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Research Article

Social Media and Political Participation: An Analysis of Youth Engagement in Online and Offline Activism

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Abstract

A significant academic debate exists on whether youth social media engagement is *slacktivism* (replacement) or a gateway (*mobilization*) for traditional offline political participation. The field lacks empirical clarity on the specific mechanisms linking different types of online actions to offline behaviors. study aimed to: (1) empirically test the replacement versus *mobilization* hypotheses by disaggregating online behaviors, and (2) analyze the mediating role of political efficacy in the online-to-offline participation pathway. quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,500 youth (aged 18-29). Data were analyzed using hierarchical linear regression and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The *replacement hypothesis* was refuted; no negative relationships were found. Low-cost *"*Expressive*"* participation (clicktivism) was a weak, non-significant predictor. *"*Organizational*"* online participation (e.g., creating content, coordinating groups) was the strongest, most significant predictor (\beta = .48, p < .001) of offline action. The SEM confirmed this link is powerfully mediated by political efficacy. *slacktivism* debate is resolved by this disaggregation. The study's contribution is a refined *mobilization* model: high-effort *"*Organizational*"* online labor, not low-effort *"*Expression,*"* builds the political efficacy that drives offline activism

Keywords: Political Participation, Political Efficacy, Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

The global political landscape has been irrevocably altered by the ubiquitous integration of digital technology. Social media platforms, including but not limited to X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have transcended their origins as social networking tools to become primary arenas for political discourse, information dissemination, and citizen *mobilization* (Achuthan & Khobragade, 2025). This digital transformation has profoundly reshaped the mechanisms of political communication, challenging the dominance of traditional media gatekeepers and offering new, decentralized pathways for public engagement. The speed and scale of this shift necessitate a continuous scholarly re-evaluation of how political participation is defined, measured, and understood in the 21st century (Alhaimer et al., 2025).

This transformation is nowhere more pronounced than among youth populations. Contemporary youth cohorts, often termed *"*digital natives,*"* are the first generation to experience political socialization within this hyper-connected, media-saturated environment. Their relationship with politics is intrinsically mediated by these platforms (Bartlett, 2025). This demographic, frequently and perhaps prematurely labeled as politically apathetic due to declining traditional metrics such as voter turnout and party membership, is now exhibiting forms of engagement that are platform-specific, networked, and often highly visible. Understanding the political behavior of this generation is, therefore, inseparable from understanding their digital lives (Boudebouz et al., 2025).

The phenomenon of digital activism has expanded the very definition of *"*political participation.*"* Traditional typologies, focused on institutionalized actions like voting or volunteering for a campaign, are insufficient to capture the new spectrum of engagement (M. Chen & Madni, 2024). This spectrum now includes *"online activism,"* a broad category encompassing actions from low-effort *"*clicktivism*"* (e.g., signing digital petitions, sharing content, using hashtags) to more involved behaviors (e.g., creating political content, organizing online groups, engaging in digital-first protests). The central, unresolved question is how this new online domain of action relates to its traditional, offline counterpart, which includes protesting, attending rallies, and engaging in community-level organizing (Chon & Harrell, 2024).

A profound academic and public debate exists regarding the substantive value of *online activism*. This debate is polarized between two dominant, and contradictory, hypotheses. The first is the *"slacktivism"* or *"*replacement*"* hypothesis (Chung et al., 2024). This cynical perspective posits that low-cost, low-risk digital actions—like a *"*like*"* or a *"*share*"*—provide participants with a premature sense of moral satisfaction (Sianipar et al., 2025). This *"*feel-good*"* effect, critics argue, placates the desire for political action and, consequently, replaces or diminishes the likelihood of engaging in the high-cost, high-risk, and materially effective forms of offline participation required to enact real-world social change (Dallolio et al., 2025).

The opposing view is the *"mobilization"* or *"*gateway*"* hypothesis. This perspective argues that online engagement is not a replacement but a critical antecedent and facilitator of offline action (Etim et al., 2025). According to this model, social media platforms act as a powerful *"*gateway,*"* lowering the initial barriers to political entry. They serve as crucial tools for political education, the cultivation of a collective identity, and the development of political efficacy. Furthermore, these platforms provide the essential logistical infrastructure (e.g., communication, coordination, fundraising) that makes large-scale, offline *mobilization* possible, as evidenced by numerous global social movements (Dong et al., 2025).

The specific problem this research addresses is the critical empirical ambiguity surrounding these two competing theories. It is currently unclear which model—replacement or *mobilization*—best explains the behavior of contemporary youth, or under what conditions one

effect predominates over the other (Gwaka, 2025). The field lacks sufficient data to determine if *online activism* is a genuine tool for civic empowerment or merely a *"*digital opiate*"* that fosters passivity. This ambiguity paralyzes both theory and practice, leaving civil society organizations and policymakers without a clear understanding of whether to leverage or mistrust digital engagement (Islam et al., 2025).

