Social Media and Political Participation Among British Youth
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Scholars have long debated on youth political disengagement; its causes and its solutions. Recent research (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Loader et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014) has suggested that social media has become a space where new forms of participation have been established. These forms of participation are distinct and disassociated from traditional participatory acts and institutions, proving to be more favourable among young people. While current research has addressed social media's influence in facilitating new forms of participation, what has yet to be established is whether participating in these forms encourages young people to participate in traditional manners, such as voting. The aim of this study, therefore, was to explore whether political experiences on social media has encouraged young people to participate in traditional manners. This study presents the findings of a thematic analysis of eight semi-structured interviews, conducted with university students. The results of the study show that having a prior interest in and knowledge of politics is the key determinant in whether young people partake in traditional participatory acts. This research highlights that social media cannot encourage further participation for those who feel disconnected and uninterested in politics and political issues, and that negative features of social media, such as the 'fear of aggression', pose as serious boundaries for young people when wanting to participate.

Keywords: social media, political participation, young voters, political engagement, British politics

INTRODUCTION

"People are politically disengaged if they do not know, value or participate in the democratic process. In the UK, political disengagement is more prevalent among certain groups than others." (Dempsey and Johnston 2018, p.4)

Political disengagement among young people in the United Kingdom is a topic that has been widely debated over the last few decades and continues to be an issue that

fascinates political analysts and academics alike. Young people are the most politically disengaged group in the United Kingdom; whilst reporting the lowest levels of knowledge about politics, they are also the least likely of any age group to participate in political activities (Dempsey and Johnston 2018). British youths failure to participate is exemplified through a low voter turnout of people aged between 18 and 24. A report, based on the most recent general election in 2019, showed that young people are still noticeably less likely to vote than older age groups, with 47% of 18 to 24-year olds having voted, compared to 66% of 55 to 64-year olds and 74% of 65-year olds and over (Skinner et al. 2019). These statistics serve to contextualise already well-established research that shows that political engagement among young people has been declining over recent decades; fewer young people are participating in political practices, and with a growing alienation from politicians and political parties, British youth feel disconnected, powerless and unwilling to engage in politics (Henn et al. 2007; Sloam 2007; Hart and Henn 2017; Ehsan 2018).

However, the development and progression of social media has altered not only how young people participate in politics, but how we define participation itself. Attention towards traditional forms of participation, such as voting and protesting, has shifted; instead, participation can be recognised as simply being conscious of and having a knowledge of politics, as well as expressing political ideas and aims through non-political actions (Ekman and Amna 2012; Van Deth 2014; Pontes et al. 2018). Social media has been established as a platform that can mobilise citizens and trigger forms of political action, as well as enticing youths who had previously rejected traditional participatory activities to engage in political issues, by providing a medium in which new forms of political participation can be achieved (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Anduiza et al. 2009; Ahlqvist et al. 2010; Zuniga et al. 2012; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Loader et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014; Zuniga et al. 2014).

Whilst how young people use social media to engage with politics has been largely addressed (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Loader et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014; Theocharis 2015; Vromen et al. 2016), there has been, thus far, very little research conducted on whether participating in new forms of participation on social media can lead to involvement in traditional forms of participation 'offline' (Bode 2017). Through an exploratory research based on eight semi-structured interviews, this study expands on academic work that has analysed how young people use social media to engage in politics and participate in new forms of participation; examining the extent to which social media encourages participation in traditional or 'institutionally-orientated' (Bode 2017) manners. This research further contributes to an already rich field by exploring young people's personal experiences with politics both 'offline' and 'online', investigating the impact social media has towards one's attitudes and feelings towards politics, beyond the direct correlation between social media use and online participation. Traditional forms of participation, particularly voting, remain both the easiest and most accessible way that citizens can bring about formal political change; thus, by broadening the knowledge in this field, this study aims to assist in the understanding of issues that affect young people's desire to participate in politics.

DEFINING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

How political participation is defined has been recently debated by scholars, particularly towards distinguishing between levels of participation that can be inclusive of a wider range of behaviours. Ekman and Amna (2012) conceptualised political participation as two distinct definitions, 'manifest' and 'latent' political participation. 'Manifest' political participation represents what is more commonly referred to as 'formal' political participation; it is goal orientated and, within the context of representative democracy, includes actions such as voting in elections and signing petitions (Ekman and Amna 2012). A facet of 'manifest' participation is 'extra-parliamentary' forms of participation; this can be exercised through manifest forms of protest as well as actions such as boycotting/buy cutting which align with participatory forms defined under political consumerism (Ekman and Amna 2012). Political consumerism as a political action behaviour has become more integral in the process of participation; it represents a more individualised form of participation that is more closely related to everyday activities and is seen as a more valuable form of participation than more conventional, 'manifest', forms (Stolle et al. 2005). Ekman and Amna (2012) define more individualised forms of participation as 'latent' political participation, with attention placed upon an individual's personal interest in political issues and emphasis upon a sense of belonging to a group with a distinct political image.

