

From Ephemerality to Organisationality: The Role of Hashtags in the Constitution of the #wirsindmehr Protests in Germany

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Abstract

Bound by a need for belonging and togetherness, open and fluid hashtag collectives like neo-tribes challenge the notion of political participation and activism in the digital. Although these new forms of activist collectives scale up quickly via social media, it is unclear how these loose neo-tribal collectives can transform from weak bonds to more organised collectives, with interconnected decision-making, organisational actorhood and collective identity. Building on the concept of organisationality, this study investigates how hashtags as non-human actors afford and restrict the communicative constitution of organisationality in digital neo-tribal collectives. Situating organisation in communicative interaction between human and non-human actors, the study shows how non-human actors such as hashtags constitute organisationality and, therefore, enable neo-tribes to act collectively. This paper uncovers this transformation by exploring the hashtag #wirsindmehr and the related protests on Twitter with a mixed-method approach combining social network analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis. This paper advances understanding the constitutive dimension of communication in neo-tribes and their transformation into more organised collectives. In addition, it complements the research on organisationality by understanding neo-tribal hashtag activism as a new form of organising on social media platforms.

1. Introduction

Hashtags play a crucial role in protests, activism, and community building in the digital (Eddington, 2018; Jackson *et al.*, 2018; Kuo, 2018; Rambukanna, 2015), as #OccupyWallStreet in the Occupy Movement (Kavada, 2015), online feminist solidarity in #MeToo (Pain, 2021), the fight against discrimination and racism with #BlackLivesMatter in the U.S. (Jones, 2020; Mahin and Ekstrand, 2021), and political and hate campaigns such as #MAGA (Eddington, 2018) illustrate. Hashtag activism challenges the notions of collectivity and organisation by leveraging the new possibilities of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to connect and communicate (Dolata and Schrape, 2016; Khazraee and Novak, 2018; Milan, 2015b; Puranam *et al.*, 2014). The emergence of loose hashtag collectives held together by a need for belonging and togetherness characterises new forms of political participation and collective action (e.g., Riley *et al.*, 2010). According to Choup (2008) and Priante *et al.* (2018), it is an emotional bond, a sense of “we-ness”, that lies at the heart of these hashtag collectives.

Being neither communities nor social movement in the traditional sense, scholars such as Robards (2018) or Hart (2018) argue to understand these hashtag activist collectives as neo-

tribes (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016). Due to their fluidity and lack of formal structures, these hashtag neo-tribes are often criticised for having no real impact, being too loose to transcend their ephemeral dynamic and shifting to actual practices. Nevertheless, hashtag activism can lead to coordinated protests and political action: political participation in the digital is considered a meaningful way of facilitating change (Halupka, 2014; Madison and Klang, 2020). However, it is unclear how these neo-tribes consolidate, stabilise – in short, how they can become organisational.

To collectively do something, neo-tribes need to transcend their ephemeral status and become at least partially or temporarily organised (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2019; Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019). Therefore, the study combines the concept of neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016) with the notion of organisationality (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019; Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019) as partial, temporal degree of organising constituted through communication. Investigating how such neo-tribal collectives reach a certain degree of organisationality (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019), this research focuses on the role of hashtags as non-human actors in the emergence of organisationality in hashtag activism. Thus, the research question is: how does the hashtag as a non-human actor shape, afford or restrict the communicative emergence of organisationality in loose neo-tribal collectives?

With a mixed-method approach combining social network analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis, communicational acts with the hashtag #wirsindmehr¹ on Twitter were analysed to understand the hashtag's role in the transformation from a loose neo-tribal collective in the digital to a protest concert with more than 65.000 attendees in a couple of days. The findings show how the hashtag, first, enables the neo-tribal collective to express their need for belonging and togetherness, to, then, co-constitute the emergence of collective identity, acquires organisational actorhood through internal and external attribution, and facilitates coordinated actions and collective decision-making.

The contributions of this study are as follows. The findings and conclusions advance the literature on hashtag activism and neo-tribals with a constitutive understanding of communication and hashtags as hypertext (Albu and Etter, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021) to account for the consolidation of neo-tribes in becoming organisational. Further, the study discusses neo-tribal characteristics of ephemerality, the search for belonging and the temporality and fluidity inherent in such hashtag collectives not as a counterpart to more organised and stable forms of political protest (such as social movements), but an inherent part of the relations and interactions, providing a fertile ground for becoming more organisational.

In what follows, this paper first presents hashtag activism as neo-tribal collectives that fuel digital protest through belonging togetherness and are characterised by ephemerality and fluidity. Next, the study introduces the concept of organisationality to discuss how loose fluid collectives outside formal organisations can nevertheless become organisational based on a constitutive understanding of communication. Introducing the empirical case study on the #wirsindmehr protests, the findings illustrate how the hashtag facilitates the shift from loose neo-tribal bonds to more organised forms of activism with a collective identity, organisational actorhood and interconnected decision-making. The paper concludes by briefly discussing limitations and future research and drawing conclusions for research on hashtag activism, neo-tribalism and organisationality.

¹ eng. „ We are more“

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The role of hashtags in social media activism

Combining social and technological abilities to share and organise information on a collective level (Eddington, 2018; Etter and Albu, 2021), hashtags with their hypertextual characteristics (Albu and Etter, 2016) afford a specific communicational behaviour for online activism. They adhere and categorise communicational acts like tweets or posts to a constantly redefined social context, and, thus, they make them searchable, storable, volatile, and durable at the same time (Kaufmann and Jeandesboz, 2017). Second, they act as anchors for attributing or appropriating identities to organisations, collectives or communities (Albu and Etter, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021). By using hashtags, users “enter an ongoing interaction on Twitter and thus contribute to co-constructing it, by bringing into their post the views and positions expressed by others using the hashtag” (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021: 17).

Although hashtags account for large-scale discussion spaces and facilitate mobilisation via digital communication, their affordances also restrict certain kinds of collective behaviour. Contributorship (Bencherki and Snack, 2016) to a hashtag network cannot be controlled or filtered a priori, even if these posts or tweets contradict the initial purpose of the hashtag. Albu and Etter (2016: 12) discuss this promiscuity of hashtags with “open authorship”: users can simultaneously support, alter and even contradict the initial message by using the hashtag in tweets, retweets, or quotes. Therefore hashtags shape but do not fully determine or pre-define the communication between different agents (Khazraee and Novak, 2018; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). These ephemeral and fluid characteristics of hashtags in activism lead to criticism of online actions as slacktivism or clicktivism, which focuses on the shareability and exposure rather than on the problem-solution itself (Carr, 2012). Thus, hashtag-led online protests seem to contradict “the bona fide ideal of activism – choosing to advocate for the cause that is needed the most” (Etter and Albu, 2021: 87).