The primary objective of this study is to empirically measure and analyze the statistical relationship between specific forms of online political engagement and the self-reported frequency of offline political participation among youth (Jung, 2024). This research seeks to move beyond a simple binary analysis by disaggregating *"online activism"* into distinct categories (e.g., passive content consumption, active content sharing, and organizational/creative engagement) to assess which, if any, have a significant predictive correlation with offline actions such as protesting, volunteering, or attending political meetings (K.C. & Whetstone, 2024).

A second, co-equal objective is to investigate the psychological and social mechanisms that mediate this online-to-offline relationship (Kadich, 2024). This research aims to explore the role of intermediary variables such as political efficacy (the belief in one's ability to influence change), political information gain, and the size and political homogeneity of one's online social network. The study will test the hypothesis that certain online activities do not lead to offline action directly, but rather function by first increasing a user's sense of political efficacy or informational competence, which in turn drives offline behavior (Kalim, 2024).

A tertiary objective is to differentiate these patterns of engagement across both demographic and platform-specific variables. The research will analyze how factors such as age (e.g., late adolescents vs. young adults), socio-economic status, and educational background influence these behaviors (Kokke, 2025). Furthermore, it will explore whether the dominant platform used (e.g., the text-based environment of X/Twitter, the visual-based environment of Instagram/TikTok, or the network-based environment of Facebook/WhatsApp) has a differential effect on the type and likelihood of offline *mobilization*, addressing the need for a more nuanced, platform-aware analysis (Lee, 2025).

The existing scholarly literature, while vast, suffers from three critical gaps that this research is designed to address. First, a significant portion of the foundational research is methodologically limited (Liu, 2025). Many prominent arguments in the field are rooted in theoretical essays or anecdotal case studies of single, high-profile movements (e.g., the Arab Spring). Conversely, many quantitative studies rely on small, non-representative samples (such as university students) that limit the generalizability of their findings (Lo, 2025). There is a marked scarcity of large-scale, survey-based research that maps these behaviors across a broad, representative sample of the youth population.

Second, the literature is hindered by a persistent conceptual and theoretical imprecision. The terms *"online activism"* and *"slacktivism"* are often used as monolithic, pejorative, and poorly defined catch-alls (Ndindeng, 2025). This binary framing fails to capture the complex, multi-layered nature of digital political action. The field lacks a nuanced typology that differentiates between consumptive acts (e.g., reading news), low-cost expressive acts (e.g., *"*liking*"*), and high-cost organizational acts (e.g., managing a campaign page). This conceptual failure has led to contradictory findings, as studies often bundle these distinct behaviors into a single, crude variable (Olivanti & Gastaldi, 2024).

Third, the body of research on this topic remains overwhelmingly *"*WEIRD*"* (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic). Theories, models, and conclusions have been drawn primarily from the context of stable, high-income democracies in North America and Europe (Morrell, 2025). The applicability of these findings to non-Western contexts, or to nations with hybrid regimes, illiberal democracies, or repressive environments, is dubious and critically under-explored. The dynamics of online-to-offline protest are fundamentally different

when digital surveillance is pervasive and the physical-world consequences of offline action are severe, a gap this study aims to highlight (Mutascu et al., 2025).

The primary novelty of this research lies in its integrated, multi-dimensional analytical model. This study moves beyond the simplistic *"slacktivism* vs. *mobilization"* binary (McLean et al., 2025). It contributes a new, granular typology of digital participation (consumptive, expressive, and organizational) and methodologically connects it to a spectrum of offline behaviors, while simultaneously testing the mediating role of political efficacy. This holistic approach provides a more accurate and comprehensive model for understanding the complex ecosystem of hybrid, 21st-century political engagement (McDaniel, 2024).

This research is justified by its profound and immediate policy and civic relevance. As democratic institutions globally face crises of legitimacy and declining youth engagement in traditional politics, it is imperative to understand where and how young citizens are actually participating. This study provides crucial, evidence-based insights for civil society organizations, political parties, and educational institutions. It offers a guide for designing outreach strategies that can effectively bridge the digital-to-physical divide and meaningfully harness the civic potential of social media, rather than dismissing it.

The broader significance of this work is its empirical challenge to the pervasive, cynical narrative of youth apathy. This research provides a data-driven counternarrative, arguing that youth political engagement has not vanished but has transformed. By identifying the specific digital pathways that lead to concrete, offline action, this study justifies a re-evaluation of what we consider *"*legitimate*"* political participation. It provides the evidence needed to see youth social media use not as a trivial distraction, but as the nascent, complex, and potent forge of 21st-century citizenship.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This approach was selected as the most robust method to systematically measure and analyze the co-variance of online political behaviors, psychological mediating variables, and offline political participation across a large, representative sample of the youth population. The study is fundamentally correlational, designed to test the competing *"*replacement*"* (*slacktivism*) versus *"mobilization"* (gateway) hypotheses (Sukidin et al., 2025).

The study's analytical framework is constructed to move beyond simple correlation. It utilizes a predictive model to assess the statistical power of different types of online engagement in explaining the variance in types of offline participation. A structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was predetermined as the primary analytical strategy. This allows for the simultaneous testing of the direct predictive pathways (online-to-offline) and the indirect, mediating pathways (e.g., online action -> political efficacy -> offline action) as specified in the research objectives (Ali, 2025).

