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## Activists' Strategic Communication in an Authoritarian Setting: Integrating Social Movement Framing into Issues Management

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**Activists' Strategic Communication in an Authoritarian Setting:  
Integrating Social Movement Framing into Issues Management**

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Abstract

Triangulating 18 in-depth interviews with activists and campaign participants, news coverage, and social media content related to the campaign “6,700 people for 6,700 trees,” this study integrates social movement framing theory and issues management framework to examine activists’ strategic communication in an authoritarian setting. Results indicate activists’ sophisticated use of framing strategies following different stages of the issue life cycle to legitimately form an issue and successfully manage the issue in order to achieve their goals. This study offers meaningful theoretical implications for examining strategic communication in social movement campaigns. It also discusses practical lessons for applying these strategies to foster social change in similar contexts.

*Keywords: social movement, activism, issues management, strategic communication*

**Activists' Strategic Communication in an Authoritarian Setting:  
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On an early day in Spring 2015, a group of workers began to chop down the first few trees on the Nguyen Chi Thanh Street in Vietnam's capital city of Hanoi where the population was nearly eight million (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2018). The scene caught the attention of onlookers. Its images were immediately captured and spread on Facebook by citizens, with questions like: "Does anyone know what they are doing to the trees?" It did not take long for collective investigation efforts to find the answer. Authorities had ordered a project to cut down 6,708 big trees on various streets in the densely populated city of Hanoi and replace them with new, younger trees for an unclear reason (Peel, 2015).

Anger pervaded Facebook. Several pages were created. The most popular one, titled "6,700 people for 6,700 trees," garnered thousands of likes within days (Le, 2015). The case quickly focused the Vietnamese mainstream media's spotlight. A few weeks after the incident was first reported, activists orchestrated rallies in downtown Hanoi, terming them "outdoor picnic" or "green walks" instead of a "protest." In Vietnam where authorities do not tolerate public collective opposition, the protest was a bold move. In less than two weeks after the first photos of the trees being felled on streets were circulated on social media, Hanoi halted the project, making the social movement the first to succeed in changing a policy implemented by the government (Vu, 2017).

This study examines the campaign "6,700 people for 6,700 trees" to better understand activists' strategic communication to achieve their goals in the context of an authoritarian political system and the increasing use of social media. This study extends the literature of strategic communication by integrating two frequently-used theoretical frameworks in strategic communication and social movement literature, including issues management framework

(Hallahan, 2000; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Young & Leonardi, 2012) and social movement framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992). In doing so, this study provides a holistic view of how activists framed an issue and advanced it through different stages of a successful social movement. It responds to scholars' call for an interdisciplinary approach that advances insights and knowledge in strategic communication (Werder, Nothhaft, Vercic, & Zerfass, 2018). The study also offers a practical contribution to activism in a politically risky environment, where grassroots social movements are often nipped in the bud.

### **Activism and Strategic Communication**

Although scholars have recognized that activist groups use strategic communication to create and manage issues to seek changes in public policy arenas, public relations research investigating activism has been sporadic (Anderson, 1992; Anderson, 2017; Kim & Sriramesh, 2009; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). Moreover, studies examining activism mainly focused on how activists challenged corporations in order to provide practitioners with insights related to issues management (Coombs, 1998; Ciszek, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Scholars, therefore, have recently called for more attention to activists' alternative viewpoints of social issues, which are often silenced by public relations' mainstream discourse (Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2013).

Zerfass et al. (2018, p. 493) define strategic communication as "all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals." Considering that a grassroots social movement in an authoritarian context inherently contains a range of strategic complexities (e.g. resource mobilization, risk-driven operation, and a hostile political environment), an issue advanced by activists to public arenas is clearly a strategic and substantial one. To make sense of this complex social phenomenon, scholars posit that the field of strategic communication can

theoretically benefit from the adoption of an interdisciplinary worldview to generate a more comprehensive understanding (Werder et al., 2018). As such, this study integrates social movement framing theory and issues management framework to provide empirical results on how framing techniques were strategically applied in different stages of a social movement to create and manage an issue for social change.

### **Social Movement Framing Theory**

Social movements are “forms of collective action that emerge in response to situations of inequality, oppression and/or unmet social, political, economic or cultural demands” (Horn, 2013, p. 19). Nilsen (2009) suggests the forms of social movements are determined by the directions taken by the social groups waging the movement and the expected outcome associated with subsequent social changes. Thus, social movements are distinguished between those that emanate from below and those start from above. Social movements from above are conceptualized as the efforts of dominant social groups to expand their roles and resources by drawing on their superior access to economic, political and cultural resources (Cox & Nilsen, 2005). In contrast, social movements from below are grassroots movements, which are often initiated by socially marginalized groups with the basic goal of eliminating the perceived threats to their marginalization. Grassroots social movements are often less structured and entail open-ended outcomes (Obregón & Tufte, 2017). They carry important insights about subaltern groups’ experience of deprivations within a social setting that shapes their grievances, which often necessitate the targets of their anger (Nilsen, 2009; Piven & Cloward, 1979).

Grassroots social movement activists need to frame their messages to mobilize collective action from the mass. Gamson (1992) used Goffman’s (1974) concept of framing to explain how ordinary people make sense of public issues and subsequently participate in collective action. Gamson (1992) identified three main themes commonly created by activists to mobilize

collective action, including injustice (a sense of unfairness), agency (a perception of efficacy that a social injustice can be corrected), and identity (group members feel that they have a shared background, such as race, social class, and economic status). These are also useful concepts for examining framing strategies in social movements because they allow for a more nuanced understanding of how activists create social change (Noakes & Johnston, 2005).

