

## **CYBER-ACTIVISM: A CRITICAL REVIEW ON THE MODELS AND THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

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### **Abstract:**

Social media is becoming an alternative to mainstream media. People from different walks of life very easily make use of social media to pitch their point of view to the whole world. Thus, social media enthusiasts, creators, and curators become opinion leaders. Any triggering event that happens in the society becomes the pivotal theme for discussion and dissemination. Through textual, pictorial, and visual descriptions, the social media activists opine their point of view so as to construct collective identities of protest movements. This aspect of mobilization has been witnessed in the protests happening in Mexico, Philippines, Tunisia, Egypt, etc. Analysts postulate various models and theories underpinned this activism. This paper critically reviews some of the social media models and theories and subsequently proposes a conceptual framework of a model to understand the evolutionary process of social movement in social media.

**Keywords:** Cyber-Activism, Social movement, Social Media, Social Network Theory, Stage based Model, Social Capital Theory.

### **1.0 Introduction**

Cyber-activism in the virtual space has been influencing societies across the globe in forming social movements for a cause. Sandoval defines Cyber-activism as “using the internet to gather political information, to discuss political issues, and to perform acts of dissent online” (Sandoval Almazan, 2013). Thus, Cyber-activism is an act of dissents who use cyber-space to inform, interact, and mobilize people for protest for a social or political cause. Some of these dissent movements are Tunisian, Egyptian, Mexican, Arab Spring Uprising, etc. Even India witnessed such kind of uprising from Anna Hazare’s Movement to the CAA Protest Movement. Analysts postulate various models and theories underpinning these activities. This paper critically reviews some of the social media models and theories and subsequently proposes a conceptual framework to understand the evolutionary process of social movements in social media

### **2.0 Understanding Cyber-activism**

After the advent of Web 2.0 technological applications, internet users are able to share and interact with one another through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media applications. “Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of the Web” (Wilson, 2011), wherein people stay

in contact with one another for various purposes. Cyber-activism is “the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline” (Yang, 2014). ‘Techopedia’ an e-dictionary portal specifically meant for technology defines Cyber-activisms “the process of using internet-based socializing and communication techniques to create, operate and manage activism of any type”. Thus, Cyber-activism refers to the use of social media platforms to conscientise, mobilize, and protest for achieving certain social and political objectives (Chen, 2008).

### **3.0 Cyber-activism and Various Social Movements**

Cyber-activism has both successful and unsuccessful stories right from its evolution to today’s hashtag-activism. Some of the well-known Cyber-activists are enumerated here to understand the context and content of those protests.

#### **3.1 We Are All Khaled Said Movement**

In Egypt, twenty-eight year old Khaled Said was tortured to death while in police custody in 2010 (Mepfhuo, 2016). The death of Khaled Said initiated the uprising against Hosni Mubarak in 2011 as millions of people gathered at Tahrir Square in Cairo. This massive protest, despite hundreds being killed, overthrew the autocratic government of Mubarak (Sen, 2014).

#### **3.2 ‘I am Number 132’ Movement**

In Mexico the presidential candidate Enrique Pena Nieto on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2012 came to address a Catholic University named the Universidad Iberoamericana. University students asked several questions to him and they were not happy about the presidential candidate’s responses. Eventually, the students started shouting at the presidential candidate which no mainstream media telecasted. When Pena Nieto was asked about the incident in the University, he said those were not students but provokers. Responding to this, student activists posted videos with their id cards with a hashtag “I am Number 132”. This hashtag became a protest label for the students’ Cyber-activism in Mexico (Sandoval Almazan, 2013).

#### **3.4 The Umbrella Movement**

The Umbrella Movement is a civil resistance movement in Hong Kong in late 2014 where protesters used umbrellas to protect themselves from pepper spray and tear gas. The movement got intensified through cyberspace when ‘the 2017 Chief Executive proposed electoral reform’ was made against the Basic Law and the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) decisions (Chan, 2014).

### **3.5 ‘Do not touch my Internet’ Movement**

‘Do not touch my Internet’ Movement took place in Turkey in 2011. When the government authorities banned and censored the use of the internet, people got organized through social networking sites and came to the streets. Demonstration and protest happened in 28 provinces of Turkey against the government’s new filter on the use of the internet on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011 (Baban, 2015).

