

POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
THE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL
BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES

by

DANIELLA STACH

A THESIS

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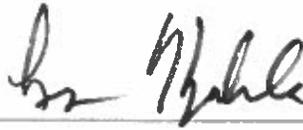
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This study examined young adults (ages 18–30) political behavior and attitudes and their exposure to and perceptions of political advertisements on social networking sites. Perceptions of and exposure to political advertisements were assessed in relation to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. Perceptions and exposures were also measured in relation to each other. Data from an Internet survey of young adults who are registered voters of the United States showed significant positive relationships between exposure to political advertisements and perceptions of political advertisements. Political self-efficacy and situational political involvement were not significantly related to exposure or perception of political advertisements. Political self-efficacy was negatively correlated with participants who ignored political advertisements on social media. Implications are discussed for political advertising's impact on young adults' political behavior and attitudes.

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Introduction

Marketing and advertising are powerful revenue-generating tools used to create brand awareness, customer acquisition and retention. Just like a company selling a product, a political candidate and his or her party are an entity whose main purpose is to convince voters (*consumers*) why they should vote on (*consume*) the ideas (*products*) that the campaign (*advertisers*) proposes (*offers*). Parties, candidates and activists deploy marketing techniques such as persuasive advertising to convince voters why they should vote for a particular candidate or measure that the party or organization promotes. Like marketing campaigns, political campaigns use the psychology of consumer behavior to understand how best to appeal to potential voters. The psychology of consumer behavior strives to understand how consumers “think, feel and reason” between options (Perner, 1999). Consumer behavior is

the study of individuals, groups, or organizations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society (Perner, 1999).

Understanding consumer behavior and decision-making patterns is important for any brand, including political brands, because understanding how consumers (*voters*) make decisions between options affects how a political campaign will advertise to specific subsets of voters.

Today, big data extracted online has further empowered marketers by creating greater access to information about consumers, including potential audiences and current target markets. Similar to marketing campaigns, political campaigns use data about potential voters to promote their candidates and ideas. Advancements in

technology have allowed advertisers to make tremendous strides in their ability to deliver customized messages to niche audiences (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013). Whereas television was previously the most prominent way to target specific groups, the Internet has opened up endless possibilities for advertisers to better reach their target audiences. Though slower to adapt to this innovation in big data and target advertising, political campaigns are using information about prospective voters from sites like Facebook, Twitter and Google to propel advertisements that capitalize on the unique motivating factors that influence specific groups to vote (Samuelsohn, 2014). The use of personalized political advertisements has already begun to affect the way in which citizens make political decisions. Zac Moffrat, Mitt Romney's digital director, explained this phenomenon to the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2011:

Online advertising cuts through because of its ability to target. It's unparalleled in any other medium . . . TV may be more effective for driving a big message, but per usage, the Internet is more powerful. We are probably one presidential cycle away from everyone believing that (Fouhy, 2011).

There is no denying the rapid growth of social and digital media in politics. Forbes reported that the 2014-midterm elections spent \$271.2 million dollars on digital advertisements, which is a 1,825 percent increase from the 2010 midterms and over \$100 million more than the 2012 digital advertising costs (Johnston, 2015).

The trend in social and digital media advertising has been especially important for gaining political support from young adults (Gerodimos, 2012; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Ward, 2012). Young adults are an important sector of the voting demographic and their trend of political apathy and disengagement (Snell, 2010; File, 2014) has been a cornerstone focus for political campaigns. Campaign managers and

marketers focus on ways to entice this sector to get to the polls and vote (Cooperstein, 2013; Samuelsohn, 2014). Using insight extracted from big data on popular social networking sites, recent campaigns have deployed new advertising tactics that capitalize on young people's need for socialization in order to engage this sought-after group in political activity (Ward, 2012). Socialization involves using interactive communication between an organization and its intended audience to encourage potential supporters to engage in the political process (Ward, 2012). Using video sharing and social networking sites to obtain campaign information, share campaign news, exchange political ideas and express support for a candidate are the primary ways campaigns capitalize on socialization (Kohut, 2008), particularly among young adults.

This study will explore the relationship between political advertisements on social networking sites and the political attitudes and behaviors of young people in order to understand the impact of target political marketing on the electoral process from engaging voters to winning their vote. This research contributes to previous research about social media's relationship with political participation. It provides new insights into the effectiveness of targeted political advertisements and their impact on political behavior and attitudes of young adults (18–29).

Theoretical Background

Social Networking Sites and Young Voters

Social media and the social networking sites that transmit social media content are powerful communication tools that can be used in every element of day-to-day life spanning our business, personal and civic roles. While social media and social networking are often used interchangeably, the distinction between social media and social networking sites is important. Social media includes the media, or content, that is uploaded onto a digital platform (Burke, 2013). This content includes blogs, videos, status updates, and photos. Essentially, social media is a one-to-many communication tool. Social networking sites, on the other hand, are the platforms used to publish or display social media. Social networking sites are Web-based systems within a public or semi-public platform that connect people and user-generated content. Social networking sites are many-to-many communication tools, including popular sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Online interaction has completely changed the landscape for political communication. Agenda setting in media has transformed from the media telling people what issues they *should* think about to people telling the media what issues they *want* to think about (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008, p. 708). The ability of user-generated content has been made possible by the interactivity and socialization features offered on social networking sites. For young voters, interpersonal connectivity has become an essential component to every aspect of their lives from consumption to education to civic engagement (Loader & Mercea, 2012). Ward (2012) found that young people, in the

habit of using social networking sites, prefer co-productive interactivity and socialization in order participate politically (Ward, 2012, pp. 159). Because social media usage is highest in the youngest voter demographic, political campaigns must use this communication tool to engage this sector of the voting population.¹ Young people's need for socialization has led political campaigns and civic organizations to target young people through online social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Socialization and personalized communication cater to the phenomenon of *civic consumerism*, which is a central component in young people's willingness to engage in participatory politics (Gerodimos, 2012). Civic consumerism is defined as "a self-oriented stance toward public life, according to which public leaders have to 'sell' their ideas or policies to citizen-consumers who choose whether or not to engage with certain issues" (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 184). Prior research reveals the existence of civic consumerism in young people, as it has established that a stark sense of individualism exists in today's youth. Research has revealed that socialization and personalization (Ward, 2012), personality traits (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010), cognitive and emotional elements (Gerodimos, 2012) and website features (Gerodimos, 2012) are all essential factors that motivate young people to engage on social media and to participate in the democratic process (Ward, 2012).

