Slacktivists or Activists?
Millennial Motivations and Behaviors for Engagement in Activism

Sasha R. Dookhoo, M.A.
Senior Account Executive
PAN Communications

Melissa D. Dodd, Ph.D., APR
Associate Professor
University of Central Florida
melissa.dodd@ucf.edu

Abstract

Millennials are the world's digital natives and its largest generation. This study explores how   Millennials are engaging in social media activism and whether online activism is driving offline   activism behaviors. A quantitative survey of 306 participants was conducted to learn more about the gratifications Millennials obtain through social media and whether associations exist between their online and offline activism behaviors. The results showed that Millennials engage in online activism behaviors to a greater extent than offline activism behaviors. Millennials primarily gratify intrinsic needs for interaction, belonging, and control by engaging in social media activism behaviors. So-called "slacktivist" behaviors were most common among Millennials engaging in online activism. Similarly, online activism behaviors that require greater investment from Millennials were a good predictor of activism behaviors that occur offline. Theoretical and practical implications for public relations are discussed.

Keywords: activism, Millennials, issues management, offline activism, online activism, slacktivism, social media activism, uses and gratifications

Introduction

Millennials – those born between 1982 and 2001 – are the largest generation in American history, surpassing their Baby Boomer parents by some 17 million. They are 95 million strong, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse than generations prior (Howe & Strauss, 2009). Millennials are defined by an Internet and media landscape that permeates nearly every facet of their daily lives. They represent the heaviest users of social media. In a 2018 report, the Pew Research Center concluded that the Millennial demographic stands out for both frequency of social media use and variety of platforms used. The research reported that 88% of 18-29-year olds use social media. This generation, for better or for worse, is leading and transforming the most important conversations of our time.

By way of social media, the Millennial generation can drive awareness and organize for action like never before. According to a report by the World Economic Forum, social media have transformed civic participation and engagement, providing a direct input on government initiatives (Guzman & Vis, 2016). "The rise of digitally native international actors has challenged the state's dominance" (Owen, 2016, para. 3). And, in 2020, Millennials will make up the largest generation of eligible American voters. A series of industry studies, The Millennial Impact Project, touts itself as "the largest body of data and analysis on how U.S. Millennials interact with causes (2017, para. 1)." Data from 2017 showed that online activism ranked high among the cause/issue behaviors indicated by Millennials. However, when asked which of their activist behaviors were most likely to bring about change, online activist behaviors dropped significantly. In other words, while Millennials engage heavily in online activism, they are skeptical of its ability to have an actual impact offline. This phenomenon has been identified by the academic and popular press as: "slacktivism" or low-cost, low-risk online activism, such as using Facebook's "like" feature to show support for a political group. The policy impacts of online activism ("slacktivism") are not well understood; however, the body of research about activism, issues management, and public relations may help shed light on the topic.

Social movement organizations (SMOs) practice public relations that drives activism, and companies are frequently the recipients of activist organization attention, which requires public relations professionals to engage in issues management. In order to better understand the organizational implications of online activism, this study examined how Millennials engage in online activism and the gratifications they fulfill by engaging in these online activities. An online activism scale was created and tested. Four factors were identified as significant variables related to online activist behaviors. The relationship between online activism, as well as independent groups of online activist behaviors, was analyzed with relation to offline activism behaviors. The significance of this study is in its ability to identify online activist behaviors that may signal an issue-engaged, aware public. More so, the study demonstrates a predictive ability for moving from online to offline activist behaviors, grounded in traditional models of issues lifecycles and communication. Public relations professionals and social movement organizations engaged in issues management and environmental scanning may use this research as a starting point for identifying online activist behaviors that signal greater potential engagement in issues among stakeholders, as well as the potential for escalation from online to offline activist behaviors. Likewise, by determining how and why Millennials use social media for online activism, organizations may strategically mobilize them around issues

on social media platforms. Organizations can determine which online activist behaviors prompt offline activist behaviors and develop strategies accordingly.

Literature Review

The advent of social media has reinvented traditional theories of mass media and public relations. Public relations scholars study the ubiquity of social media and its potential for dialogue and relationship building between organizations and stakeholders. Stakeholders may use social media to empower themselves, empower organizations, and/or disempower organizations (Ciszek, 2016; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; 2012b). However, research has not explicitly addressed the motivations of so-called "slacktivists" for online activism, nor the implications of this behavior. The intersection of uses and gratifications theory with an issues management perspective of public relations provides an initial step forward in understanding online activist behavior and implications.

