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Gender and Political Participation: News Consumption, Political Efficacy and Interpersonal Communication

WEN Nainan, HAO Xiaoming, and Cherian GEORGE

Abstract

With the backdrop of women's political progress in recent decades, this study was designed to answer two related questions. First, is there a gender gap in political participation among young males and females with similar educational background and equal access to political news and information? Second, how do factors such as news consumption, political efficacy, and political discussion interact with the relationship between gender and political participation? Through a survey of university students in Singapore, this study showed that females were less politically knowledgeable, less politically efficacious, and less likely to engage in political discussion and in offline and online political activities than males. Results further showed that females depended on political efficacy and discussion, whereas males were more likely to be motivated by political efficacy in their political participation. News consumption on the new and social media platforms also appeared to contribute to political participation for both males and females. Implications of this study were discussed.

Keywords

Asian women; political efficacy; political discussion; political participation; new media

Introduction

Women have made much political progress in recent decades (Amirell, 2012). They have gradually started to participate in a number of political arenas that require an activist approach and have become competitive in nature. They hold a growing number of political offices and sometimes surpass men in voter turnout (Paxton et al., 2007; Lovenduski, 2005). Women also equal men's level of activity in attending political rallies, wearing buttons, working in campaigns (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993), and attending protests (Verba et al., 1995).

Increased political activity by women can be attributed mainly to their better education and improved social status, but other factors need to be examined as well. For example, the increasing use of new information and communication technologies in recent years has provided fresh opportunities to accelerate political participation. The Internet, social media and mobile phones have greatly enhanced the information and communication capacities of women, expanding their presence in public and political arenas. Women leaders now use new information and communication technologies to get elected, engage with their constituencies, and channel voices of the public in legislative processes. Women's groups and civil society organizations innovate by using technologies to disseminate information and generate discussion to influence public policy.

Despite women's progress in political activism, they still participate less so than men in other forms of political engagement. Compared to men, women are less knowledgeable on political issues, are less interested in politics, and are less likely to have opinions on political issues (Verba et al., 1997; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996;

Rapoport, 1981). Moreover, many of these differences have remained relatively constant across continents and over time (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011; Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003; Lee, 2000; Hansen, 1997).

The persistent differences between men and women in political attitudes and behaviors deserve the special attention of political and other social scientists. Political life embraces all aspects of human activities in managing communal, societal and national affairs and can hardly be defined by voting and activist practices alone. Although highly valued in democracy, voting is a private activity and a very easy type of political participation. People are often motivated to vote by a sense of responsibility or duty and may not have the skills or attitudes required for other forms of political engagement.

Political activism is a necessary ingredient of public life, but only a relatively small number of citizens, men or women, are political activists. Engagement in such activism depends on personal traits and tastes rather than the mobilization efforts of political parties or candidates (Atkeson, 2003). Therefore, increasing participation at the voting level cannot be simply generalized to other forms of political and civic participation. Many types of political and civic engagement are often carried out through communication, dialogue, and discussion in daily life, which are components of the political system in a society. When women lag behind men in participating in these aspects of political life, either because of personal preferences or systemic handicaps, their representation in the political world is undermined, no matter how large the female voter turnout.

In line with such an argument, this study attempts to answer two related questions regarding female participation in political and civic life. The first is related to literature regarding the impact of education on political participation. It is argued that education functions as a causal mechanism that increases civic skills and participation (e.g., Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Verba et al., 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). While women were disadvantaged in political and civic engagement due to the gender gap in education, the global gender gap in education is closing (World Economic Forum, 2011).

Therefore, we are interested in finding out if gaps in political participation persist between males and females with similar educational background. More importantly, we would like to examine the issue in the Asian context, where women have been traditionally disadvantaged in political matters. It will be significant if we can find out if the gaps can be bridged by equal educational opportunities. Also, we seek to find out if gender gaps still exist in political participation when education is constant. Further, we will attempt to see what factors determine the gender gaps in political participation, if such gaps exist, and how men and women may be influenced by such factors.

