

## Civic Life in the Digital Space of Pre-Service Teachers

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### Abstract

This research investigates the profile and perceptions of respondents towards widely accessible social media platforms to identify key considerations in transforming online engagement into actual civic action. Quantitative in design, the survey of the descriptive method of research is used adopting the developed questions for the study of the United Nations Development Programme on young activists in 2021 to assess the digital engagement of 118 pre-service teachers randomly selected through the multistage sampling method. Utilizing descriptive statistics, social media platforms providing greater opportunities for self-expression such as Facebook and Tiktok are found frequently used for creating and sharing content related to education, and health. Respondents concurred on widespread disinformation online and the complementary nature of civic engagement. Despite the manifested lack of trust and reservations due to the risk of data surveillance and breach, the respondents consider social media platforms as enabling venues for civic engagement. Corresponding policies and programs that institute gender-inclusive, safe, and participatory venues in both digital and traditional forms are necessary means for supporting the youth as key players in nation-building.

**Keywords:** Education, Sustainable development, Social media platform,  
Digital civic engagement, Digital literacy

## Introduction

Cognizant of the role of the youth in nation-building, universities worldwide are into advancing the civic mission of education. In the Philippines, higher education institutions are mandated by the Republic Act No. 9163 also known as the “National Service Training Program (NSTP)” to promote civic consciousness and enhance youth involvement in public and civic affairs. Whilst most studies concluded the effective implementation of civic education under the program, the challenge posed by the findings of Custodio et al. (2016) and Garingan (2021) in their research on sustaining commitment for civic participation of students beyond NSTP course completion and graduation gave impetus to this research.

Many studies revealed an increasing trend of civic disengagement among Filipino students after NSTP completion. The study by Garcia & Rizal (2017), found that only 30% of the respondents continued to participate in community service activities after completing the NSTP program. Similarly, Gavina & Miano (2019) found that only 25% of the respondents continued to engage in civic activities after the NSTP course completion. As most studies have revealed NSTP’s success in fostering students’ civic engagement during the program, the post-program participation of students was found to be relatively low in the study by Pangilinan & Loquias (2021). Several reasons were provided in explaining the declining trend in the civic engagement of students after completing the NSTP course. In 2016, Custodio cited limited access to information and resources as one of the barriers to civic engagement and highlighted the role of technology in providing opportunities for students to participate fully in civic life. Emphasized the absence of follow-up activities and support systems from stakeholders as a demotivating factor for students while Garingan (2021) pinpointed the limited opportunities for meaningful participation as barriers to student civic engagement. Confronted with this phenomenon of disengagement, finding ways and means to better support and sustain students’ civic engagement beyond civic education completion is considered a research gap this research aims to focus on.

As technology becomes intertwined with people’s lives, an evident shift in the way people engage civically has changed. In the study by Vromen et al. (2015), young people in Australia are found to be turning to digital media in engaging in civic and political affairs. Comparable to this, Kahne & Bowyer (2017) conducted a study involving youth in the United States. As found, they primarily use digital media in expressing their views on many socio-political issues affecting the country. In the Philippines, more than half of Filipino youth are accessing social media platforms and engaging in politics through their smartphones according to the Social Weather Stations. The increasing number of internet users who are actively engaging civically in the digital realm only proves the potential of digital media as a tool for promoting civic engagement among the youth sector.

Premised on the potential of digital technology in empowering and mobilizing the youth for civic engagement and social activism, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducted a study in 2021 to explore the digital engagement of young activists in Europe and Central Asia. One significant finding of the study revealed that young activists consider the digital realm as positively enabling them for civic engagement. Similarly, this research aims to study the ways pre-service teachers use digital tools and platforms to participate in civic activities. By studying how this sector engages digitally, stakeholders may gain a better understanding of how students engage with issues that matter to them, and identify key considerations for leveraging digital technology as a tool to facilitate, support, and sustain students’ engagement in civic affairs.

Specifically, this research focused on the following objectives; -

1. Profile the respondents by gender as online users.
2. Ascertain the perceptions of the respondents by gender towards the digital realm as a tool for civic engagement.
3. Assess the perceived benefits and barriers to civic participation online of respondents.
4. Determine significant differences by gender according to; -
  - 4.1 perceptions towards the digital realm as a tool for civic engagement
  - 4.2 perceived benefits and barriers to civic participation online.

