



Spring 2020

## Digital Activism: How the Online Youth-Led Climate Movement Mobilizes Communities for Change

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### Recommended Citation

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# Digital Activism: How the Online Youth-Led Climate Movement Mobilizes Communities for Change

## Abstract

With the increasing prominence of online media, digital environments have allowed for new developments in establishing online social movements. Social media, in particular, offered a new way to generate knowledge amongst publics, facilitate dialogue, and build a coalition around the movement's cause. The theoretical framework provided by the contributions of McLuhan, Castells, and Goffman allowed key strategies of community building and storytelling to emerge through the lens of the youth climate change movement. Digital ethnography was used to collect data on seven female youth climate activists through their public Twitter accounts to assess social media as a tool for social organizing and community building. The seven youth activists uniquely employed five emergent strategies that appeared effective in engaging activist communities on Twitter: (1) projecting an activist identity through the content generated in their tweets; (2) disseminating information and documenting offline protests in an online forum to inspire followers and ignite action for change; (3) engaging in broad political conversations, and recentering focus on the larger environmental concerns that motivated the movement; (4) building a network directly connected to several core actors, here the most important being Thunberg; and (5) crafting a message and utilizing a medium that resonates with the base of followers that the movement wants to attract. These were used to build a common narrative around the youth fear of their future on Earth given that climate change may render it unlivable in their lifetime, and advancing the youth climate cause, whether digitally or physically.

## Keywords

digital ethnography, youth climate activism, social media, social movements

## Disciplines

Environmental Studies | Politics and Social Change | Sociology | Theory, Knowledge and Science

## Comments

Written as an Honors Thesis in Sociology.

**Digital Activism: How the Online Youth-Led Climate Movement Mobilizes  
Communities for Change**

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**Abstract:** With the increasing prominence of online media, digital environments have allowed for new developments in establishing online social movements. Social media, in particular, offered a new way to generate knowledge amongst publics, facilitate dialogue, and build a coalition around the movement's cause. The theoretical framework provided by the contributions of McLuhan, Castells, and Goffman allowed key strategies of community building and storytelling to emerge through the lens of the youth climate change movement. Digital ethnography was used to collect data on seven female youth climate activists through their public Twitter accounts to assess social media as a tool for social organizing and community building. The seven youth activists uniquely employed five emergent strategies that appeared effective in engaging activist communities on Twitter: (1) projecting an activist identity through the content generated in their tweets; (2) disseminating information and documenting offline protests in an online forum to inspire followers and ignite action for change; (3) engaging in broad political conversations, and recentering focus on the larger environmental concerns that motivated the movement; (4) building a network directly connected to several core actors, here the most important being Thunberg; and (5) crafting a message and utilizing a medium that resonates with the base of followers that the movement wants to attract. These were used to build a common narrative around the youth fear of their future on Earth given that climate change may render it unlivable in their lifetime, and advancing the youth climate cause, whether digitally or physically.

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## Introduction

The actions taken by youth climate activists to address critical issues facing the global environment have transformed environmental conversations in unseen ways. Recently, this has primarily been due to the use of online media, specifically social media sites like Twitter. While youth activists were engaged in the fight for climate justice in the past, they did not have access to the same platforms that today amplify their voices for mass public consumption. One notable attempt of a youth activist to spark change on a global scale was a speech given by Severn Cullis-Suzuki at the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where she paralleled many of the thematic ideas employed by contemporary youth climate activists; the weight of her message, however, did not quite garner the same longevity of attention globally as it is today. In 2018, Greta Thunberg, 15 years old, pioneered the “Strikes for Climate” by protesting outside of the Swedish Parliament instead of attending classes until serious government action was taken to tackle issues of climate change in Sweden. Within a year of her solo strikes, Thunberg became a prominent leader in youth climate change activism as her journey was documented and circulated on social media sites like Twitter, where she was able to build a network to promote her cause and generate a community of followers online.

Thunberg and Severn-Cullis are not outliers when it comes to youth engagement in political advocacy. Youth activists have long been on the front lines of social change globally, in an attempt to overcome injustices imposed upon them in a society whose ideas are dominated by older generations (Blakemore 2018). As a result, social movements have not been devoid of youth involvement as was notably seen in the civil rights movement, where college students led efforts for change. Today, with the power of online media at their fingertips, current youth

activists, many in high school or younger, are calling adults to action to right the wrongs otherwise left for future generations to restore (Astor 2018). Youth activism is not unique to the United States, as teens and young adults have fought for change in their own communities worldwide, sometimes creating movements for broader global change on salient issues (Astor 2018). The inception of the digital age, where technological advances in society have become inextricably embedded into the fabric of people's lives, and the rise of social media in mobilization efforts have allowed news and events encompassed in these social movements to be delivered to large publics faster than ever before, changing the landscape in which social movements permeate societies today.

Literature with a focus on the emergence of new social movements and digital media has started to develop substantially over the past few decades. Some scholars sought to understand the ways that digital communication technologies have transformed collective action efforts in our society (Park, Lim, and Park 2015; Chon and Park 2019). Other literature touched on the ability to mobilize publics and see critical actions taking place either through online networks or a shared meaning of what individuals are fighting to change. More current research looked specifically at social movements that emerged through online platforms in localized communities such as the Arab Spring or #BlackLivesMatter. By employing McLuhan, Castells, and Goffman as the theoretical foundation, my research examined narrative framing and linguistic conventions to better understand how youth climate activists in particular utilized Twitter to build community and mobilize followers. In looking at the youth climate movement specifically, this project advanced the knowledge of the discipline by understanding how social movements emerging on digital platforms could generate salient narratives that built communities across global networks.

This research further contributed to an understanding of youth activism in particular, and developed a strategic framework to assess future social movement advancement via social media platforms.

Using digital ethnographic analytic techniques, I assessed the latent and manifest thematic content embedded in the Twitter feeds of seven prominent youth climate activists to capture how leaders of the movement built community in an online environment. The analysis revealed five noteworthy strategies employed by the activists that proved effective in building this change-oriented coalition around global climate action: (1) the presentation of self to create a shared identity with followers; (2) the fusion of digital and physical acts of protest and mobilization to ignite change-making processes; (3) an emphasis on environmental crises as they unfolded; (4) the importance of a central node in the media network; and (5) the power of youth voices in bringing attention to global climate justice. While each activist developed and implemented these strategies from their own unique perspectives, they served as a common thread throughout the activist Twitter accounts and constructed a roadmap for future activists attempting to establish an online social movement. The analysis also provided a foundation for future ethnographic research development by constructing a viable research site on Twitter to assess social interactions and developments in virtual communities that span locations spatially and temporally. Since the actual success of the youth climate movement is yet to be seen as it is still evolving in real time, this project provided key insights in real-time to compare against future assessments.

## **Definition of the Research Question**

The research questions that guided this project were: 1) *How do youth climate change activists use Twitter to create community and shared identity among followers?*; and 2) *How is Twitter used strategically to create narratives that mobilize community action among this group of followers?* I am particularly interested in how language is employed to build communities of solidarity around climate change activism. This project specifically assessed what strategies youth activists used to build narratives surrounding climate change as a way to mobilize support, with a focus on the linguistic conventions shared by the group, a creation of shared norms, and how they evoke emotional responses in followers. In assessing these different facets of communication and community-building, I was able to further understand the role of social media in emerging social movements.

## **Theoretical Framing**

This project was situated within three main theoretical frameworks that work together to examine the nuances of youth-led online social media movements including: (1) the evolving nature of social movement theories; (2) digital media theories and how they can be used to build networks or communities; and (3) the presentation of self developed by Goffman (1959). The examination of the activist narratives and strategies from multiple theoretical perspectives allowed for richer insight into the construction of identity and community on online platforms.

