

Networked Publics: How Connective Social Media Use Facilitates Political Consumerism among  
LGBT Americans

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**Abstract**

Although research shows that social media use is associated with political consumerism, it is not clear which online activities encourage boycotting and buycotting. In this paper, we theorize that when people use social media to meet other people or discuss politics, social media use has the potential to create networked publics or imagined communities that can mobilize people to action. This means that how people use social media matters more than whether they use social media at all. To test our expectation, we analyze data from a 2013 nationally representative survey of LGBT adults ( $N = 1,197$ ). We find that those who use social media for connective activities such as meeting new LGBT friends or discussing LGBT issues are significantly more likely to engage in boycotts or buycotts to promote equal rights. We also find significant interactions between connective media use and political interest. Specifically, connective forms of social media use mobilizes people with low levels of political interest to participate, and reinforces the likelihood that people with high levels of political interest will participate. These findings increase our understanding of how specific types of digital media use have the potential to mobilize issue publics. They also demonstrate that the relationship between social media use and political interest is more complex than previously assumed.

**Word Count: 214**

*Keywords:* social media, political consumerism, political participation, civic engagement, mobilization, issue public, networked public, mobilization, Internet, voting

### Networked Publics: How Connective Social Media Use Facilitates Political Consumerism among LGBT Americans

In recent years, it has become increasingly common for people to make purchasing decisions that reflect their political or moral concerns. A prominent example of the power of these decisions comes from the summer of 2012, when Dan Cathy, the CEO of fast-food chain Chick-fil-A, gave a radio interview in which he stated that Chick-fil-A supported “the biblical definition of marriage” (Sverson, 2012). The fact that the Cathy family had donated millions of dollars to organizations dedicated to defeating same-sex marriage at the ballot box and to groups promoting “conversion therapy” as a way to change people’s sexual orientation made Cathy’s position highly salient and established a public connection between his business and LGBT rights. In response to Cathy’s statements, an enraged New Yorker took to social media to urge gays and lesbians to boycott—or refuse to eat at—Chick-fil-A, as well as to stage same-sex kiss-ins as a form of protest at the company’s 1,600 restaurants across the United States.

Adding to the prominence of people’s objections to Chick-fil-A and Cathy, former Republican governor of Arkansas, presidential candidate, and talk show host Mike Huckabee declared August 1, 2012, as “Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day.” His call to action, which was posted on Facebook, urged people across the country to boycott—or deliberately eat at—their local Chick-fil-A restaurant to “affirm a business that operates on Christian principles and whose executives are willing to take a stand for the Godly values we espouse.”<sup>1</sup> Former Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum also rallied his 200,000 followers by tweeting: “With two of my boys, Enjoying chick-in-strips and an awesome peach shake at Chick-fil-A. See you here next Wednesday!” (Sverson, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Collectively, the competing boycott and buycott of the fast-food chain suggest the central role of media in political consumerism. The boycott was a

response to a broadcast message and was initiated through social media; likewise, the counter-campaign relied on both traditional and social media.

Although studies have shown that political consumerism is a fairly common form of political behavior and have identified some of the key characteristics of political consumers, research has paid little attention to the dynamics of digital media use for political consumerism. As a testament to political consumerism's popularity, a recent cross-national study suggested that 34 percent of adults across 20 nations had participated in boycotts or buycotts in the preceding twelve months (Neilson & Paxton, 2010). Other studies put this number at about 50 percent for Americans (Baek, 2010; Copeland, 2014a, 2014b; Copeland & Smith, 2014), and as high as 60 percent for Swedes (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Researchers have simultaneously determined some of the key antecedents of political consumerism, such as education and political interest (Baek, 2010; Copeland, 2014a, 2014b; Copeland & Smith, 2014; Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Neilson, 2010; Neilson & Paxton, 2010; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Shah et al., 2007; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Strømsnes, 2009; Ward & de Vreese, 2011), and have shown that political consumerism complements a larger participation repertoire (Baek, 2010; Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Stolle et al., 2005; Strømsnes, 2009). However, few studies focus on the communicative aspects of political consumerism.

In this study, we aim to situate political consumerism within the realm of political communication and the public sphere. We propose that political consumerism may be a function of the ability of social media use to create *networked publics*, or groups of individuals who come together online to connect across areas of shared interest (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; boyd, 2014; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Networked publics offer an online space for a community of people to gather, connect, and mobilize others to action. We argue that this effect revolves

around *issue publics*, or groups of individuals who care deeply about a particular cause or set of political concerns (Converse, 1964; Ho et al., 2011; Kim, 2009). This sense of belonging within an issue public, we argue, encourages the proliferation of imagined communities that provide new opportunities for people to participate in public life (boyd, 2014). Specifically, by meeting and engaging people with similar interests and identities through social media, individuals can be mobilized to engage in political participation offline.

To test this expectation, we examine whether connective social media use—or the use of social media to meet new friends and discuss politics—acts as a conduit for political consumerism among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. To do so, we analyze data from the Pew Research Center’s 2013 Survey of LGBT Americans. These data were collected just prior to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *U.S. vs. Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, and asked respondents whether they engaged in boycotts or buycotts to promote LGBT equality.

