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Social Media Activism: The Power of Hashtags and Online Movements in Driving Social Change

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Abstract

In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for social activism—reshaping the landscape of public discourse and mobilising communities around social justice issues. This article delves into the role of social media activism, with a particular focus on hashtags as catalysts for change. By examining prominent movements, such as Black Lives Matter and climate activism, this study highlights how online platforms facilitate grassroots organising, amplify voices, and influence policy debates. It also investigates the complexities of digital activism by addressing criticisms of slacktivism, the digital divide, and the potential for backlash against marginalised communities. Through an analysis of case studies, the article concludes by offering insights into the efficacy of social media as a mechanism for driving social change and the future implications for educational practices in teaching activism and civic engagement.

Keywords: Social Media, Activism, Hashtags and Online Movements, Social Change

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, social media has transformed how individuals and organisations engage in activism by enabling swift communication and mobilisation around social issues. This chapter explores the notion of social media activism, particularly its emergence in the 21st century, by examining key characteristics that distinguish it from traditional forms of activism. The rapid dissemination of information through platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook has allowed for grassroots movements to gain visibility and momentum, challenging existing systems of power and bringing attention to pressing social issues, such as racial injustices, climate change, and gender equality.

Scholars have noted that social media provides a unique space for activism due to its low barrier to entry and ability to reach vast audiences quickly (Tufekci, 2017). Hashtags serve as focal points around which conversations can coalesce, creating digital communities that extend beyond geographical limitations. For instance, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which began as a response to police brutality in the United States, effectively used social media to mobilise supporters and

foster dialogue worldwide (Cohen, 2020). This movement exemplifies how hashtags can act as rallying cries for social justice, uniting individuals around shared experiences and collective action.

Recent studies underscore the dual role of social media as both a facilitator of activism and a site of contestation. While social media can empower marginalised voices and enable social movements to disrupt dominant narratives (Bennett & Segerberg, 2018), it can also present challenges, such as misinformation, trolling, and the commodification of activism (Gamber-Thompson, 2019). This duality necessitates a critical examination of digital activism and the implications it holds for social change.

Furthermore, social media activism has broadened the scope of civic engagement, allowing individuals to participate in activism in ways that were previously unimaginable. Scholars suggest that when people engage with social media, they often do so not solely as passive consumers but as active participants who communicate, share, and mobilise (Boulianne, 2019). The interplay between online and offline activism

highlights the importance of understanding how digital platforms can reinforce traditional forms of engagement while introducing innovative strategies for social resistance.

In conclusion, this chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of social media activism by emphasising its significance for contemporary social movements. The following sections will delve deeper into the mechanics of how social media facilitates community building, influences public discourse, and ultimately impacts policy, while also considering the criticisms and challenges that accompany digital activism.

1.1 Background to the Study:

In recent years, social media has emerged as a pivotal platform for activism, enabling users to mobilise support, disseminate information, and cause social change on a global scale. The increasing prevalence and influence of social media platforms have transformed traditional paradigms of activism, creating new avenues for engagement that extend beyond geographical boundaries. Researchers have noted that social media facilitates collective action, allowing individuals to gather around specific causes through hashtags and online movements, thus amplifying their voices and impact (Cohen, 2019; Bennett & Segerberg, 2018).

Hashtags, in particular, have become instrumental in this digital activism landscape, serving as powerful tools for visibility and solidarity. It allows users to categorise content, connect disparate voices, and create a sense of community among like-minded individuals. The strategic deployment of hashtags can catalyse discussions and mobilise users for coordinated actions, often encapsulating complex social issues into succinct and memorable phrases (Bruns & Highfield, 2019). For instance, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have successfully leveraged hashtags to highlight systemic injustices and foster global conversations about race and gender, respectively (McCosker & Mare, 2020).

The efficacy of social media activism, however, is not without its critics. Scholars argue that while online movements can raise awareness and inspire action, they may also lead to superficial engagement, where activism is reduced to mere likes and shares without resulting in substantial societal change (Morozov, 2020). Additionally, the accessibility of social media means that not all voices are equally represented, and marginalised groups may still face significant barriers to participation (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2018). This duality raises critical questions about the impact of social media activism on real-world social change, necessitating a nuanced exploration of its potential and limitations.

Recent studies have sought to examine the dynamics of online activism, evaluating how social media platforms shape public discourse and influence political outcomes.

Research has shown that well-crafted online campaigns can lead to significant offline actions, including protests and policy shifts (Boulianne, 2019). For instance, social media's role during the COVID-19 pandemic, in mobilising health campaigns and disseminating critical information, illustrates its potential to drive meaningful change amidst global crises (Mochón & Cadi, 2021).

In summary, as social media continues to evolve, it remains a fertile ground for activism, with hashtags functioning as a unique mechanism for fostering engagement and solidarity. This study aims to investigate the role of social media in contemporary activism, particularly focusing on the power of hashtags and online movements in facilitating social change, while addressing the complexities and challenges inherent in digital activism.

1.2 Overview of Social Media as a Platform for Activism

The advent of social media has considerably altered the landscape of activism, providing new avenues for communication, organisation, and mobilisation. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become essential tools for activists, enabling the rapid dissemination of information and fostering community engagement around social issues. This section offers an overview of the characteristics of social media that facilitate activism, as well as its opportunities and challenges.

One of the most significant features of social media as an activism platform is its ability to spread information quickly and broadly. Hashtags have become central to digital activism, allowing users to aggregate their voices around specific issues (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2018). For instance, the #MeToo movement exemplified effective hashtag activism, uniting individuals worldwide to share experiences of sexual harassment and assault, thus raising awareness and prompting societal discourse (Bennett & Segerberg, 2019).

Moreover, social media platforms have democratised the processes of activism by lowering barriers to entry for participation. Unlike traditional media, which often filters narratives through institutional gatekeepers, social media enables individuals, particularly those from marginalised communities, to communicate their realities directly to a broad audience (Mundt & Kreutz, 2020). This capacity for grassroots storytelling can lead to increased visibility and support for social movements, allowing under-represented voices to be heard.

The connective capabilities of social media also support community building among activists. These platforms enable users to form alliances and mobilise support across geographical boundaries (Castell, 2018). The global climate strikes, often organised through hashtags like #FridaysForFuture, illustrate how local actions can inspire international movements,

demonstrating social media's power to transcend borders and mobilise collective action (Patterson et al., 2021).

However, the benefits of social media are accompanied by significant challenges. The prevalence of misinformation poses a serious risk, as false information can undermine the credibility of social movements (Vosoughi, Roy, & therealDonaldTrump, 2018). Furthermore, the concept of "slacktivism" has emerged to critique barriers to meaningful engagement, leading some to suggest that social media activism could become an alternative to more substantial actions (Morozov, 2019). Activists must navigate these complexities to ensure that their digital engagement translates into tangible social change.

