

Digital Activism for Social Causes

Digital Activism for Social Causes: Understanding Clicktivism and Substantive Actions

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Abstract: *Successful fundraising is one of the main challenges for many charities and non-profit organizations. At the same time, the widespread adoption and proliferation of social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and crowdfunding platforms (such as GoFundMe and Indiegogo) put forward novel opportunities to these organizations. Our research builds upon theories from social psychology and social movement to develop a model for explaining and predicting social media users' engagement in symbolic online action (i.e. clicktivism) as well as substantive action (e.g., donating money or time) in support of a social cause. Using data from 4,539 crowdfunding campaigns, this short paper also reports on a preliminary exploration of symbolic and substantive actions on a donation-based crowdfunding platform. The outcomes of this research will inform charities and non-profit organizations in developing more effective digital communication and grassroots fundraising strategies.*

Keywords: *Crowdfunding, Social Media, Clicktivism, Social Movement*

Introduction

Is there a merit to “digital activism” for social causes? In a contentious article in *Foreign Policy*, Morozov (2009) cited the example a popular Facebook group “saving the children of Africa” with over 1.2 million members who altogether donated just around \$6,000 (i.e., only half a cent per person). Likewise, political science studies showed that a government blackout on social media did accelerate revolutionary mobilization in the 2011 Egyptian uprising (Hassanpour 2014). Hence, on the one hand, there is a pervasive concern that social media has made minimal-effort digital activism (aka, “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”) too easy, at the expense of actual benefits for society. According to one side of the debate, then, social media impose a significant hidden cost stemmed from crowding out more substantive pro-social efforts.

On the other hand, proponents of digital activism argue that social media are instrumental in raising awareness about social causes and community building. Also, using them is one of many tactics in the strategic repertoire of campaigning and fundraising. Thus, their use should not be studied in isolation (Karpf 2010). In fact, there are success stories that reinforce these claims. For example, causes.com, an online campaigning platform with a strong Facebook integration, has raised over \$48 million for nonprofits and collected 34 million signatures for grassroots campaigns. GoFundMe a crowdfunding platform for charity and personal causes has raised over \$3 Billion (statistics according to the company websites). More recently, and after their involvement in \$17 Million fundraising for earthquake victims in Nepal, Facebook has announced its launch of “Social Good Team” with the purpose of building features to connect users with social issues. There are, hence, compelling arguments both for and against the importance and relevance of social media in facilitating improvements in human and environmental well-being. To better understand this phenomenon, we look into the actions of social media users and the micro-structures affecting them.

Conceptual Research Model

In this research, we distinguish between two types of action: symbolic vs. substantive. Symbolic action is generally understood as an action that expresses, signals, or symbolizes what the actor feels, wants or believes. In his classic book, Burke (1966) uses the example of chopping down a tree versus writing about chopping down a tree to illustrate the difference between a substantive and symbolic actions. Within the context of this paper, examples of such symbolic actions can be “follow-”ing charities and social campaigns on Twitter, “like-”ing them on Facebook, re-tweeting/sharing their links, adding stickers to profile picture, or writing supportive comments in their YouTube channels. However, donating money, or dedicating time for volunteering in a fundraising event can be the examples of substantive action.

Our general approach to this research is inspired by the classic works of Doug McAdam and colleagues on high-risk activism (McAdam and Paulsen 1993). There is an inherent similarity between symbolic actions in social media (aka, clicktivism) and low-risk activism such as signing a “save the arctic” petition on the one hand, and substantive actions and high-risk activism such as participating in an attempt to protest on an oil drilling platform. Findings from these studies in social movement research suggest that psychological predisposition towards participating in a high-risk activity is not a good predictor of the actual behavior. Interestingly, these studies found that purely structural factors (e.g., strong friendship ties with activists) could not explain activist behavior (participation) either. The key conclusion from these studies is that one’s decision to participate in a movement depends on a successful linkage between movement and his/her salient identity, and support of this linkage from those persons who help in sustaining this identity (and absence of opposition stemmed from other salient identities) (McAdam and Paulsen 1993).

