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**MEDIA USE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG THE YOUTH:
AN ANALYSIS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT DURING
LEISURE TIME**

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Keywords: social capital, social media, youth, civic engagement, leisure time.

The decline in social capital, observed in recent decades, has become a major concern for researchers and policymakers. The main goal of this paper is to investigate to what extent media consumption by young people in their leisure time affects specific types of communal activities, defined as an element of social capital. The basic hypothesis that the authors aimed to test in this paper is that the consumption of entertainment-focused media content reduces community engagement while the consumption of informative and educational media content increases

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it. The empirical data were collected in 2020 from an online sample of Croatian adolescents ($N = 481$) using snowball sampling. The study was part of the *We The Youth* project funded by the European Social Fund, and the measures used in the study comprised frequency of use of different media content and frequency of different leisure activities, as well as additional control variables. The data were analysed using a series of linear regressions and the results generally supported both hypotheses. The authors conclude that there is indeed a competitive relationship between community engagement and the entertainment industry, and the increasing availability of entertainment technology could have a negative impact on the socialization of young people. On the other hand, given the positive relationship between social media use and community engagement, the authors also point to the need for a careful and nuanced understanding of technological determinism in this research field.

KORZYSTANIE Z MEDIÓW A KAPITAŁ SPOŁECZNY WŚRÓD MŁODZIEŻY: ANALIZA AKTYWNOŚCI OBYWATELSKIEJ W CZASIE WOLNYM

Słowa kluczowe: kapitał społeczny, media społecznościowe, młodzież, zaangażowanie obywatelskie, czas wolny.

Głównym celem artykułu jest zbadanie, w jakim stopniu konsumpcja mediów przez młodzież w czasie wolnym wpływa na niektóre formy aktywności społecznej, definiowanej jako element kapitału społecznego. Podstawowa hipoteza, którą Autorzy weryfikują w artykule, mówi o tym, że konsumpcja treści medialnych o charakterze ściśle rozrywkowym zmniejsza zaangażowanie społeczne, a konsumpcja treści medialnych o charakterze informacyjnym i edukacyjnym zwiększa zaangażowanie społeczne. Podstawą empiryczną analiz są badania zrealizowane w 2020 roku na internetowej próbie chorwackiej młodzieży dobranej metodą kuli śnieżnej ($N = 481$). Badanie stanowiło część projektu “We The Youth” finansowanego ze środków Europejskiego Funduszu Społecznego. Pomiarom objęto częstotliwość korzystania z różnych treści medialnych oraz częstotliwość podejmowania różnych aktywności w czasie wolnym, a także dodatkowe zmienne kontrolne. Dane analizowano za pomocą serii regresji liniowych, a wyniki zasadniczo potwierdziły przyjęte hipotezy. Autorzy doszli do wniosku, że zaangażowanie społeczne i przemysł rozrywkowy tworzą konkurencyjne obszary, a coraz bardziej dostępna rozrywka wykorzystująca nowe technologie może mieć ne-

gatywny wpływ na socjalizację młodzieży. Z drugiej strony uwzględniając pozytywny związek pomiędzy korzystaniem z mediów społecznościowych a zaangażowaniem społecznym, wskazują na potrzebę ostrożnego i zniuansowanego rozumienia determinizmu technologicznego w tym obszarze.

Introduction

Social capital is a multidimensional concept that is usually defined through social relations, which create (a) obligations and expectations, (b) information channels, and (c) norms and effective sanctions (Coleman 1988). It can also be defined as the resources individuals or groups possess due to their social networks, relationships, and social norms. It includes *bonding capital* (relationships among similar people) and *bridging capital* (relationships between different people). It has been argued that the abundance of social capital, among others, has positive consequences for institutional efficiency and functioning democracy (Putnam 1994, Walters 2002), prosocial behaviour (Salmi, Kivivuori 2006; Hoffmann et al. 2020), educational outcomes (Croll 2004, Pavić 2014), although it has also been shown to have negative consequences, even among the youth (Pavić 2021). The perceived decline of social capital has become a point of concern in the last decades. For instance, Robert Putnam (1995) detected the decline in the lower participation in politics, trade unions, and other forms of social engagement in the U.S. In addition to the increased mobility and other changes in the family structure, Putnam identified the technological transformation of leisure time as a major cause of the decline. Indeed, new forms of entertainment lead to a more individualised and privatised use of leisure time, undermining relationships between people and, consequently, interest in social issues. It should be noted that Putnam's hypothesis predates the widespread use of the Internet and the new forms of leisure and entertainment that came with it. We can assume that media use and social capital among young people are closely related, as media can be a powerful tool for developing and maintaining social connections. Media use might enhance social capital among the youth by providing opportunities for communication, information exchange, and social interaction, and by allowing young people to connect with friends and peers or participate in online communities. Social media, online gaming, and virtual worlds can also facilitate social connections and enhance support among those with common interests (Hampton et al. 2011). However, excessive media use can also have adverse effects on young people's social capital. Excessive social media or gaming time may lead to social isolation, a lack of face-to-face

communication, reduced social skills, weakened social relationships and decreased social capital (Lin 2001).

