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Hybrid Civic Activism as a Tool for Building Social Inclusion³

Abstract

Modern democracies around the world are threatened by growing political populism and intolerance. This fact is prominent especially in the Balkan region, where the effect of violent ethnic conflict is still present. Empirical data from this region registered low level of political engagement, high ethnic stereotyping and distance toward non-majority groups.

We examined the effects of activism in real and virtual worlds on social distance toward minority groups, and how it is mediated by belief in a just world, political interest, political anomie and cynicism. We employed analysis of national representative survey data on adult citizens, collected through face to face method in Serbia in 2017 (N=1258). Survey design has been used to investigate the extent to which common forms of online/offline civic activity mediated by different psychological constructs foster offline forms of social inclusion of marginal groups.

Results confirmed that both online and offline activities can have a positive effect on social inclusion in real world by reducing political anomie and cynicism and belief in a just world, and increasing political interest. This research highlights the importance of fostering different types of civic activism because the impact of political engagement in the real and even more in the virtual

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world leads to a reduction of social distance toward minority groups in reality. Data suggested that broadening platforms for civic engagement could be an effective strategy in building social inclusion.

Key words: civic participation, social media, social distance, online, offline civic activity

Introduction

Modern political systems are threatened by growing political populism and social exclusion of numerous minority groups (such as migrants as a group recognized on a global level and other groups specific for each local community). This is specifically the case for the ethnic minorities in the Balkan region, as a consequence of violent conflict form the past (Second World War and ethnic conflicts in 1990-1999). The effect of these conflicts is still evident in Serbia, manifested by strong ethnic stereotyping and discrimination, as well as frequent tensions and political disputes between them. Empirical data from Serbia and the region have indicated great prejudice not only toward ethnic minorities (mostly Albanians, Croats and Hungarians) but also toward gay and lesbian people (Milošević Đorđević, 2016: 421; Bajović, 2013; Kalaba, 2013; Ivanov, 2008; Miladinović, 2008; Mihić & Mihić-Lisul, 2003: 168). In addition, the Balkan region became in the past few years, a route for migrants from the Middle East who are trying to reach the European Union in attempts to escape the conflict and political instability of their home countries. Studies have also confirmed the growing intolerance toward migrants in the Balkan region (Vesković Anđelković & Bobić, 2015: 231-236). As gay and lesbian people, ethnic minorities and migrants are usually the target for hate speech and stereotyping, it is of great importance to analyze mechanisms that might promote tolerance and acceptance toward different groups, using modern online platforms.

The Internet and its diverse platforms, including numerous social networking sites have a huge impact on attitudes and behaviour of ordinary people. It influences our everyday life, therefore it is of great importance to understand how is it used and integrated into various political contexts for shaping attitudes and political actions. The Internet makes information and contacts instantly available, making socializing and searching for information much easier and less demanding (Branković, 2017: 26; Skorić et al., 2016: 3). Empirical data confirmed that using the Internet for information leads to a higher level of political knowledge and civic participation (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018: 482; Kahne

& Middaugh, 2012: 493-509; Kenski & Stroud, 2006: 173-190; Pasek et al., 2006: 197-215). Greater availability and access to information are one of the unambiguous positive impacts of the Internet, together with endorsement of social interaction, building tolerance and inclusive societies, and creation of social cohesion (Quan-Haase et al., 2002: 291-324). What is less clear, however, is whether and how engagement with social media is associated with social inclusion. Nevertheless, there is mounting evidence that the Internet can have negative impact, including disempowering citizen's freedom, endorsing the hate speech, and developing addictive behavior (Milošević Đorđević & Žeželj, 2014: 229-234; Dahlgren, 2000: 335-340). Thus, allowing selective avoidance or acceptance of content of (dis)similar others, the Internet can be used for both types of civic tolerance and/or intolerance. Some studies have shown that active Facebook users might perform selective avoidance of the people they do not agree with, which can be characterized by a certain level of political intolerance (Zhu, Škoric, Shen, 2017: 112-131). These facts inspired the number of studies investigating the positive and negative capacity of the Internet, and its influence on political behaviour.

