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Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection

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Abstract

An ongoing debate concerns the extent to which political consumerism constitutes political behavior. To address this debate, researchers have examined several predictors of political consumerism, but have not focused on its communicative dimensions, especially with respect to digital media. In this study we conceptualize political consumerism as a form of civic engagement, and we theorize that people who use social media are more likely to engage in political consumerism than those who do not. Using original survey data collected in the US, we find that political consumerism is more closely related to civic engagement than it is to political participation, and that use of social media mediates the relationship between general Internet use and political consumerism.

Keywords

Boycott, buycott, civic engagement, digital media, Internet, political consumerism, political participation, social media, social networking sites, social networks

Many people bring their political and civic concerns to the marketplace, avoiding certain products or purposefully seeking others in light of political and ethical concerns. Although acts of "political consumerism" in the US are as old as the boycotts of British

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goods in the pre-revolutionary period (Breen, 2005), they have become an increasingly important part of Americans' shopping practices in the last few decades. Approximately 22–48 percent of Americans and Europeans make such choices, which is more than engage in many other forms of political and civic engagement, including contacting public officials, participating in rallies or political meetings, and contributing to campaigns (Baek, 2010; Copeland, in press; Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Neilson, 2010; Newman and Bartels, 2011; Strømsnes, 2009).

Although scholarly interest in political consumerism has increased, researchers have not studied predictors of political consumerism extensively. Moreover, not much is known about the relationship between digital media use and political consumerism. In general, digital media use predicts traditional acts of political participation, although this relationship is modest and varies over time (Bimber and Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009). How people use digital media is known to be more important than how frequently they use it (Bakker and De Vreese, 2011; Gustafsson, 2012; Ostman, 2012). However, it is not clear what research on the relationship between digital media use and political participation means for political consumerism; there is much debate about the extent to which it is, in fact, "political" and whether it may be better conceptualized as civic engagement. Several studies find that digital media use is associated with civic engagement, but this relationship also varies greatly depending on how people use digital media (Pasek et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2001; Ward and De Vreese, 2011). In addition, key studies of the relationship between digital media use and civic engagement have not examined political consumerism.

In this article, we examine the extent to which digital media use, and social media use in particular, increases the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism. To do this, we begin with the theoretical question of whether political consumerism is actually political. We theorize that political consumerism should be more closely associated with civic engagement than it is with a general index of political participation. Next, we turn to the question of digital media, theorizing that social media use should be more strongly associated with political consumerism than is general Internet use. To test these expectations, we use original survey data collected in the US.

Using factor analysis and hierarchical regression modeling, we find that political consumerism is more strongly associated with civic engagement, such as volunteering for non-political groups or attending meetings to discuss neighborhood problems, than it is with traditional acts of political participation. We also find that social media use mediates a relationship between general Internet use and political consumerism, but not the relationship between general Internet use and traditional forms of political participation. These findings demonstrate that the communicative aspects of political consumerism—especially with respect to digital media—should be conceptualized in light of theories of civic engagement, not simply traditional political participation.

Theoretical framework

Scholars define political consumerism in several ways (Ward and De Vreese, 2011). We begin with a common definition, namely that political consumerism constitutes purchasing decisions based on ethical or political considerations (Stolle et al., 2005). Political consumerism is a tool through which people can articulate social or political preferences,

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and it can take one of two forms. Firstly, people can avoid (i.e., boycott) specific products or brands to punish companies for undesirable policies or business practices. For example, people may avoid purchasing clothes and accessories made in sweatshops to promote fair labor practices. Secondly, people can purchase products from companies whose production practices or values are consistent with their own (i.e., buycott). For instance, people may purposefully buy organic fruits and vegetables because organic farms do not produce pesticide runoff that harms soil and water.

The use of purchasing power to express political preferences is not new, but it is only recently that researchers have attended to consumerism. Studies have shown that it is more common than most forms of traditional political participation. For instance, Copeland (in press) estimates its frequency in the US at 39% for boycotting and 36% for buycotting, which is consistent with other estimates of 22–44% for the US and Europe (Baek, 2010; Neilson, 2010; Newman and Bartels, 2011; Shah et al., 2007; Stolle et al., 2005; Strømsnes, 2009).

