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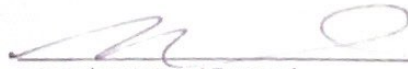
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# An Experimental Test on the Effects of Digital Framing Disputes on Social Movement Organization's Mobilization and Organizational Image

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*William & Mary*

## Recommended Citation

An Experimental Test of Intra-Social Movement Organization Framing Disputes on Mobilization and
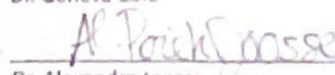Organizational Image

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By

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Accepted for _Honors_____

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## **Abstract**

Framing disputes within social movement organizations have been shown to damage people's opinions of the organization and the organization's ability to maintain mobilization. However, the majority of the research surrounding framing disputes has been conducted through case studies at in-person movement meetings. While these town hall-style meetings do still take place, many social movement organizations have begun to utilize social media as a part of their regular interactions with supporters and messaging efforts. This study employs a survey experimental design to examine the effects of online framing disputes on how social movement organizations are perceived and their ability to generate mobilization. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups where they were presented with a story about a student-run social movement organization and their use of social media. One group's article included a description of a framing dispute happening in the comments of the organization's posts. They were then polled on their opinions of the organization and how likely they were to willingly interact with the organization and its activities. Findings suggest that while online framing disputes did negatively affect how cohesive participants viewed the social movement organization to be, they did not affect mobilization nor how successful people thought the social movement organization was likely to be. These findings go against the previous findings on the effects of framing disputes in in-person settings, suggesting there is something unique about the digital setting.

**<u>Introduction</u>**

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a potent tool reshaping the landscape of social movements, offering unprecedented avenues for organization and mobilization. Among the movements that have sought to utilize social media, Black Lives Matter (BLM) stands out as one of the most successful, with #BlackLivesMatter being tweeted over 44 million times between 2013 and 2023 (Bestvater et al., 2023). It was not just movement leaders sending out these tweets; rather, it was predominantly ordinary supporters, activists, and BLM members who dominated this online discourse (Bestvater et al., 2023). Moreover, they were not all organizing these tweets and were not all utilizing the same framings when talking about BLM and its goals, with some people painting it as a struggle for individual rights, while other activists utilized frames about gender, racial, and LGBTQ identities (Tillery, 2019). BLM is far from the only Social Movement Organization (SMO) that utilizes social media, and it feels reasonable to assume that other SMOs will also see multiple framings of their movement appear online. However, under the curtain literature, it is unclear how different framings existing within the movement, particularly in the digital sphere, would affect BLM and other SMOs as organizations. This research endeavors to shed light on a portion of these effects, looking at how these framings operate within the realm of social media. By doing so, I aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within SMOs and their use of social media.

**<u>Literature Review</u>**

<u>Social Movements and the Importance of Framing</u>

From the abolitionist movement in the 19th century to the civil rights movement in the 20th century, social movements have played a crucial role in shaping our world. Social

movements have taken on a variety of goals ranging from criminal justice and legal reform to gun ownership protections and anti-war efforts, but not all have been equally successful. Many scholars have pointed to political opportunity and resource mobilization as key indicators of a social movement's potential for success (Tarrow, 1988; McCarthy and Zald, 1977), but a new way of studying the path and success of social movements has gained popularity: framing (Satell, 2019; Bonilla and Tillery, 2020). The concept of framing is largely borrowed from cognitive psychology and communication and media studies (Druckman, 2001; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). In the context of social movements, framing is the deliberate construction and interpretation of meanings by movement participants and other actors, influencing how events, activities, and actors are perceived (Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988). In simpler terms, framing is the way a social movement defines what and who they are. Framing within a social movement is an active process that members on all levels of a social movement organization take part in, not just leaders (Benford and Snow, 2000). While it is true that movement leaders may often lead framing through the tasks associated with movement leadership, everyday members also contribute to framing because they can actively dictate how their organization talks about issues and presents itself. Within a social movement organization (SMO), framing is often a strategic process used to recruit and mobilize new members (Snow et al., 1986).

More broadly speaking, framing is used to define a problem, identify a solution, and decide how best to enact that solution (Snow and Benford, 1988). These can be broken down into the core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Snow and Benford, 1988). Diagnostic framing refers to the identification of a problem and the assigning of blame and causality. For instance, an environmental justice organization may decide

that climate change is being driven by pollution and attribute the blame to large industrial corporations. Prognostic framing is the identification of solutions while also looking at tactics that might be used to bring about that solution. This could be an organization meeting with lawmakers or organizing events like protests and boycotts. Motivational framing focuses on how a movement wants to be perceived and how it goes about trying to generate collective action. This could be done through things like the literature the SMO produces, their intentional interactions with the press, or their social media. It is important to note that while these framing tasks do often feed into one another, they are separate processes, and it is common to see two SMOs agree on one part of the framing but not another (Haines, 1996 & Benford 1993). For instance, two SMOs could agree that pollution is driving climate change, but one is focused on lowering personal carbon footprint while the other is focused on renewable energy.