Civic activism has been changed by the emergence of the Internet. There are no sharp divisions between the real and virtual worlds for political engagement, as citizens in modern societies are engaged in different forms of activism within online and offline contexts, forming new "hybrid activism" (Milošević, Žeželj, 2017: 113-118). Civic activism differs in the scope of engagement from low involvement (expressing one's opinion, or trying to persuade others to change their opinion) to high involvement (protesting, volunteering) in real and virtual world. The Internet expanded diverse forms of civic activism, so traditional forms of activism are strengthened by a wide range of civic activities that nowadays exist in the virtual world. It provides new platform for civic engagement, and changes greatly traditional activities, offering alternative such as easy self-expression and sharing ideas in social networking sites, supporting online groups and online petitioning (Dalton, 2008). Scholars agree that social media has a significant positive impact on civic participation in general, with special effect on political transformation such as mass protests in North Africa, USA, and Latin America (Castells, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012: 363-379; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012: 299-314). The empirical data confirming this fact is so robust that some authors suggest that the Internet has a leading role in organizing protests nowadays (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002: 465-493), since digital world connects and organizes collective action on a larger

engagement scale, more quickly and flexibly, bringing more diversity issues into discussion (Žeželj et al., 2017: 386-395; Skoric et al., 2016: 1817-1839; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 739-768).

There are several possible factors mediating the relationship between civic activism and social inclusion. People develop just-world preservation strategies (belief in a just world), a belief that people get what they deserve. The stronger the belief in a just world, the more inequality will be denied, in an effort to preserve one's belief that the world is a just place, and the responsibility for negative outcomes will be attributed exclusively to the individual. When people believe strongly in a just world they tend to blame disadvantaged groups, denying inequality of life opportunities (Mohiyeddini & Montada, 1998: 41-54), therefore a strong belief in a just world would be associated with lower social acceptance. However, empirical findings are somewhat controversial, since experimental studies in which people were confronted with suffering of the victims, such as poor people, AIDS patients and rape victims, demonstrated higher emotional concern for disadvantaged people (Appelbaum, 2006: 387-402; Hafer, & Bègue, 2005: 128; Furnham, 2003: 795-817; Hafer, 2000: 165; Dalbert, 2000; Mohiyeddini & Montada, 1998: 41-54; Dalbert, Fisch, & Montada, 1992: 11-18; Furnham & Proctor, 1989: 365-384). In addition to belief in a just world there are other factors associated with a tendency for social exclusion such as the political anomie and political cynicism. Political anomie is a concept introduced by sociologist Durheim (1897), reflecting an increase in moral disruption, and a breakdown of the social bonds between citizens and the society. Political anomie and cynicism might lead to higher social exclusion of minority groups (Zhao & Cao, 2010: 1209-1229).

The aim of the study is to measure: a) endorsement of different forms of civic participation among adult Serbian population; b) social distance toward minority groups; c) online and offline activism predictive capacity in reducing social distance; d) the mediating role of political cynicism, anomie, interest and belief in a just world in this relation. We tested two online and offline activism models, hypothesizing that those more active both online/offline would perform higher acceptance of minority groups, mediated by lower levels of political anomie, cynicism, belief in a just world and higher political interest. We assessed the potential significance of six broad categories of online activities and their counterpart in offline civic activities testing the hypotheses that these practices in offline and online world will foster social inclusion. These hypotheses might be broken more specifically:

H1a: Civic activism in online world will be positively related to social inclusion.

H1b: Civic activism in real world will be positively related to social inclusion.

H2a: Political cynicism, anomie, interest and belief in a just world mediate the effects of online activities on social inclusion.

H2b: Political cynicism, anomie, interest and belief in a just world mediate the effects of offline activities on social inclusion.

H3: Online civic participation would have stronger impact than offline forms on social inclusion in real world

There is uncertainty in the literature and empirical evidence whether and how online social media activity affects offline participation. Our study advances knowledge on social media activism to social inclusion in reality on few aspects: First it tested the model through national representative sample; Second it introduces a model explaining psychological moderators fostering effects of online and offline activism to social inclusion in real world; Third it compares the impact of online and offline activities on behavior in real world.

