

## THE PYRAMID OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT: CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT GRETA THUNBERG IN INDONESIA

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### Abstract

This study extends the Pyramid of Digital Activism conceptualized by George and Leidner (2019) to the global environmental movement, using Greta Thunberg as a case study. The proposed framework categorizes digital activists into three tiers: gladiators, transition, and spectators.

The gladiator level is characterized by eco-celebrity status, confrontative nature, and the utilization of digital activism. Greta Thunberg exemplifies this tier through her confrontative activism, strategic use of digital media, and global recognition as an eco-celebrity. This research explores Thunberg's impact on environmental politics in Indonesia, highlighting how her digital activism has galvanized a new generation of eco-activists and influenced policy discussions. By leveraging social media, Thunberg has transcended geographical barriers, demonstrating the potential of digital activism to foster significant environmental advocacy and policy change. The study concludes that the new Pyramid of Global Environmental Activism framework provides a robust model for understanding the dynamics and impact of digital activism within the environmental movement.

Keywords: Global Environmental Movement, Greta Thunberg, Indonesia, Digital Activism, Case Study

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of digital activism is continually evolving, with scholars presenting various models to capture its essence. Among these, George and Leidner (2019) proposed a pyramid framework that categorizes digital activists into three layers: gladiators, transition, and spectators. This study extends their model to the global environmental movement, highlighting how Greta Thunberg epitomizes the gladiator tier due to her confrontative activism, adept use of digital media, and her role as an eco-celebrity. We explore the impact of Thunberg's movement on Indonesia, emphasizing the transformative effects of her digital activism.

In recent years, the world has witnessed a remarkable surge in youth activism, especially in environmental sustainability. This surge is epitomized by the emergence of young leaders who have transcended national boundaries to inspire global movements. Among these leaders, Greta Thunberg stands out as a pivotal figure. Born on January 3, 2003, in Stockholm, Sweden, Greta began her activism in her teenage years, driven by a profound concern for climate change and its impacts on future generations.

Despite her parents, Malena Ernman, a renowned opera singer, and Svante Thunberg, an actor, not being activists, Greta's environmental commitment has roots in her family history. She is a descendant of Svante Arrhenius, a scientist who pioneered the greenhouse effect model and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1903. This lineage, while not directly activist, imbued Greta with a legacy of scientific curiosity and environmental awareness.

Greta's activism took a personal turn when she convinced her family to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle and cease flying in 2016, underscoring her commitment to living her principles. Her solitary protest outside the Swedish Parliament in 2018 evolved into the global 'Fridays for Future' movement, drawing millions of young people worldwide into climate action. Greta's approach and message have catalyzed a transnational dialogue, challenging policymakers, businesses, and communities to address the urgent need for environmental sustainability.

In 2019, Greta Thunberg was honored as Time magazine's Person of the Year, a testament to her courageous advocacy and significant impact in elevating climate change issues. Thunberg's "Fridays for Future" campaign, where she skipped school every Friday to demonstrate the urgency of climate action, became a seminal symbol within the global climate movement.

Driven by a deep-seated belief that her generation faces a bleak future if the climate crisis remains unaddressed, Thunberg has sharply criticized global leaders and industries for their failure to produce concrete solutions, including the prevalent practice of greenwashing by corporations to attract customers under false environmental pretenses.

This journal article aims to revisit the Pyramid of Digital Activism conceptualized by George and Leidner (2019), applying it to the case study of Greta Thunberg. According to George and Leidner, the Pyramid of Digital Activism is structured into three layers:

- Spectator: Individuals who consume content but do not actively engage.
- Transition: Individuals who engage with content by sharing and promoting it, thus beginning to take a more active role.

- **Gladiator:** Highly active participants who create content and lead movements.