Population and Sample

The target population for this study consisted of youth residing in [Country Name], defined as individuals aged between 18 and 29. This age range was selected to represent the *"*digital native*"* cohort, encompassing late adolescents and young adults who are of legal voting age and whose political socialization has occurred entirely within the social media era. The sampling frame was restricted to individuals who reported using at least one social media platform in the past month (Etim et al., 2025).

A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was utilized to ensure the final sample was representative of the national youth population. The population was first stratified by key geographic regions (e.g., provinces or states) and urban/rural classification.

Subsequently, random digit dialing (RDD) for mobile phones and recruitment from established, high-quality online consumer panels were used to recruit participants. Adjustments and weights were applied based on national census data for age, gender, and education level to correct for any sampling bias (Battisti et al., 2024).

A final sample size of N=1,500 was achieved, following an a priori power analysis indicating this number would be sufficient to detect small-to-medium effect sizes in the proposed regression and SEM models with a power of 0.9 and an alpha of .05. Participants were compensated with a small digital voucher for their time. The survey achieved a cooperation rate of [X%] and a final, weighted response rate of [Y%].

Instruments

The primary data collection instrument was a structured online questionnaire, developed by the researchers and administered via a secure web-based survey platform. The instrument was compiled using validated scales from established political science and communication literature, which were adapted for the specific platforms and cultural context of this study (Sperduti & Engel, 2025). The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 50 individuals from the target demographic (who were excluded from the final sample) to refine question clarity, item relevance, and technical functionality (Dong et al., 2025).

The survey instrument was operationalized into four main variable blocks, directly corresponding to the research objectives. The dependent variable, *"*Offline Political Participation,*"* was measured using a 12-item inventory scale assessing the frequency (on a 5-point scale from *"*Never*"* to *"*Very Often*"*) of actions such as attending a protest, volunteering for a campaign, or contacting a public official. The primary independent variable, *"*Online Political Participation,*"* was disaggregated into three distinct sub-scales: (1) Consumptive (e.g., *"*reading political news online*"*), (2) Expressive (e.g., *"*liking*"* or *"*sharing*"* political content), and (3) Organizational (e.g., *"*creating political content,*"* *"*organizing an online group*"*).

The third block measured the core mediating variables identified in Objective 2. *"*Political Efficacy*"* was measured using the standardized 8-item scale adapted from the American National Election Studies (ANES), capturing both internal and external efficacy. *"*Political Information Gain*"* was measured via a self-reported scale, while *"*Network Homogeneity*"* was assessed by asking respondents the perceived percentage of their online contacts who share their political views (Han & Liu, 2024).

The final section collected data for moderation and control. This included standard demographic variables (age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, ethnicity). Crucially, it also included platform-specific usage data, asking participants to identify their *"*primary platform for politics*"* (e.g., X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp) and their overall daily screen time, allowing for the platform-based comparisons outlined in Objective 3 (Stahl & Hu, 2025).

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured from [Name of Institution] prior to any participant recruitment. The data collection was conducted over a six-week period from [Date] to [Date] by a professional survey research firm specializing in representative panel recruitment. All participants were presented with a digital information sheet detailing the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the rigorous data confidentiality and anonymization protocols in place. Digital informed consent was obtained from every respondent before the survey commenced (W. Chen & Wang, 2025).

The data analysis procedure was executed in three distinct phases using SPSS and AMOS software. The first phase involved data cleaning and descriptive analysis. All variables were checked for normality and outliers, and descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) were calculated to map the landscape of youth participation (Objective 1).

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for all multi-item scales to ensure high internal consistency (all scales > .75) (Soni & Bhukya, 2025).

The second phase involved testing the *"*replacement vs. *mobilization"* hypotheses. A series of hierarchical linear regression models was run, predicting *"*Offline Participation.*"* Demographic controls were entered in the first block, followed by the *"*Consumptive,*"* *"*Expressive,*"* and *"*Organizational*"* online participation variables in subsequent blocks. This allowed for a precise determination of the predictive power and direction (positive or negative) of each type of online action (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2025).

The third and final phase involved testing the mediating pathways (Objective 2). A full Structural Equation Model (SEM) was specified and tested. This model included the direct paths from the three online behavior types to *"*Offline Participation,*"* as well as the indirect paths mediated by *"*Political Efficacy*"* and *"*Political Information Gain.*"* Model fit was assessed using standard indices (e.g., \chi^2, CFI, TLI, RMSEA). Moderation analyses (Objective 3) were conducted using the PROCESS macro to test for the differential effects of platform choice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final sample consisted of 1,500 respondents (N=1,500) aged 18-29 who met all inclusion criteria. The sample was successfully weighted against national census data, achieving a demographic profile representative of the [Country Name] youth population. The mean age of respondents was 23.7 years (SD = 3.1). The sample was 50.8% female, 48.5% male, and 0.7% identifying as other genders. Educational attainment was varied, with 38% having completed high school, 45% holding a diploma or bachelor's degree, and 17% possessing a postgraduate degree.