Materials and Methods

Data was collected via face to face interview in May and June 2017, on a nationally representative sample (N = 1258) of Serbian population older than 18. The average length of the interview was approximately 30 min. Data was collected by the Institute of Political Studies in Belgrade. The survey includes multiple measures of civic engagement and online activity.

2.1 Instruments

Online and offline civic participation were assessed through parallel versions of the activism scale, in which the participants were asked to mark all (offline/online) activities they ever took part in (Milošević-Đorđević, Žeželj, 2017: 114). Every offline activity had its online counterpart. Different levels of engagement were operationalized by activities in the real offline sphere (I openly expressed my opinion on that issue; I tried to persuade other people to agree with my opinion; I was wearing a T-shirt or a badge with the slogan supporting an idea; I signed a petition; I participated in meetings/rallies to support an idea; I volunteered in organization / was a member of some organization) and online activities (I openly expressed my opinion about that issue in a virtual discussion; I tried to persuade other people to agree with my opinion during a virtual discussion; I changed a photograph, status or profile on Facebook/ Twitter, etc. to support an idea; I

signed an online petition; I joined Internet groups to support an idea; I volunteered in an Internet group e.g. as an administrator). The respondents were offered four options to express the frequency of each online or offline civic activity behavior (from 1 never to 4 regularly). Online and offline separated activity scale was calculated by adding all different forms of online/offline activities (making the total score from 6 to 24 for ONLINE activism, and the same score scope for activism in REAL life).

Social distance/acceptance was measured for each minority group using four questions: I wish I have more friends among...; I would not mind having a close relationship with...; I would not mind if my next door neighbour was...; I would not mind having a boss...; This was an adapted version of Bogardus' social distance scale (1959). Participants assessed their agreement on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 do not agree at all, to 5 completely agree). Social acceptance scales of five targeted groups demonstrated satisfactory internal reliability (Cronbach's Alphas for gay and lesbian people social distance scale = .923; Hungarians social distance scale = .920; Immigrants = .938; Albanians = .952; Croats = .948), which allowed computing a total score ranging from 5 to 25 for each social group. One composite measure of social distance toward different marginal groups was composed from 20 to 100 (Cronbach's Alphas = .96).

Political cynicism refers to the degree in which public respect politicians, perceive closeness, value and importance of the political sphere. The object could be politicians, political institutions and political system in general. It could be defined as a degree in which the public perceives immorality and incompetence of the politicians, institutions and system in general. It was assessed by eight items, combining several already used scales of political cynicism (Pavlović, 2013: 11; Dekker, 2007; Schyns Nuus, 2007: 91-103) such as: The politics are dishonest and a 'dirty' job; The biggest concern of politicians is how to stay in power longer; Political parties are only interested in my vote and not my opinion; Politicians always promise more than they can achieve. The respondents were given the scale from 1 (I completely disagree) to 5 (I completely agree). We compose one measure of political cynicism ranging from 8 (low political cynicism) to 40 (high political cynicism) (Cronbach's Alphas = .937).

Political interest was defined as a subjective perception of interest of each respondent in politics, assessed by one question: How much interest do you have in politics. Respondents were offered scale from 1 not interested at all to 5 very interested (Pavlović, 2013: 10).

Belief in a just world is defined as a belief that people, in general, deserve what they get and get what they deserve, providing individuals with a perception of order and stability of the social context, serving as a protective factor defending the individual against the possible negative outcome (Appelbaum, Lennon, Lawrence Aber, 2006: 387-402). This variable was assessed by six items such as (Allen, Ng, Leiser, 2005: 159-185; Kamble, Dalbert, 2012: 269-278): I think basically the world is a just place; I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice; I think people try to be fair when making important decisions. Respondents were given Likert scale from 1 I completely disagree to 5 I completely agree. The composite score has minimum 6 (do not believe in a just world) and maximum 30 (believe in a just world to the great extend). (Cronbach's Alphas = .846).

Political anomie reflects the breakdown of social ties between an individual and their community in the social context with no moral guidance from social institutions to individuals. The concept consists of two components: lack of social ties and lack of social norms. We assessed political anomie with four items (Dulić, 2012: 57-61; Šram, 2007: 103-118) such as: We cannot expect anything good from the future; I feel helpless to do anything in life for myself; If a person wants to achieve something in life he/she is forced to cheat and steal; Respondents were given a scale from 1 I completely disagree (low political anomie) and 5 I completely agree (Cronbach's Alphas = .763).