Socialization is defined as interactive communication between an organization and its intended audience to encourage potential supporters, or consumers, to engage in its message (Ward, 2012). Ward (2012) explains that there are three types of

¹ Eighty-nine percent of adults ages 18–29 use social networking sites compared to the average total adult use of 74 percent (Pew Research Center, 2014b).

communication: one-way communication, transactional interactivity, and co-productive interactivity. One-way communication means information is directed towards an audience, and transactional interactivity is a way of gathering information from Web-users (e.g., collecting personal identification information like age, address, location through an online form.). On the other hand, co-productive interactivity allows users to contribute to the content of the Web page or social networking site. Ward (2012) determined that co-productive interactivity is essential for engaging young people due to their inherent need for socialization. In the context of political organizations, socialization is used to engage potential voters to support, vote and/or participate in the democratic process. Socialization means that Web pages must be interactive and personal. For this reason, social networking sites—designed to connect users and display user-generated content—is the ideal tool for engaging young people to participate in the political process. In this way, users can show support by following, liking, and retweeting political campaign pages, while political campaigns can learn more about their followers and send personalized messages aligned with their specific demographics and psychographics.

In addition to socialization, personality traits of users correspond with their engagement in participatory media (Correa et. al., 2010). For instance, extroverted men and women are more likely to engage on social media than their introverted counterparts (Correa et. al., 2010). Additionally, emotional stability is a negative indicator of likelihood to engage, as users with higher levels of emotional instability are more likely to participate in social media than those with low levels (Correa et. al., 2010). Personality traits are important for political campaigns to understand when

attempting to interpret the various levels of engagement and interaction of their followers (and non-followers) on various social networking sites.

Research also reveals that cognitive and emotional factors (de)motivate youth to engage in political participation (Gerodimos, 2012). Common emotions among youth in regarding the political environment and political participation include frustration and skepticism (Gerodimos, 2012). Therefore, websites must appeal to certain cognitive factors in order for young people to engage, which include availability and appeal, appearance of information, efficacy (or lack of) and relevance to the user (Gerodimos, 2012).

Gerodimos (2012) reveals that youth engage with online political content based on “the availability (or lack) of accessible, appealing and constructive communication that acknowledges young people’s needs, abilities and cultures” (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 169). Not only do young people want solid communication from organizations, political leaders and campaigns, but they also want a way to channel their voice as well (e.g., Ward’s (2012) co-productive interactivity). One participant of the study explained:

Making things more accessible to young people would motivate me to be more active. Perhaps to feel that when we discuss public affairs online we will be listened to—otherwise it’s all complaining and nothing being done (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 171).

In other words, youth want to know that their participation is actually having an impact, and an effective way to convey that their voice is heard is through interactive communication that acknowledges their concerns and informs youth how their voice can make an impact.

Gerodimos (2012) found that the appearance of information is another important element in determining young people's motivation to engage. The study found that youth are less likely to engage in public debate or discussion about politics because they are not as knowledgeable and are more self-conscious about discussing politics among people whom they consider older and wiser (Gerodimos, 2012). Research also suggests that the constant flow of information showing up on Facebook and Twitter feeds, search engine advertisements and email is so overwhelming that many young people ignore it all together (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 171). Malhotra (1984) describes the effects of information and sensory overload in decision-making, concluding that "an individual has a limited capacity to absorb and process information" and that overload leads to "dysfunctional consequences" in decision-making (p. 11). Information overload has caused young voters to actually ignore important political information and advertisements online due to the inability to cope with the massive amount of information that the Internet provides (Graber, 1988).

Research has also found that if young people cannot see how an issue will directly affect them, they tend not to be concerned about it (Gerodimos, 2012). This concept is referred to as relevance and is an important factor of political self-efficacy, a central component of this study discussed in greater detail in the next section. Young voters are often frustrated that they cannot see the direct results of their engagement, so they are skeptical that their individual participation makes a difference (Gerodimos, 2012). Lack of political socialization, inadequate informal socialization and an overall decline in political and social connectedness creates political irrelevancy for young people (Kaid et al., 2007, p. 1094). Gerodimos (2012) concluded that young people,

today more than ever, have a serious lack of political self-efficacy, which makes it more difficult for political campaigns to encourage them to engage in the democratic process.

In addition to cognitive elements that (de)motivate young people from participating in politics, Gerodimos (2012) observed specific website features that encourage participation. Important website features include content, design and interactivity (Gerodimos, 2012). Young people want a website's content to provide practical information that justifies why a cause is important and demonstrates how their actions will make a difference if they are to engage further. They want to know where their money or vote is going and who benefits from their actions. In other words, political organizations must be entirely transparent if young people are to participate in their cause or the organization will risk them feeling skeptical and avoid their platform altogether. Content should also be direct and personal; it should be distributed in a way that is easy, convenient and cost-effective (Gerodimos, 2012). A participant of the study explained that informative content means “giving me examples of how I can easily/non-time-consuming make an impact already, without spending too much money” (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 174). Obama's success in the 2008 campaign is largely credited to his campaign's ability to capitalize on the sentiment of easy, cost-efficient and influential online engagement. Faced with limited funding at the outset of his campaign, the campaign utilized social media, knowing that Obama would fail to defeat his opponent, Hillary Clinton, if he used traditional media. Obama successfully fundraised by using social media to reach out to the highest volume of supporters and potential supporters possible, which contributed to record sums in “\$5 and \$10

donations that quickly added up to a multimillion-dollar arsenal” (Qualman, 2009, p. 62).

