4
Transforming the Disengaged
Social Media and Youth in Canada
SHELLEY BOULIANNE

Social networking sites are extremely popular, with three-quarters of Americans and Canadians using them (Pew Research Center 2016; Statistics Canada 2014). Approximately 61 percent of Canadians have engaged in at least one form of online political discussion, such as posting political information on social media, blogging, emailing about politics, or participating in an online group (Hilderman, Anderson, and Loat 2015). However, the implications of social media for democratic participation remain unclear. There is an abundance of research, as shown in this meta-analysis (Boulianne 2015a, 2017). However, most of this research has a built-in assumption that social media are producing more engaged and politically interested citizens. The assumption has implications for digital infrastructure investments for social movement organizations, interest groups, and political campaigns (e.g., Stromer-Galley 2014). Is this infrastructure supporting the process of transforming citizens into being politically interested and engaged? Or is it limited to supporting citizens who are already politically interested and engaged: that is, the usual suspects? If the latter is occurring, then digital media, including social media, might be reinforcing or expanding inequalities in political participation rather than addressing them. The findings in this chapter should appease concerns about expanding participatory inequality among youth. However, there are some concerns about inequality related to protesting and connecting with candidates, officials, and political parties on social media.

Here I examine how social media use is transforming political engagement and the consequences for Canadian politics. Much of the research
on social media use focuses on political elites (Boulianne 2016b), particularly in Canada. Highlighting ordinary citizens addresses a clear gap in existing research on social media in the Canadian context. Internationally, most of the research on citizens’ use of social media and political participation is based on cross-sectional surveys (Boulianne 2015a). Cross-sectional designs are weak for assessing causal processes, such as whether social media are an outcome or a predictor of political engagement. The answer to this question will determine whether social media will replicate, expand, or diminish inequalities in participation.

Finally, this research is distinctive in highlighting social media use for a population that tends to be disengaged from formal political life but is active outside institutional channels (Boulianne 2015a, 2016a; see the chapter by Raynauld, Lalancette, and Crandall in this volume). The 2015 federal election (Elections Canada n.d.) might have been an exception to these patterns, but the effect of social media on voting is unclear. Given youth’s greater use of social networking sites (Pew Research Center 2016; Statistics Canada 2014), the effects of social media on political attitudes and behaviours are expected to be larger than they are for older citizens. Social media have reshaped day-to-day life for younger citizens (see the chapter by Raynauld, Lalancette, and Crandall in this volume). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of social media and political participation suggests that the effects of social media are strongest among young people (Boulianne 2015a). Here I examine whether social media use is limited to youth already interested and engaged in politics, or can social media use transform its young users into being interested and engaged in politics? The question is important for addressing the role of social media in replicating, expanding, or diminishing gaps in participation that undermine democratic representation.

The effects of media depend on the nature of media use. The use of social media tends to be divided into information or news gathering, network building, and political expression (Boulianne 2017), but the three uses flow seamlessly together. On social networking sites, users can acquire political information or news by following or “friending” political candidates and news organizations. In 2016, approximately 62 percent of adult Americans acquired their news from social networking sites (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). These sites can be attractive to those who seek more
interaction with, rather than mere exposure to, political content (Bode 2012). This interaction could involve posting content, reposting or retweeting content, forwarding, liking, or “favouriting” content (Bode et al. 2014; Yamamoto, Kushin, and Dalisay 2015). Social networking sites are important venues for connecting with friends who are also interested in politics and want to discuss political issues. Social networking sites provide alternative spaces in which to discuss a broad range of issues that might not be on the government’s or media’s agenda (Boulianne 2011, 2015b). Social networking sites are also important for creating connections between citizens and political officials. These connections provide opportunities for individuals to discuss political issues with their elected representatives and for elected representatives to solicit citizens’ votes and opinions (Gainous and Wagner 2014; Kruikemeier 2014). These processes and features are probably most appealing to those already interested and engaged in the political process. Social networking sites merely ease the effort to become informed, to interact on political issues, as well as to connect with other politically interested and engaged friends and political officials. Social media are a tool for reinforcing participation among a select group of citizens. This process has been labelled the reinforcement or normalization hypothesis (Norris 2000; Theocharis and Quintelier 2016; Vissers and Stolle 2014). Social media effects are limited to those who are already part of the political process; if social media expand their engagement, then the gap between the engaged and the disengaged will expand.

