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Exploring Youth Preferences for Collective Action: A Comparison of a Grassroots Initiative with a Union-Led One

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Article abstract

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Exploring Youth Preferences for Collective Action: A Comparison of a Grassroots Initiative with a Union-Led One

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Summary

Many young individuals now prioritize involvement in collective action as a means to instigate societal change. Crucially, they have access to social media platforms, which help them connect with like-minded peers and coordinate efforts. Some of them may be thus more inclined to favour less conventional collective action over formal union membership. In this study, which draws on data from young British workers during the period from December 2022 to March 2023, we endeavoured to ascertain this cohort's preferred approach to collective action. We distinguished between an informal grassroots initiative and one led by a labour union as a means to advance the rights of gig economy workers. To this end, we conducted a controlled online experiment. We focused exclusively on a specific age cohort within a particular timeframe, thus limiting our ability to determine generational differences in preferences for collective action and in attitudes toward unions. Nevertheless, the results do offer insights into the forms of collective action preferred by Generation Z. British youth were found to view the informal grassroots initiative more positively than the union-led one. However, they viewed the latter as potentially having greater influence on government policy. Furthermore, they were not significantly more willing to join one initiative than the other. Nonetheless, they were more inclined to recommend the grassroots initiative. This paper contributes to the body of research on the relationship between labour unions and young people. It also provides insight into how members of Generation Z think about various ways of participating in collective action.

Keywords: organized labour; youth; UK; bottom-up initiatives; social activism

Résumé

De nombreux jeunes individus priorisent une participation active aux actions collectives comme moyen de provoquer un changement sociétal. Un aspect crucial est que ces jeunes ont accès aux plateformes de médias sociaux, facilitant la communication avec des pairs partageant les mêmes idées et la coordination des efforts. Ces facteurs ont potentiellement poussé certains d'entre eux à préférer des modes d'action collective moins conventionnels par rapport aux adhésions à des syndicats formels. Cet article, qui s'appuie sur des données obtenues auprès de jeunes travailleurs

britanniques pendant les périodes de décembre 2022 et mars 2023, s'efforce de déterminer leur approche d'action collective privilégiée. Nous avons distingué une mobilisation informelle de la base (*grassroots*), par opposition à une initiative menée par un syndicat plus formalisé, visant à faire progresser les droits des travailleurs de l'économie gig. Pour ce faire, l'étude utilise une expérience contrôlée en ligne. Il est important de reconnaître que la conception de l'étude, qui se concentre exclusivement sur un groupe d'âge spécifique dans une période particulière, limite notre capacité à déterminer de manière concluante les variations générationnelles dans les préférences pour l'action collective et les attitudes envers les syndicats. Néanmoins, elle offre un aperçu des formes préférées d'action collective parmi les membres de la génération Z. Les résultats suggèrent que les jeunes Britanniques affichent une préférence envers l'initiative informelle de base par rapport à l'alternative dirigée par un syndicat. Cependant, ils perçoivent cette dernière comme ayant une plus forte capacité d'influencer le gouvernement que la première. De plus, nos résultats indiquent qu'il n'existe pas de disparité significative en ce qui concerne l'intention des jeunes de rejoindre l'une ou l'autre initiative. Néanmoins, des variations sont évidentes dans leur volonté de suggérer l'une ou l'autre des formes de mobilisation. Les jeunes Britanniques sont plus enclins à propager l'initiative de base. Cet article contribue au corpus de recherches sur la relation entre les syndicats et les jeunes et améliore également notre compréhension des préférences et des attitudes de la génération Z concernant les modes distincts de participation aux actions collectives.

1. Introduction

There is a perception that younger individuals are less likely to be union members than their older counterparts (Hodder, 2015). This perceived disinterest, together with the overall decline in union membership, has renewed debate on young people's attitudes toward unions and unionization (e.g., Hodder & Houghton, 2020; Smith & Duxbury, 2019). In Britain, only 10.9% of people 19 to 24 years old belong to a union (Office for National Statistics, 2023). In at least one respect, unions should not be overly concerned. The association between age and membership seems to follow an inverted U with a peak among workers in their mid-40s (Blanchflower, 2007). Research also shows that contemporary young people hold views on unions similar to those of their older counterparts (Bryson et al., 2005). It is argued that "we currently do not have any compelling evidence that generational differences in union attitudes actually exist" (Aleks et al., 2021: 533). Recent successful unionization drives in the U.S. suggest that union membership may still appeal to today's youth. In fact, these efforts have often been spearheaded by young workers who, in the face of union-busting, have embraced social media-enabled strategies.

Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that young people may lack basic knowledge about labour unions (Lorenzini, 2016) or view them as outdated, bureaucratic organizations that represent older blue-collar workers (Hodder, 2015). Unions are also thought to be less adept at communicating digitally with young people than they are with institutions and organizations (Carneiro & Costa, 2020). At the same time, the presence of unions is limited in sectors where young people make up much of the workforce. This is evident in the hospitality industry and, especially, in the gig economy (Polkowska, 2020). All of this has led some to argue that unions have failed to connect with young people (Vandaele, 2018). These tendencies, alongside a rise in "never-membership" (Bryson & Gomez, 2005), have far-reaching implications, since union membership is often conceptualized as an "experience good." In other words, an individual cannot easily evaluate its benefits before actually becoming a member (Gomez & Gunderson, 2004).

Moreover, today's youth have grown up in an era dominated by social media, unlike any other generation except the youngest millennials. Since generational cohorts are defined by shared formative experiences (Costanza et al., 2017), the widespread adoption of social media can be seen if not as a defining event for Generation Z then as a paradigmatic shift of comparable consequence. It has changed the way Gen Zers—i.e., those born between 1997 and 2012—behave as customers and employees (e.g., Goh & Jie, 2019; Liu et al., 2022). Importantly, social media have made it easier for young people to connect with their peers and to mobilize around causes they care about. By its very nature, digital technology facilitates horizontal, networked, grassroots organizing (Wood, 2020). This adoption of social media, together with the shortcomings of unions—their image problem, their apparent lack of web-savviness, their weak presence in new areas of work—may have led young people to favour more *informal* ways of engaging in collective action, thus potentially making them less interested in union membership (Cha et al., 2018).

For all these reasons, it might be informative to find out which form of collective action, defined as "a matter of people doing something together" (Gilbert, 2006: 3), is preferred by Generation Z. Is it the more formal approach of unionism or the less formal one of grassroots movements? In this study, which draws on data from young British workers born between 1997 and 2004, we sought to answer this question through a controlled online experiment. Our study is significant in its exploration of Generation Z's preferences for collective action, especially because few studies have used this approach. By understanding the preferred forms of collective action in this demographic, it will be easier to develop strategies to organize labour in the evolving landscape of the modern workforce. Generation Z is a significant and influential segment of the labour market, and its

inclinations can inform the development of more effective and tailored ways to organize that cohort (e.g., Smith & Duxbury, 2019). Furthermore, our study will contribute to broader discourse on the future of labour movements and social activism, thus offering insights that may guide policymakers, organizations and activists in their efforts to create environments that resonate with the preferences and values of the emerging workforce (Cha et al., 2018; Hornsey et al., 2006). Ultimately, it will help all of us understand the generational dynamics of collective action and become better at dealing with a more responsive and engaged workforce. In this sense, it will contribute to ongoing debate on the future of organized labour (Holgate et al., 2018; Simms et al., 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theories on Reasons for Union Membership

People join unions for rational, emotional or ideological reasons (Wheeler & McClendon, 1991). Rational choice theory suggests that people are driven by self-interest. Accordingly, a union may be seen as providing employees with ongoing services to maximize their utility. Emotional reasons include job dissatisfaction (Godard, 2008) and "a sense of injustice" due to the employer's violations of workers' rights (Kelly, 2005: 66).

Ideological reasons encompass pro-union attitudes and left-wing values. In fact, willingness to join a union is higher among "those who particularly value union policies and ideals by being highly politically involved and highly left-wing oriented" (Hadziabdic & Frangi, 2022: 151). Conversely, it is lower among those who have doubts about the raison d'être of unions or who espouse right-wing ideologies (Scott, 2022). This is in line with micro-sociological theories of union membership that see values, i.e., beliefs about right and wrong (Schminke et al., 2015), and norms as the key drivers of union support (Toubøl & Jensen, 2014).

