

## **Civic Engagement, Community Attachment, and the Limitations of Social Media**

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### Abstract

In the past decade, social media has emerged as a popular tool for promoting volunteerism, giving, and community engagement. Public and nonprofit managers often feel pressure to use social media platforms to engage with the public and frequently seek advice on how to increase reach. However, as with many things, quantity does not always equal quality. Using data from interviews with 40 community leaders in the Upper Midwest, this research seeks to expand the existing literature on the role of social media and community engagement behaviors by providing a critical analysis of its usefulness and limitations.

### Proposal

Research on civic engagement has a long, well-established history which consistently indicates positive correlations between engagement behaviors and two key socioeconomic variables: social capital and community attachment. The emergence of social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so forth within the past decade have undoubtedly shaped the way individuals and organizations now engage with local communities, both within cyberspace and in the real world. This research seeks to understand the relationship social media plays between individual and institutional actors in facilitating community engagement and the moderating role social capital and community attachment play in this relationship.

Public administration and nonprofit management research has highlighted social media's role as a tool for engaging with organizational stakeholders. For example, one popular topic is using social media for advocacy purposes. National, regional, and issue-specific studies report that (Campbell, Lambright, & Wells, 2014; Guo & Saxton, 2013; Svensson, Mahoney, & Hambrick, 2015) nonprofits typically use social media to market activities, raise issue awareness, connect with stakeholders, and facilitate collective action. Mergel (2017) presents methods used by public administration researchers to analyze social media use and increase its efficacy. Other studies examine online charitable giving (Cox et al., 2018; Saxton & Wang, 2014). However, commented on more frequently are the strategic applications of social media that help organizations accomplish their public missions (Campbell et al., 2014; Cox et al., 2018; Guo & Saxton, 2013; Svensson et al., 2015; Xu & Saxton, 2018).

Within research examining social media use, there appears to be an increased amount of attention paid to socioeconomic variables that drive offline engagement and improve community wellbeing. For instance, two recent studies (Cox et al., 2018; Saxton & Wang, 2014) explore the concept of social capital and note that social media provides public and nonprofit managers with access to an expanded network of contacts. Differences exist between online and offline behavior, but offline research shows that communities with dense relational networks and high amounts of social capital tend to be more engaged and possess lower crime rates, poverty, and

unemployment, and higher rates of health and education (Beggs & Others, 1996; Norris, 2008; Xenos & Moy, 2007). However, social capital is not the only predictor of civic engagement, and research has yet to focus on community attachment specifically.

We argue that the existing literature, while useful for providing ways for public and nonprofit managers to accomplish their goals, remains lacking in its understanding of the moderating role that community attachment plays in the usefulness of social media as a tool for facilitating civic engagement. To this end, our proposed paper will present findings from our qualitative analysis of 40 interviews with community and nonprofit leaders in Kalamazoo, MI and Chicago, IL conducted between the fall of 2017 and the summer of 2018. Using a grounded approach to complete data analysis, we will examine the relationships between individuals' perceptions of their community ties and their engagement behaviors, both online and offline. Results will be discussed in the context of the usefulness and limitations of social media as an effective tool for promoting engagement behaviors with particular attention paid to the sentimental feelings that individuals report having to groups, organizations, and their communities (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2010; Halpern, 2004).

Aside from presenting findings from our study, we intend to use study results to develop prescriptive guidance for community leaders and public and nonprofit managers by discussing specific methods that can maximize the effectiveness of social media tool use. This guidance will encompass strategies for better success in fundraising and event attendance, volunteering in general, and engagement in community decision making, and will highlight the necessity of offline interactions to promote more meaningful online engagement. Finally, we will offer new directions for future research studies.

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