Gendered Political Participation

While women have made substantial gains in wielding political influence, they have been found to participate less so in politics across various western nations, where gender gaps have otherwise reduced in various spheres (Burns, 2007; Norris, 2002; Schlozman et al., 1999; Schlozman et al., 1995). Women have been less informed of and less interested in political issues, and less frequently engaged in political discussions than men. They are found to be less active in formal participation in politics (Bimber, 1999; Norris, 2002; Schlozman et al., 1999; Verba et al., 1997; Schlozman et al., 1995); they have less direct contact with government officials (Lehman et al., 1994) and are less likely to participate in collective action (Coffe & Bozendahl, 2010).

Several explanations have been proposed regarding gender differences, such as due to socioeconomic resources, educational attainment, access to the labor market and marital status. Women compared to men have less formal education, which is related to political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) had earlier suggested that women's advancements in education should decrease the knowledge gap between men and women. However, they found that the probabilities for correct answers to political questions based on educational levels actually decreased slight-

ly both among men and women during this time, and in particular, among women.

Other factors that have been explored in past research to account for gender gaps in political engagement include employment, income, and division of labor. Employment outside the home provides politically relevant experiences but a smaller percentage of women, compared to men, are in the labor force (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2000). Women in the labor force are also likely to work in less “politically impinged” jobs than men (Luskin, 1990). Unmarried women have lower incomes than unmarried men and income is also associated with political knowledge (Magnusson, 2010). Because of childcare responsibilities, women have much less time for political activity and spend less of their time in talking about politics with others (Sapiro, 1983; Jennings & Niemi, 1981).

The gender gap theory regarding political participation, however, is not free of challenge. Studies by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996; 2000) have shown that women are socialized to be more involved with and understand local politics better than national politics. They are as knowledgeable as men about local party issues, and are more likely than men to know the names of the heads of local school systems. They are now equally or more active in community activities, grassroots movements, and NGOs than men (Enns et al., 2008; Burns et al., 2001).

Different Paths to Political Participation

Despite research interests regarding gender differences in political participation, our knowledge remains limited about the impact of psychological factors, such as internal political efficacy and external factors, for instance, media use and interpersonal communication regarding differences between males and females in political and civic engagement. Existing research focusing on gender and politics leads us to consider that women do not participate less than men, but do

so differently. A number of factors have been suggested to influence men's and women's different types of political engagement.

Media Usage

Media use is considered a key determinant in civic and political participation as this can serve multiple functions and lead to different effects in terms of political communication. Consumption of newspapers and Internet news has been repeatedly proven to positively affect various forms of civic and political measures, including political knowledge, interest, efficacy, voting and participation (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Zhang et al., 2010; Jeffres et al., 2007; Wang, 2007; Scheufele, 2002; Weaver & Drew, 2001; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; McLeod et al., 1999). Research findings about the relationship between television news-viewing and political participation have been less consistent, but at least the informational use of television news has been found to directly or indirectly influence political and civic participation in a positive manner (Jung et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2011; Zhang & Chia, 2006).

Regarding the relationship between gender and media use, a few studies lead us to believe that the impact of media use on men and women's political engagement is likely to be different. Bimber (1999) suggested that women seemed to be less likely than men to be daily consumers of news from newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet. The gender gap is greater for the Internet than other sources of news and information. Owen and Dennis (1992) found that boys were more likely to collect political information from the television and newspapers than girls, therefore, media exposure proved to have a greater effect and enhanced the political sophistication of boys rather than girls. Hayes and Makkai (1996) observed that men's political attitudes and voting behavior appeared to be influenced by the agenda-setting effect of the media, but not that of women. In addition, Bimber (1999) found that women were less likely to contact the government than men and this gender difference became larger on the Internet than in other older forms of communication.

Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is defined as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process” (Campbell et al., 1954: 187). The concept of political efficacy is composed of two dimensions—internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy is individuals’ perceived self-competence to understand and participate in politics (Balch, 1974), while external efficacy refers to the belief that one is effective when participating in politics, such as getting a response from the government to one’s demand (Niemi et al., 1991). Political efficacy has been considered one of the most important psychological constructs influencing various types of political participation, such as political campaigning, contacting political officials, and voting (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Delli Carpini, 2004; Cohen et al., 2001).

