Digital Platforms as a Successful Tool to Mobilize Collective Action

Melda Gül Doğan (S4948815)

University of Groningen, Campus Fryslân

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Anna Mikhaylovskaya

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that *Digital platforms can be successful tools to mobilize collective action* by countering criticisms of its inability to mobilize collective action. I do this by applying pathways to participation in traditional activism to digital activism, looking into significant predictors of participation, e.g. building collective identity, feelings of empowerment, influencing out groups and expressing core values. The criticisms I will respond to are negative consequences due to slacktivism as well as digital platforms' inability to mobilize collective action due to weak tie relationships and non hierarchical structures. I counter these criticisms by positing that negative consequences of low effort phenomena are overestimated and positive effects of digital activism such as raising awareness are overlooked, and arguing that weak tie relationships can build collective identity and coordinate activism efforts.

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Introduction

Activist utilization of digital platforms through sharing videos, pictures and messages were significant in such events as the Green Movement in Iran and election protests in Belarus. These movements and protests are also referred to as the Twitter revolution in Iran and the Telegram revolution in Belarus (Herasimenka et. al, 2020; Schleifer, 2009). The utilization of online media platforms for activism is gaining prominence, as new mediums and tools are now common in most activism initiatives. We cannot talk about the movements and protests of Iran and Belarus without looking at the way in which digital platforms such as Twitter and Telegram were used to mobilize collective action or raise awareness amongst national and international audiences (Herasimenka et. al, 2020; Schleifer, 2009). This also applies to movements such as the Black Lives Matter Movement in which digital media were used to share videos of racialized police violence (Auxier, 2020). These examples portray the emerging role of digital media and digital tools in activism amid a changing public sphere.

Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere has come a long way, as the emergence of the internet has had transformative effects on it. The public sphere is defined by Habermas as "...a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas et. al, 1974). In the public sphere, it is crucial that freedom of assembly and association and freedom of expression is guaranteed to all citizens. The expression of opinion and the communication of citizens in the public sphere is strengthened by media tools such as printed press, television, radio (Habermas et. al, 1974) and currently social media. The traditional information model of mass media has changed drastically as social media employs a many to many instead of a one to many information model (Mills et. al, 2012). Thus, every user on social media can both be a producer and consumer of

information and reach a larger audience. In a quickly changing landscape of technological innovation, it is important to consider these transformative changes that social media may or may not have on aspects of the public sphere. This is especially the case when 60% of the population makes use of social media platforms and when one typical user spends around two hours every day on social media (Ali, 2023). These platforms can be used for many purposes – as a way to connect with friends and family, express opinions and as a form of entertainment.

This multipurpose use of social media may put into question the significance of digital activism. When there is so much digital content made for mere entertainment is there any room for online political engagement? However, where there are cute cats, there is activism - at least that is what Zukerman's Cute Cat Theory poses. This theory is explained by the conceptualization Zuckerman makes of Web 2.0, which refers to new digital tools on the internet. These new tools have allowed people to share cute cat pictures with ease on the internet. Web 2.0 is then not only useful for people that want to share cute pictures of their cats, but also for people that want to talk about political affairs and advocate for change. Blogs or tools made specifically for activist purposes are an easy target for authoritarian governments. Access to these can be fully blocked. However, when it comes to access to a medium in which other content is shared as well - such as cute cats - it makes it more difficult. This is because fully blocking access to these mediums makes apolitical or unaware people aware of the political issues at hand. Another way for authoritarian regimes to block out unwanted activism is by censoring Web 2.0 or social media platforms. This, however, turns out to be difficult and costly. It also does not stop all forms of activism, since activists find new and innovative ways to reach their audience. For instance by using different codes or by changing wording. This shows us that activists do not choose their tools on social media, but

work with what they have in new ways (Zuckerman, 2008). This makes the topic of digital activism an even more interesting and relevant topic to explore further.

Even though digital platforms and tools are important in the context of social movements and activism, they have been heavily criticized and their actual effectiveness has been questioned. For instance, a criticism of Belarus' Telegram revolution states that mobilization of the election protests were not restricted to a single app and activists used a plethora of methods in their collective action (Herasimenka et. al, 2020). Narratives of the Telegram revolution in Belarus and the Twitter revolution in Iran are viewed to be overestimating the importance of digital media and underestimating that of different methods utilized by activists (Herasimenka et. al, 2020; Morozov, 2009). The overly positive narrative of digital mediums in activism has also given rise to slacktivism criticism, which refer to a feel good low effort online activism. This criticism along with other criticisms question digital platforms ability to mobilize collective action.

