

From Social Media Usage to Collective Action: A Cognitive-Behavioral Model in Controversial Issues

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Abstract

In the context of controversial public issues, social media has become a key channel for shaping civic engagement and mobilizing collective action. Drawing on Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) and Social Capital Theory, this study investigates how individual-level cognitive perceptions—such as problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, and social media self-efficacy—predict willingness to participate in collective action. The model also examines the roles of interpersonal injustice as potential explanatory mechanisms. Using a time-lagged survey design, data were collected from 423 respondents in Guangdong province, China. The findings demonstrate that social media self-efficacy, problem recognition, constraint and involvement recognition positively influence collective action intentions. Interpersonal injustice further contribute to the model, with the latter showing a significant association with decreased willingness to act. The study highlights how social media engagement in controversial contexts can activate participatory behaviors through cognitive and perceptual pathways. These findings offer practical implications for public communication strategies, digital platform governance, and issue-based mobilization efforts.

Keywords: Social Media Usage, Interpersonal Injustice, Willingness to participate in collective action, Situational Theory of Problem Solving, Social Capital Theory

Introduction

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a powerful space for individuals to interpret, express, and respond to controversial societal issues. Over the last decade, social media has significantly influenced the way individuals interact with information, perceive societal issues, and engage in collective action. Particularly in emotionally charged or politically sensitive environments, users are increasingly confronted with the question of whether, how, and to what extent they should respond online. While its rapid information dissemination offers benefits, excessive reliance on online interaction may lead to the deterioration of face-to-face communication skills, reduced sensitivity to non-verbal cues, and greater exposure to misinformation (Lutz *et al.*, 2022; Yu *et al.*, 2018; Stronge *et al.*, 2019). These dynamics can affect individual decision-making and collective behavior, especially in contentious social contexts (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Asibong *et al.*, 2020).

This study is motivated by the observation that, despite the widespread use of social media for public issue engagement, many users remain passive or overwhelmed when faced with complex and emotionally intense situations online. Although prior research has examined the role of social media in domains such as advertising, brand performance, and public relations (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017; Reisach, 2021), there remains a notable gap in understanding how individuals use social media to engage with controversial social issues. In particular, it is unclear how cognitive processes—such as recognizing a problem, evaluating constraints, feeling involved, and believing in one’s ability to influence change—translate into online social actions that ultimately affect collective behavior. Moreover, while digital platforms have enabled new forms of activism, often referred to as social media activism, the mechanisms by which users move from passive information consumption to active participation remain underexplored (Sheldon & Titova, 2023; Liu & Ma, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to explore the cognitive and motivational factors that explain why some individuals engage actively in issue-related discussions and actions on social media, while others remain disengaged. It seeks to bridge the gap between psychological readiness and behavioral participation in controversial contexts, using an integrated theoretical approach.

To address this research gap, this study applies the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) and Social Capital Theory to develop a conceptual model explaining how individuals' engagement with social media in controversial contexts influences their willingness to participate in collective action. The study investigates four key cognitive variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, and social media self-efficacy, which are hypothesized to influence social media activities, ultimately shaping collective action intentions. Additionally, the study introduces interpersonal injustice as a moderating variable that may amplify or diminish the impact of social media activities on action-related outcomes.

Guided by the theoretical framework, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does social media usage influence willingness to participate in collective action?
2. Does interpersonal injustice moderates between social media activities and willingness to participate in collective action?

This paper offers several noteworthy contributions. Firstly, it supplements the existing body of literature by examining how social media usage influences individuals' willingness to participate in collective action through cognitive pathways such as problem recognition, involvement recognition, constraint recognition, and social media self-efficacy. Secondly, it addresses a theoretical limitation in STOPS by introducing social media efficacy as a key enabling condition in the digital environment. It further extends and validates the situational theory of problem-solving and social capital theory by integrating them into a unified framework that explains how individuals move from information processing to behavioral intentions in the context of controversial issues. In addition, the study offers practical implications for public relations and communication management by providing insights into how individuals perceive and respond to public issues on digital platforms. Understanding these perceptual and motivational processes can help organizations and institutions better respond to public sentiment, guide issue-based engagement, and manage social controversies more effectively. Lastly, by employing a time-lagged survey design among residents in Guangdong, China, this study addresses a contextual gap in digital civic engagement research, especially in rapidly developing regions, thereby enhancing the generalizability and relevance of its findings.

