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News Consumers, Opinion Leaders, and Citizen Consumers: Moderators of the Consumption–Participation Link

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Abstract

The intersection of consumer culture and civic life has long been a topic of academic discussion. This study revisits the relationship between consumption and civic engagement and investigates the moderators of this relationship. Specifically, we focus on news consumption and opinion leadership as intervening factors that condition the way consumption and civic life are interconnected. Our data reveal that both socially conscious consumption and status-oriented consumption are positively related with civic participation. The positive relationships become stronger when news consumption increases or when one's opinion leadership is strong. Implications for research on consumer culture and civic engagement are discussed.

Keywords

news effects, news commercialization, civic participation, consumer culture

The intersection of consumer culture and civic life has long been a topic of academic discussion.¹ Traditional critical theory—drawing on Weber, Simmel, and Marx—argues that society's increasing overindulgence in materialistic values dampens civic

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life and democracy. Bellah and colleagues note that in a culture where “utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority; [and] ‘being good’ becomes ‘feeling good,’” an orientation toward consumption discourages public-mindedness in favor of personal interest and, ultimately, undermines civil society.² In the same vein, scholars recognize that increasing consumerism has not only contributed to but has also been accelerated by the decline of civic life.³ Although not making a clear case for causal direction, this train of thought maintains that a consumption-oriented culture coincides with a move away from community commitment.

A growing number of scholars suggest, however, that the interrelationship between civic and consumer culture are more complex than what the classical critiques of consumption originally suggested. Scammell, for example, notes that

the act of consumption is becoming increasingly suffused with citizenship characteristics and considerations . . . It is no longer possible to cut the deck neatly between citizenship and civic duty, on one side, and consumption and self interest, on the other.⁴

Taking a similar track, Bourdieu, Veblen, Schudson, and Shah and colleagues have provided insights into the reciprocal relationship between consumer culture and civic life, where the two are viewed as co-constructed, rather than oppositional.⁵ Accordingly, reducing consumption to a purely instrumental behavior focused on personal preferences or status display may disregard the fact that “consumer culture gives expression to a multitude of meanings, values, and social interests.”⁶

Despite a lengthy history of debate, empirical investigation of the relationship between consumption and civic participation is just beginning.⁷ Work by Keum and colleagues, for example, categorizes consumptive behavior into two types, socially conscious and status conscious, and provides evidence that both types of consumption were positively associated with civic participation.⁸ Yet the mixed literature with regard to the consumer–citizen link still suggests that the relationship might be contingent upon individual differences and social circumstances. Building on such recent advances in research, this study aims to advance the understanding of the relationship between consumption and participation by investigating which intervening mechanisms condition the linkage. Specifically, we examine whether the informational factor, news use, and the dispositional trait, opinion leadership, moderate the interrelationship between consumptive and civic behaviors. In most past work, news use was conceived of as influencing, either directly or indirectly, citizens’ consumer life and civic/political life.⁹ Although much is known about the role news use plays in consumption and civic engagement, the possibility that news use moderates the consumption–participation link has rarely been examined. Our study extends the previous literature by testing whether news use facilitates the convergence or separation of consumer life and civic life.

Alongside news use, opinion leadership, often viewed as a guiding principle of individuals’ behavior,¹⁰ is also considered a moderator of the link between consumer and citizen. Even though opinion leadership might be one of the common dispositional grounds for consumption and activism, past work has paid little attention to the role

opinion leadership plays in consumers' and citizens' lives. In recognition of its theoretical relevance, we elaborate the role of opinion leadership in the dynamic by assessing whether it moderates the consumer–citizen link and whether it further conditions the moderating effects of news use. Pre-existing dispositional traits are widely recognized in the communication literature as being able to shape the way news influences the individual.¹¹ In light of this research, we propose that the interaction between information and dispositional factors is a moderating mechanism underlying the consumer–citizen nexus. Examining these moderating roles of news use and opinion leadership will elucidate the complexity of the ways in which citizen and consumer life are interconnected.

In the sections that follow, we first conceptualize consumption as two distinct types—socially conscious and status oriented—as suggested by Keum et al. and discuss how the two types of consumption are associated with civic participation.¹² Next, drawing on the baseline relationship between consumption and civic life, we propose models for the roles news media and opinion leadership play in the consumer–citizen. We then turn to the 2006 DDB Needham Life Style Survey data to test our theoretical models.