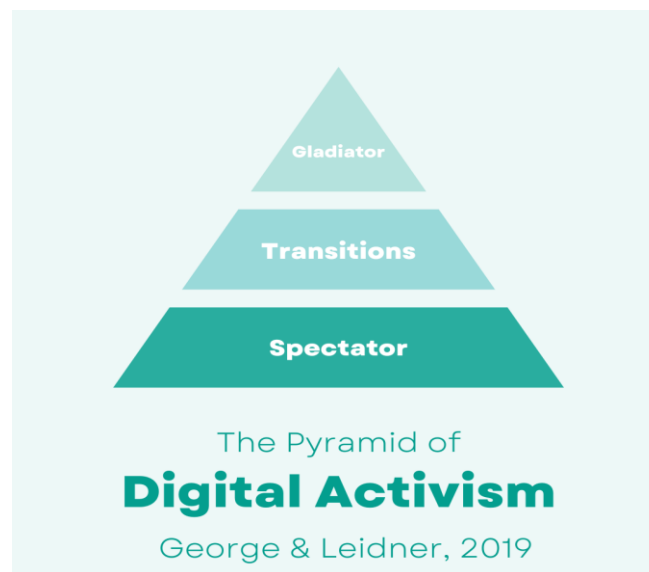
Research on the impact of Greta Thunberg's transnational movement on environmental politics in Indonesia offers new insights into how global activism influences national policies. Initiatives like Thunberg's Fridays for Future have inspired many young activists around the world, including in Indonesia, to be more vocal and active in climate change issues.

As a country with high carbon emissions and significant vulnerability to climate change impacts, Indonesia faces unique challenges. Law Number 16 of 2016 and Presidential Regulation Number 59 of 2017 affirm Indonesia's commitment to supporting the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals. However, financial constraints, technology, and scientific resources often hinder the effective implementation of policies.

## 2. Literature Review

In their 2019 article, George and Leidner present a hierarchy of political participation tailored for the digital age, encompassing three distinct levels: digital spectator, digital transitional, and digital gladiatorial activities. Each level signifies varying degrees of engagement and impact within the sphere of digital activism.

**Figure 1. The Pyramid of Digital Activism**



Source: George & Leidner, 2019

According to George and Leidner, the digital spectator level encompasses the majority of activities in digital activism and engages the most people. Approximately two-thirds of social media users have participated in social media politics at some point, highlighting the extensive reach and accessibility of these activities. This tier includes three main types of activities:

1. **Clicktivism:** Simple engagements like liking, sharing, or following political content.
2. **Metavoicing:** More engaged actions such as sharing, retweeting, or commenting

on political content to amplify a message.

3. Assertion: Creating original content or posts to express personal or political views.

The next level is digital transitional activities, which act as a bridge between spectator and gladiatorial activities. These activities require more resources than spectator actions and generally have a stronger impact, though not as potent as gladiatorial activities. Transitional activities typically include:

1. Political Consumerism: Using consumer choices to support political agendas.
2. Digital Petitions: Gathering digital signatures to prompt government or organizational responses.
3. Botivism: Utilizing automated bots to spread political messages or influence public opinion.
4. E-funding: Leveraging digital platforms to fundraise for political causes or campaigns.

At the highest tier, the gladiator level involves direct actions where participants actively create change rather than merely influencing it. These activities are typically carried out by loose coalitions or independent groups rather than traditional political parties. The potential impacts of these actions are significant, affecting societal norms, government policies, and organizational practices. Examples of gladiatorial activities include:

1. Data Activism: Leveraging data for advocacy or change by accessing, distributing, or analyzing data to support a political cause.
2. Exposure: Engaging in activities like whistleblowing or leaking information to reveal hidden truths.
3. Hacktivism: Using hacking skills to access information, disrupt services, or highlight vulnerabilities for political or social causes.