The design of a website is also important and must be emotionally engaging (Gerodimos, 2012). Because today’s young people are so preoccupied and experience high levels of information overload (Malhotra, 1984; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p. 193), a website must immediately captivate their attention or risk losing them at the click of a mouse. According to one participant of Gerodimos’ (2012) study, youth need “[p]ictures that speak more than words to get you more involved and get involved more efficiently . . . things that promote empathy” (p. 176). This finding reveals that emotional engagement is directly linked to the need for “interactive applications, such as message boards and forums” (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 176). Overall, prior research “denote[s] a consumerist approach to citizenship, which sees civic participation as a choice that has to be marketed in appealing and beneficial terms to consumers (citizens), rather than as a duty or ritual within a broader democratic community” (Gerodimos, 2012, p. 174).

Efficacy, Involvement and Political Attitudes

In addition to understanding the factors that motivate young people to participate in politics, political campaigns also need to understand the level of their engagement in order to fully understand how best to target this sought-after voting population. Two decision-making variables that determine a citizen’s level of democratic participation are political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. Political self-efficacy measures the health of a democracy (Craig, Niemi & Silver, 1990) and is defined as an individual’s belief in the effectiveness of his or her

participation in the democratic process (Tan, 1980). In other words, political self-efficacy is the degree to which individuals believe their efforts impact political outcomes (Tan, 1980). These efforts can include voting, donating and volunteering time. Those who have a higher degree of political self-efficacy are more likely to participate in these civic duties. For these reasons, political self-efficacy is highly predictive of political participation and voting behavior (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). A catalyst of political self-efficacy, situational political involvement looks at the perceived relevance of an issue and degree of interest in election outcome (Austin & Pinkleton, 1999; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2012). Research shows that the more an issue is perceived relevant, the greater the need is for information (Chew, 1994; Lambrecht & Tucker, 2014), which implies an increase in “information-oriented media use” (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). When this concept is applied to the digital era, it means that the more someone perceives an issue is relevant, the more likely he or she is to seek out that information on social and digital media outlets.

Studies have shown that young people’s feelings of skepticism and frustration influence their lack of efficacy, and subsequently their failure to participate in politics and voting (Gerodimos, 2012; Kaid, McKinney & Tedesco, 2007). Keeping in mind that young users’ primary use of social networking sites is to serve their individual desires and sense of self-importance, individuals that have a higher sense of political self-efficacy are more likely to involve themselves in political social media use beyond their individual needs. Thus, using social networking sites as a tool for political participation—whether it is visiting a candidate’s page, sharing election information or following a campaign page—presumably aligns with a greater sense of political self-

efficacy and situational political involvement (Young & Giedner, 2008). Young people's degree of self-efficacy and situational political involvement structures their political behavior and attitudes.

For apathetic voters with low political self-efficacy and/or situational political involvement, scholars argue that misinformation may be more detrimental than a lack of information (Kaid et al., 2007, p. 1095). With the information tide of the digital era, defined by constant sensory overload (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, p. 193), voters have learned to use shortcuts to make decisions without being fully informed (Kaid et. al., 2007). Misinformation is especially dangerous in an era of targeted political advertising, where apathetic and undecided voters are being targeted by advertisements designed to attract their interests and gain their vote. Consider the concept of collaborative filtering—a personalized website experience in which users preferences and purchase history are utilized to provide future suggestions of products and content that they will likely prefer (Sunstein, 2001, p. 20). While this concept may sound exciting and convenient for consumers, it may not be as beneficial to deliberative democracy if it consequently serves to cater to narrow interests and prevents exposure to diverse options. For instance, people with certain political convictions may find themselves learning about more political authors who share those same interests and thus strengthen their preexisting notions instead of expanding their thought process and contributing to further rational deliberation.

Not only are misinformation and narrowly skewed information dangerous to the democratic process, but lack of political knowledge or involvement also influences voters' perceptions of politics and confidence in their abilities to participate

authentically. One of the primary reasons young people give for not voting is their lack of sufficient knowledge to participate as an informed voter (Kaid et al., 2007, p. 1095). Lack of confidence and knowledge affects young people's willingness to vote, and it may also influence their perceptions of political information, especially political advertisements.

Target Advertising

Targeting consumers is a relatively new concept in the digital advertising world. Online behavioral targeting is defined as an online marketing technique that infers specific interests of consumers based on their online activities (Liu & Tang, 2011), and then uses that information to target specific messages to those consumers. Online behavioral targeting has exploded in the past five years, with innovations in big data capabilities and the immersion of the big data industry for consumer information. As the largest processor of consumer information, Acxiom generates over one billion dollars a year in revenue with sales accounting for 12 percent of total sales generated by the U.S. direct marketing industry (Marr, 2015). Information providers like Acxiom offer details on millions of customers around the world, of which companies and marketing firms use in order to obtain details about “frequency of content consumed, the recency of user engagement, and interactions” on millions of websites throughout the world (Liu & Tang, 2011). Social media and social networking sites have made it possible to target people not only based on their browsing history but also on their connections and “likes.” This new form of targeting is called social targeting (Liu & Tang, 2011).

The success of the 2012 Obama campaign is largely credited to social targeting (Cooperstein, 2013; Scherer, 2012; Viser, 2012). The campaign amassed large support

through big data (Cooperstein, 2013), target advertising (Viser, 2012) and the use of socialization (Fouhy, 2011; Qualman, 2009), particularly among the youngest voter demographic, ages 18–29. The most important component of the campaign was its ability to target voters through online platforms, especially social networking sites.

