
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Digital Public Square: Analyzing the Dimensions of Students' Engagement in Online Political Debates

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is on the various ways college students in Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines engage with politics online through the "digital public square." The study used descriptive-correlational research design and specifically examines four ways of engaging politically: latent engagement, follower engagement, expressive engagement, and counter-engagement. The results of the analysis find that latent engagement was the most common way that students participated in politics online since their average score was 2.76; this is compared to 1.64 for counter-engagement and 1.90 for follower engagement. There is a statistically significant positive relationship ($r=.235$) between latent engagement and expressive engagement, indicating that there is a link between the two types of engagement, and that passive consumption of information is a precursor to expressing oneself publicly. Additionally, there is an even stronger correlation ($r=.636$) between expressive and counter-engagement, indicating that when people are more vocal about their opinions, they tend to be more aggressive in their online behavior. The regression analysis indicated that active forms of engagement are the primary predictors of digital political followership, based on the R^2 value of $=0.719$. Therefore, while students are interested in staying informed about political issues, they often prefer to engage privately due to the negative environment created by highly polarized individuals in the digital public square.

KEYWORDS

Digital public square, latent engagement, expressive engagement, counter-engagement, spiral of silence

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Introduction

Digital technology proliferation has largely changed how people engage in politics; it has created a "digital public square" where people can engage with one another through all levels of politics. In countries like the Philippines, these platforms have become critical to where people can have public discussions and participate civically. Additionally, social media platforms are highly influential. Users can both consume information and engage in complex ways whether positive or negative with political structures (Loney-Howes, 2020). Many studies have documented the complicated relationship that social media has with political discourse and demonstrate that while social media does create opportunities for real citizen engagement, it also has limitations (Nugroho, 2025).

The evolution of digital public squares has produced many different types of engagement that shape how users experience and interact within them. These types of engagement include latent engagement, expressive engagement, and counter-engagement (Dalia, 2025). In the Philippines, there has been a rapid growth in the number of users on platforms like Facebook, Tiktok and X formerly known as Twitter; this has created a vibrant landscape of political expression, especially during elections and public discussions of controversial government policies. This increasing level of engagement makes it necessary to systematically consider the various forms of participation within this type of political sphere, along with their implications for democracy.

Increasingly complex online political debates are also associated with increasing levels of abusive behavior, including doxing and harassment, which can inhibit meaningful political discourse and disproportionately affect those who are already marginalized.

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Studies have shown that counter-engagements may deter overall participation in political debate, which ultimately diminishes the quality of public discourse (Tan, 2023; Raj, 2023). As online harassment continues to escalate, an increasing number of individuals are facing obstacles to engagement because they fear for their own safety and freedom of expression (Doerr, 2024).

The socio-political context in the Philippines complicates engagement due to economic inequalities as well as to differing levels of digital literacy among users. Some groupings of users use social media to organize support for political advocacy and to affect change to policies. However, due to limited access and lack of understanding about using digital technologies, some groups are marginalized or limited in terms of actively participating (Zayani & Khalil, 2024; DeCook, 2020). This raises concerns that the digital public square not only provides a mechanism for debate but also serves as a reflection of the inequality that exists in society. Therefore, the need to analyze how different user demographics engage with online political debates is particularly significant in understanding the broader patterns of engagement and exclusion.

Although there is a great deal of research on digital civic engagement, there remains a significant lack of comprehensive analysis of the dimensions of engagement for citizens within the unique socio-political context of the Philippines. Most of the research has focused on either general trends in digital activism or has provided case studies focusing on the activities of movements, without investigating in detail the complexity of user interactions on the various social media platforms (Galpin, 2022; Afrasiab et al., 2025). This study intends to fill identified gaps in the academic literature by evaluating engagement, as well as exploring the socio-political consequences of engagement, on the part of citizens in the Philippines.

