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Does Citizen–Government Fit Matter? An Exploration in the Context of Online Civic Engagement

Short Paper

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Abstract

Despite technological development and individuals using technologies more than ever, their engagement in e-participation initiatives remains low. A close assessment indicates that simply setting up platforms for e-participation does not inevitably result in online civic engagement. Addressing this gap, this study goes beyond technological factors to consider the citizen-government fit to influence online civic engagement. Using the theoretical lens of person–organization fit, self-efficacy, and the social influence theory, this study argues that (1) the congruence between citizens and their government (i.e., C–G fit) will positively impact online civic engagement and (2) this relationship will be mediated by citizens' commitment and moderated by e-participation-specific self-efficacy and social networking site usage. Data was collected from six interviews and 14 survey responses as the preliminary study. The data showed an initial indication in support of the research hypotheses. The research method and implications for the final study are described.

Keywords: C–G fit, e-participation, engagement, self-efficacy, social networking sites

Introduction

While efficient service delivery remained the primary focus of e-government for a long, recently, its use for (1) facilitating dialogue between government and citizens (e-consultation), and (2) engaging citizens in policy decision-making and co-production of services (e-decision making) appears to be unfolding (Toots 2019). Consistent with Macintosh (2004), this study views e-participation initiatives as instruments for online civic engagement, defined as the use of e-participation platforms by citizens for engaging in consultation and direct dialogue with the government and participating in policy development. Despite the recent flourishing of e-participation (Medaglia 2012), many of these initiatives (e.g., Estonia's Osale.ee) have failed to engage the members of society (Choi and Song, 2020; Epstein et al. 2014; Karlsson 2012; Toots 2019). In particular, while people use e-participation platforms to consume government information (e-information), participation in e-consultations and online policy decision-making remains relatively very low in most countries. For instance, India scored 0.8182 in terms of e-information while the scores for e-consultation and e-decision-making were 0.3571 and 0.1, respectively (0 being lowest and 1 being highest) (United Nations 2022). The lack of citizen engagement in e-participation remains an ongoing challenge for government leaders and public administration (Choi and Song, 2020). The success of e-participation hinges on the end users or citizens in large part, indicating the importance of uncovering citizens' engagement with e-participation platforms.

While the mainstream empirical work on online civic engagement is focused primarily on the consumption of public services and official governmental information (e-information) (Dahi and Ezziene 2015; Rodrigues et al. 2016), "consuming information does not necessarily translate to people effectively engaging or interacting with the government online" (Epstein et al. 2014, p. 338). Further, while reviewing prior research, most studies were found to draw on various theories and notions such as Technology Acceptance

Model (TAM) (Carter and Bélanger 2012), Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Oni et al. 2017), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Naranjo-Zolotov et al. 2019), Trust (Alrashedi et al. 2015; Kim and Lee 2012), Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) (Oni et al. 2017), and social capital (Choi and Song 2020) among others. These studies examined mainly technological factors (e.g., perceived ease of use of the technology, perceived usefulness, technological skill, and trust on the Internet) and some political factors (e.g., political interest, party involvement, participation efficacy, legal support) for understanding citizens' adoption of e-participation rather than exploring their engagement behaviors (Kim and Lee 2012; Oni et al. 2017). It is crucial to note that adoption does not necessarily reflect engagement behavior. Engagement goes beyond adoption to incorporate citizens' involvement in a dialogue with governments and the decision-making process. However, factors studied in past literature often fall short of explaining citizens' online engagement behavior (Choi and Song 2020; Oni et al. 2017). This knowledge gap calls for exploring additional contextual factors that lie outside the technological realm.

To fill this gap, this study considers citizens' perceptions founded on their interaction with the government to be particularly important. This is based on motivational access, which van Dijk (2005) explained as a function of the psychological process or social context on which the adoption and use of new technology depend. This motivational access, as argued by Epstein et al. (2014), in this study context, refers to not only the motivation to use technology but also the motivation to engage with the government through meaningful participation in e-consultation and e-decision-making. Addressing concerns that citizens would have developed based on their perceptions and prior experiences of government interactions is crucial to facilitate online civic engagement (Epstein et al. 2014). It is thus reasonable to expect that citizens develop perceptions regarding the degree of fit with their government, and this citizen–government (C–G) fit plays a major role in influencing online civic engagement. The notion of C–G fit is founded on the perspective of person–organization (P–O) fit and is defined as the level of congruence between the values of citizens and that of their government. This study posits citizens with a high C–G fit will be more motivated to engage with the government and actively participate in online consultation and policymaking. Conversely, a low level of C–G fit may fail to motivate citizens to put their time and effort into such governmental activities. Despite the significance of the congruence between citizens and government, past studies have seldom examined the role of C–G fit in the e-participation context. Motivated by this, the first research question is:

RQ1: What is the relationship between perceived C–G fit and online civic engagement behavior?