Consumption and Participation

Socially conscious consumption involves the purchasing of products that “will benefit society as a whole as well as the user.”¹³ In this type of consumption, individuals think about the public consequences of their private purchasing behavior and use their material consumption as a way to express their opinions or attitudes about public issues.¹⁴ Green consumption is a typical example of this type of consumerism. Green consumers consider the environmental consequences of each purchase and are willing to pay a premium for environmentally friendly products or services.¹⁵ Likewise, a growing number of consumers take corporate social responsibility into account when making purchases. For these consumers, consumption choice is a way to support and reward companies that contribute to communities or non-profit causes.¹⁶ These efforts against corporations deemed socially irresponsible and in favor of entities that support certain social causes speak directly to the relationship between consumption and civic engagement. Indeed, recent research links individuals' socially conscious consumption and their engagement with political and community issues.¹⁷ Activist networks not only connect individuals but also link community organizations with corporations to solve problems and advance causes. “Buycotting” and “boycotting,” for instance, are just two of the many ways that social movements mobilize members through their consumption practices.

Status-oriented consumption, on the other hand, involves purchases intended to display an individual's social position to other members of their social group.¹⁸ In this type of consumption, buying material goods is considered a status game. That is, people purchase designer fashions, expensive handbags, and luxury cars as a way to exhibit their social status and to distinguish themselves from some segments in society, while showing their affinity with others. Indeed, much of the criticism of consumerism in

relation to declining civic life concerns such as status-oriented consumption. Yet, the available literature suggests that even this type of consumption has the potential to enhance, or at least sustain, consumers' base in their civic life. Bourdieu posits that cultural capital gained through certain forms of consumption is essential to symbolically reproducing class positions.¹⁹ People often engage in consumption as a means of status seeking, to establish social position, and to gain access to certain networks of belonging. Given that status expressions through consumer goods occur more frequently within formal social networks such as leisure and service clubs and professional and religious groups,²⁰ status-driven consumption likely plays a role in sustaining civic membership through alignments of taste. In support of this line of thought, Keum and colleagues suggest that consumer culture and civic engagement are not antithetical in citizens' lifeworld.²¹ Their findings indicate that socially conscious and status-oriented consumption are positively interrelated, and both forms of consumption are positively associated with civic participation. This array of positive associations lends support for those proposing a convergence of consumer and civic culture.

News Media Use and the Citizen–Consumer

A considerable body of research has considered what roles news media play in citizens' civic life. The general conclusion of this research is that informational uses of mass media have pro-civic consequences.²² Evidence generally suggests that news consumption helps individuals learn issues of the day, organize their thoughts about issues, and feel efficacious and connected to their community. These psychological resources (e.g., knowledge, cognitive complexity, efficacy, community ties) then serve to enhance participation in community life.²³ In addition to internal self-mobilization, news consumption provides a basis for political discussion and deliberation that lead to civic action.²⁴

Yet, research also suggests that, under the market-driven media system, news has become increasingly commercialized. Based on audience research and market analysis, news media increasingly focus on soft news such as arts, travel, fashion, food, products, and technology.²⁵ Such coverage carries information about goods and services.²⁶ In recognition of the increasing infiltration of commercial information into news, scholars have warned that media-driven commercial imperatives would direct public attention to material values and away from community life.²⁷ Others argue, however, that consumerism is not always in conflict with civic culture.²⁸ This train of thought suggests that civic life in America has indeed been transformed as new forms of citizen activities such as consumer movements, lifestyle politics, and socially conscious consumption have emerged and replaced traditional forms of civic engagement.²⁹ The fact that commercialized news nurtures consumer culture does not necessarily mean that news consumption leads to an erosion of civic life. Rather, it is possible that news media energize civic culture in a way different than traditionally thought.

Given the multifaceted nature of civic engagement, news media may facilitate the process by which citizens and consumers converge around lifestyle concerns. For

example, news media can stimulate cause-related consumption by providing market information relevant to consumption choice. As Scammell notes, “[contemporary American] consumers . . . are better informed shoppers than ever before. Consumer rights and interest groups and their advice are now daily in our mainstream mass media.”³⁰ Frequent reporting on shopping and consumer issues helps the audience learn about the way products are produced or distributed (e.g., organic products, fair trade) and how seriously companies take their social responsibility (e.g., community-friendly companies). The informed consumers may then alter purchasing behavior based on the understanding of products and companies that has been shaped by news media. Likewise, news media’s increasing focus on environmental issues likely promotes environmental awareness and pro-environmental orientations, which in turn can foster green consumption.³¹

On the other hand, the trend of soft news and the increasing availability of commercial content in news programming have led to news media promoting a status-oriented consumer culture. Soft news on lifestyle issues, often featuring the lives of celebrities or an upper-middle class lifestyle, portrays at least implicitly the pursuit of material and luxury goods as desirable and common.³² Thus, repeated exposure to news stories on material goods and tastes (e.g., the latest styles of fashion, newly available technology, and specialized services) likely cultivates a desire for “the good life” and encourages status-oriented consumption. However, in news coverage, the affluent lifestyle of public figures and celebrities is often juxtaposed with their public life. For example, when news media reported on Princess Diana’s service to the poor, it was overlapped with her fine clothes and jewelry. As such, traditional public values and material values increasingly overlap in news coverage, blurring the boundary between politics and consumption.³³ Thus, news media, albeit commercialized, appear to be able to bring civic culture and consumer culture to a convergence in citizens’ lifeworld.