The first step in targeting voters online is to determine whom to target. Historically, it is the norm to heavily target undecided voters in order to win votes because these “swing voters” typically decide close elections. However, the 2012 Obama campaign took that thought-process one step further and divided undecided voters into two categories: those who were truly undecided and apathetic and those who were undecided yet persuadable (Cooperstein, 2013). The Obama campaign determined that the persuadable voters—those who can make or break an election—are more likely to be affected by media and advertisements than the apathetic voters. Most importantly, the Obama campaign’s implementation of online advertisement during the 2012 election placed heavy emphasis on targeting young voters because they are the primary users of social and digital media (Cooperstein, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014b). It targeted young adults through interest-based topics including gay marriage, abortion and contraception to engage young people, who are more likely to be interested in those issues (Viser, 2012). After determining whom to target, the campaign utilized Web browsing history to target these potential voters.

Important quantitative milestones of the campaign included the number of Obama campaign Facebook page “likes,” which increased from 19 million to 45 million over the course of the race, as well as its increase in Twitter followers from 7 million to 23 million (Sherer, 2012). The campaign also used a special social network for its

supporters called Dashboard, where it organized offline events and received 1.1 million RSVPs (Sherer, 2012). The campaign also created its own Facebook App that allowed it to cross-reference “voter files with the friend network of its supporters” (Sherer, 2012). In the final weeks of the race, the campaign used this information to directly ask its followers via Facebook to contact their friends—persuadable voters in important swing states—and encourage them to watch persuasive videos and to vote early (Sherer, 2012). The targeted campaign proved successful, as Obama won 60 percent of the voter group ages 18–29 (Roper Center, 2013).

The connection between voters’ level of apathy and targeted political advertisement is important in understanding how and to whom personalized and specific messages are conveyed via social media. Research has determined that there is a positive relationship between consumers’ product preferences and their reception towards retargeted advertisements (Lambrecht and Tucker, 2013). Retargeted advertisements are designed to engage people who have not returned to a product’s Web page by showing the exact product on other platforms, particularly social media and search engines. The study concluded that the more interest one takes in a subject—the more research one does—the more positively he or she will perceive retargeted ads that align with the topic (or product) of interest (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013). Keeping in mind that behavioral targeting infers specific interest of consumers through use of big data collected on millions of websites, it is possible that an individual’s interest in political information online may correlate with the number of targeted advertisements he or she sees about a certain political topic. If Lambrecht and Tucker’s (2013) theory holds true to targeted political advertisements, online users’ reception of political

advertisements should relate to how much information they seek and subsequently how many advertisements they see.

If people who are more interested in politics are receiving the most retargeted advertisements due to their Web browsing history and have a more positive perception of those advertisements, then political campaigns may not be using big data to their advantage to target undecided voters. If, on the other hand, the opposite proves to be true—uninterested and unengaged voters receive more targeted ads and have a positive perception of them—then the nature of the democratic process could be in jeopardy with voters making misinformed decisions due to technological advances. The other train of thought is that such a scenario is positive because it engages previously unengaged voters. This thought process does not typically take into account political competence—degree of political knowledge of a voter—or it considers many who already actively participate to be politically incompetent, so it does consider political knowledge to be a distinguishing factor between engaged and unengaged voters.

The rise of digital socialization among young people—the need to be constantly connected—and the advent of behavioral targeting means the future of politics can no longer rely only on traditional, one-way information channels because voters, especially the youngest voting demographic, have demonstrated the desire to participate in the conversation and big data gives marketers and campaign managers the ability find these potential voters. Understanding the relationship between political attitudes and behaviors of young adults who participate more frequently on digital platforms is instrumental for the future of political campaigns as social and digital media begin to threaten the longstanding influence and power of traditional media and advertising

platforms. As political campaigns increasingly utilize new forms of media, with predictions that \$1 billion will be spent on digital advertising in 2016 (Samuelsohn, 2014), knowing the impacts of this medium on political communication to potential voters is fundamental to campaign success.

Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between young adults' (18–29) political attitudes and behaviors and their exposure to and perceptions of political advertisements on social networking sites. This research attempts to determine if political target advertising on social networking sites has a positive association to young people's political attitudes and behaviors. Young adults are the focus of this study because young people are the most concentrated users of social and digital media (Pew Research Center, 2014a) and are traditionally the most persuadable group of voters, as they are less habitual in their voting behavior and are the highest percentage of voters that claim independent (Newport, 2014). Independent voters are important because they are not aligned with a specific party. Because they are considered highly persuadable and undecided, independent voters are an important focus for all political parties. As Obama demonstrated in 2012, capturing the young, independent vote is essential for winning elections, and social media is a catalyst for success.

The first objective of the study is to determine the degree to which young people are politically engaged, which is operationalized as the individual's political self-efficacy—the degree to which individuals believe their efforts impact political outcomes (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Tan, 1980). Political engagement also considers situational political involvement, which looks at “the perceived relevance of an issue at a given moment and the degree of interest in social situations such as election outcome” (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010, p. 610). To understand how big data and target political advertisements are affecting potential voters, the study will also measure the frequency with which young people use social media and their exposure to political

advertisements. This study attempts to understand the relationship between young people's political behavior and attitude and their exposure/attitude towards political advertisements online.

The research question addressed by the data is three-part: (1) Is there a relationship between political self-efficacy and situational political involvement to young people's (18–30) exposure and perception of political advertisements?² (2) Does young people's perception of political advertisements affect their exposure to political advertisements? (3) Is there a relationship between education and income to young people's political self-efficacy, situational political involvement and/or their perception about political advertisements? The following hypothesis formally state the predictions:

H1a: Exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites is positively related to political self-efficacy.

H1b: Exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites is positively related to situational political involvement.

H1c: Exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites is positively related to perceptions about political advertisements on social media.

