

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN A DIGITAL TIME – IS THERE A DIVIDE IN TERMS OF SOCIAL CIVIC BEHAVIOR?

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Abstract

ICT's and social media dramatically reshape the way citizens communicate and get involved into the civic life of a city and country. As a consequence of these developments, we would expect people to be more engaged citizens, active participants in both their online and offline communities. However, two questions arise: do people actually become more civic minded due to the digital evolution? Does social involvement in online virtual communities translate into real life actions? Answering these questions is the aim of the present study, which intends to analyze if there is a divide in terms of social civic behavior on two axes – attitude towards civic engagement and stated civic participation, online and offline behavior. We used survey as main research method in order to answer our research questions, and the study is a descriptive one. The investigated population consisted of a purposive sample of internet users from cities with possible different degrees of civic attitude (measured through a classical Civic Engagement Scale).

Key words: *civic engagement, civic attitude, offline and online civic participation, stated civic behavior.*

1. Introduction: context and theoretical background

The starting point of our study was the increasing importance of civic values and civic participation for the modern economy and society. The huge importance of people's involvement in all aspects of economic and especially societal life, through various civic actions, was recognized through the development of new models, like the quadruple helix, in which civism plays a major role: industry – academic environment – government – civil society [32], [33]. The civil society can act as catalyst, accelerator, guardian and helmsman, at the same time, leading to synergic effects between all economic and social actors. The social capital obtained through civic participation produces economic growth effects, as previous research showed [44], and leads to new participatory models [42], to the development of the field of various and complex civic services [10] and to a new type of economy, something that can be labeled a real “economy of engagement” [25]. In such a civic engaged economy, new mechanisms of communication and participation can change the way in which the entire society functions. Although it might sound like a big word, this change can be dramatic, as noticed by Kleinhans, van Ham and Evans-Cowley [30], when they refer to the organized demonstrations in Egypt (the Arab Spring) or those of riots in London and Manchester, 2011. Not at all less dramatic were the demonstrations against corruption organized in Bucharest and several other big Romanian cities, in January – February 2017. All these manifestations have in

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common ICTs and social media as powerful tools for citizens' quick mobilization and self-organization.

Civic education and civic engagement lead to youth empowerment and long term positive effects on various economic and social issues – wellbeing, intelligence, creativity and innovation, democratic values and behavior, happiness – and all these contribute to personal growth and economic development [1], [2], [3], [14], [28], [31]. Participation and civic engagement are associated with psycho-sociological wellbeing, social intelligence, social innovation, democracy supportive behaviors or happier societies [14], [15], [25], [36], [41], [46]. Effects are found on various levels - academic, personal, social and citizenship level outcomes [8]. All these lead, in the end, to a better quality of life, as a terminal or end value, through a simple mechanism similar to that described by Zanolli and Naspetti [49] for something very pragmatic, like organic food. For example, if we get involved in civic issues, we can fight for concrete attributes, like school abandon, get to abstract attributes, such as better educated people or better democracy, obtain functional competences or consequences, such as ability for continuous learning or ability to understand societal issues; one step further, this leads us to psycho-social consequences, like feeling good, and then to obtaining instrumental values, such as own physical and mental health, translated finally to a higher quality of our life.

Numerous factors influence civic engagement, at both individual and social group level. Some of the previous studies focused on personal factors [9], [35], [39], while other analyzed educational or cultural factors [4], [25], [39], [48]. Among all these factors, social media seem to have a significant impact on all aspects of life, including societal issues and civic participation [5], [27], [37], [43], [47], [50]. Although the effects of internet and social media on civic engagement and participation are mostly positive, not all dimensions of internet use are linked to civic engagement [37], and there might be thresholds in internet use – as previous investigators noticed, the time spent online has the potential to actually erode social capital [43], thus having a negative effect. The relationship between democracy and Internet is controversial [6], but Internet could become a less coerced public sphere and a place for fruitful debates, despite inherent risks of fake news or manipulation. Social media seems to play a very important role especially for cynics and skeptics [5], who rely more on citizen generated news, specific for social networks.

