

# The Logic of Collective Action in the Social Media Age

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## Abstract

Mancur Olson's famous work *The Logic of Collective Action* argues that large groups cannot successfully organize in order to achieve collective action. However, in 2020, upwards of 20 million people participated in the Black Lives Matter movement, seemingly overtaking the whole of social media for weeks. *The Logic of Collective Action* failed to predict the invention of social media. I seek to understand why we see large groups of people cooperating towards a collective interest on social media such as the Black Lives Matter movement, despite Olson's theory of collective action. I hypothesize that social media users are in fact influenced to support social movements because of selective incentives. I evaluate this claim by conducting a survey, asking respondents to self-report on whether they have used selective incentives to garner support for social movements on social media or have been influenced by them to support social movements themselves. I find little support for this claim, and I suggest further research be conducted on the motivating factors behind social media activism and large scale, loosely organized movements.

## 1. Introduction

Few developments in the last decades have been more remarkable than the emergence of transnational social movements, and none have been more powerful (nor unexpected perhaps) than the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement can be traced back to July 2013 when newly energized communities, adopting the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, took to social media to protest the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Black American teen Trayvon Martin in February 2012. The movement returned to national headlines and gained further attention in response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

Soon the movement spread not just across the United States but around the world. According to the New York Times, an estimated 15 million to 26 million people participated in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, making it one of the largest movements in the country's history.<sup>1</sup> Protests also arose spontaneously in the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, France, Japan, Australia and Canada.

The explosion of social movements was all the more remarkable because it defied well-established scholarly expectations based on Mancur Olson's theory of collective action, not to mention the obvious obstacles raised by language barriers, cultural differences, income inequalities, racial differences, political affiliation as well as simple spatial distance between activists globally.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

In Mancur Olson's, *The Logic of Collective Action* he seeks to explain the genesis and relative effectiveness of groups. He begins by reviewing traditional theories of groups that explain the existence of groups by reference to their purpose. The purpose of an organization, in traditional theories of groups, is to further the interests of its members.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this is the defining feature of most, if not all, organizations. Moreover, it is commonly assumed that the existence of

common interests will spontaneously spawn groups for the purpose of furthering those interests. For example, labor unions are expected to emerge to promote higher wages for their members, farm organizations are expected to cooperate to promote favorable legislation for their members, corporations are expected to exist to further the interests of its stockholders, and the state is expected to further the common interests of its citizens.<sup>3</sup>

Olson argues, to the contrary, that whether or not groups will organize to promote common interests will vary depending on the kind of goods they are seeking – private versus public goods – and the size of the group - small, medium, or large. The pursuit of private goods produces few obstacles to collective organization and action, according to Olson. Private goods can be defined as a good that provides immediate benefits to those that contribute to the good while excluding the benefits from non-members. Thus, the enjoyment of private goods are restricted to those who pay for it. Private goods present few obstacles to collective action because the consumers of the private good fully expect to enjoy the benefits of a good individually. Thus individuals have an immediate private incentive to contribute to goods that they - exclusively - will enjoy. According to Olson, private goods, in contrast to collective goods, can be advanced and usually advanced most efficiently by individual, unorganized action.<sup>4</sup> There is no purpose in joining an organization to further a private interest, since it is more efficient to achieve this interest individually.

By contrast, groups seeking public or collective goods typically cannot hope to achieve them through unorganized, individual action. Collective goods are non-excludable, meaning that even those who do not pay for the collective good cannot be excluded or kept from sharing in the consumption of the good. Collective goods present significant obstacles to collective action because it both requires widespread collective action to achieve while making contribution to the collective good individually irrational: if an individual pays for the cost of the collective good's creation, they would only get to enjoy the benefit if the good is produced. However, the good likely won't be produced because rational individuals realize that they have no reason to help create the good because they can rely on the efforts of others and get the benefit after they fact even though they didn't participate in the good's creation. Thus rational actors will not contribute to the public good if they can't be confident that others will also contribute in large numbers.

At the same time, if an individual does not contribute to the public good while others do, they will see that they can enjoy the benefits of the good without enduring the costs of contributing, thus also discouraging contributions. No matter what an individual expects others to do, they are better off not contributing towards the collective good. Rational action on the part of every individual would lead to socially irrational and undesirable outcomes.

