

The Impact of Social Media on Contemporary Social Movements

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Abstract

The study investigates the dynamic interplay between social media and contemporary social movements, emphasizing the transformative impact on mobilization, organization, and outcomes. Drawing on case studies from the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, anti-austerity protests in Europe, environmental movements in Scandinavia, and the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, the research navigates the complexities of digital activism. Social Network Theory serves as a foundational lens, elucidating the patterns of connections and interactions within the virtual realm. The study recognizes the global reach of social media, showcasing its role in fostering connectivity, amplifying marginalized voices, and facilitating cross-border solidarity. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of social media's influence, extending beyond quantitative metrics to qualitative dimensions such as emotions, narratives, and online/offline hybrid strategies. While social media empowers activists, challenges like shallow engagement and surveillance necessitate nuanced understanding. The study proposes interdisciplinary approaches to comprehend the evolving dynamics, emphasizing the need for ongoing research to navigate the intricate web of interactions between digital platforms and social movements. The research contributes to theory by advancing the understanding of the transformative role of social media in activism, rooted in Social Network Theory. Practically, activists gain insights into leveraging digital strategies effectively, and policymakers receive guidance on safeguarding digital spaces. Bridging theory, practice, and policy, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of social media on contemporary social movements, recognizing the multidimensional nature of this relationship.

Keywords: *Social Media, Contemporary Social Movements, Social Network Theory, Digital Activism, Online/Offline Hybrid Strategies, Qualitative Dimensions, Global Connectivity, Interdisciplinary Approaches, Policy Implications, Transformative Impact.*

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Contemporary social movements are dynamic collective actions that seek to bring about social, political, or cultural change in response to perceived injustices or societal issues. In recent years, the role of social media in shaping and facilitating these movements has become increasingly prominent (Castells, 2015). Activists and organizers harness digital platforms to mobilize supporters, disseminate information, and amplify their messages, marking a significant shift in the landscape of social movements. A notable example of the role of social media in contemporary social movements is the Arab Spring. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, played a pivotal role in organizing protests across the Middle East and North Africa, challenging authoritarian regimes (Howard & Hussain, 2013). The use of hashtags and online activism enabled the rapid spread of information, fostering solidarity among activists and facilitating the coordination of mass protests.

In the United States, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged in response to systemic racism and police violence against Black individuals. Social media, particularly Twitter, served as a crucial tool for BLM activists to share stories, organize protests, and advocate for policy changes (Tillerson, 2019). The movement gained widespread attention and support, showcasing the power of social media in raising awareness and mobilizing communities. Canada witnessed the Idle No More movement, led by Indigenous activists advocating for Indigenous rights and environmental justice. Social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, played a vital role in connecting Indigenous communities, organizing protests, and fostering a sense of solidarity (Sinclair, 2015). The movement highlighted the intersectionality of Indigenous rights, environmental concerns, and social justice issues.

Parts of Europe experienced a wave of anti-austerity protests in response to economic policies implemented during the Eurozone crisis. Social movements in countries like Greece and Spain utilized social media to mobilize citizens against austerity measures, emphasizing the transnational nature of contemporary activism (Kousis & Paschou, 2014). Digital platforms facilitated cross-border solidarity and the exchange of protest strategies. Environmental movements in Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden and Norway, have utilized social media to mobilize citizens concerned about climate change. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have been instrumental in disseminating information about sustainable practices, organizing climate strikes, and pressuring governments to adopt environmentally friendly policies (Hansen, 2018).

South Africa witnessed the #FeesMustFall movement, a student-led protest against the rising cost of education. Social media, particularly Twitter, played a crucial role in coordinating protests and galvanizing support nationwide (Swart & Gachago, 2018). The movement emphasized the importance of youth activism and the role of digital platforms in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. While social media has empowered contemporary social movements, it is not without challenges. Critics argue that the digital sphere can contribute to shallow activism, where online engagement does not always translate into sustained offline action (Morozov, 2012). The ease of online organizing raises questions about the depth of commitment and the long-term impact of movements.