Literature Review & Theoretical Development

Situational Theory of Problem Solving and Social Capital Theory

The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), developed by Kim and Grunig (2011), extends the earlier Situational Theory of Publics by emphasizing how individuals cognitively and behaviorally engage with problems in a social context. This theory focuses on the conditions under which individuals become motivated to seek, select, and process information to address issues they perceive as personally relevant. STOPS posits that three key perceptual factors—problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition—jointly determine the extent to which individuals move from passive awareness to active communication and problem-solving behaviors (Kim & Krishna, 2014). While originally applied to topics such as psychological adjustment, peace education, and quality of life (Lee *et al.*, 2014), the theory has growing relevance in the digital age, particularly in understanding how people engage with controversial issues on social media platforms. In this study, STOPS is utilized to explain how these cognitive evaluations, together with social media self-efficacy, influence individuals' willingness to participate in collective action related to contentious public debates online.

Social Capital Theory, originally introduced by Lyda Hanifan in 1916 and later developed by scholars such as Lin (2017), offers a foundational lens for understanding how individuals derive value from their social networks. The theory emphasizes that relationships and connections within a community can provide access to resources such as information, trust, and cooperation, which in turn facilitate coordinated actions and collective outcomes (Carmichael *et al.*, 2015). Traditionally applied in fields like sociology, economics, and political science, social capital theory has gained renewed relevance in the digital era, particularly in examining how online interactions foster civic participation and collective engagement (Chang & Hsu, 2016; Sheikh *et al.*, 2019). In the context of controversial public issues, social media platforms serve as critical spaces for forming and activating social capital—both bonding (within similar groups) and bridging (across diverse communities). This study applies social capital theory to explain how users' engagement in social media activities can catalyze

collective action intentions by leveraging the strength of online relational ties and shared concerns. Understanding this process provides valuable insight into how digital networks mobilize support, amplify voices, and shape public opinion in contentious environments (Huang *et al.*, 2021; Workman, 2019).

Integrated Model of Social Media Usage

This study introduces a comprehensive framework for understanding social media usage, encompassing factors individuals encounter when navigating contentious issues. The integrated model of social media comprises elements such as social media self-efficacy, problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition. In order to integrate these factors, the model aims to elucidate the motivations driving individuals to engage in media activities through social media platforms.

Firstly, social media self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks required for online learning and engagement in social networking sites (Ruggieri *et al.*, 2023). This concept, proposed by psychologist Albert Bandura, builds on self-efficacy and refers to an individual's ability to effectively utilize social media platforms (Pekkala *et al.*, 2022). For instance, in terms of creating and curating content, managing content, and interacting online. It touches on all aspects of modern life, further enhancing an individual's ability to control the media and reduce the stress and anxiety of interacting with online platforms (Boursier *et al.*, 2020). Problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition are three key concepts used to explain human behavior (Kim & Grunig, 2011). They provide an important basis for how individuals recognize problems, deal with constraints, and gather stakeholders. Problem recognition refers to a situation in which an individual perceives the absence of certain factors that can be taken into immediate action (Mariani *et al.*, 2020). It is the gap between the current state and the expected state, marking the beginning of the entire problem-solving process and contributing to the development of the individual and the organization. Constraint recognition involves the obstacles and limitations encountered in problem-solving, potentially reducing the ability to solve problems (Kim, 2006). This factor allows individuals and organizations to clarify the feasibility of a solution, assists in the efficient allocation of resources, and prevents unrealistic expectations. Involvement recognition refers to the degree to which a problem is perceived to be related to oneself (Kim, 2006). It is a judgment of whether an individual or organization takes the problem as its own responsibility (Kim *et al.*, 2010). It promotes ownership and commitment towards the solution, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful implementation (Kim & Grunig, 2011). These four concepts are interrelated and influential, forming a cohesive framework that guides individuals or organizations in making decisions about problems.

