Connected, but are they engaged? Exploring young adults' willingness to engage online and off-line

by Michelle I. Seelig and Huixin Deng

Abstract
Past research has been inconsistent about how awareness and social activism influence young adults’ likelihood of virtual or in-person engagement. The present study thus conducted a national survey of young adults to examine further how social media use, attitudes toward technology, civic-mindedness, social norms, and other factors influence digital engagement, and if online behaviors translate to a willingness to partake in off-line activities supporting a cause. Overall, the findings reveal social media increases awareness of issues, young adults engage and connect with others about social issues online, and perceive positive outcome expectations for social good online. More importantly, this research indicates that young adults are willing to engage online for social causes, and these behaviors are starting to translate to engagement off-line. The study findings also provide important implications for NPOs and advocacy groups on how to design messages for social media advocating specific conditions for people to partake in social activism for the greater good.

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Introduction
In this age of digital connectedness, social media have expanded the dynamics of engagement where people interact with others in online communities about important social issues afflicting the wider world online (Jung, 2012; Özdemir, 2012; Pearson, et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 2013). Research has thus established a new culture of advocacy conceptualized as social activism (see Elliott and Earl, 2018; Seelig, et al., 2019; Weinstein, 2014). Social activism breaks from the traditional one-way transmission of information to a
Connected, but are they engaged? Exploring young adults' willingness to engage online and off-line cooperative media culture of engagement between nonprofit organizations (NPOs), advocacy groups, and their supporters to deepen engagement. As a result, "these entities are no longer talking at people. Instead, there is a conversation through the Web and social media where others listen, engage, and respond" [1]. The conversation may start when an NPO or advocacy group shares content advocating for a cause, and then the audience responds (e.g., comments, likes, shares). Or, an "aware public" makes their voice heard by posting links, photos, videos, or opinions and engages others to take part in a cause (Chon and Park, 2020; Guo and Saxton, 2018; Seelig, et al., 2019).

It is evident social media have transformed the ways people interact with others in online communities about social causes and advocate for social change (Hutchinson, 2021; Özdemir, 2012; Skoric, et al., 2016). Empirical evidence supports that social media plays a role in encouraging communication and disseminating information among interested supporters about important social and political issues online (Anderson, et al., 2018; Jung, 2012; Seelig, 2018). Yet, criticism persists that social activism does not translate to a willingness to do something virtually or face-to-face (Elliott and Earl, 2018; Xu and Saxton, 2019). Past research that examined on older Millennials' social media behaviors found social media serves as a distraction (Auxier and McClain, 2020; Yang and Wang, 2015). Primarily, they use social media for self-indulgence and do not engage in meaningful behaviors supporting an NPO or advocacy group’s cause in online or face-to-face contexts (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020; Debevec, et al., 2013; Lee, 2020). Whereas, research focused on younger Millennials found that they are more aware of news and social issues spread on social media, actively involved in advocating social issues using social media, and perceive positive outcome expectations for social good online (Jones and Mitchell, 2016; Pearson, et al., 2016; Seelig, 2018). In addition, younger Millennials find social media easy for self-expression and connecting with others in a virtual conversation, expressing joy and discontent on various issues (Borrero, et al., 2014; Ciszek, 2014; Harlow and Harp, 2012; Warren, et al., 2014).

Like young Millennials, Generation Z (GenZ), young adults born after 1996, also grew up digitally connected and are heavy users of social media compared to older generations (Debevec, et al., 2013; Dimock, 2019; Jones and Mitchell, 2016). Research has thus started sampling GenZ and found they too use social media extensively, engage in some form of civic activity online, and mirror younger Millennials’ behaviors and views about race, climate, and politics (Anderson, et al., 2018; Parker, et al., 2019). While social media have become valuable for young adults to address issues of public concern, research shows mostly they use social media for social interactions, such as expressing ones identity, sharing an opinion about a social issue; and cultivating, building, and maintaining relationships (Auxier and McClain, 2020; Kim, et al., 2016; Lee, 2020). Evidence indicates that social media mostly mobilizes off-line political behaviors and has had little influence on non-political activities (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2018; Haro-de-Roasrio, et al., 2018; Skoric, et al., 2016).

The literature that has attempted to understand how social media influences young adults engagement, either virtual or in-person, has been generally small in sample size, drawn for convenience, and mostly limited to college students (Chon and Park, 2020; Lee, 2020; Skoric, et al., 2016). Thus, our understanding of how awareness and interacting with others using social media influences young Millennials and GenZ behaviors that start online and encourages off-line actions is limited (Boulianne, 2019; Seelig, 2018; Xu and Saxton, 2019). The present study thus surveyed a national sample of young adults, both young Millennials and GenZ, to examine how social media use, attitudes toward technology, civic-mindedness, social norms, and other factors influence digital engagement, and if online engagement translates to off-line engagement. We believe that the results of this study are beneficial for NPOs and advocacy groups interested in designing messages advocating specific conditions fostering social activism that will successfully engage an interested citizenry for the greater good.

