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Reference:

Waeterloos Cato, De Meulenaere Jonas, Walrave Michel, Ponnet Koen.- Tackling COVID-19 from below : civic participation among online neighbourhood network users during the COVID-19 pandemic

Online information review : the international journal of digital information research and use - ISSN 1468-4527 - 45:4(2021), p. 777-794

Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-08-2020-0379>

To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1763570151162165141>

Tackling COVID-19 from below: civic participation among Online Neighbourhood Network users during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Abstract

Purpose – Following the outbreak of COVID-19, many forms of bottom-up civic action emerged as ways to collectively ‘flatten the curve’ and tackle the crisis. In this paper, we examine to what extent local online and offline social integration contributes to civic participation, above and beyond typical predictors such as news consumption and civic talk.

Design/methodology/approach – An online survey was administered among 7137 users of the Online Neighbourhood Network Hoplr in Flanders (i.e. the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) from May 8 to May 18, 2020. Regression analyses were used to examine how local social integration, in addition to news consumption, civic talk and political antecedents, predict different types of civic participation.

Findings – The results show consistent positive associations between news consumption, civic talk and civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the role of political antecedents varied across different forms of civic participation. Further, our results point to the importance of both offline and online local social integration in explaining civic participation.

Originality/value – Our study provides much-needed insight in the societal and democratic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results confirm the importance of local social integration in explaining civic participation, while also advancing theoretical understanding of more established predictors of civic participation, such as news consumption and interpersonal communication.

Keywords – Civic participation, COVID-19, News use, Civic talk, Local integration, Online Neighbourhood Networks

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, SARS-Cov-2, many governments implemented lockdowns and ‘social distancing’ soon became the norm in countries affected by the virus, hereby limiting possibilities for social contact and action. In Belgium, measures included the mandatory closure of most businesses and stores, the obligation for people to work and study from home as much as possible, restrict social contacts to an absolute minimum and keep others at 1.5m distance (Federal Public Service Domestic Affairs, 2020). In the context of these measures, citizens soon began to engage in different forms of civic participation, offering their help to those in need or encouraging others to help ‘flatten the curve’, often by means of digital platforms and social networking sites. Different forms of civic participation thus allowed citizens to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, for example by sewing facemasks, doing groceries for the elderly or using the hashtag #StayAtHome to urge others to follow the measures taken by the government.

While the COVID-19 pandemic remains a global issue, many of these actions occurred on a local level. Moreover, crucial predictors of participation, such as interaction with news media and interpersonal discussion often manifest themselves through local formal and informal networks (Friedland, 2001; Shah et al., 2005). Therefore, local social integration and connection to community life are often assumed to stimulate civic participation (McLeod et al., 1999; Rojas et al., 2011; Talò et al., 2014). In this context, we recently saw the development of Online Neighbourhood Networks (ONNs). Emerging on social media platforms, ONNs are local online environments, where neighbourhood residents can engage in conversations with each other, share information pertaining the neighbourhood, town or city, and ask for neighbourly help, which effectively contribute to stronger neighbourhood attachment (De Meulenaere, Baccarne, et al., 2020). Although the capacity of such local social media use in the context of collective action has been widely speculated on (Bouko and Calabrese, 2017; Gregory, 2015; De Meulenaere, Courtois, et al., 2020), there is currently little empirical research that has considered the role of online local integration in the context of civic participation.

Therefore, this study investigates to what extent ONN users actually engage in civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic and which individual factors explain their behaviour. Specifically, we aim to

assess to what extent news consumption, interpersonal communication and political antecedents, together with local social integration, affect three types of civic participation during the pandemic: volunteering, consumerism and participation through an ONN. As such, we hope to inform policy makers about the relevance of online local social integration, and specifically ONNs, in tackling crises and stimulating democratic citizen participation.

