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A Comparison of Online and Offline Social Participation Impacts on Generalized Trust

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Abstract

Generalized trust, which arguably follows from civic participation, brings positive consequences with regard to the individual and social goal attainment. Since sociability, especially when it comes to the young people, is increasingly exercised on the Internet, the main goal of this research paper was to set side by side the impacts of online (SNS) and offline social participation on the generalized trust. Research questions are explored by means of a field survey conducted on a sample of research participants aged between 18 and 35 years. The results indicate that the membership in civic organizations is associated with higher levels of social trust, whereas the participation in Internet social networking sites (SNSs) does not show this association. The results also revealed that civic activity on SNSs is not independently associated with generalized trust. These results are interpreted by evoking structural and motivational characteristics of online and offline social networks. In addition to the main research questions elaboration, socio-demographic predictors of generalized trust are also discussed.

Keywords: social capital, generalized trust, Internet social networking sites

1. Introduction

By replacing older concepts such as social integration and social cohesion when trying to prove beneficial effects of social connections on the

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achievement of individual or collective goals, the concept of social capital has experienced a marked expansion into sociology, political science, economy, and other social sciences. It has expanded into various fields of study, such as educational outcomes research, development and entrepreneurship research, media studies, political culture research, etc., while its popularity can be well illustrated by the four-fold increase of papers that deal with social capital covered by the Social Science Citation Index database from 2000 to 2013 (Kwon and Adler, 2014: 413).

For Robert Putnam (1995a: 67), social capital is embodied in "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". According to him, the source of social capital can be located in civic organizations, i.e., in voluntary organizations membership. This membership advances generalized trust and the occurrence of reciprocal behavior that facilitates solution of the problems that are commonly associated with any kind of collective action ("free riding" problem), either through reputation building, or through an internalized sense of loyalty to the community. It is Putnam's contention that civic associations generate trust through several mechanisms (1994:70). The density of civic associations increases the costs of opportunistic behavior, i.e. if an individual behaves opportunistically in one transaction he or she can be punished for such behavior in the following transactions. Civic associations can also increase and build trust on the grounds that members of civic organizations notice the benefits arising from the cooperative behavior (i.e., norm of reciprocity becomes more "robust"). Furthermore, the density of civic organizations increases the flow of information and communicates a reputation credibility of the organization members. Finally, the cooperation within civic organizations creates a long-term cultural pattern that can be historically deposited and used in future situations. In other words, people can get used to human interaction that takes place on the principles of mutual trust, whereat historically deposited interactions become a social norm.

According to another important author, Alejandro Portes (1998), the functions of social capital can be grouped into three general kinds: (1) social capital as a source of social control, (2) social capital as a source of family support (3) social capital as a source of benefits through extrafamilial networks. The first one refers to situations wherein social capital enables sanctioning of social norms violations, and consequently increases the likelihood of socially desirable behavior (e.g., prevention of deviant behavior among young people, promotion of standards of academic achievement and hard work, etc.). The second kind of effect is mainly related to strong family bonds that provide for the transfer of resources from parents to children. Family support may enhance the circulation of resources among the adult

members of the immediate or extended family (e.g., a money transfer that can capacitate entrepreneurial ventures). In the third case, the extrafamilial connections can serve as a source of useful resources, such as knowledge and information, which may be useful in various situations, such as when finding a job (Granovetter, 1972; Lin and Dumin, 1996).

On the other hand, Coleman (1988: 98) defines social capital in a more abstract fashion, as "a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure". As three of the most important forms of social capital, Coleman emphasizes obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms.