Literature review
Past traditional activism and civic engagement took place face-to-face, constituting targeted actions or activities aimed at benefiting conditions in a local or global community (e.g., changing what we know, the way we think about something, or behavior change) (Ballard, 2014; Pattie, et al., 2003). These activities consisted of helping a neighbor, volunteering for a local community group or social cause, contribute money to a charity or social cause, attending an organized protest or sit-in, or participating in a cause-related event (e.g., Relay for Life, March for Our Lives), or some other face-to-face activity that may make a difference.

With the emergence of social media, NPOs and advocacy groups have shifted their messaging strategy from a top-down approach to social activism, where social media plays a strategic role in relationship-building and encouraging communication among interested supporters about important issues online in the hopes of moving awareness into action off-line (Boulianne, 2015; Chon and Park, 2020; Guo and Saxton, 2018). In this new culture, all sorts of civic activity and activism transpires virtually, such as information on how to help others, online promotion of community projects or social causes, circulating virtual petitions, sharing resources, fundraising, e-letter writing campaigns, volunteer matching, and mobilizing people online to get involved in off-line actions (e.g., boycotts, protests, and sit-ins) (Boulianne, 2019; Jones and Mitchell, 2016; Seelig, et al., 2019; Skoric, et al., 2016). In addition, political participation occurs in-person and online, such as generating awareness about political candidates, volunteering for a campaign, online money contributions, and displaying buttons, signs, and stickers (Valenzuela, 2013; Weinstein, 2014; Warren, et al., 2014).

Also popular, NPOs and advocacy groups engage like-minded people with unique and creative experiences accessible through digital media and social media (Büscher, 2016; Hutchinson, 2021; Özdemir, 2012). They connect with others interested in a particular cause, such as tailoring messages to build and cultivate relationships, inspiring people through creative projects and storytelling, and aligning with businesses for philanthropic purposes that advance a cause (Ciszek, 2014; Seelig, et al., 2019; Harrison and Barthel, 2009). For example, the international organization ONE, established by Bono, the lead singer of the music group U2, is devoted to ending extreme poverty and preventable diseases, particularly in Africa. They have partnered with celebrities like Morgan Freeman and Connie Britton, activists, scientists, faith leaders, business leaders, and students to end global poverty (Tatarchevskiy, 2011). The ONE campaign launched a Web site and used social media to feature “ordinary people” in local communities sharing their stories about how they fight to end poverty. Volunteers from across the globe share what they are doing in their local communities to make a difference. The campaign also provided a range of resources on their Web site to get involved, including tools for mobilizing action in local communities.

ONE generated awareness through viral videos and (RED), a subdivision of ONE, which partnered with iconic brands to raise awareness and funds to support the fight against HIV and AIDS, and most recently COVID-19. These partners have produced an exclusive line of (RED) products such as clothes by GAP, Apple’s series six watch (product) red, as well as Vespa Primavera, Beats Solo3 wireless headphones, as well as Louis Vuitton candle, to name a few (see https://www.red.org).

Another organization, the Surfrider Foundation, advocates for the health of the world’s oceans and beaches using both the Web and social media at the national and local levels (Seelig, 2019; Seelig, et al., 2019). Surfrider provides communication advocacy kits and online tools for entities to act. Tool kits consist of petitions, letter-writing campaigns to government officials, how to host and coordinate beach clean-ups, promotion of art contests capturing why the oceans matter, and education materials for students to learn about protecting the oceans and marine ecosystems (see https://www.surfrider.org).

The broader evidence indicates a positive relationship between social media use and civic engagement and activism online (Chon and Park, 2020; Seelig, et al., 2019; Skoric, et al., 2016). Mainly, digital and social media have become effective for cultivating awareness about social issues plaguing all aspects of society, promoting civic engagement activities, cause-related events, and soliciting people to donate money, but mixed findings demonstrate how dialogue and virtual conversations motivate prosocial behaviors off-line (Chadha and Harlow, 2015; Haro-de-Rosario, et al., 2018; Ilten, 2015; Lee, 2020). For example, past
research found young adults use Facebook and Twitter to share content and make others aware of social issues, but they rarely take part in traditional engagement (Bokkowski and Smith, 2013; Meyer and Bray, 2013; Xu and Saxton, 2019). Young adults also reported flooded with posts and tweets about social causes, and as a result, overwhelmed and less likely to engage in activism.