While the abovementioned studies identified the importance of the “content” of the network processes (in addition to the structures), they did not provide a model on how exactly the content affects the behavior. In order to address this gap and more clearly explain a pro-social substantive action originating from social media interactions and messages, we propose a conceptual model (Figure 1) for a research program that takes into account the importance of action frames in social media and salient identity of its users. The ultimate desired outcome of such symbolic and substantive activism is a focal campaign’s success, i.e., achieving campaign target goals, which depending on the context, could be raising sufficient funds for a cause, affecting political decisions, or other similar goals.

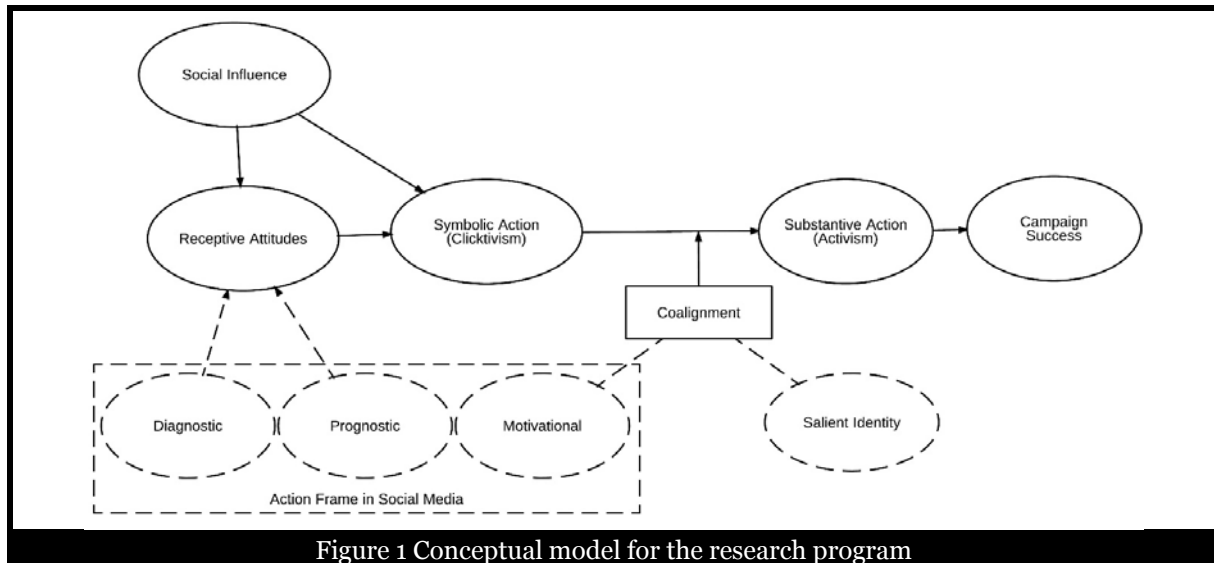


Figure 1 Conceptual model for the research program

Social movement literature posits that activists frame issues in a manner that resonate well with the ideologies, identities, and cultural understandings of their target audience and potential supporters. Frames denote “schemata of interpretation” that allow people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their environment and the world at large (Goffman 1974). A frame is referred to as an “action frame” when it encompasses “*action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization*” (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). These frames consist of three components – diagnostic (constructing a problem in need of action), prognostic (suggesting a solution), and motivational. The model in Figure 1 implies the impact of these framing components on the formation of pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Since we are interested in explaining the move from symbolic actions to substantive ones, the motivational component is of particular interest (Akhlaghpour and Lapointe 2010). In Benford and Snow’s (2000:615) words, this is the component that “fosters action, moving people from the balcony to the barricade”. Our model implies that if this motivational component aligns well with the salient identity of a social media users, there will be a higher likelihood that he/she will engage in practical action to support the social cause associated with the action frame. We will further discuss this in the next sections where we introduce the Identity Based Motivation model (Oyserman, 2009).