## Methodology

Conceived to ascertain the profile of respondents as online users and their perceptions of the digital space as to opportunities and barriers in civic engagement, this investigation utilized the descriptive method of research. Quantitative in nature, the researcher sought permission from the Dean of the College of Teacher Education of which the researcher is a faculty of many years to conduct the study. Administration of the survey questionnaire to the target representative sample of students from the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) program in the College of Teacher Education of the university proceeded thereafter. During administration, student participants are ensured that all information in the questionnaire is exclusively for the study only and would be handled with the utmost confidentiality.

For this research, the survey questionnaire used by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) team in their study in 2021 on the digital civic participation of youth in Europe and Central Asia was utilized. Permission for the utilization of the instrument was granted via email from the Regional Communications Specialist of UNDP. Sharing similar objectives of examining the extent to which young people engage in digital civic activities and identifying barriers and opportunities they face; this research differs in involving teacher education students specializing in Social Studies and differentiating respondents by gender.

### Research Sample/Participants

The respondents of the study were delimited to teacher education students majoring in Social Studies enrolled during the First Semester of the Academic Year 2022-2023. Interest in the group as respondents for the study is based on the competency required of them as future educators stipulated in CHED Memorandum Order No. 75, s. 2017. Accordingly, the institution is tasked to produce graduates of the Bachelor of Secondary Education Program majoring in Social Studies who can demonstrate leadership in organizing communities and in producing empowered community student leaders as well. Understanding the civic life of these teacher education students in the digital space would give important insights into how they perceive and use online tools in civic engagement.

Adopting the multistage sampling technique, the Sample Size Calculator by Raosoft with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error was used to determine the total number of respondents by gender from the total number of enrollees under the BSED program majoring in Social Studies during the period. In the second stage, the stratified proportional random sampling technique was utilized to ensure a relative balance of male and female samples by year level for the study. Through the requested enrollment list from the College Dean, the systematic sampling procedure was done by selecting every 3rd person from the list until the desired number of respondents to survey by year level was achieved.

The distribution of respondents by year level and gender are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Distribution of Respondents by Year Level and Gender

Year Level	Male	Sample	Female	Sample
1	6	6	30	23
2	7	6	24	19
3	6	6	31	24
4	11	10	31	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>90</b>

### Data Collection Method/Instrumentation

In profiling the respondents as online users and determining their perceptions of the digital space for civic engagement, the researcher adopted the Survey Questionnaire developed by experts and utilized by the UNDP research team in 2021 which rapidly analyzed the digital civic participation of youths in Europe and Central Asia. Whilst the study focused on the identified student activists in the region, this research involved teacher education students specializing in Social Studies and selected only the question item sets suitable for the study.

The Survey Questionnaire utilized in this research is of two (2) parts with items based on the adopted UNDP instrument which the researcher was permitted to use and was found very effective in gathering the needed data for this investigation. Part 1 is on the profile of respondents as online users. Part II consists of 30-item statements, which the subjects used to manifest their perceptions of the digital space as a tool for civic engagement. Respondents choose a scale point continuum that ranges from one to five. For interpretation, the researcher utilized the mean score ranges and verbal interpretation specified below; -

Value	Scale Ranges	Verbal Interpretation
1	1.00 – 1.80	Strongly Disagree
2	1.81 – 2.60	Disagree
3	2.61 – 3.40	Neither Agree/Nor Disagree
4	3.41 – 4.20	Agree
5	4.21 – 5.00	Strongly Agree