Indeed, scholars have pointed out that the success of a social movement depends on activists' ability to mobilize people to participate in their campaigns (Klandermans, 1984; Morrison & Isaac, 2012). To mobilize people, activists frame their messages that resonate with people's ideologies and values. According to Benford and Snow (2000, p. 624), framing processes are strategic because "frames are developed and deployed to achieve a specific purpose - to recruit new members, to mobilize adherents, to acquire resources, and so forth." Three framing strategies, including *diagnostic*, *prognostic*, and *motivational*, are core in achieving consensus mobilization. Diagnostic framing refers to problem identification and the attribution of causes to the problem. Prognostic framing is mainly concerned with suggesting solutions to the problem. Motivational framing aims at encouraging participation and eventually action (Snow & Benford, 1988). These framing strategies have been widely used in examining strategic communication related to social movements (Goh & Pang, 2016; Nefes, 2017). This framing theory also guided the present study.

### **Issues Management and Issue Life Cycle**

In the issues management framework, issues are social problems that are directly perceived as influencing the quality of life of a social group (Young & Leonardi, 2012). Heath (1997, p. 3) defines issues management as "the strategic use of issues analysis and strategic responses to help organizations make adaptations needed to achieve harmony and foster mutual interests with the communities in which they operate." It is a function of the organizational

management to help foresee issues, communicate their impacts on stakeholders, and formulate strategies to influence policies (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Thus, issues management has been discussed in public relations primarily to preempt social movements. Scholars, however, argue that many activist groups are sophisticated strategists with issues management (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985; Smith & Ferguson, 2010; Sommerfeldt, 2013). Research on grassroots social movement indicates that activists are able to convert inactive publics into active publics through their strategic management of an issue (Kim & Cho, 2011).

The public arenas model created by Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) suggests that the strategic communication of activists determines whether a social issue will advance to public discourse and consequently impact social change. Because public arenas include various communication platforms, which are rife with competitive social issues, the role of activists is essential to formulate, introduce, and manage their prioritized issues throughout an issue life cycle. That is, a social issue for which activists advocate evolves through a cycle of development (Hallahan, 2000). As a result, an issue life cycle is central to issues management (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). This cycle is connected to, and influenced by, the degree of participation from a group of people who have common interests or issue-related goals. The issue process model proposes that knowledge of and involvement in the issue predicts collective action following the narrative of a social movement (Hallahan, 2000). An issue can be activated for an inactive public in order to move them to the state of activism by increasing their level of knowledge and involvement in the topic. To wit, an inactive public can change to become active as a result of strategic communication and persuasion (Hallahan, 2000; Sison, 2013). Thus, both activists' framing strategies and their ability to adapt these strategies to different stages of an issue life cycle are pivotal to the success of a grassroots social movement.

The issue life cycle generally has five stages, including the potential, imminent, current, critical, and dormant stages (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985). The *potential* stage is characterized by an individual or a nascent group showing interest in a social issue. The cycle moves to the *imminent* stage when the issue is perceived as legitimate by a more expanded group of individuals whose concerns are connected to the issue. At the *current* stage, collective action reaches an apex when intensive communication efforts by activists through various forms of communication are advanced to move the issue to the public arenas. At this stage, collective action is significantly shaped by a collective identity in the pursuit of shared values and goals (Pinard, 2011; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). A collective identity is defined as the shared perspective of a group that emanates from their common interest, experience, and solidarity (Taylor & Whittier, 1998). The issue reaches a *critical* stage when the institutions in power become involved to tackle the social problem. Once policy creation is proposed and implemented, the issue turns to a *dormant* stage, and it may resurface if conditions are favorable (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017).

According to social movement framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000), it is likely that at the potential stage, activists prioritize communication strategies to bring their issues into life by influencing the public to recognize a social issue. At the imminent stage, activists may use strategic communication to articulate the social problem as an objective deprivation to the public. Activists may then link the implications of such a deprivation to the quality of people's lives, which further arouses the public to the issue. By the end of this stage, an aware and awakened public likely transform into an active public as a result of intensive communication to heighten the issue's urgency (Kim & Cho, 2011). In the current stage, social movement actors carry out collective action in direct confrontation with their opponents. This stage, therefore, potentially introduces substantial risks to social movement participants. Activists need strategic

communication to amplify messages underlying their symbolic activities on the site, while also minimizing risks to participants. These first three stages of an issue life cycle in a grassroots social movement, therefore, comprise issue dynamics with activists' extensive efforts to frame an issue and inspire collective action. Thus, in this study we focused our analysis more on the first three stages than the last two stages of an issue life cycle.

Grassroots social movements are incredibly difficult to start and move forward in authoritarian countries because social movement narratives are often interpreted and reported in state-controlled media as anti-government ideologies, which are in direct confrontation to a political party's power (Pu & Scanlan, 2012). As such, activists' strategic communication in this setting to form and manage their issue may deviate from the extant corporate and western-centric literature on social movement framing and issues management. For example, the diagnostic framing assumption with attribution to causes of a social deprivation in early stages of an issue life cycle may not be practical when the target culpable adversary is an authoritarian government. Thus, an in-depth examination of a social movement in an authoritarian setting helps to extend the cultural and political scope of strategic communication research and practice, which may not be salient to scholars working in different socio-political settings (Werder et al., 2018). A recent study showed that the majority of strategic communication research has focused on the politically liberal western context (over 90% with the United States comprising 55.7%), and very few studies examining non-western authoritarian settings (Werder et al., 2018). Vietnam has not been on the strategic communication scholars' radar. This study focuses on examining activists' strategic communication in the unique political and media landscape of Vietnam, which represents an authoritarian setting. In the section that follows, we provide a synopsis of the political and media landscape of Vietnam to highlight the research context.