Statement of the Problem

This research study has several different questions that seek information about different components of online activity regarding users' political engagement in the Philippines. These are the following:

1. What is the prevalent level of latent engagement, counter engagement, follower engagement, and expressive engagement among the respondents in terms of consuming political news and media?
2. Is there a significant relationship between latent engagement and expressive engagement?
3. Does a high level of expressive engagement significantly correlate with an increase in counter-engagement behaviors?
4. To what degree does follower engagement predict the likelihood of a user's latent engagement, counter engagement and expressive engagement

Theories of Political Participation

The Civic Voluntary Model, developed by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, is a basic framework for understanding political participation. The Civic Voluntary Model has three primary components that affect a person's willingness and ability to engage in politics: resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment. Resource factors consist of time, money and civic skills, which determine whether or not someone is able to participate. Psychological engagement includes an individual's interests in politics and the individual's perceived efficacy as a voter. Recruitment indicates how people receive encouragement from their social networks (Nonnecke et al. 2006). In the Philippines, where political engagement is highly influenced by social networks and community participation, providing a wealth of information on how Filipino citizens are more likely to become involved in political discussion through the use of online media or online communities.

The Civic Voluntarism Model serves to clarify the importance of socio-economic conditions for shaping political participation. People who are lower-income have many barriers that can stop them from engaging in political dialogue and in political action. This is very evident in the Philippines where the digital divide exists along socio-economic lines and impacts how much online political participation there will be from Philippine citizens (Neelen & Fetter, 2010). As the Civic Voluntarism Model indicates, these disadvantaged people may not have a high level of digital presence or engagement; however, they can still use the resources of their local networks to build political momentum therefore, using community-based strategies will allow these groups to raise their voices within the digital public sphere.

The Civic Voluntarism Model is a useful tool in understanding how electronic forums are both a benefit and a detriment to political participation. They provide a level of access and means of participation that has not previously existed; however, they can reproduce the inequities that already exist in the public sphere (Edelmann, 2013). Therefore, meaningful engagement will not happen simply through online political debate; rather, understanding the societal and/or political factors that will influence the interactions will produce a greater depth to the level of engagement for the user groups in the Philippines.

Digital Communication Theory

According to Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory, when people think of themselves as being in the minority they will tend not to express their opinions, which ultimately results in a silencing of public discourse. This theory has significant relevance in the area of online political participation because it lays out some of the users' fear of experiencing social isolation or backlash from expressing an unpopular opinion in a world where social networks are highly interconnected (Merry & Simon, 2012). As the Philippine digital space continues to flourish, with many examples of highly polarized political discourse, it becomes a context in

which the Spiral of Silence serves as a cautionary indicator to users who might choose to be simply silent observers of online conversations due to the potential for social alienation.

The Online Disinhibition Effect is the theory that acts as a counterpoint to the Spiral of Silence. According to this theory, users feel free to behave with less inhibition in the online environment because there are fewer social cues and because they perceive themselves as being anonymous (Chen & Chang, 2011). Thus, the Online Disinhibition Effect results in users expressing bold and/or controversial opinions in an online environment that they may not express in person. By comparing and contrasting these two theories it becomes clear that many users are motivated based on situational factors and their perceptions of social context; therefore, some users find themselves engaging in online discussions in a more "aggressive" manner than other users, depending on the perceived social climate and the anticipated reactions from their peers.

The Spiral of Silence and Online Disinhibition Effect create a complex political engagement landscape for users in the Philippines. Users will switch between expressing their opinion about government issues and remaining silent based on how they perceive the current public discourse about an issue, such as how many people are participating, and whether any opposing views are present in the digital public square (Popovac & Fullwood, 2018). This highlights the importance of conducting research into how the cultural and contextual factors that influence discourse practices and the level of participation in this type of environment, which has a very active political climate and is sometimes hostile in nature.

Latent vs. Manifest Participation

In order to understand the behaviors of those who are members of an online political community it is important to recognize the distinction between latent or (lurking) participation as opposed to manifest (active posting) participation. There have been studies that have shown that most lurkers will have participated in discussions but do not actively participate as they choose not to actively participate but instead observe the discussion and learn (Oswald, 2015). There could be many reasons why someone would choose to lurk as opposed to posting; these may be psychological barriers such as social anxiety, feeling they don't know enough or that they would rather passively consume content than contribute to it (Fullwood et al., 2018). In some cases, the cultural context of a community like in the case of the Philippines exacerbates such behaviors, as individuals may fear being ridiculed for sharing unconventional opinions or expressing their views, so they choose to lurk instead of post.