To address the above RQ, this study draws on the discourse on P–O fit and employee commitment (Finegan 2000; Greguras and Diefendorff 2009) and posits that citizens who perceive a high congruence between their values and that of the government would show a higher level of commitment and will effectively participate in e-consultation and e-decision making. Thus, citizens' commitment can be argued to mediate the relationship between C–G fit and online civic engagement behavior. However, this relationship between the C–G fit and online civic engagement is likely to vary depending on the computer self-efficacy, given that effective participation in online consultation and policymaking demands online information search ability and associated skills (Epstein et al. 2014). Thus, this study expects that e-participation-specific self-efficacy will influence the impact of (1) citizens' commitment and (2) perceived C–G fit on online civic engagement. Further, with the increasing usage of social networking sites (SNSs) and people following their friends and significant others, it is highly possible that a citizen's engagement with e-participation platforms is influenced by others' opinions and behaviors. This is consistent with prior research where others' thoughts and actions were found to shape an individual's use of information systems (IS). Accordingly, this study suggests that the extent to which C–G fit impacts one's level of online civic engagement will be highly contingent on SNS use. Thus, the second question is:

RQ2: What are the roles of e-participation-specific self-efficacy and SNS use in the relationship between C–G fit and online civic engagement behavior?

To address this question, this study draws its arguments on the notion of self-efficacy (Bandura 1986) and Kelman's (1958) social influence theory to propose that e-participation-specific self-efficacy and SNS use will moderate the relationship between C–G fit and online civic engagement. In sum, this study investigates the (1) direct effect of perceived C–G fit on online civic engagement; (2) mediating effect of citizens' commitment on the above-mentioned direct effect; (3) moderating role of self-efficacy on the relationship between (a) perceived C–G fit and online civic engagement and (b) citizens' commitment and online civic engagement; and (4) moderating role of SNS use on the impact of (a) C–G fit and (b) citizens' commitment

on online civic engagement. A preliminary study was conducted with six interviews and 14 surveys. The responses provide an initial indication in support of the hypotheses.

The study makes two key contributions to the IS literature and practice. First, it offers insights into the role of C–G fit in explaining online civic engagement. As opposed to the prior studies where technological factors were focal points, this study suggests that simply setting up platforms may not be adequate to stimulate engagement with e-participation platforms. If citizens do not perceive a fit between their values and that of the government, they may feel somewhat disconnected from the government and not participate in online consultation and policymaking. Thus, this study extends the e-government literature by conceiving C–G fit as the crucial determinant of online civic engagement, explaining the mediating role of citizen commitment, and the moderating role of self-efficacy and SNS use. Second, this study helps policymakers understand how to encourage civic engagement online and brings their attention to the need for policy-level changes to align their values with citizens to increase C–G fit and engagement with e-participation platforms.

Theory and Hypotheses

C–G Fit and Online Civic Engagement

The notion of fit (or, congruence) has long been regarded as important in the fields of psychology and organizational behavior (Nadler and Tushman 1980; O'Reilly et al. 1991). In studying person–environment fit, interactional psychology suggests that continuous interaction between the person and the environment causes behavior (Terborg 1981). Grounded in this conception, Kristof (1996) defined P–O fit as: “the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both” (pp. 4–5). One such fundamental characteristic that is shared by both employees and organizations is “values” (Finegan 2000). Prior research suggests that a person is more likely to be comfortable in an environment that corresponds to his or her values (Finegan 2000). For instance, when employees perceive a higher level of congruence with their organization, they not only internalize the organization’s goals and values but also are willing to invest personal effort for the sake of the organization, which leads to positive organizational behavior. Extrapolating this line of thought, this study expects that the willingness of citizens to take part in e-consultation and e-decision-making will be influenced by their interaction with the government since online civic engagement reflects positive citizen behavior that is discretionary and promotes the effective functioning of the government. The citizen–government relationship has received significant attention in the context of e-government and is regarded as the central ground for the development of citizens’ trust in e-government (Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies 2017) and the subsequent success of e-government (Teo et al. 2008). Online civic engagement behavior thus can be assumed to be a joint function of citizens and government. That is, citizens who perceive a higher degree of C–G fit are likely to be engaged in online governmental affairs. They will invest the personal effort to contribute to ideation forums, provide their inputs on draft policies, engage in e-voting and participatory budgeting, co-produce services (e.g., crowdsourced disaster maps), participate in hackathons, and file e-petitions to co-create policies. On the contrary, if citizens perceive their values to be less consistent with those of their government, not only they would be less motivated to engage with e-participation platforms, but there is a possibility that they will also feel indifferent to their government’s online engagement efforts. Hence, it is hypothesized:

H1: Citizens’ perceptions of C–G fit will be positively associated with online civic engagement.

