
How Image-Based Social Media Websites Support Social Movements

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Abstract

The Internet has disrupted the traditional progression of social movements. We explore common characteristics of image-based activism on Instagram by qualitatively analyzing 300 Instagram posts from three social movements: Black Lives Matter, the battle against defunding Planned Parenthood, and the backlash against the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act. We found that common types of images emerged among the three social movements, indicating a possible underlying pattern in social movement content posted on Instagram. Users also engage in workarounds to leverage Instagram toward a collective goal, going beyond the features offered by the platform to communicate their message. These findings have implications for future work studying social movement theories online.

Author Keywords

Social media; Social movements; Instagram.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.2. Computer and Society: Social Issues; H.5.3. Information Interfaces and Presentation: Group and Organization Interfaces.

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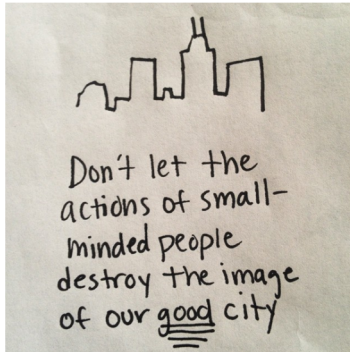


Figure 1: Example of post on Instagram related to social movements (courtesy of @penchantforpixels)

Introduction

Social movements are complex systems of informal, organized relationships that work toward common objectives [7, 9]. These objectives can be aimed either narrowly at a specific policy or, more broadly, at cultural change. Examples of social movements in the last century include the civil rights movement and the women's suffrage movement. The advent of the Internet has disrupted the traditional progression of social movements by displacing the locus of activity from the streets to the screens.

The canon of social movement theory contains various theories and established characteristics of traditional social movements [15]. Those social movement theories and underlying characteristics have been formulated prior to the ubiquity of the Internet and, more specifically, social media. Consequently, online activism may not fit original theories of offline social movements due to unique affordances the platforms offer or differences in computer-mediated behavior [11]. Most prior research on how social movements evolve online has studied Facebook and Twitter — two primarily text-based social networking sites. Other platforms, such as Instagram, may have different dynamics because of their emphasis on original photography-based content (e.g. Figure 1). Because photographs are subjective to the interpretation of the viewer, their meanings are often socially negotiated by the groups who are viewing them [19]. Research has also suggested that types of images will have different effects on viewers. For example, pictures with faces are 38% more likely to get likes on Instagram [1]. As such, we wanted to explore how online activism on Instagram interprets social movement theory.

To do so, we considered three different social movements: Black Lives Matter (BLM), the battle against defunding Planned Parenthood (PP), and the backlash against the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). Our preliminary results show that: (1) social movements show at least five recurrent themes on Instagram; (2) to participate in online activism, users appropriate Instagram features and functionality by creating workarounds to accomplish their goal when the limits of Instagram do not allow for it.

Related Work

Social movements and visual communication have long been a facet of society. The progression of social media has engendered an expansion of social movements into the online world, especially social media, fostering a new kind of activism, namely, online activism. This led to, among other things, leveraging visual communication in new ways. Instagram is one example of social media that can enable a discussion on social movements, with visual communication as the prime vector of information.

Social Movements

Social movements are informal collectives of people who seek to enact a common political or social goal. The study of social movements has a lengthy history, its inception being collective behavior theory, which originated from the class warfare of the 1920s [4]. It developed the social psychology of protest and was instigated by precipitating events. Other theories followed, one of which being resource mobilization theory, which saw more connections between social movements and the political process as well as preexisting organizations guiding the movements [17].



Figure 2: Example of a photograph taken on the ground at a rally.

New social movement theory, another social movement ideology, is denoted by collective identities comprised of constituents with overlapping ideologies and often sees large-scale changes [20]. Each of these theories, among others, can be used to understand a movement, and different movements are more accurately characterized by different theories. However, the historical progression from collective behavior theory to new social movement theory is indicative of changing priorities and social contexts in which movements take place.

Social Media and Online Activism

The rise of the Internet, and subsequently social media, brings new challenges to existing theories. The prevalence of the Internet has profoundly changed the way social movements can originate and evolve [16], and social media platforms have transformed social interactions between people sharing common goals. They also have enabled the key actors of social movements to reach a wider crowd than before thanks to the pervasiveness of today's social networks [5, 11]. Several online platforms, such as Change.org, were also created specifically to foster social change [13]. While these platforms lack the mainstream appeal and audience of broader social media platforms, they nonetheless epitomize the online activism that broadly occurs on the Internet, and especially on more general social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram.

