

Civic and Political Involvement among Young Adults:  
Exploring Political Talk, Political Efficacy and Political Participation in a Community Context

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#### Abstract

This study expands research on uses and gratifications by exploring political information-seeking uses of the Internet and social networking sites (SNS) and their relationships with political efficacy and political participation. Approximately 300 young adults completed a survey covering information-seeking, information access, and information sharing uses for local civic and political purposes. The study hypothesizes that young adults' political talk, particularly in their online social networks, is associated with political efficacy. Variables that support the relationship between information-seeking and political efficacy are also explored. Random and convenience samples of young adults were combined in this study to explore the cognitive (perceived efficacy) and civic (actual behavior) behaviors of undergraduate students at Virginia Tech in order to examine the role of political talk in individuals' opinion networks measured by the outcome of political talk. Results show considerable support for hypotheses emphasizing the predicted relationships between Internet and SNS for political information-seeking uses, political efficacy, and political participation gratifications. Future research exploring the broad range of political communication uses and their association with political efficacy and political participation is warranted.

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## Dedication

To Ashley, for standing by me and loving me so that I can achieve my best.

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## I. Introduction

*“It seems like for some people, it’s more amenable for them to be involved in a virtual situation where they’re following Twitter feeds and Facebook friends and are posting things on blogs. We know that there can be potentially powerful involvement that way, but for it to happen, there has to be a deep engagement on both sides.”*

-Dr. Craig Leonard Brians (Higgins, 2013)

Communication perspectives on citizens’ civic behaviors and the social influences of media and communities have been transformed by a new era of continuous connectivity (Semetko & Scammell, 2012). Thus, political communication as a discipline has evolved to identify new approaches for studying processes in which citizens participate as consumers and creators of political content. This thesis seeks to extend exploration of political communication by broadening the current understanding of political efficacy in young voters and examining the relationships between political talk, political efficacy and political participation and Internet or social media uses. The following chapters will 1) examine previous operationalization of political efficacy and civic behaviors to help guide the current project, 2) review relevant literature on the role of social networks in civic and political participation, and 3) present hypotheses and research questions aimed at advancing the research literature exploring young adult political efficacy and political engagement.

### Rationale

Political communication can be characterized broadly as the strategies and intentions of message senders to influence the political environment (Denton & Woodward, 1998). There

exists a multiplicity of mass media and political theories and perspectives from which to observe such intentions to influence political behavior. Unfortunately, few studies have examined what motivates individuals' political information-seeking on the Internet (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). The current study will explore the social networking behaviors of young voters through the lens of the uses and gratifications perspective. The uses and gratifications perspective asserts that individuals actively seek media to gratify their needs (Katz & Blumler, 1973). This study will focus on media uses (Internet or social media information-seeking, political talk) and the political outcomes, or gratifications, reported (political efficacy, political participation) by the young adults in a survey of community-level civic and political affairs.

Scholars have investigated demographic variables, primarily education and socio-economic status in attempts to explain political efficacy. Research suggests that education and socioeconomic status are significant predictors of political knowledge and political efficacy. In fact, education and socioeconomic status are more powerful predictors than partisanship or media exposure variables (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). However, social affordances available via social media are changing the political communication landscape, particularly among digital natives. As a result, this analysis will explore the role of Internet and social networking uses and their relationships with political efficacy.

The term political efficacy has been conceptualized historically as the perception that citizens feel capable or empowered to influence the political process (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Sharing comparable historical precedence, political knowledge is rooted in democratic theory, which suggests citizens should be informed if they are to participate in a democratic society. Political knowledge is simply defined as holding correct information—whether that is civic, issue, or candidate information (Hoffman, 2012). Political knowledge and political

efficacy variables have been routinely examined in American National Election Studies, National Annenberg Election Studies, and Pew Research Center studies. However, this thesis explores these variables in the unique context of community-level civic and political affairs.

Political effects research has asserted that because young citizens are highly apathetic and less interested in politics, they are more likely to be influenced by media, especially considering their limited interpersonal interactions with politics and politicians (Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011). On the basis of age, young people perceive political participation differently than their older counterparts (Lariscy et al., 2011). Activities such as Internet browsing and social networking constitute political participation for these digital natives. Therefore, the traditional measures and approaches to political participation may be evolving in an age of social media and continuous connectivity. Thus, this thesis aims to explore levels of political participation and the ways media use, political talk and political efficacy relate to participation.

Wollman and Stouder (1991) argue that the best predictor of voting is a measure of perceived political efficacy specific to a voter. Political efficacy has been found to predict a myriad of political behaviors because it offers motivation to participate in politics (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982). Wells and Dudash (2007) also argue that more analysis on how young citizens make sense of political information, and how they use this information to become more engaged citizens, is an area of study that deserves careful attention. The political information uses and efficacy gratifications of political talk will be examined, as will the civic and political participation variables of young adults. The goal is to contribute understanding of the interrelationship of young adult political behaviors and attitudes.

Another unique contribution of the present study is the focus on newer Internet features that afford interactivity, or Web 2.0 involvement, among users. Traditional Internet use involves

a linear “sender-receiver” relationship, while Web 2.0 engages users in a collaborative relationship (Graham, 2005). Web 2.0 does not refer to a new technology. Web 2.0 refers to the development of web interfaces that invite users to contribute information, typically referred to as user-generated content, instead of simply retrieving (or receiving) it. This thesis will focus its attention on the affordances of SNS among young adults.

Researchers have also called for more investigations to foster a deeper understanding of how users engage newer media and urged the research community to develop more specific measures for capturing the nuanced and specific gratifications obtained from newer media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). The present analysis seeks to identify, and to isolate, information-seeking uses among young adults and evaluate their relationship with the gratification of political efficacy. Thus, political efficacy will be used as a variable to explore gratifications and the outcome of political participation, broadly defined.

## II. Literature Review

Theoretically, an optimal democracy would contain citizens who possess high levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and participation (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Due to systematic declines in civic and political participation (Putnam, 1995), especially among young people between 1972 and 2000 (Levine & Lopez, 2002), the question of generational differences and young people's political engagement has received much more analysis (e.g. Dudash & Harris, 2011; Kaid et al., 2007; Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011; Payton, 2008). However, there has been significant re-engagement of young adults in the political process in the three most recent US presidential elections, especially during the 2008 campaign (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). Research indicates that political participation among young people is influenced by two key mechanisms: political efficacy and political cynicism (Hoffman & Thompson, 2002). Thus, in exploring young adult engagement in local civic and political affairs, this thesis includes political participation, political efficacy and political talk variables. Since the re-engagement of significant numbers of young adults into the political process coincided with major changes in the media landscape, media uses will also be explored in this study.

### Theoretical Justification

#### *Uses and gratifications approach*

The uses and gratifications theoretical perspective stands as one of the more developed theories in communication, as it outlines motivations for information-seeking through media (Lariscy et al., 2011). This thesis seeks to understand the use of SNS among young adults and the relationship with the key variables of political efficacy and political participation. First, it is important to understand several key assumptions inherent in uses and gratifications theory: (1) the theory assumes that media audiences are active and goal-oriented; (2) the theory also

suggests that motivations help to explain media exposure and interest; (3) uses and gratifications posits that people form intentions and expectations for media use to fulfill their needs; (4) “people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their intentions and motives” (p. 511); and (5) no value judgments should be applied to the cultural significance of media when exploring uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). The current analysis will consider these assumptions as it explores one specific media use in political contexts (information-seeking) and gratification outcomes as measured through political efficacy and political participation.

Scholars have criticized uses and gratifications as being a research strategy or heuristic perspective rather than a theory (Ruggiero, 2000). However, research over the years has shifted from a mechanistic focus interested in direct effects to a psychological perspective that stresses individual use and choice (Rubin, 2002). This analysis is not focused on legitimizing the theoretical value of the uses and gratifications perspective. Instead, the author is interested in enhancing the understanding of its psychological concepts and typologies. In addition to the empirical goals of this study, there are practical implications derived from the current analysis. For example, it is a goal to enable campaign strategists and voter engagement advocates to benefit from a richer understanding of political information-seeking behaviors and their relationship to political participation among young adults. Specifically, this analysis will help to reveal the dynamic and evolving atmosphere of Web 2.0 in the context of political attitudes and behaviors.

While much of the extant research using the uses and gratifications framework has been applied to entertainment media, the perspective historically focused on analyzing political information-seeking motivations (Lariscy et al., 2011). Uses and gratifications research leads to

the prediction that active involvement in the political process would activate voters' needs for reinforcement and for new information (Tan, 1980). In an early and extensive examination of media gratifications and political effects, McLeod and Becker (1974) found that a significant amount of variance among political effects variables was explained by a combination of gratification and avoidance measures. Researchers used McLeod and Becker's seminal work to investigate the reasons individuals choose to adopt an information source (approach) and the reasons individuals choose to shun another (avoid). Taken together, these assumptions undergird the perspective taken in the current analysis.

Blumler (1979) also made significant contributions to the early development of uses and gratifications theory. In particular, Blumler developed four motive dimensions to conceptualize uses and gratifications motivations pertaining to television. His four categories of media satisfaction were surveillance, curiosity, diversion, and personal identity. Surveillance involves a cognitive orientation in which a user looks primarily for information about society or issues in the world around them. Surveillance also involves scanning media in order to stay current or aware of important issues for the individual. Diversion is a gratification sought from users who seek to escape boredom and routine from daily life. Blumler's concept of personal identity involves the way in which media uses allow audience member to connect or form some sort of opinion based upon personal experience. Finally, the curiosity dimension can be understood as a need to discover and know things through media that satisfy a sense of curiosity.

Similarly, and more recently, Kaye and Johnson (2002) discovered through exploratory factor analysis four primary motivations behind information-seeking on the Internet. These categories included guidance, surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. While Blumler's (1979) dimensions of media satisfaction were examined in a television environment, Kaye and

Johnson's (2002) Internet analysis largely support traditional media studies. Surveillance through Internet uses is the most logical parallel to traditional media studies, suggesting that audience members are interested in seeking information about the world or some feature of society. Guidance is also a sort of information-seeking dimension, but specifically for the purpose of learning about issues as a means to make informed decisions. Meanwhile, entertainment satisfies audience members' purposes for relaxation and amusement. Finally, social utility is a motive dimension that Internet users seek in an effort to engage in communication or to equip themselves for offline discussion with others. In a similar study, Kaye and Johnson (2004) explicated an additional factor called convenience, which refers to the ease of accessing information with traditional Internet use. This current study focuses on the information-seeking uses, mostly surveillance and guidance, through survey questions that attempt to assess types of media young adults use and the gratifications they report.

