



# Engagement across three social media platforms: An exploratory study of a cause-related PR campaign



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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzed a social media campaign promoting child welfare to explore the associations among people's social media use, their engagement with different social media platforms (blog, Facebook page, Twitter account), and three intended behavioral outcomes (social media behavior, offline communication behavior, and helping behavior). An online survey of 73 participants shows that people's use of each social media platform was significantly related to their engagement with it at a bivariate level (when the other control variables were not considered). Social media use was also related to all three behavioral outcomes. Additionally, users' engagement played a significant mediating role in the relationship between their social media use and their offline communication behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

For nonprofit organizations and advocates of social causes, social media promise new opportunities for mobilizing social movements and transforming inactive segments of the public into either the aware or active type of public identified by Grunig (1978). However, researchers have only begun to investigate how effectively social media can promote an organization's goals, and whether different social media platforms might do better or worse jobs of achieving them. The current study explores this issue by examining the relationships among the following variables: people's use of a cause-related campaign's three social media platforms; their engagement with each platform; and the campaign's intended behavioral outcomes. A key assumption informing this study is that campaign messages are more likely to be effective if they appear in media vehicles with which people are highly engaged. To test this assumption, we analyzed responses to a survey about a cause-related social media campaign.

The campaign was called Every Child Is Yours, and its featured cause was child welfare and advocacy. It appeared on three social media platforms: a blog, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account. Both the campaign and this study were organized with the financial support, and under the auspices of, the Children's Trust Fund of Michigan, which is the sole statewide child maltreatment prevention agency and state affiliate of the national organization Prevent Child Abuse America. The funding agency approved the study as one of a number of activities in which it would be engaged to generate public support for programs to prevent child abuse.

The campaign had two primary purposes: to mobilize and to educate. The mobilization purpose was guided by the assumption that an organization could more effectively educate a local community about a social cause by getting its

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citizens to take a related social action. The three social media platforms were therefore used to connect potential volunteers with a variety of established child- and family-related voluntary organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, Big Sisters and Big Brothers, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and others. These organizations support the causes of child welfare and child abuse prevention to the extent that they all perform activities that are intended to reduce stress in the lives of the community's families and children.

The campaign's related educational purpose was to raise consciousness about the severe and widespread social consequences of stress experienced in childhood, and the wealth of recent research that has documented these consequences. On the same social media channels where volunteer activity was encouraged, one of the current study's authors provided a steady stream of educational material. Generated mostly by the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), this material focused on the significant negative effects that childhood stress, otherwise known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), has on adult psychological and physical health. Research on ACEs consists of more than 60 medical studies that have connected the maltreatment of children with subsequent adult emotional and physical health problems.

To establish context for the study that emerged from this campaign, the next section reviews the current state of knowledge in public relations research on the following topics: the purposes for which public relations practitioners have used social media; the need for more research specifically on the effects of social media public relations campaigns; and the role that engagement with a social media platform might play in achieving these effects. Based on the theoretical and empirical arguments developed in the literature review, two hypotheses and a research question are generated about the relations among people's use of social media platforms, their engagement with them, and the behavioral outcomes of a social media campaign.

## 2. Literature review

Several studies document how companies, nonprofit organizations, activists, and practitioners have been using social media for a variety of public relations purposes (e.g., [Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008](#); [Men & Tsai, 2012](#); [Wright & Hinson, 2012](#)). Specifically for nonprofit organizations, these purposes include volunteer recruiting ([Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011](#); [Yeon, Choi, & Kioussis, 2005](#)), fundraising ([Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009](#); [Smitko, 2012](#)), media relations ([Reber & Kim, 2006](#); [Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010](#)), and stakeholder relationship management ([Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009](#)). Nevertheless, other studies suggest that practitioners are not taking full advantage of the interactive and dialogic capabilities afforded by new media platforms such as websites ([Jun, 2011](#); [Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012](#)), blogs ([Kent, 2008](#); [Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009](#)), Twitter ([Waters & Jamal, 2011](#)), and Facebook ([Waters et al., 2009](#)).

Notably, many of these studies focus on the production side of the social media campaign process—that is, on how practitioners and managers either perceive or use social media ([Briones et al., 2011](#); [Eyrich et al., 2008](#); [Porter et al., 2009](#); [Reber & Kim, 2006](#); [Sommerfeldt et al., 2012](#); [Waters et al., 2009](#); [Waters & Jamal, 2011](#); [Wright & Hinson, 2012](#)). Research is scarce, though, on the reception side of the process concerning the extent to which cause-related public relations efforts conducted on social media actually achieve their intended goals with target publics. [Sommerfeldt et al. \(2012\)](#) have called for studies that could show “how web metrics and analytics can make websites more useful to activist practitioners” (p. 310). The current study is an exploratory effort to answer that call in the context of a social media advocacy campaign promoting child welfare.

In research on people's media use and their degree of participation in public life, engagement has become a key concern ([Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010](#)). When strategic communicators design and manage a social media campaign, they need to consider the extent to which users will feel engaged by the websites and other vehicles and platforms that carry it. This assumption has been widely studied in research on strategic communication (e.g., [Bronner & Neijens, 2006](#)). According to a FedEx and Ketchum study on social media use in the business world, statistics show that practitioners are also increasingly concerned about what kinds of experiences people have and how engaged they feel when they use social media. About 80% of companies surveyed claim they are currently measuring their consumers' and publics' social media use, and 84% of those have focused on engagement ([FedEx/Ketchum, 2012](#)). Nevertheless, many business leaders continue to be frustrated with the difficulty of assessing public engagement and translating it into tangible benefits for their organizations ([Loechner, 2012](#)).

According to the advertising researchers [Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel \(2009\)](#), many studies of engagement neglect to define what it actually is. Either they conceive it as frequent use of a media platform (e.g., website, blog, social networking service), or they focus on the consequences of engagement rather than the nature of the phenomenon itself. To resolve this issue, [Calder et al. \(2009\)](#) define engagement as the *experiences* that people have in a media vehicle or platform—specifically, “a collection of experiences” that relate to “a consumer's beliefs about how a site fits into his/her life” (p. 322). They identified eight types of experience that consumers might have with advertising websites: stimulation and inspiration, social facilitation, temporal, self-esteem and civic-mindedness, intrinsic enjoyment, utilitarian, participation and socializing, and community. Of these, the four selected as most relevant to the current study's cause-related social media campaign were civic mindedness, utilitarian, social facilitation, and inspiration.

These media experiences are similar to the “gratifications” at the heart of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach to media research, which assumes that peoples' various uses and experiences of media determine how much their needs or wants are gratified (for an overview, see [Rubin, 2010](#)). Relying on this approach, the current study represents an early effort

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