

## All News Is Not the Same: Divergent Effects of News Platforms on Civic and Political Participation

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Online news platforms are often grouped together as “online news” or “social media,” yet each delivers news in a distinctive way. This article examines different online news platforms—including legacy news organization website and news apps, instant messaging services (WhatsApp), Facebook, and YouTube—and observes that each contributes differently to civic engagement and political participation. Based on a cross-sectional survey of Singaporeans ( $n = 2,501$ ), our study finds that watching news stories on social media platforms such as Facebook or YouTube is strongly correlated with engagement in civic or political life via information seeking and expressive behaviors online. Viewing news on traditional news websites or news apps was still impactful, but slightly less so. Viewing news through instant messaging apps had no impact on civic and political engagement. We discuss the implications of consuming news via different online platforms through the lens of technological affordances.

*Keywords: online news, social media, news platforms, affordances, civic engagement, political participation*

Democracies thrive on the basis of an informed and participatory citizenry (Barber, 1984; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). News delivered on traditional or newer social media or direct-messaging platforms plays a central role by helping citizens orient toward collective problems of the community and giving them the “currency” to participate (Gans, 2003; Habermas, 1962/1989). Hence, one of the most fruitful areas in political communication has been the relationships between news consumption and two distinct but related areas: citizen engagement (volunteer activities within and for the benefit of the community) and political

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participation (citizen activities performed with the intention of affecting political life; e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999).

Today, however, the first part of this relationship is changing as the diversity of platforms on which news can be accessed makes it difficult to grasp what it means to “view news online” (e.g., Boulianne, 2009). The literature on citizen engagement and political participation has been mindful of this development (Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). Compared with earlier work that relied on the frequency or duration of Internet use (e.g., Nie & Erbring, 2000), later studies have specified informational as opposed to recreational use of the Internet as the key factor that affects citizens’ engagement in civic or political life (e.g., Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). More recent work focuses news on the use of particular devices such as mobile phones or particular channels such as social media or blogs (e.g., Chan, Chen, & Lee, 2017; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009).

This study looks at a distinctive angle. It asks how the use of news on different platforms—ranging from online versions of legacy media outlets and news apps, to social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and to instant messaging (IM) services—might relate to civic engagement and political participation differently. If news is to continue its association with engagement in civic or political life, it is essential to understand how the delivery platform is associated with that behavior. Yet, to date, most studies disregard the reality that each platform has distinctive functionalities (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014), even among those that are grouped together as “social media” (see Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014).

We explore the distinction among news platforms by using the concept of affordances to better understand the way people engage with news on different platforms. Affordances have received much attention in recent years among digital media scholars (e.g., Jung & Sundar, 2018; Masip, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Capilla, & Zilles, 2021; Moreno & Uhls, 2019). While a contested concept for which the perfect definition has yet to be agreed, an affordance of technology is the use to which it can be put, or the meeting point of its functionality and the perceptions of the user of what that functionality can achieve (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Bucher and Helmond (2018) have called for a platform-sensitive approach to investigate the affordances of social media, to which this study responds.

We test how engagement/participation effects are mediated by online-specific behaviors that stem from news use, namely information seeking behavior and expressive participation—two plausible routes of influence that have been examined (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005) yet rarely together. Information seeking behavior is defined as where news users seek more information to better understand issues, while expressive participation is engaging in discussion about public issues either offline or online. Assessing the relative strength of these two mediating routes will help us better understand the relationships among news platforms, civic engagement, and political participation.

These relationships are examined in the unique political and media environment of Singapore. A multicultural, racially diverse sovereign state, Singapore restricts press freedom as a way to ensure continued peace and harmony in the country: “We want the mass media to reinforce, not to undermine, the cultural values and social attitudes being inculcated in our schools and universities” (Lee, 1971, p. 6). In recent years, however, the country’s rapidly evolving media environment has promoted the rise of digital

media platforms for news (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp; see Tandoc, 2020). This marks a revolutionary shift in the news media landscape in the country, offering fresh perspectives and opportunities for political discourse. This unique context will allow us to compare the relative usage and effects of different online news platforms while supplementing existing knowledge about how news use affects civic and political engagement in a non-Western context.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***News, Civic Engagement, and Political Participation***

Civic engagement is defined as volunteer activities—typically nonpolitical ones—with an objective of helping others (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). This includes volunteering at charities, spreading awareness of social issues, contacting public officials, signing petitions, or having political conversations with family and friends (Skoric et al., 2016; Zukin et al., 2006). Political participation, meanwhile, is defined as activities aimed at influencing government, such as voting, protesting, making political donations, following politicians on social media, displaying campaign buttons, or engaging in political consumerism (Skoric et al., 2016).