To briefly sum up, the elements of social capital can be observed at the micro level (as the individual characteristics that facilitate the achievement of individual goals), and at the macro level (as group features that facilitate the achievement of collective goals). In reference to the macro level of analysis, Putnam (1995a) posits that an erosion of social capital can be observed in the United States, and that this decline cannot be explained by sectoral explanations (e.g., by the declining trust in politics, or by the decline of religiosity). For example, Putnam argues that in the United States one may notice a decrease in political participation, as well as a decrease of membership in religious organizations, charities, trade unions, parents' associations, and other civic organizations. Putnam believes that possible culprits for the diminishment of social capital are to be found in various social changes, such as the changes in family structure (smaller number of marriages and children), but he also puts the blame on technological changes related to leisure industry that led to the privatization of leisure and an increased mass media consumption. However, social capital decline might not be a universal process, i.e. it might be contingent upon the characteristics of respective societies. For example, Rothstein and Stolle (2003) demonstrate that a decline of social capital (social trust and density of civic associations) is not taking place in the Scandinavian countries. They interpret this finding by the Scandinavian tradition of the welfare state, as well as by low levels of economic inequality and corruption in that part of Europe. Similarly, Di Nicola (2014) shows that institutional welfare systems (higher levels of public spending and services) are positively associated with interpersonal trust. It follows that changes in welfare systems could lead to changes in generalized trust in both directions.

2. Social capital and the media

As previously mentioned, Putnam's analysis of the supposed diminishment of American social capital tries to demonstrate that most of this decrease can be attributed to a generational effect, rather than to an age, or a period effect. Granted that the generational differences can hardly be completely explained by the economic conditions, the changes in family structure, or by the U.S. political circumstances, the changes in leisure habits (i.e., the arrival of television) remain as the only suspect. Putnam reinforces this conclusion by the analysis of the survey data (The General Social Survey), indicating that civic engagement and trust decrease with increased television viewing time, while newspapers reading delivers an opposite effect. The negative effect of television viewing on social capital is explained by several factors (Putnam, 1995b: 678-679). Primarily, television viewing takes away a part of time that could have been spent on civic participation (the so-called „social displacement hypothesis"). Additionally, the research conducted within the paradigm of the cultivation theory have shown that people who frequently watch television tend to equate the real world with the television world, attributing the characteristics of the latter to the former (for a review of the *mean world syndrome* research, see Morgan and Shanahan, 2010). Even though some research has been favorable to Putnam's ideas (e.g., Nie and Hillygus, 2002), subsequent research has not fully corroborated Putnam's thesis. For example, Patulny (2011) found that the time spent in watching television negatively correlates with generalized trust. However, this study suggests that the causal link between the general trust and television viewing may go in the opposite direction. Specifically, time spent on television watching with superficial acquaintances was not associated with lower trust, while this was the case with regard to the amount of television viewing with friends and relatives. In other words, time spent on watching television together with friends and relatives may be the result of low generalized trust, or high particularistic trust in people. Hooghe (2002) also finds a negative relationship between the amount of television viewing and civic participation, but this relationship is particularly strong when it comes to the amount of watching entertainment programs and commercial television stations. Similarly, Norris (1996) founds that information programming is positively correlated to social participation, while Shah (1998) founds that, even though total television time is weakly negatively associated with civic engagement and interpersonal trust, this relationship is highly dependent on the context, i.e. on the television content type. Hence, it is possible that the negative relationship between social capital and television viewing is not imputable to the "seizure" of time required for civic participation. Commercial television contents might not

encourage civic attitudes, or people who are not interested in civic participation simply turn to television viewing.