H2a: Perception of political advertisements on social networking sites is positively related to political self-efficacy.

H2b: Perception of political advertisements on social networking sites is positively related to situational political involvement.

² Even though demographically speaking, the youngest voter age group is 18–29, this study looked at voters 18–30 because it did not want to discount those voters who were 29 during the 2014-midterm elections that occurred four month prior to the study.

Methods

In March 2015, an online survey was conducted by the researcher through Qualtrics—an online survey software program that allows for highly secure and customizable data collection.³ Participants were recruited online through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is an internet-based research platform that hosts “workers” (participants) to complete web-based projects (Human Intelligence Tasks, or HITS) anonymously for small amounts of money. MTurk was chosen in order to obtain a more diverse sample than traditional American college samples, as has been used in previous similar research about youth, social media and political behavior (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).

To view the survey, participants were required to be at MTurk’s “Master” level (they have completed at least 1,000 HITS at an approval rate of 95 percent).⁴ Participants were also required to be American adults between the ages of 18–30 and registered voters of the United States. In order to mitigate the occurrence of ineligible participants indicating they are eligible to obtain the incentive provided through MTurk, a screening test was used that blindly asked the participants age and voter registration status in order to approve them to take the survey. In addition to the screening test, two quality assurance questions were asked to ensure participants were reading the questions and answering to their best ability (as opposed to filling out the form at

³ The 4-month lapse in time frame from the 2014-midterm elections is important to note, as participants may not remember the exact amount of political advertisements they saw online. This is especially true if participants had low political self-efficacy or situational political involvement because they are more likely to block out any advertisements they saw from their memory if they never engaged in them.

⁴ Following the implementation of the HIT, it was brought to the researcher’s attention that Master level limits a greater variety of participants, which helps explain, at least partially, why the sample has a higher level of education and income than the average population.

random to receive easy compensation). Of the 468 total responses to the age screening question, 294 were screened out because their age did not lie within the 18–30 age range. Of the 174 who responded to the voter eligibility question, 15 were screened out for not being registered voters of the United States. Of the remaining 159 responses, 23 responses were screened out for failing quality assurance questions or not completing the survey. The resulting sample size was 136.

Table 1 provides the demographics of the sample population. The sample population indicated some higher than average education levels for some areas including high school degree, which accounted for 13.2 percent of participants compared to the national average of 32.1 percent for people ages 18–29 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). For all education levels less than Bachelor’s degree, the sample population was lower than the national average and for all education levels that were Bachelor’s degree and higher, the sample was above the national average. The national average for ages 18–29 that have completed an Associate’s degree or less is 75.3 percent compared to this sample, which indicated only 55 percent. National average for Bachelor’s degree or greater for this age group is 24.7 percent compared to the sample, which indicated that 44.8 percent of participants completed Bachelor’s degrees or higher. The average income of respondents was about \$37,900. In 2013, the reported average income for ages 15–34 was \$33,407. Income of the sample population is slightly higher than the national average (Short, 2014).

TABLE 1: Sample Demographics

	<i>M or % (N)</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender		
Male	55.1% (75)	
Female	44.9% (61)	
Age	26.2	2.47
Region		
West	26% (36)	
Midwest	21% (28)	
Northeast	29% (39)	
South	24% (33)	
Education Level		
Did not complete high school	0.7% (1)	
High school/GED	13.2% (18)	
Some college	30.1% (41)	
Associate's degree	11.0% (15)	
Bachelor's degree	39.0% (53)	
Master's degree	5.1% (6)	
Doctorate or other advanced graduate work	0.7% (1)	
Income		
Under \$25,000	24.3% (33)	
\$25,000–\$39,999	25.7% (35)	
\$40,000–\$49,999	13.2% (18)	
\$50,000–\$74,999	19.1% (26)	
\$75,000–\$99,999	11.8% (16)	
Over \$100,000	5.9% (8)	
Party Identification		
Democratic party	52.9% (72)	
Republican party	8.8% (12)	
Libertarian party	2.9% (4)	
Green party	1.5% (2)	
Constitution party	0.7% (1)	
Independent	30.9% (42)	
Other	2.2% (3)	

Party identification was quite skewed in this population, as 52.9 percent of participants identified themselves as Democratic compared to only 8.8 percent, who reported identifying as Republican. While the reported Democratic affiliation is closely in line with a 2015 Pew Research study that reported the Millennial generation (18–33)

as being 51 percent Democrat, the results do not align with their report that 35 percent of Millennials identify as Republican (Pew Research Center, 2015). A Gallup poll (Newport, 2014) that asked participants to identify as Democratic, Republican or Independent helps explain this discrepancy. The poll noted that nearly half of participants initially identified themselves as Independent when asked (Newport, 2014). Only after they were asked to identify if they leaned towards the Democratic or Republican spectrum did many participants change their answer (Newport, 2014). Thus, the 30.9 percent who identified as Independent may have more of a Republican leaning, explaining the stark contrast between Democratic and Republican identification in this sample. Additionally, the level of education in this sample is above the U.S. average, and studies show that higher education indicates higher Democratic leaning, which also helps explain the discrepancy (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Measures

Participants completed the survey that contained Likert-style scale questions supplemented with some multiple-choice and open-answer questions (numerical format only). The measures for political self-efficacy and situational political involvement were acquired from previous research (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). The measures for social media participation and online expression were developed to understand participant's frequency of use and engagement with the various social media platforms selected based on their popularity and frequent use of targeted political advertisements.

Political Self-Efficacy. Using a 9-point Likert-style scale with *strongly agree (1)* and *strongly disagree (9)*, political self-efficacy was measured by directing respondents

to, "Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements."⁵ The statements were: (1) "Voting gives people an effective way to influence what the government does" (2) "I can make a difference if I participate in the election process." (3) "My vote makes a difference" and (4) "I have a real say in what the government does" These items were combined into a four-item index of political self-efficacy ($\alpha = .95$), with higher scores indicating higher political self-efficacy.