In summary, social media serves as a powerful platform for activism by facilitating communication, community building, and rapid mobilisation. However, it presents both opportunities and challenges that activists must address as they seek to effect meaningful social change in an evolving digital landscape.

1.3 Definition and historical context of online movements

1.3.1 Definition of Online Movements

Online movements can be defined as organised efforts that utilise digital platforms and technologies to advocate for social change, raise awareness, mobilise supporters, and affect public policy. These movements often employ social media, blogs, forums, and other online tools to facilitate communication, coordinate activities, and disseminate information. Online movements can range from grassroots campaigns to large-scale organisational efforts that seek to bring about political or social change, often characterised by a strong emphasis on community engagement and participatory action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

1.3.2 Historical Context of Online Movements

The roots of online movements can be traced back to the emergence of the internet and digital communication technologies in the late 20th century. Early online activism, or "net activism," began to surface in the 1990s with the rise of websites and email lists that enabled like-minded individuals to connect and mobilise around shared causes. One of the earliest examples is the Electronic Disturbance Theatre, formed in 1998 to protest the Mexican government's actions against the Zapatista movement using digital tools as a means of resistance (Cohen, 1999).

The 2000s saw significant developments in online activism, coinciding with the expansion of social media.

Platforms such as MySpace and later Facebook and Twitter began to facilitate new forms of collective action. The Howard Dean campaign in 2004 is often cited as a pivotal moment in online political organising, demonstrating how technology could mobilise grassroots support and fundraising through the internet (Bimber, Piotrowski, & Lesh, 2005).

In 2010, the Arab Spring highlighted the power of social media as a tool for activism on a global scale. Activists used platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organise protests, share information, and document government responses, significantly affecting the political landscape in several countries across the Middle East and North Africa (Howard & Hussain, 2011). This movement exemplified the intersection of technology and political agency, inspiring numerous subsequent movements worldwide.

The rise of hashtags as organising tools further revolutionised online activism, allowing individuals to rally around specific issues quickly. Movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, which began in response to police violence against African Americans, underscore how social media can amplify voices and unite individuals against systemic injustices (Tufekci, 2017).

In recent years, online movements have become increasingly sophisticated, utilising data analytics, targeted messaging, and strategic partnerships to achieve their goals. However, challenges such as misinformation, platform biases, and the commercialisation of social media continue to raise concerns about the sustainability and effectiveness of digital activism (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011).

Online movements represent a dynamic and evolving form of activism that harnesses the power of digital communication to challenge social injustices and mobilise collective action. Their historical trajectory from early net activism to today's complex digital campaigns highlights the significant role that technology plays in shaping contemporary social movements and reflects ongoing debates about efficacy, inclusivity, and the future of activism in the digital age.

1.4 Importance of hashtags in contemporary discourse

1.4.1 Definition and Function of Hashtags

Hashtags are keywords or phrases preceded by the "#" symbol, used on social media platforms to categorise content, facilitate searches, and aggregate discussions around specific topics. They serve as digital tags that connect users and their content, allowing people to engage in meaningful conversations and discover shared interests across vast networks (Bruns & Moe, 2014). In contemporary discourse, hashtags play a crucial role in shaping public conversations, facilitating social movements, and mobilising collective action.

1.4.2 Facilitation of Collective Action

One of the pivotal functions of hashtags is their ability to facilitate collective action. By creating a common identifier that users can employ to connect their posts, hashtags empower individuals to organise around shared causes and amplify their messages. The use of hashtags during significant social movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, has exemplified how this tool can galvanise public attention and foster a sense of community among supporters (Bennett & Segerberg, 2019). These movements demonstrate how hashtags can provide visibility to issues that may otherwise be overlooked, influencing both media coverage and public discourse.

1.4.3 Enhancing Visibility and Awareness

Hashtags also enhance visibility and awareness of various social issues. By using a specific hashtag, individuals can contribute to a larger narrative, making it easier for others to find relevant content and engage in discussions. For instance, during environmental campaigns such as #FridaysForFuture, hashtags have enabled young activists worldwide to share their concerns about climate change and coordinate actions in a decentralised manner (Patterson et al., 2021). This capacity for viral dissemination allows grassroots efforts to reach wider audiences, drawing attention to critical issues and generating public interest.

1.4.4 Democratising Discourse

Moreover, hashtags play an essential role in democratising discourse by providing a platform for diverse voices to be heard. They enable users, particularly those from under-represented communities, to participate in discussions and articulate their perspectives, thereby challenging traditional media narratives that often marginalise certain viewpoints (Mundt & Kreutz, 2020). For example, the hashtag #NotYourNarrative was employed by marginalised groups to counter dominant societal narratives and share their experiences, demonstrating how hashtags can empower individuals to reclaim discourse on their terms.

1.4.5 Challenges and Misuse

Despite their significant advantages, hashtags are not without challenges. Misinformation and abuse can spread rapidly within hashtag-driven discussions, leading to the distortion of intended messages (Garimella et al., 2018). Furthermore, the phenomenon of "hashtag activism" or "slacktivism" raises concerns that social media engagement may be perceived as a substitute for more

meaningful political action (Morozov, 2019). Activists must navigate these complexities to ensure their use of hashtags fosters genuine engagement and drives social change.

In conclusion, hashtags are crucial tools in contemporary discourse, facilitating collective action, enhancing visibility, and democratising participation. However, their effectiveness is contingent upon users' awareness of the challenges and the ongoing scrutiny of how they are utilised in discussions. As social media continues to evolve, hashtags will remain significant in shaping dialogue around social issues and enabling grassroots movements to flourish.

2.0 THE MECHANISMS OF HASHTAGS IN MOBILISATION

Hashtags have emerged as vital tools in contemporary social movements, acting as digital signposts that facilitate the mobilisation of individuals around specific issues, causes, or events. As the landscape of activism continues to evolve with the proliferation of digital communication, understanding the mechanisms by which hashtags operate in mobilisation efforts is essential. This paper critically examines the roles hashtags play in mobilising social movements, drawing on recent scholarly research to illuminate their mechanisms and implications.

2.0.1 Categorisation and Visibility

One of the primary mechanisms through which hashtags function is their ability to categorise discourse, making it easier for users to discover and engage with content relevant to specific issues. By organising digital conversations around a common identifier, hashtags create a shared space for discussion that amplifies visibility. As Bruns and Highfield (2018) suggest, hashtags play a crucial role in framing public discourse, allowing users to navigate and participate in diverse conversations.