One of the main factors that cultivates such engagement in civic or political life is news consumption. News acts as a direct source of information for political and current affairs content, which is necessary for organization of political activities (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). With the Internet, it has also become a platform for people to exchange views and engage in political discussions, ultimately helping people build community-oriented mindsets and boost engagement in civic or political life (Hao, Wen, & George, 2014; Skoric et al., 2016). Indeed, many studies have found that both traditional and online news use have positive effects on civic engagement and political participation (e.g., Chan, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Casero-Ripollés, 2021; McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2005). For example, Chan (2016) found that the amount of time people spent on Facebook viewing news was strongly associated with engaging in expressive behaviors on Facebook (e.g., expressing their own political views, reposting others' political posts or information). This, in turn, promoted political activism offline. Others found that news use on social media or other media (e.g., television, newspapers, online news sites, etc.) encouraged political discussions on conversational online platforms, which ultimately led to greater engagement in participatory activities (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021).

Much of the literature on online news consumption and civic or political engagement takes a somewhat simplistic view of online news by either treating it as a singular construct or by focusing on a single platform at a time (e.g., Chan, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidge, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). Yet it is important to note that online news platforms vary significantly and differences exist even among those that are typically grouped together. For instance, a person accessing news sent by friends on IM and one reading *The New York Times* app are having dissimilar experiences, despite both being seen as “consuming news online.” They are viewing news in different contexts (e.g., surrounded by friends and acquaintances, surrounded by other news) with different action possibilities (e.g., can engage in immediate discussion or not) that stem from a combination of technological features and the way people came to use technology. In

this article, we focus on the possibility that these platform-based differences have implications for citizen engagement in civic and participatory activities. To do so, we draw upon the concept of affordances to explore the differences among platforms.

### ***Online News Platforms and Digital Media Affordances***

The term affordance was first introduced in psychology to present an ecological approach to perception, and in its original form it referred to latent action possibilities offered by an environment: a cave affords shelter, an apple affords nourishment (Gibson, 1977). The concept has been applied to many disciplines, including design, human-computer interaction (HCI), sociology, and communication studies (Masip et al., 2021). In the study of digital media technology, scholars note that affordances should be understood as “functional and relational aspects that frame the relationship between [technology] and social practice” (Masip et al., 2021, p. 4). In other words, affordances are constrained by technological features but not determined by it, as social practices play important roles in shaping the use of different kinds of technology.

Despite having similar or at least comparable features, digital platforms may be associated with different affordances. Looking specifically at political participation, for example, Facebook is often adopted by users with political connections and used largely for promotional and propaganda purposes (Chan, 2016). As a result, Facebook users are more likely to support proestablishment causes, often encouraging civic engagement and political participation among users (Chan, 2016). On the other hand, WhatsApp is perceived to be a more private and controlled space, providing safety from surveillance thanks to its end-to-end encryption (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021; Masip et al., 2021), so users may be more inclined to use the platform for antiestablishment messages that facilitate acts such as activism and protest planning. More broadly, Kim and Ellison (2021) showed that social media afforded visibility in political participation; that is, people saw how others were involved in political activity and felt more empowered to do so themselves. Looking at how political parties use Facebook strategies to encourage citizen participation, Jensen and Dyrby (2013) identified enabling dialogue, promotion of political interests, projection of authenticity, and interaction with supporters. Each of these affordances represents a meeting point of content and sociality.

We therefore consider the differing levels of sociality and content affordances on each platform. For example, Facebook’s focus is on preexisting social relationships expressed through content, while YouTube is more concerned with content that attracts users to follow content contributors. For Facebook, the user’s (social) profile is a key characteristic and helps add value to the content; in YouTube, it is less important than the content posted. Facebook is based on personal information and social networks on which content circulates; YouTube is based on shared interest in content types (O’Riordan et al., 2012) and reaching as many people as possible. Facebook and YouTube are media-content-rich, while WhatsApp is less so, albeit allowing for sharing of images and short video clips. YouTube focuses on content but does not require users to use their real names, affording some social anonymity; Facebook profiles offer more transparency; and WhatsApp is linked to people identifiable through their phone numbers, making sociality central to the platform. This list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates that diverse social networking sites (SNS) have diverse affordances, depending also on the interests of the user.

Accordingly, we consider content and sociality and speculate that platforms can broadly be divided into those that offer greater opportunities for sociality (e.g., social media platforms) and those that are more limited in this regard (e.g., news websites, apps) but offer significant content; and between those with more direct news content sharing from news organizations (e.g., social media platforms) and those where news sharing is socially mediated by individuals (e.g., IM). We investigate sociality in terms of the use of platforms for expression, and content in terms of the use of platforms for information as each mediates the relationship between news use and political and civic participation.

