways in which media such as television and radio have influenced vote choice. Druckman [11] found that people who watched a candidate debate on television were primed to rely on personality preferences more than people who listened to the same debate on the radio. He concluded that the visual medium provided more personality cues because traits such as dishonesty often have non-verbal “tells.” While some studies have explored how young voters decide among candidates [27], few studies have explored how SNSs afford certain types of candidate evaluations.

2.2 Politics, ICTs and young people

Young voters are among a growing number of Americans who are accessing political information on social network sites (SNSs). Two-thirds of 18 to 24 year olds in the United States have participated in social media-related political activities [30]. However studies have found conflicting results about whether SNSs engage young voters. One survey found that attention to one-way political Internet content such as TV and print news websites increased political self-efficacy, while attention to social media did not [16]. Conversely, an experimental study found that interactivity increased “political information efficacy” among young voters [33]. People who were exposed to interactive content reported being more politically engaged [33]. Based on his findings, Tedesco [33] concluded that the interactive nature of the Internet increased “political information efficacy,” which is the phenomenon where information about candidates and issues leads to increased perception of value in the political process.

Interactivity may not only increase engagement but may also provide new ways of evaluating candidates. Utz [35] found politicians who were responsive to citizens’ comments on a Dutch SNS were viewed as more favorable. While candidates have interacted with citizens for as long as democratic government has existed, SNSs make the candidates’ interaction with voters visible at an unprecedented scale, as well as accessible to a younger generation less engaged with organized politics [24].

However, political participation on social media does not always guarantee offline political engagement. Seventeen percent of political SNS users only participate on social media and engage nowhere else, suggesting “slacktivism” [30]. These “slacktivists,” who tend to be younger, less affluent and less educated [30], view solitary activities such as searching for political information to be a form of political participation, while their older counterparts may not [18].

In this paper, we aim to better identity how social media influences young citizens’ evaluation of political candidates. Our research seeks to contribute to our understanding of political deliberation by young voters on SNSs through answering the following research questions:

(1) To what extent do young people use social media for political deliberation?

(2) How do young voters evaluate a candidate when they are viewing the candidate’s Facebook page?

3. METHOD

The results presented in this paper are based on a larger experimental lab study on how social media and traditional media (meaning non-social media material) might interact when subjects are exposed to both media types but in different orders. For the purposes of this paper, however, we focus on the post-experiment recall and semi-structured interviews conducted with 70 participants—all of whom were undergraduate college students at a large American university.

3.1 Study setting and protocol

The 2011 Mississippi gubernatorial election, which focused on Republican candidate Phil Bryant and Democratic candidate Johnny DuPree, was chosen as the study setting. We chose this in part because our subject pool was located in a different region of the United States and would have little or no prior knowledge of the candidates. Also, neither candidate was an incumbent candidate. Local news coverage existed for both candidates, and both maintained large Facebook walls (300 or more posts) that had attracted many citizen comments.

Subjects were randomly assigned into one of three media context conditions:

Group one: social media and related non-social media material in the form of the candidates’ Facebook walls and campaign-related news articles (n=22 subjects).

Group two: social media and unrelated non-social media material in the form of candidates’ Facebook walls and a speech given by the former governor of Mississippi that was unrelated to the candidates or the campaign (n=23 subjects).

Group three: a completely non-social media group that received both the campaign related news articles and the former Governor’s speech (n=25 subjects).

Snapshots of the Facebook walls for each of the candidates were captured and presented to those in the conditions containing social media (groups one and two). These looked exactly like the ‘live’ version of the walls and contained user-generated pictures, posts and replies to posts which the participants could read and scroll through. Neither the unrelated Governor’s speech nor the relevant news articles contained any social media components (i.e. no user-generated pictures or comments). The news articles chosen provided balanced campaign coverage for both candidates. They centered on candidate viewpoints of the Mississippi "personhood" ballot initiative, support for a rainy day fund, and campaign funding.

After reading a consent form, each subject was instructed to:

“Imagine that you are about to move to Mississippi and that you want to decide which candidate to vote for when you get there.”

