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# EMERGENCE OF ONLINE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: A RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Research into the emergence of social movements has traditionally been split into models that focus on grievances and masses and models that focus on resource mobilization as primary independent variables. This paper in addition to the resource mobilization perspective that involves external leadership developing central points in a social network, the characteristics of the online social networks on which digital-age movements are formed affect the coalesce of those movements. This study aims to provide contributions to the social movements and IS literature on social network functionality and provide firms with the ability to predict the strength of (and ultimately respond to) consumer protests.

## Keywords

Social movements, consumer protests, resource mobilization theory, networks, social media

## INTRODUCTION

On July 16th, 2012, the Baptist Press published an interview with Dan Cathy, the president and CEO of Chick-fil-A, a small fast food chain headquartered in Atlanta. In the interview, Cathy said that he was “guilty as charged” in support of the “traditional family.” In a radio interview the next day, Cathy reaffirmed his beliefs: “I think we are inviting God’s judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, ‘We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage,’ and I pray God’s mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to think that we have the audacity to try to redefine what marriage is about.”

Over the next week, consumers began boycotting the business, sharing their petitions through social networks. On July 22nd, less than one week since Cathy’s interview, former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee created an event on Facebook in affirmation of the fact that the business ran on explicitly “Christian principles” and that its executives were “willing to take a stand for the Godly values.” Within days, over 500,000 users had committed to “attend” the August 1st event. Facebook users then planned a counter-protest to the counter-protest and, although the activist activity has quieted in the months since July, dialogue about the company’s stance on gay marriage has not yet ceased.

It is clear that social media played an important role in galvanizing the consumer social movement in the Chick-fil-A protests (and has played a similar role in other recent protest movements both domestically and internationally). In spite social media’s utility to those protests, however, there has been little empirical work that examines how the presence of social media affects the emergence and coalescence of social movements. The objective of this paper is to determine how the use of social media impacts the formation of consumer social movements as a response to a triggering event.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

### Social Movements

Scholars of social movements have conceptualized the formation of social movements in two primary ways: grievance-centered classical and traditional theories and resource mobilization theory. Theories in the first category model the formation of social movements with grievances and masses as the primary independent variables while theories in the second category reverse the process, using leadership and resources as the primary independent variables. Grievance-centered theories, especially recently, have emphasized issues of identity politics and culture while resource mobilization theory emphasizes the zero-sum nature of financial and nonfinancial resources to a social movement. Both views inform the way information systems scholars think of the role of social media in the formation of these movements.

### *Traditional Social Movement Theory*

Traditional social movement theories form as a result of collectivized behavior as a response to a particular grievance. These models focus on either the people (see e.g. Heberle 1951) or the grievance (see e.g. Turner and Killian 1987) and theorize on the formulation of the social movement from the convergence of individuals in response to an event. These models use a

multi-step process in which the movement emerges and coalesces before it bureaucratizes into an end state and ultimately declines as it succeeds, fails, or is co-opted by another movement (Blumer 1969, Mauss 1975, Tilly 1978). The formative stages of the movement are critical in determining its success; without a coalescence of individuals, the movement will be too disjointed to be effective in its goals. Within the emergence and coalescence stages of the movement, participation evolves in four steps: first, an individual becomes a sympathizer of the movement; second, he or she is targeted by the movement as a potential member; third, he or she becomes motivated to participate; finally, he or she overcomes barriers to participation and joins the movement (Klandermans 1984).

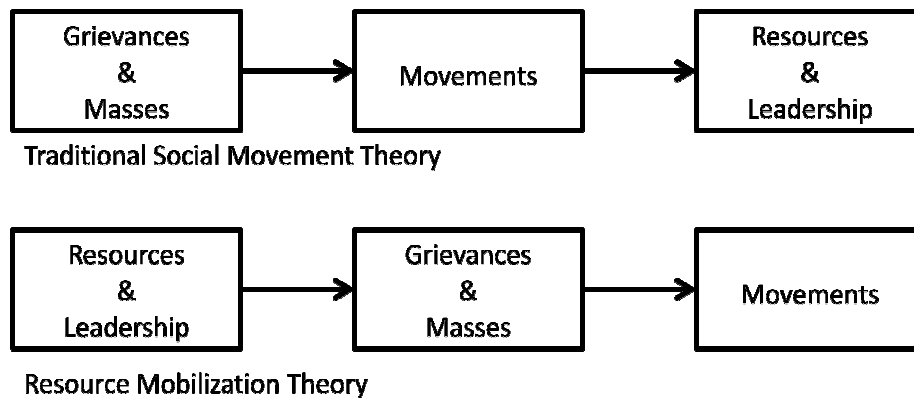
Empirical studies of social movements have generally not modeled participation in these movements as a multi-step process (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006). Additionally, those studies that have created multi-step models have focused exclusively on the third and fourth stages of the model (see Oegema and Klandermans 1994). Problems at the third stage (“nonconversion problems”) and the fourth stage (“erosion problems”) focus on circumstantial factors that make the conversion of action preparedness into actual participation less likely for an individual member of a social movement.

