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How Do Nonprofits Increase Civic Engagement? Testing A Model Of Online And Offline Advocacy And Activism.

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HOW DO NONPROFITS INCREASE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT? TESTING A MODEL OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Gustavo Martucci,

for his love, patience, encouragement, and support.

I also dedicate it to my mom, Renata Bello,

for always prioritizing my education.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The current landscape of Americans' civic engagement is a contested area. While some authors still embrace Putnam's (2000) viewpoint that Americans are "bowling alone" (Gergen, 2008; Richey & Zhu, 2015), and therefore, are becoming more disconnected from informal and formal social structures (e.g., family, neighbors, church, PTA, political parties), others believe that Americans are not more disconnected, but that today's civic engagement has taken new forms (Boulianne, 2009; Frumkin, 2009; Skoric et al., 2016), which are the result of widespread use of the internet and social media platforms (Glenn, 2016; Piatak & Mikkelsen, 2021; Salamon, 2012).

Both lines of thought agree that, over the last two decades, there were significant behavioral changes among Americans regarding civic engagement preferences; however, they disagree on the outcomes of these changes. This dissertation is aligned with authors who see these changes as positive, indicating that civic engagement among Americans is not declining but evolving. For instance, Frumkin (2009) explains that instead of establishing formal ties with groups or nonprofit organizations that reward long-term service, Americans now prefer to work toward specific causes and projects with definite duration and objectives. Additionally, one's involvement with various social causes is no longer limited to where the person resides (Milan, 2015). Today, people can engage in civically oriented activities locally, nationally, and globally. Further, Gunn (2021) asserts that the new generations of Americans are hyperaware of social issues especially related to civil rights, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that advocacy and activism behaviors are shaping the current American cultural moment.

Evidence that civic engagement among Americans is not declining can be found in their overall financial contributions to nonprofit organizations each year. According to the Giving USA Foundation, charitable donations in 2020 were one of the highest on record, with donations totaling

$471.44 billion. And charitable giving from individual Americans, in particular, represented almost 70% of all donations in 2020 — more than 5% increase compared to the previous year (Giving USA Foundation, 2021).

An important reason contributing to the changes in Americans' civic engagement is advancements in communication technology. Piatak and Mikkelsen (2021) explained that most studies investigating the influence of social media on civic engagement have found positive relationships. Glenn (2015) also affirmed that social media and other technological developments, such as smartphones and high-speed internet, affected how individuals, groups, and organizations advocate for social change and participate in different causes online and offline. Social media have also played an important role in facilitating the development of shared experiences and views, ultimately building social capital that can be mobilized for activism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019). Similarly, Milan (2015) argues that Americans now have more venues to express their support for different causes and more opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations at the local, national, and global levels that otherwise would not be accessible to them. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media's participatory nature has helped individuals adapt their civically oriented activities by finding new ways of organizing and protesting (e.g., home protesting, car caravans, webinar activism education; Gunn, 2021).

In sum, today's widespread use of the internet and social media has the potential to enable individuals to engage in meaningful online and offline advocacy and activism, two categories of civic engagement that can be done with or without establishing formal ties with nonprofit organizations. Using Lewis' (2018) definition, *advocacy* can be understood as activities that *amplify,* for instance, a social cause message, while *activism* refers to the *execution* of more concrete engagement activities to advance a particular social cause. More specifically, an

individual can **advocate** or amplify a nonprofit's messages surrounding a specific social cause online by sharing a post from the nonprofit related to a particular cause, or offline, by talking about the nonprofit's work with friends and family. The person can also engage in **activism** or execution by getting involved with concrete activities surrounding the cause that can also be online, such as donating money in response to an online fundraising campaign, or offline, by volunteering to work in person for the nonprofit or joining demonstrations promoted by the organization.

For nonprofit organizations, the internet and social media can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they can engender agile and flexible message dissemination (Drahošová & Balco, 2017; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2010), improve awareness to large audiences or segmented publics (Auger, 2013; Briones et al., 2011), facilitate community creation and cultivation (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), allow direct communication with publics, bypassing journalists and other gatekeepers (Kent, 2013), and assist with mobilization for activism purposes (Kim, 2017). On the other hand, the internet and social media are a very competitive marketplace of ideas, making it difficult for all organizations to have their voices heard by their intended audiences (Guo & Saxton, 2018, 2020). Also, the fact that online communication allows nonprofits to access geographically distant audiences can be detrimental to some organizations as this generates more competition for awareness and public support between nonprofits operating all over the world. Additionally, for organizations to have successful online performances, it is necessary to employ appropriate resources, such as skilled professionals, time, and money—resources that are usually scant for most nonprofit organizations.

The employment of online organizational communication practices, once considered dispensable, is no longer a yes or no question (Levy, 2013) but rather an essential part of any survival toolkit for all types of organizations and industries (Kim, 2017). According to Worth

(2019), nonprofits that are most adaptable to changes in their environments are the ones that will better compete and survive in their niches. Some common organizational survival strategies are related to business-like management approaches. For example, Liket and Maas (2015) developed an instrument to help nonprofits evaluate their organizational effectiveness by assessing 26 managerial practices related to transparency, organizational characteristics, and program. Nevertheless, some authors criticize the employment of business-like practices in the nonprofit sector (Balanoff, 2013; Herman & Renz, 2000) by arguing that they can cause, for example, loss of idealism (Maier et al., 2016) or goal displacement when nonprofits end up changing their goals and missions to attend to their partners' needs (Worth, 2019).

The American nonprofit sector has gradually adapted to environmental challenges such as the changes in civic engagement preferences through online technologies. Scholars have already documented nonprofits' adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as websites (Kent, 2013; O'Neil, 2014), social media (Cho et al., 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013), and online fundraising platforms (Saxton & Wang, 2014; Zhou & Ye, 2018). However, nonprofits adoption of the latest communication technologies does not guarantee individuals' engagement with them in online and offline environments. Nonprofits should strategically use online communication platforms, which is why some organizations are more successful than others in attracting, cultivating, and mobilizing public support through online efforts. This can be understood as an important adaptability challenge for nonprofits that are now tasked with navigating these changing times.

Considering the scenario just described, it is important to understand from the perspective of Americans what leads them to engage in different types of civic engagement activities in the digital era. It is possible that the internet and social media have reduced the perceived distances

between Americans and social causes and nonprofits, making them willing to participate in various advocacy and activism activities through or on behalf of nonprofits at the local, national, and global levels. Thus, the two main objectives of this dissertation are to: 1) identify individual factors that lead people to engage in online and offline advocacy and activism through and on behalf of nonprofit organizations and 2) understand whether nonprofits from different levels of proximity (i.e., local, national, or global) would elicit different or similar civic engagement behavior intent among Americans.

To achieve these objectives, this dissertation adapted the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011) and a novel scale that focuses on individuals' advocacy and activism behaviors (McKeever et al., 2020). STOPS is a general theory of communication that looks at the antecedents of individuals' communication and information behaviors in problem-solving processes. This theory is situation- and goal-specific in nature, and it aims to explain why and how individuals communicate when faced with problematic situations. This project focuses on the food insecurity issue, which is a salient social problem at all geographic levels. Food insecurity is also nonpartisan in nature, and there are many nonprofits working to combat it locally, nationally, and globally. This project employed an adapted version of McKeever et al.'s (2020) activism and advocacy scale to test all relationship outcomes.

Methodologically, this dissertation undertook a national online survey with an experimental manipulation embedded in it to investigate Americans' self-reported interest and perceived connection with food insecurity and their self-reported intended engagement (online advocacy, online activism, offline advocacy, and offline advocacy) toward or on behalf of nonprofits working to combat the food insecurity problem at three geographic levels–local, national, and global.

In doing, this project offers several contributions to the existing literature surrounding social media, nonprofit organizations, and activism and advocacy of the general public. Theoretically, this dissertation extends the STOPS model by adjusting and incorporating two new variables (affective involvement and cognitive involvement) and considering three levels of analysis that aim to capture individuals' perceptions of nonprofits combating food insecurity at three different locations (local, national, and global). Also, methodological contributions involve the exploration of four concrete behavioral outcomes (online and offline advocacy and activism) that are part of a novel scale (McKeever et al., 2020).

The results of this investigation are helpful for nonprofit and public relations scholars and professionals seeking to better understand communication and support behaviors of the general public. They also indicate how individuals arrive at these behaviors on behalf of nonprofit organizations. Thus, this dissertation's findings can assist organizations from the nonprofit sector to better adapt their communication strategies, considering the changes in Americans' civic engagement preferences.

The next chapters explore the literature building blocks that pertain to this dissertation project. Chapter 2 discusses the nonprofit sector in the United States, the concept of nonprofit organizational effectiveness (NOE), the role of communication and social media in assisting nonprofits' abilities to thrive, and the current changes in Americans' civic engagement preferences. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical foundations of this dissertation, the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), the necessary adaptations to meet this project's needs, and introduces the conceptual model. Chapter 4 discusses online survey research methodology, the food insecurity social problem and its different levels, and presents a pilot test of dependent

variables. Chapter 5 presents the online survey results and Chapter 6 concludes this project, discussing the results, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: NONPROFIT LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter starts by providing a brief overview of the American nonprofit sector and the various adaptability challenges pertaining to it. Then, it discusses the concept of nonprofit organizational effectiveness (NOE) and the role of communication in achieving NOE. The chapter explicitly explores the importance of information and communication technologies (websites and social media) to help nonprofits thrive.

The second half of the chapter focuses on civic engagement and introduces a central topic of this dissertation project—recent changes in Americans' civic engagement preferences. The chapter also discusses how nonprofit organizations can benefit from social media to adapt to this new civic engagement reality. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of a possible upsurge in civic engagement attitudes among Americans as the COVID-19 pandemic subsides and how nonprofits should adapt to it.

The American Nonprofit Sector

The American nonprofit sector is an essential part of the country's economy, not only in terms of contributions to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), but also as an important employer and service provider. Until 2019, before the coronavirus global pandemic emerged, this sector experienced solid expansion. For instance, in the 2019 fiscal year, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) registered almost 1.9 million organizations with tax-exempt status (Internal Revenue Service Data Book, 2019), an increase of approximately 16% in comparison to 2016 (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2020).

According to the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (Jones, 2019), the nonprofit sector is divided into ten subfields: health; education; human services; arts, culture and humanities; environment and animals; international and foreign affairs; public or societal benefit; religion-

related; mutual/membership benefit; and unclassified. Each subfield varies in size, share of economy, functional division of labor, government-nonprofit relations, regulatory policies, market-nonprofit relationships, and informal-nonprofit relations (Gronbjerg & Smith, 2015).

In his seminal book, Salamon (2012) stated that the American nonprofit sector has conflicting multiple identities because not-for-profit organizations operate in a for-profit market economy, a reality that imposes several challenges for their activities and longevity, such as competition with for-profit organizations that usually have more resources and are more professionalized than nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the author explained that the sector has rapidly evolved in the last decades, but it has four conflicting impulses: voluntarism, professionalism, civic activism, and commercialism. Salamon described the four impulses as part of a powerful "force field" where nonprofits are required to navigate with each impulse pulling them simultaneously in different directions.

Voluntarism is an impulse that exerts a significant gravitational pull on public perception, as it refers to the distinctive and historical value claim of the sector, which is the understanding that nonprofits are organizations mostly staffed by selfless volunteers that work on initiatives for the common good. Although this impulse is still predominant in many faith-based charity organizations, in recent years, however, the voluntarism impulse has become more ideological than practical, with nonprofits moving to more formal than informal management styles.

Professionalism is the impulse that mostly shapes the American nonprofit sector in recent decades. It has enhanced the relevance of the nonprofit organizations in the government's eyes, by transforming them into essential service providers in many areas, such as health, housing, and education. This impulse refers to specialized work, formal training, and service delivered by

experts that are usually paid employees. Professionalism also relies on a more bureaucratic and formal management style, and a close relationship with the government.

The **civic activism** impulse assumes that nonprofits are means to social change. They operate by mobilizing volunteers and trained professionals to exert political pressure to alter power structures to fix social imbalances and inequalities. This impulse embodies people's capacity to promote significant social changes through nonprofits' participatory, empowering, and confrontational operating styles. Also, this impulse treats the media as an ally of nonprofits, as a tool that amplifies the voices of constituencies.

Finally, **commercialism** is the impulse that has gained more traction and relevance in recent years. It focuses on organizational effectiveness, which has to do with the organization's ability to fulfill its mission by doing its work effectively to achieve desired results. Commercialism also highlights innovation, entrepreneurial, and cost-containment strategies. It is the impulse that brings to the nonprofit sector business-oriented skills related to, for example, leadership, customer service, marketing, finance, human resources, and metrics to track the organization's activities.

Salamon (2012) explained that every American nonprofit organization leans toward a particular impulse according to their role, strategy, structure, leadership, operations, and resource base. Similarly, Frumkin (2009) explained that the American nonprofit sector is multifaceted, diverse, and heterogeneous, such that it provides an ever-widening range of products and services, constantly increasing the complexity of the sector. Frumkin also emphasized that the pressures for survival are leading the nonprofit sector to move away from historical modes of operation by adopting business-like management approaches. In other words, American nonprofits are trying to achieve organizational effectiveness by moving closer to the commercialism impulse. Maier et al. (2016) corroborated this opinion and affirmed that nonprofits becoming business-like

organizations is a well-established phenomenon that presents more positive than negative effects to the sector because well-documented management practices allow nonprofits to better adapt to a variety of environmental challenges.

Adaptability Challenges

"The strength of nonprofits rests on their adaptability" (Sussman, 2003, para 1). Sussman defined adaptability as a fundamental skill related to a nonprofit organization taking the initiative to make adjustments to improve performance, relevance, and impact. Worth (2019) also explained that in the nonprofit sector, the most adaptable organizations in their environments are the ones that will better compete and survive in their niches.

Sussman (2003) affirmed that a nonprofit's ability to adapt is intertwined with four management themes: external focus, network connectedness, inquisitiveness, and innovation. **External focus** is the notion that before adjusting any internal organizational processes, it is necessary to understand what is happening in the external environment in which the nonprofit resides. External focus closely relates to **network connectedness**, which is the acknowledgment of a nonprofit's interdependence with outside players, such as the government and other nonprofits, especially in terms of resource acquirement and allocation.

Both external focus and network connectedness concepts present similarities with the resource dependence theory, which postulates that the primary condition for organizations to survive is the establishment of relationships with their constituencies and other external stakeholders (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), and that organizations depend on external forces to be able to generate revenue, acquire information, and other resources (Worth, 2019).

Inquisitiveness relates to an organization's proactiveness in seeking internal and external data and information to generate and apply tailored knowledge to impact its operations and

performance. Further, **innovation** refers to an organization's ability to change and pursue results, considering any internal or external circumstances. Both inquisitiveness and innovation features assist nonprofit organizations to continually recognize what is going on inside and outside to quickly react and adapt to, ultimately, succeed in the sector.

Nonprofit Organizational Effectiveness (NOE) and the Role of Communication in Achieving it

With increased competition from traditional organizations (Kerlin & Pollak, 2011; Kerlin, 2013; Meier et al., 2016) and the recognition of a variety of environmental challenges that affect the American nonprofit sector (Sussman, 2003; Worth, 2019), assessment and monitoring of a nonprofit's success have become crucial tasks. To address them, a body of literature focused on Nonprofit Organizational Effectiveness (NOE) has emerged to explore the strategies and practices nonprofits employ to maximize their bottom lines.

The ultimate goal of most NOE research is to assist nonprofits in identifying the sector's best practices to address the daunting task of measuring their success. Also, because nonprofits are mission-oriented organizations, success is often understood as their ability to fulfill their missions. Nevertheless, every organization has its own way of defining its mission and understandings of how to accomplish this end goal (Worth, 2019).

Liket and Maas (2015) developed a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on NOE, examining various developments, arguments, and measurement propositions on this topic. Then, they created an NOE assessment instrument that comprises 26 best business-like practices of the nonprofit sector. This instrument is a self-assessment survey aimed to help nonprofit managers to identify the practices currently employed in their organizations and the practices and areas that still need improvements. This instrument is based on three pillars of practices: transparency, organizational characteristics, and program. Further, Liket and Maas assert that by

conducting a careful assessment of all elements from the three pillars, nonprofit managers will be able to map out the most critical areas involving the nonprofit's operations and strategic decisions. Then, by combining all results, it will be possible to determine the nonprofit's current effectiveness and how to improve it in the future.

This dissertation employed a one-factor experimental manipulation based on the transparency pillar of Liket and Maas' NOE instrument. The **transparency** pillar comprises three major communication practice themes: *reporting, accessibility,* and *online publication*, that in accordance with the STOPS model, facilitate one's problem recognition, constraint recognition, cognitive and affective involvement to the food insecurity social issue. *Reporting* refers to the organization making available to the public its strategic plan, the annual report, and an evaluation of the content of the annual report. *Accessibility* refers to the organization's availability through several communication channels such as phone, email, and postal mail, and the presence of a systemic process to deal with questions, feedback, and critiques. *Online publication* comprises tactics around specific contents on the organization's website, such as contact information, online version of the strategic plan, annual report, board members' identities.

The transparency pillar demonstrates the importance of employing communication practices for achieving NOE. The pillar is embedded in communication practices because it focuses on disclosing internal information to external publics and employing open and easy communication ways to engage with nonprofits' constituencies and establish relationships with them. I believe the transparency pillar could also be called the accountability pillar because the best practices presented there will certainly improve the organization's accountability with its external publics.

Sawhill and Williamson (2001) conducted another important NOE study, but unlike Liket and Maas (2015), these authors believed that performance measurements should be created based on the specific mission and goals of each nonprofit organization. In other words, there is no generic scorecard or indicators able to precisely capture the effectiveness of all nonprofits. Therefore, instead of listing a set of best practices to accomplish NOE, the authors provided four general pieces of advice that could be adapted to any nonprofit organization. These lessons are the result of interviews conducted with leaders of 30 prominent American nonprofit organizations about their performance measurement practices. All lessons include communicative elements, but only two will be explained here because they are relevant to this dissertation project.

The first lesson is, "keep measures simple and easy to communicate." Sawhill and Williamson (2001) explain that nonprofit organizations need to ensure simplicity and clarity in the measures they want to implement to achieve NOE. In other words, the measures will only be well executed and evaluated if they are easily understood across all relevant stakeholders (e.g., paid staff, volunteers, donors, board members, the general public, media). Also, by keeping measures simple, nonprofits will likely assess their impact (mission success), activity (goals and strategies), and capacity (ability to mobilize the necessary resources) better.

The second relevant important lesson is "measures are marketable," which means that the measures created can and should be used for accountability and transparency purposes with the nonprofit's stakeholders. The authors explain that measures impart a notion of focus and businesslike competence that brings comfort and a sense that the nonprofit is doing its job in the best way possible to internal and external stakeholders.

One of this dissertation's central goals is to reinforce the importance of strategic communication practices to assist American nonprofit organizations thrive, considering the

changes in civic engagement preferences. Therefore, what to communicate and how to communicate, the baseline Sawhill and Williamson's (2001) two lessons and the transparency pillar of Liket and Maas' (2015) work, are essential understandings for achieving NOE.

Additionally, the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), the theory that guides this dissertation project as explained in Chapter 3, presents a framework that can assist nonprofits in achieving NOE, specifically by improving its public support. For example, the theory proposes that individuals with high levels of problem recognition and low levels of constraint recognition are more likely to engage in problem-solving communicative behaviors. Therefore, by assessing nonprofits combating food insecurity at the local, national, and global levels, it will be possible to identify perceptual gaps among Americans that can be addressed through communicative efforts to improve problem recognition, reduce constraints recognition, and ultimately enhance a nonprofit's overall public support.

Communication Practices in the Achievement of NOE

Some communication scholars have already argued that the employment of communication best practices can help nonprofit organizations maximize their effectiveness (e.g., Lewis, 2005; Koschmann et al., 2015; Koschmann & Sanders, 2020). After observing and reflecting on Liket and Maas' (2015) NOE tool and the lessons of Sawhill and Williamson (2001), it is evident that there are several aspects in which communication expertise can make a difference in assisting nonprofits in attaining their effectiveness. The following subsections explore the strategic function of two important digital communication tools used by organizations–websites and social media platforms.

Websites

The transparency pillar of Liket and Maas' NOE instrument recommended that nonprofits be available (e.g., through phone, email, postal mail) and disclose internal information (e.g., strategic plan, annual report, and USCIS I-90 form) to external publics to improve the organization's accountability, which will impact their effectiveness. A common and effective way for organizations to be available and make internal information accessible to external publics is through their websites.

Dumont (2013) reinforces the idea of strategic function of websites as a digital accountability tool for nonprofits by introducing the Nonprofit Virtual Accountability Index (NPVAI), a measurement tool used to assess the quality of nonprofits' websites based on five dimensions: accessibility, engagement, performance, governance, and mission. Dumont asserts that the evaluation of the five website dimensions can determine a nonprofit's level of virtual accountability. The author also explained that governance, performance, and mission have already been identified in the normative accountability literature, but accessibility and engagement have not, and they are possibly unique to virtual accountability, which is an important observation for this dissertation project that will further assess online advocacy and activism behaviors.

Today, we know that a website is an essential communication tool for organizations to establish their digital presence; however, websites mostly enable one-way communication, which, according to public relations scholars, is not enough to establish high-quality and long-lasting relationships between organizations and their publics. Social media, however, are known for their interactivity and possible two-way forms of communication between organizations and their publics.

Social Media

Social network sites (SNSs), social media sites (SMSs), or simply social media are terms used to describe web-based platforms that allow users to create personal profiles; establish connections with other users (e.g., family, friends, online friends, brands, and organizations); and interact through text-based messages, photos, videos, likes, shares, and comments on their feeds (Phua et al., 2017). Examples of social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and Reddit. Most of these platforms are known for being interactive and flexible tools that facilitate engagement and two-way communication practices between organizations and their publics (Drahošová & Balco, 2017; Kim, 2017; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Unlike corporate websites, social media platforms are frequently used to connect like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations to advocate for social change at the local, national, and global levels (Glenn, 2015; Milan, 2015).

Earlier investigations surrounding social media and nonprofit organizations mostly focused on their adoption and use in a variety of contexts (e.g., Briones et al., 2011; Nah & Saxton, 2013), others looked at the characteristics of organizational profiles on social media (e.g., O'Neil, 2014), or message strategies in different platforms (e.g., Cho et al., 2014; Saxton & Waters, 2014). These research approaches were essential to exploring this type of media in the nonprofit context; however, current studies indicate social media are expected to do more and provide applicable knowledge that could guide strategic decisions to demonstrate these platforms' real value for nonprofit organizations.

Today we know that each social media platform has particular affordances. For example, Twitter is a text-based platform often referred as a micro-blogging site due to its emphasis on quick information sharing. It also focuses on message dissemination to larger audiences and presents a

low level of reciprocal connections (Kwak et al., 2010). Instagram relies on visual image sharing, focuses on larger audiences, and enables a low level of reciprocal connections (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). Facebook is considered the most comprehensive social media format currently available given its array of functions (Stoycheff et al., 2017). The platform allows users to communicate through text-based messages, photos, and videos. It also enables reciprocal relationships and information sharing that can be tailored to smaller or larger audiences given its sophisticated privacy settings (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018).