Tufekci (2017), Milan (2015a), and Puranam *et al.* (2014) stress that traditional concepts and structures of social movements and offline activism cannot understand the underlying dynamics in the fluid ephemeral and lose digital phenomena like hashtag activism. Users who contribute to online activism on social media platforms search for emotional connection and digital intimacy (Rambukanna, 2015) to express shared sentiments (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Theorising these loose ties between ephemerality, togetherness, and activism, scholars (Hart, 2018; Robards, 2018; Robards and Bennett, 2011) have referred to the neo-tribal characteristics of such online collectives.

2.2. ‘The bond of the pack’: neo-tribal collectives

Maffesoli (1996) defines neo-tribes as “the constant interplay between growing massification and the development of micro-groups” (p.6). According to Dawes (2016), ‘neo-tribe’ is a metaphor for a dissolving distinction between the individual and society through an emotional connection. Neo-tribes emerge as ephemeral, fluid, non-exclusive, temporal and transitive groups of people, where individuals are bound together by a need for belonging (Dawes, 2016; Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Riley *et al.*, 2010; Robards and Bennett, 2011; Taylor, 2005). The neo-tribe as a temporal escape requires only a partial commitment from its

participants, a fragmented contribution of their individual identity (Kelemen and Smith, 2001). Therefore, individuals shift between the tribes to rearrange and reconstitute the fragments of their own identity and the multiple fluid tribes they are part of. Maffesoli (1996) emphasises the shared sentiment, the sharing of common taste or a certain state of mind, their “ethical experiences” (p. 15), in the tribal community expressed through the “aesthetic aura” (p. 9) such as lifestyles, appearances, forms or values. “The bond of the pact rather than the contract” (Maffesoli, 2016, p. 747) unites individuals through their quest for belonging and togetherness.

This new emphasis on emotions and belonging also characterise new forms of political participation constituted by sociality and proxemics, solidarity and belonging, hedonism, vitality and puissance and sovereignty over one’s existence: the politics of everyday life (Riley *et al.*, 2010; Robards and Bennett, 2011). This shift towards a more emotional approach of political activism requires an aloof, disconnected stance towards traditional political institutions and organisations (Riley *et al.*, 2010; Robards and Bennett, 2011). Simultaneously, this aloofness liberates the individuals, at least temporarily, from the implications of formal structures (Maffesoli, 1996; Riley *et al.*, 2010). Neo-tribes’ informal and heterogenic nature requires extensive effort to create and sustain this collectivity, as Crespín-mazet *et al.* (2017) stress. The individuals negotiate their membership through communication, following tribe-specific customs and styles in a defined territory (Maffesoli, 2016), such as, e.g., using similar hashtags or visuals. Through the shared use of symbols, neo-tribes may strengthen their unstable bonds through physical or digital connective threads (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Lewis, 2021). However, as Hart (2018: 215) stresses in his research on the Tumblr hashtags #ToplessTuesday and NSFW (Not Safe for Work) bloggers, a “hashtag itself is not a tangible community.”

Robards (2018) and Hart (2018) see neo-tribalism with its focus on belonging, floating levels of participation, aloofness to formal organisations or institutions, and ephemeral nature as particularly useful to understand online collectives such as hashtag activism that are not (yet) communities or social movements. While neo-tribalism accounts for the emotional, temporary and ever-changing nature of such digital collectives (Dawes, 2016), it cannot explain how these tribes manage to do things collectively. Bauman (1992: 137) saw tribes as “much too loose as formations to survive the moment from hope to practice.” Similarly, Hart (2018: 217) underlines that “tribes disperse as quickly as they form”. Research on neo-tribalism has rarely discussed how neo-tribes collectively do things and evolve from collective effervescence (Taylor, 2005) to more organised collectives. Hardy *et al.* (2021) and Hart (2018) point to the lack of research in understanding the formation and consolidation of neo-tribes that show some continuity or stability. In the end, some neo-tribes evolving around hashtags lead to political actions and start to matter (Albu and Etter, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2012).

To understand how neo-tribes can transform their loose emotional connection to coordinated and organised forms of collectivity, this study integrates the concept of organisationality (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019; Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019). This paper positions organisationality as particularly useful to discuss this shift as it acknowledges the temporal emergence of organisational characteristics by degree and anchored in the constitutive role of communication without denying the ephemeral and fluid nature of collectives like neo-tribes organising outside formal organisations. Building upon CCO (communicative constitution of organisation) theory (Cooren *et al.*, 2011; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019), communication between human and non-human

actors can lead to (at least partially and temporal unfolding) emergence of organisationality (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Endrissat and Islam, 2021).

2.3. Doing things together: organisationality in neo-tribal collectives

Anchored in a constitutive, processual and relational understanding, communication lies at the heart of organisation, in contrast to the notion of formal organisation with human members at its core (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Cooren *et al.*, 2011; Taylor and van Every, 1999). The notion of organisation as communicatively constituted includes more open and fluid forms of organisational phenomena that emerge outside formal organisational settings (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019; Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019). Thus, organisationality offers a framework for temporal or partial instances of organising or organisation, constituted through communication (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019). To become somewhat organisational, (digital) collectives have to at least partially or temporally display distinct organisational characteristics: interconnected instances of decision-making, the attribution of collective actorhood or authority and the negotiation of identity and boundaries (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). Through its focus on the temporality and partiality of these organisational aspects, organisationality opens the understanding of organisation as a stable entity with specified criteria like membership, hierarchies or sanctions towards a more open and fluid notion with various degrees of “organization-ness” (Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2015: 580).