The Mediating Role of Citizens’ Commitment

Online engagement with the government is beyond the consumption of governmental services and information and demands time and effort (Epstein et al. 2014). Without any commitment, such engagement is hard to be achieved. For instance, in an e-participation initiative where the government seeks comments from citizens on policy issues, their opinions need to be supported by credible facts, adequate reasoning, and thoughtful acknowledgment of competing arguments (Epstein et al. 2014). In such a case, citizens are required to invest their time and effort to understand relevant institutional, legal, and political factors to make a meaningful contribution. They must also possess operational skills to understand the functionality of a website, information skills to process online information, and strategic skills to structure their opinion (Epstein et al. 2014; van Dijk 2005), which requires commitment from citizens. Accordingly, this study contends that a higher level of citizen commitment will lead to increased online civic engagement.

Prior research on P–O fit has shown that congruence between the values of persons and their organizations leads to stronger organizational commitment (Hoffman and Woehr 2006; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). In particular, employees having a higher level of P–O fit feel connected with their organizations (Cable and DeRue 2002), identify themselves in terms of their organizations (Saks and Ashforth 1997), and follow the organizational goals (Cable and DeRue 2002), all of which positively affect their organizational commitment (Greguras and Diefendorff 2009). Similarly, it is reasonable to argue that citizens who perceive their values to match the values of their government will feel connected to the government and its participatory initiatives and will be willing to exert substantial efforts to develop required skills and share constructive comments to engage in a dialogue with their government. In sum, citizens' commitment acts as a mediator through which their perceived C–G fit will influence their level of engagement with online governmental affairs. Hence, it is hypothesized:

H2: Citizens' commitment mediates the relationship between their perceived C–G fit and online civic engagement.

The Moderating Role of E-Participation-Specific Self-Efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy is derived from the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986). It is about beliefs in an individual's ability to perform a specific course of action or behavior, and computer self-efficacy is the "judgment of one's capability to use a computer" (Compeau and Higgins 1995, p. 192). Given that online civic engagement is contingent on the use of e-participation platforms, the role of e-participation-specific self-efficacy (EPSE), defined as a citizen's judgment of his or her ability to use e-participation platforms, is noteworthy. EPSE is thus about a citizen's belief regarding his or her personal skills and abilities and represents an internal locus of control (Wang et al. 2013a) in using e-participation platforms such as e-consultation and e-decision-making. In these advanced forms of participation, one needs the skills necessary to comprehend and provide inputs on complex policy proposals and other such initiatives such as hackathons or similar competitions (United Nations 2020). For citizens who are highly committed and motivated towards online civic engagement, having a higher level of EPSE will make them more confident in being active in information searching, understanding the functionality of e-participation platforms, and interacting with such content-oriented platforms, thereby leading to a higher degree of online civic engagement. In contrast, having the same level of commitment, citizens with a low level of self-efficacy pertaining to the use of e-participation platforms for sharing their comments may attain a lower level of engagement. This line of argument is equally relevant to the relationship between C–G fit and online civic engagement. That is, for citizens who perceive a high congruence between their values and that of the government, having a higher level of EPSE is expected to enhance their motivation of using e-participation platforms for engaging with the government, while a lower level of EPSE may discourage their motivation for online engagement. Hence, it is hypothesized:

H3: EPSE will moderate the relationship (a) between perceived C–G fit and online civic engagement and (b) between citizens' commitment and online civic engagement such that the relationship will be stronger for citizens with high EPSE than for citizens with low EPSE.

