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Crisis in digital era and brand sustainability: Analyzing the #whitelabapologize activism on social media

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Abstract: This research aims to examine how crisis information spreads on social media and leads to activism. The public perceives the Whitelab brand event, which collaborated with K-Pop idol Sehun, as fraught with issues. This has resulted in public protests and the emergence of the #whitelabapologize hashtag on Twitter. This qualitative research uses social network analysis (SNA) to understand the social network and actors surrounding the conversation. A total of 10,000 tweets using #whitelabapologize were extracted from Twitter using Netlytic on the crucial date of the event. The research results classify #whitelabapologize as hashtag activism. Individual actors and the fan bases of K-pop idols drive the conversations on this social network. The data also reveals that this activism follows the logic of connective action.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat bagaimana informasi krisis menyebar di media sosial dan memicu aksi aktivisme untuk melakukan kritik terhadap brand. Publik memandang event dari Brand Whitelab yang berkolaborasi dengan idola K-Pop, Sehun, mengalami berbagai masalah. Hal ini kemudian memicu protes publik dan memunculkan tagar #whitelabapologize di Twitter. Penelitian dengan pendekatan kualitatif ini, menggunakan social network analysis (SNA) untuk mengetahui jejaring sosial dan aktor di sekitar pembicaraan. Sejumlah 10.000 tweet bertagar #whitelabapologize ditarik dari media sosial Twitter menggunakan Netlytic pada tanggal krusial acara tersebut berlangsung. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa #whitelabapologize dapat diklasifikasikan sebagai hashtag aktivisme. Pembicaraan pada jejaring sosial ini didorong oleh aktor individu dan basis penggemar dari idola K-Pop. Hal ini sekaligus menunjukkan bahwa logika connective action terjadi pada aktivisme ini.

INTRODUCTION

Since the public's introduction to social media, Twitter has grown to be a significant social networking site, a platform for public communication, and a global news media outlet. Organizations, in addition to individuals, utilize Twitter for outreach and information dissemination. Various businesses used it for commercial gain through viral marketing tactics (Nitins & Burgess, 2014). However, while it serves as a valuable tool for brand communication, it also exerts a significant influence on businesses. The platform has its own unique culture, which fosters an open environment for consumer engagement and participation. So, brands must understand the sentiment of the Twitter community.

Like other social media sites, Twitter also introduced the hashtag feature or symbol to mark a tweet that is relevant to a specific topic. It used to make a tweet more discoverable to other users (Bruns & Moe, 2014). It served as more than just a catalog; various brands used it as a campaign tool. However, as scholars have pointed out, practitioners must also be ready to handle various outcomes, including potential fallout. This symbol serves as a powerful tool for socio-political movements (Bernard, 2019). Clark (2016) argued that hashtags have the ability to generate and connect individual stories. It can also invite online participation in online collective protests, depending on the interaction among the actors.

More than just a symbol, many people in the world use hashtags to connect with each other in a protest movement and spread a certain cause on social media, including discussions related to certain issues (Dobrin, 2020). The public uses the hashtag to amplify their message into a virtual form of resistance. Activists and scholars use the term "hashtag activism" to

describe an attempt to drive social change through the use of hashtags on social media, especially Twitter. For instance, the public utilized the hashtag #yesallwomen to highlight the misogynistic acts that led to the tragedy in Isla Vista, California. The public used the hashtag to focus media coverage on the systemic misogyny that allegedly sparked public anger (Dobrin, 2020). In another example, the #grabyourwallet hashtag campaign emerged on Twitter to boycott brands and companies associated with Donald Trump (Clark, 2016).

The research above shows how Twitter also functions as a communicative space about specific issue or crisis. Users were able to post and share information about crisis events. By using specific hashtags related to the crisis, people or actors can engage with real-time information or breaking news about these events (Reilly & Vicari, 2021). In this case, Twitter allows individuals to engage in the network without a formal organization. Individuals can participate in hashtag activism networks in their own unique ways, based on their feelings or experiences with the problem under discussion. In this case, the logic of connective action is at play. Unlike the logic of collective action, which requires strong organizational coordination of action, Bennett & Segerberg (2012) logic of connective action is more based on the use of information technology and involves digitally networked action with a loose organizational role (Mirbabaie et al., 2021). Although the activities conducted may be similar to collective action, self-created information shared with others is recognized as connective action.