Using hierarchical regression analysis, we find that general social media use does not increase the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism. However, people who use social media for connective reasons, specifically to meet other LGBT individuals or to discuss LGBT issues, are significantly more likely to engage in political consumerism. In addition, political interest moderates these relationships. While social media use for connective reasons mobilizes those who are low in political interest to participate, it amplifies the likelihood that those who are already high in political interest will participate. These findings demonstrate that how people use social media matters more than whether they use it at all. They also add to a growing body of literature that shows that the relationship between digital media use for political information and political interest is more complex than previously assumed.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Political consumption refers to ‘the evaluation and choice of producers and products with the aim of changing ethically, environmentally or politically objectionable institutional or market practices’ (Micheletti, Stolle, & Berlin, 2012, p. 145). Although political consumerism can take one of four forms (Micheletti, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), most research focuses on boycotts and buycotts. Whereas boycotts punish companies for undesirable behavior, buycotts (or reverse boycotts) reward companies for desirable behavior or favorable policies. For example, people may boycott certain clothing companies if they pay their workers in third-world countries substandard wages. Conversely, people may shop deliberately at retail outlets that do not test their skincare products on animals.

Although the use of purchasing power to express political preferences is not new (Breen, 2004), it is only recently that researchers have attended to consumption as a form of political behavior. This research has pursued several lines of inquiry. One line of inquiry has examined which people are more likely to engage in political consumption than others. In line with most of the literature on political participation and civic engagement (e.g., Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995), political consumers tend to be better educated and wealthier than non-political consumers (Baek, 2010; Copeland, 2014a, 2014b; Copeland & Smith, 2014; Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010; Neilson, 2010; Neilson & Paxton, 2010; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Shah et al., 2007; Strømsnes, 2009), though education tends to be a more reliable indicator than income. In addition, studies generally find that younger people are more likely than older people to engage in political consumerism (Copeland, 2014a; Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014), though this relationship may be curvilinear (Copeland, 2014b; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

With respect to race and ethnicity, findings from previous research are mixed. Some studies find that people who self-identify as white are more likely to engage in political consumerism (Newman & Bartels, 2011), while others do not (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014). The findings for gender are also mixed. Using the 2002/2003 European Social Survey, Stolle and Micheletti (2013) found that women were more likely than men to engage in political consumerism in Northern Europe and the U.S. However, U.S. studies are not consistent with this finding (e.g., Baek, 2010), and tend to show that while women are more likely to engage in boycotting, they are not more likely than men to engage in boycotting (Neilson, 2010).

With the exception of educational attainment, socio-political variables tend to be more reliable predictors of political consumption than socio-demographic variables. In fact, political interest is the most stable predictor of political consumption; political consumers are more interested in politics than are non-political consumers (Baek, 2010; Copeland, 2014a, 2014b; Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Neilson, 2010; Neilson & Paxton, 2010; Newman & Bartels, 2011; Shah et al., 2007; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Strømsnes, 2009). Researchers have also been attentive to the implications of partisanship and ideology for political consumerism. In the U.S., studies tend to find that liberals are more likely to participate than conservatives (e.g., Copeland, 2014b).<sup>3</sup> Ideological strength also tends to be associated with political consumption, while partisan strength is not (e.g., Copeland, 2014a, 2014b; Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber 2014; Newman & Bartels, 2011). This dynamic is consistent with the idea that people are motivated to engage in political consumption because they are disaffected with the state.

Based on theories of subpolitics (Beck, 1999; Inglehart, 1997), research has also examined the relationships between social trust, life satisfaction, and political consumption. In general, political consumers tend to espouse high level of social trust, or the belief that other

people can be trusted (Neilson & Paxton, 2010; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). At the same time, theories of lifestyle politics suggest that the impetus to engage in extra-institutional or non-electoral forms of political action stems from frustration with the inability of government to address social and political grievances. Some empirical studies are consistent with this theoretical proposition (Newman & Bartels, 2011), while others are not (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber 2014).

Another line of inquiry has examined whether political consumerism is a complement to—or substitute for—other forms of civic and political engagement. Despite concerns that people engage in political consumption at the expense of other civic and political activities, political consumers are among the most participatory citizens. To be sure, people who engage in political consumption exhibit a preference for individualistic and non-electoral forms of political behavior, such as signing petitions and participating in demonstrations (Copeland & Smith, 2014; Earl, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013; Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Gotlieb & Wells, 2012; Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Strømsnes, 2009). However, they are also active in electoral politics. As Willis and Schor (2012) note, political consumption “‘crowds in,’ rather than ‘crowds out,’ political activism” (p. 179).

A third, and newer, line of research examines the communicative features of political consumerism. Several studies show that political consumerism is associated with interpersonal discussion (Baek, 2010) and political talk (Shah et al., 2007). Other studies show a relationship between associational involvement and political consumerism (Neilson & Paxton, 2010), which suggests that people are more likely to engage in political consumerism if they engage in connective behaviors.



Researchers have also speculated that certain types of Internet use should facilitate political consumerism. For instance, Stolle and Micheletti (2013) argue that the Internet “not only helps citizens collect relevant information but also facilitates borderless information communication, problem formulation and solution-seeking, collective identity, political mobilization, political action, and even value change” (p. 38). However, empirical research linking political consumerism to Internet use is scarce. Ward and de Vreese (2011) find that people who engage in political consumerism are more likely to engage in online political participation, but they do not analyze whether digital media use increases the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism. Similarly, Shah et al. (2007) find that although conventional and online news use is associated with political talk, they are not associated with political consumerism.