Van Deth (2014) expands on Ekman and Amna's definitions by constructing a conceptual map which utilises the use of seven rules to define distinct facets of political participation. A 'minimalist' definition of political participation represents a similar mode to that of a 'manifest' definition, in that it characterises all political actions within the sphere of government and politics, such as casting votes and signing petitions (Van Deth 2014). A facet of this is the 'targeted' definition which places emphasis on the targets of political action and not the aims and intentions, as with 'minimalist' participation; examples include peaceful demonstrations and citizen initiatives (Van Deth 2014). Should neither of these more traditional definitions of political participation fit, Van Deth (2014) argues, similarly with Ekman and Amna, that newer expressive, personalised and individualised non-political actions can be identified as modes of participation. This is defined as 'motivational' participation and can be expressed through non-political forms if they are used to express political aims of the individual (Van Deth 2014). Differentiating between different forms of participation not only allows an understanding of new forms of political participation (Ekman and Amna 2012) but aligns with how young people understand political participation. Pontes et al. (2018) identifies a distinction between political participation and political engagement. Conducting focus groups with 18-24-year olds, political engagement was defined as distinct from political participation, with engagement incorporating ideas of having knowledge and opinions of, being conscious of, and being involved in politics (Pontes et al. 2018). This engagement incorporates a cognitive element, that is an individual's willingness to exert desire to understand political issues, and an emotional element, that is the reaction, both positive and negative, to political decisions and beliefs around political values (Pontes et al. 2018). Young people's conceptualisation of political engagement aligns with both Ekman and Amna's (2012) and Van Deth's (2014) definitions of 'latent' or 'motivational' participation, with focus on personal interest,

individualisation, belonging and political expression, as opposed to being defined as performing more traditional political actions.

Patterns of participation among young people in Britain rationalises the need to acknowledge and address 'latent' forms of participation, as opposed to just traditional definitions. It is widely acknowledged by scholars that political engagement among young people in the United Kingdom has been decreasing over recent decades with fewer young people participating in political practices such as voting in elections and becoming members of political organisations (Hart and Henn 2017; Ehsan 2018). Scepticism towards politicians, as well as a lack of trust in the current political system in Britain, largely contribute to young people choosing to exclude themselves from participation (Henn et al. 2002). Political parties and politicians are largely to blame, failing to encourage youths to engage in politics, leaving young people disconnected, powerless and unwilling to engage in formal political practices (Henn et al. 2007; Sloam 2007; Hart and Henn 2017). The disconnection between politics and British youths is not explicitly defined by a lack of trust but is a complicated area with no uniformity (Henn et al. 2007; Henn and Foard 2014), instead defined by socioeconomic and educational factors (Henn et al. 2007).

Henn et al. (2007) analysed the relationship between socioeconomic characteristics and patterns in political engagement, discovering that those from middle-class households show more faith in the British political process than those from working-class households. Similarly, Henn and Foard (2014) concluded that there was a larger level of interest and investment in politics from those from middle-class backgrounds compared to those from working-class backgrounds. Educational factors have less explicit conclusions; those with higher levels of education are more likely to mistrust politics (Henn et al. 2007) but are also seen as more interested and invested in political affairs, and therefore less marginalised (Henn and Foard 2014). These factors are compounded by government policy which addresses, or arguably doesn't address, educational and socioeconomic issues (Henn et al. 2007). Hart and Henn (2017) examined how a transition to a neoliberal logic, with a focus on individualism, increased competition and uniform policies, has upheld the current political system and ignored the political concerns of young people. Neoliberal governance, coercive in nature, is not attractive to active contribution from young people; political parties have remained reluctant to broaden democracy and encourage more active citizenship and participation which is more favoured by young people (Hart and Henn 2017; Pontes et al. 2018). However, scholars have acknowledged that young people still have faith in democracy and elections and aren't apolitical, as previous research has suggested (Henn et al. 2002; Henn et al. 2007; Furlong and Cartmel 2011; Henn and Foard 2014). Evidence shows that young people are turning to political consumerist (Stolle et al. 2005) forms of participation, replacing formal forms of participation (Hart and Henn 2014). Young people are displaying a preference for direct forms of democracy, where their opinions are heard, making them a larger presence on the political scene (Furlong and Cartmel 2011; Hart and Henn 2014). To achieve this, young people are taking to new methods to engage, including social media (Ehsan 2018).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NETWORKED CONNECTION

