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### Student Leaders' Social Media Engagement Shaping Online-to-Offline Activism in a Teacher's College

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#### Abstract

Social media is an emerging arena where students are practicing leadership in both virtual and physical realities. While previous studies have established the association between social media engagement and activism, there is a need to document how such online activity is connected to extra-online manifestations, particularly in selected teacher education institutions in the Philippines. Hence, this study explored how social media helped these students perform their empowerment-based activism in the real world. Informed by Kelman's Social Influence Theory, the descriptions provided by nine (9) organization chairpersons and vice chairpersons selected through purposive sampling became the basis of this study's findings. After transcribing the responses to the semi-structured interview guide presented through Google Forms, the researchers applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis. This study found that students' activism was actualized through the online medium via increased mobilization, leadership skill development, ethically guided conduct, and response to online challenges. Contrary to activism's performative nature, the respondents prioritized information gathering, decision-making, cooperation, and leadership in promoting civic responsibility. As such, this study's results added to the existing scholarship on social media's role in activism while highlighting the importance of empowerment-based leadership in teacher education.

**Keywords:** Social media engagement, student leadership, online-to-offline activism, civic engagement, social influence theory.

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## Introduction

In recent years, social media has become a new and influential channel through which student leaders can participate in civic life and community activism. In addition to providing communication channels for student leaders, social media provides a platform for social change and leadership development through advocating social causes, organizing, and participating in public debates that enhance leadership skills (Quimba et al., 2025; John Erwin Prado Pedroso, Sibag, et al., 2023). Earlier studies established that social media increases civic participation levels by raising awareness, advocating issues, and recruiting youth in taking action (Seelig et al., 2019). Similarly, social media has enabled young leaders to interact, network, and collaborate to advance their leadership skills while engaging in civic life both online and offline (Herawati et al., 2024; Mohiuddin et al., 2021). Besides influencing youth leadership and activism, social media has become part of the daily interactions of pre-service teachers and student leaders, as it provides a communication channel that enhances interactions and collaboration, thus supporting leadership skills (John Erwin Prado Pedroso, Timothy Christian Bonyog, et al., 2023; Pedroso et al., 2024). Student leaders and pre-service teachers face challenges in using this technology due to the negative publicity surrounding it, but it remains significant in helping student leaders take action online and influence some aspects of their lives offline (Hutchinson, 2021).

While earlier studies established the role social media plays in youth civic participation, there is a need to fill gaps in examining how students understand and respond to their experiences using this technology to influence their leadership. Earlier studies used quantitative designs to establish the association between social media and youth civic participation (Fujiwara et al., 2021). Most of these studies have been conducted in Western Countries, making their findings non-generalizable to the Filipino context (Ross & Bürger, 2014; Velasco et al., 2024). Additionally, most of the previous studies established the benefits of using social media for youth civic participation but ignored issues such as how students develop leadership, negotiate their identities and ethics, and deal with the challenges that social media presents to youth activism. This study uses a qualitative design to understand the lived experiences of student leaders who use social media to influence their leadership in taking action in their communities. It focuses on students' experiences using digital tools and resources to participate in debates on current issues affecting society and how this influences their leadership. This study fills the gaps left by earlier studies on the lived experiences of student leaders and their understanding of social media in terms of their leadership development. This study's findings will add to the body of literature on social media's role in the civic participation of student leaders at large and specifically fill the research gap on social media and leadership in the context of the Philippines.

This study focuses on determining the effect that the social media engagement of student leaders from a teachers' college has on their online to offline activism. The study will be conducted using a narrative inquiry design to examine the social media use in terms of the students' own experiences. This approach will allow the study to generate results based on participants' personal experiences with social media and how it influences their activism and leadership. The study's findings will help fill a gap in research on the civic participation of student leaders by providing an in-depth exploration of the impact that digital technology has on the leadership of student leaders. Additionally, the study will add to the body of knowledge on the influence of social media on leadership in general and specifically on students' leadership in particular. Therefore, it will provide empirical data that can help organizations or institutions that facilitate leadership programs for student leaders understand their needs and help them develop digital activism skills to increase their civic participation levels.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

In order to comprehend and interpret people's experiences, perceptions, and meanings within their natural contexts, this study used a Qualitative Research Approach. In particular, the study used a Narrative Inquiry Approach, which focuses on gathering and analyzing participant's personal narratives to comprehend how they interpret and make sense of their experiences (Butina, 2015). Researchers can study how people interpret and reconstruct their experiences over time by using narrative inquiry, which reveals the meanings that influence people's identities, behaviors, and social realities (Kim, 2016). This strategy was appropriate because the study examined student leaders' personal accounts of social media engagement and how these experiences influenced their civic participation and leadership practices in order to investigate the perceived impact of online activism on their offline civic actions. Herbert C. Kelman's Social Influence Theory, which proposes that social influence occurs through the processes of compliance, identification, and internalization. Whereby individuals adopt behaviors, mimic influential figures, and incorporate values into their belief systems, formed the basis of the study conducted by the researchers (Kelman, 1958). In particular, the theory helped to investigate the impact of social media as a social institution, where interactive engagement with advocacy content facilitates the development of civic values, leadership skills, and group participation. By applying the framework, the researchers were able to interpret the subjects' accounts in terms of the effects of online participation on their decision-making, self-identities, leadership emergence, and collective political involvement, thus revealing the mechanisms through which digital activism could translate into offline engagement.