Thus, in the same way as neo-tribalism, organisationality requires a degree of we-ness by combining parts of individuals’ identity to a collective through communication without an a priori formal structure. However, with the lack of any additional glue that holds these tribes together, shared values and emotions are not sufficient for neo-tribal collectives to become more stable, enduring, or organisational. The constitution of organisationality requires the interconnected episodes of decision making (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019), the negotiation of identity and boundaries (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015), and the internal attribution of actorhood to human or non-human actors that stand for the organisation (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021). Additionally, external audiences and actors have to attribute and grant authority to human or non-human figures to do something for the collective to acquire actorhood and, thus, organisationality (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Smith, 2021). What creates the basis for the emergence of organisationality in such unstable environments are formal or informal, interrelated communicational acts (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019; Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2015). Strengthening the scope of communication beyond (human) language, Smith (2021: 1) stresses the need to include “a ‘plurality’ of entities that differ in ontological status” into the understanding and formation of organisationality.

Referring to a communicative understanding of organisationality, a plenum of human and non-human actors can make a difference (Cooren, 2006, 2020; Latour, 2005; Mol, 2010). Treem and Leonardi (2012: 173) argue that non-human actors “allow people to do things that were difficult without them to do”. They can help individuals achieve things they could not do alone. Non-human actors such as texts, hashtags, infrastructure or more abstract things like visions do things in manifold ways. They merge and condense conversations and interactions and, e.g., create a notion of collective identity as a basis for coordinated actions (Cooren *et al.*, 2011). They can make other (human) actors speak through text in different places at different

times (Brummans, 2007; Cooren, 2004), co-create organisationality through space (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Wilhoit, 2018; Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2015), or carry-out multiple functions through their affordances as digital actors within platforms (Eddington, 2018). These actors create new possibilities to manifest and shape organisations' material and social reality (Eddington, 2018; Latour, 2005; Orlikowski, 2007). They act as formative participants in the constitution of organisation (Bencherki, 2016).

Thus, exploring the potential of hashtags as non-human actors for the emergence of organisationality in neo-tribes is promising for two main reasons. First, for neo-tribes, hashtags afford to act individually and as a mass simultaneously (Brock, 2012). Therefore, they enable individuals in neo-tribes to contribute part of their identity to a specific topic temporarily (Bencherki and Snack, 2016), with a heavy emphasis on emotional bonds, togetherness, and political participation outside formal organisations (Riley *et al.*, 2010; Robards and Bennett, 2011). However, literature on neo-tribes has not yet explored the potential of hashtags leading to more organised collectives through their communicative properties. Second relating to literature on the communicative constitution of organisationality (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019), the hashtag with its hypertextual characteristics (Albu and Etter, 2016) and its ability to “dis/attribute action to entities” (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021: 17) links communicational acts in the digital to specific topics and builds the basis for the attribution of actorhood, coordinated action and decision-making (Eddington, 2018). Thus, this study asks: *how does the hashtag as a non-human actor shape, afford or restrict the communicative emergence of organisationality in loose neo-tribal collectives?* Empirically, this study approaches the research question through a case study of the #wirsindmehr (eng. “We are more”) protests in Germany.

3. Empirical case study: the hashtag #wirsindmehr

3.1. Case description

On Aug 26, 2018, two refugees were accused of stabbing a festival visitor to death during local festivities in the German city of Chemnitz (Klormann, 2018). Although the details of the attack were unclear and not yet officially confirmed, right-wing-populist groups quickly gathered and organised a “funeral march”, which turned into a demonstration with 8,000 people, mainly from the right-wing organisations Pro Chemnitz and Pegida (ZEIT ONLINE, 2018). During this demonstration, various people were filmed chasing people off the streets and re-engaging in National Socialist activities like Nazi salutes. As a counter-protest, other people started to take action against this funeral march, but most protests still consisted of anti-immigrant groups gathering in Chemnitz (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2018c). The dynamic suddenly changed when the local musicians “Kraftclub” initiated a protest concert with other artists from Germany. Using the hashtag #wirsindmehr, the bands created awareness for discussing and criticising right-wing ideologies, immigration policies and the refugee crisis (Fluch, 2018). The initiative quickly gained momentum on social media platforms and, within a couple of days, resulted in a protest concert with approx. 65.000 participants in Chemnitz (Würfel, 2018) and nearly 1,000,000 people watched the YouTube live stream (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2018a). After the concert on Sep 3, more protests in several cities emerged from the initial protest (Bild.de, 2018). According to Twitter, #wirsindmehr was the most popular hashtag in Germany in 2018 (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2018b).

In line with the concept of neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996), an emotional debate about migration policies and emotional identity construction characterises the #wirsindmehr protests. The use of the hashtag scaled up very quickly in just a few days. It became one of the trending topics in Germany, fuelling a protest concert with 65.000 attendees in Chemnitz and inter-connected protests in several European cities. However, it is unclear how the neo-tribal collective accomplished organisationality among the protesters scattered all over Germany without any pre-existing formal structures. Therefore, the #wirsindmehr hashtag can offer valuable insights into how non-human actors enabled and restricted the formation and coordination of organisationality in neo-tribes.

3.2. Choice of method and data selection

To account for the technological and communicative aspects of the hashtag in the formation of organisationality on Twitter, this paper adopts a mixed-methods approach combining social network analysis (SNA) (Blaschke *et al.*, 2012) and critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) as suggested by Kuo (2018). The combination of these methods acknowledges the impact of the technological functionality of the hashtag on the connectivity and centrality of the communicative acts and provides insight into the social matrix of the internet phenomena (Brock, 2012, 2018; Sweeney and Brock, 2014).

Discussing the advantages of integrating the network perspective into CCO research, Blaschke *et al.* (2012: 880) emphasise that “individual episodes of communication connect to each other to form collectively an organisation as a network of communication episodes”. SNA offers the possibility of discovering connections between communicative acts, like, e.g. tweets with a particular hashtag (Jackson *et al.*, 2018), and identifying the communicative acts in conversations around hashtags (Eddington, 2018). Therefore, this paper integrates SNA to discover and visualise the ties created by the technological properties of the hashtag and select the most central tweets for the subsequent discourse analysis (Jackson *et al.*, 2018; Kuo, 2018).