The Role of Opinion Leadership

The assumption that consumption and participation are positively related raises the question of what underlying factors account for consumerism and activism. We posit that opinion leadership is one such common factor. Opinion leaders are defined as people “who exert influence on the opinions of others.”³⁴ Profiles of opinion leaders show that they are early adopters leading social trends and have higher levels of education, social status, interest in politics, and motivation to achieve.³⁵ It is also known that opinion leaders display higher “gregariousness” in interactions in social clubs or organizations,³⁶ and are more likely to participate in civic activities such as working on community projects and volunteering.³⁷

Beyond civic activities, opinion leadership also plays an important role in consumption activities. In general, opinion leadership is related to high levels of knowledge about and enduring involvement with products and adoption of innovative products.³⁸ The importance of opinion leadership to consumer behavior has been documented for both types of consumption, socially conscious and status conscious.

Opinion leaders have been found to seek and spread product and service information, encouraging corporate social responsibility.³⁹ Likewise, Davis and Rubin provided evidence of a relationship between opinion leadership and conscientious energy consumption.⁴⁰ Research by Price, Feick, and Higie, on the other hand, suggests that opinion leadership has associations with status-conscious consumption, such that opinion leaders prefer “product categories in which pleasure or satisfaction is derived from product usage, or where association with the product provides a form of self-expression.”⁴¹ In the same vein, Coulter, Feick, and Price contend that opinion leaders tend to be aware of more brands overall and, within these brands, purchase ones that are more upscale than those purchased by non-leaders.⁴²

Given that opinion leadership is a common factor underlying both consumption and civic activity, we assume that opinion leadership may explain the interrelationship between consumer and citizen activism. Providing insight into this positive dynamic, Summers found that one type of opinion leader, the fashion leader, was also active in organizational membership, participation, affiliation, and informal social activities.⁴³ Similarly, Shah and Scheufele observed connections of non-political predispositions toward innovation and cosmopolitan lifestyles with opinion leadership and civic participation.⁴⁴ Accordingly, opinion leaders are expected to be more likely to display sophisticated consumption practices and active civic engagement. Said another way, opinion leadership, as the common thread running through civic participation, socially conscious consumption, and status-conscious consumption, will play roles in amplifying this complex set of interrelationships.

In addition, we assume that the role of opinion leadership goes beyond direct moderation of the consumer–citizen link. It is also likely that opinion leadership, as a deep-seated dispositional trait, conditions the way news influences the individual. As discussed earlier, news use is thought to facilitate the convergence of consumer and citizen life and strengthen the link. We expect this moderating effect of news use itself to be moderated by the level of opinion leadership. Presumably, opinion leaders are more attentive and sensitive to news about recent trends and developments in society, which helps them stay up to date on new products and services as well as events and opportunities for civic life. Their motivation to lead social trends then encourages them to apply what they have learned from news about society to their everyday lives. Given the trend in journalism toward commercialized news where material and civic values often overlap, it is likely that opinion leaders align themselves with the lifestyles presented in news by merging their consumptive and civic behavior. That is to say that if news use helps merge consumer and citizen lives, the convergence is likely more pronounced among opinion leaders.

Modeling the Moderation of the Consumer–Citizen Connection

By integrating all the above rationales, we advance theoretical models that highlight how news use moderates the consumer–citizen connection, while also illuminating the

moderating role opinion leadership plays. We first assert that consumptive behaviors—socially conscious and status conscious—and civic participation are positively interrelated even after considering news use and opinion leadership, factors commonly associated with both consumption and participation (Model 1). It is then expected that the magnitude of these relationships will differ by level of news use and opinion leadership, such that the positive relationship between consumption and civic participation becomes stronger as news media use and opinion leadership increase. This model involves two moderators (i.e., the informational and dispositional factors) functioning in a parallel manner on the baseline consumer–citizen relationship (Model 2). Our next model examines whether opinion leadership indirectly moderates the consumer–citizen link by conditioning the moderating effects of news use. This “moderated moderation” model specifies that the moderation of the consumption–participation link by news use is itself moderated by opinion leadership, with the moderation effects of news use being pronounced for those scoring high on opinion leadership (Model 3). Taken together, the proposed models suggest that news use contributes to the convergence of consumer and citizen lives. Yet, this role of news use is contingent upon how high one scores on the dispositional trait of opinion leadership.