### *Informants*

This study used the method of purposive sampling, which is a qualitative research technique that involves the deliberate selection of information-rich participants with firsthand experience and knowledge pertinent to the phenomenon being studied (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The informants were selected on the basis of specific inclusion criteria established for this study. The process was one of a targeted type, which provided participants with profound experience in the subject of leadership and online civic engagement. The inclusion criteria are as follows: (1) be currently enrolled in a government teacher education institution during the Academic Year 2025–2026; (2) be the duly elected Chairperson or Vice-Chairperson of the recognized academic organization representing their respective degree program; (3) maintain at least one active social media account; and (4) have demonstrated engagement in both online sociopolitical advocacy and corresponding offline civic or advocacy activities. Table 1 presents the nine (9) organization Chairpersons or Vice-Chairpersons of the college who served as the informants in the study. Every participant is enrolled in a different program for teacher education. Informants were informed about the goal and extent of the study prior to data collection. The goals of the study and ethical issues, such as confidentiality precautions and the voluntary nature of their involvement, were sufficiently explained to each informant.

Table 1. Informants of the study

| Pseudonym | Sex    | Program                                                          | Organization                                         | Status               |
|-----------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ren       | Female | Bachelor<br>Secondary<br>Education<br>Major in Social<br>Studies | of Social Science Students' Society<br>(3S' Society) | Vice-<br>chairperson |

| Pseudonym | Sex    | Program                                                                                 | Organization                                              | Status           |
|-----------|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Annie     | Female | Bachelor of Early Childhood Education                                                   | Association of Early Childhood Education Students (AECES) | Chairperson      |
| Charlie   | Male   | Bachelor of Elementary Education                                                        | Association of General Education Students (AGES)          | Chairperson      |
| Arvin     | Male   | Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Mathematics                                    | Circle of Mathematicians (COM)                            | Chairperson      |
| Josh      | Male   | Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English                                        | English Majors Organization (EMO)                         | Vice-Chairperson |
| Lorenz    | Male   | Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Filipino                                       | Kapisanan ng Diwa at Panitik (KADIPAN)                    | Chairperson      |
| Marc      | Male   | Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Values Education                               | Majors of Values Education (MOVE)                         | Vice-Chairperson |
| Claire    | Female | Bachelor of Special Needs Education Major in Teaching Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Learners | Special Education Students' Association (SPEDSA)          | Chairperson      |
| Jed       | Male   | Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in Science                                        | Science Teaching Majors' Association (STEMA)              | Chairperson      |

*Data Source and Research Instrument*

Data were collected using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide distributed via Google Forms. The instrument consisted of a guide for conducting in-depth, narrative interviews, which aimed to extract information from the selected informants about their social media engagement data and experience. The guide is divided into two sections, of which the first one contains a written informed consent. It includes the information about the objectives of the research, ethical concerns, and confidentiality and anonymity provisions to ensure that the participants are comfortable and confident about their involvement in the study. It should also be noted that the interview is composed of the second section with the actual interview guide, with questions that the researcher will use to elicit the detailed narratives from the participants. The latter will be asked to describe their experiences as the student leaders who engage in activism via social media, offline and online.

The entire interview guide was designed in the English language and written in a conversational but thoughtful tone to promote considerate, narrative-based answers. The questions were based on the expressed research purposes and grounded in a narrative inquiry to be able to embrace the richness of the experience of each of the informants. The instrument was initially validated by an expert. After that, it was then pilot-tested with one (1) student leader with experience in organization leadership to test the suitability of the clarity, the tone, and the sequencing of the items. This feedback was taken into consideration, and minor revisions were made accordingly. This asynchronous and written design enabled respondents to devote more time to consider their responses. They did not feel pressured by time restrictions and were able to answer them in the comfort of their own space, so the instrument was very appropriate when eliciting detailed accounts among respondents with varied schedules and the ability to be geographically dispersed.

#### *Data Gathering Procedure*

Data collection started with the purposeful sampling of subjects that met the inclusion criteria established after the approval of the study by the institutional authority. An introductory message about the research's aims and objectives, voluntary nature of participation, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, and right to withdraw, was sent to the prospective participants through Facebook Messenger. A researcher-made semi-structured interview was administered to collect the necessary information from the subjects, and the link to the Google Form containing the questions was shared with them through Facebook Messenger. This approach allowed giving the respondents enough time and freedom to provide detailed responses in their answers, reflecting on their experiences with using social media and engaging in offline civic activities in an asynchronous mode. The first page of the Google Form included the informed consent statement, which the participants could review before moving to the next page with questions. Pseudonyms were assigned and used throughout the study to protect the participant's identities. Facebook Messenger was used to keep lines of communication open during the data collection period in order to address clarifications and ask follow-up, in-depth questions as needed. Data collection persisted until narrative saturation was reached, at which point participant accounts ceased to yield any new narratives, patterns, or insights pertinent to the phenomenon.

#### *Data Analysis*

After the data was collected, the researchers meticulously examined the information supplied by the respondents. To guarantee accuracy and dependability, all recorded interviews were verbatim transcribed. Thematic analysis, a flexible qualitative analytical technique for finding, examining, and interpreting patterns of meaning throughout the dataset, was used to analyze the interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For data analysis, the study used Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. These included (1) familiarization of the data by reading transcripts several times, (2) generation of initial codes to identify important aspects of the data, (3) looking for trends to establish initial themes, (4) examining and improving the themes to make sure they are coherent and consistent with the dataset, (5) defining and labeling the themes to accurately represent the experiences of the participants, and (6) develop a concise description of the findings. To ensure a thorough and well-supported discussion, the identified themes were cross-referenced with existing literature and observational data to find both converging and contrasting evidence (Joella Nicole C. Faeldonea et al., 2025).