There are some words and concepts that will be used frequently in this thesis, including activism, collective action, digital activism, online activism and digital platforms. The concept of activism will be explained thoroughly in the first section. Important to note here is that activism will be used interchangeably with collective action and collective efforts. In order to better distinguish digital activism from traditional activism, different words for digital activism and non-digital activism will be used. Digital activism will also be referred to as online activism and non-digital activism will be referred to as traditional activism, onsite activism and offline activism. When referring to digital platforms, social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are meant. Specifically, any accessible online media platform that allows users to display pictures, videos and interact with a large number of people. The

digital tools mentioned in this thesis refer to digital functions on digital platforms such as liking, sharing, commenting, online petitions, hashtags and much more. These digital tools will all be talked about in the context of digital activism, which refers to any form of activism on digital platforms.

In this thesis I will debunk the criticisms of digital activism's ineffectiveness and argue that *Digital platforms can be successful tools to mobilize collective action*. I will do this by giving an overview of fundamental concepts and significance of activism and pathways that lead to participation in the first section. Thereafter, I will address the criticisms of digital platforms' effectiveness in mobilizing collective action in the beginning of the second section. I will counter these criticisms by demonstrating that digital platforms play an important role in raising awareness and uniting a large group of people, which are important predictors of participation in collective action. Finally, I will give some limitations of my arguments and recommendations for further research in the last section.

1. Background of Activism

1.1 Fundamental Concepts and Significance of Activism

The term "activism" was coined around the 70s, describing it as the ability to take action to have an impact on society. Herein, the makeability of society by activism is a crucial aspect in the definition of it, as the course of history is greatly influenced by activism's ability to effectuate social change. The endeavor for change is usually accompanied by direct action in which citizens struggle to change a system or society to their liking by using different methods of action. This pursuit is, however, not always progressive in its nature and can be driven by reactionary tendencies as well (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007).

Even though the term activism appeared only around 50 years ago, its principles predate its formal definition (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007). Citizens have struggled in efforts to change or reshape society for thousands of years. Both violent and peaceful, successful and unsuccessful, activism campaigns have marked the trajectory of history all over the world. Through protest, revolutions and other forms of resistance people have fought for rights or overall change of a society. For instance, the slave revolts led by Spartacus in ancient Rome (Whelan & Lambrecht, 2020), the political revolutions of the Enlightenment in the United States and France (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017), Gandhi's Salt March against British rule in India (Sellars & Oltvai, 2016), and the #MeToo Movement that emerged on social media (Levy & Mattson, 2019). While success in some of these movements is debatable, all of them have achieved a form of change in their own way.

The slave revolts of Spartacus are perceived to be a failure as these uprisings were defeated by Roman armies. However, some historians believe that these revolts have had a significant impact on the slaveowners perception of their slaves. It is argued by some historians that slave owners' view of slaves changed, since they saw them as beings with reason and souls more equal to themselves (Whelan & Lambrecht, 2020). In the example of the political revolutions of the Enlightenment age we can talk of great change that came forth, as these revolutions laid the foundations for democracies in France, the United States and England (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017). Similarly, Gandhi's civil disobedience acts, such as his Salt March, have had a great influence on the Indian independence from British rule (Sellars & Oltvai, 2016). Lastly, the #MeToo Movement is a relatively recent movement shedding light on the sexual harassment issues women are dealing with. The movement grew prominence in 2017 on Twitter even though it was coined before that by a

community activist called Tarana Burke. It has raised awareness on the topic of sexual violence against women and has also given rise to onsite collective action and criminal court cases directed at sexual harrasment cases (Levy & Mattson, 2019). These examples show us the significance of activism for society. It has played - and is playing - an important role in the abolition of slavery, the development of democracy, gaining independence and gaining justice for gender-based violence and many more cases.

Some special features of activism that sets it apart from conventional politics is the use of creative methods to reach its aims. If we take the example of a representative democracy, the conventional political methods used to effectuate change include electoral campaigning, voting, law passing and lobbying politicians. It is not unlikely for activism to make use of these conventional politics. For instance, the labor movement could make use of conventional political tools by supporting the labor party in electoral campaigning. However, conventional political methods do not always align with the aim of activists, especially not when activists are critical of conventional politics. In these cases, those with less power are not able to use conventional political methods to reach their aims. They must be creative and use unconventional methods. These differ per society, as conventionality is dependent on context. What is conventional in one context can be unconventional in another (Anderson & Herr, 2007). For instance, an individual critiquing their government in a country that assures free speech can be seen as a conventional act. However, in a country that heavily penalizes governmental critique, this is an unconventional act. Or raising awareness on homophobia is conventional in a country that prioritizes LGBTQIA+ in its political agenda, however unconventional in a country that prohibits homosexual relations. These examples show that

conventionality is based on context which can have an influence in shaping the different methods used in activism.