2.2 Respondents and sampling

The sample type was a two staged stratified combined probability sample. The sample stages were households chosen by a simple random method and household members chosen by quotas derived from the Serbian Census 2011 data. Primary sampling units were households: one household comprised people living in the same dwelling. Secondary sampling units were actual respondents. Allocation of the sample by stratum was proportional to the size of the stratum. We had a majority of Serb ethnicity respondents in our sample (85%) but other ethnicities living in Serbia were also covered (Montenegrins, Albanians, Bosniaks, Hungarian, and Coratian ethnicity, all together represented 14% of the sample). Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample of the adult citizens of Serbia.

Table 1:

Demographic profile of the sample

Sample structure	Percent %	
Gender	Male	53
	Female	47
Education	Primary and lower	15
	Secondary	60
	Higher	25
Age	18-25	15
	26-45	40
	46+	45
Internet use	Every day	48
	Every week	17
	Every month	6
	Rarely	5
	Never	21
	DK NA	3
Ethnicity	Serbs	85
	Other	14
	No answer	1
Total number of respondents	1258	

2.3. *Data analysis*

To test our hypothesis we used descriptive statistics, correlation, path and regression analysis. Path analysis parameters were used for this purpose: chi-square (the normal theory maximum likelihood chi-square), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). A value up to 0.08 for RMSEA represents the reasonable error of approximation in the population (Browne & Cudeck, 1993: 136-162). Values below the recommended level of 0.900 for CFI suggest that model cannot be accepted, and above this limit that the model can be accepted (Byrne, 2001: 55-86). Adequate model fit was evaluated using a combination of indices: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA <0.08), the comparative fit index (CFI≥0.90), and the discrepancy level (i.e., $\chi^2 / df < 5.00$). For comparing an alternative causal ordering of the variables, we also used the Akaiki Information Criterion (AIC).

Results

One of the study aims was to investigate the prevalence of online and

offline activism among Serbian adult citizens (Table 2). Activism is not present among Serbian population to a great extent. Online activism is less endorsed than offline activism in Serbia, strongly confirming previous research findings among youth in the region (Milošević Đorđević, Žeželj, 2017: 115). As expected, soft activism forms were more present than the hard ones. If one action requires less involvement the chances that one would join are greater. Expressing opinions online or offline, happens more frequently than signing petitions or volunteering.

Table 2:
Different forms of Offline/online activism among Serbian adults (from 1 never to 4 regularly)

Offline	
	Mean
I openly expressed my opinion on that issue	2.04
I tried to persuade other people to agree with my opinion	1.67
I was wearing a T-shirt or a badge with the slogan supporting an idea	1.54
I signed a petition	1.71
I participated in meetings/rallies to support an idea	1.68
I volunteered in organization / was a member of some organization	1.45
Online	
I openly expressed my opinion about that issue in a virtual discussion	1.62
I tried to persuade other people to agree with my opinion during a virtual discussion	1.44
I changed a photograph, status or profile on Facebook/ Twitter, etc. to support an idea	1.40
I signed an online petition	1.43
I joined Internet groups to support an idea	1.51
I volunteered in an Internet group e.g. as an administrator	1.24

Data showing social distance is presented in Table 3, where the lower mean signifies lower acceptance of minority groups. An acceptance of the Hungarian minority was the highest, followed by Croats and gays and lesbians, while the lowest acceptance is of Albanians and migrants. In general, the Serbian adult population exhibits low social acceptance toward minority groups. The curves for all measured groups accept Hungarians is banded toward the left, showing non-acceptance of different social relation with specific minority group.