Although scholars have suggested that an individual will be more likely to have nonconversion and erosion problems if they have obligations that reduce the time and energy available for activism (such as marriage or children), empirical evidence suggests that, in many cases, individuals with those constraints are actually more likely to engage in activism (see e.g. Oberschall 73). These findings suggest that the initial stages of a social movement—the stage in which an individual first becomes a sympathizer of a social movement and the stage in which the movement targets the sympathizer—are the most important elements of the formative stage of the movement. Resource mobilization theory conceptualizes the formation of a social movement in another way; instead of viewing a social movement as an amalgamation of people with a cause, it sees “entrepreneurial leaders and resource availability as independent variables leading to movements that then frame grievances and recruit membership to suit their purposes.

#### *Resource Mobilization Theory*

Since the late 1970s, resource mobilization theory (“RMT”) has emerged as one of the dominant paradigms for studying collective action in the United States (Buechler 1995). RMT examines “the variety of resources that must be mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success, and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements” (McCarthy & Zald 1977).

RMT evolved out of economics research in the 1960’s that attempted to reconcile the increase in social movement activity with the economic growth and expansion of the middle class at the time (McCarthy & Zald 1977). In *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson argued that social movements were intrinsically collective action problems; if people are economically rational actors, they should not have any incentive to participate in social movements because they have more to gain by freeriding. As a result, Olson argued that individuals participating in social movements derive “selective incentives” in order to be rationally motivated to participate in movements (Olson 1965).



**Figure 1. Process models of traditional and resource mobilization theories**

McCarthy and Zald’s seminal piece on RMT argued that the significance of membership had declined, particularly in situations in which funding for the movement came from external sources and if grievances were framed by “media-savvy professionals rather than rising up from a mass base” (Buechler 2011). Figure 1 summarizes and compares these two perspectives. This deemphasis on membership resulted in a shift from “intensive, exclusive membership” to more “partial, inclusive membership with relatively few obligations beyond signing petitions or sending checks” (Buechler 2011).

McCarthy and Zald operated under the assumption that social movements operated like individual firms, each of which were competing with one another for resources (see e.g. Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

### Networks and Social Media

Some scholars using the network approach to study social movements have focused on the connections between and across social movements. For example, studies have examined the effects of network properties (such as the number of brokers, centrality of leaders, number of cliques, and network size) on the emergence of the movement and probability of repression of the protest (Soule 2012). The studies cited in Soule, however, use datasets from movements such as Poland's Solidarity movement of the 1960s and 1970s and Milanese environmentalists in the 1980s. The nature of the movements studied and the extent to which their participants were engaged in those movements is qualitatively different from the consumer protests that occur today; in addition to studying the characteristics of the social network, it is important to study the distinguishing feature of today's digital-age movements: the characteristics of the online social media tools used by the movement.

Extant research on the impact of social media on movements has focused on the attributes of social media that facilitate the formation of such movements. For example, researchers have posited that social media contributes to decentralized, grassroots movements that begin without a set agenda or organizational hierarchy, increasing the "spontaneity" with which they are formed (Samuels 2011). IS research on social media, however, is particularly instructive here because it analyzes the structure and functionality of various types of online social networks. These structures and functionalities may ultimately influence the ability of social movements to form around an issue. Additionally, social networks give individuals the ability to rapidly exchange information about the grievance around which the movement is formed because of the myriad ways that users can self-identify with political or ideological groups prior to the movement's existence. Social movement theorists have analogized this property to a reverse Foucauldian panopticon; because members of social movements can exchange information so quickly, corporations are forced to self-monitor their actions to prevent protests and other consumer action (Garrett 2006).

### HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT AND PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

To our knowledge, the foundational relationship of RMT has not been empirically tested. As mentioned above, RMT evolved out of the "paradox" of increased social movement activity amidst the affluence of the 1960s. As Buechler (2011) describes, the classical model of movements saw grievances and masses as independent variables that then generated leadership and sought resources. The RMT model, on the other hand, begins with entrepreneurial leadership and resource availability as independent variables that frame grievances and recruit membership to suit their purposes. (Buechler 2011). The first and second hypotheses test theory from the social movements discipline and provide the structure for the rest of the study. Figure 2 depicts the research model.