### Data Analysis Method

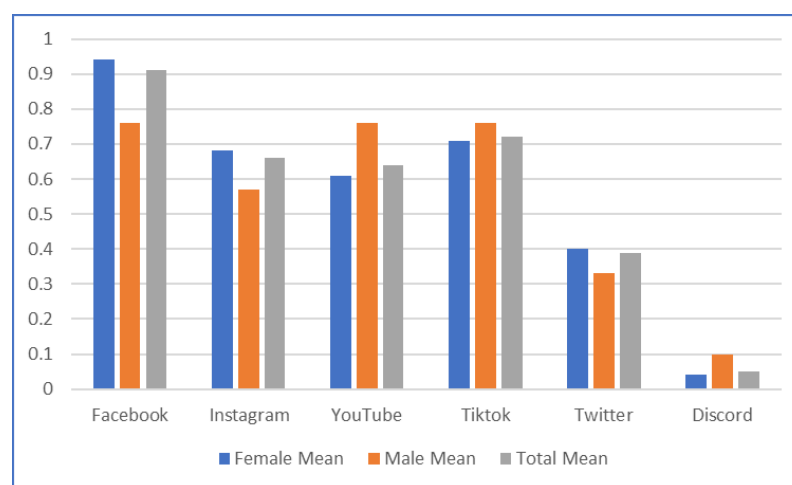
Empirical in nature, this research study attempted to profile the respondents as online users and assess their perceptions of the digital space as a tool for civic engagement. The research utilized IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for the use of descriptive statistical measures and tests such as mean, standard deviation, and Mann-Whitney U Test of 0.050 significance level for the analysis of the quantitative data collected.

## Results

This portion covers the discussion of the findings patterned in a manner that coincides with the organization of the objectives posed in the study.

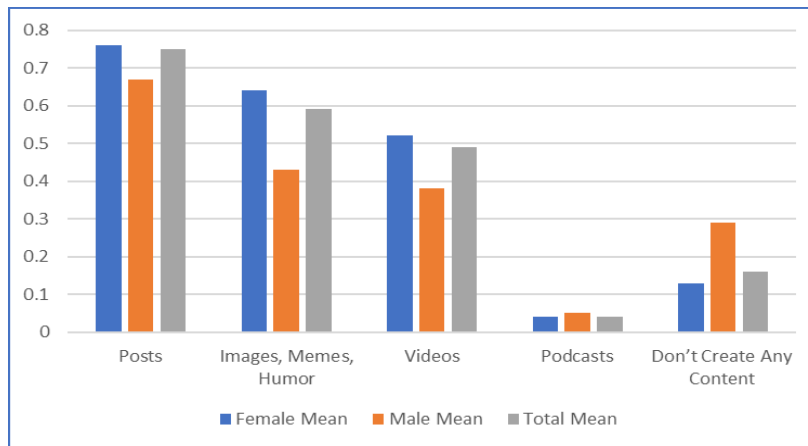
### 1. Profile of Respondents by Gender as Online Users

Profiling the civic life of respondents in the digital space is a growing area of research interest today. With the rise of social media and other digital forms, understanding how students use these online spaces could provide important insights into the role of technology in shaping democratic processes and citizenship. Figure 1 presents the profile of respondents according to their most frequently used social media platform.



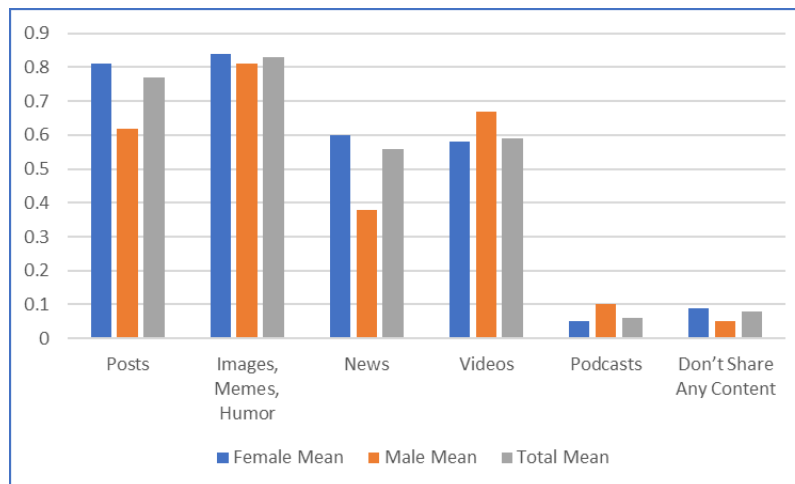
**Figure 1** Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform by Gender

Social media has become intertwined with people's lives as it enables them to connect with friends, share information, and engage in various activities. As most young people look for opportunities for connectivity and self-expression, Facebook, Tiktok, and Instagram are revealed to be the most appealing platforms to respondents. This coincides with the views of Marwick & Boyd (2011) noting that people are attracted to platforms that provide the needed space for individuality and creativity. Gender differences were found with the social media pattern where females are frequently using platforms that support and maintain relationships like Facebook while males indicating a wider range of activities online are drawn to YouTube and Tiktok for entertainment and tutorial purposes. The revealed preference by gender could be attributed to the functions and features of the social media platform that the respondents consider effective in satisfying their needs. This contention is aligned with the conclusion of Hargittai & Walejko (2008) attributing gender differences in online activities to the differing motivations that while men use technology as a tool for entertainment and information search, women are more to communication and networking purposes.