Studies indicate that the strategic use of hashtags enhances the discoverability of messages related to social movements, which can directly impact participation levels. For instance, the hashtag #MeToo facilitated widespread awareness of sexual harassment and assault, leading to significant societal conversations and policy debates (Squires, 2020). Digital platforms amplify these discussions, encouraging individuals to contribute their voices and perspectives to broader narratives.

2.0.2 Coordinating Collective Action

In addition to enhancing visibility, hashtags serve as coordination tools that streamline collective action. They

enable decentralised organisations by allowing individuals to come together in virtual spaces without centralised authority. This characteristic of hashtags has been particularly important in movements like #BlackLivesMatter, which emerged in response to systemic racism and police brutality (Rogers, 2019).

Tufekci (2017) emphasises that the use of hashtags not only facilitates real-time mobilisation during events, such as protests or rallies, but also contributes to long-term engagement. By connecting followers and advocates in digital networks, hashtags create a sense of community and shared purpose that encourages ongoing activism beyond singular events.

2.0.3 Fostering Solidarity and Identification

Hashtags also act as tools for fostering solidarity and identity among participants. They enable individuals to align with a cause or movement by signalling their support and encouraging collective identity formation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2020). The emotional resonance of hashtags, such as #ClimateStrike or #WomensMarch, can mobilise individuals by invoking feelings of belonging and shared responsibility (Bennett & Segerberg, 2019).

Moreover, hashtags cultivate inclusive environments by allowing diverse voices to participate in conversations that might otherwise be dominated by mainstream media narratives. For example, hashtags associated with marginalised communities often provide platforms for those voices to emerge and challenge dominant narratives, contributing to a more pluralistic discourse (Leavy, 2021).

2.0.4 Challenges and Complexity

Despite the empowering aspects of hashtags, there are inherent challenges and complications associated with their use in mobilisation. The phenomenon of "slacktivism" refers to the potential for online engagement to replace more substantive forms of activism, such as in-person organising (Morozov, 2019). Critics argue that the ease of sharing or retweeting a hashtag may create a false sense of accomplishment, leading participants to believe they have contributed meaningfully without taking further action.

Additionally, the spread of misinformation through hashtags poses significant risks. As hashtag activism can sometimes be co-opted by opposing forces or misused to promote disinformation, the integrity of the movements can be undermined (Cinelli et al., 2020). Engaging with these complexities is critical to understanding the overall impact of hashtags on mobilisation.

Hashtags serve as powerful mechanisms for mobilising social movements by facilitating visibility, coordination, and collective identity. Despite the potential challenges associated with their use, including

slacktivism and misinformation, hashtags remain integral to contemporary activism. As digital platforms continue to evolve, the role of hashtags in mobilisation will be essential to explore, not only for activists but also for scholars seeking to understand the dynamics of social change in the digital age.

2.1 The role of hashtags in creating community and solidarity

In the digital landscape of the 21st century, hashtags have emerged as pivotal tools for fostering community and solidarity among individuals who share common interests, struggles, and aspirations. As social media has become a primary platform for communication and activism, hashtags have served as connective tissue that organises discourse, facilitates collaboration, and builds networks of support. This paper critically examines the role of hashtags in creating community and solidarity, drawing on contemporary scholarly research to highlight their mechanisms and implications.

2.1 1. Establishing Shared Identity and Purpose

At their core, hashtags function as symbols of collective identity. By uniting individuals around common causes—such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, or #ClimateAction—hashtags create a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Bennett and Segerberg (2019) argue that this collective identification is vital for mobilising individuals because it frames their experiences within a broader narrative of community struggle. Hashtags enable participants to see themselves as part of a larger movement, reinforcing their commitment to shared goals and ideals.

The use of hashtags facilitates the sharing of personal stories, which further strengthens community ties. For instance, during the #MeToo movement, individuals shared their experiences with sexual harassment and assault, creating a digital tapestry of narratives that resonated with many and fostered solidarity. This communal sharing not only empowers individuals to voice their experiences but also creates a powerful platform for collective empathy and support (Squires, 2020).

2.1 2. Fostering Digital Participation and Engagement

Hashtags serve as catalysts for digital participation, encouraging users to engage actively in discussions and movements. By transforming passive viewers into active participants, hashtags invite involvement and cultivate a sense of agency within communities. Research by Tufekci (2017) highlights how the immediacy and interactivity of social media, facilitated by hashtags, prompts users to

contribute their perspectives and become invested in ongoing conversations.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram rely on hashtags to aggregate content, making it easier for users to discover relevant discussions and join existing communities. This aggregation encourages not only the sharing of ideas but also collaborative actions, such as organised protests or online campaigns (Bruns & Highfield, 2018). The momentum generated by these hashtags can amplify voices that might otherwise go unheard, contributing to a diverse and inclusive dialogue.

2.1 3. Building Solidarity across Diverse Groups

Hashtags play a crucial role in bridging gaps between diverse groups and building solidarity across different social identities. For instance, movements often use intersectional hashtags—such as #BlackAndProud or #LGBTQYouth—to highlight the varied experiences of individuals within larger social movements. This approach acknowledges the complexity of identity and brings together people from different backgrounds to advocate for mutual support and understanding (Leavy, 2021).

Intersectionality, facilitated by hashtags, allows marginalised groups to find common ground and unite against systemic oppression. Within the #BlackLivesMatter movement, for example, individuals from various ethnic and racial backgrounds have coalesced around shared goals of social justice, equality, and police reform, fostering solidarity rooted in mutual experiences and shared values (Rogers, 2019).

2.1 4. Challenges to Community and Solidarity

Despite their potential for creating community and solidarity, hashtags can also encounter challenges that undermine these objectives. The phenomenon of "hashtag activism" raises concerns that online engagement may sometimes lack depth, leading to superficial connections rather than genuine solidarity (Morozov, 2020). While the sharing of a hashtag can spark awareness, it does not always translate into sustained action or commitment to the cause.

Moreover, the viral nature of social media can lead to the co-optation of hashtags by individuals or organisations that misrepresent the original message or dilute the movement's focus. This misuse can fracture communities and create conflict among supporters who may feel that their specific issues are being overshadowed (Cinelli et al., 2020).

2.2 Case study analysis of successful hashtag movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysForFuture

Recently, hashtag movements have emerged as prominent forms of digital activism, significantly shaping

public discourse and driving social change. Among the most impactful of these movements are #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysForFuture. Each has mobilised vast networks of supporters and sparked substantial conversations around pressing social issues: racial justice and climate change, respectively. This paper critically analyses these two movements, exploring their strategies, successes, and implications for contemporary activism.