Such norms particularly include subjective norms, where one's behaviours are influenced by a desire to meet the expectations of peers (Ajzen, 1991). Through a desire to "stand well with one's co-workers" (Bendix, 1956: 314) and through fear of workplace ostracism, defined as the act of being excluded (Williams, 2001), an individual may decide to join a union, as predicted by interactionist theory (Rokeach, 1968).

2.2 Relationship between Unions and Youth

Because workers have traditionally come into contact with unions at work (Carter, 2006), the above considerations go some way toward explaining why "direct contact with union leaders and other members may still lead to the development of positive attitudes about unions" (Hadziabdic & Frangi, 2022: 152). This is especially so for unionization of young individuals.

As previously noted, union membership is often conceptualized as an "experience good," i.e., its characteristics are hard to evaluate before joining (Gomez & Gunderson, 2004). While some union benefits (e.g., the union wage premium) are apparent, others remain undisclosed until one becomes a member or receives information from a reliable source. Since young workers have little work experience, they naturally rely on others for information about the advantages of membership. Not coincidentally, children whose parents are union members tend to join unions themselves (Bryson & Davies, 2019). Unfortunately, unions are weak or nonexistent in those sectors where young individuals make up a significant portion of the workforce. Thus, it is increasingly unlikely for a young worker to have the opportunity to interact with a union member while at work.

Furthermore, some studies have shown that younger generations may not clearly understand the purpose and function of unions (Lorenzini, 2016). It has also been suggested that today's youth sometimes perceive unions as stodgy entities that represent only the interests of older workers from declining industries (Hodder, 2015). Some studies have also shown that young people may have radically negative or very critical perceptions of unions (Kovács et al., 2017). Thus, unions still have an image problem, notwithstanding the aforesaid youth-led unionization drives in the U.S. In this context, it is argued that unions have failed to reform themselves and connect with young people (Vandaele, 2018). For example, because some unions have been viewed as undemocratic and hierarchical, they tend to put off youth who appear to favour more inclusive and participative governance arrangements (Juris & Pleyers, 2009). Others point out that unions have not prioritized issues that matter to younger workers, such as flexible working arrangements.

2.3 Organizing in the Gig Economy

Sometimes, the labour movement is accused of giving short shrift to the situation of those who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Tait, 2005). The latter include young individuals employed in new areas of work. In particular, the gig economy has emerged as a significant employment option for young workers who seek flexibility and independence, although it offers them substandard working conditions and few benefits, notably health insurance (Polkowska, 2020). Indeed, with no comprehensive health insurance and an unstable income, they are left without the protection and support typically afforded by traditional employment. Moreover, limited social security benefits, together with long working hours and irregular schedules, can lead to physical and mental strain. Gig economy workers, particularly in Canada and the U.S., are increasingly faced with an often overlooked issue: arbitration clauses. These clauses force the parties to resolve disputes through a private arbitrator who adjudicates on the basis of mutually agreed-upon legal principles (Coiquaud & Martin, 2020). Arbitration clauses can significantly impact gig economy workers by depriving them of their rights to legal action in public courts, and thus limiting their ability to settle grievances collectively or seek recourse for labour violations. This arrangement tends to favour companies by potentially leaving gig workers with fewer protections and less recourse in the event of a dispute (and de facto silencing them). As a result, many gig economy workers earn precarious and modest incomes, a situation that may be perceived as a glaring example of social injustice.

Thus, young gig economy workers particularly need unions to protect them against exploitation (Polkowska, 2020). However, since many of them hold temporary or freelance positions, traditional worksite unionism may not be adequate (Heery et al., 2004). Nonstandard employment, alongside other idiosyncrasies of the gig economy, complicates organizing efforts and makes it particularly hard for the labour movement to reach out to young workers (Tailby & Pollert, 2011).