### **3.6 Women’s Right to Drive Movement**

*#Oct26Driving* is another campaign through social media claiming Saudi Women’s right to Drive during 2013 (Tokdemir, 2016). Female Muslim bloggers and Twitter users used social media platforms to coordinate and mobilize protests which had no anti-Islamic or political agenda but was only urging the government to lift the ban on women driving (Tokdemir, 2016).

### **3.7 Arab Spring Movement**

On 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, a young college graduate Mohammed Bouuazizi, who was working as a street vendor in Tunisia, was brutally beaten by the government authorities which led to setting himself on fire (Bas, 2015). This particular incident triggered the emotions of the people of Tunisia and later steered to Arab Spring, a revolution which brought down the 23 year regime of President Zine El Abidine (Kavanaugh, 2016).

### **3.8 Sunflower Protest Movement**

The Sunflower Protest was a social movement in Taiwan well known for its Cyber-activism. When the Taiwan government made a trade deal with China, people postulated the trade pact as China’s indirect entry to Taiwan for political and economic gain. University students

conscientize people through social media and on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2014 brought them to streets for a massive agitation against this trade pact (Basu, 2016).

### **3.9 Marina Beach Movement**

When the Supreme Court banned *Jallikattu*, an ancient bull-taming sport in Tamilnadu, India, having engineered by the social media platforms, so many thousands of people gathered at Marina Beach in Chennai and protested to withdraw the ban on 21<sup>st</sup> January in 2017 (Maitra, 2018). Through satirical memes and humorous cartoons, protesters created hype and tried to get the attention of the government officials (Shanthi, 2018).

### **3.10 CAA Protest Movement**

Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) erupted in various parts of India when the Central government amended the act on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2019. Dr. Narender Nagarwal from the University of Delhi attributes, “The CAA is fundamentally discriminatory and has been enacted aiming to target India’s largest minority community i.e. Muslims” (Nagarwal, 2019). As the Muslim community felt that it was directly or indirectly targeting them they made their strong contestation through various protests. On 15 December 2019, the students of Jamia Millia Islamia University protested against the implementation of this Act and took a march from Jamia Metro to Parliament Street which later erupted as a clash between policemen and the protesters (The Wire web portal, 2019). These series of incidents were posted in social networking sites which provoked and percolated a nationwide protest.

## **4.0 Research Problem**

The Purpose of the study is to critically review the models and theories of social movements in social media and to propose a new model as an alternative to the extant models. The objective of this paper is also to know how does the proposed model analyse the evolutionary process of social movements in social media and to study how far it is different and distinct from the other models.

## **5.0 Research Method and Design**

Based on the Review of Literature and the Secondary data the evolutionary process of social movements in social media has been analyzed in the first part of the paper. In the second

part, a new framework is designed as an alternative to the extant models. In the third part, a proposed alternative model is introduced and studied to know how does the proposed model analyses the evolutionary process of social movements in social media and to study how far it is different and distinct from the other models.

## **6.0 Extant Models and Theories of Cyber-activism**

### **6.1 Social Capital Theory**

Social Capital theory postulates that the relationship maintained and developed in the social network entails trust and value to the individuals. Steinfield, a contemporary theorist, advocates Social Capital as the benefits that we receive from social relationships (Carmichael, 2015). It is argued that the concept of bonding and bridging Social Capital refers to friends and acquaintances (Carmichael, 2015). The relation and connection between the online and offline environment are studied with the tool of social capital theory. This theory also helps to comprehend how social networking sites like Twitter are functioning based on the concept of bonding and bridging (Carmichael, 2015).

### **6.2 Social Network Theory**

Freeman suggested three types of network centrality measures to find out the position of the opinion leader in the social network sites (SNS). These centralities are termed as *Degree*, *Betweenness*, and *Closeness*. According to Freeman *Degree centrality* measures the number of in-links and out-links in the SNS. *The centrality of Betweenness* gauges the frequency of interactions between nodes and also connects the unconnected clusters. Most of the time it acts as a gatekeeper in disseminating concepts and precepts. *Closeness centrality* measures the spatial distance between different nodes in the SNS (Liu, 2017). Social Network Theory serves its purpose when it analyses the nodes and opinion leaders of the social networking sites but it doesn't study the process and progress of social movements.