Nowadays, especially when the younger generations are concerned, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the Internet largely assumes the role previously occupied by television. Therefore, an important question arises as how the Internet affects the building of social capital. Grabner-Kräuter (2009) emphasizes that Internet networks have the potential of social capital construction, both in terms of types of social networks that are dominant within a network/group, as well in terms of the similarity of members of the network/group. Namely, the same Internet social networks can be used to maintain strong links with characteristics of continuity and diffusion of relations, as well as to foster weak links that are temporary and aimed at a specific type of interaction. The first type of connections on the Internet generally meet emotional and social needs, while the second one meets a need for obtaining information, and other resources. Internet networks represent bonding social capital in the case when the contacts are aimed at people with similar social characteristics, but they also can build bridging social capital while connecting people with different social characteristics[1]. Neves (2013) posits that Internet's low-cost and high speed communication, as well as ubiquity that might be helping individuals to activate latent ties and to create new ties through reaching friends' friends. In other words, online and offline social networks cannot be sharply distinguished. As underlined by Matzat (2010), online networks can be transformed into offline contacts and networks, while at the same time offline connections form a natural basis for the online networks creation. Hitherto studies indeed confirm that online networks can be used to make new offline connections, or to consolidate them (e.g., Hampton and Wellman, 2003; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007), thus strengthening the offline social capital. For example, Boase et al. (2006) determined that the use of Internet enhances the quantity of face-to-face ties, and that it promotes a more effective social networks mobilization as well. The studies that deal with the relationship of Internet use and generalized trust are still quite rare, since this field of research is still developing. However, they usually demonstrate a positive association. For example, Warren, Sulaiman, and Ismawati Jaafar (2014) found that the coordination of activities on Facebook, such as cooperation with other people related to the organization of events dealing with social issues, facilitates the formation of social trust. Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) determined a small

[1] A distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is introduced by Gittell and Vidal (1998).

positive association between the intensity of Facebook use and social trust, as well.

On the other side, Internet social networks are full of possibilities for opportunistic and malicious behavior. In consequence, the participation in online networks might have an impact on the reduction of social capital, particularly when it comes to generalized trust. The fundamental problems of Internet networks are imperfect protection of the privacy of data being shared, i.e. the issue of unauthorized use of private information, as well as abundant cases of false self-representation. Unauthorized public disclosure of private information, cyber bullying, together with the use of private data for marketing purposes can lead to unpleasant experiences of betrayed trust, and can result in the reduction of general trust in people.

Having said that, we can conclude that technological changes associated with the explosion of Internet use might have an even stronger impact on social capital in comparison to the traditional mass media. It is plausible that the Internet offers new venues to connect and socialize. To put it another way, it is possible that the Internet creates a new type of civic organization that enhances the sense of generalized trust and the sense of importance of civic duties fulfillment. While general Internet usage can be interesting to research in its own merit, we hypothesize that social networking sites (SNSs) hold the most significant potential regarding the creation of generalized trust. To be more precise, a participation in social networking sites is by definition a social activity, whereas other Internet activities can be very solitary endeavors. Therefore, the present study examines the following research questions.

3. Research questions

In social capital research, it is common to divide trust in people into a specific and a generalized one. The specific trust relates to trust in specific individuals whose characteristics or previous experience in interacting with them makes us prone to believe or not believe them. The generalized trust refers to trust in people whom we do not know, and have no previous experience with them. Generalized trust can be successfully built through positive experiences and interactions marked with benevolence and reciprocity, as well as through participation in various social groups. Generalized trust becomes especially important in today's impersonal societies, wherein a significant part of the interaction and co-operation takes place with people whom we are not previously acquainted with (Rontos and Roumeliotou, 2013: 66). The current study seeks to contribute to a more

developed understanding of generalized trust in the light of important changes in social connectedness brought upon by the Internet. To this purpose, the basic aim of the research is to make a comparison of the independent influences of face-to-face social participation and social networking sites (SNSs) on generalized trust in others. Our basic contention is that the membership in civic organizations has a stronger impact because Internet networks, although they are structurally more powerful than offline social networks, are characterized by potential opportunistic behavior, they are much more volatile and deprived of personal contact that allows authentication. To put it differently, Internet networks can have structural advantages, but they can also possess significant content (motivational) deficiencies.