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight instances where gig economy workers, particularly in Canada and the United States, have organized themselves through a combination of traditional and innovative workplace organization strategies. A case in point is the unionization effort at Foodora, a Toronto-based food delivery company, where the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) provided drivers with key support and guidance in helping them organize (Green, 2021). By leveraging the union's expertise, they were able to launch a grassroots campaign of targeting drivers where they typically spent most of their working hours—in restaurants. Organizers would initiate short conversations with them, discussing the importance of improving their working conditions and the potential benefits of unionization. They often took advantage of the time that drivers spent waiting in line to collect their delivery orders. These efforts proved effective in garnering support for the union vote. We may note in passing that U.S. gig economy workers called their first major strike in 2019, when rideshare drivers refused to sign onto apps for work (Hogan, 2023).

Also important is the rise, in America, of "alter-activism" (Juris & Pleyers, 2009), which highlights "the contrast between emerging cultures of activism and traditional forms of collective action, such as that commonly found in the labor movement" (Cha et al., 2018: 452). This contrast is evident in the emergence of various alt-union associations (Milkman, 2020), i.e., non-traditional forms of labour organization or unionization that deviate from conventional models in terms of structure, goals or strategies (Fine, 2005). The term encompasses an assortment of experimental or progressive initiatives that aim to meet the evolving needs and preferences of contemporary workers, particularly in sectors with a high prevalence of temporary work and non-traditional employment arrangements. Such initiatives include One Fair Wage and Fight for $15, which seek to support U.S. hospitality workers. Notably, the latter has helped secure a $15-per-hour wage for fast food workers in certain jurisdictions.

2.4 Generation Z's Commitment to Social Activism and Collective Action

The above is important because many in Generation Z not only hew to progressive values, such as equality, but also engage in social activism (Cha et al., 2018). Many of them thus have a mindset that prioritizes active engagement on vital issues as a means to effect change in society (Pascarella et al., 2012). Granted, one could argue that young people, irrespective of their generational cohort, often take part in worthwhile initiatives, such as pro-democracy or pro-poor protests (Flesher Fominaya, 2017). However, apart from the youngest millennials, no other generation has had access to the digital tools, such as social media platforms, available to Generation Z (Creevey et al., 2022). These tools enable horizontal, networked, grassroots organizing (Wood, 2020), which helps them connect with like-minded individuals and organize around causes they deeply care about (Zamponi & González, 2017).

It is unsurprising, therefore, that many young people gravitate toward social movements, i.e., "coalitions that engage in sustained action to promote ideas and preferences for changing prominent social, cultural and business practices" (Georgallis, 2017: 736). This is all the more so because it is easy to join a social movement with a minimal investment of resources. Joining a union, by contrast, is more structured and requires regular payment of union dues. Besides, social movements convey their messages—as described by mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977)—through emotional calls to action that are fueled by dissatisfaction and aimed at rectifying an injustice or averting a catastrophe. In the case of the "Fridays for Future" movement, for instance, its supporters use such slogans as "Climate change is real—act now!" or "There is no Planet B." By conveying the urgency of the situation and the need for immediate action, such slogans can attract young people who prioritize environmental justice. The persuasiveness of this message—and, by extension, the attraction of social movements and informal grassroots forms of collective action—is enhanced by support from peers. In today's era of social media, young people are more influenced than ever by their peers in terms of opinions and behaviours. By the same token, since grassroots movements are typically run by digitally proficient young individuals, they attract young activists by emanating a sense of dynamism and web-savviness. Relatedly, given the stereotype that unions are managed *by* and *for* older workers, young people might distrust unions, even if the latter have resources and a proven history of influencing legislation and policy.

2.5 Social Unionism: Conceptualizations and Implications

To reiterate, unions are still viewed in some circles as bureaucratic organizations that focus on the narrowly defined interests of unionized workers while failing to use social media to good effect (cf., Carneiro & Costa, 2020; Houghton & Hodder, 2021). True to form, they are hardly associated in the public mind with the fight against climate change or discrimination against LGBTQ workers. But things have started to change. For instance, several British unions are now stressing their dedication to people on the lower rungs of society, most of whom have irregular work and are not card-carrying members (Heery, 2018). They have initiated collaborations with less formal social

movements, in keeping with the central premise of Kelly's (1998) "fusion thesis." A case in point is the "Time's Up Legal Defense Fund," a union-backed initiative established as part of the #MeToo Movement to support victims of workplace sexual harassment (Mendes et al., 2018). Also in America (where unions have long been linked to "business unionism"), more and more individuals are viewing unions as a means to tackle matters of social justice that go beyond mere wages and working conditions (Fiorito & Padavic, 2022).