Developing Propositions at Individual Level

The model in Figure 1 is inherently multi-level as frames are constructed at the meso-level through inputs from social organizations and interactions by supporting online communities. Likewise, the relationship between symbolic and substantive actions should be studied both at individual and at aggregate levels in order to avoid an atomistic fallacy (Burton-Jones and Gallivan 2007). In this short paper, we study the conceptual model solely at an individual level from the perspective of an individual social media user. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual model adapted as an individual level variance model. The impact of the action frame and salient identity is captured through an individual actor’s attitudes and perceptions of alignment. The following section elaborates on the development of propositions.

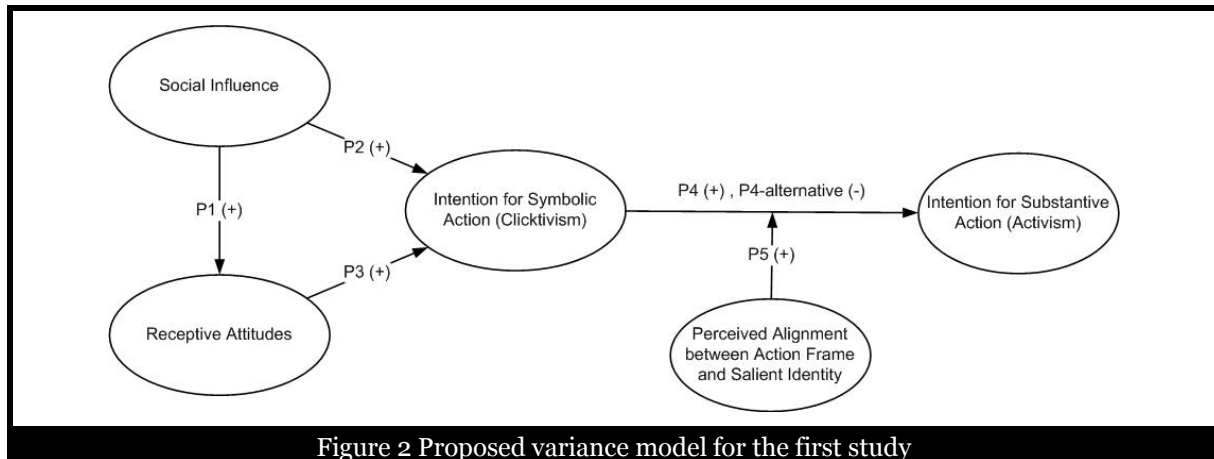


Figure 2 Proposed variance model for the first study

The first three propositions in our model (P1-3) is an adaptation of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980) to the context of our study. TRA is a well-researched theory that is useful in predicting and explaining behavior in many domains. The theory assumes that behavior is determined by behavioral intention, which is in turn determined by attitude and subjective norms. According to this theory, attitudes towards a behavior are determined by one's salient beliefs of the consequences of the behavior. Subjective norms are the individual's perception of her expectations of other people or groups - the terms "subjective norms" and "social influence" have been used interchangeably in TRA research. In the technology domain, TRA based models have traditionally been considered as successful predictors of IT users' behavior, and studies have found "impressive evidence for the predictive validity of TRA" (Hartwick and Barki 1994: p. 444). Likewise, social movement studies (McAdam and Paulsen 1993) have found predictors of low-risk activism (i.e., receptive political attitudes and contact with activists) that are very similar to the two determining factors in TRA. Hence, we expect that the general assertions of TRA can be applied in predicting symbolic action among social media users.

Proposition 1: Social influence exerted through social media in support of a cause has a positive direct effect on receptive attitude towards the cause.

Proposition 2: Social influence exerted through social media in support of a cause has a positive direct effect on intention for performing a symbolic action towards the cause.

Proposition 3: Receptive attitude towards a cause has a positive direct effect on intention for performing a symbolic action towards the cause.

