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**Flexible Organizational Structures of the Digitally Mediated  
Collective Actor - A Case of the Shame Movement in Georgia**  
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# Abstract

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Recent scholarship has challenged the notion that digital tools alone can sustain a social movement, emphasizing instead the importance of collective identity and organizational structures. However, there is still limited understanding of how organizational structures emerge and transform in a social movement. This study argues that despite appearing chaotic or disorganized, collective actors possess *flexible organizational structures*, which develop in reaction to the external forces of dominant powers, and through the relation of humans, digital media, and physical spaces. Organizational structures take different forms at different stages of a protest's transformation, becoming increasingly rigid. Ultimately, the research offers valuable insights into the process of transformation of the Shame Movement in Georgia, from a reactionary protest to a social movement and a registered organization. Additionally, study provides curious insights for the further research in organizational scholarship, strategic communication, and collective action.

*Keywords:* Communication Constitutes Organization, Collective Action, Structures, Digital Media, Georgia, Shame Movement

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# Introduction

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## **Strategic Communication and the Organization of Collective Action**

By an established definition, when organizations apply communication to reach goals crucial for their existence and development, it is understood as strategic communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). While Habermas (1984, as cited in Falkheimer & Heide, 2018) makes a distinction between strategic and communicative action, referring to the former as solely goal-oriented, persuasive, and instrumental, and the latter oriented towards understanding and consensus, modern scholarship blurs the lines between these categories (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). While strategic communication is a purposeful communication, it must not be understood as a transmissive model of communication, but as a dialogue, where stakeholders not only speak, but listen to each other (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). The concept of strategic communication as a negotiation process provides valuable insights into the participatory role of stakeholders in the sense-making process. This idea of strategic communication as a facilitator of the conversations becomes even more valuable when it is applied as an analytical lens to examine internal organizational processes.

According to Zerfass et al. (2018), there is a wide array of organizations that employ communication for their strategic purposes, such as international corporations, non-governmental entities, political parties, social movements, and even public individuals. While in the early stages of organizational communication research, organizations were viewed solely as physical objects, or *containers*, where messages were transmitted across layers of bureaucracy, contemporary scholarship analyzes them as networks of processes, focusing on agency rather than structure (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). The idea that ‘organization’ is a verb rather than a noun was inspired by Karl Weick (1969, 1979, as cited in Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), who argued that communication is the means

by which human beings coordinate actions, establish relationships, and manage organizations. This marked a paradigm shift from a functionalist to a constructivist perspective in organizational communication scholarship, which developed theories based on the idea that organizations are constituted communicatively (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). In other words, the shift happened from how communication is a process of organizing to how the communicative processes create organization (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). These studies crystallized as a separate strand of research known as CCO, or *Communication Constitutes Organization*. CCO does not view communication as being equivalent to organization, rather it defines them as separate processes that co-produce each other (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). According to McPhee and Zaug's (2009) analytical framework, there are four distinct communicative 'flows' which constitute organization: *membership negotiation*, *organizational self-structuring*, *activity coordination*, and *institutional positioning*, all of which are unpacked in the following chapters.

The relationship between organization and communication becomes even more curious when one analyzes social movements and collective actors. Viewing organizational communication of a social movement as a network of processes that constitute its very existence and success makes it strategic by definition (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). The CCO lens has been applied to many studies that examine various modern collective political actors, in order to understand how they build their identity (Kavada, 2015), leadership (Poon & Kohlberger, 2022) and organization (Laaksonen & Porttikivi, 2021). Furthermore, the theory of connective action introduced by Bennet and Segerberg (2013) departs from a CCO perspective of organization. It considers communication as a central agent constituting contentious political actors of the digital age. Bennet and Segerberg (2013) introduce the concept of 'individuated publics' as a characteristic of the modern globalized society and a cornerstone of their theory. Such publics, they argue, experience common problems, and seek solutions, but instead of joining traditional movements or parties, they prefer to personalize issues to fit their online and offline identities. Digitally mediated networks of action are characterized by an "ethos of diversity and inclusivity" and engage people on a very personal level (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 4).

Over the past decade, many studies have been dedicated to how digital communication technologies have enabled new forms of contentious political action (see Toepfl, 2017 for the overview). The Arab Spring, Occupy, and other collective phenomena drove the research, as they arose from social media platforms and poured into physical spaces all over the world (Bennet & Segerberg 2013). A considerable amount of scholarship has focused on the nexus of media, communications, technology, organization, and collective action (see Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Earl, 2015; Fuchs, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Toepfl, 2017; Tufekci, 2017 for examples and overviews). At the crossroads of these fields of knowledge, a number of topics have been proposed, discussed, and contested. However, the role of communication in the organization, function, and impact of modern political actors became central to their analyses (see Kavada, 2015 for overview). Similarly, this research adopts a multidisciplinary approach to the study of strategic communication of contemporary social movements and applies the analytical lenses provided by the modern theories of organizational communication and collective action in the constructivist tradition (Bennet & Segerberg 2013; Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009; McPhee & Zaug, 2009; Melucci, 2003).

In this study, I do not seek to investigate the role of digital media in the communication of a contemporary social movement, but rather to provide insights into how communication processes and modern media infrastructure shape its very existence. The centrality of communication in the survival of social movements stems from their innate heterogeneity and complexity (Melucci, 2003). Social movements use communication not only to engage in meaningful discussions with populations, but to continually re-define and reorganize themselves (Melucci, 2003; Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). For contemporary social movements, often formed in a reaction to a crisis, the lack of bureaucratic structure and hierarchy is compensated for by intense communicative processes that help them figure out who they are and what they do (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Melucci, 2003). In a similar vein, this research primarily focuses on the formation of the movement out of reactionary collective action, as it begins to distinguish itself from the environment and builds organizational structures through communicative processes.



## **Research Problem**

The recent scholarship has contended that digital tools provide modern collective actors with the opportunity to diffuse their identity, and mobilize protests, but they alone cannot account for their sustainability (Gerbaudo, 2017; Toepfl, 2017). Consequently, the scholarship has increasingly integrated the organizational communication and the collective action theories, into the studies of the social movements in digital media, to understand how they function and sustain themselves. However, the research is new, and there is not yet enough knowledge about the organizational structures of digitally mediated collective actors in the *process of their transformation*, which they constantly undergo. This problem should not be understood as a philosophical exercise, but an attempt at a novel application of the CCO theories to an actively re-occurring empirical phenomenon.

## **The Aim of the Research and Research Question**

By combining Melucci's (2003) Theory of Collective Action, Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) Logic of Connective Action and McPhee and Zaug's (2009) Four Flows Framework, this paper proposes an analytical framework that will enable a thorough exploration of the modern social movement and how strategic communication facilitates formation of its organizational structures.

The aim of this research is to address the existing gap in the literature that concerns the complexities of the *emergence* and *transformation* of a collective actor and investigate the communicative processes that constitute its organizational structures. This paper will investigate the communicative processes of the Shame Movement from Georgia, which was created in 2019 in a reaction to a political crisis and managed to sustain itself to the present day by undergoing multiple transformations. The research will examine first six months of protests and distinguish communication processes and organizational structures they formed throughout the stages of transformation. Therefore, the research question is as follows:

***RQ:** How did communicative processes create organizational structures of the collective actor known as the Shame Movement?*

Apart from its academic inputs, this paper aspires to act as a practical tool for reflection for people involved in social movements. By bringing these issues to the forefront and providing analytical lenses and practical tools for activists, active citizens, and interested groups, this paper aims to bridge the gap between scientific research and practice (Van de Ven, 2007) and contribute to the democratic processes and *sustainability* of the grassroots movements.

## **Delimitations and the Scope of the Study**

This research is stretched over the events that took place during the six months of protest. However, this study does not set strict temporal limits to the action (contextual background is provided further, prior to analysis). With the limited resources this study covers in-depth interviews with five core activists (out of 15), two of whom are no longer closely involved with the movement. The study is limited to the personal interpretations of the core organizers of the protest and subsequent founders of the movement. It does not consider the experiences of other political actors, media, or less active participants of the protests. The study also analyzes the digital platforms they refer to most in their interviews, such as their personal Facebook accounts, their official Facebook page, and other less significant Facebook pages. The factual data was checked against media sources.

## **Disposition**

The study is structured as follows. In the following chapter I unpack the multidisciplinary literature dedicated to the contemporary contentious political actors, as well as the input of communication studies to the topic. Next, in the theoretical framework section, the Four Flows Framework (McPhee & Zaug, 2009) is presented as a grounding theory of organizational communication. The chapter includes the critique of the framework by Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) and sets a definition of a 'structure'. The Theory of Collective Action (Melucci, 2003) and the Logic of Connective Action (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013) are also presented as analytical frames. The paper then presents the methodology of the study, and the research paradigm. Finally, I present a descriptive analysis of the organizational communication flows and discussion about organizational structures. I conclude with the main outcomes and recommendations for further research.

# Literature Review

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## **The Study of Social Movements in Georgia**

After conducting a thorough investigation, I have discovered a lack of research in communication studies regarding political collective action in Georgia. A considerable amount of literature is dedicated to post-Soviet revolution studies, including the Rose Revolution in Georgia, Velvet Revolution in Armenia, and Orange and Maidan Revolutions in Ukraine (Baev, 2019; Beacháin & Polese, 2010; Mitchell, 2013; Kozlowsky, 2016; Kuzio, 2016; Radnitz, 2010; Terzyan, 2020; Wynnyckyj, 2019;). Furthermore, social movements in the region are discussed as predecessors of the aforementioned revolutions (Anglely, 2013; Duda, 2010; Frances, 2017). However, there is still very little research available about the Shame Movement in Georgia, the social actor under study. Analyzing the political-economic situation in Georgia from a left-wing academic perspective, Khelaia and Chivadze (2022) describe the Shame Movement's role in reproducing the neo-liberal hegemony. Despite considerable research on political collective action in the South-Caucasian and Post-Soviet regions, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the role of communication in the constitution of modern social movements. In the next sections, I will review the existing literature on digital media, communication, and organization in relation to modern social movements around the world.

## **Digital Media and Democracy**

The emergence of digital media, its rapid expansion, and ubiquity initiated a wave of research focused on its role in shaping democratic processes (see Gerbaudo, 2012, 2019; Graeber, 2013; Tufekci, 2017 for examples and overviews). Initial judgement of social media, as either inherently good or bad for democracy, was immediately contested by critical scholarship. It argued that technology does not act as an independent non-human agent, and therefore must not be entirely praised or vilified (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Cooren & Fairhust, 2009; Fuchs, 2013). One of the first academic debates emanated from the hopes and concerns of web 2.0

becoming a coveted Habermasian Public Sphere, a safe space for free expression of opinions (Fuchs, 2013). Fuchs (2013) argues that social media platforms, which belong to corporations and include surveillance mechanisms, cannot fully constitute a classic idea of the Public Sphere (see Mehrabov, 2016 for a discussion of state surveillance and digital media). Furthermore, unequal access to social media platforms, which can be explained by a lack of physical access to technology or technical skills to use them, creates informational inequalities and silences voices. The discourse constructed on digital platforms does not represent all social groups and excludes them from positions of power (Fuchs, 2013). Therefore, social media cannot constitute a classic idea of the Public Sphere, a place for ‘critical public debate,’ because it is not equally accessible for all members of society and does not always allow for free expression of speech (Fuchs, 2013).

According to Fuchs (2013), the asymmetrical power balance is caused not only by unequal access to social media platforms, but also by the popularity of certain users, who are able to amplify the topics and influence the discourse. Here, it would be appropriate to introduce the concept of the Digital Naturals (Young & Åkerström, 2017), which refers to those individuals who are engaged in social media life and constitute principal Internet discussions. By definition, these are the people who do not distinguish between their online and offline lives (Young & Åkerström, 2017). They have the skills and access to use social media technologies and are not necessarily defined by age. In conclusion, Digital Naturals are a group who have the most online presence. This group has the ability to dominate public debate, especially if they are also influencers, in which case digital algorithms skew attention in their direction (Locatelli, 2021). The inequality of representation, caused by a lack of technical access, skills, or state surveillance, creates power asymmetry among the strata of society and it is a reality one has to consider while discussing online engagement in contentious political action.

