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# Sex and political participation on Facebook

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SEX AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON FACEBOOK

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Rachel Gregory  
University of Northern Iowa  
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## ABSTRACT

Active political participation from the citizenry is essential for a healthy democracy. However, research finds a significant sex gap in political participation, limiting the influence of a substantial group from the political system and democratic representation. This division by sex is further marked by the types of political activities in which males and females engage. Candidates, elected officials, political organizations and voters alike now utilize Facebook as a means to spread political messages and engage the citizenry. Facebook is also a platform dominated by women. Due to women's position on social media, it is hypothesized that women and men participate at comparable rates on Facebook, as it mediates problems of access women have in order to engage politically. At the same time, the Internet is a largely unregulated medium on which conflicts and disagreement often arise. Since women engage in conflict avoidance at higher rates than men, it is also hypothesized that women who report experience conflict on Facebook will engage in less political participation on the platform. In order to test these hypotheses, a series of ordinary least squares regression models and logistic regression models explain the relationship between sex, conflict and other independent variables on Facebook participation and offline participation. Results show that although sex is not a significant predictor of political participation on Facebook or offline in most cases, the interaction term between sex and conflict is significant for both forms of participation. This research suggests the need for further investigation of the influence of conflict and issues of safety with sex and political participation.

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A Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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University of Northern Iowa

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This Study by: Rachel Marie Gregory

Entitled: SEX AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION ON FACEBOOK

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Women's and Gender Studies

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Literature on political participation shows that men participate more in traditional forms of political participation. Men are more likely to belong to a political party (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010), read newspapers and watch television programming regarding politics, discuss politics more and generally are more engaged in the political process (Verba et al. 1997). They also contact elected officials more often (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010) and donate more money to campaigns (Lehman Scholzman et al. 1994).

Women participate in politics in other ways than typically measured in political participation research, with the exception of voter turnout. Women are more likely to vote than men (Carroll 2013; Manza and Brooks 1998). Political consumerism, boycotting the buying of products, is a form of participation significantly more popular for women than men (Stolle et al. 2005). Women participate more in civic participation and social activism (Verba et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1997; Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010). Even from youth, these differences between male and female participation and expected participation are found (Hooghe and Stolle 2004; Quintelier 2008). Once women do participate politically, however, they participate at higher rates than their male counterparts (Lehman Scholzman et al. 1994). There is also a sixteen percentage point difference in internal political efficacy between males and females (Gidengal et al. 2008). However, when a female candidate or U.S. Senator is in the district, political knowledge,

political efficacy and political participation increase for women (Verba et al. 1997; Fridkin and Kenney 2014).

Political participation online is a budding area of research with limited focus on possible sex differences. Some research in online political participation finds sex differences, while others do not find sex differences. For instance, significant sex differences occur for visiting government website and politically-oriented websites (Bakker and de Vreese 2011). The same study also finds gender differences for traditional political participation, including writing letters, contacting an elected official, protesting, and political deliberation. However, these activities could correlate to other variables that are already positively associated with men, such as higher political efficacy.

Narrowing the focus to social media, especially Facebook, provides a way to examine sex issues in online political participation. More women than men use Facebook (Pew 2013), and women use the Internet more for communication, while men use the Internet for information searches (Jackson et al. 2001; Tsai and Tsai 2010). The fact that more women use Facebook and that they use the Internet for communication, the latter being an inescapable component of political participation, social media could act as a medium to level the playing field for women's political participation. It also provides an outlet for nontraditional forms of political participation beyond deliberation, such as posting political/civic articles and joining Facebook groups. This leads to the primary research question: Do women and men engage differently in political participation on Facebook?

At the same time, the Internet is a place of conflict and harassment (Biber et al. 2002; Lindsay and Krysik 2012; Pittaro 2007). This leads to other concerns about the way personal interactions on Facebook could affect the way in which people, in particular women, participate politically. This leads to the second research question: How does conflict on Facebook affect women's online political participation?

In order to answer these research questions, a survey is employed to gather information on specific participatory habits on Facebook and offline, as well as evaluations of conflict on Facebook. Ordinary least squares regression models are used to test hypothesis one: *Due to women's presence and activity on Facebook, women and men will engage in political participation at an insignificantly different rate* (H<sub>1</sub>). An independent samples t-test evaluates the first part of the second hypothesis: *Women will report an environment on Facebook that has more conflict than the environment that men will report* (H<sub>2a</sub>). While an additional OLS model tests the second part of the second hypothesis: *Women who report more conflict on Facebook will engage in online political participation less than women who report less conflict or men* (H<sub>2b</sub>).

Current literature on Facebook does not consider the different ways in which men and women might interact with the platform in regards to political participation at any significant level. Existing research also does not consider conflict avoidance and the impact of that psychological force on political participation on Facebook. Understanding these problems further can help shape the approach to political participation on Facebook while building a profile of women who engage online. A review of the current state of the literature on political participation provides further context for this problem, while the

methodology and results show the need for future research and construction of a reliable scale to measure conflict and political participation on Facebook.

CHAPTER 2  
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE UNITED STATES:

A LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Participation

Citizens engage in the democracy of a nation through civic and political participation. The two concepts have much in common; however, they possess distinct differences. Civic participation is “organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others” (Zukin et al. 2006, 7). Civic engagement could include activity in a community association (Putnam 2000), feeding the homeless and raising funds for community needs (Valenzuela et al. 2009).

Political participation, on the other hand, is “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al. 1995, 38). This would encompass acts such as voting, volunteering for a political campaign or signing a petition to elected officials on behalf of an organization like Planned Parenthood. This broad definition allows for inclusion measures of political participation that not only include typical variables, such as voting, but also apply to volunteering for social organizations that attempt to influence government.

Online Political Participation

The Internet is a newer platform for political participation with opportunities for involvement on political websites and social media platforms. Researchers argue that

online political participation is its own unit of analysis, while still correlating to offline political participation (Dimitrova et al. 2011; Krueger 2002; Oser et al. 2013). Using latent class analysis to define groups of political participants by offline and online participation, Oser et al. (2013) find that there is crossover between those who participate online and those who participate offline, as those who participate online use the Internet to increase activities and levels of participation while also participating offline. However, distinctive clusters arise between those who participate primarily online, primary offline and a hybrid of the two offline and online clusters. Online political participation was measured in terms of emailing an elected official, “sign[ing] an online petition,” “contribut[ing] money on the Internet,” and “start[ing] or join[ing] a political group or group supporting a cause on a social networking site” (Oser et al. 2013, 95). There are also important and significant demographic differences between those who primarily participate online and those who primarily participate offline. Young men are more likely to belong to the online participation group, whereas, recruitment in online participation is also a significant indicator of dominance in the online participation group (97-98).

Comparative research also suggests “that higher use of social media,” specifically, correlates to increased participation offline during an election cycle (Dimitrova et al. 2011, 14). In a two-panel study of 4,760 Swedish citizens, respondents were asked about the frequency of using Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, along with activities including “following a politician or party” and “discuss[ing] politics or current affairs on [the] Internet” (Dimitrova et al. 2011, 12). These indicators were measured against eight indicators of offline political participation, including “visiting a campaign rally, attending



a political meeting, contacting a politician [and] trying to convince others to vote for a specific party” (Dimitrova et al. 2011, 10). An increase in the wide range of social media activities correlates to an increase in an index of offline participatory acts. Although online and offline participation may be separate, correlations still exist between the two to suggest that online participation is still meaningful participation.

Evidence also exists indicating online political participation promotes voting (Teresi and Michelson 2015; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Searching for political news online increases the likelihood of voting during presidential elections (Tolbert and McNeal 2003, 183). Furthermore, in an experiment on Facebook, researchers find an 8.22 percentage point difference for those who see a Facebook post that encourages voting versus those who do not see such a post (Teresi and Michelson 2015, 199). White women were particularly susceptible to treatment effects, as they experienced a 19.6 percent-point increase in their likelihood of voting (200).

However, not all forms of political participation on Facebook correspond to offline participation. If looking only at “liking” political candidates on Facebook during the 2012 election, research does not indicate that there is a correlation between that particular activity and offline political participation (Pennington et al. 2015, 281). During the 2008 presidential election, the most common forms of participation on Facebook are posting a wall comment about politics and creating a politically related status message (Vitak et al. 2010, 5).

How much investment one must commit in order to see offline participation returns from online participation is debatable. The current concern with online participation

relates to what political scientists deem as “slacktivism,” which is “a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change” (Kristofferson et al. 2014, 1149). Active political participation is a way for people to be a part of the political system directly (Verba et al. 1995). This can entail acts such as voting or even political discussions and persuasion. However, access to and participation in the political system can be unequal, demonstrated by the demographic differences in those who participate (Oser et al. 2013; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). There especially appears to be a discrepancy between the participation of men and women (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010; Verba et al. 1997).