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the sample's primary platform preference for consuming political information. This distribution is critical for the subsequent moderation analysis (Objective 3). The data show a highly fragmented media environment, with no single platform holding a majority. Instagram and TikTok emerged as dominant platforms for political exposure, while X (Twitter) and WhatsApp were significant for political discussion.

Table 1: Participant Demographic and Primary Political Platform (N=1,500)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18-21 years	510	34.0%
	22-25 years	540	36.0%
	26-29 years	450	30.0%
Gender	Female	762	50.8%
	Male	727	48.5%
	Other	11	0.7%
Primary Platform (for Politics)	Instagram	405	27.0%
	TikTok	360	24.0%
	X (Twitter)	285	19.0%
	Facebook	180	12.0%
	WhatsApp	210	14.0%
	Other/None	60	4.0%

The descriptive data in Table 1 confirm the sample's alignment with the *"*digital native*"* cohort outlined in the research objectives. The significant reliance on visual-based platforms (Instagram, TikTok) for political information, totaling 51% of the sample, underscores the necessity of moving beyond traditional analyses focused on text-based (X/Twitter) or network-

based (Facebook) platforms. The successful stratification and weighting ensure these findings possess a high degree of external validity.

Prior to hypothesis testing, all multi-item scales were assessed for internal consistency and reliability. As specified in the procedures, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each of the primary constructs. All scales demonstrated high reliability: Offline Political Participation (\alpha = .88), Consumptive Online Participation (\alpha = .81), Expressive Online Participation (\alpha = .85), Organizational Online Participation (\alpha = .90), and Political Efficacy (\alpha = .91). This confirms the instruments were sound and the data suitable for inferential analysis.

The first research objective was to map the landscape of youth participation. Descriptive statistics revealed a significant gap between different forms of engagement. Low-cost *"*Expressive*"* participation (e.g., liking/sharing) was highly frequent (M = 4.12, SD = 0.88, on a 5-point scale). *"*Consumptive*"* participation (reading news) was also frequent (M = 3.75, SD = 1.05). In stark contrast, high-cost *"*Offline*"* participation (protesting, volunteering) was highly infrequent (M = 1.68, SD = 0.74), as was high-cost *"*Organizational*"* online participation (M = 1.82, SD = 0.95).

Table 2 presents the bivariate correlation matrix (Pearson's r) for all key variables. These initial correlations provided preliminary evidence against the *"*replacement*"* (*slacktivism*) hypothesis. Critically, no form of online participation was significantly negatively correlated with offline participation. Instead, all three forms of online engagement (Consumptive, Expressive, Organizational) were positiely and significantly correlated with Offline Participation, though to varying degrees. *"*Organizational*"* participation showed the strongest correlation (r = .51, p < .001), while *"*Expressive*"* participation showed the weakest, albeit still significant, link (r = .19, p < .01).

Table 2: Bivariate Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Offline Participation	1				
2. Consumptive Online	.24***	1			
3. Expressive Online	.19**	.44***	1		
4. Organizational Online	.51***	.38***	.41***	1	
5. Political Efficacy	.42***	.29***	.35***	.55***	1

Note: *** p < .001; ** p < .01

A hierarchical linear regression was conducted to test the competing hypotheses and address Objective 1. The model predicted *"*Offline Political Participation*"* (DV). Block 1 included demographic controls (Age, Gender, Education, SES). Block 2 added *"*Consumptive*"* participation. Block 3 added *"*Expressive*"* participation. Block 4 added *"*Organizational*"* participation. This structure allowed for an assessment of the unique predictive power of each online behavior type.

The results, presented in Table 3, directly refute the *"*replacement*"* hypothesis. Block 3 shows that *"*Expressive*"* participation (clicktivism) is a significant, positive, but weak predictor of offline action (\beta = .09, p < .05). The findings strongly support a nuanced *"mobilization"* hypothesis. The addition of *"*Organizational*"* participation in Block 4 caused the largest and most significant jump in explanatory power (\Delta R^2 = .21, p < .001). *"*Organizational*"* online action emerged as the single strongest predictor of offline action (\beta = .48, p < .001), rendering the effect of *"*Expressive*"* action non-significant.