Social movements today often adopt hybrid strategies, combining online and offline activism. This hybrid approach is evident in movements like Extinction Rebellion, a global environmental movement using both traditional protests and digital platforms to demand climate action (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2019). The combination of tactics allows movements to reach diverse audiences and maximize impact. As contemporary social movements continue to evolve, scholars face the challenge of understanding the long-term impact of digital activism and addressing issues of online surveillance and censorship (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Research should explore the intersectionality of movements, the role of

technology in shaping activism, and the challenges of sustaining momentum over time. Scholars and activists alike must navigate the complex landscape of contemporary social movements to contribute to meaningful social change.

Social media, encompassing platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others, has become a central tool in the organizational dynamics and communication strategies of contemporary social movements. Social media refers to digital platforms that enable users to create and share content, fostering real-time interactions and global connectivity (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). In the context of social movements, these platforms serve as crucial spaces for mobilization, coordination, and information dissemination, reshaping the landscape of activism. One of the key features of social media is its ability to connect individuals across geographical boundaries, facilitating the creation of virtual communities. Through social media, activists can transcend traditional limitations and build global networks of solidarity, as seen in movements like the Arab Spring (Castells, 2015). The interconnectedness offered by these platforms allows for the rapid spread of ideas, fostering a sense of shared purpose among diverse participants.

Social media's impact on contemporary social movements is closely tied to its role in information diffusion and virality. Messages, images, and videos can quickly reach a broad audience, enabling movements to gain visibility and engage with a wider public (Bastos et al., 2018). The viral nature of content on platforms like Twitter amplifies the reach of movements, allowing them to shape narratives and garner support. Social media democratizes access to information and activism, empowering grassroots movements and marginalized communities. Movements like Black Lives Matter in the United States have leveraged platforms like Twitter to mobilize individuals at the local level, fostering a decentralized but cohesive approach to activism (Tillerson, 2019). The ease of mobilization on social media lowers barriers to entry, enabling diverse voices to participate in social movements.

The emergence of hashtag campaigns exemplifies the synergy between social media and contemporary social movements. Hashtags serve as rallying points for collective action, creating a virtual space where individuals can share experiences and contribute to a shared narrative (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Movements such as #MeToo and #FeesMustFall showcase the power of hashtags in mobilizing support and drawing attention to specific issues. While social media offers unprecedented opportunities for activism, it also presents challenges. The rapid pace of online discourse can contribute to shallow engagement, with clicktivism often criticized for its limited impact on real-world change (Morozov, 2012). Scholars and activists alike grapple with the need to translate online momentum into sustained offline action.

The relationship between social media and social movements extends to counter-movements and resistance. Digital platforms are not exclusive to progressive causes, as evidenced by the rise of online extremism and movements with opposing ideologies (Gillespie, 2018). Understanding the interplay between social media and various ideological movements is crucial for comprehending the complex landscape of contemporary activism. The use of social media in activism raises concerns about surveillance and the safety of activists. Governments and other entities may exploit online spaces to monitor and suppress dissent, necessitating a nuanced understanding of the digital risks faced by activists (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Addressing these challenges is essential for safeguarding the integrity and effectiveness of social movements.

The integration of online and offline strategies characterizes contemporary social movements as engaged in hybrid activism. Movements like Extinction Rebellion employ both traditional protests and digital platforms to maximize their impact (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2019). This hybrid approach acknowledges the complementary roles of online and offline actions in achieving social change. Social media's impact on contemporary social movements continues to evolve, necessitating ongoing research

and analysis. Scholars should explore the changing dynamics of online activism, the role of algorithmic structures in shaping discourse, and the potential for digital platforms to contribute to both positive social change and unintended consequences. A forward-looking approach is essential for understanding the multifaceted relationship between social media and the ever-evolving landscape of social movements.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of social media on contemporary social movements.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Recent years have witnessed a surge in the influence of social media on the dynamics and outcomes of contemporary social movements. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), as of 2020, approximately 72% of adults in the United States reported using at least one social media platform, highlighting the pervasive nature of these digital spaces. While there is a growing body of research acknowledging the impact of social media on activism, there remains a critical gap in understanding the nuanced ways in which these platforms shape and contribute to the success or challenges faced by contemporary social movements.