Willingness to Participate in Collective Action

It refers to an individual's readiness or intention to join others in pursuing shared objectives related to social, political, or environmental issues. It is shaped by perceived injustice, identity alignment, and perceived collective efficacy (Sabucedo *et al.*, 2020). In today's digital age, social media and algorithmic amplification increasingly influence individuals' motivation to participate (Schumann & Klein, 2022). Recent studies highlight that emotional responses, such as anger or moral outrage, can significantly increase participation willingness, especially among younger generations and marginalized communities (Kende *et al.*, 2021). In environmental activism, willingness to act collectively has been found to correlate strongly

with climate concern and pro-environmental values (Bamberg *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, trust in institutions and group-based moral obligation also determine the degree to which individuals perceive collective action as effective (Félonneau *et al.*, 2023). From a broader societal lens, willingness to participate in collective action is a key driver of democratic engagement and societal resilience, especially during times of social crisis or political unrest. Understanding this construct is thus essential for mobilizing public efforts and shaping inclusive policy interventions.

Hypothesis Development

Integrated Model of Social Media Usage and Willingness to Participate in Collective Action

In this study, the integrated model of social media usage comprises four components: social media self-efficacy, problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition.

According to the situational theory of problem-solving, there is an emphasis on the influence of individual factors in responding to public or collective issues, offering a relevant framework for studying willingness to participate in collective action, which refers to individuals' intentions and motivations to engage in group-based efforts to address social concerns (Sabucedo *et al.*, 2020). The integrated model highlights how situational factors affect participatory behaviors in digital environments (Stronge *et al.*, 2019). Social media self-efficacy, for example, plays a crucial role in encouraging individuals to contribute to collective discourse and mobilization. Individuals who feel confident in their online communication skills are more likely to speak up, organize, or join collective movements, especially when facing social injustice or environmental threats (Schumann & Klein, 2022).

In the context of social media, individual willingness to participate in collective action is shaped by the interaction of four key factors: social media self-efficacy, problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition. First, **social media self-efficacy**—the belief in one's capability to effectively use social media platforms (Stronge *et al.*, 2019)—enhances individuals' confidence in expressing opinions, organizing, and mobilizing others. When individuals perceive themselves as competent users of digital tools, they are more likely to engage in activism and participatory behaviors online (Schumann & Klein, 2022). This sense of competence lowers the perceived cost of participation and facilitates digital collective engagement. Second, **problem recognition**, which refers to the awareness that a social issue exists and requires resolution (Kende *et al.*, 2021), is a fundamental trigger for collective action. When individuals acknowledge a problem as significant and unresolved, their psychological readiness to participate in collective efforts increases. This recognition activates concern, moral responsibility, and the perceived necessity of action. Third, **constraint recognition** reflects the perception of obstacles that might impede participation (Félonneau *et al.*, 2023). Although traditionally viewed as a barrier, acknowledging such constraints can sometimes intensify the drive to participate—particularly when these constraints are perceived as unjust or suppressive. In such cases, individuals may develop a stronger moral resolve and collective urgency to act against the perceived limitations. Finally, **involvement recognition**, defined as the extent to which individuals feel personally affected or emotionally connected to a social issue (Bamberg *et al.*, 2020), significantly influences their willingness to act. This perceived relevance enhances emotional investment and a sense of moral obligation,

making individuals more likely to transition from passive observers to active participants in collective efforts.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis (H1a): Social media self-efficacy negatively influences Willingness to participate in collective action.

Hypothesis (H1b): Problem recognition positively influences Willingness to participate in collective action.

Hypothesis (H1c): Constraint recognition positively influences Willingness to participate in collective action.

Hypothesis (H1d): Involvement recognition positively influences Willingness to participate in collective action.