At the same time, Earl, Copeland, and Bimber (2013) find that people who engage in boycotts or buycotts learn about these activities online, either through email, the Internet, or social media. In addition, they demonstrate that people who use the Internet to gather information are more likely to engage in political consumerism, as are people who use social media for political reasons. To our knowledge, only one other study has examined the relationship between social media use and political consumption. In this study, respondents were asked whether they used social media to stay in touch with family and friends, meet people who share their interests, stay informed about their local community, and obtain news about current events, among other things (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Using hierarchical OLS regression, the authors find that social media use mediates the relationship between general Internet use and political consumerism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Based on this finding, the authors conclude that political consumerism has a networked character. They explain, “In our view, the chief

reason for this linkage is that political consumerism is a lifestyle choice and form of pro-civic action that is subject to sharing, peer commentary, and social influence through online social networks” (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014, p. 14). However, they are unable to determine what types of social media use matter for political consumerism. Our research builds on this study by differentiating between general social media use and connective media use, and in the next section, we discuss how certain types of social media use have the potential to mobilize issue publics to engage in political consumerism. We begin by introducing the issue public of interest: LGBT Americans.

### **LGBT Americans: A Motivated and Engaged Issue Public**

Pollsters, pundits, and academics alike have deemed the fight over marriage equality and the broader struggle for LGBT civil rights as one of the most pressing social issues of our time. Organizations including Gallup and others have documented a rapid *sea change*, or dramatic shift in public support for same-sex marriage, from a low of 27 percent in 1996 to a high of 55 percent support in May 2014 (McCarthy, 2014). While this rapid increase in support is not universal across the U.S. and is primarily attributed to an increasingly younger electorate and rising rates of social contact (Becker, 2012), it is clear that “years of playing offense have finally paid off as this movement has reached a tipping point in recent years—both legally and in the court of public opinion” (McCarthy, 2014, para 8.) At present writing, thirty-six states permit same-sex marriages, and the US Supreme Court is slated to revisit the issue during the spring 2015 session.

Without question, much of this movement on the same-sex marriage issue has been driven by calculated issue advocacy efforts orchestrated by a mobilized LGBT issue public, or a small group of people who have come to express pointed concern about personally relevant

political issues (A. B. Becker, 2014; Becker, Dalrymple, Brossard, Scheufele, & Gunther, 2010; Converse, 1964; Kim, 2009). Like other social movements, the push for LGBT civil rights has often appeared decentralized and unstructured at times, relying on members of the LGBT community to lead the charge by engaging in acts of participatory democracy (Rimmerman, 2008).

In effect, the passage of Proposition 8 by California voters in November 2008 served as a galvanizing force for LGBT advocacy organizations ("Same-sex marriage laws," 2014). Groups such as the Human Rights Campaign and Freedom to Marry narrowed their efforts to focus almost exclusively on the case for marriage equality over other relevant LGBT civil rights issues (J. Becker, 2014a). Collectively, these groups spearheaded an increasingly calculated, strategic, and multi-pronged effort to advance the same-sex marriage debate through the courts of the U.S. judicial system and at the ballot box in a handful of key states (J. Becker, 2014a). While these advocacy organizations pushed for institutional change and greater political support for marriage equality (including President Barack Obama's own evolution on the issue), they simultaneously worked to engage the broader public and spur citizen engagement via digital media (J. Becker, 2014b). The height of this effort coincided with the drive to bring the case of marriage equality, and in particular the constitutionality of California's Proposition 8 and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) before the US Supreme Court in the spring of 2013.

On March 25, 2012, for instance, the Human Rights Campaign encouraged people to change their Facebook profile pictures to a pink-on-red equal sign to show support for marriage equality. The following day, approximately 2.7 million members updated their profile picture, an increase of 120 percent over any given day (Bakshy, 2013). LGBT advocacy organizations also encouraged participation including the use of boycotts and buycotts to punish or reward

companies, respectively, for their policies on LGBT equality. In fact, to aid in the act of political consumerism at the individual level, the Human Rights Campaign created a Buyer's Guide smartphone application that would alert consumers about brands and businesses' levels of workplace equality (e.g., a green label for companies receiving high workplace equality scores, a red label for those that have to do more work to promote workplace equality) ("Buyer's Guide,"). It is this highly charged political context that serves as the backdrop for our examination of how connective social media use serves as a conduit for political consumerism among members of the LGBT issue public.

### **Drawing Connections: Political Consumerism among LGBT Americans**

In examining the case of political consumption among members of the LGBT US adult population, we suspect that many of the same key antecedents driving more generalized boycotting and buycotting behaviors (e.g., education, political interest, political participation) will also emerge as factors shaping engagement. In terms of social media activity, we expect that simply having a social media account will not influence the likelihood of engaging in political consumption. Rather, we suggest that social media activities that both break down spatial divisions and engage individuals in social practices that help reinforce a sense of a shared community may encourage even those who are not that interested in political matters to engage in political consumption (boyd, 2014; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Specifically, engaging in discrete connective acts such as meeting a new LGBT friend online or discussing LGBT issues in online forums should help reinforce the creation of networked publics or imagined communities that offer a safe, almost boundary-less space to come together as a community, connect, and simply hang out (boyd, 2014). This sense of community space may be particularly important for LGBT adults who have often been pushed to the margins of society and have

historically lacked physical, public spaces for congregation and community-building (Rimmerman, 2008).