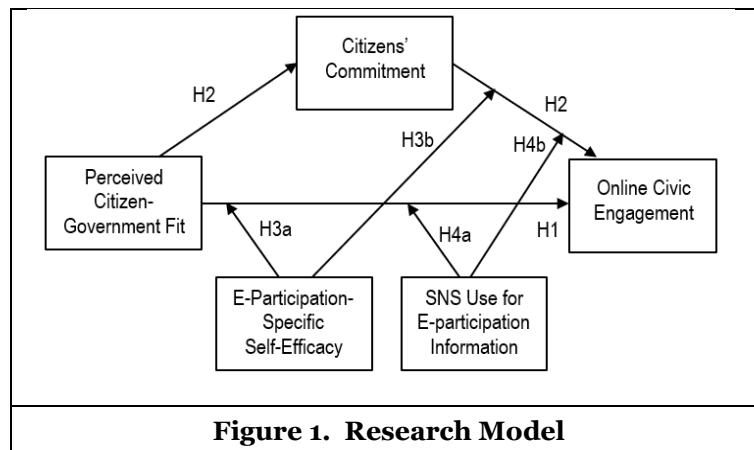
The Moderating Role of SNS Use

Prior studies have drawn on Kelman's (1958) social influence theory to explain how others may influence individuals' IS use (Malhotra and Galletta 2005). The theory suggests that our attitudes, beliefs, and resulting behaviors could be shaped by other people through any of the three theoretical mechanisms: compliance, internalization, and identification. Compliance happens when individuals are forced to behave in a certain manner to secure rewards or avoid penalties. Internalization processes lead individuals to behave in line with others' opinions. Identification occurs when individuals embrace behaviors of a respected social group to maintain a healthy relationship with that group. Social networking sites (SNSs) allow individuals to interact with others and share a connection with them (Arayankalam and Krishnan 2022; Boyd and Ellison 2007). SNSs provide a crucial platform where individuals are influenced by significant others. Drawing on the social influence theory, this study argues that when an individual's social media friends and significant others talk about e-participation platforms and participate in online governmental affairs, the individual is more likely to look favorably upon e-participation platforms and engage in direct dialogue with the government and participate in policy development. Doing so provides external validation to individuals by which their self-perception is developed (Melone 1990). These

essentially reflect the mechanism of internalization, whereby individuals’ attitudes and behaviors are shaped by referent others. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that when individuals use SNSs to consume information about public affairs and e-participation initiatives through friends and significant others, they are more likely to use e-participation platforms (Arayankalam and Krishnan 2022; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012) than those who use SNSs for general purposes only (e.g., personal identity construction, social relationships or entertainment). In other words, given the same level of C–G fit and commitment, the level of online civic engagement will be higher for an individual who uses SNSs to consume information about public affairs and e-participation initiatives than others. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H4: The relationship (a) between perceived C–G fit and online civic engagement and (b) between citizens’ commitment and online civic engagement will be positively moderated by SNS use such that the relationship will be stronger for citizens using SNSs for e-participation-related information.

The research model depicting the hypothesized relationships is presented in Figure 1.



Research Method

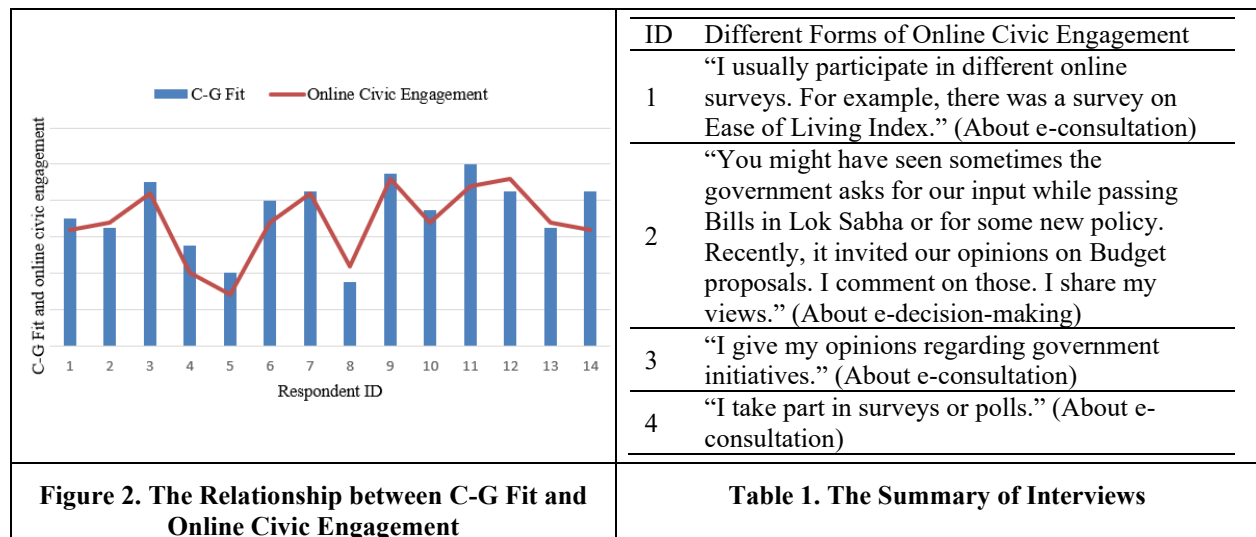
Data to empirically validate the research hypotheses will be collected from citizens by using survey methodology. The sampling frame consists of citizens of India who are older than 18 years. Since the minimum voting age in a public election in India is 18 years, citizens aged 18 years and older are considered appropriate candidates to participate in the policy decision-making process. It is important for the study to consider a representative sample of citizens in India, and accordingly, a random sampling technique will be used in the final study. A market research firm will be appointed to conduct the survey. The firm will be provided with the necessary instructions and the survey measures. The cover page of the survey will inform that the respondent’s identity will remain anonymous and confidential, and the information provided by them will be used solely for research purposes. Their privacy will be ensured while filling out the questionnaire. It will also mention that the participation is completely voluntary. Based on the content and purpose of the survey, respondents can make an informed judgment about whether they wish to participate. There will be a screening question in the questionnaire to identify the right respondents. The respondents will be informed that online civic engagement is based on their participation in various participatory tools available on the e-participation platform—MyGov (<https://www.mygov.in/>). MyGov is founded to promote public engagement in consultations and decision-making processes and offers various e-participation tools to support thematic discussions, online groups, ideations, polls, surveys, competitions of national interest, blogs, and talks (United Nations 2022).