Recent studies suggest that lurking is mischaracterized as a negative phenomenon, whereas there may be several advantages to lurking; they include learning, calibrating one's opinion, and creating relationships with a community's values without the fear of pressure to engage publicly (Honeychurch et al., 2016). By lurking, individuals in the Philippines who are apprehensive of sharing their opinions due to the sensitive nature of political discussions or negative online interactions are able to use the community for information while not in the limelight. Through this passive form of engagement, the individuals are able to help develop a sense of community, which is beneficial to developing a more informed citizenry who may feel empowered to eventually express their opinions.

The differences in motivation between lurkers and posters also indicate that lurking may provide insight into online community dynamics. For example, posters engage in active discourse, while lurkers obtain viewpoints from many different sources that they may use to enhance their own participation and/or behaviors outside the online environment (Siple, 2022). In the case of the Philippines, understanding the degree to which online users are passively participating can help to determine how participation behaviors evolve over time and change from passive consumption to active participation.

The Rise of Counter-Engagement

The counter-engagement phenomenon manifested through doxing practices, hacking, and trolling is a cause for concern and indicates that there has been a shift in political discussion on the web. Individuals/groups in the Philippines utilizing these tools are often attempting to stifle dissent and exploit the vulnerabilities of their adversaries. For example, doxing—the act of publicly disclosing personal/private information with the intent to cause fear or to harass—highlights how the digital environment can be misused to undermine true discourse and create an unhealthy atmosphere (Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). The effects of these aggressive tactics can limit someone's ability to express their thoughts and, thus, perpetuate the Spiral of Silence, which affects the ability to have healthy political discussions.

Moreover, the fact that trolling has emerged as an effective means of using political discourse has created another barrier to engaging in political conversations online. Users have begun using trolling to ridicule, mislead, and delay political discussions by purposely disseminating false information and/or posting incendiary comments that encourage violent reactions from fellow users (Setoyama et al., 2011). In the context of the Philippines, in which political debates often evoke strong emotions, trolling is not just a threat to freedom of expression but also creates a risk that online forums will lose their relevance as a place to have substantive discussions and erodes the trust users have in those forums. Therefore, there presents a significant hurdle for the civic engagement of users in an environment that presents both a hostile and deceptive experience.

Synthesis

The multiple aspects of political involvement through the different political participation theories, internet interactions and behaviors, lurking behavior, and counter-engagement behavior all provide us with an understanding of how political discussion on the internet has developed in the Philippines. Political participation theories are concerned with identifying resources and motivations needed for individuals to either participate as 'active' participants or as 'passive' (lurkers). Theories on communication on digital rights provide us with an insight into how social dynamics (e.g., spiral of silence, online disinhibition effect) may inform

user behavior and the quality of those who contribute to a discussion that takes place on the internet. The distinction between latent and manifest participation demonstrates that there are different strategies for using the internet and therefore how individuals view and interact with civic engagement online.

Finally, the emergence of using counter-engagement behaviors, such as trolling or doxing, demonstrates how difficult it is for constructive political discussions to take place and will affect users' ability or desire to participate in such discussions. While these multiple aspects are interconnected and interact within a single digital ecosystem that both creates engagement and also silences dissent, further investigation is required to understand how behaviors can be changed to provide all internet users with a healthier digital public square by supporting individuals with differing perspectives while combating the negative aspects produced through disinformation and hostility.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research was conducted using a descriptive-correlational design, a research approach that investigates the nature of digital citizenship among the population being studied. This approach is quantitative in nature, permitting not only an understanding of levels of engagement but also how these levels, such as latent, expressive, and counter engagement, correlate to and affect one another through the mechanisms identified in the research propositions.

Research Locale

The research took place at a major college in Santiago City, Isabela, in the Philippines. The choice of Santiago City as the site of the research is due to the high concentration of "digital natives" and the existence of colleges and universities in the city that would provide a suitable representative environment to examine how the young Filipino citizens were utilizing the digital public square.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents were determined by selecting college students enrolled in the aforementioned institution in various departments. The final sample represents a range of year levels and types of courses in order to fulfill both the statistical significance criteria and to also reflect the wide variety of socio-political perspectives represented by the students of Santiago City.