Framing Disputes

Framing alignment within an SMO allows the individual frames of members to become congruent and complementary within the SMO, encouraging greater mobilization and more consistent and cohesive messaging and action across all of its members (Snow et al., 1986). However, because framing is an ongoing process and anyone within an SMO could affect its framing, framing disputes can easily arise. Framing disputes are defined as the contested claims or opinions arising within a social movement concerning its goals, purpose, or other fundamental aspects of the movement (Benford, 1993). Unlike counter-mobilization and any bad-faith actions that are external efforts intentionally trying to harm a social movement's image, framing disputes are internal and the harm they cause is entirely unintentional. They are the result of disagreement within the SMO rather than a disagreement between the SMO and outside groups. They can

occur within the larger social movement, between SMOs, and within an SMO (Benford, 1993; Snow 1986). Additionally, a framing dispute can manifest in many different ways and at different levels of severity. Three main types of framing disputes have been identified: diagnostic, prognostic, and frame reference (Benford, 1993). Each of these disputes attacks one of the main core functions of framing. For instance, diagnostic framing disputes are disputes over a movement's perception of reality. This could mean a disagreement on what is causing a problem or even who to blame for the issue the SMO is trying to address. A good example of this would be one person looking at an increase in overdoses in a town as the direct result of opioid abuse while another could see it as a byproduct of poverty. Prognostic framing disputes are disputes over what the solutions to the agreed-upon problem should be or the methods by which those solutions should be implemented. Going back to the overdose example, one framing could present making Naloxone more available while another framing could be focused on anti-drug education. Frame reference disputes are disputes over how a social movement should present itself and its goals to the public. For example, within one SMO, a person could be trying to present the SMO as a part of a larger anti-poverty movement while another could be trying to present it as a movement being led by medical professionals.

Framing disputes arise from social movements' lack of unity around a singular frame (Zald and McCarthy 1981). Typically, framing disputes often originate from and are spread by social movement leaders. This is because movement leaders are able to use their platforms to spread their views among their supporters, generating wider framing disputes within the movement (Benford, 1993; Snow, 1986). However, framing disputes does not necessarily need to originate from social movement leaders. For instance, some celebrity endorsers of SMOs have been known to generate framing disputes (Meyer, 1995). Barbra Streisand once became a

spokesperson for a Colorado amendment meant to protect LGBTQ people. In doing so, she shifted the movement from one being led by LGBTQ people advocating for themselves to a movement about straight people standing up for their LGBTQ neighbors (Meyer, 1995). These celebrities do not need to be directly affiliated with their chosen SMO, nor do they have any leadership status within the movement they are endorsing. Their fame and platforms alone give them the ability to create and disseminate framing disputes throughout a social movement or SMO. The way celebrities can use their pre-existing platform to generate these framing disputes and become the face of a social movement tells us that anyone with a large enough platform could generate a meaningful framing dispute, and in the age of social media anyone can create a platform for themselves.

Effects of Framing Disputes on Social Movements and Social Movement Organizations

Framing disputes can be detrimental to an SMO and its social movements, often leading to demobilization and factionalism. Through his research within the denuclearization movement, Benford (1993) observed that frequent or severe framing disputes within SMOs led to chaotic meetings devolving into shouting matches, ultimately tarnishing the perception of these organizations among activists. These disputes eroded these SMOs' credibility among activists, resulting in supporters reporting apathy, uncertainty regarding the organization's legitimacy, and concern over the ability of the group to maintain a united front. Framing disputes greatly harms SMOs' ability to recruit and mobilize supporters, which often leads to the overall collapse of an SMO (Benford, 1993; Snow et al., 1986). Additionally, evidence suggests that framing disputes between SMOs can also harm the broader social movement. For instance, in Charlotta Stern's (1999) case study of the interactions between two similar Swedish SMOs, she found that framing disputes between organizations led to competition between them despite both groups being a part

of the same larger movement. They ended up directly competing with each other for limited resources and human capital, making it very difficult for both organizations to reach their goals while also damaging the progress of the larger social movement.

<u>The Role of Social Media in Social Movements and Framing Disputes</u>

The introduction of social media has transformed how social movements operate on numerous fronts. For instance, social media platforms serve as effective tools for coordinating actions and disseminating information about gatherings and protests among movement participants (Hara and Huang, 2013). Moreover, they have fundamentally reshaped the process of mobilization, allowing social movements to quickly reach a wide and extremely diverse audience (Mina, 2019). Social media platforms also allow SMOs to quickly disseminate movement-related information and infographics, often utilizing movement-specific hashtags like #BLM and #MeToo to streamline information sharing (Hara and Huang, 2013; Mina, 2019). However, it is not just movement leaders and organizations that are using social media to share their opinions or support for a social movement. A Pew Research Center survey found that 32% of U.S. adults report using social media to express their support for a social movement or to encourage others to join the movement (Auxier, 2020). Despite questions about the effectiveness of social media activism due to its low commitment and concerns that digital activism is difficult to transfer to offline high-cost activism, like attending a protest, it is generally agreed that social media is extremely effective at raising awareness about different causes and movements (Foster et al., 2019; Kidd and McIntosh, 2016).