To be sure, networked publics are not inherently political in their construction—they are first a foremost a site for shared community and gathering (boyd, 2014). Further, online engagement among members of a networked public does not necessarily translate into political action. At the same time, however, we expect that given the unique political, social, and cultural challenges facing the LGBT community in the spring of 2013, social media activity that either encourages new social connections (e.g., meeting a new LGBT friend online) or the discussion of relevant community concerns (e.g., discussing LGBT issues in online forums) should positively influence political activity. More specifically, engaging in these discrete social media activities should amplify or reinforce the likelihood that LGBT adults with higher levels of political interest will engage in boycotting and buycotting behaviors, and at the same time mobilize those with lower levels of political interest to also engage in political consumption.

### **Data and Methods**

To test our theoretical expectations, we conducted a series of analyses using data from the Pew Research Center's 2013 Survey of LGBT Adults ( $N=1,197$ ). The data were collected between April 11-29, 2013 using KnowledgePanel, the GfK Group's nationally representative online research panel. Members of the panel are recruited using probability sampling via random digit dialing (RDD) and address-based sampling (ABS) methodologies. KnowledgePanel members complete a yearly profile survey that measures demographic questions, attitudes, and behaviors. 3,645 panelists (5.2 percent of the full KnowledgePanel) classified as LGBT and were eligible to participate in the survey, yet only one member of each LGBT household was randomly selected to participate. A total of 1,924 panelists were invited to participate in the

survey, while 1,422 completed enough of the interview to determine eligibility for the study. The final sample of 1,197 represents 73 percent of those invited who screened in, qualified, and completed the interview as well as those who ended up not being qualified to complete the survey. The cumulative response rate (CUMRR1) was 7.4 percent and is based on the household recruitment rate for the panel, the household profile completion rate, and the cooperation rate.

The final data set was weighted in a series of steps to match population parameters (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.) from the 2013, 2012, and 2011 US Census Bureau Current Population Surveys (CPS), to account for the Hispanic composition of the LGBT population, and for any potential bias among those LGBT panel members who chose to complete the survey. The margin of sampling error for the weighted sample was +/- 4.1 percent for all LGBT respondents ( $N = 1,197$ ). Margins of error for key subgroups within the dataset (e.g., lesbians, gay men, bisexual men, bisexual women) were higher. Key variables used in the analyses are detailed below.

### ***Dependent Variable***

***Political Consumerism:*** The survey included two measures of political consumerism. To measure boycotting, respondents were asked if, in the past 12 months, they “bought a certain product or service *because the company that provides it is supportive of LGBT rights*” (emphasis added). To measure boycotting, respondents were asked if, in the past 12 months, they “decided NOT to buy a certain product or service *because the company that provides it is not supportive of LGBT rights*” (emphasis added). Following the standard practice in the literature (Newman & Bartels, 2011; Shah et al., 2007), we collapsed these measures into a single dependent variable (two items, inter-item  $r = .57, p < .001$ ). Our measure of political consumerism, therefore, is a

binary variable coded “1” if the respondent engaged in at least one form of consumer activism and “0” if the respondent engaged in neither form.

Descriptive statistics show that approximately 31 percent of LGBT adults boycotted a product or service to promote LGBT equality in the past year, while 25 percent of LGBT adults deliberately purchased a product or service from an LGBT-friendly company. Combined, roughly 37 percent of LGBT adults in our survey engaged in at least one act of political consumerism in the past year to promote LGBT equality. This figure is consistent with findings from general population surveys of U.S. adults, which show that approximately 38 percent of adults engage in boycotts, while about 35 percent engage in buycotts (Baek, 2010).

### ***Independent Variables***

***Social Media Activity (Block 4):*** The independent variables of primary interest in this study are three measures of social media use that were featured in the survey, including: (1) *social network membership* (80 percent “use Facebook, Twitter or other social networking sites”); (2) *meeting new LGBT friends online* (55 percent have “met new LGBT friends online or through a social networking site”); and (3) *LGBT political discussion* (16 percent “regularly discuss LGBT issues online or on a social networking site”).

***Political and Civic Engagement (Block 3):*** Two measures of political and civic engagement were included in the analyses, aligning with extant work on the antecedents of political consumerism (Copeland & Smith, 2014; Earl, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Gotlieb & Wells, 2012; Stolle et al., 2005; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013; Strømsnes, 2009). *Voting frequency* was based on a response to the question: “How often would you say you vote?” ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ; 1 = “Seldom,” to 4 = “Always”). *Civic participation* was an additive scale, ranging from 0 to 4, based on involvement with four LGBT community-

oriented activities in the past year or beyond ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). These activities included: (1) "Been a member of an LGBT organization," (2) "Attended a rally or march in support of LGBT rights," (3) "Attended an LGBT pride event," and (4) "Donated money to politicians or political organizations because they are supportive of LGBT rights."

***Predispositions (Block 2):*** We included *Democratic party identification* in the analyses (56 percent identified as Democrats; coded as "1" vs. all others), along with *liberal political ideology* ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ; 1 = "very conservative," to 5 = "very liberal"). A measure of general *life satisfaction* or happiness in response to the question, "Generally, how would you say things are these days in your life?" ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = .62$ ; 1 = "not too happy," 2 = "pretty happy," and 3 = "very happy") was included as well. *Political interest* was based on how often respondents indicated they "follow what's going on in government and public affairs" ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .96$ ; 1 = "hardly at all," to 4 = "most of the time"). *Social trust* was based on a choice between two paired statements [(1 = "Generally speaking, most people can be trusted" (39 percent) vs. 0 = "You can't be too careful in dealing with people" (61 percent)].