Despite profound structural and cultural changes all over the world during the past century, the gender gap in political efficacy is surprisingly substantial and persistent. Access to education has been identified as a key determinant for enhancing women’s interest in politics and there are limited opportunities to do so for them and to acquire the required cognitive and information-processing skills (Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003; Verba et al., 1995). However, Beckwith (1986) found that although education did enhance women’s sense of internal political efficacy, they still did not feel competent to do so, unlike their male counterparts. Although women’s roles in the domestic sphere as housewives was considered a limitation on their opportunities to discuss politics (Kay et al., 1987), their increased participation in the labor force has not helped to reduce the gender gap in internal political efficacy (Beckwith, 1986). Marshall and others (2007) found that women derived less political confidence than men from high-status occupations even in some of the most developed modern societies of North America. They argued that their gains in political self-confidence, which otherwise may be expected from women’s advances in realms of education and employment were offset by responsibilities of motherhood.

Political Discussion

Interpersonal communication is considered an important source of political information and a predictor of civic and political participation (Zhang et al., 2010). Such communication takes place between family members, friends, and others with whom there is regular contact. Political discussion within personal networks has a positive impact on political behaviors (Mondak, 1995; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991). Nonetheless, men and women may form different habits of political discussion. Portney et al. (2009) found that talking to parents about politics enhances political engagement among young women more than it does among young men. On the one hand, as women are more likely than men to value connections and relationships with others, it is rational to expect that close friends and associates play a role in women's political practices (Ruddick, 1989; Belenky et al., 1986; Sapiro, 1983). On the other hand, previous research has conclusively demonstrated that men may be more politically active than women. They discuss politics more frequently with significant others and are more likely to engage in political proselytizing and in expressing their enjoyment in related discussions (Hansen, 1997; Verba et al., 1997; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995).

The existing literature shows that the three factors discussed above—media use, political efficacy and political discussion—not only affect people's attitudes and behaviors in political participation in general, but may also help to explain similarities and differences between men and women in political and civic engagement. However, such research conducted in the western context in the last century, did not take into consideration the fast growth of the Internet, which may have changed the landscape of political participation. This paper examines college students' political and civic engagement in Singapore and is a continuation of an earlier research on the impact of various factors on female political participation in a different social context by taking into consideration two important changes: the advancement of new media and the ever growing equality of men and women with respect to educational opportunities.

Singapore is an economically advanced and highly wired city-state. Around 82 percent of all households have Internet access at home, and more than one-third (34 percent) also use Internet-enabled mobile phones (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2011). Women in Singapore have made dramatic progress in politics in recent years. However, gender gaps persist in a variety of political arenas. Women today remain significantly underrepresented in government and parliament. Of the total 84 elected members of parliament in Singapore, only 18 were female. In 2010, women's employment rate (53 percent) for all age groups over 15 is still lower than men (71 percent, MRSD & SDS, 2011). Despite a decreasing wage gap between men and women, women still earned 26.7 percent less than men in 2010 (MCYS, 2011). Scholars are concerned that the gender gap in political and civic engagement may grow wider on the new online platform as a result of the digital divide between the genders (Norris, 2002; Bimber, 1999). Against such a backdrop, this study tries to assess how political efficacy, media use and political discussion are associated with political and civic participation among men and women of similar educational background. By controlling the effect of education, we hope we can better examine the impact of media use, political efficacy, and discussions regarding political participation undertaken by men and women.

Method

The present study was carried out through a survey of university students in Singapore in January 2012. The sample comprised 904 students from various faculties who attended a general education class that included science, engineering, business, humanities, and social sciences. All the students were Singapore citizens or permanent residents and were invited to participate in the survey and given a link to a website where the survey questionnaire was posted. The respondents were offered a shopping voucher of SGD \$10 (= USD

\$7) as incentive. In the end, we received 397 completed responses, resulting in a response rate of 44 percent.