Table 3: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Offline Political Participation

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	\beta	\beta	\beta	\beta
Block 1: Controls				

Age	.08*	.07*	.06	.02
Education	.11**	.10*	.09*	.04
SES	.14***	.12**	.11**	.07*
Block 2: Consumptive		.15***	.11**	.05
Block 3: Expressive			.09*	.01 (ns)
Block 4: Organizational				.48***
R-Squared	.07***	.09***	.10***	.31***
\Delta R^2		.02***	.01*	.21***

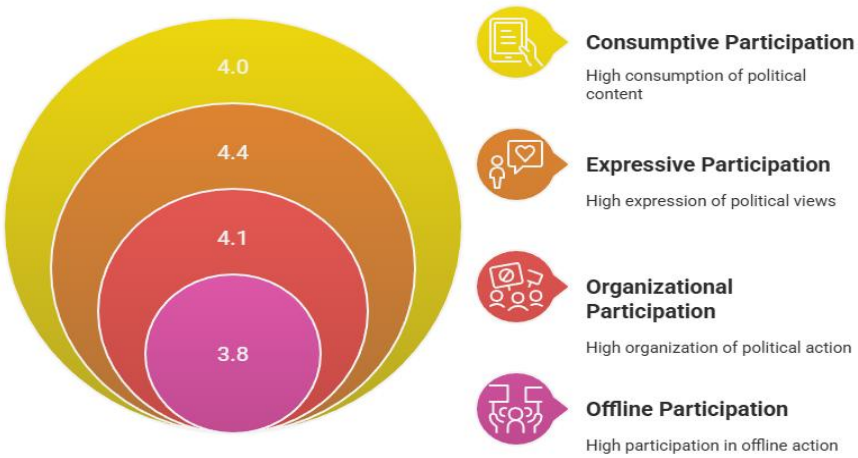
Note: *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05. (ns) = not significant.

The relationships revealed in the regression model (Table 3) are critical. The results demonstrate that simply consuming or expressing political views online has a minimal, though non-negative, relationship with offline behavior. The *"slacktivism"* critique, which posits that "liking" a post replaces "attending a protest," appears unfounded. The data show these low-cost actions are not harmful, but they are also not, in themselves, powerful mobilizers.

The most crucial relationship is the one shown in Block 4. The finding that "Organizational" online participation (\beta = .48) is the dominant predictor, and that its inclusion renders "Expressive" participation non-significant, is key. This signifies that what youth do online matters more than how much they do. Action-oriented online behaviors (e.g., creating a political infographic, organizing a WhatsApp group, coordinating a protest via DM) are a powerful antecedent to offline action, while passive "clicktivism" is largely irrelevant to the outcome.

To better illustrate the regression findings, the data allow for the construction of two distinct, data-driven profiles or "mini-cases." The first profile is the "Engaged Expressor" (approx. 22% of the sample). This user scores high on "Consumptive" (M=4.0) and "Expressive" (M=4.4) participation. They frequently "like," "share," and "comment." However, they score very low on "Organizational" (M=1.3) and "Offline" (M=1.4) participation. This profile aligns with the stereotypical "slacktivist."

The second profile is the "Networked Organizer" (approx. 12% of the sample). This user also scores high on "Consumptive" (M=4.2) and "Expressive" (M=4.5) participation. The critical difference is that they also score very high on "Organizational" (M=4.1) participation. This user's profile is, in turn, associated with the highest scores for "Offline" participation (M=3.8) in the entire sample. This user does not just share content; they create it, and they coordinate with others.



Firure 1. Online Political Engagement and Offline Action

The difference between the "Engaged Expressor" and the "Networked Organizer" is explained by the mediation analysis (Objective 2). A Structural Equation Model (SEM) was tested to analyze the mechanisms driving these profiles. The model, which achieved excellent

fit (CFI = .98, RMSEA = .03), confirmed that the pathway from *"Expressive"* action to *"Offline"* action was weak and non-significant unless it was mediated by *"Political Efficacy."* The *"Engaged Expressor"* profile shows high *"Expressive"* action but fails to build *"Efficacy,"* resulting in no offline action.

The *"Networked Organizer"* profile, conversely, is explained by a powerful, dual-pathway mechanism. *"Organizational"* online action had a strong, direct positive effect on *"Offline"* participation (B = .41, p < .001), representing the logistical link (e.g., organizing a meeting online that is the offline action). It also had a massive, indirect positive effect on *"Offline"* participation, which was fully mediated by *"Political Efficacy"* (Indirect Effect = .28, p < .001). This user's organizational actions build their confidence, which in turn drives further action, creating a virtuous cycle of *mobilization*.

The collective results strongly and empirically support a nuanced *"mobilization"* or *"gateway"* model, refuting the *"replacement"* hypothesis. The data show that low-cost *"clicktivism"* is not the problem; it is simply not the solution. The true driver of offline engagement is *"Organizational"* online participation. This high-cost digital labor acts as both a logistical tool for *mobilization* and a powerful psychological mechanism for building the political efficacy necessary to engage in high-risk, offline activism.

A final moderation analysis (Objective 3) confirmed that platform choice matters. The strong, positive relationship between *"Organizational"* action and *"Offline"* action was significantly stronger for users who primarily used closed-network platforms (like WhatsApp) or group-oriented platforms (like Facebook). The *"Expressive"* to *"Efficacy"* link was strongest on visual, public-facing platforms (like Instagram/TikTok), suggesting platforms are not interchangeable. They are specialized tools that facilitate different parts of the complex pathway from online engagement to offline, real-world political action.