The skincare brand Whitelab's One Memorable Day with Scientist Ganteng Oh Sehun fan meeting on November 6, 2022, sparked public opinion on social media.

The public perceives the brand as having failed to organize the event and committed internal errors. This issue then sparked a public debate on Twitter. On Twitter, the public disseminated crisis information about the #ScientistGanteng event. After successfully running the hashtags #WhitelabXSehun and #ScientistGanteng, Whitelab was criticized by the public, using the hashtag #whitelabapologize after the event. Under the hashtag, the public demanded an apology from the brand's representatives. Previous research related to sentiment analysis on this hashtag showed that most tweets about the crisis were negative, while supportive or sympathetic messages were rare (Purworini et al., 2025). The emotional tone of the public was assessed in relation to cognitive appraisals and emotional reactions to the crisis. Based on these findings, it becomes interesting to analyze the #whitelabapologize network from the perspective of the logic of connective action. This is because the online public participates in raising issues based on their respective versions (such as anger, disgust, sadness, guilt). This demonstrates the sharing of messages based on personal expression (Mirbabaie et al., 2021), which aligns with the logic of connective action.

Brands are confronted with crises when they fail to coordinate events and receive negative public opinion on social media. In addition to requesting an apology from Whitelab, certain consumers have rated the brand negatively on their marketplace. This will affect the reputation and brand's sustainability. In this context, sustainability pertains to a long-term in business (Kitchin, 2013). A crisis represents a pivotal moment for a brand (Chinnamanthur, 2020). Three potential outcomes may arise: the organization may cease operations, endure while losing

public esteem, or successfully navigate public perception and persist (Fearn-Banks, 2017). Consequently, effective crisis management and communication are imperative for organizations. Furthermore, organizations must engage all stakeholders, as a sustainable organization is defined by its ability to maintain exceptional performance and achieve enduring success through a balanced consideration of the interests of customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders, and society (Dahlgard & Anninos, 2022).

In this case, the public uses Twitter to form opinions or voice their demands on the brand. The rise of social media is causing a significant challenge for the brand because it has been implicated in facilitating the spread of bad news (Park et al., 2012). Due to its immediate ability to reach a large audience, social media is often used to share information about crisis events (Stieglitz et al., 2018). Hashtag activism on Twitter enables action without the need for formal organization. As a result, some activism occurs on a large scale and can even transcend national borders (Mirbabaie et al., 2021). During a crisis, the public often feels uncertain and anxious. For this reason, organizations should be able to use effective communication to minimize the impact of the crisis through social media (Jin, 2020).

Even a large, well-known brand has a troubling history when it comes to hashtag usage. In the short time after launching the hashtag campaign in January 2012, McDonald is facing hashtag hijacking by Twitter's users to share negative, critical, and disrespectful tweets (Gilkerson & Berg, 2018). In addition to assisting in getting their messages amplified and heard by a wider audience, the case shows that hashtags on Twitter or social media in general have been effective and strategic

tools used by individuals or groups to pressure the organization to action.

Several previous studies have focused on the role of social media as a tool or strategy for fan activism. Collective activities on social media, such as boycotts and petition creation, have the potential to influence public change (Hinck, 2019). Meanwhile, according to Guerrero-Pico (2017) research, the public uses Twitter as an activism tool to launch the campaign and can influence the organization's decisions. Many previous studies have tended to focus on the role of social media in shaping activism or consider the media as a tool in social movements or activism rather than seeing it as a form of social network (Zempi & Rahayu, 2019).

The aforementioned cases illustrate how using social media as a tool for various activities can pose challenges for an organization's sustainability in the face of social media firestorms. Twitter, for example, allows users to express their opinions and connect with one another through hashtags. Organizations need to prepare for this sentiment, as it can cause turbulence within their ecosystem or during a crisis. In crisis studies, social network analysis can contribute to helping crisis management professionals disseminate crisis information, build effective communication, and provide immediate responses (Jin, 2020).