The rise of social media has been widely interpreted by scholars in an attempt to explain how new efforts to mobilise citizens in political causes have come about given the decline in traditional political participation. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) identified the rise of 'Digitally Networked Action' and its impact on the organisation and undertaking of collective action. Collective action is defined as an emphasis on formal organisations to get individuals to contribute to a collective cause when seeking a public good, for example democratic reforms, taking on similarities to that of 'manifest' and traditional participation forms. This alone does not explain how citizens that feel so far removed from politics have found ways to mobilise in the pursuit of political causes (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). With recent developments in political participation, that has seen an emphasis on individualisation and personal values to engage in political causes, 'individualised collective action' is often organised through digital media technologies (Bennett 2012). To understand this phenomenon, social media as an organising agent is recognised and defined as the 'logic of connective action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Citizens can politically participate more easily within this logic due to the eroding of boundaries between public and private; boundaries that are blurred particularly within social media networks which facilitate the crossing of public and private boundaries (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Participation is self-motivating, where personalised, expressive content is shared through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, thus, collective action has been superseded by individual expression and connective action when taking action for political causes (Bennett 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). These networks can form communities which can quickly trigger forms of political action, such as demonstrations (Ahlqvist et al. 2010).

Social media's ability to mobilise citizens, as well as its use for keeping up with news within the social and political process, was tested by Zuniga et al. (2012). Similarly, to findings by Bennet and Segerberg, the inherent structure of social media sites facilitates not only the accession of news, but the ability to discuss and share this content within an individual's network (Zuniga et al. 2012). This not only increases the ability of the individual to reflect and elaborate on learned information, but this increased knowledge, as well as a feeling of being connected to a community, can stimulate norms of reciprocity, thus, exerting a positive impact on individual's engagement in civic and political action (Zuniga et al. 2012). This extends to the debate surrounding social media's ability as a tool for democracy. With an approach that realises the shift from traditional forms of participation to more 'latent' forms (Ekman and Amna 2012), the political and democratic potential of social media can be realised (Loader and Mercea 2011). By enabling citizens to critically monitor actions of major corporations and governments, social media facilitates the ability for the individual to disrupt traditional political institutions and practices (Loader and Mercea 2011). However, social media's ability as a tool for democracy is not a foregone conclusion. Fenton and Barassi (2011) critically reflected on participation promoted by social media and, while acknowledging that social media, through mass communication of personal expression, enables citizens to politically participate, contend that it distorts the understanding of political participation and collective action. Social media's individualistic nature invalidates the collective dimension of political participation, thus, dispelling the political properties of

the participatory act (Fenton and Barassi 2011). Social media's ability to produce significant political change, rather than simply serve as a medium for individuals to self-reflect on political issues comes in to question (Fenton and Barassi 2011).

Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) analysed digital media's ability in replicating and widening the range of political participatory actions, as well as the relationship between offline and online participation. Online political activities can be differentiated as they form distinctive practices, like offline political activities, thus, affirming a multidimensional nature to social media, while also showing that offline types of political engagement are occurring online (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013). However, there is interdependence between offline and online engagement, with evidence that social media as a medium matters in relation to 'latent' forms of participation (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013). Further studies, such as Hirzalla and Van Zoonen (2011), suggest that the internet is not a unique place where youth are more inclined to participate. However, such forms of political activity that are reliant on social media as a medium may serve to widen the pool of politically engaged citizens, by enticing youth who have rejected traditional forms of participation (Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013).

Extensive research has been conducted by scholars identifying the relationships between social media and political participation, among young people in particular. Young people prefer to participate in non-hierarchical networks, seen in developments of participation (Ekman and Amna 2012; Van Deth 2014), then be members of traditional institutions; Loader et al. (2014) conceptualised these individuals as the 'Networked Young Citizen', where social relations can be enacted through social media networks. Networked citizenship constitutes of lived experiences of young people; it can be seen as fluid and constantly under construction, reflecting social and economic inequalities (Loader et al. 2014). Theocharis (2015) concurred, suggesting digitally networked participation has captured a new conception of citizenship, similar in nature to that of Van Deth's (2014) 'motivational' definition of political participation, where young people can show personalised, symbolic solidarity with political issues (Vromen et al. 2016). Furthermore, this new conceptualisation is closely associated with political consumerism; Zuniga et al. (2014) identified that political consumerism has a networked character and is not driven by traditional forms of mobilisation associated with politics. New forms of participation and social media show a strong relationship, providing a medium in which political activities can be achieved beyond the scope of classical institutions, as well as holding representatives to account and critically monitoring policies (Anduiza et al. 2009; Loader et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014; Zuniga et al. 2014). Patterns among engagement on social media suggest its ability to stem inequalities faced by young people in the offline world, flattening out social imbalances that act as boundaries to political engagement (Loader et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014). Ekstrom (2016) argues that young people could potentially see social media as a risky setting for political talk, where a risk of being misunderstood could lead to conflict within networks (Vromen et al. 2016). Though this does present a potential negative of social media as a medium, it provides no evidence that can dispel the relationship between social media and moving in to new forms of political participation.