However, Olson argues that different sizes of groups have a different expected probability of success in achieving a collective good. Common sense would lead you to believe that the larger the group, the larger the probability of being able to achieve a collective good. However, Olson argues the opposite. He argues that the larger the group, the less likely a group is able to succeed in obtaining a collective good. This is interesting because most political action campaigns operate by the idea that the more people that share a collective interest the more likely they are to succeed in obtaining the collective good. Olson explains why the existence of common interests is insufficient to inspire collection action in large groups while small groups are expected to organize.<sup>5</sup>

A small group can be defined as a group with sufficiently few members that they can all be familiar with each other. Olson argues that small groups can provide themselves with collective goods without relying on coercion or any inducements apart from the collective good itself.<sup>6</sup> This is because the expected benefit for each individual is large in a small group. In some small groups, it is more likely that some members will find that his personal gain from having the collective good exceeds the total cost of providing some amount of that collective good. There are members who would be better off if the collective good were provided even if they had to pay the entire cost of providing it themselves than they would if it were not provided.

Members of a small group, if rational, will often find it worth it to contribute towards the collective good because the cost of contributing is less than the individual benefit each member of the small group would enjoy from the provision of the collective good. For example, imagine that all a small group would have to do in order to receive a raise from their boss would be to have individual conversations with the boss to convince them. In that scenario, the small cost of convincing the boss to give everyone a raise would be less than the monetary benefit of the raise.

In addition, members in a small group will be likely to contribute towards the collective good because their action or inaction will be noticeable to the other members of the group. When the group is small the members of a small group can interact directly with other members of the group and can thus pressure each other to contribute towards the collective good. The costs of working within a small group is also low, because formal organization is not required to achieve a collective good. The few members of a small group can easily communicate and coordinate their efforts with each other without a complicated organizational structure. In sum, in a small group, where each member gets a substantial portion of the total gain because of there being few members a collective good can be provided by the voluntary self-interested action of the members of the group.

An intermediate group, or a medium group faces greater obstacles to collective action in pursuit of a collective good. An intermediate group can be defined as a group that has a membership somewhere between a small group and a large group. An intermediate group has a small enough number of members where an individual's contribution or lack of contribution to the group objective has a noticeable effect on the costs or benefits of others in the group. The cost of organizing within an intermediate group towards a collective good is greater than in a small group because some formal organization being required. In this group, no one member gets such a large benefit from the collective good that he had an interest in providing it even if he had to pay all of the cost himself. The rational behavior of an individual within a group is indeterminate because on the one hand, an individual is not motivated to contribute to the collective good because the benefit they enjoy personally if the collective good is achieved is shared among a larger number of member so that their portion of the collective good's benefit that accrues to each member is smaller. However, an individual may be motivated to contribute because their lack of contribution will be noticeable to other members of the group, therefore creating scenarios where rational individuals will contribute towards the collective good despite receiving a small portion of it. Due to rational behavior pointing individuals in both directions of contributing and non-contributing, the odds of an intermediate group achieving a collective good is indeterminate.<sup>7</sup>

A latent group, or a large group, is the third group Olson analyzes in its effectiveness of achieving a collective good. A latent group can be defined as a group with a sufficiently large number of members that no single individual's contribution makes a difference to the achievement of the collective good for the group as a whole. In addition, the benefits of the public good are shared among all members, thus the portion of the benefit that accrues to each individual in the group is small.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the cost of organizing a latent group to achieve a collective good is high, due to the complex and formal organization structure required with so many members. The costs of organizing include transaction, information, and communication costs. Transaction costs are the total costs of making a transaction, including the cost of planning, deciding, changing plans, resolving disputes, among other things. Information costs are costs incurred by an individual while collecting information in order to make a decision. Communication costs are the total time, effort, and material cost necessary to transfer a message among members of the large group.

In a latent group, Olson predicts the collective good will not be provided. If the members within a latent group are rational, then they will not contribute towards the collective good because their expected portion of the collective good is so small that it will be a net loss to contribute. Also, the motivation behind contributing is even smaller because an individual's contribution or lack of contribution will not have a noticeable effect on the group while, at the same time, they will be in a position to free-ride off the contributions of others and enjoy the collective good even if they make no contribution to its achievement. The members of a latent group, simply because of their large number, cannot be familiar enough with each other to put pressure on other members to contribute. Thus, there is no motivation for rational actors to cooperate towards a collective good and the collective good will not be achieved without selection incentives or coercion.<sup>9</sup>

