

### **Interpreting Networks: A Study of Modeling and Testing Online Activism on Twitter**

The idea of hysteria originated from ancient Greece, where “people saw it as peculiar to women and caused by disturbances of the uterus” (O’Brien, 2009, p. 448). Through time, however, the term has come to mean behaviors that exhibit overwhelming fear or emotional excess (Showalter, 2013). According to Showalter (2013), in the current media environment, media hysteria results in massive fears and anxieties when people sense the toxic interaction between technology and information, in which modern journalism plays a significant role in transferring messages about social issues, but more often, it promotes divisiveness and fragmentation, facilitates paranoia and conspiracy, and highlights a national culture of victimization (Showalter, 2013). Mass hysteria is an expression that is often imprecisely referred to anything from ending into fashion fads to participating in riots and raves and eventually has become something of a fluid concept (Cohut, 2017).

In this study, mass hysteria will be discussed in the context of online social media and referred explicitly to the out-of-focus phenomenon of public discussion about social issues as social activists advocate on the sphere of social media such as Twitter. In other words, mass hysteria happens when the focus of the public discussion shifts from the targeted critical social issues to other unintended aspects contrary to activists’ expectations. The most recent example is the environmental social movement led by the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. While she has been trying to raise governments’ and people’s awareness about climate change, most of the public discussion has been focused on her personal profile, and Thunberg herself has been commodified in the news industry and online social media. Such mass hysteria has not been positive for the progress of environmental activism and public awareness of climate change.

To explore the dynamic of the mass hysteria on social media, this study applies modeling as a research method to describe and explain the process of online activism on Twitter.

Considering the focal point of mass hysteria is the audience at large, this designed model will concentrate on the audience and hence build a model of the mass audience's contribution to online activism. Based on the modeling, this study is dedicated to identifying the key factors that affect the concentration of the online activism conversation and what facilitates the sustainable concentration of online activism from the audience perspective.

The significance of this study not only contributes to the effectiveness of online social activism but also helps sustain the conversations of online activism groups. For online activists, they can develop effective strategies to advocate critical social issues and create a sustainable online conversational climate for the public discussion. This study allows activists to reevaluate the ability of online social media to influence social movements, the characteristics of Twitter users' discussions, and the essential elements of planning an online social movement.

As public attention itself is a kind of social resource, this study also provides problem-solving strategies to reduce the waste of such resources. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of modeling in researching the dynamics of online social movements and suggests using a real-world case study to test the reliability and validity of the specific model. When it comes to the textual analysis of users' tweets, this study employs the psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches to interpret user-generated posts on social media. Such methods are vital to media and communication studies and need more attention from the scholarly community. The phenomenon of mass hysteria is also pervasive in other research fields, and this study will encourage interdisciplinary research teams to utilize the concept of mass hysteria to explain other social issues with regard to the mass audience.

### **Literature Review**

The 21st century has been named “the age of networks” (Van Dijk, 2012, p. 2). Previous studies have exhibited that the development of new information and communication technologies — social media in particular — has played a significant role in social and political activism in the last decade (Ertugrul et al., 2019). The scholarly community focuses on the description, the explanation, and the predication of the online activism dynamics in social change studies. Agenda-setting becomes the most common theoretical framework in such studies, and researchers from different academic backgrounds highlight the process and effects of online activism in order to evaluate current social movements and to predict future movements.

#### **The Rise of Online Activism**

There has been a growing number of researches on digital activism, and much attention shifts from the website-based to the social media-centered platforms. Faenzi (2011) illustrates how water activists are using the online media, stressing that “the real influences the virtual, which in turn influences the real” (p. 2). Moreover, according to him:

Behind the accounts, behind the avatars and behind the Facebook groups there are real people who become active, apart than on the web, on their job, at school, in the squares and in the streets; they talk, raise the awareness, study, inform. Social mobilization generates virtual mobilization ... Facebook is helpful, but without the distribution of flyers, the initiatives, the activation of the territorial committees and of the organizations supporting public water and against nuclear power, the quorum would have been impossible to reach. (Faenzi, 2011, p. 2)

Such observation not only identifies the strength of mobilization on social media but also necessitates the effective distribution of online activism. Following this principle, Kaun and