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications is used to explain how individuals use media to satisfy their needs, to understand motives for media behavior, and to identify the consequences of media behavior (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). A uses and gratifications theoretical approach argues that audiences are active media users who choose media to fulfill specific needs. Needs are "the combined product of psychological dispositions, sociological factors, and environmental conditions" (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973, pp. 516-517). Gratifications, then, represent the fulfillment of needs. Uses and gratifications theory uncovers media use motivations and can determine why Millennials utilize social media platforms (Sun, Rubin & Haridakis, 2008; Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). Smith and Gallicano (2015) found that Millennial social media usage progresses to higher levels of absorption and immersion "through a personal reflexive process of assessing the degree to which social media activities fulfill users' needs in information consumption, sense of presence, interest immersion, and social interaction" (p. 87).

Researchers have suggested four general categories of needs driving social media use: emotional, cognitive, social, and habitual (Katz et al., 1973; Leung, 2009; Park, Kee, & Valenzua, 2009; Wang & Tchernev, 2012; Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012). Emotional needs are related to strengthening the pleasure of experience; whereas, cognitive needs refer to strengthening information, knowledge, and understanding. Social needs refer to strengthening contact with salient others (e.g., friends, family, peers) and the world and may include elements of control wherein users seek outcomes from salient others. Habitual needs refer to strengthening the structure of daily life, such as the ritual checking of Facebook before bed. Wang, Tchernev, and Solloway (2012) found that social media use is significantly driven by each of the four groups of needs, but only gratifies some of them.

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) identified distinctions between instrumental and ritualized Internet use. Information-seeking was the most salient use of the Internet and has a purposive, satisfactory orientation, while ritualized Internet use was linked to like-mindedness and past behavior. The authors identified a framework with five widely accepted motives for using the Internet: interpersonal utility; passing time; information seeking; convenience; and entertainment (see also: Whiting & Williams, 2013). Interpersonal utility refers to social

interaction and companionship; whereas passing time refers to the use of media to occupy time and relieve boredom. Information seeking refers to social media use to gain knowledge or information. Convenience refers to usefulness and ease of communication; whereas, entertainment refers to media use for the purposes of escapism, fun, and enjoyment.

Understanding the motivations and gratifications of Millennial engagement in online activism offers theoretical and practical insight into issues management as a function of public relations.

Issues Management and Online Activism

Social media have similarly revolutionized modern notions of activism with regard to both definition and access to participation. As noted, these digital natives are transforming civic participation and engaging with issues online. Hallahan (2001) stated, "Issue dynamics (i.e. how disputes arise and are responded to by organizations and others in society are a central concern of public relations. For example, issues management can be defined as a public relations specialization that encompasses an organization's efforts to monitor, analyze, and communicate with strategic audiences […]" (p. 27). Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) argued that social media have shifted corporate communication efforts from organization-centric to "issues arenas" wherein stakeholders interact with organizations both online and through traditional media.

Public relations scholars have sought to describe the issues life cycle. In their seminal work, Crable and Vibbert (1985) outlined a catalytic model of the issues lifecycle. An issue begins in the *potential stage* when an individual or small group of people begin asking questions and forming arguments. The issue progresses to the *imminent stage* when it is legitimized by "significant people or publics seeing the *linkages* between themselves and others interested in the issue" (p. 6). At the third stage, *current stage,* the issue receives widespread attention and the traditional media are disseminating information. In the current stage, the issue reaches more audiences because of the media attention, and stakeholders begin to choose "sides" on the issue. An issue reaches the *critical stage* when stakeholders become more invested in their side of the issue and begin to seek resolution. "Critical issues, then, are at a moment of decision – a crisis in the sense that something is willed (and predicted) to happen. Some policy decisions are demanded" (Crable & Vibbert, 1985, p. 6). However, there is an additional issue stage – the *dormant issue stage.* The dormant issue stage indicates that some resolution has been reached; yet, a new concerned stakeholder group may still resurrect the issue.

Further, public relations scholars have proposed how key stakeholders may be categorized around issues and appropriate communication strategies for the issues lifecycle (Hallahan, 2001; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Kim & Grunig, 2011; Werder, 2006). Hallahan (2001) proposed an issues process model based on the public's level of involvement and knowledge. Grounded in social psychology, he proposes that knowledge refers to "beliefs, attitudes, and expertise" (p. 35); whereas, involvement refers to motivation or "a predisposition to pay attention and communicate about a topic" (p. 35). He argues, "High knowledge and high involvement thus are necessary conditions for activism on a particular topic" (p. 34). In other words, these *active publics* with high issue involvement and knowledge are most likely to engage in activist behavior. *Aroused publics,* on the other hand, have high issue involvement, but low knowledge about the issue or how to bring it to resolution.

"Aroused publics include people who have recognized a potential problem or issue but are not prepared to move into an activist role" (p. 34). *Aware publics* represent those individuals who have high knowledge about an issue but are not mobilized to act. *Inactive publics*, then, are those who have both low levels of issue involvement and knowledge. Hallahan (2001) goes on to identify appropriate issues management strategies, given the status of the public (i.e., education-based; prevention-based; negotiation-based; and intervention-based). However, despite this body of research surrounding issues management, little attention has been given to understanding how the emergent and widespread use of online activism may impact our current theory and practice of issues management.