Research shows that political consumerism is predicted by postmaterialist values and political distrust (Newman and Bartels, 2011; Stolle et al., 2005). However, not much is known about the communicative dimensions of political consumerism, especially where digital media are concerned. Although digital media use predicts many traditional forms of political participation, such as working for political parties, these relationships are small and moderated by political interest. They are also inconsistent over time and context-dependent (Bimber and Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009; Vaccari, 2010). In addition, it is not clear whether findings about political participation apply to boycotting and buycotting. Some boycotts are organized by interest groups and other political elites who distribute messages online, and occasionally these boycotts attract news media coverage (Friedman, 1999). To the extent that boycotts have an episodic and event-centric quality involving attention in the mainstream press, they may exhibit some of the communication dynamics associated with political actions, such as petition drives or letter-writing campaigns. However, many acts of political consumerism do not have an episodic or event-centric quality. Some boycotts are self-directed rather than organized, and many buycotts occur regularly as part of people's everyday routine. For example, some consumers seek out fair-trade coffee or locally produced food every time they go to the supermarket rather than in response to specific campaigns or mobilizing messages. For example, Zukin et al.'s (2006) analysis of the 2002 National Civic Engagement Survey shows that approximately 21% of people engage in boycotts or buycotts on a *weekly* basis. These findings cast doubt on whether the communication practices and media uses associated with political campaigns are also at work in the case of political consumerism.

Political or civic consumerism?

A first step in understanding how political consumerism may be associated with digital media use, therefore, is to explore its relationship to political participation and civic engagement. Empirically, political consumerism correlates with many forms of traditional participation (Baek, 2010; Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Newman and Bartels, 2011; Stolle et al., 2005; Strømsnes, 2009). For example, Strømsnes (2009) finds a strong,

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positive relationship between political consumerism and 13 political acts, a finding that has been supported by many other studies of political consumerism (Baek, 2010; Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Newman and Bartels, 2011; Stolle et al., 2005; Strømsnes, 2009). Theoretically, however, the connection between political consumerism and participation is less clear because political participation has been conceptualized in terms of actions directed at the state. Verba and Nie (1972) offer a canonical definition: "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (p.2). Under this canonical definition, political consumerism does not qualify as political participation (see also Schlozman et al., 2012).

Over the years researchers have offered a variety of categorization schemes to update the definition of political participation, and these schemes have addressed political consumerism. For example, Teorell et al. (2007) classify five main types of political participation: voting, party activities, protest activity, political consumerism, and targeted forms of communication, such as contacting elected officials. They classify political consumerism as an extra-representational channel of participation that can be exit-based or voice-based. Dalton (2008) conceptualizes political consumerism as a form of "unconventional" participation distinct from acts such as voting, working for a political party, or contacting elected officials. Although there is much debate about categorization schemes for participation, there is widespread agreement that political participation is best understood in terms of specific sub-categories. As Dylko (2010) shows, general indices of political participation that combine multiple actions have different predictors than many of the individual acts of which they are composed.

Political consumerism can be conceptualized as a form of non-institutional, informal action embodying the kind of personalized, individualized, lifestyle-oriented politics that has become more common in recent decades, and which is generally understood to be associated with digital media use and civic involvement (Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2008; Newman and Bartels, 2011; Stolle et al., 2005). This approach is well described by Shah et al. (2007), and is reflected in empirical studies showing a relationship between political consumerism and postmaterialist values (Stolle et al., 2005), as well as political distrust (Newman and Bartels, 2011; Stolle et al., 2005), and the absence of a relationship with strength of partisanship (Baek, 2010; Newman and Bartels, 2011).

Political consumerism blurs boundaries between the public and private spheres, and is likely to reflect a variety of motivations. Purchasing "green" products or avoiding those made in sweatshops may evince different political orientations and motivations than do "buying American," "looking for the union label," or boycotting corporations for discriminatory hiring practices. These examples support the idea that political consumerism is less likely to be associated with political participation as a general concept than it is with people's lifestyles, social contexts, and civic engagement.

The term "civic engagement" has itself been subject to a good deal of definitional flexibility, like political participation. In some cases, the term has been used to describe involvement in community-level politics, and in other cases actions like contacting elected officials, both of which fit well within classical definitions of political participation. For our purposes, we follow the definition of Putnam (2000), who defines civic engagement in terms of informal community-based associational activity that does not

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involve political organizations, parties, or officials, and that is undertaken on a voluntary basis for charitable or social purposes.