Social movement theory continues to evolve as paradigmatic shifts continue to redefine and assess how collective identity formation occurs within activist communities, and how

mobilization efforts take place. In her analysis of social movements and new communication technologies, Carty (2011) gave a brief overview of the four traditional frameworks through which social movements have been assessed: (1) collective behavior theory; (2) resource mobilization; (3) political process; and (4) cultural-oriented perspectives (framing analysis). Collective behavior theories looked at social movements as random occurrences that have emerged through a unified group of individuals unhappy with a certain social situation (Carty 2011; Tarrow 1994; Blumer 1971). Carty argues that this approach was too limiting and micro in scale, so current approaches arose within this framework. These approaches assess the “collective challenge by a plurality of actors whose common purpose and shared conflictual issues work in solidarity” (Carty 2011). Resource mobilization theory, on the other hand, focuses on the resources that activists have access to in order to successfully mobilize publics through a process similar to a cost-benefit analysis. This, however, overlooks the contextual setting of social movements within the social issues and political context of the time which may overshadow a social movement’s ability to fully emerge (Carty 2011; Habermas 1984). Political process theory pays attention to the interplay between political institutions and social actors to enable meaningful protests and mobilize publics. By looking at the micro in conjunction with the macro, this view gives a broader view of what factors might expand or limit a social movement from gaining momentum (Carty 2011; Gamson and Meyer 1996). Framing analysis “focuses mainly on the why (the meaning of collective action and subjective interests), rather than on the how of social movements (political conditions and resources available)” (Carty 2011:12). Within this theoretical approach, the bridge linking the why to the how is assessed, with a particular focus on the tools employed to create a message that persuades others of the cause’s worthiness

and urgency (Carty 2011; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Framing analysis provides the most useful foundation for my assessment of youth-led online social movements.

While each has value in understanding the ways in which publics partake in and later analyze social movement emergence and implications, Carty (2011) suggests that individually these theories present too narrow an approach to social movement analysis. With the inception of new information communication technologies (ICTs), an integrative model of social movement theories might be best for understanding the complexity and consequences of these movements (Carty 2011:7). “The Internet can serve as a medium through which collective identity is established and sustained because it enhances the visibility and marketability of opinions and opportunities, and in contrast to the one-to-many mass communication media citizens comment on, and/or pass along information they receive” (Carty 2011:17), which enables social movements to potentially emerge more quickly or via different methods than has been traditionally seen prior to the 21st century and the birth of the digital age.

Media and communication theories have assessed the ways in which media is utilized to communicate and form communities or network societies online. Hartley (2002) provides an overview of theoretical concepts encompassed in these theories that will provide a useful foundation to understanding social movement and community development online. Media studies worked off this foundational ideal: “reality was a product of how communicative systems ordered the world” (Hartley 2002:33). In understanding systems of communication, the world becomes simultaneously interconnected and interdependent, creating new links and bridging new sources of information and knowledge generation globally. Additionally, advancing communication technologies increased performance and function, allowing greater speed and

rate of communication globally and locally. When thinking about networked societies - “interconnected systems that exchange data selectively and intentionally” (Hartley 2002:161) - the creation of online interactions and communities has to be negotiated in various ways. Hartley (2002:59) further elaborates: “Culturally, the cyborg allows for the creation of strategic identities in a technologically mediated society.” Hands (2011) advances the concepts explained by Hartley (2002) by describing technology as containing “a set of social values” that are adaptable locally and globally (Hands 2011:38) to changing constructions in a given context. Thus, with the birth of “virtual communities,” meetings and interactions between individuals have become easier.

However, the removal of face-to-face interaction still plays a role in the formation and negotiation of identity in online forums. As McLuhan (1967) argued, the medium in which communication occurs sends a message to the receiver that is separate from the actual ideas communicated verbally or visually, but still profoundly important. His theory explained the concept: “The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty - psychic or physical” (McLuhan 1967:17). This understanding focused on the importance of the environment or medium when assessing what is being presented in a given interaction, and in the case of digital technologies, the medium can provide unique messages that more traditional forms of information transmission could not. He expanded on the importance of these new communication media - although not quite the same as what has evolved into contemporary social media platforms - in “reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life” (McLuhan 1967:8).

McLuha's theories connect well with the work of Manuel Castells to nuance the conversation of the Internet and the self.

Castells (2000) offered a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand the interactions between the Internet and the self, specifically through emerging media platforms and the ways in which virtual network societies are created. Despite large gaps in the ways individuals utilize the Internet, Castells (2002) notes the importance of the Internet across the globe in dictating certain behaviors or ways of life, purporting that what is occurring online is capturing a new expression of being. His work has transformed how language and communication techniques have been transferred to online platforms, noting: "a new communication system, increasingly speaking a universal, digital language, is both integrating globally the production and distribution of words, sounds and images of our culture, and customizing them to the tastes of the identities and moods of individuals" (Castells 2000:2). Since the Internet spans geographic locations and creating a "new" language, the production of knowledge and information online is constantly shaped by offline and online interactions to create new forms of "social interaction, social control, and social change" (Castells 2000:18), and thus, suggests changes in the ways that social protests can take hold online and in the streets (Castells 2002). Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) build upon Castells' (2002) understanding of online modes of communication, theorizing that the Internet has become embedded in our everyday lives. The pervasiveness of the Internet in society has become so deeply ingrained that individuals, in many ways, have become unaware of the power that it holds in permeating public opinion and understandings of the world around them.

To better understand the ways in which these youth activists have created an online presence as a group and individually to generate a steady online following, the theoretical

contributions of sociologist Erving Goffman were included to assess the creation and presentation of self in an online media setting. Goffman (1959) rooted his theories in dramaturgy, where the creation of self is always being negotiated based on setting and through interactions with others, essentially being acted out by the individual to meet expectations or intentionally deviate from them within a given social context. Of particular use to the project are Goffman's (1959) conception of various regions of performance - the front stage and backstage - where certain aspects of identity are accentuated or suppressed during the interaction. In applying it to the digital age, the performance of self is shaped by the role of the media in mediating performance for the audience. The actions taking place on screen, online, or over the radio become the front stage performance of the individuals, curated to appeal to an audience and present a very polished sense of self; the backstage, then, occurs when the cameras and microphones are off and there no longer remains an expectation that the individuals will stay in "character" (Goffman 1959). In looking at the posts of youth activists on Twitter, the project will assess the ways in which these individuals have chosen to present themselves and the activist persona crafted to send a message to the world regarding the changes they seek on climate change.

Incorporating these theories of the self as performed via online communication technologies in conjunction with the continuous shifts in social movement analysis built the foundations to understand narrative strategies and community building techniques in the youth climate change movement. Other relevant literature was surveyed to assess current conversations around emerging social movements and online communities, as well as to reveal clear gaps in the literature that this project fulfilled.

## **Relevant Sociological Literature**

### ***Understanding Digital Technologies and Media Studies***

Online digital technologies are changing the social interactions occurring between individuals. Within this scope, social media can be understood as “a broad collection of digital platforms that have radically changed the way people interact and communicate” (McFarland and Ployhart 2015:1). Platforms, such as Twitter, serve a variety of functions, including facilitating information sharing, user-generated content, and interactions amongst individuals (McFarland and Ployhart 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2013; Murthy 2012) in addition to expanding the opportunities for public engagement (Finlayson 2019; Kim and Adam 2011; Effing et al. 2011). The fact that the content messaging is user-generated on social media sites allows for an increase in “creation, manipulation, and distribution of content” and distinguishes it from other more traditional media because it is “much more open, interactive, fluid, and dynamic” (McFarland and Ployhart 2015:1654).

Murthy (2012) assesses that social media is a tool for “ordinary” people to create content and share information as opposed to groups with more power, such as the news media industry or politicians, but that does not mean that they have not adopted the platforms at all. It also allows for ordinary people then to connect with large social networks with social media as the mediator of those interactions. This means networks can be built across the globe with strangers, and on the rare occurrence with celebrities, through a few clicks of a button (Murthy 2012). Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Guilia, and Haythornthwaite (1996:213) expand on this understanding of connectivity in saying: “fostering situations that combine global connectivity, the fragmentation of solidarities, the de-emphasis of local organizations (in the neighborhood

and the workplace) and the increased importance of our home networks” suggests that Internet interactions can build just as meaningful social networks as offline interactions (Willems 2019; Kim and Adam 2011).

