The Personal Is Political on Social Media: Online Civic Expression Patterns and Pathways Among Civically Engaged Youth

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Social media have dramatically altered the communication landscape, offering novel contexts for individual expression. But how do youth who are civically engaged off-line manage opportunities for civic expression on social media? Interviews with 70 U.S.-based civic youth aged 15 to 25 revealed three main patterns characterizing the relationship between off-line participation and online expression: blended, bounded, and differentiated. Five sets of empirically derived considerations influencing expression patterns emerged: organizational policies, personal image and privacy, perceived alignment with civic goals, attitudes toward the platform(s), and perceptions of their audience(s). Most civic youth express the civic online, yet a minority highlight tensions that lead them to refrain from sharing in certain or all online contexts.

Keywords: civic engagement, social media, civic identity, expression, civic youth

Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s—decades before the advent of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—the phrase "the personal is political" became a prevailing maxim of the feminist movement (Hanisch, 1970). Over the last several years, however, the personal has become political in an entirely new way (Jenkins, 2012): Facebook statuses, tweets, and Tumblrs are just a few of myriad online outlets for individual identity expression that enable not only social, but political and civic expression.

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There is cautious optimism about the potential for the digital context to ignite civic engagement among youth (Bennett, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Levine, 2011; Rheingold, 2008). At the same time, there are challenges inherent in using the online space for civic expression. Kony 2012 is a timely example: The short film intended to focus attention on the brutality of African militia leader Joseph Kony and his use of child soldiers gained more than 40 million views on YouTube within days and flooded the Twittersphere with almost 10 million related tweets in the same week (Goodman & Preston, 2012). Yet the film also received criticism for its alleged oversimplification and even misrepresentation of the issues (Cohen, 2012). Mere weeks after its release, the film's 33-year-old creator was diagnosed with reactive psychosis, a condition brought on by extreme stress (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2012). Research that explores how youth navigate the rich and yet challenging opportunities for civic expression on social media platforms is increasingly important. Social media unequivocally provide a potential venue for online civic expression, but how do young people manage the opportunity for expression?

Some researchers argue that contemporary youth do not make distinctions between their work and social lives and that they blur the lines between public and private (Tapscott, 2009). Accordingly, one might suspect that young people, particularly those who are already engaged in civic issues off-line, bring this facet of their identities into their online lives by expressing the issues they care about on social media platforms. But concerns about "flaming" and uncivil responses (e.g., Burnett, 2000) and an awareness of the collapse of multiple audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011) might lead youth—even those who are passionate about civic issues—to keep their civic expression out of the online space.

In this article, I describe the results of an investigation designed to explore whether and how civic youth express the civic facets of their identities in their online lives. Literature about youth online highlights opportunities for identity expression and experimentation. However, there is a relative dearth of research on the ways youth share their civic identities online. Youth with considerable commitments to civic issues off-line may be more inclined to ground their online identities in these issues and related expression rather than masking the civic facet of their identities. On the other hand, they may perceive risks related to unique features of the online space that prevent them from sharing civic views on social networking sites (SNSs).

Drawing on interviews conducted with a sample of youth targeted for their civic work, I identify patterns characterizing the relationship between off-line engagement and online civic expression. I explore the considerations described by participants and present a framework for conceptualizing diverse pathways to each expression pattern. Although civically engaged youth adopt different approaches to online expression as they attempt to reconcile a range of tensions and related considerations, most lean toward expression of their civic identity either across all platforms or in specific online contexts.

Context

I adopt a broad conception of the term *civic* (as in Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2012), intended to capture the expansive range of service-oriented endeavors, political participation, and activism activities in which youth engage to improve their worlds. I use the term *online civic expression* to refer to an individual's "true self-expression" to others via the Internet (as in Bargh,

McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002), when the content relates to their civic views, interests, or participation. This may take many forms, including posting status updates, sharing links, creating online "events," or changing profile pictures. For example, youth may express their support for gun control laws by posting a status or tweet about their opinion, sharing a news article with a similar perspective, or setting their default photograph to an image of a gun with a line through it.

Online civic expression, whether in the form of a "like," a shared image, or a written post, can lead to or even constitute civic participation (Rheingold, 2012). Given the networked nature of SNSs, online civic expression might also influence—and even spark—engagement from less engaged peers. Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, and Seltzer's (2011) review of empirical studies of civic engagement and SNSs indicates that purposefully using SNSs for civic means also has potential for increasing youth voice and participation. Kim and Geidner (2008) found that users who engaged in political behavior on SNSs scored higher on metrics of civic duty and related self-efficacy, and Vitak and her associates (2011) found that political behavior on Facebook was related to off-line political engagement. Online civic expression may, therefore, strengthen individuals' identification as civic actors and bolster their off-line engagement. The integration of civic engagement as a component of individual identity during adolescence and early adulthood also holds promise for supporting civic engagement in adulthood (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

In the next section, I consider what the broader literature about youth online suggests about the online civic expression of civic youth. I then describe motivations that might inspire such expression and reasons youth might avoid expression. These sections set the stage for the subsequent investigation of whether and how youth express the civic facets of their identities in their online lives.

Identity Expression in the Age of Social Networking Sites

Youth living in the digital age have extensive opportunities for individual expression. On SNSs, teens can "write themselves into being" (boyd, 2007, p. 13), either using opportunities for authentic expression of different facets of identity or intentionally engaging in more performative or even deceptive identity play (Buckingham, 2008). Early research on identity expression in online environments such as chat rooms (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Turkle, 1995) underscored concerns about identity play and deception, but more recent works on "nonymous" online communities such as Facebook (e.g., Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) highlight "anchored relationships" with off-line friends and more authentic identity expressions. Youth are surprised or upset by the prospect of discovering friends' out-of-character SNS conduct (Davis, 2012). Accordingly, the considerable overlap between connections on SNSs and off-line relationships (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008) furthers the need for at least some degree of consistency and authenticity on SNS profiles. Yet, even if online identity expression is a coherent and authentic extension of off-line life, youth may choose which facets of their identities to emphasize and which to mask. Indeed, Gergen (1991), an identity scholar writing at the dawn of the digital era, highlights a postmodern emphasis on multiplicity; new technology contributes to a climate in which individuals have multiple voices and selves. Why, then, might youth choose to express or mask the civic facets of their identities online? I address this question in the next two sections.