One potential concern about the role of social media in social movements is the openness of the platforms. Social media allows anyone with an account to present their opinions and feelings about a movement in the same public fashion as movement leaders, causing movement

leaders to potentially lose control over their SMO. For example, in 2006, Tarana Burke founded the MeToo movement to bring resources, support, and community advocates to women, particularly poor women, who had experienced sexual assault (Riley, 2019). However, the movement did not truly gain traction or attention until 2017 when Alyssa Milano, an actress, used the hashtag #MeToo. Since then, founder Tarana Burke has come out multiple times with her concerns that the movement has become too focused on Hollywood and general awareness rather than gathering resources for the women she had initially designed the SMO for (Burke, 2020). What happened with the MeToo movement is a prime example of a diagnostic framing dispute generated by a celebrity, but it is different from the framing disputes traditionally studied because it took place on social media.

What allows movement leaders and celebrities to spread framing disputes is their platforms, but what constitutes a platform and who can obtain them has fundamentally changed with the introduction of social media. Typically to gain a meaningful platform, a person needs to be in a leadership position or gain the attention of news organizations and other forms of traditional media, but with the rise of social media people can bypass this process and self-generate their platforms (Tufekci, 2013). A prime example of this can be seen in the rise of social media influencers. Influencers can broadly be defined as individuals who have built a sizable following through one or more of their social media accounts (Lee, 2021). While influencers are typically thought of in connection to consumerism, not all influencers and influencers-adjacent individuals are trying to sell or promote a tangible product. For instance, in a 2013 case study, Zeynep Tufekci looked at digital activist Zainab Al-Khawaja. Prior to her engagement in digital activism, Al-Khawaja lacked any prominent platform. However, through her online advocacy, she quickly emerged as a prominent global figure in the Bahrain protests,

which were primarily focused on ending discrimination against the Shia majority by the Sunni-led government. Her social media account gained international interest, with news organizations like the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* interviewing her and covering her protests. While every social media user may not have as large of a platform as digital activists like Zainab Al-Khawaja or influencers, social media inherently gives all users a platform. This platform, no matter how small, gives them the potential to generate framing disputes in a similar fashion.

## **Hypotheses**

Current framing dispute literature is heavily focused on disputes generated by SMOs and their leaders within a broader social movement (Benford, 1993; Snow and Benford, 1988). Additionally, the literature has a strong focus on case studies, following SMOs and their framing disputes that are generated at their in-person meetings (Snow et al., 1986; Benford, 1993). This has left the effects of framing disputes on public opinion and the effects of social media on framing disputes almost entirely unexplored. It is clear that social media has rapidly transformed how social movements exist and how people interact with them. Framings and framing disputes are largely an extension of how SMOs communicate with their members and supporters, as social media becomes a more popular way for people to interact with SMOs, it makes sense that it would play a role within the framing process. However, the extent to which a framing or framing dispute that originates on social media would affect a person's understanding of an SMO or social movement is questionable. While we know that people use social media to learn about and advocate for social movements, we also know that people's trust in the information they find on social media varies based on a variety of factors including age and education level (Liedke and Gottfried, 2022). This study will look to evaluate the extent to which framing disputes

generated by non-movement leaders on social media is able to affect mobilization and people's perceptions of SMOs.

The primary objective of this study is to interrogate how framing disputes on social media forums affects the way people interact with and think about social movements. It is clear that social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram have given people a new way to interact with social movements that surpass the physical limitations of traditional "town hall" meetings. Social media decentralizes social movements by giving a greater number of people public platforms to discuss social movements. While this is not inherently a positive or negative thing, the increased number of pseudo-spokesmen for these movements could easily lead to a greater number of public framing disputes. However, it is unclear if these social media framing disputes are having the same effects on people and social movements as their impersonal traditional counterparts. To test whether these digital framing disputes have the same effect, I first identified the common effects of the literature and developed the following hypothesis to evaluate:

**H1:** Framing disputes generated by non-movement leaders on social media will negatively affect how organized and cohesive people think a social movement organization is.

**H2:** Framing disputes generated by non-movement leaders on social media will lower how likely people think a social movement organization is to succeed in enacting change.

**H3:** Framing disputes generated by non-movement leaders on social media lower people's willingness to participate in a social movement organization.

I chose to specifically look at these effects because being able to maintain a positive image and being viewed as likely to succeed play a crucial role in maintaining membership within an SMO

and being able to generate mobilization is crucial for an SMO's success (Benford, 1993; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Snow et al., 1986; Tarrow, 1988).

## **Methods**

To test my hypothesis, I fielded a survey experiment *(n = 271)* through William & Mary's Omnibus project. The Omnibus project is run through the Social Science Research Methods Center and fielded to students enrolled in Government Department courses. Consequently, all participants were college students between the ages of 18 and 23. With this demographic in mind, I chose to center my vignettes around a movement against the rising costs of tuition (Hartig, 2021). As current students, the participants are part of the group of people most likely to support reducing the cost of college, and they are part of the demographic an SMO focused on reducing the cost of tuition would try to recruit.