Situational Political Involvement. Using a 9-point Likert-style scale with *strongly agree (1)* and *strongly disagree (9)*, situational political involvement was measured by directing respondents to, "Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements." The statements were: (1) "I pay attention to election information" (2) "I like to stay informed about the elections" (3) "I'm interested in election information" and (4) "I actively seek out information concerning elections." These items were combined into a four-item situational political involvement index ($\alpha = .98$), with higher scores indicating higher situational political involvement.

Perception of Political Advertisements on Social Media. Using a 9-point Likert-style scale with *strongly agree (1)* and *strongly disagree (9)*, respondents were asked, "Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements." The statements were: (1) "Political advertisements on social networking sites are informative" (2) "Political advertisements on social networking sites have helped me to make a voting decision on at least one candidate in the last 6 years" (3) "Political advertisements on social networking sites are misleading" (4) "Political

⁵ 9-point Likert-style scale was chosen because nine is the maximum number of categories that a person can store in short-term memory as he or she is processing. Additionally, people typically lean to one side of the scale immediately, so using nine points gives them more options to discriminate within one end of the scale.

advertisements on social networking sites are applicable to me” (5) “I ignore political advertisements on social networking sites” (6) “Political advertisements on social networking sites have made me more curious about a candidate or an issue in an upcoming election” (7) “Political advertisements on social networking sites are an easy and convenient way to attain political knowledge about upcoming elections” and (8) “I do more research on a campaign, candidate or issue after seeing advertisements about it on social networking sites.” A subset of questions (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8) that was determined most reliable was combined into a six-item index of perception of political advertisements ($\alpha = .76$).

Political Influence. Using a 9-point Likert-style scale with *strongly agree* (1) and *strongly disagree* (9), respondents were asked, “Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.” The statements were: (1) I have felt pressured to vote by my peers” (2) “My peers are very knowledgeable about politics (e.g., upcoming elections, candidates, issues)” (3) My family is very knowledgeable about politics (e.g., upcoming elections, candidates, issues)” and (4) “I have felt pressured by my family to vote.” These items were combined into a four-item index of political influence ($\alpha = .94$)

Social Media Utilization. Using a categorical scale of (1) “Do not use” (2) “Never” (3) “Once a week or less” (4) “2–3 times per week” (5) “1–2 times per day” (6) “3–5 times per day” and (7) “More than 10 times per day,” the survey asked respondents, “How often do you visit each of the following social networking sites?” The sites included Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google+, and YouTube. Using the same scale (“Do not use” to “More than 10 times per day”),

respondents were asked, “How often do you interact (e.g., comment, like, favorite, retweet, pin) on each of the following social networking sites?” The sites included Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google+, and YouTube.

Exposure to Political Advertisements on Social Media. Using a categorical scale of (1) Do not use (2) None (3) Less than 1 (4) 1–2 (5) 3–5 (6) 6–8 and (7) 9 or more. Participants were asked, “In the three months leading up to an election, how many political advertisements from candidates, parties, measure proposals and interest groups do you typically see on the following social networking sites each time you utilize them?” The social networking sites included Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google+, and YouTube.

Results

Descriptives

Social Media Utilization, Interaction and Political Advertisement Exposure.

Table 2 shows the means for the number of times each social networking site was visited per day, the number of interactions participants reported on each day on each site and the number of political advertisements participants reported seeing in the three months leading up to any election.

TABLE 2: Social Media Visits, Interactions and Political Advertisement Exposure

	<i>Visits</i>		<i>Interactions</i>		<i>Political Ad Exposure</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Facebook	5.51	2.33	4.47	2.26	3.32	1.67
Twitter	4.19	2.44	3.07	1.92	2.71	1.54
Pinterest	2.37	1.57	2.11	1.52	1.66	0.76
Instagram	2.51	1.70	2.07	1.38	1.76	0.89
LinkedIn	2.99	2.25	2.44	1.90	1.82	0.84
Google+	2.37	1.29	2.08	1.28	1.78	0.80
YouTube	6.21	1.71	3.51	1.92	3.30	1.48

Note: Higher means indicate higher visits, interactions and exposure. Visits and interactions are measured on a per day basis. Exposure is measured per visit to each site, so lower scores are expected.

The results reveal that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have far greater utilization rates by the sample than the other social networking sites with higher scores indicating higher usage. The number of times that participants indicated seeing political advertisements on social media was relatively aligned with the average utilization of each site. The highest frequency sites where political advertisements were seen were on Facebook (3.32), Twitter (2.71) and YouTube (3.30).

Correlations

Exposure to Political Advertisements on Social Networking Sites. Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation between political self-efficacy and exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites in the months leading up to elections. Advertisement exposure was measured in the number of times per day participants reported seeing ads on each of the following social networking sites. H1a stated that exposure to advertisements on social media would be positively associated with political self-efficacy. This hypothesis was not supported, as exposure to advertisements on social networking sites and political self-efficacy were not significantly correlated.

TABLE 3: Efficacy, Involvement and Perceptions in Relation to Political Advertisement Exposure On Social Networking Sites

	<i>Political Self-Efficacy</i> <i>R</i>	<i>Situational Political Involvement</i> <i>R</i>	<i>Perception of Political Advertisements</i> <i>R</i>
Facebook	0.138	0.139	0.174*
Twitter	-0.021	0.008	0.197*
Pinterest	0.023	-0.066	0.231**
Instagram	-0.022	0.001	0.271**
LinkedIn	0.016	-0.082	0.185*
Google+	-0.058	-0.094	0.157
YouTube	0.074	0.096	0.128

Note: Although Pinterest and Instagram revealed the highest correlation between perceptions of political advertisements and exposure, only seven participants indicated seeing at least one political ad on Pinterest each time they utilized it and only 11 participants indicated seeing at least one political ad on Instagram each time they.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3 also reveals a Pearson correlation between situational political involvement and exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites in the

three months leading up to an election. H1b stated that exposure to advertisements on social networking sites would be positively correlated with situational political involvement. This hypothesis was not supported, as there was no correlation between exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites and situational political involvement, indicating that participants' general level of involvement and interest in politics was not positively related to the number of political advertisements they saw on social media in the three months leading up to elections. This result could be due to the fact that participants with high situational political involvement were not necessarily active on social networking sites, or those participants may access their political information from traditional media (e.g., television, radio, newspaper) (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Likewise, those participants who had low levels of situational political involvement may have had higher exposure to political advertisements because campaigns, like the 2012 Obama campaign, determined that they were undecided voters that would require more attention via advertisements on social networking sites.