Nonetheless, there seems to be a persistent perception that unions are stodgy entities that primarily represent their members' interests. Accordingly, some researchers are arguing that young people may well be "lost for the labor movement because of the perception that they favor other causes and different forms of collective action" (Cha et al., 2018: 453). That is why this fusion of union activism and social movements might appeal to young people. In other words, social unionism, with its emphasis on a more inclusive, participatory and socially conscious approach, is emerging as a potential catalyst for advancing the engagement of young individuals in the labour movement. Although this trajectory seems to be evolving, social movements and grassroots organizations are for the time being gaining popularity and, if not surpassing, at least temporarily overshadowing traditional unionism.

To summarize, there are compelling reasons for finding out whether British youth prefer acting collectively through informal grassroots initiatives or through union-led actions. We suggest that they may find informal grassroots collective action to be more attractive, appealing, effective and motivating than union-led efforts. Therefore, we will test the following hypotheses:

> H1: There is a positive relationship between the informal grassroots initiative (as opposed to the union-led one) aimed at advancing gig-economy workers' rights and young Britons' attitudes toward this initiative.

> H2: There is a positive relationship between the informal grassroots initiative (as opposed to the union-led one) aimed at advancing gig-economy workers' rights and young Britons' intention to join this initiative.

> H3: There is a positive relationship between the informal grassroots initiative (as opposed to the union-led one) aimed at advancing gig-economy workers' rights and young Britons' assessment of its impact on the government.

> H4: There is a positive relationship between the informal grassroots initiative (as opposed to the union-led one) aimed at advancing gig-economy workers' rights and young Britons' intention to spread information about this initiative.

3. Research Method

3.1 Design of the Study

To achieve our objective, we conducted a two-stage study. The first stage took the form of a questionnaire and had the aim of selecting a group of participants who perceived social and political activism as an important part of their lives. The second stage was a controlled online investigation into whether attitudes, intention to join, impact on government policy and intention to recommend were different for different project initiators (union versus grassroots organization). The research protocol, containing the study's details, was approved by the faculty's ethics committee. We recruited the participants—all UK citizens born between 1997 and 2004—via Prolific, a specialized crowd-sourcing platform for academic research (Peer et al., 2021). The data were collected in two stages: in December 2022 and March 2023 (i.e., at a time when the UK

experienced a cost-of-living crisis due to high food and energy prices, as well as a series of strikes organized by public-sector unions). A two-stage study would provide more robust results and enable us to include only those respondents who prioritized social activism. All of the participants were paid to complete the questionnaire. Eligibility criteria included age (participants born between 1997 and 2004, i.e., 18-25 years old), residence in the United Kingdom, fluency in English and non-membership in a labour union. Admittedly, this absence of direct union experience raises questions about how our participants developed their views on unions. It could be argued that they, like most individuals of the public who pay any attention to such matters, often associate unions with strikes, demonstrations and protests—topics that frequently make headlines. While this association is valid, it is crucial to acknowledge that people form their attitudes not solely through personal experiences but also through exposure to the experiences of others. This is especially true for young people, who are more oriented toward "experience goods." Also pivotal are such factors as education and the portrayal of unions in traditional media. As previously noted, opinions on social media have become increasingly influential in shaping views, in line with the evolving dynamics of information dissemination in contemporary society.