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have expanded their functions by including "fleets" and "stories," popular functions from Snapchat that consist of ephemeral posts in the form of images or videos that expire every 24 hours (Perez, 2020). Instagram has also incorporated "reels," short videos that resemble TikTok's main affordance. Nevertheless, the previously explained primary functions of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are still prevalent.

The characteristics and affordances of each platform attract different audiences and achieve different objectives. According to Pew Research Center (2021), YouTube is currently the most popular social media platform among American adults (81%), followed by Facebook (69%) and Instagram (40%). Although YouTube is the most popular social media among Americans of all ages, gender, ethnicity, education level, and socioeconomic status (Pew Research Center, 2021), it consists of a video-sharing site that is predominantly one-way oriented (Stoycheff et al., 2017), so its use is very limited for public outreach, awareness creation, and community building, some of the main objectives of nonprofit organizations when using social media platforms.

An important consideration for nonprofits to strategically use social media sites is understanding how each platform develops social capital. The concept of social capital is closely related to civic engagement as it refers to resources gathered through people's relationships

(Coleman, 1988) that can be used to create positive social outcomes, such as "better public health, lower crime rates, and more efficient financial markets" (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1145).

Shane-Simpson et al. (2018) explained that social media can enact two types of social capital—bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Platforms that enable **bonding social capital** facilitate relationships between already close users that can be used for mutual benefits (e.g., friends sharing information and news with one another), and platforms that foster **bridging social capital** provide benefits to users that are based on casual relationships (e.g., users connecting based on their interests instead of pre-existing relationships). For instance, Shane-Simpson and colleagues (2018) investigated social media preferences (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) among college students and found that students who prefer Facebook indicated high levels of bonding social capital in contrast with students who prefer Instagram. Also, students who prefer Twitter reported high levels of bridging social capital. These findings resonate with Binns (2014) distinction between Twitter and Facebook online environments, defining them as "Twitter city" and "Facebook village."

Understanding social media affordances related to social capital developments can assist nonprofits in communicating more strategically online and also improving their organizational social capital. Organization social capital refers to "established trust-based networks among organizations or communities supporting a particular nonprofit that an organization can use to further its goals" (Schneider, 2009, p. 644). Schneider also explains that organization social capital exists independently of the people that directly work in the organization (e.g., staff, volunteers, board members); that is why it is essential for any nonprofit to reach out to external publics to expand its support base and cultivate relationships with them through social media platforms.

Another strategic use of social media by any organization, including nonprofits, would be monitoring the analytics of each platform to understand the different publics' communicative preferences and behaviors (Kim, 2017). Thereby, it is possible to develop tailored messages to prompt and motivate specific publics to amplify the organization's messages online (e.g., like, comment, share) and offline (e.g., word-of-mouth), and connect with audiences outside its immediate geographic proximity.

Returning to the STOPS model, the baseline theory of this project, nonprofit organizations that strategically use social media platforms for public outreach will likely expand their cause and operations awareness that can be translated into improved cognitive involvement and problem recognition (two independent variables of the model) of the publics reached by their messages. Over time, these publics can be cultivated into supporters regardless of the geographic distance and, for instance, engage in online or offline activism through the organization.

Examples of Strategic Research Involving Nonprofits and Social Media

Guo and Saxton (2014) assessed not only whether advocacy nonprofit organizations are using social media, but most importantly, how they are using these platforms. The authors conducted an in-depth analysis of messages (tweets) through a quantitative content analysis and qualitative inductive analysis, and identified three categories of tweets that serve different purposes (information, community creation, and call to action). Then, they introduced a three-stage model of social media-based advocacy that consists of messages tailored to reach out to people (**information function**), messages to keep the flame alive (**community function**), and messages to mobilize people to step up to action (**action function**). According to the authors, advocacy nonprofits should use this mix of advocacy messages to create stronger relationships with their current and prospective supporters.

Another example is McKeever et al. (2019), in which the authors looked at individuals' past pro-social behaviors, such as financial donation and volunteerism, to understand how they can influence future pro-social behaviors. The authors found that the most active individuals in pro-social behaviors in the past and present, learned about the issues they support on social media (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), followed by the news (television, newspaper, online news, and radio), and word-of-mouth (family, friends, coworkers, etc.). This result demonstrates the importance of social media in creating awareness of social causes and how nonprofit organizations should strategically use these platforms to attract, cultivate, and mobilize public support. Thereby, by expanding their public support, nonprofit organizations are more likely to succeed and achieve their effectiveness.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is the notion of citizens working together for the common good (Schneider, 2008). It does not imply organizational membership, and the beneficiary is society as a whole. Civic engagement can be enacted through individuals' participation in civil society institutions such as nonprofit organizations (Brint & Levy, 1999), and this participation can be formal (e.g., serving as a volunteer) or informal (e.g., donating goods or money).

Most civic engagement scholarship revolves around three civically oriented activities: voting (political participation), volunteering (formal and informal), and donating (goods and money). However, civic engagement involves many other forms of activities that are less prevalent in the academic literature. Points of Light, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to inspire, equip, and mobilize people to take action that changes the world, proposes a path for change through nine categories of civic engagement activities that people could get involved with to promote changes in their communities and the world. The first three categories are donate,

volunteer, and vote, which are the most common civic engagement forms documented in the literature. According to Points of Light, **donating** refers to service, goods, or money contributions to support and advance a cause. **Volunteering** is the choice to give time and talent, inside or outside a person's home, to help a community or a particular cause to thrive. **Voting** is participating politically in the democratic process nationally or locally by supporting causes and candidates that are aligned with a person's values.

Other categories are also present in the academic literature on civic engagement but receive less attention. These include **purchase power** (e.g., Bloom et al., 2006), **social entrepreneurship** (e.g., Martin & Osberg, 2015), **work** (e.g., Bryson et al., 2012), **public or military service** (e.g., Honig et al., 2006), **listening and learning** (e.g., Mirra, 2018), **voice (**e.g., Metzger et al., 2015), and **raising awareness** (e.g., Boulianne, 2016). All of these civic engagement categories vary in involvement and impact, but they are all necessary to promote social changes at the local, national, and global levels. This dissertation recognizes the existing differences between various civically oriented activities, and investigates civic engagement considering four major categories of activities enacted through or on behalf of nonprofit organizations: **online advocacy**, **offline advocacy**, **online activism**, and **offline activism**. These four civic engagement categories include some of the civic engagement types defined by Points of Light (donate; volunteer; listen and learn; and voice). They are also the dependent variables of this dissertation and will be explained in detail in Chapter 3.

Changes in Americans' Civic Engagement Preferences

As previously discussed, it is vital for all nonprofit organizations to understand and monitor what is happening with their internal and external environments to appropriately adapt and survive in their niches. Several adaptability challenges can be addressed through business-like practices

related to, for example, leadership, logistics, finance, marketing, and human resources (Maier et al., 2016). This dissertation, in particular, revolves around an **adaptability challenge** related to the changes in Americans' civic engagement preferences that nonprofits can address through communication practices.

Frumkin (2009) explained that civic engagement preferences among Americans have changed, and instead of cultivating lifelong ties with nonprofit organizations or other social groups in their communities, most Americans now prefer to act upon specific projects with definite objectives. As already mentioned, the overall financial support to nonprofits through Americans' charity donations has consistently increased each year until 2020 (Giving USA Foundation, 2021).

However, volunteering and giving rates among younger generations of Americans are a concerning topic. According to researchers from the University of Maryland Do Good Institute, there is a gap between intentions in doing good and actual civic engagement of young Americans (Grimm & Dietz, 2018a). In their report, the authors mention a study from the Higher Education Research Institute (Eagan et al., 2016) that shows that the desire to do good is at an all-time high among college students; however, giving and volunteering behaviors among this population have declined since the early 2000s, and rates are still low and stagnant.

Furthermore, according to Dietz and Grimm (2019), the national volunteer and giving rates of Americans from the 22-35 age group are 21.6% and 41%, respectively. Volunteerism has been declining across all age groups. In contrast, charitable giving has been stagnant among young adults from the 22-35 age group (Piatak et al., 2019), but it has increased among Americans from the Generation X (adults born between 1965 and 1980) and Baby Boomers (adults born between 1946 and 1964; Points of Light, 2020), which explains the consistent increase of financial support to nonprofits from Americans (Giving USA Foundation, 2020).

Additionally, Dietz and Grimm (2019), argue that in the last two decades, the United States experienced a decline in volunteering and charitable giving rates among young adults (ages 22 through 35) due to several societal factors related to milestones of adulthood. According to these authors, today's young adults are less inclined to seek and reach traditional milestones associated with the transition to adulthood (e.g., graduating from college, having a full-time job, getting married, having children, and owning a house); all of these life events are positively associated with volunteering and giving behaviors. Moreover, the decline in volunteerism is happening especially in metropolitan areas (Grimm & Dietz, 2018b). Researchers explained that Americans are less likely to volunteer in large cities, in places where they do not know their neighbors, and in areas that present more economic distress, such as high unemployment and poverty rates.

Another reason influencing the volunteerism decline among Americans is related to how they now prefer to communicate and interact with others. More specifically, it relates to advancements and adoption of social media platforms, that was also amplified because of the pandemic. As previously discussed, digital technologies have affected how individuals, groups, and organizations advocate for social change and participate in different causes online and offline (Glenn, 2015). They have also offered more opportunities for citizens to engage in a variety of online civically oriented activities and connect with like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations at the local, national, and global levels that otherwise would not be accessible to them (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Milan, 2015).

The literature on civic engagement has already explored several antecedents of civically oriented activities (e.g., volunteering, voting, and charitable giving). However, understanding what motivates and predicts participation in each type of activity, considering online versus offline

modes of civic participation, is still an evolving area. Therefore, this dissertation project explores this opportunity by expanding the literature on this topic.

Examples of Research on Civic Engagement Predictors

Traditionally, scholars of social movements and political participation have studied intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for civic participation in general, in which intrinsic motivations are typically related to more altruistic and selfless behaviors, including personal and societal growth and development, increased self-esteem, self-realization, and personal well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009). Extrinsic motivations are mostly related to selfish reasons, as they refer to personal gains, recognition from peers, as well as social approval and prestige (Deci, 1971). Other authors claim that people's engagement in social action can be a combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (Degli-Antoni, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Verba et al. (1995) is a prominent work in political science that identified four categories of benefits that people seek from civic engagement participation: selective material benefits (akin to the extrinsic motivation of furthering one's career), selective social gratification (akin to the intrinsic motivation of being approved and recognized by peers), selective civic gratification (akin to the intrinsic motivation of self-realization), and collective outcomes (akin to the intrinsic motivation of societal development, such as influencing government policy).

Additionally, Omoto et al. (2010) have investigated antecedents of volunteerism in a study focused on AIDS service organizations that considered clients, volunteers, staff, and supporters' perspectives. The authors' main finding was that various motivations, interpersonal orientations, and personality traits predicted volunteerism in AIDS service organizations. In particular, the "other-focused motivation" and "social network orientation" were the best predictors of volunteerism. By volunteering, people get closer to the cause and interact with politically and

socially engaged individuals, which increases their willingness to take on additional roles in the organization.

Specific to charitable giving, Bekkers and Wiepking conducted a comprehensive project that aimed to organize the existing literature in giving behavior that was scattered across several disciplines. The first publication (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011a) examined 550 articles focused on charitable giving and identified eight mechanisms that drive giving behaviors: awareness of need, solicitation, costs and benefits, altruism, reputation, psychological benefits, personal values, and efficacy. They pose these mechanisms as intermediary variables (mediators or moderators) that link the relationship between individuals' demographics characteristics (focus of the second and third publications) and donation behavior. Some of the main results of the second (Bekker & Wiepking, 2011b) and third (Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012) publications are that typical donors are religious, older (48+), present higher levels of education, income, and wealth, and are married homeowners with children. Nevertheless, evidence on gender, race, and political affiliations is not conclusive. It is important to note that the findings need to be carefully examined since they may vary depending on the cultural and geographical contexts analyzed.

Studies intending to capture differences between online and offline forms of civic engagement are still limited. However, there are works that have explored civic engagement outcomes, such as financial support, volunteerism, or communication behavior in general, that combine both modes in a single variable (e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2017; McKeever et al., 2019). One example that has explored both modes of engagement is Lilleker and Koc-Michalska (2017), who investigated motivations driving online and offline political participation. However, the authors did not identify differences comparing both types of participation; instead,

they found that extrinsic motivations have greater explanatory power on political participation as a whole, regardless of modality.

Another example is Piatak and Mikkelsen (2021), who examined if online political engagement though social media could be translated into three forms of offline civic and political engagements—volunteering (formal and informal), political participation (working or donating for political campaigns and attending public meetings), and voting. The authors found that online political engagement influences all offline civic engagement forms examined, but some vary depending on the generation. Specifically, online political engagement positively influences formal volunteering behavior across all generations. In contrast, online engagement does not translate into informal volunteering, political participation, and voting behaviors among Millennials, but it does for Gen X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation.

Overall, it is clear that there is still room for further investigation focusing on different modes of civic engagement (online vs. offline) and studies that explore various motivations and predictors of particular forms of civically oriented activities in the digital era. Therefore, this was an excellent opportunity for this dissertation to compare the differences of four civic engagement categories (online advocacy, offline advocacy, online advocacy, offline activism) as part of the STOPS theoretical framework, a theory that considers less common predictor variables (e.g., affective involvement, cognitive involvement, problem recognition, and constraint recognition).

This dissertation also contributes to the literature by exploring nonprofit organizations combating the food insecurity problem at three different levels of proximity–local, national, and global–because social media allows individuals to civically engage with organizations at various geographic levels. This project investigated how the perceived proximity of the nonprofit impact individuals' intent to engage in online and offline advocacy and activism behaviors. To date, I

have only found one other study that investigated civic engagement intent (charitable giving specifically) across organizations at the local, national, and global levels (Eckel et al., 2005); however, the focus of that study was to test whether third-party contributions impacted private giving to charity, and the organization that the survey participants selected to contribute to (from a list of ten organizations) was not the focal point of the manipulations. Therefore, the ten organizations and causes were not comparable and, unfortunately, did not elicit any meaningful cross-level results. The only slightly relevant finding for this dissertation is that among the ten organizations, the one focused on food insecurity at the national level (Feed the Children) was the second charity participants were more willing to donate to; the first was the American Cancer Society.

The Impact of COVID-19 on American Civic Engagement

It is important to recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed unforeseen challenges to the American nonprofit sector and that some of the management and communication practices described in this chapter might not be realistic or feasible during this period. In a recent report from Charities Aid Foundation America (2021), 90% of the nonprofits investigated reported being negatively impacted by the pandemic, 73% mentioned experiencing an incompatibility of their services and programs with the online format, 20% reported lacking access to adequate technology and infrastructure for remote operations, and 25% expect to close permanently within the next 12 months.

It is also important to emphasize that during crises, such as environmental disasters and, possibly, the COVID-19 pandemic, people's willingness to engage in social actions might change. For instance, a recent study exploring civic engagement intent across generations found that the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted participants from all generations to increase their intent levels

of involvement and participation with causes they care about (Paquin, 2020). Specifically, 82% of all respondents reported that they intend to get actively involved to rebuild their communities when the pandemic is over. Additionally, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2020) also investigated Americans' attitudes during the pandemic and found that 64% of the respondents agree that the pandemic "will lead to changes for the better in how we live, work, and treat each other as people."

Dietz and Grimm (2020) examined three recent American civic responses to national crises–the September 11 attacks in 2001, the hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009–and argued that civic engagement among Americans would likely increase after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that after a long period of social isolation due to the pandemic, many Americans will feel the need to engage in more in-person and concrete civic engagement activities and also establish or reestablish formal ties with social groups, such as nonprofit organizations, to get involved with social causes they care about. For example, volunteering and giving rates among high school and college students hit their highest points in 2003, when there was a surge in civic attitudes and behaviors after the September 11 terrorist attacks (Dietz & Grimm; 2020; Grimm & Dietz, 2018a).

However, despite the apparent optimistic scenario and perspectives surrounding Americans' civic engagement once the pandemic is over, not all nonprofit organizations will be able to capitalize from them. Resource scarcity is still a prominent barrier preventing most nonprofits from applying the best management practices. The same is true for communication practices since effective organizational communication strategies to activate and expand public support require professional expertise, time, and money.

Therefore, this dissertation also contributes to nonprofit and public relations academic and practice realms by advancing knowledge surrounding communication and civic engagement

behaviors of the general public toward nonprofits, considering different modes of civic engagement activities and different geographic levels of nonprofit organizations. Additionally, this dissertation's findings can help nonprofit organizations adapt their communication strategies to thrive today, given the latest changes in Americans' civic engagement preferences. The next chapter explores the theoretical framework that guides this dissertation's investigation, the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS).

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation lays its foundations in the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), a general theory of communication that looks at the antecedents of individuals' communication and information behaviors in problem-solving processes (Kim & Grunig, 2011). This theory is situation and goal-specific in nature, and it aims to explain why and how individuals communicate when faced with problematic situations (Kim & Krishna, 2014). This dissertation project not only applies the theory but also adapts it by expanding its antecedents, testing new outcomes, and using three levels of analysis that will be discussed in this chapter.

Theory Origins

STOPS derives from another theory, the Situational Theory of Publics (STP; Grunig, 1968, 1978, 1989, 1997) that has long been recognized as the first "deep theory" of public relations (Aldoory & Sha, 2007) given its usefulness in explaining when different publics acquire information about an issue or situation. The STP has been applied to academic, practical, and pedagogical settings, and it is grounded on perceptual and situational variables to explain subsequent communication behavior (Kim et al., 2012).

The STP proposes a framework that explores factors that impact different publics' communication behaviors toward an organization or a cause based on their perceptions and involvement with a particular issue (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). The theory postulates that *problem recognition, constraint recognition,* and *level of involvement* predict information acquisition behavior, specifically *information seeking* (active) and *information processing* (passive; See Figure 1).
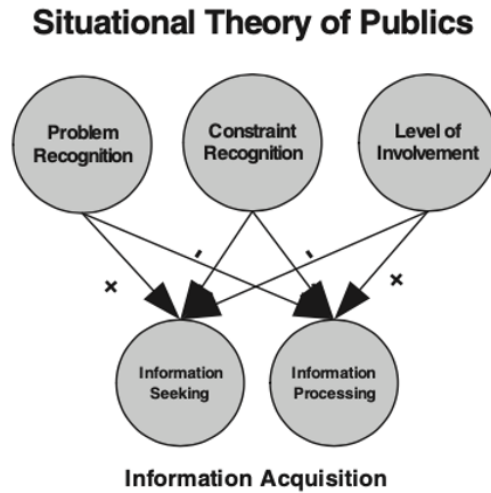
Situational Theory of Publics

Figure 1. Situational Theory of Publics (Kim & Grunig, 2011)

Initially, the STP model had a fourth variable, the *referent criterion*, that can be understood as an individual's pre-existing perceived solution to the problem that was carried from previous experiences with that particular problem (Grunig, 1997). However, over time, this variable's impact on communication behaviors has been deemed inconclusive and was dropped from the model.

The STP is particularly useful to explore the effectiveness of public relations campaigns considering different publics' characteristics (e.g., Kim et al., 2012) and different publics responses to the context of risk and crisis communication (e.g., Aldoory et al., 2010). For example, Aldoory et al. (2010) employed the STP in an experimental study to investigate the effects of news coverage of a fictional food terrorist attack on participants' perceived shared experience with the victim and the spokesperson. Results demonstrated that participants perceived the risk as more serious (high problem recognition) and wanted to learn more about the issue (information acquisition) when they perceived high shared experience with the victim, but not with the news' spokesperson.

Most of the STP usefulness is due to its public segmentation feature that is operationalized through a simple summation method, specifically, by utilizing self-reported levels of the *problem*

recognition, constraint recognition, and *level of involvement* to segment publics into nonpublic, latent public, aware public, and active public. Aldoory and Sha (2007) explained that segmenting publics based on their problem and constraint recognition and level of involvement with an issue has practical benefits for organizations. For example, organizations can craft messages that intend to decrease constraint recognition to appeal to latent and aware publics that might not be active publics yet for currently recognize high constraints preventing them from doing something about the problem.

Although the STP was not originally intended to focus on social problems or investigations surrounding nonprofit and activist organizations, several authors have employed the theory in these contexts (e.g., Aldoory et al., 2010, McKeever, 2013; Werder, 2006), which demonstrates its fitness for exploration regarding public relations, nonprofit organizations, advocacy and activism. For instance, McKeever (2013) employed the STP to investigate public support for a specific fundraising event benefiting the American Cancer Society. Participants presenting high problem recognition and low constraint recognition with the problem of cancer were more likely to seek information and were willing to attend the fundraising event. Also, the strongest predictor was constraint recognition, explaining 32% of the variance in the behavioral intentions to participate in the fundraising event.

Kim et al. (2012) argued that STOPS is a more generalized situational theory than STP because the latter only describes public's communication action in terms of information acquisition, while STOPS generalizes communicative action as problem solver's transmission, acquisition, and selection of information specific to a problem. STOPS also includes a motivational variable that broadens the theory's scope, which already includes perceptional and cognitive aspects pertaining to problem-solving.

The current STOPS model (Figure 2) presents some of the same elements and conceptualizations of the original STP, such as *problem recognition*, *constraint recognition* (independent variables), and *information seeking* (dependent variable). The next section will explain each element comprising the current STOPS theoretical model.

