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Christoph Lutz
BI Norwegian Business School

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Abstract

Research on digital divides has been helpful in advancing our understanding of the social structuration of Internet access, motivations to go online, digital skills, and Internet (non-)use, including participatory uses. However, digital divide research has been criticized for oversimplifying the relationship between demographic characteristics and Internet use and for its under-theorization. A social milieu approach, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, presents an excellent set of concepts to address these criticisms and thus advance digital divide research. This article uses the social milieu approach for an empirical investigation of the participation divides in Germany. Focus groups and online communities with 96 participants from seven distinct Internet milieus serve to differentiate online participation along social lines. The results show that German citizens are strongly segregated into distinct Internet milieus that differ in their intensity, variety, understanding, and attitudes toward online participation. Each milieu displays specific participatory patterns and some of the findings challenge existing research on digital and participation divides. Implications are derived and limitations of the approach carved out.

Keywords

digital divide, online participation, participation divide, social media, focus groups, online communities

Research on digital divides¹ has shown that not all citizens experience the same positive and negative consequences from new media (Van Dijk, 2006). Age, gender, and socio-economic status (SES) affect if and how citizens use the Internet (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014).

However, digital divides research has been criticized for oversimplifying the relationship between demographics and Internet use (Halford & Savage, 2010). By focusing on individual user characteristics, digital divides studies neglect the social embeddedness of individuals' Internet use. The motivation and ability to use the Internet in a capital-enhancing way is strongly affected by each user's social environment, such as teachers, colleagues, friends, and families (Robinson, 2009; Sims, 2014).

I propose that a deeper understanding of the effect of demographics on online participation—and the resulting digital divides—requires a consideration of the social embeddedness of Internet use. In this study, I apply social milieu theory to seven distinct milieus of Internet users, characterized by both demographic characteristics and attitudes toward the Internet. I analyze patterns of online participation in each milieu using focus groups and online communities conducted among German Internet users in fall 2014. A social milieu describes an individuals' social environment (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). Accordingly, an Internet milieu is defined as the context where an individual's Internet use takes place.

This article will answer the following research questions: How does online participation in Germany differ by Internet milieu? What is the participation pattern in each milieu?

My understanding of online participation is strongly tied to online content creation (OCC). Brake (2014) discusses some problems of defining OCC and assessing it empirically: Where to draw the boundaries between passive consumption of web content and active OCC? How to deal with the “problem” of platforms and the distinction of application use and OCC, especially with social network sites (SNSs)? Despite not resolving the issues completely, I employ the following working definition of online participation: “Online participation is the creation and sharing of content on the Internet addressed at a specific audience and driven by a social purpose” (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014, section 2). As a consequence, participation divides are “differences in the online creation and sharing of purpose-driven content with specific audiences due to socio-economic influences” (Hoffmann, Lutz, & Meckel, 2015, p. 699).

BI Norwegian Business School, Norway

Corresponding Author:

Christoph Lutz, Department of Communication and Culture,
BI Norwegian Business School, 0484 Oslo, Norway.
Email: christoph.lutz@bi.no



Literature Review

Digital Divides and Participation Divides

According to digital divides research, individuals' social position affects their online behavior. More precisely, social inequalities are reproduced online, with structural disadvantages limiting user access to as well as advantages from using the Internet (Van Deursen, Van Dijk, & Helsper, 2014; Van Dijk, 2006). The most common indicators of social inequality in the digital divides literature are SES, gender, and age.

SES, mostly measured by income or education, is a key construct in the digital divides literature. It captures the "vertical" dimension of social inequality, indicating where users stand on the social ladder. Digital divides scholarship proposes that those with high SES can more easily take advantage of the Internet, as they command the necessary resources in terms of human, cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). These resources give them easier access to modern technology (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004), such as the most current gadgets and fast broadband Internet. Moreover, high SES users, in contrast to those with low SES, tend to command the *skills* necessary to use new media productively (Hargittai, 2010; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2010). Hargittai and Walejko (2008) find that higher social status is associated with more *expressive and participatory* Internet uses. Compared with low SES users, those with high SES are also expected to use the Internet in more *capital-enhancing ways* (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009) and draw stronger *benefits* from their Internet use (Van Deursen et al., 2014).

As a research area strongly shaped by sociology, digital divides scholarship puts much emphasis on this vertical dimension of social inequality. The empirical results, however, are weaker than expected, especially when it comes to participatory uses. Some studies on participation divides find no SES effects (Correa, 2010), others counter-intuitive ones, in the sense that SES negatively influences certain forms of OCC (Blank, 2013; Hoffmann et al., 2015; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014). Such findings call for a more nuanced understanding of participation divides (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2014) and allude to a differentiation of participation areas or domains (Blank, 2013). They also call for the inclusion of non-vertical or horizontal forms of social inequality. Two horizontal indicators are commonly included in digital divides studies in the form of demographics: gender and age.

As for *gender*, although differences in access to the Internet have almost leveled out in many Western countries, inequalities in the usage remain (Li & Kirkup, 2007). Online games or sexual content, for example, are male-dominated uses, while online health information tends to be more popular among female users (Helsper, 2010). Studies have found that men are more active and eager to participate online than women (Calenda & Meijer, 2009).

Age is a strong predictor of Internet use and skills, with younger users being more active and skillful (Hargittai, 2010; Schradie, 2012). On the other hand, the effect of age on online engagement can be moderated by the users' interest, for example, older users being more interested in political affairs (Wang, 2007).

In summary, the digital divides literature provides substantial support for the notion that both SES and demographics influence how individuals use the Internet. With the advent of social media, digital divides research is increasingly incorporating the investigation of social media (Hargittai, 2007) and OCC or online participation (Blank, 2013; Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Schradie, 2011). Brake (2014) summarizes the existing evidence on the social structuration of online participation—understood as OCC: "Nonetheless the balance of the evidence does seem to suggest that stratification of OCC is an observable and widespread if not universal phenomenon" (p. 599).