Motivations for Online Civic Expression

Actualizing Citizenship

Historically, civic engagement and expression manifest in joining particular clubs and organizations (de Tocqueville, 1863); with a societal decline in group membership (Putnam, 2000), the Internet offers a modern venue for civic identity expression (Bennett, Wells & Rank, 2009). Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005) contend that the Internet has in fact transformed the "expressive potential of the average citizens" (p. 536), by providing individuals with low cost opportunities for broad, public expression. This type of civic expression also meets a young citizenry that may be especially eager for it (Bennett, 2008). In contrast to those with more dutiful orientations to citizenship, contemporary actualizing citizens are more open to many forms of civic expression, blurring lines between consumption and production via online peer networks; through social media, they can "personalize citizen identity and expression" (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010, p. 398). Contemporary civic youth may therefore be especially likely to find empowering the opportunities for civic identity expression online.

Impression Management

For young civic actors, the impression management literature also provides a framework for considering how individuals might benefit from portraying their civic views and work in their online lives and why they might choose to engage in online civic expression on their SNS profiles. *Impression management* refers to "the process by which people control the impression others form of them" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34; see also Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Although the social phenomenon of attempting to influence or control others' impressions by emphasizing certain identity aspects predates the Internet context, SNSs provide a robust context for identity curation and presentation. Leary and Kowalski highlight two components of impression management: *impression motivation* and *impression construction*. The former refers to a desire that may or may not translate into behavior; the latter is comprised of five factors—self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, values, and current social image—that influence presentation behavior. The authors contest the notion that impression management is about portraying a false character, suggesting instead that projections are often about managing accuracy in terms of how people see themselves.

SNS platforms are ripe environments for impression management, because they offer curatorial control and ongoing opportunities for modifying self-presentation. Krämer and Winter (2008) suggest that these features make the online context an "ideal setting" for impression management (p. 106). For young people who view civic concerns or participation as an important part of their identity, online civic expression may enable them to portray accurate and desired identity images that align with their values and off-line social images.

Reasons to Avoid Online Civic Expression

Although online civic expression may enable empowering opportunities for identity expression, civic participation, and impression management for civic youth, it also may be fraught with challenges. In

the off-line context, expressing civic and political views pose challenges to social relationships (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Warren, 1996). The online context may pose additional challenges because of the persistence and searchability of online expression (boyd, 2008) and the creation of a "digital afterlife" for youth who post (Soep, 2012). If civic youth are concerned about the long-term implications of identification with a particular civic issue or initiative, they may choose to refrain from expressing even strongly held views in their online lives. The collapse of audiences from different domains of life into one context on SNS (Marwick & boyd, 2011) may complicate online civic expression in a more immediate way. For example, if youth do not want to share their passion for abortion rights with their classmates, they may refrain from posting about a hearing they attended with their out-of-school pro-choice group. Further, the disembodied nature of online environments may invite hostile responses—termed "flaming"—intended to insult rather than to engage in productive or civil discourse (Burnett, 2000).

Research Questions

For civically engaged youth, civic expression on SNSs may support the inclusion of civic engagement as a component of identity during an influential developmental period. By expressing civic views online, youth can add another dimension to their civic engagement and may bolster their off-line civic participation. Individually, youth's decisions to engage in online civic expression may relate to desires for identity expression and positive impression management, or they may be constrained because of concerns about the nature of online expression. However, to our knowledge, no empirical investigation of civically engaged youths' SNS civic expression currently exists. Thus, I seek to answer the following questions:

RQ1:   *Do civically engaged youth express the civic facets of their identities in their online lives? If so, what patterns characterize the relationships between their online civic expression and off-line civic engagement?*

RQ2:   *What considerations influence youths' online civic expression patterns?*

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The sample consists of 70 U.S.-based, civically engaged youth (27 male, 43 female) aged 15 to 25. Our team identified youth through public recognition and awards they received for their work, affiliation with recognized civic organizations, and referrals. Participants engaged in a range of civic work, including traditional forms of political engagement, environmental initiatives, social justice efforts, public health work, and international aid.

We invited all recruited participants to take a pre-interview survey about their civic activities.[2] Among the 137 participants who initially responded to the survey, we selected 73 for in-depth interviews based on reports of current and sustained involvements. Three participants were unable to complete the interview. Interviews took place between February 2011 and January 2012. We audio-recorded interviews and transcribed interviews verbatim.

Our team used an interview guide to engage participants in discussion of their civic work. Related to their use of media, we asked what sorts of media (if any) they use as a part of their participation in civic groups and activities. We asked, "Why do you use these media? What's good/helpful about them? What are some drawbacks or limitations?" We then asked specifically about social media, including Facebook and Twitter. We inquired about civic-oriented sharing on their personal pages by asking, "On your SNS profiles, do you have any information related to your participation in [group/activity]? What is the purpose of (not) including this information on your profile?" We also asked participants whether they signal anything about their political interests online and again followed up, asking them to explain why. In the current analysis, we focus on participants' responses to these questions.

Youth and Media: Our Sample and National Norms

Cell phone ownership and social media use across our sample are broadly similar to national averages, as defined by the Pew Internet and American Life Project surveys (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Madden et al., 2013). At the time of our study, 69 of the 70 participants in our sample reported owning a cell phone, of which 41 (about 60%) indicated that they could access the Internet from their phones. Likewise, 69 of the 70 participants reported having Facebook accounts, and 48 of these Facebook users (about 70%) indicated that they check Facebook every day during a normal week. Fewer participants (n = 32), but still almost half of the sample, reported having Twitter accounts.

