Millennial Engagement in Online Activism: Theoretical and Practical Implications for Public Relations

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OVERVIEW

By determining both how and why Millennials use social media for online activism, activist groups and organizations may better understand online activism behaviors, such as effectively communicating with online activists and influencing both on- and off-line activist behaviors. This research sets the stage for future research that addresses specific communication strategies and messages that gratify Millennials to this extent. As a result of this research, organizations may better determine which online activist behaviors prompt offline activist behaviors and develop strategies that lead to tangible social-political impact. Further, the implications for potential activist-induced crises are realized in the connection between these online-offline behaviors.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

- **Online activism** is a politically-motivated movement which relies on the Internet and it includes proactive actions to achieve a common goal or reactive actions against certain controls and the imposing authorities (Vegh, 2003; McCaughey & Ayers, 2013).
- **Slacktivism** is low-cost, low-risk online activism – such as clicking "like" or "retweet" to show support for a cause, signing online petitions, sharing videos about an issue, or changing your profile picture to support an issue – which can affect other civic actions that occur offline (Lee & Hsieh, 2013).

MEASURES

Previous work on Internet motives by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), and Sun, Rubin, and Haridakis, (2008) was used to measure the uses and gratifications Millennials experience when engaging on social media platforms. Statements derived from research from McCaughey and Ayers, (2013), Jackson (1982) and Valenzuela (2013) on social media, Internet activism, and activist groups, measured online and offline engagement in activism.

Four research questions were proposed and tested:

- RQ1: In what ways are Millennials engaging in social media activism?
- RQ2: Which gratifications do Millennials fulfill by engaging in social media activism?
- RQ3: How are social media activism behaviors associated with Millennials' engagement with offline activism behaviors?
- RQ4: Does greater identification as an activist predict (a) online and (b) offline activism?

Participants used a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) to rate statements in this study. The uses and gratifications items for this study comprised of 32 items regarding how Millennials use social media platforms for: *interpersonal utility and social interaction* (10 items), *passing time* (8 items), *information seeking* (6 items), *convenience* (3 items), *entertainment* (3 items), and *control* (2 items). A high score indicated greater uses and increased gratifications from utilizing social media platforms, while a low score indicated less uses and diminished gratifications among participants.

Participants also responded to 22 items about *how they use social media for online activism behaviors* and higher scores on these online behaviors indicate active engagement in social media activism while low scores indicate that participants do not engage in social media activism behaviors. Participants then responded to 22 items about *how they engage in offline activism behaviors* and higher scores on these offline behaviors indicate that participants actively engage in offline activist behaviors, while low scores indicate that they do not engage in offline activist behaviors.

METHOD

Non-probability quantitative survey of 306 undergraduate students was conducted to learn more about the gratifications Millennials obtain through social media and whether associations exist between their online and offline activism behaviors.

RESULTS

An exploratory principal components factor analysis was conducted on the set of 22 items about online activism behaviors and 4 new factors were uncovered with eigenvalues greater than 1.0:

- **9 *Slacktivist Behaviors*** e.g. "posted a status," and "liked or favorited a post"
- **5 *Mobilize Others*** e.g. "signed an online petition," and "shared your experience about participating or supporting a social-political issue"
- **4 *Tangible Online Activism*** e.g. "changed my social media profile picture surrounding a social-political issue," and "donated money to a social-political issue that originated on social media,"
- **4 *Negative Perspectives*** e.g. "generally speaking, I prefer not to engage in social-political issues online," and "I do not like to voice my personal social-political beliefs on social media,"

Millennial participants engaged primarily in *slacktivist behaviors* (M = 4.01, SD = 1.65). *Tangible online activism behaviors* received the lowest overall mean scores (M = 2.23, SD = 1.26).

Participants utilize social media primarily for *entertainment* (M = 5.93, SD = .98) and *information seeking* (M = 5.92, SD = .92). A backward stepwise multiple regression was conducted to examine the relationship between uses and gratifications with online activism behaviors and ***interpersonal utility/social interaction* (β = .241) and *control* (β = .126) were significant predictors of online activism behaviors.**

A backward stepwise regression was used to determine which online activism factors predict offline activism. ***Tangible online activism* (β = .446), *mobilize others* (β = .307) and *negative perceptions* (β = .211) were positively and significantly associated with offline activism behaviors.**

Activism identification (β = .648) was a predictor of engagement in online activism. Activism identification (β = .621) was also a significant predictor of engagement in offline activism. Therefore, **identification as an activist predicted both online and offline activism among Millennials.**

MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

- Millennials do NOT have a strong inclination to engage in social media activism behaviors, but participate in these behaviors to a greater degree than in offline activism.
- Tangible online activism behaviors for online activism are the best predictors of offline activism among Millennials as these activities are more difficult to engage in than slacktivism behaviors.
- While Millennials can easily mobilize online, some tend to refrain from engagement in social-political issues online, and negative perceptions toward online activism predicted offline activism.
- It is impendent upon public relations researchers to examine the theoretical and practical implications of online activism for organizational outcomes – both tangible and otherwise.
- By understanding which gratifications Millennials seek to achieve through the performance of specific independent components of online activism, PR practitioners can target individual-level variables to encourage change.
- Millennial engagement in online activism does not naturally translate to offline activism which has practical applications for organizations as they develop targeted messages in order to garner support and engage Millennials through online mediums

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should consider whether online activism behaviors are influenced by social media platforms Millennials utilize frequently and whether key user interface features of these social media platforms are more conducive to engaging in online activism. This would allow PR practitioners to determine which social media platforms are best utilized in order to garner millennial support around issues-related campaigns.