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study was conducted in accordance with the qualitative study ethical guidelines to ensure the rights, safety, and well-being of the participants during the study and after its completion. All participants provided informed consents to participate in the study that explained the study's objectives, procedures, benefits, and their rights as participants. In addition, the participants were notified that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they had a right to withdraw their consent at any moment and for any reason without any negative consequences. Additionally, the informed consent explained how the information would be used and the steps taken to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were given to participants and used in place of their true names in order to protect their identities in all research reports, analysis, and transcripts. No personally identifying information was included in the presentation of the findings. All responses and research records were stored securely and were accessible only to researchers. Since the study employed narrative inquiry, participants' personal accounts were presented responsibly by ensuring that their stories were accurately represented while protecting their identities and maintaining the integrity of their narratives. Throughout the study, the researchers remained committed to respecting the participants' perspectives, preserving the authenticity of their accounts, and adhering to ethical standards in the collection, analysis, and reporting of qualitative data.

## **Results**

Results should be clear and concise. The discussion should explore the significance of the results of the work, not repeat them. A combined Results and Discussion section is often appropriate. Avoid extensive citations and discussion of published literature. To describe how online-to-offline activism is influenced through the social media engagement of student leaders in a Teacher's College, four (4) significant themes, modeled after the theory of social influence. These were (1) Mobilizing Activism, (2) Developing Leadership, (3) Managing Identity and (4) Experiencing Constraints.

### *Mobilizing Activism*

Student leaders use social media as a platform to start online conversations and turn them into significant offline actions. Through this, mobilizing activism which they relate as mobilizing activism are the actions of student leaders in using social media as a platform to start online conversation and turning them into significant offline actions, it relates to mobilizing activism. It is divided into three (3) sub-themes, namely (1) Building Support, (2) Choosing Involvements and (3) *Sharing Decisions*

### *Building Support*

Social media enabled student leaders to encourage participation, organize community initiatives, and promote collective action. This sub-theme includes (1) Promoting Causes and (2) Raising Awareness

#### *Promoting Causes*

The use of social media engagement as a source of inspiration to promote and advocate others to an offline action. *Josh said, "I was really against the corrupt system, and I wanted change for a better Philippines. Therefore, I translated online postings to actual physical actions."* *Lorenz shares another perspective. He stated, "I have seen a reel about students who have different skills but don't have the resources to showcase their skills. I initiated an offline action about that situation and started the 'Proyekto Talento' which aims to showcase and improve the different skills of the students in the secondary level."* *Ren also added a similar experience. She said, "After seeing these discussions online, I took action offline by participating in various HIV awareness initiatives and eventually became a volunteer."*

#### *Raising Awareness*

Educating societal issues through social media engagement then further translating into offline activities such as educating others, building advocacies, and promoting understanding. *Josh and Charlie share similar ideas. Josh shared, "I have limited resources and connections here in the city, but I do my part in participating in an issue by spreading awareness first among the closest people, who are my classmates and relatives."* *Charlie noted, "I've seen a lot of posts about corruption and problems with flood control that really bothered me. Even though my club is for school work, I felt I had to do something personally, so I started sharing facts from real sources with my friends."* However, Ren and Annie had a different perspective and focused more on a direct community impact. *Ren discusses, "We organized outreach activities, collected donations, and promoted HIV awareness to encourage students to become more socially responsible."* *Annie added, "Discussions about child wellness and inclusive education inspired us to conduct storytelling sessions and outreach activities for children with diverse needs."*

#### *Choosing Involvements*

Social media allowed student leaders to decide which movements or actions are worth and safe joining. The sub-theme includes (1) Assessing Risks and (2) Aligning Strategically.

#### *Assessing Risks*

Evaluating the dangers of online actions before ground commitment on social media. *Ren said, "The credibility of information sources on social media strongly influences whether I support or respond to a social issue. I make sure to check if the information is reliable, verified, and backed by trusted sources before I engage or act on it."* *Lorenz also shared a similar perspective. He shares, "It is very important that student leaders have this mindset of fact checking because we have this power to influence what we are able to know and inform people."*

#### *Aligning Strategically*

Participants described selecting activities that were consistent with their organization's mission, available resources, and long-term objectives. Strategic alignment enabled them to maximize the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. *Arvin said, "Instead of directly engaging or taking a public stance, I consciously choose to refrain from organizational involvement to protect our group from political conflict and unnecessary controversy."* *Jed also explained that he uses a comparable technique. He states, "I do not normally get involved or make myself busy with issues*

*online that I do not have any connection or interest in or our organization”*

### *Sharing Decisions*

Students demonstrate sharing by organizing efforts, informing members and encouraging actions, and participating offline in their organization. Its sub-themes are (1) Discussing Concerns, (2) Promoting Unity and (3) Fostering Collaboration.