3.2 Procedure and Stimuli

In the first stage of the study (December 2022), we surveyed the participants about their orientation toward social and political activism, using a nine-item scale developed by Pascarella et al. (2012) (α=0.86). A total of 322 responses were collected. Ten responses were excluded, as the participants had failed to answer an attention-check question correctly. Subsequently, in March 2023, we used Prolific to contact a subset of participants from the original sample who had expressed a significant interest in social and political activism (n=174). They were invited to participate in a controlled online experiment, and 140 of them agreed to take part. For the second stage of the study, we created two fictional press notes that resembled brief news items from the *Daily Telegraph*. These notes were about an initiative to provide gig economy workers with sick pay, thereby advancing their rights. Importantly, all of the participants were explicitly informed at the outset of the questionnaire that the notes had been created solely for the study's purposes (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Press release describing an initiative by a labour union (on the left) and by a grassroots organization (on the right)

The 140 participants were randomly divided into two equal groups. Both groups received an identical introduction about the study's objectives. Subsequently, the participants were randomly assigned either to the union initiative or to the grassroots one. Each group was shown the same news note about an initiative to enhance gig economy rights. While the primary description and all the content remained consistent, the first group was informed that the initiative was led by a union, whereas the second group was informed that it originated from a grassroots organization. Following the presentation of the news notes, all of the participants were directed to an identical questionnaire. We asked them to rate (on a five-point Likert scale) their: 1) attitudes toward the initiative; 2) intention to join it; 3) assessment of its potential impact on government policy; and 4) intention to recommend it.

3.3 Measures and Demographics

To measure their attitudes toward the initiative, we used four items adapted from Bruner et al. (2001). To measure their intention to join the initiative, we used three items adapted from Lee et al. (2010). To measure their assessment of its potential impact on government policy, we used one item (i.e., "Indicate the extent to which you think the protests would be effective in influencing government leaders and policy makers") adapted from Hornsey et al. (2006). To measure their intention to recommend the initiative, we used two items (Bruner et al., 2001). We also controlled for gender, education and contract type (full-time vs part-time) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographics of Participants (*n*=140)

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Women	73	51.12
	Men	67	47.86
Education	Secondary	35	25.00
	University	91	65.00
	Other	14	10.00
Employment status	Full-time	73	52.14
	Part-time	23	16.43
	Other	44	31.42
Work experience	Less than 1 year	29	20.71
	1-3 years	55	39.29
	More than 3 years	56	40.00

4. Results

To check for the one-dimensionality of our multi-item constructs, we carried out exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The EFA revealed that all of the items loaded significantly onto their corresponding constructs with factor loadings above the recommended 0.7 (Table 2).

Table 2

Results of the EFA

Construct	Item	Loadings
Intention to join the initiative (Cronbach's α=0.919)	IJI1 Given the chance, I predict that I would join this initiative.	0.892
	IJI2 Given the chance, I intend to join this initiative.	0.925
	IJI3 If given the opportunity, I would like to join this initiative.	0.862
Attitudes toward the initiative (Cronbach's α=0.860)	ATI1 My opinion of this initiative is: very bad/very good.	0.890
	ATI2 My opinion of this initiative is: negative/positive.	0.892
	ATI3 I like/dislike this initiative.	0.815
	ATI4 This initiative is: not interesting/very interesting.	0.774
Intention to recommend the initiative (Cronbach's α=0.812)	IRI1 I would recommend this initiative to my family and friends.	0.790
	IRI2 I would talk up this initiative to my friends and family.	0.864

To assess the effect of our press notes, we asked the participants to respond to the following statement: "Based on the information provided before, the initiative to advance gig economy workers' rights was launched by": (1="trade union"; 2="informal grassroots group of workers"; 0="I don't know"). As expected, there was a significant difference between the informal grassroots initiative (M=1.96; SD=0.266) and the control condition (M=1.01; SD= 0.208; $p< 0.001$). Therefore, we confirmed that the press notes had a significant effect.

In H1, we posited that British youth have a more favourable attitude toward the informal grassroots initiative as a means to advance gig economy workers' rights (rather than the union-led one). To that end, we performed a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), with their attitude as the dependent variable and the informal initiative as the independent variable. There was a statistically significant difference between the means of the two groups ($F(1,138)=17.561$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.114$). The participants seemed to perceive the grassroots initiative as more attractive (M=4.28; SD=0.55) than the union-led one (control condition) (M=3.72; SD=0.95). The effect remained robust after adding control variables, i.e., ($p=0.389$), work experience (0.507) and type of contract (0.517) as covariates into the model ($F (1,135) = 17.850$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.117$). These results provide empirical support for H1.