Several studies have focused on analyzing the public's sentiments on social media. However, in addition to understanding public sentiment, it's crucial to scrutinize the network of crisis information. When confronted with a crisis, public relations must focus on identifying the individuals involved in the crisis information network. So, they can give their best communication to handle the crisis. Therefore, it is important to view hashtag activism as a medium for public protest against brands using connective

action theory. The logic of connective action is used to examine how the public, including individuals like K-pop fans, forms connections and collective action through social media. This study will focus on the crisis that Whitelab faced when organizing the One Memorable Day with Scientist Ganteng Oh Sehun's event. Using Netlytic, this study collected tweet data about #whitelabapologize hashtags from November 7, 2022, to November 9, 2022. This study collected and curated a total of 10,000 tweets, discarding those containing ads or unrelated to crisis information. This process involved reducing the amount of data by eliminating those that contained no information. Using social network analysis, this research aims to determine the social network surrounding #whitelabapologize.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing social network analysis to identify social networks, actors involved in the #whitelabapologize conversations. Social network analysis on social media can be an effective method for investigating tweet distribution and retweeting public pressure on WhiteLab to apologize for the crisis that occurred in organizing their events. Social network analysis can also be an effective way to identify influential actors in the flow of information. They regulate the types of messages circulating in the network (Kadushin, 2012).

In social network analysis (SNA), the role of actors and communication patterns play an important role in providing and receiving information (Harris & Nelson, 2009). Relationships shape social lives and patterns. In this case, a social network is defined as a collection of nodes or network members bound by one or more types of relationships (Marin & Wellman, 2011). The Twitter accounts that contain the hashtag #whitelabapologize became the object of this study.

This study begins with the collection of data from Twitter accounts that contain #whitelabapologize hashtags based on the event's crucial date, November 7–9, 2022. The study collected data the day after the event, November 6, 2022, when the hashtag #whitelabapologize was trending on Twitter. This study collected a total of 10,000 tweets. Data crawling was done before any access restrictions by Twitter (now X) and when Netlytic was still running.

The researcher divides the analysis into two stages: crawling and reduction. The researcher extracts tweet data based on the selected hashtag during the crawling stage using Netlytic tools (Gruzd, 2022). Subsequently, the original data was filtered to eliminate tweets that were either irrelevant to the crisis or contained advertisements. This also entailed the removal of data that was lacking of information. After that, this study used Gephi to create graphs related to networks, relationships, and the actors.

Gephi is an open-source software that is designed for the analysis of graphs and networks. It employs a 3D render engine to accelerate the exploration process and to display extensive networks in real-time (Bastian et al., 2009). Many studies use Gephi software because it is considered to be convenient for creating visualizations of thousands of nodes in social media networks. After obtaining a graph that measures centrality according to the SNA theory, the researcher will conduct a qualitative analysis to delve into the crisis information that was disseminated during the Whitelab event. This analysis focuses on the meaning of the content and provides a detailed description. This analysis endeavors to discern the prevailing pattern of disseminating information,

encompassing the public's interpretation of the occurrence.

Data triangulation was employed in this research to interpret the findings through various data sources (Renz et al., 2018). Social Network Analysis (SNA) primarily utilizes quantitative data to capture the nature of relationships, such as intensity, frequency, or strength. However, it often neglects to address the content of those relationships. According to Schipper & Spekkink (2015) studying complex social systems requires researchers to thoroughly examine the content, including interests and purposes. Consequently, this research seeks to connect the findings of SNA with qualitative data obtained from Twitter, which provides additional tweet data from participants within the network. This research not only clarifies the actor relationship map but also enhances the understanding of how the public utilizes hashtags for activism to communicate messages to brands during crisis situations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study found that this social network has some clusters. Individual fans, as well as the fanbase of K-Pop idol Sehun, dominate the public opinion. The public operates this network as an activism, exerting pressure on Whitelab to issue an apology, take action, or devise a solution to resolve the crisis.

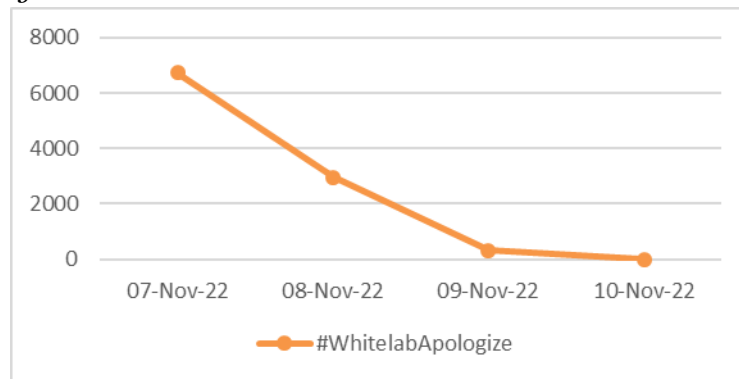
On November 6, 2022, the fan meeting event ignited public opinion on Twitter. Most of them share their disappointment with Whitelab because of some incidents at the event. They express their anger towards the internal stakeholder who offended the fans. Many tweets demand Whitelab's apology, using the hashtag #whitelabapologize. The curve is getting worse day by day, along with the

appearance of an apology from the CEO of Whitelab, which was uploaded on social media to Twitter on the evening of November 7. Figure 1 illustrates the flow of crisis information associated with the

hashtag #whitelabapologize. On November 7, 2022, the public opinion using #whitelabapologize showed the highest curve with 6724 tweets.