### ***The Mediating Role of Information and Expression***

News use might affect engagement in civic or political life in two ways. First, viewing news may raise awareness and spark interest in issues (Boulianne, 2009), which may, in turn, motivate viewers to seek more information to better understand the issues in the community, contextualize issues, and think of collective solutions. News programs encourage civic and political participation as they stimulate mental reasoning and elaboration of news events (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Indeed, past studies have found that news use on both traditional and online platforms is positively correlated with further information seeking online, and that both forms lead to greater engagement in political processes (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Shah et al., 2005). Recently, these effects were found to hold with regard to online media as well. Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (2012) report that people who use SNS sites for informational purposes, for example, have higher online and offline political participation levels, which in turn lead to greater information seeking behaviors, resulting in a virtuous circle.

Another route might be through expressive participation. Online expressive engagement refers to people's use of online spaces for expressing their views on political or public matters (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). It generally includes activities such as "sending messages with political information, commenting on news online, participating in online forums, posting comments to political blogs, and using social networking sites to express their opinion on current affairs" (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009, p. 911). These activities are characterized by the "sharing" factor, where the online activities are forwarded or shared with other people (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Sharing ideas and views with others can amplify the effects of news media. Expressing one's views not only helps people organize their thoughts better but it also increases the likelihood to think from a broader, more public-spirited point of view (Pingree, 2007). This idea is substantiated empirically: Engaging in discussion about public issues either offline or online positively predicts engagement in civic or political life offline (Shah et al., 2005). Since engaging in reflection and debate has never been easier—expressing one's views or joining a discussion is only a click away—this can thus breathe life into static information from the news and help mobilize citizens (e.g., Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009).

The citizen communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2005) integrates the two different mediational routes and specifies a pathway between informational uses of media and political participation via expressive acts of citizenry. Building on this framework, several studies (e.g., Chan, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, 2014; Li & Chan, 2017) uncovered associations between informational use of media and expressive behaviors instead of two separate expressive and informational pathways. Despite the theoretical contributions of the citizen communication mediation model, in this study, we decided to keep

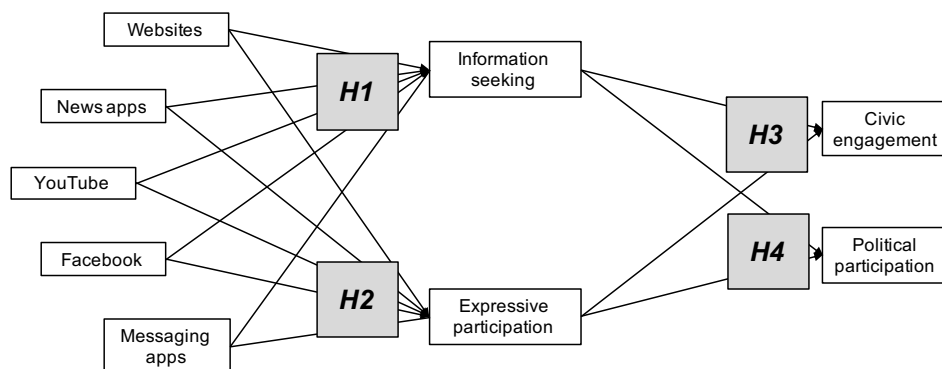
the two mediational pathways separate instead of posing a serial mediation between the two. As the focus of this study is on the differences among platforms, we wanted to examine if platforms that afford different levels of interactivity show different patterns of association with information seeking versus expressive participation.

### **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

This study tests whether and how the consumption of news on diverse online platforms predicts civic engagement and political participation in Singapore. We hypothesize:

- H1: Online news consumption on each platform will be positively associated with information seeking behavior.*
- H2: Online news consumption will be positively associated with expressive participation online.*
- H3: Information seeking behavior and expressive participation will promote civic engagement.*
- H4: Information seeking behavior and expressive participation will promote political participation.*

These hypothesized relationships and the overall theoretical model are depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Theoretical model of hypothesized relationships.**

Alongside these hypotheses, we pose an exploratory research question that examines potential differences among the online platforms that are associated with different affordances:

- RQ1: Does news consumption on different platforms have differential effects on information seeking behavior and expression?*

### **Study Context: Singapore**

We examine these relations in Singapore, a relatively young parliamentary republic that has been governed by the People's Action Party since its first election in 1955. Singapore has an "underdeveloped and constrained" civic culture (Soh & Yuen, 2006, p. 32), which has been traced to broadly contented citizens who feel that the government is able to meet their expectations, reducing the need for them to play active roles (Chua, 1997). Political participation is also constricted as citizens are cautious about getting involved in politics (Lee, 2014). This is not to say that government discourages civil society and politicians frequently speak out in its favor; but it has been argued that their intention "is not so much to enable a thriving public sphere, but to advance and perfect the regulative apparatuses and technologies of governmentality" (Lee, 2010, p. 74). This sociopolitical context contributes to a subdued civic culture as well as high political apathy.