They then answered demographic questions via an online questionnaire. Depending on the condition they were assigned to, participants were asked to view each of the candidate Facebook walls for 5 minutes (10 minutes total) and/or the speech and news articles for 10 minutes total. After viewing the various assigned media for 20 minutes, all participants again used the online questionnaire to respond to three free-recall items and to cast a ‘mock’ vote. The free-recall items were:

- Summarize everything you can remember about candidate Phil Bryant.
- Summarize everything you can remember about candidate Johnny DuPree.
- Describe how you feel about the election and your decision.

Upon completing the online questionnaire, semi-structured verbal interviews were conducted lasting approximately 15 minutes for individual sessions and 20-25 minutes for group sessions. This concluded the session.

When group sessions were run, these consisted of two to three subjects at a time using room partitions to separate the subjects until after they had finished the free recall questions of the online questionnaire. Upon completing the questionnaire subjects were allowed to interact with each other in the final group interview. Twenty-eight individual and 17 small group interview sessions were facilitated by two of the authors in this paper (SD and MM).

The interviews were conducted as a triangulation measure to support the demographic and recall information collected via the online questionnaire. They were generative, and the interviewers followed the directions that subjects went. The five main interview questions that were always asked were as follows:

- What did you think of the study?
- How did the material influence your thinking about the candidate?
- What was most important or influential to your decision?
- How did you feel as you read through the material?
- How do you use social media today in regards to politics?

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and later transcribed for analysis. Even though our participants were exposed to different media, as well as asked open-ended questions (with respect to both free recall and post-experiment interviews), we found many similarities across participants in what was most influential in their voting decisions.

3.2 Subjects

Students were solicited as part of a course participation requirement. Of the 70 subjects, 39 were male, and 31 were female. Fifty-seven of the participants reported that they were in the 18-20 year old age category. The remaining 13 fell within the 21-29 year old age category, with the exception of one participant reporting they were in the 17 or younger age category and one non-response. Twenty-seven participants identified themselves as Democrats, 29 identified themselves as Independents, and 13 identified themselves as Republicans, with one non-response. Of those who identified themselves as Republicans, all were within the 18-20 year old age category. Table 1 shows means, minimums, and maximums for ratings measuring political ideology and technology use. The relevant scale endpoints are as follows: Political Views (1=Very Liberal, 3=Neutral, 5=Very Conservative); Interest in Politics, Likelihood of Voting, Familiarity with ICTs, and Frequency of SNS usage (1=Very Low, 5=Very High).

Table 1. Political Ideology and Technology Use

	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Political views	1	5	2.8	.677
Interest in politics	1	5	2.5	.944
Likelihood of voting	1	5	3.26	1.19
Familiarity with ICTs	1	5	4.29	.941
Frequency of SNS use	1	5	4.34	1.03

A review of the demographic data suggests that the majority (81%) of the study participants were first-time voters age 18-20 and considered themselves Democratic or Independent, placing themselves slightly to the left of center. This is also in keeping with a recent study suggesting that Millennials often identify as independents but vote democratic [24]. Our participants had a high familiarity with ICTs and social networking. However they had a moderate or low interest in politics, and in part due to their age, low experience or expectation of voting in elections.

3.3 Data analysis

For group interview sessions, each subject was identified in the transcripts using audio cues and interview notes so they could be analyzed separately. Three of the 70 subjects had opted out of audio recording and handwritten interviewer notes were used instead. The final compiled transcripts and interviewer notes comprised 406 pages. This was then combined with an additional 124 pages of subject profiles for each of the 70 participants. The profiles were created as a way to synthesize the responses in the online questionnaire data collected.

Composed of the questionnaire data, profiles detailed the subjects' demographics (including political behavior and social media use), final study vote decision (e.g. DuPree, Bryant, undecided), and the answers to the three self-reported free recall items. In analyzing the interview data the profiles served as an important data source. Because the questionnaire recall data responses were seen to be similar to those shared during the interview, it was possible to use the responses as a cross comparison. This helped to confirm that the information reported in the interviews was largely unaffected by groupthink or interviewer bias.

The final data corpus of interview data and profiles for each of the 70 subjects was then coded using Atlas.ti - a coding analysis toolkit for qualitative content analysis. Using a grounded theory approach [31], we conducted open coding in an iterative process. Axial coding was used to help reduce codes and link concepts. The coding was done by two of the paper authors together (SD and MM). When coders occasionally disagreed on a coding item or finding, they discussed the discrepancy to come to an agreement. Team meetings were conducted to discuss the emerging concepts. The remaining categories were then fleshed out and further refined through selective coding to generate the final themes presented in this paper.