Uldam (2017) argue for analyzing digital activism in a manner that “traverses a two-dimensional axis of digital technologies and activist practices” in order to strike a balance between the context and media-specificity (p. 2099). They further explain this two-dimensional axis of digital technologies and activist practices:

First, that digital activism is often explored in ahistorical ways that foreground a technology-centered perspective; second, that many studies reinforce the myth that digital media are used in a universal manner to promote political change ... [it] focuses on digital activism in different regional contexts and take into account digital technologies and activist practices. (Kaun & Uldam, 2017, p. 2102)

Their study also calls for the attention to considering the geological information in the examination of online activism, which encourages scholars to develop effective models for online activism (Haffner, 2019; Ertugrul et al., 2019).

### **Activism on Twittersphere**

When it comes to online activism on Twitter, most scholars utilize social network analysis to examine the diffusion pattern of activism dynamics (Chong 2019; Yang & Saffer, 2019; Mountford, 2018). From the perspective of the network society, they suggest effective campaign strategies for advocacy on social issues for non-government organizations (NGOs) or social groups. (Chong 2019; Yang & Saffer, 2019). Some other studies focus on developing novel methodological models to interpret text on Twitter such as memes. Grundlingh (2018) emphasizes the importance of studying memes on Twitter, in which he explains, “memes are successfully used for communication purposes because certain memes (specifically image macros) are essentially speech acts and are also understood as being speech acts by internet

users” (p. 147). Priss (2017) proposes a semiotic-conceptual analysis (SCA) model to interpret images.

### ***Interpreting activism networks***

As for network analysis on Twitter, the most common nodes are keywords, hashtags, and users. Knowing the relationship and dynamics on Twitter helps build agenda with a target on specific audience groups through ideal patterns discovered by the social network analysis (Yang & Saffer, 2019; Gaumont et al., 2018). This perspective also allows activists to identify challenges in their online social movement practice and create coping strategies to pursue the ideal outcomes of online activism. Applying social network analysis also reveals that there are reverse agenda-setting effects of hashtag activism with the combination of the topic modeling (Chong, 2019).

Another focus on network analysis of online activism lies in studying the dynamics of protest recruitment through social media (González -Bailon et al., 2011). These findings, according to González -Bailon et al. (2011), “shed light on the connection between online networks, social contagion, and collective dynamics, and offer an empirical test to the recruitment mechanisms theorized in formal models of collective action” (p. 2).

### ***Interpreting activism tweets***

Given that little prior work has systematically addressed the role of images in mobilizing online participation in social movements, Casas and Williams (2019) prove that images have a positive mobilizing effect in the context of online protest activity and then argue that images are mobilizing because they trigger stronger emotional reactions than text. Furthermore, they theorize that “images evoking enthusiasm, anger, and fear should be particularly mobilizing, while sadness should be demobilizing” (Casas & Williams, 2019, p. 360). To test their theory of

the mobilizing role of pictures, they examine the Black Lives Matter protest on Twitter and verify their argument. Grundlingh (2018) and Cannizzaro (2016) use the semiotic approach and models to interpret memes from the author's scope and argue that memes could function as speech acts in textual studies.

Instead of the traditional textual analysis, Hatipoğlu et al. (2019) introduce a novel technique to assist researchers in analyzing texts on Twitter: "a clustering methodology based on Longest Common Subsequence Similarity Metric, which automatically groups tweets with similar content" (p. 183).

### **Online Activism Models**

Scholars mainly use modeling as a research method to analyze the dynamics of online activism in three ways: the diffusion process of online activism, the prediction of social movements, and the participation of audience groups on social media.

#### ***Process-Centered Model***

Some researchers identify the gap between social movements and the policymaking process and then develop a model of connection to understand activist efforts on the policy impact (Harris & Morris, 2017). Some scholars concentrate on the spatial and temporal characteristics of online activism and test the efficacy of such movements (Haffner, 2018). However, most cases Haffner (2018) selects to support his argument are race-related, which results in the limitation of his findings. Bartling (2017) suggests the importance of leadership in online activism to facilitate policymaking at local and regional levels in the United States.