Despite past research claiming social media effectively brings awareness to important social issues and have outlined the many benefits of using social media to increase activism (Ciszek, 2014; Hutchinson, 2021; Özdemir, 2012; Warren, et al., 2014), mainly the focus has been organization-public relationships and message-level analysis, not how or if social media motivates awareness online and willingness to engage in-person (Boulianne, 2019; Guo and Saxton, 2018; Seelig, 2018; Skoric, et al., 2016). Furthermore, national surveys of civic engagement have shown that civic engagement drops off after high school and while in college or working (Corporation for National & Community Service [CNCS], n.d.; Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 2013). Thus, while research has shown that young Millennials and GenZ are aware of social issues owing to social media use (Anderson, et al., 2018; Debevec, et al., 2013; Jones and Mitchell, 2016; Lee, 2020; Parker, et al., 2019), we know little about how actively they are engaging in behaviors online and the likelihood of engagement off-line. As such, this investigation attempts to answer the following broader questions:

- **RQ1**: What are young adults’ barriers to taking part in off-line engagement?
- **RQ2**: How do young adults perceive online activism translating into off-line engagement?

### Theoretical background

Initially introduced by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) has proven a valuable and relevant framework to understand human behavior across an array of disciplines (e.g., health communication, consumer behavior, technology adoption, and education). Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) posit that an individual’s behavioral intention to perform a specific behavior can be predicted by measuring two determinants: attitude and subjective norms. If an attitude is a function of an individual’s belief, then according to TRA, an individual evaluates whether to perform a behavior based on a held belief. As such, if performing a behavior will lead to a positive outcome an individual will hold a more favorable attitude toward performing the behavior such as using social media for social good, but if the belief is a negative outcome, then an individual will hold an unfavorable attitude and not use social media (Chang, et al., 2015; Chung, et al., 2010).

An extension of the TRA is Davis, et al.’s (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which is used for explaining motivations and intentions to use new technology. Two key determinants, perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, provide insight as to a person’s likelihood and intention to perform a specific behavior such as using social media for social good. Perceived ease of use (PE) is the perception that the technology requires little to no effort to use, while perceived usefulness (PU) is the expectation that technology helps perform the desired task. Research has applied TAM in similar technological contexts as the current study and found that people using social media to engage with others in virtual communities perceived them easy to learn and held a favorable view toward participating with others online (Chang, et al., 2015; Chung, et al., 2010; Park, et al., 2007; Yang and Wang, 2015). Another dimension of this research was that positive feelings and attitudes toward technology served as a motive to use technology (Dimitrova and Chen, 2006; Wang, et al., 2012).

Over the years, there have been several modifications to TAM such as the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Park, et al., 2007; Venkatesh, et al., 2003; Venkatesh and Davis, 2000; Venkatesh, et al., 2012; Yang and Wang, 2015). Intention to use technology also is related to the context of use, user experience, performance expectancy and effort expectancy (operationalized using the same items as perceived usefulness and ease of use) (Kwon and Wen, 2010; Lin and Lu, 2011; Warren, et al., 2014).
Although we know that young Millennials and GenZ are more aware of social issues because of messages dispersed through social media (Anderson, *et al.*, 2018; Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020; Debevec, *et al.*, 2013), we know little about how actively they are involved in advocating social change online or the likelihood of engagement off-line. Building on the above discussion and reviewed literature, this study proposed the following:

**H1**: Social media has a positive effect on (a) traditional engagement and (b) digital engagement.

**H2**: Digital engagement will have a positive effect on traditional engagement.

**H3**: Perceived ease of use will be positively associated with (a) perceived usefulness of social media and (b) behavioral intention to engage in digital engagement.

Recent research has also considered the concept of affordance, which Norman (2013) described as people’s perception of the actions possible to operate a thing or the ease of using an object to perform a particular behavior without specific directions. In the context of technological adoption, perceived technological affordances is when an individual perceives the new opportunities or specific benefits a specific technology adds to performing a behavior such as engaging with others in a virtual community using social media for activism (Chadha and Harlow, 2015; Itten, 2015; Hutchinson, 2021; Ruhleder, 2002; Wang, *et al.*, 2012). Past research also found perceived technological affordances strongly associated with both PE and PU (Chung, *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, this study incorporates perceived technological affordances as another factor linked to the intention to use technology.

**H4**: Perceived technology affordances will be positively associated with (a) perceived ease of use and (b) perceived usefulness of social media and (c) positively predicts digital engagement.

Research also shows that social norms (conceptualized as social influence, group incentives, and community involvement) and voluntariness (*e.g.*, civic-mindedness) exert some influence over an individual’s beliefs and behavioral intention to perform a behavior (Borrero, *et al.*, 2014; Dimitrova and Chen, 2006; Paek, *et al.*, 2013; Venkatesh, *et al.*, 2003). The underlying belief is that an individual performs a particular behavior when they evaluate a positive outcome and when others important to them think they should also engage in that behavior. Evidence supports that social norms influence the perception held by an individual to perform a specific behavior, such as joining a social network (Kwon and Wen, 2010) and network externalities such as friends and relatives influence individuals to join social networks (Lin and Lu, 2011; Wang and Chen, 2012). Empirical evidence suggests that younger Millennials are more inclined to engage in some form of social good online when a friend posts content or sends a request reaffirming the cliché of doing something because others are doing it too (Kim, *et al.*, 2016; Meyer and Bray, 2013; Xu and Saxton, 2019). From another perspective, the research found social influence, group incentives, and community involvement as a motivation for participation (Borrero, *et al.*, 2014; Wang, *et al.*, 2012; Warren, *et al.*, 2014).