### *Discussing Concerns*

Student leaders discuss new issues with the organizational members and stakeholders to identify collective actions that can mobilize offline advocacy and activities. *In managing criticism, one leader, Annie, explains, “whenever I encounter criticism regarding our work, I always assess its relevance in a very composed and objective manner. From there, I can then repackage these criticisms as talking points for our executive board meetings. By formally relaying these points to my members, we can then collectively deliberate on the most appropriate line of action to take.” Similarly, when responding to high-traffic issues, Ren shares, “whenever I notice certain topics doing well online, I always try to bring those up in our planning meetings and think of actionable steps or initiatives that we can take to address the issue...”*

### *Promoting Unity*

The participants stressed the need for solidarity between members while pursuing their advocacy goals. They found that unity helped them increase their efforts while encouraging each other to boost their performance. *Besides that, Josh said, “As far as my experience goes, I have to say that English Majors’ Organization has been mostly supportive of our causes and activities since we share similar views.” In turn, Arvin also added another perspective about sustaining unity, “As a student leader, I also had to ensure that my advocacy efforts kept neutrality so that we could promote critical thinking and discussion in private and not in public forums, thus maintaining the integrity of our organization...”*

### *Fostering Collaboration*

Student leaders are expected to work in collaboration with members, partnering agencies, and the community in decision-making policies, responding to comments, and advocating initiatives. *Ren and Arvin expressed almost the same opinion about transforming online ideas into collaborative efforts. Ren said, “With the help of other school organizations, we were able to conduct events, solicit donations, and educate people about HIV.” Arvin remarked, “The educators and activists I look up to inspire me to make better choices in my studies and organization by encouraging me to develop fundamental values and lead my group in adopting collaborative strategies to drive positive change... I have imitated the manner in which they have motivated their communities, deliberated on matters affecting the organization, and ensured their programs have a lasting impression on the people they intend to assist.”*

### *Developing Leadership*

Engaging through social media engagement contributes to their personal and professional growth, enabling student leaders to apply it into real-world action. Through this, developing leadership which they relate to as developing leadership are the actions of engaging through social media management that contributes to their personal and professional growth that enables student leaders to apply it into real-world action. It is divided into two (2) sub-themes, namely (1) Learning from Others and (2) Guiding through Principles

### *Learning from Others*

Developing growth through social media by interacting in online communities, and participating in digital advocacies. The sub-theme includes (1) Internalizing Competencies, (2) Cultivating Confidence and (3) Strengthening Initiative.

### *Internalizing Competencies*

Enhancing leadership by adopting knowledge, skills, and practices that support their personal and organizational development. *Jed and Arvin shared similar experiences in modeling key traits from senior leaders, It tells, Jed shared, "One trait I adopted from my seniors was being a 'coach' I let my officers lead us in some of our endeavors within our organization. Because I am a firm believer of experiential learning." Arvin added "I find myself mirroring traits such as confident yet approachable communication, a calm and positive tone of voice, and a clear, organized way of presenting ideas or updates."*

### *Cultivating Confidence*

By observing successful online initiatives, educational campaigns, and programs, it empowers the student leaders to implement their grounded projects. *Arvin said, "Yes, online leaders and educators I admire have influenced the way I lead offline by shaping how I approach leadership with purpose and responsibility." However, Annie and Claire specifically shared the power of speech and how it shaped them as student leaders. Annie shared, "Watching charismatic leaders on platforms like TED Talks has a profound influence on my aspirations to become a more confident and articulate speaker." Claire also added, "Sometimes, I watch the speeches of some leaders online to fuel my drive to serve... if you have the heart to serve, this is nothing to be afraid of."*

### *Strengthening Initiative*

Exposure from advocacy contents and leadership experiences in social media boost their willingness to lead, organize, and participate in offline actions. *Ren and Jed described both being influenced by the actions and qualities of fellow student leaders. Ren shared, "Seeing my student leader seniors post their initiatives and advocacies online really influences how I make decisions offline. It inspires me to be more proactive, especially in promoting inclusive programs and awareness campaigns..." Jed added, "The way how they think is what I really admire from them... Their curiosity also to try out new things made me also inspired to achieve more for me and our organization."*

### *Guiding Though Principles*

Guiding leadership through the principles learned through social media engagement by shaping ethical values and accepting accountability in the implementation of offline advocacy. Sub-theme includes (1) Committing Ethically and (2) Accepting Accountability.

### *Committing Ethically*

Incorporating decision making processes that will maintain institutional integrity, transparency, justice and respect to every individual in the community. The concepts upheld by moral agents through online and offline interactions. *Josh mentioned, "I believe Leni Robredo's principles of being open minded to everything and showing up always, and admire Chappel Roan's being vocal about everything." Charlie stated, "I prioritize transparency. I've adopted the practice of 'radical honesty' from certain online advocates."*

### *Accepting Accountability*

Establishing a willingness to assume direct responsibility for collective outcomes and errors

within the organization. *Claire and Annie both shared that a responsibility needs a collective action. Claire said, "I learned that if you're a leader, when your subordinate makes a mistake, its your mistake too." Annie added "This process ensures that our organization remains accountable to the community we serve, both digitally and physically. I believe that a leader's true strength is shown in how they handle dissent..."*

### *Managing Identity*

Student leaders manage their identities by balancing their personal, public, and digital personas while fulfilling their responsibilities within their organization. Through this, managing identity which they refer to as managing identity, are the actions that student leaders are managing their identities by balancing their personal, public, and digital personas while fulfilling their responsibilities within their organization. It is divided into three (3) sub-themes, namely (1) Projecting Professionalism, (2) Handling Visibility and (3) Ensuring Authenticity.

### *Projecting Professionalism*

It emerged that social media engagement could enable student leaders to demonstrate efficiency by positioning as a credible and responsible leader in online to offline activism. The sub-themes generated under Student Leadership Engagement were (1) Demonstrating efficiency, (2) Posting responsibly and (3) Sustaining reputation.

