



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT, AND THE LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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NONPROFITS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- Technology plays a big role in civic life
- Research finds that nonprofits (NPOs) use social media for “issue marketing” and to help educate stakeholders
- NPOs also:
 - Use social media to network with local residents (e.g., Volda, Harmon, & Al-Ani, 2012)
 - Facilitate collective action
 - Tend to use one-way communication strategies
- These findings align with Lovejoy and Saxon’s (2012) portrayal of use as related to information, communication, and action

OUTCOMES

- Why does studying NPO social media use matter?
- Social media lends itself to building organizational capacity, fundraising, event organizing, disaster coordination, and more!
- Harvested data can inform public decision-makers
- Helps NPOs accomplish strategic goals and direct interest-group coordination (e.g., Campbell et al., 2014; Cox et al., 2018)
- May also encourage civic engagement

ENGAGEMENT, ATTACHMENT, AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

- Civic engagement refers to public-facing actions that improve community life (Ehrlich, 2000)
 - Associated with lower rates of crime, poverty, and unemployment
 - Better health and education
- Two variables predict engagement – social capital and community attachment
 - Social capital is connections among individuals
 - Community attachment is how connected individuals feel to his/her community and the actors that are positioned inside of it

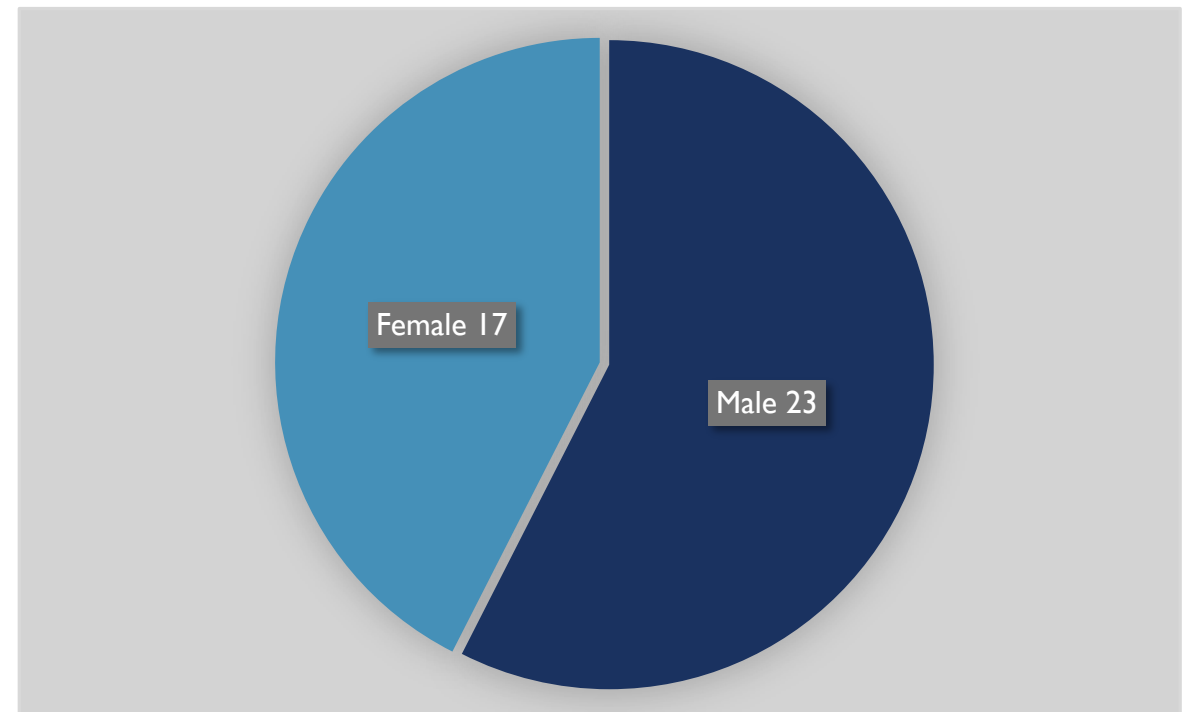
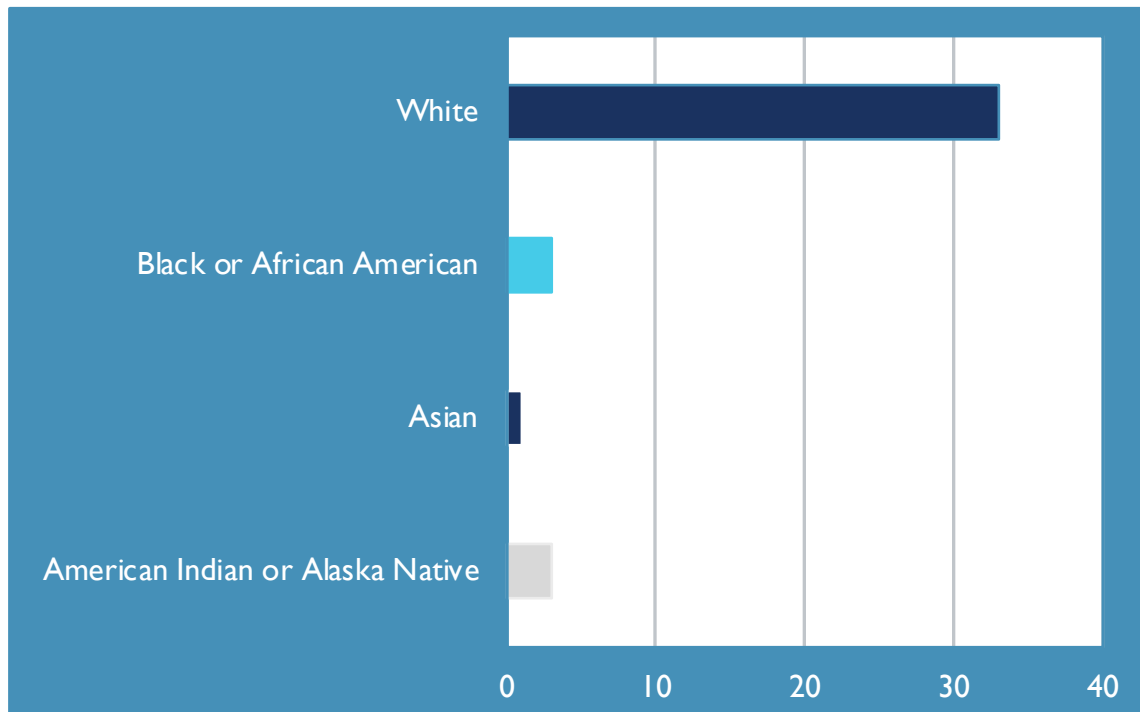
GAP IN LITERATURE

