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ACCIDENTAL ONLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ESCAPISM IN ONLINE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Introduction

The effect of online media on political participation has received substantial attention (Boulianne, 2009). As soon as significant numbers of citizens started using the Internet, observers began to wonder how the new medium would affect citizens' options for engagement within the political process. Optimistic observers associate a number of positive effects with online media: new media provide easy access to an unprecedented wealth of information, facilitate the association with like-minded citizens, and support the organization and coordination of interest groups (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010).

Social media, particularly, reduce barriers to public self-expression and could provide non-elite citizens with access to the public agenda (Towner & Dulio, 2011). Yet scholars disagree on whether these new opportunities would mobilize previously inactive citizens (Krueger, 2002) or primarily foster the political engagement of already engaged citizens (Norris, 2001).

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In this paper, we will build on these perspectives by focusing on a phenomenon we term “accidental online political engagement”. We will introduce the concept of escapist media use to online political participation (OPP) research. Based on a quantitative survey of 762 German Facebook users, we examine how escapist Facebook use moderates the effect of various forms of Facebook use on OPP. Thus, we will answer the following research question: *Does escapism impede or facilitate the effect of Facebook uses on OPP?*

Escapism and OPP

Escapism is seen as a key motivation of media use that describes a temporary escape from everyday life into the world of media. The concept suggests that mass media can fulfill individuals’ needs to distract themselves from everyday life by turning “to the dreamlike world of the mass media for substitute gratifications” (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, p. 379). Escapism is usually conceptualized as an avoidance-oriented coping mechanism (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2009). Media use can be driven by an escapist desire to withdraw from everyday life (Katz & Foulkes, 1962), to draw attention away from negative self-awareness (Moskalenko & Heine, 2003), or to regulate unsolicited emotional states (Kubey, 1986). Escapism has received little attention in the context of social media. Yet platforms such as social networking sites (SNS) provide many opportunities to engage in escapism.

On SNS, even users geared towards escapist motives may be lured into OPP without initial intent. Our research model examines the effect of three distinct Facebook uses on OPP: (a) consumptive Facebook use, e.g. checking the newsfeed (H1), (b) participatory Facebook use, e.g. liking or sharing posts (H2), and (c) productive Facebook use, such as writing public posts or uploading pictures (H3). We control for an influence of political interest (H4) and internal political efficacy (H5) on OPP. We then test for a moderating effect of escapism on the relationships between all three forms of Facebook use and OPP on Facebook (H 6a-c). Finally, we control for the age, gender, education, income, and political orientation of participants. Figure 1 shows the research model.

Methods

Our analysis is based on an online survey of 762 German Facebook users. The survey sample was provided by a certified market research institute. A gender and age composition of the sample representative of the population was ensured by defining quotas for these attributes. During March 2016, Internet users in Germany were invited to participate in the survey by e-mail and 1013 users responded. The participants received a small monetary incentive. After filtering for Facebook profile ownership, 762 participants remained for the regression analysis.

The questionnaire surveyed the participants on their Facebook use, socio-demographics, escapism, political interest, knowledge, efficacy and orientation, and online and offline political participation. We used established measures with sufficient

Cronbach's α for all scales and applied linear regression analysis to answer the research question. For each construct in the data set, we carried out a principal component analysis (with SPSS) and saved the factor scores with the "Regression" command. The resulting components were then included in a linear regression model with 3 steps: Model 1 includes all independent variables and control variables but not escapism and the interactions, Model 2 adds escapism, and Model 3 adds the interaction effects. The regressions were carried out with Stata (version 14) using robust standard errors to account for heteroscedasticity. We also tested for multicollinearity and none of the VIFs exceeded 5.