Through retweets, replies or mentions, Twitter as a social media platform offers various possibilities to tie the individual communicative acts. These ties serve as a transmitter of messages and meaning (Battisti *et al.*, 2021; Knoke and Yang, 2010) and create a relational space around hashtags enabling the emergence of organisational actions (Eddington, 2018). Building upon Knoke and Yang (2010) and Battisti *et al.* (2021), the retweets, quotes and replies offer a first understanding of the interaction within the neo-tribe. The retweet increases the reach of a specific communicational episode. This relocation of the original tweet immerses new audiences and configures a joint frame for interaction with shared authorship (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021). Within these retweets, hashtags engage and represent collectives or organisations to a broader public (Albu and Etter, 2016). A reply encourages a discussion, while a quote increases the reach, but not without adding another aspect to the initial communicational episode. The reactions in such replies and quotes can both be positive (satisfaction, support, or gratitude) or negative (such as dissatisfaction, arguments and questioning) (Dawson, 2018).

According to Brock (2018), CTDA explicitly includes natively digital objects and features of ICTs (e.g., hashtags) in the negotiation of meaning in public discourses not as neutral actors but as a means to replicate, change or redefine cultural power structure and values. CTDA wants to shift the focus of discourse analysis towards the technological affordances of social

media platforms without losing its critical lens and qualitative focus (Brock, 2012, 2018; Sweeney and Brock, 2014).

The tweets with #wirsindmehr offer an opportunity to analyse the communication leading to the constitution of the protest concert in Chemnitz, Germany. The data set for the analysis consists of 25.784 tweets that include the hashtag #wirsindmehr: 11.891 tweets from Aug 29, 2018, (the initiation of the hashtag and start of the #wirsindmehr protests) and another 13.893 tweets from Sep 3, 2018, (the day of the protest concert). The first period captures the first use of #wirsindmehr as a response to the funeral marches. The second period represents the day of the #wirsindmehr protest concert. In addition, several media reports about the protests, YouTube videos, and information on protest-related websites, were included as secondary material to gain an in-depth understanding of the process and context of the protests.

3.3. Data analysis

The mixed-methods approach of combining SNA and CTDA offers the possibility to go beyond the technological affordances of the hashtag #wirsindmehr. It shows the importance of the hashtags as hypertext (Albu and Etter, 2016) for the connections and relations between communicational episodes and investigates how organisationality and neo-tribal characteristics come into being in a plenum of human and non-human agencies on platforms in the digital (Cooren, 2006; Smith, 2021).

The SNA provides an overview of the tweets that use #wirsindmehr in the emerging protests and the interactions connecting them. In line with a communication-centred understanding of organisation, the empirical analysis focuses on communicational acts (i.e., tweets) rather than individuals like user profiles. The ties to communicative acts (i.e. retweets, quotes, or replies) are analysed as the degree of the nodes (i.e. the tweets) in the network, which help reveal the central communicative acts and how they are amplified through interaction (Kuo, 2018). The visualised star networks (see Figure 4.1.1 and Figure 4.2.1) indicate tweets with a highly favoured structural position in the network. The size of the nodes depends on the outgoing degree of the respective tweets. As the gathered data does not present a complete network but only a selected period and scope of the conversation, SNA metrics like closeness centrality or betweenness centrality would not provide precise representations of the network. In line with Hanneman and Riddle (2011), the outgoing degree was chosen to calculate the node size in the network.

As a basis for qualitative analysis, the data was selected regarding the most central and connected tweets in the SNA's modularity classes (i.e., more extensive star networks) encompassing more than 1 per cent of the analysed network in total. Further, the tweets were filtered again by an outgoing degree with a minimum value of 1. These tweets entail at least one interaction with another communicational act, whether through a retweet, a quote, or a reply. These metrics ensure that at least one other communicational episode is linked to them. They have been acted upon and thus, contribute to the ongoing stream of communication and organisation. For the second, qualitative-oriented step of the analysis, 1.631 tweets from Aug 29, 2018, and 2.710 tweets from Sep 3, 2018, were critically analysed with an open coding approach to gain an overview of the conversational framework surrounding the hashtag and its link to neo-tribal characteristics and organisationality. Retweets were excluded from the CTDA as they are (content-wise) identical to the original tweets, and their impact is represented in the SNA.

4. Findings

4.1. Stage 1: the emergence of the #wirsindmehr neo-tribe

On Aug 29, 2018, the German Indie band Kraftklub started using the hashtag #wirsindmehr to announce the upcoming concert and counter-protests to the right-wing demonstrations. Thus, the hashtag #wirsindmehr initially formed as a protest sign against the right-wing demonstrations in Chemnitz and spread among the Twitter community rapidly. The language and meaning of the words themselves (the German expression “Wir sind mehr”, meaning “We are more”) highlight the emphasis on an emotional bond and togetherness.

Figure 4.1.1 visualises the network of tweets with the hashtag #wirsindmehr from Aug 29, the day of the protest concert announcement. A strong emphasis lies on the relocation of the hashtag to new audiences through retweets. The initial tweet by Kraftklub and the follow-up tweets linked to the announcement by several fellow musicians got quickly retweeted by the local population in Saxony, activists, music fans all over Germany and its neighbouring countries, media outlets like Spiegel Online, and the municipality of Chemnitz (“Stadt Chemnitz” in Figure 4.1.1). With a vast amount of retweets, the hashtag quickly was transformed and adapted through shared authorship (Albu and Etter, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021) and established a space for interaction for those who wanted to share their need for belonging and contribute to a diverse, open and peaceful political protest.