Table 3 presents a Pearson correlation between participants' perceptions of political advertisements on social media and their exposure to political advertisements on social media. H1c was supported, as there was a positive correlation between participants exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites with perceptions of political advertisements on social media. Exposure to ads on social media had a significant correlation with perceptions of political advertisements on Facebook ($r = 0.174$), Twitter ($r = 0.197$), Pinterest ($r = 0.231$), Instagram ($r = 0.271$) and LinkedIn ($r = 0.185$), indicating that the more participants were exposed to political advertisements on these sites, the more positively they viewed them.

Perceptions of Political Advertisements on Social Media. The second set of hypotheses predicted relationships between political self-efficacy and situational political involvement with perceptions of political advertisements on social networking sites.

TABLE 4: Perceptions of Political Advertisements Online

	<i>Political Self-Efficacy</i> <i>R</i>	<i>Situational Political Involvement</i> <i>R</i>
(1) Informative	0.109	-0.036
(2) Help make voting decision	0.117	0.002
(3) Misleading	-0.116	-0.023
(4) Personally applicable	0.070	-0.011
(5) Ignore	-0.232**	-0.055
(6) Increase curiosity	-0.011	0.026
(7) Gain knowledge	0.032	-0.044
(8) Increases research	0.087	0.078
Perceptions of Political Advertisements	0.086	0.017

Note: Questions 1-8 were the initial questions referred to in Measures section: *Perception of Political Advertisements on Social Media.* Questions 3 and 5 were removed to create the final six-item index ($\alpha = .94$) for Perceptions of Political Advertisements but are included here to show the individual responses.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 4 shows the Pearson correlation between the individual indicators of perceptions of political advertisements on social networking sites with political self-efficacy. H2a stated that there would be a positive correlation between perceptions and political self-efficacy. H2a was unsupported, as perceptions of political advertisements on social media did not correlate with political self-efficacy. However, Question 5, which was removed from the multi-item index to indicate overall perception, had a high negative

correlation with political self-efficacy ($r = -0.232$). The results indicate that participants who ignore political advertisements have a low level of political self-efficacy and do not believe that their political participation makes a difference. The results did not show any correlation between situational political involvement and perceptions of political advertisements, so H2b was unsupported.

Education and Income. Table 5 presents Pearson correlations of education and income using the same variables tested against perceptions of political advertisements. The results show a positive relationship ($r = 0.199$) between education and situational political involvement suggesting that people with higher education tend to be more politically active citizens.

Table 5 reveals a positive relationship between income level and situational political involvement ($r = 0.177$), with higher income levels indicating higher levels of political activity. In addition, higher income also correlated with more positive perceptions of political advertisements ($r = 0.170$), suggesting that income levels from the sample indicate a more positive perception of political advertisements. Table 5 also reveals that those with greater incomes are more likely to be influenced by family and peers ($r = 0.183$).

TABLE 5: Education and Income

	<i>Education</i> <i>R</i>	<i>Income</i> <i>R</i>
Political Self-Efficacy	0.101	0.177*
Situational Political Involvement	0.199*	-0.005
Perception of Political Advertisements	0.099	0.170*
Political Influence	0.098	0.183*
Exposure to Ads on Facebook	0.160	-0.111

Exposure to Ads on Twitter	0.035	-0.008
Exposure to Ads on Pinterest	-0.085	0.014
Exposure to Ads on Instagram	-0.042	0.024
Exposure to Ads on LinkedIn	0.058	-0.048
Exposure to Ads on Google+	0.013	-0.085
Exposure to Ads on YouTube	0.112	-0.023

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Comparison of Groups

Political Self-Efficacy. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between income levels on political self-efficacy ($M_{high} = 5.52$, $M_{low} = 4.70$, $t(134) = -2.297$, $p = .023$). Higher income participants—those respondents that made \$40,000 per year or more—reported greater self-efficacy than those respondents with less income.

Situational Political Involvement. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference on situational political involvement between high education and low education participants ($M_{high} = 4.83$, $M_{low} = 3.89$, $t(134) = 2.42$, $p = 0.017$). High education participants—those with a bachelor’s degree or greater—reported greater situational political involvement than less educated participants.

Perception of Political Advertisements. An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between income levels on perceptions of political advertisements ($M_{high} = 4.36$, $M_{low} = 3.61$, $t(134) = -2.35$, $p = .020$). Higher income participants reported having a more positive perception of political advertisements on social networking sites than lower income participants.

Discussion

Efficacy and Involvement

This study looked at exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites in relation to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. Because target advertising utilizes Web browsing history to find its audience, exposure to political advertisements on social networking sites was expected to be positively related to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement, suggesting that those who seek out political information online will be more exposed to targeted advertisements regarding upcoming elections.

My results did not support this reasoning. Exposure to political advertisements was not related to either political self-efficacy or situational political involvement. There are several factors that can explain the lack of correlation. One possible explanation is the amount of time individuals spent on social networking sites. There was no correlation with the amount of time participants spent on social networking sites with either of the political engagement variables (efficacy and involvement). The only significant correlation related to exposure was time spent on social networking sites and gender, which has been shown in previous studies to be indicative of political engagement (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). However, these results did not reveal any relation between gender and political self-efficacy or situational political involvement.