Boulianne (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of research on social media use and

participation in political life, concluding that there is a positive relationship between the two. Drawing on this, Bode (2017) analysed the causal effects of social media use on participation, suggesting that incidental exposure to political information on social media can lead to thinking about, or acting on, politics in other realms (Boulianne 2015). Those who engage with political content on social media are significantly more likely to participate in offline political activities (Bode 2017). However, this is a highly contested area within the current literature and the claim that social media provides a platform which increases the likeliness of participating in offline or more traditional political behaviours is not a concrete one. Keating and Melis (2017) argue that social media has not mobilised a new audience to engage in institution-orientated activities, instead focusing on political consumerist and 'latent' styles of engagement. Networked forms of participation, facilitated by social media, share similarities with offline participation, in that existing political interest is driving online political engagement (Vromen et al. 2016; Keating and Melis 2017). Young people are, therefore, only using social media to engage in political activities if they hold a prior interest in politics; simultaneously, this reinforces the non-participation of those who show little prior interest in politics (Anduiza et al. 2009; Keating and Melis 2017). What constitutes political engagement comes under scrutiny when analysing the relationship between social media and political participation. On one hand, those who have not seen their lived experiences reflected in traditional, institutionalised politics feel positive about political engagement on social media (Vromen et al. 2016). Alternatively, social media is not seen as encouraging greater numbers, and types, of young people to become interested in politics (Keating and Melis 2017). Despite a wide variety of research, what hasn't been addressed is if 'latent' forms of political participation, facilitated by social media, can lead to, and become, involvement in more traditional or institutionally-orientated forms of participation (Bode 2017).

For the purpose of this study, Ekman and Amna's (2012) and Van Deth's (2014) definitions of 'latent' and 'motivational' political participation are acknowledged as legitimate forms of participation, emphasising individuality and belonging, particularly among young people. This does not dismiss traditional forms of political participation as a suitable definition, instead providing an opportunity to examine the relationship between the two. Furthermore, this study utilised the concept of 'digitally networked action' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), and that social media as a medium facilitates participation that is more individualised and personal. We adhere to the assumption that those more educated and interested in politics are more likely to participate in the aforementioned forms of political participation on social media, outlined by Anduiza et al. (2009) and Keating and Melis (2017). The extent to which this is true, as well as whether this reinforces the non-participation of the lesser interested or politically educated (Anduiza et al. 2009; Keating and Melis 2017), is the focus of examination. Moreover, the extent to which social media facilitates moving from performing 'latent' and 'motivational' forms of participation to participating in institution-based forms is explored.

Thereupon, drawing on the literature review, the following research questions and objectives have arisen:

> RQ: Does social media provide a platform that encourages and facilitates participation in institutionally-orientated manners?

Objective 1: To examine whether and how social media has impacted political interest and involvement for those that have studied politics at undergraduate level, versus those that have not.

Objective 2: To examine whether participants experiences on social media encourage them to participate in activities, such as voting or joining parties, that are associated with traditional political institutions.

METHOD

To address the research question and objectives, a qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews was conducted. The individuals studied consisted of eight university educated students and ex-students, three females and five males, all between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, varying from different areas of the U.K. (although all currently residing in Bournemouth) and from differing economic backgrounds and upbringings. Participants were originally recruited from Bournemouth University and further participants were recruited through snowball sampling; due to limited resources and a constrict on incentives to encourage people to participate, snowball sampling provided an access to participants of differing social groups that otherwise may not have been possible (Noy 2008). Out of the eight individuals that were interviewed, four were currently studying politics at Bournemouth University, and four had had, either experience studying politics at lower level education, or reported to have little to no interest in political affairs.