We also posited that British youth have a greater intention to join the informal grassroots initiative (rather than the union-led one) (H2). Again, we performed an ANOVA, with their intention to join as the dependent variable and the grassroots initiative as the independent variable. Contrary to our a priori assumption, there was a non-significant difference between the means of the two groups ($F (1,138)=0.318$, $p=0.574$, $\eta^2=0.002$). The participants did not seem to differ in their intention to join either initiative. Thus, H2 was not supported.

We then posited that British youth believe that the informal grassroots initiative would have a greater impact on government policy to advance gig economy workers' rights (rather than the union-led one) (H3). Again, we conducted an ANOVA with their assessment of the effectiveness of the grassroots initiative as the dependent variable and the grassroots initiative as the independent variable. There was a statistically significant difference between the means of the two groups ($F(1,138)=11.918$, $p< 0.001$, $\eta^2=0.079$). The participants seemed to perceive the informal initiative (M=3.61; SD=0.87) as less effective than the union-led one (M=4.09; SD=0.74) in terms of impact on government policy. The effect remained robust after adding the control variables, i.e., gender (p=0.377), work experience (0.459) and type of contract (0.438) as covariates into the model ($F(1,135)=11.807$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.080$). Although H3 as such was unsupported, there seemed to be a significant difference in the perceived effectiveness of the initiatives, with the union-led initiative being seen as more impactful than the informal one.

Finally, we posited that British youth have a greater intention to recommend the informal grassroots initiative as a means to advance gig economy workers' rights (rather than the union-led one) (H4). To test the relationship, we once more conducted an ANOVA, with their intention to recommend as the dependent variable and the grassroots initiative as the independent variable. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups (F $(1,138)$=8.997, p=0.003 η^2=0.061). This result remained robust after adding the control variables, i.e., gender (p=0.082), work experience (0.083) and type of contract (0.732) as covariates into the model (F$(1,135)$= 9.503, p=0.002, η^2=0.066). The participants seemed to differ in their intention to recommend the initiative, with British youth being more likely to recommend the grassroots one. Hence, H4 was supported.

5. Discussion

The findings, admittedly, are not straightforward. We found that British youth had a more favourable opinion of the informal grassroots initiative as a means to advance gig economy workers' rights, rather than the union-led one (H1). This finding implies that informal types of collective action may be more attractive to today's youth than structured, formalized ones, such as union membership. From a certain point of view, this finding backs the view—much-discussed in the existing literature—that, in an age of social media, alternative forms of engagement are likely to gain importance (Cha et al., 2018). However, British youth showed no significant difference in their intentions to join either initiative (H2). In other words, while young people may well view informal grassroots initiatives more positively than formalized ones, it remains unclear whether they are truly willing to participate in collective action. On this point, it is worth remembering that, according to the theory of planned behaviour, intention is the best predictor of behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, additional research is needed.

Crucially, British youth were more likely to recommend the grassroots initiative than the union-led one (H4). This can be attributed to their more favourable perception of the former and the greater convenience of sharing content on social-media platforms. This, *mutatis mutandis*, is further evidence that digital technology (Creevey et al., 2022) plays a key role in the lives of Generation Z. Similarly, our discovery of their concern about the challenges facing the "precariat" empirically validates the view that contemporary youth prioritize social justice issues, in line with existing research on their values. That said, our participants assessed the union-led initiative as potentially having a greater impact on government policy than the informal one (H3). From a certain point of view, this finding is consistent with the one that established institutions, such as unions, are typically viewed as more trustworthy and proficient in achieving their goals (Warren et al., 2014; Frangi et al., 2017).

The above finding points to an apparent contradiction: young workers seem to believe that unions can be more effective than grassroots organizations in engaging with governments, yet, concurrently, they believe that traditional labour unions and their methods of engagement are unappealing. In other words, a belief in the efficacy of unions in shaping government policy coexists with a skeptical attitude toward traditional structures. This demographic seems to want a more modern, adaptive approach to collective concerns, in line with the characteristics often associated with Generation Z: innovation, flexibility and preference for dynamic, inclusive methods.