Extant literature may provide some insight. Harlow and Guo (2014) defined activism as the "practices of individuals challenging the status quo in order to bring about social, political or economic change" (p. 465). Jackson (1982), identified five communication tactics that activist groups employ to pursue their goals: informational activities such as interviews and media relations; symbolic activities such as boycotts; organizing activities such as networking and conducting meetings; legal activities such as petitioning and being involved in legislative activities; and civil disobedience such as sit-ins and trespassing. Vegh (2003) defined online activism as a movement that is politically motivated and relies on the Internet. Online activism includes proactive actions to achieve a common goal or reactive actions against certain controls and the imposing authorities (McCaughey & Ayers, 2013). According to Lee and Hsieh (2013), online activism may be similar to traditional offline activism behaviors because there are sometimes costs and risks imposed on individuals participating in such activities. McCaughey and Ayers (2013) identified three types of Internet activism: awareness/advocacy; organization/mobilization; and action/reaction. Awareness is created when relevant information about an issue is accessed, while action occurs when activities that support the aims of the movement are carried out offline. In online communities, it is easier to organize and mobilize groups. Vegh (2003) found that the Internet is used for mobilization in three different ways: to call for offline action, such as rallying a public demonstration by posting details online; to call for an action that normally happens offline but can be done online, such as emailing your state representative; and to call for an online action that can only be carried out online, such as a spamming campaign.

The relationship between online and offline activism remains contentious. Lee and Hsieh (2013) suggest that slacktivism, also known as low-cost, low-risk online activism, can affect civic actions that occur offline. Slacktivism includes clicking "like" or "retweet" to show support for a cause, signing online petitions, sharing videos about an issue, and changing your profile picture to support a cause – but not engaging in offline activism. In an experiment conducted to test whether signing or not signing a petition online would boost or reduce consequent charity contributions, Lee and Hsieh (2013) found that when participants signed an online petition, they were more likely to donate to a related charity. Conversely, if participants did not sign the petition, they were more likely to donate a significantly higher amount of money to an unrelated charity. Alternatively, Park, Kee, & Valenzuela (2009) found that greater intensity of social media use was related to increased engagement in offline civic (e.g., community volunteerism; charity work) and political (e.g., boycotting; signing a petition) activities.

Scholarship has provided a wealth of models to frame our scholarly and practical

conversations about activism; however, there remains a dearth of research focused on the motivations and gratifications for online activism. By determining how and why Millennials use social media for online activism, organizations may better understand the issues lifecycle and formulate appropriate communication strategies. It is important for public relations professionals in particular to understand the relationship between online activism and other activist behaviors such as protests, boycotts, information sessions, and so on that occur in an offline context. Whether public relations professionals are serving in a corporate or agency role, scanning the environment for potential activist issues, or serving as part of social movement organizations that are employing public relations strategies and tactics, it is important to address how and why online activism among Millennials occurs, as well as if so-called slacktivism can provoke offline activism. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: In what ways are Millennials engaging in online activism?

RQ2: Which gratifications do Millennials fulfill by engaging in online activism?

RQ3: How are online activism behaviors associated with Millennials' engagement with offline activism behaviors?

Methodology

In order to address these research questions, an online survey was distributed to a sample of Millennials over a four-week period. The survey measured social media uses and gratifications, online and offline activism behaviors, and demographic items to include the frequency of social media use across several popular social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Snapchat). Data were analyzed to address each of the research questions and identify whether any significant associations exist.

Participants

Participants in this study were a convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate students from a university in the southeastern United States. In order to capture the Millennial demographic, an initial filter question asked participants if they were born between the years 1982 – 2001. Participants were students in upper-division undergraduate communication courses and graduate courses. A total of 343 students were invited to participate in an online survey and 306 students completed the survey (89% completion rate). Of the sample, 102 (33.3%) participants indicated that they were male and 204 (66.7%) indicated that they were female. The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian (n=218, 71.2%). Participants also indicated the following ethnicities: Hispanic/Latino (n=59, 19.3%); African American/Black (n=43, 14.1%); Asian/Pacific Islander, (n=31, 10.1%); Native American (n=1, 0.3%); and 13 participants (4.2%) indicated "Other."

Measures

In order to measure the uses and gratifications Millennials experience when engaging in activism on social media platforms, previous research on Internet motives by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), and Sun et al., (2008) was linguistically adapted to fit this study. Social media uses and gratifications was measured using 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). Participants used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) to rate statements on the modified Internet motives scale.