Despite digital space not being able to fulfill the role of the Public Sphere, it would be wrong to ignore the willingness of Digital Naturals to use it as such. Contemporary protests have enjoyed the promise and possibility of creating physical and online ‘agoras’ and engaging in public debates and discussions of political issues (Gerbaudo, 2017). In conclusion, Digital Media might not have

delivered an ideal rendition of the democratic Public Sphere, but it created a distinct type of digital citizen. It is someone who understands the world based on the mix of online and offline realities and is willing to engage in political conversations, even if the digital space is not properly equipped for it. Considering that human agents blur the lines between online and offline realities; this study extends over digital media to include analysis of offline communication and create a bigger picture of communication flows that comprises the organizational structures of a modern social movement.

## **Strong and Weak Social Ties in the Organization of Social Movements**

Apart from creating a new type of a citizen, digital media has promoted new kinds of relationships among the individuals and groups involved in contentious political action. The discussion about the relationships in the context of digital media and protest is largely based on the concept of strong and weak social ties. In his essay “Small Change”, Gladwell (2010) introduces the idea of strong and weak social ties into the discussion about digital activism. He argues that activism on social media is built around weak ties, which account for less trust and accountability, as opposed to strong ties, which are normally formed when participants personally know each other and go through risky experiences together. The courage to face police brutality, or possible arrests, constitutes strong relationships among the group of activists, which Gladwell (2010) connects to the ability of a protest to build solidarity and produce real change. Similarly, Morozov (2009) contends that file sharing, liking, and commenting have become only a convenient way to protest. The author refers to 'feel-good online activism,' as 'clicktivism', or even 'slacktivism', because it does not require much effort beyond joining a Facebook group.

The notion of strong and weak ties was first introduced by Granovetter (1973) as a contribution to the ongoing discussion about social networks and how they establish a link between the micro and macro levels of sociological theory. In his study, “The Strength of the Weak Ties”, Granovetter (1973) concludes that while strong ties create local cohesion *within a group* of similarly minded individuals, paradoxically

they lead to overall fragmentation. Conversely, weak ties foster connections *among groups* and are essential to integrating individuals into the diverse community. Thus, focusing analytically on the relationships between the groups, the study of weak ties contributes to understanding macro effects of micro interactions. However, Granovetter (1973) concludes that the strength of the ties should not be the only point of their analysis. They should also be examined by their content and in the context of the specific organizations.

In his work “The Rational Weakness of Strong Ties”, Flache (2002) contends that strong ties have been almost automatically connected to the idea of solidarity in group mobilizations and political protests, but he argues that connection between solidarity and strong ties is more complex and non-linear. Flache (2002) argues that sometimes, cohesive networks may undermine group solidarity rather than sustain it, because even rational individuals may be reluctant to impose social control out of fear of losing the affection or approval of their group members. Thus, research shows that common good is sometimes sacrificed for strong ties between only two individuals (dyadic ties) or because of peer pressure (Flache, 2002). In conclusion, most online interactions can be attributed to creating a web of weak ties, which connect diverse groups. On the other hand, most offline communications build strong ties, which create strong connections within a small group. It is important to understand the structures that relationship ties create in contemporary social movements, especially in regard to membership, leadership, and solidarity.

## **Membership and Leadership Structures in Social Movements**

Communication has always been critical to the organization of social movements (Melucci, 2003). However, the emergence of digital media and its centrality to contemporary contentious actors directed scholarship towards analyzing political actors from the CCO perspective. One of the most discussed topics in the organization of the digitally mediated social movements has been the leadership and membership logics. The phenomenon of the Arab Spring, which marked the beginning of social-media-mediated uprisings, has been interpreted in many ways, and was hastily labeled as *leaderless* by the media. Scientific scholarship has since

tried to dispel the myth of the ‘leaderlessness’ of modern social movements despite them beginning to identify themselves as such (Poon & Kohlberger, 2022). Gerbaudo (2017, 2019) explains that this massive renunciation of the official leaders is caused by ordinary citizens being disappointed in traditional parties, wanting to “democratize democracy”, and re-claiming their personal dignity by taking matters in their own hands (2017, p. 9). The power imbalance between the ordinary citizens and the privileged political or economic elites gave birth to the new type of disenfranchised citizen, one who is ready to fight side by side with others, with whom one has nothing in common but the desire to be treated fairly (Gerbaudo, 2017). Some activists rejected the idea of leaders so passionately that at one of the Occupy rallies they refused to let the late US veteran civil-rights leader and Congressman, John Lewis, address the crowd just because he was a political figure (Tufekci, 2014). Much like Occupy, the Yellow Vests Movement in France refused a top-down leadership structure, embracing their multiplicity, and leaving intellectuals wondering about their common ideology (Graeber, 2018). It seems that political leaders have lost so much appeal that citizens avoid creating new political leaders altogether. In addition, the diversity of protesters would make it difficult to agree on a single leader. However, despite the change of forms, recent scholarship contends that contemporary social movements and protests are not without leadership (Kavada, 2015; Poon & Kohlberger, 2022).

In her study, Kavada (2015) examines how communication on social media formed the Occupy movement as a collective actor. By combining Melucci's (1996) framework of collective identity with the CCO perspective, the author (2015) examines how reactionary protests became organized collective identities. Kavada (2015) contends that social media significantly blurred the boundaries between the movement and its environment, thus promoting the movement's values of extreme inclusivity and direct participation. However, the blurred lines do not imply that everyone was considered an equal member. Social media followers made up the outer circle (weak ties), while activists who participated physically on a regular basis comprised the inner circle (strong ties). For most activists, “it was regular involvement face-to-face that actually rendered someone an ‘Occupier’.” (Kavada, 2015, p. 879). The outer circle of social media followers could follow the meetings of the general assembly, where foundational documents were approved and

decisions were made, but they could not vote or be included in the process. Contrary to Morozov's (2009) disfavor of the 'online activists' who are not involved in the decision-making mechanisms, Kavada (2015) concludes that they nevertheless have a very important role in reproducing a movement's collective identity by diffusing the information across digital media.

The late David Graeber (2013), who at the time was one of the founders and core activists of the Occupy Wall Street movement, describes the 'inner circle' as a 'working group' who met in person and made all strategic decisions. The process was facilitated by a member of the group who would ask questions and address concerns, and final decisions were reached by the consensus of the group. It is important to note that Graeber (2013) does not refer to the 'working group' as leadership but recognizes that those with the greatest workload and access to information had more influence on the processes. Nevertheless, Graeber (2013) opposes the idea of formalization of leadership and sees the solution to preserving the horizontal hierarchy in ensuring transparency of the processes, making information widely available, and rotating the members of the working group. This mindset was manifested in the fact that all foundational texts constituting the movement's identity and collective will, were uploaded online, and could be altered at any time. Furthermore, everyone who spoke to media on the Occupy movement's behalf identified themselves simply as activists, often concealing their first or real names, thus rejecting the idea of a leader (Kavada, 2015). However, Kavada (2015) contends that regardless of their efforts and intentions, due to the design of the digital platforms, the admins of the social media accounts who belonged to the inner circle had a significant role in shaping the identity of the movement. Despite guidelines that urged activists to make distinctions between the 'I' and the 'We' statements, conflicts over the content were unavoidable. While Kavada (2015) concludes that the digital media is a technological tool that makes it impossible for the movement to be leaderless, Poon and Kohlberger (2022) introduce the concept of digital technology as a *leadership actor*.

Poon and Kohlberger (2022) apply the CCO perspective to analyze Twitter's influence on the 2019 Hong Kong Protests. Authors argue that leadership is not necessarily a human factor but should instead be regarded as a 'relational process'



that significantly influences people's lives and identities (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, as cited in Poon & Kohlberger, 2022). In their argument they apply Fairhurst and Cooren's (2009) notion of 'leadership actors', which includes all stakeholders who have power to influence the definition of reality. By analyzing three most-retweeted tweets of the protest, authors (2022) identify how Twitter's algorithms contribute to the structure of the discourse and demonstrate that Twitter communicatively constitutes leadership as a *nonhuman* leadership actor. While modern social movements claim to be leaderless, "Twitter's co-participation ensures they are not leadership-less" (Poon & Kohlberger, 2022, p. 356). In conclusion, Poon and Kohlberger (2022) see leadership in digitally mediated uprisings as a more fluid concept. While it is not always salient, and fixed, leadership on social media exists as a hybrid form of technology and human effort. The study also confirms Fuchs's (2013) critique of social media platforms mentioned earlier and concludes that Twitter's mechanisms have the power to dictate specific modes of communication, generating authority, increasing polarity, and maintaining inequalities. Poon and Kohlberger (2022) assert that the issue requires both scholarly and legislative attention.

## **Connective Action and Personalization of Politics**

Bennet and Segerberg's theory of Connective Action (2013) marks the shift in analysis of contemporary contentious political actors. The study is entirely dedicated to the organization of collective action in digital media and views communication as central to its constitution (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The point of analysis in the Connective Action framework is not digital media itself, but what people do with it, and what structures it allows them to create (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The discussion departs from the reevaluation of the modern public. According to the authors, globalization-related changes have disconnected individuals, mostly younger ones, from integrated structures such as class identification, political parties, churches, and families. These more 'individuated publics' are unwilling or unable to join formal political organizations and prefer to adopt definitions of problems closer to their personal values and beliefs (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). They continue to experience common grievances and concerns. However, divorce from official social structures has led them to adopt more

*personalized political frames* that fit well within their lifestyles and social networks. These authors contend that such trends motivate aggregate behavior, which promotes various social issues and values (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The question remains, however, if this aggregated behavior can lead to real change and if being separated from political organizations makes it more difficult to communicate strategically, that is, to negotiate common goals and ways to reach them.

The virally spread and massively adopted political protest frames might aggregate individuals under the same signifier but not necessarily under the same meaning (Beraldo, 2020). The author followed the hashtags #Occupy and #Anonymous across the internet to examine their appropriation. There were interesting findings from the empirical data: hashtags were applied in diverse contexts that sometimes showed contradictory viewpoints. For example, in 2013, groups affiliated with Anonymous began executing what they called OpIsrael (Operation Israel) and attacking Israeli websites. In 2015, outraged by the infamous attack on Charlie Hebdo, individuals and groups formed under the name Anonymous to launch OpISIS (Operation ISIS) to report ISIS-related accounts (Beraldo, 2020). On the same day, the same Twitter account celebrated the successful OpIsrael attack, which targeted an Israeli website and replaced its homepage with the notorious Guy Fawkes mask with the slogan: “Khilafah [the Caliphate] will transform the world” (Beraldo, 2020, p. 1099). Both cases used Anonymous signifiers: the name, the logo, and the hashtag, to perform actions with contradictory motives and goals. Similarly, the name and Occupy hashtag were used to denote many different protests around the world, ranging from resistance to the political and economic system in the USA to protests against fuel costs and government corruption in Nigeria (Beraldo, 2020). What Beraldo (2020) aims to distinguish, is that adaptable frames of the meta movements do not signify the universal idea that unites contentious groups together but rather provide a flexible symbol that can be interpreted by any group in any way. In highlighting the extreme heterogeneity of the two meta-movements, the author brings back *collectiveness* as the point of analysis of the social movements. Beraldo (2020) finds that the centrality of collectiveness, especially to movements’ identities, is neglected in the

connective action theory, as it primarily focuses on the connective ability of easily personalized signifiers but not on their ability to sustain organizational structures.

## **From Connective Back to Collective**

Although neither Bennet and Segerberg (2013) nor Kavada (2015) deny that digitally mediated movements have a sense of ‘we’, Beraldo (2020) challenges the resiliency and meaning of the ‘we’ by demonstrating how absurdly contradictory the interpretations of the same signifiers can be. Observing the Occupy movement from the ground, Gerbaudo (2017), on the other hand, argues that despite the vicious heterogeneity of the movement, there is a concept of shared identity that unites people in solidarity. He calls this concept *citizenism* (Gerbaudo, 2017). Gerbaudo (2017) argues that being a citizen and reclaiming one’s civil rights has become a stronger common denominator for all modern movements of the twenty-first century than the notions of class, gender-based, and cultural identities. There is a ‘we’ that makes people come together in one collective action, and that is realizing one’s power as a citizen. “Citizenship is reclaimed *as a source of dignity*,” in a world in which people feel disgraced and disregarded by the global financiers and political elite (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 8). The ‘movements of the squares’ exhibit the characteristic of social movements, to be discussed in the upcoming chapter, because they express conflict with the ruling leadership. What they demand is counter-hegemonic politics, but instead of marching against the state power as many anarchist movements have done, “they build an ‘under-power’, a power from below, which starting from the squares could progressively reclaim all levels of society, including state institutions” (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 10).