### **Vietnam's Political and Media Landscape**

As a single-party authoritarian country, Vietnam places censorship on the media and tolerates no public opposition, especially from those who challenge the legitimacy of the government (Mansour, Snegovaya, & Abuza, 2015). However, while all mainstream press in Vietnam is state-controlled, it has increasingly gained its independence from the government's voice. The arrival of the Internet and the surge in the number of privately-funded news media organizations have further complicated the relationship between the state and the media. Scholars have reported a slow improvement in the condition under which Vietnamese news media operate (Elmqvist & Luwarso, 2006). Wells-Dang (2010, p. 94) argued that despite the state's tight grip, the Vietnamese new media are taking "a more active role as public watchdog on cases of corruption, environmental damage and land use."

Since its arrival in the late 1990s, the Internet has quickly expanded in Vietnam. According to Internet World Stats (2017), by March 2017, Vietnam had some 40 million active Internet users, about 52% of its population. Facebook is immensely popular in this Southeast Asian country, with about 50 million accounts. The proliferation of social media has brought about new sets of challenges for the communist government, changing the dynamics of information diffusion and opinion expression and pushing the boundaries of political spaces.

Although sustainable collective resistance is still rare in Vietnam, economic inequality and environmental challenges fueled by rapid economic developments over the past three decades have bred new political conflicts. A series of public protests have been reported in this country since it began its economic reform in the late 1980s. Most were disputes related to land being seized from farmers for commercial use as part of the growing urbanization and industrialization (Wells-Dang, 2010). However, recent protesters also focused their campaigns

on environmental disasters and ecological degradation (Hutt, 2017), which have “galvanized opposition in unprecedented ways” (Hoang, 2017, p. 1).

In this study, we examine the social movement “6,700 people for 6,700 trees,” which took place in a “networked authoritarianism” setting, where forms of both overt and subtle authoritarian control of media are implemented (Parks, Goodwin, & Han, 2017). Besides being the first movement to succeed in contemporary Vietnam, the campaign “6,700 people for 6,700 trees” presented an interesting case study. Unlike other grassroots campaigns that sprung up in hostile political environments (Brunner, 2017; Lim, 2012; Pu & Scanlan, 2012; Youmans & York, 2012), this movement achieved its objectives with no violence, nor arrest. Building on the above literature, this study asks:

RQ1: How did the activists frame the tree felling project to form an issue and mobilize public support in the potential and imminent stages of the social movement “6,700 people for 6,700 trees?”

RQ2: How did the activists frame their messages and adapt their framing to the government’s responses in the current stage of the social movement to carry out a successful protest that advanced their issue to the critical stage?

### **Method**

This study employed a qualitative single case study approach with multiple data sources. A single case is appropriate when researchers need to study a critical, unique, and revelatory case (Yin, 2018). To trace the evolution of the issue and strategies used by activists, we combined the analysis of in-depth interviews with news coverage and social media content. For interviews, we used snowball sampling to get access to the study participants. A snowball sampling is appropriate when researchers face the task of reaching “an elusive, hard-to-recruit population” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 114); that is, our sample included individuals in a loosely defined

social network, who shared an ideological motivation during a social movement in a tightly-controlled political environment. We used purposive sampling for social media postings on the “6,700 people for 6,700 trees” Facebook page, as well as for Vietnamese mainstream news articles. These platforms represented the public arenas, which contained information critical to elaborating the relevant theory (Schwandt, 1988).

### **In-depth Interviews**

Over a two-month period in 2016, we contacted a mix of activists and protesters for interviews. A number of these contacts declined to participate because the topic was deemed a “sensitive matter.” Ultimately, our sample included 11 activists and seven campaign participants. Campaign participants were those who did not see themselves as activists, but as individuals who shared the movement’s missions and voluntarily joined in campaign activities (Bobel, 2007). Bobel’s (2007) study of how social movement participants perceived their roles shows a separation and distinction between *doing activism* and *being activists*. These identifications of specific roles in this campaign is necessary because of the possible charges the government may impose. Often these charges depend on what role an involved person takes. An activist will receive a much more severe accusation compared to a campaign participant. We included campaign participants in the study because their experience and reflection of the movement contributed to illuminate activists’ communication tactics and effects. The activist group comprised key individuals who initiated the social movements and were influential in both online and offline environments. The activists came from various backgrounds, including university professors, non-government organization workers, retired soldiers, and university students. The group started with 20 individuals. After one week, the number of activists had grown to 110. However, the 20 initial activists continued their leadership role throughout the

social movement. A few activists had experience with activism. Others reported that it was their first involvement in a social movement that directly confronted the authority.

In-depth interviews allow the researchers to get access to interviewees' detailed descriptions and reflections on sensitive issues (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The interviews were conducted either in-person or via Skype in Vietnamese. Interview transcripts were then translated into English by two Vietnamese natives who are fluent in English. Interviews lasted between 45 - 90 minutes. We used an open-ended interview approach which is useful to understand how and why people are motivated to engage in interpreting meanings related to issues under study (Lazarsfeld, 1944). That is, we designed the interview guide with flexibility in that respondents could discuss the event in their own way, which allowed for new perspectives to emerge. Interview questions centered on informants' perceptions of the issue, strategies to inform and influence different publics about the issue, and how they developed messages and activities to mobilize the mass support, while still ensuring issue legitimacy. For example, we asked the activists "How did you initially get people to pay attention to the tree-cutting news?", "How did you motivate people to engage in voicing their opinions and tell stories related to the trees?", and "What made you decide to move your campaign forward with a protest?" We used probing questions during the interviews to encourage the informants to elaborate their responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). We obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board before proceeding with data collection. The names of interviewees and those they mentioned remained confidential throughout the entire study.