**Figure 2** Types of Content Created Online

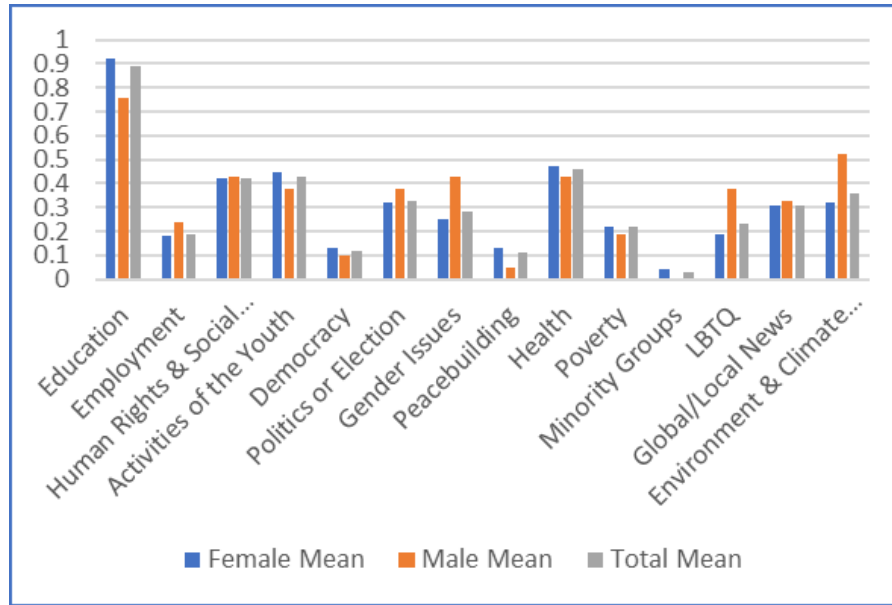
As shown in Figure 2, the respondents are more into the creation of posts and images, memes, and humor online due to the ease and speed of creating them, particularly on platforms with features supporting connectivity. As posts are short and can be quickly created and shared, they become an effective tool for communication, self-expression, and socialization. Hootsuite even found out that posts with images are 2.3 times more engaging and significantly enhance the impact of social media posts. Gender differences could be traced with female students revealing higher mean values thus more into creating posts, images, memes, humor, and videos than male respondents. This is consistent with the previous findings attributing social media usage by females for purposes of networking and self-expression. Women who are more into building and maintaining relationships are more likely to create content online (Chang et al., 2018).



**Figure 3** Types of Content Shared Online

The data disclose the types and frequency of content shared by the respondents. Studying the mean values, it can be deduced that images, memes, and humor are the most frequently shared content which could be attributed to the known traits of Filipinos for humor and positivity. Amid hardships, sharing humorous content online is a way Filipinos relate to one another which later on becomes the foundation of friendship. Supporting this, Crawford & Gressly (1991) noted that humor has been shown to facilitate social bonding as it increases positive effects on people and enhances the sense of community and group cohesion. Moreover, comparing means the female respondents are revealed to be more engaged in

sharing content than their counterparts as women by nature are known to be more expressive of their thoughts and feelings intended for keeping social networks. The resulting standard deviation revealed on the other hand variability in online activities of male respondents who use technology for entertainment and information consumption. This is in parallel to the findings by Hampton et al. (2011) explaining that women tend to be more active in sharing content as it is seen as a way to strengthen social bonds and connections.