The relationship between social participation and social trust is often established in cross-sectional studies (e.g., Shah, 1998; Welch, Sikking and Loveland, 2007). Nevertheless, as often implied, causality does not automatically follows from the correlation. For instance, Uslaner and Brown (2005) question the causal impact of participation on generalized trust on two accounts. The first refers to the possibility that participation causes particularistic, but not generalized trust. Another reason for their skepticism represents a relatively small proportion of the total time that is carried out in a participatory activity, which implies a low probability of a causal influence. In one of the rare longitudinal studies, Glanville, Andersson, and Paxton (2013) controlled for a number of background variables, such as religious participation, frequency of television viewing, family circumstances, degree of education, and the like, as well as for the time sequence between participation and trust. Their findings, based on data from the USA, show that social participation indeed increases generalized trust, and that this correlation is not spurious. However, there are studies that bring opposite results by demonstrating that the causal link is non-existent. For example, van Ingen and Bekkers (2015) attribute the correlation between social participation and generalized trust to the selection effects.

Social, interactive nature of the Internet when compared to the classical mass media implies the need to establish ways of its usage. As pointed out by Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009), researchers who measured Internet usage, or the time spent on using it, largely determined the negative impact on the amount of social capital (e.g., trust or social participation), while the researchers who measured the ways of Internet use often determined the positive correlation between specific ways of using the Internet (for example, to search for information) and social capital. Therefore, the second aim of our study was to determine the difference of the social capital impact between the mere membership on the SNSs, and the types of activities on them that include the stronger elements of civic participation.

In addition to these goals, our study explores the impact of socio-demographic variables on generalized trust.

According to the aforementioned Putnam's analysis of social capital in the United States, education is the strongest predictor of different dimensions of social capital, especially when it comes to trust and civic participation. A strong correlation between social trust and the level of education is to be found in other studies, as well (e.g., Rontos and Roumeliotou, 2013; Tranter and Skrbiš, 2009). Putnam attributes this connection to the higher income of the more educated persons, but also to "the skills, resources, and inclinations that were imparted to them at home and in the school" (Putnam, 1995b: 667). Even though this explanation is a bit cryptic, it can be inferred that education increases self-confidence and self-efficacy that enable us to assess other people and situations in a reliable manner, and thus prevent possible malicious intents or lack of reciprocity when dealing with other people. It is not possible to ignore the contextual effect, too. The more educated persons are more likely to socialize with other educated people, and these people are more likely to trust and to engage in cooperative behavior. Similarly, Nie, Junn and Stehlik-Barry (1996) divide the effect of education on political participation, as one of the dimensions of social capital, into cognitive and positional ones. The cognitive effect is related to the increased verbal competencies that are directly related to the ability of understanding of political concepts and events, and thus the ability for meaningful political participation. Positional effect is linked to a central position in the social network that is related to the centers of political power. The connection to the people who are in positions of power increases the possibility of obtaining relevant information, but also enhances the likelihood to influence political decisions. Therefore, the more educated individuals, who have a more central position in the social network, usually have a higher level of political participation compared to less educated individuals, who often have a peripheral position in the network.

Previous studies regarding the connection between the place of residence and generalized trust are relatively few in number, and they generally show the lack of association. For example, Nummela et al. (2009) found no difference between generalized trust in settlements of different sizes, and the same results are obtained by Paxton (2007). However, Turcotte (2005) established that the inhabitants of rural settlements show a slightly higher level of social trust and trust in neighbors, although this correlation is not substantial, and certainly does not justify nostalgic notes on the lost rural idyll.

When gender is concerned, previous studies mainly bring mixed results. For instance, Alesina and La Ferrara (2002) analyzed data from the U.S. General Social Survey and showed that women have a slightly lower level

of trust compared to men's, although it should be noted that this association is small. On the other side, Rontos and Roumeliotou (2013) in a survey carried out on the Greek population did not find a statistically significant difference in the general trust between women and men, while Delhey and Newton's (2003) analysis of the determinants of trust in seven societies also brought mixed results that generally indicate the absence of connection. A lack of association is also found in Valenzuela, Park and Kee's (2009) research on college students' Facebook use, as well as in Paxton's (2007) analysis of the *World Values Survey* data.