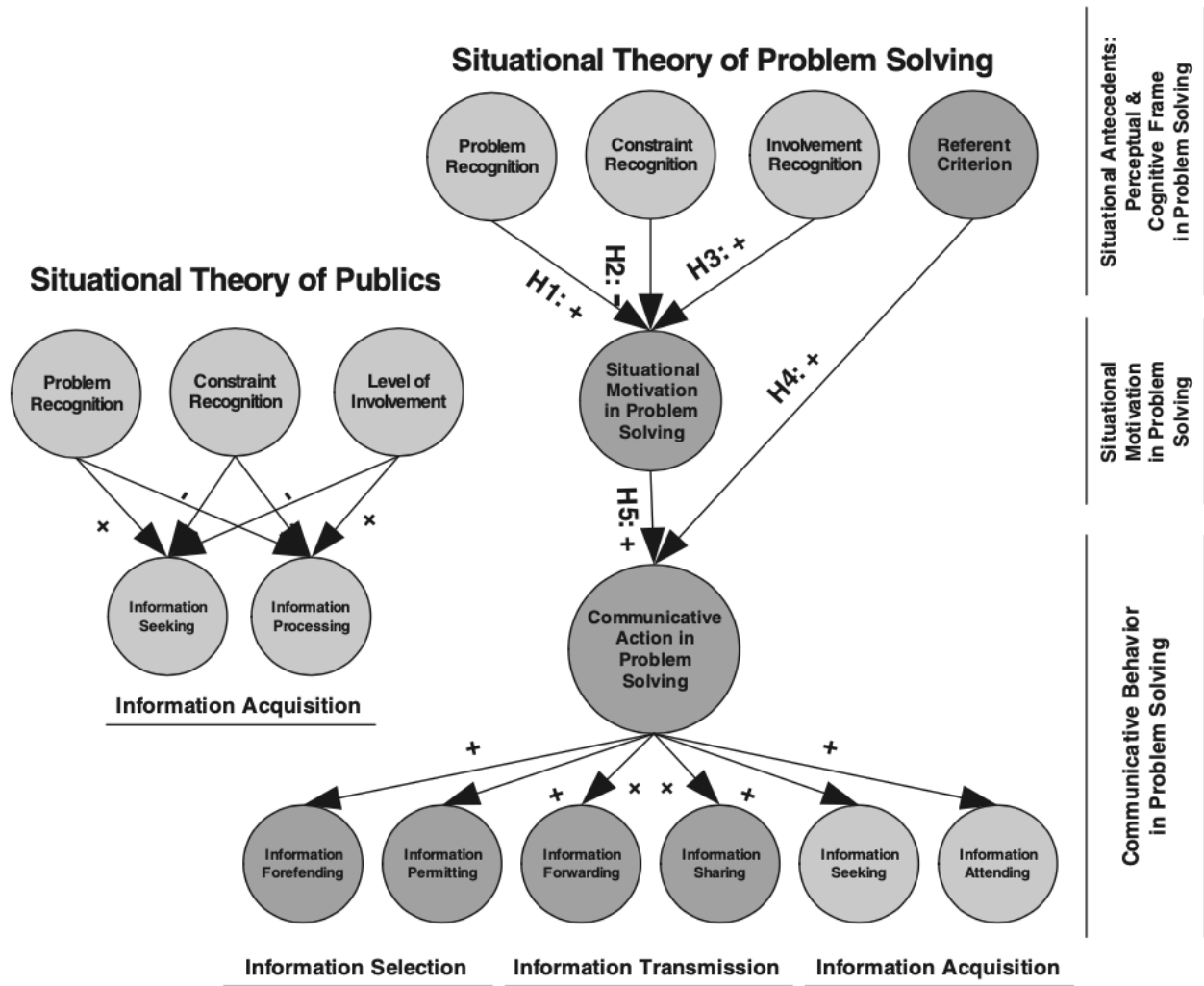*Figure 2. Situational Theory of Publics and Situational Theory of Problem Solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011)*

Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS)

The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) consists of four antecedent constructs: *problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition,* and *referent criterion*; and a mediating construct, *situational motivation in problem solving*, that predicts

communicative action in problem solving (CAPS). CAPS is characterized by six constructs: *information forefending, information permitting, information forwarding, information sharing, information seeking,* and *information attending* (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Problem recognition is an internal inquiring stage related to knowledge activation or awareness of a problem. Kim and Grunig (2011) explained problem as a combination of our "mind at work" and the perceived world around us. Additionally, the *problem recognition* varies from person to person since each individual recognizes a problem or issue differently based on their previous experiences, background, values, and interests (Aldoory et al., 2010). In the STOPS model, *problem recognition* is described as the main factor that leads a person to a problem-solving behavior, and this relationship is mediated by *situational motivation in problem solving* (Kim & Krishna, 2014). An example of this concept application is a study investigating public participation and support for a specific fundraising event benefiting the American Cancer Society. McKeever (2013) measured *problem recognition* by asking the survey participants how often they stop and think about cancer and how often they think about what they can do to help the problem of cancer.

Constraint recognition is a concept that originated in economics (Bandura, 1986) that refers to the perceived or actual obstacles limiting individuals' ability to act upon a problem (Aldoory et al., 2010, Kim & Krishna, 2014). The STOPS model suggests that high levels of *constraint recognition* make individuals less inclined to engage in communication behavior about that problem. That is, when people perceive a lot of barriers to address the issue, it hinders them from participating, such as communicating about the problem (Kim et al., 2012). Grunig (1983) provided a great example of this in a public relations context. The author investigated the effectiveness of a drunk driving campaign and found that messages presenting tragic portrayals

and emphasizing what can be done about the problem were more effective in fostering behavior change than messages presenting tragic images but no clear solution path. In other words, how the problem (drunk driving) was presented in the communication campaign impacted individuals' perceived constraints and subsequent intent communication behavior to act upon the problem.

Involvement recognition has been explored in other psychological and communication models (Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and is understood as the degree of importance or concern that an issue has in an individual's life (Lovelock & Weinberg, 1984). Kim and Grunig (2011) defined this variable for STOPS as "a perceived connection between the self and the problem situation" (p. 130) that predicts subsequent problem-solving efforts. For instance, a person who had been homeless or knows someone who is or was homeless will likely have higher *involvement recognition* with problems or situations related to homelessness than a person who had no previous connection or experience with this social issue. The *involvement recognition* variable was renamed since its introduction in the STP as the *level of recognition*, but its conceptualization and operationalization remain the same.

The *referent criterion* is a controversial construct that was initially part of the STP, but it was later removed for failing to predict communication behaviors. Kim and Grunig (2011) reconsidered its utility and redefined the variable, reincorporating it into the STOPS model. The authors explained *referent criterion* as any previous knowledge or subjective judgment that influences how a person approaches a problem-solving situation. Unlike the other antecedents, *the referent criterion* is more cognitive rather than perceptual variable referring to available prior knowledge in handling the problematic situation (Kim et al., 2012). The authors suggested that strong *referent criterion* subscription leads to high levels of communicative action in problem-solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Kim (2017) proposed measuring this variable by asking

participants to indicate their level of agreement to the following statements: I have a very clear and specific position (stance) on what should be done regarding this problem/issue; I have a preferred method of resolving the problem/issue; I have a specific direction in mind for what to do about this problem/issue; I know what to do and what should be done about this problem/issue.

In addition to the perceptual and cognitive independent variables, STOPS utilizes a motivational variable, the *situational motivation in problem-solving*, which is defined as "a state of situation-specific cognitive and epistemic readiness to make problem-solving efforts" (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 132). This variable is posed as mediating the effect of *problem recognition*, *constraint recognition*, and *involvement recognition* on *CAPS*. Kim et al. (2011) explained that *situational motivation in problem solving* represents the extent to which an individual is eager to learn and think more about a specific problem as a result of recognizing the problem, perceiving little constraint to act upon it, and having a close and personal connection to it. To measure this construct, Kim (2017) suggested asking questions such as: "Do you often think about this problem when you are doing something else?", "To what extent would you say you are curious about this problem?", "How curious are you about the following problem?", and "Please indicate to what degree you would like to better understand each of these problems."

Moreover, the STOPS' *communicative action in problem solving (CAPS)* expands the STP model by assessing three communicative behavior dimensions. The three communicative dimensions are used to capture communication action in selecting, transmitting, and acquiring information, and each one entails active and passive aspects. According to Kim and Grunig (2011), by observing both active and passive communicative aspects of each dimension, it is possible to understand the extent to which the investigated issue matches individuals' subjective life problems. Active communication behaviors are expected from individuals exhibiting higher levels of

problem recognition, involvement recognition, referent criterion, and lower levels of constraint recognition. And passive communication behaviors are expected from individuals with lower levels of problem recognition, involvement recognition, referent criterion, and higher levels of constraint recognition.

The first dimension, *information selection*, consists of *information forefending* and *information permitting*. *Information forefending* is an active form of communication that can be understood as the act of an individual in selecting relevant and useful information about an issue for problem-solving purposes (Kim et al., 2012). In contrast, *information permitting* refers to a passive action that one engages when accepting any information related to a problem-solving situation.

The second dimension, *information transmission*, comprises *information forwarding* and *information sharing*. *Information forwarding* is considered an active form of communication consisting of proactively disseminating information to others, while *information sharing* is a passive communicative action that refers to reacting to another person's request for opinion, idea, or expertise about an issue.

The last dimension, *information acquisition*, is manifested through *information seeking* and *information attending*. *Information seeking* represents an active communication behavior that is defined as a planned scanning of various communication outlets for information and messages about a specified topic (Grunig, 1997), such as searching for additional information about the problem online. At the same time, *information attending* is a passive communication behavior described as unplanned information and messages gathering about a topic (Kim et al., 2012), that is simply paying attention to the news mentioning the problem.

Despite how STOPS is considered an improvement of STP (Kim & Grunig, 2011) and its authors claim that it is a comprehensive new theory, it is more common to find STOPS applications not encompassing all of its elements. For example, several articles employing the theory did not include the *referent criterion* (e.g., Favarin et al., 2020; McKeever et al., 2016; Park & Rim, 2020; Zheng & McKeever, 2016; Zheng et al., 2016), which can possibly be the result of the variable's history of being dropped, reincorporated, and dropped again from the STP model, leading some researchers to imply that this variable might not be strong enough or a relevant concept to explore. Additionally, several scholars have adapted STOPS' elements by adjusting its independent and dependent concepts (e.g., Favarin et al., 2020; Yoo et al., 2018); some used different measurements or even new definitions for the variables (e.g., Park & Rim, 2020). Other authors only tested one or two of the STOPS original antecedents (e.g., Zheng & McKeever, 2016) or combined STOPS with other theories (e.g., McKeever, 2013; Zheng et al., 2016). This dissertation will also propose an adaptation to the original STOPS model, which is explained later in this chapter. The next section will explore some examples of STOPS applications in a variety of contexts.

STOPS Applications

STOPS has been applied to three major contexts: risk and crisis communication (e.g., spillover effect, hot-issue publics), health communication (e.g., health-related events and fundraising efforts, childhood vaccination, organ donation), and computer-mediated communication (e.g., cyberactivism, social media instant activism). Moreover, the theory has also been tested cross-culturally by investigating individuals from South Korea (Kim et al., 2012), China (Zheng et al., 2016), and Hong Kong (Poroli & Huang, 2018). All theory applications, however, considered only one level of analysis.

Poroli and Huang (2018) investigated the spillover effect of one university's crisis on students from another university in Hong Kong. The crisis in question was a rooftop collapse that injured three people. The interview protocol was largely based on the STOPS elements, with questions related to problem recognition, involvement recognition, proactive and reactive communicative behaviors, and other concepts such as trust (in the university's ability to solve the problem) and crises responses (recall of messages and their perceived effectiveness). The study's main findings were that individuals exhibiting higher levels of problem recognition and interest in on-campus safety were more communicatively active (information seeking and forwarding) regarding the crisis that happened at the other university. Also, the authors found that, to better understand the crisis, students mostly relied on their interactions on social media with friends and other individuals and non-culpable organizations related to the crisis.

Another risk and crisis communication example applying STOPS is from one of the authors who developed the theory, Kim et al. (2012), that used STOPS to investigate South Koreans' communication behaviors towards the government's decision to resume American beef importation, a *hot issue* situation that received six months of intense media coverage and resulted in several anti-government protests. In this research, the authors included all antecedents and communication behaviors in the STOPS model, but the situational motivation in problem-solving was tested as an antecedent variable instead of a mediating one. Moreover, the authors examined the role of cross-situational factors, such as political interest, prior protest participation, and sociodemographic characteristics. Some of the main findings were that the theory was successfully replicated in a different cultural context, individuals with high levels of political interest also presented greater problem recognition and involvement recognition and less constraint

recognition, and previous engagement in an issue-related action also increased problem and involvement recognition and decreased constraint recognition.

The most common application of STOPS is in health communication contexts. One example is Zheng and McKeever (2016) who examined how the general public seeks, processes, and shares information about three fundraising events (Relay for Life, Race for Cure, and March for Babies) benefitting three nonprofit health organizations (American Cancer Society, Susan G. Komen, and March of Dimes, respectively). The study looked at different communicative actions across several media sources. The authors adapted the STOPS model by introducing a new variable, health consciousness, as the only antecedent of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition. The authors also removed referent criterion and situational motivation in problem solving. In addition, they tested problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition as mediating variables between health consciousness and communicative action. The communicative action was also adapted by presenting only one overarching dimension (communication action about health-related nonprofit events) rather than three dimensions proposed by the STOPS model. Moreover, the study examined the effects of individuals' demographics and media use characteristics to try to determine the best target audiences for fundraising communication and events. Some of the most significant results are that the study provided support for a new antecedent variable (health consciousness), which successfully predicted health-related communicative action, and that social media use was the strongest predictor of communicative action among all media variables tested (newspaper, television, radio, internet, and social media).

The final example is a recent study from Park and Rim (2020), who employed the STOPS model to explore the effects of instant activism on social media. These authors investigated how

individuals' perception of deceptive messages (hoaxes) influence their behavioral commitment in the context of GMO (genetically modified organisms) labeling. In this study, the authors adapted the STOPS model by assessing issue knowledge and issue involvement (akin to problem recognition and involvement recognition, respectively), the situational motivation in problem solving, and information forefending, information forwarding, and information seeking. They also added hoax belief as a mediating variable and behavioral commitment as an outcome. The authors found that participants with low levels of issue knowledge and a high levels of issue involvement tended to believe the hoax. And belief in the hoax led to higher engagement in active communicative activities in problem-solving and behavioral changes (behavioral commitment to not purchase or consume any foods that do not clearly indicate GMO information) when mediated by situational motivation in problem-solving. In sum, the authors demonstrated that individuals less knowledgeable on a social issue but presenting high levels of issue involvement were more prone to get involved in activism on social media.

In conclusion, STOPS has been applied to various contexts, including nonprofit organizations, and tested considering several social problems. Therefore, its application in this dissertation, that focuses on civic engagement behaviors toward nonprofits and the food insecurity problem at three geographic levels, is appropriate and extends the boundary conditions of this theory.

Proposed Adjustments to the STOPS Model

The scholars who expanded the STP by developing STOPS have acknowledged that, because it is a relatively new theory, it is necessary to apply it to more contexts, considering a variety of issues and problematic situations in order to validate its measurement scales and test its generalizability (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim et al., 2011). Additionally, as seen in the previous

section, it is very common for researchers to adjust the STOPS model to meet their research needs, although some studies have empirically tested the full model (e.g., Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Krishna, 2014; Kim et al., 2011; McKeever et al., 2019). This dissertation also adapts STOPS by keeping some elements, and removing, relocating, and redefining others.

Variables and Relationships from the Original STOPS Model

The conceptualization of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and situational motivation in problem solving as well as the relationships between these variables will follow the original STOPS model and will not bear any changes. This research project poses the following hypotheses to confirm previous authors' findings:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals' problem recognition will be positively related to their situational motivation in problem-solving.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals' constraint recognition will be negatively related to their situational motivation in problem-solving.

Independent Variable: Involvement Recognition

Most research measuring *involvement recognition* has found positive associations between this construct and subsequent communication behaviors. Thus, *involvement recognition* will be retained, but changes will be made to its conceptualization and measurement. The current *involvement recognition* variable in the STOPS model is loosely defined as "a perceived connection between the self and the problem situation" (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 130), and it is measured with vague questions, such as "I am closely connected with this problem/issue" or "I am connected with this problem/issue and its consequences". Therefore, this variable was replaced by affective and cognitive involvement, two more specific constructs with detailed measurement items as proposed by McKeever et al. (2016).

According to Matthes (2013), both *affective involvement* (feelings or emotions associated with a problem) and *cognitive involvement* (objective or subjective knowledge about the problem) are facets or dimensions of the same concept. They are also independent but intertwined processes that can better capture the overall idea of issue involvement impacting future behaviors when measured separately.

McKeever et al. (2016) reconceptualized *involvement recognition* as *affective involvement* and *cognitive involvement* to offer a more in-depth understanding of a person's involvement with an issue as a whole. These authors were not the first to measure both constructs, but they were the first to propose the adjustment to the STOPS model when investigating how and why individuals engage in communicative action about childhood vaccination on social media and other online platforms. They found that affective and cognitive involvement with the issue helped drive individuals' communicative action, especially when individuals did not support childhood vaccination.

Considering the food insecurity social issue, an individual should have some knowledge about food insecurity to perceive it as a social problem. Also, it is conceivable that if the individual has a certain amount of knowledge or information about food insecurity, they may also have feelings in a certain way about it. Therefore, I propose affective and cognitive involvements as antecedent variables of the whole conceptual model. In other words, the level of cognitive and affective involvements of individuals toward the food insecurity social problem will affect their problem recognition, constraint recognition, and situational motivation in problem-solving. Consequently, the expectation was that individuals with high levels of affective and cognitive involvements with the food insecurity problem are more likely to commit to problem-solving behaviors by engaging in online and offline advocacy and activism as they recognize food

insecurity as a problem, recognize less constraints related to it, and are situationally motivated to solve this problem. Below are the hypotheses related to affective and cognitive involvement:

Hypothesis 3: Individuals presenting high affective involvement with the food insecurity problem will present higher levels of problem recognition (H3a) and situational motivation in problem-solving (H3b).

Hypothesis 4: Individuals presenting high affective involvement with the food insecurity problem will present lower levels of constraint recognition.

Hypothesis 5: Individuals presenting high cognitive involvement with the food insecurity problem will present higher levels of problem recognition (H5a) and situational motivation in problem-solving (H5b).

Hypothesis 6: Individuals presenting high cognitive involvement with the food insecurity problem will present lower levels of constraint recognition.

Independent Variable: Referent Criterion

Despite Kim and Grunig's (2011) attempt to adjust and reconceptualize the *referent criterion* variable, it does not seem that scholars are convinced that this is a relevant or even reliable variable to include in their studies as they are consistently ignoring it in their research. I will follow how most researchers are currently applying the theory and omit it from my conceptual model. Nevertheless, the main reason to remove this variable from this investigation is that according to Kim and Grunig (2011), *referent criterion* was added to the STOPS model to serve as a cognitive independent variable (in addition to the perceptual and motivational ones). Now that I have included the *cognitive involvement* in my conceptual model, which is similar but a more robust construct than the *referent criterion*, it seems unnecessary to keep this variable in this investigation.

Dependent Variables: Online and Offline Advocacy and Activism

Another proposed adjustment to the original STOPS model regards the communication outcomes of interest. The existing CAPS variables refer to three broad categories of communication-based actions. More specifically, information selection, information transmission, and information acquisition. This dissertation, however, investigates four concrete behavioral outcomes that involve communicative-based actions. Therefore, following what other authors have already done by adapting the STOPS variables to meet their needs, this dissertation tests the STOPS model by examining *online advocacy, offline advocacy, online activism,* and *offline activism* as the outcomes of interest. They consist of four behavioral concepts adapted from a novel scale developed by McKeever et al. (2020). These four outcomes are similar to some of the *CAPS* dimensions. For example, *online advocacy* comprises active communication-based actions such as sharing and commenting posts about food insecurity from nonprofit social media accounts, which resembles the *information forwarding* and *information seeking* subvariables of CAPS.

The four new dependent variables–*online advocacy, offline advocacy, online activism,* and *offline activism*–are forms of civic engagement and can be considered categories of public support behavior. They were also inspired by a recent scale development (McKeever et al., 2020). The authors explained that with the increased importance of advocacy and activism for organizations and society, it was necessary to develop valid measurements to adequately capture these concepts that could be applied to studies surrounding nonprofit public relations and other areas such as social movements and political participation.

McKeever and her colleagues' first challenge was defining advocacy and activism because they have been inconsistently outlined and discussed over the years. After considering several definitions (e.g., Jenkins, 1987; Ophélie, 2016; Poorisat et al., 2018; Schmid et al., 2008),

McKeever et al. (2020) chose Lewis' (2018) definition that articulates advocacy as amplifying and activism as executing. That is, advocacy involves activities that support a cause, issue, or organization by amplifying their messages. It also refers to listening to learn more and engaging in dialogues about the cause or the organization. On the other hand, activism involves more dedicated and committed action, such as actively participating in activities to create change on behalf of (or against) a problem, cause, or organization. According to Lewis (2018), both advocacy and activism are necessary to advance various causes, groups, and organizations. Also, both concepts differ in action and commitment levels, but in general, advocacy activities are the foundation for several activism activities. This dissertation also employs Lewis' (2018) understanding of advocacy and activism concepts.

The next step for McKeever et al. (2020) was to identify specific activities pertaining to advocacy and activism. According to the authors, what mainly distinguishes the concepts are the differences in risk and cost levels associated with them. More specifically, activities related to advocacy usually involve lower risks and costs than activities related to activism. McKeever at al.'s (2020) original scale and measurement items are in Appendix A.

Although I understand the logic used in this scale categorization, I believe it is more beneficial to combine the six factors in a simpler way. Because both advocacy and activism can manifest online and offline, my approach to McKeever et al.'s scale was to rearrange both advocacy and activism activities by distinguishing the settings in which they are performed; therefore, combining them into four categories instead of six: *online advocacy, offline advocacy, online activism,* and *offline activism*. Conceptually, the original six variables fit into the four new categories, and this recategorization was statistically validated in a pilot test that compared four advocacy and activism scales. Chapter 4 presents more information about the pilot test.

As explained in Chapter 2, both advocacy and activism are civic engagement forms that can manifest through several online or offline activities. Most of the literature on civic engagement focuses on three forms of civic engagement: voluntary work, financial donation, and political participation. Today, however, people can opt to engage in a variety of civically oriented activities online, through social media, online fundraising, or volunteer platforms (e.g., volunteermatch.org), and offline, through in-person participation in the organization's facilities, raising funds in loco, or attending demonstrations.

McKeever et al. (2019) pointed out that although online civic engagement forms are oftentimes described as less impactful than offline activities (e.g., slacktivism), they can be the first step for more concrete forms of offline civic engagement. Additionally, social media platforms enable individuals to connect with like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations at the local, national, and global levels and engage in online civically oriented activities that otherwise would not be accessible to them (Milan, 2015).

Specific to this dissertation project, *online advocacy* was assessed by asking questions related to organizational-based activities done through social media platforms, such as following a particular nonprofit account as well as liking, commenting, or sharing a publication about a cause posted by the organization. *Offline advocacy* was measured by asking intent behavior to discuss a particular nonprofit's work with friends and family or demonstrate support to the organization by wearing a t-shirt, or putting a sign in the yard to amplify a specific message. *Online activism* was evaluated, for example, by asking intent behavior, such as one-time financial contribution in response to an online fundraising campaign favoring a particular organization's work. Finally, *offline activism* was assessed through questions that involve intent to engage in more regular or in-person activities with or on behalf of a nonprofit organization, such as by making periodic financial

contributions, becoming an officer or a regular volunteer. The full measurement items used in this dissertation are in Appendix B.

The following hypotheses postulate that the relationships between all independent, mediator, and dependent variables will occur through a series of multivariable mediation pathways:

Hypothesis 7: Problem recognition and situational motivation in problem-solving will mediate the effect of affective involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H7a), offline advocacy (H7b), online activism (H7c), and offline activism (H7d).

Hypothesis 8: Constraint recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of affective involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H8a), offline advocacy (H8b), online activism (H8c), and offline activism (H8d).