The Theory Problem in Digital Divides and Participation Divides

Digital divides research has been helpful in pointing to the social stratification of Internet uses. However, explanations for the observed divides are often absent or remain vague. What is it, for example, that makes younger people participate more in most domains of the Internet than older people? Why are certain participatory Internet uses associated with SES, while others are not? Digital divides research mostly fails to address and answer such questions. Accordingly, one of its main points of criticism is its *under-theorization* (Halford & Savage, 2010; Van Dijk, 2006).

Several digital divides studies have used social theories, from sociological, such as Marxist readings (Fuchs & Horak, 2008), to communication approaches, such as diffusion of innovation or knowledge gap (Mason & Hacker, 2003), to psychological frameworks and mixed approaches, like the affordances perspective (Hsieh, 2012). Overall, however, the problem of under-theorization seems to persist, as a recent call for "Theorizing the digital divide" shows.²

A prominent line of research addressing this criticism has attempted to strengthen the cognitive pathways from demographics to participation (Bimber, 2001). Accordingly, differences in users' environment lead to unequal cognitions and attitudes toward technology, which, in turn, affect individuals' online activities. Hargittai and Shafer (2006), for example, show that women's digital skills do not significantly differ from men's but their perceived skills or self-efficacy does.

Social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986) has been helpful in explaining how social conditions shape new media use. By pointing the attention to cognitions as mediating factors between demographics/SES and digital practices, a more fine-grained picture is drawn than in most digital divides research. SCT with its focus on agency and self-efficacy is

thus helpful in “translating” social conditions into concrete digital practices. Several studies have employed SCT with promising results (Hoffmann et al., 2015; Wei, Teo, Chan, & Tan, 2011). However, SCT does not sufficiently account for the temporal dimension and lacks a historical grounding. Hence, it cannot satisfyingly explain why social inequalities occur in the first place and how they perpetuate themselves over time. Here, other theories, such as gender- and identity-focused theories (Wajcman, 2007) or structural theories that concentrate on the black box of “the environment” in SCT are more useful. They give a better understanding of the context of Internet use.

Accordingly, a number of studies have shed light on the effect of social conditions on Internet uses by employing qualitative methods with a theoretical grounding in structural sociology, especially Bourdieu’s social theory (Robinson, 2009; Sims, 2014). However, the social milieu approach has not been applied yet to study social media use and online participation. In the following section, I therefore give an outline of the concept.

The Social Milieu Approach for Research on Participation Divides

The social milieu approach enjoys a long history in sociology. Durkheim (1964) was one of the first to theorize the idea of social milieus. He saw them as an “emergent system” that is characterized by two attributes: their size and their cohesion or concentration (Sawyer, 2002, p. 233). In this traditional definition, social milieus organize communication and ties. Members of a social milieu are expected to share some type of relation and are thus often spatially connected (Sawyer, 2002), for example by living in the same neighborhood.

More recently, Bourdieu’s (1984) research on tastes has reinforced the interest in the milieu perspective. Especially in German sociology, various researchers have used milieu or lifestyle³ typologies to advance social stratification research (Otte, 2004). In many cases, these typologies are strongly influenced by Bourdieu’s (1984) understanding of the social space as structured not only vertically in terms of class and SES but also horizontally in terms of cultural preferences and attitudes. In contrast to Durkheim’s (1964) definition, milieus in that understanding have largely lost their spatial and communicative closure. Instead, they unite people with similar tastes, practices, and comparable resources.

In this current form, social milieu or lifestyle theory is mostly descriptive and lacks a strong sociological mechanism (Rössel, 2008). However, Bourdieu’s social theory offers a way out. Its central concept of habitus,⁴ as the connector between the social space and individuals’ practices, can partly explain why social milieus differ and how these differences are perpetuated via distinction practices. In this vein, Bourdieu presents a relational perspective that takes into account how social groups differentiate themselves unintentionally and mostly unconsciously. I do not rely on

the habitus concept here—and thus cannot sufficiently account for the relational dimension—because the data do not allow for a thorough investigation of user habitus (p. 1) and distinction. Instead, I focus on describing milieu differences. Thus, I make the point that horizontal characteristics are crucial in explaining online practices and should be more salient than vertical characteristics.

Although I do not focus on the habitus, social milieu theory incorporates another important notion of Bourdieu’s theory that is taken up: the concept of *social fields* (Bourdieu, 1996). Fields are areas of society with specific rules and forms of capital. Examples include the field of literary production (Bourdieu, 1996) and the academic field (Bourdieu, 1988). To understand social practices, we need to understand the field where they take place. Different classes and class fractions engage differently in different fields (Bourdieu, 1984). Similarly, different social milieus exhibit varying propensity to engage in certain social fields, such as art and politics (Schulze, 1992).

Both aspects—the importance of horizontal characteristics and the necessity to distinguish fields—have not sufficiently been taken up by current digital divides research. The majority of digital divides studies operate with few social indicators, neglecting users’ endowment with *cultural capital*. The incorporated dimension of cultural capital might prove especially useful to differentiate how Internet users participate in different online contexts.

Research on online participation also suffers from a plethora of operationalizations of participation types, without a clear concept or typology (Blank, 2013; Lutz et al., 2014). Bourdieu’s concept of *field* is helpful in strengthening our understanding of how online participation depends on field-specific characteristics.

Method

I base the analysis on a combination of focus groups and online communities among German Internet users, conducted in September and October 2014. Overall, 96 users participated in the focus groups and online communities. The focus groups took place in September 2014 in Frankfurt and Berlin. A total of 12 focus groups were carried out with eight participants per group and with seven milieus in total (Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet [DIVSI], 2012). The milieu categorization used in this study is based on the “Sinus-Milieus[®].” This typology was developed in the 1980s by the German social science and market research company Sinus and applied in a large variety of contexts, mainly in the German-speaking world (see Otte, 2004, for a discussion in German and Gröger, Schmid, & Bruckner, 2011, for a summary in English).