The news media in Singapore are divided into channels controlled by the government and those not controlled by the government: "Newspapers and broadcast stations in Singapore are operated by two media conglomerates closely linked with the government, but alternative publications have started to flourish online" (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2020, p. 386). The result is not as totalitarian as some imagine nor as liberal as some would like (Hao & George, 2015). In terms of mainstream media use, 40% of the population access the flagship English-language broadsheet newspaper *The Straits Times* each week (41% online), while 36% turn to *Channel News Asia* on television (48% online; Tandoc, 2020). Both represent the perspectives of the government. Nevertheless, online news with little or no government intervention is rapidly emerging as a space for discussion, and "the Internet serves as an open public sphere for digitally savvy Singaporeans to discuss sociopolitical issues and express diverse voices" (Lin, 2019, p. 865). Alternative perspectives come from alternative news sites such as *MotherShip* and *The Online Citizen*, which 40% and 17% of the population look at each week, respectively (Tandoc, 2020).

Studies have been optimistic that the Internet could promote civic and political engagement:

The Singapore media scene is unique in the sense that while the government exerts considerable influence on how the traditional media report news about local politics, the Internet is left more or less free for information and discussion about politics. As a result, the Internet has made a qualitative difference in the extent and nature of political participation. (Hao et al., 2014, p. 1225)

In Singapore, social media use has been positively associated with political participation (Skoric & Poor, 2013) and now, given the government controls of mainstream media, the online sphere has been a space for engagement (Zhang, 2013). Information received on social media has been associated with offline political engagement (Skoric & Zhu, 2016), and studies have observed a weak but positive association between social media use and political participation (Skoric et al., 2016). Younger Singaporeans who are engaged politically primarily do so online by sharing their views on social media and forwarding content. This suggests information seeking followed by expressive activity as they seek and share alternative viewpoints using social media (Zhang, 2013). One study in particular (Hao et al., 2014) found that online news consumption was associated with civic engagement and political participation, although the overall

level of civic engagement and political participation on- and offline was low. It is in this sociopolitical and media context of Singapore that we examine variations in platform-based news consumption and their effects on information seeking behavior, expressive engagement, and civic and political participation.

## **Method**

### ***The Sample***

The sample consisted of 2,501 residents of Singapore. Data were collected from December 27, 2016, to January 23, 2017. The survey was commissioned to Survey Sampling International, a commercial survey company that maintains nonprobability online panels in Singapore. Altogether, 36,380 invitations were sent out to potential respondents, 3,235 clicked on the link to initiate the survey, and 2,739 actually completed it. Screening out those who could not be verified or showed problematic data patterns yielded 2,501 valid completes (completion rate = 6.9%).

The respondents in our sample ranged from 19 to 80 years of age ( $M = 38.8$  years,  $SD = 12.68$ ) and were split evenly between sexes (50%). The racial composition mirrored the population with those identifying as ethnically Chinese 71.2%, Malay 14.4%, Indian 9.1%, and others 5.2%. The sample was highly educated with 46.5% having university degrees or above (Polytechnic/Diploma = 26.3%; Junior College/"A" levels = 8.8%; Secondary School/"N" or "O" levels = 16.6%; Primary 6/PSLE = 1.4%; No formal schooling = 0.4%).

### ***Measures***

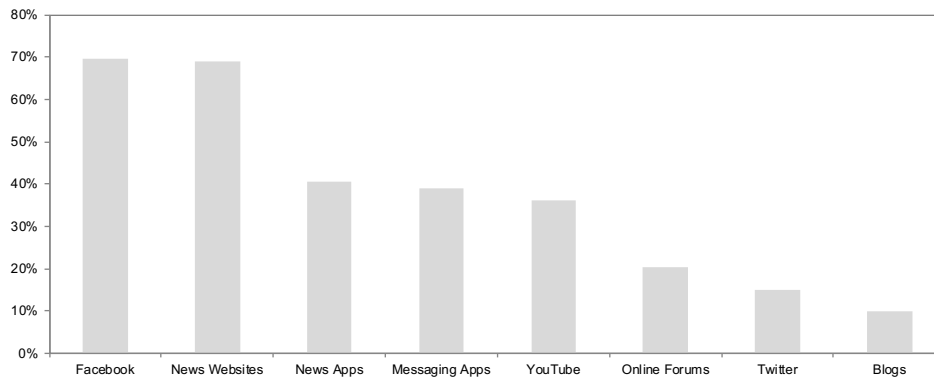
Civic engagement was measured by 11 items from the civic engagement scale (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2013; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). On a scale of 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Very frequently"), respondents indicated the frequency with which they engaged in the following activities: "Organized a social activity," "Organized a community service," "Attended a meeting to discuss neighborhood problems," "Joined a community or a special interest group online or offline," "Raised money for charity," "Donated to a charity group or project," "Signed up to volunteer or support a campaign or issue," "Tried to recruit someone to volunteer," "Volunteered in a community group or project," "Provided feedback on government policies," "Contacted a government agency or town council about a problem in your neighborhood or public areas." Responses were averaged to form a single, reliable measurement scale for engaging in civic activities ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ,  $\alpha = .96$ ).