Differences between all three groups were initially examined. However, the themes emerging in group one (social media and related non-social media) and group two (social media and unrelated non-social media) proved similar. One possibility is that the participants' may have seen the Governor's speech as related material after all, since we did see some evidence of using Facebook to attempt to fact-check the speech material (as well as the news articles and vice versa).

For whatever reason, both groups were seen to employ the same strategies when evaluating the candidates based on their Facebook pages. With no differences between the groups, we decided to collapse them into a single group. We refer to this group as the social media group throughout the rest of this paper. Group three continued to serve as a control group in which no social media exposure occurred, allowing us to contrast impressions of how voters might gather candidate knowledge in a traditional (non-social media) environment. Insights between the group types and coded findings were therefore contrasted between two groups – a social media group and a non-social media group – with emphasis

placed on addressing the research questions which were geared toward the social media participants and their use of this medium.

4. RESULTS

Through the analysis of informants' explanations, we were able to better understand how young people use social media for political deliberation in their daily lives and to contrast this to how they were using social media in the experimental setting. We report how the affordances of Facebook provided its users with different interactive spaces. In their daily lives, people described engaging in political deliberation both offline and online. Within the context of the experiment, people were using Facebook walls to better understand candidates from a community perspective in addition to gathering information on personality or stances on various issues.

4.1 Social media use in daily life

In the context of their daily lives, our informants (in both the social media and the non-social media groups) used social media as a non-political tool. In other words, they used Facebook to maintain friendships and connect with others socially. Through interviews, however, we found that although our informants did not intentionally use Facebook for political deliberation, they all described being serendipitously exposed to political information and discussion through their interactions on Facebook, as well as their interactions with others face-to-face.

Firstly, our first research question was: To what extent do young people use social media for political deliberation? We posed the open-ended question to all interviewees, and two themes emerged from participants' responses: (1) serendipitous encounters with political information online and (2) the influence of online and offline interactions in their political decision-making process.

Few respondents intentionally sought out political information online. Most who had encountered online political content in the past reported they had stumbled upon it inadvertently through e-mail, news articles or on their Facebook wall. Thus, political exposure was not the result of an active search on Google, Facebook or Twitter, but a consequence of bumping into the information while browsing their respective newsfeeds. S21 writes of an expectation that in the weeks leading up to the 2012 Presidential election, political posts were unavoidable:

S21: It'll probably be brought up, obviously, like through FB or something so, like I won't go there to gain knowledge but it's definitely hard not to be influenced by stuff that comes up.

When participants do view political content on SNSs, they are often drawn to the most popular posts. These "digital natives" are accustomed to relying on the wisdom of the crowd to gauge the quality of online content. Several participants reported looking for cues indicating the level of interactivity a post had generated – such as the number of "likes" or comments – to evaluate whether the post was worth reading. For example, one participant said that when he does view political content on Facebook, he will not *"read it unless if it has a lot of comments and replies."*

When explaining why they did not seek political information online, we were surprised to learn that often this stemmed more from a desire to avoid undesirable situations than a lack of political interest. Many of the participants said they did not actively seek political information on SNSs because they were averse to flaming that could be incited by political discussion. Many felt that Facebook could be a boiling pot of opinions, and they wanted to avoid the tension of these emotional debates. For instance, one participant said he preferred to read articles rather than view candidates' Facebook walls to obtain political information. He explained that he felt overwhelmed by the opinionated clamor on the candidates' Facebook walls:

S72: It feels like there is someone over your shoulder telling you, 'Do this.' It's like that whole – I don't want to say that whole angel and devil thing – but it's like someone over your shoulder saying, like – go vote for him, vote for him, vote for him, vote for him. There's nothing like that [with the articles]. It's just – you just read it.

Some reported customizing their SNSs to avoid a cacophony of opinions. For instance, one participant said she dislikes when her Facebook friends *"bombard you with their point of views and issues.*" Another participant said she hides people from her newsfeed when she feels overwhelmed by their negatively charged opinions. She added she envisions Facebook as a place for connecting, not flaming:

S37: People get into arguments over Facebook, too. I don't like to see that happen. Facebook isn't supposed to be for arguments.