Six focus groups took place in Berlin and six in Frankfurt. Each focus group was composed of a different age and social profile. Two of the seven milieus can be categorized as *digital outsiders*: elderly people who hardly use the Internet and

are cautious and inexperienced in using Internet applications. These milieus were analyzed with one focus group each. The remaining five milieus are characterized by more open attitudes toward the Internet. They can be categorized as either *digital natives* or *digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001) and were analyzed with two focus groups each.

Appendix A gives an overview of the seven milieus and Figure A1 shows a graphical depiction (in German). The focus groups were moderated by two experienced employees of a cooperating German social research institute. Four additional members of the research team observed the conversations but did not actively intervene during the discussions. All focus group discussions were recorded on video and audio and transcribed.

The online communities comprised the participants of the focus groups, plus a small number of additional milieu representatives to ensure lively online discussions. Overall, 96 people participated in the online communities over the course of 10 days in the beginning of October 2014. Each day, participants carried out a small task, such as describing their daily Internet use. Findings from the online communities complement and illustrate the findings from the offline focus groups.

All data were analyzed in November and December 2014. The analysis did not use a particular coding scheme, such as grounded theory, but heavily relied on the focus group guideline as the main structuring element (Appendix B). I was guided by current studies using focus group methodology for the analysis (e.g. Hargittai, Neuman, & Curry, 2012). To analyze the data, I read each focus group transcript several times and did the same for the online community files. I then selected the sections that described users' participation behavior for each transcript, as opposed to the other sections of the transcripts that described attitudes, definitions, and general Internet use (Appendix B: sections/bullet points 1–4, 7, and 8). From these excerpts, I synthesized the main tendencies in each milieu, illustrating them with suitable comments.

Results: Participation Patterns in Different Milieus

I will draw strongly on a typology of online participation developed from a systematic literature review which distinguishes five areas or fields of online participation (Lutz et al., 2014): political and civic, economic/business, cultural, educational, and health-related.

Digital Natives

*Immersed natives.*⁵ Because the Internet takes a central role in the life of immersed natives, various areas of participation become apparent. Immersed natives concentrate their online participation on cultural, economic, and educational affairs—not so much in political or health-related domains. Moreover, immersed natives engage in civic activities on

the Internet but rarely political ones.

Certain members of the milieu are very up to date about recent technological developments, especially in the economic realm, such as the “sharing economy”—a topic that did not come up in the focus groups of the other milieus. They are also most trustful in that regard, sometimes sharing their places with *Airbnb* or *Couchsurfing*. In a similar vein, several members of this milieu are confident about presenting themselves online and sharing their creativity—also for commercial purposes:

I post a ton but also because of my fashion label and that is all of the same size. I create videos on YouTube, where I wear the jumper and it looks awesome and you can buy it in my store. You sell an image with a brand and the image of my brand, well, that's me! It might sound disgusting but that's the way it is and that's why I must post constantly. Actually, I post something on Instagram almost every day. I post a lot on Tumblr. (M., female, 26, stylist, focus group Berlin)

Their online participation in economic contexts often intertwines with their cultural and educational participation. Members of that milieu frequently exhibit their online participation on blogs and in online communities:

Online communities are a different form of communication for me. I mean, also specialized, so that I can really tap into a certain circle of people. I use them a lot for professional purposes but also privately. (D., male, 29, project manager, focus group Berlin)

Finally, political participation on the Internet is not common in this milieu. When the immersed natives engage for political purposes online, they do it in non-traditional ways, for example, for critical consumption. Social media, especially Facebook, are used for such low-threshold forms of participation: “On Facebook, I'm campaigning for the right things and I criticize the wrong ones, political opinions and so on, critical consumption” (A., male, 35, freelance photographer, online communities Berlin).

Selective natives. Selective natives do not invest much time and effort into their online participation. A consumption- and purpose-driven use of the Internet dominates. Active participation takes mostly place in the business area and often has economic motives:

I would say that I'm not participating on the Internet, personally. I'm more of a consumer. For example, on social media, I'm more of a stalker. [. . .] Sometimes, I like or comment on something. (S., female, 33, fundraising manager, online communities Berlin)

Although in general, selective natives do not participate very actively on the Internet, there are exceptional users who participate in various contexts, sometimes intensively. However, participation mostly takes place on well-known

and large platforms, such as Facebook or eBay. Since many selective natives participate in economic contexts and favor low-threshold forms, rating products is a common activity in this group. The purpose- and task-driven use of the Internet is sometimes reflected in online cultural participation. In the few cases where it occurs, it can have economic motives:

I'm member of a forum for collectors, drivers and fans of Japanese motorbikes from the 70ies. I answer questions, post information and pictures, start threads, try to sell my special interest books, look for interesting offers and get informed about meetings, rides, exhibitions and other events. [. . .] The main reason for my participation in the forum is the promotion and sale of my books and the development of my collection through cheap purchases. Self-interest, basically . . . but not only, of course. I also enjoy posting information and pictures and getting praise and recognition for it. (A., male, 47, financial adviser, online communities Frankfurt)

The participation in online communities is the exception rather than the rule, though. By contrast, selective natives use the Internet for educational participation somewhat more frequently than members of other milieus. This can be informal—via YouTube tutorials—or in formalized settings, via e-learning.

Finally, selective natives overwhelmingly refrain from political participation on the Internet. Likewise, online civic engagement is restricted to few exceptions. Although they view social engagement and participation positively, selective natives do not feel motivated to engage for political or civic purposes. The few that participate prefer low-threshold activities that create a clear benefit: “I'm actively engaged on Facebook, where I post various ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ to articles of a new party so that they will have more votes for the coming elections” (P., male, 40, police officer, online communities Berlin).

Entertainment-oriented natives. The entertainment-oriented natives use the Internet mainly for consumption and entertainment, especially gaming and shopping. At the same time, certain participatory traits can be found but generally the communication in closed, small groups is preferred, above all on SNS (especially Facebook) or via mobile communication (especially WhatsApp).