Political participation was measured by four items used in past research (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). On the same scale of 1 to 5, respondents indicated the frequency with which they engaged in the following activities: "Wrote to a politician, e.g., your member of Parliament (MP)," "Followed a politician on social media," "Attended a meet-the-people session to discuss a problem in your neighborhood with your MP," and "Sent a political message to someone." Responses were averaged to form a single, reliable measurement scale ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).



A series of questions asked about frequencies of using online platforms for getting the news. First, a filter question asked, "On a typical weekday, which of the following online sites do you use to get news?": news websites, news apps, online forums, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp), and Twitter. The percentages of people who chose each of these platforms are shown in Figure 1. Facebook and news websites were chosen by nearly 70%, while blogs were chosen by only 10% of the respondents. As the usage was quite low for some platforms (online forums, Twitter, and blogs, all less than 20%), we focused only on the top five platforms (news websites, news apps, YouTube, Facebook, and messaging apps) for the analysis.

For each of the checked platforms, the respondents were asked: "How often do you use [chosen platform] to get the news during the following time periods? [After waking up; during commute; around lunchtime; while at work/school; around dinner time; before sleeping]." Responses were recorded on a scale of 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Very frequently"). Online news consumption on each platform was calculated by averaging news use for the five time periods. Because the frequency questions were asked only to those who chose the platform, those who did not choose the platform were imputed the lowest score 1 ("Never") for that platform. This ensures that all analyses are performed on the full sample and not on different subsets.<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, the averaged and zero-imputed frequency of news use variables will be referred to by the name of the platform: news website ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ,  $\alpha = .80$ ); news apps ( $M = 1.48$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ); YouTube ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ); Facebook ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ); and messaging apps ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ).



**Figure 2. Percentage of respondents selecting each platform as their source of news ( $N = 2,501$ ).**

<sup>2</sup> This methodological choice artificially deflates the means for news use but was inevitable to preserve the sample size. If we do not impute the missing values of nonusers to the lowest value on the frequency scale, we would be excluding every respondent who indicated nonuse of any of the platform choices offered (i.e., reducing our sample size from 2,501 to 209). Moreover, indicating nonuse of a platform (i.e., not checking on the platform as a source of news) is conceptually equivalent to "never" using the platform for news on a frequency of use scale. Although those who did not check a specific platform were never asked the frequency question, if they were given a chance to answer, logically, they would have indicated "never" as their response.

For information seeking, on a scale of 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Very frequently"), respondents indicated how frequently they engaged in the following activities: "Looked up information online about charity," ". . . about the environment," ". . . about the government," ". . . about the religion," ". . . about the human rights," and ". . . about improving conditions at school/work" ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ).

For expressive participation, on the same scale, respondents answered how frequently they engaged in the following activities: "Posted your views online on politics or public affairs to a news organization (e.g., newspaper, online news site)," "Posted your views on politics or public affairs on social media," "Shared news on politics or public affairs in Singapore," "Shared general news that you think is important for people in your chat group to know," "Took photos or videos of problems in public areas (e.g., litter, hazardous infrastructure) and shared it on social media," and "Took photos or videos of problems in public areas (e.g., litter, hazardous infrastructure) and sent it to the authorities" ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).

### **Analytic Strategy**

Path analysis was used to assess the overall model fit and to test the hypothesized relationships among variables ( $H1-H4$ ; Stata 14 SEM package). Lagrange multiplier (LM) statistics were consulted to consider empirically based model modification suggestions to the original proposed model (Figure 1). These statistics estimate potential improvement in model fit for additionally estimating a fixed parameter. In addition, Wald statistics were used to examine the potential differences among the effects of news platforms ( $RQ1$ ). The correlational matrix of all measured variables is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Correlation Matrix of All Measured Variables.**