When understanding the use of media to disseminate information and to lead to public action, a variety of elements should be considered. Specifically, it is important to pay attention to the demographics of who is gaining the most attention or has the most influence on the Internet. While Internet access and technology are becoming critical elements of today’s society, that does not mean that they are easily accessible across socio-economic divides, as well as within other minority identity categories (Castells 2002). For instance, while older data, Jordan (2001:3) describes how in the early-2000s, the majority of the 250 million Internet users “had an average household income of \$60,000 USA per year, were nearly 90% white and had an average age in the early thirties.” While in a span of ten or more years the demographics have surely evolved as digital and technological advances have also been made, the idea that everyone has an equal opportunity to access these resources and share their opinions is not necessarily true. He also elaborates on the heavily skewed online presence of US Internet-users, further obscuring the accessibility and depth of information being shared or generated (Jordan 2001).

Social media sites offer a unique set of functions that serve to advance information sharing and content generation online. Hashtags are a popular linguistic tool used primarily on Twitter but have permeated other social networking sites as a way to “tag” and “index” information for quick retrieval and topic tracking beyond single users (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Shapp 2014). Often, hashtags are created to link tweets in a way that weaves a narrative together from connected or disparate Twitter users around a given topic whether its an event, personal

story, or emotion related to the context of the hashtag message (i.e. #BlackLivesMatter) (Yang 2016; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). While hashtags only tell a partial story, the ability to track content from a broader movement, cause, or topic and “reorient from [the] network and community” to “individual experiences, practices, and socialites” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015:6) to build a more robust narrative. Hashtags serve different linguistic functions depending on how users employ them, whether it is to ignite a call to action through verb usage (#StrikeforClimate) or to provide further commentary on the information shared in the body of the tweet (#annoying) (Yang 2016; Shapp 2014). Other common functions include such as “retweet” or mention add to the rhetorical strategies users can employ to inform the narrative being generated and interact directly with other Twitter users. Other tools that can be used to craft a tweet are media images, videos, and other graphics to show, rather than simply state the message being conveyed (Yang 2016), as was corroborated by McLuhan’s theories. The variety of strategic functions and tools available on Twitter have proven effective in other social movements as they “allowed a message to get out, called global attention to a smaller corner of the world, and attempted to bring visibility and accountability to repressive forces” (Bonilla and Rosa 2015:7) and advanced their movement forward.

### ***The Emergence of Online Social Movements***

Social movements serve as a foundational component to social change in society as they have been used for decades to voice concerns and mobilize communities to act around a variety of issues. Since the creation of more advanced digital technologies and the Internet, the trajectory of social movements has changed from the early days of the Civil Rights Movement and the

LGBT rights movements, where activists mostly took to the streets to protest the injustices they faced. The Internet paved the way as a new platform to connect publics to engage online from anywhere in the globe, sparking a desire for individual or collective action often through a few clicks of a button (Park, Lim, and Park 2015). Social media in particular allows individuals to share their concerns and make their voices heard by a broad audience, facilitate discussions, and motivate publics by creating large online networks, and expand the reach that their activism can attain. Past research suggests: “In the context of social movements, social media serve as useful communication tools for protesters, who may deploy social media not only to disseminate their ideas but also to motivate others to engage in collective action” (Park, Lim, and Park 2015:208). This enhanced structure of creating emerging social movements reduced the hierarchical nature Castells (2002) that can appear through on the ground protests or in current conversations surrounding policy changes as social media networks afford all users the opportunity to share their opinions, contributing to global communities for social change.

As the implications of social media led social movements are still unfolding for activist work in the 21st century, there are a few campaigns of note that suggest the viability of social media as a forum for mobilizing and inspiring communities to act. Social media allows activists to share information or updates, and facilitate dialogues in real-time via tweets or posts, as opposed to having the more traditional gatekeeping tactics exemplified in former social movements pre-media age (Cox 2017; Park, Lim, and Park 2015). By sharing news or even harnessing the power of pictures or videos to display an emotional scene, activists have more power to manipulate public opinion and mobilize passionate communities that want to see change occurring, making it more difficult to remain untouched or unaware of the complex

global problems that currently exist. Specific emerging social movements that appeared to have benefitted from the use of online social media sites include #OccupyWallStreet, #ArabSpring, #BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo, attesting to the breadth and depth of online social movements in sparking global activism rather than simply reaching more localized communities or publics (Cox 2017; Park, Lim, and Park 2015; Frangonikolopoulous and Chapsos 2012).

While social media is increasingly becoming a forum for social change, many also argue that it is not a viable tool to inspire lasting offline action. Instead, these scholars refer to this as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” insinuating that support for these causes through “like,” “retweets,” and “shares” is not doing enough to actually change the situation, but rather makes the individual “feel good” that they have contributed in a small way to the movement (Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya 2017). “Slacktivism” suggests a negative form of interaction online, while Christensen (2011) introduces an alternative description: “micro-activism.” This instead “refers to the small-scale, many-to-many forms of politically-oriented communication,” (Christensen 2011) which could ultimately bridge online interaction and offline participation in social activism. Thus, only in further assessing the progress being made in emerging social movements can one assess whether online participation is detrimental or productive in sparking offline change.

### ***Creating Activist Communities for Social Change***

As digital technologies continue to expand, an increase in their use to connect and become more informed on global issues is continually evolving, especially on social media platforms (Chon and Park 2019). Depending on how activists are taking to social media to mobilize communities to act, one can see a shift in how activist communities, or communities for

social change are forming (Chon and Park 2019). Activism, as expressed by Chon and Park (2019) is the “process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic,” thus alluding to the need to build a collective understanding about what change needs to occur in order to effectively create environments for change. By using the new digital platforms, as well as more traditional means of media engagement, activists interact to share information that ultimately serves as the foundation for action, uniting the group into a single collective (Chon and Park 2019; Velasquez and LaRose 2015). With the increasing use of digital technologies that allow for expansive social networks, online media also change the ways that activism may have been more traditionally understood (i.e. “direct vigorous action”) (Chon and Park 2019; Seo et al. 2014). Thus, the ease with which individuals thus can connect over social media allows one to reconceptualize the specifically action-oriented nature that can be desired in emerging social movements, lending to new understandings of commitment to the cause.

The emergence of social movements has taken on a variety of forms over the past few decades as a shift away from more localized agents seeking change to global networks connected via cyberspace seeking change on a large scale and garnering increased support for the causes that warrant action. A result of this disparate organizing is a need to foster a sense of community and shared understanding of the common goal of the group of individuals, as Buecher (1990) described as “social movement communities” or as Fantasia (1988) describes as “cultures of solidarity.” Taylor and Whittier (1995) explore the notion of ideas and beliefs that drive collective activism or protest in the assessment of frames of understanding that guide action. This can be expanded upon in digital media realms to better conceptualize how language and

creation of an online culture can bridge the gap between more intimate local community organizing and global, widespread networks working for social change. Seo, Houston, Knight, Taylor, and English (2014:887) understand this shift in social movement development and organizing as follows: “The observation that the emergence of digital communication technologies has lowered the ‘threshold for collective action,’” suggesting that the stakes of participating through online activism might change the overall incentives individuals face when deciding whether or not to participate. These changing stakes embedded in online political activism could be the difference between an emerging social movement gaining increased attention and bringing about change through collective action or the diminishing of a movement before it has even begun based solely on attention to the cause through these online media sites.

Social media provides a unique outlet for youth voices in emerging social movements, allowing them to share their concerns, generate knowledge and be politically active since they are not yet able to vote (Seo et al. 2014; Velasquez and LaRose 2015). Social media has become a popular forum for younger generations to connect and share information, with 88% of young adults 18-29 years active on social media sites in 2018. The younger portion of that age group in particular utilizes Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter as their social media sites of choice when compared to individuals just a few years older (25+) (Smith and Anderson 2018). The implications for understanding the driving force of youth collective action through social media sites will offer insights into the future of global activism and the social capital that can be generated online to mobilize public support for social change within underrepresented populations (Seo et al. 2014).