Compared with the other digital native milieus, health-related participation takes a more important part. Moreover, members of this milieu participate in commercial and cultural contexts. Political, civic, and educational participation are not at the center of attention, though: “I'm very much engaged on Facebook. I inform myself about what moves me at the moment and what disturbs me” (O., male, 24, unemployed, online communities Frankfurt).

Among entertainment-oriented natives, auction and vending platforms, such as eBay or mobile.de, are very popular. Also, entertainment-oriented natives participate in surveys or contests as a means to earn a small additional income.

Next to their participation in commercial activities on the Internet, entertainment-oriented natives (disproportionally) often use forums and online communities. Depending on their hobbies, participation for varied purposes can evolve, such as sports, pets, music, or cars. Active users spend much time in communities and actively participate in different online discussions:

You are registered . . . and you have a profile of your animal there, and you can discuss what kinds of illnesses you [i.e., the animal] already had . . . Our tomcat died of a virus and he was four months old, and therefore I came across the place [the platform], swapped views with others who had had similar problems and talked about what could be done about it. (B., female, 19, apprentice custom tailoring, focus group Frankfurt)

The younger entertainment-oriented natives shift their cultural participation to SNS like Facebook. Their stance toward these platforms is more critical than toward forums and they criticize other users' flamboyant exhibitionism and sharing of banal news.

Finally, entertainment-oriented natives tend not to participate for political purposes on the Internet. The main reason for this is lack of interest. When they participate for political or civic purposes, it is for specific, non-traditionally political topics, like animal rights. This happens mostly on Facebook:

I participate on Facebook. I post comments and share postings that I think are worthy of my voice: Sea Shepherds, for example. This way, I try to give this organization another platform to foster the good cause. (D., female, 39, middle-level civil servant, online communities Berlin)

Comparison of the digital native milieus. There is stratification by SES within the milieus of digital natives. The entertainment-oriented natives mostly belong to the working class. The immersed natives and selective natives, in turn, belong predominantly to the upper class and middle class.

This has consequences. The participation pattern of *immersed natives*, as their name says, is sovereign, immersed, and self-confident. The milieu is characterized by a certain curiosity and innateness when it comes to the online world. Asked about whether they sometimes reach certain boundaries on the Internet, they reveal a relaxed and self-assured stance. Consequently, they are self-confident when it comes to online participation. They participate naturally in different domains as part of their daily routine.

By contrast, the participation pattern of the *selective natives* is more purpose-driven. Since time is money, this milieu restricts its Internet use to “useful” purposes—often non-participatory ones or low-threshold participation that does not take much time. They participate in economic contexts, less so culturally or for political, civic and health-related purposes. They are not very critical toward mainstream social media and tend to stick to them for their online participation.

In essence, they show a pragmatic, utilitarian participation approach.

Finally, the participation pattern of *entertainment-oriented natives* is characterized by more hedonistic online participation. Compared to the other milieus, they more often lack the self-confidence, skills or motivation to participate online. At the same time, they are quite engaged for cultural, economic and health-related topics. In contrast to the immersed natives, they do not care as much about current developments in the area of online participation and stick to established applications, such as online communities and SNS. Despite their frequent online participation and skepticism toward excessive social media self-promotion the entertainment-oriented natives are sometimes susceptible to online fraud, which signals a lack of control and knowledge.

Digital Immigrants

Detached immigrants. Members of this milieu use the Internet intensively for a wide range of purposes (information, communication) and see the web as an essential part of their life. However, they participate online less frequently than other milieus. Similarly to the selective natives, the detached immigrants prefer practical, quick, and efficient forms of online participation.

Online participation sometimes emerges because of external pressure. A prominent example is the (online) support of family members. These detached immigrants do not participate out of enthusiasm but because it is brought to their attention via family or institutional pressure: “I uploaded a video of my son, so that he can take part in a contest. In addition, I uploaded one of our musical performances onto our YouTube account” (S., female, 37, housemaker, online communities Berlin).

In this milieu, offline participation is more prevalent than online participation. Detached immigrants often see the online participation of younger generations critically:

I believe we [the participants of that focus group] are more of a group that does something in real life. Unfortunately, today there are not too many activists left, also among our kids. No one does sit-ins anymore. Therefore, I believe that this limited Internet behavior applies to us, yes. (U., female, 49, teacher, focus group Frankfurt)

If the detached immigrants participate online, they do it in a wide range of contexts—economically, culturally, politically, and civically. Often, their occupation builds an important context. Examples are online training, union activism, rating, and selling products. These activities mostly serve to support offline engagement.

Some detached immigrants participate for cultural purposes. Like in other milieus, this is mostly driven by special interests or hobbies:

Horse-Gate.com with forum . . . There are all kinds of questions around the horse. Interesting discussions are possible and you can watch videos and photos of stallions. Basically, this site covers all questions, also on illnesses, around the horse. (K., female, 43, commissioner, online communities Berlin)

In contrast to the majority of milieus, members of this milieu occasionally participate in highbrow activities on the Internet—and again the boundaries between online and offline are blurring. Infrequently, detached immigrants participate politically or civically on the Internet. They primarily use low-effort forms, such as petitions, which enjoy high popularity:

Sometimes, I participate in online petitions on topics I'm interested in, for example inclusion, crowding out of elderly tenants and so on. [. . .] Because I get updates about the petitions I signed, I see whether my signature has been useful. That's really nice! (U., female, 47, commercial clerk machine engineering, online communities Frankfurt)

Skeptical immigrants. Like the detached immigrants, skeptical immigrants have a positive attitude toward participation in general. However, they see the use of the Internet in this context critically. This leads to a rather limited pattern of online participation. Pure online participation without an offline equivalent is very rare. More frequently, online participation complements offline engagement or the participation takes place offline entirely.