A compelling example of such an ‘under-power’ construction is presented by Florian Toepfl (2017) in his research on the Russian social movement in 2011. Antecedent to Beraldo’s (2020), his study similarly shifts the spotlight back to the ‘collectiveness’ of the movement, arguing that in order to sustain themselves, digitally mediated protests are eventually bound to draw boundaries and transform into more traditional political actors. Toepfl (2017) introduces the extant scholarship of contemporary social movements, arguing that they primarily focus is on collective identity (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Jensen & Bang, 2013),

organization (Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014), and mobilization (Anduiza et al., 2014). Toepfl (2017), on the other hand, presents an in-depth case study unfolding the process of how and why a digitally mediated movement transitioned from one type of organization into another. The study adopts the analytical framework of Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) connective action to identify the typology of organizations and investigate the transition.

Toepfl (2017) examines the protests 'For Fair Elections', which broke out in Russia after an allegedly fraudulent parliamentary election took place in December 2011. Digitally mediated rallies remained stable for approximately eight months, until the summer of 2012. Seeing the decline in commitment, Russian opposition activists decided to create a more formal organizational structure and revive the protest (Toepfl, 2017). To support this transformation, the activists constructed what Gerbaudo (2017) calls an 'under-power', an alternative democratic power structure – the digitally enabled 'Internet elections' and the official governing body of the protest – the 'Coordination Council of the Opposition'. All activists, regardless of ideological background, were encouraged to vote online in October 2012 to elect the 45 members of the Coordination Council of the Opposition who would officially lead the movement (Toepfl, 2017). The activists ensured democratic elections' security by creating a system that let voters verify their identity by making a micro-transaction from their account or emailing a photo of them holding their passports. Every night, the opposition channel "Dozhd" broadcast the news about upcoming elections, including debates between the candidates. As a result, 81 000 Russian citizens registered and voted.

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) not only mobilized the protest and sustained it for eight months but facilitated its transformation to a more traditional organizational structure by enabling 'digital elections' and providing media support. Furthermore, similar to other 'protests of the squares', the protest adopted extremely inclusive language manifested in 'personalized action frames' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 35): "'For Fair Elections' and 'We Were in Bolotnaya Square and We Will Be Back'" (Toepfl, 2017, p. 7). However, once the movement solidified in the aftermath of the digital elections, it shifted from broader

frames to narrower claims, such as: ‘free political prisoners’ or the agreement on the ‘Goals of the Protest Movement’ (Toepfl, 2017). Toepfl (2017) refers to Earl (2015) and argues that Russian protest turned into a Social Movement Organization (SMOs) because it needed to secure long-term success and stable networks. Recent scholarship further explains that digitally mediated protests draw boundaries with the environment and create alternative power structures as a way of reclaiming democratic institutions (Gerbaudo, 2017).

## **Synthesis**

Communication theories have become essential to the study of contemporary social movements. As shown in this chapter, the studies of contentious political actors analyze not only informational technologies but the behavior and psychology of the human actors who employ them. On different occasions, the scholarships on communication and collective action have conceptualized contemporary human actors as tech-savvy individuals who blur the line between online and offline realities (Young & Åkerström, 2017), are disenchanted with politics, refuse to join formal groups and are ready to unite in action to restore their dignity and reclaim their democratic institutions (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Gerbaudo 2017, 2019). Similarly, more recent scholarship contends that digital media acts as a non-human agent in the constitution of the protest, thus blurring the line between human and non-human agency (see also Clifton et al., 2021; Poon & Kohlberger, 2020;). Individuals, groups, and digital media algorithms blend as a hybrid of humans and technology, and act as agents of communicative processes producing, reproducing, and influencing power structures in both online and offline realities.

Despite the shift of focus to the communicative constitution of the social movement, the *collectiveness* factor as argued by Earl (2015), Toepfl (2017), and Beraldo (2020) remains a crucial analytical point in the research of the collective actor. While *connectivity* is tied to reactionary collective action, rapid diffusion of information through social media and weak ties among various groups or individuals, the ‘collectiveness’ is associated with organizational boundaries, ideology, and strong ties, and decision-making mechanisms (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013; Kavada, 2015). While ‘connectivity’ is inevitably tied to social media,

'collectiveness' primarily concerns interpersonal communication. Communication, therefore, plays a central role in the constitution of the movement, and its transformation into a more sustainable form of organization. This study builds on extant multidisciplinary literature reviewed in this chapter and presents a framework that analyzes a social movement and its organizational structures by applying both communication and collective action theories.

# Theoretical Framework

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This chapter presents the theoretical framework of the research. The first section is dedicated to the perspective of Communication Constitutes Organization (CCO) grounded in McPhee and Zaug's (2009) Four Flows Framework. The second section encapsulates the critique by Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) concerning the role on the non-human agency in constitution of the organizational structures. In the following section, the definition of structure is revised based on the critique. Finally, the remaining two sections present the Theory of Collective Action proposed by Melucci (2003), which encompasses the analytical points of the social movement and Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) Logic of Connective Action which provides the analytical typology of collective actors in digital media.

## **The Four Flows Framework**

Communication Constitutes Organization, or CCO is a strand of organizational communication that sees communicative processes as means "by which human beings coordinate actions, create relationships, and maintain organizations." (Putnam et al., 2009, p. 1). This theory accepts that organizational communication is more than just processes of informational exchange, and an organization - more than just a "container" (Putnam et al., 2009, p. 2). As put forth by Karl Weick, organization should be treated as a verb (1969, 1979 as cited in Putnam et al., 2009). Putnam et al. (2009), however, argue that the theory of organizational communication is entangled in complexities and requires grounding in analysis, which should neither oversimplify the processes to the level of trivial details nor overcomplicate them to the level of abstraction. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that not all communication is organizational. Consequently, I ground my analysis in McPhee and Zaug's (2009) Four Flows Framework, which offers a blueprint for understanding the principal communicative processes that create and recreate an organization. The 'four flows' defined in this framework are analytically distinct, each reacting to a different set of questions: "the idea of the process, the question of equivalence, the idea of structure, and the idea of power" (McPhee &

Zaug, 2009, p. 26). However, the authors note that the same empirical data can be used to analyze all flows. By utilizing the Four Flows Framework, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the communicative processes involved in the emergence and transformation of the collective actor. Through this approach, the study acknowledges the complex interplay between communication and organization and recognizes the importance of distinguishing between the two.

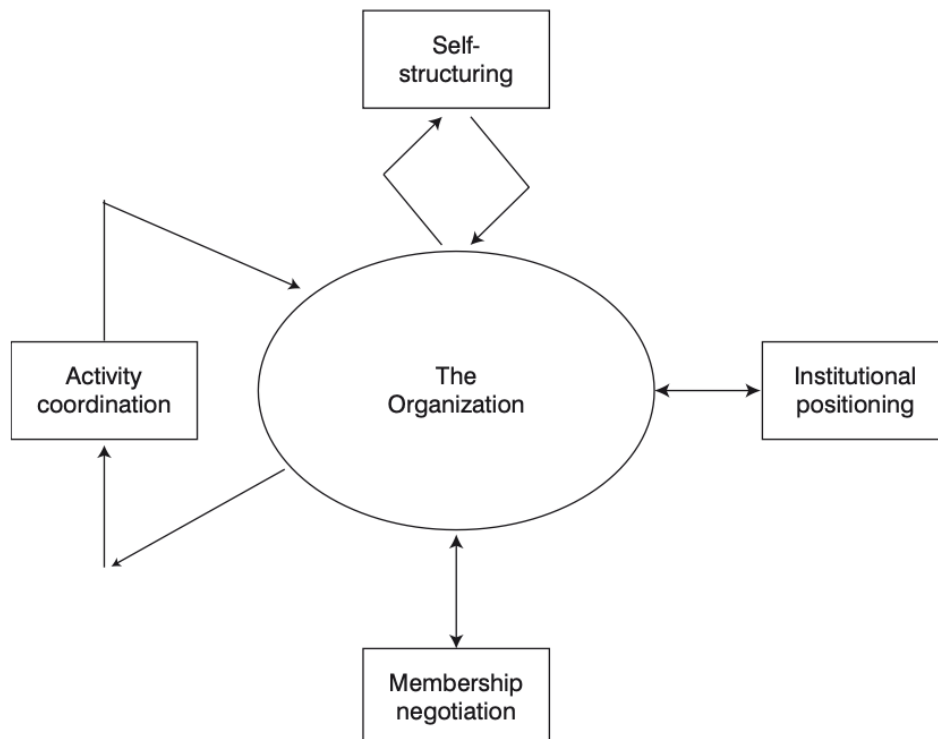
The initial flow identified in McPhee and Zaug's (2009) framework is referred to as *membership negotiation*, which deals with the constitution of members, their relationships with one another, and the boundaries of the organization itself. By placing humans as the singular agents responsible for communication (a notion derived from Giddens, 1984, as cited in McPhee and Zaug, 2009), this flow contains all human interactions, responsible for building the relationships among members and defining organizational boundaries. This flow addresses the previously mentioned question of *equivalence* which emphasizes the distinction between organization and communication. In other words, according to the authors (2001), the membership negotiation highlights that communication and organization are not equivalent processes, because communication is solely a human agency. Next, there is a process of *self-structuring*, which denotes all interactions that produce and sustain structures of power and system within an organization. This flow is analytically distinct from the first flow, in that it is not concerned with the formation of organizational boundaries and questions of its identity but focuses on relations that produce rules and norms within those boundaries which in turn shape and influence work processes (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). This flow more than others addresses the question of power structures in an organization. The third flow, *activity coordination*, denotes the communicative processes that are needed when it is imperative to make quick adjustments and solve immediate tactical problems. These are the communication processes that constitute coordination, mutual adjustment, and fast decision-making, which are characteristic of crisis situations and are especially analytically essential when it comes to protests and social movements. Finally, the fourth flow - *institutional positioning* encompasses the communicative processes that position an organization within the larger environment and contribute to its identity formation. All these flows influence each other and the organization. Despite each of them intended to be analytically separate



from one another, however they are not isolated in practice in that “a single message can and often does make more than one type of contribution.” (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). For the visual explanation of the model, please see Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Explication of the Model: Four Flows (McPhee & Zaug, 2009, p. 33)*



### **Critique of the Model: Recognizing Non-Human Agency**

McPhee and Zaug (2009) understood that their Four Flow model might be perceived as having functionalistic undertones. Despite rejecting such presuppositions, they contended that any analysis identifying the *communicative patterns that contribute to an organization's existence and survival* would be at risk of being construed as functionalistic (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). At a fundamental level, the concern that McPhee and Zaug (2009) had for their model, and which was later scrutinized by other scholars, relates to the traditional tensions of the social sciences, related to the micro and macro levels of analysis. The analysis of communication and interactions, primarily constructivist by nature, is largely focused on the micro level, whereas the organizational structures and the

distribution of power fall under the macro level and a functional-structuralist analytical category (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009).

According to Cooren and Fairhurst (2009), there are two primary ways in which ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts attempt to bridge the micro-macro gap in organizational communication. First, there is the *aggregation thesis* put forward by Cicourel and Knorr-Cetina (1981, as cited in Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009), which posits that communicative patterns which persist overtime create a certain structure of the system. However, Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) argue that the “regularity” of communicative patterns alone is not sufficient to bridge the gap between the micro and macro level of organization (p. 120). Similarly, they scrutinize the *lamination thesis* provided by Boden (1994, as cited in Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009), which postulates that specific decisions, or topics which can later be referred to in communication, create a certain structure within an organization as they have an ability to transcend space and time. The authors appeal to the notion of ‘transcending space and time’ but reject the lamination thesis as being insufficient to account for the organizational structure, as it does not cover questions of identity and agency of an organization.

Instead, Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) propose to bridge the gap between the micro level of interaction and the macro level of structure, by introducing the third social ontology, the *association thesis*, grounding it in the theories of Bruno Latour (1986, 1994, 1996, 1999, as cited in Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) which depict non-human entities as agencies. In contrast to McPhee and Zaug's (2009) Giddensian approach to agency, as solely attributed to humans, Cooren and Fairhurst draw upon Latour's (1994, as cited in Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) idea of attributing agency to technology, thus viewing agency as a relation between human and non-human actors. This way, the authors (2009) recognize that documents, rules, protocols, technological and other non-human devices, not only capture interactions at a given moment, but transcend communication through space and time, solidifying and materializing it. This “dis-location” as they call it (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009; p. 123), also produces a *stabilizing effect*, which makes it possible to create redundant operations, assign stable roles and duties.