Method

Data

To test the hypothesized models, we used the 2006 DDB Needham Life Style survey data set, which include measures of Americans’ consumer habits and social activities. This mail survey was conducted by Market Facts, a polling firm, using stratified quota-sampling procedures. For its annual Life Style survey, Market Facts selects a demographically representative sample from a large panel of respondents who have expressed a willingness to participate in mail surveys. Response rates for this annual survey are consistently above 70%. A total of 5,188 adult respondents completed the 2006 survey. Although this survey relies on a stratified quota-sampling technique, the data have proven comparable with national survey data based on conventional probability sampling procedures.⁴⁵ Putnam, for instance, compared the DDB Needham Life Style data with the General Social Survey and Roper Poll and found few differences.⁴⁶ The converging results from extensive validity tests suggest the data are an effective barometer of mainstream America.

Measures

Civic participation was measured by three questions asking respondents how often in the past twelve months they had participated in activities such as volunteer work, community project work, or attending club meetings. Respondents were asked to answer these questions using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 7 = *once a day or more*. Scores of the three items were averaged to create an index of civic participation ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.20$, $\alpha = .80$).

Consumption. Socially conscious consumption was measured by using six items about the effort respondents made with respect to environment-oriented and cause-related consumption practices. Specifically, respondents were asked to what extent they made an effort to recycle everything they possibly could, to conserve energy, to pay more for a product with all natural ingredients, to pay more for organic foods, to buy from companies that support charitable causes, and to support charitable causes. Respondents answered these questions on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 6 = *definitely agree*. These six items were averaged to create an index of socially conscious consumption ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.87$, $\alpha = .75$).

Status-oriented consumption was measured using three items about respondents' consumption patterns. Three questions asked how much respondents agree with the following statements: "I prefer to buy products with designer names," "I often reward myself by buying expensive items," "I buy only the best." Respondents answered these questions on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 6 = *definitely agree*. These three items were then averaged to create an index of status-conscious consumption ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = .73$).

News use was measured as newspaper readership. Respondents were asked how often they read newspapers on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 7 = *once a day or more* ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.99$).

Opinion leadership. Consistent with the measurement scheme in previous research,⁴⁷ this study measured opinion leadership with five survey questions about respondents' perceptions of self-assuredness and social influence in their community. Three of the five questions asked how much respondents agreed with the following statements: "I am the kind of person who knows what I want to accomplish in life and how to achieve it," "I like to be considered a leader," "My friends and neighbors often come to me for advice about products and brands." Answers to these questions were recorded on a 6-point scale (1 = *definitely disagree* to 6 = *definitely agree*). The final two questions asked respondents how much the two words, "leader" and "influential," describe the person they would ideally like to be, respectively. Again, a 6-point scale was used for each of the two words (1 = *definitely does not describe ideal self* to 6 = *definitely does describe ideal self*). Then, the five items, all measured on a 6-point scale, were averaged to create an index of opinion leadership ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.91$, $\alpha = .76$).

Control variables. A host of demographic variables were measured: gender, age, education, income, ethnicity, and residential area. Gender (49.9% female), age ($M = 46.46$, $SD = 16.38$), and ethnicity (87.1% white) are self-explanatory. The level of education was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *less than high school* to 5 = *attended post-graduate school*. The sample mean was 3.4 (between "attended college" and "graduated from college"; $SD = 1.07$). Household income was assessed on a 10-point scale (1 = *under \$20,000* to 10 = *\$150,000 or more*). The sample mean was 4.75 (between "\$40,000-\$49,999" and "\$50,000-\$59,999"; $SD = 2.54$). Residential area was initially measured with three categories—rural (28.1%), urban (27.4%), and suburban (44.5%). From these categories, two dummy variables—rural and urban

residence—were created with suburban residence serving as the reference category. Liking of television news was also used as a control variable to hold overall attitude toward television news constant in the analyses. Respondents were asked, on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 = *do not like* to 3 = *like a lot*, how much they liked television news ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.65$).