Figure 1

The #whitelabapologize Tweet curve

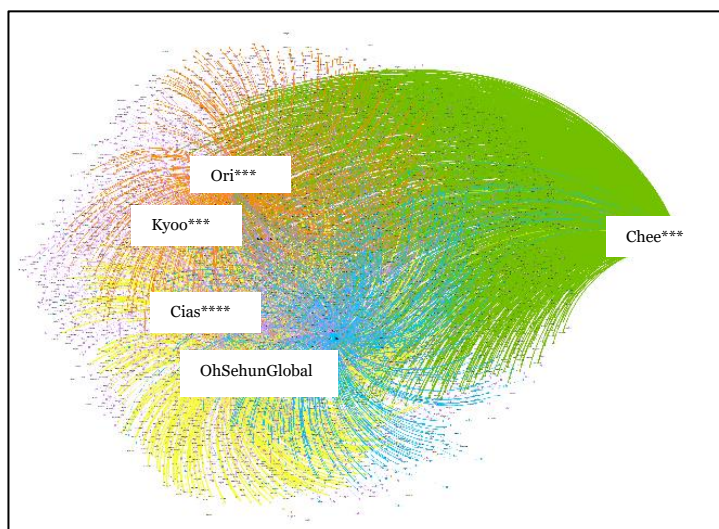


Source: Processed by researcher

This study ultimately acquired a dataset of 7,224 tweets after excluding those containing ads or irrelevant information pertaining to the issue. The tweets were later analyzed using Gephi software to provide visualizations of networks, clusters, and participants. Figure 2 illustrates the formation of a cluster within the network of tweets containing the hashtag #WhitelabApology. The structure of the community that has been established in the conversation network surrounding the Whitelab crisis information is evident from the cluster. Gephi's software bases community detection on modularity, establishing connections between existing nodes or users. The connection between users can occur because they share or agree with the opinion conveyed by the actor.

Figure 2

Cluster of crisis information related #whitelabapologize



Source: Picture Exported from Gephi (2023)

The hashtag #whitelabapologize has 4691 nodes and 6550 edges. This indicates that there are 4691 users and 6550 relationships. The data led to the formation of 37 communities. To focus more on large communities, this study focused on five communities with a higher number of nodes than other communities.

In social network analysis (SNA) research, it is important to look at the dominant actors within the network. This

actor plays a significant role in the discourse surrounding the #whitelabapologize hashtag. People frequently retweet the actor's tweets, thereby increasing their weight. The popularity of actors was ascertained through the use of degree centrality data in the SNA analysis with Gephi. Central actors possess the greatest number of relationships within the network.

Table 1

Dominant actors in #whitelabapologize conversation 7 to 10 November 2022

Twitter Account	Degree Centrality	Closeness Centrality	Betweenness Centrality
Chee***	1320	0.0	0.0
Kyoo***	477	0.0	0.0
Ori***	439	0.0	0.0
Cias***	439	1.0	0.000025
OhSehunGlobal	437	0.0	0.0

Source: Processed by researcher using Gephi Software

The data above indicates that accounts that frequently tweet about K-Pop are the most popular actors. Individual fans, as well as K-Pop idol Oh Sehun's fan base, drive the #whitelabapologize conversation. Chee***'s account has a very wide reach with a large degree of centrality and is the most popular actor in the #whitelabapologize conversation. In this case, accounts with a high degree of centrality means that actors are retweeted or mentioned, replied a lot by others in the network, so they also have a large weight. Through these, the actors establish connections with other actors within the network because retweet or mention is a tie. However, the data indicates that the actor did not act as a mediator between different clusters, meaning that she/he did

not facilitate an information flow across those clusters.