Hypothesis 9: Problem recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of cognitive involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H9a), offline advocacy (H9b), online activism (H9c), and offline activism (H9d).

Hypothesis 10: Constraint recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of cognitive involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H10a), offline advocacy (H10b), online activism (H10c), and offline activism (H10d).

Levels of Analysis

The final proposed adjustment to the original STOPS model is an expansion of its analysis to multiple levels. To my knowledge, no other study has employed the STOPS model to investigate a social cause across three different levels of analysis, i.e., local, national, and global levels. The three levels of analysis are relevant because it is conceivable that the perceived proximity of the nonprofit combating food insecurity will impact individuals' intent behaviors and attitudes. Thus, by assessing the validity of the STOPS model on three levels, the factors influencing individuals' intent behaviors and the specific civic engagement preferences depending on the nonprofit level can be explored. These multilevel findings will benefit both scholars and nonprofit managers as they advance understanding of public support behavior toward nonprofit organizations locally, nationally, and globally.

Therefore, this dissertation expands the STOPS model by examining nonprofits at three different geographic locations where the food insecurity problem is being addressed, an aspect that has the potential to impact civic engagement intent behavior that has not yet been extensively investigated in the civic engagement literature regardless of the discipline.

According to Tremblay-Boire and Prakash (2017), the location of a nonprofit's operations impacts individuals' willingness to donate. The authors found that people are more inclined to donate to local nonprofits instead of international nonprofits because of the physical and cultural distances that limit the quantity and quality of information that donors gather to inform their charitable decisions. However, it is unclear if their findings are the result of the perceived geographic proximity of the nonprofit or the perceived proximity of the issue's impact (national versus international). Also, Tremblay-Boire and Prakash's (2017) results are based on an investigation comparing nonprofits providing comparable services in the United States and Haiti

geographical contexts. Therefore, the authors acknowledge that future research examining nonprofits operating in different locations might obtain other results depending on the foreign country's choice used in the investigation or something else that they did not include in their theoretical argument.

In a recent study, Salido-Andrés et al. (2019) investigated the determinants of success of donation-based crowdfunding (DCF) through digital platforms in order to compare the success factors of online versus offline fundraising campaigns. To the authors' surprise, most of the results contradicted the well-established literature surrounding success factors of offline fundraising campaigns. Particularly, in terms of the geographical scope (i.e., the proximity between donors and beneficiaries), it was expected that campaigns focused on domestic organizations and causes would receive more support than international. However, their results showed that campaigns focused on international organizations and causes were more successful than the domestic ones. Additionally, regarding the number of potential beneficiaries involved in the fundraising, it was expected that campaigns concerning larger numbers of beneficiaries would be the most successful, but it turned out that campaigns involving limited numbers of beneficiaries (up to 100 people) were the most successful in their investigation. Those results, however, need to be carefully interpreted since all 360 online fundraising campaigns analyzed took place in Spain.

By using a social problem evident locally, nationally, and globally, this dissertation demonstrates how the perceived proximity of the nonprofit combating food insecurity at the local, national, or global level impact individuals' willingness to engage in online and offline advocacy and activism behaviors. The following multi-pronged research question was posed to understand if the perceived proximity with the nonprofit prompts some intended behaviors over others:

Research Question 1: How does a nonprofit's geographical level impact individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities: online advocacy (RQ1a), offline advocacy (RQ1b), online activism (RQ1c), and offline activism (RQ1d)?

As discussed in previous chapters, information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially social media, offer Americans more opportunities to express their support for different causes and to connect with like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations at the local, national, and global levels (Milan, 2015). Therefore, the possibility to engage in meaningful online civic-oriented activities through and on behalf of nonprofits has influenced the shift in Americans' civic engagement behaviors. This shift in behavioral support is attracting researchers lately (e.g., Piatak & Mikkelsen, 2021), but the distinctions between public support considering different levels of proximity of the nonprofit organization remain yet to be examined and are one of the primary contributions of this dissertation. To further understand the impact of social media use on individuals' civic engagement preferences, this dissertation included and tested a social media use variable as a control variable.

Conceptual Model

Based on the discussion presented in this chapter, I advance the following adapted STOPS conceptual model to achieve this dissertation's two objectives: 1) to identify individual characteristics that lead people to engage in online and offline advocacy and activism through and on behalf of nonprofit organizations, and 2) to understand how nonprofits from different levels of proximity (i.e., local, national, or global) combating the food insecurity problem can harness affective and cognitive involvements, problem recognition, constraint recognition, and situational motivation in problem solving to drive individuals' participation in their organizations.
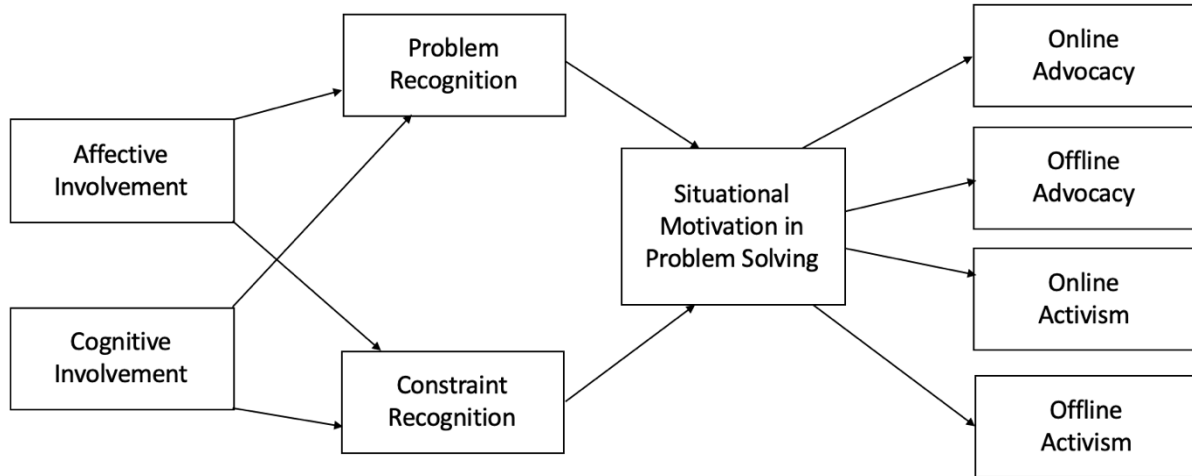
Figure 3. Dissertation Conceptual Model

The model was tested using the food insecurity social issue across three levels of analysis. That is, the model was tested three separate times considering nonprofits combating food insecurity at the local, national, and global levels and assessing subsequent online and offline advocacy and activism intent through or on behalf of nonprofit organizations. Theoretically, it was expected that the model would replicate at each level. In doing, it was possible to observe whether individuals' online and offline advocacy and activism intent varied depending on their perceived proximity of the organization. It was also possible to identify individual characteristics that explained participants' preferences in engaging in those four categories of civic engagement activities at the three different levels. Individual characteristics of the participants were assessed through post-hoc analyses of the control variables.

The next chapter discusses the food insecurity social problem and how nonprofits address this issue at the local, national, and global levels. It also explains the methodological approach chosen to test all hypotheses and research question, and concludes by presenting the results of a pilot test of the dependent variables.

CHAPTER 4: CURRENT STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter has four parts. The first introduces the food insecurity social problem and explains how nonprofits address this issue at the local, national, and global levels. The second presents the results of the pilot conducted to test the dependent variables. The third part outlines the methodological approach chosen to test all hypotheses and the research question pertaining to this dissertation project. And the last part explains all elements of the quantitative online survey employed to test the conceptual model of this dissertation project.

The Food Insecurity Problem

To appropriately test the conceptual model introduced in Chapter 3, it was first necessary to identify a significant social problem that impacts the lives of people locally, nationally, and globally. A social problem or issue is a condition or behavior that causes negative outcomes for a large number of people (Rubington & Weinberg, 2010). Social problems can be related to civil rights, human rights, and welfare, for example, homelessness, unemployment, racism, xenophobia, poverty, and drug abuse. Environmental problems, such as global warming, water pollution, or deforestation, are also considered social problems, given their potential negative impacts on many people's lives.

Food insecurity is the social problem chosen for this investigation, and the criteria for this choice were its timely importance at the local, national, and global levels; current impact on Americans' lives; nonpartisan nature; and the existence of many nonprofits working to combat this problem at all levels.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2009), food insecurity is the disruption of food intake or eating patterns of household members due to lack of money and other resources that happens many times in the year. It is a condition that results from insufficient

household resources that can be temporary or long-term. Many factors influence food insecurity, such as poverty, employment, education, race, ethnicity, and disability status (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [ODPHP], 2020; USDA, 2019).

This social issue can also be affected by neighborhood conditions (Zenk et al., 2005). For instance, across the United States, many neighborhoods in urban, rural, and low-income areas present limited physical access to healthy food. Limited physical access refers to communities with scant public transportation and long distances between residents and grocery stores or full-service supermarkets (Zenk et al., 2005).

In the United States, food insecurity has been a particularly salient social issue despite the government's emergency assistance programs and stimulus payments during the pandemic (Fang et al., 2021). It was estimated that 1 in 4 of all U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2020 (Silva, 2020), and this problem mainly affects families from minority populations (Morales et al., 2020). Other factors that exacerbated food insecurity in the United States are the rise of inflation and supply chain disruptions in 2021 and 2022, increasing food prices and unemployment, and reducing food availability and affordability in many communities across the country (Martin, 2022).

In this dissertation project, survey participants were provided with a general statement explaining the food insecurity social problem and introduced to a fictional nonprofit working to combat food insecurity at one of the three levels; local, national, or global. Each nonprofit featured in the vignettes is based on a real nonprofit and was assembled considering the communication elements recommended by the transparency pillar of Liket & Maas' (2015) NOE instrument. Some authors have already tested the STOPS model using real organizations (e.g., American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, Susan G. Komen Foundation, March of Dimes); however,

the objective of using hypothetical examples of nonprofits was to avoid possible biases the participants have about real organizations.

By testing the conceptual model presented at the beginning of this chapter, it was possible to shed light on why and how Americans are currently willing to engage in four categories of civically orientated activities (online and offline advocacy and activism) based on their proximity perceptions to the organization. This model is expected to replicate to a number of nonprofit organizations addressing various social problems at all geographic levels.

Food Insecurity at the Local Level

To put the food insecurity problem into perspective, approximately 39% of Detroit (Hill, 2020), 20% of Dallas ("Rate of food insecurity in Dallas," 2021), and 14% of New York (Dervishi, 2021) households are food insecure. At the local level, food insecurity is directly related to another social problem that is commonly known as food deserts. Food desert is the term used to describe communities and neighborhoods that experience deficiency in affordable and nutritious food (Beaulac et al., 2009). In urban areas, food deserts are considered any location more than one mile away from a supermarket. In rural areas, food deserts are more than ten miles away from supermarkets or large grocery stores (Silva, 2020). According to a Johns Hopkins study, residents of food deserts are more likely to experience food insecurity due to their lack of access to affordable and nutritious food sources (Brooks, 2014).

Moreover, food deserts are most commonly found in minority neighborhoods and rural areas (Dutko et al., 2012). According to USDA (2019), Black and Hispanic households are more likely to experience food insecurity than White and other racial groups' households. In particular, 19.1% of Black and 15.6% of Hispanic families were food insecure in 2019. In contrast, 7.9% of

White households experienced food insecurity in the same year. Additionally, rural areas that do not experience population growth are likely to become food deserts (USDA, 2019).

In general, residents of food deserts only have access to food through convenience stores or fast-food chains, leading them to negative eating habits that culminate in various health issues such as diabetes and obesity (Beaulac et al., 2009). In children, nutritious food deficiency can also affect physical development and mental health (Burke et al., 2016).

To combat food insecurity at the local level, many nonprofit organizations work in partnership with local food suppliers and producers by collecting and redistributing surplus food to neighborhoods and communities without access to nutritious food. This food distribution is frequently done through food banks, food pantries, and churches. Public support through nonprofits combating food insecurity is usually manifested through food and financial donation; many forms of volunteerism, such as working in the warehouse, distributing the food, or in administrative functions; participating in events promoted by the organizations; or spreading information related to the nonprofit's work online and offline. At the local level, nonprofits' operations are usually smaller in scope and capacity and less professionalized than national and global nonprofits' operations. However, getting involved with local nonprofits may elicit more personal connections with the beneficiaries, and consequently, people may perceive their support as making a difference before their eyes.

For this project's investigation, the fictional nonprofit example used for the local level manipulation was based on Detroit Feedback Loop (DFL), a nonprofit organization that collects leftover and unused food from local restaurants, bakeries, and grocery stores and distributes them to community soup kitchens and homeless shelters. The nonprofit manipulation based on the DFL

is presented to the survey participants as it is from their household location. The vignette used for the local manipulation is in Appendix C.

Food Insecurity at the National Level

Food insecurity at the national level is closely related to hunger, which can be understood as "discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain caused by prolonged, involuntary lack of food" (ODPHP, 2020). To combat hunger, the USDA has developed the U.S. Household Food Security Scale (HFSS), a screening tool used to measure Americans' food security every year. Until 2019, almost 90% of all U.S. households were considered food secure, but this reality had significantly changed after 2020.

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 9 of all American households experienced food insecurity sometime in the year (USDA, 2019). In 2020, this number skyrocketed, and according to an estimate published by Northwestern University, 1 in 4 of all U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2020, which is more than 35 million Americans (Silva, 2020). According to a recent estimate from Feeding America, this number can be up to 42 million in 2021 (Hall, 2021).

Moreover, food insecurity was considered one of the seven 2021 Trends for Communicators to Watch according to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). In this article, PRSA advises American communicators and organizations to consider mobilizing their employees to make donations to food banks, food pantries, and schools that offer food programs for their students (Dupont, 2021).

To combat food insecurity at the national level, nonprofits typically establish partnerships to acquire large amounts of food and other resources with food suppliers, producers, prominent corporations, and the government. Food distribution is commonly conducted using food banks,

food pantries, shelters, community-based agencies, or delivery. Public support of national nonprofits combating food insecurity is mostly done through financial donations; several forms of voluntary work, like sorting and packing, assembling food boxes, delivering meals, or helping fundraise; participation in events promoted by the organizations; or use of one's online and offline networks to spread awareness about the nonprofit's work and cause. At the national level, nonprofits' operations are usually well-structured with moderate to large scope and impact. They are usually professionalized organizational environments, and administrative volunteer opportunities are less common than in less professionalized environments such as local nonprofits. Getting involved with a national nonprofit might foster the notion that the organization's work benefits more communities and, therefore, helps more people than local operations. It can also nurture a sense of nationalism, that the support will be destined to other Americans instead of foreigners.

The national fictional example used in this investigation was inspired by Feeding America, the country's largest hunger-relief nonprofit organization that comprises a nationwide network of 200 food banks that distribute food through soup kitchens, shelters, and community-based agencies. The vignette for the national manipulation is in Appendix C.

Food Insecurity at the Global Level

Worldwide, before the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity affected around 690 million people or approximately 9% of the global population. After 2020, an additional 83 to 132 million people have become affected by this problem (FAO et al., 2020). Moreover, most people experiencing acute food insecurity live in countries impacted by conflict, climate change, and economic crises. And the countries that faced the worst food crises in 2019 were Afghanistan,

Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen (Food Security Information Network, 2020).

A recent report from Charities Aid Foundation of America (2021) explains that there is an increased demand for food relief efforts in all continents, which includes new partnerships between food companies and nonprofits, food banks, and food pantries; food and financial donations from individual donors (fundraising campaigns); and volunteers to support nonprofits with their logistics.

To combat food insecurity at the global level, nonprofits usually serve as humanitarian hubs connecting communities, governments, corporations, and other nonprofits to tackle the food insecurity problem in conflict-affected countries and communities suffering from natural disasters, political and economic crises. Food distribution is usually part of larger emergency relief operations that involve other types of assistance related to health, resilience, nutrition, and education. Public support of global nonprofits combating food insecurity is often through financial donations, voluntary work online (e.g., raising funds) and offline (e.g., voluntourism), participation in events promoted by the organizations, supporting organizations, and acquiring goods that part of the sales revenue is destined to the cause (cause-related marketing); use of one's online and offline networks to spread awareness about the nonprofit's work and cause. Also, getting involved with global nonprofits has the potential to appeal to some individuals as being more impactful in terms of the number of beneficiaries, and more professionalized than local and national organizations, given the large dimensions and complexity of their operations.

The global fictional example used in this investigation was inspired by the United Nations World Food Programme, the world's largest humanitarian nonprofit organization based in Italy

that operates in 88 countries combating food insecurity and saving lives of people at risk of hunger. The vignette used for the global manipulation is in Appendix C.

Pilot Test of Dependent Variables

An important contribution of this dissertation is a test of the proposed conceptual model, which identifies the predictors and outcomes of civic engagement related to nonprofit organizations. Most predictors came from the original Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) model; however, the outcomes or dependent variables came from an adaptation of a new advocacy and activism scale (McKeever et al., 2020), which has not been tested against the STOPS' variables yet. Therefore, determining the best measurement tools to use as dependent variables of the conceptual model was an essential first step of this dissertation project.

In July 2021, I conducted a pilot test of eight potential dependent variables, derived from four scales: the adaptation of McKeever et al.'s (2020) Advocacy and Activism scale (reduced from six to four factors; Online Advocacy, Offline Advocacy, Online Activism, Offline Activism), the Political and Social Advocacy subscale of the Social Issues Advocacy Scale (SIAS 1; Nilsson et al., 2011), the Social Justice Behavioral Intentions (SJBI) subscale of the Social Justice Scale (Torres-Harding et al., 2012), and the high- and low-risk subscales of the Black Community Activism Orientation Scale (BCAOS; Hope et al., 2019).

A total of 125 participants were recruited through Dynata, a first-party data company that distributed the survey to its large database of participants. Each participant who completed the survey received $3.00. Incomplete responses, responses that failed the attention check, or exhibited a streamlining bias attitude (e.g., 7,7,7,7 or 1,1,1,1) were removed from the sample and were not charged by Dynata. Among the 125 participants, 48% were male, 51.2% female, 0.8% nonbinary, and the mean age was 46 (SD=18.59). Regarding household location, 34.4% of the sample lived

in urban areas, 44% in suburban, and 11.2% in rural areas. Additionally, 52% of the participants self-identified as white, 14.4% as Asian, 11.2% as Black, 10.4% as Hispanic, and 1.6% as Native American. In terms of education, 32.8% completed university, 15.2% completed graduate school, 15.2% reported having some university, 15.2% completed high school, 9.6% completed trade/technical school, 0.8% completed grade school education, and 0.8% reported not having formal education.

Participants were presented with a list of 14 categories of social problems and asked to select the one that has been most important to them in the past 12 months. 42.4% of the participants selected COVID-19, 9.6% civil rights, 8.8% climate change, 6.4% voting rights, 5.6% children's rights, 5.6% healthcare, and the rest 21.6% selected one the other options (animal rights, education, food insecurity, gun rights, homelessness, immigration, reproductive rights, or veteran rights).

Regarding internal consistency or reliability of each scale, all presented Cronbach's alphas above .8, that indicates strong reliability. *Online Advocacy* (α=.948), *Offline Advocacy* (α=.826), *Online Activism* (α=.938), *Offline Activism* (α=.922), *SIAS1* (α=.934), *BCAOS low-risk* (α=.950), *BCAOS high-risk* (α=.970), and *SBJI* (α=.924).

Next, it was important to assess which scale presented the strongest correlation with the situational motivation of problem solving, a variable from the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011) that serves as mediated and independent variable in proposed conceptual model of this dissertation. Pearson's *r* data analysis revealed positive correlations between situational motivation in problem solving and almost all scales, except *BCAOS high-risk*. Nevertheless, the most robust correlations were with *Offline Advocacy* (Pearson's *r*=.62, *p*<.001) and *Online Advocacy* (Pearson's *r*=.46, *p*<.001) scales. Exploratory

factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) also demonstrated that the majority of items loaded onto their respective factors.

To conclude, among all scales the adaptation of McKeever et al.'s (2020) advocacy and activism tool was the one that presented the best predictability results. As previously explained, McKeever et al.'s (2020) original scale was reduced from six to four factors. The conceptualization of advocacy and activism were kept the same, with advocacy referring to civic engagement activities that *amplify* an organization's message or cause, and activism referring to the *execution* of concrete activities with or on behalf of a nonprofits that involve higher risks and costs than advocacy activities. Then, both concepts were distinguished by the setting the activities within them were enacted, online and offline. All items comprising online advocacy, offline advocacy, online activism, and offline activism are in Appendix B.

Online Survey Research

Online surveys are a very popular research mode that present several advantages for researchers, such as low cost, an array of design options, less data entry time, shorter transmitting time, and flexibility and agility to fix any problems (Lyberg & Weisberg, 2016). Additionally, online surveys have been applied to multiple settings, contexts, and publics, which demonstrates its versatility and usefulness (Moy & Murphy, 2016). Online survey research was also the method chosen to test and validate the original STOPS model (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Most subsequent researchers who applied this theory have also employed online surveys in their investigations.

Nevertheless, online survey research is a deceptively easy technique because anyone can write a list of questions and distribute it to their contacts; however, to generate relevant statistical data, it is necessary to construct an effective questionnaire considering meticulous strategic and

methodological decisions and the best practices in the field (Moy & Murphy, 2016). Therefore, this project employed the Total Survey Error approach to avoid methodological issues.

Total Survey Error (TSE)

Some possible drawbacks related to the application of online surveys are low response rates and misapplications of web-based questionnaires that can compromise internal and external validity and generate erroneous and misleading results (Fan & Yan, 2010; Lyberg & Weisberg, 2016). Thereby, to avoid or minimize possible shortcomings, it is recommended to use the Total Survey Error (TSE) framework, a highly accepted approach used to ensure quality and consistency in survey research.

Several authors have developed their vision of how to apply the TSE. One example is Biemer and Lyberg (2003) who argue that there are five sources of survey errors that researchers should watch out for when creating surveys to improve their quality. *Specification error* is when wrong questions are used to measure the concept of interest, *frame error* regards improper sampling; that is, when inadequate individuals participate in the survey, *nonresponse error* refers to the item or unit-level missing data, *measurement error* is when the survey respondent does not interpret the questions as intended in the design, and *processing error* has to do with issues related to editing, entry, or coding of data; errors calculating and applying survey weights; or problems during the data tabulation process. I carefully created the questionnaire and analyzed all data considering these five sources of survey errors.

Moreover, the survey research literature offers several strategies to minimize the different types of survey errors. For example, Berchtold (2019) and Myers (2011) looked at ways to address the nonresponse error. Myers (2011) asserted that social scientists' most common treatments (e.g., listwise, pairwise, imputation, and maximum likelihood methods) are prone to biased results and

reduced statistical power, so she introduced a computation tool for SPSS called *hot deck imputation*. According to the author, the *hot deck imputation* consists of replacing the missing value with a "donor" information. That is, the value from the dataset from another individual that matches the dataset of the participant that presents missing information. This procedure retains the complete sample of individuals, preventing the loss of incomplete cases and decrease of the statistical power of the results. This procedure's weaknesses are if the sample is too small and there is no "donor" available for the match or if the missing data comes from unique cases that are very different from other cases and no match is possible.

