

Presence, Efficacy, and the Net: Exploring Patterns in Political Participation from a Comparative Perspective

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1.0 Introduction

This paper aims to examine the concepts of presence, efficacy and political participation as interlinked phenomena that might explain the impacts of internet usage on political behavior. More specifically, it first introduces presence as a new variable to consider political participation, and then examines its connections to political efficacy.

In previous studies, participants have reported experiencing a sense of presence (the “illusion of non-mediation” [Lombard & Ditton, 1997]) while using the Internet (Tu & McIssac, 2002). In addition, the concept of presence has been established as a mediating variable in audiences’ perceptions of credibility (Bracken, 2006). Building from this perspective, we examine whether or not presence and efficacy can be linked in explaining motivations to political participation. In this context, the particular experiences that evoke feelings of presence are also expected to increase feelings of efficacy.

A final contribution of this study is its comparison of American and Turkish college age students (representing the only generation that has grown up with the Internet so far), in determining how much the technology itself, as opposed to particularities of the respective political cultures, contribute to our understanding of internet’s impact on political participation.

RQ1: Can presence sensations predict political participation?

RQ2: Can presence sensations predict internal efficacy?

RQ3: Does nationality/culture influences presence sensations?

2.0 Methodology

A survey was conducted in both the United States and in Turkey. The 221 respondents were students attending university in both countries. The survey included items relating to presence, political efficacy, media use, and political participation.

2.1 Presence

Two measures of presence were included in the survey: Immersion and social richness [1].

2.2 Political Participation

Participation was measured using an additive scale in which

respondents were asked if they ever participated in political behaviours ranging from going to a political website to running for a political office.

3.0 Results

RQ1 was tested using forced entry multiple regression. The overall model was significant ($p = .045$). However, the presence dimensions were not predictors of political participation. RQ2 was also tested multiple regression. But the presence dimensions did not significantly predict feelings of internal efficacy.

The last RQ inquired about the influence of nationality/culture on general presence sensations. To test this RQ a t-test was employed with the respondents’ home institution serving as an indicator of “culture” as the independent variable. The two presence dimensions were the dependent variables. The t-Test for both presence dimensions was significant ($p = .001$) for both DVs. The American students reported higher levels of immersion ($M = 4.51$) than the Turkish students ($M = 3.80$). The American students also gave higher ratings for social richness ($M = 4.88$) than did the Turkish students ($M = 4.23$).

4.0 Discussion

This exploratory study found unique differences between American and Turkish respondents for general sensations of both immersion and social richness. While the relationship between general sensations of presence, efficacy, and political participation was not significant, it might be because the respondents were not exposed to a particular political content in which to respond. Further investigation is necessary.

References

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