Yet social networking sites can help to generate political interest and expand participation to a broader set of citizens. Indeed, these sites offer many opportunities for those who are not politically interested to be exposed to political content by monitoring their friends’ activities (Dimitrova et al. 2014; Tang and Lee 2013; Xenos, Vromen, and Loader 2014). Vaccari, Chadwick, and O’Loughlin (2015) suggest that this type of accidental exposure favours more community-oriented and discursive forms of engagement (e.g., political talk) rather than campaign-focused activities. Users can track their friends’ activities to find out what their friends think about various political issues (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2009). Users can trust this information because it is circulated by friends (Bode 2012). Social networking sites present opportunities to make connections with political candidates and political parties without making
long-term commitments to them. Such sites eliminate the middleman (e.g., news media) and connect voters directly to political candidates. For those with limited financial resources, limited appetites for news media, or busy work-family schedules, these online networking opportunities can be critical to enabling their engagement. In these ways, social media can provide opportunities for a new set of political actors to emerge and reduce inequalities in participation. These media enable a transformative process, turning users into interested and engaged citizens. This process has been labelled the mobilization hypothesis (Norris 2000; Theocharis and Quintelier 2016; Vissers and Stolle 2014).

Cross-sectional research cannot determine whether the correlation among variables is explained by a process of self-selection: that is, whether those who are more engaged select social networking sites or whether the use of these sites causes them to become more politically engaged (Bode 2012; Tang and Lee 2013; Valenzuela et al. 2009; Xenos et al. 2014). This nuance is important in addressing the question of whether social media will ameliorate inequalities in participation or whether they will reinforce or expand inequalities in participation by enabling a select group of people to engage in civic and political life.

The framing of reinforcement versus mobilization is a bit problematic because both processes can occur simultaneously but with clear differences for participation. The difference in outcome depends on the characteristics of the group affected by digital media use. For example, a select group of citizens already engaged could be further mobilized by social media, expanding their participation advantage and consequently increase participation inequality. Norris (2000) describes this process as a virtuous circle – media use enables further participation among those already engaged. This process would be evident in a series of positive and significant effects between prior levels of engagement and interest (moving forward prior engagement and interest will be designated as time 1) and social media use as well as between social media use and current or future political interest and engagement (moving forward current or future engagement and interest will be designated as time 2).

Another possibility is that this process would lead to transformative effects that reduce participation inequality by engaging a broader set of citizens in the political process. This process would be evident if there is
no significant relationship between prior levels of engagement and interest (time 1) on social media use and if there is a positive and significant relationship between social media use and current or future political interest and engagement (time 2). This process would be indicative of a transformational effect – transforming disengaged and uninterested citizens into engaged and interested citizens.

A handful of studies have collected longitudinal data to examine the effects of social media on political engagement (Bode et al. 2014; Dimitrova et al. 2014; Ekström, Olsson, and Shehata 2014; Holt et al. 2013; Towner 2013). However, these studies have a built-in assumption about mobilization/transformation and rarely find statistically significant effects (Boulianne 2015a). These studies consistently model social media use as a predictor of engagement and do not assess how prior engagement predicts social media use. As such, these studies do not examine reinforcement effects. This study is a key contribution to the literature because of its focus on reinforcement effects. It also explores the virtuous circle, a theory that remains untested in social media research. Two studies are distinct in this field of longitudinal research because they examine mobilization versus reinforcement effects: Vissers and Stolle (2014) and Theocharis and Quintelier (2016).

Vissers and Stolle (2014) offer a variety of findings exploring reinforcement versus mobilization effects using a sample of university students in Quebec. Their findings demonstrate that the relationship depends on the type of social media use and the type of engagement (Table 4.1). For example, when political activity is measured as signing petitions, social media use for political expression is not a significant predictor or outcome of engagement. Political expression on Facebook is a positive outcome and predictor of protest participation, such as participating in demonstrations or marches. The findings suggest a pattern of reinforcement, particularly a virtuous circle, that would reinforce inequalities in participation.