#### Sex and Political Participation

The political participation patterns of men and women differ significantly. For example, women have had a larger voter turnout in presidential elections than men since the 1984 election (Conway et al. 1997; Norrander 2008; Seltzer et al. 1997). After women won the right to vote in 1920, the road to increasing women’s voting participation was slow but incremental (Norrander 2008, 10). Since the Bureau of Labor and Statistics began keeping data on voter turnout by sex in 1964, a gradual increase was noted until women surpassed men in 1984 (Seltzer 1997, 65). Women also have had a larger voter turnout than men in midterm elections since 1986 (Center for American Women in Politics [CAWP] 2015). Although it might have taken them decades to become socialized to participate as voters, women eventually became the larger voting bloc, with more

black women voting as the largest proportion of the eligible voting population since 2006 (although white women account for a larger vote share in raw numbers) (CAWP 2015).

Another form of political participation dominant among women is political consumerism, which is “actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti 2003, 2). Political consumerism allows people to select or choose to not select products based upon political preferences. These are private decisions that influence capitalist markets, a way for the private sphere to influence the public domain (2). This form of participation, much like voting, is a private political act, between a woman and her grocer.

The use of political consumerism as participation is well documented in Western countries. A survey of over 1000 college students in Canada, Belgium and Sweden revealed that young women use this form of participation significantly more than young men (Stolle et al. 2005, 258). In Sweden, especially, gender had the largest effect size of any other indicator besides strong beliefs regarding post-materialism.

These same trends are visible in the United States. A survey of 1159 college students at a Southwestern university revealed the discrepancy between sex and political consumerism in the United States (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2014). Women indicated participation in political consumerism significantly more than men. However, that same study finds that the activities of those that engage in political consumer mimic other activities associated with civic participation more than political participation (496). Although political consumerism is significant as an indicator for civic participation and

political participation, the effect size is larger for civic participation (.37 and .27, respectively).

Men discuss politics in person with others and engage with traditional forms of media for political information more than women (Verba et al. 1997, 1055). Men are significantly more likely to discuss politics frequently, enjoy discussing politics, watch politically related television and read national political stories in newspapers (Verba et al. 1997, 1055). Women do, however, read local political stories in newspapers at the same rate as men, indicating a difference in policy matters for men and women. Men also participate more in activities geared toward electoral politics, such as volunteering for a campaign. Men hold party membership, attend political meetings, contact elected officials and contact the media more than women do (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010, 323).

Little research concerning sex and online political participation exists. What little is known about women's political behavior on Facebook does suggest that women could be less prone to political conflict. Women are more likely than men to "unfriend" a Facebook friend over political disagreement, post fewer political statuses and are less likely to fill out political orientation information on their Facebook profile (Miller et al. 2015, 384-387). Even though women on Facebook self-report greater comfort discussing politics online, they are less likely to do so when they disagree (384). While women participate more in private acts of political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2014; Seltzer 1997, 65), men participate in more public ways, such as political discussions and campaigning (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010).

Although women's participation is lower overall, women who do participate do so at higher frequencies than men (Lehman Schlozman et al. 1995). Thus, women who do self-select into political participation are more committed than their male counterparts. The question then becomes what could be creating a participation sex divide in which a significant number of men compared to women choose to individually participate in the political system?

### Factors affecting Political Participation

#### Resource Theory

One possible theory for the differences between political participation in men and women involves the resources available to each to participate. Notably, political participation requires time, money, civic skills and education. Research shows that these resources are significant for women and men; however, women have less access to these resources (Burns et al. 2001; Lehman Schlozman et al. 1994; Lehman Schlozman et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1995). Verba et al. (1995) conducted the two-stage Citizen Participation Study in 1989 to determine civic and political participation of Americans with an emphasis on gender. The first round included telephone interviews of 15,053 participants followed by a stratified random sample of interviews with 2,517 of the original respondents. Questions for the survey included activity and frequency of political acts, nonpolitical activity and demographic information for employment, household demographics and recruitment information. Data show that resources matter when determining political participation. Income, education, employment, civic skills and free time all positively correlate with an increase in political participation. The distinction for

men and women lies in the amount of resources each has. For instance, higher income is positively associated with political participation. Gender differences exist, however, as men make more money than women (Lehman Schlozman et al. 1994, 972-973). At the time of the survey, men also accounted for a greater number of higher educational attainment and graduate and professional degrees. The amount of leisure time someone reported was significant, but the gender breakdown on leisure time was insignificant. Women spend more time on household chores and childcare, while men spend more time at paid employment. Thus, while the gender discrepancy with income and education play a role in political participation, leisure time does not have a significant gender difference (Lehman Schlozman et al. 1994). When controlling for income and education, the gender difference subsides, suggesting that the resources available to men and women account for differences in political participation.

Employment serves two roles within the resource theory of political participation. The first is that employment provides income (addressed above), and the second role is that as a facilitator to practice what Lehman Schlozman et al. (1994) describe as “civic skills” (974). Civic skills are the practices learned through education and employment, such as public speaking, leading a meeting, writing and making decisions for a group, that correlate to skills needed to participate in the political system (Verba et al. 1995, 559-561). Women have lower levels of educational attainment, shorter average working hours and achieve lower ranks within employment positions, which contribute to women’s significantly lower levels of civic skills compared to men (Lehman Schlozman 1994, 976; Lehman Schlozman 1999, 47). Men are more likely to indicate opportunities

through employment to practice civic skills. Thus, men's higher incomes and better employment positioning give men an advantage in preparation for political participation.

### Situational Theory

Much like resource theory of political participation, access is the determinant of the situational theory for political participation. Situationally-induced participation is a result of the context of a person's everyday life. For example, "social pressure, health condition, and leisure time" can determine one's ability to participate in the political system (Lamprianou 2013, 31). The space one occupies and the everyday factors surrounding someone, then, determines the ability and desire to participate in the political system. Some crossover does exist between resource theory and situational theory, such as with leisure time; however, the two theories remain separate by the demarcation of *space* that allows for participation.

Situational theory can account for participation differences between men and women. Men tend to occupy the spaces in everyday life that cultivate the skills and provide opportunity for political participation (Tedin et al. 1977). Men who are employed outside of the home have the opportunity to engage in political discourse with others that women who work inside the home do not have (Tedin et al. 1977; Welch 1977). Much of this research comes from a time before many women worked outside the home. Although more women now work in the formal economy and hold managerial positions, women do hold the majority of part-time work and are still more likely to be outside of the formal labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014).

Changes have occurred in the way that men and women engage in workforce, education and their personal lives; however, the space that people occupy changes with technological advancements. A survey that looked at the decision-making process between engaging in and abstaining from voting in person and voting online finds that Internet access (already occupying the space of the Internet), trust in using the Internet, convenience of using the Internet and offline voting correlate to voting online (Carter and Belanger 2012). No information for sex or gender existed within the research, but this study shows the relevance of situational theory in the changing realm of political participation.

### Socialization Theory

Some researchers point to longstanding social structures that contribute to the discrepancy between men's and women's political participation. Indeed, discrepancies in political participation start at a very young age. Data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement of 2,811 eighth graders representing 124 American schools show the perceived participation patterns of girls and boys (Hooghe and Stolle 2004, 7-8). Children were asked how likely they perceived themselves to engage in twelve different political activities as adults. Political participation involved activities related to voting, volunteering, petitioning, protesting, party membership, running for office, political occupations and street protests (10). Although girls in the study perceived their political involvement to be greater than boys as adults, the types of participation differ. Girls perceive their involvement to include volunteering, voting and petition; however, boys indicate a greater intention of declaring party membership,



running for office and participating in violent forms of protest (11). It should be noted that these results are perceptions and do not necessarily reflect eventualities. Research on the role model effect finds a significant relationship among fourteen-year-old girls (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2005); however, the same effect is not found for women of college age (Fox and Lawless 2014). Although perception versus reality could account for the level of political participation, the types of participation mimic sex difference in studies on political participation in adults, giving legitimacy to the socialization theory of sex and political participation.

Other research notes that socialization of political participation occurs within familial structures. Jennings (1983) performed an eight country study of familial relations and political participation. Data come from a subset of a larger two-wave study of 12,588 participants and follow up with 1,635 child-parent pairs. The focus of the study included participatory acts of the larger sample and familial patterns from the matched pairs. Findings conclude that the United States was the only country in which children considered the mother the primary conversant for political issues (372); however, once Kent Jennings controlled for the sex of the child, a noticeable difference emerged. Daughters discussed politics with their mothers significantly more, while sons discussed politics with their fathers significantly more than their mothers (375). The United States has the strongest effect size for the daughter-mother preference. Under this guise, girls and boys are perpetuating the participatory habits of their mothers and fathers. Children pick up on the cues from those with which they discuss politics. Girls' participatory acts

would emulate those predominant with mothers, while the same would be true for sons and fathers. The data are isolated to children from two-parent, heterosexual households.

Beyond child-parent relationships, familial relations between marital partners could also explain some of the differences between women's and men's political participation. Examining data from eighteen countries, married women, especially those with children, have lower participation than single women or childfree women (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010). However, this could also be related to resources, as women with children would have less available time than single women. There is no significant difference in participation for men based on marital or child status.

