HOW MOBILE MEDIA ENABLED AND LIMITED ONLINE CIVIC PARTICIPATION AMONG U.S. LOW INCOME YOUNG PEOPLE DURING THE PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY

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Introduction: Digital and mobile media and political expression

Digital media have provided important spaces for self-expression among youth, and in recent years many scholars have explored the ways that political and civic expressions occur in youthful online contexts (Graef 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2020). Many focus their analyses on what happens online in social media spaces (see, e.g. Lane et al. 2018; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018). Existing research often overlooks how young people, particularly those from Latinx, Black, Indigenous, Asian American, and White young people living in low-income neighborhoods, find their way into these civic and political online spaces, particularly if they are newcomers to political and civic action (but see Tufekci & Wilson 2012; Lee 2020).

Research is revealing the ways that the pandemic heightened societal inequities and deepened the challenges facing people who are experiencing multiple intersecting forms of marginalization (Milan, Trere, & Masiero, 2021). This paper, which had its origins in two interdisciplinary youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects seeking to support young people in leadership and online civic development, offered an opportunity to better understand how these inequities played out in the lives of 35 young people who were experiencing marginalization and who were newcomers to politics. The central research question of this paper is: what are the prospects for and barriers to online civic participation activities among young people who, along with their families, are experiencing economic precarity and other forms of marginalization?

Methods:

We undertook a comparative and cross-platform analysis, focusing on young people who had been civically active prior to the pandemic but who dropped out of these activities during the period between March 2020 to March 2021. We coded communication devices used (phone, laptop, or both), contexts of use (shared technologies, wifi, household arrangements and expectations), and civic and political experiences with peers in on- and offline settings. We also coded *named withdrawal* when a young person stated that they were going to withdraw from participation and *silent withdrawal*, when a young person stopped responding to texts, calls, tags, pings, or other forms of invitation.

Findings:

Previous research has found that offering invitations and incentives for young people to get involved in activities aligned with their passions have been sufficient motivators for newcomers to participation (Kappaler, Festic, & Latzer 2020). However, our analysis found that these were not sufficient during the situation of COVID.

The organizers made several adjustments so that the meetings at the heart of the online civic and political endeavors would better align with young peoples' scheduling demands. Meeting times were shorter and scheduled with fewer people - often one-on-one with a mentor - accommodating the young person's school and family commitments, and sometimes physically bringing the mentor to the student offline. The organizers made available gift cards to favorite food places, and found that online games drew young people who longed for social connection.

Several barriers to participation quickly emerged, however. For seven of the young people who had been longtime participants in civic and political leadership activities, every virtual meeting took place via a hand-held mobile phone, as these young people did not have access to a laptop or tablet, either because they did not have one or because a device was shared among several family members. Four of these young people were always in the company of a younger sibling, cousin, or neighbor, thus limiting their ability to participate. One 16-year-old female multitasking child care provider let the group know that she needed to withdraw from the project after the first week; another attended for three weeks and then returned texts intermittently before dropping out entirely. A third female of the same age and cultural background withdrew because she was balancing a part time job to support her family, caring for younger children, and schoolwork. A male multitasking child care provider attended one meeting and then did not answer texts and phone calls. Another male continued to participate, almost always via phone and from the restaurant his parents owned. And a male who had emerged as a peer leader had to drop out when his family needed him to get a frontline job at Wal-Mart to help the family pay rent. Most did not have time to meet, let alone create materials for online engagement, research community issues, or participate in online meetings with legislators.

Discussion:

Among young people who were interested in leveraging social media for political and civic expression and who had been involved in similar activities in the past, the picture of participation that emerged during COVID was decidedly bleak. There were simply too many conflicting demands on their time. Some expressed their regret, but most - more than half of the original 35 participants - simply ceased their participation entirely.

Thus, they were continually choosing not to respond to prompts from adults and peers who, in pre-pandemic times, had been sources of emotional as well as social and political support. The losses were not only to the civic and political realm, therefore, but were also representative of losses to mental and social well-being.

Our analysis suggests that, in spite of the great deal of attention focused on the individual political and civic expressions of young people during the pandemic, those stories may have obscured the stories of those who *ceased* to be present in such activities. Building on concepts of "presence bleed" (Gregg, 2011, 2014) and "spectral modalities" (Watson, Lupton & Michael 2021), terms that reference the "leaky boundaries" adults experienced between home and work before and during the pandemic, we argue that young people in our projects experienced what we term *tethered compliance:* young people found themselves having to negotiate new demands between their schoolwork, home life, families, and their own well-being, and their mobiles were devices that tethered them to those who made heightened demands on them. Thus their mobiles amplified stressors that had existed *before* the pandemic and foregrounded challenges around how they would or would not comply with those making various competing demands.

Conclusion:

In pre-pandemic contexts, low income young people engaging in civic and political activities online and off were often leaving behind the responsibilities that shape their everyday lives, including child care, work, school, and family responsibilities, in order to participate. And in these situations of co-presence with like-minded peers and adults, they were able to build community that contributed to both well-being and political efficacy.

We argue that even without the extreme constraints of the pandemic, those interested in working with young people from lower income communities, particularly for supporting political expression, need to consider the constraints of tethered compliance that shape the lives of young people in low income communities. Co-presence is key to collective political and civic work. Until we address inequities and ensure that young people can be co-present with their peers and with caring community members, technologies will only exacerbate rather than bridge current divides in political participation.

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