### **6.3 Stage-based Model**

Stage-based Model proposes a circular flow model to explain the relationship between social media and social movement protest. Sandoval-Almazan developed this model with four stages of maturity of protests using social media. "The stages are Triggering event, Media Response, Viral Organisation and Physical Response" (Sandoval-Almazan, 2014). In the first stage, the theorist posits that any triggering event like political-social-economic

upheavals would easily and quickly disseminate the cascade of information to the masses. It is according to the veracity of the triggering event, velocity of dissemination takes place. If the Umbrella revolution in Hong Kong is the effect, then the declaration of conservative electoral reform is the triggering event (Basu, 2016).

The second stage of the Stage-based model is the media response. In this model, the message is repeatedly shared and reached to a multitude of people mostly through virtual spaces such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc. These social networking sites precipitate political and social interactions in virtual platforms. This process of information cascade entails information aggregation for the activists (Sandoval-Almazan, 2014).

Viral Organisation will be the third stage of the Stage-based model. In the Viral Organisation stage, the disseminated message elevates the conscience of individuals and elicits them for online community building. This consolidated identity has the characteristics of the horizontal organisation and cyber-activism (Sandoval-Almazan, 2014).

The fourth level of this model is the Physical response. Sandoval asserts this as a stage for protest in the real world situation (Sandoval-Almazan, 2014). The consolidated online community with collective identity pushes their virtual self into the real world as a social movement for protest.

## **7.0 Critical Review on the extant Models and Theories of Cyber-activism**

### **7.1 Reviewing Social Capital Theory**

Though theorists argue that Social media act as an impetus in bringing connections and relations between cyber movement and social movement, critics argue that cyber relationship is full of ‘complexities and uncertainties’ and there is no organisational nature in cyber movement (Xiao, 2013). Moreover, social network analysts observe that people more often find favors not based on strong social ties (family, friends, and relations) in the social networking sites, but based on weak social ties (acquaintances) in diffusing ideas and information (Liu, 2017). Social Capital Theory analyses the relationship observed between people in social networking sites with trust (Carmichael, 2015), but it doesn’t posit the evolution and effect of social movement in social media.

### **7.2 Reviewing Social Network Theory**

Critics who look into the elements of Social Network Theory postulate that most of the new media directly pitch its message in the minds of individuals without any opinion leaders.

And therefore the positions of opinion leaders in social networking sites become redundant (Liu, 2017).

### **7.3 Reviewing Stage-based Model**

Donatella Dellain Porta in his book reiterates the very nature of the social movement, “the organizational resources already present within the social movement sector tend to influence the evolution of single organizations” (Porta, 2006). Though Sandoval-Almazan’s Stage-based model proposes a circular flow of information, it doesn’t evolve but repeats the circular process in the same pace. Strictly speaking, repeating the same process is not essentially the nature of social movements in social media.

### **8.0 Need for a New Model**

Reviewing the models and theories of social movements in social media posits a serious need for an alternative model of social movement in social media which studies the entire processes and evolution of Cyber-activism. The above-mentioned models and theories help to study how the concept of relationship is observed on the internet with trust and value to every individual, to analyze the relationship between opinion leaders and the internet users, and to understand the process of a social movement in social media. But these models are mostly either linear or circular and repeat the same passive process. These models don’t analyze and understand how social movements in social media evolve and revolve dialectically with dynamism through multiple active discourses. That is the reason why we need a new model that can study and understand how do social movements evolve and revolve in social media and process cyber-activism with dynamism and multiple active discourses.

### **9.0 Proposed New Model for Cyber-activism**

#### **9.1 Dialectical Social Media Activism Model**

Social activism is defined as the instrument for social change and it is the offshoot of social interactions and collective behavior of the activists who work for various objectives and social causes (Dumitrascu, 2014). Victor Pickard in his book titled, “Media activism in the digital age”, explains the unprecedented role of communication technologies in shaping various activities in both offline and online environments (Sorce, 2018). When Slacktivism

refers to passive participation with weak commitment, activism proposes active participation with strong commitment. Social media activism not only accelerates the process of social activism through communication technologies but also mobilize, interact, inform, and transform the individual identities into the collective consciousness for social change.