Previous research and theoretical framework

The literature on the subject contains many analyses of the impact of media use patterns on social capital. Of particular importance is the scope and nature of the content transmitted and the mechanism of influence of this content on collective actions (Campante et al. 2022). The media can influence behaviour in many ways, but the research connected by the above authors is fundamental to our analysis. Research suggests that the impact of entertainment content on social trust and engagement can be minimised (ibid). The media can help to strengthen social acceptance of specific behaviours and facilitate the dissemination of information about particular activities or opinions of individuals.

Modern media operate on the basis of algorithms, which also help to strengthen the homogeneity of the messages offered, creating specific information bubbles (Campante et al. 2022). We can assume that the mechanism linking the way of spending leisure time on media consumption to the amount of social capital is becoming more explicit and more transparent.

Cited by Campante et al. (2022, p.70) and two other authors (Ostrom, Ahn 2009) emphasised in their analysis that social capital can manifest itself in many forms of collective action. Three types of social capital are critical in the study of collective action: (1) trustworthiness, (2) networks, and (3) formal and informal rules or institutions. The challenge of collective action is one of the main obstacles to achieving results that are beneficial to social development. In this context, it can also be argued that social capital, supported by the consumption of leisure time through the media, is vital for the creation of networks and the trust they inspire. One of the most important factors is trust in unknown members of the media community with whom the user communicates.

Currently, the media play a role in stimulating public participation (i.e. protests), but at the same time, their content can only reflect the preferences of society (Barberí, Jackson 2020). However, it is difficult to substantiate this claim, especially as social media use is endogenous to individual and social characteristics.

Analyses conducted so far also emphasise the tendency for networks created by the media to be homogenised. Connecting people with similar characteristics promotes collective action (cf. Campante et al. 2022).

However, this is not a simple mechanism. It is possible to identify many contextual factors that determine the choice of media consumption mechanisms. The characteristics of individuals are essential here, as are the types of media consumption. Analyses indicate that television and radio translate into a lower level of participation in collective activities (which can be explained by the emphasis on entertainment content rather than information or journalistic content). A study conducted by Benjamin Olken (2009, cited in Campante et al. 2022, p. 78) showed that traditional media (radio, TV) correlate with lower levels of participation in various types of associations (neighbourhood, school, or local). Similar conclusions can be drawn from analyses of data from the World Values Survey (Bruni, Stanca 2008). The analysis presented in this paper shows that television viewing negatively affects individual life satisfaction indirectly through a significant crowding out effect on relational goods.

New ways of influencing social capital are shown by interpreting the role of Internet use. On the other hand, analyses suggest that the Internet plays a different role in shaping social capital. Stefan Bauernschuster et al. (2014) and Andrea Geraci et al. (2018) indicate that the lack of access to the Internet does not translate into social contacts, but intensifies the frequency of using high culture offers. The informative nature of the message favours participation in organised forms of social activity (Campante et al. 2022).

Hunt Allcott et al. (2020) presented evidence, as a result of an experiment with Facebook, that the use of social media may displace social interactions, including the closest ones, on well-being and even cause health consequences (Kross et al. 2013; Hunt et al. 2018; Twenge et al. 2018; Braghieri et al. 2022; all cited in Campante et al. 2022).

The influence of media on social activity in adult life is related to experiences in early life. Ruben Durante et al. (2019) note that lower levels of engagement in adulthood correlate with intense exposure to media messages at a young age. Campante et al. (2022, p. 76) report empirical results on aggregate measures of social capital, television, and Internet penetration. On average, Internet penetration was associated with increases social capital levels, whereas television penetration appeared to be largely uncorrelated. As for television penetration, while it does not seem to have much of an association with more expensive forms of social capital, such as group membership, there is a hint of a negative association with weaker forms of collective action, as measured by political activity.