Regarding the study of the process and its ecology, Cernison (2019) focuses on modeling the communication environment on social media and using five elements to illustrate their impact on online activism. Lindgren (2019) further examines the challenges of noise, hate, and

disengagement in online campaigns and provide certain solutions for future activists to produce more effective social change strategies. Cundill et al. (2018) hold the position of non-financial shareholder activism create a process model for influencing corporate environmental and social performance.

### ***Prediction-Centered Model***

Ertugrul et al. (2019) develop an interpretable spatiotemporal model to forecast the protest activities. They describe this model:

A novel predictive framework that incorporates a new design of attentional networks, and which effectively learns the spatiotemporal structure of features. Our approach is not only capable of forecasting the occurrence of future protests, but also provides theory-relevant interpretations—it allows for interpreting what features, from which places, have significant contributions on the protest forecasting model, as well as how they make those contributions. (p. 5)

### ***Public-Centered Model***

Suh et al. (2017) explore the role played by social media in reshaping the repression-mobilization relationship in online activism (p. 282). Furthermore, they develop a social media intervention model to mitigate the state repression on making social movements (Suh et al., 2017). To demonstrate the value of an interactional approach toward social media analysis, Housley et al. (2018) perform a detailed analysis of Twitter-based online campaigns and develop a typology of user exchanges. Their model based on the observation of identified occurrences of social media activism and apply content analysis help them categorize topics of these movements (Suh et al., 2018)

By analyzing the digital divide phenomenon, Elliott and Earl (2018) use a model to explain the digital divide on online protest participation, and this dynamic is vital to prevent the digital divide in future social movements on social media. Chon and Park (2019) focuses on contentious issues in online activism and explore audience discussion with their situational theory of problem-solving (STOPS) as an integrative model to explain and predict social media and offline activism.

Other than these models, Harvey (2016) suggests the emphasis on “how activism and the relationship between activist and scholar roles can often be challenging and how many activist-scholars work in changing environments” (p. 371). Instead of researching the public at large, Pallas et al. (2017) apply modeling to guide NGO advocacy in their target selection and evaluation of online activism.

Previous studies have discovered the big picture that explains the dynamics of how online activism works through social media with a focus on activists and user’s participation. However, the missing link in this process is the communicative bridge; the process that the public audience receives the message from activists has not been discussed in the scholarly community. Such a reaction process from the audience perspective is critical to the success of an online campaign, and it is helpful to contribute to the sustainability of online social changes. This study, therefore, will take these elements that influence the audience's reaction and participation in online activism into consideration and test the model with a real-world case to adjust the ability of this model that explains the dynamics in the audience’s contribution to the online activism. More importantly, this model is essential to analyze mass hysteria phenomenon in online activism and generate solutions to avoid side-effects of mass hysteria and to save the audience resource in online platforms.



## Theoretical Framework

### Psychoanalytic-Semiotic Approach

Psychoanalytic thinking in current media and communication studies is often marginalized. Some visionary scholars argue:

Psychoanalysis offers a reservoir of conceptual and methodological tools that has not been sufficiently tapped. In particular, psychoanalytic perspectives offer a heightened concern and sensibility for the unconscious, i.e. the element in human relating and relatedness that crisscrosses and mars our best laid plans and reasonable predictions.

(Krüger & Johanssen, 2016, p. 5)

Storey (2018) considers that there are at least two ways to apply Freudian psychoanalysis to analyze text: author-entered and reader-centered (p. 101). However, he postulates that Freudian psychoanalysis highlights fictional texts to access the world hidden beneath the human consciousness (Storey, 2018, p. 102). Storey (2018) includes Freud's explanation to support this speculation:

In my opinion, all the aesthetic pleasure which a creative writer affords us has the character of a fore-pleasure ... our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds ... enabling us thenceforward to enjoy our daydreams without self-reproach or shame. (Freud, 1989, p. 443)

However, given the same current news event, different news stories report the same topic in various ways and angles. It is reasonable to apply psychoanalytic approach to examine media texts and these contents reflect cultural implications. These media texts are equivalent to authors' dreams because they are creative media productions.