Exploratory Analysis: Identification of Patterns and Considerations

In analyzing descriptions of their media use, we recognized that participants described different approaches to using social media for their civic work, particularly related to their expression. We used a thematic analytic approach to explore these expression differences and to identify major patterns characterizing the relationship between online expression and off-line engagement. We chose thematic analysis because of its appropriateness for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns that capture salient distinctions in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We began by coding one-third of our transcripts (n = 23) collaboratively to enable constant dialogue about the development and application of codes (Smagorinsky, 2008).

Through this process, we identified three main expression patterns: blended, bounded, and differentiated. Participants who *blend* express their off-line civic beliefs and work in their online lives.

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[2] The survey prompted for information about participants' activities to confirm current and sustained participation in civic activities and to enable personalization of interview questions. The survey also included questions about general media use.

Participants who *bound* refrain from expressing their off-line civic beliefs and work in their online lives, in essence creating boundaries. Participants who *differentiate* vary their civic expression across different platforms; they may blend on one platform and bound on another platform, or they may vary the quantity or type of expression on different platforms.

Following the development of these three pattern codes, two members of our team independently coded the remaining 47 cases and used *NVivo 9* to obtain kappa statistic as an indicator of interrater reliability. We obtained kappa statistics of 0.7 or higher for each of the patterns (blended: $\kappa = 0.92$; bounded: $\kappa = 0.71$; differentiated: $\kappa = 0.84$).

We noticed that participants with the same patterns sometimes cited different considerations, while other participants indicated similar considerations but different patterns. To explore these differences, we again employed a thematic analytic approach. We began by open-coding explanations to identify all the considerations participants described. We used these descriptions to develop a framework representing five sets of considerations, described by our participants, which putatively influence their online civic expression. These considerations are *organizational policies, personal considerations, perceived alignment with civic goals, attitudes toward the platform*, and *perception of audience*. As depicted in Figure 1, I propose that these considerations comprise the collection of concerns and motivations underlying youths' civic expression patterns. Youth can take different pathways to each expression pattern based on unique constellations of considerations.
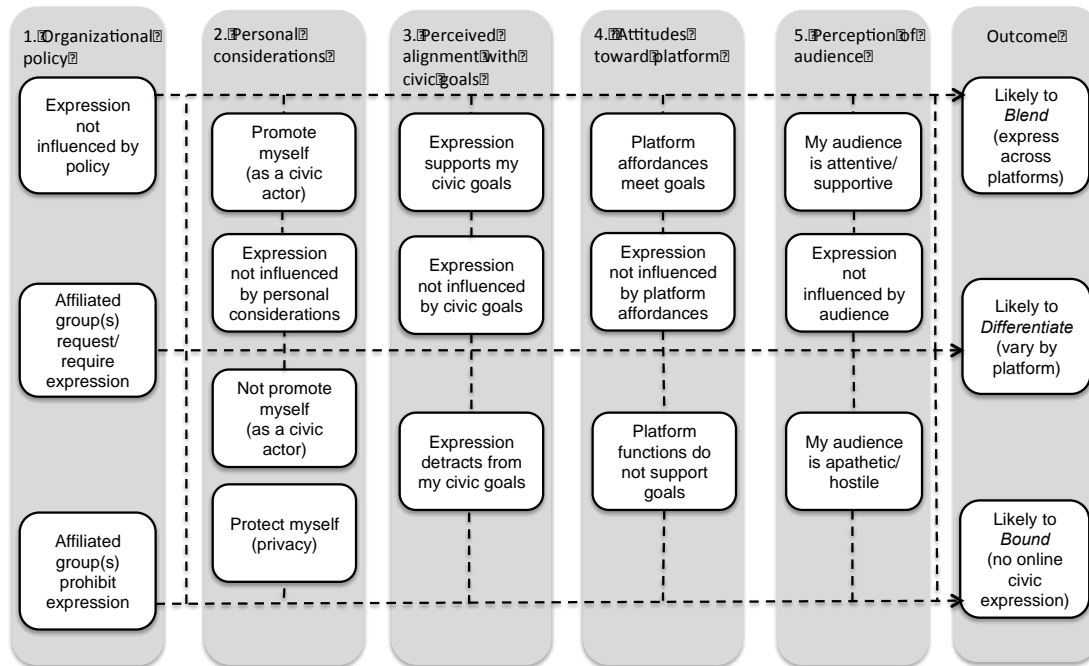
Figure 1. Considerations underlying online expression patterns

We were cognizant that two factors, age and gender, might explain observed differences in expression patterns. The sample represents a wide age range developmentally, and previous research documents differences in social media use by gender (e.g., Barker, 2009; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). I used a Fisher's exact test to explore the possibility of conflation of differences by age or gender by testing the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the proportion of expression patterns by either demographic characteristic. I selected Fisher's exact test because of its suitability for analysis of contingency tables and for small sample sizes. In both cases, Fisher's exact statistic indicates that we cannot reject the null hypothesis; there is not strong evidence for expression pattern differences by age (p = .071) or gender (p = .339) in the current sample. Accordingly, I present and discuss findings for the sample as a whole.

Findings

Patterns and Pathways

All the participants in our sample are actively engaged in civic issues off-line, and we wondered how they manage opportunities to express their views and engagements online. As described, we found that three main patterns characterize participants' online civic expression: blended, bounded, and

differentiated. We found five sets of considerations—organizational policies, personal considerations, perceived alignment with civic goals, attitudes toward the platform, and perceptions of audience—that influence decisions about online expression. These considerations hold varying weights and salience for different participants and may be factored into expression pattern decisions in any order. Although they represent a comprehensive collection of the considerations participants discussed, participants take different "consideration pathways." Our sample also includes seven low media users, who consequently do not adopt any expression pattern or describe related considerations.