A noticeable difference from the other milieus, especially the digital native ones, is the skeptical stance of skeptical immigrants toward the commercial aspects and implications of the Internet. Therefore, members of the milieu see the large Internet companies and their business models very critically. They often participate on smaller, local, sometimes even subversive platforms: “Anonymous is one of the sites that I'm interested in and that encourage me to share and participate” (S., female, 49, hospitality business administrator, online communities Berlin).

The skeptical immigrants who participate online often do it for political and civic purposes, especially for ecological and social causes:

Save Fehrman! Over there, a whole area is about to collapse because profit-driven marketing hipsters sniff a huge profit. [. . .] Already now, the residents and tourists are disgusted, as interviews (see Facebook and YouTube) show. They have started a petition and collected several thousand signatures. I find this state of affairs insupportable and therefore get involved here. (H., male, 54, employee in an interim employment society, online communities Berlin)

In many cases, their ecological and social engagement carries a strong real life connotation, helping weak, marginalized people in need. The Internet with its participatory affordances serves to facilitate such participation. Online participation is thus employed for operative purposes:

We have built this site together with the IHK [Chamber of Industry and Commerce] Hanau to accelerate the construction of a commuter train that has been put off for years and years now. We organize much around our Facebook group. In a sense, it's more of an organization of a real world engagement, because you can address and reach so many people and everyone can see it. (C., female, 27, employee in a clothes shop, online communities Frankfurt)

Online cultural participation for special interests and hobbies is barely present among the skeptical immigrants, although in few instances social media are used for participatory purposes. The skeptical immigrants are aware of the existence of online communities and forums but use them passively and not actively.

Comparison of the digital immigrant milieus. The different social positions of the digital immigrant milieus result in different participatory patterns. The detached immigrants mostly belong to the upper class, whereas the skeptical immigrants form the middle of society.

The dominance of cultural capital among the *skeptical immigrants* results in a prominence of political and civic online participation. Their participatory habitus is a critical and limited one. Privacy concerns were an overarching motive among the skeptical immigrants. Their principle-driven and self-disciplined lifestyle in general becomes apparent in their online participation. Since they are very critical of Internet companies, their participation is mostly restricted to small, local initiatives and contexts they can stand for.

Like the skeptical immigrants, the *detached immigrants* show little enthusiasm for online participation. They use the Internet frequently and productively but rarely get immersed. In a certain sense, they resemble the selective natives but in contrast to them, they seem less restricted to participation in business affairs, more confronted with online participation via their own environment (especially family and children) and more strongly geared toward highbrow cultural activities.

Although the skeptical immigrants and detached immigrants resemble each other in their participation intensity, there are differences: the skeptical immigrants have incorporated a worldview of self-sufficiency, which limits their online participation. By contrast, the detached immigrants resemble Bourdieu's (1984) depiction of the dominant class in terms of their detachment. They do not really care about online participation. Other things are more important, so that they show a confident indifference in their participatory pattern. Despite these differences, both digital immigrant milieus have a strong grounding in the offline world and participate offline in various contexts—more so than the digital natives.

Digital Outsiders

Law-and-order outsiders. As digital outsiders, the law-and-order outsiders participate less on the Internet than the other

milieus described above. Often a lack time and opportunities is mentioned as the reason for their restraint. Many members of this milieu are not aware about possible forms of online participation:

I have never been actively engaged on the Internet yet: first, because of time reasons. [. . .] Second, I've never really thought about participating on the Internet. I consider this virtual level of relations with other users on the Internet as the biggest hurdle. For me, it's as if the other user would not be a man of flesh and blood. (D., female, 55, customer service employee telecommunications industry, online communities Berlin)

The law-and-order outsiders see active online participation as less real and valuable than participation outside of the Internet. The virtual nature of many web activities depreciates it in their eyes.

Online, the members of this milieu consume information from different suppliers—mainly passively. In a few instances, they reveal some active participation, though, predominantly in the areas of culture and health. To follow their personal interests, some law-and-order outsiders are on SNS. They tend to be part of groups and sometimes contribute with comments. Also in forums and online communities, some members of this milieu sometimes engage actively through comments:

I'm only on it [Facebook] with my profile and stray around in two groups: dogs and health. Closed, not everyone has access and I'm just in there with my profile. Unfortunately, that can't be changed that you are only visible in the group. (B., male, 53, European Union [EU] pensioner, focus group Berlin)

The occasional participation in health-related contexts might be due to the high average age of this milieu. Law-and-order outsiders consume information on health topics, but in few instances they also contribute actively:

I'm also in a community for disabled. Two times per month, I'm active there, write articles for others that need help, because I know a lot in that domain. (T., male, 45, former police officer now early-retired, focus group Berlin)

Internet-distanced outsiders. Members of this milieu participate very little to not on the Internet. Already the registration for an online-service can be too high of a barrier for a possible participation. Generally, the Internet is a small part of their lifeworld and they lack a basic understanding and will to approach it more actively:

M1: Well [laughs] I bought a big computer screen and a friend of mine, he did . . . what do you call that, if you don't use it for a while, something . . .

M2: Screen saver.

M1: . . . a screen saver turns on and he put me a beautiful big aquarium on there [laughs], and that's on for the

whole evening at my place. [laughter all over] And he showed me that I can change it, so that I have a fireplace on, fire in the fireplace. [laughter]. That's my computer.

In some cases, there is a desire for participation, which cannot be realized due to the lack of familiarity with the Internet:

As a politically interested person I would like to participate and engage in general and specific topics, in an exchange of opinions, votes and suggestions, for example on questions about housing projects, school policy, traffic, military interventions, health policy, taxes and emergency contribution. [. . .] I think it is a serious and dangerous deficiency to keep us citizens left outside. (D., male, 70, pensioner, focus group Frankfurt)

Especially in the areas of culture, hobbies, and health, Internet-distanced outsiders use the Internet passively. Only in exceptional cases, however, they contribute something actively to the used platforms.