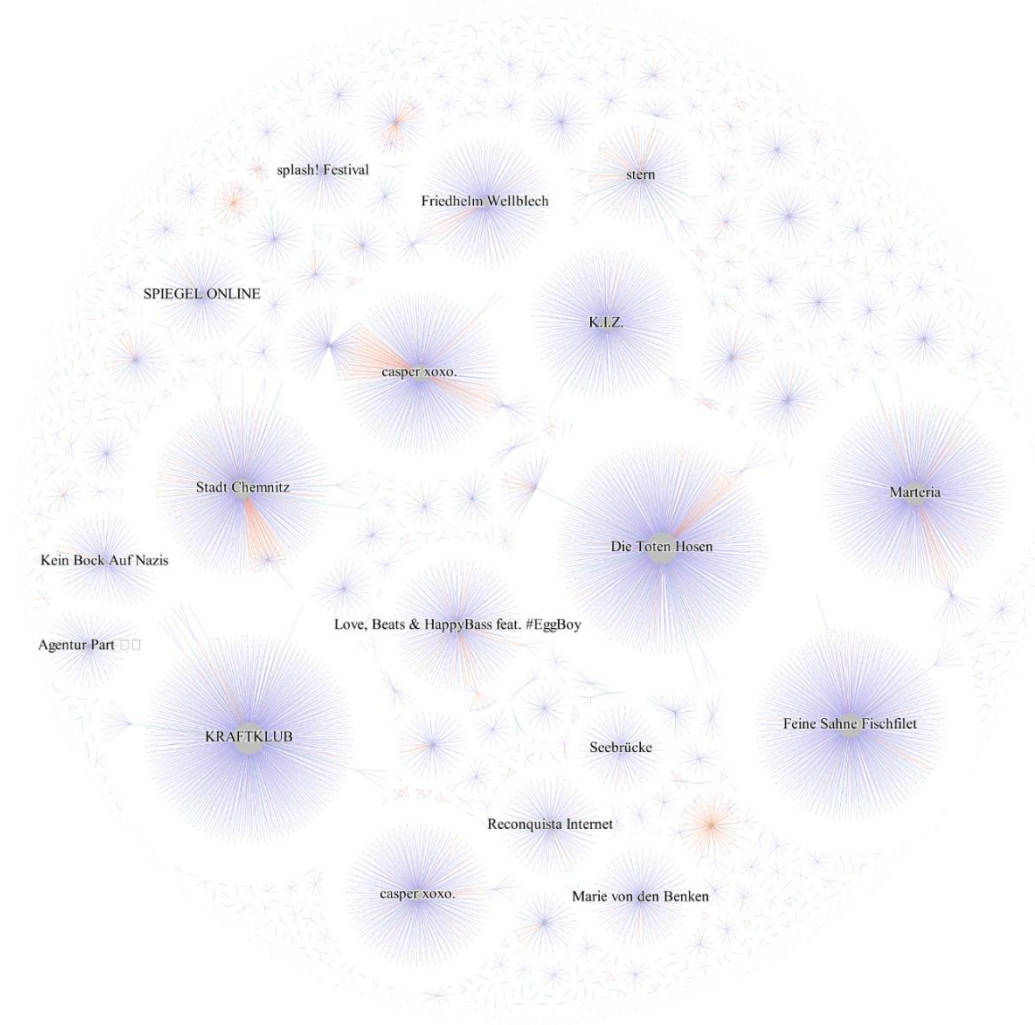


Figure 4.1.1. Visualisation of the Twitter data set of Aug 29, 2018 (purple = retweet, orange = quote, green = reply).

As shown in Table 4.1.1, the neo-tribal characteristics within this initial phase of the hashtag activist collective forming materialised in the low-commitment participation (by simply retweeting) guided by a shared aesthetical aura (i.e., the use of the same hashtags and similar expressions) and the search for belonging and togetherness.

The search for being together and belonging, the ethical experience (Maffesoli, 2016) within a group, was central to many communicational episodes. It revolved around the notion of “not being alone” and “being part of a diverse society”. The hashtag #wirsindmehr established such a space with a distinct aesthetical aura (Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Maffesoli, 1996), where the members of the neo-tribe could express shared sentiments and claim sovereignty over their existence and beliefs. This discursive space also enabled the expression of political values such as democracy, diversity, and human rights without the need for formal institutions. This neo-tribal politics of everyday life (Riley *et al.*, 2010) exemplified the aloof stance towards institutionalised political action and formal democratic organisations.

Neo-tribal characteristics	Exemplary quotes
<p>The ethical quest for belonging and togetherness (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016; Robards and Bennett, 2011; Riley <i>et al.</i>, 2010)</p>	<p><i>“stand up against right-wing rushes! we will come to Chemnitz on Monday! entrance is free, come around! you are not alone, #wirsindmehr (all info: https://t.co/Tpe2YxVxWC)”</i> (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</p> <p><i>“Hey Gabi [a local citizen who shared a video calling for support], you are not alone! Because #wirsindmehr! #GabiIsNotAlone #SaxonyAgainstTheRight #WeNeedMoreGabis</i> (Tweet from August 29, 2018)</p>
<p>The aesthetic aura shared (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016; Goulding and Shankar, 2011; values Robards and Bennett, 2011)</p>	<p><i>„(...) That’s not #Saxony! #wirsindmehr! Let’s dance lifestyles, colourfully and together for love and open-mindedness ❤️😊 or (...)”</i> (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</p>
<p>Politics of everyday life (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016; Riley <i>et al.</i>, 2010; Robards & Bennett, 2011)</p>	<p><i>“(...) We are no longer talking about a “nice festival” with #wirsindmehr, but about a clear reaction of pop culture to the and ailing brown mob.”</i> (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</p>
<p>aloof, disconnected stance towards traditional political institutions and organisations</p>	<p><i>“The things politics is not able to deliver is now done by artists towards #wirsindmehr Thanks @marteria @CASPERxOFFICIAL @dietotenhosen @Kraftklub @K_I_Z_ @nura #c0309</i> (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</p> <p><i>“THIS is #Chemnitz! Making a mark with music. #wirsindmehr”</i> (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</p>

Table 4.1.1. Neo-Tribal characteristics in the emergences of the #wirsindmehr collective.

However, one of the most embraced and simultaneously criticised neo-tribal characteristics surrounding the hashtag was the emphasis on the festive and hedonistic format of the protest (i.e., the concert) linked to the ephemerality and the intention of hashtag activism. Especially, tweets with the aim to deconstruct the validity of the protest referred to #wirsindmehr as a party and as another hashtag being “a flash in the pan” rather than considering it as an actual political protest. Further, these texts discredited the attendees as they suggested they joined just for fun, not for the cause itself. The festive character and impact of the planned protest concert were similarly embraced and criticised amongst the concert initiators, as the following Twitter thread from Aug 29, 2018, illustrates:

User A: *In the office, the calls for a company trip to Chemnitz on Monday are getting louder. Casper, Marteria, Kraftklub, Trettmann, K.I.Z. and Feine Sahne ... quite a decent line-up.*

User B (answers): *As cool as the line-up is, how does that help against right-wing violence? I think I'm getting tired of demonstrations.*

User C (answers): *Does it hurt?*

User B: *No, but does it help?*

User C: I think so, yes. But not every event is a thing for everyone.