- Research shows that social media use predicts civic engagement (e.g., Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014)
- Social capital is a focus
 - Social media provides public and nonprofit managers access to a network of contacts they would not otherwise have (Cox et al., 2018)
- Less studied is the role of attachment
 - May apply to online communities (Burke & Settles, 2011), but most work examines offline interaction, as it relates to NPOs
 - Chew et al. (2011) find social media prevents and encourages bond formation

METHODS

- We set out to close this gap in the literature
- Two questions
 1. What role does social media play in facilitating civic engagement, especially as it pertains to use by NPOs?
 2. What role do social capital and community attachment play in this relationship?
- Multi-site, exploratory study
- Qualitative interviews (n=40) at two sites in the upper-Midwest – Chicago, IL and Kalamazoo, MI – and maximum variation sampling
- Recruited using GuideStar and local directories of nonprofits

DEMOGRAPHICS



AFFILIATIONS

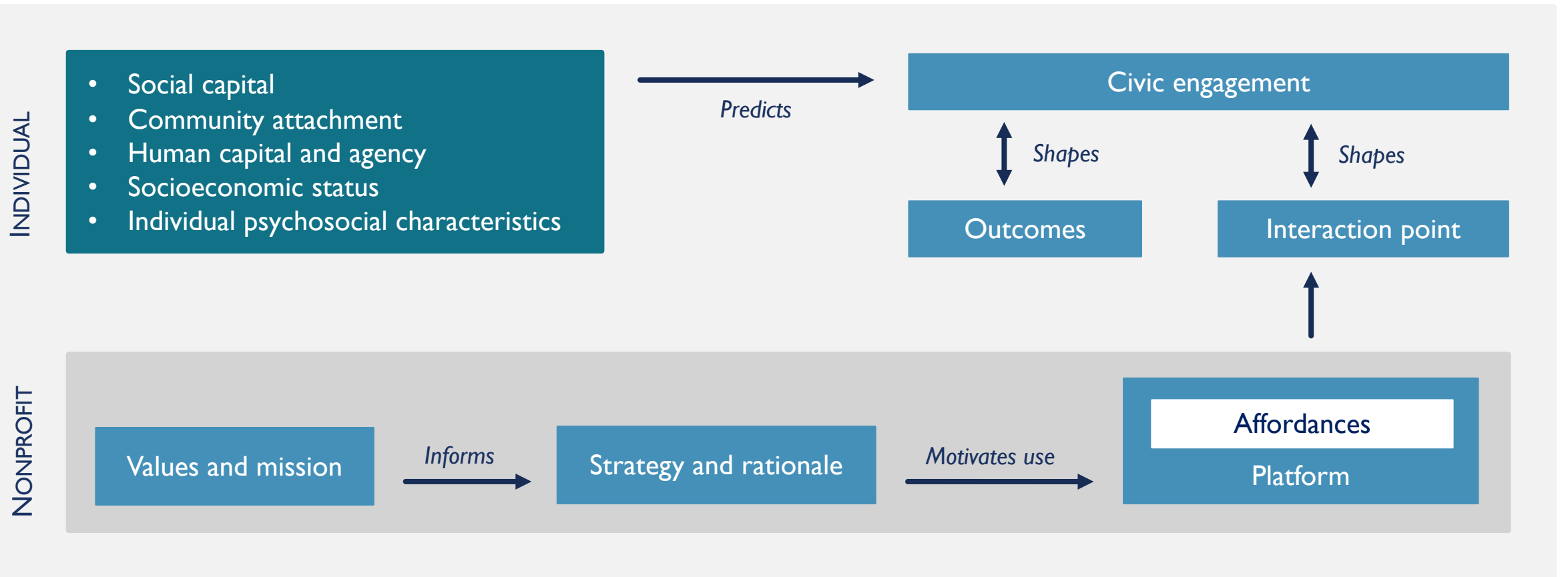
Organization Type	Description	Count
Advocacy organization	Raised awareness about issues among stakeholders and pushed for changes like criminal justice reform.	6
Healthcare provider	Provides clinical and health-related services to the public.	1
Interest group	Non-political groups motivated by shared interests.	10
Political community	Sought to create electoral coalitions of individuals to support candidates in efforts to win office and pass laws.	4
Religious organization	Motivated by religious considerations.	3
Residential community	Dedicated to issues within residential geographies such as traffic congestion and gentrification.	12
Social group	Dedicated to creating or maintaining social connections.	4

INTERVIEW DATA

- Interviews contained a range of data
 - We asked about NPO social media use, missions, strategies, civic engagement, social capital, community attachment, and use outcomes
 - Gathered individual and organizational perspectives
- Used an inductive, structural approach to code interview data (Saldaña, 2016)
- Developed a codebook
- Created a descriptive logic model using our codebook, then re-coded interviews using 12 parent codes and 100+ sub-codes



LOGIC MODEL



PARENT CODES

Code	Description	Count
Affordances	Perceived uses of social or other media platform.	1,698
Civic engagement	Engagement act.	1,417
Community attachment	Sentimental or emotional feelings about a community, and the entities within it, that motivate engagement.	1,054
Human capital	Attributes embodied in the ability to perform labor.	154
Individual psychosocial trait	Interrelationships between social factors and individual thoughts or behaviors.	198
Interaction point	Online and offline interaction context.	313
Outcomes	Outcomes associated with civic engagement, often because of social media use.	661
Platform	Social media or other platform.	1,282
Socioeconomic status	Position of individual in relation to others within society.	84
Social capital	Relationships among individuals who live and work in a community allowing it to function.	543
Strategy or rationale for use	Rationale for using platform.	807
Values and mission	Motivation for nonprofit or individual to engage in a given activity.	218

