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The Role of Social Media in Shaping Modern-Day Activism

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Abstract: The Industrial Revolution has greatly influenced the development of digital media. Global communication has been profoundly altered by technology breakthroughs, with social media platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, and WeChat at the forefront. The study explores how social media has changed activism in the modern day by highlighting how it can increase access, visibility, scope, and empowerment. Examining well-known movements including the Greta Thunberg climate change protest, #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Anti-Discrimination Movement in Bangladesh. The analysis delves deeply into the dynamics of digital activism. Despite false information, divisiveness, performative activism, and privacy concerns of social media, the globe is currently moving towards a more sophisticated technical development. It is anticipated that activism in the future will become more digital, propelled by innovations in technology like virtual reality and artificial intelligence. In order to protect user data and guarantee social media's effectiveness as a weapon for social change, the study emphasises the necessity of responsible platform management.

Keywords: Social media, digital activism, misinformation, privacy, slacktivism, global movements, empowerment, technological advancement, Bangladesh

Introduction: Technological advancement is undergoing a rapid shift on a global scale[1,2]. Currently, most of the world's communities are linked together by a single network called the Internet[3]. Social media sites like X, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, WeChat, and others have grown in popularity as a result of the expansion of internet networks[1,3]. These platforms have significantly altered traditional communication frameworks, enabling individuals to express opinions, share lifestyles, and exercise their right to free speech. On social media, young people and other internet users are now expressing their worries about socio-political and cultural issues[4]. It gives a new dimension where information spreads quickly and formerly disempowered voices can now be heard. This

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raises the question: *How does social media drive modern activism, and what are its societal ramifications?*

The study seeks to explore the functions of social media in the contemporary activism. The specific aim is to analyze the effectiveness of social media in the planning, coordination, and spreading of activist movements and assess the benefits and shortcomings of their application in this regard. The background of the research highlights the emergence of communications and mobilization frameworks within the realm of activism. It notes that social media has amplified previously disadvantaged voices, enabling the quick dissemination and coordination of information on a global scale [5]. The study highlights a gap in the literature regarding the assessment of the negative and positive influence of social media on activism in general. Whereas other previous researchers concentrated either on the pros or on the cons of social media, this research intends to address the centre in between.

Methodology: This study employed the Web Extraction and Statistical Analysis (WESA) Method in examining social media's role in activism. Data extraction focused on social media utilization in activist movements. Data extracted were statistically organized and examined using Excel to establish trends and patterns. Descriptive and inferential statistics provided insights into how social media influences organizing, mobilizing, and disseminating activism. Though effective, the scope of the study was limited, as the WESA approach does not fully account for the instant consequences of social media activism.

Literature Review: On how social media helps activism today, the literature review includes both local and global studies[2]. Locally, for example, literature from Bangladesh stresses how social media helps foster social movements and public policy. At the global level, the same accounts promulgate much about the use of social networks like Twitter and Facebook to coordinate protests, share relevant information, and bypass censorship with real-life examples such as the Arab spring[4]. While

some studies emphasize the empowering effects of social media, others discuss its drawbacks, including misinformation and privacy concerns[3]. But can at the same time threaten, through things like misinformation and invasion of privacy, negative connotations[6]. Hence, this review fills a very large vacuum in the scope of the literature that has already been written about the various ways that social networking affects activism, ranging from promoting it to stifling it. This review fills a crucial gap by analyzing the dual impact of social media on activism—both its promotion and suppression.

Discussion:

Impact on Modern Activism: Social media has changed the meaning of activism by increasing clarity and scope, empowering individuals and cherishing the global movements. As for example in 2011, Tahrir gained international notice. By drawing attention from a sympathetic worldwide public, digital networks that enabled the demonstrators to broadcast to the world increased the costs of repression[4]. Social media facilitates leaderless activism, allowing decentralized organization and protest[2,4]. Asserts that the internet serves as a catalyst for social movements by offering a public space for individuals to share ideas and mobilize. However, now a day internet has become a catalyst for social movements by offering a public space to share emotions, ideas, and aspirations[7]. It allows individuals to form networks beyond personal or organizational affiliations, fostering solidarity and overcoming fear, an emotion often exploited by oppressive powers. From the safety of cyberspace, diverse groups transitioned to occupying physical spaces, asserting their right to shape history and demonstrating the self-awareness integral to transformative social movements[2].

Social media has also influenced consumer behavior and education systems, making it difficult to quantify its global impact[5]. For instance, the Egyptian Revolution was fuelled by social media, with activists like Asmaa Mahfouz using YouTube to rally support[8]. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Facebook has become the primary platform for protests and

awareness campaigns, with 22.3% of the country's internet users participating in activism via social media[9].