All of the participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups. Both groups were presented with a fake newspaper article describing a fictitious student group at a fictitious university protesting the university's plan to raise tuition rates. Both articles include the group's use of social media to organize and spread awareness about the issue and proposed solutions. However, the treatment group's article included a section describing how the comment section of their post has people arguing about what they think the group's proposed solution should be. The section read as follows *"However, the community's replies under SFAE posts have become a battleground for discussion on how Crestwood should go about lowering its tuition costs. Some commenters argue that increased government funding should be used to subsidize higher education. Other commenters feel it will take too long to work through the legislature and Crestwood should make budget cuts to implement income-based tuition fee*

*reductions."* The inclusion of this section is meant to represent a prognostic framing dispute. The control group's article includes no mention of a framing dispute but is otherwise identical (see Figure 1, where the framing dispute treatment is outlined in red).

To measure how this framing dispute affected participants' willingness to interact with the movement, I asked participants about how likely they would be to participate in a variety of activities: 1) following the groups on social media[1], 2) attending one of their meetings,[2] and 3) attending one of their protests[3]. Participants were asked to rate how likely they were to do each of these things on a four-point scale ranging from "Not at all likely" to "Extremely Likely." These questions were designed to not only measure general participation but also if the introduction of framing disputes would affect the kinds of participation they are willing to take. As mentioned before there is still a lot of debate within the literature about social media's ability to mobilize people to participate in higher-cost offline activities. If willingness to participate in just one of these activities was asked about, results would have likely been skewed. Each of these different forms of participation will be tested against the independent variable separately.

To capture how the framing dispute affects the way participants view the SMO as well as the broader movement, they were asked if they thought the SMO was going to succeed[4], how

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[1] Q1. How likely would you be to follow the Students for Affordable Education on social media if they were active on your campus? A. Extremely likely (3), B. Very likely (2), C. Somewhat likely (1), or D. Not at all likely (0)

[2] Q2. How likely would you be to attend a meeting hosted by Students for Affordable Education if they were active on your campus? A. Extremely likely (3), B. Very likely (2), C. Somewhat likely (1), or D. Not at all likely (0)

[3] Q3. How likely would you be to attend a protest being held by the Students for Affordable Education if they were active on your campus? A. Extremely likely (3), B. Very likely (2), C. Somewhat likely (1), or D. Not at all likely (0)

[4] Q4. How likely do you think it is that the Students for Affordable Education will be able to successfully petition the school to lower tuition costs? A. Extremely likely (3), B. Very likely (2), C. Somewhat likely (1), or D. Not at all likely (0)

organized[5] and cohesive[6] they thought the SMO was, and how organized[7] and cohesive[8] they

thought the larger social movement was as separate entities from one another. This was done to

see if the framing dispute within the SMO would only affect the way people view the SMO, or if

people's opinions would transfer to how they view the larger movement as well.

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[5] Q5. How organized do you think Students for Affordable Education is? A. Very organized (3), B. Somewhat organized (2), C. Somewhat disorganized (1), or D, Very disorganized (0)

[6] Q6. How cohesive do you think Students for Affordable Education is? A. Entirely cohesive (3), B. Cohesive (2), C. Somewhat cohesive (1),or D. Not very cohesive (0)

[7] Q7. How organized do you think the overall movement for affordable education at Crestwood Institute is? A. Very organized (3), B. Somewhat organized (2), C. Somewhat disorganized (1), or D, Very disorganized (0)

[8] Q8. How cohesive do you think the overall movement for affordable education at Crestwood Institute is? A. Entirely cohesive (3), B. Cohesive (2), C. Somewhat cohesive (1),or D. Not very cohesive (0)

**Figure One: Article Shown to Participants**



# The Daily Update

## STUDENTS RALLY AT CRESTWOOD INSTITUTE TO COMBAT RISING TUITION RATES

### Crestwood Institute

In an act of retaliation to impending tuition hikes, students at Crestwood Institute have united to form a new organization, "Students for Affordable Education" (SFAE).

The organization is led entirely by student leaders and aims to address the growing concern over the burden of higher education costs. SFAE members have already held a series of rallies and awareness events, including workshops, panel discussions, and petition drives, all aimed at pushing for concrete changes in the institution's tuition policies.

The organization primarily uses its social media platforms to speak to its members and supporters, and they have gained significant traction on all of its platforms. Hashtags like #SFAEforAll and #TuitionJustice are consistently trending among students, faculty, and even alumni. However, the community's replies under SFAE posts have become a battleground for discussion on how Crestwood should go about lowering its tuition costs. Some commenters argue that increased government funding should be used to subsidize higher education. Other commenters feel it will take too long to work through the legislature and Crestwood should make budget cuts to implement income-based tuition fee reductions.

With the Crestwood Institute's administration taking notice of the movement's widespread support, all eyes are on the horizon, as SFAE members and supporters alike await further developments in their fight for affordable education.

### Rain From Above

In an astonishing turn of events, our beloved city experienced an unanticipated deluge earlier today, leaving citizens astonished and delighted. Reports suggest that this rain shower came as a complete surprise to local meteorologists, who were left scratching their heads in disbelief.

Witnesses from various neighborhoods reported an unexpected symphony of raindrops dancing on rooftops, accompanied by a refreshing, earthy aroma that permeated the air. Some even claim to have spotted rainbows gracing the sky, as if nature itself was celebrating this extraordinary event.