### **Social Media Creative Texts and Mainstream News Stories**

We examined the creative texts and news stories to look for facts and evidence supporting key strategies located in the in-depth interviews. Analysis of the texts on social and mainstream media was conducted to triangulate with data from in-depth interviews (Lindlof &

Taylor, 2011). We did so by selecting social media posts and mainstream news articles corresponded to each stage in the issue life cycles in order to provide more evidence for the analysis of the in-depth interviews. Specifically, we first created a timeline of the social movement based on informants' responses and mainstream media news (*Figure 1*). We then listed all social media posts and published news articles following the movement's timeline. A total of 84 news articles was published by two major mainstream news outlets' websites, *VietNamNet* and *Thanh Nien*, which were among the top viewed news sites and influential to set agenda for other media in Vietnam (Vu, Lee, Duong, & Barnett, 2018). We discussed the news contents to find reports that were informative and meaningful to better understand the dynamics of the issue life cycle, as well as any significant changes in journalists' reporting of the activists and their movement. We applied a similar process for the campaign creative texts posted on the Facebook page "6,700 people for 6,700 trees."

[Figure 1 about here]

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the verbatim transcripts, we applied a systematic process of categorizing and coding, using Lindlof and Taylor's (2011) descriptions. We devised categories based on the social movement framing theory and examined each transcript following the individual stages in the issue life cycle. We created a coding scheme which included categories, the codes, and individual informants' detailed responses that supported the codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The coding scheme also divided the responses according to informants' groups. Using the coding scheme, each of the authors reviewed the qualitative responses several times to identify emerging themes and patterns of response by their forcefulness, recurrence, and repetition of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Owen, 1984). We discussed the codes to refine and reorganize the responses according to the identified themes within categories (Berg, 2001). We then examined

the social media posts and mainstream news articles to triangulate the results. Finally, we discussed the results of the triangulated analysis to come to an agreement.

### **Findings**

Using the lens of social movement framing theory, we assess the way activists framed their social media posts and the changes in their messages as the issue progressed. To answer the first research question, we focus on the first two stages of the issue life cycle (i.e. the potential and imminent stages). To answer the second research question, we investigate the current stage of the issue life cycle, where both the activists and campaign participants moved away from their screens and took action on the streets. In addition, we briefly discuss how the movement concluded in order to provide a complete picture of the movement.

#### **The Potential and Imminent Stages: Activating the Public**

The first research question focused on how activists initially framed the tree felling news to form an issue and gain public attention. Insights from our in-depth interviews with the activists revealed two overarching themes. First, the activists used a diagnostic frame to depict the tree felling project as a problematic situation, where injustice and victimization turned a news item posted on social media into an important issue. Second, activists ramped up emotions among the public by presenting and articulating how the tree-felling project was related to the city-dweller's identity. The activists then strategically created issue urgency, or an imminent threat to the public's identity, using social media to gain issue legitimacy, raise the public's awareness, and engage people. We first report how the activists strategically transformed the city government's tree-felling news into a public issue. We then report the activists' strategic communication to create the public's sense of issue urgency.

**Issue formation.** The issue started with one of the activists coming across a prominent Facebook user's post about tree-cutting in Hanoi. It was an individual act of an amateur activist

who identified herself as a housewife. In one of the first few posts about the tree-felling project she published, she wrote “You may question who I am to start this movement, to call for your support or to take some minutes of your time... I am just a regular housewife who stays at home to take care of my children...” Within the course of that first day some of the posts received thousands of likes and shares. Activist 5 said she learned about the news when she saw the tree-cutting images on Facebook. She said, “Many people shared this news. I asked my co-workers, and they said that the government had a plan to cut down 6,700 trees in Hanoi. I started searching for more information on social media.”

Similarly, other activists first heard of the project through their network of friends on Facebook. Activist 1 said that after she learned about the news, she went out to the street where the trees were cut down to verify the information. She then contacted others and the group held several meetings at cafes to discuss the incident. For discussions that involved analyzing the situation and identifying activities, where multiple activists participated, using Facebook was not an optimal choice. Activist 6 said, “We felt it was urgent, so we met to figure out what to do. We thought it’d be more effective to meet in person to discuss this issue than sitting in front of the computer screen.”

At first, the Facebook platform was a temporary space for activists and the city’s dwellers to share their thoughts after hearing about the project. Activist 1 said, “We had neither an agenda nor a strategy. We agreed that it [Facebook] was only for us to release our emotions by sharing concerns and feelings.” Activists’ views of the movement, at the time, seemed to diverge into two different directions. Some saw the incident simply as a threat to the environment. Others considered it a violation of people’s rights to participate in the city decision-making process. The meetings, however, helped to merge the activists’ views and they agreed to focus on an immediate goal, which was to stop the tree-cutting project.

In the first two months of 2015, the Vietnamese mainstream news media sporadically reported Hanoi's municipal government's plan to cut trees on the city's streets. But not until the photos of tree cutting on several streets of the city spread on Facebook and a post by a prominent Facebook user circulated questioning the project, did the incident emerge as a potential issue of public concern. The activists decided to create the Facebook page "6,700 people for 6,700 trees." The Facebook page creators hoped to use the page to mobilize the support from 6,700 people only. However, after only one day the page reached more than 9,000 followers, showing a rapid evolution of tree-felling news into an issue of public concern. In a repressive political environment, where public protests are not allowed, the support the activists received in this one day of the potential stage was beyond their expectation.