***Demographics (Block 1):*** We also controlled for *age* (1 = "18-24," to 7 = "75+;" Median age of "35-44"); *education* (1 = "less than high school," to 4 = "bachelor's degree or higher;" Median level of education at "some college"), and *income* (1 = "less than \$20,000," to 8 = "\$150,000 or more;" Median level at "\$30,000 to under \$40,000"). In addition, we included dummy codes for race (17 percent Hispanic; 10 percent Black) and sexual orientation (19 percent Lesbian, 11 percent Bisexual male, 29 percent Bisexual female, 5 percent transgender; gay males were the default category at 36 percent).

### ***Analytical Plan***



Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, we used hierarchical logistic regression to examine the various factors that best predict the likelihood of LGBT adults engaging in political consumerism. Displayed in Table 1, hierarchical regression enters blocks of variables based on their presumed causal order, allowing researchers to assess the relative contribution of each variable block above and beyond previously entered blocks. Table 1 displays the upon-entry coefficients and standard errors for the independent variables in the model as well as the final regression coefficients. In addition, the contribution of each variable block toward explaining the variance in the dependent variable, political consumerism, is listed as the incremental Nagelkerke  $R^2$ . The sum of these incremental  $R^2$ s is listed as the Final Nagelkerke  $R^2$ , or the approximate percent of the variance in political consumerism, that is explained by the models.

Demographic variables were entered initially, followed by predispositions in the second block. In line with extant work on political consumerism (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013), measures of political and civic engagement were included as the third block of the models followed by social media activity as the fourth block. A fifth and final block was added to test for any significant interactions between political interest and the three social media variables (social network membership, meeting new LGBT friends online, and LGBT online discussion). The interaction terms were created by multiplying the standardized values of the key main effect variables in order to prevent possible problems of multicollinearity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

After the regression analysis we then estimated predicted probabilities using CLARIFY (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000). To do so, we estimated a regression containing only significant predictors. Based on those regression results, we computed probabilities by setting the

values of the binary variables to zero, ordered variables to their median, and continuous variables to their mean.

## Results

As Table 1 shows, demographic variables are important for explaining variation in political consumerism (incremental  $R^2 = 25.9$  percent). Specifically, those who engaged in LGBT-relevant political consumerism were younger (final  $\beta = -.35, p < .001$ ) and more highly educated (final  $\beta = .51, p < .001$ ). These individuals are more likely to be white, as evidenced by the significant negative coefficients for minority status both initially and in the final model (final  $\beta = -1.05, p < .001$  for black; final  $\beta = -.65, p < .001$  for Hispanic). In addition, bisexual males, bisexual females, and transgender individuals were less likely to engage in political consumerism when compared against gay males (final  $\beta = -1.17, p < .001$  for bisexual males; final  $\beta = -.52, p < .05$  for bisexual females; final  $\beta = -1.60, p < .001$  for transgender individuals). While lesbians were initially less likely to engage in political consumerism (initial  $\beta = -.39, p < .05$ ), this relationship was no longer significant in the final, full model.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

Predispositions explained an additional 5.9 percent of the incremental variance in political consumerism. Liberals were more likely to have engaged in political consumerism both initially and in the final model (final  $\beta = .42, p < .001$ ). While general political interest was significant initially (initial  $\beta = .34, p < .001$ ), this relationship weakened once other variables were added to the model. Political engagement explained the second largest amount of incremental variance in political consumerism (incremental  $R^2 = 12.7$  percent), driven primarily by the large positive relationship between civic participation and political consumerism (final  $\beta = .61, p < .001$ ). Lastly, social media activity explained an additional 1.8 percent of incremental

variance in political consumerism even after controlling for demographics, predispositions, and civic and political engagement. Significant predictors included meeting new LGBT friends online through a social networking site ( $\beta = .55, p < .01$ ) and discussing LGBT issues on social media ( $\beta = 1.05, p < .001$ ); simply having a social network account was not significant. Taken together, the four direct effects blocks explained 46.3 percent of the variance in political consumerism. As the direct effects models show, those who chose to engage in political consumerism tended to be older, more educated individuals who would be most likely to benefit from marriage equality (gay men in particular, with political consumerism less likely for bisexual males and females). These individuals were left of the political center, engaged more broadly in LGBT civic participation and more interested in politics in general, and more likely to interact online, both to meet new LGBT friends and to engage in online discussion.