Defined this way, we see several commonalities between political consumerism and civic engagement. In most cases, purchasing practices are not themselves undertaken to influence the state, but like civic engagement, these practices can have political consequences. As Atkinson (2012) shows through the use of interview data, socially conscious consumption produces benefits in the form of empowerment and an orientation toward social obligation, even when people are not active in traditional political activities. Moreover, as we suggested above, buying practices are part of people's lifestyles and habits, and are likely to have a reasonably enduring character. This makes political consumerism similar to involvement in neighborhood groups or associations. Political consumerism can be thought of as acting on one's sense of civic concern in the retail marketplace, just as one also acts on that sense in community associations.

The theoretical links between political consumerism and civic engagement are supported by empirical work, which shows that the frequency with which people participate in social meetings is associated with political consumerism (Bechetti and Rosati, 2007; Neilson and Paxton, 2010). Using a self-selected sample of MTV's website, Ward and De Vreese (2011) find that political consumption is predictive of civic engagement and online political participation, but not traditional offline political participation. In our view, political consumerism is best understood as a boundary-blurring civic act that reflects lifestyle-oriented politics but is especially closely associated with civic concerns. This expectation forms our first hypothesis: *Political consumerism is more closely associated with civic engagement than it is with traditional acts of political participation.*

Political consumerism: The social media connection

Conceptualizing political consumerism as strongly related to civic engagement raises interesting questions about its relationship to digital media. It is clear that general measures of Internet use are not useful in predicting political behaviors (Boulianne, 2009). Measures of social media use are emerging as a somewhat better predictor of political participation, especially when operationalized in terms of specific actions, such as participation in online groups or organizations (Bode, 2012; Feezell et al., 2012; Gibson and McAllister, 2013; Gustafsson, 2012) and production of user-generated content (Ostman, 2012). Relatedly, the social context that social media provide for political messages has been shown to influence participation (Bond et al., 2012). Other studies demonstrate that political interest and political discussion mediate the relationship between digital media use and political participation (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2005, 2007; Xenos and Moy, 2007). Research has also tackled whether certain types of political discussion affect political participation more so than others (Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2011), as well as whether online and offline discussion have different participatory effects (Baek et al., 2012).

Compared with this literature on political participation, there is much less research on civic engagement and digital media. Just before the Web 2.0 revolution, Shah et al. (2001) found that overall Internet use as an aggregate concept is unrelated to civic

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engagement, such as volunteering, working on a community project, and attending club meetings. Moreover, different forms of Internet use have different implications for civic engagement: while playing games online and using chat rooms are negatively associated with civic engagement, informational use of the Internet is positively associated with civic engagement. Pasek et al. (2009) show that social media use is positively associated with offline civic engagement but find that this varies between people who use Facebook, where the relationship is positive, and those who use MySpace, where no relationship exists. Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) show that larger political discussion networks online, as well as offline, are positively associated with an index of five forms of civic engagement, including measures related to political consumerism.

It is not known whether these relationships exist with respect to political consumerism. Ward and De Vreese (2011) find that political consumerism predicts civic engagement and online political participation, but they do not model Internet use as a predictor of political consumerism. Similarly, while the study by Gil De Zúñiga and Valenzuela (2011) shows that online network size predicts a set of civic acts, including political consumerism, this study does not report broader measures of social media use, nor does it isolate political consumerism as a form of civic engagement.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that social media use is associated with political consumerism. For example, after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, a "Boycott BP" Facebook group appeared. At the time of this writing, nearly 800,000 people had "liked" the group, signaling their views to their social networks. Similarly, a boycott of Target stores for their "funding anti-gay politics" had about 79,000 Facebook "likes." People also encouraged others to boycott Rush Limbaugh's radio show through Facebook and blogs after he disparaged law student Sandra Fluke for her testimony before Congress on abortion (Gaudin, 2012).

Based on these theoretical considerations and extant empirical work, we expect that digital media use is associated with political consumerism to the extent that people use media for social purposes, and particularly so because consumption practices have the potential to spread through social influence and information-sharing online. In their social and familial networks, people express, share, and reinforce their identities, values, and lifestyles. These practices are likely to include exchange of information about organized consumer actions, product interests, stores, sales, brand affinity, or aversion, and other aspects of consumption of goods (e.g., "I'm boycotting Nike products because my friends say they are made in sweatshops"). This peer exchange may also involve persuasion (e.g., "You should not buy a Hummer because it is bad for the environment"), or imitative behavior (e.g., "I'm getting a hybrid car because my friends have them"). We expect that this kind of information-sharing and influence in social context is likely to influence political consumption beyond the effects of news and exposure to messages in mass media that might relate to products.