**Figure 4** Socio-Political Topics Shared/Created Online

As disclosed in Figure 4, the respondents regard education and health as important topics that interest them the most. The high interest portrayed by the students in topics related to education only purports the high regard of Filipinos for education. This is consistent with the findings by the Philippine Statistics Authority (2020) revealing that education is highly valued in the country, with over 90% of Filipinos believing that education is important in achieving success in life. Succeeding this is the manifested concern of respondents with health issues which can be attributed to the heightened anxiety of everyone about the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought everyone to the awareness of giving importance to health and effective healthcare systems in times of crisis. In terms of gender differences, the resulting value of the standard deviations reflects the more diverse preferences of males in terms of content they share or create online. This is consistent with the study of Eagly and Wood in 2012 suggesting that males tend to explore new experiences and be more competitive than females, which may be contributory to their diverse preferences in topics available online. More so, it can be surmised from the responses the difference in the respondents' outlook on life that while the males exhibited outward-looking perspectives that go beyond oneself, the females are more interested in topics that are of a personal level. Supporting this contention, Crowder-Meyer & Hall found that women are more likely to prioritize social welfare topics such as health and education compared to men who are more likely interested in issues relating to politics and national security.

## 2. Perceptions of Respondents by Gender towards the Digital Realm

The table below presents the perceptions of respondents by gender towards the digital realm as a tool for civic engagement.

**Table 2** Perceptions Towards the Digital Realm

Items	Sex						Total		
	Female			Male					
	M	SD	V.I.	M	SD	V.I.	M	SD	V.I.
1. I feel confident using my real name/identity on social media.	3.99	0.94	Agree	3.95	1.244	Agree	3.98	1.00	Agree
2. I feel my data/privacy is protected online.	3.26	1.02	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	2.67	1.11	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.14	1.06	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree
3. I feel free in expressing myself online.	3.48	0.99	Agree	3.76	0.83	Agree	3.54	0.96	Agree
4. Being active online gives me a sense of empowerment and belonging to society.	3.38	0.95	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.81	0.92	Agree	3.46	0.95	Agree
5. If I express my views on social or political issues online, they could be used against me.	3.39	0.84	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.71	0.84	Agree	3.45	0.85	Agree
6. I feel my gender impacts how others react to my civic view online.	2.96	0.86	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.10	0.83	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	2.99	0.85	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree
7. The internet creates a polarization of public discourse and opinions.	3.62	0.83	Agree	3.81	0.60	Agree	3.66	0.79	Agree
8. I trust traditional media sources (TV, newspapers) more than online/social media.	3.85	1.01	Agree	4.57	0.59	Strongly Agree	3.99	0.99	Agree
9. There is a lot of disinformation and fake news on social media.	4.46	0.99	Strongly Agree	4.76	0.53	Strongly Agree	4.52	0.92	Strongly Agree
10. I am worried about hate speech, or bullying online.	4.35	0.88	Strongly Agree	4.33	0.73	Strongly Agree	4.35	0.85	Strongly Agree

As shown, the respondents strongly agreed with the prevalent disinformation and fake news on social media and the rampant hate speech and bullying online. This is consistent with findings by the Oxford Internet Institute revealing the Philippines is among the top countries with widespread disinformation. One may assume that the lack of media literacy and the highly polarized political environment in the country as primarily causing this phenomenon. While access to social media is widespread through smartphones across ages, many Filipinos still lack the necessary skills in using and navigating the internet much more to critically evaluate the information available online. In the conducted Philippine National ICT Household Survey of the Philippine Statistics Authority (2020), while 66% of Filipino households have access to the Internet, 28% lack knowledge and skills in using this digital space. The respondents agreeing on the polarization created by the internet may be rooted in the manifested political divide online most particularly at the height of the national election in 2022. Social influencers and online trolls known as the “keyboard army” have been paid to spread fake news and use hate speech in bullying opposing groups or critics of the government. The rampant use of social media as a platform for political campaigning and propaganda resulted in growing skepticism about the accuracy and reliability of news and information shared online impacting negatively public trust in government institutions, leadership, and democratic processes as a whole.

While both genders generally agree that they feel confident in using their real name/identity on social media and in expressing themselves in the digital realm, they also revealed concern about the risks of expressing themselves fully online. Gender stereotypes and the red-tagging of civic actors may be considered contributory that discourage young people from actively engaging in community affairs. This reality is explained by Boler & Davis (2018) stating the complexity governing the freedom of expression online that creates uncertainty and anxiety for individuals who want to express themselves but are also anxious about the potential risks involved.