With respect to the interaction terms, the results point toward significant interactions between political interest and meeting new LGBT friends online ( $\beta = -.21, p < .01$ ) and between political interest and discussing LGBT issues online ( $\beta = -.41, p < .001$ ). These significant interactions are displayed graphically in Figures 1 and 2. As Figure 1 shows, meeting new LGBT friends online increases engagement in political consumerism among those with lower levels of political interest and also reinforces engagement with political consumerism among those who are already paying more attention to political matters. This suggests that engaging in online social interactions can act as a mobilizing force, encouraging higher levels of political consumerism among the less politically interested. In addition, meeting new LGBT friends online amplifies the likelihood that those with higher levels of political interest will feel motivated to engage in boycotting and boycotting behaviors.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

Similarly, Figure 2 suggests that discussing LGBT issues online influences political consumerism among those with lower levels of political interest as well those who are already expressing greater interest in general political matters. Yet again, we see that engaging in social media activity, in this case in online political discussion, mobilizes those with lower levels of political interest to engage in boycotting and boycotting behaviors and also reinforces the likelihood that those who are already interested in political matters will feel moved to engage in political consumerism. Overall, with the interaction terms included, the final full model explained 48.5 percent of the variance in political consumerism.

[Insert Figure 2 about here.]

To tease out the relationship between political interest and social media, we estimated predicted probabilities in which we varied the effect of social media use for people with one standard deviation above, and one standard deviation below, the mean level of political interest, holding all else constant. As displayed in Table 2, through our analysis of predicted probabilities, we found that for people who are low in political interest, the probability of engaging in political consumerism is about 53 percent. However, if this individual uses social media to meet other members of the LGBT community, this likelihood increases by about 12 percentage points ( $p < .05$ ). Similarly, if this individual uses social media to discuss LGBT issues, the probability of participating in political consumerism increases by about 17 percentage points ( $p < .05$ ). Finally, if this individual uses social media to both meet other members of the LGBT community and discuss LGBT issues, the probability of engaging in political consumerism increases by a considerable 26 percentage points to 80 percent ( $p < .05$ ).

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Next we looked at the probability of participating among those who are high in political interest but who do not use social media for connective reasons. The results show that this individual has roughly a 68 percent chance of engaging in political consumerism. If this individual uses social media to meet other members of the LGBT community, this probability increases by about 9 percentage points to roughly 77 percent ( $p < .05$ ). If this individual uses social media to discuss LGBT issues, the probability increases by roughly 13 percentage points to 81 percent ( $p < .05$ ). Finally, if this individual uses social media to both meet other members of the LGBT community and discuss LGBT issues, the probability of participating in political consumerism to promote LGBT equality increases to a hefty 88 percent—a 20-percentage point increase ( $p < .05$ ). In short, for those who are low in general political interest, using social media for connective reasons increases the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism to promote LGBT equality by about 26 percentage points, and it increases the probability of engaging in political consumerism among those who are high in political interest by about 20 percentage points, and these differences are statistically significant.

## **Discussion**

Our research examined how social media use influences the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism among members of an LGBT issue public with varying levels of political interest. Importantly, this study examined which types of social media use matter for political consumerism, and in doing so, moved beyond baseline metrics of Internet or social media use, finding that connective social media use is a greater catalyst for political engagement than simply having a social media account. In effect, our results confirmed that how people use social media matters, not whether they use it at all. Engaging in connective activities online (e.g., meeting new LGBT friends online; discussing LGBT issues on a social networking site) was positively related

to boycotting and buycotting. Moreover, using social media in these ways not only reinforced the likelihood that those with higher levels of political interest engaged in political consumerism, but also mobilized those with lower levels of general political interest to participate. This pattern of findings aligns with concurrent scholarship on the relationship between digital media use and civic and political participation more broadly (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001).

More specifically, our findings speak to an ongoing debate in the political communication literature about the extent to which digital media use increases the likelihood of participating in politics. Since the 1990s, two main theoretical approaches have guided the study of the relationship between digital media use and political participation: (1) the instrumental model, and (2) the psychological model (Xenos & Moy, 2007). According to the instrumental model, people who use digital media should be more likely to engage in politics because digital media increases the volume of information to which an individual is exposed, as well as the ease with which information can be gathered and distributed. In this vein, digital media use for political information should lower the threshold for participation. An alternative school of thought, the psychological model, holds that the relationship between digital media use is contingent on user characteristics, such as political interest. Therefore, whether people use digital media is less meaningful than individual user characteristics and the content to which people are exposed.

Most of the early work on digital media use and participation has been consistent with the psychological model (for a review of the literature see, e.g., Boulianne, 2009). More recent work, however, contends that the relationship between political interest and digital media use is more complex than previously assumed; it is no longer necessarily the case that only the participation

rich get richer. For example, recent work by Bimber and colleagues shows that exposure to political information online may not only reinforce the likelihood of participating among those high in political interest, but may also mobilize those who are low in political interest to action (Bimber, Cunill, Copeland, & Gibson, 2015; Copeland & Bimber, 2014). The present study adds to this growing body of literature by illustrating that certain forms of social media have the potential to mobilize both people who are low and high in political interest to action.

This study also advances our understanding of political consumerism among LGBT adults in the U.S. instead of focusing on general reasons for political consumption among the U.S. population as a whole, as most studies do. Interestingly, the results suggest that LGBT individuals who engage in political consumerism are not all that different from political consumers more generally. Consistent with other studies on political consumerism, LGBT political consumers are younger and better educated, but not necessarily wealthier. Ideology also matters for LGBT political consumerism, but party identification does not. In addition, while LGBT political consumers are more likely than non-political consumers to belong to an LGBT organization, attend a rally or march in support of LGBT rights, attend an LGBT pride event, and donate money to politicians or political organizations that support equal rights, they are no more likely to vote in elections. Collectively, these findings suggest that while LGBT political consumers are motivated to advocate for equal rights through extra-institutional or non-electoral venues, they feel disaffected with the state.