Literature review

Emerging spaces for civic participation

Throughout the literature on participatory behaviours, different conceptualizations exist to describe the ways in which citizens engage in community and political life. As pointed out by Theocharis and van Deth (2018a), lines between civic participation and related concepts have become blurred, and some scholars have called for conceptual clarification in the field (Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Sairambay, 2020; Talo and Mannarini, 2015). Therefore, the current paper follows the guidelines set out in the work of Theocharis and van Deth (2018a) and considers civic participation as voluntary citizen activities, with the aim of solving shared and collective problems. In contrast to other forms of participation (such as voting or protesting), they are not located in, or targeted directly at the sphere of government or state. Rather, they are targeted at processes of problem solving, often on a community level (Nah et al., 2016). In addition, civic participation consists of activities that are intended to influence circumstances in society that are of relevance to others outside one's own close peers such as family or friends. As such, civic participation means getting organized to solve local problems and hereby, improve conditions for certain groups in society (Ekman and Amnå, 2012). As civic participation fosters norms of reciprocity and faith in others, it is considered a critical behavioural marker of democratic health (Shah et al., 2005). These actions can occur in many forms, and have evolved drastically over the past decade with the emergence of online participation through digital platforms such as social media. The affordances of these platforms allow citizens to form mobilizing social network ties (Boulianne, 2015) and provide tools for civic discussion, opinion expression and more personalized, local and action-oriented forms of civic engagement (Bennett, 2012; Ekström and Shehata, 2018; Theocharis, 2015; Vromen et al., 2016).

Moreover, increasing research has acknowledged the unique and distinct character of online forms of participation and consider them a valuable addition to more established, often offline, participatory acts (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis et al., 2019).

Especially during times of crisis, social media and other digital communication technologies can provide an important space for civic participation and mobilization as they allow citizens to participate even when formal structures for collective action lack (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Social media can provide a united space for decentralized individuals to take civic action around a common cause, even under crisis conditions of financial strain, collapsing institutions and public provisions (Theocharis et al., 2017). As such, they have proved to be a useful mobilization tool during times of emergency and crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Carlsen et al., 2020). During the early months of the pandemic, a shortage of medical equipment and capacity grew, causing European healthcare systems to function under severe pressure (Verelst et al., 2020). In addition, at-risk groups suffered from the imposed isolation (Armitage and Nellums, 2020) and in Belgium specifically, Amnesty International concluded that the government violated the human rights of nursing home residents by not seeking hospital treatment for many who were infected, leaving some to die prematurely (Amnesty International Belgium, 2020).

The possibilities of digital media and the Web to function as virtual mobilizing structures is highlighted by conditions of amplified need, shared frustrations and collective trauma that often emerge from crisis and disaster situations. Online spaces provide a way for citizens to create new social ties and a sense of collective identity beyond physically bound communities. In turn, these digitally mediated social processes can be activated for a variety of participatory activities, both online and offline (Ortiz and Ostertag, 2014). In times where physical contact is limited or even prohibited, as was the case during the early months of the pandemic, digital media provide a welcome alternative space for civic mobilization.

A specific online space where civic participation can emerge on a local level is through Online Neighbourhood Networks (ONNs), in which neighbourhood residents appropriate social media platforms to exchange and discuss local information, news and opinions (Konsti-Laakso, 2017; De

Meulenaere, Courtois, et al., 2020), send and answer support requests (López and Farzan, 2015; Silver and Matthews, 2017), and mobilize others in the context of local protest (Gregory, 2015). As such, they provide community members with novel means to connect to their local community, develop local social relations and increase their sense of belonging (De Meulenaere, Baccarne, et al., 2020). Moreover, positive associations between similar local social media use and civic participation have been demonstrated in prior studies (Kavanaugh et al., 2005; Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2001; Kim, 2015; Kwon et al., 2020; Nah and Yamamoto, 2017).

News, civic talk and civic participation

News media are considered to be important enablers of participatory acts, as they inform citizens on socially relevant events and issues in their communities, hereby making them aware of possible opportunities for participation (Boulianne, 2016; Eveland Jr and Scheufele, 2000; McLeod et al., 1999). While there is evidence that not all types of news use contribute equally to participation in civic life (Choi, 2016; Edgerly et al., 2018), overall positive and strong associations are found between news consumption and civic participation.

Mass communication through news media is often assumed to work in tandem with interpersonal discussion to stimulate civic participation (Shah et al., 2005). These forms of conversation, often referred to as civic talk, exist when informal discussions about politics and current events occur between citizens and their peers or social network (Klofstad, 2010). While news provides information on social issues ‘as they happen’, interpersonal communication provides an opportunity to follow up on that information (McLeod et al., 1999). Through discussion with others, citizens can learn more about these issues and relate more closely to social and political events, which potentially leads to deeper engagement (Yamamoto and Nah, 2018). Across different studies, civic talk has been found to positively predict voting and campaigning, as well as more informal forms of civic participation (Boyd et al., 2011; Ekström and Östman, 2013; Eveland Jr and Hively, 2009) and online participation (Valenzuela et al., 2012).