A new model has been proposed here as an alternative to critically study and analyze the process of cyber-activism. This Dialectical Social Media Activism Model (DiSMA) takes a niche to validate the complete process and progress of social movements in social media. This dialectical model consists of three stages of development: 1) Context, 2) Cyber-text and 3) Contest. All these levels are dialectical in nature and therefore evolves and revolve around the process of mobilization for social movement through social media. The evolving and revolving process instigates from context to cyber-text, from cyber-text to contest and again bounces back from contest to cyber-text then to the context. But the dialectical end will never be identical to the dialectical beginning.

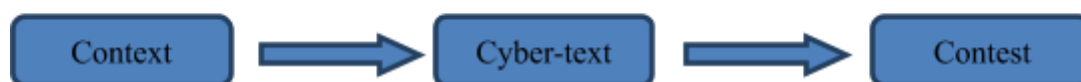


Fig1. The process of evolution of Social Movement engineered by Social Media

Mikhail Bakhtin who pioneered relational dialectics theory argues that “messages do not construct meaning in isolation but do so in dialogue with other meanings that have been constructed in the past and that are anticipated responses in the future” (Baxter, 2016). Messages that have been disseminated through the social media platform will garner multiple responses through interaction and various discourses. As a result the “dialectical tension in the relationship” (Baxter, 2016) in the social networking sites shapes and snowballs the meaning and messages as acceptable one which may later act as a key dogma for the social movement.

## **9.2 Evolving and Revolving Dynamism of DiSMA Model**



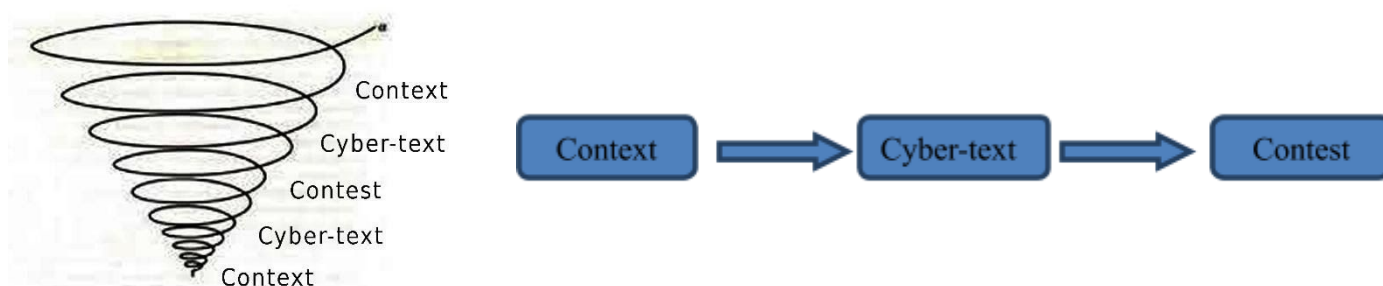


Fig 2. The Evolving and Revolving Dynamism of the newly proposed model

Most of the above-mentioned models and theoretical frameworks for the social movement in social media studies propose a linear or circular model and therefore they fail to evaluate the continuous process and progress of the social movement in social media. The proposed conceptual framework, Dialectical Social Media Activism (DiSMA) model suggests an evolving and revolving dynamism. The main characteristic of this approach is that it is both evolutionary and revolutionary. Though the issue, in the beginning, has less visibility, in course of time it revolves and evolves helically, expands the scope of objectives by suspending doubts through multiple discourses in Social Media. When the issue gets more visibility, people come to know about the intensity of the issue and try to rectify it through various online discussions and eventually emerge as a social movement to address the context with the collective consciousness. And this process of ‘evolving and revolving’ continues until the issue is addressed or discussed.

### **9.3 Understanding the Dialectical Stages of the Model**

The term Social Movement is introduced by a German Sociologist, Lorez von Stein. In the 1950s, Social Movement is defined as “conscious, concerted and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means” (Lopes, 2014). The actualizing process of social movements through an extra-institutional means like social media is being studied by the conceptual framework of the Dialectical Social Media Activism Model (DiSMA).

#### **9.3.1 Context**

Context is the originating space of any social, political, and cultural issue born out of a particular emotional involvement (Dekeyser, 2007), a triggering event (Sandoval-Almazan,

2014). Emotional involvement in a societal context is the root of any social movement. Many contemporary movements have evolved mainly because of political or cultural context (Porta, 2006).