From author's perspective, as Storey (2018) states that "the surface of a text (words and images, etc.) is regarded as the manifest content [conscious], while the latent content [unconscious] is the author's hidden desires" (p. 99). According to Freud (1989), dreams are always a "compromised structure" between wishes "emanating from the id" and censorship "enacted by the ego", and such structure is significant to use psychoanalysis to examine dream-work of media texts, in which he explains:

If the meaning of our dreams usually remains obscure to us ... it is because [they contain] wishes of which we are ashamed; these we must conceal from ourselves, and they have consequently been repressed, pushed into the unconscious. Repressed wishes of this sort and their derivatives are only allowed to come to expression in a very distorted form. (Freud, 1989, p. 136)

In order to interpret latent dreams, Freud (1989) suggests the view of displacement to explain the distorted form of people's repression; there are three aspects of displacement: chains of association, shifting focus, and symbolization. These three aspects are key elements in the analysis of media texts.

Chains of association not only explain "what is in the manifest content alludes to something in the latent dream" because of authors' affect, the emotional intensity attached to the figure (Storey, 2018, p. 99), but also create new association for the public when they consume certain news. Shifting focus is one of the major symptoms in media hysteria, in the dream-work, such displacement "changes the focus of dream" (Storey, 2018, p. 99) while in media texts, the author changes the focus of the subject through narratives and writing techniques. Symbolization indicates that "the latent-dream thoughts ... are dramatized and illustrated" (Freud, 1989, p. 47),

in which any figure of speech can reflect the symbolization that author embraces in their unconsciousness when creating media texts.

From reader's scope, "a text works like a substitute dream" (Storey, 2018, p.102), and it allows readers to connect author's desires and fantasies in texts and to figure out the message that author wants to send to the public through media texts.

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

As the agenda-setting theory is instrumental in analyzing activists' positions and purposes in structuring public knowledge and perceptions of the reality This study will adopt the three-level agenda theory proposed by McCombs and Guo (2014), in which they explain:

In the first level, the media capture public's attention and inform the audience the priority in social issues; secondly, media deliver critical angles of these trending topics to serve their readers; last but not least, the media potentially "influence an integrated picture of these attributes [from first two levels] (p. 265).

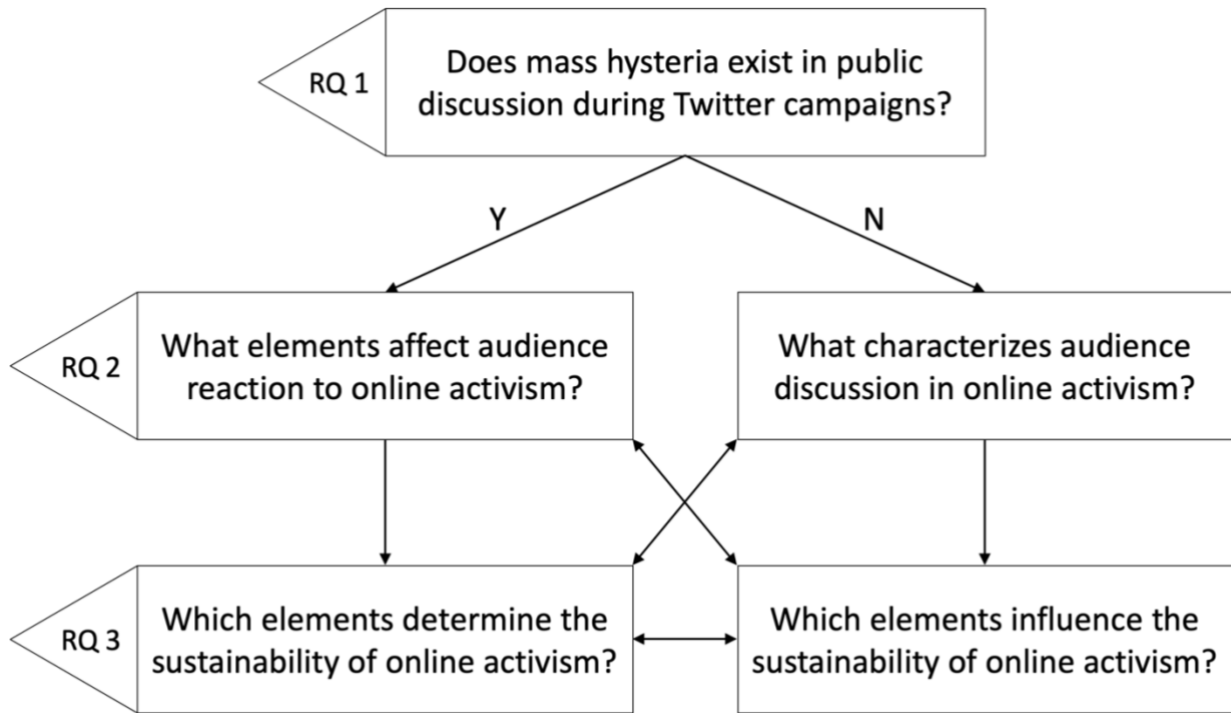
Such information selection, also known as gatekeeping, is the focal point of agenda-setting theory in media studies. Researchers utilizing content analysis and survey find that the media's agenda plays an influential role in the formation of the public opinion (Crouch & Rozell, 2014; McCombs & Guo, 2014).