Thus, based on the literature, the current study assumes that mass communication through news media and interpersonal communication in the form of civic talk complement each other in stimulating civic participation. Therefore, we pose the following hypotheses (*H*):

H1a. News consumption will be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H1b. Civic talk will be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political interest, collective efficacy and civic attitudes

According to social cognitive theory, all motivational factors to action are rooted in the belief that one has the power to produce effects by one's actions (Bandura, 1982, 2001). However, many of the goals people have, civically or politically, can only be achieved through collective efforts. Therefore, the concept of collective efficacy seems especially relevant in the context of civic participation, as it refers to '*people's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results*' (Bandura, 2006, p. 316).

While perceptions of individual agency have been widely investigated in relation to various forms of civic participation (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2019; Gastil and Xenos, 2010; Kenski and Stroud, 2006), empirical work on collective efficacy in this context is less common. Nonetheless, some studies found that collective efficacy was associated with various forms of civic participation, both online and offline (Halpern et al., 2017; Kim, 2015; Lee, 2006).

In the context of the crisis caused by COVID-19, governments are appealing to citizens as a collective to commit to social distancing and help mitigate the spread of the virus. It seems plausible to assume that citizens' beliefs towards their collective ability to cope with this crisis, will influence their engagement in civic participation during the pandemic. Therefore, we expect the following:

H2a. Collective efficacy will be positively associated with civic participation during COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from efficacy beliefs, the current paper includes two additional attitudes as key predictors of civic participation, namely political interest and civic attitudes. First, political interest describes how

appealing the realm of politics is to someone (Boulianne, 2011). It concerns a general curiosity and attentiveness towards politics and current affairs and is considered a central motivator for participation in democratic life (Deth, 2000; Serek et al., 2017).

H2b. Political interest will be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Civic attitudes can be regarded as one's appraisal of both one's own as well as other community members' civic responsibility. It concerns the belief that citizens can and should make a difference in the community (Doolittle and Faul, 2013; Gastil and Xenos, 2010). This sense of 'civic duty' is often considered a necessity for participation in civic life because it refers to perceptions of good citizenship (Blais and Achen, 2019; Raney and Berdahl, 2009). As civic participation is not a solitary act, but a manner of dealing with collective issues among community members (Theocharis and van Deth, 2018a), the perceptions and norms about what constitutes a good citizen are likely to influence civic behaviour (Pattie and Johnston, 2013):

H2c. Civic attitudes will be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local social integration and civic participation

In order for news consumption, civic talk, civic attitudes, political interest and collective efficacy to take effect in terms of civic participation, citizens need to be socially integrated (Kang and Kwak, 2003; McLeod et al., 1999). Social integration, or the extent to which citizens participate in a broad range of social relationships (Brissette et al., 2000) involves a structural and an affective component. The structural component pertains to the sets of relationships citizens have with various groups and networks. On a local level, these are formed through their proximity to their direct neighbours, as well as their membership to local organizations. Being a member of local associations and networks offers citizens increased exposure to more diverse information and opinions (Granovetter, 1973; Kavanaugh et al., 2005), allowing citizens to be socialized in a civic culture and develop democratic opinions and skills (Coffé, 2002; Putnam, 2000). The affective component, expressed as sense of community, pertains to

feeling connected to these local social relations (Anderson, 2010; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Wellman, 2001). This affective relation provides the incentive to preserve the well-being of that community, hence increasing participation (Talò et al., 2014).

Hitherto, local social integration has predominantly been found to be positively related to civic participation aimed at tackling local challenges (Miranti and Evans, 2019; Talò et al., 2014). Although the current COVID-19 crisis is by no means a local issue, the enforced lockdown measures made its existence very palpable. In addition, many of its ramifications played out on a local level. Local shops, restaurants and bars had to close down, while citizens living in single households faced challenges in basic provisions when confronted with the illness. Accordingly, we expect local social integration, in terms of local membership and neighbourhood sense of community, to contribute to civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H3a. Local membership will be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H3b. Neighbourhood sense of community will be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similar to offline local social integration, citizens using ONNs can develop an online sense of community. Not only do ONNs provide a local space to interact and share information, but it also allows neighbourhood residents to acquire a community awareness. Still, the extent to which online indicators of local social integration produce similar civic participation outcomes as offline indicators is currently unknown. Therefore, we pose the following research question (*RQ*):

RQ1. How are the online indicators of local social integration associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

Procedure and sample

The data for this study were collected using an online survey, which was distributed among users of the ONN Hoplr. Hoplr is a Belgian non-commercial SNS specifically designed for neighbourhoods and currently available in Belgium and The Netherlands. Hoplr is similar to Facebook-groups in terms of uses and functionalities, although only residents of a particular neighbourhood can join and access the particular ONN of that neighbourhood. For this study, we randomly selected 250 Flemish neighbourhoods, with a minimum of 100 users, out of a total of 909 neighbourhoods, proportional to their size.