In understanding George and Leidner's article, Beduya et al. (2022) utilized the digital spectator concept in their research on the Anti-Terrorism Bill in the Philippines. They found that while digital spectatorship is widespread, its impact on actual policy change and meaningful activism is limited. The study highlights the challenges of translating digital engagement into concrete political outcomes (Beduya et al., 2022). Dynel and Poppi (2020) also used George and Leidner's article in their analysis and found that the pyramid's structure oversimplifies the fluid and multifaceted nature of digital activism. The study argues that the model does not fully capture the complexities and hybrid forms of participation that emerge in real-world digital activism (Dynel & Poppi, 2020). These critiques underscore the need to consider the dynamic and evolving nature of digital activism, which can encompass a range of activities and impacts beyond what a hierarchical model may suggest.

### 3. Research Method

In this study, the researcher employs a qualitative methodology, grounded in the post-positivist philosophy as outlined by Grønmo (2020). This philosophical foundation guides the entire research process from data sampling to analysis, which is

conducted inductively and qualitatively to achieve a deeper understanding. Various qualitative techniques are utilized as key instruments to support the sustainability of the study, focusing on the scientific conditions of the subject being researched

The focus of this research is on analyzing the impact of Greta Thunberg's digital activism from the perspective of civil society in Indonesia. The research is carried out using a descriptive analytic approach, as described by Neuman (2014), which aims to describe and provide an objective portrayal of the research object based on collected data.

The data used in this study include both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data are derived from books, magazines, and other scholarly sources, including personal and official documents. The researcher collects source data from relevant readings, including scientific journals, books, and information from online mass media.

In the descriptive analytic method, the researcher gathers data through in-depth interviews with two key informants. The first informant is Bambang Sutrisno, Executive Director of Teens Go Green Indonesia and a member of the National Steering Committee Board GEF SGP Indonesia, who has been active in environmental movements since high school and continues to be involved in the Teens Go Green organization. The second informant is Rieke Amru, Co-Founder and CEO of Beecom Indonesia, has a journalistic background and focuses on business collaborations to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 The New Theory of Global Environmental Movement**

In this section, we introduced a novel framework for understanding the global environmental movement, which we term the "Pyramid of Global Environmental Activism." This framework consists of three levels: gladiators, transition, and spectators. The focus is on the gladiator tier, which encompasses eco-celebrities, the utilization of digital movements, and a confrontative nature. To illustrate this, I use the example of Greta Thunberg, whose digital activism has had a significant impact on the environmental movement globally and in later on the next section, we will use the framework on understanding the impact of Greta to the environmental activism in Indonesia.

Current literature on global environmental movements has extensively examined various aspects of environmental activism, governance, and justice, yet none have proposed the idea of categorizing activists into gladiator, transition, and spectator levels. D. Schlosberg (2004) discusses the concepts of environmental justice in global movements, emphasizing equity, recognition, and participation but does not categorize activists into distinct levels (Schlosberg, 2004).

P. Dauvergne and J. Clapp (2016) analyze trends in global environmental politics, focusing on governance mechanisms, market-based solutions, and climate change, without segmenting activist roles into a hierarchy (Dauvergne & Clapp, 2016). Lucy H. Ford (2003) explores social movements and global civil society's role in challenging global environmental governance, highlighting the complexity of agency and power relations but not defining specific activist tiers (Ford, 2003). James Gustave Speth and Peter M. Haas (2006) provide a comprehensive overview of global environmental governance, emphasizing the interplay between state and non-state actors, but do not propose a tiered structure of activism (Speth & Haas, 2006). David John Frank, Ann M. Hironaka, and Evan Schofer (2000) discuss the rise of global environmentalism and its institutionalization, focusing on the historical development and impact on nation-states,

without categorizing activists into specific levels (Frank et al., 2000).

These scholars provide valuable insights into global environmental movements but do not propose the gladiator, transition, and spectator levels. Our theory fills this gap by categorizing activists based on their engagement and impact with the global environmental activism framework adopting George and Leidner's digital activism.