Additional ways to address measurement errors are commonly discussed in the survey research literature, although some recommendations are not consensual. For example, both Lyberg and Weisberg (2016) and Fan and Yan (2010) believe that the order of the questions influences the way participants complete their surveys and suggest that randomization of response alternatives improves the validity of data. Kennedy and Vargus (2001) also believe that randomization of questions removes order effect and reduces social desirability bias. Regarding techniques to avoid response fatigue, Burkey and Kuechler (2003) claimed that surveys must be completed in 20 minutes or less, while Fan and Yan (2010) asserted that the completion time should be 13 minutes or less.

Ways to address errors related to the comprehension of survey questions are also present in the literature. For example, Morrison (2009) explained that the items on a scale should present a strong theoretical foundation but also need to be succinct, with no abstractions, redundancies, or unnecessary complexity. In addition, survey items should never present double-barreled, double negatives, or leading questions. Lastly, even following all the best practices on assembling a questionnaire, it is essential to conduct a pilot test of the survey items and the whole questionnaire

with part of the sample to ensure all questions are understood and generate high-quality data. "The quality of the end results cannot be better than the quality of the raw data" (Berchtold, 2019, p. 11).

Sampling Technique

This dissertation employed convenience sampling technique by recruiting participants through Dynata, a market research firm. Some of the advantages of data collection through a research firm are that it avoids multiple responses of a single participant and ensures participants' confidentiality using a double-blind procedure.

Convenience sampling is a nonprobability technique that relies on readily available participants to participate in the survey as they are part of a firm's database (Etikan et al., 2016). Some practical limitations of this technique are that participants are likely to be "expert survey takers," and the sample might over or under-represent certain demographics (Morrison, 2009). These two aspects pose threats to results' generalizability. However, although its limitations, convenience sampling is still a reliable and common way to collect social science data.

In the survey research literature, there is no consensus for sample size recommendations (Morrison, 2009). However, for large populations, a common practice is to use the Z-score formula to define sample sizes. This formula assumes 95% of confidence level, 0.5 standard deviation, and margin of error of 5%. Based on this dissertation's population (all Americans over 18), a sample size of 385 individuals would be sufficient. Nevertheless, this project recruited a sample of 504 participants. Considering this project's single-factor experimental design, around 150 participants per treatment would allow for reliable comparisons. Yet, 167 participants were collected for the local, 164 for the national, and 173 for the global manipulations. According to Etikan et al. (2016), sample size increases the statistical power of convenience samples, and this project's sample size

was sufficient to generate statistically significant results. It is important to note that all participants were randomly assigned to one of the three manipulations proposed. More specifically, each participant only answered questions about a nonprofit combating food insecurity at one level–local, national, or global. The following subsection describes the experimental manipulation.

Experimental Manipulation

This dissertation expands the STOPS model by investigating the food insecurity problem and intent behaviors through and on behalf of nonprofit organizations at three levels of proximity–local, national, and global. As explained in previous chapters, today's civic engagement has taken new forms (Frumkin, 2009) that are highly affected by the internet and social media. These technologies provide Americans more venues to express their support for different causes and more opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations at all levels that may otherwise be inaccessible (Milan, 2015). By testing this dissertation's conceptual model across the three levels of analysis, it was possible to identify if the perceived proximity of nonprofit prompted differences in individuals' intended online and offline advocacy and activism behaviors.

The operationalization of this experimental manipulation was based on the transparency pillar of Liket and Maas' (2015) instrument to assess Nonprofit Organizational Effectiveness (NOE). The pillar consists of three major communication practice themes: *reporting, accessibility,* and *online publication*. More specifically, the transparency pillar focuses on disclosing internal information to external publics and employing open and easy communication ways to engage with nonprofits' constituencies to establish high-quality and long-lasting relationships with them. According to the authors, the employment of the best practices present in all three pillars has the potential to improve a nonprofit's effectiveness.

Thus, each experimental manipulation mimics a homepage of a nonprofit website at one of the three geographical levels in adherence with the transparency pillar, such as providing full description of the nonprofit operations, target audience, contact information (email, telephone number, and social media), and availability of strategic plan and annual report. The three vignettes created for this experimental manipulation are in Appendix C.

Statistical Analysis

The original STOPS model and most articles applying this theory have employed online survey research to collect data and structural equation modeling (SEM) to test and explain the variables' relationships within the model. This dissertation employed an online survey to test the hypothesized model using a regression-based strategy called serial multiple mediator model (Hayes, 2017). A serial multiple mediation technique was adequate to test this dissertation's hypotheses because it allowed the inclusion of multiple independent, dependent, and mediator variables to test the direct and indirect effects among and between all observed and latent constructs.

Additionally, to properly apply the serial multiple mediator technique, it was necessary to download a computational tool developed by Hayes (2012; 2017) called PROCESS. This tool was easily incorporated into SPSS and provided a straightforward estimation of the regression coefficients that a regular OLS routine built into SPSS would not allow.

Finally, because the research design proposed involved a one-factor experimental manipulation, it was necessary to run ANOVA analysis to assess the variance between the three groups (local, national, and global) and post-hoc analyses to understand the reason for the variances. It is important to note that the pool of participants was randomly assigned to a manipulation.

Data Collection Overview

This dissertation assessed affective, cognitive, perceptual, and motivational factors surrounding food insecurity that could lead to intended behavioral outcomes through or on behalf of nonprofit organizations at three different levels of proximity–local, national, and global. To accomplish this goal, a self-administered quantitative online survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed to a sample of participants matching the age, gender, ethnicity, and education quotas of the American adult population. Participants were recruited in August 2021 through Dynata, a first-party sampling firm that allows targeting specific audiences, generating a high-quality sample considering the population sought.

Participants

A total of 504 participants were recruited and compensated $3.00 each for their participation. Table 1 provides a full description of the sample demographics and shows how the sample matches U.S. Census information for some demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Sample Sociodemographic Characteristics

	N	M	SD	%	U.S. Census %
Age	504	45.9	17.9		
Gender					
Female	254			50.4	50.8
Male	245			48.6	49.2
Other	5			0.6	0
Ethnicity					
White	305			60.5	57.8
Hispanic	95			18.8	18.7
Black/African American	60			11.9	12.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	30			6	6.2
Native American	6			1.2	0.7
Other	8			1.6	4.6
Education					
Less than college degree	195			38.7	39
Have some college	309			61.4	61
Household location					
Urban	189			37.5	
Suburban	225			44.6	
Rural	86			17.1	
Income					
$0 - $25,000	76			15.1	
$25,001 - $50,000	116			23	
$50,001 - $75,000	92			18.3	
$75,001 - $100,000	71			14.1	
More than $100,000	123			24.4	
I prefer not to say	21			4.2	

Note: Gender and ethnicity comes from 2020 U.S. Census data; age and education from 2019

The ages of participants were collected following the age quotas of the 2019 U.S. Census Bureau (2021), excluding quotas below 18. The mean age of the sample of participants was 45.9 (SD=17.9) and ranged from 18 to 88 years old. Therefore, the sample age was reflective of the United States adult population.

The breakdown of participants' gender was as follows: 50.4% female (N=254), 48.6% male (N=245), and 1% nonbinary or preferred not to say (N=5). This variable was also reflective of the

American population, where women correspond to 50.8% of the population and men 49.2% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

In terms of the participants' ethnicity, 60.5% self-reported as White (*N*= 305), 18.8% (*N*=95) as Hispanic or Latino, 11.9% as Black (*N*=60), 6% as Asian or Pacific Islander (*N*=30), 1.2% as Native American (*N*=6), and 1.6% as biracial or other (*N*=8). Participants' ethnicity is comparable to the 2020 U.S. Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Participants' education was another variable collected to reflect the reality of the U.S. adult population over 25 years old. A total of 195 or 38.7% of participants reported having less than college degree (no formal education, completed grade school, completed high school, completed trade/technical school), and 309 or 61.4% of participants reported having at least some college education. According to the 2019 U.S Census data (USA Facts, n.d.), 39% of American adults over 25 have less than college degree and 61% have at least some college.

The last two demographic variables, household location and income, were not purposefully collected to match the U.S. population, but they were diverse enough to not favor one over other location or income range of participants. Regarding household location, 38.7% live in urban areas (*N*=189), 44.6% in suburban areas (*N*=225), and 17.1% in rural areas (*N*=86). In terms of household income, 24.4% reported earning more than $100,000 (*N*=123), 23% between $25,001 and $50,000 (*N*=116), 18.3% between $50,001 and $75,000 (*N*=92), 15.1% less than $25,000 (*N*=76), and 14.1% between $75,001 and $100,000 (*N*=71).

Because key demographic characteristics of the sample match the 2019 and 2020 U.S. Census estimates (2021), they allow for generalizable inferences of this dissertation's findings that will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

Procedures & Design

A questionnaire was developed using both scale and single-item questions from validated measurements. Most of them contained interval-level items that were combined to form the scales of the variables of interest. The questionnaire also included two attention-check questions, and only participants who passed both checks were included in the sample. Responses presenting straight-lining bias attitudes, when participants answer multiple questions the same way (non-differentiation in ratings) in a short period of time, and failing to notice reverse-coded items, were also removed from the sample.

After reading the study's instructions and consenting to participate, participants were first asked four basic demographic questions (gender, age, ethnicity, and education). These questions were used as quotas and were adjusted as they were filled out with complete responses. Next, all participants were presented with the following problem statement:

> *Food insecurity is a condition many families face when there is not enough money to buy nutritious food. This situation can be temporary or can last a long time. Food insecurity is influenced by several factors, including income, employment, race/ethnicity, and disability. When people don't consume nutritious food, they can develop serious health complications, such as obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.*

Then, they were asked questions about their *affective involvement, cognitive involvement, problem recognition, constraint recognition,* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* related to food insecurity. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three manipulations that consisted of a homepage of a fictional nonprofit organization combating food insecurity locally, nationally, or globally, and asked questions about their intent *online* and *offline advocacy* and *activism* behaviors toward the nonprofit. The questionnaire ended with questions related to social media use, previous civic engagement (in the last 12 months and last five years), political

interest, and two final demographic questions, household location and income. The whole survey took an average of 12 minutes to complete (*SD*=21 minutes).

Measures & Operationalizations

The conceptual model introduced in Chapter 3 contains four independent variables, one mediator variable, and four dependent variables. Ten hypotheses were posited to investigate the relationships between all variables of interest, and these variables were measured on 7-point Likert scales. The psychometrics chosen to measure the variables were based on Krosnick and Fabrigar's (1997) recommendations that bipolar scales (two opposing alternatives with a clear conceptual midpoint) are better than unipolar scales (scales with no midpoint and zero at one end).

Independent Variables

Affective Involvement (*M*=4.39 and *SD*=1.77) was adapted from Matthes (2013). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements:

> "At times, the issue of food insecurity has aroused me emotionally"; "it happens every now and then that I react emotionally about the issue of food insecurity"; "food insecurity deals with things that touch me emotionally"; and "as far as food insecurity is concerned, I can get quite emotional" (Cronbach's α=.937).

Cognitive Involvement (*M*=4.79 and *SD*=1.57) was also adapted from Matthes (2013). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements:

> "It is important to me to know the arguments of the food insecurity issue in detail"; "the more information I get regarding food insecurity, the better"; "it is important to me to know as much as possible about food insecurity"; "I rarely spend time thinking about information regarding food insecurity" (reverse-coded); and "I am not interested in specific information regarding food insecurity" (reverse-coded) (Cronbach's α=.758).

When removing the two reverse-coded items, the reliability score improved to α=.915. Therefore, the last two items were dropped from the scale in all subsequent analyses.

Problem Recognition (*M*=5.30 and *SD*=1.40) came from the original STOPS model (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements about food insecurity:

> "I think this is a serious social problem"*; "*I am concerned about this problem"; "something needs to be done to combat this problem"; "people should take action to solve this problem"; "regarding this problem, I see a large gap between the way things should be and the way they are now"; and *"*I believe people need to pay more attention to this problem" (Cronbach's α=.950).

Constraint Recognition (*M*=3.90 and *SD*=1.36) also came from the original STOPS model (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements about food insecurity. All items are reverse-coded:

> "I can't make a difference regarding this problem"; "I don't feel comfortable taking action regarding this problem"; "I see a lot of obstacles preventing me from doing something regarding this problem"; and "I feel like my ideas and opinions don't matter to those who are working on this problem" (Cronbach's α=.793).

Mediator Variable

Situational Motivation in Problem-Solving (*M*=4.79 and *SD*=1.50) is another variable coming from the original STOPS model (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements about food insecurity:

> "I am curious about this problem"; "I often think about this problem"; "I want to better understand this problem"; "I want to make this problem a priority these days"; "I want to work hard to develop a better understanding to solve this problem"; "I consider this problem a very important issue today"; and "I am determined to fix this problem as soon as possible" (Cronbach's α=.948).

Dependent Variables

The four dependent variables were adapted from McKeever et al. (2020) advocacy and activism scale. All items were measured focusing on organization-oriented engagement opportunities related to food insecurity social problem.

Online Advocacy (*M*=4.42 and *SD*=1.92) was assessed by asking participants to indicate

their likelihood to:

> "Follow the organization's social media accounts"; "like a post of the organization about the food insecurity issue"; "comment on a post of the organization about the food insecurity issue"; "share a post of the organization about the food insecurity issue"; "watch a video posted by the organization talking about its work combating the food insecurity issue"; "share a video posted by the organization talking about its work combating the food insecurity issue"; and "sign an online petition of the organization related to the food insecurity issue" (Cronbach's α=.963).

Offline Advocacy (*M*=4.41 and *SD*=1.84) was assessed by asking participants to indicate

their likelihood to:

> "Discuss the organization's work in combating the food insecurity issue with your family"; "discuss the organization's work in combating the food insecurity issue with your friends"; "pay attention to the information in the news related to the organization and food insecurity"; "wear a t-shirt in support of the organization that is combating food insecurity"; "wear a button in support of the organization that is combating food insecurity"; "put a sign in your yard related to the organization that is combating food insecurity"; and "display a bumper sticker in support of the organization that is combating food insecurity" (Cronbach's α=.950).

Online Activism (*M*=3.97 and *SD*=1.98) was assessed by asking participants to indicate

their likelihood to:

> "Donate money to the organization in response to an online campaign (one-time donation)"; "volunteer online by joining the nonprofit's team that organizes online fundraising to support the nonprofit to combat food insecurity"; "volunteer online by joining the nonprofit's team that organizes campaigns to raise awareness for the food insecurity cause"; "engage in online activity related to the organization that could compromise the relationship with my family"; "engage in online activity related to the organization that could compromise the relationship with my friends"; "send messages through social media to politicians on behalf of the organization to voice your concerns related to food insecurity"; and "send messages through social media to celebrities on behalf of the organization to attract their support for the food insecurity cause" (Cronbach's α=.963).

Offline Activism (*M*=3.88 and *SD*=1.96) was assessed by asking participants to indicate

their likelihood to:

"Join one of the organizations' committees to discuss future plans"; "make periodic financial contributions to the organization to combat food insecurity"; "serve as an offline volunteer in the organization distribute food in loco"; "engage in offline activity with the organization that could compromise the relationship with my family"; "engage in offline activity with the organization that could compromise the relationship with my friends"; and "call public figures on behalf of the organization to voice your concerns related to food insecurity" (Cronbach's α=.954).

Control Variables

As previously mentioned, this dissertation incorporated relevant control variables. Some were extensively investigated in the literature of civic engagement and nonprofit public support behavior, while others have been less common in this specific literature but are very pertinent for this specific research project. Descriptive statistics for these variables can be found in Table 2.

Previous Civic Engagement is the most prominent factor influencing future support or pro-social behavior (Hall et al., 2009; Toppe et al., 2002). That is, if a person has already supported a social cause or organization by volunteering or donating goods or money, they will likely engage in future support behavior. Therefore, this dissertation presented a list of 16 civic engagement activities and asked which activities individuals have participated in the last 12 months and in the last five years. For the last 12 months, the mean was 3.71 activities per participant (*SD*=3.56) and, for the last five years, mean was 4.06 activities (*SD*=4.19).

Social Media Use (*M*=4.63 and *SD*=1.86) was included as a control variable because the advancements and widespread use of the internet and social media have influenced how Americans prefer to engage in civically oriented activities. They also allow Americans to connect with causes and like-minded individuals, groups, and organizations that might be physically distant from them (Milan, 2015). Therefore, the following questions were asked to capture the extent to which social media help one's:

"To stay informed about U.S. current events and public affairs"; "To stay informed about the local community"; "To get news about current events from mainstream news media";

"To get news about current events through friends"; and "To stay informed about international public affairs and issues" (Cronbach's α=.954).

Political Interest is another construct associated with civic engagement (Kim et al., 2012), especially political participation like voting, donating for a political campaign, or attending local meetings (Piatak & Mikkelsen, 2021). Therefore, it was asked how interested the person was in politics on a scale from very uninterested (1) to very interested (7). The mean was 4.88 (SD=1.99).

As any study intending to shed light on people's civic engagement behaviors, this dissertation project also considered the impact of demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, and household location) on participants' perceptions of the food insecurity problem and willingness to engage in civically oriented activities to combat the problem on behalf or through nonprofit organizations. Descriptive statistics for these variables were presented in Table 1.

Table 2. Measures Summary

	N	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	*SD*
Affective Involvement	504	1	7	4.39	1.77
Cognitive Involvement	504	1	7	4.79	1.57
Problem Recognition	504	1	7	5.30	1.40
Constraint Recognition	504	1	7	3.90	1.36
Situational Motivation in Problem-Solving	504	1	7	4.79	1.50
Online Advocacy	504	1	7	4.42	1.92
Offline Advocacy	504	1	7	4.41	1.84
Online Activism	504	1	7	3.97	1.98
Offline Activism	504	1	7	3.88	1.96
Social Media Use	504	1	7	4.63	1.86
Political Interest	500	1	7	4.88	1.99
Civic Engagement last 12 months	504	0	16	3.71	3.56
Civic Engagement last 5 years	504	0	16	4.06	4.19

The next chapter presents the results pertaining all hypotheses and research question posited in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of all hypotheses and research question posited in previous chapters.

Hypotheses & Research Question

To test all hypotheses and the research question pertaining to this dissertation project, Pearson correlations among all variables of interest were conducted (Table 3). Overall, all variables correlate with each other except *constraint recognition* that did not significantly correlate with *problem recognition*, *situational motivation in problem-solving, online advocacy,* and *offline advocacy*.

Table 3. Bivariate Pearson's Correlation Among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Affect_Invol	1								
2. Cogn_Invol	.640**	1							
3. Prob_Recog	.610**	.665**	1						
4. Const_Recog	-.167**	.179**	-.032	1					
5. Sit_Mot_Prob	.755**	.760**	.790**	-.061	1				
6. On_Adv	.698**	.650**	.614**	-.073	.786**	1			
7. Off_Adv	.676**	.642**	.627**	-.073	.806**	.883**	1		
8. On_Act	.651**	.559**	.515**	-.127*	.757**	.879**	.887**	1	
9. Off_Act	.652**	.529**	.494**	-.158**	.726**	.810**	.857**	.925**	1

Two-tailed significance, **$p<.001$, *$p<.01$

Hypotheses 1 and 2

The first two hypotheses sought to replicate previous Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011) findings. More specifically, H1 and H2 aimed to test the relationships between individuals' *problem recognition* (the detection of food insecurity as a problem that needs to be combated), *constraint recognition* (the perceived obstacles limiting one's ability to act upon food insecurity), and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (the extent to which an individual is eager to learn and do more about food insecurity).

H1: Individuals' problem recognition will be positively related to their situational motivation in problem-solving.

H2: Individuals' constraint recognition will be negatively related to their situational motivation in problem-solving.

As expected, there was a strong Pearson correlation between *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (r=.790, p<.01). An OLS regression model was conducted to assess how well *problem recognition* would predict *situational motivation in problem-solving*, accounting for age, gender, ethnicity, education, household location, income, social media use, political interest, and previous civic engagement as control variables. The model showed that individuals' *problem recognition* significantly predicted individuals' *situational motivation in problem-solving* and the full model explained approximately 74% of the variance in motivation (R^2=.74). *Problem recognition* alone explained 65% of this variance (ß=.65, p<.001). Therefore, individuals are more situationally motivated to combat food insecurity as they recognize food insecurity as a problem that needs to be combated. H1 was supported.

The OLS regression also indicated that some control variables were significant predictors of *situational motivation in problem-solving.* Age (ß=-.01, p<.001), household location (ß=.16, p<.05), political interest (ß=.06, p<.01), civic engagement in the last 12 months (ß=.02, p<.05) and in the last 5 years (ß=.20, p<.05), and social media use (ß=.19, p<.001), meaning that younger participants, from urban areas, with higher levels of political interest, that participated in more civic engagement activities in the last year and last 5 years, and use social media more frequently were more situated motivated to solve the problem of food insecurity.

Regarding H2, a Pearson correlation revealed no statistically significant relationship between individuals' *constraint recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (r=-.06,

p=n.s.). Then, an OLS regression model including all control variables showed that although *constraint recognition* was not a predictor of *situational motivation in problem-solving* toward the food insecurity social problem (ß=.047, p=.217), some control variables were; age (ß=-.10, p<.01), political interest (ß=.12, p<.001) and social media use (ß=.42, p<.001). The full model explained approximately 47% of the variance in motivation (R^2=.47, *p*<.001). Thus, H2 was not supported. Implications of this can be found in Chapter 6.

Hypotheses 3 and 4

The next two hypotheses examine *affective involvement* (feelings or emotions associated with the food insecurity problem), the new predictor variable, in relation to three original STOPS variables—*problem recognition, situational motivation in problem-solving* and *constraint recognition*.

> *H3: Individuals presenting high affective involvement with the food insecurity problem will present higher levels of problem recognition (H3a) and situational motivation in problem-solving (H3b).*

> *H4: Individuals presenting high affective involvement with the food insecurity problem will present lower levels of constraint recognition.*

Regarding H3, *affective involvement* presented strong and positive Pearson correlations with *problem recognition* (H3a, *r*=.610, *p*<.01) and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (H3b, *r*=.755, *p*<.01). An OLS regression model was used to measure H3, accounting for all control variables. This model showed that *affective involvement* (ß=.27, *p*<.001) and *problem recognition* (ß=.50, *p*<.001) are significant predictors of *situational motivation in problem-solving*. Thus, H3a and H3b were supported. The whole OLS regression model accounted for 79% of the variance in *situational motivation in problem-solving* (R^2=.79, p<.001), and some control variables

also exhibited significant relationships. They include: social media (β=.14, p<.001), age (β=-.01, p<.01), political interest (β=.04, p<.05), and civic engagement in the last 5 years (β=.02, p<.01).