#### *Uses and Gratification Theory and the Internet*

Previous studies have examined the relationship between media uses and political attitudes. In a pre-Internet era, individuals seeking political information used media to gather information in preparation to protect themselves against others in arguments and reinforce their beliefs about candidates (McLeod & Becker, 1974). However, in a contemporary Internet age Kaye and Johnson (2002) discovered that individuals interested in political information used the Internet to obtain information to engage in civic discourse with others. Previous findings indicate that some motivations, such as information-seeking, are significantly correlated with factors such as interest in politics and political efficacy (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004). Also, young adults develop information-seeking motives to use the Internet for political information because they desire additional details on topics first discovered in traditional media sources like newspaper



and television news (Parmelee & Perkins, 2012).

However, with regard to political information and political efficacy, it is important to assert that not all information seekers gain the gratifications sought. Thus, it is important to distinguish between gratifications sought and gratifications earned. Established research findings suggest that political information-seeking online is often the result of a multi-step process, in which political talk offline, or in other media, serve as the first step for information-seeking. Similarly, Brubaker (2010) discovered that young adults seek Internet news not as a substitute for traditional media; but rather, political information-seeking online is used in conjunction with traditional news (p. 305). Brubaker's finding offers logical support for previous research (e.g., Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004) and may suggest that information-seekers, if interested in politics, will use the full range of media options to gain the gratifications they desire.

Uses and gratifications research on the Internet has suggested that people use media for either the content carried by the medium (e.g. information or entertainment) or for the experience of the media usage (e.g. playing with technology or browsing) (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004, p. 267). Scholars have characterized these two broad dimensions of media use as content gratifications and process gratifications. Sundar and Limperos (2013) suggest that uses and gratifications research has traditionally treated gratifications as somewhat static and arising from pre-existing needs, but SNS have given rise to new Internet affordances that create and satisfy new gratifications (p. 521). Brubaker (2010) states that it was sufficient in previous research to conclude that information-seeking is a motive for media use, but there is a need for more dimensions as media choice allows for users to progressively tailor their usage based upon other factors (p. 306). These findings reveal the need for further exploration of social media gratifications, specifically as they pertain to political information-seeking, as well as the roles of

other factors like political talk. Stafford et al. (2004) also mention that there are few expectations offered by existing theory to the connection between traditional Internet use (website interaction) and social media involvement (social gratifications for Internet use) (p. 278). The current analysis will examine participants' Internet and social networking uses and the relationship with efficacy and participation outcomes, or gratifications.

### Web 2.0 Gratifications

Web 2.0 has become an important channel for candidates and voter/civic engagement advocates to reach citizens, especially young adults (Tian, 2011). Web 2.0 is characterized by the age of social networking sites (SNS), which allows users to actively influence online content through creation or co-creation, tagging, posting, rating, and sharing information with friends and those within individuals' social networks (Tedesco, 2011, p. 697). Min (2007) suggests that online deliberation, like face-to-face deliberation, can have positive impacts on issue knowledge, political efficacy, and willingness to participate in politics (p. 1381). This thesis will focus on SNS in order to operationalize the Web 2.0 affordance of media interactivity.

### *Political talk*

Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini examined in their "Discursive Participation Survey" that the concept of political talk is not only valuable in and of itself, but it can also help to facilitate more informed, reasoned, and active engagement in public life (p. 158). Web 2.0 affords users a rich type of interpersonal dialogue and deliberation with members of a social network, allowing online political discussion networks to be wider and deeper than the networks generated by other types of discussion (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). The same authors argue the overwhelming significance of political talk and online messaging to facilitate political participation (p. 45).

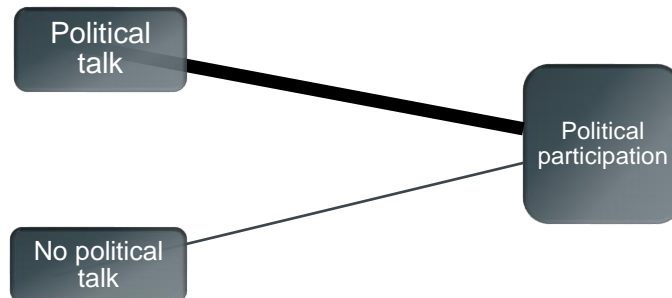
Studies suggest that there are differences in gratifications earned from the use of traditional Internet sources and social media involvement. In an early study on the role of Internet in civic life between generations, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) found that individuals who use the Internet for information exchange encounter more information and experience more opportunities for civic engagement (p. 154). Similarly, online information-seeking has been positively associated with increases in online civic messaging (or political talk) that ultimately result in higher levels of civic participation (Shah, Cho, & Eveland, 2005). Previous findings have indicated that individuals with Internet access are more likely to have access to other political news media and more likely to talk about politics with friends or family (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Liao (2009) examined that political efficacy and attention to campaign news are catalysts that stimulated political talk and sustained discursive democracy during the 2004 presidential election cycle. Kenski and Stroud (2006) suggest that, while the Internet does not serve as a panacea for democracy, political talk online has positive and significant associations with the political talk variable. The objective of the current analysis includes exploring the role of political talk as a media gratification facilitated by social networking sites.

The literature regarding online information-seeking suggests the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Young adults who engage in political talk are more likely to participate the political process than those who do not engage in political talk.

In order to conceptualize the role of young adults' use of social media for political talk and the associated gratifications, this study's first hypothesis will examine the relationship between political talk and political engagement. Figure 1 demonstrates the hypothesized correlation between political talk and political engagement. The lines in each of the figures depict relationships between variables, but the degree, or significance, of those relationships depends

upon the thickness of the line illustrating correlation. Thus, thicker lines represent higher degrees of expected association, while thinner lines acknowledge relationship, but to a lesser extent.



*Figure 1: Hypothesis 1 examines political talk and political participation*

### *Political Efficacy*

Young adults often cite lack of information, or lack of confidence in what information they possess, as a reason why they do not engage the political process. In fact, Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco (2000) found that young voters tend to be a politically cynical, lacking in political awareness and interest, and generally disengaged from the political process. Since political efficacy plays such an important role in political engagement, exploration of young adult political efficacy, and the relationships between efficacy and information-seeking, political talk, and exposure to diverse political opinions are worthy of exploration, particularly in the social media context.

Conceptually, political efficacy can be thought of in three ways: as a norm, as a psychological feeling, and as a form of behavior (Tan, 1981). This analysis will address political efficacy as a psychological feeling. This psychological feeling of political efficacy is important to the current study because the responses that inform this analysis are based upon individual's self-concepts rather than perceptions of social norms or actual behavior manifestations. The

political efficacy concept is used to refer to the relationship between knowledge, trust in government, and political participation. Since its introduction more than a half century ago, political efficacy has been an important aspect of political attitude research (Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014). In fact, political efficacy measures have long been a part of the National Election Studies (NES), serving as an important variable for understanding political attitudes (Williams & Tedesco, 2006). Research has come to recognize that political efficacy involves two highly related components, internal efficacy and external efficacy. While external efficacy refers to an individual's belief in the responsiveness of government to constituent concerns, internal efficacy refers to individual's confidence in their own political knowledge and the sufficiency of that knowledge to participate in politics (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991).

When introduced, the concept of political efficacy was defined as the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have impact upon the political process (Campbell et al., 1954). For instance, an individual would agree that it is worthwhile to perform one's civic duties because an individual citizen can play a part in bringing about change. This thesis holds to that definition of political efficacy and the complexity in which it has evolved. It is important to mention that there is a lack of agreement among scholars for regarding the best items to measure political efficacy.

For example, Schulz (2005) used items such as "I know more about politics than most people my age" and "I am able to understand most political issues" for internal efficacy, and used items such as "The government is doing its best to find out what people want" and "When people organize to demand change, the leaders in government listen" for external efficacy. This demonstrates the variations in assessing political efficacy, particularly as the latter external efficacy item is also consistent with the concept of collective efficacy. Other research has

indicated that some original measures of political efficacy (e.g. those used in the American National Election Studies) are of questionable validity and reliability (Craig & Maggioto, 1982). Taking that perspective, Morrell (2005) utilized new items to measure internal efficacy using statements such as “I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics” and “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country”. In order to direct perspective guiding this analysis, internal efficacy can be thought of as having an antithetical response to the idea that “Sometimes local politics and government seems so complicated that persons like me can’t truly understand what’s going on”. External efficacy can be thought of as the expression “There are plenty of ways for people like me to have a say in what our local government does”.

Regardless of the lack of agreement among researchers regarding the proper items to measure political efficacy, the concept continues to prove useful as a variable in political communication research. Previous studies have examined the role of different media in facilitating political efficacy in young people. Among young voters, there is evidence that viewing certain television programs can influence political efficacy. For example, Hoffman and Thompson (2009) found that political efficacy is a significant mediator between late-night TV viewing and civic participation. In another study on political entertainment viewing and political participation, Hoffman and Young (2011) discovered that consumption of traditional television news increases individuals’ political efficacy and indirectly increases participation in political activities similar to the findings in political parodies and satires (p. 165). In yet another examination of young adult political efficacy, McKinney and Chattopadhyay (2007) discovered that after exposure to televised presidential debates, participants reported significantly less political cynicism while reported feelings of political efficacy increased at a level approaching

significance (p. 1178). Other studies indicate that viewing local television news can have significantly negative effects on political knowledge and internal political efficacy, suggesting that local news is not an effective information source for national politics (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Studies on other forms of political information indicate that young adults are increasingly seeking information in other media. According to an analysis by Delli Carpini (2000), 36% of young adults say they follow the news every day, but less than 20% of young adults read the newspaper on any given day (p. 342). These findings suggest that young adults see the Internet as the most useful source for political information, beating out television news, newspapers, radio, magazines, and even personal conversation (Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 346). Although none of these prior works specifically focuses on political information uses for information about local community civic and political affairs, they do explore the ways political information, through exposure or use of particular political content, are related to political efficacy and political engagement. In this study, political efficacy and political participation will serve as two important variables. Political efficacy is considered a gratification of political information-seeking uses. Since political efficacy has been established as an important link to political participation on the national politics level, it will be interesting to see if political efficacy is associated with engagement in civic and political affairs at the community level.