The lack of correlation between exposure to advertisements and political self-efficacy or situational political involvement could also mean that participants who experience high political self-efficacy or who are highly involved in politics may not

necessarily be highly active on social media, explaining their lack of exposure to political advertisements. In the same way, those participants who reported low self-efficacy or low situational political involvement may be more active on social media, which would expose them to more political advertisements or re-posts of political advertisements, regardless of their civic engagement. More research is needed to understand the relationship between Web browsing history and advertisement exposure to understand if those participants with greater political self-efficacy or higher situational political involvement read more online articles and are being targeted more than participants that do not. Assuming that people who have a high level of situational political involvement seek at least some of their information online, current research does not show that political advertisers are targeting based on this kind of Web browsing history with this particular population.

Perception of Political Advertisements

Research shows that consumers are more likely to respond positively to a targeted advertisement on social media if they have narrowly construed interests about the product (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2013). If we apply this literature to targeted political advertisements, those who are more engaged or interested in politics would have a more positive perception of political advertisements. The hypothesis predicted that perceptions of political advertisements would be positively correlated with political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. The results did not support this prediction.

The results, however, did reveal that political self-efficacy was positively correlated with participants' willingness to engage in or ignore a political advertisement

online. Those participants who reported lower political self-efficacy reported ignoring political advertisements online. Thus, while political self-efficacy was not a direct indicator of whether participants saw advertisements, for people who did see political advertisements on social media, their level of political self-efficacy determined whether or not they would ignore the advertisement. This result is important for politicians and campaign managers because, as the Obama campaign discovered in 2012, apathetic versus undecided yet persuadable voters are entirely different audiences that require different messages. In the case of the Obama campaign, they determined that focusing on undecided young voters, and not apathetic ones, would be a more constructive use of time and resources. Our results confirm their theory, as voters who do not believe their vote matters—apathetic citizens—are not as likely to read or engage in political messages on social media.

Although political self-efficacy and situational political involvement were not strong indicators of perceptions of political advertisements, our results did find significant correlations between perceptions of political advertisements and exposure to political advertisements online. Those respondents who reported more positive perceptions of political advertisements on social media were more likely to be exposed to political advertisements on the various social networking sites used in the study. There are a few explanations for this behavior.

Narrowly construed preferences relate to more positive perceptions of targeted advertisements. If someone who is already interested in politics sees an advertisement by the political party he or she supports, he or she is more likely to have a positive perception of that advertisement than an apathetic voter that gives little regard to the

elections. Stemming from this view is the idea that those voters who are seeing advertisements are seeing ones that positively correlate with their interests (i.e., sponsored by the party they support or promoting an issue that affects them). The results suggest that people who have a higher exposure to political advertisements are being exposed to advertisements that are relevant to them or in line with their current beliefs, which helps explain why they would have a more positive perception of those advertisements. This explanation makes sense if their social media interactions are indicative of their political interests (i.e., “liking” a politician’s campaign page or “retweeting” an interest’s group’s tweet), and, in this case, suggests that campaigns are finding the individuals that support or are likely to support their cause. The results align with the notion of collaborative filtering, and more research needs to be done to understand if collaborative filtering explains the positive relationship between perceptions of political advertisements and exposure to political advertisements. More research is also needed to understand if those people who are politically engaged (like, follow, retweet political pages and advertisements, etc.) on social networking sites are more targeted by political advertisements on those platforms than those that are not politically engaged on social networking sites.

Interestingly, the results also showed significant differences between income levels, self-efficacy and perceptions of political advertisements. Those participants with high levels of income reported higher levels of political self-efficacy, suggesting that the amount of money people make is indicative of how they perceive their ability to influence government and make a difference through participating—voting, donating, volunteering. Income level was also positively correlated with perceptions of political

advertisements. Those people with higher income levels reported more positive perceptions of political advertisements on social media. These results make sense, because, just as those people with higher income see themselves as having more influence in what government does, they also have a more positive perception of politics and therefore perceive political advertisements on social media more positively.

Additionally, education had a positive relationship to situational political involvement. These results suggest that those with higher education pursue political information at a greater degree and have an overall higher interest in politics and election outcomes. This aligns with the consensus from empirical literature on the subject, which has shown a positive correlation between education and political participation.

Conclusion

This study has extended prior research by offering a new conception of social networking sites as a medium for political campaigns to spread messages through targeted and personalized advertisements, not just a platform for user-generated political content. The rapid growth of social media and the intersection of big data with marketing is expanding the boundaries of what is possible for political advertising, allowing campaigns, political organizations and issue advocates to reach a greater number of people with more specific messages catered to individuals' preferences. The research reveals that exposure to political advertisements on social media positively correlates with perceptions of those messages. It also shows that individuals' level of political self-efficacy—whether or not they are apathetic to the democratic process—is highly indicative of whether they choose to ignore or engage in political advertisements on social networking sites.

The impacts of behavioral and social targeting online have yet to fully be realized in the political spectrum, but this research indicates that more emphasis needs to be placed on understanding if, how and when political advertisements on social networking sites are impacting voting behavior. More research also needs to be done to understand why more advertisement exposure leads to more positive perceptions of those advertisements. With the evolution of marketing and target advertising in politics, campaign managers and marketers will need to fully utilize these innovations to be competitive in future elections. Because social targeting allows campaigns to reach very specific groups of voters based on their interests, the future of electoral politics may depend on the ability of campaign marketers to best utilize big data and niche targeting.

Since political campaigns and organizations want their message received in the most positive light by the highest concentration of voters, understanding the attitudes and behaviors of young people on social networking sites will be a critical future component of the electoral process, as digital platforms continue to integrate deeper into every facet of day-to-day life.

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