Dependent Variables

There were three dependent variables in this study—offline political and civic engagement, online political and civic engagement and political knowledge. To measure offline and online political and civic engagement, we gave respondents a list of 22 activities and asked them to indicate whether they had engaged in these in the past six months. Offline political and civic engagement included 11 activities, such as signing a petition regarding political or public affairs and joining a student organization. Online political and civic engagement included 11 activities, such as posting comments on a news website or political blog and submitting a political video on YouTube or similar websites. The 22 indicators were converted into two sets of reliable composite measures for young people's self-reported offline and online political and civic engagement (offline, $\alpha = .60$, $M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.70$; online, $\alpha = .66$, $M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.81$). To measure respondents' actual political knowledge, we asked them to answer seven questions on international, regional, and local affairs. We coded whether or not a respondent answered a given question correctly (1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect answer or "don't know") and added the scores together to create the variable of political knowledge.

Independent Variables

We identified three sets of independent variables—political efficacy, political discussion, and media consumption. The first block of independent variables included political efficacy and political discussion. We first measured political efficacy using two questions—"I am knowledgeable enough to participate in politics and community affairs" and "I am better informed about politics and government than most people." The responses were given on a 4-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A reliability test showed that the two indicators formed a reliable composite measure of the

young people's political efficacy ($\alpha = .71$, $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.72$). Regarding political discussion, we asked respondents to report how frequently they talked about politics or current events with friends and family ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .70$). Answer options ranged from "never," "sometimes," "often," to "very often."

The second block of independent variables included media consumption factors. We measured the consumption of news from both traditional and new media, including newspapers ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.77$), television ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.88$), radio ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.54$), the Internet ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.77$), and social network sites (SNS, $M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.00$). Respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spent on various traditional and new media platforms on an average weekday. Answer options ranged from (1) none, (2) 1-5 minutes, (3) 6-10 minutes, (4) 11-15 minutes, (5) 16-30 minutes, (6) 31-60 minutes, (7) 61-90 minutes, to (8) more than 90 minutes. For the frequency of respondents' news consumption from SNS, answer options ranged from (1) never, (2) sometimes, (3) often, to (4) very often.

Control Variables

Earlier research has suggested that a few demographic variables may affect measures of political and civic engagement, including age and religiosity (i.e., the level of importance of religion in one's life). For example, Kenski and Stroud (2006) found that age was negatively associated with both internal and external political efficacy. Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010) showed that age was positively associated with party membership and voting behaviors of both women and men. They also found that men who attended church more often tended to participate in political spheres more so than others. Housewives who attended church more often were more likely to participate in private and collective activities. Therefore, we recorded age and religiosity as control variables. In addition, we controlled for whether or not respondents were born in Singapore.

Results

The respondents were between 20 and 28 years ($M = 22.57$, $SD = 1.40$), with 261 females (65.7 percent) and 136 males (34.3 percent). They had studied for between one and nine semesters in the university ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.80$). The majority of the respondents (87.2 percent) did not consider themselves as racial or ethnic minorities in Singapore. Most of them (61.2 percent) reported a religious affiliation.

Gender differences were first tested using a series of independent-samples t-test for all dependent and independent variables and its results are shown in Table 1. Regarding offline political activities, we found female respondents were less likely than the male respondents to attend public rallies/demonstrations or public discussion forums. In addition, the gender gap for online political participation was significant. Female respondents were less likely than the male ones to engage in five types of online activities: visiting the website of a political party or organization, posting comments on a news website or political blog, forwarding links to political videos or news articles, posting comments, questions, or information about politics on websites, and submitting a political video to YouTube or similar online sites. Further, we found that our female respondents appeared to possess less political knowledge than their male counterparts. In response to six of the seven questions measuring political knowledge, female respondents were less likely to answer correctly than the men. As for the independent variables, female respondents proved to be less likely to feel politically efficacious, engage in political discussion, listen to the radio for news, and use the Internet for news than the male respondents, but were comparable to the latter in reading newspapers, watching television and logging on to social network sites (SNS).