Increasingly, studies have discovered that the Internet holds dynamic potential for mediating political efficacy among young adults. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) discovered in an analysis of Internet use and political participation that the Internet meets citizens' demand for political information in a more convenient form and at a lower cost than traditional media (p. 184). This study builds from a small group of political efficacy and political engagement studies spanning the previous few presidential campaigns. The changing media landscape, with the

Internet emerging as a primary source of political information among young adults and social media fostering ease of communication between members of a networked community, raises questions about the way these media changes could foster, or inhibit, political efficacy and engagement. In fact, an information shift occurred during the 2004 election cycle, in which the Internet arose as a significant source of political information, with 71% of young voters indicating that they search for political information online (Kaid, et al., 2007). Tedesco (2011) discovered through empirical analysis that young adult political efficacy increases after exposure to candidate messages on the Internet. Furthermore, Tedesco reported that participants in experimental conditions where media interactivity was available resulted in significantly higher levels of political efficacy than conditions where participants were not exposed to interactive media (Tedesco, 2007). Thus, the social media environment, which affords much interactivity, is worthy of additional exploration of its relationship with efficacy and engagement when focused on local community civic and political affairs.

#### *Political efficacy and Online Media*

Scholars have offered varying positions on whether or not political efficacy is as significant in predicting political participation online, as it is offline. In an analysis of both online and offline participation, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2010) discovered that using SNS for news had a significant and positive association with both online and offline political participation (p. 326). Engaging in dialogic processes has a direct and powerful effect on young adults' perceptions of political efficacy (Williams & Tedesco, 2006). Specifically, SNS offer interactivity, which appears to have a significant influence on internal efficacy and its political outcomes (p. 195).

Some research reveals that diverse social networks may lead to confusion among young voters. In a national focus group analysis, Wells and Dudash (2007) discovered that participants



suggested that their exposure to conflicting political information left them uncertain about the candidates and issues and unclear as to how they could use this knowledge to engage the political system. Because media platforms have the ability to influence feelings of political efficacy, it is important to understand the role of social media involvement, especially considering it enables users to be sender or receiver of information and increases the amount of control a user has to meet their information needs (Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010). Participants' perceptions of political efficacy will be explored to examine its relationship with political talk and information-seeking.

Based upon the political efficacy literature reviewed here, the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 2: Young adults who report engaging in political talk will score higher on political efficacy than young adults who do not report engaging in political talk.

Hypothesis 3a: Young adults who report engaging in information-seeking via traditional internet will score higher on political efficacy than young adults who do not report engaging in information-seeking via traditional Internet.

Hypothesis 3b: Young adults who report engaging in information-seeking via SNS will score higher on political efficacy than young adults who do not report engaging in information-seeking via SNS.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between political talk and political efficacy as put forth in Hypothesis 2. Figure 3 demonstrates the relationship between information-seeking gratifications sought through traditional Internet and reported levels of political efficacy as stated in Hypothesis 3a. Meanwhile, Figure 3 shows the hypothesized relationship between information-seeking gratifications sought through SNS and reported levels of political efficacy suggested in

Hypothesis 3b. Each of these hypotheses suggests that political talk in traditional Internet and social media uses will increase political efficacy. Post-hoc analyses will reveal the role of varying levels in political talk and the distinctions between the two types of media uses.

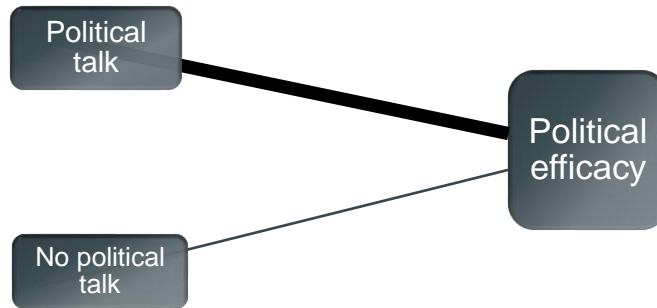


Figure 2: Hypothesis 2 examines the relationship between political talk and political efficacy, suggesting that individuals with political talk in their network will have a stronger association with political efficacy.

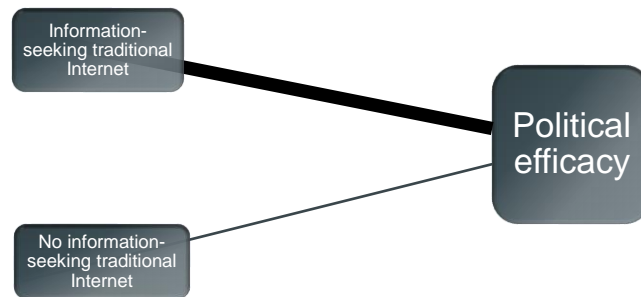


Figure 3: Hypothesis 3a examines the relationship between information-seeking uses through traditional Internet and political efficacy and suggests that Internet information-seeking uses are associated with political efficacy

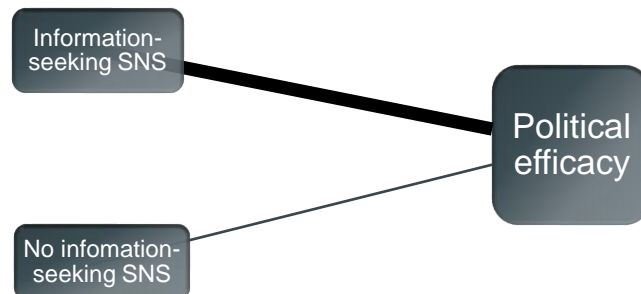


Figure 4: Hypothesis 3b examines the relationship between social media information-seeking uses and political efficacy

### *Collective efficacy*

Additionally, this study gives attention to the role of traditional Internet and social media with regard to collective, or community efficacy. In particular, the current analysis will examine whether traditional Internet or social media differences in young adults' use of social networks is associated with differences in participants' feelings of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is a term given to the beliefs that an individual's group or community can achieve a particular goal. This dynamic of efficacy differs from political efficacy because political efficacy involves personal agency, or self-efficacy. Thus, the concept of collective agency places the locus of perceived collective efficacy in the minds of group members (Bandura, 2000).

This thesis operationalizes collective efficacy as a dimension of political efficacy. In a study on public health campaigns, Johnson-Young and Magee (2014) suggest that the collective efficacy variable is viable in predicting attitudes and behavioral intentions regarding issues (p. 373). The authors also indicated that their collective efficacy scale might prove useful in heeding the call of Bandura (2000) for collective efficacy to be included in studies as technology advances. A goal of the current study is to provide a useful measure for collective efficacy that can be examined in relationship with respondents' political talk and information-seeking uses.

In an analysis of the collective efficacy construct in the domain of community participation, Carroll and Reese (2003) identified three underlying factors: active cooperation, social services, and economic infrastructure. Active cooperation involves items such as "working together" and "common vision," social services involves items related to education and geriatric services, and economic infrastructure involves items such as "new jobs" and "better roads." This thesis focuses on the active cooperation factor that provides an understanding of respondents' perceptions of a group or community "working together" to achieve an outcome. Those same

authors suggest that in order for the construct to be useful, it is important to understand the structure and the consequences related to collective efficacy, as well as calling for future studies to explore the relationships between collective efficacy and direct behavioral indicators online. Therefore, the uses and gratifications perspective offers the theoretical justification from which to observe the structure and consequence of the construct and the Internet uses (behavioral indicators) of participants.

Research reveals that socioeconomic status and education are key determinants in collective efficacy, with those higher in socioeconomic status and education developing higher levels (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Reese, & Zin, 2005). A strong sense of collective efficacy is also a significant predictor of active participation in civic affairs. These findings are similar to research on media uses and gratifications and political efficacy, which traditionally explain variance among these variables with the same demographic determinants (e.g., Kaye & Johnson, 2002). The current study is interested in understanding if the Internet may serve as an additional determinant. While previous findings have primarily focused on adult populations, the following analysis will enhance the current understanding of collective efficacy and civic participation among young adults. Although hypotheses are presented based on research findings from related contexts, prior research examining these paired questions in relations to efficacy does not exist, but the relationship expectations are logical based on both theory and application in related research contexts. Hypotheses 4a, 4b and 5a, 5b have implications for homogeneity and heterogeneity of communication networks, which will be discussed in relation to the results.

Hypothesis 4a: Young adults who agree that the Internet has helped them connect with more people like themselves will report higher levels of political efficacy (internal, external, collective).

Hypothesis 4b: Young adults who agree that the Internet has helped them connect with a diversity of people will report higher levels of political efficacy (internal, external, collective).

Hypothesis 4c: Young adults who agree that SNS helped them become more involved in local issues of interest will report higher levels of political efficacy (internal, external, collective).

Hypothesis 5a: Young adults who agree that SNS helped them connect with more people like themselves will report higher levels of political efficacy (internal, external, collective).

Hypothesis 5b: Young adults who agree that SNS helped them connect with a diversity of people will report higher levels of political efficacy (internal, external, collective).

Hypothesis 5c: Young adults who agree that SNS helped them become more involved in local issues of interest will report higher levels of political efficacy (internal, external, collective).

### III. Methodology

#### *Procedure*

The method is designed to test the aforementioned hypotheses put forth based upon the literature reviewed. To test these hypotheses, the current study analyzes data from an online survey conducted in 2013. Participants were drawn from two samples, a random sample of young adults in the Virginia Tech community ( $N = 200$ ) and a convenience sample of undergraduate students in Virginia Tech's Department of Communication ( $N = 113$ ). These data sets were merged after statistical tests revealed no significant differences between these two groups with regard to political efficacy evaluations. An independent sample  $t$ -test revealed that the two samples did not differ on the political efficacy dimension,  $t(280) = -.662, p = .509$ .

The random sample was drawn through the Virginia Tech Center for Survey Research. Two thousand young adults were contacted via email for possible inclusion in the survey. The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board approved the survey and recruitment methods for this study (see Appendix for a copy of the IRB approval). Consent, in both forms of the survey, was accomplished electronically prior to releasing the questionnaire to participants. The questionnaire contained 82 items that measured variables related to community life, opinion leaders and networks, group membership, attitudes towards civic affairs (including political efficacy), civic engagement, Internet and social media use, mobile phone use, and demographic information.