This way Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) attempt to stay true to the bottom-up logic of the constructivist scholarship that studies local interactions in order to construct a big picture, instead of starting with observing the overarching structure and seeking for a transcendental phenomenon to explain it (Tarde, 1999, as cited in Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). By granting non-human entities the power of agency, the authors acknowledge their active participation in structuration and stabilization of the social order. In other words, technology as much as any other non-human entity does not only exist, but acts, and “makes a difference” in a situation (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009, p. 131). Furthermore, the authors note that non-human agents should only be accounted for if they have a capability to make a difference and influence human agency.

The expansion of agency to non-human actors has become particularly attractive in the analysis of new information technologies and digital media. Here, the phenomenon termed “hybrid action” as conceptualized by Latour (1993, as cited in Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009) regains recognition (see also Clifton et al., 2021; Poon & Kohlberger, 2020). The hybrid relationship of a human and non-human agent allows them to exchange properties and *act together* (Cooren, 2004, as cited in Poon & Kohlberger, 2020). While human beings still have agency in these relationships, this understanding of communication shifts the emphasis to the materialization of communication (Cooren, 2020, as cited in Poon & Kohlberger, 2020).

## **The Definition of Structure**

At this stage, I found it important to clarify and make sense of a “conceptual hodgepodge” that is structure (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009, p. 136). The aim here is not to engage in a scientific debate, but to agree on some ground definitions for the analytical purposes. Grounded in the Giddensian (1984) understanding of an agency-structure relationship, McPhee and Zaugg’s (2009) framework differentiates between human agency and non-human structures. Therefore, structure is a tangible force that exerts a persistent influence on human behavior. While Cooren and Fairhurst (2009) accept the *feature* of the structure, they do not see structure as having an autonomous *analytical power in organizational communication*. Much like ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts who ignore the existence of structure unless it is specifically oriented to in a conversation, they too almost

completely disregard it (p. 127). Cooren and Fairhurst's idea of structure in an analysis of organizational communication is an expansion of human agency to non-human actors. This study accepts Cooren and Fairhurst's (2009) definition of structure for analytical purposes, and does not treat structure as a pre-existing entity, but a result of relation of a human and non-human agency.

## **The Theory of Collective Action**

Melucci (2003) departs from a constructivist epistemology, viewing social processes as "products of actions, choices and decisions" (p. 15). In his theory of Collective Action, Melucci (2003) proposes a framework which examines how actors construct their action and become "we". The author (2003) introduces a definition according to which a collective action is:

a set of social practices (i) involving simultaneously a number of individuals or groups, (ii) exhibiting similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space, (iii) implying a social field of relationships and (iv) the capacity of the people involved of making sense of what they are doing (p. 23).

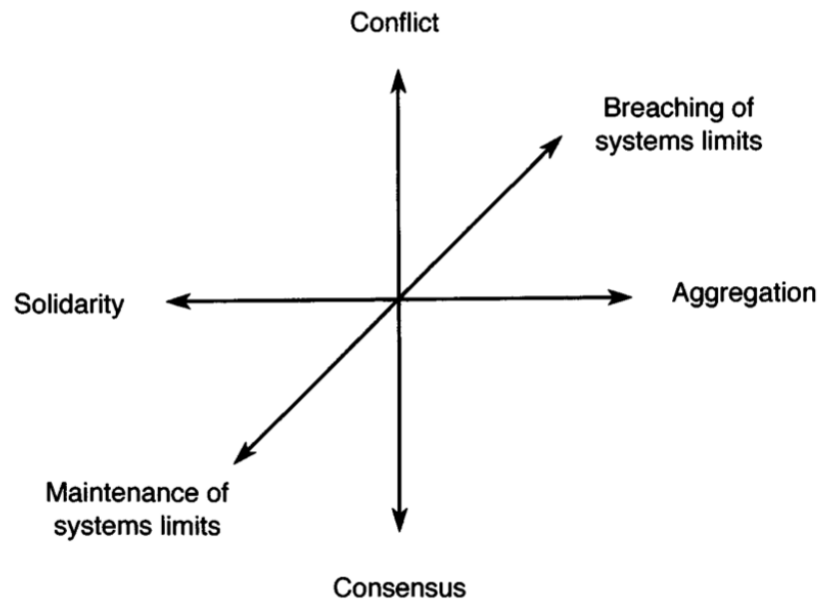
This definition sets collective action apart from general collective behavior, which can denote a multitude of phenomena ranging from impulsive panics to carefully prepared revolutions (Melucci, 2003). According to the author (2003), people involved in collective action can either represent a group of aggregated individuals or be united in solidarity. They must exhibit similar behavioral traits and be in spatial and temporal proximity to each other. There must be some form of social interaction, whether it is exchange, competition, conflict, cooperation, or accommodation, and they must be aware of what they do and how they do it.

Despite this comprehensive definition, collective action can still denote a number of empirical phenomena, from rituals to competitions to social movements. So, it needs to be defined what sets social movements apart from other forms of collective action. As Melucci (2003) proposes a basic set of features that can be plotted as

axes, there is an opportunity to visualize the analytical concept of a collective action as shown in the figure below.

**Figure 2**

*The Theory of Collective Action (Melucci, 2003, p. 26)*



The first orientation that needs to be examined is one of conflict versus consensus. Social movements are characterized by conflicts, which are described by Melucci (2003) as disagreements over the allocation of limited resources. Often dominant powers refuse to acknowledge the existence of the conflict, referring to social movements as simple reactions to crises (Melucci, 2003). If the leadership in power would admit that there is indeed a deeper disagreement, it would have to acknowledge collective demands and that would challenge its authority (Melucci, 2003).

Another feature, and probably the most elusive one, that characterizes social movements is solidarity (Melucci, 2003). That is people's ability to recognize each other, as "belonging to the same social unit" (Melucci, 2003, p. 23). The sense of belonging is central to the sense of solidarity, but as it was previously mentioned there is no scientific consensus whether it is strong or weak social ties that contribute to its formation. Solidarity is not always evident, as it can be easily mistaken for the aggregation of individuals in the same socio-temporal dimension. In that case one deals with individual resistance - an aggregation of atomized actors

united by the conflict over the limited resources. According to Melucci (2003), communication is central to the construction of a common “we”. Actors need to be able to communicate what they want to achieve and how they want to achieve it in the existing environment. Collective actors need to be able to negotiate conflicting needs and constant tensions which arise over the most strategic issues such as definition of goals, the choice of resources and for building solidarity. They constantly negotiate and renegotiate these aspects through repeated communication.

Last but not least, the orientation between the breaching and maintaining the system’s limits further defines collective actions. According to the author (2003) social movements are collective actions which not only express a conflict but challenge the status quo. They exist to question the legitimacy of power and put forward their non-negotiable objectives. In conclusion, social movements are collective actions which are defined by some kind of solidarity, are engaged in a conflict over resources and whose action entails “a breach of limits of compatibility of the system within which the action takes place” (Melucci, 2003, p. 29).

### **The Logic of Connective Action**

Bennet and Segerberg’s (2013) Logic of Connective Action presents three types of contemporary collective actors, categorizing them according to how they make use of digital platforms in their communication. First, there is a more traditional, *the organizationally brokered collective action*, which uses digital media primarily to reduce communication costs and improve coordination; Then, *the organizationally enabled connective action*, or a loose network of organizations around general issues, in which “followers are encouraged to personalize their engagement”; and finally, *the crowd-enabled connective action*, a network of individuals in which “digital media platforms are the most visible and integrative organizational mechanisms” (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 13). The three types of organizations are distinguished by how they use digital media for their strategic communication purposes. As opposed to organizationally brokered collective action, which utilizes more traditional methods of strategic communication to connect with its external stakeholders, a crowd-enabled network relies on online platforms to engage its members on a very personal level, thus extending its borders and reflecting the co-constitutional model of strategic communication. However, these categories are

analytical concepts and in reality, these organizational types are changing and transforming all the time (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). See the figure below, for illustration:

**Figure 3**

*Defining elements of connective and collective action networks (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013, p. 47)*



# Methodology

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## **Ontology, Epistemology and Research Design**

This is a qualitative study conducted in the interpretive tradition, which regards human interpretation as the source of knowledge about the world of relationships and communication (Prasad, 2018). Ontologically, the study accepts reality as a socially constructed phenomenon, through the means of communicative processes and subjective interpretations. To study that reality and understand meaningful communication processes that constituted the collective actor, the research applies social constructionism as an epistemological lens (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study is conducted using abductive reasoning, with an idea in mind, but no determined hypotheses at hand (Flick, 2018). Moving back and forth from data and theories, I believe this method allows for the most rigorous explanation of the phenomenon under study (Flick, 2018). The research is designed to include in-depth interviews, to account for the past events that are impossible to simulate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and analysis of the digital platforms that are mentioned in a conversation.

## **Data Collection and Sampling**

Five out of fifteen founding members of the Shame Movement were interviewed. Three of them were active members, and two were no longer involved. The sampling of both in-group and out-group members allowed to paint a more comprehensive picture of the movement. The first interviewee was selected because of existing personal connection. Furthermore, to find additional interviewees, the study employed snowball sampling by asking existing participants to refer other members of their group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were semi-structured and departed from the question: Tell me, who are you and how did it all start for you with the Shame Movement? The interviews followed a loosely structured format, mainly led by the topics that interviewees expressed interest in expanding. This method allowed for flexibility and in-depth exploration of the topic



(Flick, 2018). In more scientific terms, the nature of interviews was balanced between phenomenological and hermeneutic approach, as participants had freedom to focus on the experiences, they found most meaningful, but at some moments were challenged to provide rationales for their opinions and actions (Flick, 2018). The interviews were held digitally, via the Zoom platform, and both video and audio were recorded. Four participants spoke in Georgian and one in English. The English conversation was transcribed using a digital platform, Trint. The Georgian interviews were transcribed manually. Nvivo software was used to code the texts. Considering the scope of this study, I found it sufficient to interview only five participants, as they produced a total of 12 hours and 15 minutes of conversation. Additionally, the sample comprised a third of the members who were involved in organizing the initial protest and subsequently became the founding members. Three of them are males, and two - females. The sample was chosen solely from the founding members, as they were most engaged with the processes and the collective actor under study was centered around them. For a detailed account on the participant sample, please see figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*The sample of participants*

#	Participants	Language	Duration
P. 1	Current Member	Georgian	02:50 h
P. 2	Current Member	English	02:00 h
P. 3	Current Member	Georgian	01:55 h
P. 4	Former Member	Georgian	03:21 h
P. 5	Inactive Member	Georgian	02:09 h

## **Analysis of the Digital Platforms**

In their interviews participants referred to both digital and physical spaces as integral parts of their organization and communication activities. The analysis of the physical spaces, such as the area where their rallies took place, is based solely

on the interpretation of the participants. However, I examined their digital spaces, in addition to their analyses. My aim was to study the nature of the communication processes that these platforms supported. There were two major digital platforms that have been repeatedly mentioned, the private Facebook group and the official Facebook page of the movement. For ethical reasons, I could not conduct research on the private Facebook group, but I asked participants additional questions about the most popular posts, the nature of discussions, and the meaning of the group. I examined the first six months of communication on the official Facebook page and other time periods, to which interviewees referred. Participants also referred to other Facebook pages and their personal Facebook accounts, which this study also took into consideration. I cross checked the information regarding facts and figures using online news media sources.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

There is no doubt that my relationship with certain participants influenced their selection, as I found a way to connect with two people, I personally knew from the Shame Movement. I understand that personal connection might have affected the level of honesty of the conversations. Furthermore, I realize that my personal sympathy and support for the social movement could have influenced my analysis and interpretations. In order to mitigate potential biases, I consistently reflected on my assumptions throughout the research process to ensure the validity and reliability of my findings. I also acknowledge that my interpretations concern this particular case and cannot be generalized. Therefore, I invite readers to critically engage with my research and contribute to ongoing discussions about the communicative constitution of a social movement.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations I would like to address in this study. First and foremost, it is the anonymity and security of my respondents. Keeping in mind the nature of work they are or have been pursuing I was vigilant as to choose the information that would not compromise their identity or any of their endeavors in the future, even though they might have said it on record. I provided participants with consent forms, which guaranteed them anonymity and data security (see

Appendix #1). However, personal trust was the deciding factor of their approval. Additionally, I have abstained from analyzing the most central digital platform of their communication, the private group on Facebook. Despite being a member, I could not use the material provided in the group for content analysis, without receiving consent from all, over 11 000 members of the group. The group has been referred to many times, and I attempted to gain deeper understanding about it and its content from the conversations, since that remained to be my only source.