Table 3:
Social distance toward minority groups

Mean (1 do not agree at all, to 5 completely agree)	LGBT	Hungarian	Migrant	Albanian	Croat
I would like to have more friends among..	2.03	3.18	2.01	2.04	2.63
I wouldn't mind to have close relationship ...	2.12	3.31	2.12	2.17	2.81
I wouldn't mind if my first neighbour ...	2.65	3.62	2.33	2.38	3.04
I wouldn't mind to have boss from...	2.53	3.42	2.19	2.27	2.82
Total acceptance (4-20)	9.16	13.47	8.49	8.69	11.20

The correlation matrix in Table 4 shows the association among variables: moderate offline and somewhat lower online activism with strong correlation between them confirming existence of the new hybrid forms of civic activism on both platforms (Milošević Đorđević, Žeželj, 2017: 117); extremely high political cynicism, and high anomie and 0belief in a just world; moderate political interest and moderate social acceptance of five minority group. Social inclusion is positively correlated with higher online and offline activism (H1a & H1b), negatively correlated with belief in a just world and political anomie.

Table 4:
Correlation, means and standard deviations for measured variables (1strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree)

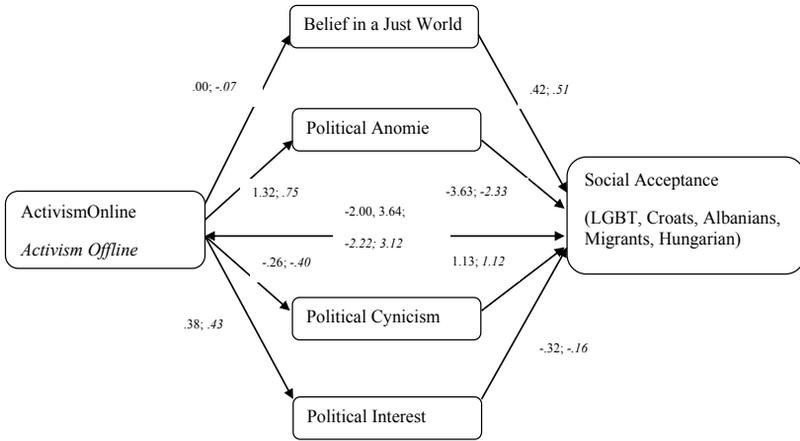
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Activism REAL (1)	1	.70**	-.16**	.04	-.01	.41**	.12**
Activism ONLINE (2)		1	-.09**	.06	.03	.29*	.17**
Political cynicism (3)			1	-.02	.16**	-.09**	.08*
Belief in a just world (4)				1	.12**	-.01	-.07*
Political Anomie (5)					1	-.04	-.16**
Political interest (6)						1	.04
Social acceptance (7)							1
Scale Min-Max	6-24	6-24	8-40	6-30	4-20	1-4	20-100
Mean	10.07	8.64	32.92	18.53	10.91	2.34	51.34
SD	4.23	3.98	7.96	6.10	4.26	1.02	21.60

* p< .05 ** p < .01

Next, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to test the validity of our models for online and offline activism (Graph 1). When analys-

ing the fit of the model we relied on conventional recommendations about the parameters (Table 5). Both models (for the impact of online and also for offline activism) demonstrated superior fit in all required indices (H2a & H2b): CFI and NFI were higher than .90, and RMSEA remained even lower than an acceptable level of .09. In addition, we employed an additional fit measure AIC which is commonly used to compare competing models.

Graph 1:
Online (Offline) activism model with moderators as a tool for reducing social distance



Note: Direct and indirect effects of online/offline activism to social acceptance. Arrows indicate path coefficients that are standardized regression weights.

Table 5:
Path analysis, fit indices for online and offline model

	Chi Square	Df	Chi/Df	CFI	NFI	RM-SEA	AIC
Online model	18.8	5	3.76	.932	.916	.054	62.828
Offline model	13.2	5	2.64	.975	.962	.036	57.184

Note: HI: The normal theory Maximum Likelihood Chi-square; DF: Degrees of freedom; CFI: Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; NFI: Normative Fit Index; AIC: Akaike's Information Criterion.

Finally, we conducted regression analysis to see what kind of activism has better predictive value in explaining social acceptance. Table 6. shows that offline activism is not significant in predicting higher acceptance of minority groups, conforming the predominant influence of online social activities in building social inclusion (H3) (the predictive power in explaining social acceptance of marginal groups of all measured variables is 8%).