There is one way that a large group will be able to achieve a collective good. Only a separate and "selective" incentive will stimulate a rational individual in a large group to act in a group-oriented way. Selective incentives operate not indiscriminately but rather selectively toward the individuals in the group. Selective incentives work by treating those who cooperate and those who don't differently, in negative or positive ways. A negative selective incentive could coerce individuals to cooperate by punishing those, individually, who fail to contribute. A positive selective incentive could provide a reward to those who cooperate in the provision of the collective good. In sum, a latent group that utilizes selective incentives to motivate members of the group is a "mobilized latent group" and are more likely to organize to achieve collective goods.<sup>10</sup>

Olson's book *The Logic of Collective Action* is influential in the political science literature for his arguments of group behavior. However, Olson could not have anticipated how social media may have altered both the costs of organization across groups and the mechanisms for delivering selective sanctions.

Social media has been ingrained in the very fabric of our lives since the late 90's/early 2000's with websites such as MySpace and Facebook, and only further increasing with the invention of social media sites such Snapchat, Instagram, and Tiktok. Social media not only influences our day to day interactions, but influences how groups organize.

Group organization on social media does not follow the typical hierarchical structure that traditional organizations follow. Organizing on social media also does not require the same high costs as traditional organizing. For example, organizing without social media involves high information costs, such as a climate change action group putting together a pamphlet for potential volunteers to understand what climate change is. Without access to social media, in order for a potential volunteer to join a climate change organization they would have to receive a pamphlet, go to their local library, go to a seminar, etc. It costs to learn about an organization's cause without social media. In contrast, in the age of social media, organizations can put together an infographic detailing the top 5 things you need to know

about climate change and why you should care. It costs a potential volunteer nothing to read this infographic, and they can read it from wherever they want, versus traveling to a library and finding a book about climate change which costs money and time.

Due to the drastic drop in information costs, social media allows even large groups to have small group benefits. According to Olson, organizing and achieving a collective good is easy in a small group because there are few members. With a group with only a few members, it does not cost much to inform other members about an important cause and how they can contribute to the collective good. In a large group, in order to inform members about a cause, there has to be complex and formal organization in order for the message to reach all members. In a small group, almost no formal organization is needed and the same is true for social media. Thus, social media lowers organizational costs to almost nothing, which is what Olson thought was only possible in small groups.

Social media can also approximate some of the conditions typical of small groups by making individual contributions (or non-contributions) readily and personally visible to others in the group. In a small group, members can be expected to contribute towards the collective good because whether or not they contribute is noticeable to other members of the group. The members are familiar with each other, know each other's personalities and interests, and are thus able to pressure other members to contribute towards the collective good. Social media sites have millions of members, and theoretically, it would be impossible to actually be familiar with everyone else on the website. However, social media sites allow users to create their own profiles, which acts as a proxy for a user's identity, personality, and interests. On social media, you don't need to actually get to know someone to "know" them. Social media creates a kind of visibility that is not possible in large groups that operate without social media. Social media allows its users to make judgments of other users by viewing their profile. For example, if someone on social media cares a lot about climate change, and they are suggested to follow another user on Instagram, check out their profile, and see that they are posting on their Instagram stories about climate change, they are more likely to follow them.

### 3. Literature Review

Social media allows even very large groups to enjoy some of the organizational advantages Olson expects only for small groups. In *Globalization From Below: Transnational Activists and Protest Networks*, Donatella Porta writes about how huge, transnational organizations organize through networking. To demonstrate this phenomenon, she uses the example of protest events in Seattle that were prepared in thousands of meetings in many countries and by a global campaign of information. According to Porta, Seattle has been called a turning point and the highpoint of an aggregation process involving groups and social movement organizations (SMOs) active in countries all over the world: blue-collar workers and farmworkers, consumers and environmentalists, churches and feminists, pacifists and human rights associations. These different groups acted as a network of networks, each one operating within its own locality but towards a collective goal. Her argument is consistent with Olson's, in that transnational organizations are not giant successful organizing efforts that defy national borders and logic, but the aggregation of small groups, which allow a large group to enjoy the benefits of small ones.<sup>11</sup>

Social media provides users with expressive rewards, for example, meaning that a user rewards themselves by expressing their beliefs on social media and fulfilling a need for self expression. This expressive reward is a private good that motivates users to contribute towards a collective good on social media and is established in the literature. "Teens social media use and collective action" by Hyunjin Seo, J Brian Houston, Leigh Anne Taylor Knight, Emily J Kennedy and Alexandra B English asks how teens' need for belonging affects their social media use and participation in collective action. Through their research, Seo et. all discovers that social self-efficacy, collective self-esteem, and need to belong can be used to predict teens' use of social media, and can be extended to different age groups.<sup>12</sup> This personal feeling of belonging, and raised self esteem is a motivating factor for social media contribution, but is a private good which rational actors are expected to contribute towards anyway, with the side effect of contributing to some collective good.