This study focuses on applying the psychoanalytic-semiotic approach to read texts and images included in the online activism and interpret their denoted meaning on the audience side and also decoding the agenda set by activists. This theoretical framework is vital to identify whether the focus of the public discussion is focused on the social issues that activists advocate and hence to determine the occurrence of the mass hysteria phenomenon. This approach also helps to draw the timeline when the ups and downs happen during online activism.

**Research Questions/Hypotheses**

**Figure 1**

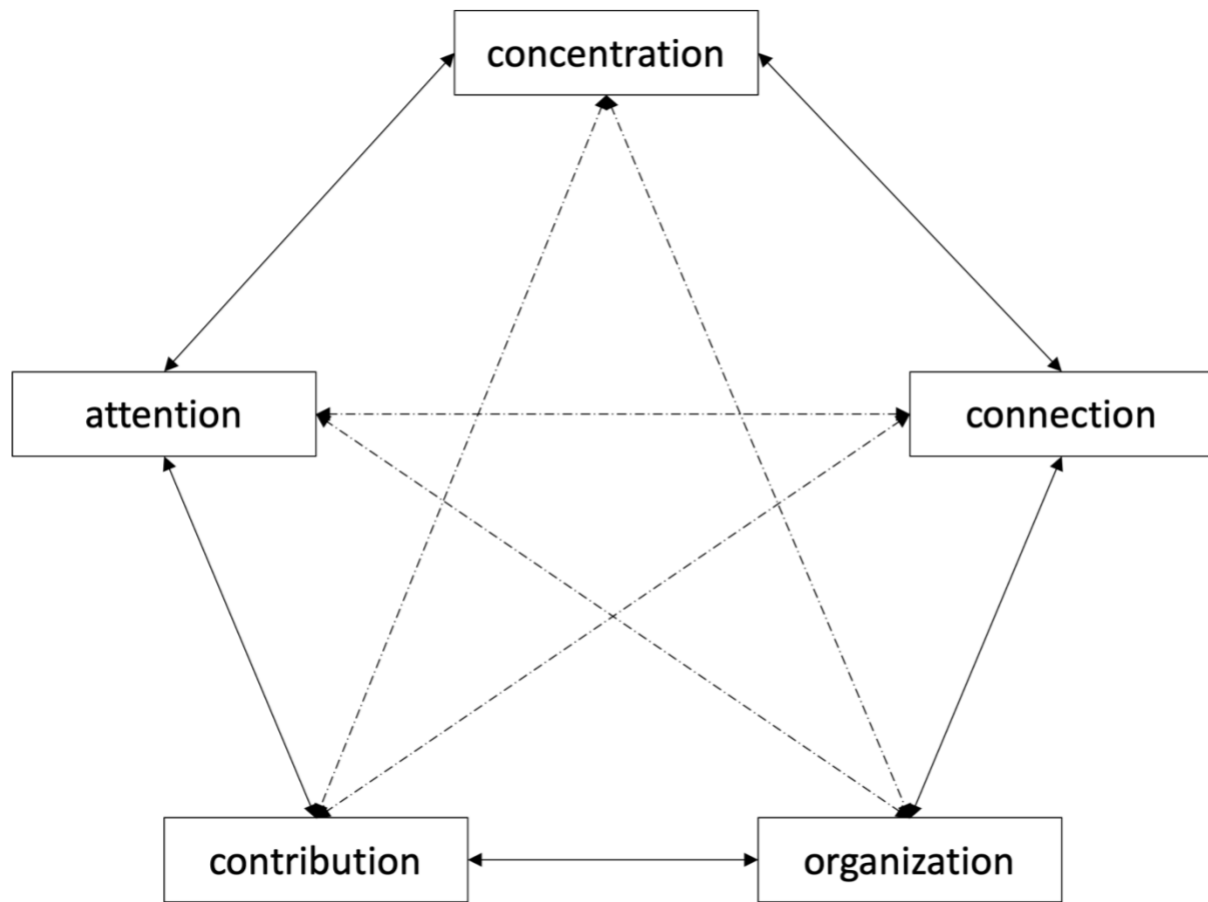
*Research Questions*



RQ2 and RQ3 are based on the positive hypothesis of RQ1; if H1 fails, then RQ2 and RQ3 will focus on the questions listed below the negative hypothesis of RQ1.

**Figure 2**

*Audience Interaction Model (AIM)*



Following research questions, H1 confirms that there is a mass hysteria phenomenon during the public discussion in online activism. H2 and H3 reflect in AIM modeling and hypothesize that there are five elements that are vital to the audience interaction in online activism and each of them is indispensable with regard to a successful and sustainable online activism. Although there is an order that organize these elements, however, they influence each other in any way that can affect the outcomes of social movements on Twitter. Also, concentration is the key factor that affect the mass hysteria the most in these elements and false concentration in this model will accordingly influence the effectiveness of the whole cycle.

## **Methodology**

### **Modeling Design**

As it is shown in Figure 2, this model focuses on the audience interaction in online activism. It lists five elements that affect audience participation in online activism: attention, contribution, concentration, connection, and organization.

**Attention:** audience's awareness of the existence this social movement or social issues, for example, a "like" or a simple comment on Twitter.

**Contribution:** audience's initial engagement of distributing related messages advocated by online activists, such as retweeting and mentioning on Twitter.

**Concentration:** at least a weeklong period of a user's Twitter engagement such as "attention" and "contribution" within certain topic.

**Connection:** at least follow 3 Twitter accounts within a same social movement that advocate specific social issues.

**Organization:** individual users become distributor of sending messages under critical social issues and join in the influencer circle of making online movements.