Social cognitive theory delves into the collective action behaviors within youth activism to assess the implications of group versus individual participation in working toward change (Velasquez and LaRose 2015). This further leads to an understanding that different incentives, costs, or benefits will exist for individuals who choose to collectively participate in online activism, as opposed to the individual decision to participate and act alone (Velasquez and LaRose 2015). Other scholars elaborate saying that the desire to belong to a social group may be satisfied by participating in online communities or may provide a space for youth to partake in a community they may not have been a part of offline (Seo et al. 2014). In concert with social cognitive theory, one might look toward collective political efficacy (CPE) to assess “responsiveness to collective demands for social change,” to better understand why these youth-led social movements have gained significant traction recently (Velasquez and LaRose 2015).

### ***Current Study***

After reviewing the literature, it is clear that the discipline is still trying to discern the rapidly evolving role that social media is playing in the future of protest and dissent. While online social movements seem to be cropping up in all parts of the world, very few studies have followed the emergence of global movements. The youth-led climate change movement thus brings together two fascinating aspects of social movement development through social media that have yet to be seriously studied. While youth have been involved in social organizing and mobilizing for previous causes, my project specifically focuses exclusively on the role that youth are playing in the climate change movement globally and how they have utilized new digital

tools of communication such as Twitter as a mechanism to promote their message, mobilize publics, and form community through online networks. In understanding emerging social movements through the lens of social media sites, I hope to contribute to the growing literature on digital sociology, shifting social movements, and provide insights into how youth activists can have success in pursuing social change.

### **Research Design**

To assess the stated research questions, I conducted a digital ethnography on the social media site Twitter to obtain data for this project. I followed accounts for five prominent youth leaders in the online climate change movement to examine the ways in which they construct a sense of community using digital media and mobilize support or action to fight climate change. First, I made a private<sup>1</sup> Twitter profile solely for the purposes of research to allow for the collection of tweet data. To ensure full transparency to the individuals being observed, in the “Twitter bio” section of my Twitter account, I explained my role as a researcher and elaborated on the nature of my research. This description used in my Twitter bio can be found in Appendix A.

To create this community, I followed the Twitter accounts of these five activists. The accounts observed may not have initially been created for the purpose of activism, but have since been used as a platform to distribute information and generate community involvement to achieve activist goals. This purposive sample of individuals was determined through research and news coverage over the past year to determine which faces and voices have become the most

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<sup>1</sup> Private in this context means that I have the ability to control or limit the individuals who may follow or have access to my account. If content were to be generated by me, it would still be subject to public Twitter feeds depending on if it was retweeted or commented on by other accounts.

prominent in the emerging online climate change movement. By following the accounts of these individuals, I accessed the content they were specifically producing online to generate a following, as well as any interactions they had with their audience (the public). This specifically allowed me to incorporate Goffman's theories of self, and look at how the Internet is a forum to display one's "front stage" identity. After following each account, I extracted the "tweets"<sup>2</sup> from my Twitter feed<sup>3</sup> for each of the activists during the timeframe.

The Twitter "field site" served to replicate a more traditional field site used in ethnographic research by framing a community that was to be studied within the broader youth climate change movement. I identified individuals of particular interest - seven prominent youth climate activists - to serve as the informants to the norms and practices of the broader community. These informants served a role that also heavily impacted the community through the tweet content they generated and circulated within the time frame of the study. Twitter as a virtual community mimics the interactions of offline communities in numerous ways. Each individual Twitter account represents an individual or organization that belongs to the community of interest, and their interactions are traced through Twitter's unique functions: tweets, retweets, mentions, and hashtags that create a dialogue among users. Twitter imposes certain controls on social interactions by limiting characters per tweet, but does allow users to upload media content to visually display their message. The network of youth climate activists is created using the "follow" function where individuals can select different accounts from which they will see the content generated and build a sense of community around a given topic, cause, or movement. While some connections serve to extend offline networks into the virtual sphere,

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<sup>2</sup> The posts made by activists to disseminate information on Twitter specifically, typically 240 characters or less.

<sup>3</sup> The stream of tweets by these individuals who have posted online from their Twitter accounts.

for the purposes of the climate movement, the “follow” function allows networks to transcend time and space online.

The data collection occurred over a 30-day period from November 15, 2019 to December 15, 2019. Within this timeframe, I used NCapture, a web browser extension linked to NVivo to capture tweet data and compile a dataset of tweets for each identified activist in the study. All the tweets captured within the specified timeframe were included in the data set except for Margolin, as she tweeted more than 2000 times compared to less than 200 for each of the other activists in the study. Instead, all of Margolin’s originally generated tweets (50) were analysed, and 10% of the remaining sample in order to understand how she built community online. To analyze that data, I used coding techniques to uncover manifest and latent themes and ideas displayed by these activists. The coding analysis was conducted using a modified, emergent grounded theory approach through which themes and patterns will emerge from reading the tweets, rather than developing a codebook prior to beginning the analysis. In order to answer the proposed research questions, I coded each tweet to identify patterns in the language employed by each activist, or the cohort as a whole, to uncover community-building strategies, such as common terminology or evoking responses to the tones presented in the tweets. Through latent content analysis, I uncovered patterns and themes that emerged around action and mobilization to see at what point and how these activists have been successful in garnering a following they can mobilize into offline action for climate change.

This project raises some ethical concerns in accessing Twitter data of minors via their social media accounts. Since the accounts of these individuals are public and accessible through a public domain (Twitter), there is no expectation of privacy from observation and analysis of the

content being generated. Participants were engaging in public conversations in a public way. Due to the public nature of this data, it was not possible to guarantee confidentiality throughout the project. Since the specific language used in the tweets could still be easily traced back to the individual activists through a simple search of the tweet language, the identities of the activists were not kept confidential and their names were used in the discussion of the data. This model of data collection has been approved by the Gettysburg College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

An IRB form for this project was submitted on Friday, October 18, 2019 for a Full Board Review. After careful consideration, it was determined that the proposed project did not warrant this extensive review process and was exempt from IRB oversight due to the “non-private” nature of that data being collected for analysis. I received a formal approval of my IRB exemption on the same date.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The tweets revealed key insights that drew connections between the future of social movements and the evolution of new digital technologies to disseminate a particular story or message to large publics. Using digital ethnographic techniques, numerous narratives emerged from the activists’ tweets, pointing to multiple salient strategies that were used to effectively build and mobilize communities for change. A convenience time frame was used to collect tweets which allowed for themes and patterns to emerge through a grounded theory approach rather than using a predetermined set of codes. After analyzing the tweets from each activist, the five major themes revealed how these activists used Twitter to develop communities for change centered around the global climate crisis and created narratives that inspired individuals to mobilize around the cause.

## *Descriptive Statistics*

*Table 1: Overview of Twitter Data on Each Youth Climate Activist*

<i>Activist</i>	<i>Activist Username</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Tweets during Time Frame</i>	<i>% Original Tweets</i>	<i>Followers</i>
Lilly Platt	@lillyspickup	11	Netherlands	124	98%	11.5K
Haven Coleman	@havenruthie	13	USA	53	96%	11.4K
Isra Hirsi	@israhirsi	16	USA	134	77%	34K
Alexandria Villaseñor	@AlexandriaV2005	14	USA	156	65%	38.3K
Holly Gillibrand	@HollyWildChild	13	Scotland	186	45%	14.3K
Greta Thunberg	@GretaThunberg	16	Sweden	119	40%	3M
Jamie Margolin	@Jamie_Margolin	17	USA	2203	2%	25.9K

The tweeting habits of youth climate activists taken from their Twitter profiles during the time frame of the study, tell a general story about how social media offers unique tools to track engagement and can mobilize communities around a given cause. While the numbers do not tell the entire story about this particular activist community, they provide a good starting point for the analysis. Within the timeframe from November 15, 2019 to December 15, 2019, the range of tweets from each activist was between 53 and 2203, which shows that the content being generated by each activist online varies greatly. The average number of tweets that were produced during this timeframe, whether via original content by the activist or by retweeting others in the community, was 128\*. This average was generated with the exclusion of Margolin, to provide a clearer number since she proved to be a clear outlier in the data set, which is discussed in more detail in the analysis.