# Background

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This chapter examines the environment in which the Shame Movement (the social actor under study) came into being and provides context to the phenomenon. It is divided into three parts. The first sub-chapter explains the social and political tensions in Georgia regarding its relationship with Russia, embodied in ‘Anti-Occupational Discourse’. The second sub-chapter is dedicated to the incident, Gavrilov’s Night on June 20, 2019, that initiated the wave of protests under study. The third sub-chapter provides an overview of the key moments in the development of the movement. The fourth, and final sub-chapter explains the demand of civil society for election reform.

## **Anti-Occupational Discourse**

Anti-occupational discourse in the context of Georgia refers to the public and political opposition to the ongoing occupation of two of its territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, by Russia. The discourse includes various forms of activism, such as protests, rallies, and social media campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the issue and advocating for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity.

According to Kofman, (2018) the modern conflict between Georgia and Russia began in the early 1990s, when the tensions grew between newly emerged Georgian republic and the two regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. South Ossetia and Abkhazia engaged in armed struggles for secession from Georgia, which were backed by Russia politically and militarily. After the conflicts ended, Russia cemented its role as the security guarantor for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with Russian peacekeepers stationed there.

In August 2008, tensions between Georgia and Russia escalated in what was Europe's first war of the 21st-century (Dickinson, 2021). The conflict only lasted a few days, but its impact continues to be felt, shaping the geopolitical environment. The Russo-Georgian War is now recognized as a landmark event in the

deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. As a result of the war, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and stationed military bases in the regions. Since then, the Georgian government has been advocating for the restoration of its territorial integrity and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the situation remains unresolved, and the two regions continue to be occupied by Russian military forces.

### **Gavrilov's Night, June 20, 2019**

In June 2019, Russian member of parliament (MP) and representative of the Communist Party, Sergey Gavrilov, took the speaker's chair in Georgian parliament as he addressed the members in Russian during the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) (OC Media, 2019). For Georgian citizens, the image of Gavrilov in the speaker's chair in the Georgian parliament acted as a symbol of Russian occupation and a trigger that set massive protests of thousands in action (BBC, 2019). By 10-11 a.m. the news about the incident started circulating, and by noon, there were around 200 people in front of the Parliament building, chanting to throw him out of the country.

The protest gained power towards the evening as people joined the rally after work. Although the event was announced by citizen activists, it was hijacked by the opposition political parties, chiefly The United National Movement (UNM). The tensions reached the tipping point, when the leader of UNM, urged its party supporters and Georgian citizens to storm the parliament building. After a few hours of a police force hold off, the order was given to dismantle the protest by force. The rubber bullets and tear gas were applied. 240 people were hurt, including journalists and 80 policemen. Two people lost their eyes and over a hundred were detained by the police (BBC, 2019). The event was named Gavrilov's night and marked a series of protests called 'Shame'.

### **The Shame Movement - Demands and Key Events**

On June 21st, the day after the Gavrilov's Night, the civil society put forward the three demands of the protests: the liberation of the detainees, the resignation of the minister of interior affairs, Giorgi Gakharia, and the transformation of the

majoritarian electoral system to proportional one. The first demand - liberation of the detainees - was met within the first days and weeks of the protest, which was contingent on the legal processes.

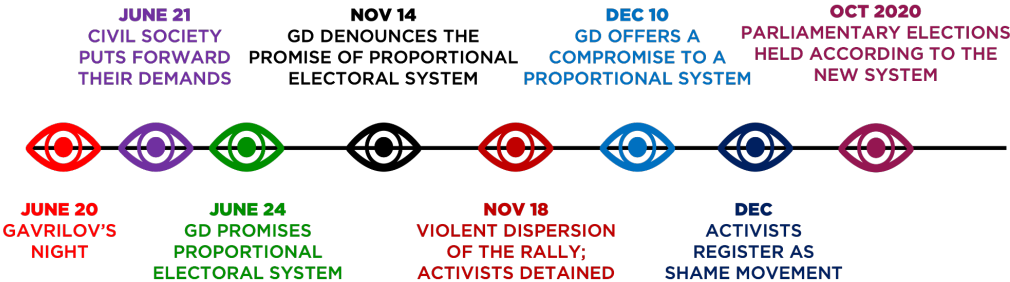
On the fourth day of protests, Georgian Dream (the ruling party, GD hereafter) promised to grant citizens *fully proportional elections*. The protests continued, demanding the resignation of Giorgi Gakharia. The rallies lasted 93 consecutive days and ended due to withered attendance.

In November GD promoted Giorgi Gakharia to prime minister and denounced its promise to install the new electoral system. The rallies were rekindled, and police oppression grew. In December, GD offered protestors a compromised version of the proportional electoral system. In 2020, the compromised version of the proportional elections was institutionalized. The parliamentary elections of that year were held accordingly. GD won the majority of seats (Reuters, 2020).

In December 2019, the core organizers of the ‘Shame’ protests founded an NGO and called it ‘Shame Movement’. The Shame Movement continues their work to this day by organizing protests and media campaigns against political and religious oppression and supporting Georgia’s European integration. See Figure below for a visualization of the key events.

**Figure 7**

*The Timeline of Protests. Own creation.*



## **Proportional Electoral System**

In order to understand the importance of civil society's demand regarding the reform of the electoral system, it is important to explain why the former one, a majoritarian system, was unacceptable. There are 150 seats in the Georgian parliament. Under the majoritarian system, 77 MPs were elected from the party lists, proportionally. The remaining 73 seats were reserved for candidates who were elected by the majoritarian system. In a majoritarian electoral system, a candidate must receive more than 50% of the votes in order to be elected to parliament, which means that those who lose even by one percent are left out. In conclusion, a majoritarian system causes discrepancy between the political mandate in the parliament and the proportion of actual votes. Georgian Dream, which had 48% of votes in 2016, received 75% of seats in parliament and enjoyed a constitutional majority. The proportional system was seen as a way to make a parliament more representative, and democratic. Its installment was promised to take place in 2024, by the Georgian constitution. Critics, however, noted that biggest parties had the most to lose from this system and they would most likely act against it (OC Media, 2019).

# Analysis and Discussion

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This chapter presents descriptive analysis and discussion of the organizational structures and *organizational communication processes* in the Shame protests, conceptualized as Self-Structuring, Membership Negotiation, Activity Coordination, and Institutional Positioning Flows, by McPhee and Zaug (2009). Flows *overlap* with each other, meaning that the same messages contain information that accounts for more than one flow. The overlaps are accounted for in the analysis and discussion. The chapter examines the structures created by the relation of ‘flows’ and ‘non-human agents’, as argued by Cooren and Fairhurst (2009). In more practical terms, the chapter discusses organizational structures that are created by communication processes supported by social media. The analytical concepts of ‘solidarity’, ‘conflict’, and ‘breach of system’s limits’ put forward by Melucci’s (2003) Collective Action Theory, are additionally applied in the analysis and discussion to account for the political qualities of the collective actor. Furthermore, the chapter applies Bennet and Segerberg’s (2013) concept of connective and collective typology of organizations to describe the collective actor on different stages of its transformation. The concept of ‘easily personalized frames’ is used to denote all visual and textual messages which had a viral effect on social media (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The analysis also refers to Gerbaudo’s (2017) concept of ‘citizenism’ and ‘under-power structures’, Kavada’s (2015) concept of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ circles, and Granovetter’s (1973) concept of ‘strong and weak social ties’, discussed in the literature review. The chapter concludes with the summative discussion.

## **The Overlap of the Institutional Positioning and the Self-Structuring Flows**

The Institutional Positioning Flow encapsulates all communicative processes that take place with the entities *outside* of the organization (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). In other words, when actors negotiate their identity and relations with the environment



– those communication processes are institutional positioning flows; “Identity Negotiation” is another label for them (McPhee & Zaug, 2009, p. 40). Self-Structuring Flow on the other hand, denotes all interactions that produce structures. However, as the study examines the *emergence of organizational structures*, the Self-Structuring Flow materialized in all communication processes. Therefore, the Identity Negotiation, which could not be separated from the Self-Structuring Flow in the empirical material, produced an analysis of the *identity formation* of the movement. Furthermore, the concept of organization’s identity presented by McPhee and Zaug (2009), proved to carry a conceptual resemblance with the idea of *solidarity* by Melucci (2003), as they both are analytically concerned with the formation of ‘we’, and drawing the boundaries with the environment. Additionally, the analysis and discussion account for the *non-human agents*, or digital platforms and in some cases, physical spaces, which facilitated the sustainability of the identity and solidarity as structures (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). In conclusion, the following sub-chapter presents the analysis and discussion of identity and solidarity as organizational structures of the movement as it emerged as a crowd-enabled network and transformed into a more traditional collective actor (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The second section presents the analysis and discussion of the communication processes and agents which constituted those structures (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009; McPhee & Zaug, 2009).

### ***Identity and Solidarity as Organizational Structures***

On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, participants of the rally were brought together by their shared anger and shame for themselves and their government. The word Shame in Georgian also sounds like a scolding - ‘shame on you.’ The rally was called Shame, which eventually became the movement's name. The activist who first voiced the idea for the name, said:

I remember what I felt most profoundly was shame. I was ashamed of what I was seeing, I was ashamed for my government... There was also anger that we let this happen, as citizens ... Of course, it is their shameful act, but the fact that we have reached this point, as a society, that we are watching the session of the parliament conducted in Russian in the morning ... this

was about dignity, and that's how the name of the rally came to mind.  
(participant #1)

Today, organizers of the movement say that if they had to choose, they would probably come up with a more positive name for themselves. But the reason they are called *Shame*, or *It is a Shame*, is because out of all their names and slogans, throughout the years, this was the one that stuck. It was a summary of collective sentiments which resonated with people. On an emotional level, it was a mix of collective mourning as in 'How did we get here? It is embarrassing', and a collective condemnation as in 'How could you? Shame on you'. This emotional mixture defined the line between the victim and the enemy. 'We' were the ones who were embarrassed and angry, and the 'others' were the ones who were neither angry nor embarrassed. Consequently, out of all slogans, *Shame*, or *It is a Shame*, became the most widely adopted *personalized frame* (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013).

The organizers of the rally also used a slogan, 'get out in the street', which is by definition similar to 'occupy', (*gamodi garet* in Georgian), and 'in my country's service', (*qveknis samsakhurshi* in Georgian) to support an idea that attending rallies was like going to work but for the benefit of the country's democracy. But *Shame* became the most popular personalized frame on social media because it was used to condemn the government and the ruling party for their wrongdoings and express the collective *grievance*. The condemnation was embraced as a meaningful action because it helped people not only to express their anger but empowered them to act in challenging the hegemonic power structure. Consequently, the eye became the visual symbol or the logo of the protests. It symbolized the eyes lost during Gavrilov's night and denoted the empowering whistleblower stance that many citizens embraced. The colorful circles within the logotype were intended to exemplify the movement's inclusivity. The name chosen for rallies and consequently the movement arose from the bottom up and served as an expression of the logic and sentiment that already existed in the society. First, people let themselves express how they felt and then started to think what it meant, by scrutinizing, and drawing the boundaries between right and wrong, between *shame* and *dignity*, between 'us' and 'them'.

The rationale behind the appeal of ‘shame-dignity’ was the existing anti-occupational discourse. In other words, it was shameful to commit acts that would ‘return Georgia to the Russian orbit’, and it was dignified to fight for sovereignty and independence of the country. Through this shame-dignity lens, anti-occupational discourse acquired a moral dimension. Consequently, the rallies acquired another name - ‘Anti-Occupational Rally’. The activists described the ‘Russian Occupation’ as a threat not only to territorial sovereignty but a collective mindset, calling it a mental occupation. Therefore, any political reasoning that favored the Russian agenda was interpreted as an occupation.

The Shame-Dignity dichotomy, which was a moral manifestation of the anti-occupational discourse and a validation of the collective trauma, drew a circle around the protestors and prompted condemnation of the hegemonic power. But anti-occupational discourse alone, as a rationale, was not sufficient to create a sustainable ‘we’. Unlike Occupy, and Gillets Jeunes who refused all political affiliation (Graeber, 2018), Shame protests were a mix of civil and political collective action. The activists’ decision, to not denounce the participation of the opposition political parties in the protests, was prompted by a lack of resources and experience. Fearing GD’s power, they instead aimed to rationally negotiate solidarity with the political opposition, in order to develop as a more powerful agent against GD. The anti-occupational discourse and the conflict over power was what united civil society and opposition parties. But, proportional elections, put forth by activists as a core demand, meant more power to the citizens, not more power to one particular party, to which the most powerful parties did not agree. Therefore, to refer to Melucci’s (2003) terminology, the powerful political actors joined the protests, because they were united around the same conflict – the conflict over power, but not in solidarity – power to the citizens (Gerbaudo, 2017).