Intuitively, one can expect that if a person invites others -through a symbolic action- to participate in a pro-social action, he himself would also provide some sort of substantive contribution to the cause. The theoretical argument for this assertion can be made based on the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957). This theory states that an inconsistency among belief, attitude and action leads to a state of mental stress and discomfort. The actor will subsequently try to minimize this stress and discomfort, aka, "dissonance", and achieve consonance. For developing the next proposition, we are particularly interested in the *hypocrisy paradigm* (Stone and Fernandez 2008) in this line of study. The procedure in this paradigm is to first ask subjects to make a public advocacy (e.g., a speech) about the importance of a pro-social behavior. After this, they are reminded that in the past they themselves have failed to practice the same behavior. The results from these studies show that after this procedure, the subjects are motivated to take the steps to make their behavior consistent with the behavioral standards that they promote for others, i.e. they will literally "practice what they preach". This is an interesting outcome because other approaches in dissonance studies, which do not have the element of advocacy to others, will mostly result in a change of attitudes (and not actions) to regain consistency. Given that our phenomenon of interest, i.e. social media users promoting a pro-social activity, entails an element of advocacy, we expect that a state of dissonance will more likely result in performing a practical action in order to achieve consonance:

Proposition 4: Intention for performing a symbolic action towards a cause in social media has a positive direct effect on intention for performing a substantive action towards it.

While the above proposition is certainly plausible, there are theoretical counter-arguments which predict a relationship between symbolic and substantive action in an opposite direction. Instead of dismissing these arguments, we embrace the *logic of opposition* (Akhlaghpour and Lapointe 2008; Akhlaghpour and Lapointe 2018; Robey and Boudreau 1999) and provide two competing propositions regarding this relationship. A negative impact of symbolic action on substantive action can be justified based on moral self-licensing (Lee and Hsieh 2013). Moral self-licensing occurs when a past moral action makes people more likely to worry less about feeling or appearing immoral and engage in a subsequent potentially immoral behavior. For example, in a series of experiments, Mazar and Zhong (2010) found that people performed less altruistic acts and were more willing to cheat and steal, after buying green products than after buying conventional products. In the context of charity donation, Sachdeva et al (2009) found that subjects' intention for donating to charity reduced after they thought about their positive traits. Hence, we argue that if a social media user performs a symbolic action in support of a cause, she might feel morally licensed for not performing a subsequent practical action (e.g., donating money):

Proposition 4-alternative: Intention for performing a symbolic action towards a cause in social media has a negative effect on intention for performing a substantive action towards it.

As discussed earlier, in this paper we propose an analogy between low- and high-risk activism in social movements on the one hand, and symbolic (clicktivism) and substantive action in social media on the other hand. Based on the findings of social movement research on high-risk activism (McAdam and Paulsen 1993), alignment between a movement and one's salient identity is the main differentiating factor between those who engage in low- and high-risk activism. Identity is broadly defined as one's traits, characteristics and goals. The identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman 2009) posits that Identity is an important determinant of cognition and behavior as it influences what actions people take (action-readiness) and how they make sense of the environment (procedural-readiness). One important element of this theory is its portrayal of identity as highly malleable and situation-sensitive. The salient identity according to this perspective is a product of two elements, one that is chronically accessible and one that is dynamic and situationally cued. Based on this theory, we expect that if an action frame in social media succeeds in cueing and evoking a particular identity of a social media user (e.g., female, Christian, liberal), there is a higher likelihood that he/she will move beyond symbols and engage in identity-congruent substantive action (i.e., equivalent of a high-risk activism). Hence, we propose that a perceived alignment will moderate the relationship between symbolic and substantive actions by amplifying the positive impact expressed in P4.

Proposition 5: Perceived alignment between one's salient identity and an action frame in social media moderates the relationship between intention for performing a symbolic action and intention for performing a substantive action towards the cause.

Preliminary Exploration of Crowdfunding Data

In order to provide a better understanding of the use of digital social campaigns, this section reports on our preliminary exploration of a sample of campaigns on GoFundM.com website. GoFundMe is a donation-based crowdfunding platform that allows people to raise money for events ranging from life events such as celebrations and graduations to challenging circumstances like illnesses and emergencies. Each campaign contains a page created by a campaign organizer describing why the money is needed, how much money should be raised, and possible updates about the cause.

We developed a web-crawler application and took a comprehensive snapshot of information on 4,539 active campaigns in 13 different categories (see Figure 3) of GoFundMe platform in October 2016. Each campaign's information, including its description, creator, target goal, time since creation, achieved funding, and number of shares on social media was captured. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics for some of the variables extracted from this sample.