People that are more aware of social issues, politically involved, pay close attention to the news, and express concern for others are thus more likely to be civic-minded (*e.g.*, willingness to take part in behaviors that support a social cause, online and off-line) (Dimitrova and Chen, 2006; Paek, *et al.*, 2013; Pattie, *et al.*, 2003). Research has shown that social media plays a considerable role in facilitating social interactions, voluntary engagement, and charitable giving online and positively related to one’s civic-mindedness (Mano, 2014; Yang and Wang, 2015). Evidence also indicates awareness of issues occurs on social media and a positive relationship between awareness of social issues generated civic engagement and activism online (Skoric, *et al.*, 2016). Relevant to this research, social norms and civic-mindedness influence an individual’s belief and behavioral intention to perform a behavior when they perceive others important to them think they should engage in that behavior and perceive intrinsic importance of the issue.
Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

\[ H5: \text{Civic mindedness (a), social norms (b), and perceptions about online vs off-line engagement (c) will have a positive effect on traditional engagement.} \]

\[ H6: \text{Civic mindedness (a), social norm (b), and perceptions about online vs off-line engagement (c) will have a positive effect on digital engagement.} \]

Method

A national online survey was designed and administered via Qualtrics in spring 2018 to measure more comprehensively what factors motivate young adults to take part in prosocial behaviors, both online and off-line. All participants were recruited through Qualtrics, an online platform that helps commercial marketers and academics recruit qualifying respondents for research at a nominal fee and fits a more representative sample of the U.S. population. Use of online research panels has been well established in the literature as a valid and reliable practice to recruit participants for research rather than using student samples or convenience sampling (e.g., Behrend, et al., 2011; Chon and Park, 2020; Heen, et al., 2014).

In our study, criterion sampling was used so that the sample fit the target population and compared favorably to U.S. census data (Dimitrova and Chen, 2006; Heen, et al., 2014; Krippendorf, 2013). Criteria for inclusion consisted of respondents in the 18 to 24 age group and self-reported social media users (Valenzuela, 2013; Yang and Wang, 2015). To avoid a self-selection bias, the survey invitation did not include specific details about the contents of the survey. The survey was approximately 15 minutes in length.

Our initial data set included responses from 1,346 respondents. However, we removed 295 cases due to missing values, failure to pass attention checks, or outliers (e.g., only one response for every answer or extreme values). After excluding these cases, the sample consisted of a total of 1,051 usable responses retained for the final analysis. Of the total, respondents were between the age of 18 to 24, 525 (50 percent) were male, 525 (50 percent) were female, and one refused to answer. Regarding race and ethnicity, 571 (54 percent) were Caucasian, 190 (18 percent) were Black/African-American, 154 (15 percent) were Hispanic or Latino, 76 (7 percent) were Asian-American/Pacific Islander, 14 (1.3 percent) were Native American/American Indian, and 46 (4.4 percent) were classified as “Other.” The highest level of education completed ranged from high school 336 (32 percent), freshman 60 (6 percent), sophomore 87 (8 percent), junior 84 (8 percent), to senior 59 (6 percent), and the highest, graduate 422 (40 percent). The sample also included participants from the five regions of the U.S., 284 (27 percent) from the northeast, 244 (23 percent) from the southeast, 226 (22 percent) from the midwest, 124 (12 percent) from the northwest, and 173 (17 percent) from the southwest. A majority of the participants (73 percent) said they use Facebook at least once a day; more than half use Instagram (60 percent) and Snapchat (60 percent) at least once a day; while less than half use Twitter (38 percent), Pinterest (22 percent) and LinkedIn (11 percent) at least once a day.

Measures

Items from a pilot study were revised for ambiguous wording and to address the phrasing and clarity of items included in the current study (Seelig, 2018). Additional constructs developed and validated for TAM and UTUAT in previous research were modified to better capture theoretical constructs applicable to this research (e.g., Chang, et al., 2015; Chung, et al., 2010; Venkatesh, et al., 2003; Wang, et al., 2012).

Traditional engagement. This construct was measured with 12 statements adapted from past research
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(Harlow and Harp, 2012; Howard, et al., 2006; Mano, 2014; Paek, et al., 2013; Pattie, et al., 2003), which asked respondents whether, during the last 12 months, they had taken part in traditional civic engagement activities, such as attending a social issues related event, signed a petition about a social issue, visited the Web site of a charity or social cause, contributed money to a charity or social cause, did volunteer work to help groups like the poor, homeless, or elderly, etc. Responses ranged from: not at all, sometimes, often, to very frequently. The 12 items were averaged to construct a traditional engagement index ($\alpha = .95$).