The literature establishes how social affirmation on social media could be a motivating factor for online and offline participation in collective action efforts. In "The social affirmation use of social media as a motivator of collective action" Anna Kende, Martijn van Zomeren, Adrienn Ujhelyi, Nona Anna Lantos hypothesized that the social affirmation use of social media, rather than merely instrumental use, would positively predict enduring online participation and enduring offline participation among activists. They tested this hypothesis by conducting a study on a 6 week long student occupation of an auditorium at a large state university in 2013. Their results confirmed that social affirmation use of social media is positively related to protest participation because of its positive relationship with politicized group identification.<sup>13</sup> Meaning, that when individuals feel like they are a part of a group on social

media, they are more likely to participate in protests despite the costs associated with the participation and lack of tangible benefit.

Another source in the literature supports the idea that personal relationships play a role in mobilization efforts on social media. In, “Source effects in the micromobilization of collective action via social media” by Elmie Nekmat, Karla K. Gower, William J. Gonzenbach and Andrew J. Flanagan argues that mobilization efforts on social media are motivated by personal networks, meaning the participation of those close to the user. Nekmat et al. found that variation in the different levels of personalness affected individuals’ willingness to publicly express support online through social media based collective activities and offline activities.<sup>14</sup> This finding supports Donatella Porta’s argument of a “network of networks” in that mobilization efforts on a large scale such as on social media, are not extremely large groups but a collection of personal networks. This suggests that mobilization efforts online look similar to mobilization efforts offline, in-line with Olson’s argument that small groups are able to mobilize because of the existence of personal relationships.

Social media also serves as a mechanism for users seeking external validation. To the extent that people value the opinions of other people and external validation is important to one’s sense of self and can be a strong motivating force. With social media, receiving external validation is very easy. By posting your outfit on your Instagram for example, you receive validation for your fashion sense via likes and comments on the post. On social media, rewards can be thought of as likes, comments, reposts, follows, etc. Punishments can be thought of as dislikes, public call outs, unfollowing etc. Different social media sites provide a multitude of different ways that users can reward or punish other users, meaning that they can target each other with selective incentives.

#### **4. Hypothesis**

I argue that the causal mechanism causing widespread support of social movements, that seem to defy the logic of collective action Olson describes, is the ability of social media to allow large groups to enjoy the benefits of small ones. Social media allows users to operate selective incentives against other users, and drastically lower transaction costs which thereafter incentivizes rational actors to contribute towards the collective good. Thus, I hypothesize that social media users are in fact influenced to support social movements because of selective incentives. In essence, I expect that individual contributions towards collective action in support of public goods on a large scale are, in fact, motivated by the use of social media to deliver selective incentives such as the individual expressive rewards, social affirmation, or punishments.

#### **5. Research Design**

To explore if and how selective incentives actually affect individuals’ contributions to social activism on a global scale, I have constructed a survey of convenience, with the aim of collecting as many responses on people’s level of social media use, their responses to selective incentives, and level of activism in global movements.

The independent variable I seek to measure is selective incentives. In the survey, I will ask questions relating to whether a respondent has used methods of “rewarding” or “punishing” other social media users using tools such as unfollowing/following, liking/disliking, commenting, reposting, tagging, etc. The dependent variable I seek to measure is contributions to social activism, how much or whether people participate in the creation of public goods. I will measure this by asking respondents to report what activities they have engaged in in the past year to support a social movement, such as engaging in group protests/demonstrations, donating money to preferred causes, sharing news and information on social media, inviting participation from friends, family, and peer networks, publicly expressing opinions on social media, etc. I will also measure the motivation to support social movements, in an attempt to see if there are any discrepancies between the amount of respondents that report the motivation to support social movements and foot-on-the ground support.

This study is trying to understand the relationship between independent and dependent variables but it is plausible to expect demographics to impact its results. Respondents within a 15 to 25 age bracket are expected to generally use social media more than respondents in older age brackets. Thus, with more exposure to social media, I can plausibly expect that younger respondents will have more exposure to selective incentives on social media and thus be more likely to engage in social activism. In addition, while it is not my hypothesis that ethnicity will impact social activism due to selective incentives, it is reasonable to expect that due to recent examples of large transnational social

movements centered around the rights of minorities such with Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, Free Palestine, that respondents belonging to a ethnic minority might report higher levels of social activism than white respondents.