Based on the conclusions of Campante, Durate and Tesei, the relationship between media use patterns and the level of social capital (measured mainly by the level of social involvement) does not allow us to

make clear statements. This is due to the different content of the messages (entertainment vs. educational/informational content) consumed in leisure time. With this in mind, this article aims to examine how different types of media consumption during leisure time affect some forms of social activity, which is one of the forms of social capital. The basic idea that we intend to test in this article is that the consumption of strictly entertainment media content will reduce community engagement (Hypothesis 1), while the consumption of informational and educational media content will increase community engagement (Hypothesis 2).

Methods

The measures used in the study comprised (1) frequency of use of various media content, and (2) frequency of various leisure time activities. Both sets of items were previously used in empirical studies and demonstrated good intercorrelation reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .70 to .90 (Livazović 2012; Livazović, Ham 2019). Items were measured on a scale containing the following values: 0 (never), 1 (a few times a year), 2 (a few times a month), 3 (several times a week), and 4 (every day). The following questions were asked: (1) "How often do you consume the following media content?", and (2) "How often do you engage in the following activities in your leisure time?". The list of leisure time activities and media content that were offered as response categories are listed in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. Gender and age were used as control variables.

The data were collected in 2020 from an online sample of Croatian adolescents ($N = 481$) using a snowball sampling procedure. The study was part of the *WeTheYouth* project financed by the European Social Fund. The project leader was the World Youth Alliance Croatia, and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences was one of the project partners. The sample consisted of 80.63% female and 19.37% male respondents, 61.95% of whom were university students. The mean age was 23.07 years (12 missing responses), with the sample age ranging from 15 to 30 years. All respondents provided informed consent to participate.

Before the analysis and hypotheses testing, we conducted two separate factor analyses to explore the dimensionality of the scales. First, we conducted a factor analysis of the items related to leisure time use. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was 0.68, while Bartlett's sphericity test was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 749.26, p < 0.001$). Principal axis factoring was used as the extraction method, whereas the initial solution was rotated using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation. A total of three factors were obtained and the

rotated factor matrix is presented in Table 1. The total explained variance amounted to 53.45%, while only factor loadings higher than 0.4 were listed in the table. We can see that the first factor contains the items related to *active social engagement in the local community*. The second factor contains *community activities related to the traditional culture*. The third factor is related to the *participation in the sports activities*.

Table 1

Factor analysis of leisure time use items (rotated solution)

ITEM	F1	F2	F3
Attends various courses, public forums, lectures and round tables.	0.70		
Participates in the work of organisations for children and youth.	0.79		
Does charity and humanitarian work.	0.74		
Participates in politics	0.60		
Goes to mass or participates in religious events through the media.		0.70	
Participates in traditional games, performances, dances and folklore.		0.78	
Actively involved in sports (as a club member).			0.82
Goes to sports events (matches, competitions).			0.75
Visits gyms and fitness clubs			0.68
Participates in sports recreationally			0.71

Source: Authors.

We also conducted a factor analysis of the items related to media use. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin’s measure of sampling adequacy was 0.71, while Bartlett’s sphericity test was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3132.10, p < 0.001$). Principal axis factoring was used as the extraction method, whereas the initial solution was rotated using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation. A total of four factors were obtained and the rotated factor matrix is presented in Table 2. The total explained variance amounted to 53.40%, while only factor loadings higher than 0.4 were listed in the table. We can see that the first factor contains the items related to the *films and TV series*. The second factor contains *information and educational* content. The third factor is related to the *excitement of enticing activities*, while the fourth factor is related to *social media*.

Table 2

Factor analysis of media use items (rotated solution)

ITEM	F1	F2	F3	F4
Films (horror, thriller)	0.61			
Films (drama, comedy)	0.76			
TV series (crime, thriller)	0.78			
TV series (comedy, drama)	0.80			
TV news		0.59		
Weeklies		0.70		
Educational TV-series		0.58		
Radio		0.59		
Daily press		0.71		
Pornographic videos			0.69	
Fight sports			0.63	
Video games			0.70	
Instagram				0.66
Facebook				0.69
Viber, WhatsApp, and similar messaging applications				0.60

Source: Authors.

All items belonging to the same factor were added to form scales that were used in the subsequent regression analysis.