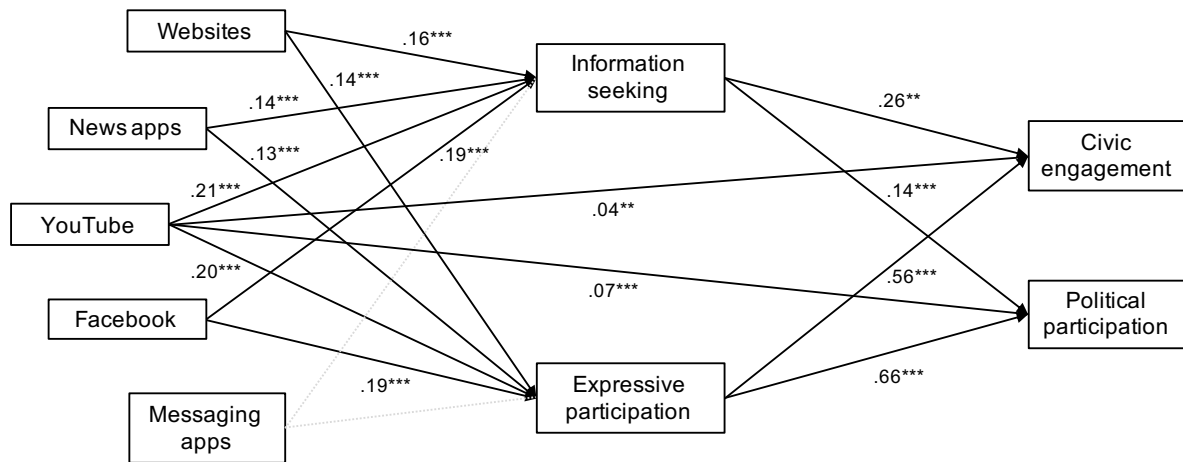
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Websites	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. News apps	.18	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. YouTube	.13	.15	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Facebook	.12	.15	.27	-	-	-	-	-
5. Messaging apps	.14	.18	.42	.34	-	-	-	-
6. Information seeking	.24	.24	.31	.30	.23	-	-	-
7. Expressive participation	.22	.22	.29	.29	.21	.73	-	-
8. Civic engagement	.19	.20	.29	.22	.19	.68	.77	-
9. Political participation	.17	.18	.30	.21	.17	.62	.76	.90

Note. All correlations are  $p < .001$ .

### **Results**

The original hypothesized model (Figure 1) showed adequate model fit ( $\chi^2 = 36.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .032, 90% CI = [.021, .044]; CFI = .997; TLI = .993; SRMR = .012); however, LM statistics suggested a significant improvement of model chi-square by specifying a direct effect from YouTube use to political participation (MI = 14.62). As this direct effect was theoretically justifiable, the final model

additionally estimated the direct effects of YouTube on both dependent variables. The final model exhibited excellent model fit (see Figure 3):  $\chi^2 = 11.03$ ,  $p = .200$ ; RMSEA = .012, 90% CI = [.000, .028]; CFI = 1.000; TLI = .999; SRMR = .007.



**Figure 3. Path analysis results examining the effects of online news consumption on civic engagement and political participation. All path coefficients are standardized regression coefficients. Dotted lines represent nonsignificant pathways. The model exhibited excellent model fit:  $\chi^2 = 11.03$ ,  $p = .200$ ; RMSEA = .012, 90% CI = [.000, .028]; CFI = 1.000; TLI = .999; SRMR = .007. Covariances between information seeking and expressive participation, and civic engagement and political participation were also estimated but omitted from the figure for clarity. \*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .**

Online news consumption was positively associated with information seeking behavior ( $H1$ ) and expressive participation online ( $H2$ ) for some, but not all, news platforms (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Path Analysis Results of Online News Use on Civic Engagement and Political Participation.**

	Standardized Coefficients	SE	p
<i>DV: Information Seeking</i>			
News websites	.16	.02	.000
News apps	.14	.02	.000
YouTube	.21	.02	.000
Facebook	.19	.02	.000
Messaging apps	.03	.02	.135
(Constant)	1.95	.08	.000
<i>DV: Expressive Participation</i>			
News websites	.14	.02	.000
News apps	.13	.02	.000
YouTube	.20	.02	.000
Facebook	.19	.02	.000
Messaging apps	.02	.02	.295
(Constant)	1.24	.07	.000
<i>DV: Civic Engagement</i>			
Information seeking	.24	.02	.000
Expressive participation	.59	.02	.000
YouTube	.04	.01	.001
(Constant)	-.05	.04	.237
<i>DV: Political Participation</i>			
Information seeking	.12	.02	.000
Expressive participation	.65	.02	.000
YouTube	.07	.01	.000
(Constant)	-.17	.04	.000
<i>Model Summary</i>			
Log-likelihood		-27532.80	
$\chi^2(p)$		11.03 (.200)	

Note.  $N = 2,501$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

As expected, accessing news through news websites ( $\beta = .16, p < .001$ ), news apps ( $\beta = .14, p < .001$ ), YouTube ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ), and Facebook ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ ) was positively associated with information seeking behavior; news viewing via messaging apps, however, was not ( $\beta = .03, p = .135$ ;  $H1$  partially supported). Likewise, news use through news websites ( $\beta = .14, p < .001$ ), news apps ( $\beta = .13, p < .001$ ), YouTube ( $\beta = .20, p < .001$ ), and Facebook ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ ) was positively associated with expressive behaviors online; once again, news viewing via messaging apps had no distinguishable effect ( $\beta = .02, p = .295$ ;  $H2$  partially supported).