#### Table 1

*List of Variables and Constructs and the Questionnaire items that comprise the construct or variable*

Political talk:  $n = 5$  items. Cronbach's alpha = .81

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Please indicate how often in the last six months you performed the following activities:

Discussed politics

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Talked to family members about local issues or concerns  
Talked to family members about national or global issues or problems  
Talked to people outside your family about local issues or problems  
Talked to people outside your family about national or global issues or problems

---

Political participation:  $n = 8$  items. Cronbach's alpha = .85

---

Please indicate how often in the last two years you performed the following activities:

Attend a neighborhood meeting  
Written a letter or email to a local newspaper editor  
Called in or emailed a local radio station  
Circulated or signed a petition for a local candidate or issue  
Watched a local town council or board of supervisors meeting on cable television  
Attended a local town council meeting  
Worked locally for a political campaign  
Contacted a local public school official about an issue of concern to you

---

Political efficacy: Single item measures.

---

	Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:
Internal efficacy	Sometimes local politics and government seems so complicated that persons like me can't truly understand what's going on
External efficacy	There are plenty of ways for people like me to have a say in what our local government does
Collective efficacy	I am convinced that we can improve the quality of life in the local community, even when resources are limited

---

Internet information-seeking:  $n = 6$  items. Cronbach's alpha = .76

---

Please indicate you level of agreement with each of the following statements:

To get local news  
To get information on a local political candidate  
Look for information on the Blacksburg Electronic Village, or BEV, website  
Look for information on the Montgomery County website  
Look for information on the Town of Blacksburg Website  
Look for information on the Town of Christiansburg website

---

Social media information-seeking:  $n = 4$  items. Cronbach's alpha = .80

---

Please indicate you level of agreement with each of the following statements:

Received any community news or information  
Started or joined a community group supporting a cause I like  
Clicked the "Like" or "Dislike" button of any community or civic group  
Posted a comment regarding a community or civic issue

---

## Measures

The variables reported in this analysis are used to explore relationships between media use, political talk and political efficacy. The measures include: political talk, political participation, political efficacy, traditional Internet information-seeking, and social media information-seeking. The current focus is on the relationship between perceived political efficacy, both internal and external, and political participation behaviors based on different media uses. Furthermore, the relationship between political talk and political efficacy will be analyzed to determine the role of talk in both Internet and social networking environments. Although the constructs are explained in written form below, the table above (Table 1) presents the constructs and variables employed in this thesis project with the goal to enable readers an easy visual reference when referencing the questionnaire items that comprise the construct.

The method for the current analysis will employ non-parametric statistical tests that examine average ranks among groups. Since each of the hypotheses proposed involve relationships, Mann-Whitney  $U$  (comparisons between 2 groups) and its related statistical test, Kruskal-Wallis (comparison among 3 or more groups), will be used to compare ordinal dependent variables and compare the averages of their medians between groups. These tests are very similar to parametric statistics using  $t$ -tests because they assume equality of variances, but the non-parametric measures do not assume a normal distribution in the data. Specifically, these two statistical tests calculate the rank for each value instead of using the variables as-is.

For example, if comparing two groups using a Mann-Whitney  $U$  from a 5-point Likert scale, assume the following data:

Group A	1	3	2	4	2
Group B	3	5	5	2	4

Then, rank (R) those values.



Group A	1 (R1)	3 (R6)	2 (R2)	4 (R7)	2 (R4)
Group B	3 (R5)	5 (R9)	5 (R10)	2 (R3)	4 (R8)

Finally, use the average ranks and correct for ties.

Group A	1 (R1)	3 (R5.5)	2 (R3)	4 (R7.5)	2 (R3)
Group B	3 (R5.5)	5 (R9.5)	5 (R9.5)	2 (R3)	4 (R7.5)

If the ranks are skewed enough, it can be determined that there is a significant difference between the groups, and average ranks can be used to describe the sample differences (Field, 2009).

### *Independent Variables*

While many studies examine the Internet as a single, comprehensive entity, the current study differentiates between traditional Internet use (e.g. browsing webpages), and social networking uses (e.g. interacting on SNS). The uses of both of these Internet forms are very different in affordances available to participants. While traditional Internet is of interest, the academic community has a relatively stable understanding of its role in political communication contexts. However, the social media environment and its effects are less clear in research, particularly since the range of social networking tools continues to evolve. Participants in a social networking environment are expected to operate as both sources and receivers of political information. The questionnaire assesses many other features related to civic engagement and participation, but this study will specifically report on political talk as a mediating variable for political efficacy, and the subsequent outcome, political participation.

### Traditional Internet Information-Seeking

The Internet information-seeking construct uses ordinal data in that it asks respondents to indicate the frequency (*never, less than once a month, about once a month, about once a week,*

*several times a week, about once a day, several times a day*) in which they participate in a range of information-seeking behaviors. The Internet information-seeking construct contained six items in which respondents were asked to report their frequency of using the Internet: 1) “to get local news,” 2) “to get information on a local political candidate,” 3) “to look for information on the Blacksburg Electronic Village, or BEV, website,” 4) “to look for information on the Montgomery County website,” 5) “to look for information on the Town of Blacksburg website,” and 6) “to look for information on the Town of Christiansburg website.”

#### Social Media Information-Seeking

Similar to the Internet information-seeking construct, the social media information-seeking construct uses the same ordinal scale (*never, less than once a month, about once a month, about once a week, several times a week, about once a day, several times a day*) to measure respondents’ use of social media to get local information. The social media information-seeking scale consisted of four items, which asked respondents to indicate the frequency in which they: 1) “received any community news or information,” 2) “started or joined a community group supporting a cause I like,” 3) “clicked the ‘Like’ or ‘Dislike’ button of any community or civic group,” and 4) “posted a comment regarding a community or civic issue.”

#### Political Talk

The construct political talk consists of four items to measure the amount of political talk with family, friends and acquaintances about local, national, and global issues. Respondents were asked to report the amount they 1) “talked with family members about local issues or concerns,” 2) “talked to family members about national or global issues or problems,” 3) “talked with people outside your family about local issues or problems,” and 4) “talked with people outside your family about national or global issues or problems.” Response options included *never, less*

*than once a month, about once a month, about once a week, several times a week, about once a day, several times a day.*

### *Dependent variables*

#### Political Efficacy

The political efficacy variables will be analyzed using single-item measures from the online questionnaire. Questions will prompt participants to respond to their feelings of internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, and collective efficacy. While political efficacy is traditionally measured using a multi-item measure, this study uses single item measures for each component of efficacy. Other studies have empirically reported significance using a single-item measure of political efficacy. Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013), examined political efficacy in a similar context to this analysis, exploring social media use and civic engagement. Kim et al. (2013) used the item “I think people like me can influence government,” with responses options ranging from *not at all (1)* to *all the time (10)*. Similarly, the current analysis will measure young adults’ feelings of each efficacy dimension using a scale from *strongly disagree (1)* to *strongly agree (7)*. The internal efficacy item asked for agreement level to the statement, “Sometimes local politics and government seems so complicated that persons like me can’t truly understand what’s going on.” The external efficacy item asked for agreement level to the statement, “There are plenty of ways for people like me to have a say in what our local government does.” Lastly, collective efficacy was measured through level of agreement to the statement, “I am convinced that we can improve the quality of life in the local community, even when resources are limited.”

The questionnaire used in this study asked respondents two items related to the external efficacy dimension. For this thesis, one of these dimensions was dropped in order to utilize consistent single-item measures for each dimension and due to the lack of significant findings for

that external efficacy item. Furthermore, the internal efficacy item was negatively worded. Thus, the item was reverse-coded in order to indicate the same type of response on every item.

### Political Participation

The questions included in the political participation construct attempted to measure a range of political behaviors. Eight items were included in this variable, with ordinal response options ranging from *never* to *several times a day*. Respondents were asked how frequently in the last two years they performed the following activities: attended a neighborhood meeting, “written a letter or email to a local newspaper editor, called in or emailed a local radio station, circulated or signed a petition for a local candidate or issue, watched a local Town Council or Board of Supervisors meeting on cable television, attended a local Town Council meeting, worked locally for a political campaign, contacted a local public school official about an issue of concern to you. When used as the dependent variable, the frequency score for these variables was summed to designate the frequency score for each respondent.

To illustrate the relationship between the study’s independent variables and dependent variables, Figure 5 presents a visual representation of the relationships that shape the hypotheses. Since surveys do not enable researchers to identify causation or directionality of effects, the arrows exhibit relational associations between the variables or constructs. For example, one of the relationships shows an expected association between political talk and political efficacy. It is also expected that information-seeking will be associated with political participation and political efficacy. Since the research community does not have a rich understanding of young adult engagement in community or local political contexts, the strength of the expected associations remains a bit uncertain. However, the expected associations are based on research from studies exploring national (e.g., presidential campaigns) contexts among adult (not solely young adult)

populations.

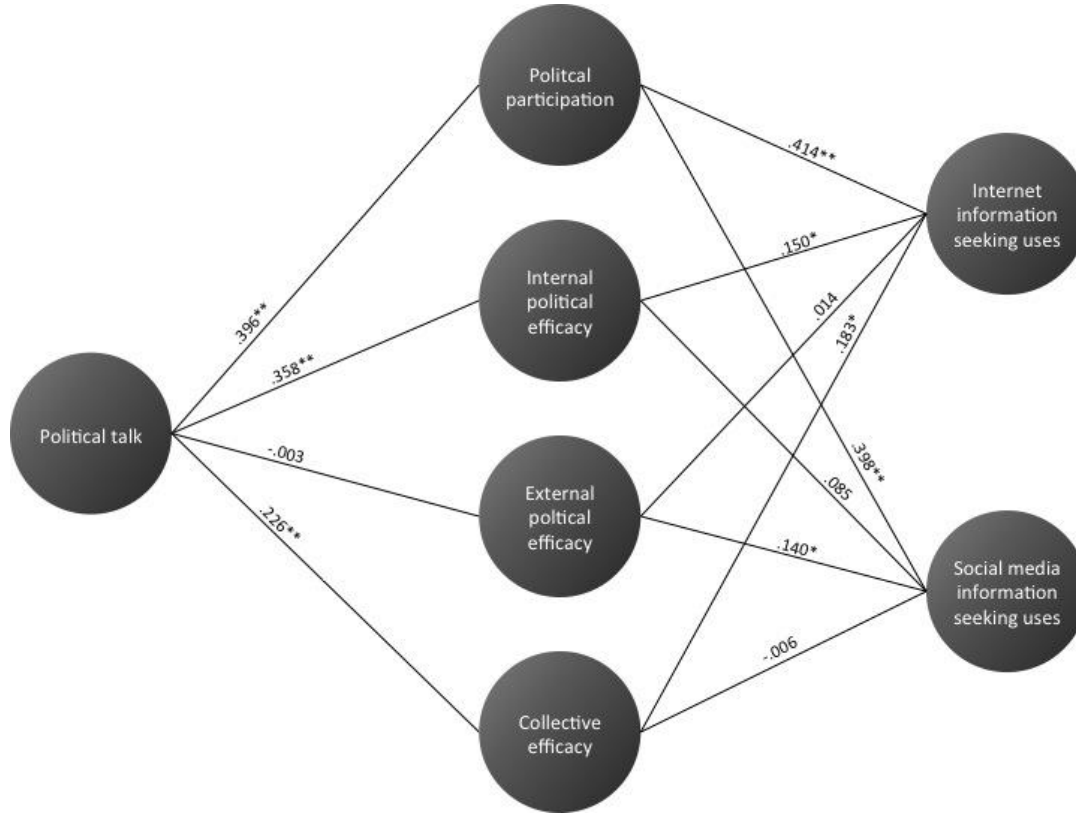


Figure 5: Summary of the expected relationship between the study's variables and constructs. Arrows connect variables expected to have a significant correlation.