H4 posited that there would be a negative relationship between *affective involvement* and *constraint recognition*, and the variables did present a significant negative Pearson correlation (r=-.167, p<.01). Therefore, H4 was supported. However, when assessing whether *affective involvement* predicted *constraint recognition* through an OLS regression, the model revealed no predictive effect between both variables (β=-.08, p=n.s) when accounting for all control variables. Nevertheless, some control variables presented marginal effects on *constraint recognition*—age (β=-.01, p<.001), ethnicity (β=-.30, p<.05), income (β=-.10, p<.05), and civic engagement in the last 12 months (β=.04, p<.05), meaning that younger, non-white participants, with lower levels of income, that participated in more civic engagement activities in the last 12 months perceived fewer obstacles limiting their ability to act upon food insecurity.

Hypotheses 5 and 6

Hypotheses 5 and 6 had similar objectives as Hypotheses 3 and 4. This time, the goal was to verify the relationship between *cognitive involvement* (subjective or objective knowledge about the food insecurity problem) and the three original STOPS variables—*problem recognition, situational motivation in problem-solving* and *constraint recognition*.

> *H5: Individuals presenting high cognitive involvement with the food insecurity problem will present higher levels of problem recognition (H5a) and situational motivation in problem-solving (H5b).*

> *H6: Individuals presenting high cognitive involvement with the food insecurity problem will present lower levels of constraint recognition.*

H5 theorized that *cognitive involvement* would be positively related to *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving*. Both predictions were initially supported with Person correlations (H5a *r*=.665, *p* <.01 and H5b *r*=.760, *p* <.01). An OLS regression model was also performed to assess the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, and its results demonstrated that both *cognitive involvement* (H5a, ß=.39, *p*<.001) and *problem recognition* (H5b, ß=.42, *p*<.001) were strong predictors of *situational motivation in problem-solving*, controlling for all control variables. This OLS regression model accounted for 80% of the variance in *situational motivation in problem-solving* (R^2=.80, p<.001), and some control variables were also significantly predictive. They are social media use (ß=.13, *p*<.001), age (ß=-.01, *p*<.01), and civic engagement in the last 5 years (ß=.02, *p*<.05), meaning that younger participants, with higher levels of social media use, and that participated in more civic engagement activities in the last 5 years are slightly more eager to learn and do more to combat food insecurity.

H6 postulated that there would be a negative relationship between *cognitive involvement* and *constraint recognition*. The variables were significantly, but weakly correlated. Also, the correlation was positive instead of negative (*r*=.179, *p* <.001). Therefore, H6 was not supported. When performing an OLS regression to check whether *cognitive involvement* predicted *constraint recognition*, the model revealed that there was no predictive effect when controlling for all control variables (ß=-.08, *p*= n.s). Similar to H4, the model revealed statistically significant effects of some control variables on *constraint recognition*. They are age (ß=-.01, *p*<.001), ethnicity (ß=.29, *p*<.05), income (ß=.10, *p*<.05), and social media use (ß=.11, *p*<.05). Thus, for this OLS regression model, younger, white participants, presenting higher levels of social media use and income perceived fewer obstacles limiting their ability to act upon food insecurity.

Finally, H3 to H6 demonstrated that the two new independent variables, *affective involvement* and *cognitive involvement*, fit the first half of the adjusted STOPS model. When adding all independent variables of interest in an OLS regression model, controlled by all control variables, they explained 82% of the variance in individuals' *situational motivation in problem-solving* (R^2=.82, p<.001), with all independent variables but one presenting significant predictive effects—*affective involvement* (ß=.18, p <.001), *problem recognition* (ß=.38, p <.001) and *cognitive involvement* (ß=.29, p <.001). Three control variables also presented marginal effects on situational motivation in problem-solving—age (ß=-.01, p <.05), social media use (ß=.11, p <.001), and civic engagement in the last 5 years (ß=.02, p <.05). The next four hypotheses assessed the overall fit of the whole model, considering all independent and dependent variables.

Hypotheses 7 to 10

Hypotheses 7 to 10 theorized that the relationships between all independent, mediator, and dependent variables would happen through a series of multivariable mediations. All serial mediation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS module (model 6) in SPSS 28.0 (Hayes, 2017), that generated 95% of bias-corrected confidence intervals for estimates of indirect effects calculated with 5,000 bootstrapping re-samples. Additionally, all serial mediations included the same control variables used in the previous analyses.

> *H7: Problem recognition and situational motivation in problem-solving will mediate the effect of affective involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H7a), offline advocacy (H7b), online activism (H7c), and offline activism (H7d).*

Four mediation models were established to test H7a to H7d, and they contained the same independent and mediator variables. Thus, a serial mediation model was fitted to contain *affective*

involvement as the independent variable, *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* as sequential mediator variables to predict *online advocacy* as the dependent variable. Figure 4 illustrates all path analyses examined in H7 to H10.
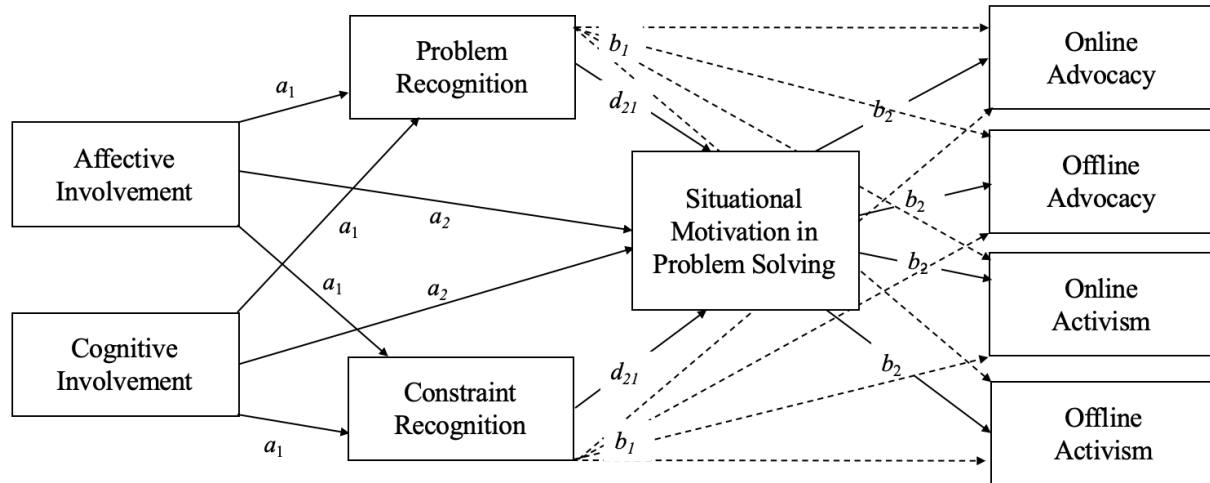

Figure 4. Illustration of path analyses of direct and indirect effects for the serial multivariable mediations of H7 to H10.

Results of the first serial multiple mediation analysis revealed that, as predicted, the relationship between *affective involvement* and *online advocacy* (H7a) was mediated by *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving*. There were significant relationships between *affective involvement* and *problem recognition* (a_1-path, ß=.16, *p*<.001), *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (d_{21}-path, ß=.38, *p*<.001), and *situational motivation in problem-solving* and *online advocacy* (b_2-path, ß=.39, *p*<.001). Additionally, the overall indirect effects of *affective involvement* on *online advocacy* through *problem recognition* and then *situational motivation in problem-solving* were also significant (ß=.024, CI=.009-.044).

A second serial multiple mediation analysis demonstrated that the relationship between *affective involvement* and *offline advocacy* (H7b) was also mediated by *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving*, with b_2-path of ß=.57 (*p*<.001) and significant indirect

effects of *affective involvement* on *offline advocacy* through *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (ß=.035, CI=.015-.060).

Similarly, results of H7c also confirmed that *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* mediate *affective involvement* and *online activism* (b_2-path, ß=.63, *p*<.001), and the indirect effects of *affective involvement* on *online activism* through the two mediators were also significant (ß=.039, CI=.017-.067).

H7d also displayed the same pattern of results with *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* mediating the relationship between *affective involvement* and *offline activism* (b_2-path, ß=.60, *p*<.001), and significant indirect effects of *affective involvement* on *online activism* through the two mediator variables (ß=.037, CI=.016-.063). Therefore, H7a/b/c/d, were all supported.

The full serial mediation pathway for H7a accounted for 75% of the variance in individual's *online advocacy*, H7b and H7c models both explained 72% of the variance in individual's *offline advocacy* and *online activism*, and H7d model for 66% of the variance in *offline activism*.

> *H8: Constraint recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of affective involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H8a), offline advocacy (H8b), online activism (H8c), and offline activism (H8d).*

H8 analysis revealed that although there was a significant negative association between *affective involvement* and *constraint recognition* (a_1-path, ß=-.17, *p*=.001), *constraint recognition* was not significantly associated with neither *situational motivation in problem-solving* (d_{21}-path, ß=.032, *p*=.161) nor any of the dependent variables (*online advocacy* b_1-path ß=.061, *p*=.075;

offline advocacy b_1-path ß=.018, *p*=.602; *online activism* b_1-path ß=-.011, *p*=.763; *offline activism* b_1-path ß=-.069, *p*=.091). Therefore, there were no serial multivariable mediations through *constraint recognition*, and H8a/b/c/d were not supported. Implications of this finding will be discussed in Chapter 6.

It is important to note that some control variables presented significant predictive effects in the full pathway analyses of H7 and H8. In particular, *social media use* was a very significant predictor of *online advocacy* (ß=.40, *p* <.001), *offline advocacy* (ß=.22, *p* <.001), *online activism* (ß=.41, *p* <.001), and *offline activism* (ß=.24, *p* <.001), meaning that people presenting higher levels of *social media use* are more willing to engage in all forms of civic engagement activities on behalf or toward nonprofit organizations investigated in this project.

Other control variables also presented significant effects predicting *offline advocacy—political interest* (ß=.08, *p* <.01) and *civic engagement in the last 12 months* (ß=.03, *p* <.05), meaning that people who are more interested in politics and have engaged in civic-oriented activities in the last 12 months are slightly more likely to engage in *offline advocacy* toward nonprofits combating food insecurity. Moreover, two additional control variables presented significant effects on *online activism*. They are *civic engagement in the last five years* (ß=.03, *p* <.05) and *civic engagement in the last 12 months* (ß=.05, *p* <.01); that is, past civic engagement behaviors predicted future *online activism* intent. Finally, *age* (ß=-.01, *p*=.05), *sex* (ß=-.23, *p* <.05), *political interest* (ß=.06, *p* =.05), and *civic engagement in the last 12 months* (ß=.06, *p* =.001) were significant predictors of *offline activism*, meaning that younger male participants, who are interested in politics and have engaged in civic-oriented activities in the last 12 months are more likely to engage in *offline activism* activities with nonprofits fighting food insecurity.

H9: Problem recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of cognitive involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H9a), offline advocacy (H9b), online activism (H9c), and offline activism (H9d).

The examination of H9 was very similar to H7. Again, four mediation models were established to assess H9a to H9d, and they comprised the same independent (*cognitive involvement*) and sequential mediator variables (*problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving*) to predict the four dependent variables.

H9a serial mediation model was postulated to predict *online advocacy*, and results of this analysis revealed that the relationship between *cognitive involvement* and *online advocacy* was indeed mediated by *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving.* There were significant relationships between *cognitive involvement* and *problem recognition* (a_1-path, ß=.47, *p*=.001) and *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (d_{21}-path, ß=.38, *p*<.001). Because a_1 and d_{21}-paths were statistically significant, all H9a/b/c/d serial multiple mediations were as well, resulting in the same regression coefficient values of b_2-paths (*situational motivation in problem-solving* and dependent variables) as seen in H7. That is, *situational motivation in problem-solving* and *online advocacy* (ß=.39, *p*<.001), *situational motivation in problem-solving* and *offline advocacy* (ß=.57, *p*<.001), *situational motivation in problem-solving* and *online activism* (ß=.63, *p*<.001), and *situational motivation in problem-solving* and *offline activism* (ß=.60, *p*<.001).

Moreover, the overall indirect effects of *cognitive involvement* on each dependent variable through *problem recognition* and then *situational motivation in problem-solving* were also significant— *online advocacy* (ß=.068, CI=.034-.108), *offline advocacy* (ß=.100, CI=.063-.145),

online activism (ß=.111, CI=.070-.161), and *offline activism* (ß=.106, CI=.066-.154). Therefore, H9a/b/c/d, were all supported as predicted.

The full serial mediation pathways for H9a to H9d were the same as H7a to H7d because both H7 and H9 models were controlled by the same control and independent variables. Thus, H9a explained 75% of the variance in individual's *online advocacy*, H9b and H9c models both accounted for 72% of the variance in individual's *offline advocacy* and *online activism*, and H9d model for 66% of the variance in *offline activism.*

> *H10: Constraint recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of cognitive involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H10a), offline advocacy (H10b), online activism (H10c), and offline activism (H10d).*

The situation that happened in H8 repeated in H10 because both hypotheses posited *constraint recognition* as part of their serial multivariable mediation models. Therefore, despite the significant relationship between *cognitive involvement* and *constraint recognition* (a_1-path, ß=.18, $p<.05$), *constraint recognition* was not significantly associated with neither *situational motivation in problem-solving* (d_{21}-path, ß=.03, $p=.161$) nor any of the dependent variables (*online advocacy* b_1-path ß=.061, $p=.075$; *offline advocacy* b_1-path ß=.018, $p=.602$; *online activism* b_1-path ß=-.011, $p=.763$; *offline activism* b_1-path ß=-.069, $p=.091$). Therefore, H10a/b/c/d were not supported. Finally, the control variables discussion included after H7 and H8 results applies here. Some control variables presented significant predictive effects in the full conceptual model analysis, with *social media use* being the most significant one. That is, social media heavy users tend to be the most receptive to all forms of civic engagement intent behaviors investigated in this project.
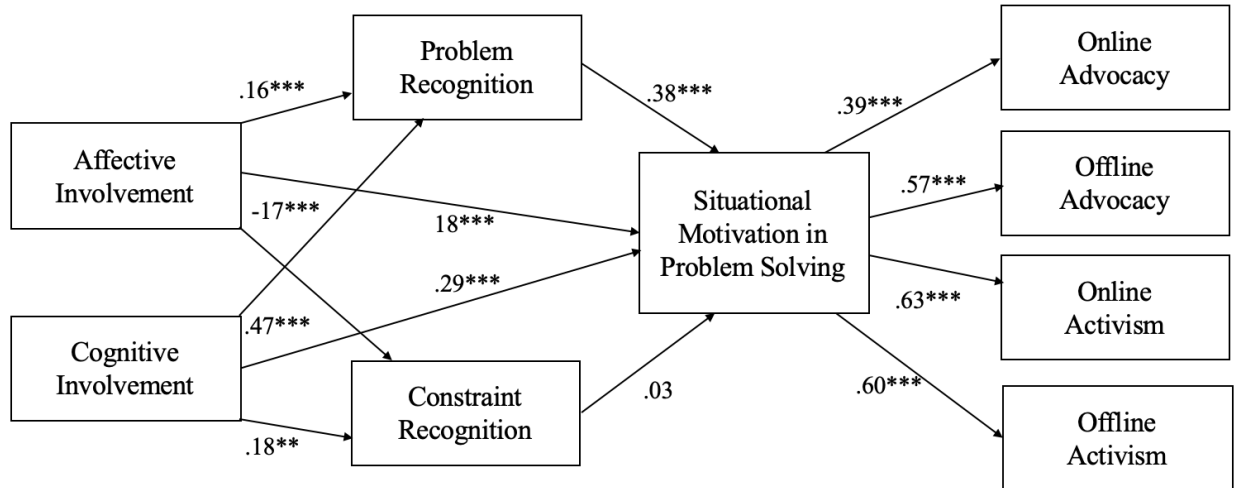
Figure 5. Illustration of the indirect effects model for the serial multivariable mediations of H7 to H10. a1, a2, b2, and d21 are standard least squares (OLS) regression coefficients.
Note: ***p<.01 and ***<.001*

Research Question

The following research question was posited to examine if there were significant differences between the three manipulations tested in this dissertation project. In other words, the research question aimed to investigate if the location of the nonprofit combating food insecurity would elicit different or similar civic engagement behaviors.

RQ: How does a nonprofit's geographical level impact individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (RQ1a), offline advocacy (RQ1b), online activism (RQ1c), and offline activism (RQ1d)?

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effects of the three nonprofit locations on the four forms of civic engagement behaviors. Comparisons were made between the local, national, and global manipulations and results indicate that the nonprofit geographic location has no statistically significant impact on *online advocacy*, $F(2,501)=.022$, $p=.978$; *offline advocacy*, $F(2,501)=.003$, $p=.997$; *online activism*, $F(2,501)=.045$, $p=.956$; or *offline activism*, $F(2,501)=.035$, $p=.966$.

Additionally, the same series of multivariable mediation analyses conducted on hypotheses 7 to 10 were replicated to each subsample (local, national, and global) to verify the direct and indirect pathways present in the proposed conceptual model. Figure 6 shows the regression coefficients of all serial mediation analyses comprising each manipulation.

The three full serial mediation analyses (full conceptual model) were controlled by the same control and independent variables used to test H7 to H10 and produced very similar results. Nevertheless, it was possible to notice slight differences in how much each full model (similar to H7 and H9) explained of the variance in each individual's civic engagement behavior intent. That is, the full **local** model accounted for 80% of the variance in individuals' *online advocacy*, 77% *offline advocacy*, 73% *online activism*, and 69% *offline activism*. The full **national** model accounted for 78% of the variance in individuals' *online advocacy*, 74% *offline advocacy*, 76% *online activism*, and 65% in *offline activism*. And the full **global** model accounted for 73% of the variance in individuals' *online advocacy*, 71% *offline advocacy*, 70% *online activism*, and 69% *offline activism*.

Moreover, similar to H8 and H10, the independent variable *constraint recognition* was not significantly associated with *situational motivation in problem-solving* for the three manipulation models; therefore, there were no serial mediation relationships involving the *constraint recognition* variable.

Figure 6 shows the three full models, considering the coefficient values of all path analyses. It is worth noting that although the coefficient for the relationship between situational motivational problem solving and online advocacy is slightly smaller than many of the other outcomes, more important than the effect size demonstrated by the coefficient values is the statistical significance of them, which are all highly significant at $p<.05$, $p<.01$, and $p<.001$.
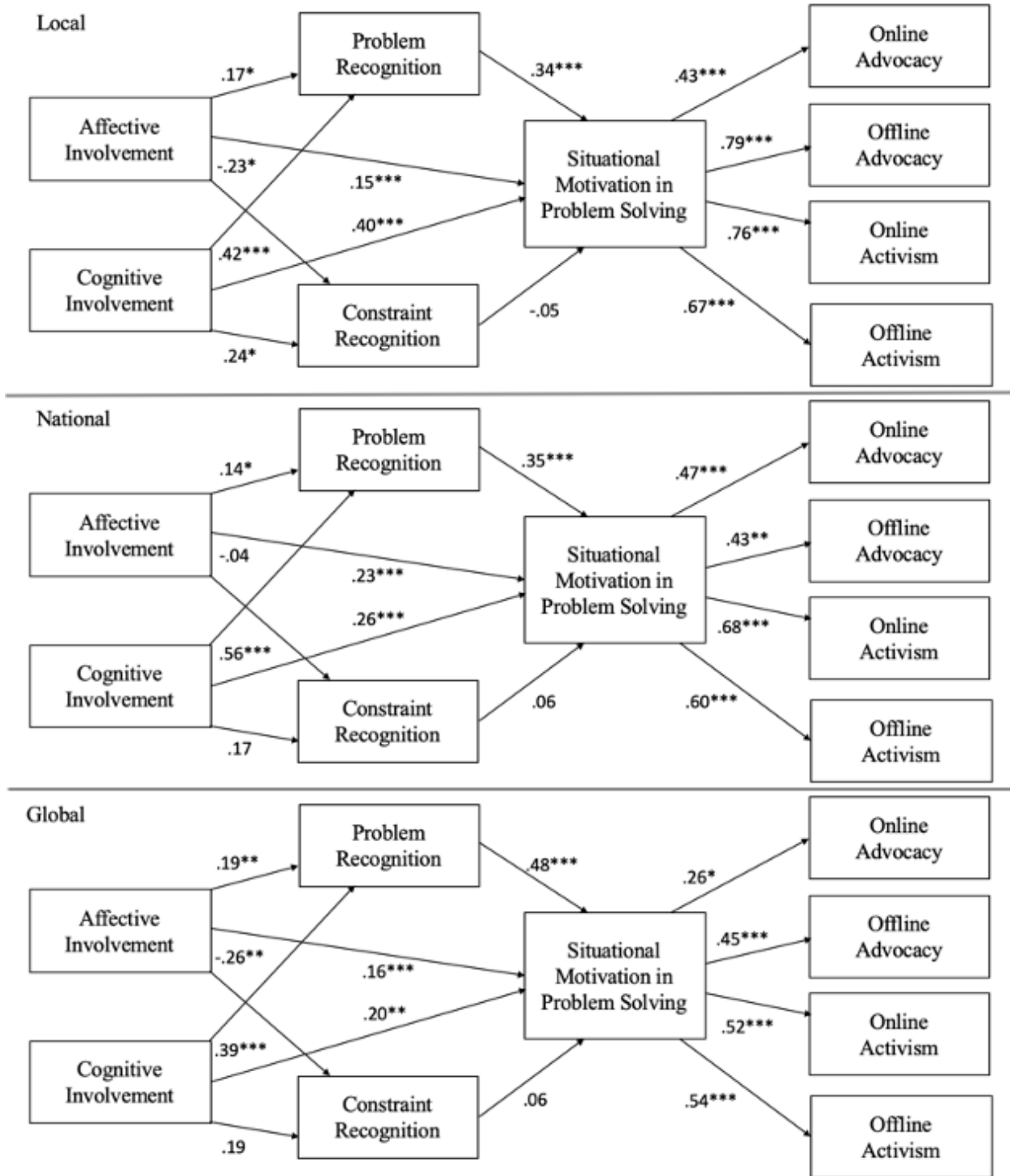
Figure 6. Illustration of the indirect effects of the three models for the serial multivariable mediations. a1, a2, b2, and d21 are standard least squares (OLS) regression coefficients.
Note: *p<.05, **<.01 and ***<.001

Table 4 displays the summary of all ten hypotheses and research question results.