### Psychological Factors

Along with resources, socialization and situational differences, psychological factors could also contribute to the sex gap in political participation. Political efficacy is positively associated with political participation (Jung et al. 2011; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Valentino et al. 2009; Verba et al. 1997). Political efficacy is "the feeling that an individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process" (Campbell et al. 1954, 187). This can be further divided into internal political efficacy and external political efficacy. Internal political efficacy is a person's own sense of competency to participate in the political system (Niemi et al. 1991). External political efficacy "refers to the perception of the responsiveness of political officials to citizens' demands" (Jung et al. 2011, 413). The positive correlation between political participation and political efficacy is intuitive. If people believe that they are capable of making

change or that political systems will be responsive to change, they are more likely to participate within the political system.

A sex gap exists for political efficacy. Verba et al. (1997) find a sex difference in external political efficacy with data from the Citizen Participation Study, with men indicating higher levels of external political efficacy (1057). However, Kenski and Stroud (2006) find that women have significantly higher external political efficacy, but women do have significantly lower internal political efficacy (184). These data come from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey. It is possible that between the CPS in 1988 and the NAES in 2000 women's external political efficacy did increase. After all, women's education levels have increased and surpassed those of men (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). However, internal political efficacy remains significantly lower for women. This is even true for women with a college education (Gidengal et al. 2008). Although college educated women have higher internal political efficacy than women without a college education, a nineteen percentage point difference still exists between college educated women and college educated men (Gidengal et al. 2008, 551).

Internal political efficacy is also an important component to political participation. Valentino et al. (2009) find that "moving from the minimum to the maximum level of internal efficacy boosts the probability of performing some form of participation by [twenty] points" (316-318). Although women may have used resources to gain ground in external political efficacy, the essentiality of internal political efficacy puts women at a disadvantage for political participation. However, when a female candidate or U.S.

Senator is in the district, political knowledge, political efficacy and political participation increase for women (Fridkin and Kenney 2014; Verba et al. 1997).

Another psychological factor with implications for political participation is conflict avoidance, especially for publicly visible acts. Those who engage in conflict avoidance would then choose to disengage from certain political acts in order to avoid conflict or disagreement (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Thus, public acts, such as political canvassing, would have a greater risk for conflict than private acts like voting. Although the root causation of conflict avoidance is debatable, it is possible to construct a vignette of those who engage in the practice. Hayes et al. (2006) describe those who practice conflict avoidance or what they describe as “self-censorship,” which is the conscious decision to not engage in political discussion (Hayes et al. 2006, 264). Those who are “less educated, older, more likely to be female, lower in political self-efficacy, shyer, discuss politics less frequently” and ideological moderates engage in conflict avoidance (Hayes et al. 2006, 272).

There is a direct connection between those who report conflict avoidance and the number of political activities in which they participate (Hayes et al. 2006, 274). However, Ulbig and Funk (1999) would argue against the use of an index for all political activities and, instead, advocate for the distinction between types of political activities to determine if conflict avoidance is hindering participation. When separating political activities into individual acts, conflict avoidance is related to decreased activity in protesting, political discussion and volunteering for a political entity; however it is not significant for voting or engaging with an elected official (275).

## Evaluation

In order to participate online, people must have the resources particular for using the Internet. In the most basic sense, political participation online requires the ability to use the Internet. Those with higher Internet skills are more likely to engage in online political participation (Best and Krueger 2005; Krueger 2002). Demographically, people who are more likely to have Internet access also have higher incomes and education (Krueger 2002; Oser et al. 2013; Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Those at the lower levels of income experience greater disenfranchisement from political participation online and offline than those with higher incomes and education (Oser et al. 2013, 98). People who have higher Internet skills are also younger (Best and Krueger 2005). Men are most likely to possess the characteristics that enable online political participation, as they have higher Internet skills and resources (Krueger 2002).

Social network sizes and behavior within those networks also correlate to the level of online political participation people exhibit. A social network in this sense refers to discussions with other people “whether online or offline” (Valenzuela et al. 2012, 172). As the size of the online social network increases, the amount of online political participation also increases (175). Isolating this effect only to Facebook, the more Facebook friends one has, the greater amount of political discussions that one engages (Miller et al. 2015, 382). Coinciding with network size, those who discuss politics more with “co-workers and acquaintances” along with “strangers” rather than “family and friends” participate more online (Valenzuela et al. 2012, 172). People, then, are more willing to engage in matters, in this case politics, that can bring contestation with people

who are relationally more distant. Online social network websites provide a medium on which to discuss political issues with a wide range of relational ties, including more distant networks.

Indicators of political participation place women at a disadvantage through resources, socialization and psychological factors (Gidengal et al. 2008; Jennings 1983; Ulbig and Funk 1999). However, certain women participate more than others, suggesting there could be instances in which women actively participate in the political system. These could be when barriers to participation are lower, such as the private acts of voting or political consumerism (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2014). The Internet, specifically social media, is a platform that could mitigate some of the resource factors, as women could access the platform anywhere they have the Internet or mobile network. Women would also have the ability to engage in public participatory acts with those who are more distant, decreasing the risk of conflict (Valenzuela et al. 2012).

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### Hypotheses

Activity on the Internet is generally broken down into two categories: communication and surfing (Jackson et al 2001). Communicative purposes on the Internet primarily include email and the use of forums or chat rooms (Tsai and Tsai 2010); however, social media as a communication device is a newer form of social technology (Wang et al. 2007). Women use the Internet significantly more for communication purposes: email, online chat rooms and forums, while men use the Internet to search for information (Jackson et al 2001; Tsai and Tsai 2010). Evidence also exists for a sex division in the use of social media, particularly Facebook. Women have more Facebook accounts than men, and Facebook is the predominant social media platform for all social media users (Pew 2015). Thus, women's preference for communication services on the Internet extends, at least, to Facebook.

At the same time, Facebook is an ever increasing platform for political outreach by electoral campaigns (Williams and Gulati 2012). The research on sex and political participation on Facebook is limited. Evidence does suggest that men do tend to possess the characteristics associated with political participation, such as efficacy, Internet skills and higher incomes (Krueger 2002). It also suggests that women experience conflict avoidance in political interactions on Facebook (Valenzuela et al 2012). However, since women engage with Facebook more than men and with increased activity (McAndrew and Jeong 2012; Tsai and Tsai 2010), Facebook could act as a mediating platform that

removes barriers to women's political participation. Unlike offline political systems, women are already on the medium in high numbers. A reverse understanding of the situational theory of women's decreased political participation (Welch 1977), could apply to Facebook. Instead of women being unable to access political systems due to the position and demands of their gender, women have greater access to a medium that can be utilized by political systems to invoke participation. This leads to the first hypothesis: *Due to women's presence and activity on Facebook, women and men will engage in political participation at an insignificantly different rate (H<sub>1</sub>).*

Additionally, women are more susceptible to conflict avoidance (Hayes et al 2006; Ulbig and Funk 1999). Political participation makes those involved vulnerable to conflict, as disagreement and opposition are a part of a democratic system. Beyond even disagreement, women have safety concerns and could experience conflict in a different way that affects political participation. For instance, women who perceive their neighborhood as less safe are less likely to participate in civic participation, such as neighborhood associations (Caiazza 2005). Men do not experience this same aversion due to safety concerns. Thus, women's temporal views of safety and conflict matter for political participation offline.

On the Internet, women are similarly vulnerable to safety concerns. Women are more likely to be the victims of cyber stalking than men (Pittaro 2007). In addition to cyber stalking, women also experience sexual harassment and are more likely than men to note an interaction on the Internet as sexual harassment (Biber et al. 2002). The amount of time people spend on social media positively associates with reported



instances of sexual harassment victimization (Lindsay and Krysik 2012). Women's heightened awareness of sexual harassment could extend to conflict online in general. Therefore, it is hypothesized that *women will report an environment on Facebook that has more conflict than the environment that men will report (H<sub>2a</sub>)*. Applying the research describing women's decreased civic participation in relation to a decreased sense of safety offline to online participation, the second part of this hypothesis claims that *women who report more conflict on Facebook will engage in online political participation less than women who report less conflict or men (H<sub>2b</sub>)*.

### Survey Design

In order to test these hypotheses, a survey of 405 participants in the United States who were at least eighteen years of age was employed using MTurk as the interface for recruitment. MTurk is a growing medium for social science research. Although some researchers have concerns regarding the validity of research conducted on MTurk, meta-analysis on convenience samples shows that MTurk demographics mimic those of the general population and mirror the gender and age distribution of student convenience samples and income of those in adult convenience samples (Berinsky et al 2012, 355).

### Dependent Variables

The primary dependent variables include Facebook political participation and offline political participation. Each dependent variable is indexed to create an additive score ranging from zero to ten for offline political participation and zero to fourteen for Facebook political participation. Offline political participation includes questions on voting activity in two general and two primary elections. These variables are indexed as

one variable, a proportion of the number of times a respondent voted divided by the number of elections eligible to vote to account for age between the years of 2008 to 2014. It also includes questions from the 2012 American National Election Studies to gauge participation, including whether a participant volunteered for a campaign, donated money, displayed electoral signage, signed a petition, participated in a protest or contacted an elected official. Two of the questions have variation in wording to include politically related socially organized activity as well (Verba et al. 1995). Cronbach's alpha score for the index is .796.