However, negotiating the agreements, between civil society, NGOs, and opposition parties, was not always successful, and something most activists (of the interviewed) regret doing today. As one of the activists put it: “I would do it differently today... they (opposition parties) are vultures... They would have joined the rally anyway” (participant #5). Out of its attempts to negotiate solidarity and

manage its multiplicities (Melucci, 2003), Shame Movement emerged as a facilitator and a leader, bridging the civil society members, most of whom resented UNM with the opposition parties.

One of the features that defined the movement was its propagation of a peaceful form of protest. After the violent events of Gavrilov's Night, the activists vowed to hold peaceful but consistent protests, until all their demands were met. They planned to pressure GD to relinquish some of its power. This was contrary to UNM's disposition to sabotage the ruling power altogether. Referring back to Melucci's (2003) framework, *the breach of the limits of the system*, defines the social movement from a classical political party, in that the political party *competes* for power within the system's limits, while the social movement is expected to *challenge* those limits. This rule was somewhat reversed in the given situation, because of the activists' denouncement of violence.

We often joked that instead of us, activists, being more radical, and politicians behaving like politicians, in a rational and balanced way, it is the other way around! We are more level-headed ones, and they behave like radicals! What is this? Nobody knows their roles! (Participant #4)

After the civil society activists' intense year-long struggle, the 2020 elections were held in a partially proportional manner. The compromise was reached on the core demand of the Shame movement, but GD still managed to maintain its parliamentary majority. Consequently, UNM attempted to sabotage the results, and the European Union intervened to facilitate the process. The Shame Movement was involved in the facilitation process of the agreement put forward by President of the European Council, Charles Michel, to recognize the elections and legitimize the new parliament. The negotiations were successful, and the potential chaos was avoided.

In conclusion, the identity formation of the movement happened in several stages, which traces its transformation in Bennet and Segerberg's (2013) terms, from a digitally mediated network to the more traditional collective organization. In the initial phase, the easily personalized frame, 'Shame', acted as a structure that united

civil society and political parties in action. It was a moral manifestation of the existing anti-occupational discourse and of the assault on dignity (Gerbaudo, 2017), triggered by Gavrilov's Night. In the beginning the easily personalized frame acted as the identity of the movement, which united both civil activists and political actors. The structure was solidified by the Facebook page and private Facebook group, which contributed to dissemination of the hashtag (to be discussed in the following sections). As protests continued, the circle of 'we' became narrower, as the *structure of solidarity* emerged, which distinguished the political actors from the civil activists, who shared the same values of citizenship and desire to reclaim their democratic institutions (Gerbaudo, 2017). At this point, the communication became more nuanced and shifted from the generic Shame frame to discussions about democracy and justice (similar change in communication noted by Toepfl, 2017 in Russian protests of 2011). This also influenced the membership in the organizational group, as the activists who were or developed as opposition party supporters, left the movement (more on membership in the following sections). Finally, the smaller group of activists, which was in charge of negotiation of multiplicities emerged as the leadership of the movement and registered itself as an NGO under the name Shame. This concludes the transformation of the crowd-enabled network into the more traditional collective organization. The following sub-chapter presents the more nuanced analysis of the communication processes that contributed to the emergence and transformation of the identity structures discussed in this section.

### ***Communication Processes which Constituted Identity and Solidarity***

The *identity negotiation flow* which determined the Shame Movement as a 'crowd-enabled network' (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013), in the moment of its emergence, primarily consisted of the easily personalized frame 'Shame'. As discussed in the previous sub-chapter, it spread rapidly, because the civil society embraced the role of a whistleblower and applied the hashtag to condemn the wrongdoings of the government collectively. However, in the following months and years, the hashtag Shame (Sirtskhvilia in Georgian) was used in many different contexts, by political actors and media influencers among others, which changed its meaning. Some political media influencers applied the hashtag against the members of the rally. To

Beraldo's (2020) argument, the signifier of the protest was used to denote different and even contradictory points of view. But, in this case, the contradictory use of the hashtag was intentional. In other words, there were intentional attempts to *hijack the hashtag*.

As civil protest gained power and threatened the legitimacy of the ruling party and powerful political opposition (Melucci, 2003), both parties attacked the identity of the movement. GD inserted protests into their anti-UNM discourse, portraying them as the antithesis of peace and order. They accused activists of being UNM affiliates, enemies of the state and the Church, and harming the Georgian economy. GD's so-called 'troll factory' carried out personal disinformation attacks on the organizers of the protests, especially the speakers of the rally. In retaliation, volunteer activists and NGOs committed to revealing trolls and fighting against propaganda together. These actions were coordinated in a private Facebook group of the movement (to be discussed in the following sections). As a result, in a year, Facebook removed 500 pages, 100 accounts, 122 groups, and 56 Instagram accounts related to GD's propaganda machine. Facebook also removed 80 pages, 23 accounts, 41 groups, and nine Instagram pages linked to UNM and its disinformation campaigns (Meta, 2020). GD's disinformation campaigns, which portrayed activists as enemies of the state, usually *served to legitimize the oppressive actions* they were about to deliver. "You should know they do not call you something for no reason ... if they call you something, it means they are coming up with the whole campaign" (participant #3).

The propaganda was used to delegitimize the protestors in the public eye and validate the growing police pressure. Around the third week of protests, the GD attempted to sabotage the rally by confronting them with far-right homophobic religious fundamentalists. Allegedly, the hater groups were brought together by the GD itself under the false pretense that the rally was planning a Pride parade. The government attempted to stage the scenario in which it would appear as a beacon of order and the peaceful protesters as - the source of disturbance. Police forces stood between the two rioting crowds while several activists were trapped behind the stage surrounded by an aggressive mob. Activists weathered 24 hours of physical and mental pressure until the GD's resources to maintain their alleged undercover allies were exhausted. These high-risk experiences contributed to the

construction of very *strong social ties* and fundamental trust among a smaller group of activists (Granovetter, 1973). A former member said, “If you want to bring us together, you just have to threaten one of us, and we’ll all be there.” (participant # 4). GD’s oppression increased exponentially. In addition to propaganda, imprisonment, and fines, it also included surveillance and personal threats.

The oppression coming from the opposition parties such as UNM (the second most supported party in Georgia) and European Georgia (founded by former UNM members) was somewhat different. They supported the anti-occupational discourse of the rally, but they also supported GD’s framing by portraying civil protesters as their followers. This was because the opposition tried to portray themselves as the leaders of the protest. UNM managed to hijack the first rally initiated by civil activists on June 20<sup>th</sup>, but after being violently dispersed by riot police on a Gavrilov’s Night, they lost their momentum. Both UNM and European Georgia (opposition party) attempted to frame the collective action as their political party’s protest on their respective media channels. In doing so, they applied media manipulation tactics, such as interviewing their leaders with the rally in the background and placing activists at the end of the story. This *disinformation in unison* from GD and the opposition framed activists as politically biased supporters of UNM.

The power lever that activists exercised, was the support they had from the civil society at the rally and on the social media channels. In order to maintain control of the protest, the organizers decided to establish a speaker mandate and let each person from each party, except for the party leaders, speak at a rally. Thus, they wanted to avoid media manipulations of the politically biased television channels and balance power. It was also a way to demonstrate what proportional representation would look like in a parliament and encourage lesser active members of society, who dreaded standing next to certain opposition parties, to join the rally.

First, we wanted to empower women in parties, and second, we wanted to empower small parties. We would invite small parties in front of the parliament and big parties further away at the philharmonic theatre. That way we showed big parties that we could close the street without them. It

was a bit like showing them their place, a bit of power balance... We did not want people to join a political rally, we wanted politicians to join a people's rally. (Participant #5)

On top of disinformation campaigns and media manipulations, opposition parties also attempted to hijack the rally by mimicking the protest. In September, opposition parties established their own youth groups and infiltrated them into the protests. They were called #change (UNM) and #dare (all other opposition parties). The emergence of novel hashtags and slogans, resembling #shame confused the public. It was unclear whether or not these pro-UNM young adults represented the protest. The movement founders had to confront the party leaders because they felt it was another way to hijack the rally.

They opened their #change flag right in front of the stage and cameras again. We were already fed up with that trick! We said get out of here, put it somewhere else, not in the center. They wouldn't budge. Then I cussed at them from the stage. They agitated. I stormed to their leader (Grigol Vashadze), I told him, if you don't remove this fake absurdity from here, we will dismantle the whole protest!... We said if they didn't stop, we would hit them hard (in communication). (Participant #5)

In addition, activists were repeatedly excluded from the closed-door meetings with the ruling party, where the negotiations of the demands took place. They remembered being referred to as 'kids', which they found frustrating. Activists gradually realized how difficult it was to negotiate solidarity and manage powerful multiplicities within the protest. Eventually, on the final stage of their transformation, activists dropped the role of the facilitator between the actors who were only united by the conflict. A current member of the movement stated: "Now we only accept relationships, where they count us as equals" (participant #3). In order to allocate funds, the organizers of the rallies registered as an NGO. They received a grant from the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) and continued their work.



In conclusion, the identity structure of the collective actor started to emerge with the appearance of the Shame frame triggered by Gavrilov's Night. The Shame frame, with an anti-occupational discourse behind it, was communicated at the rallies, through digital media posts, (primarily Facebook), and on mainstream media. However, soon the anti-occupational discourse and shaming became too generic to describe the movement's identity. Too many actors fit that frame. This is when activists began introducing new messages, communicating their values, such as dedication to democracy, inclusivity, and peace, thus negotiating solidarity on the rally and on social media. All these values fit Gerbaudo's (2017) concept of citizenism, or the will of citizens to reclaim their democracy and dignity, which also urged them to act in a dignified manner and abstain from initiating violent scenarios. The speakers of the protest, who emerged as leadership figures, were also important agents in identity formation. As the rallies gathered civil support, and powerful political actors (GD and UNM) felt threatened, they advanced on their disinformation campaigns. The activists learned to anticipate GD's steps, by their disinformation campaigns, which served as a *precursor* to legitimization of their oppressive actions. Opposition parties on the other hand, capitalized on hijacking the rally, by using media manipulations and disinformation campaigns to portray themselves as leaders. Consequently, activists were forced to repeatedly communicate who they were *in opposition* to the political actors and their discourses, which might have taken their resources from cultivating solidarity among non-political actors. Distinguishing themselves from existing political actors meant they would never behave the same way: resort to false information, incite violence, and attempt to disintegrate society. Citizenship-inspired solidarity and constant distinction from political actors put Shame activists in a curious position, where they felt like *they* were State, and political actors were irresponsible rioters. Furthermore, high-risk encounters cultivated strong ties within the group, which further distinguished the group from the environment. Eventually, as the borders became more defined, people who were or developed as opposition party supporters, left the movement.

## **The Overlap of the Membership Negotiation, the Activity Coordination, and the Self-Structuring Flows**

This sub-chapter presents the organizational structures of roles, membership, and leadership, as they gradually developed, while Shame protests turned from a crowd-enabled network to a more traditional collective actor (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013). The communication activities that constituted these structures, can be categorized as Membership Negotiation, and Activity Coordination Flows (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). The Membership Negotiation Flow comprises all interactions that contribute to the constitution of roles within an organization, while the Activity Coordination Flow encapsulates all communication responsible for the adjustment of the work processes to environmental changes (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). Since the roles and responsibilities were not known in advance and were negotiated in the process of protests, these flows overlapped with each other and with the Self-Structuring Flow in the empirical data. The next sub-chapter presents the analysis and discussion of membership and leadership as structures in the Shame Movement, as it transformed from a digitally mediated network to a collective actor. The second sub-chapter analyzes and discusses the communication flows which contributed to the constitution of these structures.