Results

Our analytical strategy involved a series of three linear regression analyses, each containing two models. In the first model, we entered only control variables as predictors, while in the second model we also included *media use* variables as predictors. Different forms of leisure time use were used as criterion variables. Before the regression analyses, we present the bivariate Pearson correlations between the study variables. In Table 3, we can see that social engagement in the community is positively correlated with the use of (1) information and educational media content and (2) social media use. Engagement in activities related to traditional culture is also positively correlated with the abovementioned media content, but negatively correlated with films, TV series, and excitement-inciting activities. Engagement in sports activities is positively correlated with all media content, with social media being the only exception.

Table 3

Intercorrelation matrix

	Social engagement	Traditi. culture	Sports	Films, TV-series	Inf. and education	Excitement	Social media
Social engagement	/	.26**	.16**	-.07	.31**	-.01	.12**
Traditional culture	.26**	/	.13**	-.15**	.12**	-.24**	.14**
Sports	.16**	.13**	/	.09*	.11*	.16**	.08
Films, TV-series	-.07	-.15**	.09*	/	.24**	.32**	.09**
Inf. and education	.31**	.12**	.11*	.24**	/	.10**	.05
Excitement	-.01	-.24**	.16**	.32**	.10**	/	-.10**
Social media	.12**	.14**	.08	.09**	.05	-.10**	/

Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Source: Authors.

In Table 4, the results of the first regression are presented. We can see that in the final model, male gender and older age are associated with higher social engagement. The consumption of films and TV series is negatively related to social engagement, since for each one-point increase in media use, social engagement drops by 0.11 points. On the other hand, information and educational content and the use of social media increase social engagement by 0.23 and 0.20 points respectively. Exciting media content is not related to social engagement.

Table 4

Hierarchical linear regression with active social engagement in the local community as the criterion variable

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Gender	0.40	0.36	0.05	1.00	0.43	0.13**
Age (in years)	0.15	0.04	0.17**	0.09	0.04	0.10*
Films, TV-series				- 0.11	0.04	- 0.13**
Information and education contents				0.23	0.04	0.28**
Exciting contents				- 0.10	0.08	- 0.07
Social media				0.20	0.06	0.17**
R ²		0.04			0.15	
Adjusted R ²		0.03			0.14	
R ² - change		0.04			0.11	
F for change in R ²		8.45**			14.69**	

Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1; Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Source: Authors.

The next regression (Table 5) analyses engagement in community activities related to the traditional culture as the criterion variable. We can see that male respondents and younger respondents are more likely to participate in such activities. As for media use, information and educational contents and the use of social media are associated with a higher frequency of communal activities related to traditional culture, while films, TV series, and exciting activities are negatively connected (the unstandardised regression coefficients amount to 0.09, 0.09, -0.07 and -0.19, respectively).

Table 5

Hierarchical linear regression with community activities related to the traditional culture as the criterion variable

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Gender	- 0.20	0.20	- 0.05	0.52	0.23	0.13*
Age (in years)	- 0.02	0.02	- 0.03	- 0.05	0.02	- 0.11*
Films, TV-series				- 0.07	0.02	- 0.15*
Information and education contents				0.09	0.02	0.21**
Exciting contents				- 0.19	0.04	- 0.26**
Social media				0.09	0.03	0.14**
R ²		0.01			0.13	
Adjusted R ²		0.01			0.12	
R ² - change		0.01			0.12	
F for change in R ²		1.02			15.93**	

Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1; Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Source: Authors.

Finally, in the last regression (Table 6), sports activities are entered as a predictor variable. Here, the predictor significance and number signs were somewhat different. Namely, information and educational content and exciting media content were positively related to sports activities (the unstandardised regression coefficients amount to 0.09 and 0.14, respectively), while films TV series, and social media use were not established as significant predictors.

Table 6

Hierarchical linear regression with sports activities related to the traditional culture as the criterion variable

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Gender	1.00	0.34	0.14**	0.71	0.42	0.10
Age (in years)	- 0.08	0.04	- 0.10*	- 0.09	0.04	- 0.11*
Films, TV-series				-0.02	0.04	0.03
Information and education contents				0.09	0.04	0.12*
Exciting contents				0.14	0.06	0.11*
Social media				0.10	0.06	0.09
R ²		0.02			0.06	
Adjusted R ²		0.02			0.05	
R ² - change		0.02			0.04	
F for change in R ²		5.13**			4.86**	

Gender: Female = 0, Male = 1; Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$; $p < .001^{***}$

Source: Authors.

Discussion and conclusion

In a general sense, social media refers to interactive digital instruments that facilitate connections among individuals sharing an interest in dialogue or information exchange. These platforms play a crucial role in establishing a support network (Fine 2006; Lovejoy, Saxton 2012 as quoted by Scott, Maryman 2016).