The target goals of most campaigns are somewhere between a symbolic amount of one dollar, and 100 million dollars, with a median of \$4,500. While the achieved funding per campaign ranged from zero to \$333,945 (median=\$735). A histogram of the percentage of target funding amount to the achieved funding can be found in Figure 4. It illustrates the fact that most GoFundMe campaigns either fail significantly or meet their goals by relatively small margins. Out of 4,539 campaigns, 312 (7%) were able to meet or exceed their target goal, and only 38 (0.8%) generated more than twice the original target amount. GoFundMe

recommends sharing on Facebook as “the absolute best way to reach out to those closest to you”. As shown in Table 1, campaigns in our dataset have been shared from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 22,000 times (median=88 times).

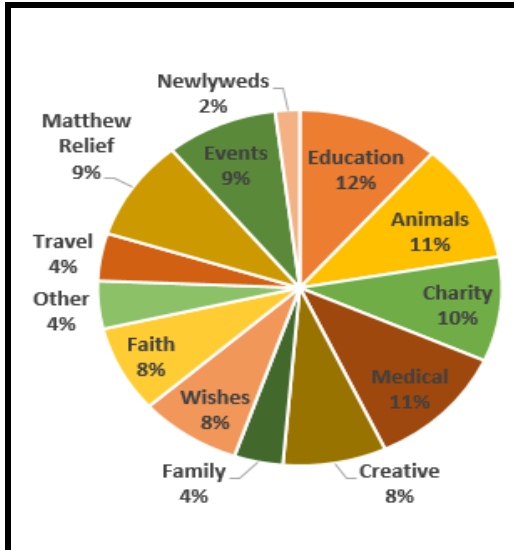


Figure 3 Categories of crowdfunding campaigns in our sample (n=4539)

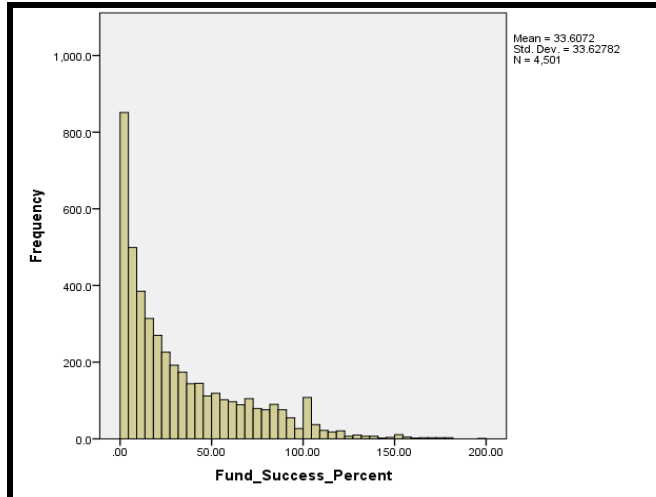


Figure 4 Histogram of the percentage of total achieved amount to the fundraising goal. An additional 38 campaigns (0.8% of all projects) funded more than 200% of the goal amount are excluded.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the campaign variables (n=4539)

	No of Donors	Achieved Funding	Funding Goal	No of Shares on Social Media	Active
Mean	45.70	3,256.62	48,161.60	282.67	50.71
Median	13	735	4,500	88	10
Std. Deviation	219.23	11,628.77	1,504,540.63	879.25	143.54
Skewness	25.23	14.76	64.76	11.61	6.18
Kurtosis	821.36	324.06	4,295.56	189.23	48.99
Minimum	0	0	1	0	1
Maximum	8,576	333,945	100,000,000	22,000	2,070

Based on our earlier discussion, we can consider sharing on social media as a symbolic action and donating money to the campaigns as a substantive action. Figure 5 illustrates the number of shares on social media versus the number of actual donors across the campaigns. The gap between the two data series alludes to the presence of clicktivism in our dataset. As expected, many people have shared a GoFundMe campaign without directly contributing financially to the cause. In our sample, on average, there was one donation (substantive action) per 12 social media shares (symbolic action).