Moderating Role of Interpersonal Injustice

Interpersonal injustice refers to the perception or experience of unfair treatment, disrespect, or mistreatment in interpersonal relationships. It involves a subjective sense that one has been treated improperly, often violating principles of fairness, equity, or social norms within the context of personal interactions (Ferris *et al.*, 2010). Interpersonal injustice can manifest in various forms, including discrimination, prejudice, bullying, harassment, or exclusion (Skarlicki *et al.*, 2008). The research on interpersonal injustice in the context of social media activities explores how individuals perceive and experience unfair treatment, disrespect, or mistreatment within online interactions. The digital perspective introduces unique challenges, as individuals engage in virtual relationships and communication.

Rather than discouraging action, interpersonal injustice may serve as a **catalyst for collective engagement**. Individuals who perceive that they or their communities are being mistreated are more likely to experience anger, moral outrage, or a desire for social change, which in turn increases their **willingness to participate in collective action** (Kende *et al.*, 2021). From this perspective, injustice becomes a motivator rather than a deterrent: it sharpens awareness of systemic or interpersonal inequities and enhances perceived legitimacy and urgency of mobilization.

In the context of social media, where public opinion and personal identity frequently intersect, the perception of injustice can intensify the emotional salience of an issue. When individuals already recognize a problem and feel personally involved, **interpersonal injustice can amplify the emotional drive and moral justification needed to take collective action** (Sabucedo *et al.*, 2020). Rather than feeling powerless, those who perceive mistreatment may be more likely to speak out, join protests, or support advocacy efforts to restore fairness and dignity (Yeo, 2020). This reflects a reactive mobilization mechanism, where experiences of unfairness increase the psychological pressure to act. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis (H2): Interpersonal injustice positively moderate the relationship between Social media usage and Willingness to participate in collective action.