Visual Communication and Activism

The Internet and social media have facilitated the diffusion of photographs and other visual artifacts, commonly used as social tools for interpreting and making sense of the world [18]. Images can be interpreted uniquely by each observer and audience,

but also paradoxically retain some meaning when isolated from the context around them. Such a strong visual culture exists in western culture that 'seeing' has become equated with knowledge and has strong ties to existing power structures [18]. Because of this visual culture, photographs and other visual artifacts can have a significant impact on activism. In fact, so-called *visual activism* can be used to showcase activist behaviors and practices or to highlight the socioeconomic and political contexts of a cause [6]. While this visual activism has been practiced since the early days of photography, the pervasiveness of digital images means that much of this activism is now occurring online. One platform that focuses on the image above all else is Instagram.

Instagram

Instagram is a mobile-first, social networking platform which focuses primarily on the display of images. It is mainly used as a mobile application accompanied by a website with limited functionality. Users of Instagram interact by taking and sharing pictures with their "followers," i.e., other users who have elected to receive their content. They can also discover new content using keywords—the so-called "hashtags"—and an "explore" feature showcasing content that the user is likely to enjoy. After taking or importing a picture within the mobile application, the user has the option of modifying their photo, writing a caption with hashtags, tagging other users, and/or posting simultaneously to other social media platforms [12]. Boasting more than 400 million users in 2015, 75% of whom live outside the United States, Instagram sees more than 80 million photos shared per day, as reported by the website itself [14].

Instagram offers few metrics to measure popularity of users and posts. Popularity of media, measured by the number of likes and comments, grows by preferential attachment. This is similar to how, for example, scientific papers acquire citations: resources with large number of likes (in this example, citations) are more likely to acquire even more likes (citations) [10]. In addition, the only user metrics readily available are how many followers individual users have and how many people they are following. These limitations on both post and user metrics limit the kind of analysis that can be performed on post and user data.

Methods

To understand how online activism on Instagram interprets social movement theory, we selected three social movements of different origins: Black Lives Matter for racial equality, the battle against defunding Planned Parenthood for reproductive freedom, and the backlash against Indiana's Religious Freedom Restoration Act for ending discrimination of LGBT individuals. As the movements have different origins, we posited that the characteristics would be expressed differently for these social movements on Instagram. We prefaced our Instagram investigation with a description of the three social movements chosen.

Social Movements Analyzed

BLACK LIVES MATTER (BLM)

Black Lives Matter is a social movement born online, in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012. The movement seeks to abolish the remains of racism in today's American society [3], specifically the killing of unarmed black people by police.

THE FIGHT AGAINST DEFUNDING PLANNED PARENTHOOD (PP)

The social movement fighting against the defunding of Planned Parenthood is just the most recent iteration of an enduring social movement defined by legislative and legal battles. The movement, as we know it, is led by Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), a long-standing organization. The goal of the movement is to achieve reproductive freedom: education of and access to reproductive health care. The existence of the organization adds, simultaneously, a structure, artifacts that can be used in the movement, and a unique message to be spread by its members.

THE BACKLASH AGAINST THE INDIANA RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RESTORATION ACT (RFRA)

During the 2014 Indiana legislative session, a bill called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) was drafted. This bill allowed businesses to deny service to people based on their sexual orientation by citing religious convictions. Proponents of the bill supported it under the guise of religious freedom while detractors were against a bill they said was a solution looking for a problem. The fight against RFRA brought national attention and ridicule to the state of Indiana. The debate shifted from an LGBT rights issue to a state issue, as Hoosiers (apart from the LGBT community and their allies) felt concerned by a bill that depicted them as unwelcoming. This network of people, not directly affected by the movement but sharing a collective identity, emerged as a driving force for defeating RFRA.

Data Collection

We used hashtags created for the social movements to collect information (6 for BLM, 2 for PP, and 3 for RFRA). For BLM, the hashtags referred to specific



Figure 3: Example of user-created art and photography (courtesy of @emendment)



Figure 4: Example of an image used by businesses to express their support (openforservice.org campaign logo)

events, such as #trayvonmartincase; for PP we used #istandwithpp and #standwithplannedparenthood; and for RFRA, #rfra, #equalityact, and #religiousfreedomrestorationact. Data collected from Instagram included: the username of the users who posted using the selected hashtags; their number of followers (at the time of data collection); and their posts (including the link to the post, comments, number of likes, and number of comments). We collected a total of 8,415 posts (our overall dataset), posted by 4,689 different users.