Theocharis and Quintelier (2016) also find that the type of social media use matters in whether the effects are significant and positive using a sample of fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds from Belgium (Table 4.1). When social media use is measured simply as having a Facebook account, social media are not a significant predictor or outcome of civic participation, such as membership in an association. When Facebook use is measured as the
number of friends on Facebook, social media use (time 1) is not a significant predictor of civic participation (time 2), but civic participation (time 1) does predict the number of friends on Facebook (time 2). Finally, they examine the time spent on social networking sites. This measure of use (time 1) does not have a significant effect on civic participation (time 2), but civic participation (time 1) has a positive effect on this measure of use (time 2). Both findings suggest a clear and consistent pattern of reinforcement.

Neither study highlights the important role of political interest in this process. Political interest is a key attitude driving political behaviour. Indeed, political interest is a necessary precondition for political participation, so changes in interest are necessary for changes in behaviour (Boulianne 2011). However, in the two studies, political interest is used as a statistical control and given little attention (Theocharis and Quintelier 2016; Vissers and Stolle 2014). Studies are inconsistent in controlling for political interest. When studies do control for it, they tend to be cross-sectional in design (e.g., Scherman, Arriagada, and Valenzuela 2015). Treating political interest as a secondary variable is not appropriate since many longitudinal studies document the critical importance of political interest and its reciprocal relationship with media use and engagement (Boulianne 2011, 2015b; Holt et al. 2013; Kruikemeier and Shehata 2016). Here I highlight the role of political interest in the process of reinforcement and mobilization.
CASE STUDY

I looked at whether social media are a significant, positive predictor and outcome of civic and political engagement among youth. The question is relevant for understanding the transformative effects of social media on engagement. My research builds on studies by Vissers and Stolle (2014) and Theocharis and Quintelier (2016). I examined multiple forms of social media use as well as different forms of political engagement; however, unlike other studies, my study highlights the role of political interest in this relationship. Given the precedents set by other studies, the key question is whether social media are reinforcing engagement among a select group of users and whether the reinforcement effect can further be described as a virtuous circle (Norris 2000). In a virtuous circle, social media use is both a positive predictor and an outcome of engagement. Social media mobilize citizens, but this mobilization is limited to those already interested and engaged in politics. This process would have dire consequences for inequalities in participation.

Methods

The data source that I used to conduct this work was a two-wave panel survey of a random sample of students and former students of MacEwan University (Edmonton). The first wave of the survey was completed in 2010, 2011, or 2013 (n = 875) while the students were enrolled part time or full time, following much of the research in this field (see Boulianne 2015a, 2017). Each year a list of current students was acquired from the Registrar’s Office and stratified by gender, and then a random sample of students was chosen to contact to participate. All participants were resurveyed in January–May 2014. Approximately 37 percent of the respondent pool were no longer students at this institution (see Boulianne 2016a), creating a pool of youth living across Canada. The response rate to the second wave of the survey was 60 percent (n = 495).

Findings

Descriptive statistics on political engagement and social media use demonstrate that this sample is comparable to other student or youth surveys in this field of research. The descriptive statistics are comparable to those
of Theocharis and Quintelier (2016) and Vissers and Stolle (2014) except in relation to the rate for protests and the portion of youth with Facebook accounts (Table 4.2). As mentioned, Vissers and Stolle used a survey of Quebec university students conducted in 2011 and 2012, whereas Theocharis and Quintelier used a survey of Belgian fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds conducted in 2012 and 2013. Approximately 37 percent of the sample at time 1 had signed a petition in the previous year, similar to Vissers and Stolle’s estimate of 39 percent based on the past six months (for both of their waves). The time periods for their surveys and the first wave of the current survey are similar; the similarity in frequencies is assurance of representativeness. In the current survey, at time 2 (2014), 28 percent of the sample had signed a petition.