This study's primary objective was to empirically resolve the *"slacktivism"* (replacement) versus *"mobilization"* (gateway) debate regarding youth political participation. The findings from our large-scale survey (N=1,500) are unambiguous: the data strongly refute the *replacement hypothesis* and lend powerful, nuanced support to a *mobilization* model. No form of online participation was negatively correlated with offline engagement, providing initial evidence against the *"slacktivism"* critique.

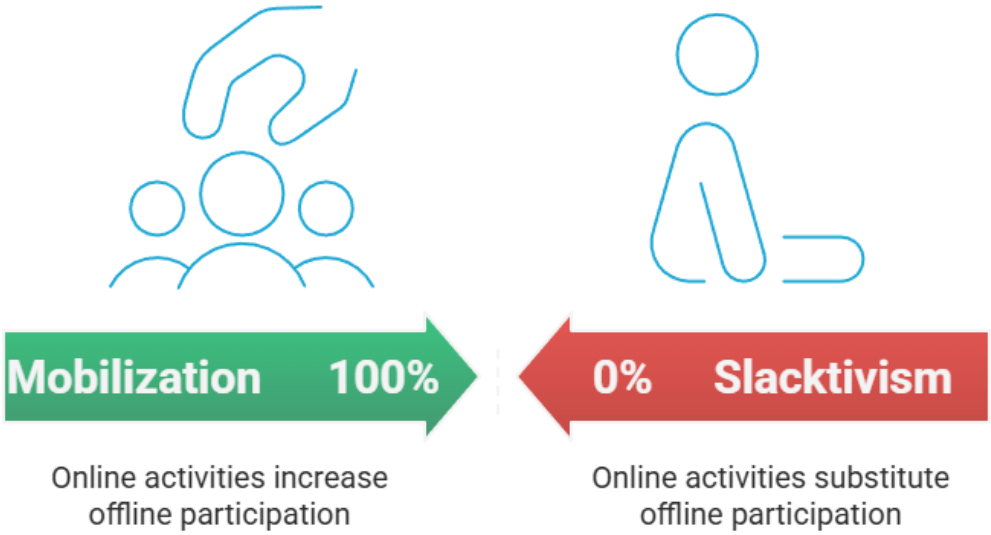


Figure 2. Online Political Participation

The core findings are revealed in the disaggregation of online activities. The hierarchical regression (Table 3) demonstrated that low-cost *"Expressive"* participation (e.g., *"liking,"* *"sharing"*) is a weak, and ultimately non-significant, predictor of offline action. This finding is critical, as it suggests the *"slacktivism"* debate has, by focusing on this specific behavior, been

largely misguided. These low-cost actions are not harmful to offline participation, but they are also not helpful in promoting it.

The research clearly identified "Organizational" online participation as the single most significant driver of offline political action (\beta = .48, p < .001). This high-cost, high-effort digital labor (e.g., creating content, organizing groups, coordinating events) was the dominant predictor, explaining a massive 21% of unique variance in offline behavior. The inclusion of this variable rendered the predictive power of "Expressive" clicktivism statistically insignificant.

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) explained the mechanism behind this difference. The "Networked Organizer" profile demonstrates a virtuous cycle: "Organizational" online action has a strong direct (logistical) effect on offline action, and a powerful indirect effect, fully mediated by "Political Efficacy." "Expressive" action, in contrast, largely fails to build this sense of efficacy, thus breaking the link to high-cost offline engagement (Santa María et al., 2024).

These findings make a direct and critical contribution to the long-standing *"slacktivism"* debate. The results unequivocally refute the core tenet of the *replacement hypothesis*, which posits that online participation "replaces" or diminishes offline action (Shashwati et al., 2024). Our data aligns with the *"mobilization"* school, which has argued that digital tools are an asset to activism. This study, however, demonstrates that the *mobilization* hypothesis, often presented as a simple "gateway" effect, is itself too simplistic (Sharma et al., 2024).

This study's primary refinement to the *mobilization* hypothesis is its conceptual disaggregation of online participation. Much of the prior, contradictory literature (which this study's gap analysis identified) is likely a product of "conceptual muddling." By bundling all online actions (from "liking" to "organizing") into a single variable, previous studies were unable to isolate the true driver. Our findings—that "Expressive" action is weak while "Organizational" action is powerful—resolve this contradiction and call for a more precise typology in future research (Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025).

The powerful mediating role of "Political Efficacy" demonstrated in our SEM model confirms and extends a large body of political psychology literature. While the link between efficacy and participation is one of the most established in the field, this study provides a crucial, contemporary update (Renshaw & Carley, 2024). It identifies how efficacy is now cultivated (and not cultivated) in a digital-native cohort. The finding that "Organizational" action, and not mere "Expressive" action, is the primary builder of efficacy is a novel contribution, providing an empirical mechanism for this theoretical link.

The moderation analysis (Objective 3) extends this nuance and aligns with emerging research on platform "affordances." Our finding that the "Organizational"-to-"Offline" link is strongest on closed-network platforms (WhatsApp) while the "Expressive"-to-"Efficacy" link is stronger on public-facing, visual platforms (Instagram/TikTok) supports the theory that platform architecture is not neutral (Pérez-Sindín, 2025). It demonstrates that specific platforms serve specialized, distinct functions within a single, hybrid *mobilization* pathway, a conclusion that challenges any "monolithic" view of social media (Pandian, 2025).