Before concluding, it is important to point out some limitations of the current study. First, while the Pew Research Center's 2013 *Survey of LGBT Americans* constitutes the first nationally representative sample of LGBT adults in the US and is the result of a formidable data collection effort, we were limited to the items and question wordings within the dataset. Of course, this is

the case with any analysis of secondary survey data. Second, while LGBT adults in the US may be at the core of the LGBT civil rights movement, there are certainly other Americans who care deeply about the same-sex marriage debate and other concerns relevant to the LGBT community. For example, we know from prior research that younger individuals and those who have gay or lesbian close friends or family members are also more likely to be fighting for marriage equality (Becker & Scheufele, 2011). Said another way, we recognize that these data do not represent the totality of people working to promote LGBT civil rights through political consumption. Third, this research explored one case of political consumerism. Future research should extend our model to apply to other issue contexts (e.g., environmental concerns, public health controversies) with networked issue publics. Finally, our analyses only feature two discrete social media activities (e.g., meeting a new friend online, discussing an LGBT issue via social media). We suspect that there are many other relevant online behaviors, including additional connective activities, that may promote participation—and that these relationships may continue to challenge the belief that only the information- and participation-rich benefit from online mobilization efforts.

At the outset, we discussed the possibility that engaging with others who share similar interests and backgrounds online could lead to the creation of networked publics. We suggested that these online connections could mobilize people to engage in politics in the offline world. While we cannot offer a causal or directional test of this assumption, our findings suggest that mediated interactions with like-minded individuals encourages political participation among those who are both high and low in political interest. This suggests that LGBT adults who use social media to meet other people and discuss issues online have become part of what Rainie and Wellman (2012) call “the networked operating system [which] gives people new ways to solve



problems and meet social needs.” (p. 9). The networked operating system also creates bridging social capital, or the inputs people need “to change the world or at least their neighborhood” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 19). As Putnam (2000) argues, social capital helps build trust and facilitate interactions with other citizens, provides information, helps people resolve collective problems more easily, and supports civic and political engagement. It is this social capital that lowers the costs of engaging in political action, particularly self-directed acts like political consumerism. In sum, our research shows that engaging in connective behaviors online serves as a conduit for offline political action among members of a dedicated issue public. We encourage future research to further explore the relationship between political interest, social media use, and political consumerism.

Table 1. Hierarchical Logistic Regression Predicting Recent Political Consumerism

	Zero-Order Correlations	Upon-entry coefficient (Standard Error)	Final coefficient (Standard Error)
Block 1: Demographics			
Age	-.03	-.19 (.05)***	-.35 (.06)***
Education	.31***	.78 (.09)***	.51 (.10)***
Income	.17***	.02 (.04)	.01 (.04)
Black	-.13***	-.89 (.26)***	-1.05(.31)***
Hispanic	-.05	-.58 (.19)**	-.65 (.21)**
Lesbian	.04	-.39 (.18)*	-.15 (.22)
Bisexual Male	-.16***	-2.00(.29)***	-1.17(.32)***
Bisexual Female	-.12***	-.94 (.17)***	-.52(.21)*
Transgender	-.13***	-2.07 (.45)***	-1.60(.53)**
Inc. Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$		25.9%	
Block 2: Predispositions			
Party ID (Democrat)	.13***	-.03 (.16)	.02 (.18)
Ideology (Liberal)	.28***	.48 (.08)***	.42 (.09)***
Life Satisfaction	.07*	.22 (.11)	.18 (.13)
Political Interest	.17***	.34 (.08)***	.18 (.11)
Trust	.14***	.15 (.15)	.03 (.17)
Inc. Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$		5.9%	
Block 3: Civic and Political Engagement			
Voting Frequency	.16***	-.02 (.09)	-.02 (.09)
Civic Participation	.49***	.65 (.06)***	.61 (.06)***
Inc. Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$		12.7%	
Block 4: Social Media Activity			
Social Network	.01	-.31 (.21)	-.37 (.21)
Met Online	-.07*	.50 (.17)**	.55 (.18)**
LGBT Discussion	-.04	.67 (.22)**	1.05 (.25)***
Inc. Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$		1.8%	
Block 5: Interactions			
Interest x Social Network			.12 (.09)
Interest X Met Online			-.21(.09)*
Interest X Online Activism			-.41(.10)***
Inc. Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$			2.2%
Final Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$			48.5%
-2 log likelihood			1031.58
<i>N</i>			1197

Note: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 2. Likelihood of Engaging in Political Consumerism by Interest and Social Media Use

Level of Political Interest	No Social Media Use	Meet Others	Discuss LGBT Issues	Meet Others + Discuss Issues
Low	37%	49%	55%	67%
High	68%	78%	82%	88%

Figure 1. Interaction Between Meeting Online, Political Interest, and Recent Political Consumerism