## 4.2 Formulating the Gladiator Activities in the Global Environmental Movement

The newly proposed Pyramid of global environmental movement includes three distinct levels: gladiators, transition, and spectators. The gladiator level, in particular, is characterized by three main elements: eco-celebrity status, confrontative nature, and the utilization of digital activism. An activist who embodies all three elements qualifies as a gladiator, while those who only exhibit eco-celebrity status and a confrontative nature are considered transitional. Those who solely engage in digital activism fall under the spectator category.

### 4.2.1 Eco-Celebrity

The concept of eco-celebrity refers to individuals who leverage their fame to advocate for environmental causes, significantly influencing public perceptions and behaviors. Greta Thunberg exemplifies an eco-celebrity whose environmental advocacy has garnered global attention. Murphy (2021) discusses how Thunberg's visibility has made her a global eco-celebrity, highlighting her confrontative eco-politics and her ability to resist co-optation within the broader climate change discourse (Murphy, 2021). Similarly, Craig (2019) explores the roles of celebrities in environmental activism, emphasizing their cultural power and public persuasive abilities (Craig, 2019).

### 4.2.3 Confrontative Nature

Confrontative activism involves challenging established norms and directly addressing issues through assertive and often provocative actions. Thunberg's sharp criticism of global leaders and industries for their inadequate responses to climate change exemplifies this confrontative nature. This approach is crucial in pushing the boundaries of traditional activism and creating significant societal impact. Dynel and Poppi (2020) argue that the

confrontative nature of digital activism is often necessary to address the complexities and hybrid forms of participation that emerge in real-world activism (Dynel & Poppi, 2020).

### 4.2.4 Digital Activism

Digital activism leverages online platforms to mobilize supporters, spread awareness, and coordinate actions. This form of activism includes activities such as clicktivism, e-funding, digital petitions, and more assertive actions like hacktivism and data activism. George and Leidner (2019) provide a comprehensive framework for understanding digital activism, categorizing it into spectator, transitional, and gladiatorial activities (George & Leidner, 2019). Further, Edwards et al. (2013) highlight the

effectiveness of diverse digital tools in drawing people to the streets and influencing government policies (Edwards et al., 2013).

#### 4.3 Analysis of the Impact Greta's Global Environmental Movement in Indonesia

Digital activism in Indonesia has been increasingly influenced by the transnational movements of Greta Thunberg. On Greta's Instagram, there are regular publications of protest movements she conducts, which are characterized by a distinct theme: a photo of a poster containing directives for the government to take serious steps in mitigating the climate crisis. Greta's Instagram consistently publicizes her activities and receives a diverse range of responses from internet users. Instagram continues to be the premier platform among Indonesian youth in the realm of social media. Presently, Instagram is used by approximately 89.15 million people in Indonesia, including environmental activists. The environmental activists interviewed by our research team are also seriously developing communication strategies through Instagram, adopting themes similar to Greta's, featuring posters with commanding sentences directed at governments and corporations. Free Fossil UKI, one of the sources, consistently publishes its activities on its Instagram account.

Digital activism among the youth is emphasized by one of the interviewees, as noted in a statement:

*"The reason why the youth are pivotal can be observed through the demographic structure of Indonesia. According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), a significant portion of our population is dominated by the youth. Most likely, the individuals here belong to either Generation Z or the millennials. When we combine the numbers of Gen Z and millennials, they constitute more than 50% of our population. This demographic, over 50% of whom are young people, is characterized by high self-confidence and ambition. They are open to changes and are already familiar with digital activism. Furthermore, for Gen Z, since they were born into an era with prevalent internet technology, they are adept with various current technologies. They also learn faster, are creative, and enjoy challenges. Generally, the youth uphold values of freedom, egalitarianism, and adaptability" (Sutrisno, 2023).*

Greta Thunberg actively utilizes her social media platforms, and affiliated networks such as Fridays for Future rely on social media for publication and communication. The rising popularity of transnational movements supported by the internet can be attributed to the advantages that the internet offers. The internet provides a space for political participation without the barriers of funding. Furthermore, activists can launch global environmental movements without geographical constraints. The limitations faced by Greta in terms of funding and physical space are counteracted by the internet, which offers her and her supporters the opportunity to disseminate information that differs from mainstream media channels. This dynamic has transformed how activism is conducted, allowing for broader engagement and the rapid spread of messages across diverse audiences worldwide.