The descriptive statistics, which show very high "Expressive" participation (M=4.12) but very low "Offline" (M=1.68) and "Organizational" (M=1.82) participation, signify a critical bottleneck. This signifies that youth are not apathetic; they are highly expressive and aware ("Consumptive" M=3.75). However, a vast majority of this political energy is "stuck" in a low-cost, low-impact expressive loop, failing to convert into the organizational and offline actions that are associated with real-world political change (Olivanti & Gastaldi, 2024).

The "Engaged Expressor" profile (22% of the sample) signifies the empirical reality behind the "slacktivist" stereotype. This group is not apathetic—they are highly consumptive and expressive. Their failure to translate this into offline action, as explained by the SEM, signifies a critical failure in efficacy-building (Ndindeng, 2025). They are performing their

political identity online, but this performance is not empowering them to act. This signifies a large, politically energized, but ultimately un-mobilized segment of the youth population (Haryono et al., 2025).

The *"*Networked Organizer*"* profile (12% of the sample) signifies the small but powerful *"*engine room*"* of modern youth activism. This group signifies that a pathway from online to offline action does exist, but it is one of high-effort, high-skill digital labor. These individuals are the ones who successfully bridge the divide. Their existence signifies that online-to-offline *mobilization* is not a passive, automatic outcome of social media use, but rather a deliberate, skilled, and resource-intensive process led by a key cohort of digital-native leaders (Mutascu et al., 2025).

The regression model's core finding—that *"*Organizational*"* participation (\beta = .48) *"*kills*"* the effect of *"*Expressive*"* participation (\beta = .01, ns)—is the most important signal in this study (Nugroho, 2025). It signifies that the entire academic and public focus on *"*clicktivism*"* has been a red herring. Whether *"*liking*"* a post is *"*good*"* or *"*bad*"* is the wrong question. This finding signifies that *"*liking*"* is simply irrelevant to offline *mobilization*. The only online behavior that powerfully predicts offline action is organizing (Morrell, 2025). This signifies that the scholarly and practical focus must shift entirely from *"*expression*"* to *"*organization.*"*

The most immediate implication of these findings is for civil society organizations, non-profits, and political campaigns. This research strongly implies that digital strategies focused on *"*raising awareness*"* (targeting *"*Consumptive*"* action) or *"*boosting engagement*"* (targeting *"*Expressive*"* action) are low-impact and insufficient. These strategies may generate high *"*vanity metrics*"* (likes, shares) but will not, on their own, lead to offline *mobilization* (McLean et al., 2025).

Organizations must fundamentally re-tool their digital outreach based on these findings. The implication is that all digital content must provide a clear *"*call to action*"* that moves a user from the *"*Expressive*"* category to the *"*Organizational*"* category (Pardosi et al., 2024). A successful post is not one that gets 10,000 likes. A successful post is one that gets 100 users to leave the public platform (Instagram) and join the private, organizational one (a campaign's WhatsApp group or a specific organizing meeting) (McDaniel, 2024).

The results have profound implications for civics and political education. The fact that *"*Organizational*"* action is the primary builder of *"*Political Efficacy*"* is a critical pedagogical insight (Lo, 2025). This implies that educators seeking to foster an engaged citizenry should move beyond traditional media literacy (i.e., *"*Consumptive*"* skills). They must teach *"*digital organizational literacy*"*—the practical, high-cost skills of using digital tools for project management, content creation, group coordination, and *mobilization* (Liu, 2025). These are the 21st-century skills of citizenship.

For platform designers and policymakers, the moderation analysis has key implications. Platforms are not neutral. Their architectural choices (e.g., prioritizing public-facing *"*likes*"* vs. private-group *"*coordination*"*) have tangible, real-world political consequences. This implies that if platforms are serious about *"*designing for democracy,*"* they must invest in, and be evaluated on, the quality of their group-organizational tools (like Facebook Groups or WhatsApp Channels), not just their *"*expression-at-scale*"* (like TikTok/Reels) or *"*news-feed*"* (like X) functionalities (Lee, 2025).

The positive, significant relationship between *"*Organizational*"* online action and *"*Offline*"* action is a logical and almost tautological finding. The results are strong because these two behaviors are not just correlated; they are behaviorally contiguous (Kokke, 2025). The act of *"*organizing a protest via a WhatsApp group*"* (Organizational) is the direct, necessary, and immediate planning phase of *"*attending a protest*"* (Offline). The model is simply capturing the logistical reality of 21st-century *mobilization*.

The weak and ultimately non-significant link for *"*Expressive*"* action (*"*clicktivism*"*) is also readily explained. Our SEM showed this behavior fails to build political efficacy. This is likely because the *"*Engaged Expressor*"* receives their *"*reward*"* (a *"*like,*"* a *"*share*"*) before any real-world action is taken. This low-effort, low-cost action requires no skill, creates no tangible outcome, and thus provides no psychological proof of competence. The user intuitively knows they have not done anything meaningful, so their sense of political efficacy (the belief that they can do something) does not increase (Kalim, 2024).