Table 6:
Regression model

	Standardized Coefficients, Beta	T	Sig
Offline Activism	-.016	-.308	.758
Online Activism	.179	3.765	.000
Scale Political Cynicism	.160	4.611	.000
Scale Political Anomie	-.202	-5.787	.000
Interest in politics	-.005	-.125	.901
Scale Belief in a Just World	-.043	-1.257	.209

R=.286; R²= .082; F_(6,816)=12.013, p=.000

Discussion

People around the globe are heavy Internet users, and a great number of their social interactions are virtual. Additional social phenomena of the modern democracies are low political knowledge, low involvement in civic activities (Galston, 2001: 217-234), and intolerance toward minorities (Vergeer & Scheepers, 2000: 127-143). In this study those facts were confirmed presenting low level of civic activism among Serbian adult population, high level of political anomie and cynicism and moderate social distance toward minority groups. Having in mind the growing political intolerance and the popularity of the Internet, it was vital to explore online activities that may lead to social inclusion of minority groups. Can we promote social inclusion in modern societies, especially after the violent conflict, using the capacity of Internet? Whether and how particular forms of offline/online activity foster social inclusion?

Many authors suggest that digital sphere has positive contribution in fostering democratic processes and social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012: 319-336), and can be used to stimulate positive change by building civic engagement, social acceptance and sense of community (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006: 825-843; Quan-Haase, et al., 2002: 291-324). Therefore, given the promising capacity of the Internet (Pasek, More & Romer, 2009: 197-215), it is of great importance to further investigate the factors related to social media use that

can endorse public acceptance of marginal groups. To map out the effect of online activism in promoting social acceptance we included and tested both online and offline activities and involved several psychological mediators that can lower the level of social distance in real world. Data from this study confirmed that online platforms could be used to create more positive attitudes toward rival groups, encouraging social acceptance; being involved in civic activism can decrease belief in a just world, political cynicism, anomie and increase interest in politics and can lead to the reduction of social distance toward five minority groups (Gays and lesbians, Croats, Albanians, migrants, and Hungarians). Both types of civic activism can build social connections between different groups, but the effect of online activism is even stronger.

Online communities that frequently promote open democratic discourse, allowing expression of different perspectives could be used to promote higher levels of social commitment and inclusion improving intergroup relation. Our research does not confirm the doubt that online activism platforms would only increase hate speech and discrimination toward minority groups— quite the contrary, it seems that they have capacity to build tolerance. Therefore, these results have policy implications: enhancing civic activism via social media has the potential to make people more attentive to social inclusion. These mechanisms, however, need to be further investigated, as our results do not allow for causal explanations.

4.1. Limitations

The fact that our study relied on self-reported measures can be viewed as a limitation. It can be sensitive to socially desirable responding and acquiescence biases. Observable behaviour is more reliable and more strongly related to different predictors in comparison to self-reports. However, as we obtained a relatively strong pattern of correlation and path parameters, we can hypothesize that even stronger connection would have been found with observation measures. We only tested few selected psychological mediators, limited by the length of the questionnaire and some of them failed to show high relation with the social distance. In the future, it would be good to explore more diverse psychological mediators: emotional such as empathy, feelings of powerlessness and cognitive as intergroup trust or outgroup heterogeneity. Our study relies on national representative survey, and cannot resolve the causality.

Conclusion

There is large empirical evidence that political interest and online and offline news consumption is positively related to interpersonal discussion and political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2009: 553-574). However, little consideration has been given to the role of new media platforms in building social inclusion in the modern world challenged by the frequent rejection of marginal groups. The results of this study show that the use of traditional offline and even more online participation is related positively to reduction of social distance toward marginal groups mediated by beliefs in a just world, political cynicism, anomie and interest. Taken together our results suggest that enabling citizens to engage online activities can have positive effects on society in general, and that the online world can be used as a promoter for building tolerance toward different minority groups. While tailoring strategies for building inclusive societies, involving diverse online tools would have a positive effect.

Our findings reveal that online and offline civic activity relate to social inclusion. This indicated that even being exposed to weak ties of digital networking and online activity might promote higher level of social inclusion. There is a need to specify and promote different online activities and social networking because they can lead to higher social inclusion of marginal groups.

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