Facebook political participation has comparable activities, along with those unique to Facebook. Standard questions concerning political participation include "liking" a political candidate or political party, joining or starting a political group, sharing a photo/meme/comic/cartoon, posting an article on a personal Facebook wall, sharing a political article, encouraging Facebook friends to vote and reading political news (Pennington et al. 2015; Teresi and Michelson 2015; Vitak et al. 2010). Other measures include donating to a political campaign or party online, commenting on political posts and signing a petition online. The index has an alpha score of .844. Two questions concern donating money online, one with a prompt from Facebook and the other without such a prompt. It is important to note that although donating money online without a prompt from Facebook does not include direct Facebook activity, the two questions have a Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficient of .635. Clearly, the two questions are related; however, more people donate money online through a website than on Facebook (15.1 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively). Removing the general online donation

question also reduces the Cronbach's alpha from .844 to .839. The index is more reliable with the inclusion of the variable. Both dependent variables are also included as independent variables in opposite models (Facebook participation is an independent variable in the offline participation model and offline participation is an independent variable in the online participation model) to determine the relationship between the two types of political participation (Oser et al. 2013).

### Independent Variables

Facebook conflict comprises six questions as an index to determine perceived hostility and feelings of safety on Facebook. These include seeing or being the recipient of a negative aggressive response to a public remark on Facebook, sending or receiving an angry private message on Facebook, fear of negative backlash from a political comment and a six-point Likert scale of overall feelings of safety on Facebook. All six of the questions comprise an index with a range from zero to six. The variable expressing fear of negative backlash included three response questions ("No," "Yes," and "I don't talk about politics on Facebook"). The neutral option is treated as missing data and excluded from analysis. This reduces the number of respondents in this category (N=216) for this variable alone. It should be noted that those who did indicate that they did not talk about politics on Facebook did participate but at significantly lower levels ( $p \leq .001$ ). However, respondents who made that indication still completed acts within the Facebook index. Participation rates were low but still existed. Women also accounted for half of the neutral response. The construction of the question could be too vague or respondents who choose to not "talk about politics on Facebook" could do so out of fear of backlash.

The last question comprising online conflict, overall feelings of safety on Facebook, is on a scale that comprises three options that trend toward feeling safe (somewhat safe, safe and very safe) and three options that trend toward feeling unsafe (somewhat unsafe, unsafe and very unsafe). Most respondents indicate at least feeling somewhat safe on Facebook; however, variance in the question between males and females lies within the degree of feeling safe. Collapsing the responses into a dichotomous variable reduces the variance and, thus, the nuance of difference between men and women. Thus, this question is reduced to a dichotomous variable by holding it constant at the median and coding variables above and at the median as zero and variables below the median as one.

This produces an index with a Cronbach's alpha of .552. The low alpha value does point to problems with construct validity, calling into question the reliability of the index. Excluding three of the questions (fear of backlash, overall safety and saw a negative aggressive response) does increase the alpha score; however, it would ultimately require running all six questions separately, which creates higher residuals and a lower constant coefficient in the regression models. The low alpha value could be due to a few problems besides a problem with the construction of the index itself. For starters, the index only comprises six questions, and lower alpha values are associated with a lower number of variables within the index (Tavakol and Denick 2011). The same research suggests that heterogeneous responses from participants can also produce a lower alpha score. Within this sample, respondents did have similar answers to individual questions. Indeed, even differences on the safety index occurred through different levels of feeling

safe instead of unsafe, creating a necessity to divide the measure at the median. Even looking at the indicators by sex, there were few differences between respondents. In order to determine the reliability of the index while taking into account measures that affect the Cronbach alpha score, a test of correlations between the individual variables within the index and the index itself was also performed, as recommended by Tavakol and Denick (2011). All of the measures positively correlate to the index itself, suggesting that the index can still be used with all of the measures as an indicator within the statistical models in this study.

Facebook activity is measured by frequency of use on a scale from several times a day to nonuse and the number of Facebook “friends” as an open-ended question. This allows the ability to check for network size and willingness to engage in political behavior online (Valenzuela et al. 2012).

Political knowledge questions include three standard 2012 ANES questions regarding the majority party in Congress, years in a senatorial term and frequency of presidential terms allotted by the Constitution. In addition to these three standard questions, three questions regarding women in politics also comprise the measure. Research shows that the political knowledge gap between men and women becomes insignificant or reduces based upon the type of methodology employed for political knowledge measures (Dolan 2011; Mondak and Anderson 2004). Women are more likely to choose the neutral option rather than venture a guess, a tactic men significantly use more on political knowledge tests (Mondak and Anderson 2004). Women also answer political knowledge questions about women in politics and local politics more accurately

than men (Dolan 2011). In order to insure the political knowledge scale is not bias against women, three questions based on Dolan (2011) ask respondents about the number of women serving on the U.S. Supreme Court and Congress and to choose a current woman in office based on multiple choices. All of the political knowledge questions are closed ended and multiple choice. All six items are indexed to range from zero to six. The Cronbach's alpha score is .446. Although the score is lower, separating the ANES and the questions of women's participation into separate indices creates an unacceptable score, with the women's participation index showing as a more reliable index. Again, this low alpha value could be due to the low number of questions in the index and the similarity of responses. All individual measures correlate with the index.

Political efficacy questions comprise both external and internal political efficacy. The questions from this measure derive from the 2012 ANES survey, which includes four external and four internal political efficacy questions. Again, the responses from the survey were reduced from five responses to four in order to remove neutral/do not know/moderate responses. Analyses include a separate index for external and internal efficacy (ranging from one to sixteen, respectively). The external efficacy scale scores a Cronbach's alpha of .768, and the internal efficacy alpha is set at .776.

Options for the sex variable include male, female and other; however, other was dropped from the analysis as no respondent selected the category. Breakdowns for ethnicity are White (not Hispanic), Black and Hispanic. Due to the low number of non-white respondents in the sample, the dummy variable for ethnicity includes white respondents as one and all non-white respondents as zero. Income, level of education,

party affiliation and political ideology also serve as control variables. The inclusion of the respondent's zip code provides further analysis to determine if there is a female elected senatorial or gubernatorial elected official in the district, which increases women's political participation, political efficacy and political knowledge (Fridkin and Kenny 2014; Verba et al. 1997). The variable is coded as zero if there is not either a female senator or governor associated with the zip code and a one if either a female senator or governor is presently associated with the respondent's zip code. Zip codes were compared with zip code three-digit prefix groups from the United States Postal Service along with a list of current female governors and senators from the Center for American Women in Politics (2016).

Questions also include measures to determine political discussions on Facebook (Miller et al. 2015) as well as offline political discussions. These are analyzed separately and include measures for talking about politics both with someone of the same sex and someone of the opposite sex. All four variables (two for Facebook and two for offline political discussions) are coded as dichotomous variables.

### Demographics

The sample is skewed demographically toward those with a white ethnicity (not Hispanic) and female (see Table 1). Just under fifty percent of the sample (49.3 percent) is age thirty or under. Most of the respondents have an annual household income of less than \$50,000 (see Table 2). The sample skews Democratic with 66.4 percent of the sample identifying as at least leaning Democratic and 62.7 percent claim to be at least slightly liberal.

Table 1. Sex and Ethnicity

Demographic	Percent
Male	40
Female	60
Black	6.9
Hispanic	5.2
White	80.2
Other	7.7

N=405

Table 2. Income

Income	Percent
Below \$10,000	6.7
\$10,000-\$29,999	23.5
\$30,000-\$49,999	23.7
\$50,000-\$69,999	19
\$70,000-\$89,999	10.4
\$90,000-\$109,999	8.1
\$110,000-\$129,999	3.5
\$130,000-\$149,999	3
\$150,000-\$169,999	1.5
\$170,000 or more	.7

N=405

The sample is also better educated than the general public (see Table 3). Twenty percent have at least some college but no degree, and 40.7 percent of the sample hold a bachelor's degree. Respondents holding a master's degree or higher is 11.4 percent. Every respondent is at least a high school graduate, or equivalent, and 88.4 percent of the sample has at least an associate degree or higher. The higher education levels are indicative of prior research on Internet users (Oser et al. 2013). Given that this is a survey administered through an online interface, higher education rates are reasonably expected.



Table 3. Education Level

Degree	Percent
High school graduate	11.6
Associate degree	9.1
Occupation/vocational program	
Associate degree	4.7
Academic program	
Some college (no degree)	20.2
Bachelor's degree	40.7
Master's degree	11.4
Professional school	1
Doctorate degree	1.2
N=405	

In terms of Facebook use, an overwhelming 71.9 percent of respondents use Facebook several times a day. The next largest categories of usage are once a day and a few times a week. The age distribution of the sample would likely indicate the high use of social media, but, clearly, a larger number of those thirty or under also use the platform. The number of Facebook “friends” ranged greatly from only a few to 5000.

On a sixteen-point scale, men have a mean internal efficacy score of 11.38, while women have a mean score of 10.44. An independent sample t-test shows that women have a significantly lower internal efficacy score at  $p \leq .001$ . Men have a mean external efficacy score of 8.95, and women have a mean external efficacy score of 8.7. The difference is not significant.