### ***Leadership and Decision-Making Mechanisms as Organizational Structures***

In the beginning of the protests, when the organizational boundaries were still loose and undefined, it was difficult to identify a Shame activist. The membership structure first materialized in their private Facebook group, where the organizational activities took place. Everyone who was a member of the group, was considered to be a member of ‘Shame’. But, as a wave of initial reaction after Gavrilov’s Night withered, those who contributed to sustaining the protest, were dubbed as Shame activists. There was a personalized frame which denoted their participation. A Facebook status “I work at - In My Country’s Service” identified individuals who frequented the rallies after work (more on that in the following chapter). Eventually, the fourteen, sometimes fifteen individuals who consistently joined and organized the protests and communicated daily with the audiences became known as the core organizers of the protest and subsequent founders of the Shame Movement.

Communication processes, which will be discussed in the following section, included organizational activities, such as fundraising and calls for volunteers, polls, and discussions, transmitting information about detainees, court hearings, the developments of the rally, and personal posts expressing political opinions, and emotional experiences. Activists also addressed the critique from the public, media, opinion leaders, political parties, and civic organizations, and the oppression emanating from the propaganda campaigns. Activists not only posted but engaged with the individuals who commented on their posts and supported each other in the comments sections (more on communication processes in the following sub-chapter). This small group of core organizers eventually developed as the leadership of the protests and of the movement.

The core organizers intended to sustain protests peacefully and managed them as a combination of work and leisure. The work part referred to their schedule and language they used to communicate it. They scheduled rallies every day from seven to eleven in the evening and framed them as a job. They aimed to establish protests as a new habitual behavior, inspiring people to ‘work’ for their country’s democracy from seven to eleven every night. Many people who attended the rallies changed their workplace status on Facebook to “I work at - In My Country’s Service” (vmushaob qveknis samsakhurshi in Georgian). The leisure part referred to making the rally attractive during the day. Since it was summer, the outside protests allowed for the flea markets, book markets, music concerts and other fundraising activities held by volunteers to keep people interested and engaged. The idea behind these initiatives was to sustain the protests for as long as needed, that is, until all three demands were met.

But the work schedule of the organizers was quite unforgiving. Every night after the rally, the core activists would regroup to discuss the rally and plan for the next day, till two or three in the morning. They also opened discussions in their private Facebook group. The members coordinated their activities in a group chat, and at a friend’s house which they referred to as their headquarters. It was adapted to the activists’ working needs, which included the proximity to the rally and the safety and comfort of a home. The preparation continued in the morning after sleep. Some

activists slept at headquarters. In the beginning there were 20 to 30 members who volunteered to organize the rallies, but the number eventually decreased to fifteen.

We tried to finish the rally at eleven, because the subway closed at midnight, and people needed to get home. Then at midnight, we would go to a friend's house and start planning up till two or three in the morning.  
(Participant #5)

In order to sustain the protests, the core organizers had to carry out communication activities (to be discussed in the following section), as well as take care of logistics and finances. They soon realized that the stage with a microphone and speakers were the essential part of the rally, which accounted for approximately 3 500 to 5 200 Euros per day. Activists mentioned that the rally was one of their principal communication platforms, referring to it as their media. In the first days, the activists borrowed the stage equipment from one of the parties, but the recurring bargaining about their participation in the rally forced them to turn to public fundraising. According to one of its members, in two years, the movement collected approximately 200 000 Georgian Lari (around 72 000 Euros) for rally-related expenses and activists' bailouts. The organizers rented audio equipment and hired bodyguards to defend the stage from politicians and ruling party provocateurs who attempted to hijack or compromise the protest.

We had several communication channels. A Facebook group, a page and our own pages and networks. There were television broadcasts, online media, and, of course, the rally itself. We talked a lot about this electoral system, why we demand it, why we need it, why is the existing system corrupt ... This is how we managed to influence public opinion, so that this demand would gather a big support. (Participant #1)

To sustain the protests during the hot summer months as the attendance withered, the organizers changed the format of the rally. "People got tired of just standing and listening... so, we decided to engage in a conversation and start a talk show, where we would actually discuss things" (participant #4). On the 34<sup>th</sup> day of protest, they introduced the talk-show 'Shame'. The talk show started every day at 20:20 on the

rally stage in front of the parliament building and was streamed via Shame's Facebook page, as well as on state and regional TV channels. The host and the guests sat on the stage, facing each other and the people (attendance varied from 20 to 100, depending on the guest) and discussed the hot political topics of the day. They managed to attract new speakers and new faces to the rally, who preferred a conversation format to oratory. The talk show usually began with news about detainees and victims and continued to the judicial system, free media, equal pay, and other significant or ongoing issues. The work of the movement's leadership at that time resembled that of a television studio: preparing the topics, fact-checking, coordinating questions from the audience, etc. The rallies, including talk-shows, lasted for 93 consecutive days. In order to sustain the protests, in the aftermath, the organizers scheduled the rallies and prepared for them in the digital space. "When the spark died out and the streets were no longer closed every day and then we had to post dates in advance, so that we could get ready and so that many people would come that day" (participant #5).

The decision-making mechanism was based on consensus, which was unanimously described as a highly emotional but gratifying endeavor. The founders constantly negotiated the values and identity of the collective, with every decision made through consensus. The people who possessed natural facilitation skills acted as mediators of the decision-making processes, smoothing the edges. At the times when the consensus could no longer be reached, the members left the movement. As a result, even some of the core organizers chose to leave years later. In the beginning all decisions including demands, speakers, or communication activities were contested and shared as posts in the private Facebook group. However, as the protest continued, the core organizers began making decisions without consulting the collective on every matter, which some criticized: "Sometimes we would ask them simple things, like what should we write on a poster ... it would give people a sense of ownership ... but it was not real ownership." (participant #4). Hence, consensus emerged as a decision-making structure, which drew the boundary between the leadership and the rest of the activists. The consensus rule ensured flat leadership. However, this study does not account for the individual influences within the flat leadership. Consensus also provided confidence in decisions, as the

steps prompted by consensus of differently minded individuals resonated with large audiences and received substantial support.

The leadership did not have any written guidelines that structured their behavior. When asked directly, they claimed they had a set of rules for online discussions and a manifesto but never referred to them as their navigating principles. For the core activists, the process of reaching a consensus was so rigorous and exhausting that they internalized every decision. As a result, they embodied those documents and did not rely on them to guide their actions. The documents representing rules and decisions might have served as guiding structures for other, less involved activists, but this study did not account for them. One of the core activists admitted that he liked the work process because the team understood each other without ‘extra communication’. They also referred to labor division as a *natural process*.

Suddenly, it would hit you that something had to be done, and then someone sitting next to you would say - I already did that. This is the appeal of activism, when the process develops so naturally, that you understand each other without extra communication ... It's a very dynamic process, and a very pleasant one. (Participant #1)

The appeal of everyone doing everything withered when core members became exhausted from the pressure of workload and responsibilities. “I discovered that I took on too many responsibilities, and nobody thought about taking my place for a little while and sharing that responsibility with me” (participant #4). Another core activist admitted he preferred having a more defined role because it let him focus on what he was good at. Burnout and personal struggles were part of the reason it became progressively hard to reach consensus. All founding members had to make sacrifices for their unorthodox lifestyles, with friends, jobs, businesses, and relationships with children and families. The members not only sacrificed their income sources but their mental and physical well-being.

In conclusion, as the protests moved from the crowd-enabled networks to a more traditional collective actor, the membership and leadership structures emerged and created hierarchies within the movement, which affected the access to participation

in the decision-making processes. Much like the Occupy protests, the Shame protests also had ‘inner and outer circles’, of people who made the decisions and those who influenced them (Kavada, 2015). In the beginning, everyone involved in the group (approximately 10 000 people) were considered to be the members of ‘Shame’. Then, as the boundaries arose between the participants of the rally and the members of the movement, they began to differentiate between the core organizers and other activists. In the beginning, all decisions were contested in the private Facebook group. With the transformation, the organizational group felt they were not supported, but *told what to do*, in a similar vein, they did not consult with the wider group of activists on all strategic matters. Furthermore, decisions in the core group were reached by consensus, also similar to Occupy (Graeber, 2013; Kavada, 2015). Consensus worked as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it allowed for confident decisions, which provided successful results, because of diversity of opinions. On the other hand, it was emotionally exhausting and time-consuming, which resulted in members leaving the core group, which decreased its diversity. The emergence of organizational structures was prompted by activists’ concerns to sustain the protests. Consequently, they adopted creative ways to reach their goals, including framing the protests as jobs and organizing entertainment events to attract audiences. Their working style was partly reminiscent of the start-up – working late hours, from a friend’s house, and other times of a television channel. The next section is dedicated to the analysis and discussion of the communicative processes, which contributed to the constitution of the organizational structures of membership and leadership of the movement.

### ***Communicative Processes which Constituted Leadership and Decision-Making Mechanisms***

In this section I will discuss the communication processes that correspond to the Activity Coordination and Membership Negotiation Flows, which overlapped with each other and with the Self-Structuring Flow (McPhee & Zaug, 2009) and created the organizational hierarchies and decision-making structures described above. The leadership, or the core group of organizers and decision-makers, emerged from their communication and organizational activities, which they undertook based on their personal initiative. However, they might have been influenced by additional factors.

The activists, who listened and negotiated with other concerned citizens in the streets, on their personal Facebook accounts, or in their private Facebook group “Freedom Spreading Society” (FSS hereafter), expressed their opinions and actively participated in the sense-making processes, were in the middle of the events, and transmitted information about ‘what is happening’, planned the rallies and took on organizational initiatives, were seen as people who could be trusted and relied on. The activists mentioned that their dedication to the cause facilitated trust between them and the other citizens. As one of the former activists said: “They trusted us because they saw how much we worked all summer, and we did not act like politicians ... we cared about people who came to the rally” (participant #4). The portion of the public celebrated and encouraged the initiative of the young individuals and thus might have influenced their sense of duty. These individuals consequently became the organizational core of the protest and embraced the support and responsibility that their close network and online followership put on their shoulders. Founders also described the sense of duty they felt before the victims of the violent dispersion on Gavrilov’s Night after meeting them in person.

In addition, some of the founders’ (15 members in total) background in journalism and activism might have influenced their reliability, relatability, and popularity on social media. Some have organized protests but never rallies of the magnitude or consistency as Shame rallies. One of the founders previously led a small group propagating against Russian occupation. Another founder was also often involved in activism and organized performance-type campaigns. Some of the founding members had substantial followership on Facebook. One of them was a former journalist who was outspoken about social grievances and always spread information about the on-ground development of the protests. Another founder was known for writing opinion posts about politics and the economy and being a co-founder of an NGO, which investigated government spending. Some core activists were descendants of political figures, who either shared or denied their parent’s political ideas, but were framed according to them. Some members were former journalists who used to work for politically affiliated media. Others were small business owners, private sector employees, students, and active citizens.



The skills the activists possessed did not influence their choice to organize the rallies, but work they volunteered to do. Some activists mentioned having communication and digital marketing talents, which were considered to be the most valued skills in the beginning of the protests. One activist was abroad at the time and volunteered to manage the movement's Twitter account in English to communicate with an international audience. She knew one of the core organizers and met the others only a year later. Most activists met each other at the rally for the first time.

We did not know each other well, we just sort of took responsibilities and got to know each other while working together, in the process, naturally. There were so many different people who wanted to help ... in the beginning there were twenty of us, then after 2-3 weeks, some got tired, others distanced themselves, so 14 of us were left and we were the group that continued to work. (Participant #5)

Acquiring a role defined the membership of the core group. If an activist volunteered to be in the group, and was *consistently involved* in organizational activities, one became a member of the core group. One of the participants of the rally became a member after he volunteered to control the queue to the stage. One of the activists remembers about him:

There was this guy who hung out near the stage. He let some people closer to the stage, and he blocked the others. We all asked each other, who is that guy? Nobody knew who he was ... He was doing his job so professionally; he even had a Bluetooth earpiece ... It turned out that guy was an actor. He saw that control of the stage was our weakness and he just took on that job. (Participant #1)

The activists structured their roles in the working process. One of the members described her role at the rally as an observer. She was a professional actress and believed that she did not possess high-demand skills like digital communication or management. However, she was determined to find a way to help the team. She started observing the rally and noticed attempts to sabotage the event. One day she

noticed a bag full of beer lying unattended on the ground. According to her, the saboteurs, allegedly government forces, hoped for the participants of the rally would get drunk, so they could be legally detained. She learned to detect such provocations, report them to the team members, and deal with them. She also learned how to speak with the participants of the rallies and discovered that she possessed excellent interpersonal communication skills. Later on, those skills and experiences transformed her into a recruitment manager for the movement.