### **3. Perceived Benefits and Barriers in Digital Civic Engagement by Gender**

Digital technology has transformed civic engagement by providing greater opportunities for people regardless of background and location. Understanding the perceived benefits and barriers to students’ civic engagement online is essential in designing strategies to address the barriers and leveraging the benefits perceived for civic involvement.

**Table 3** Perceived Benefits of Civic Participation Online

Items	Sex						Total		
	Female			Male					
	M	SD	V.I.	M	SD	V.I.	M	SD	V.I.
1. Online participation helps create well-networked, cohesive groups.	3.85	0.69	Agree	3.95	0.74	Agree	3.87	0.70	Agree
2. Online civic activity gives more freedom and autonomy to young people to respond to issues that affect them.	3.86	0.78	Agree	3.90	0.62	Agree	3.87	0.75	Agree
3. Online participation strengthens engagement within local communities.	3.67	0.83	Agree	4.00	0.63	Agree	3.74	0.80	Agree
4. Online participation strengthens engagement among different communities across borders.	3.84	0.76	Agree	4.05	0.59	Agree	3.88	0.73	Agree
5. Online civic activity gives higher visibility to important issues that should be addressed by society.	3.91	0.75	Agree	4.00	0.54	Agree	3.92	0.71	Agree
6. Online participation alone is efficient for achieving desired change in society.	3.25	0.92	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.29	1.18	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.25	0.97	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree
7. Official decisions cannot be taken online.	3.59	1.03	Agree	3.62	1.02	Agree	3.59	1.03	Agree
8. Online communities are more efficient than traditional NGOs.	2.87	0.75	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	2.81	1.03	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	2.86	0.81	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree
9. Online civic activity needs to be complimented with face-to-face work too.	3.92	0.95	Agree	4.14	0.57	Agree	3.96	0.89	Agree
10. Online participation is not inclusive of all young people.	3.35	0.88	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.14	1.15	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.31	0.94	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree

In general, the genders are in accord with the importance of doing face-to-face work in addition to online civic activities acknowledging the complementary nature of online and offline engagement in making community projects successful in implementation. This is in line with the view of Zuñiga et al. (2012) emphasizing the importance of the holistic approach to civic engagement. Accordingly, all stakeholders wanting partnership with the youth sector should provide support both in traditional and digital forms to transform the personalized online engagement of students into actual civic participation. It is worth noting, however, that while the respondents concurred on the need for combined online and offline civic engagement, they manifested uncertainty concerning the inclusivity of the internet to all young people. This only proves the students' awareness of the digital divide leaving behind students

who lack access to the internet. As not all young people enjoy the civic opportunities available online, efforts are necessary to ensure that the digital realm is accessible to all. In consideration of this need, the respondents revealing mixed views on the efficiency of online communities are encouraging NGOs to provide the needed support to the marginalized group lacking access to the internet and in leveraging online platforms in reaching and engaging a wider audience for support and mobilization.

**Table 4** Perceived Barriers to Civic Participation Online

Items	Sex						Total		
	Female			Male					
	M	SD	V.I.	M	SD	V.I.	M	SD	V.I.
1. Lack of access to the internet (coverage, quality, cost) or smartphone/ computer.	3.72	1.29	Agree	3.95	1.20	Agree	3.76	1.27	Agree
2. Online harassment of civic actors.	3.45	1.11	Agree	3.81	0.81	Agree	3.52	1.07	Agree
3. Difficulties in getting one's message through to a wider audience.	3.67	0.96	Agree	3.57	0.97	Agree	3.65	0.96	Agree
4. Lack of resources and funding for online civic activities.	3.56	0.87	Agree	3.62	0.74	Agree	3.58	0.85	Agree
5. Lack of confidence in the impact of civic activism.	3.60	0.87	Agree	3.48	0.81	Agree	3.58	0.86	Agree
6. Lack of interest in civic engagement in general.	3.53	0.82	Agree	3.10	0.83	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.44	0.84	Agree
7. Lack of knowledge on how to advocate and participate online.	3.48	0.97	Agree	2.86	0.96	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree	3.36	0.99	Neither Agree/ Nor Disagree
8. Insufficient media and digital skills.	3.61	0.84	Agree	3.43	0.81	Agree	3.58	0.83	Agree
9. Internet restrictions (some platforms/websites are not available).	3.79	0.92	Agree	3.67	0.73	Agree	3.76	0.89	Agree
10. Data surveillance and risks to data privacy.	3.82	0.96	Agree	3.86	1.06	Agree	3.83	0.98	Agree