Comparison of the digital outsider milieus. Both digital outsider milieus are characterized by careful, anxious, and self-conscious uses of the Internet and thus a similar online participation pattern. The social position of the two milieus differs somewhat, though. The *law-and-order outsiders* belong largely to the middle class. Their participatory approach—despite being more restricted—resembles the two digital immigrant milieus in the sense that few participatory uses and exceptions become apparent.

The *Internet-distanced outsiders*, by contrast, form part of the working class. This milieu is largely excluded from the “games”—in terms of distinctions and practices—played by the other milieus in the online sphere. They make a virtue of their necessity and exhibit a functional, resigned, sometimes even cynical, humorous, and self-reflective attitude when it comes to the Internet.

Discussion and Conclusion

Summary and Implications

In sum, across all focus groups and online communities, I found a clearly recognizable *age* effect regarding the participation intensity and scope. The younger milieus of digital natives—around 44% of the German population (DIVSI, 2013)—portray themselves as more engaged online than the older milieus.

I did not specifically look at *gendered* patterns in online participation, as the focus was on other aspects and the milieus are not specifically differentiated in terms of gender. Within certain focus groups, I detected gendered Internet uses, including participatory ones. This was especially apparent among the entertainment-oriented natives, where men revealed strong interests for male-centered topics, especially

cars, football, and gaming, while females were catering to health-related issues and pets.

The role of *SES* is more nuanced than a simple translation of SES into distinct habitus and ensuing participatory practices. In this respect, a striking finding is that large parts of the high SES milieus (selective natives and detached immigrants, specifically, which make up around one-fourth of the German population [DIVSI, 2013]) opt out of participating online because of a lack of time or interest. For them, it is actually more beneficial and useful not to participate online. This runs counter to the intuition of digital divides research, which would expect these milieus to participate a lot. The findings about the high SES milieus might account for the weak effects of SES on online participation in several studies (Blank, 2013; Correa, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2015).

The summary of results (Table 1) points to a number of *implications* for digital divides research, leading to testable propositions. For these propositions, I draw on a typology by Blank and Groselj (2014), who trace Internet use along three dimensions: amount, variety, and type. Participatory Internet uses can also be analyzed along the lines of intensity, diversity, and type/area.

The *intensity* of online participation in the different milieus does not follow a clear pattern in the sense that vertical inequality predicts users' intensity of online participation. Altogether, the entertainment-oriented natives, for example, participate more intensively than the selective natives or the detached immigrants—two upper class milieus. Instead, the horizontal axis of the stratification scheme, which is represented by age and modernity, that is, opinions or cognitive factors, can better explain the intensity of online participation.

Proposition 1. The intensity of online participation depends more on horizontal parameters of social inequality—especially age and cognitive constructs—than vertical ones.

In Bourdieu's (1984) theory this makes sense if we conceptualize online participation as an act of *cultural production*.

Similarly to intensity, the *variety* of online participation depends more on the horizontal than the vertical axis of social stratification. Generally, the two digital immigrant milieus reveal a larger variety of online participation than the digital outsider milieus, while the digital immigrant and native milieus both share a large variety of online participation patterns in different domains. Here, interactions between the horizontal and vertical dimension should be taken into consideration. Thus, the milieu perspective is valuable. Selective natives and skeptical immigrants, for example, can be expected to participate in few contexts, while immersed natives and detached immigrants participate in more domains. Future research could apply the omnivorousness thesis (Peterson & Kern, 1996) and test whether high SES

Table 1. Participatory pattern of each Internet milieu.

Internet milieu	Participation pattern
<i>Immersed natives (16%)</i>	Naturalness, implicitness, self-confidence, mastery, innateness
<i>Selective natives (16%)</i>	Efficiency, superficiality, self-interest, specificity, work-focus
<i>Entertainment-oriented natives (12%)</i>	Clumsiness, hands-on, lowbrow, entertainment-driven, commercial
<i>Detached immigrants (10%)</i>	Indifference, functionality, indirectness, detachment, highbrow
<i>Skeptical immigrants (9%)</i>	Restraint, criticism, skepticism, subversiveness, abstinence
<i>Law-and-order outsiders (10%)</i>	Unawareness, uninformedness, down-to-earth, challenged, outdated
<i>Internet-distanced outsiders (27%)</i>	Absence, resigned, incomprehension, virtue of necessity

users reveal more diverse online participation patterns than low SES ones.

Proposition 2. The diversity of online participation depends more on horizontal parameters of social inequality than vertical ones. However, the effect of the horizontal parameters of inequality is weaker for diversity than for intensity.

For type, the situation is most complex and the differentiation of milieus most meaningful. Accordingly, the application of the concept makes much sense, since the subtleties of each user's milieu membership influence how and where she will participate.

Proposition 3. The type of online participation depends more on horizontal parameters of social inequality than vertical ones. However, the effect of the horizontal parameters of inequality is weaker for type than for intensity and diversity.

Political participation—the largest domain of inquiry in the literature (Lutz et al., 2014)—featured less prominently in all focus groups than expected (except for the digital immigrant milieus).

As for the *impetus for theory*, the notion of social *milieu*—partly grounded in Bourdieu's social theory—considers horizontal aspects of users' position, especially the *cultural* dimension of attitudes and tastes. In this sense, it is a holistic concept that adds to digital divides research a much needed contextualization of digital practices. In addition, Bourdieu's notion of *field* is useful in guiding us toward a more holistic understanding of the participation divides (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2014). Research on participation divides should strive to reach a holistic image of the diversities of online participation and apply Bourdieu's concept of field to the online sphere (Levina & Arriaga, 2014).

Limitations

Given the explorative nature of the research, a number of limitations have to be mentioned. First, the sampling strategy did not allow an inference on the whole German population. The study might have missed certain users, for example, the

ones at the very top and bottom of society. Second, the focus on patterns and habitus within the milieus left little room for the definitions, antecedents, and outcomes of online participation. Third, given the large number of participants for a qualitative study, I had to strongly synthesize the findings and simplify some tendencies. Fourth, the study only included data about Germany. Thus, not comparisons can be made with other countries.