To measure activism behaviors, statements based on activism research from McCaughey and Ayers, (2013) and Jackson (1982) on social media, Internet activism, and activist groups, and Valenzuela's (2013) study on social media and protest behaviors were used. A measure of social media activism was developed and tested in this research. To measure participants' activism behaviors, participants were asked to rate 44 statements. Participants first responded to 22 items about how they use social media for online activism behaviors. Statements included: "Used an activist hashtag in a social media post/tweet" and "Shared information about a protest or boycott surrounding a social-political issue on social media". Participants then responded to 22 items about how they engage in offline activism behaviors. Statements included: "Participated in a rally or march" or "Mobilized offline support for a social-political issue." Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).

Results

RQ1 sought to understand the ways Millennials are engaging in online activism. Overall, participants did not overwhelmingly indicate that they engaged in online activism behaviors ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.20$). Participants reported the strongest agreement to the item: "Liked or favorited a post about a social-political issue" ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.95$). Participants indicated the strongest disagreement to the item: "Contacted a political leader or decision maker" ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.52$). In order to further understand the variability of Millennial engagement in these online activism behaviors, an exploratory principal components factor analysis was conducted on the set of 22 items about online activism behaviors. The factorability of the 22 online activism behaviors was examined. Most of the online activism behaviors were highly and significantly ($p < .05$) correlated with one another. Well-recognized criteria for the factorability of a correlation were used. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .91, above the recommended value of .60, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 (231) = 3,685.58$, $p < .001$). A principal components analysis with orthogonal rotation was run in an effort to explore if the online activism behaviors comprised a smaller set of important independent composite variables. Factor loadings were suppressed at $< .40$ to ensure only strong loadings on each factor were analyzed. Four new factors were uncovered with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Researchers identified the four new factors as follows: "slacktivist behaviors," "mobilize others," "tangible online activism," and "negative perceptions." Table 1 displays the online activism measure created for this research and relevant factor loadings.

Table 1: Factor Analysis, Online Activist Behaviors

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Shared or retweeted a post about a social-political issue	.84			
Posted a status/tweeted about a social-political issue	.83			
Liked or favorited a post about a social-political issue	.83			
Commented on a post about a social-political issue	.78			
Generated awareness about a social-political issue using social media	.63			
Shared socially- or politically-charged images or photos on social media	.60			
Used an activist hashtag in a social media post/tweet	.57			
Friended or followed a political leader or decision maker on social media	.54			
Unfriended or unfollowed someone on social media because of their social-political posts/tweets	.47			
Prompted social connections to sign an online petition for a social-political issue		.82		
Signed an online petition		.77		
Shared information about a protest or boycott surrounding a social-political issue on social media		.64		
Mobilized online support for a social-political issue		.56		
Shared my experience about participating/supporting a social-political issue on social media		.54		
Attempted to raise money for a social-political issue using social media			.81	
Donated money to a social-political issue that originated on social media			.79	
Contacted a political leader or decision maker through e-mail or social media			.64	
Changed my social media profile picture surrounding a social-political issue			.59	
Generally speaking, I prefer not to engage in social-political issues online.				.88
I do not like to voice my personal social-political beliefs on social media.				.87
I do not use social media to engage in social-political issues.				.85
I do not agree with many online views of those in my social network.				.60

*Note: Factor loadings < .40 are suppressed

Component 1 = Slacktivist Behaviors
Component 2 = Mobilize Others
Component 3 = Tangible Online Activism
Component 4 = Negative Perceptions toward Online Activism

Nine items related to relatively simple and opportunistic engagement in online activism loaded onto *slacktivist behaviors* (eigenvalue = 4.97). This component explained 23% of the total variance in the items. The items that loaded on component one are indicative of online activism behaviors that require little time and energy to partake in. For example, clicking the "like" button on Facebook requires a lower investment than signing an online petition. This factor loaded onto items such as "used an activist hashtag" and "generated awareness about a

social-political issue through social media."

Five items that relate to engaging in collective action on social media loaded onto *mobilize others* (eigenvalue = 3.24) and explained 15% of the total variance in the items. The items that loaded on component two related to engagement in online activism behaviors that have the explicit goal of mobilization of others with regard to social-political issues. Prompting others to sign a petition or sharing information about civic unrest like a protest may require greater investment. More central to this factor, these online activism behaviors are outward facing, aimed at mobilizing others in one's network. This factor loaded onto items such as "prompted social connections to sign a petition for a social-political issue" and "shared information about a protest or boycott related to a social-political issue."

Four items that relate to online activism that results in offline activities loaded onto *tangible online activism* (eigenvalue = 3.09), which explained 14% of the total variance in the items. The items that loaded onto component three are related to activities that require substantial input and ownership. For example, changing a profile picture represents an outward representation of the self, and donating money to a cause is an invested and concrete way in which individuals can support social-political issues online. This factor loaded onto items such as "changed my social media profile picture surrounding a social-political issue," "donated money to a social-political issue that originated on social media," "attempted to raise money for a social-political issue using social media," and "contacted a political leader or decision maker through e-mail or social media."