The duration of each interview was between 36 to 46 minutes. All interviews were conducted face to face during the period of 26 March 2019 to 6 April 2019. For the purpose of analysis, all interviews were fully transcribed, and a thematic analysis methodology was utilised (Braun and Clarke, 2012). To maintain participants anonymity, interviewees can only by identified by their participant number, established by the order they were interviewed in, and whether the participant reported to have studied politics at university level, or not.   Underlying this research is not only how individuals utilise social media, but understanding their feelings, emotions and opinions attached to their participation, or non-participation, on social media. Communicating and listening to those personal accounts will provide a plethora of rich, detailed data; deriving the way in which participants view their social world (Qu and Dumay; Bryman 2012). By placing emphasis on retrieving complex, in-depth answers through qualitative interviewing, patterns, forms of behaviour, and individual's interpretations and arguments can be constructed (Bryman 2012). By doing so, this research explored beyond vague surface patterns that surveys or questionnaires would provide (Mason 2002).

DISCUSSION

The interview findings are analysed in relation to both research objectives, as well as the overall research question.

Political Interest, Knowledge, and its Impact on Traditional Participation
To explore research objective one, we first established how political interest affects

attitudes to offline political participation. When questioned on how they perceive their level of interest in and knowledge of politics, participants who had not studied politics had distinct differences in their responses compared to those who had studied politics at undergraduate level. One non-politics student highlighted how their lack of interest was compounded by a feeling of being overwhelmed by the 'daunting' subject of politics.

> "…there's no real reason for me to be interested. […] I don't really know enough about it to have an understanding of how it would affect me. So, I don't really bother. […] I think it's quite daunting really. (Non-politics 7)

This view was shared among other non-politics students:

> "I'd like to know what's going on and be interested. But, it just goes over my head and then I get bored. […] I just don't think I understand half of the articles and the laws […] I wouldn't know about the jargon, that kind of stuff." (Non-politics 4)

Politics students, on the other hand, demonstrated much higher levels of interest and involvement with politics. One politics student emphasised the importance of studying politics at undergraduate level, and that without doing so, they would not be able to make informed decisions on political issues.

> "I think have a good one (knowledge) […] If I didn't do politics, I think I would see the news, but I wouldn't understand it; I wouldn't be able to make informed decisions as I can now, now that I studied it and I know what it's about." (Politics 3)

Participant's responses appear to support the view of Henn and Foard (2014), which proposes that those with higher levels of education, political education in the context of this study, are seen as more interested and invested in political affairs. What's more, non-politics student's lack of political education appears to have adverse effects on their ability to comprehend the importance of certain issues, thus, leaving them disconnected from and powerless in the political sphere (Henn et al. 2007; Sloam 2007; Hart and Henn 2017).

Additionally, non-politics student's lack of political education and understanding had a significant impact on their desire to participate in activities specific to traditional participation. Several participants expressed that there would 'not be any point' to them attending a protest or march due to a lack of knowledge on political issues.

> "I feel like if I turned up then it would just…I wouldn't feel silly, but I'd be like 'well I don't really know anything about it, so…' Not really much point me standing around…I wouldn't feel like I should be there." (Non-politics 4)

In contrast, politics students displayed a more positive outlook, with all but one having participated in traditional manners. In particular, politics student 5 highlighted how the experience of being part of a group, whilst participating on a march for the non-profit organisation 'Take Back the Night', encouraged them to engage further in political issues.

> "I feel more empowered when I know I've done something. [...] in terms of things like 'Take Back the Night', you do sometimes see change [...] I think it's also a good way of increasing participation, because if I feel like someone else is going to reflect me too, then I'm more likely to engage." (Politics 5)

The distinct difference in attitudes towards traditional modes of political participation, particularly protesting and marches, shown in our results, not only provide further support to the view of Henn and Foard (2014), but corroborate with the findings of Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) by demonstrating the significance of political interest on whether one engages in offline political participatory forms. Desire to participate offline appears to be one that is directly tainted by one's own experiences with politics, particularly through education.

Value of Expression; Participant's Observations of 'Motivational' Participation

When continuing to discuss their perceptions of political participation, both politics and non-politics interviewees discussed how expressing opinions and sharing information about politics was an important form of political participation.

> "I see a lot of people sharing posts on Facebook and social media, that's probably another mode of participation, expressing their views on Twitter as well, definitely on Twitter." (Politics 3)

This view was also common across non-politics student's responses:

> "I'd say engaging on social media [...] I guess that is some form of participation, because then you talk about it with other people." (Non-politics 6)

> "If you're sharing it, you feel passionate about it and you want other people to know about it, so you are participating I guess." (Non-politics 4)

All bar one of the participants perceived political participation, to an extent, to be aligned with the 'latent' and 'motivational' definitions outlined by Ekman and Amna (2012) and Van Deth (2014). Notably, responses from participants across both sides heavily expressed views similar in nature to that of Pontes et al. (2018), highlighting how being conscious of, and having opinions of politics was deemed a form a political participation. Interestingly, the use of social media for political participation was mentioned before interviewees were questioned on the matter, suggesting that it plays an important role in the way young people engage in politics (Ehsan 2018).