Blending

As described, participants who *blend* express their off-line civic beliefs and work in their online lives. Of the 70 participants in our sample, 37 (53%) describe blended expression patterns. Jimmy and Lia are two such participants.[3]

Jimmy is a 21-year-old college senior studying political science. He participates in a scholarship program through which he completes more than 300 hours of service each year. He accumulates most of his hours through work with a campus chapter of Habitat for Humanity, though he has additionally participated in drives for the homeless, suicide prevention walks, and park cleanups. During his college years, Jimmy has also volunteered at a state senator's office, worked part time with Organizing for America, and led the local chapters of two political organizations.

Jimmy explains that he uses Facebook "a lot" for civic expression. He finds several platform affordances particularly useful for his work on various civic and political initiatives: the newsfeed to get "input" from others, the chat feature to connect individually and use a "personal touch" to motivate participation, fan pages to raise awareness, and private and public groups to disseminate information "efficient[ly]."

With respect to his own expression, Jimmy explains,

I sort of use my Facebook as a personal—I use it as a representation of who I am, which is someone who is involved in a lot of different things. And I'm very proud of the work we've accomplished, so I use that as a way to both advertise what we've done and what we have coming up . . . because I'm proud of it, because I want people who are not necessarily with me all the time to see what I'm working on and see what I've accomplished. And so, in some ways I use it as sort of like a personal PR.

Jimmy also has LinkedIn and Twitter accounts and similarly posts information about his civic work on these platforms. He uses the particular affordances of these platforms—for example, using his Twitter account to tweet at a politician.

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[3] Participants are referred to by pseudonyms and are described without identifying markers.

In general, Jimmy perceives his online audience as alert and attentive to his posts, which influences his decision to express.

> I think people, especially my friends, look to me as someone who knows what's going on, and they sort of value what I'm putting out there. And so . . . I think there's responsibility to put stuff that people will find informative and interesting, and that they can benefit from.

Like Jimmy, Lia adopts a blended online expression pattern. Lia is an 18-year-old college freshman. In high school, Lia was actively involved in organizing events for Black History month. She was also president of her high school's Young Democrats chapter and tried to launch a nonpartisan political awareness group. Currently, Lia works with a nonpartisan organization focused on educating youth about democracy through direct political action. Through these involvements, Lia has worked on organizing, fund-raising, community outreach, voter registration, phone banking, canvassing, and campaigning. In the future, Lia is interested in "rebuilding and rejuvenating communities . . . through education, through economics, through politics." She says of her civic work, "I'm very passionate about it."

Lia's Facebook page, an extension of her off-line views, showcases her work and values. She says, "I display my political affiliations on Facebook . . . My Facebook page indicates my political preference . . . from the things that I'm involved in, and the things I think are important." Lia says she would "always post events" about her civic projects and "like" the pages of the organizations in which she is involved. She finds the affordances of Facebook, including the ability to make announcements and the "sidebar on Facebook that says 'happening today,'" especially helpful for raising awareness. Posting on Facebook also supports a self-described goal of Lia's civic and political work: to raise awareness in the wider community. Additionally, Lia finds Facebook useful for her civic work, because it allows her to "connect" with other chapters of her organization to "find out more about what [is] going on" and to learn about other program efforts.

Lia and Jimmy both blend their online expression; their descriptions indicate overlapping and distinct considerations underlying their decisions to blend (see Figure 2). Jimmy wants to promote himself as a civic actor, and he views social media platforms as an effective way to meet his goal. He believes that his online audience is attentive to what he has to say, and he consequently feels a responsibility to post. Lia is primarily interested in raising awareness about her civic projects and sharing her political views so that she can educate people in her networks. Although she values the affordances of social media platforms, which allow her to connect with others and learn more about related initiatives, Lia's expression is not driven by a perception that her audience's reaction will be either supportive or hostile.
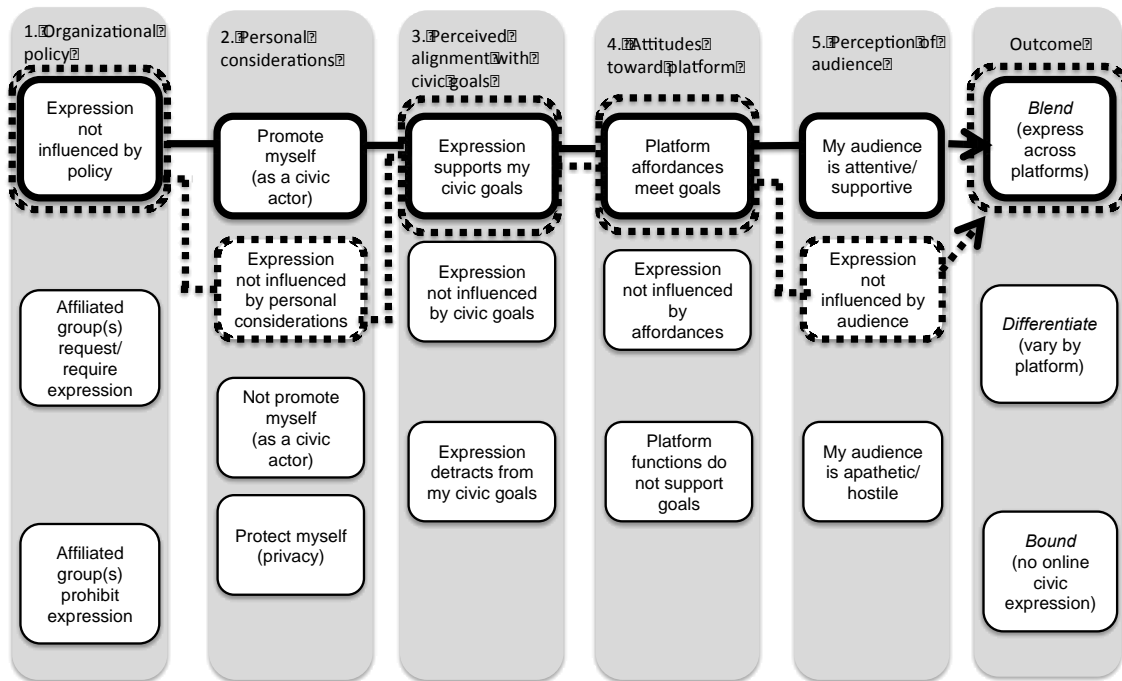
Figure 2. Consideration pathways for two blenders, Jimmy (solid lines) and Lia (dotted lines)