The data were collected between May 8, 2020 and May 18, 2020. Hoplr-users were invited to participate in the study through a post that was pinned at the top of the newsfeed of the platform. The post included a short introduction and study description and a link to the survey on the Hoplr-website. Depending on the privacy-settings of the users, they also received an invitation to participate either through the Hoplr app or via e-mail. To maximize response rates, two reminders were pushed in the news feed, through the app and via e-mail in the week after the initial post. Hoplr-users that decided to participate in the study were directed to the survey. Prior to filling out the survey, each participant was asked to provide an online informed consent. Each participant was explained that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of [name of university blinded for review purpose]. Only people that were 18 years old or older were allowed to participate in the study. In total, 8586 respondents filled in the survey. After handling our missing data, we obtained a final dataset of 7137 respondents (Table 1). Our final sample was slightly more female and had an average age of 54.65 (SD = 13.83). The majority of the participants had received higher education (i.e., a bachelor's or master's degree), with an average monthly income of €2050.69 (SD = 804.64). It is difficult to estimate how well our sample represents the population of Hoplr users specifically and ONN users in general as little is known about its characteristics (De Meulenaere, Baccarne, et al., 2020). Because of their privacy by design approach, Hoplr does not ask its members to share personal information such as age or gender. In fact, less than 20% of its user base has shared its age, with the majority being between 25 and 54

years old (23% between 25-34, 24% between 35-44, 20% between 45-54). In addition, to our knowledge, the study of De Meulenaere (2020) presents the only available information on the ONN user profile. The ONN user base seems to consist of citizens between 25 and 55, tend to be slightly more female, while no differences exist in terms of educational attainment and income level. Accordingly, our sample appears to be in line with the population of ONN users in terms of age and gender, yet better educated.

	Study sample ($n = 7,137$)
<i>Gender (n/%)</i>	
Male	3,091 (43.3%)
Female	4,046 (56.7%)
Age in years (M/SD)	54.65 (13.83)
<i>Educational level (n/%)</i>	
No diploma, primary or lower secondary education diploma	467 (6.5%)
Secondary education diploma	1,941 (27.2%)
Higher education diploma	4,729 (66.3%)
Income in euros per month (M/SD)	2050.69 (804.64)
Time of residence in years (M/SD)	16.78 (12.86)

Table 1. Characteristics of the study sample

Measures

Sociodemographic variables

We included age, gender (1 = male), educational degree, time of residence and income as demographic control variables. To capture time of residence, we asked the respondents for how many years they were living at their current address. Regarding income, respondents were asked to report the monthly net income of the household, which was then transformed using the modified OECD equivalence scale (Hagenaars et al., 1994; Ponnet, 2014).

News consumption

News consumption was measured by asking respondents: ‘When you think of the news you consult during the lockdown period, how often do you consult the news by means of the sources below?’. In line with previous research (e.g. Fletcher and Park, 2017), respondents rated 12 news sources, including both offline legacy media (e.g. newspapers), as well as digitally native news sources (e.g. personalized

news applications). Answers were recorded using a 6-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *multiple times a day* (6) (Cronbach's alpha = .70, M = 3.11 SD = .80).

Civic talk

Consistent with other studies (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019), we measured civic talk by using three items, asking respondents how often they had discussed the COVID-19 crisis during the lockdown period with a) family, b) friends and c) neighbours. Answers were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (1) to *very often* (5) (Cronbach's alpha = .70, M = .26, SD = .84). The questions were formulated to cover both face-to-face discussions as well as discussion through (video)calls or chat services.

Political antecedents

Three different political antecedents were included in the study. *Political interest* was captured with the following statement: 'In general, I'm interested in politics and current issues' (1 = *disagree*, 5 = *agree*; M = 3.996; SD = 1.05). An adapted version of the Civic Engagement Scale (Doolittle and Faul, 2013) was used to measure *civic attitudes*. These attitudes capture the respondent's beliefs and feelings about their and others' involvement and responsibility in their community (Doolittle and Faul, 2013; Gastil and Xenos, 2010). Respondents rated 8 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *disagree* (1) to *agree* (5) (Cronbach's alpha = .85, M = 3.85, SD = .64). A sample item was 'I believe that all citizens have a responsibility to their community'. Lastly, we constructed a *collective efficacy* measure, following the recommendations of Bandura (2006, 1982). Respondents were asked on a 5-point Likert scale to which extent they believed they, as citizens, could achieve the following: a) tackle the current COVID-19 crisis b) mitigate the impact of the current COVID-19 crisis c) limit the negative consequences of the current COVID-19 crisis and d) solve the current COVID-19 crisis (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *completely*). Responses were averaged to create a scale (Cronbach's alpha = .79, M = 3.75, SD = .73).