For the political knowledge index, men have a mean of 2.69 on a six-point scale, and women have a mean score of 2.51, which is significant at  $p \leq .05$ . The total political knowledge scale consists of three ANES questions and three questions that relate to

women in politics (see above). Examining the questions further as two separate scales, one for ANES and one for women in politics, differences arise with the women in politics questions. Differences in answers to ANES questions are not significant between men and women; however, men answered more questions correctly regarding women in politics than women answered correct (significant at  $p \leq .05$ ). Looking at the questions individually, the effect comes from one single question: What is the closest approximate percentage of elected officials in the U.S. Congress who are women? Answer choices included five percent, ten percent, twenty percent, thirty percent, forty percent and more than fifty percent. Women chose answers lower than the correct answer, twenty percent, significantly more than men. Women's answers for the question also had greater variance. Women in this sample seem to underestimate the number of women in Congress; whereas, the men in the sample estimate the percentage more correctly.

#### ANES Demographics

The ANES provides demographics for comparison between a reliable large-scale sample and the sample for this study. The 2012 ANES had a gender distribution of forty-eight percent men and fifty-two percent women. The age of respondents in the ANES sample were primarily born between 1943 and 1991. Seventy-one percent of the 2012 ANES sample identifies as white, twelve percent identifies as black, eleven percent are Hispanic and six percent fall into other ethnic categories. The sample is well educated with ninety-seven percent having at least a high school diploma. The income distribution varies widely with the majority of respondents from the thirty-fourth to ninety-fifth percentile, suggesting the income of respondents represents middle and high-income

earners. Forty-seven percent of the sample identify as at least leaning Democrat, fourteen percent are Independents and thirty-nine percent at least lean Republican.

#### Sample Limitations

Issues with the sample have the potential to skew results. For instance, the sample consists of a large number of Facebook users who are also very frequent Facebook users. Sixty percent of Americans belong to at least one social media platform, such as Facebook (Pew 2013). In this sample, however, all except one person responded affirmatively to having a Facebook account. Thus, this sample is above average in its usage of social media. Research from Pew Research Center (2013) also shows that sixty-six percent of social media users have participated in politics using an online medium; however, this sample shows that ninety percent of people in the sample have participated in at least one activity on Facebook. Not only does this sample have a higher number of social media users than the general population, it also consists of people who are more engaged in politics than the general population.

Demographics of the sample can also affect the results. Everyone in the sample had at least a high school diploma, while the majority of respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher. Although higher education levels are expected for Internet users (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2012), only 30.4 percent of Americans hold a bachelor's degree, as of 2012 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The sample is overeducated in comparison to the general population. This can affect results due to the positive relationship between educational attainment and political participation (Verba et al. 1995).

Although men in the sample did have significantly higher levels of internal political efficacy, women in the sample still indicated moderate levels of internal political efficacy. While men had a mean internal political efficacy score of 11.38, women had a mean score of 10.44. The statistical difference is important; however, the large discrepancy that occurs in other research (Gidengil et al. 2008) did not occur in this sample. Women and men also did not have significantly different levels of external political efficacy. Although men have higher levels of internal political efficacy in the sample, women in the sample are still efficacious, which could lead to higher levels of participation among women in the sample in comparison to the general population.

#### Statistical Models

Ordinary least squares regression models, a t-test and a series of logistic regression models test the hypotheses for political participation for the sample. The first OLS model uses Facebook participation as the dependent variable regressed against ethnicity, sex, education, income, number of Facebook friends, frequency of Facebook use, political knowledge, internal efficacy, external efficacy, age, zip code, offline participation and an interaction of party and sex. Three responses fell more than three standard deviations from the mean and were excluded. This decreased the sample size to N=402. The offline political participation OLS model regresses offline political participation against the same independent variables. Three outliers also appeared in this model resulting in N=402 for the offline participation model as well. The inclusion of Facebook specific independent variables in the offline political participation model accounts for discourse and activity on Facebook that would influence offline participation

(Mossberger et al. 2008). An additional OLS model regress previous independent variables with the conflict index and an interaction term of sex and conflict against Facebook participation. This model utilizes a smaller number of the sample (N=215).

Logistic regression models were used to analyze each individual act of participation, along with the conflict variable. Due to the number of people who indicated that they did not discuss politics on Facebook in the question regarding fear of backlash, the sample size for the logit models reduces to N=216. All offline and Facebook political measures, same-sex offline political discussion, opposite-sex political discussion, same-sex Facebook political discussion and opposite-sex Facebook political discussion serve as dependent variables with the same independent variables as the linear models, except for the interaction for sex and party. The conflict index and sex and conflict index interaction also serve as independent variables in models for both offline and Facebook political participation.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

#### Facebook Participation and Sex

To test the first hypothesis, women and men will engage in political participation at an insignificantly different rate ( $H_1$ ), two ordinary least squares regression models compare male and female political participation. An independent sample t-test confirms part A of the second hypothesis, women will report an environment on Facebook that has more conflict than the environment that men will report ( $H_{2a}$ ). Part B of the second hypothesis ( $H_{2b}$ ), women who report more conflict on Facebook will engage in online political participation less than women who report less conflict or men, is analyzed with an OLS regression model using Facebook participation as the dependent variable. The findings from  $H_{2a}$  and  $H_{2b}$  create the need to distinguish between different types of participation to determine the extent of the relationship between sex, conflict on Facebook and political participation. Additional analyses measured by individual logit models of Facebook participation and offline participation provide context for the results in the second hypothesis. Finally, an OLS model with offline political participation as the dependent variable clarifies differences between sex and conflict in online and offline participation.

The first two models show political participation on Facebook and offline (Table 4 and Table 5, respectively). Facebook participation does not reach significance for sex. In fact, the coefficient is positive, suggesting that women in the sample participate at higher levels although not significantly so. The only variables to reach significance in the

Facebook model are income, education, Facebook frequency, offline participation and internal political efficacy. As a departure from the current literature (Oser et al. 2013), income is significant and negative, meaning as the level of income increases, the level of Facebook participation decreases. A closer look at the data shows a small cluster of respondents who make \$130,000 or more and have very low participation rates. This is likely pulling the data to a negative coefficient. Education also has the same problem. Income and education are moderately correlated. The more that someone is on Facebook the more they participate politically on the medium. Internal political efficacy, but not external political efficacy, is also significant. Offline political participation is significantly associated with political participation on Facebook.

From the initial table, it appears as though suspicions about Facebook acting as an equalizer for women to participate could be accurate, as sex is not significant. However, examination of the first hypothesis requires comparing results by sex of offline participation as well. If the first hypothesis is correct, sex should not be significant in the Facebook model; however, sex should be significant in the offline participation model. As shown below (Table 5), sex is not significant in the offline model. Thus, hypothesis one is not supported.

Table 4. Facebook Participation

Variable	$\beta$
Constant	-.975
Female	.68
Age	-.015
Ethnicity	-.213
Income	-.169*
Education	-.220*
Female Zip	-.140
Party	.084
Female Republican	-.272
FB Frequency	.485***
No. Friends	.000
Political Knowledge	-.003
Internal Efficacy	.155**
External Efficacy	.069
Offline Participation	.777***
Adjusted R Square	.436

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

Age, however, is a significant indicator in the model with offline political participation increasing as age increases. Respondents who identified as white participate more offline than non-white respondents. Party is also significant, with Republicans participating less. However, an interaction with sex and party shows that female Republicans participate more in the sample ( $p < .10$ ). Facebook frequency is significant ( $p < .001$ ) and negative. Thus, as respondents spend more time on Facebook, the less they participate offline. The number of Facebook friends respondents have is positive and significant; however, the effect size is minimal.

Again, internal political efficacy is significant, while external political efficacy is not significant for political participation. Facebook participation is significant and positive in



Table 5. Offline Participation

Variable	$\beta$
Constant	.108
Female	.656
Age	.017*
Ethnicity	.448 <sup>+</sup>
Income	.035
Education	.086
Female Zip	.167
Party	-.241*
Female Republican	.276 <sup>+</sup>
FB Frequency	-.327***
No. Friends	.001***
Political Knowledge	-.083
Internal Efficacy	.180***
External Efficacy	.017
FB Participation	.407***
Adjusted R Square	.470

+p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

the model. People who participate on Facebook participate more offline. The coefficient is greater for Facebook participation in the offline model than offline participation in the Facebook model.

#### Sex, Facebook Participation and Conflict

Due to the decrease in the sample size, the conflict variables are measured in separate models. The first part of the hypothesis states that women will report experiencing more conflict on Facebook than men. To test part A of the hypothesis, an independent sample t-test (Table 6) is employed to determine if a significant difference exists between the mean response on the conflict index between women and men. Results show that the mean male response is 3.0, and the mean female response is 3.37. The difference is

significant, but at the  $p < .10$  level. However, using  $\alpha = .10$ , part A of hypothesis two is supported.