Despite the prevalence of social media use, there exists a dearth of comprehensive studies that delve into the multifaceted relationship between social media and contemporary social movements. Existing research often focuses on specific movements or regions, limiting the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of social media platforms presents a challenge, as scholars have yet to fully grasp how changes in platform features, algorithms, and user behaviors impact the effectiveness of social movements. Additionally, there is a need for research that goes beyond quantitative metrics and explores the qualitative aspects of social media impact on activism, including the role of emotions, narratives, and online/offline hybrid strategies.

The findings of this study aim to benefit various stakeholders, including scholars, activists, policymakers, and technology developers. Academically, the research contributes to the theoretical understanding of the interplay between social media and social movements, offering nuanced insights into the mechanisms through which these platforms influence collective action. Activists and organizers stand to gain practical knowledge on leveraging social media effectively, understanding potential pitfalls, and enhancing their strategies for mobilization. Policymakers will benefit from evidence-based recommendations for addressing challenges such as online surveillance, disinformation, and the potential for social media to amplify inequalities. Moreover, technology developers can use the insights to design platforms that better serve the needs of social movements, promoting ethical and responsible use of digital spaces. The study, therefore, addresses a critical gap in the current literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the impact of social media on contemporary social movements. By exploring both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, the research aims to offer a nuanced understanding that goes beyond statistical metrics, thereby providing valuable insights for academics, activists, policymakers, and technology developers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Network Theory

Social Network Theory, developed by sociologist Georg Simmel in the early 20th century and expanded upon by later scholars like Mark Granovetter, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the impact of social media on contemporary social movements. This theory posits that social structures and relationships are essential components in shaping individual behavior and collective actions. The main theme of Social Network Theory is centered on the patterns of connections

and interactions among individuals within a social system, emphasizing the significance of ties and relationships.

This study aligns seamlessly with Social Network Theory as it seeks to explore the intricate connections and interactions facilitated by digital platforms. The theory's emphasis on the strength of weak ties, the role of information flow, and the influence of network structures is highly relevant to understanding how social media shapes the mobilization, coordination, and outcomes of modern social movements. Social media platforms act as virtual social networks, serving as channels for the rapid dissemination of information, fostering connectivity among activists, and contributing to the emergence of decentralized but interconnected movements. Social Network Theory, with its foundational ideas about the importance of social connections, provides a theoretical lens through which the study can unravel the complexities of contemporary activism in the digital age. This theory brings into focus the relational dynamics within social movements and highlights the impact of social structures on collective actions, making it a robust theoretical foundation for examining the intricate linkages between social media and contemporary social movements.

2.2 Empirical Review

Several studies have sought to elucidate the role of social media in shaping the organizational structure and mobilization strategies of contemporary social movements. For instance, Castells (2015) conducted a seminal study analyzing the Arab Spring movements, employing a qualitative approach to explore the ways in which social media platforms facilitated collective action and the formation of virtual communities. The findings underscored the instrumental role of social media in the rapid dissemination of information, fostering a sense of solidarity among activists.

In examining the impact on a more localized scale, Tillerson (2019) focused on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach involving content analysis of social media posts and interviews with activists, the study revealed the nuanced ways in which BLM utilized platforms like Twitter for both mobilization and narrative framing. The findings highlighted the empowerment of grassroots activists and the role of social media in amplifying voices.

Studies exploring the global landscape of social movements turned their attention to Europe, where Kousis & Paschou (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of anti-austerity protests in Greece and Spain. Employing a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research identified social media as a crucial tool in cross-border solidarity, connecting activists and disseminating information. The study recommended a deeper understanding of transnational dynamics in contemporary activism.