Research Framework

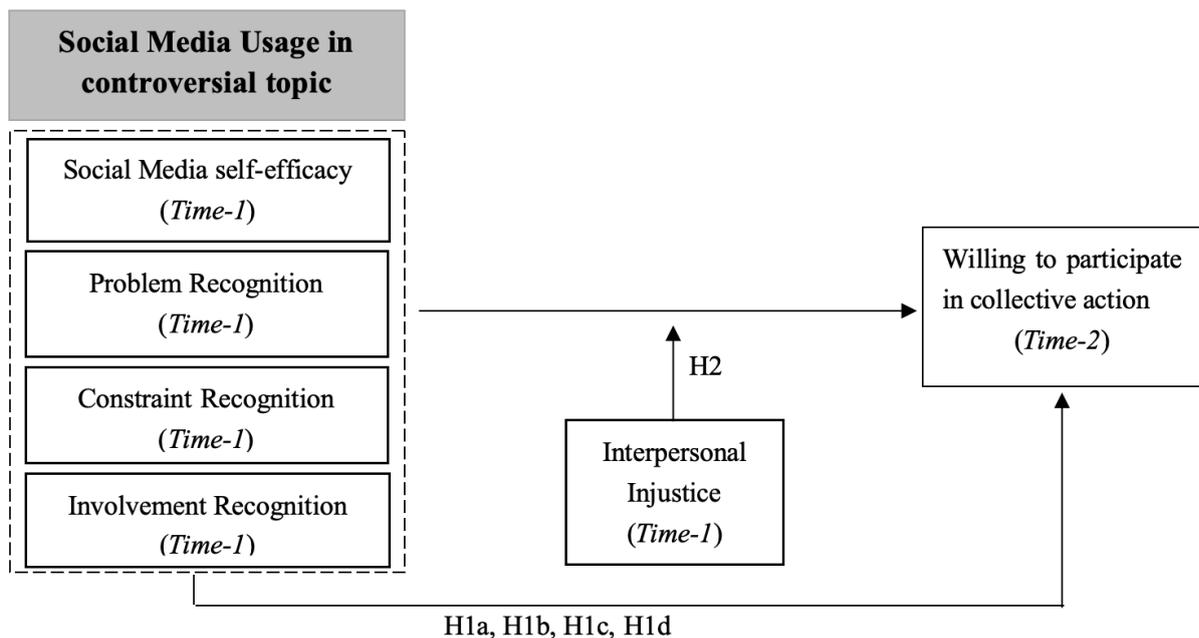


figure 1

Material and Methods

This research draws upon data collected from internet users located in Guangdong, China. Utilizing a non-probability convenience sampling technique, the study adopts the survey questionnaire method to elicit responses from individuals actively participating in social media. The current study aims to comprehensively understand the varied perspectives and experiences of the local population concerning their patterns of social media usage and its potential implications on willingness to participate in collective action. The choice of Guangdong as the research setting is deliberate, enabling an exploration of the dynamic and swiftly evolving digital landscape within a prominent Chinese city. This decision provides valuable insights into the subtleties of social media practices within the unique cultural and urban context of Guangdong. In Table 4.1, in this demographic profile, we observe a diverse mix of individuals. A total of 790 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 423 were completed, resulting in a response rate of 53.5%. The gender distribution skews towards both males and females, with females making up 61.7% of the population, while males constitute 38.3%. The age groups are diverse, spanning and divided into four categories: 20-29 with 35%, 30-39 at 28.4%, 40-49 at 22.5%, and 50-59 years at 14.2%. Education levels among this demographic vary, including those with a high school diploma at 47.3%, a bachelor's degree at 34.3%, and a master or Ph.D degree at 18.4%. In terms of marital status, individuals are also categorized as single, married, or divorced, with response rates of 30.0%, 30.3%, and 39.7%, respectively. Social media usage shows a broad range, with segments of the population spending less than 1 hour at 14.9%, 1 to 3 hours at 31.9%, 3 to 5 hours at 27.7%, 5 to 8 hours at 21.5%, and more than 8 hours per day at 4.0%, allocating their time on various digital platforms.

Measure

In the present study, a comprehensive examination of individuals' social media use was conducted using a 7-point Likert scale. To measure various constructs, the research was based on established instruments from previous studies, ensuring the validity and reliability of the measurements. The scale for three items of social media self-efficacy was adopted from (Hoffmann & Lutz, 2019), four items of problem recognition were adopted (Chen *et al.*, 2016), four items of constraint recognition were adopted from (Chen *et al.*, 2016), four items of involvement recognition of participation from (Chen *et al.*, 2016), eight items of interpersonal injustice were adopted from (Ho and Gupta, 2012), and five items from Willingness to participate in collective action was adopted from (Veenstra & Haslam, 2000).

Table 4.1

Demographic Profile

Description of N=466	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	162	38.3
Female	261	61.7
Age		
20-29	148	35
30-39	120	28.4
40-49	95	22.5
50-59	60	14.2
Education Level		
High School	200	47.3
Bachelor	145	34.3
Master/Ph.D.	78	18.4
Material Status		
Single	127	30.0
Married	128	30.3
Divisor	168	39.7
Social Media Usage Per Day		
Less than 1 hours	63	14.9
1-3 hours	135	31.9
3-5 hours	117	27.7
5-8 hours	91	21.5
More than 8 hours	17	4.0
Total	423	100.0 %

Within Table 4.2, the importance of measurement models in guaranteeing precision and reliability of constructs is underscored, employing three fundamental tools: Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and Cronbach's Alpha. AVE gauges the extent to which a construct accounts for variance in its indicators, seeking a value surpassing 0.5 with significance. CR evaluates the overall reliability of a construct, with values exceeding 0.7 indicative of robust internal consistency. Simultaneously, Cronbach's Alpha, a traditional metric for reliability assessment, seeks values above 0.7 to affirm construct reliability. This trio of metrics collaboratively offers a comprehensive evaluation of a construct's validity and reliability, ensuring the integrity of research outcomes. Consequently, in Table 4.2, the Average Variance Extracted for each item falls within the range of 0.674 to 0.852, aligning with the established criteria (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, Cronbach's Alpha values

range from 0.848 to 0.943, meeting the prescribed criteria (Hair *et al.*, 2011), while the CR of each item spans from 0.925 to 0.977.