Offline local integration

Offline local integration was captured using two variables, namely neighbourhood sense of community and local membership. *Neighbourhood sense of community* was adapted from the psychological community dimension of Buckner's (1988) Neighbourhood Cohesion Index. We created a scale consisting of 5 items (Cronbach's alpha = .87, M = 3.41, SD = .79). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A sample item was 'I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood'. *Local membership* measured membership of local organizations and groups. We asked respondents whether they had participated in the past year in any activities or meetings from any of the following local organizations or groups: a) a neighbourhood association, b) a local cultural or religious association, c) a local sports or leisure association, d) a local department of an international organization and e) a local department of a political party or association (*no* = 0, *yes* = 1). Responses were added into an additive index (M = 1.30, SD = 1.23).

Online local integration

Two variables were used to capture online local integration in the study. *Online sense of community* asked respondents about their experiences on their own online neighbourhood network (De Meulenaere, Baccarne, et al., 2020). Respondents rated 4 items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) (Cronbach's alpha = .82, M = 3.28, SD = .67). A sample item was 'I think the time I spend in the online group is valuable'. *ONN Use* measured the frequency of use of the ONN Hoplr. Respondents answered the question: 'On average, how often do you use Hoplr?'. Responses were recorded using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from *rarely or never* (1) to *more than 3 hours per day* (6) (M = 2.49, SD = .94).

Civic participation

We included three different measures for civic participation based on the work of Theocharis and van Deth (2018). Based on their taxonomy of political participation, we designed several items to reflect three different forms of civic participation: volunteering, consumerism and ONN participation. The items were specifically constructed to fit our conceptualization of civic participation and the context of our study, being the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteering refers to activities where time is given freely

to benefit another person, group or organization (Wilson, 2000) and is considered an important form of civic participation (Kaun and Uldam, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many such actions emerged to help disadvantaged social groups, such as elderly who were prone to social isolation, as well as healthcare workers who were lacking medical equipment in the early stages of the pandemic. Consumerism refers to making purchasing decisions based on ethical or political reasons (Stolle et al., 2005), often as a way of acting on one's sense of civic concern (de Zúñiga et al., 2014). During the first wave of the pandemic, many local shop owners were confronted with forced shut downs. Therefore, in this study, we employ the concept of consumerism to refer to purchasing decisions made to support local shop owners. The constructed items then referred to making consumer decisions in support of these local shop owners in the context of the pandemic. Lastly, we aimed to capture civic participation through the ONN Hoplr. Drawing from literature on for example Digitally Networked Participation (Theocharis, 2015) and the unique and independent nature of civic participation in digital spaces, we constructed several items to capture these behaviours (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Vromen et al., 2016).

Respondents were asked how often they had engaged in any of these activities, since lockdown measures were first enforced. Respondents rated the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (1) to *very often* (5). Consistent with the work of Ponnet et al. (2015, 2014) a three-factor structure was revealed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and factor scores were used to create a latent construct for further analyses. Table 2 presents the civic participation items and the factor loadings on each component. For *ONN participation*, the respondents rated four items. PCA revealed high factor loadings (ranging from .67 to .87, $R^2 = 23.98$). For *consumerism*, our respondents rated two items with factor loadings of .82 and .83. This factor explained 13.15% of the variance. For *volunteering*, the respondents rated four items. Factor loadings (PCA) ranged from .44 to .69, $R^2 = 9.63$. For each factor, the factor scores were saved as regression scores to be used in subsequent analyses.