The fact that Neilson and Paxton (2010) find a positive association between political consumerism and the frequency of associational involvement also suggests that social media may be conductive to political consumerism. Furthermore, Baek (2010) finds a positive bivariate relationship between political consumerism and interpersonal discussion, independent of news, which also suggests that use of social media may contribute

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to the spread of political consumption practices and messages through social networks. In brief, we view the social influence and social information-sharing functions of social media as a potentially important mechanism linking media use to this form of civic engagement. This constitutes our second hypothesis: *Social media use is positively associated with political consumerism*.

Methods

This study relies on original survey data collected in the US between December 2008 and January 2009 by the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, using an online panel to generate a unique cross-sectional sample.[1] The final sample size was 1159 for all items, with a subsample of 389 respondents who reported using social media. Compared to US Census data, the sample has more females and is slightly better educated. Nevertheless, our sample demographics are similar to those of surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and other organizations that employ random digit dialing (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2009). The survey instrument was administered using Qualtrics, a web survey software program, and achieved an overall response rate of 22.8%, which is within the acceptable range for this kind of survey (Sax et al., 2003)[2]. For our analysis, we included only the 389 respondents who reported using social media. Our results should therefore be interpreted as an evaluation of how variation in extent of social media use is associated with political consumerism and political participation, among those who report at least some use. We view this as a conservative approach, as it reduces the likelihood of significance and increases the chance of Type II error.

Dependent variables

Political consumerism is the central dependent variable in this study. To measure political consumerism, we asked people to answer two items with 10-point scales about how often they avoid or purchase a product or service because of the social or political values of the company, with 1 = never and 10 = all the time. We combined these into a single scale (two items, inter-item $r = .65$, range = 2–20, $M = 8.24$, $SD = 5.82$, Skewness = 0.464). Our focus therefore is on people's attitudes toward corporations, rather than toward products. This approach reduces problems with what we suspect is one of the major confounds in surveys about political consumerism, namely people's purchases of organic foods and other products for health reasons rather than for political or ethical reasons.

A second key dependent variable is political participation. We computed this variable based on questions that asked whether people engaged in any of the following activities during the past 12 months: attended a political rally; spoke to a public official in person; posted a political sign, banner, button, or bumper sticker; participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches (four items, $\alpha = .67$, range = 1–10, $M = 1.89$, $SD = .27$).

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Independent variables

Our main independent variables are general digital media use and social networking site (SNS) use. For general digital media use, respondents were asked to rate on a 10-point scale how often they used the Internet for the following activities: send/receive emails; get information for work or school; use a search engine; find difficult information; get entertainment and sports information; instant messaging; video chatting; making phone calls; and do banking or obtain financial information. Items were added to create an index of general digital media use that excludes social media (nine items, $\alpha = .70$, range = 9–90, $M = 54.7$, $SD = 13.2$). This measure excluded questions about social media and networking online.

To measure social networking use, respondents were first asked "Do you use social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace?" Those answering affirmatively were then given a battery of six questions assessing the extent of use on a 10-point scale. These included: "On a typical day, how much time do you spend on online social networking sites?" and "How much do you use the Internet for social networking." They were also asked to what extent their use of SNSs help them to "Stay in touch with family and friends;" "Meet people who share my interests;" "Stay informed about my local community;" and "Get news about current events through family and friends." These items were added to create an index of social networking use (six items, $\alpha = .83$, range = 7–57, $M = 27.3$, $SD = 12.01$). Our measure of social media therefore is centered on functions involving staying in touch, staying informed, and sharing interests, rather than a list of named social media tools.