City officials are urging citizens to exercise caution while navigating the temporarily transformed landscape, as the streets are glistening with newfound puddles of rainwater. Local children have wasted no time in donning their rain boots and embarking on impromptu puddle-jumping adventures.

Experts are attributing this rare meteorological phenomenon to a convergence of whimsical weather patterns, including a rogue cloud formation that defied all conventional forecasting models. Theories about a passing troupe of benevolent rain fairies have also been circulating among enthusiastic spectators.

Note: The text in the red box was only shown to the treatment group.

**Findings**

To test my first and second hypotheses and examine the effects of a framing dispute on how people view SMOs, I tested the effect of the treatment on how organized and cohesive people in each treatment group thought the SMO was (See Figures 2 and 3). On average participants who were not shown a framing dispute thought the SMO was 0.047 points more organized and 0.063 points less likely to think the SMO was going to succeed than people shown a framing dispute. However, neither the decrease in how organized they thought the SMO was ($t=-0.59812$, $p=0.5503$) nor the increase in how likely they thought the SMO was to succeed ($t=0.78069$, $p=0.4357$) were statistically significant. As shown in Figure 2, there also appears to be no significant relationship between the introduction of a framing dispute and how cohesive they felt the overall movement was ($t= -1.603$, $p=0.1102$), and there was no relationship between the presence of a framing dispute and how organized they thought the overall movement was ($t=0$, $p=1$). However, there was a statistically significant decrease in how cohesive people thought the SMO was, with participants viewing the SMO 0.188 points less cohesive when they were presented with a framing dispute ($t= -2.2924$, $p= 0.0227$).

While these results do fully invalidate my second hypothesis (H2), my first hypothesis (H1) remains partly intact. Of all the dependent variables I evaluated, how cohesive the participants viewed the SMO being is the most directly connected to the concept of a framing dispute. At its core, a framing dispute is a lack of agreement within an SMO, so finding a link between the introduction of a framing dispute and how cohesive participants think the SMO was, indicates that my fake article was successful in simulating a framing dispute. Additionally, it tells us that the participants did not just disregard the framing dispute. Instead, they took the information given to them about the discourse on social media into account when forming their

opinions about the SMO. Another notable implication of these findings comes from the fact that there was a decrease in participants viewing the organization as cohesive without there also being a decrease in how cohesive they thought the overall movement was. This indicated that within the digital space, the negative effects of a framing dispute within one SMO might not be detrimental to the larger movement. This is even further supported by there being a positive correlation between how cohesive participants viewed the SMO and how cohesive they viewed the overall movement, without there being a correlation between the introduction of the framing dispute and how cohesive participants thought the movement was.