An interesting data point that emerged from each Twitter account is the type of tweet that each activist emphasized on their respective accounts. The tweet type category was divided into

two options: “tweet” (tweet content was originally generated by the activist) or “retweet” (tweet content was generated by another Twitter user and reposted by the activist). Looking at the “% Original Tweet” column in *Table 1*, it is apparent that the activists all had a blend of originally-generated tweets and retweets, however, some relied more heavily on retweets to spread information to followers and build community. Jamie Margolin (@Jamie\_Margolin), Greta Thunberg (@GretaThunberg), and Holly Gillibrand (@HollyWildChild) relied the most on retweets to build their activist profile, with anywhere from 97% to 55% of their tweets coming from other Twitter users. While the content of these tweets will more specifically be addressed later in the discussion, these numbers provide a preliminary glimpse into a strategy used by each activist to build community. For the activists that used mostly retweets, such as Jamie Margolin, the use of retweets gave the appearance that she was constantly tweeting. In reality, however, she was simply recirculating content generated by other users, which could serve as a way to build rapport between her and followers, as opposed to making her personal voice more dominant in the community.

### ***Presentation of Self***

Using the framework provided by Goffman’s theory on the presentation of self, social media allowed for the analysis of the front stage performance put on by each activist in approximately 240 characters or less to gain a following and build community around the global climate crisis. Further, social media acted as a mediator for its users, allowing them to craft messages or an image that they want the public to see as the core of their online identities and presume it to be their offline identity as well. In analyzing the tweets from each activists’

accounts, the ways in which they have chosen to present themselves via an online platform falls along a spectrum of three different modes of activism, from “full-time climate activist” to “teenager with an activist or political orientation.” The purpose of the spectrum is to show how closely the activists’ accounts meet the standards of their self-described identities as “activists,” some expressing more specific activist communities in their Twitter bios (i.e. @GretaThunberg self describes as “16 year old climate and environmental activist with Asperger’s #climatestrike #fridaysforfuture”).

Thunberg, and other activists such as Villaseñor and Gillibrand, that fall on the spectrum towards “full climate activists” generally frame their concerns within the school strikes for climate, but rarely in other instances draw attention to schoolwork or other conversations typically had by kids and teenagers their age. Rather they present (and self-identify specifically in their Twitter bios as “environmental” or “climate” activists) as full blown climate activists on social media with an orientation towards inspiring younger generations to act. Thunberg’s tweet captures this sentiment:

*“School strike week 68. They say more than 500 000 people showed up tonight in Madrid! #fridaysforfuture #climatestrike #schoolstrike4climate #cop25  
<https://t.co/YAxPZt3fOU>” - @GretaThunberg*

While their “backstage” performances cannot be seen through their social media accounts, the actions they have individually taken in offline protests, the messages crafted via social media, and their self-described identity as an activist suggests that the public perception that accentuates a serious activist intent on bringing about climate justice. The content generated online in particular is a selection of curated messages to build credibility and community amongst

followers that they are knowledgeable and acceptable youth representations of activism within this iteration of the climate change movement.

Other activists presented a strong activist orientation online, but were also aware to situate this commitment to activism within the realities of their own lives as teenagers forced to grow up too fast. Margolin was particularly effective at presenting in this manner, ensuring that her tweets focused primarily on climate injustice, but also centered her actions as drastic, as she is also still balancing being a “normal teenager” who has to do school work and miss class to speak up about the climate crisis:

*“Check this @TheEnergyTalk episode out!*

*“We discuss how Jamie manages to balance her work as an activist while being in her final year of high school and dealing with the pressures that come with always being in the public eye in the era of social media.” <https://t.co/gmHMXNVuE2>” - @Jamie\_Margolin*

This approach draws attention to the strain that the climate crisis is placing on younger generations, outside of the already stressful aspects of being a teenager and growing up in today’s society. By specifically presenting herself as a teenager with a powerful voice, she is able to inspire others to do the same in their communities, as well as remind the world that she is not an adult, but yet is willing to step up and speak out about issues that matter to her on a global, public stage online, and increasingly offline. In this way, Margolin constructs her presentation of self to illuminate what is perceived as her backstage performance as “normal teenager” merged with her front stage, mediated performance, of balancing the two identities. While again, one cannot discern whether or not her offline performance mimics this sentiment, appearing more authentic, it appears to be a strategic presentation to garner support online for the climate movement.

At the other end of the spectrum designated as “teenagers with an activist orientation, other activists show their continued support and willingness to raise awareness around climate injustice, but that “climate activist” itself may not be one of the most pervasive aspects of their identity, at least as it is portrayed online. Activist Isra Hirsi was a great example of this end of the spectrum as her tweets heavily focused on different aspects of political activism beyond a central focus on climate activism. She also was not shy to showcase the “real” her, as expressed through silly videos or “tik-toks”<sup>4</sup> with her mom:

*“today on making my mom tiktok famous, we learned a tiktok dance. can you tell it’s going well? ♀ @IlhanMN <https://t.co/Ixeal0CtGb>” - @israhirsi*

Hirsi, unlike the other activists analyzed, is uniquely situated as the daughter of a United States Congresswoman, and this broader political orientation may suggest why her tweets as not predominantly focused only on climate change. Additionally, Hirsi more so than the others was not afraid to show glimpses of her personal life behind her activist identity - presumptively a glimpse into Goffman’s (1959) backstage - but only via a limited social media lens which primarily showcased dance videos or the increasingly popular “tik-toks.” So, similar to what was seen on Margolin’s account, the curated “backstage” performance is still mediated via social media, and can better be treated as a front stage performance to garner favor with followers.

Further, the personas created online by each of the activists are often centered around “events” as Twitter has created a platform based in an “event-society” and the shared human experience as a way to interact and communicate with one another (Murthy 2012; Therborn 2000). Thus, no matter where the activists fall on the spectrum, they are using their social media presence as a platform to connect with others in a shared manner - frustration over the current

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<sup>4</sup> A new social media platform used to share “short-form mobile videos.”

climate crisis, frustrations over growing up too fast, or frustrations over the broader political environment - to engage a variety of followers at home and across the globe to join in the youth climate movement.

***Protest: Digitally and Physically***

A major theme revealed in the tweets was that the persistence of the youth climate change movement has been due to a combination of online (digital) and offline (physical) protests, framed within a global context. These activists presented multiple narratives through their tweets that attracted and engaged a global community of youth climate activists. Each account showed a blend of two strategies - hashtags and retweets - to share their message, promote major events, and garner an increased following to help organize a movement that moves the public to act.

Using the framework put forth by McLuhan's theories in conjunction with the accompanying literature on social networking sites, Twitter proves to be an important medium for this particular analysis. McLuhan's (1967) theory provides the foundational claim: "The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty - psychic or physical" (17), suggesting, in this particular study, that the use of social media as the medium through which the message and mobilizing power of the youth climate movement occurred offered key insights for the future of online social movements. Twitter served as a medium must be understood within the context of emerging informational communication technologies (ICTs) (Carty 2011), where the cultural shifts to online communication across broader, more disparate networks globally serves as an advantage to the youth climate movement

in particular. Second, given that offline organizing (i.e. “Strikes for Climate”) serves as a marquee aspect of the youth climate movement in addition to the online presence, Twitter as the medium through which this community organizing and activist mobilization occurs presents as the extension of the physical suggested by McLuhan, which will be further assessed below. Even within Twitter as a site of analysis, popular tools or features serve as their own unique medium to transfer ideas within the movement to global audiences.