Our results confirm that informative media content is associated with social engagement, except for sports activities. As for the entertainment activities, in most cases, they crowd out community engagement, except for sports activities, which contain an element of entertainment and excitement and thus are also related to the exciting media content. Therefore, we can conclude that both of our hypotheses are generally confirmed. Many analyses point to the potential of social media in creating and strengthening networks of participation or involvement, considering their ability to develop new functionalities in communication and create new spaces for exchanging views (Fine 2006, Bacon 2009).

The positive relationship between the use of social media and community engagement established in our study is mainly in line with the findings of Campante et al. (2022), Bacon (2009) and Connor (2009). Given their findings, the Internet is becoming an increasingly valuable tool for

the dissemination of information due to its accessibility. Social media are evolving into a mechanism for social mobilization and can facilitate the promotion of participation at various levels (Bacon 2009, Connor 2009).

In a comparative research involving 556 participants from Poland and the United States, Anjala S. Krishen et al. in 2019 explored the success of social networking in societies with varying levels of social capital. The study revealed a lower level of social media success in Poland, which was linked to the reduced social networking capital in Polish society. Conversely, research from the Pew Institute indicated that the extensive use of social media among U.S. citizens serves as a platform for civic engagement. Among the 60% of Americans utilizing social networking sites, 60% of these individuals (comprising 39% of all American adults) reported engaging in at least one civic or political activity, such as following elected officials, participating in political or social issue groups, encouraging others to take action, or sharing content and opinions about socio-political issues (Rainie et al. 2012).

Still, the proposed model shows that the functionality of social media can overcome some barriers. Social media can develop into the intensity of social action and community building, raising pillars for further increases in involvement (cf.: Brunson, Valentine 2010; Guo, Saxton 2013; Kanter, Paine 2012; Guidry et al. 2014). Although social media may enhance the efficiency of various institutional activities, they are not capable of instigating lasting behavioural transformations (Brady et al. 2015 as quoted by Scott, Maryman 2016). Therefore, additional access to other kinds of information and entertainment could increase the opportunity costs of such engagement. On the other hand, as noted in the introduction to this paper, a significant number of studies have detected the negative effects of the Internet and social media use on social capital accumulation (e.g., Geraci et al. 2018; Allcott et al. 2020). Several scholars express reservations regarding the efficacy of online communities in promoting meaningful contributions, as they argue that social media activism might devalue public engagement by emphasizing low-cost endeavours. This phenomenon could potentially lead to disillusionment among the public when their actions receive inadequate recognition, and it may also contribute to the displacement of more profound issues by diverting attention to less substantial matters (cf. Karpf 2010, Scott, Maryman 2016).

There are several other studies indicating relationships between internet usage and socially or politically engaged behaviours. It is noteworthy to mention, for instance, the findings of Hampton et al. (2014), Rainie et al. (2012) and Hampton (2011) in this context (see more: Scott, Maryman 2016).

Moreover, a sense of community has the potential of fostering conformity that stifles meaningful action. The relationship between community engagement and the entertainment industry is notably competitive, with the growing prevalence of entertainment technology possibly adversely affecting the socialization of the youth. This underscores the importance of community engagement and suggests a potential long-term decline in social capital (cf.: Kloos et al. 2012, p. 28). The discernible distinction, identified in our research, between the impacts of informational and educational pursuits, on the one hand, and entertainment activities, on the other hand, underscores the necessity of advocating for media content utilization among young individuals that transcends mere entertainment and leisure, emphasizing the integration of knowledge acquisition and information assimilation conducive to fostering civic engagement.

However, our research outcomes concerning the nexus between social media utilization and community engagement underscore the imperative for a meticulous and nuanced comprehension of technological determinism within this research domain. In essence, social media should not be indiscriminately vilified as a scapegoat for unfavourable socialization outcomes among the youth, devoid of empirical evidence from research. In sum, it is evident that the Internet and social media persist in demonstrating their adaptable characteristics, capable of engendering both augmentation and diminution of social capital contingent upon the nature and objectives of their utilization. The most important limitation of our research lies in the fact that the sample of young people who participated in the research was convenient; that is, the participants were recruited using the snowball method. This led to the previously mentioned imbalance in the gender structure of the sample. The non-random nature of the sample may have affected the internal validity of the results. Furthermore, as is always the case, the cross-sectional nature of the research design does not allow reliable causal conclusions to be drawn, but can only indicate their possible existence.

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