**Figure Two: How Digital Framing Disputes Affect the Way People View the SMO**
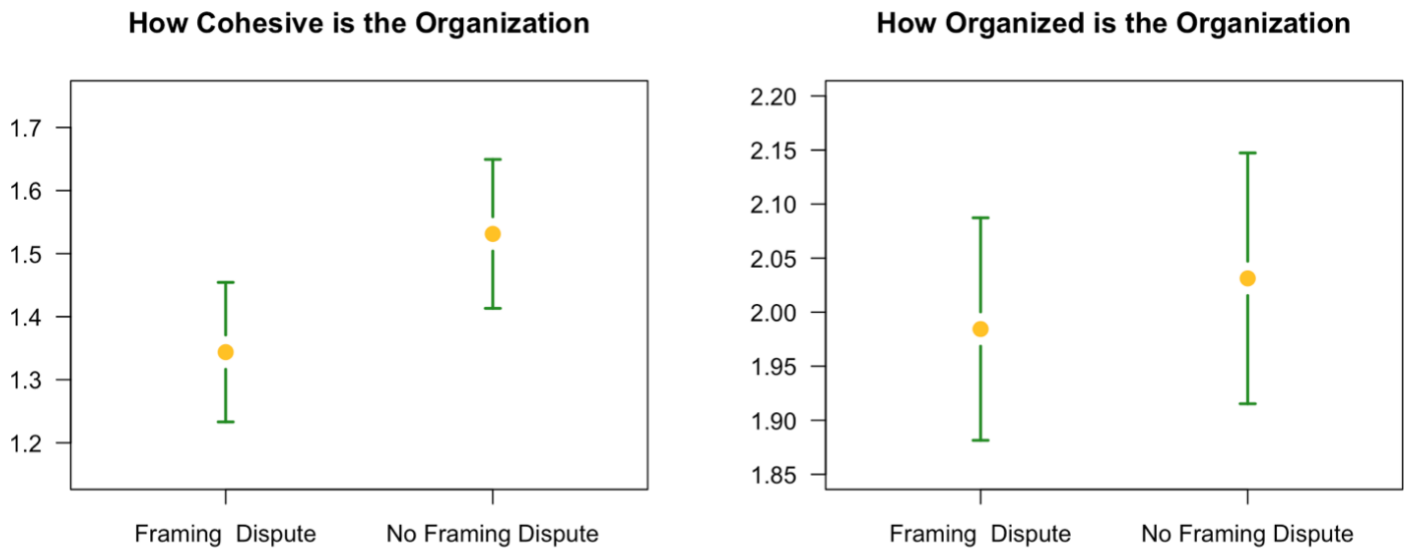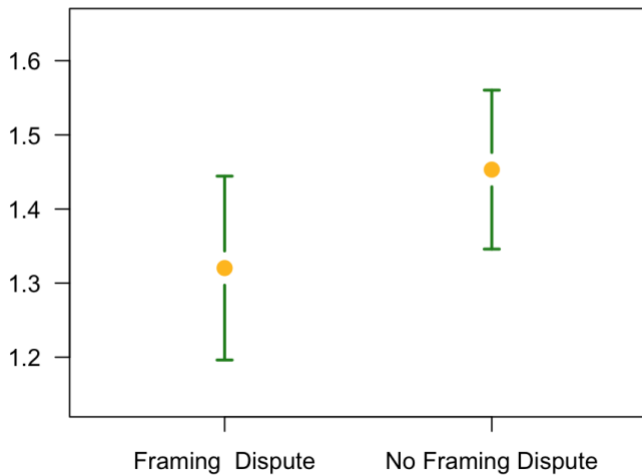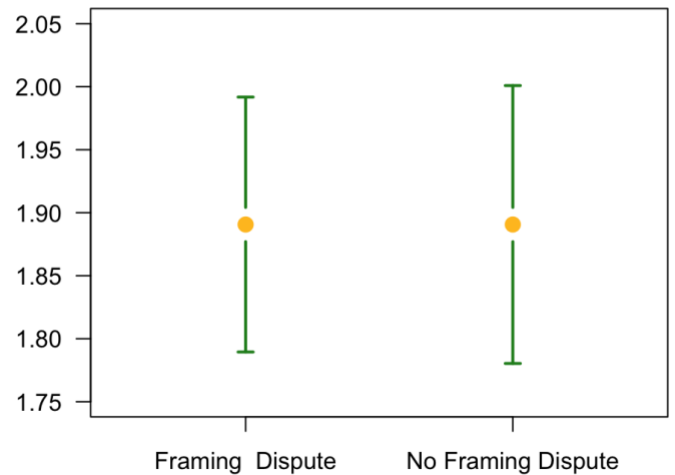
## Likelihood of Succeeding
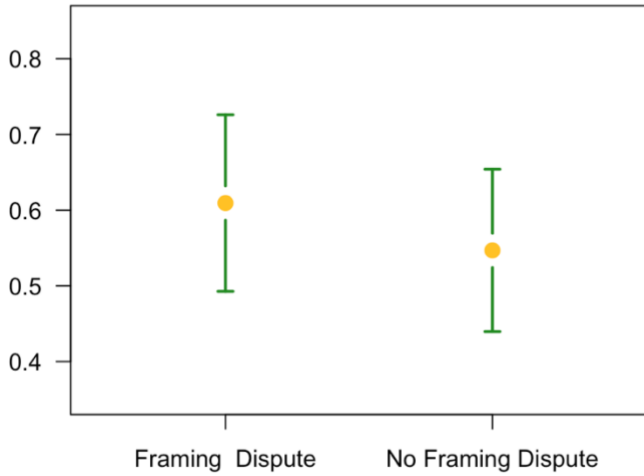


Note: Figure Two looks at how the introduction of a framing dispute affected the way participants view the SMO. The points represent the average mean for each of the groups. Data used to make this graph was taken from Questions Four, Five, and Six.

**Figure Three: How Digital Framing Disputes Affect the Way People View Movements**

### How Cohesive is the Movement



### How Organized is the Movement



Note: Figure Three looks at how the introduction of a framing dispute affected the way participants view the overall social movement. The points represent the average mean for each of the groups. Data used to make this graph was taken from Questions Seven and Eight.

To examine the effects of a framing dispute on people's willingness to participate and be involved with an SMO, I ran another series of t-tests looking at the mean difference in each treatment group's likelihood of following the SMO on social media, attending a meeting, and attending a protest (See Figure Four). If a participant was exposed to the framing dispute, there was a .078 point decrease in the participant's likelihood to join a protest, a 0.0156 point increase in the participant's likelihood of following the group, and a 0.0156 point increase in their likelihood of attending a meeting with the SMO. None of these results were statistically significant (follow on social media t=0.12706, p=0.899; attend meeting t=0.30967, p=0.7571; attend protest t= -0.69385, p=0.4884). Additionally, across both treatment groups, the likelihood of participating in any form was low across both treatment groups was very low, with following the SMO on social media being the most popular form of participation. This lack of a significant negative effect on people's interactions with the movement is contrary to my third hypothesis (H3) and the patterns established in the literature. Previous research has consistently shown that in-person framing disputes weaken SMOs' ability to keep their members mobilized (Benford, 1993; Snow et al., 1986). However, I was unable to replicate these findings when I moved the framing dispute to an online platform. The fact that there was no negative impact on mobilization, suggests that there is something different about the way people interact with SMOs online as opposed to when they are in person.