Table 4.2

Results of Measurement Model

Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
SMSE 1	0.853***	0.921	0.945	0.851
SMSE 2	0.941***			
SMSE 3	0.969***			
PR 1	0.973***	0.913	0.958	0.852
PR 2	0.939***			
PR 3	0.876***			
PR 4	0.901***			
CR 1	0.863***	0.897	0.927	0.761
CR 2	0.859***			
CR 3	0.877***			
CR 4	0.891***			
IR 1	0.837***	0.848	0.925	0.755
IR 2	0.898***			
IR 3	0.917***			
IR 4	0.819***			
II 1	0.827***	0.943	0.953	0.716
II 2	0.841***			
II 3	0.851***			
II 4	0.769***			
II 5	0.860***			
II 6	0.861***			
II 7	0.831***			
II 8	0.921***			
WPCA 1	0.781***	0.927	0.977	0.674
WPCA 2	0.857***			
WPCA 3	0.848***			
WPCA 4	0.721***			
WPCA 5	0.877***			

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0$

Test of Direct Effects

Table 4.3 illustrates the findings of willingness to participate in collective action. It reveals a relationship between social media efficacy and willingness to participate in collective action ($\beta = 0.025$, $p < 0.001$), showing that the H1a was supported and have a negative result. Additionally, H1b and H1c are substantiated as positive relationship to identified between problem recognition and psychological distress, as well as constraint distress and psychological distress ($\beta = 0.353$, $p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.310$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the positive relationship between involvement recognition and psychological distress is confirmed ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, all the hypothesis for social media usage to willingness to participate in collective action are accept.

Table 4.3

Direct effects

Hypothesis		Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
H1a	SME -> WPCA	0.251	0.251	0.013	18.904	0.000
H1b	PR -> WPCA	0.353	0.353	0.017	20.275	0.000
H1c	CR -> WPCA	0.310	0.310	0.014	22.807	0.000
H1d	IR -> WPCA	0.323	0.323	0.015	21.067	0.000

Test of Moderation

As presented in figure 2, the interpersonal injustice showed a negatively significant moderating effect between social media usage and willingness to participate in collective action ($\beta = -0.229$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, the H2 was not supported. .

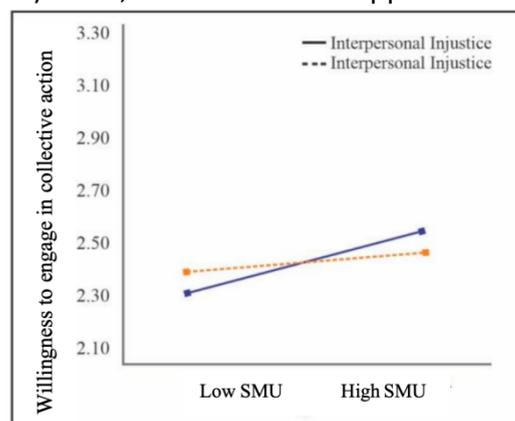


Figure 2

Discussion

Based on the situational theory of problem solving and social capital theory, the objective of this study is to examine the roles played by interpersonal injustice in shaping the relationship between social media usage and willingness to participate in collective action. The findings from the current study provide empirical support for the proposed research model. Hypothesis 1 confirms that social media usage positively influences individuals' willingness to engage in collective action, although the specific relationship between involvement recognition and participation intention was not statistically supported. These results underscore the importance of individuals' emotional engagement with public issues, their perceived self-efficacy in using social media, and the influence of ongoing events on participatory behaviors (Asibong *et al.*, 2020). According to the findings, individuals' recognition of social or controversial problems, their perceived involvement in such issues, and the perceived constraints they face in contributing to solutions all shape their inclination to take collective action. Moreover, social media serves as both a platform for information processing and emotional expression, enabling users to frame issues in personally meaningful ways, thereby fostering a stronger motivation to participate in collective efforts aimed at social change.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that interpersonal injustice would moderate the relationship between social media usage and willingness to participate in collective action. The results show a weakening effect—individuals who perceive higher levels of unfair treatment online are less likely to engage in collective action. This may be influenced by cultural factors, especially in collectivist societies where people tend to avoid open conflict and prioritize group harmony. In such settings, experiencing exclusion or disrespect can lead to emotional withdrawal and reduced motivation to act publicly. When social support is weak or the injustice comes from within one's own community, people may feel isolated and discouraged from participating. In addition, repeated exposure to subtle discrimination or incivility on social media can cause emotional fatigue. In cultures where expressing negative emotions is discouraged, this can build up internally and result in disengagement rather than action. These findings suggest that interpersonal injustice may suppress rather than stimulate collective participation, especially when shaped by cultural values and emotional norms.