This study also includes several extraneous variables, such as influence by celebrities, television, and religion to support social movements. The ability of celebrities, television shows, and religion to influence has been established in the literature and could have an impact on the dependent variable.

The questions of my study besides the demographics, all feature a “slider”. This slider allows the respondent to choose any number they want in between 0 and 100 as their response to each question. Some questions designate frequency, such as 0 to 10 being “Rarely”, 40 to 60 “Sometimes”, and “Frequently” 90 to 100. Other questions designate the extent to which the respondents identify with a certain identity, belief, or feeling, such as “Not at all”, being 0 to 10, 40 to 60 “Somewhat” and “To a great extent” 90 to 100. In all of the slider questions, the respondent is allowed to pick any number in between labels if for example they fit somewhere between “Rarely” and “Sometimes”.

My hypothesis predicted that social media users are in fact influenced to support social movements because of selective incentives. In the study, selective incentives are referenced in the questions as rewards such as likes, reposts, retweets, and punishments such as unfollows, comments, dislikes, and callouts.

First, the survey asks about the respondents' social media activity level. Second, the survey asks about the respondents' activism level. Then, ask about how often respondents use selective incentives on social media, and whether they believe that they are influenced by selective incentives in various ways. I expect that respondents will report that they frequently use selective incentives on social media to express approval and disapproval for the political action of those they know. I also expect that respondents will report that they frequently use selective incentives on social media to express approval and disapproval for support of social movements that the study defines as large scale, loosely organized efforts towards a collective goal such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

## 6. Analysis

As shown in the figure below, the social media activity level is quite high, as expected with a survey of convenience on a college campus. However, there is a lack of correlation between social media use and activism level. These results contradict my hypothesis as I expected that greater exposure to selective incentives on social media would lead to greater levels of activism.