Bounding

In contrast to youth like Jimmy and Lia, who *blend* and share their civic beliefs and work on their social media accounts, those who *bound* actively refrain from expressing their off-line civic beliefs and work in their online lives. Thirteen participants (19%) describe a bounded pattern of expression, including Chen, Ashley, and Bree.

Chen is a 16-year-old high school junior. He is an active volunteer at a local phone hotline that allows community members to call in and talk when they need a listening ear. Chen also sits on a youth advisory council for a local politician, where he works on the jobs committee. In addition, Chen is passionate about teen health and the impact of stress on health.

On his Facebook page, Chen does not have any information about his work or the issues about which he is interested. At first he says, "I think [Facebook] is just fun for me," but then goes on to explain he does not want his Facebook to be "a resume of what I'm doing," and he worries that posting about his civic work would be like "selling" himself. Although Chen does not post about his involvements, he uses

Facebook to stay on top of events and meetings. He recognizes that Facebook is "convenient" and provides a useful way to connect with others. However, he thinks that Facebook is overused, which detracts from its utility. He explains,

> A lot of people advertise on Facebook. And then, when I see that, I just go right through it. I don't really care at all when it's on Facebook. A better way is definitely to be in person.

Although Chen engages in politically oriented discussions off-line through his work with the advisory council, he does not view Facebook as an appropriate venue for voicing political opinions or engaging in critiques. He recounts his experience with a friend who repeatedly posted statuses about politics; Chen blocked his friend so that he would not have to see the posts.

Like Chen, Ashley does not share her civic work or views on SNSs. Ashley is a 23-year-old recent college graduate. She participated in a nonpartisan democracy education initiative while in high school and recently returned to the organization as a full-time employee. She has worked on a range of volunteer efforts, including producing a documentary film about local issues, hosting community discussions, and working on food drives and fund-raisers. Ashley also interned on Capitol Hill and with several local politicians. Ashley's work, with its civic and political dimensions, has been a consistent component of her life, personally and professionally.

In the past, Ashley posted pictures of candidates she supported and "liked" their fan pages. She used posting and liking as ways to express that she was "proud" of their work, and because she wanted "people who have shared interests to know that I also believe in whatever they believe in, and can create dialogue about it, talk about it." Although she sees value in online expression, Ashley now uses Facebook only to keep in touch with friends. She keeps her political views off of SNSs because the organization for which she works is nonpartisan and prohibits employee expression that could be interpreted as partisan support. Ashley explains,

> We're nonpartisan and, you know, I have certain political beliefs and views on certain things and I'd like to be able to, if I wanted to—and I would never—but to be able to write whatever I'd like on my personal Facebook page.

Whereas Ashley adopts a bounded style of expression at least in part in response to an organizational policy, Bree bounds her online civic expression by choice. Bree is a 21-year-old senior at an all-women's college. She is interested in the sociology of education; she has worked on a number of adult basic education and community-based learning programs nationally and abroad. She explains that her involvements are fundamentally grounded in Paulo Freire's idea of "praxis" and working *with* people, rather than *for* them: "When I teach, I dialogue . . . most of my courses are, "Let's talk to each other. I want to learn from you. You can learn from me."

Bree does not post about or share her civic work on social media. She first realized the challenges inherent in talking about her work through electronic formats when she set out to create a video about her work. She describes grappling with tensions throughout the process:

How do I talk about these people without creating more stereotypes about them? And that was a huge challenge, where I didn't make them out to be victims. And I had to ask people, time and time again, "Is this problematic? . . . And so, I find that to be hard, to talk about my work in electronic formats.

Bree goes on to explain, "I don't use Twitter or Facebook for events. I don't use it to promote anything." She details a transition in her own social media expression,

I stopped . . . I used to post pictures of me with little kids when I was really excited about working with little kids. And you'll notice all social justice kids who always have the international little child with them. And I was really into that. And that was kind of my way of saying, "I like social justice. I like kids. I want to change the world." But now I'm even more cautious about that, because I don't want to promote myself as this person who thinks that they are changing the world.

Bree finds online expression about her civic work ridden with issues. She worries about self-promoting and grapples with tensions around portraying people in ways that conflict with her motives for doing social justice work. Bree is not oblivious to the benefits of Facebook for raising awareness, sparking dialogue, and reaching a wide audience. However, her concerns about how she might portray herself and those with whom she works ultimately led her to adopt a bounded pattern of expression.