Table 4. Summary of Hypotheses and Research Question Results

H1: Individuals' problem recognition will be positively related to their situational motivation in problem solving.	Supported
H2: Individuals' constraint recognition will be negatively related to their situational motivation in problem solving.	Not Supported
H3: Individuals presenting high affective involvement with the food insecurity problem will present higher levels of problem recognition (H3a) and situational motivation in problem solving (H3b).	Supported
H4: Individuals presenting high affective involvement with the food insecurity problem will present lower levels of constraint recognition.	Supported
H5: Individuals presenting high cognitive involvement with the food insecurity problem will present higher levels of problem recognition (H5a) and situational motivation in problem solving (H5b).	Supported
H6: Individuals presenting high cognitive involvement with the food insecurity problem will present lower levels of constraint recognition.	Not Supported
H7: Problem recognition and situational motivation in problem-solving will mediate the effect of affective involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H7a), offline advocacy (H7b), online activism (H7c), and offline activism (H7d).	Supported
H8: Constraint recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of affective involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H8a), offline advocacy (H8b), online activism (H8c), and offline activism (H8d).	Not Supported
H9: Problem recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of cognitive involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H9a), offline advocacy (H9b), online activism (H9c), and offline activism (H9d).	Supported
H10: Constraint recognition and situational motivation in problem solving will mediate the effect of cognitive involvement on individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (H10a), offline advocacy (H10b), online activism (H10c), and offline activism (H10d).	Not Supported
RQ1: How does a nonprofit's geographical level impact individuals' willingness to engage in organizational-based activities; online advocacy (RQ1a), offline advocacy (RQ1b), online activism (RQ1c), and offline activism (RQ1d)?	No Significant Differences

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This chapter starts with a discussion of the purpose of this research project and the study overview. Then, it includes interpretation and implications of the main results presented in Chapter 5, the dissertation's limitations, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion of the entire project.

General Discussion and Study Overview

This dissertation aimed to join the contested scholarly conversation around Americans' current and future civic engagement. As discussed in Chapter 2, this project shares the optimistic viewpoints of Boulianne (2009), Frumkin (2009), and Skoric et al. (2016), wherein civic engagement among Americans is not declining but evolving, and that online communication is an integral part of this behavioral change that is more positive than negative.

The primary goals of this dissertation were to identify individual factors that lead people to engage in online and offline advocacy and activism through and on behalf of nonprofit organizations. It also sought to provide understanding of whether nonprofits from different levels of proximity (i.e., local, national, or global) would elicit different or similar civic engagement behavior intent among Americans.

Chapter 3 delineates the baseline of this project's investigation by suggesting some adjustments to the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011), a theory of communication that analyzes the antecedents of individuals' communication and information behaviors in problem-solving processes. This dissertation's first contribution to the literature lies in expanding STOPS to look at individuals' affective and cognitive factors, in addition to perceptual and motivational factors, that could lead to four behavioral outcomes (i.e., online and offline advocacy and activism) through or on behalf of nonprofit organizations at three geographic

levels. It was the first study to apply STOPS at three levels of analysis, which represents an advancement to the theory as it allows an in-depth understanding of problem-solving behaviors considering where the problem is geographically situated and addressed. These changes have the potential to situate STOPS beyond the communication and public relations realms, as they offer a baseline for studies in areas such as nonprofit management, social psychology, and social movements.

The behavioral outcomes investigated in this project were adjusted from McKeever et al.'s scale (2020) that explores individuals' advocacy and activism behaviors. McKeever and colleagues took an important step in distinguishing advocacy from activism, two closely related concepts often mistakenly used interchangeably. The authors explained that advocacy and activism differ in the level of cost and risk involved to engage in each category of civic activity. On the one hand, **advocacy** involves fewer risks and costs, and refers to activities that aim to amplify messages and create awareness for social problems and organizations, such as engaging in word-of-mouth to discuss a social problem with family and friends or sharing posts on social media about a specific social issue or organization. On the other hand, **activism** involves more risks and costs and it is associated with more concrete activities, such as volunteerism and financial donations. Methodologically, this dissertation also uniquely contributes to civic engagement literature by assessing advocacy and activism considering the environment in which each category of activities is performed, online and offline.

This study was designed and executed during the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis event that accelerated the shift in how activities and work practices are performed. Specifically, activities that were once only possible or encouraged in in-person environments are now also enacted online—for example, going to doctor's appointments, attending all types of classes,

visiting museums and art galleries, working remotely for office positions, etc. The same is true for civic-oriented activities, such as advocacy and activism. Engaging in advocacy and activism in each modality involves different resources related to technology, time, money, mobility, and levels of involvement and commitment with a cause, group, or organization. Moreover, scholars from education, psychology, and business recognize that changes related to how people behave and perform daily activities as a result of the pandemic will be permanent. In other words, the "new normal" should be normalized, and people should accept that there will not be a shift back to pre-pandemic times (e.g., Cahapay, 2020; Carrol & Conboy, 2020; Yan, 2020). Therefore, the online versus offline modality was an essential distinction to investigate the different types of civic engagement activities that were incorporated in this dissertation project.

When observing the advancements in communication technology and how people now utilize them, it is evident that nonprofits should adapt to this new reality and find creative ways to attract public support in both online and offline settings, fostering civic engagement opportunities that are not limited to physical locations. Additionally, considering the many adaptability challenges that organizations in the American nonprofit sector have to constantly endure and overcome (Sussman, 2003; Worth, 2019), such as competition with traditional organizations and limited resources to operate (Kerlin, 2013; Meier et al., 2016), the findings of this dissertation can support nonprofits and public relations professionals by offering suggestions based on empirical evidence of what to focus when, for example, crafting communication messages for public outreach.

Lastly, the most important contribution of this dissertation is the conceptual model that explains the predictors and outcomes of civic engagement behaviors related to nonprofit organizations. Chapter 3 introduced the conceptual model and all hypotheses and research question

related to it, Chapter 4 outlined the methodological approach chosen to test the model, and Chapter 5 provided a full description of the study procedures used to test the model. Chapter 5 also presented the results of the online survey and the experimental manipulation in it that will be interpreted in the next section of this chapter.

Interpretation and Implications of Results

Previous studies have tested the STOPS model in various contexts, such as health communication (e.g., Zheng & McKeever, 2016), computer-mediated communication (Park & Rim, 2020), and crisis communication (e.g., Poroli & Huang, 2018), and many researchers have adjusted the model to meet their research needs (e.g., Zheng et al., 2016). This dissertation also adapted the original STOPS model by reconceptualizing the independent variable, *involvement recognition,* into two distinct variables, *affective involvement* and *cognitive involvement*, and posing them as the very first antecedents of the conceptual model. Moreover, from the original STOPS model, two independent variables, *problem recognition* and *constraint recognition*, and the mediator variable, *situational motivation in problem-solving*, were tested as originally predicted. Finally, four concrete behavioral outcomes (*online/offline advocacy, online/offline activism)* substituted all STOPS original dependent variables.

Measuring both forms of civic engagement in online and offline environments is also an important contribution to the literature. It allows for a more accurate understanding of the chain of events proposed in this dissertation's conceptual model. Moreover, understanding the characteristics of the outcome variables and how they collectively fit in the theorized model is helpful for researchers who study civic engagement behaviors as a whole or each particular category of engagement.

The first part of this dissertation's investigation explored the relationships between the four independent and the mediator variables, focusing on the social problem of food insecurity. Specifically, the pathways assessed were related to the first half of the conceptual model (affective, cognitive, perceptual, and motivational factors). The second part of the investigation looked at the model as a whole, focusing on the prediction of civic engagement behaviors toward or on behalf of nonprofits combating the food insecurity problem.

I started the examination by replicating what previous authors had already found in the relationships between *problem recognition* (the detection of food insecurity as a problem that needs to be combated), *constraint recognition* (the perceived obstacles limiting one's ability to act upon food insecurity), and *situational motivation in problem-solving* (the extent to which an individual is eager to learn and do more about food insecurity). I confirmed that *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* are strongly are positively correlated, and that individuals' *problem recognition* significantly predicted individuals' *situational motivation in problem-solving.* In other words, individuals that recognize food insecurity as a problem are more situationally motivated to learn and do more to combat it.

Furthermore, I predicted a negative relationship between *constraint recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving*; however, no statistically significant relationship was found between both variables. Among all variables tested in this study, *constraint recognition* was the only one that presented problems. When assessing its internal consistency, the variable's reliability was considered acceptable but not as strong as all other variables in the model. Then, when checking its correlation with the other constructs, *constraint recognition* was the only variable that did not correlate with other key variables. Specifically, *constraint recognition* did not

correlate with *problem recognition, situational motivation in problem-solving, online advocacy,* or *offline advocacy* (Table 3).

One possible reason why *constraint recognition* did not perform as expected can be due to a floor effect. *Constraint recognition* presented the lowest mean (*M*=3.90) and standard deviation (*SD*=1.36) values among all independent and mediator variables of the conceptual model, which suggests that participants did not recognize a lot of constraints preventing them from acting upon the food insecurity problem. This finding is issue-specific and possibly suggests that when the data were collected, the salience of food insecurity as an important social issue and the mainstream availability of information about initiatives to combat the problem have reduced the perception of the constraints to fight it. However, this finding does not explain why even when people perceive few or no constraints about a problem, they are not necessarily motivated to act upon it. To do so, it is important to combine all elements and findings of the conceptual model and understand how affective, cognitive, perceptual, and motivational factors work together in the way people arrive at the four categories of civic engagement behaviors. Therefore, to increase the chances of people getting involved with causes and organizations, it is essential for nonprofits to properly communicate with them by employing communication strategies and tactics to promote their work and social cause. For example, nonprofits should craft messages that touch people's affective and cognitive involvement with the cause to improve the nonprofit's work and cause awareness and salience. Consequently, communication tactics that consider multiple elements that impact how individuals engage in civic-oriented behaviors have greater chances to encourage general audiences to act upon the problem, especially when the problem is already identified as important (problem recognition) and the audiences already recognize the means to mitigate it (constraint recognition). Appendix D provides some applied recommendations.

Another possible reason why *constraint recognition* did not perform as predicted is based on the way the variable was operationalized. All its items were negatively worded, for instance, "I can't make a difference regarding this problem" and "I don't feel comfortable taking action regarding this problem." Therefore, the fact that all other variables were positively worded might have caused confusion among participants. Some ways to address this problem are discussed later in this chapter.

During the first part of the analysis, I also theorized that *affective involvement* (feelings or emotions associated with the food insecurity problem) would present positive relationships with *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* and a negative relationship with *constraint recognition.* The three relationships were confirmed, meaning that people with more feelings or emotions associated with the food insecurity problem perceive it as a social issue that needs to be combated and are more situationally motivated to learn and do more about this social problem. Also, people with more feelings or emotions associated with food insecurity perceive fewer obstacles limiting their ability to act upon the problem at the local and global levels; therefore, communication strategies should employ messages that evoke those feelings and emotions, for example, providing testimonials of people from different publics that are positively impacted by the nonprofit's work, such as its constituencies, staff, volunteers, and donors. Pictures and videos of food distribution and volunteers working happily together can also induce positive emotions and feelings. Additionally, nonprofits can also appeal to emotion by utilizing food insecurity data reflective of where the target audience lives, for example, providing estimates of how many families in the county, city, country, continent, or world do not know where their next meal will come from.

I also posited that *cognitive involvement* (subjective or objective knowledge about the food insecurity problem) would be positively related to *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving*, and negatively related to *constraint recognition*. The two first relationships were confirmed, meaning that individuals who presented more subjective or objective knowledge about food insecurity recognized it as a problem that needs to be combated and were more situationally motivated to learn and do something about the problem. The third relationship, between *cognitive involvement* and *constraint recognition,* was significant; however, it was positive instead of negative. In other words, people who presented more subjective or objective knowledge about food insecurity perceived more obstacles, limiting their ability to act upon the problem. This finding is relevant because it shows that people with more knowledge about food insecurity comprehended many difficulties associated with it and, therefore, saw more obstacles to solve this problem. This result indicates that when people see a lot of difficulties in solving a problematic situation, they tend to be discouraged to act upon it. Thus, targeted communication messages that aim to reduce the obstacles' perception could be used to persuade individuals who already have knowledge about a social problem but are discouraged to do anything about it. For example, nonprofits could craft messages with logical appeal, explaining the extent of the problem in the communities attended (e.g., 1 in 4 households in this area experienced food insecurity in the last year) or the impact of each food or money donated (e.g., a $20 donation can feed a family of four for a week). Both strategies can be easily adapted considering the location and scope of the nonprofit's operations. It is worth mentioning, that it is also possible to craft messages and utilize social media targeting features to deliver tailored content to specific users based on their location and demographic characteristics.

The second part of this dissertation's investigation predicted a theoretical pathway involving all variables of the conceptual model. I first theorized that *problem recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* would mediate the effects of *affective involvement* and *cognitive involvement* on individuals' willingness to engage in *online advocacy*, *offline advocacy*, *online activism*, and *offline activism* toward or on behalf of nonprofits. Results of this full serial mediation accounted for 75% of the variance in individual's *online advocacy*, 72% of the variance in *offline advocacy* and *online activism*, and 66% of the variance in *offline activism.* These findings demonstrate that this dissertation's conceptual model successfully explained how the four categories of civic engagement are manifested when controlling for demographic variables, social media use, political interest, and previous civic engagement behaviors. Results also showed that the model better explained people's intentions to engage in civically oriented activities that involve fewer risks and costs, that is, advocacy activities.

Online advocacy, in particular, was the outcome in the model with the most explained variance, meaning that this type of behavior is highly affected by one's *affective involvement, cognitive involvement, problem recognition,* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* surrounding the food insecurity social problem. Therefore, in practice, when a nonprofit does public outreach with the intention to expand *online advocacy*, it should focus on communicative messages that would appeal to people with high levels of *affective involvement* with food insecurity, conveying information that amplifies the *recognition of the problem* to foster their *situational motivation to solve it*, because consequently, these messages will likely lead them to engage in *online advocacy* activities toward or on behalf of the organization, such as following, liking, commenting, and sharing a nonprofit's content on social media. *Online advocacy* was previously criticized as "slacktivism" (Glenn, 2015), vanity metrics, or an ineffective way to

promote concrete social changes. However, *online advocacy* has the potential to be the first step for more substantial forms of civic engagement (McLean et al., 2021), as it helps to expand public awareness of social causes, groups, and organizations fighting many social problems (Hackler & Saxton, 2007).

The other three categories of civic engagement behaviors (offline advocacy, and online/offline activism) were also substantially explained by the proposed conceptual model and are worth closer examination of their implications. Like *online advocacy*, *offline advocacy* comprises activities that also involve fewer risks and costs to be executed but are very relevant in expanding awareness about a nonprofit's work and particular social causes. Some examples of *offline advocacy* activities involve putting a sign in the yard, displaying a bumper sticker, or wearing a t-shirt or button in support of the organization, and in-person word-of-mouth (WoM), which is when a person discusses the organization's work in combating a social problem with their friends and family. All these activities require low levels of effort but are very significant in expanding an organization's message and visibility. Therefore, nonprofit organizations should purposefully craft communication messages to promote these activities.

Online and *offline activism* activities involve moderate to high risks and costs, require more effort to be executed, and their impacts are more tangible and concrete for the nonprofit. Examples of *online activism* activities are donating money as a result of an online campaign, becoming an online volunteer that helps organize campaigns to raise awareness or funds, engaging in online discussions related to the organization that can jeopardize relationships with family and friends, and reaching out to politicians or celebrities on social media on behalf of the organization to attract their support to the organization or social cause. Some *offline activism* examples are joining a nonprofit as a regular volunteer to get involved in-person activities or be part of internal

committees, making periodic financial contributions, engaging in offline activities that can compromise relationships with friends and family, or calling politicians on behalf of the organization. Both types of activities are vital to most nonprofit organizations and require effective recruitment and retention efforts. As previously mentioned, these efforts can be optimized by including language in their communication that appeal to individuals with high levels of *affective involvement*, amplifying the *recognition of the problem*, igniting an individual's *situational motivation to solve* the problem that is the focus of the organization's work.

I also theorized serial mediation relationships involving *constraint recognition.* Specifically, I predicted that *constraint recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* would mediate the effects of *affective involvement* and *cognitive involvement* on individuals' willingness to engage in *online advocacy*, *offline advocacy*, *online activism*, and *offline activism* toward or on behalf of nonprofits. However, because *constraint recognition* and *situational motivation in problem-solving* were not statistically correlated, these relationships were not supported.

In sum, most pathway analyses involving *constraint recognition* were not supported. But, all of the model's relationships that did not include *constraint recognition* were supported, meaning that the proposed model successfully explained predictive pathways for the four categories of civic engagement behaviors related to nonprofit organizations fighting food insecurity.

Furthermore, this dissertation also aimed to verify if nonprofits operating at the local, national, or global levels elicited different patterns of civic engagement. Results revealed no statistically significant differences between the three manipulations, meaning that the proposed

conceptual model works for all geographic levels of nonprofit organizations combating food insecurity.

Here it is important to note that food insecurity was the social issue chosen for this investigation because of its timely importance at the local, national, and global levels; current impact on Americans' lives; nonpartisan nature; and the existence of many nonprofits working to combat this problem at all levels. However, other social issues or categories of issues fit or partially fit the same criteria and could be examined in future investigations. Some examples are COVID-19, climate change, immigration, homelessness, civil rights, children's rights, women's rights, animal rights, students' rights, gender equality, water pollution, and healthcare reform/access. Future studies employing other social issues are necessary to confirm the universality of the proposed conceptual model.

Moreover, serial mediation analyses were conducted for each subsample and it was possible to notice that the conceptual model was slightly more effective at the local geographic level than the other two levels. The full **local** model accounted for 80% of the variance in individuals' *online advocacy*, 77% *offline advocacy*, 73% *online activism*, and 69% *offline activism*. While the full **national** model accounted for 78% of the variance in individuals' *online advocacy*, 74% *offline advocacy*, 76% *online activism*, and 65% in *offline activism*, and the full **global** model accounted for 73% of the variance in individuals' *online advocacy*, 71% *offline advocacy*, 70% *online activism*, and 69% *offline activism*. These results are important as they can inspire and instigate researchers to explore other factors that might prompt the four civic engagement behaviors at the three levels of analysis, such as personality traits, cultural characteristics, or various media preferences and consumption. Specifically, when looking at personality traits, the Big 5 (Goldenberg, 1990), for example, it will be possible to identify if

people possessing specific personality characteristics are more or less willing to engage in the four categories of civic engagement behaviors and how when looking at each independent variable of the model. Also, it would be interesting to investigate how the conceptual model would behave by comparing responses from people from different cultures, for example, a more individualistic versus a more collectivist country. Finally, it would also be worthwhile to conduct a study that explores whether civic engagement intent varies when comparing people's information and media preferences and consumption, such as people who rely on traditional versus nontraditional communication channels.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study was meticulously planned and executed, followed the best practices of social science research (e.g., Total Survey Error), and offered valuable contributions to theory and practice, it is not without limitations. A first limitation refers to the sample of participants and the sampling technique. The sample was representative of the American population for several demographic characteristics; however, generalizing the data requires some caution because recruitment was conducted through a sampling firm. That is, Dynata's pool of participants is used to taking online surveys in exchange for financial compensation and might exhibit different behaviors than individuals who are not so familiar with these online activities. Specifically, because participants completed the survey via computer or smartphone, they are likely already comfortable with the online environment and possibly more willing to engage in online activities than other populations that are not captured in this study. This situation was also noticeable when looking at the significant effects produced by the control variable *social media use* on all four dependent variables, meaning that the four categories of activities are channeled through social media platforms. Thus, this limitation impacts an accurate distinction between people's intent to

engage in online versus offline civic engagement activities and could be addressed by replicating this research utilizing a different recruitment technique. A practical takeaway of this limitation is that nonprofits fighting food insecurity should reinforce their social media communication strategies to foster online and offline advocacy and activism.

Another possible limitation was the context in which data of this study were collected. I fielded the survey in August 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. And as Dietz and Grimm (2020) pointed out, Americans are more willing to engage in civic-oriented activities in moments of crisis. Additionally, there was indeed a surge in civic engagement intent behavior in the U.S. due to the pandemic (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020; Paquin, 2020). Therefore, this significant external event might have impacted participants' responses, possibly increasing their disposition to engage in civic-oriented activities. Future research should investigate if, in non-pandemic times, the proposed model still holds as predicted. Nevertheless, it is possible that some of the behavioral changes provoked by the pandemic have become permanent, and the results captured in this study may represent a new reality involving civic engagement preferences. Also, the results of this study indicate that engaging in offline activities is perceived as more costly than online, which can also be a consequence of the pandemic moment. Future studies should assess whether the preference for online activities instead of offline is a trend in civic engagement behavior.

Additionally, this study focused on food insecurity, which was a very salient social issue during the COVID-19 pandemic in all geographic levels; therefore, this factor might have also boosted participants' intended behavior responses. Also, because food insecurity was the problem assessed by the independent and mediator variables, and nonprofits combating food insecurity were the focus of the civic engagement intent investigation, it is not yet possible to generalize these findings to different social problems and organizations. Therefore, it will be important to replicate

this study to confirm or reject its findings, for example, testing the proposed conceptual model considering other social issues and nonprofit organizations or asking participants to choose a particular social issue and organization.

It is important to note that the three experimental manipulations included in this study (Appendix C) were created using the best practices according to the transparency pillar of Liket and Maas' (2015) instrument to measure nonprofit organization effectiveness. The transparency pillar consists of three major communication practice themes: reporting, accessibility, and online publication, and it was adapted to this study in the form of a homepage of a nonprofit's website at one of the three geographic levels. Each homepage provided a complete description of the nonprofit operations, target audience, contact information (email, telephone number, and social media), and the availability of the strategic plan and annual report. An opportunity for future research would be to experiment with new vignettes based on social media best practice strategies (e.g., Guo & Saxton, 2014) that nonprofits undertake or fail at undertaking.

Additionally, future research could use the conceptual model's premises to create an interview protocol to investigate how public relations professionals working for nonprofit organizations craft communication messages to instill different civic engagement behaviors. The goal would be to understand their communication strategies and compare successful and unsuccessful cases with this dissertation's proposed conceptual model.

As previously mentioned, the independent variable *constraint recognition* did not perform as predicted, and this may be due to the social issue chosen to test the conceptual model. Food insecurity has been a salient problem widely discussed in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, this study's participants might not have identified many constraints in combating this issue. Another possible reason was that the variable's scale items were negatively worded instead

of positively as all other variables' items, and a way to address it in future research would be to reword the items positively. Because *constraint recognition* did not correlate with many key variables, such as *situational motivation in problem-solving*, four hypotheses were not supported. Thus, another suggestion for future research is to adjust the conceptual model, replacing *constraint recognition* with *self-efficacy*, which is a similar construct but positively oriented. Rimal and Real (2003) explain that "those who feel efficacious are likely to construe potential risks as challenges to be overcome, whereas those lacking in efficacy typically interpret their vulnerability in a fatalistic manner" (p. 372). In other words, *self-efficacy* is one's perceived ability to do something about a problem, while *constraint recognition* is one's perceived barriers limiting their actions toward a problem (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Another limitation worth mentioning is that most studies applying the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS; Kim & Grunig, 2011) have tested it using structural equation modeling (SEM), an advanced regression-based analytical tool used to examine multivariate data. However, I decided to apply another regression-based strategy called serial multiple mediator model from Hayes (2017). This technique allowed the inclusion of multiple independent, dependent, and mediator variables in evaluating the effects between all observed and latent constructs. Although I used a different statistical strategy than most studies employing STOPS, SEM results should be the same as the results I found with serial multiple mediator model. Nevertheless, learning SEM and using it to analyze this dissertation's data are part of my plans for the future.