In traditional activism, there are a plethora of different methods and tools that can be used to reach desired objectives. These methods can be shaped by violent acts such as beatings, vandalism and wars as well as nonviolent methods, which can be divided into nonviolent protest and persuasion, non-cooperation and nonviolent intervention. The first type of nonviolent action is nonviolent protest and persuasion and is considered to be symbolic as it expresses solidarity with or disapproval of a certain opinion, act, policy, government or group. The success rate of this method is dependent on the aim of the activist campaign. For instance if the campaign's aim is to influence opponents or other third parties, this method could be considered successful. Noncooperation is another method of nonviolent action that uses methods of noncooperation to reach desired objectives. These methods are more powerful as they can strip away or reduce important sources of power of the opposing groups. Lastly, nonviolent intervention is a method in which active disruption of the status quo is caused. Similar to non-cooperation, nonviolent interventions can be quite effective as they disrupt the opponents' sources of power. They are even considered to be more disruptive in the short term compared to non-cooperation. However, the methods of non-cooperation and nonviolent action are also at most risk of extreme repression from the side of the opponents, which brings their effectiveness into question (Sharp & Paulson, 2005).

Identifying successful methods in activism should be done with meticulous care, as many factors should be taken into account. Possible considerations include the initial aim of the movement, the political methods available, their implications and creative methods that go beyond conventional politics. Creative methods all have their strengths and weaknesses, but

we should consider them all to be relevant and powerful tools in activism as their pursuit is directed towards social change. Even when movements do not reach their aims, their pursuit towards change through activist methods such as protest, sit-ins or boycotts move in the right direction. Even if this mobilization of people is rather small and inefficient to reach social change, the mere endeavor is significant. Thus, I argue that digital tools on digital platforms are a part of these valuable creative methods and could effectuate mobilization of collective action effectively, despite the criticism it has gotten. Important to note here, is that the focus will be on the successfulness of digital activism to mobilize collective action and not on its successfulness to bring about social change.

1.2 Pathways to Participation in Collective Action

To understand the role that digital platforms play in mobilizing collective action it is crucial to understand why people engage in collective action in the first place. There are different approaches and traditions in conceptualizing the pathways that lead to collective action. A dominant approach in conceptualizing motivations of potential participation is based on the weighing of costs and benefits. In one of the steps of Klandermans' (1998) model of social movement participation, this cost- benefit approach to participation is used. He develops a model that explains what motivates people to participate in collective action with the combination of collective action theory and expectancy-value theory. The theory of expectancy-value posits that individuals are more likely to engage in behavior if the desired outcome is valued higher. Alongside this theory, the collective action theory posits the expected benefits that can result from participation. When these benefits are present, the likelihood of participation is predicted to be higher.

The three motives Klandermans' talks about are the collective motive, normative motive and reward motive. The collective motive is driven by the collective benefits that are gained through the achievement of collective goals. Once these benefits are achieved all members of the disadvantaged group profit from it. However, this could lead to problems of free riding, in which individuals choose to not participate in the hopes that the rest of the collective will accomplish the desired change which they could profit off of without having to put in any effort. Normative motives as a factor of participation are about the reactions that others have on one's participation. The participation of an individual is then dependent on the reactions of family and friends. The reward motive reflects a more personal cost- benefit analysis in which individuals chose to participate based on personal costs such as losing time or personal benefits such as networking (Stürmer & Simon, 2011; Mcveigh & Klandermans, 1998).

A great limitation that comes with these cost- benefit analysis for motivations to participate in collective action is its over individualistic nature. This view of humans and their motivations to participate in collective action has a few issues with it. Firstly, it does not consider the significance of the human as a social being and how feelings of togetherness can be a great motivator. Secondly, it assumes that humans are rational beings that are always able to perceive all the costs and benefits and weigh them successfully against each other. However, humans are rationally flawed and have a lot of different biases that shape behaviors and decisions (Wheeler, 2018). Lastly, it does not explain historic examples of people that have participated in high-risk collective action, ignoring the fact that people have and are risking their lives to common causes. So, higher costs and risks that come with participation in a collective action does not always lead to a decrease in participation. Thus, the cost-benefit

analysis is not a sufficient approach to explain the motivations of people to participate in collective action. A more nuanced approach is needed to better understand the motivations of individuals. Consequently, I will explore motivations to participate in collective action by looking at determining factors such as collective identity - especially politicized collective identity -, feelings of empowerment that emerge from collective identity and finally a reassessment of effectiveness.

Stürmer and Simon (2011) have explored an additional pathway model of motivation leading to participation in collective action, which is the social identity approach. The social identity approach focuses on the transition of individual behavior to collective behavior. Which creates a new collective identity making these social movement phenomena possible as well as furthering potential participation. Opposed to an individual or personal identity, a collective identity includes other group members in the perception of the self. For instance, an individual that takes part in the collective identity of a particular group such as a homosexual man would include himself as a group member by saying "we" when referring to him including his fellow gay male group members.