Meanwhile, table 1 reveals that actor Cias*** has high values in both closeness and betweenness centrality compared to other actors. The closeness centrality data indicates that this actor is quite central in the network because Cias*** is near several nodes. The tweet is accessible to other actors, allowing the actor to integrate into the main crowd. However, despite having some value in terms of centrality, that value is relatively small and not significant enough.

The data also reveals that OhSehunGlobal, the international fanbase, drove the formation of another cluster. In this case, OhSehunGlobal also issued an official statement regarding the crisis using the hashtag #whitelabapologize. Its

relatively high degree centrality in this network indicates its strength as a community, meaning users directly engage with their posts. However, it is interesting that some individual actors possess a higher degree of centrality than OhSehunGlobal. The data also shows that the actor is not connected to other communities. It can be concluded that fanbase accounts are strong within their cluster, while individual actors can be at the core of the network and contribute to shaping broader public opinion flows.

The actors involved in the network illustrate how the logic of connective action manifests within this context. Connective action comprises several components, including loose organizational ties, the utilization of technology, and personal action frameworks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Examining how individual actors play a significant role in the #whitelabapologize network aligns with the principles of connective action, which acknowledges personal expression as integral to a movement or activism. While the fanbase contributes to the network, the strength of individual participation is evident, as content is created by individuals and shared within the community or cluster (Mirbabaie et al., 2021). In the end, the hashtag transformed into a tool for establishing connections with others.

In addition to conducting network analysis, this research employs qualitative analysis to examine the patterns of information dissemination, including public framing. According to Park et al. (2012), in a organization crisis, the organization cares on reputation and the impact of the crisis on sales. This studies categorize public tweets related to the crisis into three types: future intent, persuasion, and perception. Future intent refers to the public's belief that they will no longer purchase products from the

company or brand. Tweets with persuasion tendencies refer to those that advise others not to buy products from the brand. Conversely, the perception category encompasses tweets confirming negative or unfavorable experiences with the product or brand.

Several popular tweets below illustrate this point. Many tweets by actors in the #whitelabapologize network refer to their perceptions of the brand.

“We demand @whitelab_id: 1. to apologize to sehun fans (their customers) and also to sehun who travelled all the way from south korea to meet his fans but ended up facing mismanagement and discomfort. 2. fully refund all the vip fans (golden ticket holders) #whitelabapologize....” (6 November 2024, 11:16 pm)

The tweet above was posted by the international fanbase of OhSehun, the brand ambassador of Whitelab. It tweet stated several demands, including an apology to fans and Sehun as a guest star at the event. The tweet also demanded Whitelab refund VIP tickets because fans with VIP tickets did not get their rights as promised by Whitelab. It is also provided an image attachment detailing some of the brand's mistakes at the event.

“This is the first time a brand has had its staff mock their brand ambassador. Rather than receiving proper treatment, the staff is proudly mocking the brand ambassador in his Instagram story...#whitelabapologize” (7 November 2024, 06:57 am)

The tweet above also expressed disappointment in Brand Whitelab's internal staff, who made an Instagram story shaming the brand ambassador. This

network actor emphasized how the brand did not take good care of an international brand ambassador with a large fan base.

“I’m most angry with these two humans,..., you think it's funny? You think Sehun and ExoL's effort to meet is easy? Your staff really underestimates (us), it's good that your brand name is raised, even international fans come, you think it's a joke.
#whitelabapologize
#whitelabapologize” (7
November 2024, 02:22 am)

Based on a sample of the popular actor data, we can categorize some of the of the tweets above as perception tweets. This means that the user's tweet confirms that they have had a bad or negative experience with the brand. While their perceptions point to the poor attitude of internal staff, poor event organization, the lack of appropriate crisis communication from the brand, and demands for an apology from the brand. This fact further emphasizes that the #whitelabapologize network exemplifies connective action, as individuals share their personal content and messages.

Public sentiment on Twitter on the organization of fan meetings is classified as digital activism. It frequently happens spontaneously, relying just on the interaction and replication of other users to achieve visibility (Carvalho & Barbosa, 2023). Social media offers a public platform for opinion formation and collective action, including citizen mobilization (Barisione & Ceron, 2017). The social media conversation that took place during this study was a public response to the Whitelab event's failure. Digital activism does have a close relationship with the digital movement.