User A (answering both B & C): It brings: solidarity. The feeling of not being alone. Positive images for the (also international) press. A good feeling for all Saxons and everyone who opposes the right anyway. And good music. And the proof: #WirSindMehr

4.2. Stage 2: shifting from loose bonds to organisationality

On Sep 3, 2018, the day of the protests concert, more than 65.000 people gathered in Chemnitz to join the protests against right-wing populism and attend the concert. Compared to the network from Aug 29, 2018 (see Figure 4.1.1), the tweets from Sep 3, 2018, are more dispersed, and prominent tweets have a smaller outgoing degree than in the first network (see Figure 4.2.1). The central actors are politicians, media outlets and journalists; the musicians only play a small role. However, one star cluster is characterised by a substantial number of replies (green). The central communicational episode in this star network is a now-deleted Tweet by the then-parliamentary party leader of the far-right party “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD). She accused the #wirsindmehr concert visitors of dancing on graves and being ‘slaves’ of then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Instead of spreading the tweet’s content along with the hashtag with the retweet function (for example, in most of the prominent tweets in Figure 4.1.1), the users discussed and reacted through replies: they entered a negotiation.

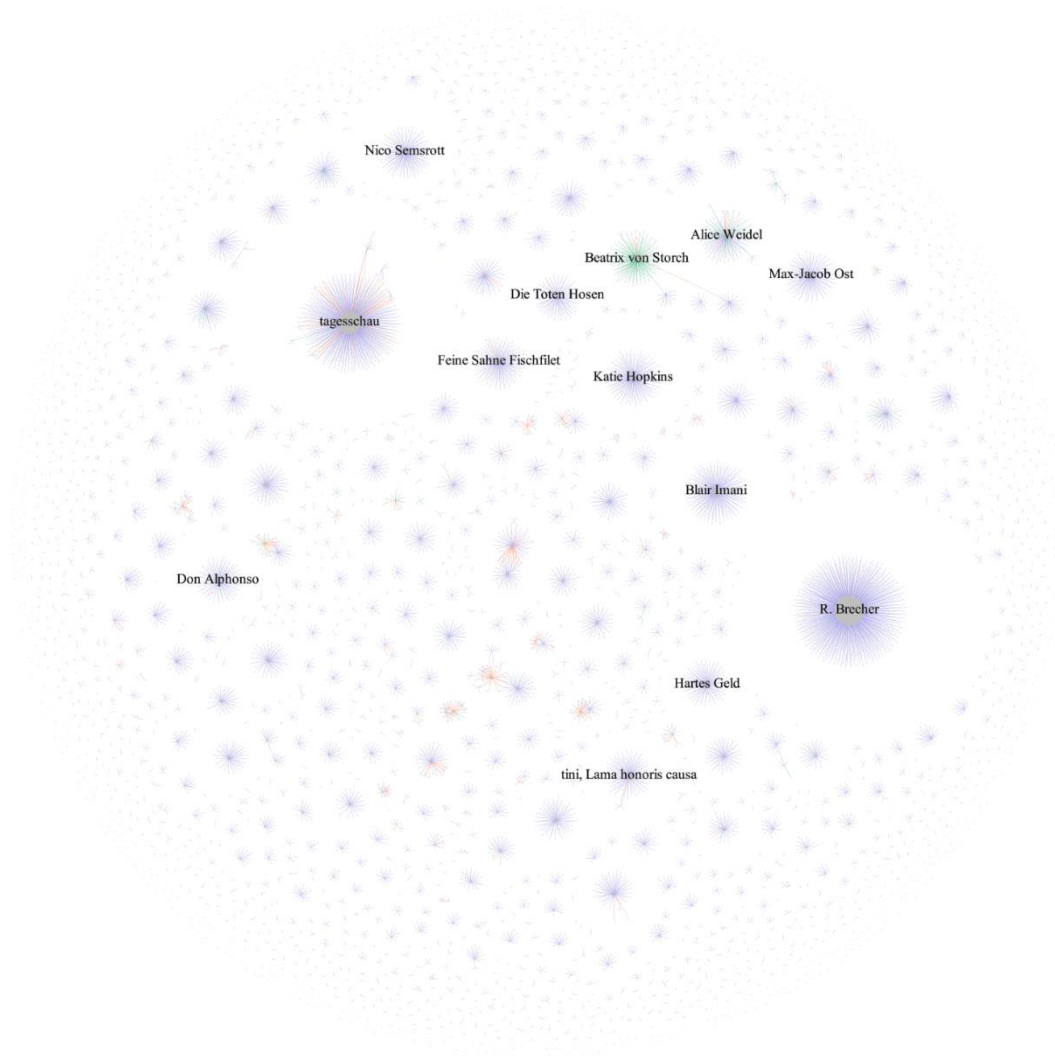


Figure 4.2.1. Visualisation of the Twitter data set of Sep 3, 2018 (purple = retweet, orange = quote, green = reply).

As illustrated in Table 4.2.1, the hashtag actively formed organisationality in terms of collective identity and boundaries, the attribution of actorhood and instances of coordinated and interconnected decision-making.

Organisational characteristics (Dawson & Bencherki, 2021; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015)	Exemplary quotes
<p>negotiation of collective identity and boundaries <i>Membership inclusion</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Membership exclusion</i></p>	<p><i>In #Chemnitz, freedom, equality, democracy and the rule of law are being defended against Nazis. By rappers, guitar bands and about 50,000 people. Thanks to all of you. You are exactly the roaring, moshing, peacefully celebrating signal that we need right now. #wirsindmehr (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p> <p><i>A beautiful showing of solidarity against right-wing fear-mongering, intimidation, and incitement.” (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p> <p><i>“AGAINST RACISM AGAINST FASCISM AGAINST HOMOPHOBIA AGAINST NAZIS AGAINST AFD AND AGAINST ALL THE AGITATORS #FCKNZS #FCKAFD #Wirsindmehr” (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p>
<p>attribution of collective actorhood <i>Internal attribution of actorhood</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>External attribution of actorhood</i></p>	<p><i>“The hashtag #wirsindmehr must live on after the concert, NOT just as a left-wing counter-movement, but as a counter-movement of the TOTAL population, who wants to stop the brown mob. THEN we are truly more!” (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p> <p><i>“Honestly: #wirsindmehr makes me really very happy! It is such a great sign against the mood of the last days - thank you for that!!!” (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p> <p><i>“Kramp-Karrenbauer [at the time, Ministry of Defence] criticises the German President for pointing out #wirsindmehr? Are you kidding #CDU?! It’s good that many people are now speaking out against racism and Nazi violence. You should not criticise but applaud. #chemnitz #c0309” (Tweet from September 3, 2018)</i></p>
<p>Interconnected decision-making <i>Coordinated action</i></p>	<p><i>“Not directly from Chemnitz, but from Dresden, but the same offer: if you would like to come from far away to #wirsindmehr on Monday: ich will gladly offer another sleeping place :)” (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</i></p> <p><i>“thanks to all the awesome people who retweeted my shit. I actually found a ride to Chemnitz for me and 3 other people for monday - thanks a lot & #wirsindmehr #Chemnitz #FCKNZS” (Tweet from Aug 29, 2018)</i></p>