Four items that relate to non-engagement in online activism loaded onto *negative perceptions toward online activism* (eigenvalue = 2.80), which explained 13% of the total variance in the items. The items that loaded onto component four are relative to non-engagement in online activism activities. All four items reflect a negative attitude toward engaging in online activism behaviors. This factor best reflects the negative perceptions Millennials may have with regard to social media as a platform for the promotion of social-political agendas. For example, some may not believe Facebook is an appropriate channel for this type of discourse. This factor loaded onto statements such as "generally speaking, I prefer not to engage in social-political issues online," and "I do not agree with many online views of those in my social network."

Next, a reliability analysis was performed to examine the internal consistency of the four factors produced by the principal components analysis. Each factor formed a reliable scale with good internal consistency: slacktivist behaviors (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .90$); mobilize others (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .86$); tangible online activism (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .79$); and negative perceptions (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .84$).

Descriptive statistics for each of the four factors identified were generated. Overall, mean scores demonstrated that Millennial participants engaged primarily in slacktivist behaviors ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.65$). As a seemingly valid point of comparison, tangible online activism behaviors received the lowest overall mean scores ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.26$). The negative perceptions of online activism and mobilize others were nearly equivalent with regard to average scores: ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.59$) and ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.65$), respectively.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant mean differences between the four new factors – slacktivist behaviors, mobilize others, tangible online activism, and negative perceptions. Five of the six pairs in the analysis

produced a significant t value: slacktivist behaviors and mobilize others ($t_{(299)} = 11.67$, $p < .001$), slacktivist behaviors and tangible online activism ($t_{(296)} = 19.85$, $p < .001$), mobilize others and tangible online activism ($t_{(302)} = 11.60$, $p < .001$), mobilize others and negative perceptions ($t_{(302)} = -5.63$, $p < .001$), and tangible online activism and negative perceptions ($t_{(299)} = -13.73$, $p < .001$). There was no significant mean difference between slacktivist behaviors and negative perceptions ($t_{(297)} = 1.71$, $p = .089$).

Table 2: Paired-Samples T-Test of Four Online Activism Factors

Pairs	M	SD	t	df	p
Slacktivist Behaviors-Mobilize Others	.87	1.29	11.67	299	.000
Slacktivist Behaviors-Tangible Online Activism	1.74	1.51	19.85	296	.000
Mobilize Others-Tangible Online Activism	.86	1.29	11.60	302	.000
Mobilize Others-Negative Perceptions	-.67	2.08	-5.63	302	.000
Tangible Online Activism-Negative Perceptions	-1.57	1.98	-13.73	299	.000
Slacktivist Behaviors-Negative Perceptions	.20	2.02	1.71	297	.089

Next, RQ2 sought to identify the motives for engagement in online activism. To answer this question, the uses and gratifications responses were first used to determine how Millennials are utilizing social media for: interpersonal utility/social interaction; to pass time, information seeking; convenience; entertainment; and control. Interpersonal utility/social interaction consisted of 10 items ($M = 5.02$, $SD = .82$) including "To show others encouragement" and had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .80$). Passing time consisted of 8 items ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.05$) including "Because it allows me to unwind" and had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .83$). Information seeking consisted of 6 items ($M = 5.92$, $SD = .92$) including "To get information easier" and had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .89$). Convenience consisted of 3 items ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.04$) including "Because it is cheaper" and had acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .69$). Entertainment consisted of 3 items ($M = 5.93$, $SD = .98$) including "I just like to use it" and had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .91$). Control consisted of 2 items ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.31$) including "I want someone to do something for me" and had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .81$).

Mean scores across the six uses and gratifications scales demonstrated that participants utilize social media primarily for entertainment ($M = 5.93$, $SD = .98$) and information seeking ($M = 5.92$, $SD = .92$). Control received the overall lowest mean scores ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.31$) indicating that Millennials do not engage in social media to request their social connections to do something or tell them what to do. Millennials also utilize social media for convenience ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 1.04$), to pass time ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.05$), and for interpersonal utility/social interactions ($M = 5.02$, $SD = .82$). Table 3 displays these results.

Table 3: Motives for Millennials' Social Media Use

Motives	M	SD	α
Entertainment	5.93	.98	$\geq$ .91
Information seeking	5.92	.92	$\geq$ .89
Convenience	5.65	1.04	$\geq$ .69
Pass time	5.12	1.05	$\geq$ .83
Interpersonal utility/social interaction	5.02	.82	$\geq$ .80
Control	2.72	1.31	$\geq$ .81

Next, for RQ2, a backward stepwise multiple regression was conducted to examine the relationship between uses and gratifications with online activism behaviors. The six scales for uses and gratifications were simultaneously entered into the model as independent variables: interpersonal utility/social interaction, pass time, information seeking, convenience, entertainment and control. The dependent variable, online activism, was regressed on the independent variables to reveal which outcomes contributed to an overall significant model. The online activism variable was the average of the 22-item online activism scale.