### Analysis

Figure 5 illustrates the relationship among the study's variables. At the most basic level, this analysis seeks to understand the relationship between information-seeking uses and the outcome gratifications (e.g., political engagement, and political efficacy). As Table 2 shows, the expected relationships hold in ways consistent with prior literature. For example, there is a significant relationship between Internet information-seeking and social media information-seeking, and both information-seeking variables are significantly correlated with political talk.

Interestingly, the traditional Internet information-seeking is more strongly correlated with political talk than social media information-seeking. Both information-seeking constructs, and

the political talk construct, are significantly correlated with political participation. The interesting, although perhaps more challenging to explain, are the results related to the efficacy variables.

Table 2

*Overall Spearman rho correlation matrix of relationship between study variables and constructs*

	<u>Internet I-S</u>	<u>SNS I-S</u>	<u>Political Talk</u>	<u>Political Participation</u>	<u>Internal Efficacy</u>	<u>External Efficacy</u>	<u>Collective Efficacy</u>
Internet I-S	----	.389**	.443**	.414**	.150*	.014	.183*
SNS I-S		----	.274**	.398**	.085	.140*	-.006
Political Talk			----	.396**	.358**	-.003	.226**
Political Participation				----	.196**	.153*	.136*
Internal Efficacy					----	.126*	.018
External Efficacy						----	-.058
Collective Efficacy							----

*Note:* I-S refers to information-seeking uses.

\*\* Indicates significance at the  $p \leq .01$  level.

\* Indicates significance at the  $p \leq .05$  level.

For example, Table 2 shows that Internet information-seeking was significantly correlated with internal and collective efficacy, but not with external efficacy. Social media information-seeking was significantly correlated with the external efficacy variable, but not with the internal or collective efficacy dimensions. Political talk was statistically significant in its relationship with internal and collective efficacy, but not correlated with external efficacy. But,

as expected, efficacy emerged as significantly related to political participation. In fact, political participation was significantly correlated with each of the three forms of efficacy (internal, external and collective), but perhaps not at the strength of relationship one might expect. Although the relationships presented in the figure were supported, the results for the political efficacy dimensions might necessitate a dotted line to indicate that the information-seeking constructs and the political talk construct did not produce significant relationships with each dimensions of political efficacy under analysis.

But, considering that the basic theoretical model was generally supported by the results, it is interesting to consider the hypotheses that develop from this basic model. The analysis will examine distinctions in Internet and social networking uses on political efficacy, political talk, and political participation by dividing respondents into groups. Rather than using a mean-split to categorize groups, divisions are based upon apparent delineations in the response options. For example, response options *never (1)* to *several times a day (7)* could be categorized into three groups: a *none* group (those who indicate *never*), a *low* group (those who indicate *less than once a month to about once a week*) and a *high/moderate* group (those who indicate *several times a week to several times a day*). Explanations of groupings within variables will be explained in the presentation of each result.

## IV Results

In order to test Hypothesis 1, which states that young adults who talk politics in their social network will be more likely to engage in the political process, two separate statistical procedures were performed. To begin, the sample was divided based upon those who did not report political talk and those who reported political talk at any level. The political talk construct measured respondents' answers to questions about their participation in discussing politics, local issues or concerns, and national or global issues. The method section, and the construct table provided in the appendix, outlines the questionnaire items used to assess political talk. A Mann-Whitney  $U$ , which compares two groups on average ranks for ordinal-level data, indicated significant difference between those who did not engage in political talk ( $n = 52$ , average rank = 86.47) and those who did engage in political talk to some degree ( $n = 192$ , average rank = 132.26),  $U(1) = 3118.5$ ,  $Z = -4.41$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

To explore this hypothesis further, those who engage in political talk were divided by level of political talk using the category labels from the questionnaire. The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their level of political talk activity from (1) *never* to (7) *several times a day*. A frequency distribution of the responses showed clear delineation between activities at the level of *about once a week* (4). Respondents that indicated they engaged in political talk less than *about once a week* were classified as "low" on the political talk scale and those who participated in political talk *about once a week* or more frequently were classified as "high" on the same scale. Thus, three groups were created, those who never participate in political talk, those low in political talk, and those with high political talk. Results of a Kruskal-Wallis test, which evaluates median ranks among three or more groups, showed significantly different results regarding political engagement, with those who talked about politics more frequently ( $n = 56$ , average rank



= 155.9) scoring higher average ranks than those with low ( $n = 136$ , average rank = 122.5) or no political talk ( $n = 52$ , average rank = 86.5),  $X^2(2) = 29.39$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

As a further examination of the role of the degree of political talk, a Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was performed comparing political engagement between two groups, those who reported low political talk versus those who reported high political talk. Results confirmed that those with more political talk,  $n = 56$ , average rank = 115.8, (*about once a week* or more frequently) were significantly more engaged than those who reported low levels of political talk,  $n = 136$ , average rank = 88.6 (less than *about once a week*),  $U(1) = 2728.5$ ,  $Z = -3.21$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Through several non-parametric tests examining the role of political talk in young adult's political engagement, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 suggests that engaging in political talk results in significantly higher feelings of political efficacy among young adults when compared to those who do not engage in political talk or engage in limited amounts of political talk. Another non-parametric test, which compared participant groups (political talk vs. no political talk), was used to identify the relationship between the political talk variable and the three single-item measures of political efficacy. Respondents were divided into groups based upon reported levels of political talk. Those who indicated that they *never* engage in political talk were grouped together ( $n = 58$ ), as were those who reported low levels of political talk (either *less than once a month* or *about once a week*) ( $n = 161$ ), and than those who reported *high* levels of political talk (*several times a week* to *several times a day*) ( $n = 60$ ). Rather than using some form of median split, it was determined that categories of participants based on frequency of political talk were a more precise way to group levels of political talk.

To begin, an analysis comparing all three participant groups was performed. A Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant difference among the three groups on the internal and collective efficacy dimensions. Table 3 presents the average ranks for each of these participant groups. The internal efficacy dimension,  $X^2(2) = 26.25, p \leq .001$ , revealed significant differences among the three groups, but the largest difference was between those that reported *never* engaging in political talk ( $n = 58$ , average rank = 96.1) and those who reported political talk at a *low* levels ( $n = 161$ , average rank = 145.1). The collective efficacy dimension *revealed* significant differences among the three groups,  $X^2(2) = 9.50, p \leq .001$ , with the largest difference between those who reported engaging in *low* political talk ( $n = 161$ , average rank = 135.8) and those who reported engaging in *high* political talk ( $n = 60$ , average rank = 165.5).

A second test was performed to explore the varying levels of political talk among respondents who reported engaging in political talk at *low* and *high* levels. The results of a Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test reveal significant differences between groups, again, on the internal efficacy item,  $U(1) = 2728.5, Z = -3.21, p \leq .001$ . Results indicate that respondents who were *high* in political talk ( $n = 27$ , average rank = 23.4) were more likely to report high levels of internal efficacy than those who were *low* in political talk ( $n = 14$ , average rank = 16.4). These findings suggest an important relationship between political talk and young adults' feelings of internal efficacy.

A post-hoc analysis was performed using another Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test to examine the political efficacy differences between those with high political talk ( $n = 60$ ) and those with no or low levels of political talk ( $n = 219$ ). This test yielded similar results, as the test reveals that the internal efficacy item,  $U(1) = 4848.5, Z = -3.16, p \leq .001$ , and the collective efficacy item,  $U(1) = 4978.0, Z = -2.93, p \leq .001$ , illustrate significant differences between the

groups. Table 3 illustrates the results of the post-hoc Mann-Whitney *U* statistical test and describes each of the single-item political efficacy items as presented in the online questionnaire instrument. Through each test, no significant differences were discovered on the external efficacy dimension. The results of these analyses suggest that a difference between *no* political talk and *low* political talk are most significant for feelings of internal efficacy. On the other hand, differences between *low* and *high* levels of political talk are most significant for feelings of collective efficacy.

Table 3

*Efficacy average rank differences based on level of political talk among young adults*

<u>Efficacy Item</u>	<u>Average rank</u>
Internal efficacy <sup>a, b, c</sup>	<i>No political talk: 96.1</i> <i>Low political talk: 145.1</i> <i>High political talk: 168.7</i>
External efficacy	<i>No political talk 142.4</i> <i>Low political talk: 136.6</i> <i>High political talk: 146.9</i>
Collective efficacy <sup>a, c</sup>	<i>No political talk 124.2</i> <i>Low political talk: 135.8</i> <i>High political talk: 166.5</i>

*Note:* The external efficacy dimension did not obtain significant differences among the three groups

<sup>a</sup> indicates significant difference between the three levels of political talk on the efficacy variable. <sup>b</sup> indicates significant difference between the “no political talk” and “low political talk” group on the efficacy variable.

<sup>c</sup> indicates significant difference between the “low political talk” and “high political talk” group on the efficacy variable

In order to examine the relationship between information-seeking through traditional Internet and political efficacy, as suggested in Hypothesis 3a, a Kruskal-Wallis test was performed. Respondents were again divided into three groups: those who indicated that they *never* used the Internet for information-seeking, those who were *low* in information-seeking on the Internet (*less than once a month to about once a week*), and those who were *high* in information-seeking on the Internet (*several times a week to several times a day*).