**Figure Four: How Digital Framing Disputes Affect Mobilization**
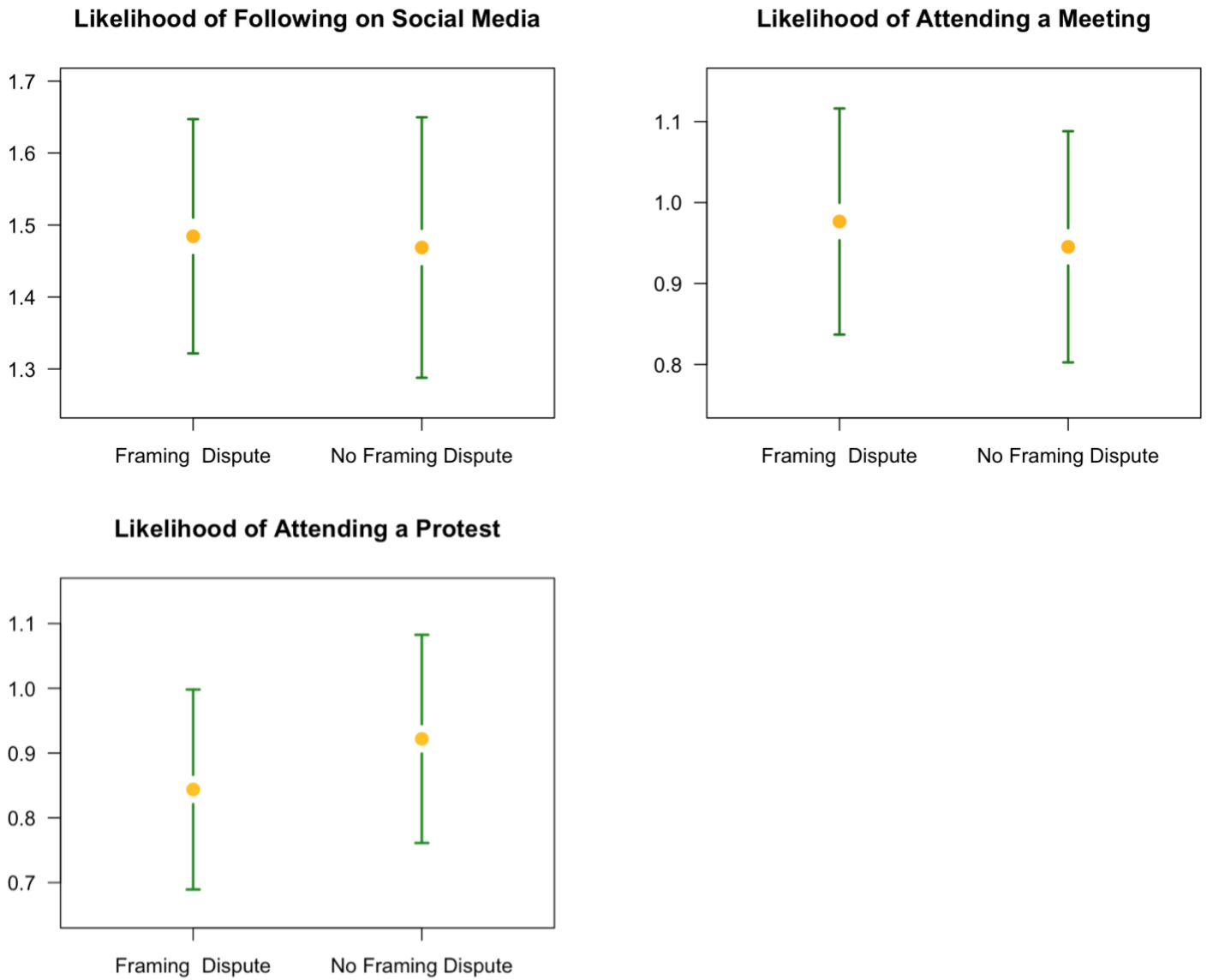


Note: Figure four looks at how the introduction of a framing dispute affected mobilization. The points represent the average mean for each of the groups. Data used to make this graph was taken from Questions one, two, and three.

## Limitations

As previously mentioned, this study was fielded through William & Mary's Omnibus

project, and all participants were students currently taking a class within the Government

department. Consequently, the study's sample composition predominantly consisted of white participants (75% White, 19% Asian, 12% Hispanic, and 6% Black) aged 18 to 23, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. While no significant correlation was found between race and the studied dependent variables, it's important to note that previous research suggests variations in the rates at which and how often different racial groups interact with social movements on social media. Specifically, studies indicate that White people are less likely to be involved with social movements on social media than their Black and Hispanic counterparts (Auxier, 2020). Similarly, while participants' age was not found to be significantly correlated with the studied variables, participants only being between the ages of 18 and 23 presents its own limitations. Previous surveys have found that people ages 18-29 are more likely than any age group to already be interacting with social movements and SMOs on social media platforms (Auxier, 2020). Their familiarity with online political discourse may have led them to react differently to the treatment than someone less familiar with the digital social movement landscape. Lastly, these participants were actively participating in Government Department courses, so it would be reasonable to assume that they are even more likely to already be a member of or interact with an SMO than the general public. Additionally, they may be more knowledgeable about SMOs and social movements than the average person, potentially leading them to have less of a reaction to the simulation. Given these limitations, caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings, and future research endeavors should aim to address these concerns by employing more diverse sampling techniques.