Control variables

To control for other variables that are known to be related our dependent variables (Bachmann et al., 2010; Schlozman et al., 2012; Valentino et al., 2011; Verba et al., 1995), the multivariate analysis included the following sociodemographic constructs: age ($M = 45.79$, $SD = 11.31$); income (Mdn = US$50,000–59,999); education, operationalized as the highest level of formal education completed (Mdn = two-year college degree); gender (1 = female); and race (84% whites). In addition, we included general life satisfaction because it is strongly and negatively correlated with political consumerism (Newman and Bartels, 2011). Our measure used an additive scale of three items extracted from the "Satisfaction with Life Scale" developed by Diener et al. (1985); using a 10-point scale, respondents were asked their level of agreement ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*) with each of the following statements: "In most ways my life is close to my ideal," "Things in my life are difficult," and "I'm satisfied with my life" ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 16.85$, $SD = 7.01$).

We also controlled for internal political efficacy and institutional political trust. To measure internal efficacy, we followed the general approach of Anderson and Tverdova (2001), as well as Bennett (1997), and utilized a single measure, which asked respondents whether they "think people like me can influence government" ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 2.74$). For political trust, respondents were asked separate items on how much they trusted Congress, the judicial system and political parties using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 10 (*all the time*). The three items were added into an index of institutional

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trust (α = .86, *M* = 10.8, *SD* = 6.1). We also controlled for the possible effect social media network size could have over the dependent variables. We included one item that registered how many friends individuals had in the social media network (*M* = 101.7, *SD* = 189.1).

Lastly, the study controlled for the effect of other types of media consumption, including both traditional news use and online news use. It combined nine items (α = .69, range = 0–55, *M* = 29.1, *SD* = 10.1), including watching network, local, and cable TV news, listening to radio news, reading traditional and online newspapers and magazines, and visiting a site with news reports generated by regular people. Each item asked respondents "How often do you [read/watch/listen each medium] to get information about events, public issues and politics" with a seven-point response scale ranging from "everyday" to "never."

Statistical analyses

To test our hypothesis about the relationship between political consumerism and civic engagement, as well as the relationship between social media use and political consumerism, we used factor analysis, two sets of hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions, zero-order and partial Pearson's correlations, and a stringent model test to estimate indirect and direct effects with multiple controls (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In the regressions, we entered the independent variables causally in separate blocks: demographics, attitudes and news media use, and, finally, general use of digital media and social media. This ordering allowed us examine the effects of general digital media use and social media use beyond the variance explained by all the controls introduced in the models.

Results

Our first hypothesis concerns the civic character of political consumerism. We expect political consumerism to be more strongly associated with civic engagement than with political participation. We tested this expectation in three ways: firstly with simple correlations, secondly by comparing betas from regression models, and thirdly with factor analysis. Consistent with our expectation, the Pearson's (zero-order) correlation is 0.51 ($p < 0.001$) between political consumerism and civic engagement, and is 0.45 ($p < 0.001$) between political consumerism and political participation. Partial correlations with controls for age, gender, education, income, race, strength of partisanship, life satisfaction, network size, and political efficacy are 0.50 and 0.40 ($p < 0.001$), respectively, for political consumerism with civic engagement and with political participation (see Table 1). We constructed a regression model predicting political consumerism, including all our independent and control variables, as well as our measures of civic engagement and political participation. Beta is 0.37 for civic engagement and 0.27 for political participation, and both are significant at the 0.05 level. We constructed a *z*-score for the difference between these coefficients, and it is significant at the 0.05 level as well. These simple tests point to a closer association for political consumerism with civic engagement than with political participation.

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Table 1. Zero-order and partial correlations among independent and criterion variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Zero-order Correlations					
1. Media Use	—	.38***	.38***	.21***	.25***	.37***
2. Digital Media Use	.34***	—	.42***	.29***	.23***	.35***
3. Social Media Use	.39***	.43***	—	.24***	.18**	.30**
4. Political Consumerism	.18**	.23***	.25***	—	.45***	.51***
5. Political Participation	.19**	.17**	.24***	.40***	—	.47***
6. Civic Engagement	.32***	.28***	.31***	.50***	.44***	—
	Partial Correlations					

Notes: Cell entries are two-tailed zero-order Pearson's correlation (top diagonal) and partial correlations in gray (bottom diagonal) with controls for age, gender, education, income, race, strength of partisanship, life satisfaction, networks size, and political efficacy. N = 380 for partial correlation; N = 991 for zero-order correlations.
*= $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$.