**Digital engagement.** This measure included 14 statements drawn from prior research (Boulianne, 2015; Harlow and Harp, 2012; Howard, et al., 2006; Mano, 2014; Warren, et al., 2014) in which respondents were asked whether, during the last 12 months, if they had ever used social media to post links about social issues, posted photos/videos/images of social issues, invited people to an event related to a social issue, or expressed an opinion about a social issue, etc. Responses ranged from: not at all, sometimes, often, to very frequently. Digital engagement was an index composed of 14 items to reflect digital engagement ($\alpha = .95$).

**Actual social media use.** This construct was measured through self-reported time using social media (Mano, 2014; Paek, et al., 2013; Valenzuela, 2013; Yang and Wang, 2015). Respondents were asked: “In a typical week, do you visit or use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Snapchat?” Responses ranged from several times a day, about once a day, a few days a week, every few weeks, to less often ($\alpha = .70$).

**Perceived ease of use (PE).** Items were adapted from TAM and UTAUT (Chung, et al., 2010; Davis, et al., 1989; Kwon and Wen, 2010; Venkatesh, et al., 2003; Wang, et al., 2012), and asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with six statements, such as “I find social media easy to use,” “Finding my way around social media is easy,” and “It is simple for me to navigate social media.” These items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .71$).

**Perceived usefulness (PU).** This measure also was adapted from TAM and UTAUT (Chung, et al., 2010; Davis, et al., 1989; Kwon and Wen, 2010; Venkatesh, et al., 2003; Wang, et al., 2012) and asked respondents to indicate how much they would agree or disagree with seven statements, such as “Social media is useful for information acquisition and exchange,” “Social media is useful for meeting people,” and “Social media is useful for entertainment.” All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .83$).

**Perceived technological affordances.** An extension of TAM included four items that measure perceived technological affordances (Chung, et al., 2010). Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with four statements such as “Social media allow people to engage in whatever ways they feel most comfortable,” and “Social media offer multiple ways for people to participate.” Items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .78$).

**Behavioral intention.** This measure was also an extension of TAM adapted for this study (Chung, et al., 2010; Park, et al., 2008; Yang and Wang, 2015). Two statements measured the likelihood of respondents taking part in engagement in the near future, both online and in-person. Responses were anchored by a seven-point scale, ranging from “extremely likely” to “extremely unlikely” ($\alpha = .78$).

**Social norms.** Nine items measured young adults’ perceptions of social norms and operationalized using the same items as social influence, group incentives, and community involvement given these items essentially capture the same aspects of social influence over one another’s behavior but with slight wording differences (e.g., Borrero, et al., 2014; Venkatesh, et al., 2012; Wang and Chen, 2012; Wang, et al., 2012; Yang and Wang, 2015). Participants responded to questions, such as “Most people who are important to me think that I should use social media,” “Activities in my community are an important part in my life,” and “Social media provides a sense of belonging with other people like me.” All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” ($\alpha = .85$).

**Civic-mindedness.** Two items measuring civic-mindedness were adapted from past research (Dimitrova and
Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with “Becoming acquainted with a social issue makes a difference in my life” and “Becoming acquainted with a social issue makes me feel like a better citizen.” Items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (α = .74).

**Online versus off-line activism.** The appeal of online activism compared to off-line activism was adapted from Harlow and Harp (2012), which asked respondents to indicate how much they agree or disagreed with five statements about their attitudes toward online activism, such as “online activism appeals to me more than off-line activism” and “online activism is easier than off-line activism.” All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (α = .76).

**Barriers to participation.** Respondents were asked about barriers to participating in-person (Corporation for National & Community Service [CNCS], n.d.; Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 2013). They answered “yes” or “no” to eight statements about engagement both in high school (α = .82) and after attending high school and attending college or working (α = .85), such as “I am usually too busy with schoolwork or working a job to volunteer,” “I do not know how to become active in volunteer work,” “I am not interested in doing volunteer work at this time,” and “I lack transportation to volunteer events.”