The construct measures are adapted from prior research. The dependent construct, online civic engagement, is adapted from the measures of e-democracy use (Oni et al. 2017) but is adapted to the study context with the help of the United Nations (2022) conceptualizations to reflect the use of e-consultation and e-decision-making platforms that specifically show citizens’ engagement with the government online. The construct, online civic engagement, measures how frequently the participants use MyGov portal to “perform a task assigned by the government”, “share their inputs”, “participate in poll”, “participate in a campaign”, and “have a dialogue with decision makers,” among others.

Measures of perceived C–G fit are developed following the measures of P–O fit and adjusted to the current context. While various dimensions of P–O fit have been defined and researched, such as goal congruence, value congruence (e.g., Cable and DeRue 2002; O’Reilly et al. 1991), needs-structure fit (Bretz et al. 1989), and personality–climate fit (e.g., Christiansen et al. 1997), most of the empirical studies focused on value congruence. Accordingly, the measures of C–G fit are developed based on Valentine and associates’ (2002) scale of P–O fit indicating value congruence. Some items of this construct include, “I feel that my personal values are a good fit with the government”; “The government has the same values as I do with regard to concern for citizens”; “The government has the same values as I do with regard to honesty,” among others.

Drawing on the discourse of Porter et al. (1974), citizens’ commitment refers to a strong belief in and acceptance of the government’s values and the goals of governmental initiatives, and a willingness to exert considerable effort for taking part in such initiatives. Measures of citizens’ commitment are developed from the scale of organizational commitment, as discussed in Valentine et al. (2002). Items measuring e-participation-specific self-efficacy are adapted from Lin and Huang’s (2008) measures of self-efficacy. Items measuring SNS use are developed based on the study by Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012). All items will be measured on a five-point Likert scale: from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

Since the unit of analysis is citizens, their demographic profile and political interest may affect the hypothesized relationships, as discussed in previous literature (Oni et al. 2017). Hence, the effects of age, gender, education, profession, political interest, and political affiliation (affiliation to any political party) on the dependent variable will be controlled during the final analysis. As part of the preliminary study, survey responses were collected from 14 individuals regarding their level of C–G fit and engagement with MyGov portal. The participants were executive students (eight male and six female respondents) at a reputable university in India, who used the e-government website MyGov.in. Figure 2 shows that when the level of C–G fit is high, the level of online civic engagement is high, which aligns with hypothesis H1.



Further, six telephonic interviews, each lasting for 15-20 minutes, were conducted to understand how citizens engage with the government through e-participation platforms. Among six interviewees, four were male, and two were female participants. Three of them were undergraduates, and the other three had higher educational degrees. All of them used the MyGov platform to e-participate. Table 1 presents some key responses from the interviews. Respondents mostly engaged in online consultations rather than online policy decisions or co-creation of policies and services. In the final study, a mixed-method approach will be adopted, whereby the interview transcripts will be coded, the survey scales will be pre-tested with the help of a pilot study and subsequently validated, and finally, hypotheses will be tested using a structural equation modeling approach through PLS-SEM followed by Hayes’ (2018) mediation and moderation analyses.