Factor analysis results are consistent with these results. In our first step, we included all 15 items comprising our three dependent measures of political participation, civic engagement, and political consumerism.[3] We employed principal axis factoring as the extraction method, with Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. The analysis converged after seven iterations to produce three dimensions.[4] We then discarded items that did not load with any factor, which included voting and three other political acts.[5] The simplified result was a two-factor solution (see Table 2). We labeled the first factor civic engagement, and all three of the civic engagement measures and the two political consumerism items load on this factor. We labeled the second factor "political participation," onto which the following items load: attending a rally; participating in demonstrations; posting a sign or banner; and speaking to a public official in person.

These results confirm that political participation it itself multi-dimensional, as the literature shows, with voting distinct from protest and social activity as well as from communicative activity such as targeted messages (Teorell et al., 2007). It also supports our expectation that political consumerism is more closely associated with civic engagement than it is with traditional political actions.

Our second hypothesis concerns the relationship among social media use and political consumerism. We again begin with zero-order and partial correlations. As Table 1 shows, general digital media use and social media use are both positively correlated with political consumerism at similar levels, as well as with political participation and civic engagement. People who use digital media for general purposes (i.e., sending and receiving email, using search engines, chatting via instant messaging, etc.) also tend to engage in political consumerism (partial $r = .23$, $p < .001$), controlling for sociodemographics, life satisfaction, partisanship, and political efficacy. Among the controls is news media use, which we treat as a proxy for political interest. The partial correlations are similar between social networking use and political consumerism ($r = .25$, $p < .001$), and social networking and civic engagement ($r = .31$, $p < .001$).

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Table 2. Factor analysis of civic and political behaviors with political consumerism.

	I	II
	Civic engagement	Political participation
Raise money for a charity	**.726**	−.195
Worked/volunteered for non-political groups	**.692**	−.172
Buycotted	**.643**	−.202
Boycotted	**.570**	−.212
Attend meeting to discuss neighbor problems	**.597**	−.281
Attend a political rally	−.132	**.829**
Participate in demonstrations, protest or marches	−.164	**.527**
Post a political sign, banner, button, or bumper sticker	−.295	**.497**
Spoken to a public official in person	−.245	**.400**
Eigenvalues	3.72	1.24
% Variance	41.4%	13.8%

Extraction method: Principal axis factoring. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated by boldface type. $N = 1006$.

To explore these relationships further, we turn to OLS regression. The first results, which are shown in Table 3 in Model 1, indicate that general use of digital media predicts political consumerism ($\beta = .153$, $p < .001$) in a model not including social media. The total variance explained is 18%. About 4% is accounted for by demographics, 12% by attitudes and media use, and 1.7% by digital media use. When we ran the same model for predicting political participation as a comparison, which is shown in Model 3, the overall variance explained was somewhat higher, at 23%, but much more (12%) is explained by the demographic block of variables, while general digital media use does not predict participation. The small contribution of digital media use to political consumerism, as well as the relationship between digital media use and political participation, is consistent with other findings in the literature (Bimber and Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009).

When we include the social media measure in the analysis to predict political consumerism, which is shown in Model 2, we find that the coefficient is significant, while the general digital media variable loses significance, suggesting mediation. The total variance explained increases from 18% to 20%, with 3.6% explained by the social media measure. In Model 4, which predicts political participation, social media use is also significant. Aside from how the social media and digital media variables work, the differences between the models predicting political consumerism and political participation include age and gender. Overall, age does not predict political consumerism, but does predict political participation, which is consistent with previous research (see, e.g., Quintelier and Hooghe, 2012; Valentino et al., 2011). Moreover, although women are more likely than men to engage to engage in political consumerism, there is no effect

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Table 3. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models predicting political consumerism and general political participation.

	Political consumerism		Political participation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Block 1: Demographics				
Age	.031	−.004	.163***	.192***
Gender	.155**	.146**	.078	.067
Race	.071	.075	.021	.017
Income	.059	.043	.039	.057
Education	.132**	.150**	.227**	.246***
ΔR^2 (%)	4.8**	4.8**	12.0***	12.0***
Block 2: Attitudes				
Political trust	.001	.006	.063	.057
Political efficacy	.162**	.157**	.231***	.225***
Life satisfaction	.019	.042	.019	.046
Strength of partisanship	.034	.027	.021	.023
Network size	.041	.038	.010	.010
Media use	.177***	.128**	.161***	.107*
ΔR^2 (%)	11.6***	11.6***	10.4***	10.4***
Block 3: Digital & soc. media				
Digital media use	.153**	.093	.092	.027
Social media use		.170***		.186***
ΔR^2 (%)	1.7**	3.6***	0.6	2.9***
Total R^2 (%)	18.1***	20.1***	23.0***	25.3***