	ONN participation	Consumerism	Volunteering
Used Hoplr to urge others to follow the COVID-19-related measures	<i>0.871</i>	0.056	0.030
Used Hoplr to inform others about the COVID-19 crisis	<i>0.819</i>	0.036	0.082
Used Hoplr to express views publicly on how the government handles the COVID-19 crisis	<i>0.817</i>	0.070	-0.038
Used Hoplr to offer your help to others during the COVID-19 crisis	<i>0.672</i>	0.012	0.312
Deliberately postponed purchases and activities until after the COVID-19 crisis to support local shop owners	0.078	<i>0.832</i>	0.067
Purchased products in local stores to support them during the COVID-19 crisis	0.035	<i>0.819</i>	0.158
Contributed to the fabrication of material during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. facemasks and respiratory systems)	0.022	-0.006	<i>0.689</i>
Donated money, food or material in function of the COVID-19 crisis	0.060	0.120	<i>0.621</i>
Did groceries for someone who couldn't due to the COVID-19 measures	0.088	0.241	<i>0.471</i>
Participated in a (digital) meeting to work on solutions for the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. hackathon and neighbourhood meeting)	0.116	-0.030	<i>0.436</i>

Note(s): Figures in italic are related to factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.40

Table 2. Principal component analysis

Analytical Strategy

In order to test our hypotheses and assess the association between our predictors and civic participation, general linear model (GLM) was used. Before proceeding with the main analyses, preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure whether assumptions regarding normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity were met. As we encountered a possible issue with heteroskedasticity, our main analyses were conducted using GLM with robust errors. Three regression analyses were carried out using SPSS version 26, with each of the civic participation variables as dependent variables. All variables were standardized using z-scores before running our analyses.

Results

Table 3 presents the results from the regression analyses for each of the dependent variables. Regarding the sociodemographic variables, we found that age and gender were significantly related to all three outcome variables. Interestingly, age was a negative predictor of volunteering, but a positive predictor when looking at consumerism and ONN participation. In other words, volunteering seems to be a civic

act that mostly appeals to younger citizens, while the propensity to participate in consumerism and ONN participation increases with age. Men are less likely to engage in volunteering and consumerism during the COVID-19 pandemic, but were more likely than women to engage in participation through an ONN. Income and degree were only significantly associated with ONN participation, with respondents with a lower income being more likely to engage in this specific type of participation. Additionally, educational attainment was negatively associated to ONN participation. This suggests how ONNs might have an equalizing effect on participation, providing a safe and low-threshold space for citizens with a lower educational attainment and disposable income to engage in civic life (Kwon et al., 2020; Xenos et al., 2014). Furthermore, and rather unexpectedly, time of residence was negatively associated with consumerism and ONN participation.

Moving to our hypotheses, our findings show that individuals who consumed news more frequently and discussed the COVID-19 crisis with peers more frequently, participated more in volunteering, consumerism and civic acts through an ONN. Thus, *H1* is supported. When looking at the role of the included political antecedents, results are more mixed. First, *H2a* predicted that collective efficacy would be positively associated with civic participation. Our results support this hypothesis only for consumerism: citizens who believed that as a collective, they could tackle the COVID-19 crisis and cope with its negative consequences, were more likely to engage in initiatives to support local shop holders. Surprisingly, political interest was a negative predictor of volunteering, consumerism and ONN participation, whereas we expected a positive relationship. Therefore, *H2b* could only partially be supported. The last included political antecedent, civic attitudes, was significantly and positively related to volunteering and consumerism, but not ONN participation, hereby largely supporting *H2c*.

Our third set of hypotheses assumed that offline indicators of local social integration would be positively associated with civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local membership revealed to be a significant predictor of volunteering (*H3a*), which partly supports our hypothesis. Additionally, the results show that neighbourhood sense of community is significantly and positively related to volunteering and consumerism during the corona lockdown. Thus, *H3b* is largely confirmed. Interestingly, none of the offline indicators of local social integration was significantly associated with

participation through an ONN. Furthermore, our research question (*RQ1*) addressed the association between online indicators of local social integration and civic participation. Our results show that online sense of community positively predicts ONN participation, while ONN use was significantly and positively associated with both volunteering and ONN participation. This indicates that more frequent users of Hoplr were more likely to engage in acts of volunteering as well as civic participation through an ONN.