4. Methodology

In order to explore abovementioned research goals, a cross-sectional face-to-face survey research has been undertaken. With regard to social participation measurement, respondents were offered a list of various types of organizations (citizens' associations such as environmental organizations, associations for the protection of human rights, animal protection organizations, political parties, cultural clubs, sports clubs, and student associations), and they were required to indicate whether they are members of these or any other civic associations. A variable was then created that represented the total number of memberships in these associations.

The respondents were then required to indicate membership in various Internet social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google+, etc.). A variable that consisted of the count of total membership in SNSs was then created. It should be noted that here only social networking sites were taken into account, i.e., Internet services whose primary role is to share content (e.g., YouTube), or to work on joint projects (e.g., Wikipedia or open source software projects) were not counted. The reason behind this decision was our assumption that Internet social networks have stronger socialization elements than these services.

Civic activity on SNSs was measured by asking the respondents to indicate how often on a scale ranging from "1 to 5" ("very rare" to "very often") they participate on SNS groups when it comes to starting discussions and participating in discussions that deal with civic or political issues.

Generalized trust was measured by asking "What is your opinion about whether people can be trusted, on a scale ranging from '1' to '5', where '1' denotes the position that almost no one can be trusted, and '5' that the vast majority of people can be trusted?". Here we have deviated from the dichotomous measurements of generalized trust often used in research, wherein respondents are usually asked whether "most people can be trusted",

or "you can never be too careful with people". Despite the simplicity of this question, we decided to ask the question that offers a higher level of measurement and information. Both ways of asking the question face the dilemma of what respondents consider under "most people", or "people"? Do they count their immediate group, people whom they hardly know, or complete strangers? An analysis made by Delhey, Newton, and Welzel (2011) on data from the World Value Survey shows that the "radius of trust" is very important if one wants to use a common measure of social trust. Namely, in the less developed countries and Confucian countries respondents include only members of the immediate group under the phrase "most people", while in the more developed Western countries respondents have a wider radius, and count strangers as "most people". Given this fact, and the preliminary findings of these authors wherein these dilemmas are not so important when measuring the difference in generalized trust within countries, we have found it reasonable to use the unspecified term "people" in the formulation of our question.

A probabilistic cluster sample of young people aged between 18 and 35 years (N=335) was used in the study. The average age of respondents was about 25 years. The table below shows the structure of the sample with respect to the relevant demographic characteristics (place of residence, gender, father's level of education, and mother's level of education). A field survey (face-to-face interviews) was conducted by trained interviewers in the Eastern Croatia in March 2015.

TABLE 1. Research sample

Variable	Frequency	Share (%)
Gender		
Male	157	46.9
Female	177	52.8
Unknown	1	0.3
Place of residence		
Rural	157	46.9
Urban	178	53.1
Respondent's education		
Secondary school or less	196	58.5
Attends or has finished college, undergraduate, or graduate school	139	41.5
Father's education		
Elementary school or less	35	10.4
Secondary school	217	64.8
College, undergraduate, graduate	83	24.8
Mother's education		
Elementary school or less	49	14.6
Secondary school	213	63.6
College, undergraduate, graduate	73	21.8

5. Results and discussion

Before performing multivariate analyses, we have calculated bivariate correlations between the variables. Generalized trust was statistically significantly associated with membership in civic organizations ($r=0.21$; $p<0.01$), and with the civic activity on Internet social networks ($r=0.16$; $p<0.01$). Membership in civic organizations and membership in online social networks are also in a weak correlation ($r=0.12$; $p<0.05$), while membership in civic organizations and the level of civic activity on social networks are somewhat more related ($r=0.21$, $p < 0.01$). The strongest correlation is to be found between the number of memberships in online social networks and the level of the civic activity level on them ($r =0.23$; $p<0.01$).