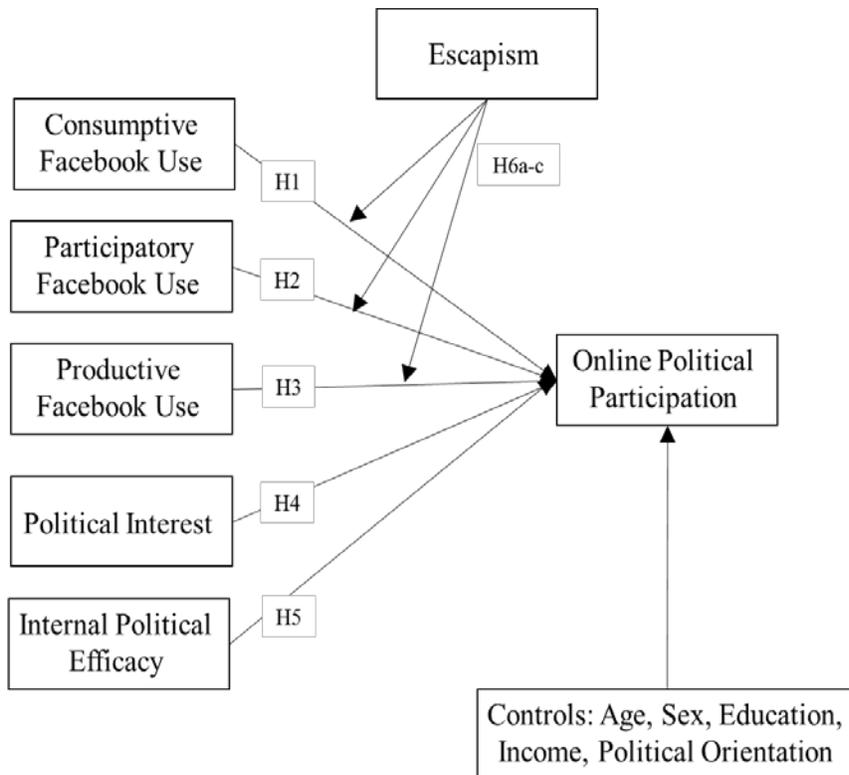


Figure 1. Research model

Findings

Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis. As seen in Model 1, both political interest and political efficacy exert a positive influence on OPP. Consumptive Facebook use has a small negative effect while productive Facebook use shows the strongest influence of all variables considered.

Adding escapism increases the explained variance by one percent. The variable itself has a positive effect on OPP. The more Facebook users indicate that they use the platform for escapist purposes, the higher they score on OPP. Finally, adding the interaction terms increases the explained variance by one more percent. The interaction terms of consumptive and productive Facebook use with escapism significantly

influence OPP. The interaction effect of escapism with consumptive Facebook use is negative, strengthening the already negative effect of consumptive Facebook use on OPP. On the other hand, escapism boosts the positive effect of productive Facebook use on OPP.

According to these results, even SNS uses geared towards distraction foster OPP, especially when users engage in productive Facebook uses in general. This phenomenon we term “accidental online political engagement”: users visit the SNS to find distraction, but then get lured into some form of OPP by the content they encounter online. Facebook users geared towards consumptive uses, instead, will experience a displacement effect, with escapism further lowering their frequency of OPP.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Gender</i>	-0.06	-0.06	-0.05
<i>Age</i>	0.00	0.00	0.02
<i>Education</i>	0.01	0.01	0.01
<i>Income</i>	0.02	0.01	0.01
<i>Political Interest</i>	0.13***	0.13***	0.12***
<i>Political Orientation</i>	-0.03	-0.04	-0.04
<i>(Internal) Political Efficacy</i>	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***
<i>FB Consumption</i>	-0.09*	-0.11*	-0.10*
<i>FB Participation</i>	0.03	0.03	0.05
<i>FB Production</i>	0.57***	0.55***	0.45***
<i>Escapism</i>		0.08*	0.08*
<i>Escapism * Consumption</i>			-0.11*
<i>Escapism * Participation</i>			0.01
<i>Escapism * Production</i>			0.19**
<i>Constant</i>	-0.11	-0.12	-0.22
<i>R²</i>	0.41	0.42	0.43

N=762; Dependent variable: OPP; Standardized regression coefficients are displayed; *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

Table 2. Linear regression results.

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