Table 6. Sex and Conflict

Sex	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	3.02	1.56
Female	3.37	1.53

Secondly, an ordinary least squares regression model shows the relationship between conflict, sex and Facebook participation (Table 7). In this part of the second hypothesis, analyses measure if women who report an increase in the observation of conflict participate less on Facebook. The removal of one outlier in the sample reduces the total to a sample size of 215. The Facebook participation index serves as the dependent variable. Within this model, offline political participation, external efficacy, education, Facebook frequency and an interaction variable of sex and the conflict index are all significant ( $p < .10$ ). However, the coefficient is not in the expected direction. Women engage more in Facebook participation as they observe and experience more conflict. Thus, the second part of hypothesis two cannot be confirmed.

#### Types of Participation and Conflict

Not all political participation requires the same level of effort, resources, knowledge or efficacy (Brady et al. 1995). Current research does not provide a detailed analysis of various types of Facebook participation and sex as it interacts with conflict. Although the interaction term is significant in the previous model, it is only significant at  $p < .10$

( $\alpha=.06$ ). Further analysis of individual acts of Facebook participation could provide information for where differences in sex and sex and conflict occur. Some activities involve higher risk and include acts that require greater interaction, such as political discussions. To determine the extent of the influence of the sex and conflict interaction term, individual logit models of each activity for Facebook and offline participation are developed. Activities include those in the indices as well as variables regarding discussions of politics, both on Facebook and offline, of same-sex and opposite-sex pairings. Since the variable for conflict and the sex and conflict interaction term are included in each model, the sample size is smaller (N=216).

Table 7. Facebook Conflict

Variable	$\beta$
Constant	-1.11
Female	-1.335
Age	-.001
Ethnicity	-.544
Income	-.162
Education	-.218 <sup>+</sup>
Female Zip	.097
Party	-.152
FB Frequency	.582***
No. Friends	.000
Political Knowledge	.133
Internal Efficacy	.092
External Efficacy	.232***
Offline Participation	.642***
Conflict	.048
Female*Conflict	.449 <sup>+</sup>
Adjusted R Square	.40

<sup>+</sup>p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

Results show that sex differences occur for only three variables at  $p < .05$  and one variable at  $p < .10$  (Table 8). These are discussing politics on Facebook, discussing politics on Facebook with someone of the same sex and discussing politics on Facebook with someone of the opposite sex. For all four variables, the effect is negative, meaning women are less likely to participate in these activities than men. Internal political efficacy is also significant in all three discussion variables. Of note, the coefficient is larger for discussions with the opposite sex than the same sex; however, further examination of the models with an interaction for sex and internal political efficacy did not prove significant, suggesting that internal efficacy is required for discussion regardless of sex. Females in the sample are 12.5 times less likely than men to participate in same-sex political discussions; however, women are 5.9 times less likely than men to participate in opposite-sex discussions. Thus, women are more likely to participate in same-sex discussions than opposite-sex discussions in relation to men; however, they participate in both more than men.

The interaction term between sex and conflict is also significant and positive for all three discussion variables. Political discussion on Facebook in general and political discussions on Facebook with a same-sex partner are significant at  $p < .001$ , while political discussions on Facebook with an opposite-sex partner is significant at  $p < .05$ . For same-sex discussions, women who report observing conflict are twice as likely as men who report conflict to participate. The opposite sex variable shows that women are 1.7 times more likely to engage than men if they report observing conflict on Facebook. In fact, for Facebook participation, the interaction term for sex and conflict is

Table 8. Facebook Activities

	Like Page	Share from Political Page	Share Meme	Start Group	Join Group	Online Petition	Donate Facebook	Donate Online	Read News	Encourage Voting	Discuss Politics	Discuss Same	Discuss Opposite	Message Elected	Comment Friend Post	Comment Political Page
	β Coefficients															
Constant	-2.4	-5.90	-2.19	-1.792	-6.46	-3.595	1.34	-.562	-6.05	-6.21	-5.45	-6.49	-5.784	2.85	-6.41	-3.61
Female	-0.813	-.793	-.918	-.619	.327	.303	.379	.188	.021	-1.04	-2.12*	-2.52**	-1.774*	-.085	-1.078	-1.32*
Age	0.011	0.004	.012	-.057*	-.007	-.002	-.089 <sup>†</sup>	-.025	.021	.002	-.014	.001	-.005	-.017	.031 <sup>†</sup>	-.026
Ethnicity	-0.506	-.040	-.513	-.787	-.321	.063	-.945	.214	.263	-.233	-.577	-.486	-.596	-.236	-.584	.227
Income	-0.099	-.018	-.113	.267*	-.038	.032	.329 <sup>†</sup>	.002	-.069	-.172 <sup>†</sup>	-.116	-.174 <sup>†</sup>	.039	.269	-.120	-.109
Education	-0.224*	-.299	-.0144	-.103	.054	-.034	-.270	-.195	.063	.040	-.225 <sup>†</sup>	-.054	-.412***	-.247	-.097	-.209*
Female Zip	1.01**	.121	-.262	.632	.172	-1.22***	-.006	-.461	.015	.268	-.106	-.131	-.354	1.04*	-.088	.424
Party	0.153	.159	-.136	-.035	.163	-.258*	-.377	-.259 <sup>†</sup>	.021	-.096	-.178	-.273*	-.219	-.740**	-.188	-.085
FB Frequency	0.291 <sup>†</sup>	0.653***	.213	-.167	.403*	.182	-.230	-.385*	.620***	-.002**	.345*	.532**	.322 <sup>†</sup>	-.000	.448**	.414*
No. Friends	0	0.000	-.001**	-.000	.000	-.000	.000	-.000	.000	-.000	.000	-.000	-.000	.000	.000	.000
Political Knowledge	0.068	-.049	.229 <sup>†</sup>	-.146	-.239 <sup>†</sup>	.436**	-.481*	.288 <sup>†</sup>	.383*	-.002	.295*	.241 <sup>†</sup>	.270*	-.174	.129	-.127
Internal Efficacy	-0.072	.077	.051	.032	.019	-.025	-.017	.086	.003	.072	.340***	.297***	.368***	-.325*	.332***	.116
External Efficacy	0.099	.121 <sup>†</sup>	.107	.171*	.194**	.010	.072	-.010	.028	.250***	.239**	.198**	.212**	-.007	.012	.130*
Offline Participation	0.34***	.231***	.260***	.280***	.254***	.423***	.371***	.382***	.153 <sup>†</sup>	.340***	.291***	.182*	.203**	.333***	.248**	.295***
Conflict	0.048	-.093	-.179	.237	.207	.186	.527 <sup>†</sup>	.174	.123	-.016	-.178	-.250	.080	.205	-.091	-.063
Female*Conflict	0.283	.266	.418*	-.074	-.126	.129	-.264	.047	.015	.297	.678**	.738**	.549*	-.226	.504*	.300
Pseudo R Square	0.185	0.154	0.141	0.211	0.173	0.263	0.338	0.232	0.177	0.217	0.29	0.25	0.271	0.241	0.237	0.186

+p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

always positive when it is significant. The term is also significant in the models for sharing a meme and commenting on a Facebook friend's political post ( $p < .05$ ).

Just as in the additive model, sex is not a significant explanatory variable for most participatory activities outside of the three discussion variables and commenting on a political page. This is contradictory to much of the research on sex and political participation (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010; Jennings 1983). Offline political participation is significant and positive in every Facebook model. Facebook frequency is also positive and significant for most of the models: liking a page, sharing an item from a political page, joining a political Facebook group, reading political news on Facebook, discussing politics on Facebook and with a same-sex or opposite-sex partner, commenting on a friend's political Facebook post and commenting on a post on a political page. Facebook frequency has a negative and significant relationship with encouraging others to vote on Facebook and donating online.

Whereas Facebook frequency increases the probability of much of the political participation online, it has the opposite effect on many of offline activities (Table 9). Respondents with more frequent Facebook use were less likely to volunteer for political campaigns, donate to political causes offline, attend a protest, volunteer for a political organization (including social and civic organizations) or attend a rally. Although Facebook frequency has a negative effect, political participation does increase the likelihood significantly of participating in each offline model.

The interaction term for sex and conflict also has an opposite effect in the offline models compared to the online models. Women who observe/experience conflict on

Facebook are significantly less likely to volunteer for a political campaign, donate offline, display signage or speak to an elected official in person. Sex is only significant (and positive) for three dependent variables: speaking to an elected official, donating money offline and volunteering for a campaign. Although women have a higher probability of volunteering for a campaign (.21 times higher), in-person participation does not attract those experiencing or observing conflict online.