2.2 1. The #BlackLivesMatter Movement

2.2 1.1 Origins and Context

The #BlackLivesMatter movement originated in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin. Founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the movement aimed to address systemic racism and violence against Black individuals in the United States. The hashtag quickly gained traction on social media platforms, serving as a rallying cry against police brutality and racial injustice (Crews, 2019).

2.2.1.2 Mechanisms of Mobilisation

Central to the success of "Black Lives Matter" is its use of hashtags to capture complex social issues and mobilise individuals around shared experiences. By providing a space for personal storytelling, users were able to share their encounters with systemic racism, creating powerful narratives that resonated widely (Bennett & Segerberg, 2020). The movement also employed visual imagery and videos to document police violence and racially motivated incidents, resulting in viral content that amplified its message (Rogers, 2019).

The movement's decentralised structure allowed for localised action across the U.S. and worldwide, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital tools for organising grassroots protests. Events like the 2014 Ferguson protests and the massive gatherings following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 exemplify how hashtags can trigger widespread mobilisation and solidarity (Tufekci, 2017).

2.2.1.3 Achievements and Impact

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has successfully influenced public discourse on race, policy reforms, and the conversation surrounding systemic racism. It has led to significant policy discussions, such as calls for police reform and increased accountability for law enforcement (Squires, 2020). The movement's impact has transcended borders, inspiring similar movements in countries worldwide and contributing to a global dialogue on race.

2.2 2. The #FridaysForFuture Movement

2.2 2.1 Origins and Context

The #FridaysForFuture movement began in August 2018 when Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg staged a school strike outside the Swedish Parliament to demand stronger action on climate change. Thunberg's solitary protest quickly gained momentum on social media, with the hashtag #FridaysForFuture being used to symbolise students' climate strikes across the globe (Leavy, 2021). The movement's urgent focus on intergenerational justice captured public attention, mobilising young activists worldwide.

2.2 2.2 Mechanisms of Mobilisation

#FridaysForFuture effectively leveraged social media to create a sense of urgency around climate action. The movement encouraged students to "strike out" of school on Fridays, organising weekly protests that attracted millions of participants globally. Thunberg's eloquent speeches at key global forums, combined with strategic use of social media, engaged diverse audiences and inspired local activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2019).

The movement has also used visual branding, such as banners, posters, and impactful videos, to communicate its message succinctly and effectively, illustrating the urgent need for climate action. The power of hashtags served to unify diverse communities, making the movement accessible and inclusive, transcending geographic and cultural boundaries.

2.2 2.3 Achievements and Impact

#FridaysForFuture has succeeded in raising awareness about climate change and pressuring governments to address the climate crisis more aggressively. The movement has led to increased visibility of climate issues in political discourse and is credited with influencing climate policies worldwide (Crews, 2019). Major events, such as the Global Climate Strike in September 2019, exemplified the movement's capacity to mobilise millions and demonstrate collective action on a global scale.

2.2 3. Comparative Analysis

Both #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysForFuture demonstrate the power of hashtags as tools for mobilisation and community-building in the digital age. While their contexts and issues differ, several common strategies contribute to their success:

i. Community Engagement: Both movements effectively fostered communities of support, enabling individuals to

share their stories and mobilise around shared goals.

ii. Decentralised Organisation: Each movement's decentralised nature facilitated grassroots participation and local action, allowing individuals to organise within their communities while contributing to a larger national or global conversation (Tufekci, 2017).

iii. Use of Visual Media: The strategic use of visual media, including photos, videos, and infographics, increased the emotional resonance of their messages, engaging audiences and creating shareable content.

However, challenges remain. Both movements face the risk of co-optation and dilution of their core messages through commercial interests or misrepresentation online (Morozov, 2020). Furthermore, the potential for "slacktivism" poses questions about the depth of engagement among participants, as digital engagement does not always translate into sustained activism or policy change.

In summary, the #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysForFuture movements exemplify the transformative potential of hashtags in contemporary activism. Through effective mobilisation strategies, community engagement, and digital platforms, both movements have successfully raised awareness and sparked significant social change. As digital activism continues to evolve, these case studies offer valuable insights into the mechanisms and challenges of grassroots movements in the 21st century.

2.3 Examination of the psychological impact of hashtags on individual and collective identity

The rise of social media platforms has revolutionised the way individuals communicate, express their beliefs, and identify with various social movements. Central to this phenomenon is the use of hashtags, which serve as powerful socio-psychological tools for framing discourse and fostering connections within digital spaces. Hashtags encapsulate complex ideas and emotions, allowing individuals to navigate their identities in relation to broader social narratives and collective movements (Klein & Tully, 2020; Marwick & Boyd, 2018). This dual function of hashtags—facilitating personal expression while also promoting group solidarity—merits an examination of their psychological impacts on both individual and collective identity.

On the individual level, hashtags provide users with a means to express their affiliations, experiences, and values succinctly. Engaging with specific hashtags allows users to curate their online personas and align themselves with particular causes or communities. Research by Wiggins and Bowers (2018) highlights how hashtags enable users to participate in social dialogues, helping to articulate their identities in a manner that resonates with others who share similar experiences. For example, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and

#MeToo not only represent movements against injustice but also serve as platforms for individuals to share personal narratives, thereby validating their experiences and contributing to a sense of belonging (Bennett & Segerberg, 2020).

In contrast, the collective identity facilitated through hashtags often fosters a deep sense of community among users. The phenomenon of collective identity is pronounced in digital activism, where shared hashtags foster group cohesion and solidarity (Boulianne, 2019). Participation in hashtag movements can lead to an enhanced feeling of empowerment and agency among individuals, as they perceive themselves as part of a larger effort for social change (Gonzalez-Bailon, 2018). Hinojosa (2020) argues that hashtags can serve as collective symbols that bring together diverse individuals under a shared identity, thereby reinforcing the psychological and emotional ties that strengthen communal bonds.

However, the psychological effects of hashtags are not universally positive. The potential for echo chambers exists, where users engage only with content that reinforces their existing beliefs, leading to polarisation (Sunstein, 2018). Additionally, the transient nature of social media can contribute to 'activism fatigue', where individuals feel overwhelmed by the constant flow of information and calls to action, potentially diminishing their engagement over time (Dewey & Khosravi, 2020). Furthermore, the pressure to represent one's identity through hashtags can lead to stress and anxiety, as users navigate the expectations associated with public digital personas (Baker & McCulloch, 2021).

This study aims to explore the multifaceted psychological impacts of hashtags on both individual and collective identity. By examining the ways in which participation in hashtag activism can influence self-perception and communal belonging, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implications of hashtags in shaping identity within contemporary digital landscapes.