Organisational characteristics (Dawson & Bencherki, 2021; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015)	Exemplary quotes
<i>Decision-making</i>	<p><i>“Found for today so far: #Chemnitz 65.000 #Kiel 4.000 #Zürich 3.000 #Duisburg 1.500 #Dresden 600 #Munich 300 Remarkable in the last few days also: #Hamburg 16.000 #Berlin 5.000 Correction/supplement requested. ❤️ #wirsindmehr #nonazis #noafd #nopegida ❤️” (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p> <p><i>It’s enough! #WIRSINDMEHR and stand up against racism and violence on 13.09. in #Essen! Save the date! More detailed information will be coming in the next 48 hours. (Tweet from Sep 3, 2018)</i></p>

Table 4.2.1. The role of the hashtag #wirsindmehr in the emergence of organisationality.

Identity and Boundaries: The communicational acts surrounding this green cluster in Figure 4.2.1 are one example of the negotiation of the collective identity of #wirsindmehr as an open, democratic collective, promoting another side of a diverse and accepting city of Chemnitz. The inside membership negotiation of the #wirsindmehr protests did not position the members as part of the far-left corner but as citizens of the political centre, including everybody who respects democratic values and a diverse society. While the tweets still heavily emphasised their solidaric bond and being together (in line with neo-tribal characteristics) through stating #wirsindmehr, the discussion also shifted towards a more nuanced negotiation of the collective identity around #wirsindmehr. Tweets advocated for #wirsindmehr to include protests discussing homophobia and especially highlighted the inclusion of young and politically aware people. At the same, actors like the right-wing party AfD, Neo-Nazis, and the organisations Pegida, Pro Chemnitz and the Identitarian movement were explicitly excluded as part of the #wirsindmehr collective.

However, the hashtag #wirsindmehr also fuelled the emergence of a second, collective identity. The tweets show that right-wing protesters discussed and framed their identity by using #wirsindmehr. The members positioned themselves as concerned citizens who care for the safety of Chemnitz, respect and grief the death of the festival visitor and take a stance against the current political course in the migration crisis with a focus on Angela Merkel and the allegedly fake news spread by the mainstream media. The membership negotiations for this collective emphasise national identity and patriotism. It explicitly excludes left-extremists and people who agree with governmental decisions linked to migration, such as #wirsindmehr. Both collective identities attribute more radical and extremist positions to each other and do not differentiate between the sub-groups amongst the identities. They distinguish themselves with an “us versus them” rhetoric.

While the focus on neo-tribal belonging and togetherness is still a big part of the shared values of the protest, as exemplified with statements like *“We’ll still live in Chemnitz when the cameras are gone. And it’s important not to feel alone. Thank you for coming!”*, the negotiation of identity in this stage draws more explicit boundaries. Especially through the emergence of the second, contradicting identity hijacking the hashtag, the negotiation and emphasis on a democratic and inclusive collective identity intensified despite the widespread and dispersed use of the hashtag.

Attribution of Organisational Actorhood: These negotiations of collective identity attributed collective actorhood to the hashtag itself through exclusive (e.g. *“#wirsindmehr does not represent right-wing populists”*) or inclusive (e.g. *“#wirsindmehr stands for a democratic and open society”*) communicative statements (see Table 4.2.1). Thus, both the supporting and opposing actors continued to attribute the capability to do things to the hashtag itself and shifted its function as a mere symbol of belonging to a formative figure with organisational actorhood (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021). In handling the unexpected protesters’ numbers (more than 65.000 instead of the initial estimated 10.000), #wirsindmehr was utilised to coordinate and organise the protester’s mobility at the concert. The initial hashtag was transformed into a stand-alone Twitter account with the username “wirsindmehr”, speaking for the protest. During the concert itself, #wirsindmehr spoke as ‘one voice’ that positions itself against right-wing hate and discrimination and stands for an open, diverse and democratic society.

Coordinated Action & Decision-Making: Through the use of the hashtag, the communicational episodes enabled forms of coordinated collective action: offline protests with more than 65.000 people at the concert in Chemnitz, the lift offers to the concert among

protesters and additional coordinated services provided by formal organisations such as FlixBus, CocaCola or car-sharing companies. In line with McPhee and Zaug's (2000) understanding of activity coordination towards a common goal, actors across the country coordinated their actions to support the movement, such as this tweet illustrates:

Two theatre ensembles, two cities, more than 400km apart - together and live connected with Chemnitz. #WirSindMehr #FCKNZS (Tweet from Sep 3rd, 2018)

Moreover, the hashtag facilitated inter-connected decision-making through increasing awareness and participation for offline protests across other German cities. Anti-right-wing protests connected to #wirsindmehr occurred in several German cities and other countries such as Switzerland, adopting similar values and joining the protest (without the concert dimension). As these protests appropriated the #wirsindmehr across several cities, the hashtag begins to develop a "life on its own" (Schoeneborn and Dobusch, 2019: 323).