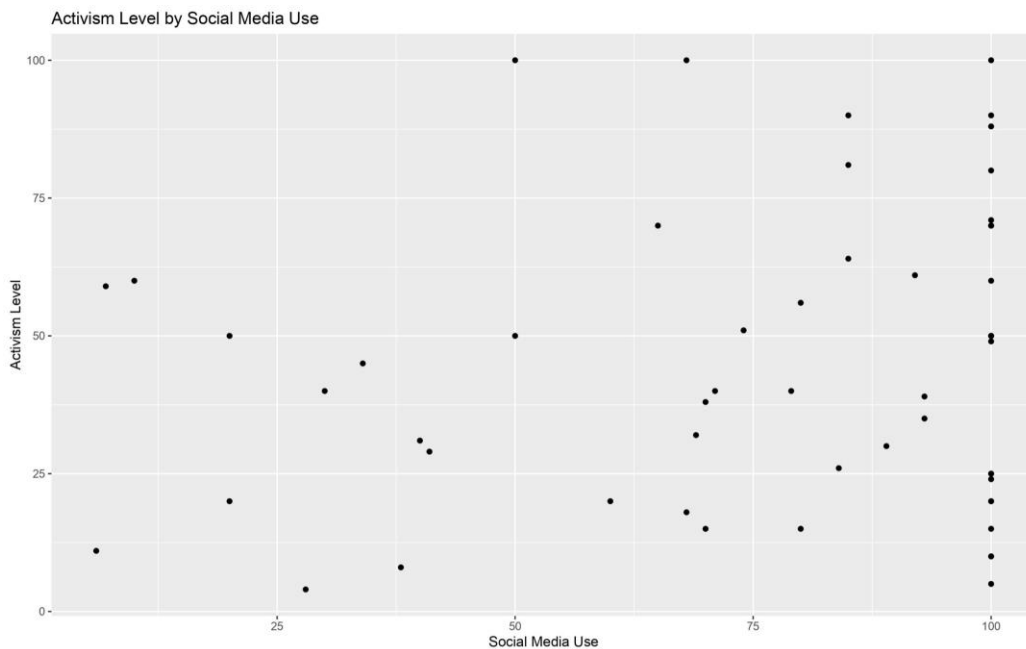


Figure 1. Activism Level by Social Media Use Scatterplot

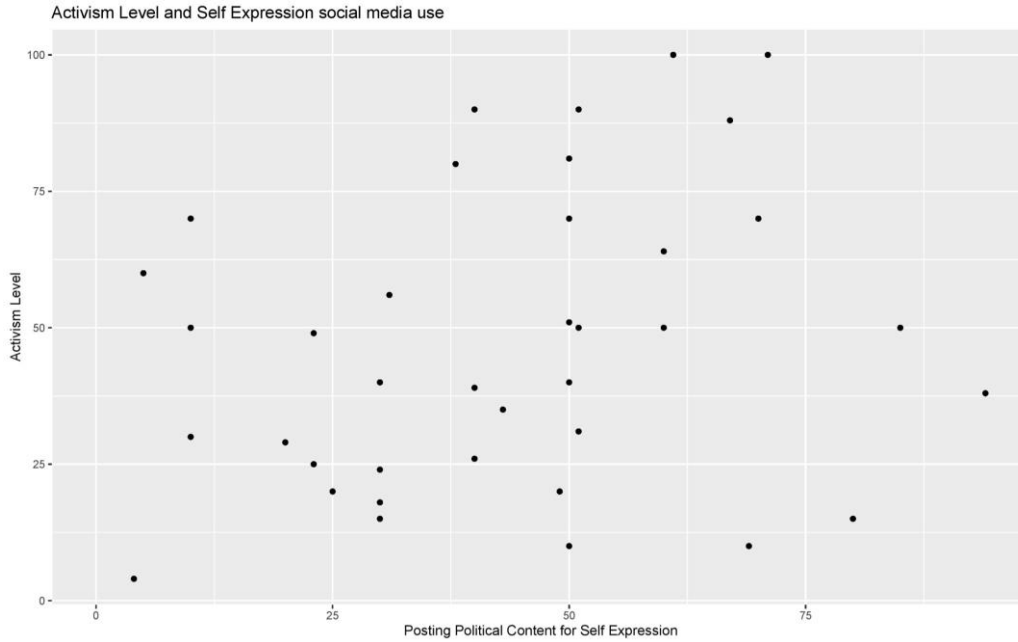


Figure 2. Activism Level by Posting Political Content for Self Expression

In this figure I created a scatter plot based off of the question “Do you identify as an activist?” for the X axis and “How much would you say you feel good when you post on social media relating to political actions and activities?” on the Y axis. As shown in Figure 2, there is not much of a correlation between the two sets of responses. It is vaguely positive which is concurrent with the literature that currently hypothesizes that the positive sense of self expression and the feeling of belonging is the motivation behind social media use. This hypothesis is somewhat supported by the results.

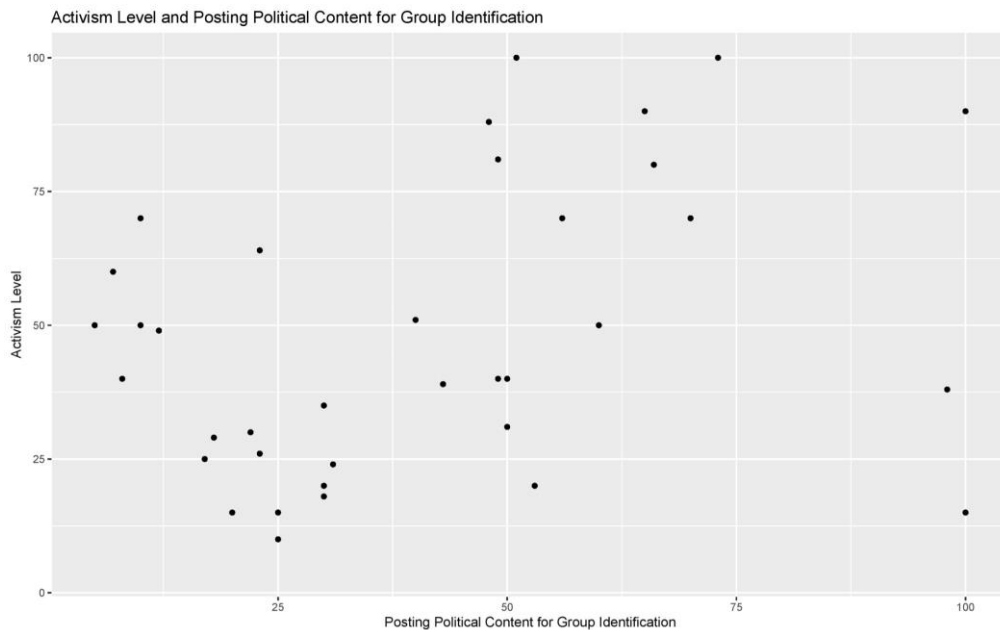


Figure 3. Activism Level by Posting Political Content for Sense of Belonging

Figure 3 displays the scatter plot based off of the questions “Do you identify as an activist?” for the X axis and “How