In turn, information seeking behavior ( $\beta = .24, p < .001$ ) and expressive participation ( $\beta = .59, p < .001$ ) were significantly associated with civic engagement ( $H3$  supported). Similarly, information

seeking behavior ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ) and expressive participation ( $\beta = .65, p < .001$ ) were significantly associated with political participation ( $H4$  supported). As mentioned above, the direct effects of YouTube news use on the two dependent variables were also estimated. YouTube-based news exposure had direct effects on civic engagement ( $\beta = .04, p < .001$ ) and political participation ( $\beta = .07, p < .001$ ) above and beyond the indirect effects.

All in all, news consumption through news websites, news apps, YouTube, and Facebook was significantly associated with civic engagement (websites indirect effect = .10,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.08, .13]$ ; apps indirect effect = .09,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.06, .11]$ ; YouTube indirect effect = .14,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.12, .17]$ ; Facebook indirect effect = .11,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.09, .13]$ ) and political participation (websites indirect effect = .10,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.08, .12]$ ; apps indirect effect = .09,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.06, .11]$ ; YouTube indirect effect = .14,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.11, .17]$ ; Facebook indirect effect = .11,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [.09, .13]$ ) through both mediating mechanisms. News use through messaging apps had no effects on civic engagement (indirect effect = .01,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [-.01, .04]$ ) and political participation (indirect effect = .01,  $SE = .01$ , 95%  $CI = [-.01, .04]$ ).

In addition, we found that news consumption on different online platforms has different effects on information seeking behavior and expressive participation ( $RQ1$ ). Wald test results showed that while the effects of YouTube and Facebook on information seeking behavior were indistinguishable ( $\chi^2 = 3.56, p = .059$ ), news viewing via YouTube had stronger effects on information seeking behavior than viewing news on news websites ( $\chi^2 = 4.18, p = .041$ ), news apps ( $\chi^2 = 8.65, p = .003$ ), and messaging apps ( $\chi^2 = 37.32, p < .001$ ). Facebook, however, did not show any stronger effects on information seeking than viewing news on websites ( $\chi^2 = 0.03, p = .854$ ) and news apps ( $\chi^2 = 1.29, p = .256$ ), and was different only from messaging apps ( $\chi^2 = 26.83, p < .001$ ).

Similarly, Wald test results also suggested equivalent effects of YouTube and Facebook on expressive behavior ( $\chi^2 = 2.11, p = .147$ ), but news viewing via YouTube had stronger effects on expression than viewing news on news websites ( $\chi^2 = 4.36, p = .037$ ), news apps ( $\chi^2 = 8.13, p = .004$ ), and messaging apps ( $\chi^2 = 34.52, p < .001$ ). Facebook, however, did not show any stronger effects on expression than viewing news on websites ( $\chi^2 = 0.65, p = .425$ ) and news apps ( $\chi^2 = 1.07, p = .300$ ), and was different only from messaging apps ( $\chi^2 = 6.40, p = .011$ ).

### Discussion and Conclusion

Does news use on different online platforms have an impact on citizen engagement in the context of Singapore? Is there a difference in the pattern of effects depending on the affordances of the platform? Following O'Riordan et al. (2012), we distinguished between affordances based on information and content that afford knowledge and certainty can guide decision making and action, and affordances based on sociality that afford self-expression and social cohesion, which can also afford more confident action if there is a sense of support of others (Kim & Ellison, 2021).

Our results revealed some expected and some surprising findings. First, overall our findings lend support to the well-established equation between news use and citizen engagement. Even in the unique

context of Singapore, where the political culture is relatively subdued (Lee, 2014), we found that viewing news is still an important root of civic or political activism. These findings contribute to the robustness of the link between news and citizen engagement by providing evidence from a non-Western context (see also Skoric & Zhu, 2016; Zhang, 2013).

Second, while we did not see much difference in the effects of news consumption on information seeking versus expressive participation (i.e., H1 and H2 effect sizes were more or less the same), expressive participation was a much stronger predictor of both civic and political engagement. This finding provides some rationale for the citizen communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2005) over the dual-routes-of-influence model that we posited. As predicted by the citizen communication mediation model, information seeking may indeed be a first step in the path that leads to expressive behaviors online that ultimately affect offline participation and engagement (see Chan, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Li & Chan, 2017). As our study design was cross-sectional, we have no way to ascertain this possibility and leave the question open for future studies.

Third, news use on different platforms showed some divergent effects, partially but not perfectly, mapping onto the information or content affordance dimension and the sociality or expressive affordance dimension. To summarize, viewing news on YouTube consistently showed stronger direct and indirect effects on all measured variables. YouTube is strongly correlated with engagement in civic or political life via information seeking and expressive behaviors online. Facebook was a close second. Both offer content and the opportunity to express opinions, and to share content with people in a social network. News viewing on news websites and news apps—content-dominant platforms—were still impactful but less so compared with social media platform-based news use in promoting information seeking behaviors and expressive participation.