As disclosed in the table, the respondents' manifested their greatest concern on data surveillance and risks to data privacy in the digital realm as barriers affecting civic engagement in addition to issues related to internet access and restrictions. Though this may not be directly connected, this concern can be linked among other things to the prevalence of red-tagging in which the government or other organizations use data surveillance to monitor and track civic actors who are actively involved in socio-political issues online posing a risk to their privacy and safety. This has serious implications for the interest and confidence of young people in engaging civically online. The respondents may have manifested a lack of interest in participating in digital civic engagement as online activism often leads to harassment and threats. Highlighted in its article the impact of red-tagging on civil society and the need to ensure the protection of human rights in the country. For democracy to work, the Philippine government should ensure freedom of expression and protection of the rights of its citizenry.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of the Respondents' Perceptions of the Digital Realm

The gender divide has always been a growing concern even in the digital realm. Understanding and identifying significant differences between genders is considered crucial in ensuring that all citizens enjoy equal opportunities in both online and offline spheres. Table 5 reveals the comparative analysis of perceptions towards the digital realm between genders.

**Table 5** Mann-Whitney U Test on Perceptions by Gender

Items	Sig. <sup>a, b</sup>	Decision	Interpretation
1. I feel confident using my real name/identity on social media.	.789	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
2. I feel my data/privacy is protected online.	.022	Reject the null hypothesis	Significant Difference
3. I feel free in expressing myself online.	.226	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
4. Being active online gives me a sense of empowerment and belonging to society.	.059	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
5. If I express my views on social or political issues online, they could be used against me.	.063	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
6. I feel my gender impacts how others react to my civic view online.	.637	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
7. The internet creates a polarization of public discourse and opinions.	.374	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
8. I trust traditional media sources (TV, newspapers) more than online/social media.	.002	Reject the null hypothesis	Significant Difference
9. There is a lot of disinformation and fake news on social media.	.223	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
10. I am worried about hate speech, or bullying online.	.634	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference

Despite the widespread disinformation and harassment online, significant differences between genders are manifested in which the males revealed a higher level of trust in traditional media sources. This may be rooted in the type of news content appealing to them. In the study by Wanta et al. (2004), a significant relationship between gender and online news consumption is found. As women have a greater interest in social and community issues, they tend to consume online news more than men. However, since women are known to be more emphatic and emotionally responsive, news through social media about social and cultural issues featuring personal narratives and emotional content relatable to personal experiences is

more of interest to them. Pew Research Center (2019) further supported this as their female respondents are found to consume news more through social media while males are into traditional news websites. Since men are more into politics and sports in which news is presented factually and straightforwardly, they manifested greater trust in traditional media sources. More so, as men are more inclined to participate in political discourse and activities, they manifested greater apprehension towards the prevailing data surveillance and data privacy breach leading to distrust and hampered digital engagement.

Table 6 Mann-Whitney U Test on Perceived Benefits by Gender

Items	Sig. <sup>a,b</sup>	Decision	Interpretation
1. Online participation helps create well-networked, cohesive groups.	.492	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
2. Online civic activity gives more freedom and autonomy to young people to respond to issues that affect them.	.903	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
3. Online participation strengthens engagement within local communities.	.062	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
4. Online participation strengthens engagement among different communities across borders.	.286	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
5. Online civic activity gives higher visibility to important issues that should be addressed by society.	.704	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
6. Online participation alone is efficient for achieving desired change in society.	.599	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
7. Official decisions cannot be taken online.	.879	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
8. Online communities are more efficient than traditional NGOs.	.862	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
9. Online civic activity needs to be complimented with face-to-face work too.	.466	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
10. Online participation is not inclusive of all young people.	.482	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference

The table shows that there is no significant difference among respondents. This finding could be attributed to the fact that the respondents belong to the same degree program and specialization with possible matching backgrounds and experiences online resulting in similar perceptions and attitudes regarding the benefit of civic engagement in the digital realm. In general, as revealed in the resulting means, the respondents regard the digital platform as an enabling tool for civic engagement. The study by Jones (2016) revealing a positive relationship between social media use and the level of civic engagement among young people supports the notion of the potential of digital platforms in transforming digital engagement into actual civic action.