Research Instrument

The structured survey questionnaire used for data collection was adapted by the researcher from Cato et al. (2021), titled "An instrument to measure political participation on social media," and was validated by experts in the field of social sciences. The instrument was divided into three components, which measured Latent Engagement (the non-active consumer), Follower Engagement (the active consumer), and Counter Engagement (the aggressive/non-authorized consumer) as well as the frequency & extent of each type of engagement using a five-point Likert scale.

Statistical Tool

To analyze the data, a variety of statistical programs were used to ensure the accuracy of the results. Mean weights and standard deviation were applied to identify the level of engagement for passive & active consumers; Pearson's *r* was used to analyze the relationship between passive & active consumption; and simple linear regression was conducted to find out if the participant's follower engagement would be related to the participant's latent engagement, counter engagement and expressive engagement.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted under a well-defined framework of ethics, which included obtaining an Informed Consent agreement from all of the research participants. Since the behaviors, such as doxing and trolling, considered to be "counter engagement," are highly sensitive in nature, total anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants were guaranteed; therefore, personally identifiable information (PII) about the participants was not collected. Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and all data from the study were maintained in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 to eliminate any possibility of social or academic consequences or repercussions against the respondents.

Result

Level of latent engagement, counter engagement, follower engagement, and expressive engagement

The results demonstrate that there are four attributes for how participants engage with use. Latent engagement is indicative of the feelings that underlie the respondents' involvement; hence, this variable provides insight into the internal aspects of engagement as well as how the respondents react to these feelings in the form of counter engagement (attitudes that show resistance to engagement). These two metrics are complemented by a third attribute, follower engagement, which captures participation in the form of passive compliance or support for established standards of conduct. Finally, there is expressive engagement, which comprises ways in which respondents overtly express their involvement through actions and behaviors. Together, these metrics create a full picture of how respondents engage within the context of this study, taking into account their participatory and observational roles.

Table 1. Latent Engagement

	Mean	SD
1. I read posts linked to the political debate	2.70	0.794
2. I read news articles or other kinds of information (e.g. an opinion piece) linked to the political debate	2.77	0.760
3. I read comments linked to the political debate	2.81	0.800
4. I watched videos linked to the political debate	2.79	0.755
5. I visited the pages or profiles of politicians or public figures in the context of the political debate	2.70	0.809
Mean	2.76	0.670

According to the information provided in Table 1, the overall level of latent engagement for all respondents was found to be moderate with an overall composite mean of 2.76 (SD=0.670). For each of the five indicators, the participants had very similar average scores: 2.70 (reading posts and visiting politician's profile), 2.73 (reading articles), 2.77 (viewing videos), 2.78 (reading comments), and 2.81 (reading through social media). All of these averages indicate that participants consume political media via a variety of formats such as posts, articles, videos, and comments at moderate levels on a consistent basis. The standard deviations are all ≤ 0.809 , which also shows that the participant responses are generally bunched around these averages. This demonstrates an even fairly strong pattern of "passive" or "latent" consumption, where individuals obtain information about political issues without being actively engaged in public participation.

Table 2. Counter Engagement

	Mean	SD
1. I broke into someone's account to get information about the political debate	1.74	0.832
2. I broke into someone's account to post something in their name about the political debate	1.67	0.869
3. I spread someone's personal information (e.g., phone number, address) without their permission in the context of the political debate	1.54	0.830
4. I did something with someone's personal information that was spread on Facebook in the context of the political debate (e.g., sent a text)	1.59	0.840
Mean	1.64	0.766

The data in Table 2 shows that the respondents had a very low average score of engagement with Counter-engagement at 1.64 (SD = 0.766). This implies that the respondents typically do not engage in any of the listed behaviors (hacking someone's account or doxing) as would be indicated by the average score of a Likert scale with 1 being "strongly disagree." The highest mean recorded was for breaking into their account to get information (1.74), while the lowest was for disclosing personal information without authorization (1.54). The relatively small amounts of standard deviation across all of the different items suggest that all respondents had similar opinions regarding their rejection of these aggressive digital behaviors when focused on political debates.