Approximately 6–8 percent of the sample (depending on the wave) had engaged in protests (i.e., participated in marches or demonstrations during the past year), whereas the sample of Vissers and Stolle (2014) had a higher rate of this behaviour (22–23 percent depending on the time) based on

TABLE 4.2
Descriptive statistics on social media use and engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed petition</td>
<td>39%, 39%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>37%, 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marched/demonstrated</td>
<td>23%, 22%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>6%, 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted official</td>
<td>14%, 11%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>10%, 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group membership</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Averages:</td>
<td>Averages:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.68, 1.63</td>
<td>1.50, 1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>Average:</td>
<td>Average:</td>
<td>Averages:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>2.37, 2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook account</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>90%, 94%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of use of social networking sites</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>71% daily</td>
<td>82% daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post thoughts on social networking sites</td>
<td>52%, 64%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend/like official on Facebook</td>
<td>22%, 20%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the past six months. However, the spring of 2012 was an unusual period for Quebec university students as they took to the streets to protest tuition changes (see the chapter by Raynauld, Lalancette, and Tourigny-Koné in this volume). Other international surveys have set the incident rates at 7–8 percent of youth (Cohen et al. 2012; Holt et al. 2013), similar to the rates in my study.

Approximately 10–13 percent of the sample (depending on the wave) had contacted a public official in the past year, identical to the estimates of Vissers and Stolle (2014), providing assurance of representativeness. These estimates are similar to each other, and both surveys use Canadian data, but in a Swedish survey of eighteen to thirty-three-year-olds 6 percent had contacted an official (Holt et al. 2013). Canadian youth might be distinctive in their more frequent engagement in this behaviour.

As for civic participation, Theocharis and Quintelier (2016) asked fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds to indicate “yes” or “no” for membership in fifteen different groups, then added up the number of group memberships. The mean was 1.68 in wave 1 and 1.63 in wave 2 (range 0–9). In my survey, participants were provided with a list of different groups (similar to those of Theocharis and Quintelier) and asked about the number of group memberships across these different types (range 0–5 or more). The average at time 1 was 1.50 (SD = 1.22), and the average at time 2 was 1.65 (SD = 1.32). The estimates are similar despite the differing data collection periods, age groups, national contexts, and questions.

Political interest is measured on a four-point scale in Theocharis and Quintelier (2016; average 2.01) and in Vissers and Stolle (2014; average 2.28). Political interest is measured as a five-point scale in my study with an average of 2.37 (SD = .96) at time 1 and 2.62 (SD = .98) at time 2. Despite the different number of response options, the averages are similar.

Theocharis and Quintelier (2016), as well as Vissers and Stolle (2014), ask about social media at both waves (time 1 and time 2), whereas I asked only about social media use at time 2 (collected in 2014). Because of this design, I can address questions about reinforcement and a virtuous circle, an underexamined hypothesis in the literature. The mobilization hypothesis has been well tested in the existing literature (Boulianne 2015a). Theocharis and Quintelier asked about having a Facebook account (90 percent had an account at wave 1 and 94 percent at wave 2). For Vissers and Stolle, 92
percent of the sample reported having a Facebook account. This line of questioning was repeated in my survey. The entire sample had Facebook accounts, reflecting the state of social media use among youth in 2014.

Participants were asked about the frequency of using social media in the past week, whereas Theocharis and Quintelier (2016) asked about the frequency of use over one month, but they found that 71 percent of the sample used social networking sites daily. In my study, 82 percent of the sample used these sites at least once per day. Again the difference reflects the growing use of social media in 2014 compared with 2012–13.

Theocharis and Quintelier (2016) asked about the number of friends using a 200-person interval, for example 0–199 and a top category of 1,000 friends, whereas I used a 100-person interval with a top category of 500 friends or more. Their average was 345 friends at time 1 and 425 friends at time 2. Vissers and Stolle (2014) used a 100-friend interval and found the averages to be 300 and 399. The comparable statistic in my study is 200 friends (SD = 200).