### **Case Study Testing**

To test the model and hypotheses, this study will focus on #fridayforfuture and @fridayforfuture on Twitter and analyze user's discussion with psychoanalytic-semiotic approach. The data will be collected by Twitter developer tools and time framework will be set from December 2 to December 13, which mirrors timeline of the 2019 UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid. Users interaction (200 users' profiles, randomly selected on Twitter) will be coded with NVIVO into five categories in accordance with the model. Meanwhile, users' comments and posts will be employed to determine the existence of mass hysteria.

### **Anticipated Result**

Through the textual analysis of users' tweets, this study will find there is good evidence that confirms the mass hysteria on Twitter, and the focus of the current online activism is more like a flash of the pan. Online activists have to repetitively post on twitter to achieve high exposure of their agenda of social issues and gain the audience's interaction. On the audience's side, the most audience only has attention and contribution, but rarely have concentration and connection behaviors on Twitter. This study will also identify other topics that highlight the public discussion under the hashtag of #fridayforfuture, and most of these topics will be self-interested and agreement to activists' posts.

Through the psychoanalytical approach, this study will find most users' comments and retweets reflect that they are not only afraid of the social crisis of climate issues but worry about their inner needs, such as reasonable natural resources and climate protection needs being neglected. In other words, they are afraid of being victims of this climate crisis. On the other hand, they desire to protect the planet in the face of such social issues, and they are either demanding a heroic figure or become heroes themselves to protect the environment.

As to the sustainability of online activism, each element is critical to the whole ecological system of online activism, and therefore, online social activists should pay attention to build a cycle with regard to the audience interaction rather than focus on only one or two factors that affect the whole picture. Since each element plays an essential role in shaping the sustainable cycle of the online public discussion, activists can adopt this model to create more effective communicative strategies on Twitter and achieve long-lasting focus within specific issues among audience groups and utilize this model to prevent the future occurrence of mass hysteria phenomenon in the pursuit of the sustainable online activism.