In an interview, one respondent, Amru, discussed their interaction with Greta Thunberg's Instagram presence: "Do any of you follow Greta's Instagram? Please do. I sometimes casually check what Greta has posted. And, those aren't just 100-200 comments. I've seen up to 12,000 on some posts. But when I actually sit down to read them, there are praises as well as criticisms. So, when I first noticed, it was quite strange to me—wow, there are people who don't like her? It makes you wonder, what must it feel

like to be Greta?" (Amru, 2023).

This quote reflects the mixed public reactions to Greta's activism on social media, highlighting the broader implications of public visibility and scrutiny faced by activists online.

As one interviewee pointed out, a significant challenge in digital activism is the battle over the legitimacy of the content promoted. Greta Thunberg's activism, for example, is not universally welcomed by all online users. Just as public figures like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin have criticized Greta, many of Greta's social media visitors also express criticism. This situation illustrates a resonance between the contestation of ideas and concepts in both the real and online worlds. The scrutiny and debate that characterize real-world interactions are mirrored in the digital sphere, highlighting the complexity and contentious nature of public discourse in the age of digital activism.

Despite not focusing on hacktivism and data exposure, Greta Thunberg's movement challenges the traditional definition of gladiatorial activism. Greta symbolizes the power of a public confrontational approach. By using social media, she effectively positions herself to challenge powerful political elites, embodying a new type of gladiator in digital activism.

The core advantage of digital activism is its ability to foster a borderless community. Social media connects communities from multiple countries without the need for travel budgets. However, not all digital activists can spread their movements internationally. Greta's movement, however, has successfully established numerous Fridays for Future groups across many countries, demonstrating the global reach and impact of her efforts, which align with gladiatorial activities.

By utilizing these strategies, Greta has effectively advanced the global environmental movement, demonstrating the potential and power of digital activism. Our findings reveal that Greta Thunberg's digital activism has profoundly influenced Indonesia's environmental movement. Her confrontative tactics and strategic use of digital media have galvanized a new wave of eco-activists in Indonesia. The evidence shows that Thunberg's impact transcends raising awareness, actively engaging Indonesian youth in environmental advocacy. This aligns with the gladiator tier of George and Leidner's model, illustrating the capacity of eco-celebrities to spearhead powerful digital movements.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the Pyramid of Global Environmental Activism provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the different levels of engagement within the environmental movement. This study has demonstrated that Greta Thunberg epitomizes the gladiator tier due to her confrontative activism, adept use of digital media, and her role as an eco-celebrity. Thunberg's impact on Indonesia's environmental movement underscores the transformative potential of digital activism, particularly when combined with high visibility and confrontational strategies.



Thunberg's ability to mobilize supporters and influence policy discussions in Indonesia highlights the significant role that digital gladiators can play in advancing global environmental causes. Her use of social media platforms has not only raised awareness but also actively engaged a new generation of eco-activists, pushing for substantial changes in environmental policies and practices.

The findings of this study support the newly proposed theory that activists who embody eco-celebrity status, confrontative nature, and digital activism qualify as gladiators. This framework fills a gap in existing literature by providing a structured way to categorize and understand the varying impacts of different forms of digital activism. Future research should continue to explore the applicability of this model across different contexts and movements, further broadening our understanding of digital activism's dynamics and its potential to drive social and political change.

Overall, Greta Thunberg's example illustrates the power and reach of digital activism in the modern age, emphasizing the importance of strategic use of digital tools and confrontational tactics in achieving significant environmental advocacy goals.

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