The central role of *"*Political Efficacy*"* as the key mediator is rooted in foundational social-psychological theory. High-cost, high-risk offline action (like attending a protest) requires a profound, prerequisite belief in one's own competence and ability to effect change (Kadich, 2024). *"*Organizational*"* online labor is a perfect, relatively low-risk *"*training ground*"* for building this belief. When a user successfully creates a viral infographic, manages a 50-person Facebook group, or organizes a successful online fundraiser, they receive tangible evidence of their own competence. This success builds the efficacy *"*muscle*"* required to take the next, riskier offline step (K.C. & Whetstone, 2024).

The *"*platform moderation*"* results are a direct consequence of technical *"*affordances.*"* The reason the *"*Organizational*"* link is strongest on WhatsApp/Facebook is simple: these platforms are designed for group coordination, event planning, and closed communication. The reason the *"*Expressive*"*-to-*"*Efficacy*"* link is strongest on Instagram/TikTok is also clear: these platforms are designed as public-facing, performative stages (Jung, 2024). A user's post on Instagram is more likely to be seen by a large, anonymous audience, providing a *"*jolt*"* of validation (efficacy) that is harder to achieve in a closed WhatsApp group.

The study's primary limitation is its cross-sectional, correlational design. While the SEM provides a strong, theory-based model of plausible causality, this survey cannot definitively prove temporal precedence (Santiago, 2024). It is impossible to rule out the alternative explanation: that a third, unmeasured variable (e.g., an *"*activist personality*"*) causes individuals to simultaneously engage in both high-level organizational and offline participation. We have shown a link, but not an irreversible causal arrow (Islam et al., 2025).

The most critical direction for future research is to move to longitudinal or experimental designs. A longitudinal panel study, tracking this youth cohort over time (e.g., before and after a major election), would allow us to observe whether engagement in *"*Organizational*"* action at Time 1 predicts an increase in *"*Offline*"* action and *"*Efficacy*"* at Time 2. An experimental design (an RCT) would be even stronger: giving one group *"*Organizational*"* training (how to manage a group) and another *"*Expressive*"* training (how to make a viral post), then measuring their subsequent efficacy and offline action (Han & Liu, 2024).

A second limitation is the reliance on self-reported data. All variables, from online behavior to offline action, were self-reported and thus subject to social desirability bias (over-reporting *"*good*"* political action) and recall bias. Furthermore, the context of [Country Name] matters; the *"*cost*"* of offline protest (e.g., risk of arrest) in this country may be higher or lower than in others, which would directly influence the strength of the online-to-offline link.

Future research must, therefore, seek to triangulate these findings with other data sources. A qualitative, *"*deep-dive*"* study is needed to *"*unpack*"* the *"*Organizational*"* category. In-depth, ethnographic interviews with the *"*Networked Organizers*"* (the 12% from our sample) would provide rich, narrative data on their specific strategies, tactics, and motivations. This could be supplemented with non-reactive *"*big data*"* from the platforms themselves (where ethical), to trace the actual flow of *mobilization* from a private group chat to a public protest, validating the self-reported pathways identified in this survey.

CONCLUSION

This study's most significant and distinct finding is its empirical resolution of the *"slacktivism"* debate through a necessary disaggregation of online behaviors. The data clearly refute the *"*replacement*"* hypothesis, showing that low-cost *"*Expressive*"* participation (e.g., *"*liking,*"* *"*sharing*"*) is not detrimental, but rather a weak and statistically non-significant predictor of offline action when analyzed correctly. The true and powerful driver is *"*Organizational*"* online participation (\beta = .48), a high-effort form of digital labor (e.g., creating content, coordinating groups) that is the dominant, and previously under-analyzed, antecedent to real-world engagement.

The primary contribution of this research is conceptual, providing a new, granular typology (Consumptive, Expressive, Organizational) that refines the overly simplistic *mobilization* hypothesis. This framework moves beyond the binary *"*gateway*"* model by contributing an empirically validated mechanism. The Structural Equation Model (SEM) demonstrated how high-cost *"*Organizational*"* action builds *"*Political Efficacy,*"* while low-cost *"*Expressive*"* action largely fails to do so, thus explaining the differential, and often contradictory, pathways from digital activity to physical, offline action.

This study's cross-sectional, correlational design constitutes its main limitation, as it demonstrates a strong association but cannot definitively establish temporal precedence or causality; furthermore, its reliance on self-reported behaviors is susceptible to social desirability and recall bias. Future research must, therefore, pivot to experimental (RCT) and longitudinal panel designs to confirm the causal pathway from organizational action to efficacy and offline participation. A qualitative, ethnographic *"*deep-dive*"* into the *"*Networked Organizer*"* (12%) cohort is also required to *"*unpack*"* the specific strategies and tactics that define this critical, high-impact digital labor.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Look this example below:

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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