Table 1. Independent-Samples t-Test of Gender Differences on All Variables (N = 397)

	Range	Men Mean (SD) /Frequency (%)	Women Mean (SD) /Frequency (%)	t- value
Dependent variables				
Offline political participation	0-8	2.25(1.80)	1.97(1.64)	1.54
Signing a hardcopy petition on politics or public affairs	0/1	.05(.22)	.05(.22)	.07
Contacting a politician or government official	0/1	.07(.25)	.03(.16)	1.90
Donating money to a charitable cause or organization	0/1	.60(.49)	.59(.49)	.11
Raising money for a charitable cause	0/1	.24(.43)	.19(.39)	1.28
Writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper	0/1	.02(.15)	.02(.15)	-.06
Doing volunteer work	0/1	.38(.49)	.39(.49)	-.24
Working on a community project	0/1	.21(.41)	.20(.40)	.24
Attending a public rally or demonstration	0/1	.24(.43)	.07(.25)	5.03*
Attending a public discussion forum	0/1	.08(.27)	.03(.17)	2.23*
Working for a political organization or association	0/1	.03(.17)	.02(.12)	.95
Joining a student organization as a member	0/1	.33(.47)	.39(.49)	-1.10
Online political participation	0-8	2.46(1.87)	1.84(1.74)	3.25*
Visiting the website of a party or political organization	0/1	.40(.49)	.30(.46)	2.04*
Signing an online petition related to politics or public affairs	0/1	.05(.22)	.06(.23)	-.25
Sending an email to a politician or government official	0/1	.03(.17)	.02(.15)	.39
Donating money online to a charitable cause or organization	0/1	.14(.35)	.10(.31)	1.07
Posting comments on a news website or political blog	0/1	.14(.35)	.03(.16)	4.41*
Watching political videos online	0/1	.64(.48)	.56(.50)	1.62

	Range	Men Mean (SD) /Frequency (%)	Women Mean (SD) /Frequency (%)	t- value
Forwarding the link to a political video or news article	0/1	.31(.46)	.20(.40)	2.55*
Communicating with friends, family or colleagues online about politics	0/1	.44(.50)	.43(.50)	.30
Posting comments, questions, or information about politics on a website	0/1	.17(.38)	.08(.27)	2.84*
Submitting a political video to YouTube or similar online sites	0/1	.04(.21)	.01(.11)	2.08*
Starting or joining a political group online, including on a social networking site	0/1	.09(.29)	.07(.25)	.84
Political knowledge	0-7	4.43(1.73)	3.55(1.72)	4.79*
Current Prime Minister of Great Britain	0/1	.59(.49)	.47(.50)	2.29*
Current US Secretary of State	0/1	.82(.38)	.72(.45)	2.28*
No. of nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	0/1	.82(.38)	.73(.45)	2.13*
Largest opposition party in Malaysia	0/1	.33(.47)	.17(.38)	3.63*
Previous Prime Minister of Thailand	0/1	.45(.50)	.27(.45)	3.59*
Maximum no. of years between national elections in Singapore	0/1	.65(.48)	.65(.48)	-.09
No. of GRCs the opposition parties win in 2011 general election in Singapore	0/1	.76(.43)	.54(.50)	4.46*
Independent variables				
Political efficacy	0-8	2.58(.64)	2.19(.61)	5.43*
Political discussion	0-4	2.38(.77)	2.19(.66)	2.54*
Traditional news consumption	0-22	8.65(3.83)	7.80(3.55)	2.20*
Newspaper	0-8	3.26(1.64)	2.97(1.77)	1.94
Television	0-8	3.30(1.98)	3.26(1.80)	.31
Radio	0-8	2.19(1.68)	1.77(1.42)	2.63*
Internet news consumption	0-8	4.81(1.60)	3.92(1.72)	5.00*
SNS news consumption	0-4	2.91(.92)	3.04(.95)	-1.24

	Range	Men Mean (SD) /Frequency (%)	Women Mean (SD) /Frequency (%)	t- value
Control variables				
Age	20-28	23.70(1.09)	21.99(1.18)	14.10*
Religiosity	0-4	2.58(.98)	2.77(.90)	-1.93
Born in Singapore	0-2	128 (94.1)	222 (85.1)	

* $p < .05$

To answer our second research question, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were carried out to examine offline and online political participation and political knowledge of male and female respondents regarding political efficacy, political discussion, and media consumption as independent variables, controlling for differences in age, religiosity, and whether or not respondents were born in Singapore (see Table 2). The results indicated that political efficacy was associated significantly with offline political participation for male respondents, but not so for female respondents. In addition, political efficacy was significantly associated with online political participation for both male and female respondents, as also with political knowledge for both gender groups. Political discussion was significantly associated with online political participation for both gender groups. However, political discussion was only significantly associated with political knowledge for women, but not so for men.