Note: N = 389. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized beta (β) coefficients.
*p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

for gender on the aggregate political participation measure. Our finding that women are more likely than men to engage in political consumerism is consistent with other studies, which show women are more likely than men to engage in political consumerism, perhaps because women have traditionally been excluded from representative political institutions (Forno and Ceccarini, 2006; Mariën et al., 2010; Micheletti and Stolle, 2005; Stolle et al., 2005). It also provides further evidence that political consumerism is more strongly associated with civic engagement than it is with traditional political participation.

Overall, these results suggest that social media use may play a mediating role between general digital media use and political consumerism (but not political participation). We explored this mediation effect with both a direct and indirect test (see Preacher and Hayes, 2008), with the results displayed in Table 4. Not surprisingly, we find a statistically significant direct association between general digital media use and social media use (β = .399, SE = .044, t = 9.14, p < .001). There is a direct relationship between general digital media use and political consumerism (β = .095, SE = .023, t = 4.11, p < .001), and social media use and political consumerism (β = .101, SE = .027, t = 3.73, p < .001). Theoretically, we can be relatively certain of the causal direction in

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Table 4. Direct and indirect effects of general use of Internet and social networking site use on political consumerism.

	β	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Digital media use→Social media use	.399	.044	9.14	.001
Social media use→Political consumerism	.101	.027	3.73	.001
Digital media use→Political consumerism	.095	.023	4.11	.001
Digital media use→Social media use →Political consumerism	.055	.025	2.11	.05

Note: β = Unstandardized beta coefficients; *SE* = Standard error.

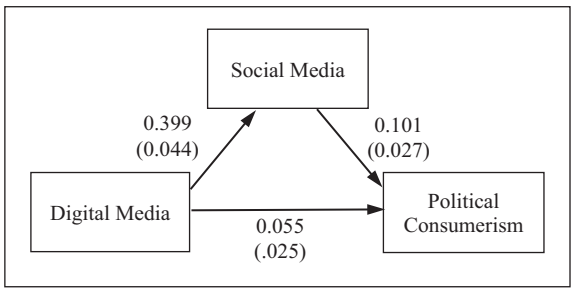

Figure 1. Relationship of general digital media use and social media use to political consumerism.

both these relationships because it is unlikely that acts of political consumerism would lead to digital media use or social media use, rather than the other way around. We also find a positive and statistically significant indirect effect from general Internet use to political consumerism via the use of social media ($\beta = .055$, $SE = .025$, $t = 2.11$, $p < .05$). Figure 1 displays the mediated model. A Sobel test confirms that the mediation effect is significant ($z = 3.45$, $p < .001$). Social media use mediates the relationship between general digital media use in general and political consumerism, while in the case of political participation, social media use alone is predictive of participation, most likely driven by news use patterns and mobilizing messages within the boundaries of social networks sites (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Discussion

This study provides support for conceptualizing political consumerism as civic in addition to political. Correlations, regression, and factor analysis suggest that political consumerism is more strongly associated with civic engagement. We do not interpret this result to mean that political consumerism is not "political." Our results are consistent with the classification of political consumerism as a form of lifestyle politics, but they extend that approach by emphasizing its relationship to behaviors that are civic rather than political. Political consumerism might well be labeled *civic* consumerism or

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political-civic consumerism. This suggests that research on political consumerism may benefit from moving beyond the debate over which forms of political participation are most closely related to political consumerism. Our findings encourage future research that develops a richer set of measurements to address connections to civic life and social networks.

We suspect that the hybrid character of political consumerism reflects the fact that choices about different kinds of products and services have been commingled in our questions, as is true of other surveys. Purchasing a hybrid car, for instance, or avoiding plastic bags at the grocery store, is likely different in character from "buying American," or boycotting Disney. We expect that further research may better distinguish which types of political consumerism are most closely associated with different types of civic and political actions.

Our expectation of the hybrid character of political consumerism led us to explore the role of social media in the communication practices associated with political consumerism. We examined this with a model of citizen communication that included general use of the Internet and social media. We found that political consumerism is associated with general digital media use. Substantively, our results are similar to studies of the Internet and other forms of political participation, with only a small amount of variance in political participation resulting from Internet use (Chadha et al., 2012). By itself, this finding suggests that *something* people do online is associated with political consumerism, but it does not say what that something is.