This identification with the collective group is dependent on previous experiences that color the importance individuals attach to being a part of the collective. Another important aspect that strengthens the sense of collective identity are impermeable intergroup distinctions. This fosters "us" and "them" distinctions, enhancing the feeling of belonging in a collective. In-group relations are also an important aspect. Sharing the same disadvantages and thus the same needs and interests are important for collective identity. Overall in-group cohesion, in-group trust and cooperation are other important factors of in-group relations that support collective identity. Finally, Stürmer and Simon found a specific collective identity to be of

great significance as a predictor of collective action, namely collective politicized identity. For instance, an individual that identifies as a particular activist such as a feminist or an activist in general will be more likely to continue participating in collective action than an individual that only feels part of a disadvantaged group (Stürmer & Simon, 2011).

From the emergence of collective identities, feelings of empowerment and encouragement may occur, which motivates individuals to participate further in collective action. Drury et. al (2005) explains this with the notion of collective self-objectification (CSO). He explains this as "Action that actualizes participants' social identity against the power of the dominant groups" (Drury et. al, 2005). This definition has similarities to the collective identity concept explained above. CSO focuses on the actions that create these collective identities, specifically against the oppositional group of social movements. As explained above, strict boundaries of intergroup relations support the creation of a collective identity. This also applies to the strong in-group relations, in-group cohesion and in-group trust that supports collective identity. In group unity was found to be an important predictor of CSO as well as empowerment. Unity in the group had to do with feelings of solidarity in the group, having the same feelings and supporting a cause as a collective. However, an important consideration of the study of Drury et. al (2005) is that continued participation is not merely based on CSO, empowerment and unity, but also on maintaining positive energy in participation. They suggest spreading the burden of responsibility and commitment to the specific collective effort to sustain positive energy in collective action participation (Drury, 2005).

A common conception of why people engage in collective action is that of perceived effectiveness. This means that people are more likely to engage in collective action efforts

when they perceive the action to achieve effective change. Studies regarding the effect of perceived effectiveness in collective action are divided (Hornsey et. al, 2006). Hornsey et. al (2006) shows that this division can be explained by the way that effectiveness was defined. It found that effectiveness was rather narrowly defined when solely focusing on effectiveness in terms of achieving change. Alternative criteria of conceptualizing effectiveness that Hornsey et. al (2006) proposes is influencing the public and out groups, constructing an oppositional movement and expressing core values of the movement. These criteria conceptualize effectiveness based on factors that predict (further) participation in collective action. Thus, it was found that building an oppositional movement, expressing core values as well as influencing the public were important factors in influencing intentions to participate in future collective action.

For members that were part of an organized collective, building an oppositional movement was more significant than for unaligned individuals that were not members of the organized group. This was an important predictor of further participation. However, for nonmembers, factors such as influencing the public and expressing their values were more important for further participation. Lastly, just as in the study of Stürmer and Simon (2011), this study found that politicized collective identification was a strong predictor of participation in collective action.

The pathways that lead to participation in collective action include various factors beyond cost-benefit analysis. Important aspects were topics of identity, specifically that of politicized collective identity. The feeling of belonging in collective identities then gave rise to phenomena of social movement participation. Additionally, out of these collective identities positive feelings such as empowerment and encouragement emerged, which are important

predictors of participation. Lastly, different conceptualization of effectiveness has added new factors predictive of participation in social movements. These were influencing out-groups and the public, expressing values and building an oppositional movement.

The findings of these studies give us a better view of predictors and important factors that mobilize collective action. With the changing nature of the public sphere in the digital age, worries started arising around the legitimacy of digital platforms as tools to mobilize collective action. There is a growing aversion towards this digital tool used by activists to mobilize collective action (Morozov, 2011; White, 2017; Gladwell 2010). However, in the next section I will show how the pathways to participation outlined in this section can be applied to digital platforms as well. I will do this by first countering the criticism of ineffectiveness of digital platforms to mobilize collective action in the next section.

2. Digital Platforms Can be a Successful Tool to Mobilize Collective Action
2.1 Criticisms of Digital Platforms as Successful Tools to Mobilize Collective Action

The emergence of digital platforms as playgrounds for activists has been met with a lot of praise and admiration. This is evident from the current narratives in which technologies have played a role in activism. For instance, consider the renaming of protests and movements in Iran and Belarus as Twitter revolutions and Telegram revolutions (Herasimenka et. al, 2020; Schleifer, 2009). This optimistic view of technological innovations in activism was followed by skepticism. In this section I will present the leading author's that are critical of the ability of digital platforms to be meaningful grounds for collective action.

