Why Do Social Movements Organized On Social Media Fail To Bring Systemic Change?

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TREO Paper

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1   Introduction

Social justice has been recognized as a global issue by the United Nations, which refers to a state of fairness, moderation, and equality in the distribution of rights and resources in society (United Nations, 2006). We are observing pressing social justice issues in our communities, such as gender discrimination, racism, and human rights violations. To solve these systemic issues, we are witnessing social movements mobilizing from the grassroots level as people take to the streets to make their voices heard and have a collective voice against injustice, inequality, or grievances. A social movement refers to an informal network of individuals, groups, or organizations banding together and purposefully engaging in action geared toward social change (Tye et al., 2018).

Due to developments in information and communications technologies (ICTs), social movements have experienced a paradigm shift in their strategies and effectiveness. People can now organize and mobilize for social causes online, mainly through social media. Social media are Internet-based technologies that allow users to create, circulate, share, and exchange information in various formats with multiple individuals (Leong et al., 2020). Social media plays a crucial role in mobilizing social movements (Leong et al., 2020; Syed and Silva, 2023). It has significantly lowered the cost of communication, helping democratize information and enabling activists to organize protests and coordinate collective actions with unprecedented speed and scale (Leong et al., 2020). Recent movements, including Women Life Freedom, Black Lives Matter, and MeToo, have been mobilized via social media. History has taught us that many social movements have had a transformative impact. For instance, The Black Lives Matter movement has created police reforms on the use of force and worldwide awareness against racism (Dunbar and Hanink, 2023).

However, many social movements do not sustain and, thus, fail to have a systemic impact. For instance, in 2021, the New Zealand government developed an immigration policy favoring a selective group of migrants to attain their residency swiftly. Such selective justice fostered an uprising by the other visa holders, who felt left out in this process (Peters, 2021). This prompted social movements to mobilize via social media, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. Thousands joined social media groups, took to the streets, and protested in different cities to change the immigration law to a more equitable one. However, the social movement was not sustainable, and it did not have an impact on immigration policy. Furthermore, digital technologies which are meant to support the cause of social justice, often have unintended consequences, such as online bullying and harassment (Aanestad et al., 2021). This, along with other failed cases (e.g., the #CancelRent movement and Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, also known as the Hong Kong protests), brings us to a crucial question: **Why do social movements organized on social media fail to bring systemic change?**

2   Theoretical background

Social movements that emerged during the post-industrial and postmodern eras are known as New social movements (NSMs) and are challenging to analyze using traditional social movement theories. NSMs do not focus on issues of materialistic qualities such as economic well-being but on issues related to values such as equality, environmentalism, and human rights (McKenna, 2020). Recently, we have noticed the increasing use of digital technologies, particularly social media, in NSMs. Therefore, understanding social media-enabled movements requires scrutinizing both technological and social elements. Existing literature (e.g., McKenna, 2020; Leong et al., 2020) suggests that social media-enabled movement can be analyzed by examining three main elements: *collective identity*, *social influence*, and *technology affordances*.

NSMs emphasize the role of collective identity in shaping and mobilizing social movements (McKenna, 2020). Collective identity encompasses shared values and experiences that help connect individuals. These also explain how movements form, foster collective action, and formulate strategic decisions. Social influence is the ability to impose meaning and shape people's thinking (Leong et al., 2020). The role of leadership in social influence is pivotal, as leaders (including opinion leaders) often serve as catalysts for mobilizing support, shaping discourse, and driving collective action. Finally, technology affordance is a relational concept that refers to "what an individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with technology" (Majchrzak and Markus, 2012, p. 1). This perspective allows researchers to examine the features of technology and what behaviors it affords. We emphasize that we will use these three elements as a "sensitizing device" (Klein and Myers, 1999) which could be changed in light of the findings of our data analysis.

3   Methodology

To address our research question, we will conduct an in-depth interpretive case study (Klein and Myers, 1999) of a social media-enabled movement, i.e., the Residency 2021 social movement in New Zealand. We chose this case for three reasons. First, this movement was mainly driven by the excluded migrant visa holders with no political affiliation; as such, it represents a unique and bottom-up collective action. Second, social media was a critical enabler of the movement. Excluded migrant visa holders created multiple community groups on Facebook and WhatsApp and disseminated thousands of tweets on Twitter. They organized e-protests and coordinated collective actions (e.g., organizing protest rallies and crowdfunding) through social media. Third, although the movement gained media traction and others (e.g., citizens, permanent resident visa holders, and political parties) showed their support, it did not sustain or impact immigration policy. The level of commitment among online participants weakened and eventually faded away.

We will gather both secondary and primary data. We will gather secondary data from Twitter, a Facebook group, and a WhatsApp group. In contrast, for primary data, we will interview key informants (i.e., leaders/opinion leaders, excluded migrant visa holders) of the movement. For any social movement, leadership plays a crucial role; hence, identifying, and interviewing leaders is essential. We will first start our interviews with a few targeted informants in New Zealand. We will use both computational and chain referral sampling approaches (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981) to identify additional potential interviewees (e.g., opinion leaders).

The process of data collection and analysis will be iterative. This study will employ a multi-method strategy to derive a complete understanding of the phenomenon. We will combine computational and qualitative analyses to answer our research question. This approach is appropriate if the problem is multifaceted, prior hypotheses are missing, and theoretical insights are lacking (Lindberg, 2020). The granularity and volume of data generated by social media platforms pose significant challenges for researchers. To overcome these challenges, the field of Information Systems (IS) has increasingly adopted computationally intensive approaches to generate, reformulate, replace, and extend theory (Berente et al., 2019; Lindberg, 2020). Regarding the computational approach, our strategy involves

leveraging transformer-based topic modeling to identify significant theoretical categories and influential opinion leaders across the entire Twitter and WhatsApp datasets. Additionally, we intend to apply dynamic topic modeling to map the temporal evolution of topics to track their emergence and decline over time. Besides, we will employ thematic analysis in our interview data. We will perform a data triangulation to add breadth and depth to our analysis.

4 Implications

We believe that our research is practically relevant and timely. There is a growing research interest in technologically enabled social movements. At the completion of this research, we will offer suggestions for future social movements on social media by providing nuanced insights as to why and under what conditions they may fail. These insights will allow social movement leaders to organize and mobilize movements more effectively to attain collective goals and bring about lasting systemic change. Furthermore, there have been calls for research encouraging scholars to pay theoretical and empirical attention to the complex roles of digital technologies serving social justice (Aanestad et al., 2021; Eckhardt, 2023) and calls for further empirical work to examine how social media messages and features jointly enable the sustainability of social movements (Syed and Silva, 2023). In this research, we answer these calls.

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