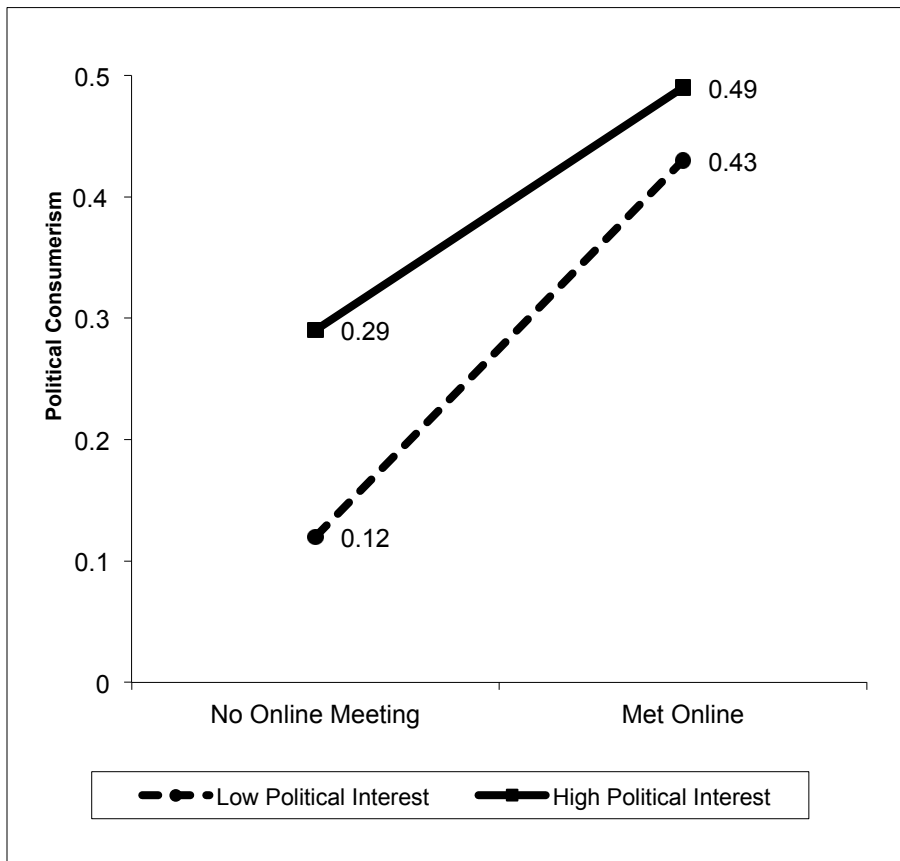
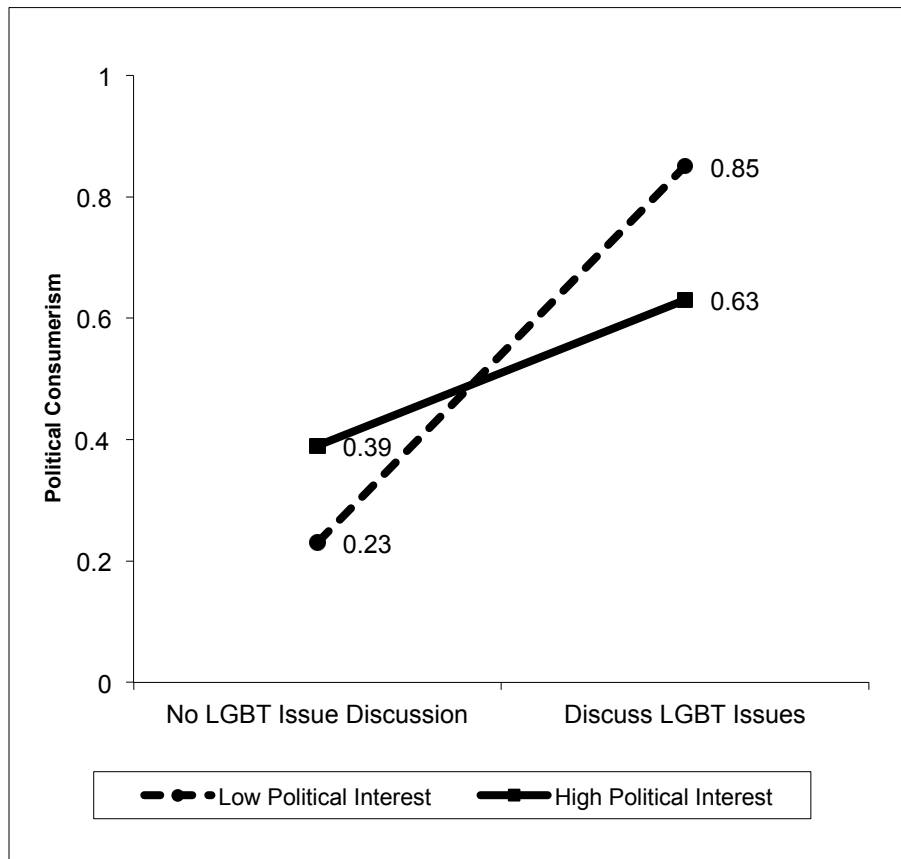


Figure 2. Interaction Between Discussing LGBT Issues Online, Political Interest, and Political Consumerism



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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Chick-fil-A-Appreciation-Day/1612129258926043>

<sup>2</sup> According to the event's Facebook page, 3.2 million people were invited, 663,700 people "attended," and 63,600 people said they might attend. As of this writing, another Facebook page, "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day" had nearly 9,000 "likes," and the Facebook page, "Boycott Chick-fil-A" had almost 17,000 "likes," despite the fact that no one has posted to the page since September 20, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> This ideological divide may have less to do with a real gap between liberals and conservatives and more to do with the tendency for researchers to focus on left-leaning causes, as well as how survey measures of political consumerism are worded (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, chpt. 8).