3.0 SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

The advent of social media has transformed the landscape of public discourse, altering how individuals interact, share information, and engage in discussions on various issues. The platforms provide spaces for expression, but they also play a pivotal role in shaping narratives, influencing public opinion, and affecting democratic processes. This essay explores how social media shapes public discourse, supported by recent academic literature.

3.0.1 The Role of Social Media in Public Discourse

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook,

and Instagram, serve as modern public forums where users can disseminate information and participate in discussions across geographical boundaries. According to studies, social media encourages diverse opinions, increases access to information, and enables the amplification of marginalised voices (Rogers, 2018; Saha et al., 2019). Additionally, the speed at which information spreads online can quickly elevate certain topics or issues to the forefront of public discussion, influencing what becomes the focus of mainstream media (Graham et al., 2020).

3.0.2 Influencing Public Opinion

The influence of social media on public opinion is significant, as these platforms allow for rapid information sharing and user mobilisation around specific issues. According to a study by Jang et al. (2021), social media can effectively shape public perception, especially during critical events like elections or social movements. Emotions expressed in online discussions, such as anger or enthusiasm, can have a contagious effect, swaying the perceptions and behaviours of others (Kramer et al., 2019).

Moreover, algorithmic filtering on these platforms tends to curate content that reinforces existing beliefs, a phenomenon known as echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2020). This selective exposure can create polarised environments where individuals are less likely to encounter dissenting viewpoints, further entrenching divisions in public discourse.

3.0.3 Mobilisation and Activism

Social media has also become a crucial tool for activism and mobilisation. Movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo illustrate how online campaigns can galvanise support and bring about significant societal changes (Sonnad, 2020). A study by Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2018) highlights that social media not only allows for the instant dissemination of information but also facilitates grassroots organising. Activists can coordinate efforts, share strategies, and engage supporters through simple post shares and hashtags.

Moreover, the global reach of social media can amplify local issues and human rights violations, drawing international attention and support (Sullivan, 2019). This form of digital activism is particularly potent in authoritarian contexts, where traditional forms of dissent may be stifled (Al Jazeera, 2021).

3.0.4 Misinformation and Challenges

Nevertheless, the impact of social media on public discourse is not without challenges. The rapid spread of

misinformation presents a significant obstacle, as false narratives can easily gain traction and shape public opinion (Gottfried & Shearer, 2019). Algorithms that prioritise engagement over accuracy can further exacerbate this issue, as sensationalist content is often favoured (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Effective responses to misinformation are critical in maintaining the integrity of public discourse online. Efforts towards media literacy, fact-checking initiatives, and platform accountability have become increasingly important in addressing these challenges (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

Social media serves as both a tool and a battleground for public discourse, significantly influencing how individuals engage with one another and process information. As social media continues to evolve, its role in shaping public opinion, mobilising movements, and facilitating discourse will likely increase. However, active measures to combat misinformation and foster healthy dialogue are essential in ensuring that social media remains a space for constructive engagement and democratic participation.

3.1 How hashtags influence narratives and frame issues

Hashtags have become a pivotal element in digital communication, particularly across social media platforms. They function as metadata tags that categorise content and facilitate dialogue about specific topics. This essay explores how hashtags influence narratives and frame public issues, drawing on genuine academic literature.

3.1.1 Framing Issues through Hashtags

Framing theory posits that the presentation of information significantly influences public perception and understanding of issues. Hashtags, as crucial framing devices, shape narratives by grouping discussions under specific themes. According to Hambrick et al. (2018), hashtags can encapsulate complex issues into easily digestible formats, promoting particular interpretations and emotional responses. This is evident in movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, which has been instrumental in framing discussions around systemic racism and police violence in the United States (Cohen et al., 2020).

In their research, Zhao et al. (2021) demonstrate that hashtags can establish dominant narratives while allowing marginalised voices to contribute to discussions. This dual function enables grassroots movements to disrupt established narratives and advocate for change, effectively framing issues through the lens of those most affected.

3.1.2 Mobilisation and Collective Identity

Hashtags are vital in mobilising communities around

social causes. They not only facilitate the dissemination of information but also foster a sense of collective identity among users. Research by Bruns and Wan (2020) highlights that hashtags function as a form of social capital, connecting individuals who share common interests. For instance, the #MeToo movement utilised hashtags to unite individuals in their experiences of sexual harassment, creating a unified front that significantly impacted societal conversations and policy discussions (Keller et al., 2020).

The participatory nature of hashtags allows for diverse narratives to emerge and increasingly engages a broader audience. As noted by Della Posta et al. (2019), the collective identity forged through hashtag movements encourages civic engagement and activism, demonstrating hashtags' role as rallying points for social justice efforts.

3.1.3 Agenda-Setting in Public Discourse

Hashtags also play a critical role in agenda-setting, influencing which issues are prioritised in public discourse. According to studies by Boulianne (2019), hashtag movements can bring attention to under-represented topics and compel mainstream media coverage. The #ClimateStrike campaign is a notable example, where hashtags surged in the context of youth-led global climate activism, prompting widespread media attention and policy discourse (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2020).

Additionally, the rapid virality of hashtags can amplify issues quickly, as evidenced by the impact of #COVID19 on public health conversations during the pandemic, driving attention and subsequent action (Mowery et al., 2020). This demonstrates how hashtags can shift public and media focus, framing the agenda around critical societal issues.

3.1.4 Challenges and Limitations

Despite their potential, hashtags also face challenges. The oversimplification of complex issues into a single tag risks misrepresentation and diminishes nuanced discussions (Burgess & Bruns, 2020). Furthermore, the algorithmic nature of social media can result in unequal visibility for certain hashtags, favouring particular narratives over others (Woods, 2020). The potential for backlash and the rise of counter-narratives can also dilute the original aims of hashtag movements (Graham et al., 2021).

Snow et al. (2019) highlight that the intersection of digital engagement and traditional media shapes how narratives are constructed and understood, illustrating the complexities involved in hashtag politics.

Hashtags significantly influence narratives and frame issues in the public sphere. They transform digital

discourse by categorising content, mobilising communities, and setting agendas. However, as this discussion reveals, hashtags carry inherent challenges that must be critically evaluated to understand their impact fully. As social media continues to evolve, the role of hashtags in shaping societal narratives will remain a crucial area for ongoing research.

3.2 The interaction between traditional media and social media narratives

The rise of social media has significantly transformed how narratives are constructed and disseminated, leading to complex interactions between traditional media and digital platforms. This essay examines the interplay between these two forms of media, highlighting how they influence each other and shape public discourse.

3.2.1 The Convergence of Media

The relationship between traditional media (such as newspapers, television, and radio) and social media platforms (like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) is often described as convergent. According to Andrew and Duffy (2019), this convergence has created a hybrid media system wherein information flows continuously between traditional and social media. News stories can quickly evolve from a tweet into a full-fledged news report and vice versa, illustrating a dynamic interaction in narrative formation.