TABLE 2. Bivariate correlations (Pearson's r)

	Generalized trust	Civic membership	SNS membership	Civic activity on SNSs
Generalized trust	1	0.21**	0,09	0.16**
Civic membership	0.21**	1	0.12*	0.21**
SNS membership	0.09	0,12*	1	0.23**
Civic activity on SNSs	0.16**	0.21**	0.23**	1

* r<0.05; ** r<0.01

In order to determine which predictors are the strongest when it comes to a prediction of the degree of general trust in people a model of ordinal regression was chosen. The reason for this decision was an ordinal nature of the criterion variable. Ordinal regression is based on the assumption that the ordinal variable categorization follows from a continuous interval variable standing in the background (Long and Freese, 2006:185). Deploying this assumption, an ordinal regression attempts to predict the cumulative probability of belonging to a category, or the probability of belonging to this or any of the lower categories on the basis of established model. In addition to the criterion variable (the regressand), the following predictor variables were entered in the regression: age, gender, place of residence, father's education, mother's education, total number of membership in civic associations, total number of membership in SNSs, and the level of civic activity on SNS's. Due to the extreme dominance of the medium category (category 3) of the criterion variable, complementary log-log function was used as the link function. It can be noted that the use of other available functions resulted in poorer results. The results show that the final model (all variables included) predicts generalized trust better than a guess based on the marginal probabilities ($\chi 2=31,79$, $p=0,001$), even though the sizes of pseudo R2 coefficients (Cox & Snell R2=0,09; Nagelkerke R2=0,10; McFadden R2=0,04) indicate that the model does not explain a large proportion of the variability of generalized trust.

TABLE 3. Ordinal regression with generalized trust as a criterion variable

Variables	Estimate	Standard error	Sig.	Confidence interval (95%)
Trust 1	-2.34	0.65	0.00	(-3.62 ; -1.06)
Trust 2	-0.83	0.63	0.19	(-2.07 ; 0.41)
Trust 3	0.92	0.14	0.10	(-0.31 ; 2.15)
Trust 4	1.89	0.64	0.00	(0.63 ; 3.14)
Age	0.01	0.02	0.60	(-0.03 ; 0.06)
SNS membership	-0.01	0.07	0.84	(-0.15 ; 0.12)
Civic activity on SNS	0.11	0.06	0.06	(-0.01 ; 0.23)
Civic membership	0.32	0.10	0.00	(0.13 ; 0.52)
Gender - male	-0.30	0.14	0.03	(-0.57 ; - 0.03)
Gender - female	0	-	-	-
Place - rural	-0.30	0.14	0.04	(-0.57 ; -0.02)
Place - urban	0	-	-	-
Level of education – secondary school or less	-0.12	0.14	0.40	(-0.39 ; 0.15)
Level of education – college, undergraduate, graduate	0	-	-	-
Father's education – elementary school or less	0.04	0.29	0.88	(-0.52 ; 0.61)
Father's education – secondary school	0.03	0.16	0.87	(-0.28 ; 0.33)
Father's education – college, undergraduate, graduate	0	-	-	
Mother's education – elementary school or less	-0.07	0.26	0.79	(-0.57 ; 0.44)
Mother's education – secondary school	-0.20	0.17	0.22	(-0.53 ; 0.12)
Mother's education – college, undergraduate, graduate	0	-	-	-

Cox & Snell R2=0.09; Nagelkerke R2=0.10; McFadden R2=0.04

Given that the sizes of the ordinal regression coefficients offer no intuitive interpretation at first sight, it is necessary to look at their direction and statistical significance in the first place. From the table it can be observed that membership in civic organizations, female gender and urban residence are associated with higher levels of generalized trust. The level of education of the respondents, the levels of education of father and mother, age, and the number of membership in SNSs are not statistically significant predictors of generalized trust, whereas the level of civic activity on Internet social networks is close to the threshold of statistical significance ($p=0.05$). If we take exponents of the estimates, we can get odds ratios. Thus, one-unit increase in social participation (one membership) increases odds of belonging to a higher category of generalized trust by 1.38 (i.e., $OR=1.38$)[2]. Similarly, females have 1.35 higher odds of belonging to a higher trust category than males, and we get the same odds ratio when comparing respondents living in urban areas to those living in rural areas[3].