On the other hand, news use via messaging apps—a recent trend in many countries (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018; Tandoc, 2020)—had absolutely no effect on any of the measured outcome variables. The platform with the most significant sociality affordances, WhatsApp, showed no effect; we suggest that because it is more concerned with sociality than with content, it is less impactful. These findings are significant because we uncovered that even when people use the media for the same purpose of “getting the news,” different affordances and norms surrounding different platforms offer qualitatively different contexts for consuming news (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). Affordances become of interest as they mark distinctions among the features of social media, instant messenger, and news websites, and the uses to which these features are put and the meanings that those uses have in abstraction. Access to news in more public spaces such as Facebook and YouTube affords a content-based understanding and sociality-based sense of support and commonality as participation becomes visible (Kim & Ellison, 2021), which may afford confidence that in turn allows for greater civic and political participation; while access to news in the more private space of WhatsApp does not generate such confidence and therefore is not associated with such participation.

It is interesting to note a consistently strong effect for YouTube compared with other platforms as well as a direct effect on the two dependent variables. While we do not have conclusive explanations for this “YouTube effect,” one speculation is that videos have a special impact on rousing participatory

behavior, thus combining highly engaging informational content affordances with social and expressive affordances demonstrated in the comments. This seems to be consistent with Sundar's argument that modality-related affordances typically have the strongest impacts on users' experiences with the technology (Sundar, 2008; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). As videos deliver news more vividly compared with textual representation, this may boost the impact of YouTube. This suggests that immersion in news might be as important as frequency of exposure (see also Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). Another possibility is related to YouTube's algorithm that offers more similar videos when a single news story is accessed. Although other social network sites also operate with algorithms that filter content, YouTube is most effective in presenting "next options" that are streamlined to drive users to consume more news when on the site. It is also possible that different cultures and norms developed on YouTube made it more conducive for further information seeking and expressive participation (see Skoric et al., 2016). Future work might consider the relative impact of video versus other forms of presentations of news on impacting engagement in civic or political life.

On the flip side, messaging apps—although cited frequently as a source of news (Newman et al., 2018; Tandoc, 2020)—had no effect on engagement in civic or political life either directly or via any of the hypothesized mediators. The lack of effects for messaging apps is noteworthy. A lot of political discussion actually unfolds on WhatsApp, at least in some countries (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). In fact, one recent multicountry, multiwave study concluded that WhatsApp-based political *discussions* play integral roles in cultivating conventional and nonconventional activism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). We speculate that while the IM-based *discussions* may be valuable for political activism, *viewing news on IM* may not always lead to political discussions.

Equally, messaging apps such as WhatsApp are considered as closed online spaces compared with other forms of social media, and engagement with news happens in a much smaller ecosystem of friends and acquaintances (Masip et al., 2021). Such a closed environment may stimulate active discussions in some cases, but in certain contexts, it may be seen as too "close quarters" to be bringing in political discussions. This finding reminds us that affordances should be seen from a relational and functional perspective beyond technological capabilities and that the way in which people use the platform affords back to the platform (see Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

The study has a few limitations. First, the frequency of using various platforms for news was still relatively low (see Figure 2). This is partly a methodological artifact of imputing the lowest score ("Never") to all those who did not choose the platforms at all. But it could also indicate that despite high Internet penetration in Singapore, news may still be more frequently accessed through traditional channels. Second, we relied on cross-sectional data to study the mediational relationships among the variables. This is an important limitation of the present study. Given that we did not manipulate our independent or mediating variables, nor measure them at different time points, our research design does not allow us to make causal inferences (see Chan, Hu, & Mak, 2020, for an extended discussion regarding the issue of research designs and inferences). However, we feel that given the prior work that carefully modeled and established the primacy of the information to participation causal relationship over alternative versions (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah et al., 2005), our arguments offer plausible models. Third, we have used affordances as a central concept, but

affordances of social media platforms change as the technology changes (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), so the findings here may also represent a moment in time. Finally, this study accounted for only two of many potential mediators—information seeking and expressive participation—and estimated the fit of only a single model. Other studies have looked at different mediating mechanisms such as civic efficacy (e.g., Reichert & Print, 2017) or political interest (e.g., Chang, 2007), both of which were not explored in this study. We note that without a closer evaluation of alternative mechanisms and alternative models, we cannot ascertain the validity of our findings (see Chan et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding the limitations, the differential results for YouTube, Facebook, and messaging apps—those that are typically grouped together as social media—compel greater research on assessing platform-based differences and focusing on the quality of the news experience offered by different platforms. At the very least, we believe it is safe to say that people are affected in different ways to news delivered through diverse platforms, even if they are all used for accessing news.

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