This study shares a limitation with most other STOPS research by relying on intended, and not actual, behaviors. An exception is Poroli and Huang (2018), who conducted a qualitative study applying STOPS in its interview protocol. The authors investigated the spillover effect of one

university's crisis on students from another university by asking them to recall communication messages received at that time and how they behaved toward that communication. This research approach has the potential to capture actual behavior; however, even this method might face social desirability bias, which is when participants' answers are not aligned with their real thoughts, attitudes, and opinions, but based on what they believe others will accept as correct and expected answers. A way to reduce this type of bias is by wording the survey or interview questionnaire to make participants comfortable and not compelled to lie. To do it, the language used in this study's survey was neutral, not making judgment values.

Additionally, many social psychology researchers have investigated how intentions can be translated into actual behaviors (e.g., Ajzen et al., 2009; Sheeran et al., 2016; Sutton, 1998; Webb & Sheeran, 2006), with studies that looked at intent-behavior correlations in the political (e.g., voting behavior), health (e.g., vaccination, cancer prevention, physical activity), and organizational (performance and turnover) settings. Many studies have also affirmed that the translation of intentions into behaviors can be encouraged through information availability and message framing (e.g., Gallagher & Updegraff, 2012), which is also a recommendation of this study to turn the four categories of civic engagement intent behaviors into actual behaviors through or on behalf of nonprofits by employing communication practices based on the proposed model findings.

As a scholar, I intend to continue to focus on studies that investigate how communication can assist nonprofits maximize their public support. Beyond replicating or using this dissertation's conceptual model as a baseline for other studies, I intend to conduct research that advances collective understanding of public support behavior toward nonprofits. For example, I want to

study the impact of word-of-mouth from friends and family members on people's engagement in public support behaviors toward or on behalf of nonprofit organizations.

Finally, it is necessary to note that even though the proposed conceptual model introduced a possible chain of causal events, results should be carefully interpreted and applied. This project proposed a conceptual model that demonstrated how a sequence of relationships between independent and mediator variables predicted a particular set of outcomes that are aligned with existing theory; nevertheless, it is possible that researchers investigate other relationships, test other predictors, and still achieve similar outcomes.

Conclusion

This dissertation is grounded in the notion that Americans' civic engagement characteristics and preferences are evolving, and such changes are strongly impacted by the internet and social media communication. This dynamic has the potential to influence nonprofit organizational effectiveness and nonprofit public relations strategies, yet it lacks in-depth investigation and understanding. Therefore, this study examined public support behaviors toward nonprofits and social causes, considering different modes of civic engagement activities and three geographic levels of nonprofit organizations.

This dissertation contributed to the literature in several ways. Theoretically, it extended the STOPS model, adjusting and incorporating two new variables (*affective involvement* and *cognitive involvement*) and considered three levels of analysis (local, national, and global). These changes can expand the application of STOPS to other fields, such as nonprofit management, social psychology, and social movements. It also provided empirical evidence on how different variables impact and predict intent civic engagement behaviors, with the proposed conceptual model successfully explaining around 70% of the total variance of the outcome variables. And,

methodologically, it evaluated four concrete behavioral outcomes—*online advocacy, offline advocacy, online activism,* and *offline activism.*

Results of this study indicated that the proposed conceptual model successfully explained how Americans arrive at the four categories of civic engagement behaviors and demonstrated that Americans do not exhibit significant differences in civic engagement intent across the three levels of analysis (local, national, or global). Finally, the findings discussed in this chapter can be applied to both academic and practice realms. For scholars, this study's findings and discussion offer new ways to look at advocacy and activism, shedding light on how people engage in online and offline civic engagement activities. For nonprofit and public relations practitioners, this study's findings can assist with tailoring communication messages to achieve specific public support outcomes.

APPENDIX A

Appendix A: Original Advocacy and Activism Scale (McKeever et al., 2020)

Oppositional Activism
1. Engage in an activity in which you run the risk of being arrested
2. Block access to a building or public area with your body
3. Engage in an activity related to the issue that could compromise a relationship with family or friends
4. Engage in an activity where you might be putting yourself in harm's way

Collective Activism
1. Make telephone calls to elected officials to voice my opinion
2. Serve as an officer in an organization
3. Help organize or host an event related to the issue/organization
4. Join a committee related to the issue
5. Attend an organization's regular planning meeting

Financial Activism
1. Make a financial contribution related to the issue/organization
2. Donate money to the issue/organization that originated online
3. Contribute to a fundraising request or campaign related to the issue/organization
4. Increase your financial support for an issue/organization

Symbolic Advocacy
1. Display a bumper sticker related to the issue/organization
2. Wear a t-shirt or button related to the issue/organization
3. Purchase a poster related to the issue/organization
4. Put a sign in my yard related to the issue/organization

Online Advocacy
1. Like or favorite a post about the issue/organization
2. Comment on a post about the issue/organization
3. Use or share materials (images, etc.) produced by an organization about the issue
4. Like or follow social media pages/accounts related to the issue/organization
5. Share or retweet a post about the issue/organization

Dialogic Advocacy
1. Discuss the issue/organization with family, friends or others
2. Express your opinion about the issue or organization when you are with friends
3. Actively seek or collect information about the issue/organization
4. Pay attention to information in the news related to the issue/organization

APPENDIX B

Appendix B: Full Questionnaire

Block: IRB

Purpose: You are being asked to be in research about different forms of civic engagement behaviors. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University.

Study Procedures: This is an online survey. Your participation is voluntary. If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to respond to questions indicating your intent behaviors toward a nonprofit that is combating food insecurity. Also, we will ask questions related to your demographic information to help us better understand the results of the study. This study will last approximately 15 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue your participation at any point. You may also email the investigator if you have any further questions about the study.

Benefits: As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks: There are no known risks at this time to participate in this study

Costs: There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation: For taking part in this research study, you will be compensated through Dynata.

Confidentiality: All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept without any identifiers.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal: Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.

Questions: If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Dr. Elizabeth Stoycheff at the following phone number, 313-577-2943. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

Participation: By clicking the Next button below, you are indicating your agreement to participate in this study.

Block: Screening

Age:
How old are you? (number)

Sex:
Do you identify as:
1. Male
2. Female
3. Nonbinary

4. Prefer not to say

Ethnicity:
In terms of your race and ethnicity, do you identify as:
1. Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander
2. Black/African American
3. Hispanic/Latino
4. Native American/Eskimo
5. White/European American/Caucasian
6. Biracial or Multiethnic
7. Other, please specify

Education:
What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

1. No formal education
2. Completed grade school
3. Completed high school
4. Completed trade/technical school
5. Some university
6. Completed university
7. Completed graduate school

Block: Problem Statement

Please read the problem statement below and answer the first set of questions:
Food insecurity is a condition many families face when there is not enough money to buy nutritious food. This situation can be temporary or can last a long time. Food insecurity is influenced by several factors, including income, employment, race/ethnicity, and disability. When people don't consume nutritious food, they can develop serious health complications, such as obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

Block: STOPS

Affective Involvement:
Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about FOOD INSECURITY(strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. At times, the issue of food insecurity has aroused me emotionally.
2. It happens every now and then that I react emotionally about the issue of food insecurity.
3. Food insecurity deals with things that touch me emotionally.
4. As far as food insecurity is concerned, I can get quite emotional.

Cognitive Involvement:
Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about FOOD INSECURITY(strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. It is important for me to know the arguments of the food insecurity issue in detail.

2. The more information I get regarding food insecurity, the better.
3. It is important for me to know as much as possible about food insecurity.
4. I rarely spend time thinking about information regarding food insecurity.
5. I am not interested in specific information regarding food insecurity.
6. After reading this question, check "disagree"

Problem Recognition:
Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about FOOD INSECURITY(strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. I think this is a serious social problem.
2. I am concerned about this problem.
3. Something needs to be done to combat this problem.
4. People should take action to solve this problem.
5. Regarding this problem, I see a large gap between the way things should be and the way they are now.
6. I believe people need to pay more attention to this problem.

Constraint Recognition:
Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about FOOD INSECURITY(strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. I can't make a difference regarding this problem.
2. I don't feel comfortable taking action regarding this problem.
3. I see a lot of obstacles preventing me from doing something regarding this problem.
4. I feel like my ideas and opinions don't matter to those who are working on this problem.

Situational Motivation in Problem-Solving:
Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements about FOOD INSECURITY(strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. I am curious about this problem.
2. I often think about this problem.
3. I want to better understand this problem.
4. I want to make this problem a priority these days.
5. I want to work hard to develop a better understanding to solve this problem.
6. I consider this problem a very important issue today.
7. I am determined to fix this problem as soon as possible.

Block: Manipulation

Manipulation Intro: The next set of questions will be about a nonprofit organization that is working to combat food insecurity. Please carefully read the information on the nonprofit's landing page (next page) and answer the following questions.

Online Advocacy:
Considering the nonprofit organization previously presented, please indicate how likely you are to participate in the following activities (extremely unlikely to extremely likely):
1. Follow the organization's social media accounts.

2. Like a post of the organization about the food insecurity issue.
3. Comment on a post of the organization about the food insecurity issue.
4. Share a post of the organization about the food insecurity issue.
5. Watch a video posted by the organization talking about its work combating the food insecurity issue.
6. Share a video posted by the organization talking about its work combating the food insecurity issue.
7. Sign an online petition of the organization related to the food insecurity issue.

Offline Advocacy:
Considering the nonprofit organization previously presented, please indicate how likely you are to participate in the following activities (extremely unlikely to extremely likely):
1. Discuss the organization's work in combating the food insecurity issue with your family.
2. Discuss the organization's work in combating the food insecurity issue with your friends.
3. Pay attention to information in the news related to the organization and food insecurity.
4. Wear a t-shirt in support of the organization that is combating food insecurity.
5. Wear a button in support of the organization that is combating food insecurity.
6. Put a sign in your yard related to the organization that is combating food insecurity.
7. Display a bumper sticker in support of the organization that is combating food insecurity.

Online Activism:
Considering the nonprofit organization previously presented, please indicate how likely you are to participate in the following activities (extremely unlikely to extremely likely):
1. Donate money to the organization in response to an online campaign (one time donation).
2. Volunteer online by joining the nonprofit's team that organizes online fundraising to support the nonprofit to combat food insecurity.
3. Volunteer online by joining the nonprofit's team that organizes campaigns to raise awareness for the food insecurity cause.
4. Engage in online activity related to the organization that could compromise the relationship with my family.
5. Engage in online activity related to the organization that could compromise the relationship with my friends.
6. Send messages through social media to politicians on behalf of the organization to voice your concerns related to food insecurity.
7. Send messages through social media to celebrities on behalf of the organization to attract their support for the food insecurity cause.

Offline Activism:
Considering the nonprofit organization previously presented, please indicate how likely you are to participate in the following activities (extremely unlikely to extremely likely):
1. Join one of the organizations' committees to discuss future plans.
2. Make periodic financial contributions to the organization to combat food insecurity.
3. Serve as an offline volunteer in the organization distribute food in loco.
4. Engage in offline activity with the organization that could compromise the relationship with my family.

5. Engage in offline activity with the organization that could compromise the relationship with my friends.
6. Call politicians on behalf of the organization to voice your concerns related to food insecurity.

Block: Control Variables

Social Media Use:
Please indicate the extent to which social media help you (strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. To stay informed about US current events and public affairs.
2. To stay informed about the local community.
3. To get news about current events from mainstream news media.
4. To get news about current events through friends.
5. To stay informed about international public affairs and issues

Previous Civic Engagement:
Now, thinking about all social issues, not just food insecurity, what civic engagement activities have you participated in (in the last 12 months and in the last five years)?
1. Volunteering
2. Money donation
3. Goods donation
4. Petition signature
5. Petition writing
6. Voting
7. Persuasion of others to vote
8. Offline protesting
9. Online protesting
10. Participation in charity events
11. Organization of charity events
12. Contact of public officials
13. Contact the media
14. Took action to solve a local problem
15. Took action to solve a national problem
16. Took action to solve a global problem
17. I did not participate in any of these activities

Political Interest:
In general, how interested are you in politics?
1. Very uninterested
2. Uninterested
3. Somewhat uninterested
4. Not sure
5. Somewhat interested
6. Interested
7. Very interested

Household Location:

How do you describe your household location?

1. Urban
2. Suburban
3. Rural

Income:

What is your household income?

1. $0 - $25,000
2. $25,001 - $50,000
3. $50,001 - $75,000
4. $75,001 - $100,000
5. More than $100,000
6. I prefer not to say

APPENDIX C

Appendix C: Local, National, and Global Manipulations

Problem Statement: Food insecurity is a condition many families face when there is not enough money to buy nutritious food. This situation can be temporary or can last a long time. Food insecurity is influenced by several factors, including income, employment, race/ethnicity, and disability. When people don't consume nutritious food, they can develop serious health complications, such as obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

1st Manipulation: Local Nonprofit

FEEDBACK LOOP

Q Search   ♀ Need Help   ✉ Sign Up   **DONATE**

Feedback Loop
is a **local hunger-relief nonprofit organization** with operations in **your community.**

WHAT WE DO: We redistribute collected food to community soup kitchens and homeless shelters. In addition to helping those in need attain a source of food, **Feedback Loop** provides nutritious options to better the health of our local communities in need. We invite residents, business owners, and recipient agencies to become connected through our "loop."
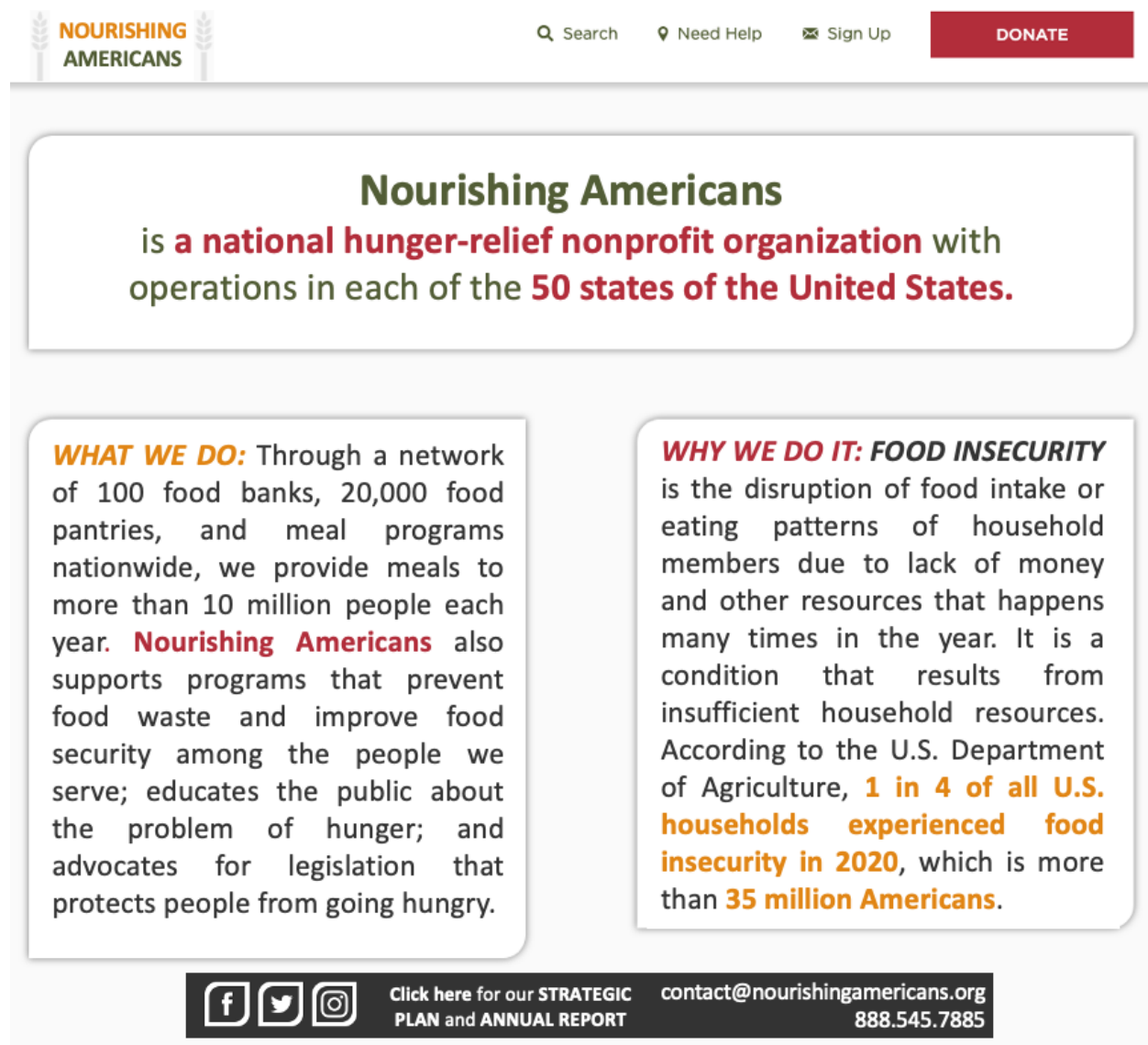
WHY WE DO IT: FOOD INSECURITY is the disruption of food intake or eating patterns of household members due to lack of money and other resources that happens many times in the year. It is a condition that results from insufficient household resources. According to the Food Policy Council, approximately **30% of your city households are food insecure.**

Click here for our STRATEGIC PLAN and ANNUAL REPORT   contact@feedbackloop.org   888.545.7885

2ⁿᵈ Manipulation: National Nonprofit

Problem Statement: Food insecurity is a condition many families face when there is not enough money to buy nutritious food. This situation can be temporary or can last a long time. Food insecurity is influenced by several factors, including income, employment, race/ethnicity, and disability. When people don't consume nutritious food, they can develop serious health complications, such as obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

NOURISHING AMERICANS

🔍 Search   📍 Need Help   ✉ Sign Up   **DONATE**

Nourishing Americans is **a national hunger-relief nonprofit organization** with operations in each of the **50 states of the United States.**

WHAT WE DO: Through a network of 100 food banks, 20,000 food pantries, and meal programs nationwide, we provide meals to more than 10 million people each year. **Nourishing Americans** also supports programs that prevent food waste and improve food security among the people we serve; educates the public about the problem of hunger; and advocates for legislation that protects people from going hungry.

WHY WE DO IT: FOOD INSECURITY is the disruption of food intake or eating patterns of household members due to lack of money and other resources that happens many times in the year. It is a condition that results from insufficient household resources. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, **1 in 4 of all U.S. households experienced food insecurity in 2020**, which is more than **35 million Americans**.

[f] [y] [o] **Click here** for our **STRATEGIC PLAN** and **ANNUAL REPORT**   contact@nourishingamericans.org   888.545.7885

3ʳᵈ Manipulation: Global Nonprofit

Problem Statement: Food insecurity is a condition many families face when there is not enough money to buy nutritious food. This situation can be temporary or can last a long time. Food insecurity is influenced by several factors, including income, employment, race/ethnicity, and disability. When people don't consume nutritious food, they can develop serious health complications, such as obesity, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases.

GLOBAL FOOD PROGRAM
Q Search   ♀ Need Help   ✉ Sign Up   **DONATE**

Global Food Program
is **a global hunger-relief nonprofit organization** with operations **in 40 countries** around the world

WHAT WE DO: We provide life-saving support to people at risk of going hungry and coordinate the response of the global humanitarian community to large-scale emergencies. The **Global Food Program** distributes food in areas where it is scarce through, in places where food is unaffordable, and we give cash or vouchers to vulnerable people buy nutritious food.

WHY WE DO IT: FOOD INSECURITY is the disruption of food intake or eating patterns of household members due to lack of money and other resources that happens many times in the year. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, **between 720 and 811 million people** faced hunger worldwide in 2020.

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APPENDIX D

Appendix D: Applied Recommendations of the Study's Findings

- **Communication to Improve Affective Involvement:**

  Content and messages about the problem that appeal to feelings and emotions.

  - Text, photos, and videos with testimonials of people positively affected by the nonprofit's work, such as constituencies, volunteers, staff, and donors.

  - Text, photos, and videos showing real information of people negatively affected by the food insecurity problem (local, national, or global level)

- **Communication to Improve Cognitive Involvement:**

  Content and messages about the problem that appeal to logic and reason.

  - Text, photos, and videos explaining the extent of the problem in the community (ies) attended by the nonprofit.

  - Text, photos, and videos providing logical reasoning of how a person can make a difference, for example, how the food or money donated will be used.

- **Communication to Improve Problem Recognition:**

  Content and messages that explain the problem:

  - Text, photos, and videos providing background information about the problem and how it is manifested at each level. More general information than specific, such as the ones addressed by affective and cognitive involvements.

- **Communication to Improve Constraint Recognition:**

  Content and messages to reduce the perceived obstacles to address the problem (tactical):

  - Text, photos, and videos that inform how people can make a difference and act to combat the problem. For example, how to become a volunteer, how to donate.

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ABSTRACT

HOW DO NONPROFITS INCREASE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT? TESTING A MODEL OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM.

by

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The current landscape of Americans' civic engagement has changed and taken new forms that are strongly impacted by the internet and social media communication. This dynamic can potentially influence nonprofit organizational effectiveness and nonprofit public relations strategies, yet it lacks in-depth scholarly investigation and understanding. Therefore, this dissertation sought to understand public support behaviors from the general population toward nonprofits, considering four different modes of civic engagement activities and three geographic levels of nonprofit organizations. Specifically, this dissertation introduced a conceptual model to explain individual factors that lead Americans to engage in online and offline advocacy and activism through and on behalf of nonprofits combating food insecurity at the local, national, and global levels. This project laid its foundation in the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) and undertook a national online survey with an experimental manipulation embedded in it. The data collected were mainly analyzed through OLS regression and serial multiple mediation techniques. Results of this study indicate that the proposed conceptual model successfully explains how Americans arrive at the four categories of civic engagement behaviors and demonstrate that

Americans do not exhibit significant differences in civic engagement intent across the three levels of analysis (local, national, or global).

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Maria Clara Bello Martucci is originally from Piracicaba, Sao Paulo, Brazil. She received her B.A. in Social Communication at Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing (ESPM) in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She also holds a Master of Science degree in Business Administration from Fundacao Instituto de Administracao (FIA), Sao Paulo, Brazil. Clara has four years of professional experience working in corporate communication departments of multinational organizations in Brazil. She moved to the United States in 2014 and completed her Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies in 2018 from Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. In the same year, she started her Ph.D. program in Communication Studies also at Wayne State University. Her research lies at the intersection of organizational communication and public relations and uses quantitative methods. She will begin working as a tenure-track assistant professor of Public Relations at California Polytechnique State University, Pomona, in the Fall of 2022.