More importantly, our study demonstrates that social media use mediates the relationship between general Internet use and political consumerism, which is consistent with a new thread in the literature about the relationship of digital media to participation and engagement. Including social networking in a model doubles the percent of explained variance, while reducing the coefficient on general Internet use to non-significance. This means that people's use of the Internet in general is associated with political consumerism because people who use the Internet also use social media. In our view, the chief reason for this linkage is that political consumerism is a lifestyle choice and form of pro-civic action that is subject to sharing, peer commentary, and social influence through online social networks. In our data, these mechanisms appear more important to political consumerism than online searches, email, and other activities that people undertake using the Internet as a general set of tools. This implies that political consumerism has a networked character; for the most part, it is not driven by the kind of mobilization that is commonly associated with political campaigns. While social networks have been known also to play a key role in explicitly political behavior, our work reinforces findings from other scholars about social networks and consumption, viewed from the new perspective of social media.

Others have found that people who attend community meetings, socialize more, and are more involved in traditional civic associations are more likely to be political consumers (Baek, 2010; Neilson and Paxton, 2010); we show that being more active in social media has the same effect. Looking at the connection between social media use and political consumerism therefore reinforces the larger view in research on digital media and public life showing connections between social uses of technology and

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civic engagement. The next step is to understand better what the content of these social connections is.

There are several caveats that need attention. Our results are based on a single cross-section conducted in 2008–2009. This means that our work, like many other cross-sections, may be vulnerable to problems of context-dependence at the time we collected the data. Research about election campaigns shows that the relationship of Internet use to political participation is highly variable across elections, such that generalizing from single cross-sections is problematic (Bimber and Copeland, 2013). On the other hand, political consumerism is less campaign-specific and event-driven than election campaigns, especially to the extent that it reflects long-term commitments rather than responses to mobilization campaigns. This means that single cross-sections may have greater validity over time in the study of political consumerism than election-related activity. It is increasingly clear that the content of what people choose to do with social media is the crucial concept. Our study focused on social uses of social media, which we believe is the most important general aspect of social media and is not likely highly variable in the short run. Nonetheless, examination of the relationship between social media use and political consumerism from other periods and over time would go a long ways toward confirming our findings, as would more in-depth analysis of what content and activities at social media sites make them conducive to political consumerism.

In our study, we measured political consumerism in terms of both boycotting and buycotting, but we did not theorize or explore potential differences between these in depth. We suspect that social and communicative differences between the two would be born out in studies designed to distinguish the antecedents and communicative practices associated with each.

At a time when the capacity of researchers to ask thorough questions about different forms of media use is challenged by the technological context, the distinction between social media and general digital media use appears to be important, implying that the social context of communication and messages is crucial to understanding how the changing media environment affects civic behaviors.

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Notes

1. A 10,000-person random draw from the lab's online panel was matched to US Census variables on gender (50.2% men and 49.8% women) and age (30% 18–34; 39% 35–54; 31% 55 or older), following the new standard practice for Internet panels (see; Gill de Zúñiga and Hinsley, 2013; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). This produced 8568 valid email addresses. An email invitation and up to three reminders were sent.
2. The response rate is based on the American Association of Public Opinion Research's RR3 formula (AAPOR, 2008: 34–35).
3. During the past year, have you: attended a political rally; participated in groups that took any local action for social or political reform; posted a political sign, banner, button, or bumper sticker; participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches; attended a public hearing,

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town hall meeting, or city council meeting; written a letter or email to a news organization; spoken to a public official in person; voted in the 2008 presidential election; worked or volunteered for non-political groups; raised money for charity or participated in a charity; attended a meeting to discuss neighborhood problems; called or sent a letter to an elected public official; participated in groups that took any local action for social or political reform; been involved in public interest groups, political action groups, political clubs, or party committees; banned a product or service because you disagree with the social or political values of the company; bought a certain product or service because you liked the social or political values of the company.

4. We tested both orthogonal and non-orthogonal rotations and found non-significant differences.
5. During the past year, have you: participated in groups that took any local action for social or political reform; attended a public hearing, town hall meeting, or city council meeting; written a letter or email to a news organization; voted in the 2008 presidential election.

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