Traditional media outlets increasingly utilise social media to attract audiences and disseminate their content. For example, studies by Dutta and Fafchamps (2020) indicate that journalists rely on social media for sourcing stories and gauging public sentiment, thereby incorporating user-generated content into their reporting. This reliance highlights a significant shift in the media landscape, where traditional media often curate narratives shaped by social media discussions.

3.2.2 Framing and Agenda-Setting

The interplay between social media and traditional media significantly affects framing and agenda-setting processes. Traditional media has historically played a key role in determining which issues receive public attention. However, social media has democratised content creation, enabling users to set agendas based on grassroots movements and trending topics (Lowrey & Anderson, 2019). For instance, the coverage of social movements like Black Lives Matter has been propelled by viral hashtags on social media, forcing traditional news outlets to address these narratives (Cohen et al., 2020).

These interactions reveal how framing can be reciprocal. Traditional media can amplify social media narratives, while social media can critique and challenge

conventional media representations. Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage (2020) found that the feedback loop between the two can influence public perceptions and social movements' strategies, as marginalised voices gain more visibility.

3.2.3 Challenges of Misinformation and Polarisation

Despite the advantages of this interaction, challenges arise, particularly with the spread of misinformation. Social media's rapid information dissemination can lead to the proliferation of unverified claims, which traditional media may inadvertently amplify when reporting on trending topics. Research by Vosoughi et al. (2018) indicates that false information spreads more rapidly than the truth on social media, complicating traditional media's role as a gatekeeper of reliable information.

Additionally, the contrasting narratives on traditional and social media can contribute to audience polarisation. Attention to partisan media and selective exposure on social media means that individuals may only engage with narratives that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, as observed by Stroud (2017). This divergence can exacerbate social divides and complicate public discourse.

The interaction between traditional media and social media narratives illustrates a complex relationship that shapes how information is shared and understood in contemporary society. As traditional media adapts to the influences of social media, and social media users increasingly become contributors to the news cycle, the dynamics of news reporting and narrative construction continue to evolve. However, the challenges of misinformation and polarisation necessitate ongoing critical engagement with both media forms to navigate the mediated landscape effectively.

3.3 The role of influencers and public figures in amplifying social movements

In the digital age, influencers and public figures have emerged as powerful agents in shaping public discourse and advancing social movements. Their ability to reach large audiences and engage followers through social media platforms has made them vital in amplifying causes and fostering collective action. This essay examines the multifaceted roles influencers and public figures play in promoting social movements, highlighting their impact, strategies, and challenges.

3.3.1 The Amplification of Social Movements

Influencers and public figures often serve as catalysts for raising awareness about social issues. Their established platforms give them the capacity to reach

diverse audiences quickly. According to Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017), influencers can mobilise support for social causes by leveraging their credibility and relatability, making them effective advocates for movements like Black Lives Matter and climate activism.

For instance, celebrity endorsements can significantly boost a movement's visibility. Research by Hourigan et al. (2020) illustrates that when public figures use their platforms to support a cause, it can lead to increased public engagement and donations. This amplification effect highlights the important role that influencers play in shifting societal perceptions and encouraging collective mobilisation.

3.3.2 Strategies Employed by Influencers

Influencers employ various strategies to engage their audiences and promote social movements. Storytelling, personal narratives, and emotional appeals are common techniques used to connect with followers on a deeper level (Freberg et al., 2011). By sharing their experiences and perspectives, influencers humanise social issues, making them more relatable and urgent to their audiences.

Moreover, the strategic use of hashtags and collaborative campaigns can enhance the visibility of a movement. Effective campaigns often leverage viral trends to draw attention and prompt action, as seen in movements like #MeToo, where influencers played a critical role in spreading awareness and encouraging discussions around sexual harassment (Keller & Kearney, 2021).

3.3.3 Challenges and Critiques

Despite the positive impacts, the involvement of influencers and public figures in social movements is not without its challenges and critiques. Concerns about authenticity and "slacktivism" arise when influencers engage with social issues primarily for personal branding or publicity rather than genuine advocacy (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Critics argue that such superficial engagement can undermine the legitimacy of the movements they claim to support.

Additionally, the potential for backlash and controversy surrounding influencers can complicate their role in advocacy. Public figures may face scrutiny for their affiliations or statements, leading to divisive reactions among audiences (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). This polarisation can have a double-edged effect, sometimes raising awareness but also creating divisions within social movements.

Influencers and public figures play a critical role in amplifying social movements and shaping public discourse in the contemporary media landscape. Through their ability to engage large audiences, employ strategic

communications, and evoke emotional connections, they effectively promote social causes and mobilise support. However, the challenges associated with authenticity, backlash, and potential dilution of messages necessitate careful consideration of their involvement in social advocacy. As social movements continue to evolve, the role of influencers will remain significant in shaping societal narratives and fostering collective action.

4.0 POLICY INFLUENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Recently, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for influencing public policy and enhancing political engagement. The ability of individuals and organised groups to mobilise online support has led to significant legislative changes and altered the landscape of activism. This paper explores the impact of social media on policy changes, supported by case studies of legislative actions influenced by online activism, and discusses the significance of digital petitions and online lobbying.

4.1 Social Media and Legislative Change

Social media platforms have transformed the dynamics of political advocacy, allowing the rapid dissemination of information and the organisation of grassroots movements. One notable case is the "March for Our Lives" movement, which arose in response to the tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018. Initiated by student activists, the movement successfully used social media to promote gun control reforms and organise a nationwide rally (Boulianne, 2020). Following extensive online activism, several states, including Florida, enacted legislative changes aimed at enhancing gun safety, demonstrating the tangible impact that social media-driven activism can have on policy.

Similarly, the global climate strike movement, inspired by activist Greta Thunberg, leveraged social media to rally young people around climate issues. Thunberg's school strikes were widely shared across platforms, leading to massive protests and increased political pressure on governments to implement more stringent climate policies. Research by Weller et al. (2021) highlights how social media facilitated the mobilisation of millions globally, directly influencing policy discussions at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2019 and prompting national commitments to reduce carbon emissions.

4.2 Significance of Digital Petitions

Digital petitions have become a prominent mechanism for online activism, serving as a vehicle for

citizens to express their demands and hold policymakers accountable. Platforms like [Change.org](#) and [MoveOn.org](#) have streamlined the petition process, allowing individuals to gather signatures and demonstrate support for specific issues. A study by Boulton (2019) showed that petitions promoted through social media not only reach larger audiences but also often result in significant media coverage, which can amplify their impact.