Moderator: Oh, OK. What is Facebook supposed to be for?

S37: I think just connecting with, like, I think it's more of like a positive place. I don't think it should be as negative as some people on Facebook are.

Secondly, while participants had inadvertent online exposure to political information, offline interactions were still very important to their political decision making. Many of the young people we spoke with said their parents were most influential to their political views. When asked how she learned about politics, a self-stated Republican student reported that:

S84: A lot, to be honest, comes from my parents. And they are both, my mom's a Democrat and my dad's a Republican, so it's like they are both separate, you know, so it's kinda good because I get to hear two opposite sides of the spectrum.

Another student said that his parents increased his exposure to political news while he was living at home, but being away during college had decreased his sense of political information efficacy:

S12: Because I used to do politics and stuff like that, but that was more when I was at home with my parents because, like, literally, like, every afternoon my dad would come home and, immediately, it was like news or CNN. So that's all that I would hear consistently, but now that I'm in the dorms, it's more that I just read the news online. So I try to stay involved that way (voice implies not often) … but I'm not consistent with it.

Politics was not a key part of most of our participants' lives. They inadvertently stumbled upon political information – both online and offline – but it was not something they actively pursued. Popularity cues, such as the number of Facebook "likes" and replies, increased the likelihood they would view political content. But, in general, most of the participants avoided seeking political information on SNSs due to the perception they would encounter flaming or an unproductive cacophony of opinions. Despite being frequent users of SNSs, participants' interaction with parents in the real world remained an important influence on their political perspectives.

4.2 Candidate evaluation using Facebook

Informants who were part of the social media group were asked to traverse two candidate Facebook walls in an effort to make a voting decision to answer our second research question: How do young voters evaluate a candidate when they are viewing a candidate's Facebook page? We found that participants looked through the candidate posts, non-candidate posts, replies and images and evaluated them on three main criteria: issue, personality, and community related information. The findings on issue and personality were consistent with other studies that have also found these to be the main criterion of the vote decision [7,11, 22]. We report here on the use of community as a voting criterion.

Through our analysis of informants' accounts, people reported relying heavily on community-related information to form their vote decision. Twenty-two of the 45 participants (49%) who were exposed to the social-media conditions explicitly mentioned "community" as a voting criterion in the post-exposure interviews. This was especially interesting when contrasted with the non-social media group, who only read news articles and a speech with no exposure to social media. Only 3 out of 25 participants (12%) in the traditional media group explicitly used the word "community."

While many definitions of online community exist [24, 26], "community" here refers to both the candidate's online network and off-line constituents. To gain further insight into how candidate-community interaction influenced vote choice, we analyzed community related comments to derive six themes: (1) Evidence of action; (2) Emotional engagement; (3) Candidate presence; (4) Responsiveness to citizens; (5); Community assessment; and (6) Community support.

4.2.1 Evidence of action

Participants wanted to know how the candidate had recently served the community. In addition to acts of community service, interviewees were also interested in the candidates' campaign promises. They wanted to know, "What have you done for the community lately? What do you promise to do?" When asked what kind of information would inform his vote decision, one participant who seemed to adopt the mindset of a Mississippi voter replied:

S74: What are they going to do for us? And, if they are running, what do they promise to accomplish to help the community out more?

Another mentioned reading through posts to learn about what the candidate might provide:

S5: I look how people talk about… what the candidate will bring to the people and what the benefit that is coming.

The perception of the candidate as a community organizer was also influential. For instance, S35 said she liked that DuPree "got his community involved." Another participant gleaned the same impression from pictures, saying:

S62: From the photos on his Facebook page, he seems like a very active community organizer.

Even information learned from the news articles, such as campaign finances was interpreted in terms of candidate-community relations. Participants who were exposed to the news articles read that Bryant raised three times as much campaign money as DuPree did. In the article, DuPree said he spent less money than Bryant on advertisements because volunteers powered his campaign. From that information, one participant extrapolated that DuPree was more community oriented.