Activists strategically employed a variety of social media tools - hashtags and retweets - to create this global online network and advance the conversation using a variety of narrative forms over the month-long timeframe. Hashtags specifically proved to be a popular organizing tool, allowing users, whether it was the activists themselves or their followers, to make connections between events and actions, to maintain a conversation thread around the same topic, and span geographic locations all using the same online “tag.” This use of particular “contentious” hashtags directly drawing together stories from major events - be they political, natural, or cultural - relating to the purpose of the movement are more influential than employing hashtags that relate to more “routine” topics such as “climate” generically (Yang 2016). An advantage of online organizing around hashtags is that the spread of information can occur more rapidly than previous methods of communication used in social movements, as well as can reduce the hierarchical nature of who is allowed to participate in the conversation. While not all hashtags generate popularity (Yang 2016), the ones that do weave together a narrative around the events topic, connecting users from across the world and taking part in shaping the narrative amongst the activist community to instill future action and engagement amongst followers. Of

particular interest during the analyzed time frame were the global climate strikes and the UN Climate Change Conference (COP25):

*“Week 45 of my #schoolstrike4climate and #schoolstrike4nature in Fort William. Yesterday we went on strike for four hours in solidarity with youth around the world. My message to all the adults now is to VOTE for our FUTURES in the #GE2019 . #FridaysForFuture <https://t.co/F639NLIu8r>” - @HollyWildChild (Image in Appendix B, Tweet 1)*

This use of hashtags (#schoolstrike4climate and #FridayForFuture, in particular) as a common thread amongst activists globally made it easier to document much of their offline protests and action using individual social media handles. Additionally, as the literature (Yang 2016; Bonilla and Rosa 2015) suggests, the use of images or pictures adds to the narrative as it documents the offline action, intending to inspire other followers to join in on the offline movement. When the story or event portrayed in the tweet is supposed to evoke a sense of urgency for future action within the community, hashtags will include a “verb expressing [this] strong sense of force or urgency” (Yang 2016), here seen in the use of the word “strike.” Gillibrand’s tweet demonstrates how the use of these rhetorical devices to engage audiences, particularly given the limited text afforded on Twitter, images and hashtags serve a greater purpose and imbue greater meaning into the emerging narratives of these activists and the youth climate change community.

Hashtags or tweets more broadly do not have to evoke a physical action as a response, but can also be used to connect events and spread awareness or information within the movement. The use of #COP25 garnered a lot of attention in early December, creating an emotionally-charged narrative (Cox 2017; Yang 2016; Park, Lim, and Park 2015;

Frangonikolopoulous and Chapsos 2012) where youth activists noted the injustices they faced while attending the UN Climate Change Conference:

*“Happening now: Youth activists from all around the world storm the stage at #COP25 to demand real climate action! Dear leaders, your empty words will not solve this crisis. #YourVoteOurFuture <https://t.co/4S6ZX8Tt4H>” - @AlexandriaV2005*

*“An utter failure. #COP25 & conferences like it are intended to be actual negotiations to urgently drawdown global carbon emissions - not cocktail parties to make politicians feel better about themselves as they squash dissent & sell off our futures to fossil fuel interests. <https://t.co/cw1B1dtS53>” - @israhirsi*

The tweets generally targeted the inadequacies of climate change policies globally, and called out specific political leaders either by name or directly their Twitter handle to open a conversation about the lack of action taken to date. As both the tweets show, youth activists are most frustrated with the continued verbal assurance that change will come, but they have yet to take firm action to reverse policies or problems that are currently fueling climate problems. In pointing to their inadequacies, they are hoping to build the same sense of distrust and frustration amongst their followers and inspire them to join in the offline protests. The use of the hashtag #COP25 connected individual stories over the multi-day conference in which the activist community, as well as the general public could reorient itself from a community/collective to understanding the individual experiences as expressed through this online medium (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

While hashtags proved the most effective method of creating a vast conversation around these events, retweets were a popular method of connection amongst youth activists, as shown most notably by Jamie Margolin (@Jamie\_Margolin), as well as Greta Thunberg

(@GretaThunberg) and Holly Gillibrand(@HollyWildChild). Their accounts showed that less than half the content generated was originally created by them, but rather they took to promoting and regenerating content produced by other users within and even outside the youth climate movement. Margolin's numbers are especially intriguing, as she generated only 3% (50 tweets) of the content disseminated in the 2,203 tweets during the timeframe. This shows the power afforded to activists online to connect and share messaging of other activists or users instantaneously if there is an agreed upon message being portrayed. Additionally, retweets aid in coalition building around major and minor activists in the movement as a whole.

A common critique of predominantly online activism is the concept of "slacktivism"<sup>5</sup> (Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya 2017; Christensen 2011) which suggests that the use of online hashtags, or other mechanisms of interacting with a social media post - likes, retweets, replies, etc. - is not a sustainable form of activism in the long run because it provides a guise of action or makes the individual "feel good" about participating as opposed to mobilizing on the ground. With this critique in mind, the fusion of an online presence to share information and stories related to global climate activism and offline action - whether its taking to the streets every Friday, attending legislative conferences, or organizing locally - might prove to be the perfect combination in order to enact real change in the future without falling victim to the issues embedded in slacktivism. Bonilla and Rosa (2015:7) pointed out in reference to #BlackLivesMatter: "[Social media] allowed a message to get out, called global attention to a smaller corner of the world, and attempted to bring visibility and accountability to repressive forces," a strategy also being employed via these activists tweets calling out global leaders

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<sup>5</sup> Also referred to as clicktivism or hashtag activism.

whether at major events or through more pointed Twitter exchanges. Additionally, further quelling fears of online activist critics, these activists have portrayed through their social media accounts, offline action is happening frequently across the globe, despite not gaining continued attention from more traditional news media. However, unlike other digital social movements that were impacted by online interaction but were devoid of a continued offline presence (i.e. #metoo), the youth climate movement has wielded social media as an organizing tool similar to that of #OccupyWallStreet, #ArabSpring, and #BlackLivesMatter in its ability to disseminate information (Cox 2017; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Park, Lim, and Park 2015; Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos 2012), but unique to the climate movement in particular, it has reached a global population in its efforts, further supporting a fusion of the two strategies.

As Carty (2011) introduced in her research, the emergence of information communication technologies (ICTs) has impacted the future of emerging social movements in a way unseen in prior movements. The overlap between digital and physical activism presented by these activists through their social media accounts suggest a shift in the way social movements will be sustained by activists. This analysis has focused on the way that these activists have used their social media accounts to bridge the why and the how, by using the unique tools offered on Twitter - retweets, hashtags, replies, mentions, and more - to bring users together from across the globe and continue to showcase the worthiness of the cause particularly from the youth perspective.

### ***“Fishing” for Change***

The tweets generated by these seven activists in particular presented various narratives to engage communities in their cause. Aside from depicting an implicit focus on the political nature of the climate movement across the globe via large events and protests, activists were not shy to weave into their individual narratives the major concerns happening to our environment in real-time. Framing this strategy within McLuhan's (1967) conception of medium, the message conveyed in these tweets serves a purpose. Given the limited character count afforded to those who utilize Twitter (240), graphics, links to news media, or videos presented a powerful message to audiences, again proving to be the extension of the physical deterioration of the Earth via online visualizations.