Social Media's Impact on Political Interest and Involvement

When questioned on how they use social media in relation to politics, it was clear that social media acted as a platform which narrowed the divide between politics and non-politics students in terms of engagement with political content. The discussion began by questioning the interviewees on the extent to which they actively search for, or read about, political issues on social media. Notably, all politics students mentioned actively searching for information about political issues on social media. Politics student 3

exemplified this point by discussing how 'following' certain sources increases their chances of receiving information on political issues.

> "I guess, I make it so that they appear to me. […] but I follow on purpose BBC news or New York Times […] because I want to see the news come to me. […] And sometimes I engage with it, so I 'like' it, and because of the algorithm […] I know it's going to pop up more." (Politics 3)

News media were seen as favourable sources of information to 'follow' or actively look on to find information on political issues.

> "…I follow news media and politicians on Twitter, so those things are going to come up when I open Twitter anyway. […] because it's the easiest way, for me anyway." (Politics 2)

This finding is not exclusive to politics students, non-politics students also reported actively following, searching and reading about political issues on social media, albeit only two out of the four participants.

> "I'll obviously see more following news pages, like Theresa Mays page and Donald Trump's page […] I'll probably see more on Twitter, or go looking for it on Twitter" (Non-politics 6)

The reason for favouring traditional news media sources may be attributed to concerns over misinformation, concerns shared by several interviewees on both sides, and the negative effect this has on engagement. Politics student 5 highlighted this issue in detail:

> "The main challenge is that there's so much misinformation. So, I would say that's part of the reason why I discredit what I read on the internet […] social media presents itself in that way of 'I'll give you the information', but when the misinformation clouds it, it becomes hard to engage." (Politics 5)

Having all the politics students, as opposed to only two non-politics students, actively 'following' and searching for political issues lends a certain level of support to claim that those more interested and educated in politics are more likely to participate on social media (see Anduiza et al. 2009; Keating and Melis 2017). However, interviewees responses appear to show that the views of Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) and Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) are more aligned with our findings; suggesting that social media contributes to widening the pool of politically engaged citizens, regardless of levels of political interest. While misinformation was a concern that arose, its impact was not considered as something that prevents people's ability to engage in politics through social media.

Participants' experiences when using social media was part of a broader narrative that emphasised the belief that social media helps young people get engaged and interested in politics; this view was shared by all eight participants. Non-politics student 4 highlighted how political messages have been adapted to suit a younger audience, one

that vastly populates social media.

> "...everyone's on social media, well I say everyone, the majority of people are on social media […] I think the younger people, like my age and younger […] who don't know anything about politics have social media to then see what's going on." (Non-politics 4)

This view was shared among the majority of participants. Politics student 2 elaborated on this point, explaining how "the way that party politicians speak on Twitter is very different to how they speak on television", and that this is seen as something that encourages young people to become interested in politics.

> "...personally it makes me more engaged and I can only speak from my personal experience but seeing the fact that these people care about issues is important. They're not just mouthpieces on TV […] they're actual real people who care about things. […] I guess it's a good way of getting young people interested because maybe we want more from our politicians than past generations; we want them to be human and honest." (Politics 2)

These responses, among others, appear to contradict Anduiza et al. (2009) and Keating and Melis' (2017) claim that social media reinforces the non-participation of the lesser interested and politically educated. Instead, those who have not seen their own experiences reflected in traditional institutionalised politics (Vromen et al. 2016), and therefore less interested, see social media as a medium in which they can see, learn and attempt to understand political issues. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that all participants expressed how the 'aggressive' nature of social media, and a 'fear of backlash', prevented them from possibly expressing their views on political issues.