Using the principal of parsimony, an overall significant model was found: $F_{(294)} =$ 8.94, $p < .001$. However, each independent uses and gratifications variable failed to reach significance as predictors of online activism in the model. Passing time and information seeking were removed, as non-significant variables, at the third, and final, iteration of the model. Interpersonal utility/social interaction ($\beta = .241$) and control ($\beta = .126$) were significant predictors ($p < .05$) of online activism behaviors. Entertainment ($\beta = .114$) and convenience ($\beta = -.116$) neared significance ($p < .063$) in the overall significant model. Interpersonal utility/social interaction, control, and entertainment were positively associated with online activism behaviors while convenience was negatively associated with online activism. Together these four predictors accounted for 10% of the variance in online activism behaviors.

Thus, RQ2 finds that motives such as "get more points of view," "tell others what to do," "enjoyment," and "communicate with friends and family" share a stronger association with online activism than passing time and information seeking motives such as "occupy my time" and "get information easier," respectively.

RQ3 sought to understand how online and offline activist behaviors are related to one another. A backward stepwise regression was used to determine which online activism factors predict offline activism. The four factors for online activism were simultaneously entered into the model as independent variables: slacktivist behaviors, mobilize others, tangible online activism, and negative perceptions. The dependent variable, offline activism, was regressed on the independent variables to reveal which outcomes contributed most to an overall significant model. The offline activism variable was the average of the 22-item offline activism scale.

All of these factors except for slacktivist behaviors were significant predictors of offline

activism behaviors ($p < .001$) in an overall significant model: $F_{(288)} = 110.71$, $p < .001$. Slacktivst behaviors were removed at the second, and final, iteration of the overall significant model. Tangible online activism ($\beta = .446$), mobilize others ($\beta = .307$), and negative perceptions ($\beta = .211$) were positively and significantly associated with offline activism behaviors. Together these three predictors accounted for 53% of the variance in offline activism behaviors.

Thus, RQ3 finds that online behaviors such as "signing an online petition," "donating money," or "sharing my experience about participating/supporting a social-political issue on social media" share a stronger association with offline activist behaviors than do slacktivst behaviors such as "likes," "comments," "shares" and "using activist hashtags."

Discussion and Implications

This study examined how Millennials engaged in online activism and the gratifications they fulfill by engaging in these online activities. It also examined how online activism is associated with engagement in offline activism. Results found that overall, Millennial participants in this study did not have a strong inclination to engage in online activism behaviors but participated in these behaviors to a greater degree than in offline activism. This study finds that Millennials are primarily "slacktivists" when it comes to engaging in activist behaviors and some generally refrain from engaging in these issues both online and offline. These results are consistent with findings from The Millennial Impact Project (2017) that skepticism about the real impacts of online activism may play a major role in Millennial's activist behaviors.

When Millennials do engage in social media activism, they are primarily fulfilling interpersonal utility/social interaction gratifications of expression, belonging, and participation. Interpersonal utility/social interaction motives for utilizing social media platforms include "to participate in discussions," "to belong to a group with the same interests as mine," "to express myself freely," and "to get more points of views." These seemingly conventional gratifications can drive online activism as they satisfy basic needs of belonging and interacting with others. By contrast, passing time and information seeking were not significant variables in the overall model, meaning Millennials do not engage in social media activism to fulfill needs related to boredom or gaining information. The implications of this finding are that social media activism may be more related to social identity than a desire to make a statement or forward some agenda.

Control, or a desire to influence others, was also a significant variable. A desire to influence others may speak to the use of online activism in hopes that it will encourage others to engage with the issue. However, control may also indicate a passivity in social media activism; that is, sharing in hopes that *someone else* will attend a protest rally, for instance, to impact the issue. This finding further reinforces the notion that Millennials are primarily performing slacktivist behaviors.

From an issues management perspective, these gratifications findings may signal that online activism among this demographic gains its greatest momentum during the *imminent stage* identified by Crable and Vibbert (1985). At the imminent stage, linkages and networks are emphasized for legitimizing the issue among a wider group of stakeholders. Publics are identifying their shared interests (interpersonal/social utility) in an issue and may begin to

share a call to action to engage with the issue (control) among their networks. Sommerfeldt and Yang (2017) recognized the salience of networks for advancing the issues of social movement organizations in the form of strategies for relationship strength and relationship diversity. In other words, social media activism may be enacted to create and define an individual's place in society. For instance, participants in this research who indicated that they used an activist hashtag were positively and significantly more likely to use social media for social needs, but not for more cognitive or habitual needs like information seeking or convenience, respectively.