Results

The Consumption–Participation Link (Model 1)

We first examine whether consumptive behaviors are related to civic participation. To test the baseline relationship, a regression equation was specified in which civic participation was regressed on two types of consumption (socially conscious and status oriented), news use, opinion leadership, and control variables, as follows:

$$\text{Civic participation} = a + b_1\text{Social consumption} + b_2\text{Status consumption} + b_3\text{News use} + b_4\text{Opinion leadership} + \sum b_K\text{Control}_K + \varepsilon. \quad (1)$$

In Equation 1, b_1 and b_2 estimate the partial associations between the two types of consumption and civic participation, respectively, controlling for news use, opinion leadership, and the set of control variables. The regression equation was estimated using SPSS. As shown in Model 1 in Table 1, results reveal that both types of consumption were positively associated with civic participation ($b_1 = .281$, $SE = .020$, $p < .001$ for social consumption; $b_2 = .046$, $SE = .018$, $p < .01$ for status consumption). Also noteworthy is that, although both types of consumption have a significant association with civic participation, the differential strengths of relationship indicate, at least qualitatively, that the link is much stronger between social consumption and participation than that between status consumption and participation. This is not surprising given the different nature of the two consumptive behaviors. Nonetheless, the overall findings indicate that those who engage in social and status consumption engage in civic life as well.

Moderation of the Consumer–Citizen Link (Model 2)

In Model 1, the relationship between consumption and participation is constrained to be the same regardless of the level of news use and opinion leadership. Model 2 extends the baseline model by relaxing the constraint. That is, the consumption–participation relationship is allowed to be a function of news use and opinion leadership. To test the model, two regression equations were specified. First, civic participation was regressed on social consumption, news use, opinion leadership, and interaction terms between social consumption and the two moderators (Equation 2.1). Status consumption, not modeled for the tested moderation, and the control variables used in Equation 1 were included for the purpose of control:

Table 1. Testing the Moderation of the Relationship between Consumption and Civic Participation.

	DV: Civic participation				
	Baseline model	Multiple moderation model		Moderated moderation model	
	Model 1	Model 2.1	Model 2.2	Model 3.1	Model 3.2
Gender (<i>female</i> = 1)	.005 (.034)	.004 (.033)	.001 (.034)	.004 (.033)	.009 (.033)
Age	.002 (.001)	.002 (.001)*	.002 (.001)*	.002 (.001)*	.002 (.001)*
Education	.160 (.017)***	.158 (.017)***	.159 (.017)***	.153 (.017)***	.155 (.017)***
Income	.000 (.007)	.002 (.007)	-.001 (.007)	.001 (.007)	-.002 (.007)
Ethnicity(<i>white</i> = 1)	-.095 (.052)	-.091 (.052)	-.091 (.052)	-.083 (.052)	-.075 (.052)
Urban residence	.035 (.040)	.027 (.039)	.032 (.040)	.029 (.039)	.037 (.039)
Rural residence	.097 (.040)*	.090 (.040)*	.092 (.040)*	.084 (.039)*	.085 (.040)*
Liking of television news	-.039 (.028)	-.036 (.027)	-.042 (.028)	-.042 (.027)	-.039 (.027)
Social consumption	.281 (.020)***	-.346 (.077)***	.282 (.020)***	.562(.159)***	.276 (.020)***
Status consumption	.046 (.018)**	.046 (.018)*	-.275 (.071)***	.044 (.018)*	.477 (.151)**
Newspaper use	.100 (.009)***	-.100 (.034)**	-.005 (.024)	.344 (.112)**	.180 (.083)*
OP	.222 (.020)***	-.107 (.064)	.125 (.045)**	.387 (.140)**	.257 (.106)*
Social consumption × Newspaper use	—	.055 (.009)***	—	-.130 (.032)***	—
Social consumption × OP	—	.091 (.017)***	—	-.123 (.039)**	—
Status consumption × Newspaper use	—	—	.037 (.008)***	—	-.128 (.031)***
Status consumption × OP	—	—	.036 (.015)*	—	-.127 (.036)***
Newspaper use × OP	—	—	—	-.100 (.028)***	-.031 (.021)
Social consumption × Newspaper × OP	—	—	—	.043 (.008)***	—
Status consumption × Newspaper × OP	—	—	—	—	.036 (.007)***
R ² (%)	18.9	20.3	19.4	21.4	20.7
N			4,505		

Note. Entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Values in bold were estimated to test the hypothesized models. Estimates for Models 2 and 3 are calculated using PROCESS. OP = opinion leadership. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Civic participation} = & a + b_1\text{Social consumption} + b_2\text{News use} + \\
 & b_3\text{Opinion leadership} + b_4\text{Social consumption} \times \\
 & \text{News use} + b_5\text{Social consumption} \times \text{Opinion leadership} + (2.1) \\
 & b_6\text{Status consumption} + \sum b_K \text{Control}_K + \varepsilon.
 \end{aligned}$$