### *Demonstrating Efficiency*

Focuses on the exact and systematic performance of organizational duties. This will assure the smooth conduct of community outreach and advocacy programs and will maximize the impact and effectiveness of such programs. *Ren said, "We got the kids things they needed, and made sure that the outreach was more than just giving, but an opportunity to have a good time." Josh added, "As a student leader, you have to have a sense of decorum at all times.*

### *Posting Responsibly*

Responsible social media posting reflected professionalism by promoting thoughtful communication and appropriate online conduct. Annie and Josh both stated that always think before you click. *Annie said, "To ensure organizational integrity, I strictly avoid posting any content that could be perceived as unprofessional or harmful to our mission." Josh noted, "I make calculated decisions before taking a course of action... I always tell myself that people see my actions online, and these behaviors will [reflect]."*

### *Sustaining Reputation*

Student leaders emphasized the importance of securing long-term institutional credibility through consistent professional conduct. *Marc said, "I don't want my actions to tarnish the name of my department and my organization". Annie had the same idea, but shared another perspective. She says, "I only support social issues that are backed by verified data to protect my organization's reputation and integrity". Arvin also added an emphasis of his idea in relation to the other perspectives. He says, "The credibility of information sources on social media greatly influences whether I choose to support or respond to a social issue... accurate and trustworthy information ensures that my decisions are responsible and well-informed... [to] maintain the integrity of both my leadership and the programs I guide."*

### *Handling Visibility*

The adaptive approaches taken by the participants to deal with the increased kudos and responsibility that came with their status in the school community. The student leaders balanced the

kudos and responsibilities of the recognition they received by addressing the demands of those counting on them for guidance and assistance. This theme comprised the following two sub-themes; (1) Balancing Attention and (2) Navigating Demands.

#### *Balancing Attention*

Student leaders have to maintain an equal focus on both the message received from the organization and the perception of individuals who follow them online. They should ensure that the latter does not overshadow the former, recognizing the difference between what they are saying as an official representative and the opinions they may express personally as individuals. *For instance, Charlie was quick to clarify, "my organization is solely focused on academics, so I make it clear that any personal opinions expressed on social media are my own. I use my personal account to disseminate the truth..." However, Ren stated, "I interpret your expectations more as a guideline to help me achieve a certain outcome based on my own terms."*

#### *Navigating Demands*

Managing expectations to continuously maintain an authoritative academic persona alongside an underlying apprehension or fear regarding the potential disappointment of peers or the organization. *Charlie shared, "Because I am seen as a 'student leader' online, I often feel I have no choice but maintain a hyper-disciplined persona offline. I feel expected to be the 'academic expert' at all times, which can feel like a performance..." Annie added a similar thought. She says, "Although I technically have the choice to deviate from these norms, the fear of disappointing my peers and the organization often makes these roles feel mandatory."*

#### *Ensuring Authenticity*

While carrying out their leadership responsibilities in offline activities, student leaders maintain their authenticity on social media. This sub-theme includes (1) Preserving Integrity, (2) Maintaining Consistency and (3) Expressing Individuality.

#### *Preserving Integrity*

Student leaders are able to adhere to personal and organizational values and principles in spite of the pressures they experience while engaging on social media. *Annie responded, "I rely on credible information as a basis for my leadership because I can only stand by social issues with verified reports to protect my organization's credibility and reputation." Arvin added another viewpoint regarding social media pressures, saying, "While I experienced the pressures, I always had the option to choose how to respond, and I intentionally made decisions that were compatible with my personal and organizational values and principles."*

#### *Maintaining Consistency*

Ensuring a leader's personal actions align entirely with the specific beliefs and values they publicly advocate for on digital platforms. *Lorence and Charles both stated their authenticity. Lorence expressed, "What you can see online is only the reflection of what we are behind the cameras. Having positive image helps us to make our organization more credible and worth to support." Charles added, "It makes me want to make sure my 'real life' actions match what I say I stand for on the internet."*

#### *Expressing Individuality*

Reflecting personal beliefs and values from online to offline while also fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. *Arvin, Charlie, and Josh shared a resembling point of view. Arvin stated, "As a student leader, acting on issues that align with my personal values ensures that I am*

*practicing responsible leadership, fostering meaningful change, and inspiring others to participate in meaningful initiatives.” Charlie noted, “Failing to act on the values I support online would diminish my credibility and make my advocacy feel hollow. Josh said, “As a student leader, your principles are going to have to be what you’re saying on the Internet. You cannot be one thing on the Internet and another thing here,” he said.*

### *Experiencing Constraints*

Challenges influenced the student leaders in terms of decision-making and participation in the online to offline activist movement. In this theme, the term experiencing constraints pertains to the challenges faced by the student leaders which affects their decision-making process and participation in online to offline activist movement. This includes the following sub-themes: (1) Facing Pressure and (2) Limiting Participation.

### *Facing Pressure*

Social media engagement influenced how student leaders responded to criticism, public expectations, and their responsibilities being associated. This sub-theme encompasses (1) Addressing Criticism, (2) Coping with dissatisfaction and (3) Challenging decisions.