much would you say you feel a sense of belonging with others when you post on social media relating to political actions and activities?” on the Y axis. As shown Figure 3, there is not much of a correlation between the two sets of responses. It is vaguely positive and is again concurrent with the literature. However, the self expression and sense of belonging were not a part of my hypothesis due to both being individual private goods that rational actors will feel themselves without the need for others to induce anything on them.

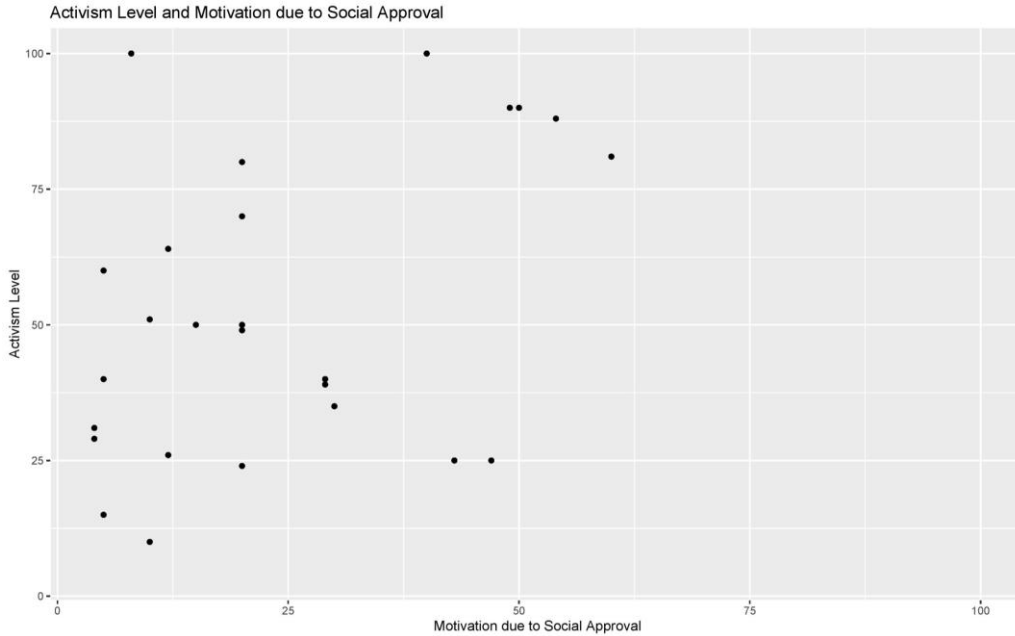


Table 4. Activism Level by Posting Political Content for Social Approval

In Figure 4 I created a scatter plot based off of the questions “Do you identify as an activist?” for the X axis and “How often have you felt social approval as a result of sharing political content on social media?” on the Y axis. As shown in Figure 4., there is no correlation between the two sets of responses. These results contradict my hypothesis as I expected that social approval or positive selective incentives is a motivating factor for social media activism.