Firstly, the terms of slacktivism and clicktivism are crucial for criticisms against the effectiveness of online activism. Morozov defines slacktivism as "...an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact" (Morozov, 2009). This term

is synonymous with the term of clicktivism that is focused on the obsession of signing online petitions, liking, sharing and commenting on online posts as a form of activism (George & Leidner, 2019; White, 2017). Both terms see these forms of activism that take place on digital platforms as low-effort activism that merely produce the illusion of meaningful change for the people participating in it. The low effort phenomena emerging from these forms of activism, are perceived to cause adverse consequences (Morozov, 2011). Micah White, writer and activist, states that these low effort phenomena can damage valuable offline political movements by unfairly competing with them (White, 2017). Potential participants might turn away from traditional activism to participate in low effort activism forms, as it is easier than the former. This is due to the fact that it is a form of activism that you can do from the comfort of your own home. It is a form of activism in which you do not have to risk getting arrested or harassed by the opposition or the authorities. Thus, there are great worries that this low effort and low risk nature of slacktivism and clicktivism may cause the decrease of potential highly engaged activists (White, 2017; Morozov, 2009).

Additionally, Gladwell (2010) argues that digital activism could never be as effective and impactful as traditional forms of activism due to its weak tie relationships and non hierarchical structure. He talks about these arguments in his article "Why the revolution will not be tweeted". Throughout the article he displays the components that have made traditional activism so successful by showcasing the successful case of the Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins. These sit-ins were a response to segregated areas in the US, specifically to a "Whites Only" lunch counter in Greensboro, where four black students occupied the "Whites Only" lunch counter as a form of nonviolent protest. The sit-in is a great example of high risk

activism, in which black students had to endure threats of verbal violence as well as potential judicial penalty. These high risk activism forms, Gladwell argues, can lead to actual change.

But what makes people capable of these high risk activism efforts? Gladwell identifies that capability of high risk activism participation emerges out of high motivation and personal connection to the case (Gladwell, 2010). McAdam (1986) found that the latter was an important indicator for continued participation in the civil rights movement underlying the lunch counter sit-ins. Gladwell calls this the strong tie phenomenon of what successful movements and activism is built on. Close relationships with friends and family are the foundation of most movements and revolutionary actions of which he mentions a few like the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, demonstrations for the fall of the Berlin wall and the Greensboro lunch sit-ins. Another important aspect for the succession of activism according to Gladwell is the clear hierarchical organization of traditional activism. In the case of reaching consensus, setting goals and coming up with a successful strategy to reach those goals, it is crucial for groups to be disciplined and have clear authority roles. The spreading of the lunch counter sit-ins to other states also did not happen spontaneously. Established activist groups with similar goals and values took the responsibility in spreading it to their own environment afterwards (Gladwell, 2010).

Gladwell argues that activism that operates on social media does not have these strong tie phenomenon and hierarchical organization that were so important in actualizing change, spreading the movement and maintaining participation. The networks and relations we have on social media are built on weak tie relationships, Gladwell argues. For example, Facebook is seen as a place to manage acquaintances and a way to keep in touch with people you otherwise wouldn't see as much. These weak tie relationships are not necessarily bad, as they can be a

great source for new ideas. However, Gladwell argues, weak tie relationships in themselves can never build hierarchical organization and high risk activism (Gladwell, 2010). His argument for this is similar to that of slacktivism and clicktivism. He argues that we can only convince these weak-tie relations to take action by requesting something low effort, such as signing a petition or sharing a post. Hierarchical organization is also difficult on online platforms as they are open spaces in which everyone has an equal say (Gladwell, 2010).

So, the main reasons why digital platforms are unsuitable to mobilize action, according to critics, is that it favors low effort action, is built on weak tie relations and due to an absence of hierarchical organization.

2.2 Countering Criticisms: Digital Platforms as Successful Tools to Mobilize Collective Action

In this section I will argue that *Digital platforms can be a successful tool to mobilize collective action* by arguing against the criticism that I have presented in the section above. I will counter the criticisms of effectiveness regarding digital platforms' inability to mobilize collective action by proving that negative effects of low effort phenomena are overestimated and positive effects such as raising awareness are overlooked and proving that in the presence of weak tie relationships collective identity and hierarchical organization of activist communities can be built on digital platforms. These arguments will support the thesis statement *Digital platforms can be a successful tool to mobilize collective action*.

2.2.1 Overestimating Negative Effects and Overlooking Positive Effects

The first criticism against digital platforms as a successful tool to mobilize collective action are slacktivism or clicktivism phenomena. These concepts describe online activism as low

effort and low risk forms of activism that give participants the illusion that they are creating meaningful change. The consequences of this phenomenon are the potential harm they could have on would-be participants, who might favor this form of activism over activism that requires a great amount of effort and will lead to more meaningful change (White, 2017; Morozov, 2009). This concern is legitimate because these forms of activism have manifested themselves in digital tools on platforms. Liking, sharing and online signature functions have allowed individuals to participate in social change without having to put in a lot of effort. However, this potential concern is overestimated and neglects the positive effects of online activism.