Similarly, the lack of significance for information seeking as a driver for online activism may signal an *aroused public;* that is, a high-involvement, low-knowledge public. This may contribute to a definition of "slacktivism" where actual information seeking behaviors and knowledge about an issue are lacking; however, involvement in the issue is high. Hallahan (2001) elaborated on this public, who he describes as non-activists. He states, "They are motivated but unorganized and could become active once they have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills and additional motivation to press their case […] Aroused publics represent the potential core followers of social movements and activist leaders" (p. 34). In other words, engagement in offline activism may be more indicative of an aware public, given Hallahan's (2001) model.

Further, this study found that specific behaviors, termed tangible online activism, are the best predictors of offline activist behaviors among Millennials. Tangible online activities are more difficult to engage in than slacktivism behaviors. More so, mobilization behaviors were a significant predictor of offline activism. These findings are valuable because they demonstrate that Millennial engagement in online activism does not automatically translate to offline activist behavior, which is a key concept as both activist and non-activist organizations seek to obtain support and avoid backlash from this major demographic. Returning to Crable and Vibbert's (1985) issues lifecycle, this study provides measurable behaviors that may signal the escalation of issues from dormant status slacktivist behaviors (e.g., shares, likes) to issues in the imminent or current stages where mobilization (e.g., sharing experiences, signing online petitions) and tangible online activism (e.g., contacting a political leader, changing of profile pictures) are occurring. The latter two online activist behaviors indicate a significantly greater likelihood that offline activist behavior will occur (e.g., boycotts, rallies or marches). Perhaps, to bring Crable and Vibbert's issues lifecycle into the digital era, it would be reasonable to suggest offline activist behavior has reached the critical, crisis stage. Although additional research is necessary, public relations scholars and professionals may seek to apply the communication strategies and tactics previously proposed by the body of issues management literature, as relevant to the issues lifecycles proposed here in the online activist context.

As detailed by Vegh (2003), McCaughey and Ayers (2013) and other models, awareness of an issue can spread rapidly online. And, those spreading awareness of the issue through "likes" and sharing posts may indeed seek to mobilize others but have little intention of pursuing action offline. That's not to say that these "slacktivists" are abandoning the issue, but may increase their involvement with the issue through additional behaviors in the online context, such as contacting a political leader through social media or changing their profile picture (tangible online activism). If we are to better understand the online-offline activism

relationship, more research with purposive samples and experimental studies are needed. Future research may further consider (confirm) the many theoretical models surrounding the progression of activist processes from awareness to mobilization to action in the digital age.

Conclusion

This research has paved the way for further examination of the connection between online and offline activism behaviors. This study provides substantive results that highlight how to better engage Millennial stakeholders in online and offline activism behaviors, grounded in intrinsic needs and gratifications. Public relations professionals should seek to appeal to Millennial needs for social identification and control. Distinct from a corporate-centric understanding of public relations – as has become more widely discussed by critical scholars in the public relations literature – this research offers much to activist, grassroots, or social movement organizations seeking to reach this demographic with issues-related communication. By understanding which gratifications Millennials sought to achieve through online activism, this research sets the stage for targeting communication and gratifications to encourage change. Public relations professionals should consider individual-level motivations to create awareness, mobilization, and action for activism, especially given the emergence of corporate social advocacy/corporate activism (Dodd, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2015; 2015). Garnering Millennial support around social-political issues in an online context holds real implications for the future. The support these issues garner from Millennials who drive much of the public debate can result in changes to laws, policies, and regulations that govern democracy and all of our organizations that exist as a part of it.

Limitations

This research is limited in its use of a convenience, student sample. While the sample used consists of the target population for study, it cannot be generalized to the greater Millennial population. In addition, the nature of the student sample may present results not representative of the Millennial population at-large, many of whom are not students. Despite this, the researchers believe this study contributes valuable quantitative insight and measures to be used for further testing and exploration.

References

2017 Millennial Impact Report, The. (2017). The Millennial Impact Project. Retrieved from http://www.themillennialimpact.com/about

Cizek, E. L. (2016). Digital activism: How social media and dissensus inform theory and practice. *Public Relations Review, 42*(2), 314-321. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.02.002

Coombs, W. T. & Holladay, S. J. (2012a). Fringe public relations: How activism moves critical PR toward the mainstream. *Public Relations Review, 38*(5), 880-887.

Coombs, W. T. & Holladay, S. J. (2012b). Privileging an activist vs. a corporate view of public relations history in the U.S. *Public Relations Review, 38*(3), 347-353.

Crable, R. E. & Vibbert, S. L. (1985). Managing issues and influencing public policy. *Public Relations Review, 11*(2), 3-16.