The same equation was specified, with social consumption replaced by status consumption. Again, social consumption, not modeled for the tested moderation, was included for control purposes.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Civic participation} = & a + b_1\text{Status consumption} + b_2\text{News use} + b_3\text{Opinion} \\ & \text{leadership} + b_4\text{Status consumption} \times \text{News use} + \\ & b_5\text{Status consumption} \times \text{Opinion leadership} + b_6\text{Social} \\ & \text{consumption} + \sum b_k\text{Control}_k + \varepsilon. \end{aligned} \quad (2.2)$$

Equations 2.1 and 2.2 were fitted using PROCESS, a software specialized to test mediation and moderation processes.⁴⁸ The results of Model 2.1 indicate that, when predicting civic participation, socially conscious consumption had a significant, positive interaction with newspaper use ($b = .055$, $SE = .009$, $p < .001$) and opinion leadership ($b = .091$, $SE = .017$, $p < .001$). That is, the degree of the relationship between social consumption and civic participation increases by .055 per one-unit increase in newspaper readership regardless of the value of opinion leadership. Similarly, the degree of the baseline relationship increases by .091 as opinion leadership increases by one unit at any value of newspaper readership. PROCESS also produces estimates of conditional effect, which assess the relationship between consumption and participation at different values in the moderators. The results show that the relationship between social consumption and civic participation is consistently positive and statistically significant across different values of newspaper readership and opinion leadership. Noteworthy, however, is that the consumption–participation relationship is weakest ($.085$, $p < .005$) when both newspaper readership and opinion leadership are low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) and strongest ($.471$, $p < .001$) when both are high (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean).

The findings of Model 2.2 show similar patterns of moderation. In the prediction of civic participation, status consumption had significant, positive interactions with newspaper use ($b = .037$, $SE = .008$, $p < .001$) and opinion leadership ($b = .036$, $SE = .015$, $p < .05$). The relationship between status consumption and civic participation increases by .037 when newspaper use increases by one unit regardless of opinion leadership. Likewise, the consumption–participation relationship increases by .036 per one-unit increase in opinion leadership regardless of newspaper use. Besides this pattern of moderation, estimates of conditional effect further reveal that the positive average relationship between status consumption and civic participation does not hold when newspaper use is low ($-.062$, $p < .05$ for low newspaper and low opinion leadership; $-.029$, $p = .202$ for low newspaper and moderate opinion leadership; $.003$, $p = .899$ for low newspaper and high opinion leadership) or when newspaper use is moderate and opinion leadership is low ($.011$, $p = .643$).

Moderated Moderation (Model 3)

Model 2 extends Model 1 by allowing the baseline relationship between consumption and participation to vary as news use and opinion leadership change. Model 2, however, does not allow the moderation of the consumption–participation relationship by the two moderators to vary. Model 3 elaborates Model 2 by further relaxing the

constraint against a higher-order interaction between the two moderators. That is, the moderation of the consumption–participation relationship by news use is allowed to vary as opinion leadership changes. This moderated moderation model is specified in two regression equations, as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Civic participation} = & a + b_1\text{Status consumption} + b_2\text{News use} + b_3\text{Opinion} \\ & \text{leadership} + b_4\text{Social consumption} \times \text{News use} + b_5\text{Social} \\ & \text{consumption} \times \text{Opinion leadership} + b_6\text{News use} \times \text{Opinion} \\ & \text{leadership} + b_7\text{Social consumption} \times \text{News use} \times \text{Opinion} \\ & \text{leadership} + b_8\text{Status consumption} + \Sigma b_K \text{Control}_K + \varepsilon. \end{aligned} \quad (3.1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Civic participation} = & a + b_1\text{Status consumption} + b_2\text{News use} + b_3\text{Opinion} \\ & \text{leadership} + b_4\text{Status consumption} \times \text{News use} + \\ & b_5\text{Status consumption} \times \text{Opinion leadership} + b_6\text{News use} \times \\ & \text{Opinion leadership} + b_7\text{Status consumption} \times \text{News use} \times \\ & \text{Opinion leadership} + b_8\text{Social consumption} + \Sigma b_K \text{Control}_K + \varepsilon. \end{aligned} \quad (3.2)$$

In these equations, b_7 tests whether the magnitude of the moderation of the relationship between consumption and participation by news use varies per one-unit change in opinion leadership. The equations were estimated using PROCESS. The results reveal that the coefficient for the three-way interaction is significant in both equations ($b_7 = .043$, $SE = .008$, $p < .001$ for social consumption \times news \times opinion leadership; $b_7 = .036$, $SE = .007$, $p < .001$ for status consumption \times news \times opinion leadership). To better understand the pattern of these moderated moderations, the results are graphically presented in Figure 1. As hypothesized, the relationship between consumption and civic participation is stronger among frequent newspaper readers. At the same time, the difference in the consumption–participation connection between the high and low newspaper readership groups is larger among those with high scores on opinion leadership. In other words, the consumer–citizen link is amplified by news use, which in turn is conditioned by the dispositional trait of opinion leadership. That is, the convergence of consumption and participation is most pronounced for those who actively consume news and rank high on opinion leadership. This pattern of moderated moderation holds for both types of consumption.