**Self-evaluation of engagement.** Respondents were also asked about their engagement since graduating high school. Two items asked: “In your opinion, since graduating high school and beginning college or working, are you more or less engaged in face-to-face activism about social issues?” and, “In your opinion, since graduating high school and beginning college or working, are you more or less engaged using social media to advocate for social issues?” Items were measured on a three-point scale: more engaged, less engaged, and, about the same (α = .70).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Barriers to engagement.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Back in high school ...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Usually too busy with schoolwork to volunteer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Usually too busy working a job to volunteer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I did/do not know how to become active in volunteer work.</td>
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<td>I was/am not interested in doing volunteer work at that time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I had/have too many other extracurriculars to volunteer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Few or none of my friends do volunteer work.</td>
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<td>Lack transportation to volunteer events.</td>
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Results

In addressing research question one about young adults’ barriers to face-to-face engagement in high school and after graduation, we found participants generally experienced similar barriers to engagement in-person (see Table 1). Mainly, young adults reported a lack of time because they were usually too busy with schoolwork or a job to volunteer as the primary barrier to off-line engagement. In addition, young adults reported participating more in high school than after graduating high school. Nearly half also shared that they engage more in high school because they completed volunteer hours as part of a high school or class requirement, and a third of respondents said that they did not know how to become active in volunteer work. Respondents not interested in doing any volunteer work were reasonably consistent while in high school and after graduation. Moreover, respondents shared that they volunteered more in high school because of friends than after graduation. We also asked respondents if they have been more or less engaged since graduating high school, and almost half (42 percent) said more engaged in-person, while slightly more (45 percent) said they are more engaged on social media.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree*</th>
<th>Agree**</th>
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<tr>
<td>Online activism is easier than off-line activism.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>51%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online activism appeals to me more than off-line activism.</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<td>Social media contributes to dialogue on social issues that interest me.</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am more aware of protests and other social causes because of social media.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activism on social media translates into activism off-line.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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In answering research question two, regarding how young adults perceive online engagement translates to
off-line engagement, as shown in Table 2, we found that respondents generally perceived online activism as more appealing and easier than participating in-person. In addition, participants reported that social media helped them become more aware of social issues and facilitated conversations online about social issues. However, less than half agreed that activism online translates into activism off-line.

To address the study’s hypotheses, we performed a series of correlation and regression analyses to examine what psychological and behavioral factors influence young Millennials and GenZ’s social media use, attitudes, intent, and willingness to engage virtually and in-person. The correlation matrix of all variables is shown in Table 3, along with their respective means and standard deviations.

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<td>Digital Engage (DE)</td>
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<td>.77*</td>
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<td>2.59</td>
<td>.99</td>
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<td>Perceived Usefulness (PU)</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>.15*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Ease of Use (PE)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.64*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Tech Afford (PTA)</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.36*</td>
<td>.62*</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online vs. Off-line (OvO)</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>.44*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.70*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Norms (SN)</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.46*</td>
<td>.53*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.66*</td>
<td>.70*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Mindedness (CM)</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.57*</td>
<td>.70*</td>
<td>.71*</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Intention (BI)</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>-.45*</td>
<td>-.50*</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.06**</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.41*</td>
<td>-.40*</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first set of hypotheses predicted that social media use will have a positive effect on traditional engagement (H1a) and digital engagement (H1b). To address H1a and H1b, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted for each hypothesis (see Table 4). Results show that social media use negatively predicts traditional engagement, [F(1, 1049) = 93.89, \( p < .001 \), \( R^2 = .08 \)], which indicates that eight percent of the observed variation could be explained by the model inputs. For every unit increase in digital engagement, traditional engagement will decrease by .24 [\( \beta = -.24, SE = .03, t = -9.7, p < .001 \)]. Results also show that social media use negatively predicts digital engagement, [F(1, 1049) = 127.10, \( p < .001 \), \( R^2 = .11 \)], which indicates that 11 percent of the observed variation could be explained by the model inputs. For every unit increase in digital engagement, traditional engagement will decrease by .26 [\( \beta = -.26, SE = .02, t = 11.27, p < .001 \)]. Thus, H1a and H1b were rejected.