Borrowing from Rainie et al. (2012), I also asked about the use of social networking sites to post one's thoughts or comments on a political issue. The question was similar to that of Vissers and Stolle (2014). The questions tapped into interaction on social media about political issues. Based on a 2011 survey using this question, the Pew Research Center reports that 42 percent of American youth posted their thoughts or comments about an issue on a social networking site (Rainie et al. 2012). I found that 51 percent of youth engaged in this activity in 2014. In Vissers and Stolle's sample, approximately 52 percent of students had engaged in this activity at time 1 (2011) and 64 percent at time 2 (2012, a period of intense engagement for Quebec students).

Many studies have examined the use of social media to like, friend, or link to political candidates or parties (Cohen et al. 2012; Holt et al. 2013; Rainie et al. 2012; Tang and Lee 2013; Towner 2013). In the original survey, these two groups were asked separately, but to offer comparability to Vissers and Stolle (2014) the variable was transformed into having a connection to either a political party or a political official or candidate. Approximately 18.5 percent of the sample had this type of connection, similar to Vissers and Stolle's incident rate (20–22 percent).
For the final multivariate analysis, I examined the relationships among political engagement and interest prior to and after social media use, controlling for age (four groups defined by three-year intervals), gender, and mother’s education. Whereas the gender control is standard in this area of research, inclusion of the mother’s education was an effort to replicate Vissers and Stolle’s (2014) model, and the inclusion of age was a necessity because this group contained a wider range of youth than that in Vissers and Stolle or Theocharis and Quintelier (2016). Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to create a partial correlation matrix of the variables, controlling for demographic variables (similar to Theocharis 2011). Table 4.3 presents the partial correlation matrix. For simplicity, the table does not include the correlations among social media measures. In addition, it does not include the correlations among engagement variables. However, as one would expect, the different measures of social media use (and the different measures of engagement) are highly correlated with each other.

As a collective set of findings, there are twenty tests of whether prior engagement or political interest predicts social media use (reinforcement). Almost all of these coefficients are positive, but only seven of these relationships are statistically significant. This collection of findings appeases concerns about a reinforcement (or virtuous circle) process among youth. For the most part, prior levels of engagement and interest do not determine social media use among youth. However, there are some clear exceptions.

As noted by Vissers and Stolle (2014), protesting (participating in marches and demonstrations) is a distinctive political activity in its relationship to social media. Unlike in Vissers and Stolle, the use of social media to post opinions or the overall frequency of use neither predicts nor is a significant outcome of protesting. Prior protesting (time 1) positively and significantly predicts the number of friends on social media (time 2) (.128, p = 0.034) and the use of social media to like or follow a candidate or party (time 2) (.300, p < .001). Both social media measures represent social network building or social connections. The number of friends on social media (.183, p < .001) and connecting to a candidate or party on social media (.134, p = 0.021) positively and significantly relate to current protesting (time 2). In sum, the use of social media for social connections
**TABLE 4.3**  
Partial correlation matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How many such groups do you belong to?</th>
<th>Contacted a politician or elected government official</th>
<th>Signed a petition online or on paper</th>
<th>Participated in a demonstration or march (protest)</th>
<th>How interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>Time 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a typical week, how often do you use social networking sites?</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p value</td>
<td>.688</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.603</td>
<td>.551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking only about your Facebook profile, how many friends do you have?</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>0.095</td>
<td>0.195</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p value</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.317</td>
<td>.829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever used Facebook to friend or like elected officials, candidates for office, or other political figures OR a political party?</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>0.173</td>
<td>0.183</td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>0.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p value</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you ever use social networking sites to ... post your own thoughts or comments on an issue?</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>p value</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Pairwise $n = 266$-$372$, controls for age group, gender, mother’s schooling.
(two measures) predicts and is an outcome of protesting. These findings on protesting suggest a pattern of reinforcement, highlighting a virtuous circle, when it comes to social connections. As further evidence of reinforcement, the sizes of the coefficients for the reinforcement process are larger than the sizes of the effects of mobilization/transformation for protesting (.300 versus .134). The combination of social media use for liking a candidate, official, or party and a focus on protesting provides the strongest support for reinforcement, particularly a virtuous circle.