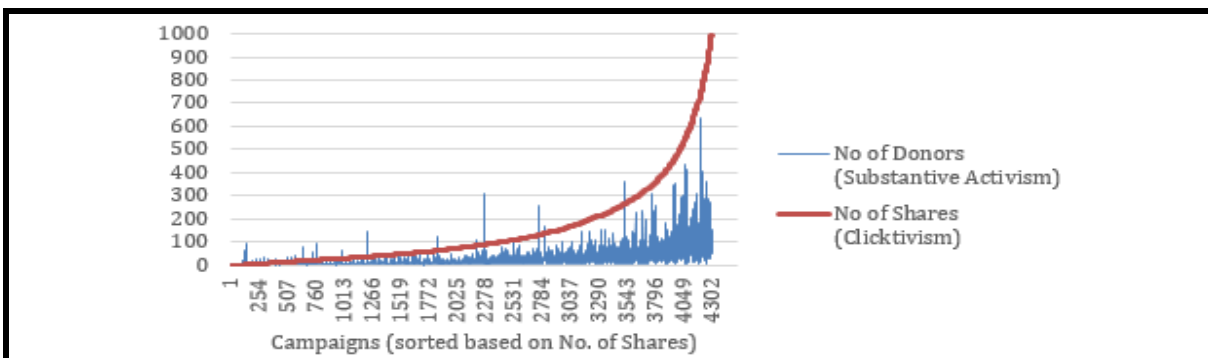


Figure 5 Shares on social media (red) versus actual donors (blue) across 4301 campaigns. An additional 238 campaigns (5% of all projects) with more than 1000 shares are excluded from this plot.

As evident from Table 1, the distributions of the variables are extremely skewed. We applied a log (to the base of 10) transformation to all variables in our analyses. The scatter plot in Figure 6 illustrates an extremely high correlation (0.909) in log space between the number of donors and the achieved donation amount. The former does predict 83% of the variance in the latter. Likewise, there is a high correlation (.768) between the number of shares on social media and the number of donors to the campaign, with the former explaining 59% of the variance in the latter.

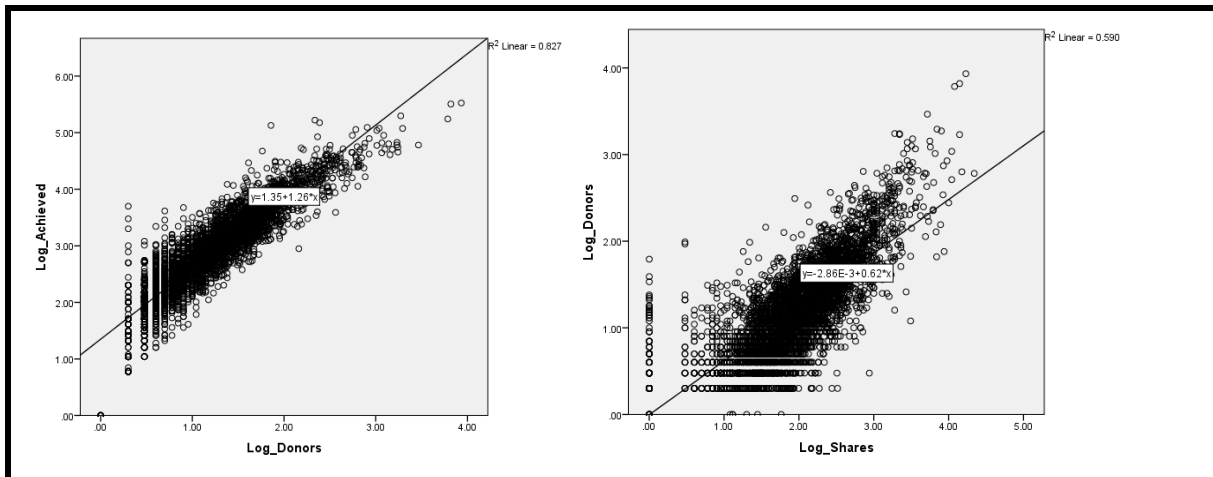


Figure 6 Achieved funding amount (log base 10) vs number of donors (log base 10), Number of donors (log base 10) vs number of shares on social media (log base 10), n=4539