The activists sought to frame their messages to arrive at a sense of injustice about the way the tree felling project was implemented. In a status posted in March 16, one of the page admins wrote, "Last night, I dreamt about the trees, which provided beautiful green leaves with singing birds and cool shades - just as they had been there for years. Suddenly, somebody arrived and chopped them all down. They did not ask for our opinions. The trees' trunk was ruthlessly sawed apart, their roots were excavated, and were all carried away to unknown places... I can't stand it, so I voice my opinion... Can you join me to stop the killing of our innocent trees?" The problem, as was framed here, was that the city people were not consulted about a matter that was closely related to their lives, which they considered as "their rights." The post received 2, 200 likes, 199 shares, and 66 comments. Although these initial posts did not overtly identify the culpable agent, they implied that someone in power was responsible for the injustice. Activist 5 said, "The trees belong to people and their city. Cutting the trees down without an explanation was unfair to people. We paid our tax. We believed that we had the right to ask questions." Clearly, the activists' social media posts identified a problematic situation, using a diagnostic framing

strategy that signaled injustice, amplified victimization, and promised a potential culpable agent, although they carefully avoided “finger pointing” at this stage.

Activist 8 said the next task for the group to turn the tree-cutting news into a salient issue was to “do something to draw further public attention.” The fact that the trees were closely connected to people’s everyday lives provided the activists with an edge to draw attention to the issue. Activist 6 said that after only a few days, the news had reached a large enough number of people in the city. This was measured by monitoring people’s reactions on their Facebook page. The activists understood that social media cues, however, were only indications of public online recognition of a problematic situation. They then focused on framing relational messages to persuade the public why people should care about the trees. They did so by creating meaningful stories about how the trees represented people’s identity. After that, they advanced the tree-cutting issue as an imminent threat to public’s identity.

**A shared nostalgic memory.** To create a space for collective identity formation, Activist 3 said that the Facebook page was set up as open to the public. Activist 3 said the page was opened to all kinds of posting, which conveyed a clear message that the page belonged to all interested individuals and not just the page administrators. He shared, “We tried to make the public feel that they owned and controlled the page, not us. We did not publish posts about personal opinions, but mostly facts and public reactions.”

Activist 2 said, “Everyone could freely express their opinion. A status that received more users’ comments would be placed on top. This created a sense of continuity and urgency of the issue.” Although the majority of posts sided with the activists to oppose the project, not all of them were supportive. Activist 2 said that as administrators they could have deleted unsupportive posts, but they did not. They wanted the page to be an open platform for diverse viewpoints - something that is not often allowed in the local media system. The key idea was to emphasize

transparency in administering the page. The administrators used comments to clarify or verify controversial posts. In addition, activists observed that unsupportive comments would be quickly swamped and counter-argued by supportive ones.

Our analysis of the initial posts on the page showed that, along with sharing tree-felling news, activists intentionally posted photos that tapped into people's nostalgic feelings of the good old days that were linked with the trees. According to the activists, their initial posts focused on the beauty, usefulness, and memory of the trees in order to appeal to the attention of people in Hanoi and in the country. For example, a post published on March 16 read, "Not only do the trees give us shade and oxygen, they are our memories and historical landmarks. They've been there for us for years. Now it's time to raise our voice for them."

The incorporation of emotional elements into the activists' strategic messages provoked people's feeling of being deprived of their identity, as Activist 9 described her observation of the public's "strong emotion that was mixed between the loss of the trees and their identity." Given that many people were born and had been living in the city for a longtime, the identity of the city was also an inseparable part of their identity. Indeed, our interviews with the campaign participants clearly confirmed this outcome, while also revealing the influence of the online social cues on the page. For example, campaign participant 7 stated:

"Even if I was very angry with the project, I would not know if other people would think the same way I did. But reading what people were talking about on the page, I knew I was not alone. I saw my friends sharing the news and participating in online discussions. That was important for my decision to participate in this movement."

The result was that only after a few days, over 10,000 people followed and interacted with the page by liking, sharing, and commenting on posts related to the tree-felling project. In a

short time, this shared nostalgic feeling turned into a valuable asset for the activists to gain the public's support.

**“I’ve got to do something.”** Members’ discussion gradually shifted to discussions about individuals’ responses to stop the tree-felling project and identifying those who sponsored the project. The activists then broached their call for action, using a prognostic framing strategy. Specifically, the activists carefully articulated their messages by attributing the call to the mass, and not from the activists themselves. A post in March 17 reads: “So many people asked us to do something: ACTION NOT TALK ONLY [original capitalized]. We agree. We can do much more than just click “like” and stay silent with our anger.” The page then was filled with many photos of people going down the streets and attaching A4 papers on the trees in the city with slogans, such as “I am a healthy tree. Don’t cut me,” and “Don’t kill me” (*Figure 2*). Campaign participant 2 said, “I felt that as they cut the trees down, they take away the shades, the protection, and part of our lives. I’ve got to do something.”

[Figure 2 here]

The activists continued with three steps. They first filed complaints to local authority. Then, they appointed representatives to meet with the local authorities to inquire for explanations about the project. They also documented the tree-felling activities using on-the-scene footage filmed by people. At this point, three key factors motivated activists to move their campaign to the next stage. The first was the communication of the city government officials in handling the tree-felling project crisis. The city’s spokesperson angered the public when telling journalists that “There’s no need to ask for people’s opinion to cut trees.” A story with the verbatim quote running as the headline on the VietNamNet news site reached the Facebook page, which had become a hub of information on the issue (Hoang, 2015). The fast circulation of the story through social media amplified the urgency of the issue. Anger pervaded the social media

platform. “They live on our tax. Trees are our assets. Now, do they dare not ask us about cutting the trees?” a Facebook user wrote in the comment section of the post that shared the link to the story. Second, denials from the business sector helped single out the city government as the sole culpable adversary. Anticipating the public attack and a possible public relations crisis, representatives of some businesses issued their statements on mainstream media to deny their involvement in sponsoring the tree-felling project (San, 2015). For example, a local bank manager stated that his bank only sponsored tree-growing projects and not tree-felling ones (San, 2015). Likewise, a representative of Vincom, a mega-corporation in Vietnam, also disassociated the corporation from the project, saying that they “had no benefit from participating in the tree-felling project” (San, 2015). This was crucial for the social movement because the public now had a clear culpable agent on which to focus their anger. Finally, the public’s reactions to social media posts provided the activists with important cues to interpreting public opinions, including the number of likes, shares, and comments. Indeed, Activist 4 said that they evaluated public opinions by using these social media cues. Taking these factors into consideration, the activists decided to move their campaign to the next phase.