Table 4

*Post-hoc Mann-Whitney U test between merged no/low political talk and high political talk groups*

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<u>Political efficacy item</u>	No/Low Political Talk (n = 219) <u>Average Ranks</u>	<u>High Political Talk</u> (n = 60) <u>Average Ranks</u>
Internal efficacy	132.1***	168.7***
External efficacy	138.1	146.9
Collective efficacy	132.7***	166.5***

---

\*\*\* Indicates significance at the  $p \leq .001$  level

There were significant differences among the three groups for the internal efficacy dimension,  $X^2(2) = 6.1, p < .05$ . Results indicate that those who reported that they *never* used the Internet for information-seeking ( $n = 37$ , average rank = 113.8), those who reported *low* information-seeking Internet uses ( $n = 187$ , average rank = 131.9), and those who reported *high* information-seeking Internet uses ( $n = 41$ , average rank = 155.4) had the greatest differences on

internal efficacy. Furthermore, while not statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level, the three groups had differences on the collective efficacy dimension at a level approaching significance. This result suggests that there are differences between groups, but more tests are necessary to determine the differences among the three levels of Internet uses for information-seeking.

A second test was performed to examine the difference between *no* Internet use for information-seeking and *high* levels of Internet use for information-seeking. The results of a Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test reveal that there were significant differences between groups for feelings of internal efficacy,  $U(1) = 518.0, Z = -2.5, p < .05$ . Those who indicated *never* using the Internet for information-seeking ( $n = 37$ , average rank = 33) were significantly less likely than those who indicated *high* levels of Internet uses for information-seeking ( $n = 41$ , average rank = 45.4) to report high levels of internal efficacy. This result suggests that compared to those who *never* use traditional Internet to seek information, those with *high* levels of information-seeking through traditional Internet are most likely to report high levels of internal efficacy.

A third test was performed to determine the differences between the *never* and *low* information-seeking groups. The results of a Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test reveal significant differences between the groups on the collective efficacy dimension,  $U(1) = 2716.5, Z = -2.1, p < .05$ . Respondents who indicated *never* using the Internet for information-seeking ( $n = 37$ , average rank = 92.4) were significantly less likely than those who indicated *low* levels of Internet uses for information-seeking ( $n = 187$ , average rank = 116.5) to report high levels of collective efficacy. This result suggests that compared to those who *never* use traditional Internet to seek information, those with at least *low* levels of information-seeking through traditional Internet are more likely to report high levels of collective efficacy.

Finally, a fourth test was run to determine the difference between those with *low* Internet uses for information-seeking and those with *high* levels of Internet for information-seeking. The results of another Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test reveal significant differences between the low and high information-seeking groups on the internal efficacy dimension,  $U(1) = 3157.0$ ,  $Z = -1.8$ ,  $p < .05$ . Respondents who reported *low* levels of Internet information-seeking uses ( $n = 187$ , average rank = 110.9) were less likely than those who reported *high* levels of Internet information-seeking uses ( $n = 41$ , average rank = 131) to indicate feelings of internal efficacy. This result suggests that, again, those who report *high* levels of traditional Internet use for information-seeking are likely to indicate feelings internal efficacy. The results of these tests all support Hypothesis 3a.

Hypothesis 3b proposes that those who report social media information-seeking uses are more likely to report higher levels of political efficacy than those who do not report social media information-seeking uses. To begin this analysis, respondents were divided into three groups based upon their reported levels of social media uses for information-seeking purposes. Similar to the analysis of groups for Hypothesis 3a, responses were categorized by those who indicated that they *never* used social media for information-seeking, those who were *low* in information-seeking on social media (*less than once a month to about once a week*), and those who were *high* in information-seeking on social media (*several times a week to several times a day*).

A Kruskal-Wallis statistical test was used to examine differences among the three groups. Similar to the results for traditional Internet, there were significant differences between the three groups on the external efficacy,  $X^2(2) = 15.7$ ,  $p < .001$ , and collective efficacy,  $X^2(2) = 11.81$ ,  $p \leq .001$ , dimensions. Results indicate that those who reported that they *never* used social media for information-seeking ( $n = 54$ , average rank = 99.5), those who reported *low* information-

seeking Internet uses ( $n = 188$ , average rank = 146.1), and those who reported *high* information-seeking Internet uses ( $n = 29$ , average rank = 138.4) had the greatest differences with regard to reports of external efficacy. There were also significant differences between those who reported that they *never* used the Internet for information-seeking ( $n = 54$ , average rank = 167.1), those who reported *low* information-seeking Internet uses ( $n = 187$ , average rank = 126.5), and those who reported *high* information-seeking Internet uses ( $n = 29$ , average rank = 140.0) on the collective efficacy dimension. While these results suggest differences among the three group for varying levels of social media for information-seeking uses, more tests are required to examine the levels at which significant differences occur.

A second test was performed to examine the differences between those who reported that they *never* used social media for information-seeking and those who reported *high* levels of social media for information-seeking. There were significant differences between these two groups on the internal efficacy item. The results of a Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test revealed that those who reported *high* levels of social media uses ( $n = 41$ , average rank = 45.4) were significantly more likely to report higher feelings of internal efficacy than those who reported *never* using social media for information-seeking purposes ( $n = 37$ , average rank = 33.0). This result suggests that *high* levels of social media use are most significant for higher feelings of internal efficacy,  $U(1) = 518.0$ ,  $Z = -2.5$ ,  $p \leq .05$ .

A third test was performed to examine the differences between those who indicated *low* levels of social media use and those who indicated *high* levels of social media use. The results of a Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test revealed that there were significant differences between groups on the internal efficacy item,  $U(1) = 3157.0$ ,  $Z = -1.79$ ,  $p \leq .05$ . Those who indicated *high* levels of information-seeking through social media ( $n = 41$ , average rank = 131.0) were significantly

more likely to report higher feelings of internal efficacy than those who indicated *low* levels of information-seeking through social media ( $n = 187$ , average rank = 110.9). This result indicates that *high* social media use is most significant for those who report higher feelings of internal efficacy.

Finally, a fourth test was performed to examine the differences between those who indicated *never* using social media for information-seeking and those who indicated *low* levels of social media use. The results of a Mann-Whitney  $U$  statistical test revealed that there were significant differences between groups on the external efficacy,  $U(1) = 3323.0$ ,  $Z = -3.9$ ,  $p \leq .001$ , and the collective efficacy,  $U(1) = 3545.5$ ,  $Z = -3.4$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Those who indicated *never* seeking information through social media ( $n = 54$ , average rank = 89.0) were significantly less likely to report feelings of external efficacy than those who indicated *low* levels of information-seeking through social media ( $n = 188$ , average rank = 130.8). Furthermore, those who indicated *never* information-seeking through social media ( $n = 54$ , average rank = 149.8) were significantly more likely to report feelings of collective efficacy than those who indicated *low* levels of social media for information-seeking uses ( $n = 88$ , average rank = 113.4). The results of these tests partially support Hypothesis 3b.

Hypothesis 4 suggests that those who indicate information-seeking uses via traditional Internet will report higher levels of political efficacy. Similarly, Hypothesis 5 suggests that those indicate information-seeking uses via social media will report higher levels of political efficacy. In order to test the relationship between media uses and the reported levels of efficacy, a non-parametric test was performed to examine differences between groups in response to paired survey questions about Internet and social media uses. Respondents were again divided into three groups; the first group reported (1) *strongly disagree* to (3) *somewhat disagree* to the paired



questions, group two reported (4) *neutral/no opinion*, and the third group reported (5) *somewhat agree* to (7) *strongly agree*. Thus, a “disagree” group, a “neutral” group and a “agree” group were formed. For the purpose of this analysis, only the first and third groups will be examined because the *neutral/no opinion* option does not provide a measure of political efficacy. Table 5 outlines the results of a Mann-Whitney *U* statistical test examining the differences between traditional Internet and social media uses on political efficacy using the paired items from the online survey. A Mann-Whitney *U* statistical test was performed to analyze the differences between groups on each dimension of political efficacy.

Table 5

*Results of Mann-Whitney U test examining responses to traditional Internet and social media paired questions and comparisons to single-item efficacy measures*

	Paired Questions	Internal Efficacy	External Efficacy	Collective Efficacy
<b>Traditional Internet Uses</b>	Internet has helped me feel more connected with people like myself in the local area	Group 1: 113.3 <sup>i</sup> Group 3: 99.15 <sup>i</sup>	Group 1: 94.7 Group 3: 113.6	Group 1: 106.3 Group 3: 105.1
	Internet has helped me feel more connected with a diversity of people in the local area	Group 1: 112.4 Group 3: 100.2	Group 1: 103.1 <sup>ii</sup> Group 3: 111.0 <sup>ii</sup>	Group 1: 91.5 <sup>iii</sup> Group 3: 114.2 <sup>iii</sup>
	Internet has helped me become more involved in local issues that interest me	Group 1: 104.1 Group 3: 109.1	Group 1: 64.3 <sup>ii</sup> Group 3: 119.9 <sup>ii</sup>	Group 1: 134.2 <sup>iii</sup> Group 3: 90.1 <sup>iii</sup>
<b>Web 2.0 Uses</b>	My use of social media has helped me feel more connected with people like myself in the local area	Group 1: 109.5 Group 3: 104.3	Group 1: 98.8 Group 3: 112.7	Group 1: 100.3 Group 3: 109.2
	My use of social media has helped me feel more connected with a diversity of people in the local area	Group 1: 114.3 <sup>i</sup> Group 3: 97.9 <sup>i</sup>	Group 1: 98.2 Group 3: 112.1	Group 1: 98.3 Group 3: 109.6
	My use of social media has helped me become more involved in local issues that interest me	Group 1: 109.4 Group 3: 103.3	Group 1: 113.8 Group 3: 107.9	Group 1: 69.2 <sup>iii</sup> Group 3: 126.1 <sup>iii</sup>

*Note:* Mean ranks comparisons using Mann-Whitney U comparing two groups

<sup>i</sup> indicates significant difference between two groups on *internal efficacy* dimension at the level of  $p \leq .05$

<sup>ii</sup> indicates significant difference between two groups on *external efficacy* dimension at the level of  $p \leq .05$

<sup>iii</sup> indicates significant difference between two groups on *collective efficacy* at the level of  $p \leq .05$

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To begin, a Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was performed to examine differences between groups on the internal efficacy dimension. The results of the first test revealed that two items yielded significant differences between groups. Respondents who reported disagreement with the idea that Internet use has helped them connect with people like themselves ( $n = 110$ , average rank = 113.3) reported significantly higher levels of internal efficacy than those who indicated agreement ( $n = 102$ , average rank = 99.2) with that same statement. Furthermore, those who indicated disagreement with the idea that social media has helped them to feel more connected to a diversity of people in the local area ( $n = 111$ , average rank = 114.3) reported significantly higher levels of internal efficacy than those who indicated agreement with that same idea ( $n = 101$ , average rank = 97.9). The results of this test of efficacy suggest that respondents who disagree with the ideas that the Internet makes them feel connected to people like themselves locally ( $U(1) = 48560.5$ ,  $Z = -1.7$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) and that social media does not connect them with a diversity of people locally ( $U(1) = 4742.0$ ,  $Z = -1.9$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ), report more significant differences on the internal efficacy dimension. The results of this statistical test on internal efficacy do not support Hypothesis 4a or Hypothesis 4b.