Encouraging and supporting civic attitudes and engagement seem an undisputable desiderate. However, the positive civic attitude is not enough, because positive attitudes towards civic engagement do not necessarily translate into real life actions – real civic behavior. There is a rather normal human gap between attitude and behavior [38], [45]. Efforts for measuring civic attitude, civic competence and civic behavior were made, all over the world, and sometimes large differences across countries, persistent in time, were found [21], [22], [23], [34], suggesting that situational factors, besides cultural ones, exercit an influence, as well.

Resuming the logical framework of our study in just a few words, civic attitude and engagement are important present issues; their influence factors need to be known; effects on various economic and social aspects are significant, and large differences are found in different countries; there is a gap between civic attitude and civic behavior, and social media is a common mediator, plays an important role in all these subjects. This is the general context in which our main research questions were raised: Do people become more civic minded due to the digital evolution? Does social involvement in online virtual communities translate into real life actions? Answering these questions is the aim of the present study, which intends to analyze if there is a divide in terms of

social civic behavior on two axes – attitude towards civic engagement and stated civic participation, online and offline behavior.

2. Objectives and methodology

The main objectives of our study were, at this stage, descriptive ones, namely to measure the stated general civic behavior of an Eastern European Country, EU member, to find out potential relationships between online civic engagement (online_CE), offline civic engagement (offline_CE), civic attitude (CEA) and the stated general civic behavior (CEB), to analyze the results and use them for a future explanatory research.

We assume positive relationships between online civic engagement and civic engagement attitude (Hypothesis1), between civic engagement attitude and general civic engagement behavior (Hypothesis 2), as well as between both online and offline civic engagement and civic engagement behavior (Hypotheses 3 and 4): (H1) online_CE → CEA; (H2) CEA → CEB; (H3) online_CE → CEB; (H4) offline_CE → CEB.

Following aforementioned study objectives, as well as literature indications, we developed and tested a research model (fig.1), using structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM method) for data analysis, and a questionnaire based survey administered online on a convenience sample for data collection.

The questionnaire contained 22 items for measuring the four constructs of interest (CEB, CEA, online_CE, offline_CE) as follows: 8 items for measuring CEA - civic engagement attitude and 6 items for measuring CEB - engagement behavior (taken from the Civic Engagement Scale of Doolittle and Faul, [12], as well as 3 items for measuring the stated offline civic engagement (offline_CE) and 5 items for measuring the stated online civic engagement (online_CE) adapted from the Online Civic Engagement and Offline Civic Engagement scales of Jugert et al. [27]. Although Jugert et al have used larger scales for offline and online civic engagement, after carefully analyzing the items and talking to 3 experts, we decided to clearly separate online and offline based on the final civic action, not on the channel of information or transmission; from this perspective, for example, money donations or volunteering can be done both entirely or partially offline and online. Therefore, we retained only two items specific for entirely offline and added an item which separated respondents in NGO members and non-members. Also, on the online civic engagement we added one item for measuring the stated perceived easiness of online versus offline civic participation. To these items we added profile questions and demographics: type of social network used, place of residence, gender, age, civil status, revenue, work experience and field of studies.

The 8 items for CEA - civic engagement attitude were *I feel responsible for my community, I believe I should make a difference in my community, I believe that I have a responsibility to help the poor and the hungry, I am committed to serve in my community, I believe that all citizens have a responsibility to their community, I believe that it is important to be informed of community issues, I believe that it is important to volunteer, I believe that it is important to financially support charitable organizations.*

The 6 items used for measuring CEB - general civic engagement behavior were: *I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community, When working with others, I make positive changes in the community, I help members of my community, I stay informed of events in my*

community, I participate in discussions that raise issues of social responsibility, I contribute to charitable organizations within the community.