Discussion

The results of this study show a general pattern of moderation such that the convergence of consumption and participation is more likely among active information seekers and also among opinion leaders. In addition, the results of our moderated moderation model reveal that the combination of news-savviness and opinion leadership is the most conducive to the merging of consumption and participation. That is, news use connects consumption and participation in citizens' lives when they are opinion leaders, yet there is no such news effect when one's opinion leadership is low. Furthermore, a noticeable difference is observed between the two consumption behaviors. The link between status

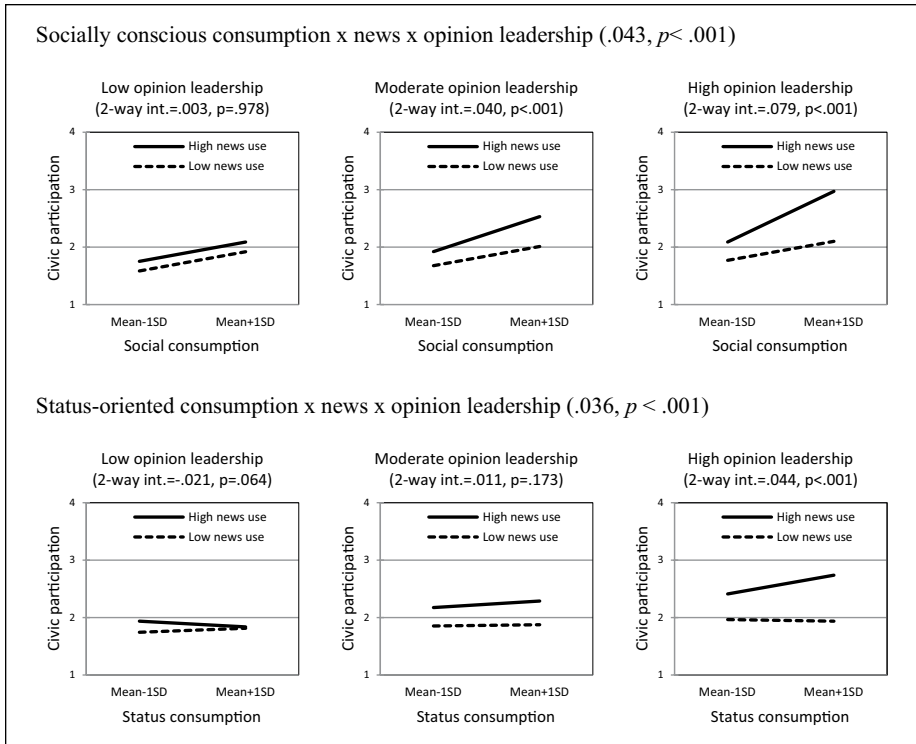


Figure 1. Testing moderated moderation.

consumption and participation is more contingent upon individual differences than is the relationship between social consumption and participation. Socially conscious consumption remains positively associated with civic participation regardless of news use and opinion leadership. In contrast, status-oriented consumption intersects with civic participation, especially among citizens whose levels of newspaper use and opinion leadership are at least moderate or above. Otherwise, the association disappears.

These findings suggest a range of important implications for the broader literature of news and citizen life. First, corroborating past research, the results provide empirical evidence for the robustness of the interrelationship between consumption and civic participation. One might suspect that the real link between people's consumer and citizen lives might be spurious; more basic and fundamental aspects common in the two realms make the two appear connected, even if they are not. Our results, however, reveal that the relationship between consumption and civic participation holds even when newspaper use and opinion leadership are considered. Of course, newspaper readership and opinion leadership are only two of the potential confounders of the consumer-citizen connection. Yet, this study demonstrates that at least news use and opinion leadership, both of which have long been considered key concepts in political

communication processes, do not function in the way critics have suspected, lending more confidence to the conclusion that consumption and civic participation are linked.