*Hypothesis 1: The presence of strong leadership and resources causes movements to coalesce around an issue because of the way the leadership can utilize the network members in broker/leader/central positions.*

*Hypothesis 2: The presence of strong leadership and resources can develop the broker/leader/centrality positions of network members.*

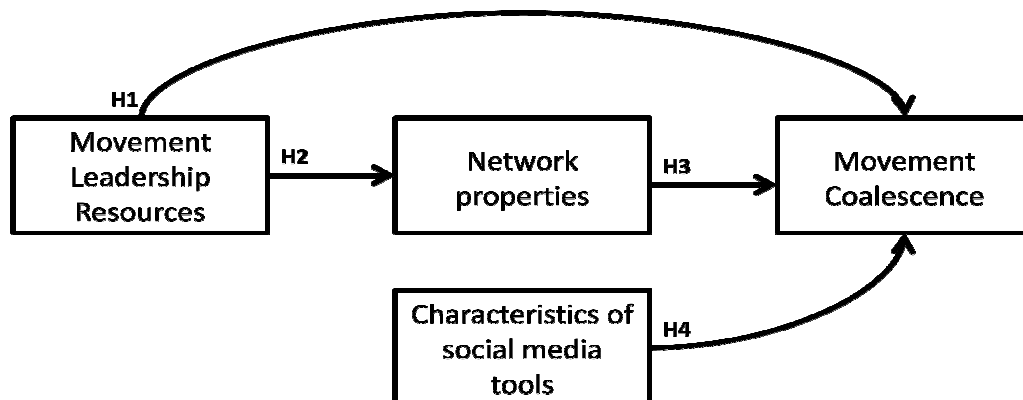


Figure 2. Proposed research model

Early research on social ties and social movements suggests that individuals who are more socially connected are more likely to join movements and more isolated individuals are less likely to do so (Oberschall 1973). Oberschall's research studied both strong ties with moral overtones (communal organization) and formal, occasionally contractual ties formed around

particular interests such as labor unions or political parties (associational organization) (Buecheler 2011). In both of these cases, argued Oberschall, preexisting organizational ties accelerate the processes of social movement formation because individuals can put social pressure on one another to join the movement, mitigating the effects of the collective action problem inherent to social movements (see Olson 1965).

Recent research on social capital has distinguished loose connections between individuals that do not provide emotional support (bridging capital) and strong, tightly-knit connections (bonding capital) (Putnam 2000). Although this research was not explicitly conducted within the context of online social networks, many scholars have applied it to the realm of online social networks and concluded that these networks excel at creating and maintaining loose, bridging bonds among individuals (see e.g. Donath & Boyd 2004).

Theories of social movements argue that two forms of pre-social movement social organization facilitate the process of social movement coalescence: communal organization and associational organization (Buechler 2011). The former type refers to “long-standing, traditional ties with symbolic or moral overtones” and the latter formal, contractual ties such as labor unions, political parties or other voluntary organizations; both communal organization and associational organization are strong ties (bonding capital) that are either issue-based or communal in nature. As a result, if an online social network were comprised of simply bridging ties without any identity interest, such ties would be unlikely to serve as strong pre-mobilization networks because individuals may not have the capacity to provide enough social pressure on their loose ties to sufficiently incentivize all of them to join the movement. This serves as a theoretical foundation on which to make hypotheses that test the studies cited by Soule as mentioned above.

*Hypothesis 3: Individuals in broker/leader/central positions formalize the clearly-defined sense of discontent required to coalesce the movement.*

Modern social networking websites, however, have robust systems by which users can publish their alignment with a political party or ideology or can join virtual groups with other members around practically any topic. This act of self-identification and subsequent grouping of similar ideologies increases the strength of social pressure applied to individuals with weak social ties by increasing the extent to which these loose ties are communal or associational (Oberschall 1973).

*Hypothesis 4: Social networks that allow members to explicitly identify their political sentiments and self-organize on the basis of those sentiments will be more successful at movement coalescence.*

Construct	Definition
Movement Leadership Resources	Movement leadership resources refers to the extent to which entrepreneurial leadership and resources are available to the movement (Buecheler 2011)
Network Properties	Network Properties refers to the presence and involvement of individuals at particular points in the social network (leaders, brokers, points of network centrality, etc.).
Characteristics of social media tools	Organization via online social network refers to the extent to which members and potential members of the movement have expressed their views regarding the grievance on an online social network.
Movement Coalescence	Movement coalescence refers to the stage of social movement formation characterized by a clearly-defined sense of discontent, overt and exoteric unrest, focalized and collective action, and emergent leadership (Hopper 1950).

**Table 1. Constructs with working definitions**

## CONCLUSION

### Practical and Theoretical Implications

Consumer protests can wreak havoc on firms. Although it is difficult to calculate the financial implications of events such as boycotts, consumer protests can force firms to funnel profits into nonproductive activities such as public relations campaigns to repair their image. Especially now that most of these protests originate on the internet, a firm’s ability to proactively manage online communities—as opposed to reacting to movements after they have been formed—can be essential to its

survival. Additionally, this research could have significant theoretical implications in the field of social movements by showing that the self-identification into socio-political groups using online social networks serves as a bridge between the resource mobilization theory of social movements and traditional theories of social movements.

Despite the value of this study, it does have some limitations. First, because the study will analyze public data on social networks, the study cannot incorporate analysis derived from private, backchannel discussions—particularly those involving the movement’s founder(s), which has theoretical significance to resource mobilization theory. Although such conversations would not add much value to the theoretical contributions made by the hypotheses, they would add substantial value to the framing of the study and underscore the importance of social networks in the planning stages of the movement.

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