With reference to our main research goal, it can be inferred that the mere participation in Internet social networking sites does not create generalized trust. In other words, the results of the current study indicate that SNSs do not create a relationship between social networking and trust, which is present in offline networks. Possible explanation of this finding might be the fact that online network sites are mainly used to reinforce offline connections, i.e. not to find new online connections (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), whereas the participation in offline civic associations lead to meeting new people and interacting with them, which could lead to higher generalized trust. As already explained, possible motivational deficiencies of interaction on the Internet (privacy concerns, misrepresentation, lack of non-verbal cues, etc.) might play a role, as well.

When it comes to our second research goal, it can be concluded that the level of civic activity on SNSs is associated with generalized trust when it comes to a bivariate association. However, civic activity on SNSs is not an independent predictor of generalized trust, as shown in results of the ordinal regression. Bearing in mind the established bivariate correlation between these variables, it can be inferred that the persons with higher level of offline civic participation, as measured by membership in civic associations, also have

[2] Although the test of parallel lines assumption turned to be statistically significant, odds ratios calculated in separate regressions were similar to those calculated from the regression in the table above. Thus, the odds are almost proportional across the categories of the criterion variable.

[3] We have calculated these odds ratios by taking exponents of the estimates, and then taking their reciprocals.

higher level of online civic participation. This correlation probably explains the bivariate correlation between SNS civic activity and trust. Thus, as evident from the results of the ordinal regression, it cannot be concluded that civic activities on social networking sites generate generalized trust, as well. This conclusion is somewhat at odds with the previously mentioned studies (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009; Warren, Sulaiman and Ismawati Jaafar, 2014), which indicate that more civic-minded use of the Internet increases trust. However, two caveats are in order. First, the size of effect in these studies is usually very small, and they do not control for offline social participation. Second, the effect from our study albeit small is near the statistical significance threshold. A study with larger sample might have shown a significant effect.

These conclusions do not imply that Internet social networking does not make some other kind of benefit, i.e., that structural online social capital is not used for the exchange of information and other resources, or for emotional support provided by friends and family members. Indeed, it seems that hitherto research supports this conclusion (for a review, see Steinfield et al. 2012). Thus, social networking sites might be providing both bonding and bridging social capital, albeit not reinforcing generalized trust.

It is noteworthy that our finding whereby the membership in civic organizations is associated with higher levels of social trust is mainly in line with the previous cross-sectional studies. However, this finding is different from the results that can be located in Krolo and Puzek's study (2014) conducted in Croatia on a very similar sample to that one that has been used in the current study. Specifically, these authors have not found a statistically significant association between these variables. Therefore, considering that there are no other studies in Croatia that have tested this association, it remains to be seen what the future research would say, especially those conducted on a general population sample.

In the current study, the established difference between respondents with regard to place of residence goes counter to theoretical expectations. To be specific, one of the reasons why social capital should be more pronounced in rural communities can be found in Coleman's (1988) concept of closure. It relates to the density of social networks that allows mutual control with respect to collective norms, particularly the norm of reciprocity. Presumably, mutual physical proximity and the amount of contacts, as well as the interconnection of network members, make such a monitoring easier in rural than in urban communities. Another reason why generalized trust should be higher in rural areas is the relative stability of the rural population. The likelihood of future interactions increases the likelihood of cooperative behavior, and that is why trust should be stronger in communities that are

stable (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002). When our study is concerned, it should be remembered that it has been conducted on a specific population, and that the strength of the predictor is not great. Therefore, this result, albeit statistically significant, should be taken with caution.

Our result whereby female respondents showed a higher degree of social trust is also somewhat surprising. As already mentioned, most studies do not demonstrate an association, or they demonstrate that women show lower level of generalized trust. The explanations given usually point to the fact that women are discriminated against, which makes them dissatisfied and distrusting. Additionally, childcare makes them more careful and more vulnerable (Delhey and Newton, 2003: 100). Therefore, the explanation of the result from the current study may be found in the fact that the study has been carried out on a sample of young people (women), and that these possible factors may not be operating yet.

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