> "...the world of politics now is becoming quite personal, I'd rather definitely avoid personal attacks because of my views […] I don't like arguing […] and I don't enjoy confrontation, especially about things that I feel emotional for" (Politics 1)

Non-politics students expressed similar feelings:

> "I would worry about putting my opinion out because there would definitely be someone who has the opposite opinion that would say something. […] then you've got to argue your point and they get mean, and it gets aggressive." (Non-politics 4)

Although this point has been dismissed in much of the literature surrounding political engagement on social media; 'aggression' appears to be a boundary that stops participants being able to express their political beliefs fully, lending support to the findings of Ekstrom (2016) and Vromen et al. (2016). Social media appears to be a medium in which individuals can see and read about politics, in ways that they may not be able to do offline, but not necessarily participate to the fullest extent. While the structural features of social media allow participants to easily access news and political information (Zuniga et al. 2012), thus increasing the level of engagement, the fear of receiving backlash when putting across their own political opinions and thoughts on

social media, as well as the less consequential issue of misinformation, appears to limit the extent to which participants can participate in 'latent' and 'motivational' manners (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

Does Social Media Encourage Participation in Institutionally-Orientated and Traditional Activities?

Notable distinctions between politics students and non-politics students were found when analysing the extent to which social media encouraged participation in institutionally-orientated or traditional activities. Interestingly, the majority of interviewees, on both sides, expressed the belief that social media provides a starting point in which young people can engage further.

> "You get your taste on social media, you think 'how could I engage with this? How could I go further?'" (Politics 5)

However, when discussing their personal experiences, differences arose around the extent of social media's impact in encouraging participation in traditional activities. A majority of politics students expressed how social media encouraged them to participate further; on the other hand, a majority of non-politics students explained how social media had little to no significance in encouraging them to participate in those manners. One politics student emphasised the importance of social media as an organising agent, lending further support to the postulation that social media positively impacts the organisation and undertaking of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

> "...as I said, I engaged in a march [...] I don't know how anyone would have heard about it if we hadn't heard about it through social media. [...] because how would people know? I guess flyers, but I don't engage with a flyer on the wall, I engage with social media." (Politics 5)

Social media's ability to encourage participation in traditional modes was further emphasised by another politics student:

> "I joined the Liberal Democrats when I did because I followed them on Twitter, and I agreed with a lot of what they were saying [...] And, I tweeted a lot about the Remain campaign and then it made me think about my opinions on it and that made me care a lot more and made me want to go out and do stuff for it." (Politics 2).

The interviewee elaborated on this point, highlighting how having an active interest in politics meant that social media was more effective in encouraging them to move to traditional forms of participation.

> "I think that because that interest is there, Twitter creates a place where I can talk about that kind of stuff and then it makes me think about it more." (Politics 2)

Similar to the point raised by politics student 2, non-politics students stressed that interest and education in politics remains the key determinant as to whether they participate in traditional political forms, and that social media does little to encourage

them to move to traditional forms of participation. Non-politics student 4 expressed their belief that social media can encourage further engagement for young people in general, but ultimately, lack of political interest and education acts as a barrier to them participating in institutionally-orientated manners.

> "Yeah, I think it (social media) gets the word out. I think a lot of people wouldn't know what's going on otherwise, unless they lived in the city."
> "…there's nothing that I can think of now that would make me want to (participate in traditional activities) […] I guess it's probably more like, lack of education of politics or lack of knowledge. Because I think, a lot of people are so intensely passionate about something, it scares you off to get involved because you don't know much about it." (Non-politics 4)

This mindset was shared by several non-politics students. One interviewee expressed that having a more active political mindset would make them more inclined to participate in traditional activities.

> "If I was more active in some sort of political mindset at least, or on social media, then I think I'd be more inclined to participate." (Non-politics 7)

Participant's responses suggest that the claim that exposure to political information on social media can lead to acting on politics in other realms (Boulianne 2015; Bode 2017) is one that can be disputed. It appears that social media has little bearing on encouraging participation in traditional forms for those less interested and educated in politics. The relatively minimal impact of social media on encouraging participation, even in 'latent' and 'motivational' forms, among non-politics students in particular, emphasises the power of interest and education in politics as the main motivation to participating in traditional and institutionally-orientated forms. Furthermore, having politics students highlight that having a prior interest played a major role in encouraging their participation in protests and joining political parties, reaffirms that interest and education is the significant factor that encourages participation. Bode's (2017) assumption that those who engage with political content on social media are more likely to participate offline, is one that can be disputed by our findings. Despite social media's ability as a medium to provide a space in which all participants can learn and read about politics, among its many flaws, it appears that social media does not possess the power to dispel fears of getting involved in traditional activities, perpetuated by a lack of education and interest in politics. Our findings, therefore, align with the view of Keating and Melis (2017), suggesting that social media has not mobilised and encouraged a new audience to participate in traditional and institutionally-orientated manners.