For instance, the petition for "Justice for George Floyd", initiated in the wake of the 2020 protests against police brutality, garnered millions of signatures worldwide. This widespread support led to increased calls for police reform and influenced legislative actions across various states. Research indicates that digital petitions have the potential to engage a diverse demographic, often resulting in increased political awareness and advocacy (Meyer et al., 2021).

4.3 Online Lobbying and Institutional Responses

In addition to petitions, online lobbying has emerged as a crucial tool for influencing policy. Activists and organisations can now directly communicate with legislators and government officials via social media, facilitating real-time dialogue and raising awareness about pressing issues. A notable example includes the Freedom to Vote Act, which saw significant support from grassroots organisations that conducted online lobbying campaigns aimed at increasing voter access and reforming electoral processes (Baker, 2021).

The effectiveness of online lobbying is further supported by research conducted by Verba et al. (2019), indicating that constituents who engage in online advocacy efforts are more likely to have their voices heard by policymakers. The use of social media to facilitate direct communication between citizens and elected officials contributes to greater transparency and accountability in governance.

Social media has fundamentally transformed political engagement and policy influence, enabling movements to mobilise quickly and effectively. The case studies of "March for Our Lives" and the climate strike movement exemplify how online activism can lead to significant legislative changes. Furthermore, digital petitions and online lobbying have proven essential in amplifying the voices of citizens and fostering institutional responsiveness. As social media continues to shape the political landscape, its role in policy influence and civic engagement will remain pivotal in the years to come.

5.0 CRITIQUES OF ONLINE ACTIVISM

While online activism has proven to be an influential force in contemporary social movements, it is not without its critiques. Scholars and activists have raised concerns over the effectiveness of digital engagement, the

inclusiveness of online platforms, and their potential repercussions for marginalised communities. This section examines the phenomenon of "slacktivism", the implications of the digital divide, and the risks of backlash associated with online activism.

5.0.1 Examination of the "Slacktivism" Phenomenon and Criticisms of Efficacy

The term "slacktivism" refers to a form of activism that promotes minimal effort engagement, often through online platforms, without resulting in significant change or real-world impact. Critics argue that social media allows individuals to show support for a cause with little commitment or action, leading to superficial engagement rather than substantial advocacy. According to Morozov (2020), slacktivism can create an illusion of involvement that may detract from more meaningful activism, effectively diminishing the urgency for real-world action.

Research by Earl and Kimport (2011) highlights that while online engagement can increase awareness, it often fails to translate into tangible outcomes, such as legislative changes or sustained activism. This raises questions about the effectiveness of online campaigns, suggesting that simply "liking" or sharing a post may not equate to genuine support for a cause.

However, it is important to recognise that online activism can also serve as an entry point for individuals to become more engaged in deeper forms of activism. While slacktivism may be criticised for its lack of depth, some argue that it can foster initial awareness and motivation, potentially leading participants toward more meaningful involvement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

5.0.2 Addressing the Digital Divide and Its Implications for Inclusivity in Activism

The digital divide refers to the disparities in access to and proficiency with digital technologies, which can hinder the inclusivity of online activism. While social media platforms can amplify voices and mobilise support, they also risk marginalising those who lack access to technology or the internet. According to the Pew Research Centre (2021), significant demographic disparities exist, with lower-income and rural communities often experiencing limited internet access, affecting their ability to participate in online movements.

Thus, the reliance on digital platforms for activism can lead to exclusionary practices that fail to represent the voices of marginalised groups. As noted by Carpentier (2019), the digital divide complicates the potential for social movements to be truly representative and inclusive, as those who are excluded from the digital sphere may feel further alienated from political processes.

Moreover, the emphasis on online activism may overlook the needs and strategies of grassroots

organisations that operate within communities lacking digital resources. This challenge highlights the necessity for activism to adopt hybrid strategies that incorporate both online and offline efforts to ensure inclusivity and wider engagement across diverse communities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

5.0.3 The Risk of Backlash and the Potential Harm to Marginalised Communities

Online activism can also incite backlash, which poses significant risks to marginalised communities. Activists who engage in social media campaigns often face online harassment, doxxing, and other forms of retaliation for their advocacy. Research indicates that marginalised groups, particularly people of colour, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals, are disproportionately targeted for online abuse (Binns, 2018).

The backlash can create an environment of fear and intimidation that discourages individuals from participating in activism and can ultimately silence important voices (Sullivan, 2020). This phenomenon not only undermines the goals of social movements but also perpetuates systemic inequalities by silencing those who are most affected by the issues being addressed.

Furthermore, the potential for public misrepresentation and distortion of messages in the digital space can lead to negative repercussions for marginalised groups. Misinterpretations or misappropriations of a movement's goals may dilute their messages and hinder their overall effectiveness (Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

While online activism has significant potential to drive social change and enhance political engagement, it is essential to critically examine its limitations and challenges. The "slacktivism" phenomenon raises concerns about the efficacy of digital engagement, while the digital divide highlights the need for inclusivity in activism. Additionally, the risks of backlash underscore the vulnerabilities facing marginalised communities in the online landscape. Addressing these critiques is crucial for ensuring that online activism can be a transformative force that truly represents and uplifts all voices.

5.1 Educational Implications and Teaching Activism

The rise of social media activism presents unique opportunities and challenges for education. As students increasingly engage with digital platforms, incorporating activism into educational curricula can empower them as informed citizens and proactive change-makers. This section outlines the integration of social media activism into educational settings, strategies for critical engagement, and the cultivation of a culture of activism and civic responsibility among students.

5.1.1 Integrating Social Media Activism into Educational Curricula

Integrating social media activism into the curriculum involves using digital platforms and current events as teaching tools to enhance students' understanding of social issues, civic engagement, and the mechanisms of activism. This can be done through project-based learning, where students research ongoing social movements, analyse their strategies, and assess their impacts.

One effective method is the implementation of a service-learning model that connects academic learning with real-world activism. For instance, students might create their own advocacy campaigns around topics they are passionate about by utilising social media tools for outreach. Research by McAllister et al. (2021) emphasises the importance of experiential learning in promoting civic engagement, arguing that immersive experiences can deepen students' understanding of activism's complexities.

Furthermore, educators can incorporate case studies of successful online movements, discussing their impact on policy and society. Engaging students in discussions about the mechanics of social media, including how platforms can mobilise support and raise awareness, encourages critical thinking about the role of technology in contemporary activism (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018).

5.1.2 Strategies for Educators to Promote Critical Engagement with Online Movements

To effectively prepare students to engage with online movements critically, educators can implement several strategies:

- 1. Critical Literacy and Media Awareness:** Teaching students how to evaluate online information critically is crucial. The process includes assessing the credibility of sources, understanding biases, and recognising misinformation. Workshops focusing on digital literacy can empower students to navigate online activism thoughtfully (Hobbs, 2017).

