

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: AN ANALYSIS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE AND OFFLINE ACTIVISM

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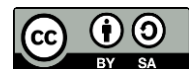
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Abstract

Indonesia's decentralization and regional autonomy reforms, implemented in the early 2000s, aimed to enhance local governance and improve public services. However, these reforms have led to varying outcomes across Indonesia's provinces, with significant disparities in the quality and accessibility of public services. This study investigates how decentralization has influenced public service delivery and governance challenges in different regions, highlighting the uneven impacts of these reforms. This research aims to analyze the disparities in public service delivery across Indonesian provinces and the governance challenges resulting from the decentralization process. The study seeks to understand the factors contributing to these disparities and their implications for regional development and equity in public service provision. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data analysis from national and regional reports with qualitative interviews with local government officials and community leaders. The study examines key indicators of public service performance, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, across various provinces. The study reveals significant disparities in public service delivery, with wealthier and more urbanized provinces exhibiting better outcomes. Meanwhile, poorer and more remote regions face challenges in governance capacity and resource allocation, leading to uneven public service provision. The decentralization process in Indonesia has had mixed results, with regional autonomy contributing to greater governance flexibility but also deepening disparities in public service quality. Further reforms are necessary to address these inequities and strengthen local governance capabilities.

Keywords: Political Participation, Political Efficacy, Social Media, Slacktivism, Youth Activism



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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 (Giancola, Perazzini, et al., 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 (Schoon et al., 2025). 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.

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 (Threadgold et al., 2025). Their relationship with politics is intrinsically mediated by these platforms. 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 (Mužik et al., 2025). Understanding the political behavior of this generation is, therefore, inseparable from understanding their digital lives.

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 (Banunle, 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.

A profound academic and public debate exists regarding the substantive value of online activism. This debate is polarized between two dominant, and contradictory, hypotheses (Schittenhelm et al., 2025). The first is the “slacktivism” or “replacement” hypothesis. 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 (Armstrong et al., 2025). This “feel-” 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.

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 (Sah & Fang, 2025). According to this model, social media platforms act as a powerful “gateway,” lowering the initial barriers to political entry (Junior et al., 2025). They serve as crucial tools for political education, the cultivation of a collective identity, and the development of political efficacy (Kaushik et al., 2025). 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.

The specific problem this research addresses is the critical empirical ambiguity surrounding these two competing theories (Giancola, Vinciguerra, et al., 2025). 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 (AlAfnan, 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 (Islamiyati & Ammar, 2023). 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.

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 (Hunter & Biglaisier, 2025). 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.

A second, co-equal objective is to investigate the psychological and social mechanisms that mediate this online-to-offline relationship (Jobin et al., 2026). 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 (S. P. Smith, 2025). 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.

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 (Iranzo-Cabrera et al., 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.

The existing scholarly literature, while vast, suffers from three critical gaps that this research is designed to address (DePaula & Hansson, 2025). First, a significant portion of the foundational research is methodologically limited. 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 (Tiwari et al., 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 (Hart et al., 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.

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 (Rando Cueto et al., 2024). 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 (Borchers, 2025). 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.

The primary novelty of this research lies in its integrated, multi-dimensional analytical model (Nguyen et al., 2025). This study moves beyond the simplistic “slacktivism vs. mobilization” binary. 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 (Kubin et al., 2025). This holistic approach provides a more accurate and comprehensive model for understanding the complex ecosystem of hybrid, 21st-century political engagement.

This research is justified by its profound and immediate policy and civic relevance (Davidson & Enos, 2025). 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 (Milli et al., 2025). This study provides crucial, evidence-based insights for civil society organizations, political parties, and educational institutions (Kacperski et al., 2025). 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 (Hicks et al., 2025). The study is fundamentally correlational, designed to test the competing “replacement” (slacktivism) versus “mobilization” (gateway) hypotheses (Weigel & Gitomer, 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 (Curth & Mayeux, 2025). A structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was predetermined as the primary analytical strategy (Newth & Scopelliti, 2025). 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.