In Egypt, twenty-eight year old Khaled Said was tortured to death while in police custody in 2010 (Mepfhuo, 2016). The death of Khaled Said initiated the uprising against Hosni Mubarak in 2011. In the setting of the Egyptian revolution, the police brutality against Khaled Said became an ‘emotional involvement’ (Dekeyser, 2007) or ‘triggering event’ (Sandoval-Almazan, 2014) or ‘context’ (Porta, 2006) for the formation of the social movement.

The ‘declaration of extremely conservative electoral reform’ in 2014 was the political context of Hong Kong where people regarded the declaration as draconian. The natives of Hong Kong considered this declaration as a huge attack on the country’s autonomy (Basu, 2016). This political upheaval precipitated the context and the cause of the Umbrella revolution in Hong Kong.

The Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS) was initiated on September 17, 2011, in New York City’s Wall Street by activists. They voiced against corruption, social and economic inequality. Here the context for the uprising is social and economic inequality (Tan, 2013). Citizen Amendment Bill was passed on 11<sup>th</sup> December in the parliament and assented by President Ram Nath Kovind on 12<sup>th</sup> December (Kuchay, 2019). CAA gives provision for people belonging to six religions such as Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists, and Jains who came from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh (except Muslims) to become Indian Citizens if they have come to India as or before the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014 (Nagarwal, 2019). Citizenship Act 1955 did not make religion an eligibility criterion to become a citizen. Some legal experts claim that “this act violates Article 14 of the constitution, which guarantees the right to equality” (Kuchay, 2019). This particular element in the CAA made Indian Muslims feel that they are targeted and eventually they may go stateless and will be regarded as outcasts. This fear was a context that provoked them to protest through various possible ways in different parts of India.

### ***9.3.2 Cyber-text***

Espen Aarseth first used the word ‘Cyber-text’ which signifies a wider textual media category. According to him, readers are invited to engage with the text which subsequently leads them to a cognitive or physical expression (Lee, 2017). In the model of dialectic social

media activism, cyber-text is the interpreted and reinterpreted virtual text in the social networking sites where arguments and counter-arguments elucidate consolidated meanings and entail collective consciousness.

In the case of Egypt revolution, the brutality caused to Khaled Said moved a 31-year-old Google executive Wael Ghonim who later created a Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Said'. On the very first day, 36,000 people followed the page (Mepfhuo, 2016). This cyberspace creates ample opportunities for the individuals whose voices formerly unheard and their freedom of expression amputated (Tokdemir, 2016). When people initiate to share their views and reviews, it paves way for a cascade of information and dialectical interactions. This dialectical tension in relationship (Baxter, 2016) fosters collective identity and collective consciousness which subsequently lead to contest, the next level in dialectical social media activism theory.

As soon as CAA had been passed, there was a massive protest in Tripura and Assam. Protesters started to share photos and videos regarding the violence and sought people's attendance in huge numbers for the protest. As a result the Tripura government suspended SMS and mobile internet services for 48 hours (Saha, 2019). In this case, the Cyber-text is the online forum where people in large number disseminate the news and views regarding CAA and its effect on the people of Northeast. Dialectical Cyber-text summoned people for online discourses and interpretations regarding CAA.

### **9.3.3 Contest**

One of the meanings given by the Cambridge Dictionary for the word 'contest' is to claim that a particular action is not fair or is not legal. Dialectical Contest is a phenomenon where people come to the streets under non-institutional or an organisational umbrella to protest as a strong social movement. "The rise of urban social movements is seen in a dialectical contest with the state and other political forces seeking to reorganise urban social life" (Buechler, 1995). Dialectical contest is the actualisation of a Cyber-protest, an extension of cyber-text in a physical format, as a social movement.

In Egypt revolution, the Facebook page 'We Are All Khaled Said', called for a demonstration on 25<sup>th</sup> January, 2011 and consequently lakhs of people attended the contest and demanded for their objectives (Mepfhuo, 2016).

In Tunisia, the social networking sites initiated a protest (Arab Spring) against the ruling regime in December 2010. People in the multitude participated in the social movement contest for more than 29 days. As a result President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali resigned and thus a 23 year old rule came to an end (Kavanaugh, 2016).

