



Chapter 1

Activism in the Digital Age: Social Movements Analysis Using User- Generated Content in Social Media


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ABSTRACT

Social movements have been transformed in the last decade by social networks, where the dynamics of the social protests have evolved and have been structured and viralized through social media. They are no longer just conversations between activists that stay on social platforms. The cyberactivism that takes place on Twitter or Instagram can also play a significant role in general society by influencing government decision making or shaping the relationships between citizens. In this chapter, the authors explore the main activist movements that took place in social media in the last decade: Occupy, BlackLivesMatter, and MeToo. The proposed approach used in this study facilitates the comparison of each movement while focusing on the user-generated content in social media. This study suggests the presence of four major categories to frame the content generated by the activists. The chapter concludes with the identification of three different approaches to the research of a future research agenda that should be considered for the study of the social movements from the UGC theory framework.

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INTRODUCTION

Social movements represent the collective effort of people to voice their concerns over the civil, economic and political welfare of a population of people (Snow et al., 2004). Although social movements in 20th century history have been marked by individuals such as Emmeline Pankhurst to Martin Luther King to Mahatma Gandhi promoting change in the awareness of people (Montefiore, 2014), the modern social movements in the 21st century have evolved with the advancement of technology and social media and have been marked by the often anonymous collective power (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015).

As George and Leidner (2019) study, from street demonstrations and marches, movements marked by technology have evolved, achieving a greater reach and being carried out in many different ways such as clicktivism, digital petitions or data activism. These social movements promoted or executed through the Internet are also called digital activism. Although, as Joyce (2010) points out, there are numerous terminologies such as cyberactivism, e-activism or online advocacy that are also used to refer to all forms of social or political campaigns using digital infrastructures.

Social movements have been transformed in the last decade also due to social networks, where the dynamics of social protests have evolved and have been structured and viralized through the channels offered by social networks (Tan et al., 2013). It is no longer exclusively about conversations between activists that emerge and are maintained on social platforms. Nowadays, cyberactivism taking place on Twitter or Instagram can also play a crucial role in society at large, by influencing government decision-making or shaping relationships between citizens, brands and other stakeholders (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2013).

Social networks facilitate leveraging and maximizing the collective power of all like-minded individuals by disseminating information quickly and expansively (Hwang & Kim, 2015). Social networks are considered to provide an effective method not only for disseminating information but also for involving new volunteers in social movements (González-Bailón et al., 2011), hence they can be considered one of the main current platforms for exercising activism.

Following Yang (2016), one of the most interesting developments in digital activism in recent years is the rise of “hashtag activism” (HA). HA occurs when users create a large number of posts on social networks under a common word or phrase, with a hashtag that acts as a social or political rallying cry. This “networked power of hashtags,” together with the power of collective storytelling, can turn the sharing of a personal experience online into an action that makes a collective movement more powerful (Clark, 2016).

Despite the social importance of this digital activism, research defining the trends, comparisons, and relationships between different activist movements in social media remains limited. Understanding modern activism requires determining the patterns and commonalities across social movements and their use of these digital channels like Twitter and Instagram for driving social movements, demonstrations and protests. Furthermore, in the same way that research on user-generated content (UGC) applied to brands has great potential value for communications, advertising or customer engagement (Liu et al., 2017), the relationship between UGC and HA has not yet been widely investigated in academia covering a gap in the literature. Therefore, the originality of the present study lies in the relevance of our object of study, as it compares and contrasts hashtag movements by exploring patterns in the use of hashtags during periods of three distinct social justice movements: Occupy, MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Specifically, we analyze UGC from the beginning of each movement to assess homogeneous features in the generation and sharing of Twitter content during different social movements.

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