Online activism can be a great tool to raise awareness for an activism campaign. A relevant example of this would be the usage of hashtags. Just like liking and sharing posts, the hashtag(#) can be an effective tool to disseminate activist content on digital platforms. It has the potential to make the specific hashtag content go viral which can lead to on site collective action in cases of activistic purpose. Just like other digital tools, it could engender slacktivism and clicktivism. However, even slacktivism appropriation of hashtags could support the function of raising awareness in activism campaigns. As these slacktivism usages amplify virality of the campaign, which can reach a larger group of people (Di Carlo, 2023).

This was the case in the #ChallengeAccepted case of Turkey. The initial campaign was dedicated to raise awareness around the subject of femicides in Turkey with the hashtag #ChallengeAccepted. The hashtag was also used for slacktivism purposes. An example of slacktivism usage in this particular campaign, is when the hashtag was used without a specific case of femicide in Turkey. Even though the campaign was not destined for these slacktivist usages, they did amplify the virality which increased the awareness surrounding the campaign. The slacktivist uses also didn't take focus away from the campaign, as engaged individuals

redirected the focus to the actual case by criticizing slacktivist uses. Dissemination of the campaign is significant because it could lead to potential on-site collective change, which further continues the movement's quest for social change. This was for instance the case in the #MeToo Movement that gained prominence on Twitter and continued to call for change on the street and in court (Di Carlo, 2023; Levy & Mattsson, 2019).

Raising awareness on desired social change is an established method of activism. It is the first type of nonviolent action that is used abundantly by activists. In section 1 this type was classified as protest and persuasion, referring to the act of expressing solidarity or disapproval of a certain opinion, act, policy, government or group (Sharp & Paulson, 2005). This expression of desired social change is not only valuable because of the addition of diversification of ideas and perspectives in the public sphere, but also because of their ability to motivate participation in collective action. Furthermore, the reassessment of effectiveness on participation by Hornsey et. al (2006) proved that other factors, including that of expressing core values and influencing out groups were important determinants of participation in collective action. These determinants were specifically relevant for nonmembers of organized groups (Hornsey et. al, 2006). In line with these findings, social media interactions do not have a direct influence on political participation but rather an indirect influence mediated by online political expression (De Zúñiga et. al, 2014). As argued above, digital tools such as hashtags can allow participants to express their opinions, influence out groups and thus raise awareness. Additionally, concerns of slacktivism in these online collective efforts do not harm this function of raising awareness but rather amplify its function. These functions of digital platforms allow the expression of opinion which can strengthen further participation. Thus, the platforms and their tools can then be successful to mobilize collective action.

The argument of slacktivism and clicktivism taking away from traditional forms of activism by unfairly competing with them is another argument that isn't built on a strong foundation. People that decide to turn away from traditional offline activism because of the availability of slacktivist forms of activism wouldn't have been committed to pursue collective action in the absence of slacktivism. It is important to consider that there might be a possibility for that argument to be true. However, this mere possibility of negative consequences does not take away from the potential that digital platforms have as important grounds for collective action. For instance, the fact that committed activists and movements can raise awareness and express activistic values of desired change on accessible digital media. As Shirky, a writer focused on the social and economic influence of the internet, puts it "...the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively" (Shirky, 2011). In this way slacktivism usage would not significantly subtract from traditional activism.

As mentioned in section 1, the use of digital platforms for activism is just one of the many unconventional methods activists use to reach specific activist aims, which differ per movement. For instance, the activist campaign of #ChallengeAccepted aim to raise awareness was achieved through the usage of hashtags. Other aims such as coordinating a large group to protest onsite could also be strengthened through social media. This was, for instance, the case for the protest against Estrada, the former corrupt president of the Philippines in 2001. Where citizens coordinated by text to protest against the evidence held back during his impeachment trial. A simple text of "Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk." had gathered over a million people over the next few days to protest the corrupt impeachment trial of Estrada (Shirky, 2011). The latter example

exhibits a new function of social media to successfully mobilize collective action, namely that of uniting a large group of people.

Arguments against the effectiveness of digital platforms to mobilize collective action based on slacktivism do not provide a solid ground. They merely overestimate its negative consequences and do not consider the positive effects it could have on collective action, such as raising awareness and - what I will argue in the next section - uniting a large group of people.

2.2.2 Fostering Collective identity and Coordination on Digital Platforms

Gladwell's argument of digital platforms inability to build movements due to weak tie phenomenon and a non hierarchical organization is too general of an assumption that needs further exploration. In the article of Gladwell "Why the revolution will not be tweeted", Gladwell takes the example of the four black students that started the Greensboro sit-ins as an example of a strong tie relationship leading to meaningful collective action. He supports his argument with McAdam's study on the civil rights movement and participation. In which it was found that a personal connection to the cause was a significant predictor of participation. This personal connection referred to the strong connection the participants had with other members in the civil rights movement. What Gladwell did not mention explicitly in his article was that the connection the participants had to other people in the movement were mostly based on the activist communities they had created, not on other pre-given relationships such as family bonds or friendships (McAdam, 1986; Billwasik, 2011). This proves that the creation and maintenance of social movements is not solely founded on strong tie relationships, but can also be built on weak tie relationships.