We then examined the relationship between media consumption and political participation for male and female respondents by controlling the effects of political efficacy and political discussion. For male respondents, news consumption from SNSs was significantly associated with their offline and online political participation. For female respondents, news consumption factors were not significantly associated with their offline political participation and political knowledge. However, news consumption on the Internet and

SNSs was significantly associated with women's online political participation. News conveyed via the traditional media was not associated with any of the dependent variables for either gender group.

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Political Participation and Knowledge for Men and Women
(N = 397)

	Offline political/ civic participa- tion	Online political/ civic participa- tion	Political knowledge			
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Demographic variables</i>						
Age	-.25**	-.11	-.07	.05	-.07	.04
Religiosity	.00	-.06	-.12	-.08	-.02	-.003
Born in Singapore	.08	-.05	.11	-.12	.10	-.06
R ² change	.07#	.02	.03	.004	.02	.004
<i>Independent variables</i>						
Political efficacy	.21*	.08	.22*	.15*	.33**	.27***
Political discussion	.05	.15#	.24*	.29***	.07	.15*
R ² change	.05#	.05*	.15***	.14***	.13***	.13***
<i>News consumption</i>						
Printed news	.14	.05	.17#	-.01	.16	.14#
Television news	-.06	.01	-.001	.02	.01	.03
Radio news	-.06	.09	-.012	-.06	-.04	-.03
Internet news	.01	.11	.10	.17*	.16	.06
SNS news	.21*	.12	.31***	.21**	-.14	-.01
R ² change	.03	.04#	.08*	.09***	.09*	.05*
Total adjusted R ²	.09	.06#	.23**	.21***	.14	.11
df	95	186	95	186	95	186
F-value	1.26	1.99#	3.48**	4.30***	1.84	1.06

#p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Discussion

Overall, our findings revealed persistent gender gaps in various modes of political participation among the respondents even though they shared similar educational backgrounds. Female respondents were less knowledgeable and less efficacious regarding politics and therefore less likely to engage in political discussion than the male respondents. In addition, compared to the males, female respondents were less likely to engage in offline and online political activities, such as attending public rallies/demonstrations or submitting political videos online. These findings are consistent with earlier research (e.g., Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2011; Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003; Lee, 2000).

Our study suggested that when engaging in political activities, our female respondents depended on both internal and external factors, whereas male respondents were more likely to be motivated by internal factors, such as confidence in their political capability. Political efficacy proved to influence online political participation and acquisition of related knowledge for both men and women, and offline political participation for men in particular. Our female respondents were less likely to believe in their efficacy via political participation than the males. The gender gap in political participation seems to be deeply rooted in gender differences in the levels of political disposition, such as political efficacy. Singapore is a predominantly patriarchal society (Advani, 1996), where the prevailing socio-cultural assumption is that women's primary role is in the family. Through childhood socialization, young girls acquire gender roles that lead them to believe that politics is incomprehensible and does not merit their interest (Rapoport, 1981). Such belief in the nature of women's roles in politics can be found even among highly educated citizens (Haque, 2000), such as the female university student respondents of this study. Such belief translates into their inability for political participation and lack of political knowledge in adulthood. In addition, Singaporean women lack experience in national service, compared with males who are required to enlist for military con-

scription once they reach the age of 18 and such training helps to build up not only their physique, but also their stamina to acquire a sense of discipline and teamwork (Ministry of Defence, 2013). Such experience may contribute to men's relatively high levels of political efficacy and participation than those of women.

In addition, external factors, such as discussion on political topics with family and friends proved to influence women's online political participation and political knowledge. Their lower levels of political knowledge and lower levels of political efficacy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Verba et al., 1997) may make them more open to and dependent on external political sources, such as family or friends to which they feel attached. For the male respondents, however, political discussion influenced their online political engagement, but not their offline political engagement and political knowledge. For men, political efficacy appeared to be a key predictor of their traditional and online forms of political engagement and political knowledge.