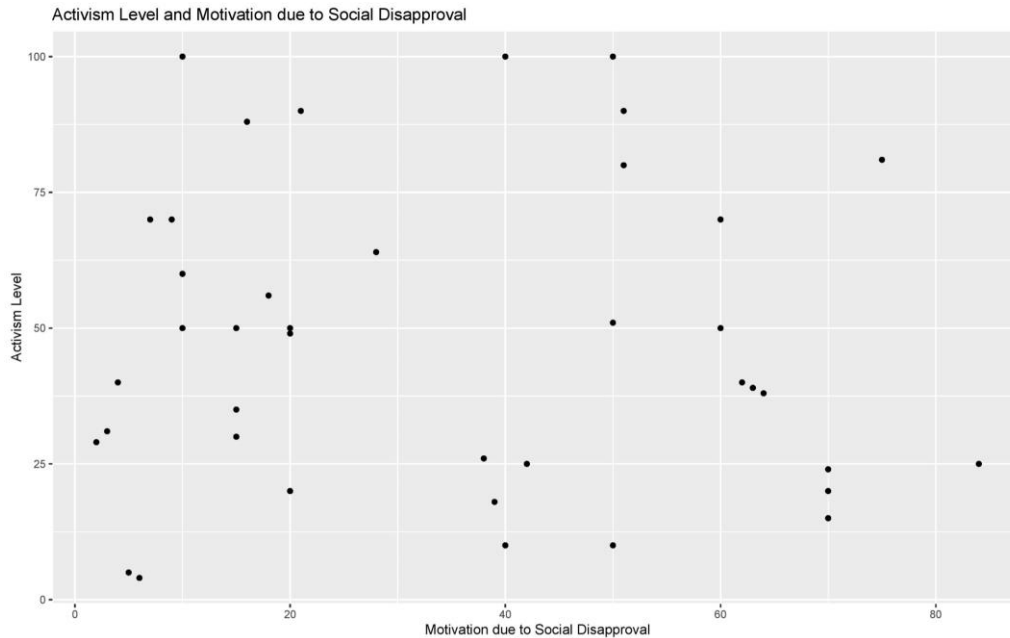


Figure 5. Activism Level by Posting Political Content on Social Media for Social Disapproval

Figure 5 displays a scatter plot based off of the questions “Do you identify as an activist?” for the X axis and “How often have you felt social disapproval as a result of sharing political content on social media?” on the Y axis. As shown in Figure 5t, there is no correlation between the two sets of responses. These results contradict my hypothesis as I expected that social disapproval or negative selective incentives is a motivating factor for social media activism.

## 6. Conclusion

I expected to find evidence of selective incentives as a motivating force for activism on social media, such as rewards and punishments that reward cooperation and punish non-cooperation through means of likes, dislikes, comments, sharing, etc. The findings of my survey were not as expected and findings suggest that the influence of selective incentives in social media activism is moderate at best. There was no correlation between social media use, or exposure to selective incentives, and activism level. These results suggest that while respondents may use social media often, it does not correlate with their level of activism. There was also no correlation between social approval/ disapproval and activism level. These results suggest that feeling social approval or fear of social disapproval is not a motivating factor for activism. There is a slight positive correlation shown in the self expression social media use and activism level scatter plot as well as the feeling of belonging and activism level scatter plot. These results suggest that self-expression and sense of belonging could be motivating factors for social media activism. Self-expression and sense of belonging as motivating factors for social media use is established in the literature and was expected in my survey. However, I expected selective incentives to have a stronger effect on respondents than the results suggest.

There are several possible explanations for these findings. The simple explanation is that selective incentives is not a motivating factor for social media activism, and rather the large collective action efforts we see online for the Black Lives Matter movement for example, is a product of self-expression for users rather than being influenced by others. This explanation would still be consistent with Olson’s argument in the Logic of Collective Action because self-expression is an individual good that rational individuals will seek regardless of the actions of others. Posting on social media in support of social movements is a way for a social media user to express their beliefs, morals, and opinions to their friends, family, peer networks or anyone that would find their social media pages. Social media is a form of public forum, and taking part of a social media movement in line with an individual's personal beliefs would be a way to share those beliefs with others.

Another possible explanation for these findings is that selective incentives do have an effect on social media users, but the survey was too limited in scope to have an accurate idea of its effects. The survey I conducted was a survey of convenience, spread through my social media pages and through my academic department. If I were able to reach a

larger pool of respondents, the results might have reflected a stronger effect of selective incentives. In addition, the average response to the question “Do you identify as an activist?” in the survey was “Somewhat”. I theorized that activists are more likely to be influenced by selective incentives and seek to motivate others to participate in social media movements than non-activists. Thus, if my pool of respondents contained a larger number of self-identified activists, there might be a stronger reported effect of selective incentives.

The recent trend of large collective action efforts being successful due to being based on social media is a phenomenon that deserves to be extensively studied. In 2020, millions of people worldwide participated in the Black Lives Matter movement both online and offline with the vast majority of organization efforts taking place online. Social media is a tool for connection and political transformation, in that people who have no stake in the outcome of a social movement in another country go out of their way to show support, and people who have never participated in a social movement are alongside activists protesting. There is something unique about social media and its ability to connect and transform individuals politically, and it will only continue to do so with the invention of new technologies. Finding out what is unique about social media and how it can seemingly defy the Logic of Collective Action in motivating people to support social movements like never seen before, is a worthwhile endeavor and might one day be its own field of study.

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