6. Contributions and Implications

The above contradiction shows that traditional labour organizations need to keep evolving and align with the changing expectations of the younger workforce, perhaps by taking a leaf out of the book of alt-union associations (Milkman, 2020) and by truly pursuing a trajectory toward social unionism (Parker & Alakavuklar, 2018; Turner & Cornfield, 2007). In practice, unions should reorient their priorities, combine conventional strategies with innovative approaches and adopt adaptable operational frameworks driven by social media.

With this in mind, unions should redouble their efforts to counter the perception that their sole purpose is to advance the interests of their members. In other words, "unions need to be seen as dealing with questions of social justice that extend well beyond the unionized workforce, rather than advocating only for a narrow interest group" (Fantasia & Voss, 2004: 131). This aim means, *inter alia*, prioritizing issues that matter to people in irregular work. Thus, unions should double down on cooperation with alt-union associations and grassroots movements, in line with Kelly's (1998) "fusion thesis." In so doing, they should publicize their willingness to join protests against the abusive treatment of non-unionized members of the "precariat." At the same time, they ought to emphasize their resources and significant experience in mobilizing people and, crucially, in influencing labour legislation, such as a controversial proposal to make union membership the default option for new workers (Harcourt et al., 2022). This new agenda would show their determination not only to walk the talk but also to gain the trust of the public, including young people.

Considering Gen Z's affinity for social media, unions should intensify their efforts to utilize platforms like Facebook, TikTok and YouTube (Simms et al., 2019). This does not imply that social media should be the sole avenue for disseminating their message and expressing their identity. Nonetheless, given the limited presence of unions in sectors with a significant Gen Z workforce, social media are emerging as a vital tool to help unions engage with younger workers (Houghton & Hodder, 2021).

Unions should also remember that the "battle of ideas is also a battle of words" (Hyman, 2007: 207). The linguistic framing of their message will be crucial. In today's world, the message has to be conveyed in a language that Generation Z will understand (Smith & Duxbury, 2020). Additionally, the messenger will also matter. Since the opinions of young people are shaped more than ever by their peers, web-savvy young union members should be used to reach out to their non-unionized colleagues. Young influencers will be key to championing the causes and values of organized labour.

In today's cyberspace, where style and visuals are increasingly taking precedence over substance and text (Creevey et al., 2022), it is crucial for unions to create visually appealing messages that resonate with Generation Z employees. Since this demographic is drawn to short clips and videos that can be easily shared on the Internet, unions should consider launching campaigns that are similar to those of the U.S. Army. Celebrities have been used to promote enlistment through Hollywood-style videos, such as the one created by Katy Perry titled "Part of Me." Unions should consider adopting comparable approaches to encourage young workers to join their ranks, while making appropriate adjustments.

To recapitulate, this paper enriches the field of research on the relationship between labour unions and young people (e.g., Aleks et al., 2021; Kovács et al., 2017), while advancing our understanding of how Generation Z views different forms of engagement in collective action (Cha et al., 2018). Admittedly, the evidence gleaned from our findings remains inconclusive and even contains, as discussed earlier, an apparent contradiction.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

It is important to consider the key limitations of this research work. Above all, it is limited to a specific age group (young people) at a particular point in time. Nor can we state that our findings reveal unique characteristics that can differentiate this generation from others. Although our participants may be classified as belonging to the Gen Z category, we cannot conclude that their attitudes and preferences are attributable *solely* to their generational cohort. We have simply investigated young people who happen to fall within the Generation Z demographic.

In addition, the sample size is small. There are also concerns about the representativeness of the participants in comparison to the broader population, as well as the distribution of the sample. Given the way we gathered our data, a possible limitation is self-selection bias. Relatedly, the study relies on self-reported data from participants we recruited through an online platform in one specific country. They were also compensated for their participation.

Given these limitations, it is crucial to interpret and generalize our findings with caution. Future researchers may consider using different recruitment methods to achieve a more diverse and representative sample. Furthermore, investigations based on larger and more diverse samples, such as data collected from the U.S. and other European countries, could provide valuable insights. In sum, the overarching idea would be to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Future researchers should especially ascertain, either through similar controlled online experiments or through field experiments, the factors influencing young people's actual intention to engage in certain forms of collective action.

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