As McAdam's study makes clear, in traditional offline social movements and activism efforts, the building of an activist community is not solely dependent on pre-given relationships

(McAdam, 1986; Billwasik, 2011). This also applies to the case of activism communities on digital platforms. On these platforms there are a multitude of ways to find and connect with like minded individuals and coordinate different collective efforts. Exposure of activist campaigns on digital media platforms can particularly be significant in cases in which mainstream media such as television and radio do not cover collective action efforts. Thus, social media was especially important in the cases of the political protest of the Tahrir Square in Egypt (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) as well as the Gezi protest in Turkey (Haciyakupoglu & Zhang, 2015). Coordination of collective efforts are also not restricted to onsite action as the example of #ChallengeAccepted showed the potential for online activism campaigns, which could also lead to onsite participation as was the case with the #MeToo Movement (Di Carlo, 2023). The participants of this online campaign were also not built on strong tie relationships, but were characterized by geographically dispersed individuals connected by social media.

Another example that portrays the ability of digital platforms to unite activists and allow them to coordinate collective efforts through social media is the Occupy Movement. The emergence of this movement was made possible through digital communication and coordination efforts of fragmented connections spread around the United States mediated by social media platforms. The movement even started online as the founders depended on digital communication tools such as email for communication. After some time of strategizing and planning, the founders' email proposal for the occupation landed on social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit and Facebook, where it gained a lot of traction. Thereafter, greater efforts of coordination and organization around the occupation occurred (Billwasik, 2011; Schwarts, 2011). Online activity on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were found to be predictive of participation recruitment for in person involvement in the occupation and vice versa

(Bastos et. al, 2015). Social media platforms were crucial in spreading the movement to different states and Facebook pages were significant in the organization of occupations on local scales (Caren & Gaby, 2011). This example illustrates that even though the movement didn't start off with established strong ties, it created a new activist community through fragmented relationships that were mediated on digital platforms such as Twitter and Reddit. The example of the Occupy Movement shows that collective identity, which is a significant predictor of participation in collective action, can also be engendered on digital platforms.

In the Taksim Square protest in Turkey in 2013, social media also played a big role in protestors coordination effort as well as their ability to raise awareness on a global scale (Smith et. al, 2019). Smith et. al (2019) discovered that an important factor of activism on digital platforms that go beyond slacktivism is social media engagement, sense of empowerment and social stake. The latter - social stake - is considered to be the most significant factor in social media activism. Social stake refers to the responsibility and the support one feels for their social group which is enhanced by the visibility and accessibility of digital platforms. This means that individuals geographically distant from the protest felt a responsibility to disseminate information and support the protest on social media for their social group, which included friends, family but also the Turkish youth community in general (Smith et. al, 2019). These social groups are not only characterized by strong tie relationships in the case of friends and family but also a bigger social group that is built on weak tie relationships. Empowerment as another factor of social media engagement that goes beyond slacktivism purpose, followed from this social stake as well as from social relationships characterized by collaboration. Lastly, social media engagement was also a factor that allowed social media activism to go beyond slacktivism purposes. Factors that allowed participants to engage in online activism beyond slacktivism

included the ability of participants to disseminate information effectively, the ability of online presence opposed to physical presence and the positive outcomes for the movement (Smith et. al, 2019).

These examples demonstrate that weak tie relationships can play an important role in building and coordinating a social movement or activist campaign. Online interactions between weak tie relations are considered to be successful tools to foster civic engagement and can have mobilizing effects as they are usually text based and result driven (De Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2014). Social media platforms can be important grounds in fostering collective identity (Gerbaudo, 2012). This collective identity is a sense of togetherness is not necessarily based on personal connection but on the fact that problems, grievances, interest and needs are shared within a collective (Sturmer & Simon). Digital platforms are especially important in fostering collective identity between geographically dispersed individuals. They can bring like minded people that are geographically dispersed together, as evident from the Occupy Movement and the #ChallengeAccepted campaign. Collective identity is also endorsed through social media platforms as it allows individuals to enact their social stake in the case of the Taksim Square protest. This social stake and interpersonal connection mediated through social media can give rise to feelings of empowerment. Collective identity and feelings of empowerment are important predictors of collective action, and digital platforms endorse these factors. Therefore, it can be inferred that digital platforms can be successful tools to mobilize collective action.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this research that are important to acknowledge and address in further research.

As mentioned in 2.2, there is legitimacy in the worry of slacktivism in digital activism. I did not try to disprove that the slacktivism phenomenon doesn't occur at all. For my argument I proved that slacktivist phenomena were inconsequential in general assumptions of digital platforms' ineffectiveness to mobilize collective action. However, further research on the actual damage of this phenomenon is needed to measure if this concern is significant.