While passionate about their civic work, Chen, Ashley, and Bree refrain from expressing anything about their work on social media sites (see Figure 3). For Ashley, the decision is a direct response to a policy of the organization with which she is affiliated. Ashley's comments suggest that she might adopt a different expression pattern in the absence of such a policy, but she respects the organization's request and delimits her expression accordingly. Neither Chen nor Bree is influenced by organizational policy, but they are both wary about promoting or "selling" themselves. Chen also senses that the quantity of information on Facebook creates a context of audience apathy. Bree worries that online expression might actually detract from her civic goals, which are fundamentally grounded in a desire to empower—rather than victimize—others.
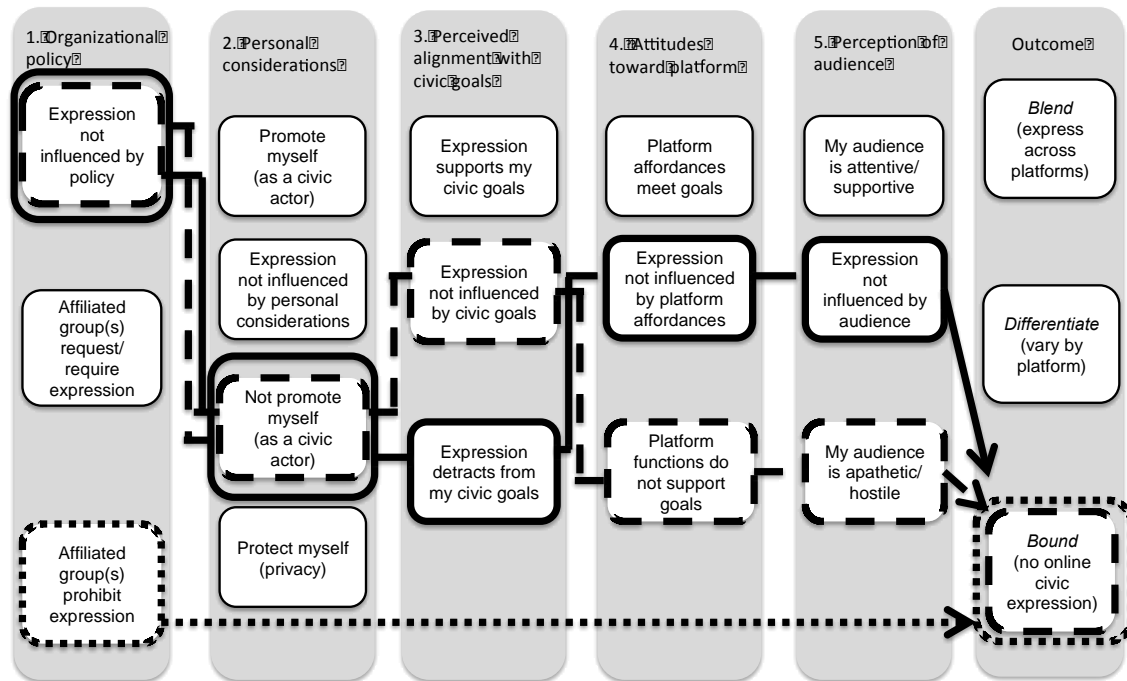
Figure 3. Consideration pathways for three bounders, Chen (dashed lines) and Ashley (dotted lines) and Bree(solid lines)

Differentiating

Participants who *differentiate* vary their civic expression across different platforms; they may blend on one platform and bound on another platform, or they may differ in terms of quantity or type of expression across platforms. Thirteen of our participants (19%) describe a differentiated pattern of expression.

Elena is a 19-year-old self-identified lesbian who is dedicated to LGBT advocacy work (e.g., testifying at policy hearings) and outreach initiatives (e.g., HIV testing, social services). She has worked at a number of different LGBT-centered youth organizations nationally and in her home city. When she begins college next fall, Elena plans to study public health; she hopes to someday "run a nonprofit advocating for healthy sexuality among young people through an anti-oppression framework."

Elena uses social media to express and participate in the LGBT issues to which she is dedicated off-line. She views her Facebook account as "professional" and her Twitter as "just way more personal." Consequently, Elena adopts different styles of expression on each platform. She explains,

> In my Facebook, I tend to post articles and share things from different people . . . [on] my Twitter page, I list out like anti-oppressionista, trans ally and all that stuff in my bio. So I think that's political . . . I think Facebook, I censor myself a lot more as far as more of, like, my radical sexual politics. But on Twitter I don't do any of that [censoring]. But then also on Twitter I don't identify myself by name.

Because her Facebook is "a lot more professional," Elena says she generally refrains from posting personal statuses. Although she still posts articles and shares events, she thinks it is inappropriate to engage in discussions or arguments on Facebook. Although Elena sees herself as a LGBT advocate, she rationalizes her decision to restrict her Facebook expression since she consistently updates and posts on Twitter. Importantly, her decision to keep her Twitter separate from her identity provides a safeguard that enables her to feel more comfortable expressing what she terms her "radical sexual politics."

In discussing her social media expression, Elena underscores the importance of knowing your audience ("It's like, who's your audience, you know what I mean?"). She is aware that she has an engaged online audience. She notes how many followers she has—almost 400 on Twitter—and remarks that each represents a person who "individually thought it was a good idea to know what I'm talking about." In general, Elena sees Twitter as more of a youth space than Facebook—a view that seems connected to her perception of her audience and her decision to tweet in a less guarded manner. Elena also highlights the particular affordances of social media platforms for reaching people: "It's so easy to spread, especially Twitter. It's like, 'Oh, retweet.' So, it'll reach Australia in two minutes."

Elena's considerations led to her decision to differentiate her online expression. Yet, whereas Elena sees value of using both Facebook and Twitter and differentiates as a way to protect her privacy and identity while still actively voicing her civic and political ideas, Monica adopts a different approach. Monica is a 25-year-old graduate student who has spent a decade working on community change initiatives through arts and education in three major U.S. cities. Monica's work is fundamentally grounded in a desire to give voice to urban youth and their experiences. She recalls,

> When I was growing up, I always was really conscious of the fact that I did not see [my] life reflected in the books I read or the TV I watched or the movies. . . . Even if it was a multicultural group of people involved, they're still, like, suburban kids riding their bikes over to their friend's house . . . And that wasn't my life, and that wasn't the life of any kid that I knew . . . And so . . . I want to give these young people an opportunity to represent themselves and their own beliefs and their own lives.

Monica thinks authentic representation is "amazing." As an adolescent, she focused on writing about her own experiences, as a way to contribute to this goal. Now she focuses on creating spaces that give voice to other youth.