Similarly, an additional Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was performed to examine differences between groups on the external efficacy dimension. Results revealed that respondents who indicated agreement with the idea that the Internet helps them feel connected with people like themselves in the local area ( $n = 177$ , average rank = 113.6) reported significantly higher feelings of external efficacy than those who indicated disagreement with the same idea ( $n = 42$ , average rank = 94.7). Furthermore, respondents who indicated agreement with the idea that the Internet helped them become more involved in local issues of interest ( $n = 177$ , average rank =

119.9) reported significantly higher feelings of external efficacy than those who indicated disagreement with that same idea ( $n = 41$ , average rank = 64.3). These results suggest that respondents who reported agreement with the ideas that the Internet helped connect them with people like themselves in the local area ( $U(1) = 3074.5$ ,  $Z = -1.8$ ,  $p \leq .05$ ) and allowed them to become more involved in issues of interest ( $U(1) = 1775.5$ ,  $Z = -1.3$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) were significantly more likely to report higher levels of external efficacy. The results of this statistical test involving the external efficacy dimension offers support for Hypothesis 4a and 4b.

Finally, a Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was performed to examine differences between groups on the collective efficacy dimension. The results of this test revealed that respondents who agreed that the Internet helped them to feel more connected with a diversity of people locally ( $n = 135$ , average rank = 114.2) reported significantly higher feelings of collective efficacy than those who indicated disagreement with that idea ( $n = 76$ , average rank = 91.5). Interestingly, respondents who indicated disagreement with the idea that the Internet helps them become more involved in local issues of interest ( $n = 76$ , average rank = 134.2) reported higher feelings of collective efficacy than those who indicated agreement with the same idea ( $n = 135$ , average rank = 90.1). On the other hand, respondents who agreed with the idea that social media helped them to become more involved in local issues of interest ( $n = 134$ , average rank = 126.1) reported significantly higher feelings of collective efficacy than those who indicated disagreement with the same idea ( $n = 76$ , average rank = 69.2). The results of this statistical test on collective efficacy partially support Hypothesis 4c and offers support for Hypothesis 5c.

## V. Discussion

This thesis investigated the relationships between political talk, political efficacy, and political participation among young adults' Internet and social media uses. These findings offer insight into the fields of media uses and political communication and confirms some of the basic relationships between these variables. The purpose of examining these variables in tandem with the longstanding uses and gratifications theory and political efficacy was to provide a triangulated perspective with rich political communication insights for local-level civic and political engagement. In order to measure the significance of each of these variables, respondents were categorized into groups based upon their indicated levels and types of media information-seeking use. This discussion will address each of the study's variables as well as the implications from each hypothesis.

To begin, Hypothesis 1 was confirmed through several non-parametric statistical analyses. Results indicated that participation in the political process was most significantly associated with young adults who indicated high levels of political talk in their social networks. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests political talk explains differences in political participation. For example, Gil de Zúñiga, et al. (2010) discovered in their analysis of traditional and online forms of political participation that there is overwhelming importance placed on political talk and online messaging to facilitate political participation (p. 45). Similarly, Kenski and Stroud (2006) revealed in their analysis of Internet access and online exposure that the most notable association with political participation was political talk with family and/or friends (p. 187). This is interesting because the confirmation of this hypothesis provides additional empirical justification for further investigation of the role of political talk on political participation.

Future research should continue to examine the relationship between these variables, but consider a deeper exploration of the types of political participation and the content of young adults' political talk. For example, studies exploring message dimensions (e.g., informative, persuasive) of political talk could help increase understanding of the role of political talk message content and its role in fostering efficacy and participation. Distinction between political talk and deliberation is also necessary for future analyses. While this thesis does not attempt to classify the level or type of political talk, future investigations could enrich our understanding if classifications of the type of talk could be identified. Also, this thesis does not directly address the relationship between these two variables any further, but the significant relationship between increased levels of political talk and the political participation outcome serves to guide the analysis on political efficacy.

Hypothesis 2 sought to examine the relationship between political talk and political efficacy, suggesting that young adults who report engaging in political talk will score higher on political efficacy than young adults who do not report engaging in political talk. Results of several non-parametric analyses confirm this hypothesis, as respondents who indicated either *low* or *high* levels of political talk reported the most significant differences on the three dimensions of political efficacy. Specifically, the difference between *never* engaging in political talk and *low* levels of political talk is most significant for feelings of internal efficacy. This result suggests that the difference between *never* engaging in political talk and engaging in political talk less than once a month is significant for young adults' confidence in their ability to participate in the political process. Meanwhile, the difference between *low* levels of political talk and *high* levels of political talk is most significant for feelings of collective efficacy. This result suggests that the difference between engaging in political talk *about once a week* and engaging in political talk

*several times a week* is most significant for young adults' feelings that their group or community can achieve a particular goal.

Kenski and Stroud (2006) indicated that future researchers should explicate the political efficacy variable in order to sort out the influence of the Internet on the distinct dimensions of feelings of political efficacy (p. 177). This study has answered their call to explore internal political efficacy, external political efficacy, and the collective efficacy dimensions as a means to obtaining a richer understanding of Internet influences on political efficacy. The findings reported here are consistent with previous research as well as the proposed relationship model in this thesis. Specifically, these results confirm previous findings on the positive, significant relationship between political talk and political efficacy. For example, Kenski and Stroud (2006) discovered in their analysis that political talk with friends and/or family had the largest standardized coefficient, especially among those with Internet access. Future research on this relationship should continue to focus on the multiple dimensions of efficacy, as this analysis has discovered political efficacy differences among the varying levels of political talk. While this analysis focused on the frequency of political talk, future studies should also explore both frequency and content of young adults' political talk. Political talk content could serve as a significant role in young adults' political efficacy, as the nature of the content could positively or negatively influence levels of efficacy.

A potential limitation to this thesis was the inability to achieve an acceptable level of reliability for the political efficacy construct. The single-item measures for each dimension of political efficacy did not reach the threshold of acceptable Cronbach's alpha to be included as a scale. Future studies should include more traditional and comprehensive measures for political efficacy, including the internal, external, collective, and political information efficacy constructs

that appear to hold together in other work (e.g., Kaid et al., 2007; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Lariscy et al., 2011; Tedesco, 2007, 2011).

After establishing the significance of the relationship between political talk, political participation, and political efficacy in Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, Hypotheses 3a and 3b aimed to examine differences between information-seeking uses and political efficacy via traditional Internet and social media, respectively. To begin, the analysis for Hypothesis 3a revealed significant differences between the three groups on the internal efficacy dimension. Significant differences occurred between those who *never* used the Internet for information-seeking uses and those who indicated *high* levels of information-seeking uses via traditional Internet on the internal efficacy dimension. This result suggests that the difference between *never* using the Internet for information-seeking and using the Internet at least *several times a week* is most significant for young adults' feelings of confidence in their ability to participate in the political process.

Furthermore, tests reveal that the difference between *never* and *low* levels of information-seeking uses through traditional Internet is most significant for feelings of collective efficacy. This result suggests that the difference between *never* using the Internet for information-seeking uses and doing so *about once a week* is most significant for young adults' perceptions of their community or group's ability to influence the political system or to achieve change. Tests reveal that the differences between *low* and *high* levels of information-seeking uses on the Internet are most significant for feelings of internal efficacy. Again, the results suggest that young adults' perceptions of their ability to participate in the political process are most significant for those who indicate information-seeking uses via traditional Internet at least *several times a week*. Altogether, these results provided support for Hypothesis 3a.

These results are consistent with previous findings that suggest information-seeking motivations through the Internet correlate with important political communication variables. For example, Kaye and Johnson (2002) discovered in their analysis of online uses and gratifications for obtaining political information that self-efficacy and trust in government are significantly correlated with political information-seeking uses (p. 63). However, according to the literature reviewed by the author, no previous studies have examined the relationship between information-seeking and political efficacy in young adults. This is important as it provides empirical justification that political information-seeking online is correlated with political efficacy for all Internet users, including young adults. It was important to consider young adults considering this group is adapting the new political communication affordances at the highest level compared to other age cohorts. These findings are potentially limited due to the focus on local politics, local issues and local news, as most all respondents were Virginia Tech students and not from the local area. Future studies should consider examining national/global information-seeking uses on the Internet and the relationship with political efficacy and examination of young adults who reside in the community being studied. Nevertheless, the college students making up this sample provide us an important view of the ways young adults engage with the community in which they attend university. Some of the questions (e.g., look for information on the Town of Blacksburg, BEV, website) were particular to the local community while others were more generic assessments (How often have you written to or called a local government official) of political participation that were not necessarily limited to the New River Valley or the Virginia Tech local community.

Hypothesis 3b examined political efficacy differences between young adults who reported using social media for information-seeking. Tests revealed significant differences



between the three groups of users (*never*, *low*, and *high*) on the external and collective efficacy dimensions, suggesting that differences exist between the varying levels of information-seeking. Results illustrated that young adults who indicated information-seeking through social media *about once a week (high)* or more are significantly more likely to report feelings of confidence in their ability to participate in the political process than those who indicate *never* using social media for information-seeking. Further, those who indicated information-seeking through social media *about once a week (high)* or more are significantly more likely to report feelings of confidence in their ability to participate in the political process than those who do so *less than once a month* or *about once monthly (low)*. Finally, the difference between those who indicate using social media for information-seeking *less than once a month* or *about once monthly (low)* are significantly more likely to report feelings of external efficacy than those who *never* use social media for information-seeking uses. Interestingly, those who indicated *never* using social media for information-seeking uses reported significantly higher levels of collective efficacy than those who indicate doing so *less than once a month* or *about once monthly (low)*. Excluding this final result, all other results support Hypothesis 3b.