While this was not the most prominent narrative shared by activists during this timeframe in particular, many of them were frank to point out - whether in a serious tone or in jest - the severe consequences of global warming and the impending climate crisis. Each activist used this strategy sparingly from November to December 2019, with Thunberg the most likely to return to the realities of what was happening to our climate, whether using original tweets or retweets:

*"The air quality in Rozelle (inner Sydney) this afternoon was 2552! Hazardous is 200+!!! Where are you @ScottMorrisonMP? #ThisIsNotNormal #ThisIsClimateChange <https://t.co/hM2J3bIqk1>" - Retweet of @StrikeClimate by @GretaThunberg*

Thunberg's tweets pointed mainly to the devastating wildfires that burned through Australia, but also broader issues of CO2 emissions and rising sea levels. By linking to a news article that explores the devastation unfolding in Sydney, Thunberg effectively advanced a major concern of the movement - the future of our environment as a viable place to live - to millions in an instant and used the interactive features of the medium, Twitter, to her advantage. Other activists

followed a similar approach to Thunberg by raising a panicked or angered response to global climate issues:

*“Oxygen in the oceans is being lost at an unprecedented rate, with “dead zones” proliferating and hundreds more areas showing oxygen dangerously depleted, as a result of the #ClimateEmergency and intensive farming, experts have warned. #ActNow, <https://t.co/mYe4HHh3hN>” - @HollyWildChild*

Appealing to anger and frustration were a common approach taken by activists (Yang 2016), showcasing the severity and urgency of their claims online, but in some instances, particularly from Lilly Platt, they used jest as a way to engage social media audiences in conversations about tangible actions that could be taken against the negative effects of climate change:

*“@medicsforfuture @zaynecowie Yes please! I am English we moved from London a few years ago! It will be great we could even go on the canal and do some plastic fishing!” - @lillyspickup*

Although each activist did not employ Lilly’s strategy as prominently during the timeframe, it still proved an effective approach to weave a narrative around Lilly’s choice of activism: a more individualistic approach where she often cited individual strategies and actions that can be taken to ensure that the public is aware and engaging in the change that needs to occur in local communities and across the globe. Additionally, in suggesting specific ways in which the public could get involved to help reverse the impacts of climate change, Lilly created a sense of community around a particular cause or action within the movement that people could tangibly partake in.

Environmental crises and proposed action served as a “social movement community (Buecher 1990) that these activists rallied around, inspiring a drive for collective action through

a variety of outlets: dissemination of information online, taking to the streets or social media to protest, or through individual efforts to clean up local communities. Regardless of the tactic employed by the activist, they each used it as a way to engage publics and create communities for change via an online platform and began to create a foundation for continued action (Velasquez and LaRose 2015; Chon and Park 2019).

### ***Tip of the “Thunberg”***

Thunberg proved to be a key player for the youth climate change movement by continuing to gain global attention and spreading awareness about the devastating realities of climate change for society. In tweets by each of the other six activists, Thunberg’s account was tagged/mentioned at least once, further cementing her as a crucial connection between people in the global movement. Recognizing Thunberg’s role as one of the main, if not the main actor, in the climate change movement is important in terms of building a united community. As Hartley (2002) assessed, social media as Thunberg’s medium of choice to advance her cause provided a space for her to develop a strategic identity - youth activist - that enabled her to further engage in her cause: fighting the negative effects of global climate change. She has been a successful connector in creating a network for climate change built around a central idea and her activism has been successful in connecting activist communities disparately spread throughout the world, which has proved necessary to the movement gaining global momentum.

Castells provides multiple perspectives from which the connection between the self and the Internet can be understood. For Thunberg, we see the connection rooted in a social media persona committed to global climate activism, where she was able to craft “a new expression of

being” (Castells 2002). While Wellman and Haythornwaite (2002) contend that users may not understand the degree of power afforded to users in these online communities, Thunberg’s strategic employment of Twitter’s key features, in addition to her ability to create a salient narrative across global contexts has allowed her to wield immense power digitally that has manifested into daily action and accolades. As Castells (2000) has further noted in his texts, this ability to create a narrative across contexts and mobilize communities through a shared language of digital technologies has been an advantage to Thunberg as well in connecting with youth across the world.

Thunberg’s Twitter account activity (number of tweets at 119) fell just below the average (128\*) for six activists during the timeframe. Of these 119 tweets, only 40% of them were originally tweeted by her, suggesting that she uses her Twitter platform to lift up the voices of others rather than her own (via retweets in particular) to bring awareness to the global climate crisis. Thunberg also has millions of followers, far more than any other youth activist in the study, and any other youth climate activist globally, which shows her increased public presence in the climate fight and the central role she has played to help the movement continue to grow.

Thunberg first became a prominent public figure in the climate movement after gaining the spotlight as she protested on the steps of the Swedish Parliament beginning in 2018 before her “Skolstrejk för klimatet” (“Strikes for Climate”) were picked up by online media platforms - specifically social networking sites - and her student-led climate strikes spread across the globe. Since her rise to fame in the online and offline movement, Thunberg has accrued numerous accolades as well as critics that have continued to spur her momentum in the public eye, further increasing her importance as a network connection in the broader movement:

*“Watching middle aged men trying to take down @GretaThunberg and failing dramatically is absolutely hilarious.” - @HollyWildChild*

Thunberg’s prominence as a voice of youth on the global climate crisis made her the target of numerous attacks, as the tweet would suggest, one of which came from Brazilian president Bolsonaro in early December 2019 calling her a “brat.” Bolsonaro’s label of brat came as Thunberg was named Time magazine’s person of the year that same December, which further garnered public attention and increased her credibility as an activist worldwide, as is expressed in the following tweet:

*“Riding my bike to school as my tire rapidly deflates:  
9th grade neighbor shouts as I go by:  
Hi, Dude!  
Me: Sup!  
She: Did you see Greta got @TIME Person of the Year?!  
Yeah! It’s cool!  
Ok, bye! (Watches me struggle w/ bike)  
That’s it. That’s the tweet.  
#YouthActivismWORKS!” - @havenruthie*

Thunberg’s role can be seen within the framework of the six degrees of separation theory (Zhang and Tu 2009), which in online communities has the potential to be even more impactful than offline. Regardless of if activists have been focused primarily in local contexts or are representing the movement on the global stage, each can point to Thunberg as a common thread among the ideas disseminated, and her willingness to lift the voices of others above her own has further entwined disparate parties in the global climate change movement. When Thunberg retweets or replies to individuals, her status or power as a public figure - conferred upon her after gaining attention from more traditional media sources and the public at large - has allowed the

conversation to expand in scope and bring people together who were otherwise confined to their local contexts and organizing efforts.

In social media theory, Thunberg's communications with other users and vice versa demonstrated network translucence, but of varying degrees or "ties" amongst the different users (Leonardi 2014). As others have assessed within media studies, Thunberg's central role makes her a key "node" or connection within the "interactive communication networks" (Castells 2000) developed on Twitter in relation to the global climate crisis because her continued online presence allows anyone to join into interactions - whether they be prominent political figures, other climate activists, or ordinary individuals who make up the general public (Murthy 2012). Thunberg's continued use of social media to spread information and ideas, as well as interact with her followers, is done strategically to build community amongst followers and create a sustained community into the future. By engaging directly with those connections, Thunberg maintained an online relationship that little by little strengthened ties between her and her network of followers, in addition to the broader movement.

***"Like the Oceans, We Rise"***<sup>6</sup>

This quote, taken directly from a sign at one of the global climate strikes, shares the most pervasive narrative of the online youth climate movement: a growing fear of the future for youth and the determination of youth to reclaim power to reverse course. Tweets within this narrative demonstrated the persistence of youth activism across the globe in response to the growing climate crisis and the continued intent to speak up and speak out. As Yang (2016:13) pointed out: "Social movements have narrative forms" and the while different narratives were woven

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<sup>6</sup> Quote was taken from a sign at a youth climate strike.

together by individual activists to paint a picture of what is happening to our environment, the overarching story that brought together a unified global community was this frustrated voice of youth populations. Yang (2016), in conjunction with the theoretical foundations of Castells (2002; 2000) and McLuhan (1967), all point to the importance of new technologies in shaping public discourse and managing complex patterns of communication. McLuhan (1967) offered a particularly prescient insight into the conversation, citing: “Youth instinctively understands the present environment - the electric drama,” calling particular attention to the ability of youth to understand complex social and political matters, as well as have an informed and powerful voice in what outcomes will shape their future. In the case of social media, youth - also referenced as “digital natives” - are particularly attuned to the present global concerns and have wielded the emerging technologies to their advantage in their activist approach.