### Table 4: Regression analysis summary for variables predicting digital engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Coefficient Std. Error</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
<th>Model Fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Use</td>
<td>4.801</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>-.329</td>
<td>46.024</td>
<td>.000**</td>
<td>[.4596, 5.005]</td>
<td>( R^2 = .108, p = .000** )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.411</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-11.274</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.329, .339]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>1.063</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.325</td>
<td>7.263</td>
<td>.000**</td>
<td>[.776, 1.350]</td>
<td>( R^2 = .106, p = .000** )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordance</td>
<td>.441</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.141</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.363, .518]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Norms</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.503</td>
<td>.933</td>
<td>.351</td>
<td>[.141, .397]</td>
<td>( R^2 = .253, p = .000** )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.763</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18.871</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.684, .842]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic-mindedness</td>
<td>1.067</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.421</td>
<td>9.709</td>
<td>.000**</td>
<td>[.852, 1.283]</td>
<td>( R^2 = .177, p = .000** )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.473</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15.020</td>
<td></td>
<td>[.412, .535]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second hypothesis predicted that digital engagement would have a positive effect on traditional
engagement (see Table 5). As shown in Table 3, we found a strong positive correlation between digital engagement and traditional engagement ($r = .77, p < .01$). Next, we conducted a simple linear regression analysis. The results show that digital engagement has a positive effect on traditional engagement [$F(1,1049) = 1597.91, p < .001, R^2 = .60$]. For every unit increase in digital engagement, traditional engagement will increase by .83 [$\beta = .83, SE = .02, t = 39.97, p < .001$]. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Coefficient Std. Error</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
<th>Model Fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept) Digital Engagement</td>
<td>.179</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.777</td>
<td>3.028</td>
<td>.003**</td>
<td>[.063, .295]</td>
<td>$R^2 = .604, p = .000*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept) Social Media Use</td>
<td>4.509</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>-.287</td>
<td>49.306</td>
<td>.000**</td>
<td>[.405, -.268]</td>
<td>$R^2 = .082, p = .000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept) Social Norms</td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>.153</td>
<td>.419</td>
<td>14.928</td>
<td>.000**</td>
<td>[.386, .549]</td>
<td>$R^2 = .175, p = .000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept) Civic-mindedness</td>
<td>1.174</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>.299</td>
<td>9.538</td>
<td>.000**</td>
<td>[.932, 1.415]</td>
<td>$R^2 = .089, p = .000**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third set of hypotheses predicted that perceived ease of use will be positively associated with perceived usefulness of social media ($H3a$) and behavioral intention to engage in digital engagement ($H3b$). A simple bivariate correlation test examined the relationships between these variables (see Table 3). The results show a positive relationship between perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of social media ($r = .64, p < .001$). However, there was a weak negative relationship between perceived ease of use and behavioral intention to engage in digital engagement ($r = -.06, p < .05$). The results of a multiple regression also show that perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, social media use, and behavioral intention were moderate predictors of digital engagement [$F(4,1045) = 87.32, p < .0005, R^2 = .25$]; accounting for 25 percent of the
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The fourth set of hypotheses predicted that perceived technology affordances would be positively associated with perceived ease of use (H4a) and perceived usefulness of social media (H4b). Also, perceived technological affordances will positively predict digital engagement (H4c). To address H4a and H4b, simple bivariate correlation tests were conducted (see Table 3). The results show a weak positive relationship between perceived technology affordances and perceived ease of use ($r = .37, p < .001$). There was also a moderate positive relationship between perceived technology affordances and perceived usefulness of social media ($r = .62, p < .001$). Thus, H4a and H4b were supported. In addition, a simple linear regression was conducted to test if perceived technology affordances significantly predicts digital engagement (H4c). The results show that perceived technology affordances positively predicts digital engagement, $[F(1, 1049) = 124.13, p < .001, R^2 = .11]$. For every unit increase in perceived technology affordances, digital engagement will increase by .44 [$\beta = .44, SE = .04, t = 11.14, p < .001$], thus supporting H4c.

The fifth set of hypotheses proposed that civic mindedness (H5a), social norms (H5b), and perceptions about online versus off-line engagement (H5c) would have a positive effect on willingness to take part in traditional engagement. A simple bivariate correlation test examined the relationships between these variables (see Table 3). The results show a positive relationship between traditional engagement and civic mindedness ($r = .33, p < .001$), social norms ($r = .46, p < .001$), and perceptions about online versus off-line engagement ($r = .32, p < .001$). Next, a multiple linear regression was calculated to examine the relationship between willingness to take part in traditional engagement based on civic mindedness ($\beta = .02$; $p = .68$), social norms ($\beta = .68; p < .001$), and perceptions about online versus off-line ($\beta = -.03$; $p = .61$) and explains 18 percent of the variance, $R^2 = .18$[F(3, 1047) = 74.27, $p < .001$]. However, only social norms was a significant predictor of traditional engagement, [$\beta = .68, SE = .07, t (1047) = 9.74, p < .001$], thus supporting H5b.

Our last set of hypotheses posited that civic mindedness (H6a), social norms (H6b), and perceptions about online versus off-line engagement (H6c) would have a positive effect on willingness to take part in digital engagement. As shown in Table 3, digital engagement was positively related to civic mindedness ($r = .45, p < .001$), social norms ($r = .53, p < .001$), and perceptions about online versus off-line engagement ($r = .46$, $p < .001$). The multiple regression model with all three predictors explained 27 percent of the variance, $R^2 = .27$ [F(3, 1047) = 128.35, $p < .001$]. It was also found that civic mindedness [$\beta = .09, SE = .05, t (1047) = 2.02, p < .05$], social norms [$\beta = .55, SE = .06, t (1047) = 8.84, p < .001$], and perceptions about online versus off-line engagement [$\beta = .17, SE = .06, t (1047) = 3.08, p < .05$] were significant predictors of willingness to take part in digital engagement, thus supporting H6a-c.