	Volunteering		Consumerism		ONN participation	
	B (SE)	<i>t</i> -value	B (SE)	<i>t</i> -value	B (SE)	<i>t</i> -value
<i>Block 1 – Demographics and controls</i>						
Gender (being male)	−0.17 (0.03)	−6.07***	−0.35 (0.03)	−12.23***	0.14 (0.03)	4.96***
Age	−0.04 (0.01)	−2.45*	0.11 (0.02)	7.19***	0.03 (0.02)	2.13*
Income	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.58	0.01 (0.01)	0.48	−0.07 (0.01)	−5.94***
Degree (no diploma, primary or lower secondary diploma)	0.01 (0.07)	0.17	−0.02 (0.07)	−0.21	0.34 (0.09)	3.96***
Degree (Secondary education diploma)	0.03 (0.04)	0.93	0.03 (0.04)	0.71	0.19 (0.04)	4.96***
Time of residence	0.01 (0.01)	0.85	−0.04 (0.01)	−2.71**	−0.03 (0.02)	−2.00*
<i>Block 2 – Communication variables</i>						
News consumption	0.09 (0.01)	6.91***	0.12 (0.01)	9.81***	0.13 (0.01)	8.79***
Civic talk	0.09 (0.01)	7.19***	0.10 (0.01)	8.11***	0.03 (0.01)	2.21*
<i>Block 3 – Political antecedents</i>						
Political interest	−0.09 (0.01)	−6.62***	−0.04 (0.01)	−3.09**	−0.05 (0.01)	−3.59***
Collective efficacy	0.01 (0.01)	0.83	0.04 (0.01)	2.80**	0.01 (0.01)	0.60
Civic attitudes	0.25 (0.01)	17.91***	0.13 (0.02)	9.01***	0.02 (0.01)	1.36
<i>Block 4 – Offline local integration</i>						
Neighbourhood sense of community	0.06 (0.01)	4.45***	0.12 (0.01)	8.45***	0.02 (0.01)	1.36
Local membership	0.13 (0.01)	10.29***	0.02 (0.01)	1.49	0.03 (0.01)	1.88
<i>Block 4 – Online local integration</i>						
Online sense of community	0.01 (0.01)	0.76	0.02 (0.01)	1.41	0.12 (0.01)	8.57***
ONN use	0.09 (0.01)	7.47***	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.75	0.16 (0.01)	12.79***
Note(s): Robust standard errors are reported; $N = 7,137$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$						

Table 3. Regression analysis predicting civic engagement

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was twofold. First, we aimed to assess to what extent a series of established predictors of civic participation in the literature were predictive of three types of civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, by focusing on users of the Online Neighbourhood Network Hoplr, we set out to examine the importance of indicators of local social integration, both offline and online.

Our findings supported our hypotheses that increased news consumption and civic talk with peers would increase civic participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was true for all three types of civic participation included in the study. Our results confirm the crucial role of news media in times of crisis as they provide a window to current events and necessary information about desired civic action (Boulianne, 2016; Eveland Jr and Scheufele, 2000). However, in our current high-choice media environment, news is reaching citizens in a continuous stream (Prior, 2007), increasingly leading some to ‘tune out’ and avoid news altogether (Blekesaune et al., 2012; Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). A recent study showed how feelings of information overload during the COVID-19 pandemic were associated with lower self-efficacy and intentions to commit to social distancing (Farooq et al., 2020). Based on our results, we argue that these experiences of information overload and the subsequent evasion of news might also hamper democratic functioning and numb civic participation. Therefore, as has been suggested by Park (2019), policy makers and educators could make efforts to boost citizens’ confidence in their news finding and handling as to counter possible experiences of news overload. In times of crisis, this seems even more important. Not only do news media play a crucial role in informing citizens on the evolution of the pandemic and government measures, but they also allow citizens to identify opportunities and needs for civic participation (Boulianne, 2016; Ohme et al., 2020). In addition, news media could look for ways to balance their supply of information during crisis situations, as to avoid perceptions of news overload and thus safeguard civic initiatives. For example, receiving push notifications has shown to be related to perceived information overload (Schmitt et al., 2018). As such, media outlets could assess whether and when push notifications are an appropriate strategy for disseminating information.

Our results further indicate that the role of the included political antecedents varies across different forms of civic participation during the pandemic. First, and in contrast to our expectations, political interest was negatively associated with volunteering, consumerism and ONN participation. These results indicate that citizens who are less interested in politics overall, are more likely to engage in the participation types included in the study. Whilst this result is surprising, it fits within an increasing body of literature that points to the relevance of alternative voicing routes for citizens who are often assumed

to be 'disengaged' or 'apathetic' towards politics, because they are abstaining from more formal participation forms (such as voting or attending town meetings) (e.g. Portos, Bosi and Zamponi, 2019). Moreover, collective efficacy was significantly and positively related to consumerism, but not to the other two forms of participation. Civic attitudes were predictive of both volunteering and consumerism, but not ONN participation. These findings suggest that while certain forms of civic participation might be targeted towards the same common goal (i.e. tackling the crisis caused by COVID-19), factors explaining these behaviours might differ depending on the specific mode of action (Theocharis and van Deth, 2018a). While some of our hypotheses regarding efficacy, civic attitudes and political interest could be supported, these insights point to the importance for future research to zoom in on citizens' participatory repertoires and look into which factors contribute to specific types of civic participation. In other words, gaining insight in these specific factors increases our understanding of why citizens choose between the available modes of action within a certain cause.