This theme emerged as a rallying cry among younger generations, an emotional appeal, that attests to the uncertainty of their future and the action that needs to be taken now. In general, these activists pointed to the insufficiency of policies regarding the climate that were created and implemented by older generations through traditional political processes that often favored business interests over the climate. This youth uprising with a dominant presence online suggests that younger generations cannot and will not be silenced in the political process. This is indicated by their increased presence at global conferences and meetings (see COP25 during this timeframe specifically), continued global climate strikes, and continued media presence drawing attention to either their offline actions or those issues negatively impacting the environment. Calls for action were demonstrated in tweets by many of the seven activists encompassed in the study, similar to these:

*“Every election is a climate election. Vote for your children. Vote for the planet. Vote for future generations. Vote for humanity. #GE2019 #UKElection” - @GretaThunberg*

*“My shopping list for #BlackFriday AKA #BuyNothingDay*

*Join the climate justice movement in resisting consumerism today. Constantly buying things we don't need is destroying our planet.*

*Skip the fads, and put the planet and life on earth first.*

*#BuyNothing <https://t.co/40kgGqWWwM>” - @Jamie\_Margolin*

Social media has proven to be a particularly important avenue for youth activists to express political dissent and urge others to vote since they do not have a direct voice in current political processes worldwide. The voting age in most countries is reserved for those 21+, but in others may be granted to those as young as 16. But for the activists in this study in particular, none of them have reached the legal voting age in their respective countries, thus precluding them and others in their generation from having a direct vote cast for politicians and policies that are directly impacting their future. This sentiment is directly captured in Thunberg’s above tweet, where she urges parents in particular to vote for their children when thinking about potential leaders.

As digital natives, younger generations have a real opportunity to organize and mobilize followers using online technologies through which they can create a platform that has global reach, as we have seen with the youth-led climate movement. Further, this allows them to connect with their cohort across the globe, but also provides an avenue to more publicly address issues with politicians and key transgressors in a public forum that is becoming increasingly hard to ignore (Seo et al. 2014; Velasquez and LaRose 2015). Reiterating the platform as a place to showcase the power of youth, especially in relation to political decisions, the use of social media has garnered increased social capital for these young activists to disseminate their message and

movement at remarkable speeds globally, building a collective response to the demand for climate change.

### ***Limitations of the Project***

The short semester-long timeframe for which the bulk of this research was conducted provided external limitations on the project in terms of scope and scale. Obviously, seven activists do not fully encapsulate the variety of perspectives and individuals that make up the online youth climate movement, but they provided insights into the movement nonetheless. Given its specific situation in the youth climate change movement, the specific goals of the movement may have impacted the strategies employed by activists to build community, but yielded a comparative foundation for future movements.

Since the nature of this project was focused more generally on strategies that were used by youth climate activists to generate narratives and build community, other aspects of movement politics and digital communication technologies were not explored in-depth. One area of note is the gendered nature of my analysis since all of the seven activists studied identify as girls/women and raise interesting questions about whether gender could alter the strategies employed by activists online. Additionally, more research on the individuals who typically make up social movement communities and their leaders could yield interesting insights to complement the work done in this project.

Another area that should be explored in conjunction with the data found in this project is the relationship between technology, capitalism, and social movement development. The

analysis lacked a sufficient discussion surrounding other more troubling aspects of digital technologies. The understanding of power in regards to who has access to technology broadly, and more specifically social media platforms, would further shape the discussion on who gets to be vocal in online communities and whose voices might become more prominent in an online or offline setting.

## **Conclusion**

The recent increase of social movements turning to digital platforms to expand their mobilization and community-building efforts has raised many questions regarding the practicality of online activism sparking offline action. While traditional theoretical understandings of social movements (Carty 2011; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Tarrow 1994; Habermas 1984; Blumer 1971) offer an important analytic framework for online social movements, Carty's (2011) conception of advancing social movement theory by fusing the various theoretical perspectives to analyze information communication technologies functioned as the starting point to assess digital activism. While climate activism has spanned decades in offline iterations of the movement, youth involvement through online platforms has transformed the landscape of emerging social movements. Previous literature revealed important components of activism, whether online or offline, in order to build a movement: (1) create a collective understanding of the movement's identity (Chon and Park 2019; Velasquez and LaRose 2015); (2) the importance of network development; and (3) mobilizing people to engage in social action work (Seo et al. 2014).

Digital environments have allowed for new developments in establishing online social movements. Social media in particular offers a new way to generate knowledge amongst publics,

facilitate dialogue, and build a coalition around the movement's cause (Cox 2017; Park, Lim, and Park 2015). With the advantages of these digital platforms to engage in building movements across disparate online networks, it does come with concerns of effectiveness compared to on the ground movements. The most commonly cited concern is the fear that online activist communities are plagued by "slacktivism," where individuals mistake "likes" and "retweets" as sufficient participation in the movement to ignite lasting change offline without ever taking direct offline action (Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya 2017). Other scholars have tried to alleviate these concerns, citing that online organizing efforts need to exceed an arbitrary "threshold" to inspire followers to move their activism to offline forums as well (Seo et al. 2014). The project revealed that activists' strategic use of Twitter's functions to engage users can also overcome the "threshold" and persuade the online community to pursue offline actions as well.

The theoretical framework provided by the contributions of McLuhan, Castells, and Goffman allowed key strategies of community building and storytelling to emerge through the lens of the youth climate change movement. In looking at the tweets of seven prominent activists, they uniquely employed five emergent strategies that appeared effective in engaging activist communities on Twitter: (1) projecting an activist identity through the content generated in their tweets; (2) disseminating information and documenting offline protests in an online forum to inspire followers and ignite action for change; (3) engaging in broad political conversations, and recentering focus on the larger environmental concerns that motivated the movement; (4) building a network directly connected to several core actors, here the most important being Thunberg; and (5) crafting a message and utilizing a medium, that resonates with the base of followers that the movement wants to attract.

The strategies, though employed differently by each activist, built a common narrative around the youth fear of their future on Earth given that climate change may render it unlivable in their lifetime. This narrative of fear projected as hope and power that the youth will rise up has resonated with younger generations and older allies across the globe, with localized offline protests springing up in countries across Europe, Africa, Australia, and beyond. Further, the message and dissemination of information, images, and videos has proved to be the perfect combination to engage followers in an online forum and participate in offline events and protests as well. This fusion of digital and physical protest was an essential component of the youth climate activist strategy and depending on its continued success in the future, serves as the foundation for the future of emerging social movements. In past movements, the need for a central social movement organization (SMO) to guide and organize the development of the message of these movements was an essential component of past social movements, but youth climate activists have advanced this understanding through their current movement-building tactics. While the need for this offline organizing cannot be overlooked, the future trends - as seen through this project - present a compelling case for an online presence in future organizing efforts as well. As McLuhan and Castells point out in particular, the Internet, the self, and society, have become so interconnected it would be ill-advised to ignore the importance of social media as a key storytelling and community-building environment for emerging social movements in the future. This research naturally lends itself to a longitudinal study regarding the success of the youth climate change movement to further confirm the effectiveness of the community-building and narrative strategies employed.

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## Appendix A: Twitter Bio Description

Here is the statement that will be provided on my Twitter bio to ensure clarity to the accounts being followed regarding my role and intentions as a researcher:

*“I’m conducting research on youth-led social media movements for my Sociology Honors Thesis. By allowing me to follow your account, you have allowed me to use your tweets in my study. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to DM me.”* (240 characters)

## Appendix B: Tweets including Media

*Tweet 1:*

“Week 45 of my #schoolstrike4climate and #schoolstrike4nature in Fort William. Yesterday we went on strike for four hours in solidarity with youth around the world. My message to all the adults now is to VOTE for our FUTURES in the #GE2019 . #FridaysForFuture”



- @HollyWildChild