S28: DuPree, his money, didn't go to just commercials. It went to volunteers and stuff, which I kind of liked because it was more like a community sense, so it was a big factor for me.

This was in contrast to the non-social media group, which did not make community references when discussing the same articles. When those in the social media group were unable to find indicators of action from the Facebook content, the absence of information about what the candidate would do for the community generated negative sentiment toward the candidate. One participant advised:

S43: Johnny DuPree needs to make his planned actions more obvious to the community.

When evidence of action was not as apparent, participants made judgments on how well they thought the candidate would perform.

4.2.2 Emotional engagement

Participants looked for evidence that the candidate cared for the wellbeing of the community. Respondents provided many rich examples of how they wanted to see the candidate showing emotional engagement with the community. As described by our informants:

S29: Although Bryant had some interesting insights and ideas, my vote is going to DuPree. He has one thing on his mind, and that is taking care of his people. He wants to make sure that they are all happy and deserve a better community.

S42: He also concerned about the community, which is the most important in this time.

Subjects often turned to pictures to gauge how much the candidate cared about the community, interpreting non-verbal cues such as smiling, shaking hands or appearing comfortable with constituents. If the non-verbal behavior appeared to be absent from photos on the candidates' Facebook wall, some participants had a negative reaction to the candidates. From the subtle cues, participants made judgments about the candidate's character and their relationship to the community:

S12: I guess in most of the pictures they didn't really smile in or what I wanted [to see] was the community aspect, I guess. I wanted somebody who was comfortable with listening to somebody. Not, I didn't want to see somebody who was self-absorbed in the picture, I guess.

Pictures were one of the main ways in which participants gleaned the candidates' character and their emotional engagement with the community.

4.2.3 Candidate presence

Participants were looking for evidence that the candidates were physically in the community, attending rallies and meeting citizens. Again, participants often relied on photos to gauge how much time the candidates spent in neighborhoods with their constituents. When the candidate was or was not shown spending time physically engaging with citizens, participants noticed. Examples include:

S31: He [Bryant] had more pictures of himself going out the community and, like, doing the public speaking and just promoting himself. But then on Dupree's page, he had more of like the

volunteers and not many of him personally going out in the community and stuff.

S14: I picked Phil Bryant as my candidate because Facebook because what I saw from the Facebook pictures. I noticed that he's always involved with the community.

Participants also read posts to learn about activities the candidate had participated in. For example P15 reported reading a long post that Bryant had shared on his Facebook wall on his trip to meet with college students at a local state university, and that this let him understand that he was willing to spend time with his constituents.

4.2.4 Responsiveness to citizens

Participants often evaluated the candidates based on how responsive they were to citizen posts on their Facebook walls. But simply responding was not enough. If the candidate's tone and grammar were poor, this could negatively influence the perception of the candidate. Most participants seemed to feel that Bryant was more responsive than DuPree, and this worked in his favor.

S23: Phil Bryant, on his post, he tried to respond to everyone's comments and took time out to answering everyone's question… [Dupree], though he shares his journey; he doesn't take time to give his thoughts and comments on people that supported him. Voted Phil Bryant.

Frequency of candidate replies did not come up in the study. What garnered a stronger reaction than frequency was the tone of the candidate's response. Responses perceived as personable had a favorable reaction while those that displayed a lack of personality produced a negative reaction.

S68: I guess like his [Bryant's] responses, I read one of his responses to someone's comment, and it was just so like, so structured and it didn't seem like he had a voice in it, seemed like a robot talking to you.

While we looked for evidence that participants were distinguishing between posts that seemed to originate directly from the candidate versus those from the candidate's staff; this distinction did not seem to have an effect and participants largely treated what may have been staff posts on behalf of the candidate as coming from the candidate themselves.

4.2.5 Community assessment

Participants also judged candidates based on who their Facebook friends were. This also extended beyond online posts into the offline as photos showing supporters and constituents in public settings and rallies were judged on race, religion, social status, education, intelligence and size.

Ben-Ur and Newman [3] found that voters draw cognitive associations between a candidate and different groups in society, a phenomenon they called "social imagery" which refers to linkages between the candidate and various voting blocks. For example, one participant said he could tell how "intelligent" the candidates' communities were based on the comments on their Facebook walls.

S34: You could tell that just the way they typed. Some people had a lot better punctuation and grammar than the others.