Similarly, the roles which defined the activists were structured according to circumstances. One of the core organizers and speakers for the rally also briefly took a role as the representative for the movement in Brussels. An opportunity emerged for him to travel to attend meetings with the European Parliament's MPs and speak at the panel discussion dedicated to Georgia's political situation. Though the meetings were held behind closed doors, he updated other activists in the FSS about the encounters. He also had a meeting with the director of European Endowment for Democracy to discuss funding opportunities for the movement.

Similar to Occupy and their digital platforms (Kavada, 2015), admin access to the Shame's private Facebook group and Facebook page were reserved for a few people, who comprised the core of the movement. The private Facebook group named 'Freedom Spreading Society' (the name was intended as a pun) became the center of gravity and the official discussion and management platform of the protests. At the time of the events the membership of the group counted approximately 10 000 people. In the following weeks and months of the protest, FSS was used for polls, discussions, and management of collective action, such as role assignment and fundraising. The group *solidified* the decision-making and activity-coordinating structures, the identity and solidarity structures, and the hierarchies of the movement, because all communication which took place in it, as described by the activists, appeared to be organizational by nature.

Initially, the private Facebook group was a discussion platform. The group was private, which meant that its content was not accessible to non-members, and it thus provided a space for more honest conversations. Admins filtered the suspicious accounts and blocked users who acted aggressively. Everyone was encouraged to

initiate conversations, but their facilitation fell on a few shoulders, mainly the admins (also the core members) who possessed skills and experience in communication. Moderation of the discussion meant managing the multiple opinions and emotions of civil and political activists, some of whom joined the group to promote their political agendas. Admins were friendly and informal, with humor and a tone of voice that could have been interpreted both positively and negatively. There were tensions in the comments that might have silenced less outspoken voices. Those who did not express their opinions in the comments section would indicate their reactions to the posts and comments or would remain silent. Another restricting factor to a more inclusive and rigorous discussion was time. The speed of events did not leave too much time for decision-making.

The three main demands of the rally, which included proportional elections and defined the movement's democratic values, were established in through a Facebook poll in FSS. The poll which defined the three main demands of the protest had 8701 votes. Separate polls were conducted to determine the speakers of the rally. Active protesters and civil society members were often prioritized over politicians. According to the group admin, polling worked well, and the most popular posts were those open to discussion.

I remember we had little democratic elections in our group. There was one poll, we chose our demands. Many people were asking many different things, but the four had the most votes, and we then merged them into three. (Participant #4)

Apart, from being a space for discussions, the private Facebook group, FSS, emerged as a management structure, which determined roles and coordinated activities. One of the most frequently carried out activities were cyber-campaigns. The group was determined to counteract the propaganda campaigns of GD and UNM affiliated actors as well as implement cyber-attacks on the Facebook posts of political leaders, to delegitimize their discourse. The group of cyber-campaigners called themselves 'elves' as opposed to 'trolls', against whom they retaliated. Posts about volunteering to help and sustaining the protest were also popular and were said to have reached up to five hundred comments.

When we said that we would start controlling the stage, I posted in a group, if anyone could help, write your profession and what you can do. That post had around 500 comments, everyone wrote, I will be just a private soldier, I am a designer, I am a doctor, I can do this and that ... I have cried many times because of that post, it was very moving. (Participant #4)

As the responsibilities and the workload of the core organizers grew, so did their leadership status. As the reactionary protest began to transform into a sustainable collective action, the invisible force began to divide organizers and other activists and, eventually, changed their communication style. The two-way communication between the activists became less intense. The admins of a private Facebook group pinned important posts to coordinate further actions, but the group members would still ask them personally, as some were reluctant to speak in a group. This repetition of questions was sometimes exhausting for the admins. Organizers admitted that some activists would only pitch their ideas or critique, not always constructively, instead of taking on an initiative and doing things themselves. The energy withered, especially after GD renounced its promise and promoted Gakharia to a prime minister.

I felt like we lost ... Before, if a thousand people would ask me what happened, I would talk to each one of them, but after November, I felt disappointed. I was burned out. I used to be excited about new ideas and now it seemed like people would just throw their ideas at me from their laptops, and I had to run around and do everything. (Participant #4)

In conclusion, FSS emerged as a principal non-human agent which materialized the organizational structures of hierarchy, roles, decision-making, and solidarity, through providing an opportunity for safe discussions, and activity coordination. FSS helped coordinate activities, such as mobilizing, carrying out cyber-campaigns, making decisions, and assigning or negotiating roles. The discussions were facilitated, but it would be unsafe to assume that all voices were heard. The time constraints and emotional temperature, in addition to politically inclined activists who might have hijacked discussions, could have made it challenging to both

facilitate and express honest opinions. Polling was used as a democratic tool to select demands and speakers of the rally, but there were no appropriate circumstances to initiate informal elections for the leadership of the movement. It did not happen in the beginning nor as protests progressed, as it did during Bolotnaya Protests in Russia (Toepfl, 2017). The leadership self-defined itself in the process of organizing of the rallies, as the members took initiative and began to recruit and motivate others to help the cause. However, the core members' background and sense of duty could have influenced their resilience in this process. As the movement progressed and the organizational leadership began to emerge, the invisible line divided them from the other members of the private Facebook group. The core organizers felt that sometimes they were told what to do, and sometimes they did not consult the bigger group of activists on important matters. The emotional toll from the unhealthy working regime and constant struggles, made it increasingly difficult to manage the emotionally charged type of communication that FSS entailed.

### ***Summarizing Discussion***

As the collective actor emerged from a reactionary protest into a formal organization, its organizational structures underwent substantial transformations. The research shows that those processes were carried out through negotiations, discussions, and interactions, and supported by digital and physical spaces. At its inception, conceptualized as a 'crowd-enabled network' (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013), its identity structure was limited to an 'easily personalized frame' - 'Shame', which was a moral expression of a deeply rooted collective trauma in Georgia. Being a member of the Shame Movement when it was a crowd-enabled network equaled the membership of its private Facebook group, possible by a 'convenient click' (Morozov, 2009). Additionally, the weak social ties enabled rapid diffusion of information and mobilization of the crowd through digital media. Some activists more than others were motivated to volunteer and become organizers of the rally. Their constant communication with the wider audiences, appearances for media and negotiations with the political actors, and their organizational efforts, shaped them as leaders of the protests. The organizational structures were solidified in the physical and digital spaces, where the organizational communication regularly took

place: the rallies, the personal Facebook pages of the activists, the official Facebook page of the movement and the private Facebook group - FSS.

Soon after its inception, (it is difficult to provide time estimates, but the first stage accounts for approximately several weeks, before the attendance began to wither) the collective actor started transforming into an ‘organizationally enabled network’ (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013), which, as this study shows was influenced by the external oppressive political forces. The identity of the movement began to shape rapidly in opposition to GD’s propaganda and UNM’s hijacking attempts and was considerably damaged by it. The ‘Shame’ frame became insufficient to denote the nuances of the fast-shaping identity. Hence, the identity, which was based on *solidarity*, or in Gerbaudo’s (2017) terms, *citizenism*, emerged as a division line between the civil society and the political opposition. The rally, which saw the most active speakers, and the FSS which saw the most active organizers, *materialized* their leadership. The activists created structures that resembled an alternative world, with alternative ‘under-power structures’ (Gerbaudo, 2017), alternative elections - Facebook polls, alternative parliament sessions - the rallies, and an alternative executive governance - organizational group.

As oppression grew and support withered, activists had to register as an NGO to qualify for international donor funding and continue sustaining the protest. The Shame rallies lasted for 93 consecutive days, which identified people who attended the rallies as Shame activists. After the rallies, the ‘Shame’ frame was gradually dropped by the activists and the ‘Shame Movement’ increasingly began to denote the organization, and its members. Its decision-making structure, consensus, which was inevitably tied to the identity of the movement, acted as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it ensured confidence in the outcomes and eliminated those with conflicting values, but on the other hand, it eliminated plurality of opinions. However, all these transformations were in place to sustain the protest for as long needed and achieve results. Eventually, a year into the protests, (first 93 days were consecutive rallies), a partially proportional electoral system was installed.

As seen in this research, the collective actor undergoes many transformations in a very short period of time. For comparison, the Occupy Wall Street rallies lasted for

59 consecutive days, but produced lasting effects on society (Graeber, 2013). The protest, as argued in this study, adapted to the environment as it aimed to sustain itself and survive in order to pressure the hegemonic power to submit to its demands. As Melucci (2003) argues, social movements need to sustain themselves until the change they are fighting for, is institutionalized; and while they seem chaotic, they only appear so when compared to the dominant structures they are challenging. As they might appear chaotic or somewhat disorganized, this study shows that collective actors, even at the beginning of their inception, develop *flexible organizational structures*, including consensus-based decision-making mechanisms, and membership hierarchies. Furthermore, their identity is not limited to the ‘easily personalized frames’, as the core members exhibit strong personal identification with the identity of the group, expressed in solidarity. Digital media has enabled collective actors with the opportunity to not only diffuse information and mobilize support, but to create spaces, which *stabilize* and *materialize* organizational structures. The Logic of Connective Action presents us with the analytical framework of the collective actors in the digitally mediated environment, to which this study frequently referred. However, this study does not understand these categories as typologies of digitally mediated organizations, but as the *stages*, that inevitably lead a reactionary crowd-enabled network to a more sustainable organizational structure.

# Conclusion

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In conclusion, this research scrutinizes the substantial organizational transformations undergone by the collective actor, Shame Movement in Georgia, from a reactionary protest into a more formal organization. These transformations were driven by negotiations, discussions, and interactions, supported by both digital and physical spaces. The identity of the movement evolved rapidly, from an ‘easily personalized frame’ to a more nuanced identity based on solidarity and ‘citizenism’. The study contends, that throughout the transformation, the movement possessed flexible organizational structures, which became increasingly rigid, to which participants referred as a ‘natural process’. These structures were developed in the course of struggle and survival against oppressive dominant forces. In order to sustain itself and achieve its goals, the movement had to establish boundaries with political actors with whom it did not share solidarity, and part ways with activists with whom it could no longer reach consensus. The organizational structures included: *decision-making mechanisms, leadership, membership hierarchies, and identity*. The roles, decisions, and identity were actively negotiated by the activists through digital media, specifically their private Facebook group, and at the rallies, which emerged as crucial media actor. The Facebook page was used to communicate with broader audiences, which contributed to the formation of the weaker ties.

The study was able to capture the transformation of structures through the retrospective analysis, combining activists’ reflections on their experiences with the digital footprint of the collective actor. In summary, this research provides insights into the stages of transformation a collective actor undergoes, from a reactionary crowd-enabled network to a more traditional social movement and emphasizes the role of strategic communicative processes and digital technologies in the constitution of its organizational structures.



## Further Research

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This study was limited to the core activists and founders of the Shame Movement. Therefore, further research is recommended to present a more comprehensive picture of the decision-making mechanisms and identity formation of the social movement by encompassing a more diverse spectrum of participants. Furthermore, the research did not cover content analysis of the private Facebook group, which appeared to be the center of all organizational communication. The study suggests continuing research within the private and secret Facebook groups, if ethical considerations allow, because it seemed to substantially contribute to the structural formation of collective initiative under study. The private/secret Facebook group also allows for moderation of discussions, which is a curious topic for discourse analysis on social media.

Additionally, the research has developed insights about the strategic communication of dominant political actors, as they apply disinformation campaigns to delegitimize their citizens and validate oppression against them. This topic needs scholarly attention and further investigation.

Regarding collective action studies, the research shed some light on the commonalities of social movements around the world. What appears to be a common denominator for citizens worldwide is the desire to feel empowered as citizens (Gerbaudo, 2017), which urges them to behave more like the democratic leaders they wish they had. Therefore, Melucci's (2003) orientation of 'breaching the system's limits' describing a social movement needs a re-examination in the context of new realities where dominant powers behave disruptively, while citizens attempt to build alternative democratic structures.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1.

### *Informed Consent for participation in a research interview:*

I....., voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. I have been made fully aware that this interview process is taking place to provide data for research conducted by Darejan Tsursumia, of Lund University.

Furthermore, I have read and accepted the following stipulations:

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can stop the interview process at any time and decide not to answer any question without any consequences.
- I have had the aim of the study explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not be receiving any monetary benefits as a direct result of my involvement in this research.
- I agree to my interview being recorded, in regard to both audio and video.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. Additionally, any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.
- I understand that quotes from my interview may be used as arguments in a dissertation under an assigned number, as opposed to my real name.

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**Date**

**Participant's Signature**