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**Discussion**

Research has established that social activism has grown in popularity with the emergence of social media and as a result, NPOs and advocacy groups communicate and engage directly with an “aware public” sparking a social conversation about important social issues (Chon and Park, 2020; Guo and Saxton, 2018; Hutchinson, 2021; Seelig, et al., 2019). The present study thus conducted a national survey of young adults to examine further how social media use, attitudes toward technology, civic-mindedness, social norms, and other factors influence digital engagement, and if online behaviors translates to a willingness to partake in off-line activities supporting a cause. As we have shown, young adults are engaging and connecting with others online about social issues, as supported by the literature (Haro-de-Rosario, et al., 2018; Skoric, et al., 2016; Seelig, 2018). More importantly, these findings show promise that digital engagement has some influence on willingness to engage in traditional activities aimed at improving society. The positive association between digital and traditional engagement points to NPOs and advocacy groups strategically
using social media to foster and maintain relationships with others interested in their cause and encouraging civic activity and activism online, and social activism has a positive effect on motivating off-line behaviors too. As such, these findings are encouraging given that past research found social media primarily used for information sharing and self-indulgence (Kim, et al., 2016; Lee, 2020; Yang and Wang, 2015).

Our research also yielded a significant positive relationship between social norms, civic-mindedness, and online versus off-line engagement perceptions and willingness to take part in digital engagement. This suggests that awareness of social causes online is contributing to how people interact with each other for the greater good in society (Chon and Park, 2020; Harlow and Harp, 2012; Paek, et al., 2013). This occurred as a result of young adults that perceived social media provides opportunities for interactions with like-minded people who also are concerned about important social causes and willing to engage with others in a virtual community about matters important to them. However, we found these factors were less effective in motivating traditional engagement. This finding may be attributed to the barriers we identified to participate in-person. In light of this, we suggest that NPOs and advocacy groups consider how to facilitate traditional engagement, such as promoting off-line activities supporting local communities, crafting volunteering around people’s hectic schedules, and resources that make it easier for people to participate face-to-face. Furthermore, past research found that issue importance motives off-line behavior (Chon and Park; 2020; Lee, 2020). Perhaps, then, NPOs and advocacy groups that strategically cultivate online relationships will make a convincing case that inspires an informed citizenry that successfully translates to off-line activities.

Consistent with past research that used the TAM and UTAUT in the context of social networks and the use of new technologies, our findings found perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness indirect determinants for social media use and digital engagement (Kwon and Wen, 2010; Wang, et al., 2012). However, this study found a weak negative relationship between perceived ease of use and behavioral intention. Conceivably, perceived ease of use did not influence the use of social media for routine users of the Internet that are well-informed about the functions and features of such applications and thus not a strong predictor of digital engagement as expected. At the same time, perceived technological affordances directly related to perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. As previous research found, it is likely that the young adults surveyed here are avid users of social media and already familiar with their functions and features and thus perceived ease of use was not relevant (Chung, et al., 2010), whereas perceived technological affordances captured the specific benefits social media offers people that are civic-minded and willing to partake in engagement online.

Our study is not without limitations and thus further investigation is warranted as to the extent in which online engagement manifests traditional engagement. Continued research in this area will provide a greater understanding of how social media and emerging technologies can support and enhance engagement both online and off-line. Therefore, we suggest research ought to consider how well NPOs and advocacy groups leverage social media as a powerful social mobilization tool and if awareness and online engagement convert into real-world action. Admittedly, this study did not differentiate between social media outlets to determine if a particular outlet entices more engagement than others, or if social media norms are unique to each platform. This research also did not address if the type of social cause encourages more engagement that translates awareness into action, both online and off-line.

Although our sample focused on young adults, it is worth noting that approximately half of the adults in the United States have used social media to engage in some type of social or political activity (Anderson, et al., 2018; Seelig, 2016). Thus, it would be interesting to expand this research to recruit a national sample of participants that fit other populations (e.g., 25–34; 35–49; 50–64; and 65+) for comparison. While this research was conducted at the time of the shootings in Parkland and before the current pandemic, recent events where young adults are active online (e.g., #MeToo, #MarchForOurLives, #BlackLivesMatter), also are driving young adults to protest and demand action off-line (Auxier and McClain, 2020). Thus, a continuation of this research will provide insight into using social media to interact with and increase participation of the public on more significant social-political issues and social movements as well as how best to mobilize supporters specifically related to behavior and willingness to take part in outreach for social causes, both virtual and in person.
Conclusion

In sum, the findings of this study provide evidence that social media is generating awareness and discussion of social and policy issues online. Also, young adults are open and willing to engage online for social causes, and these behaviors are starting to translate to engagement off-line. Overall, social interactions (e.g., family, friends, and peers) play an important role in influencing online engagement. As such, more research will uncover if social interactions have a more controlling/significant influence on their involvement in volunteering and activism in person. Perceived technological affordances, the appeal of online versus off-line activism, and civic-mindedness are other ingredients to understanding social activism online that perhaps turn into action off-line. Thus, looking forward, we believe NPOs and advocacy groups that design messages advocating specific conditions for people to partake in social activism will successfully engage an interested citizenry for the greater good.

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Note


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