Despite the organisational characteristics of #wirsindmehr, users and protesters were still concerned about the longevity and the remaining impact after the concert day as statements such as "The spirit of #WirSindMehr is so great. What's missing now: a website where all the demos, actions, protests against Nazis can be found. So that we can all take to the streets tomorrow and beyond #againstNazis and racism" or "It's all fine that people from all over Germany have come to #Chemnitz, but what happens when they're all gone?" illustrate. After the success of the protest concert and several connected protests in German-speaking cities in autumn 2018, the platform KOSMOS was founded to foster active participation of citizens, establish an open discourse in the public space and initiate further protest concerts and events in the long term. Openly discussing its roots and anchoring in the neo-tribal hashtag protest around #wirsindmehr on its website, the formally established initiative launched a revival of the initial protest concert spirit under the slogan #wirbleibenmehr (eng. We stay more) in 2019 and continues hosting many more small-scale events and workshops together in Chemnitz.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on the findings of the empirical case study on #wirsindmehr, this study shows how the formative power of non-human actors in the communicative constitution of organisationality in digital neo-tribal collectives. Hashtags enable ephemeral and fluid neo-tribal collectives can become organisational in facilitating the negotiation of identity and boundaries, the external and internal attribution of actorhood and instances of interconnected decision-making (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). This study concludes by theorising the following conclusions to the literature on hashtag activism, neo-tribes and organisationality.

First, integrating a constitutive view of communication with hashtags and their hypertextual, open and organisational features (Albu and Etter, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021) gives insight into the shift of loose neo-tribes to more organised forms of collectives. As the findings in stage 1 show, the hashtag enabled individuals to attribute and negotiate their shared values and a part of their identity. In the case of #wirsindmehr, the hashtag served as a space to express the ethical experience aesthetical aura and contribute to the politics of everyday life for the neo-tribe. However, in stage 2, it also served as a space for negotiating identity, about who belongs or contributes (Bencherki, 2016) to the neo-tribe and who does not. The changing in dynamics of interaction (as shown in the shift from retweets to replies in the SNA) and the

negotiation of exclusion and inclusion of the neo-tribes' boundaries help people to "interactionally figure out whose actions are relevant to their organisation" (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021: 7). Through this negotiation, external recognition and the purposeful staging of communication acts, the hashtag acquired organisational actorhood (Dawson and Bencherki, 2021; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015) in the ongoing conversation, both by supportive internal attribution and by critical external voices appropriating the hashtag for their purposes (Dawson, 2018). Through this interaction, the hashtag stands and acts on its own for the collective across space and time (Albu and Etter, 2016), e.g. serving as a blueprint for similar protests in other cities besides Chemnitz and building the basis for the emergence of the KOSMOS initiative. By gaining its voice through internal and external attribution of actorhood and the negotiation of a collective identity beyond the shared sentiments, the hashtag played a constitutive role in the emergence of organisationality.

In neo-tribalism and organisationality, contributorship (Bencherki and Snack, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021) to a collective is anchored in communication. While neo-tribalism has so far considered communication rather as a tool for expressing shared aesthetics, the study shows that the interaction between human and non-human actors through communication like hashtags can transform ephemeral and promiscuous neo-tribes such as hashtag collectives towards more organised, coordinated and stable collectives. Highlighting the co-constitutive dimension of communication, hashtags "simultaneously coproduce an organizational actor and act as a pastiche of the organization (i.e., a vehicle of contestation for the specific identity they were designed to bring into existence)." (Albu and Etter, 2016: 5). Future research on neo-tribes can advance this constitutive view of communication to understand how the expression of neo-tribal characteristics through various modes of communication (whether online or offline) goes beyond its representational function and has the power to transform, alter and constitute the nature of the neo-tribes, without neglecting their fluidity, ephemerality and openness.

Second, the findings of this study show that the ephemeral and hedonistic characteristics of hashtag collectives can both fuel the short-lived, loose and promiscuous neo-tribal collectives and maintain their importance in more organised forms of collectives. The festive characters of the protest (Goulding and Shankar, 2011), the aloof stance in the politics of everyday life (Riley *et al.*, 2010; Robards and Bennett, 2011) and the sense of belonging and togetherness (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016) remain a crucial part of #wirsindmehr also in later stages of the protest and follow-up initiatives. In line with recent calls to acknowledge the importance of affectual relations for the constitution of collectives outside formal organisations (Endrissat and Islam, 2021), neo-tribalism offers a promising input for digital collectives that face the criticism of being overly focused on fun, hedonism or play in contrast to 'real' social movements and political actions. The findings show that this affectual dimension in neo-tribes does not stand in contrast to organised forms of protests. It can act as the basis for starting identity and boundary negotiation and strive towards a common goal through coordinated actions and collective decision-making. The hashtag, with its possibility for open authorship, fluidity and promiscuity (Albu and Etter, 2016; Dawson and Bencherki, 2021; Endrissat and Islam, 2021) serves as a tool to express and contribute in an affectual, ephemeral and partial manner while also providing the affordances for becoming organisational with this flux. By highlighting the importance of belonging, togetherness and more festive and hedonistic notions of participation in neo-tribes (Dawes, 2016; Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Riley *et al.*, 2010; Robards and Bennett, 2011; Taylor, 2005), the link between neo-tribalism and organisationality offers a first glimpse to understand how some hashtag collective overcome the

individualisation and spectral notions of communities in a flux (Endrissat and Islam, 2021), and stabilise the fluid and precarious nature of organising at least temporarily (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015).

Taking a communication-based lens on organising, organisation and organisationality (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019) as a hybrid phenomenon situated on digital platforms, further research is needed to clarify how organising outside organisations may stabilise or what prevents them from doing so by considering power dynamics within technologically mediated platforms (for first insights, see, e.g., Etter and Albu, 2021;). A limitation of this research is the focus on only one social platform due to data privacy and accessibility restrictions of Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp. Future research could extend the scope of this empirical study towards other platforms like Instagram, Reddit or Telegram with different modes of interaction and affordances to understand different processes towards organisationality.

This study highlights the crucial role of hashtags in transforming loose and ephemeral neo-tribes to more organised activist collectives with an empirical case study of the #wirsindmehr protests in Germany. The combination of neo-tribal theory (Maffesoli, 1996, 2016) and the emphasis on the communicative constitution of organisationality (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Cooren, 2018; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Smith, 2021; Wilhoit, 2018) provide further insights into the constitutive role of communication and non-human actors like hashtags that mediate the transformation of loose and fluid collectives into, at least temporarily or partially, organised forms with the ability to act collectively. This research is another step towards understanding hashtag activism and adds a heuristic conceptualisation of the role of non-human actors in the communicative constitution of organisationality in the digital.

Keywords:

organisationality, neo-tribalism, communicative constitution of organisations (CCO), non-human actors, hashtag, Twitter

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