The convergence of consumption and participation is shown in the consistent positive relationship between social consumption and participation. Although the degree changes depending on information and disposition, the relationship itself holds regardless of individual differences. Given this stable consumer–citizen link, it may be that conscientious consumers and good citizens generally act in similar ways, albeit across different domains, to affirm their social and civic duties. If, as Schudson notes,⁴⁹ consumers consider the public consequences of their private purchasing behavior, their material consumption could be a way to exercise their opinions or values, which translates into civic engagement. More surprising is the positive interrelationship between status consumption and participation. Purchasing materials as a way to exhibit social status or good taste is positively associated with civic life for those who read newspapers at least sporadically and possess some opinion leadership traits. Indeed, this positive relationship stands in opposition to the conventional wisdom that consumption for the sake of displaying one's status is detrimental to civic life. The positive dynamic might indicate that status expressions are practiced not only through purchasing brand name products but also by engaging in socially desirable behaviors. If both status consumption and civic participation are, at least in part, driven by the motivation to distinguish oneself from others in society, the two behaviors might mutually encourage and reinforce each other.

The interconnection of consumption and participation sheds light on new ways to promote civic life. As in the example of political consumerism, a certain type of consumptive behavior itself is a new way to express and practice one's civic mind. At the same time, consumption-related activities that citizens routinely perform in their everyday life (e.g., making a purchasing choice, engaging in a consumer event, joining a consumer club/organization, conversing over a product/service with family and friends, etc.) can be a platform for traditional forms of civic engagement that are known to have declined over the past decades. By strategically planning and cooperating with local business and consumer sectors, civic organizations and community groups may capitalize on the positive link between consumption and participation in ways that promote civic life.

Second, our data also illuminate the contingencies involved in the discussion of consumption and participation, adding a new layer of complexity to our understanding of how consumer culture and civic culture intersect. As the results of our moderation analyses suggest, status-oriented consumption is not always positively related to civic participation. When a person seeks relatively little information and lacks opinion leadership, the relationship does not hold or even become negative. This contingent nature calls for a revision of previous studies' conclusions suggesting a wholly positive interconnection of status-oriented consumption and civic participation.⁵⁰ In the same vein as classical critiques of growing consumerism, these results indicate that status competition in consumer culture undermines civic culture. The flip side of this, however, is that when an individual seeks information actively and exhibits strong opinion leadership tendencies, consumption and civic participation converge in the citizen's life. Taken together, news and leadership disposition appear to play critical roles in linking consumption

and participation. Those with a leadership disposition who are equipped with relevant commercial and civic information are better versed in balancing material and public values and expressing their tastes and values in a coherent manner across different domains. Without a leadership disposition and a propensity to search for information, however, there is no known path for linking consumption and civic participation.

Third, the finding that news use facilitates the interrelationship between consumerism and civic activism sheds light on the role news media play in civic life. There have been mounting concerns about the commercialization of news media and its negative consequences for civic culture and democracy. Our data, however, counter that conventional viewpoint. Although news media may foster commercial values and motivate consumption, this media-driven consumerism does not necessarily result in civic disengagement. At the same time, news media benefit society by promoting positive interplay between consumer and citizen behaviors. This result indicates that news media are supporting the move toward political consumerism and lifestyle politics.

In conclusion, this study represents an important step in unraveling the connections between media, consumer culture, and civic culture. Future research, however, needs to pay attention to some limitations of this study. The main limitation stems from conducting secondary analyses of existing data. Fortunately, the 2006 DDB Needham Life Style survey provided a range of measures relevant to the models tested in this study. Yet one limitation is that newspaper readership is the only news consumption measure available in the data. Although newspapers are still an important source of information, future studies should include other types of news outlets to more accurately reflect the current news media landscape. It would be useful, for example, to test the role television news, especially local news, plays in the consumption–participation link. Given that local news has long been criticized for its commercialization, the pattern of moderation by local news use might differ from that of newspaper use.

Future efforts should also go beyond news media, expanding the discussion of media and consumer–civic culture to include other genres or media. For example, entertainment programs have great potential to shape viewers' perceptions of social norms and lifestyles. Given the vivid portrayal and examples of life in dramas and talk shows, viewership of entertainment programming would likely moderate the consumption–participation connection. The role of the Internet in the consumer–civic culture relationship should also be explored. Its proven capacity to disseminate and archive information, create and maintain social networks, manage consumptive behaviors, and organize collective actions suggests that it could be a force driving the convergence of consumerism and civic activism. Although discussion of this has begun, the possibility deserves more scholarly attention. Another limitation we need to acknowledge is that the results reported in this study are based on data collected in 2006. We assume that the social context, including the media environment and consumer culture, has changed since then. As such, this study should be interpreted with this perspective in mind.

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