Research Target/Subject

The target population consists of “digital natives” aged 18 to 29 who have used at least one social media platform within the past month (Salamon, 2026). To ensure a representative sample of the national youth population, a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed, segmenting the population by geographic region and urban/rural classification. The study achieved a final sample size of N=1,500, which was determined via a priori power analysis to be sufficient for detecting small-to-medium effect sizes. The sample was further refined using weights for age, gender, and education level based on national census data to correct for sampling bias.

Research Procedure

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured from prior to any participant recruitment. The data collection was conducted over a six-week period from 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.

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).

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.

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., χ^2 , CFI, TLI, RMSEA). Moderation analyses (Objective 3) were conducted using the PROCESS macro to test for the differential effects of platform choice.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

The primary data collection instrument is a structured online questionnaire compiled from validated scales in political science and communication literature. The instrument is operationalized into four variable blocks: (1) Offline Political Participation (12-item inventory), (2) Online Political Participation (disaggregated into consumptive, expressive, and organizational sub-scales), (3) Mediating Variables (including Political Efficacy and Network Homogeneity), and (4) Demographic/Platform Controls. Data collection was conducted via a secure web-based survey platform, utilizing random digit dialing (RDD) and high-quality online consumer panels to recruit the representative cohort.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was executed using SPSS and AMOS software, employing both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The study utilizes Cronbach's alpha to ensure internal consistency across all multi-item scales. The core analysis involves hierarchical linear regression to test the "replacement vs. mobilization" hypotheses and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate model fit through indices such as χ^2 , CFI, TLI, and RMSEA. Additionally, the PROCESS macro was used for moderation analysis to examine the differential effects of specific social media platforms, such as TikTok, X (Twitter), and Instagram, on political outcomes.

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 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 positively 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 ($r = .19, p < .01$).

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.

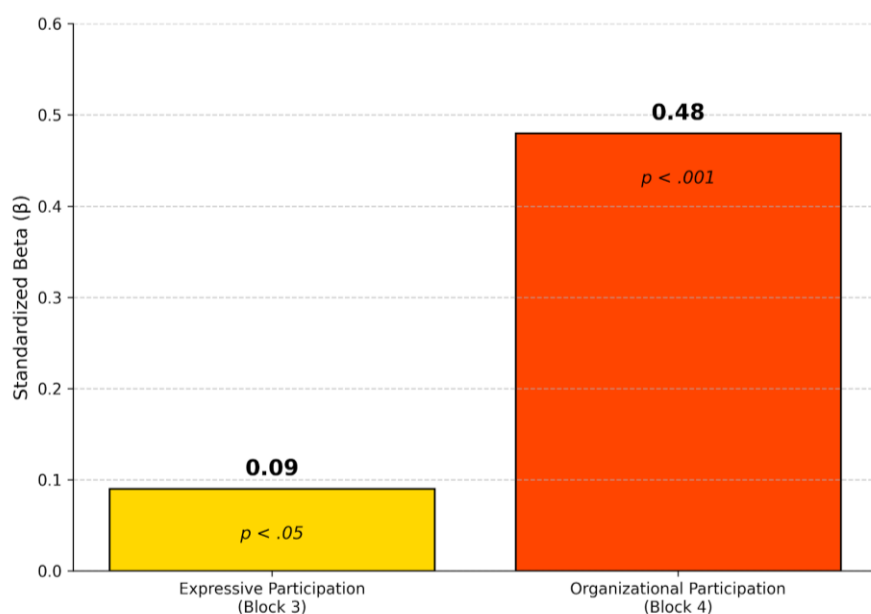


Figure 1. Predictors of Offline Action (Beta Coefficients)

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.

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.

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.



Figure 2. Networked Organizer’s Offline Participation

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 (K. A. Smith et al., 2025). 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 (Squires et al., 2025). No form of online participation was negatively correlated with offline engagement, providing initial evidence against the "slacktivism" critique.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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. 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. 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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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).

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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

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. “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.

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. 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. 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.

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.

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.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used ChatGPT to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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