### **The Current Stage: A “Non-political” Protest**

Our second research question investigated how the activists framed their issue to mobilize mass support and organized a successful public protest. This question is pertinent to the current stage in a social movement, where people came out protesting. We first reported how activists strategically crafted their messages, before discussing how they creatively deployed alternative forms of protest on the streets of Hanoi.

We found that when activists’ requests for open dialogues failed, they adapted to this disappointed turnaround by making their messages clear and consistent to avoid any negative framing. They planned a street protest, not in the way traditional demonstrations were organized

but by using creative forms of cultural activities to mask their protests. This was pivotal for activists' campaign in order to avoid being framed as "anti-government," which was a serious charge that would obstruct any attempts at public protest.

**A civic issue.** As there was no sign that the project was going to be halted, on March 19, 2015 activists asked people to register for participating in an "outdoor picnic" and a "tree-hug event." Thousands of people showed their willingness to join the event. During March 20 - 25, activists took the movement to the streets in the center of Hanoi. They requested an in-person meeting with representatives from the Hanoi Department of Construction to officially petition against the project. The city government responded by temporarily suspending the project. It also held a press conference later in the day. These events marked the current stage of an issue life cycle with activists formally advancing the issue to the public arenas.

Activists reported that they had to be extra careful with this step because they did not plan to directly confront the government. Their protest might be misinterpreted or manipulated, posing danger to themselves and campaign participants. Activist 7 said that the purpose of a protest was for local authorities to recognize the tree-felling project as an important issue that affected people's lives. The activist group first tried to set up meetings with government officials to voice their opinions. They strategically articulated their messages as a civil issue and not a politically-driven issue. A Facebook post published on March 21 read, "It is love that will protect this city, not hatred. Please help by your action, not your hateful words against the government."

However, much to the activists' disappointment, local authorities repeatedly refused to meet with the groups because, according to the activists, they deemed the issue as illegitimate. Furthermore, the activists reported that some officials saw their activism as a sign of a political disruption, which needed to be prevented. For example, Activist 1 said that when the group met to organize a seminar on trees, power was cut at the venue. Activist 8 recalled: "The city

government did not want to have a dialogue, they said because we were not a formal organization. All we wanted was that people had an explanation of what was happening. We wanted to show them that we were not their political opposition.”

The responses of the local government played a key role in escalating the issue. The activists, at this point, determined to organize public protests. Activist 8 said, “We tried to have a dialogue with the government, but they disagreed. Plus, it was not confirmed that they would halt their project. It got to a point that we needed to do something real, for people to participate, not online but offline. A protest? Yes, that would be it.”

**Alternative forms of protest.** Organizing a protest is a bold move in Vietnam, requiring preparations and strategies to articulate the purpose and form of a protest to avoid being seen as confronting the government. In Vietnam, a civil protest law is yet to be approved and any street protest constitutes a potential political disruption that often results in an immediate and drastic response from the government. For mainstream media the word “protest” would never appear when referring to demonstrations happening in the country.

Activist 3 shared that his group had only two days to prepare for the protest because after reviewing the Facebook page’s interactions, they predicted that the public’s emotions were at their peak. A public demonstration not only imbue the issue as an urgent social problem, it also draws the public and media attention. To come up with ideas for a protest, the activists consulted lawyers about how to organize a non-political protest. This was important because any violation of the law would give authorities reasons to arrest the activists.

The activists came up with creative ideas to reframe their protests. First, it was important for the group to “normalize the protest.” Specifically, Activist 3 said, “We needed to disassociate these events from the idea of protesting against the government. The events had to be seen as not related to politics so that the government did not have to worry about.” Activist 2 added, “The

idea was to make these protests ‘fun events’ that were perceived as purely cultural activities, and not a protest.” Ultimately, a range of events were organized with different names, such as “Tree Hugging” and “Biking for Trees.” Many campaign materials were created and used during this stage (*Figure 3*). In multiple Facebook posts prior to the protest, activists stressed, “We will go on a picnic this weekend, a cultural activity on Sunday morning. You can spend a morning this weekend with your family and friends to walk around the lake, looking at the trees in a fresh morning, enjoying the music and giving each other hugs.” After hearing concerns from Facebook users, a post published on the same day read, “The picnic is not a protest. It’s a cultural activity on the streets... Why can’t we have a day to show our appreciation and love for trees?”

[Figure 3 about here]

A total of four “events” were organized with thousands of city dwellers participating in various activities. The events attracted hundreds of people, who painted on canvases at a park and paraded around a lake in the city’s center. Protesters wore T-shirts and headbands with tree-hugger logos, holding signs that read: “Felling of trees means a habitat destruction,” and “Save trees - save our lives” (Nguyen, 2015).

The group carefully instructed participants “not to walk on the grass, not to trash the street, and not to stay in one place for long. If a group has more than 10 people, they need to be moving.” Thus, although a protest included more than 500 people, they kept a distance between groups to ensure the law was not violated. Activist 6 said that she even gave flowers to a security officer who was watching her group.