Interestingly, participants from both sides expressed reservations around social media's impact on bringing about political change, versus traditional methods of participation. Politics student 5 expressed that "…for a democracy to work, you have to have a level of physical engagement". The interviewee elaborated by highlighting the value of physical engagement:

> "I think there's a level of interaction that you've committed to something physical,

that social media can't give you; I know for me I've never felt as satisfied as when I've engaged physically, so I think for me to engage in democracy there has to be physical engagement." (Politics 5)

As well as emphasising the importance of physical engagement, a common theme that arose at the culmination of our discussion is the value attached to face-to-face communication and political discussion. One participant expressed their views on this point:

"Physical campaigns are incredibly important. […] it's a human experience of you and people you agree with and I think that that is going to be more motivation for you to care and to be interested than seeing a tweet" (Politics 2)

These findings provoke new questions about how young people view political participation. Conclusions from previous research, that suggest that social media is the preferred platform for participating in politics, are open for examination on the basis of this research. Instead, focus can be placed how a new generation of young citizens view political conversation, testing the assumption that social media is the favoured medium for political engagement and participation.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided further insight into the relationship between social media use and the impact this has on political participation among young people in the United Kingdom. The analysis of the interview data revealed that social media is a place where young people can engage in and learn about politics, particularly through the reading of news media, but not necessarily participate, to the fullest extent, in 'latent' and 'motivational' forms (Ekman and Amna 2012; Van Deth 2014). This is contrary to the claims of several scholars that suggest that social media is a medium in which new forms of participation can be achieved (Anduiza et al. 2009; Loader et al. 2014; Xenos et al. 2014; Zuniga et al. 2014). New definitions of participation that focus on an individual's personal interest and knowledge of political issues (Ekman and Amna 2012; Van Deth 2014) appear to narrow the gap between what entails engaging in politics, and what entails participating in politics. However, it is clear that concerns over misinformation and the potential for aggressive responses and backlash, highlighted by our interviewees, factor as barriers to young people who desire to participate beyond simply engaging with political material, such as reading news media posts. Thus, the jump from engagement to participation can be observed as a complicated process, in which experiences on social media alone cannot determine whether an individual is motivated and encouraged to participate, even in 'latent' terms. Moreover, this has shed light on the extent to which misinformation and aggression play a role in deterring young people from participating in politics, posing it as an issue that is more significant than first considered.

Following on from these findings, it can be concluded that experiences on social media play little part in encouraging young people to participate in activities associated with traditional forms of political participation and institutions. What is clear is that having

an existing and active interest in politics is the key determinant in encouraging participation in institutionally-orientated and traditional forms, and not social media. Comparing the responses of participants who had studied politics at undergraduate level, and those who had not, highlighted this point, revealing that those who reported to have a higher level of interest and knowledge of politics were more likely to have been encouraged by social media to participate in traditional manners. It is important to note that these findings do not entirely dismiss social media as a tool for encouraging further participation in politics, indeed, it is clear that social media plays a significant role in encouraging participation for those that are knowledgeable on political matters. However, what is apparent is that not even positive experiences of engaging with politics on social media, for those who reported to have little to no knowledge of political matters, could outweigh feelings of being disconnected from politics that play such a pivotal role in discouraging participation, particularly in very open and intense acts, such as protesting.

This research, therefore, can serve as a critique of social media's power to educate and mobilise citizens; concluding that the nature of social media, in that it facilitates engagement but concurrently facilitates misinformation and aggression, serves best those who have an active interest in politics, but fails to encourage greater numbers and types of individuals (Vromen et al. 2016; Keating and Melis 2017), particularly the lesser interested and knowledgeable. What is apparent, is that a lack of political education, particularly at a younger age, cannot be substituted by social media. Whilst social media is easily accessible, political material is still written and presented in a format that is limited to those who are able to understand it, or feel they have the knowledge to look up a political issue and educate themselves. In this regard, perhaps social media's power to politicise and educate individuals on political issues has been overestimated; instead, the focus should be aimed at how individuals are educated at a young age, and that the political education of citizens should not be reliant on social media.

Conclusions made from this study have also opened up new questions for future research. Future studies should further explore the extent to which misinformation on social media hinders participation and the desire for young people to engage in politics; the extent to which social media can recreate face-to-face communication and discussion, as well as testing the likeliness that a young person will participate in traditional or institutionally-orientated manners, having been exposed and educated to a political issue through social media, versus having been educated about that issue in person.
Finally, this research has its own obvious limitations regarding especially the very small sample of participants and its quite strict characteristics. Hence, future research should examine areas similar to this study, based on a broader sample. This study was limited in that it only covered individuals who were studying, or had studied, at university level; thus, future research could also study individuals who have not studied at a higher education level, testing to see if there are any differences between attitudes in that regard.

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