### *Addressing Criticism*

Processing negative online public remarks regarding leadership style by recognizing that public approval varies, and choosing to focus on continuing ongoing duties without directly reacting to the comments. *Marc, Alvin, Claire, and Lorenz differed in their perspective on handling public criticism. Marc shared, “I do feel pressured sometimes due to image that I kind of like to protect, but I do think I have a choice to act on my own, I am not overly restrictive how activities and announcements are perceived, prompting me to adjust plans, improve communication, and ensure that initiatives are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of the community.” Claire noted, “Sometimes, people will be pleased with your work, and sometimes they will not. I take their criticisms positively if it is meant to improve our organization, otherwise I do not let it affect my decision.” Lorenz shared, “Taga-west facebook page is very famous in WVSU. I have received comments there regarding on how I handle the organization and somehow it made me feel less.” Managing internal feelings of guilt or disappointment when personal or structural barriers prevent a student leader from participating in offline actions. Charlie, Annie, and Claire had similar sentiments towards guilt and frustration associated with the limitations in taking action offline despite identifying a social issue. They differed in how they coped with the challenges. Charlie explained, “When the academic scope of my organization prevents me from taking formal action on a social issue, I feel a certain degree of “Moral dissonance” or frustration. This frustration is what makes me seek personal volunteer opportunities beyond my school leadership.” Similarly, Annie also felt restricted in her scope of action, “Encountering a social issue online while being unable to take offline action immediately results in feelings of guilt and frustration in me. However, I deal with these emotions by being strong in my mind and reminding myself that every little contribution digitally can create a great impact.” She also added, “I have indeed experienced the frustration of digitally supporting a social cause while not having the required resources or materials to take immediate offline action.” Claire also expressed the same emotions as Annie, “Yes, I also feel a sense of guilt when I am unable to attend to an advocacy that is close to my heart.”*

### *Overcoming Frustration*

Managing internal feelings of guilt or disappointment when personal or structural barriers prevent a student leader from participating in offline actions. *Charlie, Annie, and Claire had feelings of guilt and frustration when they were unable to take offline action due to a barrier, but handled it*

differently. Charlie responded, "When the academic scope of my organization prevents me from taking formal action on a social issue, I often feel a sense of "moral dissonance" or frustration. These emotions motivate me to seek personal volunteer opportunities outside of my school leadership role." Annie replied similarly, "When encountering a social issue on the internet, without the resources to take action offline, I feel guilty and frustrated. However, I handle this by adopting a growth mind-set, and reminding myself that spreading educational resources is still a valid contribution to a social issue." Claire said, "I have certainly encountered the frustration of advocating for a certain cause online while being unable to take action offline due to the lack of resources or materials..."

### *Questioning Decisions*

Engaging in internal evaluation to understand various perspectives or processing feelings of personal incompetence when online reactions oppose choice outcomes. Jed and Arvin shared contrasting perspectives on how they evaluate their actions and choices as student leaders. Jed shared, "I always had a choice but usually I asked for a second or third opinion if my choice is the right choice. Because in some circumstances, as a leader, we should compromise on some things to reach mutually acceptable actions." Arvin shared another perspective, reflecting on personal guilt and decision-making, "I felt a sense of guilt for not fully acting on my online support, as it made me question whether I was truly practicing the values I promoted." He also added, "... accurate and trustworthy information ensures that my decisions are responsible and well-informed."

### *Limiting Participation*

Student leaders engage carefully on social media and select meaningful interactions to avoid unnecessary conflict. This sub-theme includes (1) Engaging Carefully.

### *Engaging Carefully*

Careful social media engagement by choosing worth involving interactions to prevent conflicts. Arvin and Lorenz shared similar perspectives on the importance of setting boundaries in online engagement. Arvin shared, "The heightened online attention often reminds me to respond carefully and responsibly rather than react immediately. Instead of engaging directly in trending debates, especially those that may cause division, I focus offline on guiding members to stay aligned with our organization's mission..." Lorenz added, "Being a student leader is not always taking actions to everything because it is somehow draining and exhausting. Proving your worth as a student leader doesn't mean you should swim across all the oceans."

## **Discussion**

This study explored how the social media engagement of student leaders, specifically academic organization chairpersons, from a teachers' college shapes their online activism (Figure 1). Viewed through the lens of Kelman's Social Influence Theory, and investigated through narrative inquiry, this study exposes how social influence processes shape the translation of digital engagement into meaningful offline participation. As social media becomes increasingly integrated into the experiences of student leaders, they become active creators and sharers of content that shapes civic values, promotes advocacy, and encourages meaningful offline action. This analysis produced four (4) key themes which are (1) Mobilizing Activism, (2) Developing Leadership, (3) Managing Identity and (4) Experiencing Constraints.