Connecting to a political candidate, official, or party is a distinctive form of social media use. Prior levels of engagement (all four measures) and political interest significantly affect liking or following a political candidate, official, or party (time 1) (coefficients are .173, \( p = .003; .246, p < .001; .183, p = .003; .300, p < .001 \), and as mentioned .300, \( p < .001 \) for prior protesting). This social media activity also significantly relates to engagement (time 2) (coefficients are .183, \( p = .001; .207, p < .001; .193, p = .001; .313, p < .001 \); and as mentioned .134, \( p = .021 \) for protesting). Those most interested and engaged use social media for this purpose, and this use leads to further engagement. For this type of use, there is clearly a pattern of reinforcement, highlighting a virtuous circle.

Signing petitions is also distinctive in that every type of social media use predicts this behaviour. Using social media frequently (.155, \( p = .003 \)), having many friends on social media (.106, \( p = .044 \)), connecting to a candidate or party (as mentioned, .193, \( p = .001 \)), and posting opinions on social media (.190, \( p < .001 \)) positively and significantly relate to signing petitions. This activity is also unique because having signed petitions in the past does not affect three of the four types of social media use (liking candidates, officials, or parties is the exception, as mentioned). In terms of signing petitions, there is strong evidence of a process of mobilization/transformation.

The use of social media for posting opinions is an outcome and predictor of political interest. Prior political interest affects the use of social media to express opinions (.150, \( p = .005 \)), and this particular use correlates with current political interest (.151, \( p = .005 \)). Although this pattern supports a process of reinforcement, for other types of social media use it was not evident. Political interest does not affect the frequency of social media use or the number of friends on social media, nor is political interest an
outcome of these two types of social media use. In terms of political interest, the findings are mixed.

The number of group memberships, or civic participation as Theocharis and Quintelier (2016) label it, at time 1 does not predict three of the four social media use measures at time 2 (the exception, as mentioned above, is connecting to a candidate, official, or party). In contrast, for three of the four social media use measures (the exception is frequency of social media use), use correlates with the number of group memberships (coefficients are .195, p < .001; .109, p = .044; and as mentioned .183, p = .001 for connecting to a candidate or party). Again this is evidence in favour of a process of mobilization/transformation.

The findings, as a collection, challenge the conclusion of a process of reinforcement (Table 4.4). Of the twenty relationships testing reinforcement, only seven of the coefficients are significant. The exceptions are largely explained by social connections, especially connections to parties, officials, and candidates and to a smaller extent the number of friends.

The number of friends on social media reinforces protest behaviour. Although the measure is not considered by Vissers and Stolle (2014), it is consistent with their findings suggesting that social media use benefits those already engaged in protests. As mentioned, they find a positive, reciprocal relationship between political expression on Facebook and protesting. My study did not replicate this finding for political expression, but it did find this pattern for connecting to parties and candidates. These findings align with the reinforcement hypothesis.

Vissers and Stolle (2014) find that social media use does not predict and is not an outcome of signing petitions. In contrast, I found that all four types of social media use predict signing petitions. In other words, they do not find any relationship between signing petitions and social media use, whereas my study suggests an effect of transformation/mobilization. The two studies are consistent in finding minimal effects of prior behaviour regarding petitions on social media use (the exception is liking candidates or officials). Again the findings align with an effect of transformation/mobilization rather than reinforcement when it comes to signing petitions.