Many of the variables that were significant in the Facebook discussion models are no longer significant in the offline discussion models. Whereas internal political efficacy, sex and the sex and conflict interaction term led to the explanation of Facebook discussion, those effects are largely missing offline. Sex is not significant in any of the three offline discussion models. Internal political efficacy is only marginally significant and only in the same-sex discussant partner model. The primary consistency between the Facebook and offline models is the significant and positive relationship between the interaction term and discussing politics with an opposite-sex discussant. Again, women that observe or experience conflict on Facebook are more likely than women who do not have a higher conflict score or men in the sample to discuss politics with someone of the opposite sex offline. Looking at the effect of sex and conflict on offline participation as a whole through an ordinary least squares regression model (N=215) with offline political participation as the dependent variable and the same independent variables as the Facebook participation and conflict model (Table 7), except with the inclusion of Facebook participation as an independent variable instead of offline participation as an independent variable (Table 10). Within this model, sex and internal political efficacy are

Table 9. Offline Participation

	Discuss Offline	Discuss Same Sex	Discuss Opposite Sex	Volunteer Campaign	Donate Offline	Display Signage	Protest	Call Elected Official	In-person Elected Official	Volunteer Political Org.	Rally	Petition	Vote (OLS)
β Coefficients													
Constant	-3.66	-4.764	-2.578	-3.372	-2.404	-1.85	-1.573	-5.403	-4.177	-3.42	-3.229	-4.76	-.399
Female	-.871	-0.755	-1.468	1.548 <sup>+</sup>	2.232*	-1.123	1.244	-.132	2.015*	1.065	1.200	-.212	.187 <sup>+</sup>
Age	-.020	0.011	-0.013	-.005	.004	.003	-.012	.017	.016	-.012	-.002	.032*	.004 <sup>+</sup>
Ethnicity	.650	0.429	.262	.054	0.023	-.269	.420	1.66*	.684	.353	.188	.580	.120*
Income	.037	-0.039	.098	-.086	.003	.048	.018	.060	.048	-.088	-.169	.111	.022
Education	.215	0.169	.048	.149	-.033	.009	.028	-.049	.350**	.287	.314**	-.127	.020
Female Zip	-1.072 <sup>+</sup>	-1.026*	-0.871*	.492	-.821*	.148	.066	-.216	.225	.235	-.264	-.517	.039
Party	.026	-.009	-.039	.036	-.275 <sup>+</sup>	-.090	-.189	.162	.315*	-.062	-.039	-.124	.003
FB Frequency	.178	0.281 <sup>+</sup>	.256	-.352*	-.377*	-.103	-.484**	-.262	-.190	-.530**	-.394*	-.083	.015
No. Friends	.000	.000	-.001**	.000	.000	-.003	.001	.000	.0006 <sup>+</sup>	.001*	.000	-.000	9.969E
Political Knowledge	.262	0.283	.311 <sup>+</sup>	-.221	.140	.007	-.205	-.381*	-.478**	-.161	-.055	.054	.027
Internal Efficacy	0.220	.183 <sup>+</sup>	0.146	.088	.186*	.148*	.185*	.338***	-.091	.190*	.138 <sup>+</sup>	.149 <sup>+</sup>	.019 <sup>+</sup>
External Efficacy	-.181	-.057	-.103	.046	-.071	-.012	-.025	-.082	.037	-.008	-.050	.077	-.002
Facebook Participation	.385***	.179*	0.21**	.248***	.254***	.251***	.262***	.194**	.287***	.308***	.292***	.196***	.026***
Conflict	0.180	.087	0.038	.418*	.300	-.149	.100	-.006	.191	.035	.258	.218	.012
Female*Conflict	0.592	.243	.684*	-.427 <sup>+</sup>	-.705**	.357 <sup>+</sup>	-.289	-.091	-.678**	-.131	-.346	.162	-.050
Pseudo R Square	0.221	0.189	0.203	0.206	0.203	0.146	0.204	0.197	.206	0.244	0.207	.190	.179

<sup>+</sup>p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001



significant and positive, while the rest of the demographics are insignificant. Facebook frequency is, once again, negative and significant, as is the interaction term for sex and conflict. This is the reverse finding of the Facebook participation model.

Table 10. Offline Participation and Conflict

Variable	$\beta$
Constant	-.353
Female	1.310 <sup>+</sup>
Age	.009
Ethnicity	.636
Income	.018
Education	.137
Female Zip	-.031
Party	-.078
FB Frequency	-.450***
No. Friends	.001*
Political Knowledge	-.150
Internal Efficacy	.216**
External Efficacy	.000
FB Participation	-.354
Conflict	1.310 <sup>+</sup>
Female*Conflict	-.370 <sup>+</sup>
Adjusted R Square	.369

+p<.10 \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

#### Discussion

With the exception of online discussion, sex is not a determinant of political participation on Facebook. However, this does not confirm the first hypothesis that Facebook acts as a conduit for greater participation for women, as sex is also not significant in the offline participation model. The results are inconclusive. Although research on women and political participation shows a gap with higher men's participation (Conway 2000; Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Jennings 1983), other research suggests that the difference dissipates once education, income and political engagement are controlled (Lehman Schlozman et al. 1995; Verba et al. 1997). Women with at least a college education have participation rates comparable to men (Conway 2000). Within this sample, significant sex differences do not exist for income or education. Every respondent in the sample has at least a high school diploma or equivalent, while the majority of respondents have at least a bachelor's degree. Demographics in the sample suggest that controlling for education and income contribute to a lack of sex differences for participation in the offline model. At the same time, research also shows that income and education are essential for social media use (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2012). Given the high use of Facebook in the sample, with the overwhelming majority of respondents indicating social media usage several times a day, high education levels and median income ranging between \$30,000 and \$49,999, the lack

of significant sex differences follows the literature for offline participation and online use.

Another reason for the lack of a difference by sex for the online and offline models could be the way in which participation is measured. While research shows that men participate more in political activities, women participate more in civic activities (Verba et al. 1995). Questions probed participation in traditional ways of measuring political participation for the offline model, as measured by the ANES, and indicators of political participation through social and civic organizations and signing petitions. Inclusion of these indicators could create an index that is insignificant in terms of sex. However, looking at the questions individually through chi-square models (N=405), only signing a petition indicated a significant sex difference. The difference just reached significance at  $p < .10$ . It seems that the more likely explanation is that the demographics of the women in the sample contribute to insignificant sex differences in the model.

Each model in the study shows a significant relationship between Facebook participation and offline participation. This is in line with previous research on the correlation between offline and online participation (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2012; Oser et al. 2013; Valenzuela et al. 2012). The coefficient for offline participation in the Facebook model is larger (.777) than the coefficient for Facebook participation in the offline model. As Oser et al. (2013) note, the groups of Facebook participators and offline participators do overlap; however, they appear to be distinct in some ways. Offline participation is more important for Facebook participation than vice versa. This is likely due to the demographics of those who engage in offline participation. People who engage offline

tend to be older, white and have higher levels of income and education (Brady et al. 1995; Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010; Oser et al. 2013). In this sample, the same is true. Ethnicity and age are only significant in the offline model.

Although Facebook participation and offline participation boost one another, the frequency of Facebook participation impacts offline participation negatively. The OLS model for offline participation (Table 5) indicates that as the frequency of Facebook use increases, a decrease in offline participation occurs. In the Facebook participation model, Facebook frequency is significant as positive. The more someone is on the device, the more opportunities to participate and engage politically. However, those who use Facebook more often do not see a similar increase in offline participation. As offline participation is associated with an increase in age, this effect could partly be due to frequency and age of respondents with younger people engaging in Facebook use more and offline participation less. However, an independent t-test to determine the relationship of Facebook frequency and age did not show that those aged thirty and under used Facebook more frequently than those older than thirty. Income and education are also not significant in the offline model. This evidence suggests a possible problem with the influence of Facebook use itself with offline participation, especially considering that less than ten percent of respondents did not report any political participation on Facebook. Clearly, some participation on Facebook is the norm for the sample. This relationship could point to evidence for “slacktivism,” the phenomenon of people engaging in a public form of activism (such as through liking a page on Facebook) but failing to participate in further activism (Kristofferson et al. 2014). Conceptually, the

public but low-impact act makes the participant feel as though they contribute and receive public acknowledgement for doing so. However, people are more likely to perform further acts with a private over public initial act. Thus, low-resource public forms of political participation could negatively influence the decision to participate in ways that require more resources. The negative relationship of Facebook frequency in the offline model (Table 5) and the positive relationship in the Facebook model (Table 4) could point to this occurring in the sample.

Another reason for the discrepancy between Facebook frequency and participation in the sample could be the influence of media on Facebook participation and offline participation. There are not enough variables in the model to tease out the influence of media beyond whether people read political news on Facebook. A simple independent t-test between offline participation and reading political news on Facebook does find a significant relationship with those reading more news on Facebook participating more offline. However, the direct is unknown. Those who already participate offline could be seeking political news on Facebook, or reading political news on Facebook could induce people to participate offline. Reading or watching offline political news does correlate with an increase in offline political participation (Verba et al. 1997). Although some studies suggest that online news consumption does not correlate with offline participation (Dimitrova et al. 2011), other research does indicate that engagement and exposure online does increase activity offline (Mossberger et al. 2008). Those who see political news online could be primed to participate offline. The full influence of media on political participation is unknown in this study.

Frequency of Facebook use and Facebook participation are two different, although related, concepts. As stated, the more someone is online, the more they participate on the medium. However, other uses of Facebook could also be an underlying reason of the negative relationship between offline participation and Facebook frequency. Time is an important resource determining political participation (Brady et al. 1995). The primary functions of Facebook are communication and entertainment. The use of Facebook in these endeavors could take up time otherwise given to offline pursuits. However, given the high occurrence mobile usage of social media (Pew 2015), this explanation is the least convincing.