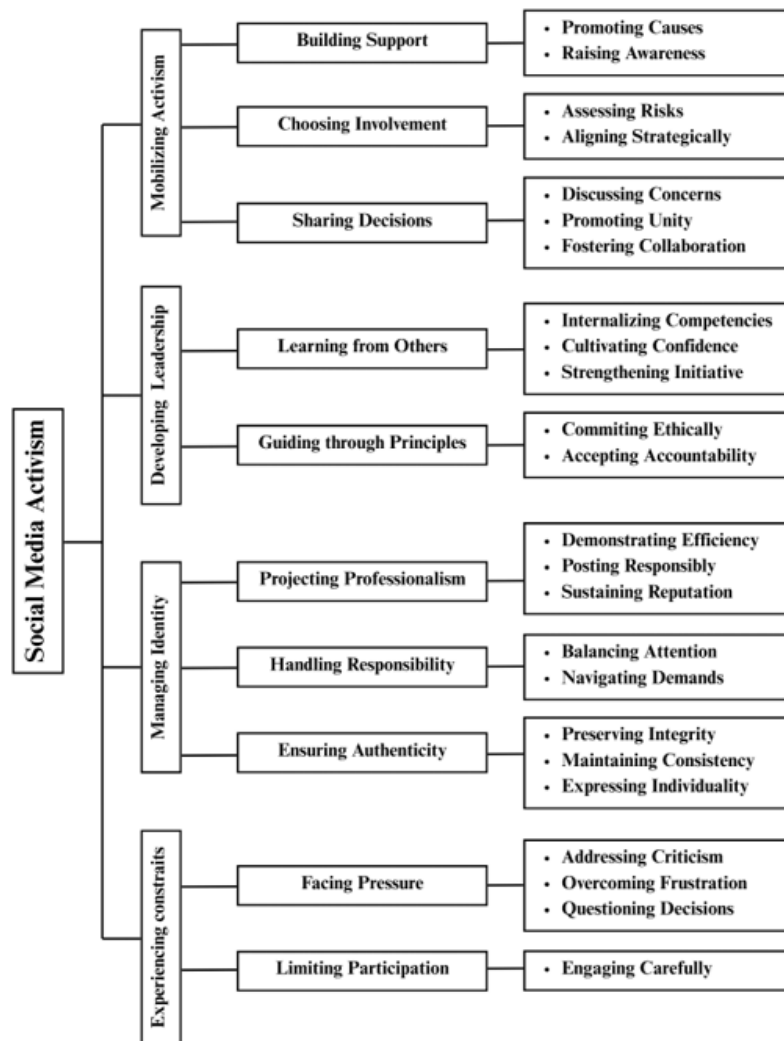


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes and their corresponding codes

In mobilizing activism, building support is very important by means of promoting causes. Parallel to the study of (Vasumathi et al., 2025), leaders feel a sense of responsibility to use their voice and their platform to uplift different causes that matter. Besides advocating, they also perceived awareness as a process of informing others and influencing people. In the same way, (Vasumathi et al., 2025) explains that student leaders use social media to advocate, realizing that it is vital to go beyond just digital space and influence others through intentional initiatives. In the same way, (Seelig et al., 2019b) explain that social media invites interactive advocacy where people influence each other. However, revealed that despite the wide reach of digital platforms in creating awareness, people are exposed to the risks of misinformation, indicating the need to ensure integrity and responsible sharing of information when advocating. Moreover, the results illustrated that the involvement in initiatives entailed considering the risks and benefits associated with participating in offline activism. It was established that the participants assessed the possible impact on their professional image, organizational reputation, and career before getting involved in activism to promote values that resonate with their interests and leadership. These results tie in with the findings of who revealed that people consider the implications of activism before participating in any campaign. In the same way, (Rye, 2024) found that. However, (Alexandro et al., 2022) argue that due to the virality of TikTok, people are easily lured into participating in activism trends without thinking of the impact. Unlike

with the TikTok trends, the students involved indicated caution and took a personal and strategic approach to activism.

Finally, it was observed that activism occurs when sharing decisions through discussion and collaboration as a way of coming to an agreement on matters that require action. It was through discussion and collaboration that the participants reached a consensus and ensured every voice was heard before taking action. In a similar manner, (Scott et al., 2022) found that youths use their online presence to collaborate offline and work together towards achieving common goals. Similarly, (Gopinathan et al., 2022) found that student leaders collaborated with each other to share and support mutual causes while also advocating. However, (Ferdiansyah et al., 2026) explains the absence of offline activism due to the inability of digital platforms to nurture activism as it creates divisions among people with different levels of access and skills. In contrast, the study found that student leaders in teacher's colleges have the ability to overcome these challenges and promote activism through collaboration and sharing of duties while also practicing their civic duties (Cammara et al., 2024).

### *Developing Leadership*

In developing leadership, participants strengthened their leadership capacities by learning from others, enabling them to internalize competencies, cultivate confidence, and strengthen initiative by observing experienced leaders, and reflecting on effective leadership practices shared through social media. These factors increased their confidence, initiative, and decision-making skills in online and offline advocacy. In this regard, the study of (Ligon et al., 2019) demonstrated that students' leadership emerges through continuous learning, mentorship, and peer relations. Additionally, the article by (Bauml et al., 2022) revealed that youth engagement in such resources provides them with opportunities to develop civic competence, confidence, and involvement in community activities. That social media contributes to leadership development by encouraging cooperation, knowledge exchange, and experience sharing among participants. Thus, combining the ideas presented in these articles, it is possible to conclude that the leadership of student leaders is progressing due to their exposure to various sources of information and role models. In addition to learning from others, committing to ethical practices and accepting accountability must be followed during online advocacy, participants demonstrated that guiding through principles plays a crucial role in developing leadership. They realized that responsible leadership means making informed decisions, checking information before sharing it, and ensuring that what they say and do online is based on values they stand for. This is in line with (Milena Jovanovic & Ivana Stankovic, 2024) who stated that ethical involvement and media literacy are core elements of responsible digital citizenship. Similarly, (Shaholli, 2025) contended that civic involvement should be built on integrity, accountability, and demographic principles to encourage meaningful citizens' involvement. (Yadav et al., 2024) also emphasized the importance of verifying information to keep the public's trust and credibility in the digital advocacy. The results showed that participants considered ethical leadership as both an individual responsibility and as a prerequisite to maintaining a credible, principled and responsible civic management.