Regarding the role of local social integration, we found that both offline and online indicators were predictive of volunteering, consumerism and ONN participation, be it in different ways. Overall, our results support the theoretical assumption that while civic participation in the context of COVID-19 is directed towards a global crisis, and the national or regional political measures taken, the actual acts of participation often take place within a local community and are therefore driven by indicators of local integration (Friedland, 2001; Kang and Kwak, 2003; McLeod et al., 1999; Rojas et al., 2011).

The affective component of local integration, sense of community, was predictive of each of the civic participation types. More specifically, neighbourhood sense of community was significantly and positively related to volunteering and consumerism, while online sense of community significantly predicted participation through an ONN. This finding is particularly interesting as it reflects earlier studies on the importance of sense of community in stimulating various participatory actions (Talò et al., 2014). At the same time, our results suggest that a sense of community developed through ONNs such as Hoplr, might foster a very unique set of participatory behaviours through these online networks. In addition to online sense of community, overall use of the ONN Hoplr was also predictive of volunteering and ONN participation. This result is not surprising, as ONNs are directed towards the

exchange of local information, support requests and mobilization among community residents within an online local space (López and Farzan, 2015; De Meulenaere, Courtois, et al., 2020). In this sense, ONN-use can be considered as a valuable structural component of local social integration, alongside for example membership of local associations and groups.

Taken together, our results confirm the importance of local social integration in explaining civic participation, even when established indicators of civic participation such as news consumption, civic talk and civic attitudes are taken into account. Our study adds to the literature by introducing the potential role of online local integration and ONNs. Offline and online local integration seem to complement each other in terms of the types of participation they spark, while ONNs show potential of providing a safe space for civic participation that allows citizens to move freely across various types action, especially in times of crisis (Kwon et al., 2020; Ortiz and Ostertag, 2014).

Our findings might be of interest to policy makers and community organisations who are looking for ways to keep citizens informed and engaged about local issues, even in or especially during times of global crisis. As our findings suggest, implementing community-level initiatives and infrastructures such as ONNs might foster democratic engagement above and beyond the local community level, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, our results provide much-needed academic insight in the societal and democratic impact of COVID-19, while also advancing the theoretical understanding of the predictors of civic participation.

Some limitations should be addressed. First, our sample consisted of users of the ONN Hoplr. Therefore, our findings cannot be generalized beyond this population of ONN users. Our sample was composed by means of a randomly selected set of neighbourhood clusters, yet we were unable to randomly select participants within these clusters. Still, given the size of the sample and the two reminders sent out to all users in the selected clusters, we believe our sample represents the population of online neighbourhood network users quite well. Especially given the resemblances it shows to a prior study that used a random a-select sample (De Meulenaere, 2020). Furthermore, in order for us to truly ascertain the benefit of online neighbourhood network use, a comparison to non-users is necessary. In the current study, we addressed this by taking into account both the Hoplr use frequency and the online sense of

community. In doing so, we affirmed that our sample does include citizens who rarely or never use Hoplr as well as those who use it more regularly. Lastly, the current study was conducted during the early stages of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the target of the civic participatory behaviours was a global health crisis, it is possible that context-specific indicators of these behaviours were at play (such as fear of the virus or personal confrontation with COVID-19). It would be valuable if future work could consider these factors, as to provide more detailed insight in the processes that explained civic participation in this specific context. Relatedly, it seems plausible that some of the relationships found in this study would change during the course of the pandemic (e.g., a changing role for news use due to experiencing information overload) or when studied in other samples. Future research could address the questions raised in this study in other samples and other timeframes.

Nonetheless, the context of crisis caused by the pandemic has shed light on the different processes that work to foster civic participation and the importance of local, online spaces such as ONNs. Whereas the rapid spread of COVID-19 has amplified conditions of need, frustration and collective trauma, these background conditions are not entirely unique to the pandemic. Rather, the COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered various social problems and dynamics in community participation that were possibly already present. As such, the processes identified in this study remain relevant beyond this paradigmatic case (Carlsen et al., 2020; Ortiz and Ostertag, 2014). In this regard, the presented insights can be used to establish high-quality, inclusive disaster response in the future and in the long-term, a healthy and resilient civil society (Marston et al., 2020).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Research Fund of Ghent University (Grantscode BOF.STG.2018.0002.01). The interpretation of the data, the writing of the article and the decision to submit the article were the sole responsibility of the authors and were not influenced by the funding institution.

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