Another important finding of our study was regarding the role new media play in stimulating political engagement. Today, the web and all other online applications that are used considerably by young people have offered a wide range of possibilities to engage them in political activities, such as reading political blogs, following online news, contacting political representatives via email or organizing electronic petitions. However, earlier research has shown divergent expectations about the development of the Internet and how it mediates the political decision-making process. Many empirical studies conducted in recent years have not found evidence either for positive or negative effects of Internet use on political participation (see Boulianne, 2009). One reason for this, as we see in this study, is that the use of the Internet may impact political engagement for different groups of citizens in different ways. Internet news consumption was found to be a significant predictor of political participation for women. However, men did not depend on the Internet for news as much as women did. This implied that different groups of citizens should be treated separately in order to get a better understanding of the par-

ticular impact of the Internet on political engagement.

This study differentiated social media from traditional Internet news sources as an important news venue for political information and participation for the well-educated members of a society. In this study, SNS news consumption proved to be significantly associated with offline political participation for males and online political participation for both males and females. For men, even in circumstances where the traditional Internet news did not seem to exert influence on political participation, news posted on SNSs played an important role in their lives. This finding suggests that SNSs offer news in a way that is different from the Internet. These provide links not only to news websites, but also facilitate the immediate dissemination of abstracted, fragmented news and information from official and unofficial sources (Hermida, 2010). Some news items break before official sources report them and these are live broadcasts (e.g., sports and accidents, Kwak et al., 2010). Unlike professionally made news articles posted on the Internet, SNS news requires little cognitive attention (Hermida, 2010). Also, social media, such as SNS enable one-on-one, synchronic, and bilateral interaction with fellow citizens and political actors, which were not available earlier. User-generated content can provide meaningful information that citizens might not be able to acquire elsewhere. Furthermore, the open and collaborative nature of social media can reduce the barriers to entry into politics, particularly for less politically sophisticated groups. The social media have thus become a viable means to counter declining political and civic engagement these days.

Despite several important findings, a discussion of the present study includes a few caveats. First, the survey employed a convenient sample of students from a comprehensive university of Singapore. The sample is skewed towards higher education and younger age. Hence, this sample is not representative of young people in general. Ideally, it would be good to attempt to replicate this study with different educational and age groups in other countries in order to get a comparative picture of gender equality or inequality

in political participation. Second, this study is cross-sectional in nature; some caution should be exercised in assessing causal inferences. For example, it is logical that political knowledge would induce political efficacy, therefore, longitudinal data or other approaches will be needed to unravel the causal order of the relationships between news consumption, political efficacy, political discussion, and political participation.

This study sought to understand the gender differences in political participation by exploring the role of news consumption, political efficacy, and political discussion in political participation for both females and males. The results also have implications for politicians, government administrators and educational institutions that want to encourage young people, especially young women, to play a more active role in political and civic matters of society. Although young women may be politically less active than men, their political and civic engagement is now enriched by their online presence. The government and politicians should not only publicize activities online, but also offer more online space and opportunities to engage young people in political and civic discussion and actions. Such online interaction will not only help young people develop an interest and passion for political and civic affairs, but also offer them more convenient means to engage themselves in these. In addition, educational programs are needed in the future to clarify gender roles for women and boost their confidence regarding their political competencies.

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Abstract in Chinese

近年来女性在政治方面取得了巨大进步，在此背景下，本研究着重考察如下两个问题：第一，在教育背景相似、获得政治新闻的机会均等的青年男女中是否仍存在着政治参与方面的性别差异？第二，新闻消费、政治效能感及政治讨论等多个因素是如何影响性别与政治参与的关系的？通过在新加坡一所大学的学生中进行的一次问卷调查，本研究发现与男性参与者相比，女性参与者具备较少的政治知识和政治效能感，她们也更少参与政治讨论及其他一些线上、线下的政治活动。研究结果进一步表明女性参与政治活动更多受她们的政治效能感和政治讨论的影响，而男性则主要依赖政治效能感。另外，新媒体尤其是社交媒体上的新闻消费同时影响男性和女性的政治参与。最后，我们对本研究的意义进行了深入探讨。

Keywords

关键词：亚洲女性；政治效能感；政治讨论；政治参与；新媒体