Another participant reported she made her vote decision based on her impressions of a candidate's community, even without knowing the candidate's policy positions:

S82: I know the people following him weren't people I would want, and, if he was like them, and I wouldn't want them in office, so since your followers are like you … so that turned me off to him – even though I didn't know exactly what he was running for.

The respondents not only associated the candidates with their supporters, but they felt the community served as a direct reflection of the candidates in terms of religion, race, class and intelligence. Like a mirror image, these communities reflected who the candidate was and who he could be as Governor in a more authentic way than the candidate could portray on his own.

Walther and Parks [36] suggest that when people are trying to learn about an individual's offline identities from online information, they place more stock in clues from third-party sources than clues from the person. "Warranting" information from others is considered to be insusceptible to manipulation by the target person, who may be motived to present him or herself in a positive light [36]. For instance, comments made by others on a candidate's Facebook wall may have been considered more reliable than those from the candidate himself because they were not subject to spin by the campaign team.

4.2.6 Community support

Participants were looking for evidence that showed the candidate had the support of the community. This extended beyond the usual cheerleading [28,29] comments of general support such as "I'm voting for you!" or "Go DuPree!". Photos were relied on heavily for this aspect of knowledge gathering, providing direct evidence of actual supporters engaged in campaign activities.

S8: I like that DuPree had a lot of support on social networking, and in places outside of technology. He had support on family's front lawns and tons of volunteers that were willing to give their time and energy to support DuPree.

But the cheerleading types of comments were not always viewed positively. For example, S21 reported that:

S21: [DuPree], his FB page had like nothing. It was just a bunch of videos with like people, supporters saying they support you.

This sentiment was expressed by other participants as well. While expressions of community support can be perceived positively, cheerleading can also be viewed negatively if it seems to have no reasoning or substance behind it.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Many participants reported being disinterested in politics. While very few of them actively sought out political information, many of them stumbled upon it inadvertently. Serendipitous exposure to political information leads to unintended exposure to political difference, which is known as the "phenomenon of inadvertency" [5]. Researchers have found that political conversations often emerge spontaneously in non-political spaces [2,5,8,23,38]. Inadvertent or not, we saw that exposure to user-generated comments online influences perception of the candidates. As Walther et al. [37] note: when presented with user-generated content, people's online and off-line beliefs are manipulated and cannot remain unaffected.

We also found a heavy reliance on other people's opinions both online and offline. The finding that young people are politically impressionable when exposed to others' opinions is nothing new [10]. However, it is interesting that in a study about social media, offline interaction – for example, with parents – repeatedly

emerged as a reason for political information efficacy and political alignment.

Designing for ways that support short bursts of politically-oriented material that is integrated into their current routines may prove more effective than expecting the age group studied to actively seek out political information on their own. Further, moderating the content or couching the material in a format that deters flaming or extensive cheerleading may help to reduce the anxiety and loss of political efficacy participants reported when these were present.

Answering the second research question - once there, *"what cues do young voters look for on a candidate's Facebook wall?,"* – proved enlightening. We found that Facebook affords a new kind of candidate evaluation: community. Our interview findings suggest that exposure to candidates' Facebook walls prime them to rely on community-based cues. About half of the social media group explicitly stated the word, "community," while only 3 out of 25 participants in the non-social media group used the term.

When evaluating the candidates, participants asked several community-related questions: (1) What have you done for the community lately? (Evidence of Action); (2) Do you care about the community? (Emotional Engagement); (3) Are you spending time in the community? (Candidate presence); (4) How responsive are you to the community? (Responsiveness to Citizens); (5) Who are your supporters? (Community Assessment); and (6) How much does your community care about you? (Community Support). Taken together, these considerations painted a portrait of candidate-community interaction for candidate evaluation.

The existing literature on how people choose between candidates focuses on two primary dimensions: personality and policies/issues [7,11,22]. Previous studies have found that the medium through which voters view political candidates influences which criteria they deem salient [11]. Druckman [11] found TV watchers were more likely to vote based on personality when compared to radio listeners, who relied more on policy and issue information. He concluded that "images matter."