Another notable limitation of this study concerns the nature of the article provided to participants. While participants were presented with a fictitious article discussing online discourse and infighting within a social movement, it is important to acknowledge that reading

about online discourse and experiencing it or reading it firsthand by engaging with actual comments may elicit different emotional reactions. The artificial nature of the article might not fully replicate the emotional intensity and cognitive processing associated with real-time interactions on social media platforms. Consequently, participants' responses to the treatment may have been more speculative than truly reactionary. Future research could improve on this model by giving participants an artificial or real social media page to scroll through. The final major limitation of this study is its inability to recreate pre-existing interest. Typically, when people are visiting an SMO's page and reading through their comments, it can be assumed that they are at least interested in the SMO, regardless of whether they support it or not. However, there is no guarantee that my participants were even remotely interested in the fake SMO and its goals, and therefore they may have reacted differently than a group of people who were already interested in or invested in the SMO.

**Discussion**

With my findings not aligning with the pre-existing literature on framing disputes, this leaves us with the question of what is different about social media and the way that people interact with SMOs on these platforms. It may be that the negative or "toxic" environment of social media has led to a desensitization to arguments and discourse on these platforms. If someone has spent any meaningful time on social media reading comments or reposts, they could tell you that there is a distinct culture of harassment, arguing, and bullying that exists on platforms like Twitter (Geiger, 2016; Matias et al 2015). One survey indicated that 41% of Americans have experienced harassing behavior online (Vogels, 2021). On top of this culture of harassment, people often find themselves engaging in online arguments with other users, with one survey finding that 70% of Facebook users and 40% of Twitter users have been involved in

at least one argument online (Baughan, 2021). Despite their prevalence, these digital arguments often fall short of finding any common ground (Lipinski-Harten, 2013). When compared to face-to-face disagreement, online arguments are less productive and are less likely to end in mutual agreement (Lipinski-Harten, 2013). Compounding this issue is the subset of individuals who actively seek out these arguments viewing them as opportunities for validation or entertainment, rather than an opportunity to find common ground (Freyne, 2015). Altogether, these studies and surveys paint a picture of social media platforms being a breeding ground for endless disagreement and aggression. Consequently, people are likely to be less surprised when they come across disagreement on social media platforms and may even be desensitized to the fighting, as it is seen as a normal part of social media interactions. This desensitization could be one explanation as to why participants in my study did not react to the framing dispute presented to them. They are used to seeing an abundance of unresolved disagreements online, whereas in person they are more used to seeing these disagreements resolved. Consequently, they have less of a negative reaction to being presented with a framing dispute online than they do when it is presented in an in-person setting because they expect to find framing disputes when they are online.

Alternatively, participants' lack of response could be a result of conflict avoidance behavior. Previous research has suggested that people tend to avoid conversations or situations with expected conflict and disagreement, particularly in political contexts (Settle and Carlson, 2019; Davidai et al., 2022). Taking this aversion to conflict in combination with the culture of disagreement and harassment found on social media, it is plausible that individuals may choose not to engage with SMOs online in the same way they do when they are in in-person settings because of the prevalence of conflict online. This potential change in engagement could be

another explanation as to why people respond differently to framing disputes online than in person. These are, of course, just theories as to why there was no effect, and more research will need to be done in order to further explore these potential explanations.

Future research should investigate whether there exists any correlation between exposure to online disagreements and the extent to which online framing disputes affect individuals' opinions of and interactions with SMOs. This investigation could provide valuable insights into why the effects of framing disputes observed in face-to-face interactions were not replicated in online settings. Furthermore, a version of this study should be created where the framing dispute is not coming from members in the comment section, but rather generated by leaders within the SMO. This approach would afford us a more comprehensive understanding of how framing disputes generated by movement leaders online impacts SMOs. Hopefully, this additional research will provide a more nuanced and rich understanding of how framing disputes operate on social media.

### Conclusion

Social media has revolutionized human interaction, allowing us to interact with people anywhere and at any time. Everyone on these sites is given a platform, although some platforms are larger than others, allowing anyone to create their own account for just their friends and family or even the general public. However, the rise of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has not only changed the way people interact with their friends; it has also given SMOs new ways to spread their messaging and interact with their supporters. Movements like Black Lives Matter and MeToo have taken full advantage of this new platform in their organizing efforts (Hara and Huang, 2013; Mina, 2019). As it stands, there is disagreement among scholars regarding the effectiveness of social media as a tool for mobilizing, with some

suggesting there is an inherent difference between online and in-person interaction with SMOs (Cabrera, et al. 2017; Hara and Huang, 2013; Foster et al., 2019; Kidd and McIntosh, 2016). While my study does not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of social media as a tool for SMOs, it does provide more evidence to suggest that there is a difference between in-person and virtual interactions with SMOs. With social media becoming a more and more prominent tool for organizing, the effects of social media on social movements and SMOs must be further explored. The social movements of today are not the same as the social movements of the 60s or the 90s, and it is important that we update our understanding of how SMOs succeed or fail within this digital era.

<div style="text-align:center"><strong>Works Cited</strong></div>

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