These results are consistent with previous research and the relationship model proposed in this thesis. For example, in an examination of the role of the Internet in fostering engagement, or reducing disengagement, among young adults, Delli Carpini (2000) suggested that online information gathering and interactions can increase young adults' political knowledge and interest in local elections (p. 348). Based upon the author's best knowledge, no other study has specifically examined the relationship between social media uses for information-seeking and young adults' political efficacy. This study offers empirical evidence that an important relationship exists, and future studies should continue to explore the relationship between the two

information-seeking uses via social media and political efficacy gratifications. While these findings identify factors related to social media uses for information-seeking, future research should explicate additional information-seeking behaviors because of evolving social media user affordances. For instance, researchers should explicate the role of social media and the ways young adults identify and gathering political information. Such studies could explore young adult uses of such affordances as Twitter hash tags and trending topics. In fact, experimental investigations could be developed to explore whether young adults recognize political topics trending on social media and their engagement in political talk around those trending topics or Twitter hash tags and the resulting effects on political efficacy.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 utilized paired survey questions to examine young adults' agreement with statements about Internet and social networking uses related to the local area. Non-parametric tests revealed significant differences between those who *agree* and *disagree* with each item when compared with a dimension of political efficacy. There were significant differences on each of the dimensions. Young adults who *agreed* that the Internet helped to connect them with a diversity of people reported the highest levels of external and collective efficacy, and those who *agreed* that the Internet has helped them to feel more connected with people like themselves reported the highest levels of external efficacy. These results indicate that the Internet is most significant for external efficacy and collective efficacy for those who *agree* that the Internet helps them to connect to others locally.

There were inconsistent results for the internal efficacy dimension. Young adults who *agreed* that the Internet had either helped them to feel more connected with people like themselves or feel more connected with a diversity of people reported significantly lower levels of internal efficacy than those who *disagreed* with those statements. Similarly, young adults who

*agreed* that the Internet helped them to become more involved with local issues of interest reported significantly lower levels of internal efficacy than those who *disagreed* with that same statement. This finding is difficult to understand since other results seem to suggest that the Internet fosters information access and association with other politically interested users, which typically would strengthen internal political efficacy. Lastly, the Internet is most significant for feelings of collective efficacy for young adults who *disagree* that the Internet helps them to become involved in local issues. Thus Hypothesis 4a was not supported, Hypothesis 4b was supported, and Hypothesis 4c was partially supported. It is possible that the inconsistent results stemmed from the lack of a reliable internal efficacy construct, so researchers are urged to reconsider these relationships through use of more comprehensive internal efficacy construct.

Results for the social networking paired questions yielded significant results for the internal efficacy and collective efficacy dimensions. Young adults who *agree* that social media has helped them to become involved in local issues report significantly higher levels of collective efficacy than those who *disagree* with that same idea. Conversely, young adults who *agree* that social media helps them to feel connected with a diversity of people locally report significantly lower levels of internal efficacy than those who *disagree* with that same idea. Again, this result is hard to interpret, but it is possible that the diverse viewpoints held by the diverse connections fostered through social media may cause young adults to question the views they hold. Since young adults still may be forming their political beliefs, diverse viewpoints could work to create internal conflict about political issues and attitudes, which could reduce internal efficacy rather than strengthen it. If young adults are not confident in their views, or lack an ability to articulate why they feel the way they do about local issues, it is possible that diverse views of others could

cause a reduction in their internal efficacy. These results failed to offer support for Hypothesis 5a or Hypothesis 5b, but did support Hypothesis 5c.

These findings are unique insofar as no other studies have examined young adults and the role of network diversity and social utility using the paired question structure employed in this thesis. These results were not expected, as the literature reviewed for this thesis suggests a positive significant relationship between social media use and reported levels of political efficacy. However, there appears to be an important relationship still between the Internet and feelings of political efficacy, particularly the external and collective dimensions. Table 5 illustrates the relationships among both traditional Internet and SNS and each dimension of political efficacy. For young adults, Internet uses for connecting with similar people are most significant for higher levels of internal efficacy. This suggests that increased confidence in one's ability to understand politics and government is significant among young adults who report Internet uses for network homogeneity. On the other hand, Internet uses for connecting with a diversity of people and becoming involved in local issues are significant for external and collective efficacy. We can assume from these results that young adults with high external and collective efficacy are less likely to report Internet uses for connecting with similar people in the local area. SNS uses for connecting with a diversity of people were also significant for young adults who reported low levels of internal efficacy, suggesting that a lack of confidence in understanding government or politics is significant for young adults who desire to connect with diverse people in an effort to surround themselves with others more knowledgeable.

This thesis sought to examine information-seeking uses, but Hypotheses 4 and 5 extended the examination to include other factors like social utility. The lack of consistent measurements within this thesis may place limits on the theoretical contributions of the findings. Nevertheless,

the paired questions offer important insight into such aspects as network heterogeneity or network homogeneity. The responses seem to suggest that efficacy considerations are not as stable when young adults are exposed to diverse viewpoints. Results indicate that more research is necessary with regard to the impact of network diversity or network uniformity on the political efficacy, political talk and political participation of young adults. It is important that researchers continue to assess the ways social network composition (heterogeneous/diverse or homogeneous/uniform) and political efficacy dimensions (internal, external, collective) impact the other.

## VI. Limitations

This study offers support for previous findings on political efficacy and the uses and gratifications perspective. However, unlike traditional uses and gratifications research, the survey instrument did not directly assess respondents' self-reports of the full range of media uses and gratifications necessary to fully explore the theory. Instead, this study focused on political information-seeking uses and described the gratifications obtained as political efficacy or political participation outcomes rather than analyzing all theoretical variables traditionally associated with the theory. The focus on the information-seeking motive dimension limits the contributions this thesis could offer to the uses and gratifications theory. Even though this study focused on information uses and gratifications, these may be understood more completely in relationship with other political uses and gratifications (e.g. entertainment, social belonging, surveillance). For example, since many young adults indicate accessing entertainment media or report being heavy users of political entertainment media such as *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live* and *The Colbert Report* (e.g., Delli Carpini, 2000; Holbert, 2005), exploring the way entertainment media not only contribute to political information and political efficacy, but also engage young adults in talk about politics may help provide a more complete picture of young adult political uses and gratifications.

Another non-traditional method in this analysis was the use of single-item measures for each dimension of political efficacy. While this methodology is not unprecedented, the political efficacy construct has traditionally obtained strong reliability and offered more convincing, if not more powerful, statistical evidence. Since few studies exist that explore political efficacy in local- or community-level political contexts, it is possible that the context resulted in the failure of the efficacy items to hold together to form a construct. Traditional measures have typically

examined political efficacy as it relates to national and global political issues. Furthermore, the young adults in the sample may be unfamiliar with the local area, as most were university students answering questions about the community in which they may not be as familiar. It may also be helpful to obtain a larger random sample of young adults, rather than merging a random sample and a convenient sample of undergraduate students.

## VII. Implications and Future Research

The results of this analysis provide support for examining important political communication variables among young adults alongside the well-established uses and gratifications tradition. Future studies should continue to explore the relationship between political talk and political efficacy in relation to political participation, and remember to understand and measure the differences between traditional media and affordances provided by social media or emerging media. This study focused on examining differences between traditional Internet and SNS, or process gratifications obtained through political information-seeking. Therefore, future studies should also explore content gratifications obtained through media, specifically in the context of local and civic issues. An exploration of issue saliency and young adults' issue involvement should serve to provide potentially powerful insight into the issues that young adults encounter when making media choices to gratify political information-seeking needs. This is particularly valuable with regards to understanding local and civic issues important among young adults.

Additionally, researchers should consider exploring the role of issue saliency and political efficacy through an agenda-building theoretical perspective. This thesis has provided empirical evidence of real associations between community-level political efficacy and political information-seeking. In order to extend the understandings gained on media uses, the theory of agenda-building would allow researchers to explore the role of the media agenda and issue saliency in forming perceptions of young voters' local or civic political efficacy.

While this thesis focuses on information-seeking via Internet or social media, it is important to remember that young adults continue to use the full array of political information sources available (e.g., television, radio, newspaper) and engage in offline communication and



deliberation (e.g., face-to-face communication). For example, in an analysis of online versus face-to-face deliberation (Min, 2007), it was determined that both forms of deliberation have positive impacts on participants' political knowledge, political efficacy, and participation. It is important that future studies include measures to capture the full range of media young adults use for political communication purposes.

Sweetser and Tedesco (2014) argue that political participation is transforming in meaning among young adults, particularly among those categorized as digital natives. A failure to include broader participation variables may limit the understanding of political talk and political efficacy in relation to participation considerations. As Dr. Craig Brians (Higgins 2013) suggested in the opening quote of this thesis, there is potentially powerful involvement for online engagement activities but more research is necessary. While young adults continue to transition from politically uninvolved citizens to active community members, it will remain significant to explore the ways in which social media and other online affordances allow for new forms of political participation.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Institutional Review Board Compliance Form



**Office of Research Compliance**  
Institutional Review Board  
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech  
300 Turner Street NW  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959  
email [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)  
website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** July 7, 2014  
**TO:** Andrea L Kavanaugh, Manuel A Perez-Quinonez, Narendran Ramakrishnan, John C Tedesco, Ankit Ahuja, Samah Hossam Aldin Gad, Kumbirai Madondo, Janet Kester, Andrae Stephen Hash  
**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)  
**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Participation on the Town Square in the Era of Web 2.0  
**IRB NUMBER:** 11-607

Effective July 7, 2014, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the Continuing Review request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

**PROTOCOL INFORMATION:**

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**  
Protocol Approval Date: **July 27, 2014**  
Protocol Expiration Date: **July 26, 2015**  
Continuing Review Due Date\*: **July 12, 2015**

\*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

**FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:**

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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*An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution*

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?
07/03/2012	1111511	National Science Foundation	Compared on 07/13/2011

\* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office (irbadmin@vt.edu) immediately.