When Monica began her civic work, "there was no Twitter, there was no Facebook," so she created a zine, which she printed on her school's photocopier, to share her perspectives. When she was

15, Monica launched her first blog to express "the minutiae of [her] daily life" and voice her opinions. She joined Facebook in 2003 and created her own Twitter profile and YouTube channel several years later.

On Facebook, Monica says, "I post videos, I post news things, I post semi-humorous comments. I think Facebook is a good platform for my voice, for my sense of humor." Facebook supports Monica's writing and expression of the issues she sees around her, long-standing components of her civic participation. Monica spends several hours each day on Facebook and posts regularly. She is careful not to post in a way that suggests personal branding or advertising, which she finds "a little distasteful." Monica says she could try harder to promote herself online, but she worries that "doing that would make people not like me anymore."

Monica is aware that she has an audience on Facebook and that others pay attention to what she posts; she remarks that she has accumulated more than 1,000 Facebook friends. She seems confident that she has found a balance on Facebook and can use the platform as a way to share her voice and work without excessive self-promotion. In contrast, Monica refrains from regular civic expression on Twitter. Monica notes that she has 140 Twitter followers, "which is tiny in the world of Twitter," and she does not tweet regularly, because, as she explains, "I'm a little grossed out by it."

Monica and Elena share differentiated patterns, but describe distinct expression pathways (see Figure 4). For Monica, the relatively small size of the audience and her distaste for the platform result in a different style of expression on Twitter than on Facebook. In her online life, she is cautious about self-promotion, which she finds objectionable. Her civic work is motivated by giving voice to authentic life experiences, so expression supports her civic goals. On Facebook, she finds that platform affordances support her voice; in contrast, she expresses distaste for Twitter. Monica also has divergent impressions of her Facebook and Twitter audiences—a consideration that further influences her differentiated pattern. Elena, on the other hand, grapples with the tension of wishing to be consistent with her off-line self-presentation as an LGBT advocate, but also wanting to be careful about aligning her identity with some of her more "radical" sexual politics. Expression supports her civic goals related to advocacy and raising awareness about LGBT initiatives and issues. She finds both Twitter and Facebook effective for sharing, though her different perceptions of the composition of her audiences and the particular affordances of Twitter underlie her differentiated expression pattern.
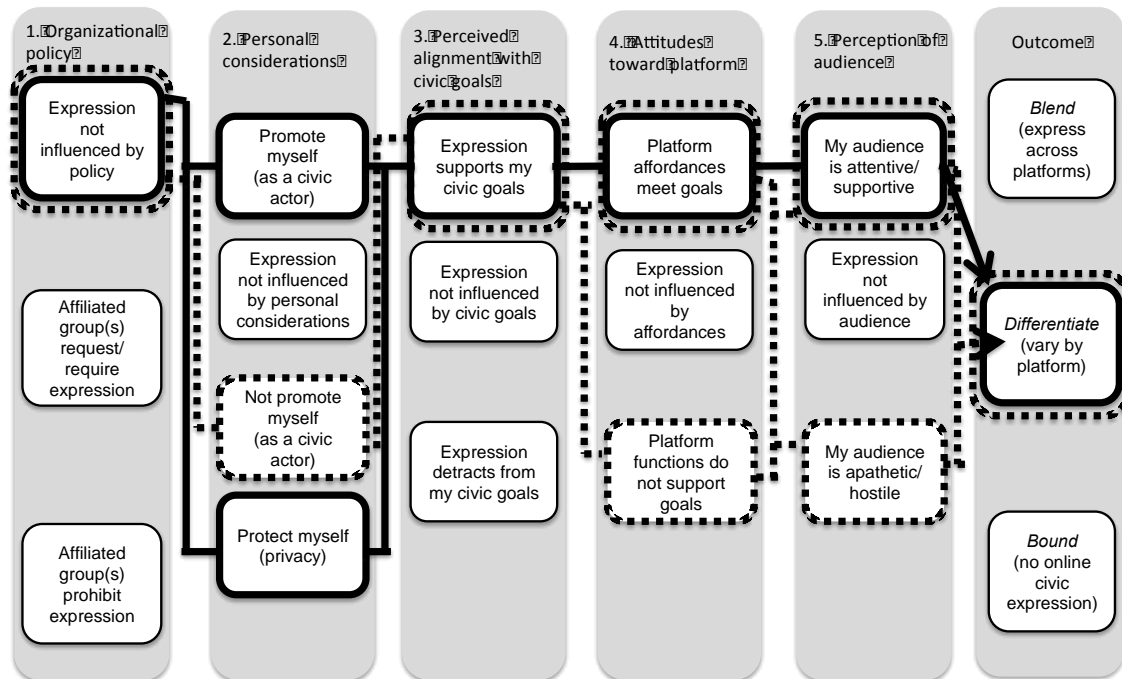
Figure 4. Consideration pathways for two differentiators, Elena (solid lines) and Monica (dotted lines)

Discussion

The online context is both ripe with opportunities and fraught with challenges, especially related to individual expression. Our findings illuminate tensions of engaging in civic expression on SNSs, particularly related to organizational expectations, personal considerations, civic work, platforms, and audiences. Yet, despite these tensions, most civic youth seem not to mask their civic identities across their online lives. In discussing their online civic expression, over 70% of our participants describe online civic expression on at least some (in the case of differentiators) if not all (as for blenders) of their online contexts. This finding aligns with previous research documenting an overlap for many youth between their online and off-line lives (e.g., Davis, 2012; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Zhao et al., 2008). These youths cite a number of reasons for engaging in online civic expression, including responding to organizational policies that request or require expression; desires to promote themselves as civic actors and be recognized for their work; alignment with their civic goals; positive attitudes about platform(s) affordances in supporting goals; and perceptions of audience(s) as interested and supportive. Participants discuss different constellations of these considerations in describing their motivations for expressing, though these reasons represent an exhaustive thematic list of the considerations they shared.