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Notes

1. I use the expression "digital divides research" to refer to the broad area of digital inequalities studies. I am well aware of the problems the term "digital divide" carries with it and that "digital inequality" might be the more appropriate expression (Halford & Savage, 2010). However, given the term's relevance in the development of the research field and its remaining importance in the scholarly discourse I chose to use "digital divides." The plural form is used to stress the plurality of divides.
2. http://www.cimj.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1169:call-for-chapter-theorizing-digital-divide&catid=26:calls&Itemid=165
3. The two concepts are often used synonymously.
4. Bourdieu (1990) defines habitus as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representation" (p. 153).
5. The names for the milieus were provided by the cooperating social science research company (Appendix A) but adapted to avoid their strong normativity.

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Author Biography

Christoph Lutz (PhD, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland) is a researcher of communication at BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo. His research interests include social media, participation, online privacy, trust, and ethical questions around robots.

Appendix A

Description of the Internet Milieus

The Internet milieus were first established in a large-scale German-wide study on Internet use in Germany (DIVSI, 2012) and subsequently reaffirmed in a follow-up survey 1 year later (DIVSI, 2013). The focus group participants in this article were recruited along the Internet milieus by the cooperating market and social science research institute. The Internet milieus are largely in line with the older concept of Sinus-Milieus[®], developed in the 1980s (Gröger et al., 2011; Otte, 2004). The Internet milieu typology was originally developed in two steps: with 60 qualitative interviews in a first step and a large face-to-face (computer-assisted) survey with 2,047 respondents in a second step. The survey was representative of the German population aged 14 and older. The Internet milieus were constructed with a cluster analysis from the quantitative data, based on three main factors: Sinus-Milieu[®] membership, Internet use, and data protection/privacy attitudes. For more information on the methodological construction of the original typology see Deutsches Institut für Vertrauen und Sicherheit im Internet (DIVSI, 2012: 19–34).

Digital Natives

- *Immersed natives/Digital Souveräne* (16% of Internet users in Germany):
 - Age: below 40 (youngest milieu of all)
 - Education: highest level of education of all groups
 - Income: high level of income
 - Occupation: often in media and creative industries, often self-employed
 - Elevated postmodern milieu, pronounced performance ethos and elite consciousness
 - High technology enthusiasm, high Internet use intensity, broad spectrum of online activities, high level of computer and Internet skills
- *Selective natives/Effizienzorientierte Performer* (16% of Internet users in Germany):
 - Age: below 50 (on average: 40 years old)
 - Education: high level of education
 - Income: highest level of income of all groups
 - Occupation: many self-employed, large part of medium/skilled employed and upper public administration professionals
 - Performance-oriented milieu, success-driven, optimistic performance stance and life stance, let's do it approach, self-confidence as modern top performers
 - High technology enthusiasm, high Internet use intensity, broad spectrum of online activities, high level of computer and Internet skills

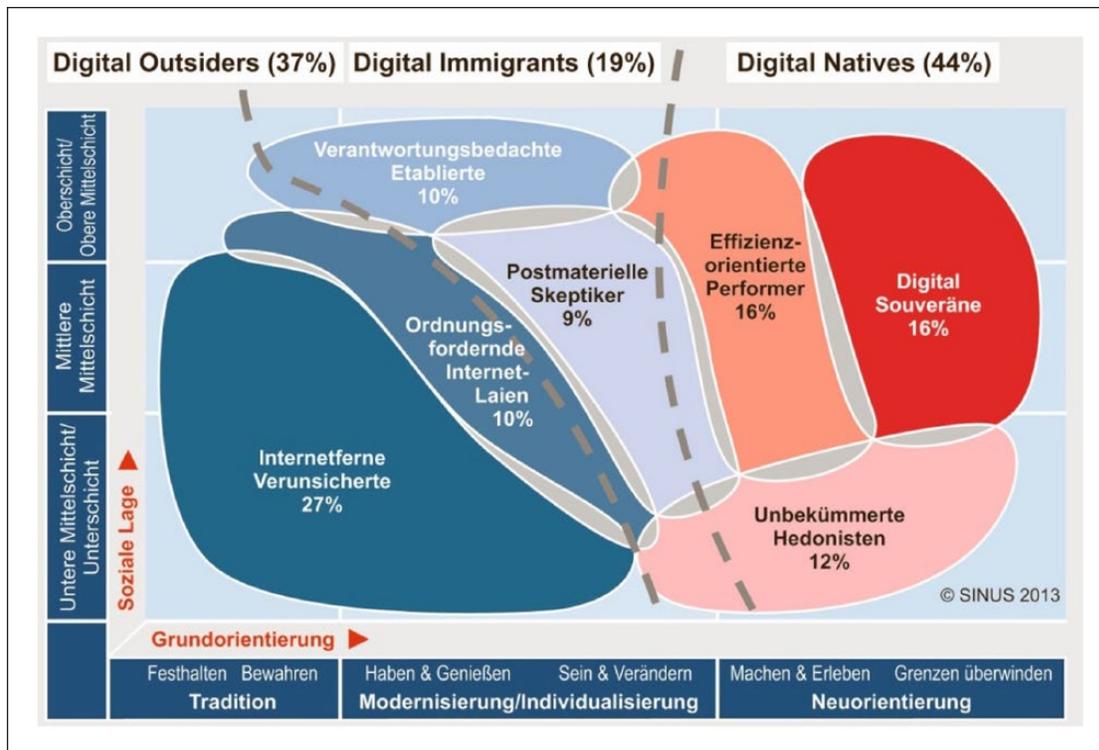


Figure A1. The vertical axis describes individuals' SES, ranging from working class to middle class, to upper class. The horizontal axis describes attitudes and orientations, ranging from traditional and conserving on the left, to modernization/individualization in the middle, to re-orientation and realignment on the right.