Both activities are examples of participation (attractive to youth) outside existing institutional channels (see the chapter by Raynauld, Lalancette,
### TABLE 4.4
Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many such groups do you belong to?</th>
<th>Contacted a politician or elected government official</th>
<th>Signed a petition online or on paper</th>
<th>Participated in a demonstration or march (protest)</th>
<th>How interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In a typical week, how often do you use social networking sites?</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
<td>Mobilization/Transformation</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking only about your Facebook profile, how many friends do you have?</td>
<td>Mobilization/transformation</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
<td>Mobilization/Transformation</td>
<td>Reinforcement/virtuous circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever used Facebook to friend or like elected officials, candidates for office, or other political figures OR a political party?</td>
<td>Reinforcement/virtuous circle</td>
<td>Reinforcement/virtuous circle</td>
<td>Reinforcement/virtuous circle</td>
<td>Reinforcement/virtuous circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you ever use social networking sites to ... post your own thoughts or comments on an issue?</td>
<td>Mobilization/transformation</td>
<td>Mobilization/transformation</td>
<td>Mobilization/Transformation</td>
<td>No relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and Crandall in this volume). As such, the distinct patterns of signing petitions versus protesting are surprising. One possible explanation of these different findings is that protest behaviour occurs offline, whereas signing petitions can occur online or offline but tends to be online. Another explanation is the different level of effort required to engage in these activities. Signing petitions is a low-effort activity compared with showing up to offline protests. One cannot decipher from the data whether there are distinct patterns in these activities or whether they represent an online versus offline divide in terms of mobilization versus reinforcement.

In terms of group membership, the findings are opposite to those of Theocharis and Quintelier (2016). They find that, for two of three social media uses, prior group membership predicts social media use (reinforcement). In my study, prior group membership only affects connecting to a candidate, official, or party. Specifically, the findings suggest that prior group membership has little impact on frequency of social media use and number of friends, the two social media use measures used by Theocharis and Quintelier. My study suggests an effect of mobilization/transformation.

**TRENDING IN CANADA**

The focus on ordinary citizens addresses a clear gap in existing research on social media in the Canadian context (see the chapter by Raynauld, Lalancette, and Crandall in this volume. This research is distinctive in documenting the effects of social media use for a group that tends to be disengaged from formal political life but is active outside institutional channels (see chapter by Raynauld, Lalancette, and Crandall in this volume). The different measures of social media use and engagement offer a multitude of tests on reinforcement/virtuous circle and mobilization/transformation processes. The findings offer some clear implications for social movement organizations, interest groups, and political campaigns. However, the implications are different for these different organizations. For protest-oriented groups, social media use among young people activates a virtuous circle. Social media comprise an effective tool for engaging young supporters already involved in protests and other activities. Social media can be used to mobilize their future protest behaviour as well.

For petition-oriented groups, social media effects have a different set of implications. Social media use predicts, rather than is an outcome of,
signing petitions. This is the strongest evidence of a distinctively transformative effect in which diverse sets of youth engage in politics, specifically signing petitions, because of social media use. The findings suggest that such use can expand the number of youth engaged in politics by offering low-effort forms of engagement such as signing petitions.

Social media are an effective tool for expanding group ties and thus can be used to expand the membership bases of social movements and interest groups. Social media serve to engage a new set of young political actors. Other than the generic measure of frequency of social media use, all other measures of their use point to increases in group memberships. In sum, the results affirm an effect of mobilization/transformation in terms of civic participation. Social media enable new relationships with civic and political groups.

For political campaigns, the results suggest a virtuous circle – social media mobilize a select group of citizens to engage further in the political process. These patterns are strongest when we examine social media use to follow candidates, officials, and parties. Those who engage in such use are not a representative set of citizens. They are distinctive in being highly engaged and very interested in the political process. Social media might not transform apathetic citizens into voters. Election campaigners who hope to tap into these likely voters can scan their own and their opponents’ lists of followers/friends to try to solicit voters. This group is already well connected to the political process, so campaigners need not worry about the barriers of apathy.

In terms of posting opinions online, the people who engage in this form of social media use are highly interested in politics but do not have well-established histories of participation. This pattern is consistent with existing literature (see Vaccari, Chadwick, and O’Loughlin 2015). This group of people could represent a key demographic for social movement organizations, interest groups, and election campaigns in terms of mobilizing or transforming participation. This group is not apathetic but not fully engaged either. Its members are waiting for an invitation to participate, particularly in discursive ways, such as deliberative events or public consultations on political issues (Vaccari et al. 2015). Social media use not only transforms political engagement but also enables new, more discursive political action repertoires.
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