The relationship between sex, conflict and political participation provides an unexpected insight into women's participation online. First, women in the sample do report observing or experiencing conflict on Facebook at higher rates than men (Table 6). Either women are more likely to experience an aggressive situation or women and men conceptualize a "negative aggressive response" differently. Both scenarios could be possible. The subjectivity of the questions do present problems for interpretation. However, the phrasing also allows women to denote aggression themselves instead of having aggression predetermined by a researcher.

Results also show that women who experience and/or observe conflict on Facebook participate more (Table 7). Even though research suggests that women avoid political conflict more than men (Hayes et al 2006; Ulbig and Funk 1999), women in the sample who experienced conflict on Facebook participated more. At the same time, roughly half of all women in the sample indicated that they did not discuss politics on Facebook

(excluding them from the conflict index), despite most respondents still engaging in political participation on Facebook. Out of the options of “No,” “Yes,” and “I don’t talk about politics on Facebook,” the latter option is the neutral choice. Women’s significant proclivity to choose a neutral option in political surveys is well documented (Dolan 2011; Mondak and Anderson 2004). This act itself could be seen as a form of conflict avoidance as well. Women are more likely to opt out of political participation so as to avoid conflict (Hayes et al. 2006). Correlations show that women with higher scores on the conflict index do not have higher internal political efficacy or external efficacy. In fact, women with a higher conflict score have a significant, though weak, negative association with political knowledge.

A positive and significant ( $p < .05$ ) correlation also exists between the sex and conflict interaction term and Facebook frequency, indicating the relationship between women experiencing conflict and Facebook frequency is related. This also helps explain the first rationale for the positive and significant relationship between experiencing Facebook participation and sex and conflict: women who experience more conflict on Facebook are already participating on Facebook at higher levels. The models do not define the direction of the effect between conflict women experience and Facebook participation. Instead of explaining the direction in terms of women who experience conflict then participate in politics on Facebook, the result could be read that since women participate in politics on Facebook, they experience more conflict. The effect, then, is simply the fact that conflict exists within political participation. This could then combine with prior research that shows women interpret scenarios online as sexual harassment at greater rates than men

do (Biber et al. 2002). Taken together, women could be experiencing conflict as they participate in politics on Facebook; however, they are more likely to interpret a situation as conflict.

Although women who experience conflict participate more online, Facebook conflict has the opposite effect for offline participation. The interaction term for sex and conflict does measure conflict on Facebook, not offline; however, the conflict index and offline participation do significantly correlate ( $p < .05$ ). Following the theory that what people do online influences behavior offline (Mossberger et al. 2008), it seems that conflict online discourages women from offline participation, while it simultaneously encourages women to participate online. This finding also presents a problem for the previous direction of causality explanation for the positive and significant relationship between sex, conflict and political participation.

Much of the research on conflict avoidance and political participation focuses on private versus public acts, with those avoiding conflict preferring private over public acts (Ulbig and Funk 1999). Women, especially, participate in private acts over collective forms of political participation (Coffe and Bolzendahl 2010). The amount of participation can depend on the level of self-disclosure in which someone is willing to engage. Thus, Facebook participation can allow participants to engage in “safe disclosure” or “targeted disclosure” of political information, politically engaging with closer online networks (Miller et al. 2015). Looking at the offline participatory acts, all except for voting require public displays, which women do less often. Even making a donation offline requires interpersonal public interaction. Facebook participation can be public, private and semi-



public. While commenting on the page of a political organization or campaign would be public, messaging an elected official, discussing politics via private message, donating online and reading political news are all private acts. Although some acts in the Facebook participation index could be considered public, these acts also have private elements. Activities such as liking a political page or commenting on a friend's page, while public, are also limited in terms of their public scope. Women are interacting with people whom they have an established relationship with on Facebook, while offline political participation can involve contact with strangers. Trust is known to mediate disclosure, as the more trust is available the more someone discloses personal information online (Joinson et al. 2010). Thus, it can be safer to engage in political participation through an online platform than face-to-face. The significant difference only found in the opposite-sex offline discussion is of particular note for this explanation, observing that women who experience more conflict on Facebook are less likely to discuss politics with someone of the opposite sex; however, they are more likely to do so on Facebook, stressing the difference between physical conflict offline and psychological or emotional conflict online. In sum, women could feel more comfortable participating in the private or semi-public confines of Facebook even if they experience conflict as opposed to offline participation.

Some research shows that women also have greater levels of comfort than men while discussing politics on Facebook with a partner who disagrees (Miller et al. 2015). Considering the women who participate more note more conflict on Facebook, it is possible that these women are seeing political disagreements as well. However, this is

unknown, as “negative aggressive response” is subjective. The conflict variable measures general conflict with one question specifically regarding politics. Most of the measures in the index gauge general conflict on Facebook. However, experiencing more conflict could mean taking part in disagreements, including political disagreements online. The timing of the survey during a presidential election could also add to the conflict people observe and experience on Facebook, especially since major candidates have profile pages and an active social media presence.

Overall, sex is not a significant factor on Facebook; however, the results are inconclusive because the offline participation model also did not vary by sex. This could possibly be accounted for by demographics or the types of questions that were included. The positive significance of the sex and conflict interaction term with Facebook participation and opposite finding for offline participation could be due to couple of options. The first option is that women who are participation on Facebook are encountering conflict as a natural part of the deliberative process, while their increased reporting of conflict in comparison to men is derived from women’s understanding of situations online to be more hostile than men view them to be. However, that does not offer a full explanation of the results for the opposite effect in the offline group. Thus, a second hypothesis regarding women’s preference for private political action is offered. Facebook, then, provides a medium for women to engage in private acts of politics while disclosing political information to those with whom a relationship exists. This would not transfer to offline participation because there is less control over the disclosure network.

It could also be a combination of the explanations. The only way to discover what is driving this difference is to conduct further research.

### Future Research

Further exploration of the relationship between sex, conflict and political participation beyond the confines of this survey would be necessary to reach definitive conclusions about the relationship. The survey instrument in this research lays the groundwork for future areas of study. It also raises serious questions about the use of mTurk for samples and the future of political participation for digitally-inclined generations.

Further research should focus on developing a more rigorous index of conflict and safety, separating political disagreements from issues such as sexual harassment. The development of a reliable conflict index could provide further insight into the impact that interactions and conflict on social media could be having on participation in general, especially women's participation. The short index included in this study can serve as evidence for the need to develop more rigorous methodology in this area. Currently, no index exists that measures conflict on Facebook, nor is there a conflict index that takes into account conflict women particularly face. The construction of a reliable conflict index that comprises different components of conflict experienced online, perhaps in the form of multiple conflict indices, could help examine the way in which interactions on Facebook and other social media color not only online participation, but offline participation as well. For instance, if a large number of supporters of one candidate engage in conflict or harassment of an opposing candidate, could it affect offline

participation, such as volunteer support or even voting outcomes at the extreme? As more campaigns stress their social media presence and try to engage voters on Facebook, considerations of variables outside actual candidate messaging need to be considered in online participation models.

Another important aspect of future research is constructing a better way of measuring and understanding women's absence in terms of conflict avoidance. A problem developed in the large number of women (half of the women in the sample) who claimed that they did "not talk about politics on Facebook," even while still indicating activities on the Facebook participation scale. It was then impossible to conceptually include those responses as part of the scale. Although one could argue that the response is conflict avoidance, it is not appropriate to simply include that group under a different response. The actual response that would more align with this group (the ones who indicated not participating but did) is not included within the parameters of this survey. Conflict avoidance may be the reason that so many women in the sample chose that response, but there could be an alternate response as well. Women downplay the impact of their volunteer efforts (Petzelka and Mannon 2006). They describe their efforts in different terms than men, who the women see as active participants. The questions concerning conflict appeared before questions regarding specific participatory acts. Further research on conflict and participation should take into account the ordering of the questions. Comparing responses to those that receive the conflict index ordered before questions regarding specific acts to a group that receives the conflict index ordered after the questions of activity could show that women do not consider themselves as political.

Changing the order, thus, could give women time to think about how they describe their participation. Further research needs to be done to fully understand how to even conceptualize conflict avoidance, especially in terms of sex.

The issue of slacktivism raised in this research is also a point of further research. With each offline model, Facebook frequency was negatively and significantly associated with offline political participation. Some research does exist on the concept of slacktivism, typically in relation to single low-effort acts. This research, however, shows that it is possible that the amount of time one spends on Facebook itself could hinder offline participation in general. It might not even be low-effort political activity online that hinders participation offline; instead, it could point to the incompatibility of a participation system online and an offline voting mechanism. As long as voting takes place offline, offline political participation will be needed. However, participation on mediums like Facebook allow for participation with less risk and for those with less time, as participation can happen while in line at the grocery store. The availability of online participation could be hampering people's feeling of duty to participation offline. This research signals the need to investigate further participation in a world with changing outlets and responses to participation.

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