Table 3. Follower engagement

	Mean	SD
1. I shared, spread a social media event, or invited people to it in the context of the political debate	1.96	0.845
2. I indicated that I would attend or was interested in a social media event in the context of the political debate	2.02	0.873
3. I signed a petition on the political debate after I saw it on social media	1.85	0.865
4. I shared a petition on the political debate, which was organized by someone else	1.85	0.834
5. I became a member of a social media group concerning the political debate	1.82	0.858

Table 3. Follower engagement

	Mean	SD
Mean	1.90	0.738

According to the statistics in Table 3, on average, the respondents to the research had only very few followers who were engaged in a significant amount of time and energy with regard to social media participation with a mean score of 1.90. Thus, the data suggests that the majority of respondents would not engage themselves with politics either in a direct manner or by attending an event or even being a member of a political group who had a social media interest (Mean = 2.02). The second lowest level of respondents adhering to this trend of disengaging themselves from participating with non-participants would be 1.82 for joining groups and 1.85 for responding to petitions. The respondents demonstrated an average low level of standard deviation: standard deviation = 0.738 indicating significant agreement between respondents regarding the trend for political disengagement through digital methods.

Table 4. Expressive engagement

	Mean	SD
1. I posted or shared something (status, meme, link,...) concerning the political debate in a closed social media group	2.02	0.911
2. I commented on something concerning the political debate in a closed social media group	1.85	0.883
3. I liked something or reacted with an emotion to something concerning the political debate in a closed social media group	2.20	0.934
4. I sent something relating to the political debate to someone in a private message on social media	2.17	0.988
5. I trolled in the context of the political debate	1.92	0.875
6. I commented on something concerning the political debate in a way that was publicly visible	1.88	0.854
7. I posted or shared something (status, meme, link,...) concerning the political debate in a way that was publicly visible	2.02	0.934
Mean	2.01	0.751

The data in Table 4 indicates that in general, the degree to which respondents demonstrate expressive engagement is fairly low, as evidenced by a mean value of 2.01 using a five-point Likert scale. The type of engagement that respondents did most frequently was liking political posts (M=2.20) or reacting to political content posted in closed groups; this was closely followed by sharing political information through private messages (M=2.17). Whereas active or hostile types of responses, such as posting comments (M=1.85) in closed groups or public comments (M=1.88), from the lowest amounts of engagement. The range of standard deviations (ranging from 0.854 to 0.988), for all items indicates that although users' responses are concentrated on the low side of the scale, a segment of the user population continues to demonstrate richer levels of engagement than their overall mean. Collectively, these results indicate that respondents consume or occasionally engage with political information; however, the majority of their engagement is in a passive manner and/or conducted in a private/safe digital environment compared to their engagement/participation in public discourse.

Table 5. Relationship between latent engagement and expressive engagement

		Latent Engagement	Expressive engagement
Latent Engagement	Pearson's r	—	
	df	—	
	p-value	—	
Expressive engagement	Pearson's r	0.235***	—
	df	336	—

Table 5. Relationship between latent engagement and expressive engagement

	Latent Engagement	Expressive engagement
p-value	<.001	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In the data shown in Table 5 there was shown to be a statistically significant positive relationship ($r = .235$; $p < .001$) between latent and expressive forms of engagement. While the relationship was weak to moderate in strength, the correlation coefficient was found to be equal to .235, the reported statistic of .001 indicates a low probability that this relationship occurred by chance among the sample of 338 individuals ($df = 336$). As indicated by this data, the more a person exhibits a latent means of engaging with an online community through passive consumption of content, the more likely they are to perform an expressive means of engaging with an online community through an active means of creating and posting content on this same online community; however, it is important to note that these are two separate behaviors such that one does not entirely dictate another.