The 5 items for measuring online civic engagement (online_CE) were: *I liked or shared link news, music or video with a social or civic content to my contacts, I discussed societal or civic contents on the net, I participated in online based petition, protest or boycott, I've visited websites of civic organizations, In general, I consider that is easier to participate or support civic actions online than offline.*

Finally, 3 items were used for the offline civic engagement (offline_CE): *I've worn bracelets or any other type of symbol of support for civic and social cases, I've taken part in a physical, offline demonstration, I am (or I used to be) an active member of a civic, non-profit organization.*

All 22 items were measured on Likert type scales with 5 steps. The questionnaire was administered in Romanian, after a content validation process of back translation, in order to ensure the appropriate connotations. We used Google forms for the survey, and the questionnaire was distributed both on Facebook and to a list of e-mails. The data was collected during a week, in January 2017.

3. Results and discussion

We obtained a sample of 217 complete answers, with the following structure of respondents: 27.1 % males and 72.9% females; 73.4% age 18-25 years, 17.4% age 26-35 years; 88.5% higher education degree; 47.7% have been NGO members. The majority of the sample consists of students with a background in economic and social studies. This can be explained by the fact that we used the Facebook accounts of the authors, who are academics and have many former student connections; also, the e-mails were sent to former students, with the kind request of distributing the questionnaire to their friends, as well – we especially targeted youth. Although a convenience or purposive sample, not representative for the whole population, it is a good pilot for our descriptive research.

Complying with PLS-SEM methodology [20] for testing the four assumptions included in the research model regarding the positive effects: (H1) online_CE→CEA; (H2) CEA→CEB; (H3) online_CE→CEB; (H4) offline_CE→CEB, the overall goodness of fit, measurement model and structural model were evaluated, and relationships between variables were reported as outlined in fig.1. Model evaluation indicated the overall goodness-of-fit (GoF), the value of SRMR (SRMR=0.075) being below the 0.08 limit of Hu and Bentler [24], as recommended for PLS-SEM method.

Also, the measurement model complied to the reliability and validity requirements, all reflective constructs ($\alpha > 0.7$; $\rho_A > 0.7$; CR > 0.8; AVE > 0.5 detailed in Table 1), as well as composite constructs (no collinearity among indicators) fulfilling methodological criteria.

Construct	α	rho_A	CR	AVE
CEA [composite: the sum-scores of the 8 items measuring CEA]	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
CEB [reflective: 6 items]	0.867	0.877	0.900	0.602
offline_CE [composite: 3 items]	-	1.000	-	-
-online_CE [reflective: 5 items]	0.838	0.876	0.883	0.605

Table 1: Construct Reliability and Validity

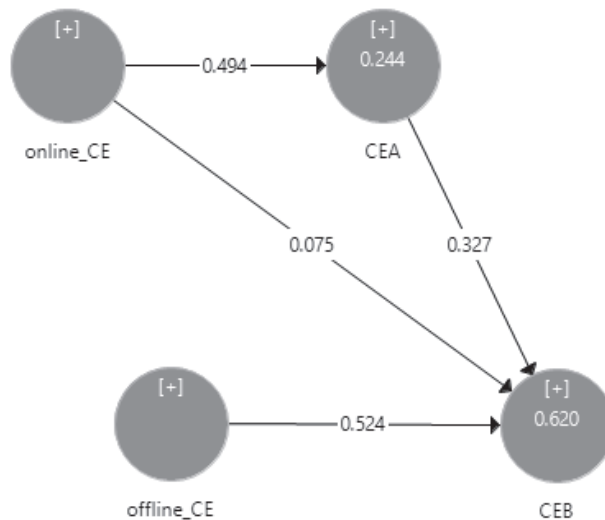


Figure 1: Research model with determination coefficients and path values

As indicated by Diamantopoulos and Siguaw [11], the variance inflation VIF < 3.3 indicated no multicollinearity among latent variables. Discriminant validity criteria of Fornell and Larcker [16] were met (detailed statistics in Table 2) and HTMT values (Table 3) were below 0.85 as indicated in Henseler et al [19], [20].