### Discussion

This study utilizes a model from the audience's perspective to explain the mass hysteria phenomenon in online activism is significant for the activist groups to evaluate the effectiveness of their online activism and hence to generate more robust strategies to facilitate social movement on social media. Moreover, this study emphasizes the study of the audience's interaction on social media, which is paid little attention to the previous study. From this microscope, it enables people to witness the key elements that affect the audience's reaction to the significant social movement on social media. More importantly, by studying users' profiles on Twitter, it is helpful to come up with coping strategies to prevent mass hysteria. With the psychoanalytic approach, this study can have a peek at the audience's unconsciousness at large, which is significant to explore the digital culture on social media.

The limitation of this study is that this model only deals with the audience's position while online activism includes activists' labor and government response on Twitter. Such a microscope may lead to the ignorance of other elements that potentially influence the dynamics of online activism. Also, this model does not involve the raking of each element that affects the effectiveness of online activism. However, it is critical to organize and rank elements according to their significance and contributions on how they affect the audience interaction.

The sample of this case study only includes one hashtag and one social media account of online activism, and this can be inadequate to test the reliability of the model. Given the complexity of Twitter users and their content, errors can happen when those collected data are being processed and organized. Because this study includes human labor in labeling texts with NVIVO software, individual biases are inevitably added to the textual analysis, and such errors can lead to the inaccuracy of the results of the study.



### **Conclusion**

This study applies the modeling method firstly proves the existence of mass hysteria phenomenon in online activism and then identify critical factors that influence the success and the sustainability of campaigns on social media. It explores the mass hysteria in online activism and provides insights to prevent the side-effects of such an unwanted phenomenon. Furthermore, the AIM model helps not only online activism to explain mass hysteria and manage their campaign strategies but also useful to the street social movement.

For future studies, researchers can apply the concept of mass hysteria and use this fluid concept to explore and explain other audience-involved social science phenomena. As for the media and communication studies, this AIM model can be further developed into a full-fledged cycle that includes other parts of the activism that may affect the process of social movements. As for testing the model, researchers can either use real-world cases or design experiments to test how these variables influence each other among the dynamics of online activism.

Given the goal of activism it to mobilize collaborative labors to pursue social changes, the principle of building models can also include other social community such as mainstream media and the scholarly community to create a healthy atmosphere to foster the advancement of social movement and promote positive social changes. Using a macro-scope to study online activism is vital to identify elements of why there are so many voices from social activists, but little effect was seen from the policymaking. Therefore, applying multiple media, communication, and cultural theories is instrumental in solving these puzzles and obstacles that restrain the progress of social movements. Although the psychoanalytic approach is marginalized in such studies, it is promising and provides a new angle in interpreting user-generated texts on social media.

**Pilot Study**

This pilot study analyzes the data generated by Twitter Search Filters with keyword “#firdayforfuture” on December 12, and summaries the major topic discussed in the top 10 tweets by individual users on Twitter. Next, these topics are compared to the concept of Friday for Future (FFF) outlined on website, [www.fridaysforfuture.org](http://www.fridaysforfuture.org) to determine whether public discussion is on or off the focus of this social issue.

User ID	User-generated Topics	Match FFF or not
1	FFF updates at high school	✓
2	Only posts racial issues	×
3	Relate to Xmas decoration with fake trees	✓
4	Only relate to 2020 U.S. election	×
5	Only posts “America is racist”	×
6	A post against FFF	✓
7	A post justifies FFF with a news article	✓
8	Relate to be a vegan	✓
9	Post a YouTube link about climate models	✓
10	Only hashtags: #COP25, #Madarid, #ClimateEmergence, and #FridayfForFuture	✓

The core concept of FFF is about school strike for climate but most tweets only deal with climate issues in general and some people take advantage of this trending topic to advocate other issues such as race and election. Although it is hard to identify mass hysteria in this pilot study, through these user topics, it is not difficult to predict audience’s diverse discussion on Twitter.

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