The fact that the protest was masked with various forms of cultural and public arts activities substantially minimized the political risks to participants. Campaign participants shared that they felt safe with the creative ideas of the activists. For example, campaign participant 2 said that she was impressed with the idea that each campaign participant would bring a plant to

exchange with others. “These activities expressed very well our love for trees and our desire to protect the environment,” she said. Several activists said that the trees that participants brought to the protest represented a message that the movement promoted peace and not violence. This strategy helped to reduce the political sensitivity of the protest. Numerous news reports on the events headlined, “Hanoians show love for trees” or “Hundreds in Hanoi sing, paint to call for tree protection” (Vietnamnet, 2015).

### **The Surprising Success and an Ephemeral Crowd**

The outcomes of this social movement were characterized by the two final stages of an issue life cycle: the critical and the dormant stages. The critical stage centered on the government’s solutions to the issue. The first was the launch of an official investigation into the project on March 25 by the Hanoi Inspection Agency, a governmental authority responsible for inspecting corruption and public denunciations. The second was the order by the country’s prime minister to Hanoi for a detailed report on the project. As the central government engaged in the issue, a shared reality was formed with the city government recognizing and accepting the tree-felling project as an issue that generated public grievances. On March 24, the media reported that city officials admitted “We were not able to foresee the people’s love for trees” (Hoang, 2015). In their post on April 2, 2015, the activists expressed their gratitude to the publics in addition to their hope that the city government would solve the issue in a timely and transparent manner.

To a number of activists and participants, the results were surprising. Campaign participant 2 said, “I did not think it could be successful in such a short time.” Participant 6 said that the success was remarkable because “none of the previous social movements was successful with the government totally giving into the public demand.” The campaign participants returned to their homes, followed with this news, and felt content with their success. The activists, at this point, had conflicting ideas about the direction of their social movement. With the exception of

Activists 4, 5, 6, and 7, the rest of the activists felt that they had achieved their campaign goals. They no longer felt the need to move on with the movement. Part of the reasons was that they felt that the public was only a disparate group of people, who were “ephemeral and unable to maintain long-term commitment” (Activist 9). Thus, as stated by Activist 1, at this stage the movement “has no reason to continue.” The social movement then turned to a dormant stage. Activist 4, 5, 6, and 7, however, felt that their long-term goals of improving human rights still were not met. They continued the social movement by monitoring the outcomes of the tree-felling project, and ultimately shifting their focus to other environmental issues.

### **Discussion**

Theoretically, scholars have suggested that activist groups are influential social actors who are sophisticated in using strategic communication to influence organizations (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2009). Paradoxically, not much empirical work has been done to examine activism with a focus on its strategic communication, particularly given that technological innovations have given rise to a new form of collective action that is more flexible and volatile than it was before (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006). This study departs from a corporate-centric perspective by investigating activists’ strategic communication to seek social change in a direct confrontation with a powerful government. Findings from the present study provide insights into activists’ use of strategic communication to frame a social issue and safely inspire collective actions throughout critical stages of an issue life cycle (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985; Heath & Palenchar, 2009). The authoritarian context illuminates the necessity and efficacy of the activists’ strategic communication.

First, the case study showed that the public activation process was strategic and dynamic, with activists successfully creating ideological narratives that constructed a shared grievance of injustice and a collective identity. We found that activists’ messages in the potential and

imminent stages mostly aimed at forming an issue using diagnostic framing with problem identification. They did so by strategically creating symbolic texts and artifacts, which were shared online. Activists' tactics, such as posting stories to consistently remind people of the memory of the trees and opening up an online space for the public to personalize tree-related stories, sped up the process of converting the latent public into being active. In this sense, the activists strategically and successfully framed their collective lived experience and produced a meaningful alternative reality (Reger, Myers, & Einwohner, 2008), which was in stark contrast with the existing reality. The gap between these two realities made it a salient social issue in the public's minds. In a way, the activists' tactics led to changes in public's perceptions and sentiments, while increasing their awareness and engagement in the issue (Hallahan, 2001). Indeed, the campaign participants in our interviews indicated that they recognized and strongly felt that the issue was closely related to their lives. Importantly, the public's identification with the issue resulted in issue legitimacy (Coombs, 1992).

Second, within these two stages of the issue life cycle, we found that activists were prudent with attributing causes to the problem. This was essential for the activists to move their issue forward, because a direct blame on the government at an early stage of the movement may be filtered through anti-government narratives via state-control media outlets. Framing of causes to the problem, therefore, required extensive communication efforts on the part of the activists in order to identify a culpable adversary. Collective online posts by activists and followers also turned into powerful pressure that forced relevant corporations to publish statements disassociating themselves from the tree felling project in response to alleged project funding, thereby fixing the blame on the city government as the sole culpable agent. In other words, diagnostic framing was used prudently and strategically by activists to eventually establish that the city government was the entity responsible for the problem.

Third, we found that at the onset of the current stage, prognostic framing was used by the activists. Specifically, they tried to communicate with the local government to exchange solutions to the problems. Notably, they requested a formal meeting with representatives of the local government and the press for a transparent discussion about solving the problem. This marked the transformation of the activist groups' legitimacy status, from "a few over-enthusiastic individuals" to "a representative group of city-dwellers" (Activist 4). The activists' efforts eventually culminated into a rare public protest in the capital city of the country. Because a public protest was risky for both the activists and participants, we also found that the activists used a motivational framing to encourage public participation in a protest. Particularly, they articulated their call for the protest in a way that reduced political sensitiveness. The social movement framing theory addressed this strategy as "the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive" for collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617). As such, the case study indicated that the three components of the core framing strategies as outlined in social movement framing theory were tools for activists to successfully maneuver the three initial challenging stages of an issue life cycle related to a grassroots social movement.