Another limitation that I have not explored further is the occurrence of echo chambers due to personalized algorithms and the effects it may have on political discourse. On digital platforms such as Twitter, users are often exposed to political views that are aligned with their existing beliefs (Garimella et. al, 2018). Echo chambers can restrict activist endeavors on digital platforms to disseminate to a larger audience that might have been interested in participating in the collective effort. It could, however, also be functional as it increases the probability of reaching the right audience. Interestingly, activist groups utilizing digital platforms for activism have recognized these limitations. Australian environmental activists have strategized different approaches to combat these limitations successfully (Calibeo & Hindmarsh, 2022).

Additionally the effects of fake news on social media activism is another limitation that wasn't further examined. Trust in information presented in activist campaigns is an important predictor of participation and engagement in activist endeavors. The possibility of fake news on social media platforms might demotivate users to engage with online collective action. However, just like the limitation of echo chambers, fake news is another limitation that activists such as the Australian environmentalist are strategically responding to (Calibeo & Hindmarsh, 2022). Furthermore, distrust of online information provided by users might be due to anonymous profiles (Campbell & Kwak, 2010). Social identification processes and overall heightened

personalization in online interactions is speculated to enhance trust in technologies provided on social media platforms (Haciyakupoglu & Zhang, 2015; Campbell & Kwak, 2010).

The digital divide is another potential topic of interest for this research that wasn't taken into account. In order to partake in digital activism, some form of digital literacy is needed. These digital inequalities - also referred to as the digital divide - could influence the potential of digital platforms to mobilize collective action, since functions of political expression are restricted to users that are competent in using digital tools (Schradie, 2019). This limitation, however, does not disprove the statement that digital platforms can be successful tools to mobilize collective action. It just posits that the ability to participate in online collective action is restricted to people that are technologically savvy.

Lastly, the examples in this research supporting my thesis statement do not fully represent digital activism. In this thesis I used digital activism cases that supported my thesis statement, focusing on examples that were successful in mobilizing collective action. However, there have been equally as many cases portraying digital platforms' inability to mobilize collective action (Shirky, 2011). Nevertheless, this does not take away from the fact that digital platforms are able to mobilize collective action.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued that *Digital platforms can be a successful tool to mobilize collective action*, responding to the criticism of ineffectiveness of digital platforms to bring about collective action. I proved that digital platforms are among many creative tools and methods successful in their endeavor for change as they have the ability to mobilize collective action through functions of raising awareness and fostering collective identity and collective coordination.

I started off by giving a comprehensive background of activism, explaining its fundamental concepts, significance for society and its methods. Thereafter, I identified important predictors of participation in collective action, which are collective identity, empowerment, expressing values, influencing out-groups and third parties and building an oppositional movement. For my arguments I applied these pathways to participation on digital platforms to prove their ability to mobilize collective action. Prior to this, I have identified criticisms against the notion that digital platforms can be successful tools to mobilize collective action.

The first criticism was based on the slacktivism/ clicktivism phenomenon, explained as a low effort and low commitment form of activism that merely gives the illusion of meaningful participation. This phenomenon was argued to unfairly compete with traditional activism methods and reduce potential highly engaged activists. I countered this argument by arguing that the slacktivist effects are overestimated and positive effects of digital activism such as raising awareness is overlooked. Raising awareness is one of many nonviolent methods used in the endeavor for change. It is also a predictor of participation as it can be classified with expressing one's opinion and influencing out groups. The second criticism posits that digital activism could never initiate meaningful collective action as it is built on weak tie relationships and an unorganized hierarchy, which are perceived to be crucial for the creation of social movements. Contrary to the notion that weak ties can not create collective action, I argue that digital platforms do allow geographically dispersed individuals to unite and coordinate collective efforts aimed at social change with examples of the Occupy Movement as well as the Taksim Square protest. This function of digital platforms can help strengthen collective identity, by allowing individuals to interact with likeminded people geographically distant from them. Digital

platforms also foster collective identity as they allow individuals to enact their social stake and maintain interpersonal connections, giving rise to feelings of empowerment.

So, by proving that digital activism can foster collective identity and empowerment and allow for the expression of values and influencing out groups with the function of raising awareness I argue that *Digital platforms can be successful tools to mobilize collective action*.

Due to the scope of this thesis there are some limitations worth acknowledging. I have not explored potential relevant topics such as echo chambers, fake news and the digital divide's influence on digital activism and its ability to mobilize collective action. Further research on these topics would give a thorough account of the ability of digital platforms to mobilize collective action. Despite these limitations I have successfully countered the criticism of digital platforms' inability to mobilize collective action by arguing that digital platforms allow for functions such as raising awareness and the creation and maintenance of collective identity and empowerment leading to participation in collective action.

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