Nevertheless, the two have differences in characteristics and goals. Despite their similarities, people often use the term movement to refer to public mobilization within a political context or to promote social change. On the other hand, activism, as Chen (2019) stated, primarily refers to a collective of individuals facing a common issue that the organization has triggered. The public then took collective action to resolve this issue. Public relations and business sectors are more likely to encounter activism than movements. There are many kinds of activism, such as consumer activism, hashtag activism, online activism, cyber-activism, network activism, and digital activism (Trere & Kaun, 2021). People alternately use this concept, usually referring to the location or medium where media activism originates.

In addition, we may refer to #whitelabApologize activism as hashtag activism. This activism emerged as a form of public demand, urging Whitelab to apologize. According to Eriyanto (2020), hashtags have the function of a link so that social media users, even though they don't know each other or follow each other (followers), can still discuss the same topic. Furthermore, hashtags may serve as opinion aggregators, and hashtag activism allows fans to band together in pursuit of a common goal. In their research on hashtag activism by brand lovers, Carvalho & Barbosa (2023) examined how fans have power to warn about the value and consistency of a brand. Fans are reluctant to protest when brands are inconsistent. When the brand listens to the fan's opinion and responds to all their questions, the fan's bond with the brand becomes stronger.

The hashtag #whitelabapologize strongly demonstrates a counter-attitude towards the Whitelab brand. Whitelab's prominent hashtags are those that represent the opposite of the brand's image. Also, previous research has demonstrated that 69.1% of tweets that were associated with the hashtag #whitelabapologize resulted in negative emotions (Purworini et al., 2025). Hashtags are also used by actors who are popular on the network to communicate their own perspectives regarding Whitelab and the event, and then other actors express their support by liking, retweeting, and commenting in agreement with these opinions. This is in line with the findings of Xiong et al. (2019), who stated that hashtag activism is a representation of a participatory culture that views online activity as a way of creating social support and connections with other people. After the event, Whitelab has provided responses by release and also video from the CEO regarding the incident. It shows that crisis response may not necessarily defuse public opinions immediately because for several days the hashtag #whitelabapologize was still the topic of conversation on Twitter. However, the duration of conversations on #whitelabapologize is relatively short. On 8th November, the chart started to decline. Due to their capacity to draw attention to a cause, hashtags may prove to be a beneficial resource. Hashtags, much like any other type of public activist work, call for a keen awareness of the audience, the context, and the goal of the effort (Dadas, 2020).

SNA research requires knowing the network's most influential or most-relationship actors. These actors will usually affect the flow of public opinion regarding an issue. The actor's background can undoubtedly influence the depth of his opinion. In several studies, (Giglietto & Lee, 2017; Nieves-Pizarro & Mundel, 2021;

Recuero et al., 2015; Reilly & Vicari, 2021; Sinpeng, 2021) hashtags activism is mostly in political environment and social change. It's interesting to observe that this activism isn't rooted in politics, but rather stems from the public's disappointment with the event's organization or brand. According to Wang & Zhou (2021), hashtag activism, as a kind of connective action, is not inherently political; instead, it constitutes a social movement wherein people independently move from expressing anger to embodying hope. In this #whitelabapologize situation, participants need the brand's good intentions to express an apology and fix all existing issues.

Furthermore, this event features K-Pop idols, who will undoubtedly interact with their fans. This study found that individuals especially fans, including Oh Sehun's international fanbase accounts, drive social networks with the hashtag #whitelabapologize, even though their reach is not as high as individual accounts'. In some cases, K-Pop fandom does move collectively to encourage individuals to take action for a specific purpose (Naomi, 2021). In this case, the main goal is to make sure that the Whitelab brand is responsible for everything that happened.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how hashtags like #whitelabapologize mobilize public opinion to voice demands and frustrations about a brand. The social network formed from the hashtag #whitelabapologize can be said to be hashtag activism because the public or fans use hashtags for a specific purpose so that their demands are heard by brands. Hashtags also make it easier to connect the public with other people with the same goal. The many perceptions of individuals towards the brand with their own emotions also show that this activism belongs to connective action. In contrast to

previous research that found activism to be more prevalent in political cases, this study found that crises that occur in an organization or brand with non-political nuances are also able to move public opinion. K-Pop fans frequently engage in collective activism to motivate individuals towards a shared objective.

However, it's crucial to understand that this study only included 10,000 tweets on November 7-9, 2022. Thus, it is possible for other tweets to go undetected on this crawl. In the future, researchers can utilize Python or other tools to extract a larger amount of data, thereby mitigating the issue of data scarcity. Furthermore, the scope of hashtag activism research can be improved by incorporating non-political public opinion objects.

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