We needed, first, to have a general understanding of the type of content posted around social movements. We open-coded the data and followed an affinity diagram process to then look for the variations in pictorial content [2, 8]. Four researchers performed affinity diagramming on 30 randomly-selected posts from the overall dataset. The affinity diagramming process concluded when all the researchers agreed on major categories that can be used to group all the images in the sample set. Subsequently, two of the researchers randomly selected a subset of 300 posts from our overall dataset (100 per social movement) on which they carried out an analysis of how users got around the limitations of Instagram to share content about social movements.

Here, we present the themes identified through affinity diagramming, as well as workarounds employed by users.

Results

Preliminary Analysis of Pictorial Content: Open Coding & Affinity Diagramming

The affinity diagramming process conducted on 30 posts identified five unique themes in images posted about social movements:

- **Photographs taken on the ground:** pictures taken during rallies or other offline political activities. Often, these included protest signs about the movement (e.g., Figure 2).
- **Infographics created by organizations:** informational or supportive imagery that has been created for the movement by non-governmental organizations (e.g., the Human Rights Campaign).
- **User-created art and photography:** users who have created original photographs or digital art to express their opinion (e.g., Figure 3).
- **Commercial images:** advertisements and symbols of support by businesses (e.g., Figure 4).
- **Repurposed media:** memes, quotes, screenshots, or pictures from newspapers, books, or TV.

The five themes illustrate the variety of content used to post about social movements.

Users' Workarounds

Our preliminary analysis of the subset of 300 posts from the three social movements shows that Instagram users have developed workarounds for the limitations of the image-based social platform to promote social movement content. For example, users employ different third-party applications, such as *Repost for Instagram*¹, to reshare content, a functionality that Instagram does not provide but that is available on

¹ itunes.apple.com/us/app/repost-for-instagram/id570315854



Figure 5: Planned Parenthood filter, a Facebook feature found in Instagram pictures

other social media platforms (e.g., retweets on Twitter, shares on Facebook). Additionally, users use screenshots of images made specifically for other social media platforms to contribute that content to the Instagram platform.

These workarounds show how Instagram's current features contribute to the progression of social movements. Some features, such as likes and comments, augment the communication around social movements. However, the lack of some features, such as limited sharing functionality or the inability to add text to pictures, hinders the progression of social movements. This dichotomy could explain why *Repurposed Media* is seemingly not as represented as are social movement posts on other social media platforms

Discussion

Possible Instagram features for Social Movements

In the current state of Instagram, users have developed workarounds to successfully broadcast content about social movements. Because of its image-based nature, Instagram is poised to be a powerful tool for fostering societal change, provided it adds a few features to its platforms. Such features include: 1) native resharing from other Instagram accounts; 2) adding text to pictures from within the application; 3) superimposing impactful filters (such as the stand with Planned Parenthood speech bubble in Figure 5) onto users' pictures. These suggested features would likely benefit the entire Instagram user base, as they highlight gaps that users currently fill by resorting to alternative strategies.

Social movement theories and online activism

The omnipresence of social media, especially Instagram, has allowed a new kind of social movement activity, online activism, to flourish. Social movement theories developed before the Internet do not fully address the signifiers and affordances of social media or the outcomes produced or affected by online activism. Consequently, the full inclusion of online activism in existing theories calls for their adaptation, or a bolder departure from them to devise theories that fully encompass social movement activity originating online.

Conclusion & Future Work

Our work provides a first insight into how Instagram users engage with social movements. We identified five unique content themes Instagram users posted about social movements. Furthermore, we discussed how features and functionality of Instagram do and do not support online images in response to social movements.

Instagram is continually adding new features, such as "Stories", ephemeral pictures and videos users post in the moment. Social media platforms will continue to offer new features, the Internet will continue to produce new social media platforms, and new forms of technology will continue to afford users new ways to interact with social movements. Despite these changes, our future work will focus on exploring these trends and connect what is being observed online with what happens offline, enlightened by existing social movement theories. We plan to do this through additional content analysis, and surveys and interviews of people posting about social movements on the Internet.

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