Dodd, M. D. (2018). Globalization, pluralization, and erosion: The impact of shifting societal expectations for advocacy and public good. *Journal of Public Interest Communication, 2*(2). Retrieved from http://journals.fcla.edu/jpic/article/view/106115/102295

Dodd, M. D. & Supa, D. W. (2014). Conceptualizing and measure the influence of 'corporate social advocacy' communication on consumer purchase intention, corporate financial performance. *Public Relations Journal, 8*(3), 1-23.

Dodd, M. D. & Supa, D. W. (1015). Testing the viability of corporate social advocacy as a predictor of purchase intention. *Communication Research Reports, 32*(4), 287-293. doi:10.1080/08824096.2015.1089853

Guzman, A. & Vis, F. (April 7, 2016). 6 ways social media is changing the world. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/6-ways-social-media-is-changing-the-world/

Hallahan, K. (2001). The dynamics of issues activation and response: An issues processes model. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 13*(1), 27-59.

Harlow, S., & Guo, L. (2014). Will the revolution be Tweeted or Facebooked? Using digital communication tools in immigrant activism. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 463-478. doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12062

Heath, R. L. & Palenchar, M. J. (2009). *Strategic issues management: Organizations and public policy changes* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2009). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York: Vintage.

Jackson, P. (1982). Tactics of confrontation. In J. S. Nagelschmidt (Ed.), *The public affairs handbook* (pp. 211–220). New York: American Management Association.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *37*, 509. doi: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747854

Kim, J-N., & Grunig, J. E. (2011). Problem solving and communicative action: A situational theory of problem-solving. *Journal of Communication, 61*(1), 120-149. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01529.x

Lee, Y. H., & Hsieh, G. (2013, April). Does slacktivism hurt activism?: The effects of moral balancing and consistency in online activism. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 811-820). ACM.

Leung, L. (2009). User-generated content on the internet: An examination of gratifications, civic

engagement, and psychological empowerment. *New Media and Society, 11*(8), 1327-1347. doi: 10.1177/1461444809341264

Luoma-aho, V. & Vos, M. (2010). Towards a more dynamic stakeholder model: Acknowledging multiple issue arenas. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 15*(3), 315-331. doi:10.1108/13563281011068159

McCaughey, M., & Ayers, M. D. (Eds.). (2013). *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice*. Chicago*:* Routledge.

Papacharissi, Z. & Rubin, A. (2000). Predictors of Internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *44*(2), 175–196. doi: 10.1207/s15506878jobem4402_2

Owen, T. (April 6, 2016). What can government disruptors learn from digital disruptors. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/what-can-governments-learn-from-digital-disruptors/

Park, N., Kee, K. F., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes. C*yber Psychology & Behavior*, *12*(6), 729-733. doi:10.1089/cpb.2009.0003

Pew Research Center. (March 1, 2018). Social media use in 2018. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/

Smith, B. G. & Gallicano, T. D. (2015). Terms of engagement: Analyzing public engagement with organizations through social media. *Computers in Human Behaviors, 53(8)*, 82-90. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.05.060

Sommerfeldt, E. J. & Yang, A. (2017). Relationship networks as strategic issues management An issue-stage framework of social movement organization network strategies. *Public Relations Review, 43(4),* 829-839.

Stafford, T. F., Stafford, M. R., & Schkade, L. L. (2004). Determining uses and gratifications for the Internet. *Decision Sciences*, *35*(2), 259-288. doi:10.1111/j.00117315.2004.02524.x

Sun, S., Rubin, A.M., & Haridakis, P. M. (2008).The role of motivation and media involvement in explaining Internet dependency. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52*(3), 408-431. doi: 10.1080/08838150802205595

Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the use of social media for protest behavior: The roles of information, opinion expression, and activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *57*(7), 920-942. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479375

Vegh, S. (2003). Classifying forms of online activism: The case of cyber protests against the World Bank. In M. McCaughey & M. D. Ayers (Eds). *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice*. (pp. 71-95). New York: Routledge.

Wang, Z., Tchernev, J. M. (2012). The myth of media multitasking: Reciprocal dynamics of media multitasking, personal needs, and gratifications. *Journal of Communication, 62*(3), 493-519. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01641.x

Wang, Z., Tchernev, J. M., & Solloway, T. (2012). A dynamic longitudinal examination of social media use, needs, and gratifications, among college students. *Computers in Human Behavior,28*(5), 1829-1839.

Werder, K. P. (2006). Responding to activism: An experimental analysis of public relations strategy influence on attributes of publics. *Journal of Public Relations Research*,

18(4), 335-356. doi: 10.1207/s1532754xjprr1804_3

Whiting, A. & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 16*(4), 362-369.

Zhu, L., Anagondahalli, D. & Zhang, A. (2017). Social media and culture in crisis communication: McDonald's and KFC crises management in China. *Public Relations   Review, 43*(3), 4