### *Managing Identity*

In managing identity, projecting professionalism is achieved by demonstrating efficiency, posting responsibly, and sustaining reputation. Participants highlighted the need to present themselves professionally to the audience through proper communication and sharing of responsible information. They saw the need to protect their professional image and reputation as young leaders to promote their organization's interest. The same view was shared by (Sacavém et al., 2025), who noted that youth leaders engage in managing their online identity as their online reputation influences their leadership efficacy as advocates. Also reported similar findings, which show that social media

encourages youth to post responsible information while presenting themselves as professionals to the target audience. From both views, it is evident that youth leaders must uphold professional behavior when presenting themselves on social media to gain public trust. However, that youth leaders' online reputation is compromised due to their lack of responsibility in sharing information online. Different from this view, participants emphasized on being responsible and using appropriate language when communicating as a way of maintaining a good reputation to promote organizational objectives (Motsamai & Onyenakeya, 2025); (Etherington, 2026).

Another important aspect of managing identity is handling visibility through balancing attention and navigating demands. It was found that participants associated visibility with attaining more followers and influencing their audience. However, some youth leaders feared that increased visibility on social media would expose them to greater responsibilities because of the public's expectations (Engel et al., 2024). While social media increases youth leaders' visibility, it also negatively challenges their civic engagement due to the audience's expectations. In contrast, that social media platforms foster visibility, which enhances the leaders' ability to influence their audiences; thus, requiring youth leaders to be responsible in their public appearances. It is therefore expected that while visibility increases leaders' ability to encourage more people to follow their leadership journey, it also exposes them to more responsibilities brought about by the audience's expectations. Contrary to these that social media algorithms make youth leaders advance their popularity agenda instead of focusing on advocacy. To counter this finding, participants noted that their visibility agenda was achieved by focusing on advocacy to promote their community's interest rather than self-promotion.

In addition to professionalism and visibility, participants emphasized ensuring authenticity through preserving integrity, maintaining consistency, and expressing individuality. They felt that authenticity is achieved by ensuring congruence between their public and private life while doing advocacy work. Similarly, that authentic leadership encourages youth leaders to promote civic participation while upholding integrity in their public appearance. That social media encourages individuals to develop their identity by advocating for various issues affecting the community through responsible sharing of information. It is therefore crucial to uphold authenticity when posting information on social media as a way of promoting integrity and self-approval. (Schradi, 2018) argued that authenticity encourages youth leaders to participate in digital activism, whose agenda revolves around attaining popularity by advocating for issues affecting their community. However, participants emphasized on congruence between their public and private life as a way of promoting integrity and avoiding artificiality in problem-solving (Nor et al., 2025); (Hu et al., 2024).

### *Experiencing Constraints*

In experiencing constraints, facing pressure is reflected through addressing criticism, overcoming frustration, and questioning decisions. The participants responded to criticism, differing viewpoints, and the expectations of others as they engaged in online-to-offline activism. Instead of demoralizing them, these challenges triggered critical thinking, improved judgment, and strengthened their will as student leaders. This is in line with the findings of (Xinyue, 2023), who noted that social media is a double-edged sword that enables people to participate in civic life while also exposing them to criticism and pressure. Activist leaders should therefore have a sense of responsibility for making good judgments when reacting to criticism and negative feedback from the public as expounded. Digital-savvy leaders' reliance on intuition in taking action are also related to the current results. The researchers argued that in the short-term, activists are likely to act hastily in response to criticism because of the fast feedback they get on social media. However, the participants acknowledged harsh feedback and used it to improve their leadership capabilities instead of deterring them from pursuing their activist roles (Weiger et al., 2026).

In addition to experiencing censure, the participants identified the limitation of using social media as a tool for advocating civic causes by exercising caution in contributing to discussions. They reported testing the veracity of the information before sharing and considered the consequences of their actions as future teachers. These results are consistent with the, who argued that individuals are more likely to invest their effort in promoting offline civic causes after they have been exposed to deliberative discussions about social issues (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021); (Lee & Abidin, 2023). That participants were more likely to engage in responsible digital activism after they had evaluated issues and the possible effects of their contributions. The results therefore show that participants used caution as a strategy to promote their leadership potential while preventing their activist activities from overriding their moral agency. In contrast, that social media's accessibility increases the likelihood of participating in civic activities due to its ability to reduce barriers to entry. The current results show that although the accessibility of social media lowers barriers to civic participation, student activists are more likely to exercise caution and self-control to maintain their morality as future teachers in the community.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides empirical evidence that social media engagement has a positive contribution to the online to offline activism of student leaders. It was achieved through mobilizing activism, sustaining leadership and maintaining credibility of the student leaders. Through online activism, the leaders were able to make responsible decisions and collaborate with others to actualize their ideas offline. Besides the study establishing the effectiveness of using social media for activism, it also proves that activism requires conscious thought to be effective. The findings support Kelman's theory by showing how social media can enhance the values, attitudes and behaviors of student leaders. The study highlights the engagement of social media by student leaders as a way of maintaining leadership and responsibility towards their communities. However, the study has various limitations including only using student leaders from one teacher's education university and relying on them to provide information about their behavior and actions. A different sample population should be used in such studies to make the results more generalizable. The study should also be done in different institutions to establish its effectiveness in various settings. Future research could explore the role of social media in activism and leadership of student leaders. It can also be done among different groups of students following up with them after the initial study to find more information.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## **Author contributions**

R. B. B. Conceptualization Investigation; Validation; Writing - Original Draft. C. E. T: Visualization, Investigation; Validation; Writing - Original Draft. P. B. T. T.: Resources; Data Curation: Validation; Investigation; Writing - Original Draft. J. E. P: Research Guidance and Mentoring; Supervision; Formal Analysis. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Grammarly to improve language clarity, refine grammar, and assist in drafting the Acknowledgements section. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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