AFFORDANCES AND ENGAGEMENT

- NPOs used social media many ways
- Common NPO uses included sharing information, organizing events, generating awareness, and sharing videos or content
 - Co-occurrences showed affordances were often interrelated
 - Example: Chicago Women's March
- Most references to civic engagement included in-person meetings, advocacy, general instances of collective action, and volunteering
- Engagement was online and offline
- Network coordination between NPOs, via social media, was also common

PRIMACY OF THE IN-PERSON

- We also found issues with social media as an engagement tool
- Most references to affective bonds had to do with geographic places, groups with shared interests, professional interests, and values
 - Participants seldom talked about online groups in this deeply personal sense
- Likewise, individuals most attached communities were professions, organization-based, and/or physical in nature
 - Exception: Kalamazoo social media manager
- Why?

MORE DETAIL

- Participants frequently said that face-to-face was most conducive to human bonding
 - Example: Chicago Ward politician
 - “I think anytime that you're meeting in person it's going to be a lot more personal; in-person meetings cement connection”
 - Example: Kalamazoo NPO group
- Trust element
- Additionally, online communication created opportunities for misunderstandings
 - Example: Kalamazoo labor organizer's backstage work
- User toxicity and the online disinhibition effect were also factors, which I discuss in more detail later



PLATFORMS, STRATEGIES, AND RATIONALES

- In interviews, participants spoke mostly about social media, but they combined it with other platforms
 - Facebook dominated
 - Email, Twitter, Instagram, and analog media were the next most common
- Strategies and use rationales related to tool effectiveness, building organizational capacity, audience reach, brand cultivation, and ease-of-use
 - Example: Chicago alumni association
- Traditional tools – and face-to-face – complemented social media as a way to make up for perceived limitations
- Bricolage

SOCIAL CAPITAL

- NPOs mined for social capital
 - Social media provided ready access to potential volunteers and donors
 - NPOs built this capital online (through reach) as well as offline at events, through networking, and socialization
- Strong and weak ties
- Weak ties with the majority of social media users, whereas strong ties were associated with people who they met in-person
- Again, trust?
- Example: Kalamazoo animal shelter

INTERACTIONS AND OUTCOMES

- Negative online interactions common
- Code co-occurrences showed negative interactions were driven by online noise and politics, which pushed people away
- However, attitudes about social media were still positive
 - Social media was good at increasing NPO event attendance, extending reach, etc...
 - Offline engagement
- Example: Kalamazoo community center using Facebook to solicit diaper donations for needy families

DISCUSSION [1/2]

- Our findings confirm NPOs use social media to “market” issues, raise awareness about issues, and foster action at the grassroots level
- Confirms prior research, especially Lovejoy and Saxton (2012)
- Uniquely, however, we found that social media is limited as a tool for promoting engagement
 - Weaker ties online
 - Strongest ties were created in-person and/or preceded online interaction
- Explained by a range of things including negative online interactions, noise, and that people connect best in-person
- Improvements are clearly needed!

DISCUSSION [2/2]

- However, we did not find social media stops civic engagement; only there are some limits to it as an engagement tool
- Granovetter (1973) says that weak ties can be strong
- NPOs using social media to mine for social capital reinforced this point, because it often led to offline benefits in communities
- Confirms prior work (e.g., Cox et al., 2018; Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014)
- Clarifies Chew et al. (2011)
- A final unresolved question, though, is how strong ties need to be in order to motivate different types of actions
- Encouraging civic engagement is good, but it is not always a goal

GUIDANCE FOR NONPROFITS

1. Use social media for networking purposes, to generate awareness, to maintain relationships, coordinate with stakeholders, etc...
2. Supplement social media with analog tools
3. Rely on face-to-face interaction when it is needed, and when the goal is to create strong ties
4. There are downstream effects of NPOs using social media in terms of community benefits, and this is very hard to predict
5. Pressure social media companies (their tools act as quasi-public infrastructure)



THANK YOU

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