**Table 7** Mann-Whitney U Test on Perceived Barriers by Gender

Items	Sig. <sup>a,b</sup>	Decision	Interpretation
1. Lack of access to the internet (coverage, quality, cost) or smartphone/ computer.	.454	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
2. Online harassment of civic actors.	.232	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
3. Difficulties in getting one's message through to a wider audience.	.586	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
4. Lack of resources and funding for online civic activities.	.983	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
5. Lack of confidence in the impact of civic activism.	.285	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
6. Lack of interest in civic engagement in general.	.028	Reject the null hypothesis	Significant Difference
7. Lack of knowledge on how to advocate and participate online.	.007	Reject the null hypothesis	Significant Difference
8. Insufficient media and digital skills.	.325	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
9. Internet restrictions (some platforms/websites are not available).	.466	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference
10. Data surveillance and risks to data privacy.	.917	Retain the null hypothesis	No Significant Difference

The responses between genders reveal insignificant differences in most of the items except for the lack of knowledge on how to advocate or participate online or the lack of interest in general civic engagement. While the females readily agreed the male counterparts neither agree nor disagree manifesting uncertainty in their responses. Undoubtedly, digital skills and knowledge are important factors affecting the extent of digital engagement of people. As the World Economic Forum (2016) contends that digital skills are necessary for engaging civically online. This connotes the need of promoting digital literacy in higher education institutions to ensure the full participation of students in the digital space.

## Discussions

Also, it is interesting to note that the uncertainty of the male respondents does not necessarily mean lacking knowledge or interest at all in civic engagement. It can be surmised that males have varying motivations in engaging digitally resulting in mixed opinions as to the levels of their knowledge and interest in online civic participation. As males are found to have varying activities online perceiving the internet as more of a tool for instrumental purposes of sourcing out information either for entertainment or education related to politics among other things, their engagement tends to be more on visiting a variety of websites, reading the news, and engaging in political activities online. Corollary to this contention is the findings by Hargittai & Walejko (2008) revealing that men are more into visiting a variety of websites related to political news and activities while women use social media for purposes of social and personal communication purposes. This difference in online behavior and consumption pattern on the internet may be contributory to the revealed variance among respondents.

## Conclusion and suggestions

This study primarily aims to assess the profile of respondents as online users and their perceptions of the digital space as a tool for civic engagement. As revealed, Facebook and Tiktok are the leading platforms used by the respondents in posting and sharing created content related to education, health, and activities of the youth. Respondents highlighted the widespread disinformation, online harassment, and risk involving surveillance and data privacy breach which may be brought about by the polarized political climate and prevalent red-tagging affecting generally their interest to engage as civic actors in the digital sphere. Both genders concurred on the complementary nature of civic engagement requiring the combined online and offline involvement of young people armed with the needed knowledge and skills in socio-political causes through the support of the traditional NGOs leveraging social media as a tool of inclusivity of the youth for mobilization in community affairs. These findings require measures by all stakeholders seeking partnership with the youth sector to provide opportunities that enhance their digital literacy resulting in reduced gender divide and risks in digital civic engagement. More so, the provision of policies, programs, and tools ensuring a gender-inclusive, safe, and supportive environment for discussions, dialogue, debates, and collaboration is necessary to encourage the engagement of young civic actors both in digital and traditional forms as key players in nation-building. As these results are limited to the specific sample focusing on profile and perceptions, a further study involving other populations and determining correlations between social media and civic engagement is suggested in studying further the digital space as an enabling tool for civic engagement and citizenship.

## New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

In general, the findings revealed that the respondents positively perceived the digital space as an enabling venue for civic engagement. Amid the challenges of widespread disinformation, harassment, and privacy breaches, investments from all stakeholders in enhancing digital literacy and in instituting safe, participative, and inclusive digital space are necessary for supporting the students' civic engagement as key players in nation-building.

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