- *Entertainment-oriented natives/Unbekümmerte Hedonisten* (12% of Internet users in Germany):
 - Age: younger and middle-aged group (on average: 42 years old)
 - Education: predominantly low level of education
 - Income: intermediate level of income
 - Education: less skilled to medium-skilled service employees, workers, and crafts(wo)men
 - Hedonistic milieu, orientation toward enjoyment, experience and excitement, underdog mentality
 - Quite high technology enthusiasm, high Internet use intensity, rather broad spectrum of online activities, average/intermediate level of computer and Internet skills

Digital Immigrants

- *Detached immigrants/Verantwortungsbewusste Etablierte* (10% of Internet users in Germany):
 - Age: broad age spectrum, centering on 30 to 50 years old
 - Education: high level of education
 - Income: intermediate to high level of income
 - Occupation: mostly high-level service employed and upper public administration

- Conservative and established milieu, liberal intellectual attitudes, elite consciousness, optimistic performance stance and life stance
- Intermediate technology enthusiasm, rather high Internet use intensity, rather broad spectrum of uses, rather high level of computer and Internet skills
- *Skeptical immigrants/Postmaterielle Skeptiker* (9% of Internet users in Germany):
 - Age: very broad spectrum from 20 to 60 (on average: 45 years old)
 - Education: primarily low level of education
 - Income: intermediate level of income
 - Occupation: qualified employees, workers, and skilled workers, self-employed
 - Social-ecological milieu, ecologically ambitious middle of society, sustainable lifestyle, high willingness to refrain from luxury
 - Low technology enthusiasm, rather high Internet use intensity, rather broad spectrum of online activities, rather high level of computer and Internet skills

Digital Outsiders

- *Law-and-order outsiders/Ordnungsfordernde Internetlaien* (10% of Internet users in Germany):

- Age: predominantly between 40 and 70 (on average: 51 years old)
 - Education: lower to intermediate level of education
 - Income: low to intermediate level of income
 - Occupation: predominantly part-time employed, housewives/homemakers, retirees, unemployed, and low/intermediate skilled employees and workers
 - Conservative-established milieu, civic middle class, harmony orientation, preference for safety and protection
 - Low technology enthusiasm, intermediate Internet use intensity, intermediate spectrum of online activities, low level of computer and Internet skills
- *Internet-distanced outsiders/Internetferne Verunsicherte* (27% of Internet users in Germany):
 - Age: highest age of all groups (on average: 62 years old)
 - Education: low level of education
 - Income: low level of income
 - Occupation: high proportion of retirees, basic professions, workers and skilled workers
 - Traditional and precarious milieu, need for straightforwardness, clarity and security, resignation and pessimism toward the future
 - Low technology enthusiasm, low Internet use intensity, small spectrum of online activities, low level of computer and Internet skills

The vertical axis describes individuals' SES, ranging from working class to middle class, to upper class. The horizontal axis describes attitudes and orientations, ranging from traditional and conserving on the left, to modernization/individualization in the middle, to re-orientation and realignment on the right.

Appendix B

Focus Group Guideline

This is a summarized version of the guideline. A more detailed version is available upon request.

- *Introduction: General attitude toward the Internet*
 - What does the Internet mean to you?
 - What are the major advantages and disadvantages of the Internet?
- *Internet use*
 - Since when do you use the Internet?
 - How often do you use the Internet?
 - How much time per day do you spend using the Internet?
 - Which devices do you use to access the Internet?
- What do you do when you are online? Which platforms do you use?
- For which purposes do you use the Internet? (Also: Do you sometimes go online without a concrete purpose in mind?)
- Do you find using the Internet easy? Where are your limits?
- How do people in your social environment use the Internet?
- Do you have friends who use the Internet very actively? How does that show?
- *Collection on Flipchart: forms of Internet use and activities*
- *Social Internet use/Exchange*
 - How important is the exchange with others for your Internet use?
 - Are you active in online communities? (If not: why not?)
 - How often do you post texts, videos, and photos online? What kind of texts, videos, and photos?
 - Who do you post texts, videos, and photos to (which audience)?
 - Do you know the people you communicate with online (from the offline world)?
 - Are there things you only do on the Internet, and nowhere else?
 - What things would you not do on the Internet?/ Are there things you would only do offline?
 - *Collection on Flipchart: social forms and activities of Internet use*
- *“Participation on the Internet” (Definition and Meaning)*
 - What does “Participation” (German: “Beteiligung”), “Participation” (German: “Partizipation”), and “Engagement” (German: “Engagement”) mean to you?
 - What does “Participation on the Internet” mean to you?
 - Association spaces/Semantic fields of online participation
 - *Sorting online/Internet activities into (n)one of the three categories (“Beteiligung,” “Partizipation,” and “Engagement”)*
 - *Addition: What else belongs to “online participation”?* (Own experience and observation of others)
- *Areas/Domains of online participation*
 - *Carefully support the areas emerging from the addition to be able to assess not mentioned but existing aspects (education, business, sports, cultural participation . . .)*
 - Which other areas/domains/fields of participation can you think of?

- Where do you participate online?
- Who is the public/recipient of your online participation activities?
- Where are your friends and colleagues participating?
- *Sorting forms of participation on a continuum according to the depth/quality of participation*
- Which are the most important areas of participation on the Internet? (ca. 3)
- *Chances and risks of online participation*
 - What are advantages, positive aspects, and chances of online participation?
 - What's the concrete benefit of online participation: for you personally? For others? For society?
 - *Laddering to assess and understand the "higher end states" (motivation and expectations)*
 - What are the disadvantages, negative aspects, and risks of online participation?
- *Offline Participation*
 - Where are you actively engaged in the offline world?
 - *Collection of offline participation activities and domains*
 - Do you know people that are especially participatory and engaged? How does that show?
- *Online/Offline participation link*
 - What role does the Internet play for these forms of participation and engagement? How would the participation/engagement work without the Internet?
 - Which forms of participation are only taking place on the Internet?
 - For which form of participation is the Internet a useful instrument?
 - Has the Internet brought about new ways of participation/engagement that would not exist without it?