However, nearly 20% of participants—all of whom describe robust civic participation and identities off-line—refrain entirely from expressing civic views on SNSs. None of these participants indicate that their bounded patterns are related to desires for identity play or multiplicity. Instead, they highlight reasons similar to youth who blend, but often with different valences or implications. They describe responding to organizational policies that prohibit or limit their civic expression; desires not to engage in self-promoting expression that might be construed as bragging; personal concerns about privacy; a misalignment with their civic goals; negative views about the potential of the platform(s) affordances to support their goals; and perceptions of their audience(s) as uninterested or hostile.

Krämer and Winter (2008) suggest that SNSs provide an ideal venue for impression management, because individuals can tailor their expression and exert curatorial control over projected identities. Leary and Kowalski (1990) delineate five factors related to decisions about impression construction: self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, target values, and current social image. The current work offers a refinement and extension of Leary and Kowalski's model that is specific to the civic domain and the online context.

Some participants describe responding to requests from their civic organizations to "share" on SNSs, while others discuss the importance of adhering to organizational requests for bipartisan public images (role constraints). Personal considerations may manifest in desires, for some, to be recognized as dedicated civic actors (desired identity) and for others *not* to be seen as engaging in civic work to gain recognition (undesired identity). Because all the participants are dedicated civic actors, their decisions result from the interplay of their extensive civic engagement (accurate self-concept) with these desired and undesired images. Many participants describe tailoring their online civic expression related to preferences (target values), perceptions, and perceived expectations (current social image) of their SNS audiences. Some describe being encouraged by a sense that their audience values their civic expressions, while others sense apathy or worry about the "drama" that posting might spark. The influence of audience perceptions becomes especially clear in the case of differentiators who hold different perceptions of their audiences on different platforms.

For the participants in this study, perceived alignment of online expression with civic goals and attitudes toward the platform also emerged as prominent considerations. These considerations are specific to the particular type of identity expression we consider (i.e., of the civic facet) and the unique context of expression (i.e., SNSs).

That civically engaged participants adopted different online civic expression patterns, and that these distinct patterns were related to similar types of considerations, reveals the complexities youth encounter in the online space. Previous research indicates the potential for SNSs to support individual identity formation (boyd, 2007) and civic engagement (Kim & Geidner, 2008). For many of our participants, online expression does appear to function in this manner, enabling the kind of personalization Bennett, Freelon, and Wells (2010) describe, and offering, as Shah and colleagues (2005) suggest, low-cost opportunities for broad, public expression with functional benefits for civic work. At the same time, civically engaged youth who are comparably dedicated to their work and describe equally robust civic engagements and identities also describe withholding expression. Concerns related to privacy, the reaction

of their audiences, and future implications of online civic expression are among the considerations these youth describe, echoing existing challenges raised by researchers (boyd, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Soep, 2012).

Through their narratives, youth who refrain from online civic expression illuminate what is at stake: most notably, peer approval and opportunities to attract or maintain desired professional roles both within and beyond the civic domain. The potential for online expression to have unwanted implications for their off-line lives crystallizes the risks for some youth and leads them to mask their civic identities online. Importantly, for these youth, the decision to refrain from expressing appears neither a reflection of problematic multiplicity nor an indicator of a less robust civic identity, but instead a response to thoughtful and even civically oriented considerations.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was designed to explore online civic expression patterns, which are most relevant for youth who already hold off-line civic interests. Our team therefore recruited a sample of 70 youth with sustained commitments to civic work. This sample enabled the type of exploratory investigation and documentation of patterns in which we were interested and additionally allowed for a robust analysis of emic underlying considerations. However, the sample makeup is not—by definition—a representative group of young people. Although the framework is almost certainly applicable to youth with lower levels of civic engagement, the prevalence rates are not appropriate indicators of trends across the population. Future research could use the patterns and considerations framework we propose to explore their suitability for more representative populations.

This investigation is based on youth's self-reports. Reliance on self-report data for studies of new media use is not atypical (e.g., Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), but future work could employ other methods to further explore and refine the framework and individual pathways. These methods might include asking youth to keep media diaries of their SNSs for a designated period of time (as in Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), collecting ethnographic data (as in boyd, 2007), or directly coding SNS profiles and posts (as in Krämer & Winter, 2008). Directly observing youths on SNSs would enable a comparison of what they say with what they do, adding another dimension to our understanding of their expression.

In the interviews, youth occasionally shared unprompted stories about decisions to modify or change online civic expression patterns. Data were collected at one point in time, and pattern shifts were not initially a focus of the investigation. Future research could benefit from longitudinal data to explore how key transitions or experiences influence expression changes.

Conclusion

Across the domains of their experiences, contemporary youth face decisions about when and how to express their voices on SNSs. Should they share information about their romantic lives, academic successes and failures, career aspirations, social engagements, or the societal issues about which they are

most excited or concerned? Because SNS use among youth approaches near ubiquity, navigating these decisions becomes increasingly relevant to their daily lives.

In the civic sphere, previous research illustrates the potential for online civic expression and participation to support engagement (e.g., Kim & Geidner, 2008; Shah et al., 2005). However, to my knowledge, the current study represents the first systematic documentation of the propensity for civically active youth to engage in different patterns of online expression and the considerations underlying their expression decisions. From these considerations and patterns, I propose a framework that illuminates the tensions of engaging in civic expression on SNSs. By documenting nuances in youth's decisions about online civic expression, this work responds to calls from scholars (e.g., Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2009; Haste, 2010; Rheingold, 2008) for the need to incorporate skills for public communication and expression into 21st-century civic education initiatives. In addition, this framework can be used to engage youth in reflection and dialogue about their individual decisions related to online expression, both civic and otherwise.

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