Discussion, Implications, and Future Research

This study explains why e-participation is not used at its full potential and uncovers some major factors to make a notable contribution to research and practice. While an informed citizenry is invaluable to a

democratic society, consuming governmental information and services does not necessarily indicate that citizens are engaged with the government online (Epstein et al. 2014). An earlier Pew report (Smith 2010) suggested that accessing government information was the most common interaction of US citizens with their government online, followed by consuming government services (such as license renewal or vehicle registration). The report found that only 23% of Internet users “participate in the online debate around government policies or issues” (Smith 2010, pp. 2-3). The scenario has not changed much since then. A recent global report indicates that 93 out of 193 countries did not even conduct one e-consultation in the past 12 months (United Nations 2022). In essence, the lack of citizens’ online engagement with the government is evident, indicating the need to understand the factors influencing online civic engagement.

While most prior research on online civic engagement has focused on technological factors, we must understand that simply offering interactive technology to citizens does not inevitably result in meaningful and productive engagement (Epstein et al. 2014), as evident from the global report on e-government and e-participation (United Nations 2020; 2022). Addressing this gap, the current study draws on the well-established theory of P–O fit and contributes to the literature on e-participation and e-government by underscoring the need to consider the congruence between citizens and their government. In other words, this study emphasizes that unless citizens perceive a fit between their values and that of the government, they may not feel connected to the government and its associated initiatives. As a result, they may not participate in online consultation and policymaking, which requires substantial effort and time from them. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the mediating role of citizens’ commitment and draws on the literature on P–O fit and employee commitment to argue that a higher level of C–G fit makes citizens committed to spending time and effort to participate in online consultations and policymaking.

Secondly, the study highlights the role of EPSE in influencing the relationship between C–G fit and online civic engagement and between citizen commitment and online civic engagement. In line with the conception of computer self-efficacy, EPSE is considered an internal cognitive resource with which citizens can engage with the government through e-participation platforms. A higher level of EPSE indicates citizens have knowledge of how e-participation platforms function and are confident about how to interact with these platforms. Thus, having the same level of C–G fit and commitment, citizens with a higher degree of EPSE tend to show a higher level of online engagement. And, lastly, this study extends the social influence theory and explains how SNSs could influence citizens’ attitudes and behaviors toward e-participation platforms through the mechanisms of internalization and identification. With the increasing diffusion of SNSs, it is crucial that we understand the extent to which SNSs could affect individuals’ IS adoption and use. This study adds to our body of knowledge in that direction in the context of online civic engagement.

For policymakers, this study suggests that offering online tools and technological solutions cannot be the only undertaking for the government at all levels to engage citizens. A misfit between citizens and the government could be one of the major reasons for the failure of e-participation initiatives involving consultation and policy development activities. That is, if citizens value honesty, integrity, and fairness and perceive their government to be corrupt, then it is less likely that they will appreciate the efforts put by the government for engaging them. Consequently, they will be less motivated to participate in such effortful initiatives. Hence, policy-level changes are necessary to increase the congruence between the values of citizens and that of the government for greater online civic engagement.

This study does not focus on the determinants of C–G fit, rather, it explores the importance of C–G fit in improving online civic engagement. Future studies may extend the current research model by identifying the factors that lead to C–G fit. Furthermore, prior research contends that negative social influence has a stronger impact on people’s behavior (Gallivan et al. 2005). However, this study does not distinguish between positive and negative social influence through SNSs. Future research could possibly extend this work by theoretically differentiating between the two and empirically comparing the moderating effects of both positive and negative social influence.

Conclusion

Online civic engagement, despite having the potential to improve the country’s administration and policies, remains low in many countries. This study intends to investigate whether the lack of online civic engagement can be attributed to a low level of C–G fit and in doing so, it draws on the discourse on P–O fit, self-efficacy, and social influence theory to explore the role of citizen commitment, e-participation-specific

self-efficacy and SNS use in the relationship between C–G fit and online civic engagement. While a preliminary analysis based on data collected from six interviews and 14 surveys corroborated the line of arguments, a final study will be conducted to test the hypothesized relationships, the results of which are expected to uncover refreshing insights into the phenomenon of online civic engagement.

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