A safer way to participate?
Online and real-world civic engagement among ethnic minority youth

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Introduction

Civic participation refers to achieving a public good through helping activities such as voluntary work, donating money or fundraising (Zukin et al., 2006). By civic participation young people work to improve living conditions in their communities but also develop their personal senses of agency (Beaumont, 2010).

Sometimes, it is assumed that civic participation brings positive psychological outcomes to young people such as more optimistic outlooks regarding society. **However, people from ethnic minorities need not necessarily encounter only positive reactions**, but also stereotypes, prejudice and non-acceptance (Seif, 2010). One can expect that in the long-term perspective, this kind of experience will evoke in some people negative feelings towards the majority society and doubts about the purpose of their own participation.

Currently, there is a growing importance of civic participation on the Internet, which provides young citizens with new opportunities to participate (Bennett at al. 2010). Civic participation on the Internet seems to be an attractive tool not only for majority members, but also for minority youth (Bloemraad & Trost, 2008). A question arises whether real-world and online civic participation are associated with different psychological outcomes in young people from ethnic minorities.

This study asks two questions:

1) **Is the association between civic participation and optimistic views on society weaker in ethnic minority youth than in majority youth?**
2) **In ethnic minority youth, is the association between optimistic views and real-world participation different from the association between optimistic views and online participation?**

Method

Sample: 1195 participants (aged 15-28) from the Czech Republic.
203 participants had Roma ethnicity, 167 had Ukrainian ethnicity (two largest ethnic minorities in the country), and 825 came from majority (ethnic Czechs).
Type of data: questionnaire-based self-reports.

Measurement of civic participation: respondents assessed how often they participated at various civic activities in the last year. Using exploratory and multigroup confirmatory factor analysis, two dimensions of participation were determined:

1) **real-world participation** (volunteer work, wearing a bracelet, sign or other symbol to show support for a social or political cause, donating money to a social or political cause/organization, and taking part in concerts or fundraising events with a social or political cause);
2) **online participation** (linking news or music or videos with a social or political content, discussing societal or political questions on the net, visiting a website of a political or civic organization, participating in online based petition, protest or boycotting, and connecting to a group on Facebook or similar online social networks dealing with social or political issues).

Further, using cluster analysis, three modes of civic participation were determined:
1) **low participation** (young people with no or very rare civic participation);
2) **only online** (young people who participate only online);
3) **real world & online** (young people who participate both in real world and online).

Measurement of optimistic views on society:
Social-well being (Albanesi at al., 2007): overall evaluation of society's functioning, and direction. Three subdimensions of social-well being were used (social coherence, actualization and acceptance).
Trust in institutions: mean trust in six major institutions (government, courts, police etc.).
Hope that discrimination against minorities can be eliminated in the Czech society: One-item question.

Results

Pearson correlations between online/real-world civic participation and optimistic views on society

The associations between all optimistic views and online participation were positive in Roma. They were mostly positive also in Ukrainians and majority
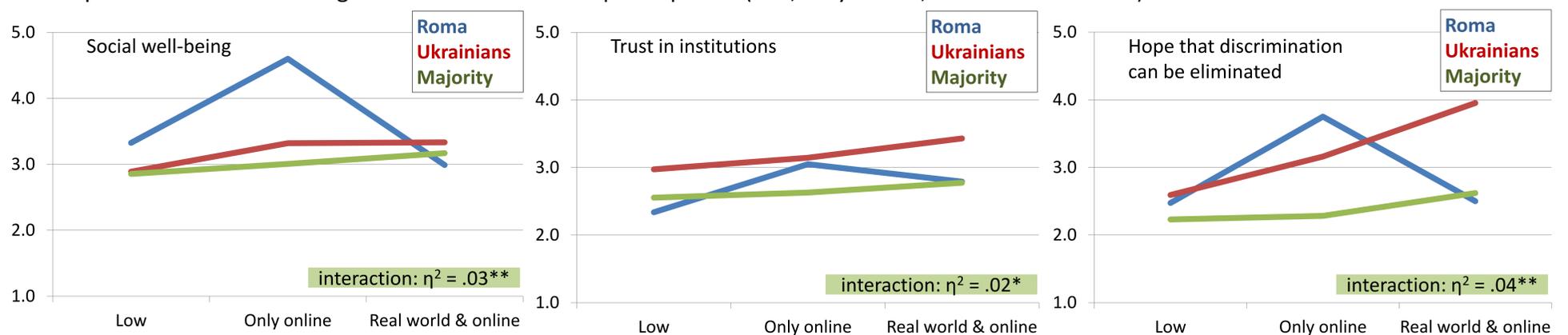
The positive association between online participation and institutional trust was particularly strong in Roma, compared to Ukrainians and majority

Optimistic views on society	Online participation			Real-world participation		
	Roma	Ukrainians	Majority	Roma	Ukrainians	Majority
Social well-being	.16	.16	.15	-.19	.15	.15
Trust in institutions	.25	.03	.08	.13	.23	.08
Hope that discrimination can be eliminated	.26	.12	.09	-.08	.17	.20

The association between real-world participation and social well-being was positive in Ukrainians and majority, but it was negative in Roma

The association between real-world participation and hope was positive in Ukrainians and majority, but it was rather negative in Roma

☐ = interaction significant at .the 05 level

Mean optimistic views according to three modes of civic participation (low; only online; real world & online)

interaction: η² = .03**

interaction: η² = .02*

interaction: η² = .04**

In Ukrainians and majority, people who participated only online had (slightly) more optimistic views than people who did not participate. At the same time, people who participated also in real world had (slightly) more optimistic views than those who participated only online.

In Roma, people who participated only online had more optimistic views than those who did not participate. However, people who participated also in real world had less optimistic views than those who participated only online.

Discussion

In general, greater civic participation of young people is associated with more optimistic views on society (social well-being, trust in institutions, hope). However, this study shows that in some ethnic minorities, only online participation has these positive outcomes, but not real-world participation.

It is possible that young people from some ethnic minorities feel exposed to ethnic stereotypes and prejudice while participating in real world. Consequently, these negative experiences can affect their views on society.

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On the other hand, online environment can provide young people from these ethnic minorities a safer way to civic participation. Due to its partial anonymity, the Internet environment might allow them to hide their identity at times. Besides that, anonymous participation enables them to avoid some personal attacks that they would have to face in the real world. Furthermore, even if one does not try to hide one's identity, it is still easier in the online space to check in what environments one finds oneself and with which people they communicate than in face to face contact.

Complementary findings from our previous research

Our previous qualitative focus groups with young Roma civic activists showed that these people can suffer from frustration and disillusion from the permanent struggle with negative stereotypes and prejudice. Some of them described their situation as "somewhere in between" their own ethnic group and the majority. They did not feel trusted either by other Roma, who perceived them as too similar to the majority, or by the majority, which viewed them on the basis of its negative stereotypes about the Roma (Šerek, Petrovičová, & Porubanová-Norquist, 2012; Šerek, Petrovičová, & Macek, 2011).

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