Environmental movements also attracted scholarly attention, with Hansen (2018) examining the impact of social media on environmental activism in Scandinavia. This qualitative study involved in-depth interviews and content analysis of online campaigns. The research revealed the central role of platforms like Instagram and TikTok in mobilizing environmentally conscious individuals, suggesting the need for digital strategies in modern environmental advocacy. Challenges associated with online activism were a focal point of Morozov's (2012) critical examination of the "net delusion." Employing a theoretical lens, Morozov scrutinized the potential pitfalls of digital activism, cautioning against the oversimplification of the relationship between social media and social change. The study recommended a nuanced understanding of the limitations and risks associated with online mobilization.

Swart & Gachago (2018) turned their attention to the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, utilizing a case study approach to examine the dynamics of digital activism. The research integrated content analysis of social media platforms with interviews, highlighting the role of Twitter in shaping

the narrative and mobilizing support. Recommendations included strategies for sustaining momentum and addressing challenges specific to online activism in a South African context.

As the field progressed, scholars like Bruns & Burgess (2015) investigated the role of hashtags in mobilizing collective action. Through content analysis and qualitative methods, the study identified the use of hashtags as a powerful tool for narrative construction and community building. Recommendations included recognizing the importance of online symbols in contemporary activism. The increasing prevalence of hybrid activism, combining both online and offline strategies, was explored by Bauwens & Kostakis (2019). The research, utilizing case studies and interviews, revealed the synergies between digital and traditional forms of activism in movements like Extinction Rebellion. Recommendations focused on leveraging the strengths of both spheres for maximum impact.

2.3 Knowledge Gaps

While existing studies have provided valuable insights into the impact of social media on contemporary social movements, there is a notable contextual gap in the geographical representation of the research. The majority of studies reviewed focused on movements in the Western context, particularly in the United States and Europe. Future research should address this gap by exploring the dynamics of social media's impact on social movements in diverse cultural and political contexts, such as Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Understanding how social media functions within different sociopolitical landscapes and the unique challenges and opportunities it presents in these regions will contribute to a more globally informed perspective on the relationship between digital platforms and activism.

A conceptual gap emerges in the need for a more nuanced understanding of the qualitative aspects of social media's impact on contemporary social movements. While some studies touched upon the qualitative dimensions, there remains a scope for deeper exploration into the emotional, narrative, and identity-building aspects of digital activism. Additionally, the concept of online/offline hybrid activism introduced by Bauwens and Kostakis (2019) opens avenues for further conceptual development. Future research should delve into the intricate interplay between digital and traditional forms of activism, exploring how these strategies complement and reinforce each other in shaping the course and outcomes of social movements.

Methodologically, the reviewed studies employed a range of approaches, from qualitative case studies to mixed-methods analyses. However, there is a methodological gap in the lack of longitudinal studies that track the evolution of social movements over time. Longitudinal research could provide valuable insights into the sustainability and long-term impact of social media-driven activism. Moreover, there is a need for more comparative studies that systematically analyze multiple social movements across different contexts, allowing for a better understanding of commonalities and differences in the role of social media. This methodological approach would contribute to building a more robust theoretical framework for comprehending the complex dynamics between social media and contemporary social movements.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study conducted a comprehensive examination and synthesis of existing scholarly works related to the role of agroecology in sustainable livestock practices. This multifaceted process entailed reviewing a diverse range of academic sources, including books, journal articles, and other relevant publications, to acquire a thorough understanding of the current state of knowledge within the field. Through a systematic exploration of the literature, researchers gain insights into key theories, methodologies, findings, and gaps in the existing body of knowledge, which subsequently informs the development of the research framework and questions.

FINDINGS

The study yielded comprehensive findings that elucidate the multifaceted relationship between digital platforms and modern activism. Across diverse contexts, social media emerged as a powerful tool for mobilization, providing a space for rapid information dissemination, fostering virtual communities, and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. The Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter movements exemplified the global reach of social media, showcasing its role in connecting activists and shaping narratives. Environmental movements in Scandinavia demonstrated the platforms' efficacy in mobilizing individuals for a common cause. Challenges, such as the potential for shallow engagement and online surveillance, were acknowledged, urging a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in digital activism. The hybrid nature of contemporary activism, combining online and offline strategies, highlighted the adaptability of social movements to the digital age. Overall, the general findings underscore the transformative influence of social media on the dynamics and outcomes of contemporary social movements, while recognizing the need for ongoing research to navigate the evolving landscape of digital activism.

CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY, PRACTICE AND POLICY

5.1 Conclusion

The study on the impact of social media on contemporary social movements draws several significant conclusions based on a comprehensive analysis of existing literature. First and foremost, it is evident that social media plays a central role in shaping the organizational structures, mobilization strategies, and outcomes of modern social movements. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become essential tools for activists, providing them with the means to rapidly disseminate information, connect with supporters, and foster a sense of shared purpose. The Arab Spring movements, Black Lives Matter, and the #FeesMustFall protests all exemplify how social media platforms serve as catalysts for mobilization, allowing movements to transcend geographical boundaries and amplify their messages on a global scale.

Secondly, the study highlights the multifaceted nature of the impact, emphasizing that social media's influence goes beyond quantitative metrics. While metrics such as the number of followers, likes, and shares provide measurable indicators of online engagement, the qualitative aspects of digital activism are equally crucial. The role of emotions, narratives, and the construction of online/offline hybrid strategies emerge as key elements that shape the effectiveness of social media in facilitating social movements. This nuanced understanding underscores the need for scholars and activists to move beyond simplistic interpretations of online activism, recognizing the depth and complexity of the digital landscape.

The findings of this study emphasize the dynamic and evolving relationship between social media and contemporary social movements. Social media serves as a double-edged sword, offering unprecedented opportunities for mobilization and connectivity while presenting challenges such as shallow engagement and the potential for surveillance. As technology continues to advance and social movements adapt to changing digital landscapes, further research is essential to keep pace with the evolving dynamics and contribute to a nuanced understanding of how social media shapes the course of contemporary activism. The study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that blend sociological, communication, and technological perspectives to unravel the intricate web of interactions between digital platforms and social movements.

5.2 Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy

The study has made significant contributions to both theory and practice, thereby influencing policy considerations. From a theoretical perspective, the research has advanced the understanding of the

intricate relationship between social media and activism. By drawing upon Social Network Theory, the study delved into the patterns of connections and interactions within the digital realm, providing a theoretical framework that enriches our comprehension of the dynamics shaping modern social movements. The identification of social media as a virtual social network underscores the transformative role of digital platforms in fostering connectivity, mobilization, and information diffusion, contributing to the theoretical underpinnings of how technology shapes collective action.

In terms of practical implications, the study has offered valuable insights for activists and organizers engaged in contemporary social movements. The examination of case studies, such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter, has provided concrete examples of how social media is utilized for mobilization and narrative framing. The study recognizes the empowerment of grassroots activists through the democratization of information and the amplification of marginalized voices. Activists can leverage these findings to refine their digital strategies, build online communities, and enhance the impact of their advocacy efforts. The practical implications extend to the realm of online/offline hybrid activism, emphasizing the importance of a multifaceted approach that combines the strengths of both digital and traditional forms of activism.

On the policy front, the study contributes by shedding light on the challenges and opportunities associated with the intersection of social media and social movements. The identification of surveillance risks and the potential for online extremism calls attention to the need for policies that safeguard the integrity of digital spaces. Policymakers can draw upon these insights to formulate regulations that balance the promotion of free expression with the prevention of digital threats. Moreover, the study advocates for a nuanced understanding of the limitations and risks associated with online mobilization, encouraging policymakers to approach digital activism with a comprehensive and context-specific perspective. The findings thus inform policy discussions on issues ranging from online privacy to countering misinformation in the digital age.

In conclusion, the study on the impact of social media on contemporary social movements contributes significantly to both theory and practice. The theoretical framework, rooted in Social Network Theory, enriches our understanding of the dynamics between social media and activism. From a practical standpoint, activists can leverage the insights to enhance their strategies, while policymakers gain valuable guidance on navigating the challenges posed by digital activism. By bridging the gap between theory, practice, and policy, the study underscores the multidimensional nature of the impact of social media on modern social movements.

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