Theoretical Implications

This study integrates the situational theory of problem solving and social capital theory to examine how individuals engage with controversial topics on social media and how such engagement shapes their willingness to participate in collective action. Situational theory explains how individuals perceive and respond to public issues based on factors such as problem recognition, involvement, and constraint, while social capital theory emphasizes the role of social networks in providing resources and support. By combining these frameworks, this study contributes to understanding how individuals' online communication behaviors are shaped by both situational triggers and their access to social support, particularly in collectivist contexts. Theoretically, the study advances STOPS by applying it beyond its traditional domains—such as marketing or health communication—to civic engagement. It also enriches social capital theory by illustrating how interpersonal injustice and perceived social exclusion may limit individuals' ability or willingness to mobilize, especially when social support is weak or cultural norms discourage confrontation. Additionally, by focusing on a general online user population in Guangdong rather than specific subgroups (e.g., youth or patients), the study enhances the generalizability of findings in the context of digital civic behavior. Overall, the research clarifies the psychological and cultural mechanisms that mediate collective action on social media, expands the application of existing theories, and provides a more inclusive view of user behavior in mass communication environments.

Practical Implications

This study provides several practical implications for individuals, organizations, and public administrators. First, individuals and organizations should adopt a more mindful and purposeful approach to social media engagement, especially when dealing with controversial issues. Users are encouraged to seek information from diverse sources rather than relying solely on social media feeds, which may reinforce polarized views. A more balanced information environment can support rational decision-making and foster civic participation based on informed judgment. Second, organizations—especially those involved in community affairs or public discourse—should strengthen their online credibility by engaging transparently and respectfully with audiences. Building digital trust and showing responsiveness to users' concerns can encourage constructive dialogue and reduce disengagement caused by perceived interpersonal injustice. Third, public administration managers should recognize the influence of social media on public mobilization and civic

engagement. Monitoring public sentiment online, addressing user grievances fairly, and intervening in cases of exclusion or harassment can help create a more inclusive and supportive online environment. This is particularly important in collectivist societies, where interpersonal trust and group harmony play a critical role in shaping willingness to participate in collective efforts. By promoting fairness, trust, and emotional safety in digital spaces, stakeholders can foster more sustainable online communities and enhance individuals' capacity to contribute meaningfully to collective actions and civic development.

Conclusions

This study employed the situational theory of problem solving and social capital theory to explore how social media usage influences individuals' willingness to participate in collective action. The model incorporated interpersonal injustice as a moderator. The findings demonstrate that higher levels of social media usage lead to increased engagement in collective action. However, the results also indicate that interpersonal injustice weakens this positive relationship. Individuals who perceive exclusion or unfair treatment in online spaces may be less likely to engage in collective behavior, especially within collectivist cultural contexts where maintaining harmony often outweighs open confrontation. This study, based on data from general internet users in Guangdong, China, provides valuable insight into how digital environments and interpersonal dynamics shape civic engagement.

Several directions are suggested for future research. First, while this study focused on controversial topics, future work should examine how different social media contexts—such as education, public health, or policy discussions—influence collective participation. Second, this research used a general sample; future studies may consider segmenting users by region, age, or profession to capture group-specific dynamics. Third, given the limited geographic focus on Guangdong, expanding studies to different regions or cultural contexts would enhance generalizability. Finally, tailoring theoretical models to specific populations can further refine the practical relevance of social media research and deepen our understanding of what drives collective action in digital spaces.

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