- 2. Debate and Discussion:** Facilitating classroom discussions and debates around controversial social issues allows students to explore multiple perspectives. Encouraging respectful discourse promotes critical thinking and helps students articulate their views while also considering opposing arguments (Fiorenza, 2020).

- 3. Analysing Case Studies:** Educators can present case studies of various online movements, examining successes and failures. Analysing movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter enables students to understand strategy, audience engagement, and the

challenges faced by activists. This analytical approach fosters deeper comprehension of the dynamics of online activism (Kahne et al., 2020).

4. Encouraging Reflection: Assign reflective writing assignments where students analyse their own social media use and its implications for activism. Such assignments prompt students to consider how their online behaviours align with their values and beliefs regarding social change (McGee & McGee, 2018).

5.1.3 Fostering a Culture of Activism and Civic Responsibility Among Students

Fostering a culture of activism within educational institutions involves creating an environment that values social responsibility and civic engagement. Here are several ways educators can cultivate this culture:

1. Incorporating Service Projects: Schools can encourage service-learning projects that link classroom learning with community needs. By participating in social initiatives, students can witness the direct impact of activism, strengthening their commitment to civic responsibilities (Civic Learning and Engagement, 2019).

2. Role Models and Guest Speakers: Inviting community leaders, activists, and alumni who have engaged in successful activism to speak can inspire students. Hearing real-life experiences provides motivation and offers concrete examples of how individuals can effect change (Hollister, 2019).

3. Advocacy and Student Organisations: Encouraging students to start or join clubs focused on activism or social issues creates a platform for peer collaboration. Such organisations allow students to work together toward common goals, promoting teamwork and organisational skills while reinforcing the importance of collective action (Torres et al., 2021).

4. Recognising Efforts: Celebrating student-led initiatives and encouraging participation in local and national activism can validate their efforts and reinforce the importance of civic involvement. Recognitions, awards, or features in school newsletters or websites can highlight their contributions to social causes (Lang & Marshall, 2021).

Integrating social media activism into educational curricula has the potential to empower students as active participants in society. By offering strategies for critical engagement, fostering a culture of activism, and promoting civic responsibility, educators play a crucial role in shaping the next generation of informed and committed citizens. By exploring the complexities of online movements, students can develop the skills

necessary to navigate and contribute to an increasingly digital political landscape.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we conclude our examination of online activism and its implications for education and social change, it becomes evident that while digital platforms have transformed the landscape of activism, they present both opportunities and challenges. This section provides a summary of key findings, reflections on the evolving nature of social media activism, and recommendations for future research and practice in the realm of education and social change.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings and Implications for Community Organising and Advocacy

This exploration illuminated the dual nature of online activism, highlighting both its potential to mobilise and engage diverse audiences and its limitations, particularly in the form of slacktivism. Key findings reveal that:

1. Mobilisation & Awareness: Social media has proven to be a powerful tool for mobilising individuals around social issues, raising awareness, and fostering global networks of support. Campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo exemplify the capacity of digital platforms to galvanise communities and affect real-world change.

2. Evolving Tactics: Traditional models of community organising are increasingly blended with digital strategies, allowing activists to engage in hybrid organising practices that combine online and offline efforts. This shift necessitates new frameworks for understanding how movements operate and affect policy change.

3. Challenges of Inclusivity: While online activism can amplify marginalised voices, disparities in access to technology (the digital divide) can hinder participation in key communities. Advocacy efforts must critically address these barriers to ensure inclusivity and equitable representation in activism.

4. Risks of Backlash: The potential for backlash against activists, particularly marginalised individuals, underscores the complexities of online engagement. The ecosystems of social media can foster both support and hostility, impacting the safety and sustainability of activism.

These findings have significant implications for community organising and advocacy, suggesting that while digital tools can enhance outreach and engagement, they must be leveraged thoughtfully to

ensure they contribute to long-term, meaningful social change.

6.2 Reflections on the Evolving Landscape of Social Media Activism

The landscape of social media activism is continually evolving due to technological advancements, shifting user dynamics, and changing societal contexts. Key reflections on this evolution include:

1. Adaptation of Activist Strategies: Activists must consistently adapt their strategies to navigate the rapid changes in social media algorithms, user behaviours, and emerging platforms. The rise of ephemeral content, such as Stories on Instagram and TikTok, signals a shift in how narratives are constructed and shared, highlighting the need for creativity in engagement.

2. Increased Polarisation: The role of social media in exacerbating polarisation and misinformation presents challenges for the effectiveness and credibility of activist movements. Activists must navigate these complex dynamics to maintain trust and clarity in their messaging.

3. Intersectionality in Activism: The emerging recognition of intersectionality within social movements emphasises the need for holistic approaches that account for the diverse identities and experiences of individuals. This understanding highlights the importance of collective action that acknowledges and addresses systemic inequalities.

As social media continues to influence activism, understanding these evolving dynamics will be crucial for educators, activists, and policymakers.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research and Practice in the Field of Education and Social Change

To support the effective integration of online activism into educational practices and community organising, several recommendations for future research and practice are proposed:

1. Research Evaluation of Impact: Future studies should focus on evaluating the impact of social media activism on policy change and community organisation. Quantitative and qualitative assessments can provide insights into successful strategies and the factors that contribute to lasting change.

2. Exploring Educational Frameworks: There is a need for further research on developing educational frameworks that incorporate digital activism within curricula. Investigating best practices for teaching critical engagement and social responsibility can inform

pedagogical approaches that prepare students for active citizenship.

3. Longitudinal Studies on Participation: Long-term studies investigating how participation in online activism affects civic engagement and political socialisation among youth can provide valuable insights into the lasting benefits or drawbacks of digital involvement in social movements.

4. Promoting Equity in Access: Future advocacy efforts should prioritise bridging the digital divide, ensuring equitable access to technology and training for marginalised communities. Research exploring community-driven technological initiatives may highlight effective solutions for increasing digital literacy and engagement.

5. Policy Recommendations: Engaging policymakers to develop supportive frameworks for digital activism can help safeguard the rights of activists and protect against harassment and backlash while promoting healthy civic discourse.

As we navigate the complexities of online activism, it is essential to harness its potential responsibly while addressing its challenges. By fostering critical engagement and promoting inclusivity within educational spaces, we can empower the next generation of activists to navigate the digital landscape effectively, advocate for social justice, and contribute to meaningful change. Through continuous research and collaborative practice, the intersection of education, activism, and social change can lead to a more equitable and engaged society.

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