Facebook is a medium rich with images, and our participants relied heavily on them as well as user comments to make both personality and community judgments. While we had expected to find that personality judgments played a prominent role in their decision process (due to the nature of it being a visual medium, as described by Druckman [11]), we were surprised at the extent to which they focused on community as a decision criterion.

McLuhan's [20] famously wrote, "the medium is the message." He argued that the medium of communication influences society just as much as the message it carried. In the 1960s, he studied television, radio and print. Perhaps in the medium of social media we unconsciously activate community-oriented attitudes that are not activated in a traditional media setting. Today's SNSs go beyond mere image presentation and allow more interactivity than was ever possible with one-way broadcast communication [21], and this allows citizens to interact directly with the candidate.

A candidate's campaign Facebook account allows people to vicariously experience other citizens' interaction with the candidates. Lurkers need not go to the campaign headquarters or attend a rally to see the candidate meeting and greeting people. Instead, they can sit at their computer and vicariously experience discussions with candidates or view images of the rally without having to hit a single keystroke. While it may seem passive on the surface, this form of interaction may be quite beneficial for young voters with high social media usage but low political motivation.

Not only can voters observe how the candidate behaves toward constituents (Evidence of Action and Emotional Engagement), but they can also observe the extent to which candidates and their staff engage in *two-way* communication with citizens (Responsiveness to Citizens). Sundar, Kalyanaraman and Brown [32] write that there are two types of interactivity: functional and contingency interactivity. Many campaign websites have functional interactivity, where people can click on buttons to donate or link to more information. But SNSs are marked by contingency interactivity, which is two-way communication. Messages are not only exchanged but are also contingent upon each other. Digital natives, who grew up viewing comments on news websites and receiving help via online chat support, are accustomed to contingency interactivity and expect it from the candidates.

Our study suggests that the challenge with contingency interactivity on SNSs is two-fold: One, online users expect responses to comments and are disappointed when candidates do not respond. Two, SNS comments are instantaneous and difficult to control. As more voices join the conversation on a candidate's Facebook page, it becomes more difficult to prune comments and respond to them. Our study suggests monitoring comments is a critical part of controlling the candidate's image, as young voters tend to view the candidate's online network as a *reflection* of the candidate.

6. LIMITATIONS

Exposure to the different media was limited to a relatively short time frame per each type of media. We therefore observed behavior relating more to initial impression formation and the browsing strategies associated with this. Given more time it is possible that we would have seen other behaviors emerge. Also, our sample was made up of college students. While our focus was on young SNS users, it would be interesting to see if other demographics such as older SNS users or those not familiar with SNSs also gravitate towards community as a voting criterion. Additionally, our data was based on after the fact self-reports. The consistency in responses between the recall and interview data helped to verify certain aspects of their reports but could not capture what the participants were thinking as they encountered material in real time.

While there were numerous comments that reflected the main themes of this study, the nuances and rationale behind the impact of certain media affordances was not as readily available using our collection method. We would therefore recommend that future studies not only increase the exposure time but also consider a think aloud portion in which the participants' thoughts are captured in real time rather than retrospectively.

Lastly, given the importance the participants placed on the photos in the social media material we feel it would be important to conduct another study in which the traditional or non-social media material also had photos. For example, the use of a news article with photos, or even a television program reporting on the candidates, would better contrast any distinctions between the uses of photos in the differing formats. While we feel the reliance we saw on the photos stemmed from a perception of them as user-generated, unscreened and informal by nature; and that this is something that is not easily incorporated into more formal media formats where the feeling of authenticity can be lost; we cannot be sure that this is so without conducting studies in which

photographs are presented as part of the traditional material as well.

7. CONCLUSION

Our study contributes to the literature on how voters use information communication technologies (ICTs) to inform the vote decision process. Through interviews with young people, we explored how they use social media to decide between candidates. We found that young people are influenced by online and offline interactions, such as conversations with their parents, in their daily lives. They were more likely to stumble upon political information rather than search for it, suggesting that designing for inadvertent exposure may be one way to increase political information efficacy among the youth. Our study suggests that once lured on to the candidate's Facebook wall, young people build a perception of the candidate based on community-related cues such as candidate-community interaction and how the community reflects the candidate's demographics, character and competence. Our work suggests that in today's interactive social-technical systems, a candidate's community matters.

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