Construct	CEA	CEB	offline_CE	online_CE
CEA	1.000	-	-	-
CEB	0.605	0.776	-	-
offline_CE	0.459	0.723	-	-
online_CE	0.494	0.578	0.652	0.778

Table 2: Discriminant Validity: Fornell and Larcker criterion

	CEA	CEB	online_CE
CEA			
CEB	0.645		
online_CE	0.512	0.629	

Table 3: Discriminant Validity: HTMT criterion

Bootstrapping procedure with 5000 re-samples employed for the structural model evaluation indicated that the relationships included in the model explain 62% of CEB variance ($R^2=0.620$), while 24,4% of CEA variance is explained by online_CE, as observable from Fig.1.

Bootstrapping results (Table 4) indicated the significance of the positive influences that were hypothesized, highlighting 3 direct effects: *online_CE*→*CEA*; *CEA*→*CEB*; *offline_CE*→*CEB* (H1, H2 and H4 confirm) and the indirect effect *online_CE*→*CEB* (H3 partially confirms).

In the *online_CE*→*CEB* relationship, the significance of the indirect effect and the lack of the direct effect highlight the mediator role of CEA, the online civic engagement (*online_CE*) influencing general civic behaviour (*CEB*) via civic engagement attitude (*CEA*), as observable from Table 4 and Figure 1.

Effects	Effect Type	Path coef β	Mean	StDev	T	P	2.5% C.I.	97.5% C.I.
CEA → CEB	direct	0.327	0.325	0.048	6.824	0.000	0.227	0.418
offline_CEA → CEB	direct	0.524	0.529	0.051	10.246	0.000	0.425	0.626
online_CE → CEA	direct	0.494	0.496	0.054	9.087	0.000	0.385	0.597
online_CE → CEB	direct	0.075	0.078	0.059	1.264	0.206	-0.043	0.191
online_CE → CEB	indirect	0.162	0.161	0.030	5.326	0.000	0.105	0.224

Table 4: Direct and Indirect Effects

As results outline, while civic engagement attitude and offline civic engagement are directly influencing civic behavior, the online engagement exerts a direct positive effect on civic attitude which mediates the indirect effect of online civic engagement on civic behavior.

Finally, a multigroup analysis (MGA) employed to control for potential differences that might appear due to participant's demographics indicated no significant influences, highlighting that the presented model holds.

4. Conclusions, limits and further research

Coming back to our research questions and hypothesized relationships, based on the results of the study we can say that people just partially become more civic minded due to the digital evolution, their attitude being affected more than their stated behavior. Although the online civic engagement positively affects the civic engagement attitude, and civic engagement attitude positively affects civic engagement behavior, the online civic engagement attitude has just an indirect effect on online civic engagement behavior. That is, the online civic engagement affects civic behavior only indirectly, through civic engagement attitude (which acts as a mediating variable). This implies that we could use social media and digital instruments in order to increase positive civic engagement

attitudes. Social involvement in online virtual communities partially translates into real life actions. The positive effect of offline civic engagement on civic engagement behavior is much stronger. No differences were found based on demographic characteristics of respondents.

The main limit of the present research comes from the non-probabilistic sample, not representative for the total population. Also, the sample was a rather small one. The analyzed population consisted mainly from students, and although previous studies have shown that youth civic engagement is a good predictor for future civic participation, we don't have enough data to describe the situation for other categories of age and education. Thus, the results are specific for an exploratory, pilot type of research.

Future research needs to specifically address other categories of age and education, as well as to include other variables than demographic ones in order to explain civic attitude and civic engagement behavior. A second stream for a future research will focus on the nature of the social capital created through civic engagement. In this respect it would be really interesting to test the type of civic engagement, and see if it is a bonding or bridging type. The term "bonding" refers to the value assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups of people (in terms of age, studies, interests, opinions etc.) and "bridging" refers to that of social networks between socially heterogeneous groups [29]; bonding and bridging ties can lead to different types of social capital, some positive and some negative, based on Putnam's work. [40] Social capital development on the internet via social networking websites tends to be bridging capital [13], but social capital formation through civic engagement is still a new area, and more research is needed. As previous studies have shown, memberships in bridging groups are more strongly linked to positive civic values than those from bonding ones [17]. This is why a future research direction will be to test the bonding or bridging nature of online civic engagement, since the desired result of stimulating civic participation is to obtain positive civic values and effects.

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