The videos, photos and texts twitted and re-twitted in social media platforms conscientised both Pro-CAA protesters and Anti-CAA protesters. Cyber-texts instigated the internet users to mobilise and protest. On 13<sup>th</sup> December Jamia Millia Islamia University students staged a protest against the new citizenship law. During the protest 30 people got severely injured and were admitted in the hospital (Saxena, 2019). Subsequently, Pro and Anti CAA protests were organised in U.P, West Bengal, Kerala, Chennai, Bengaluru, Maharashtra, Bihar, Hyderabad and in most parts of the country. Due to the inducement of politicians and their provocative talks percolated through the social media, the height of the protest got staged on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2020 in northeast Delhi's Jaffrabad. Many people died and hundreds of them severely injured (Bhatnagar, 2020). Social media's role in protest and contest is undeniable and Delhi riot is one of the recent raw evidences. The Contest in a violent format is against the ethics and principles of social movement and cyber activism as violence is the characteristics of a mob and rioters.

#### **9.4 Salient Features of DiSMA Model**

##### ***9.4.1 Evolving***

Evolving characteristic is attributed to this proposed new model for studying social movements in social media. DiSMA evolves from the context, studies the disseminated contents drastically in cyberspace and analyses the consolidated collective identity for protest.

##### ***9.4.2 Revolving***

The proposed new model also has a revolving characteristic in analysing social movements in social media. It not only studies the evolutionary process of social movements but also revolves back to the cyber space and then back again to the root of the context. This process of revolving doesn't stop at any point of time but rather continues to repeat multiple times till the issue is addressed.

##### ***9.4.3 Dialectical***

The New model is also dialectical in nature. Being dialectical the proposed model studies multiple discourses (both pro and anti) and analyses the variations and the intensity of the dialogue during the process of evolving and revolving.

#### **9.4.4 Active Dynamism**

Some social movements start with more dynamism in the beginning but later fade off due to various reasons. The proposed model studies the active dynamism of the social movements in social media in every phase of its process and analyses the velocity and variations of the movement.

## **10.0 Major Concerns and Theoretical Application**

There are somany social media activisms taking place around the world. Sharing social, cultural and political news and reviews in social media platforms in actual fact create ripple effect in the society. Social media is also looked as a pedestal of fraud and fake. Discretion is advocated to understand the underlying principles and propagandas of messages percolated in social media today. Security and safety are other major concerns of social media. Infiltrators with business motives hack and do major havoc to personal and public data. Slacktivism is another serious practice where online users show less commitment and little contribution to cyber-activism.

Cyber-activism is a major field of study which has close relevance and relations to social movements. Cyber-activism advocates social change through peaceful protest and demonstration. It is not synonymous to cyber-terrorism which proposes and propagates violence and enmity. Studying and analysing Cyber-activism and its evolutionary process will guide the analysts to comprehend the functionality of social movements in social media and the dialectical dynamism involved in it.

Dialectical Social Media Activism (DiSMA), the proposed model acts as a guiding canon to gauge and analyse the evolutionary process of cyber-activism. This proposed model also helps the analysts to distinguish Cyber-activism from Cyber-slacktivism and Cybe-terrorism. While analysing the process of cyber-activism, the researcher has wide possibility to study the context, cyber-text and the contest of the cyber-activism by critically appreciating the offline and online discourses and its dialectical factors.

There is also scope to review the Dialectical Social Media Activism model and to critically analyse its features and characteristics. Further study can be done on the models and

theories of social movement in social media with regard to its user generated contents and its authenticity. There is also possibility of future research in comparing social movements across the world in social media and to analyse the factors and the commonalities.

## **11.0 Conclusion**

Several studies show that protest in Cyber-text can only ensure visibility to a particular issue. But only when these cyber connection and relation entail social participation then there will be possibility for a complete Social change. Evgeny Morozov clarifies, “Alas, this basic insight – that political reform cannot be reduced to a war of memes and aesthetics alone, they must be backed up by strong institutions and strategies” (Maitra, 2018). Those who analyse the process and evolution of social movements across the globe argue that online activism should not procreate off line terrorism. If Cyber-activism proposes and propagates violence and hate, it has to be severely questioned and thoroughly discouraged. Cyber-activism always acts as an impetus for social movements.

The proposed Dialectical Social Media Activism Model (DiSMA) would be an effective tool to study the dialectical, evolving and revolving nature of social movements in social media. This proposed model, Dialectical Social Media Activism should be refined and redefined through further research.

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