Table 6. Relationship of expressive engagement to counter-engagement behaviors

		Expressive engagement	Counter Engagement
Expressive engagement	Pearson's r	—	
	df	—	
	p-value	—	
Counter Engagement	Pearson's r	0.636***	—
	df	336	—
	p-value	<.001	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Analyses of data presented in Table 6 indicates that there was a statistically significant, strong, positive correlation between prospective expressive engagement and present counter engagement behaviors ($r=.636$, $p<.001$). As prospective levels of expressive engagement rise, it can be reliably expected that present counter-engagement behaviors will rise with it across 338 participants (as measured with $df=336$). The extremely small p-value (less than .001) supports the rejection of the null hypothesis; therefore, the results of this study suggest that it is virtually impossible for the relationship to have occurred by chance. Therefore, the answer to the research question can be stated in the positive; high levels of present expressive engagement have a significant positive correlation with present levels of counter engagement behaviors.

Table 7. Regression Analysis of Follower Engagement as a Predictor of Latent, Counter, and Expressive Engagement Behaviors

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²
1	0.848	0.719

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=338

Model Coefficients - Follower engagement

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	0.0411	0.1027	0.401	0.689
Latent Engagement	0.0717	0.0337	2.125	0.034
Counter Engagement	0.3959	0.0372	10.638	<.001

Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²		
Expressive engagement	0.5041	0.0390	12.912	<.001

Follower engagement is an extremely strong predictor of three engagement behaviors—latent, counter, and expressive—with an R² value of 0.719, indicating that these engagement behaviors can be explained by 71.9% of the variation of the data being analyzed in this study. Of the predictors within the model, the strongest predictor of expressive engagement demonstrated a higher degree of impact on the model (estimate = 0.5041, $p < 0.001$). The second strongest predictor, counter engagement, also demonstrated high statistical significance (estimate = 0.3959, $p < 0.001$). While latent engagement also was demonstrated to statistically significantly predict ($p = 0.034$), the degree of impact was considerably less than that of expressive and counter engagement (Estimate = 0.0717). Collectively, the regression analysis results suggest that all three factors contribute to the model; however, both active and outward forms of engagement (expressive and counter) are much better predictors of follower engagements than passive forms (latent).

Discussion

The study's findings give a good understanding of how citizens are involved in political discussions over the internet. respondents expressed low latent engagement (2.76 average) when they reviewed online political media. The number of respondents who passively consumed far exceeded the number participating through the online sphere. The high degree of similarity among user responses was evident from the standard deviation around that mean, which is consistent with prior research that shows users consume political content passively within internet-based public spheres (Hetman, 2022).

The engagement level collectively is relatively low for respondents with respect to counter-engagement behavior at an average score of 1.64, indicating a general reluctance to participate in aggressive behaviors such as doxxing or hacking. Research shows that these types of behaviors are historically associated with digital environments that are low in civility and highly polarized (Howard, 2001). Previous research shows a strong disinterest in or rejection of counter-engagement behaviors has restricted constructive discourse within political communication and emphasizes the necessity to foster productive online political spaces (Dzagal 2024). The data collected on this topic would suggest that the digital public square could be viable for civil engagement provided users are encouraged to support more positive forms of interaction (Roedema et al., 2021).

With respect to follower engagement, the results indicate a troubling pattern of disengagement from political content and decreased levels of participation indicated by the mean score of 1.90 for Facebook engagement. This pattern reflects a broader narrative that has been identified in prior research, where large numbers of individuals chose not to engage actively in political conversation but rather to consume passively as a political participant (Galpin, 2022). This pattern of behavior may suggest that some respondents are disillusioned or distrustful of the political movements that they see represented on digital platforms, raising concerns for the future of the democratization process in the Philippines.

As expressed through the expressive engagement variable, the data indicates there are low mean scores (M = 2.01) associated with active engagement, specifically for posting comments on social media as an example of one form of active engagement. However, the higher percentage of posts that received likes compared with the lower percentage of posts that received comments is indicative that users like content without wanting to debate it directly. This supports the idea that users of social media typically want to use less risky forms of expressing their opinions within the context of polarized environments, where they might be worried about the backlash and/or negativity associated with them participating (Bernal, 2023). There exists a disproportionate amount of passive consumption of social media content versus active participation through constructive engagement; therefore, users are willing to remain informed but have not expressed a desire to actively engage significantly with their peers regarding the topics being discussed on social media.