Fourth, the case study suggested that the activists' ability to adapt their strategies to an opponent's critical responses. Previous social movement research has shown that communicating messages to call for a protest against authoritarian governments presents significant risks to activists (Brunner, 2017; Parks et al, 2017; Pu & Scanlan, 2012). In our study setting, for example, one of the activists' critical tasks was to organize a protest without explicitly referring to the word "protest" in any messages. Mainstream media news stories about social protests tended to employ certain frames that depicted protesters and their causes as deviant, which negatively influences their legitimacy (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Our findings showed that in order to legitimize their public protest, the activists made it clear that the city government's

messages were not helpful in solving the tree-felling issue. Public awareness of the government's failure to respond to the issue through its authoritarian messages to the public was a necessary condition for a protest. Specifically, the activists said that the city government official's statement, which ignored people's opinions about the tree felling project, was the final straw they needed to plan a protest. They then included mainstream media stories reporting the government official's response in their online postings in order to scale up the public's willingness to participate in the protest. Clearly, the city government's underestimation of the importance of recognizing the public's grievances directly contributed to the tree-felling movement protest. The results confirmed the activists' ability to adapt to an opponent's critical response to legitimately organize a protest.

Fifth, findings illustrated the strategic communication of activists during the protest to prevent an imminent government crackdown. Specifically, by framing their demonstration as "cultural events," they successfully evaded any accusations of a political motive, which could be used by authorities to crush a movement. Furthermore, their creative approaches during the protest, such as exchanging plants, presenting flowers to security forces, and deploying protest groups at intervals from one another, precluded mainstream media from framing the protest as a form of confrontational insurgency and anti-government riot (Gitlin, 1980). As a result, the protest was not quelled immediately as happened in previous grassroots social movements, while the issue was maintained and advanced to the critical stage.

Finally, findings clearly showed that the activists were strategic with using social media. Particularly, the activists' strategies to manage and operate their Facebook page "6,700 people for 6,700 trees" showed their sophistication to engage the public. For example, they moderated the page with an emphasis on the co-construction and personalization of a shared grievance, rather than applying a hierarchically top-down approach to controlling the page. The public

actively created contents with salient messages that were shared, liked, and commented on. They also cooperated to refute any competing narratives that sought to associate the activists' motives with an anti-government plot. In addition, the presence of the online normative cues, such as the number of posts, sharings, likes, and comments facilitates the involvement of the public in the issue. Both the activists and the campaign participants used these cues to assess public opinions for their subsequent action. In collectivist cultures such as Vietnam, because members share an extended self-identity, being able to identify normative cues and align with others' identity are influential to collective action (Kim & Sriramesh, 2009). In sum, the case study suggests that with creative and powerful framing techniques on social media and monitoring the public's online responses, activists can move the public beyond simply being active on screens, or "slacktivism," to be on streets and collectively reclaim social justice.

### **Conclusion**

The current research uses a single case study approach; therefore, its generalizations may be limited. The study results should be carefully interpreted within its particular context. The case study, nevertheless, sheds lights on strategic communication practices employed in a social movement. Considering the nature and the unprecedented success of this social movement, which was initiated by a group of individuals against an authoritarian government, the incorporation of social movement framing theory into activists' issues management is instrumental to understanding strategic communication used by the activists. Specifically, the study provides insights into how the activists strategically used influential framing techniques to legitimately create an issue and motivate the public to join a social movement. From a strategic communication perspective, our findings show that the first three stages of an issue life cycle are most critical in a social movement with extensive efforts on the part of the activists to communicate with the publics and the government. Within each of these stages, strategic

employment of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing techniques are pivotal in accentuating and legitimizing a social issue, keeping anti-government narratives at bay, and motivating mass support. The present research, therefore, has integrated insights from different research disciplines to examine diverse and real changes in society, particularly in under-represented contexts (Hallahan et al., 2007; Werder et al., 2018). The use of framing and issues management in explaining this social movement has a meaningful theoretical implication. This case study shows that the combination of these two theoretical frameworks is much needed to provide a nuanced understanding of how activists navigate in authoritarian settings. In other words, framing is an integral part of issue management to be successfully applied.

As this case study illustrates, although grassroots social movements in non-western authoritarian societies present considerable risks to activists, strategic approaches to frame an issue in different stages of an issue life cycle make social change possible. Using strategic framing techniques can help to de-politicize a grassroots social movement in an authoritarian setting. For example, diagnostic framing with problem identification in the potential stage of a movement may center on individuals' personal experience with an issue to focus the public's attention, without blaming any stakeholders. Meanwhile, the diagnostic framing with attribution of causes to an authoritarian government requires collective efforts to initiate necessary steps to convincingly bring forward a culpable adversary. Failure to do so often leads to a premature and direct confrontation with authorities, which likely results in a grassroots social movement being crushed before it gets to the critical stage. Findings from the case study also suggest that a protest in similar contexts might be embodied in flexible forms of collective action that meet activism's objectives, while reducing risks to those who get involved. This is particularly relevant because previous research has shown that activists' dramatic techniques to grab media and public's attention, such as mass demonstrations and clashes with police forces, may lead to a "lose-lose"

situation (Boyle et al., 2004). In authoritarian contexts, governments' responses to a protest may be drastic with "beatings, detainments, and the deployment of tear gas" (Brunner, 2017, p. 665). Moreover, activists in similar contexts can strategically harness the power of social media platforms that enable the formation of "grassroots intermediaries" - a collective online community with members contributing to the message constructions and flows - to empower their activism (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Our case study clearly demonstrates that the activists' Facebook page and their approaches to managing the page was a critical factor that contributed to shaping a social issue from an otherwise ordinary event. As such, activist groups in similar contexts may benefit from learning about this case study, especially in terms of strategically framing an issue to convert the publics and organize creative and non-violent forms of protest in their grassroots social movement campaigns.

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