Running a two-step hierarchical regression model in which symbolic and substantive action variables are incrementally added to the model hints to the fact that with the inclusion of substantive activism (no. of donors), the direct path between symbolic action (no. of shares) and campaign success (achieved funding) becomes insignificant (at $p \leq 0.01$) and the magnitude of the impact (standardised coefficient) is reduced from 0.707 to 0.021 (see the results in Table 2). Although further analysis is necessary, these regression results can be considered as an initial confirmation that as hypothesized in our conceptual model, the impact of symbolic actions (clicktivism) on campaign success is mediated through substantive actions. A path analysis using partial least squares (PLS) leads to similar results (Figure 7).

Table 2 Results of hierarchical regression analysis (n=4539)

Model	Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Adjusted R ²	Sig. F Change
1	(Constant)		55.015	0	0.499	0
	Log_Shares	0.707	67.28	0		
2	(Constant)		93.749	0	0.827	0
	Log_Shares	0.021	2.175	0.03		
	Log_Donors	0.893	92.566	0		

Dependent Variable: Log_Achieved

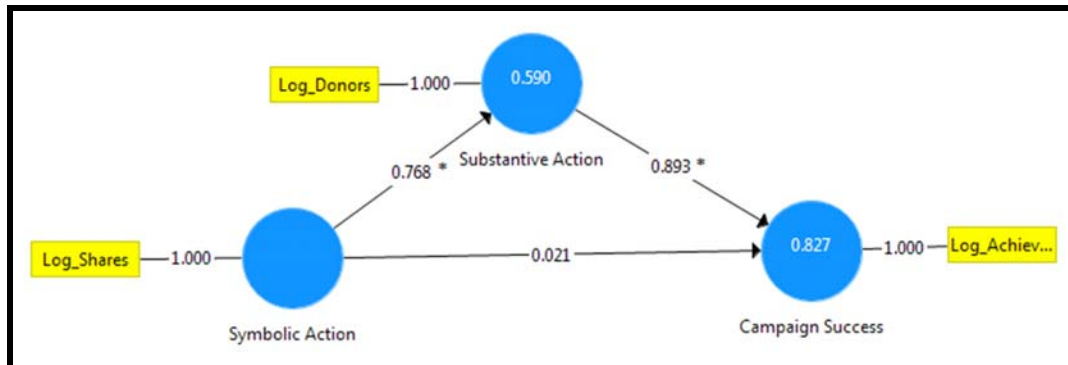


Figure 7 Partial least squares (PLS) model showing significant paths at $p < .05$, $n = 4539$

Concluding Remarks and Future Steps

This research built upon theories from social psychology and social movement to propose a conceptual model for predicting social media users' engagement in symbolic action (clicktivism) and substantive action in support of a social cause. In particular, we built an analogy between these two types of action in social media and low versus high-risk activism in social movements. Also, as a first step in a research program, we focused on the individual level of study, and developed a set of testable propositions. We intend to conduct a survey for empirical validation of this model.

Future phases of this research include studying the large and rich corpus of publicly available (hyper-)text on existing crowdfunding campaigns. As demonstrated earlier, data about campaigns can be collected from the crowdfunding platforms. Preliminary exploration of social campaign data in a crowdfunding platform demonstrated a positive impact of symbolic action on campaign success. However, this impact was fully moderated by substantive action. In the next steps, we need to use qualitative content analysis methods (Akhlaghpour et al. 2009) to extract action frames from crowdfunding campaigns. This data will be employed in refining the original conceptual model of this research and in subsequent theory building.

The results of this research can elevate our understanding of the underlying dynamics in using social media for social causes. Potentially, organizations can use the findings in developing an integrated communication strategy (e.g., by constructing action frames that resonate with the identities of their target audience). In the context of charities and non-profit organizations, this can result in higher success in terms of grassroots fundraising and securing critical resources, which in turn can lead to positive societal outcomes.

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