Latent engagement was shown to have a strong correlation with expressive participation as well as with counterproductive behaviors based on statistical analysis of the data. Iványi (2017) found there's a positive relationship from latent engagement to expressive engagement, so when a person has engaged with increasing amounts of political content, they may then be more likely to express their own views (expressive engagement) by engaging in an interactive way rather than just passively observing, which could serve as the motivating factor behind encouraging greater levels of engagement by encouraging people to move from being occasional lurkers to actively participating in conversations about political topics through use of aggressive means of interactivity. There was also a strong correlation between the expressive participation method of the participants being outspoken during political discussions and their behaviors of being counterproductive, which suggests that as individuals become more vocal in their opinions during these political debates, they will also begin to exhibit counterproductive behaviors in their political activities. Thus,

the question is raised as to what platforms could do to reduce negativity while promoting positive participation and ways of behavior (Murti, 2016).

In summary, these findings highlight the complexities of the digital ecosystem and the existence of latent, expressive, and counter-engagement behaviors that are interrelated and can impact each other. Understanding motivations and fears amongst individuals participating in the digital world is paramount to creating an inclusive, rich digital public sphere. Strategies to increase active participation while preserving civility will help build a politically engaged citizenry in the Philippines. Finally, the study identifies the need for further research into the nuanced behaviors of social media users within the context of political engagement and structural support systems that enhance effective discourse.

Conclusions

Based on the statistical analysis and assessment of the research findings, there are the following conclusions:

- Latent engagement predominates as the main type of digital political engagement among the respondents. While respondents do consume political information in multiple forms (such as, posts, videos, and articles) they generally consume that information in a "spectator" capacity; they do want to stay informed but do not engage in any public discourse/interactions.
- The respondents demonstrate a rejection of counter-engagement behaviors such as, but not limited to, hacking and doxxing. Moreover, respondents express very little intent to engage in publicly expressive acts. When respondents do choose to interact with digital political information in an expressive manner, they do so via "low-risk" types of engagement (such as, liking or forwarding rather than commenting) due to the toxicity/backlash typically associated with digital political environments that are polarized.
- The study supports a statistically significant positive correlation between latent and expressive engagement. The implication of this finding is that latent engagement is a way for individuals to gather enough political information before transitioning into expressing their opinions publicly.
- Another significant finding was that there is a strong positive relationship between the act of expressing politically and counter-engaging politically. Therefore, increasing the frequency with which respondents express their political opinion electronically increases the likelihood of respondents becoming more aggressive and/or uncivil toward others in a digital political environment.
- 71% of the variation in follower engagement is explained by the regression model, and it identifies expressive and counter-engagement as having the greatest importance in predicting follower engagement. It indicates that while passive (latent) users make up most followers, it is more active and sometimes violent forms of participation that drive the engagement and energy of digital political followership.

Recommendations.

The following are recommended to improve the digital democracy in the Philippines based on these findings:

For Civil Society and Educators

- Initiate educational campaigns focused on converting users' currently passive engagement into constructive-expressive engagement. The objective should be to teach citizens how to engage in commentary about public issues, through discussion and debate, without resorting to various forms of counter-engagement behavior (especially doxxing and digital aggression).
- Give special emphasis to assisting "passive" consumer's effort to critically evaluate the content they consume for political purposes, so their latent engagement translates to a more informed rather than a polarized perspective

For Political Actors and Organizations

- As most users' share political information privately only, political organizations must develop closed-to-open engagement funnels beginning with a closed safe space for private discussions that builds the user's confidence towards engaging in broader public discourse.

For Future Research

- Conduct qualitative interviews to better comprehend users' fear of backlash related to commenting publicly. Understanding why individuals privately express "likes" and do not publicly comment will aid in furthering refinements to digital engagement strategies.
- Continue to track if there is a meaningful transition from latent to expressive engagement that may ultimately lead to either long-term disillusionment or radicalization considering there is such a strong positive correlation between types of active expression and counter-engagement.

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