"The world has been witness to the rise of Twitter and Facebook as a powerful communication and mobilization channels in the hands of repressed populations. In probably the shortest timeframe mankind has ever seen, five Middle Eastern and North African governments with unimpressive democratic track records fell. The Egyptian revolution, was sparked by everyday, ordinary people like Asmaa Mahfouz, who passionately called people to join protests through her YouTube Post, spreading word fast like a wild fire from country to country. This unprecedented eRevolution transcended class, gender, and political boundaries – at least for a moment"[8].
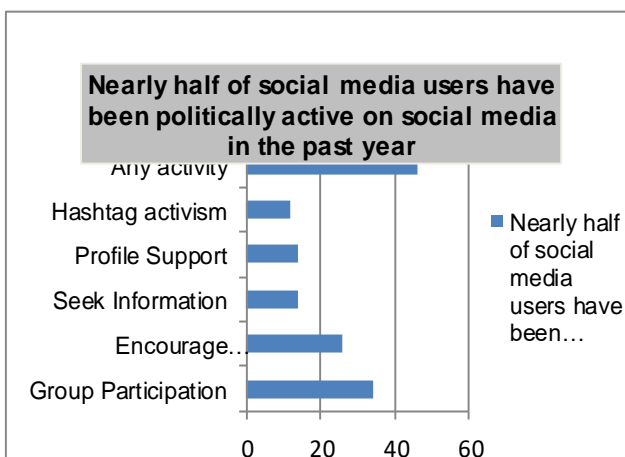

Figure 1 shows social media used for political activity [10]

Figure-1 depicted the "*50% of US Social media users who say they have done each of the following activities in social media*"[10]. Social media platforms have liberalized the access to information and gathering. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Facebook is now the primary venue for protest and awareness-raising. Results published in Meta's own tools indicate that 22.3 percent (9.7 million) people out of 44.5 percent (77.36 million internet user) used Facebook for activism between January 2023 and January 2024 in Bangladesh[9].

However, Bangladesh's recent Anti-Discrimination Movement (2024) is a noteworthy illustration of social media activism.

All social classes participated in this movement[11]. By spreading the majority of these delicate stories, social media assisted in uniting the general public to express their opposition to the oppressive Hasina government. Conversely, the movements' main organizers used Facebook and Telegram to communicate. They created internet groups to alert people about their upcoming events and asked for help from all over the nation. These online forums provided Bangladeshis with a forum for education and enlightenment[11].

People were creating cartoons, reels, and protest sloogans, which they then posted on social media. Many Facebook users in Bangladesh changed their profiles to red on July 30, 2024, as a sign of support for the movement's martyrs (Figure 2)
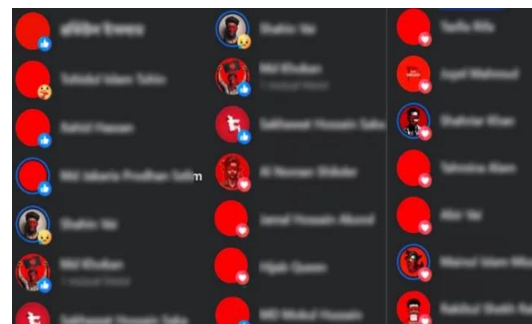

Figure 2 shows an example of the profile picture of user

Movements went through also using #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #FridaysForFuture breaks out through social media. The hashtag #MeToo started trending on Twitter. Twitter hashtag was seen first in 2006 when actress Alyssa Milano adopted and used it in reaction to claims that Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein had sexually assaulted African American women's rights activist Tarana Burke.#FridaysForFuture, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, breaks out through social media. The hashtag #MeToo started trending on Twitter. Despite being coined by African American women's rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the phrase became well-known after actress Alyssa Milano adopted it as a Twitter hashtag in reaction to claims that Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein had sexually assaulted her. In order to highlight the severity of the issue of

sexual violence, Milano urged the public to participate by using the #MeToo hashtag. In the first day alone, the hashtag was used 12 million times, garnering media and public attention[12].

However, understanding each new movement's digital activity on its own terms is crucial since different social movements use online media in different ways. We shouldn't assume that BLM's (Black Lives Matters) internet usage will be the same as that of its predecessors because, as we've seen, it differs from others in its genre in important ways. As for example, the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer sparked the global #BlacklivesMatter movement. People posted the shocking video of his death on social media, primarily Twitter, after it went viral. After that, things descended into chaos, and the government moved swiftly to punish the responsible police personnel. People speak out against racism and demonstrate their awareness of this problem[13]. A network of youth working on climate change issues, Fridays for Future, continues to operate in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes it difficult to host large-scale in-person gatherings. Approximately 100,000 people marched in Glasgow, UK, at the UN global Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021, calling for more forceful action to address the global issue. This campaign set a world record for the largest number of street campaign participants in mid-September 2019, mobilising over 7.6 million youth worldwide[14].

Empowerment & Access: People can share their opinions and tales on social media. Social media activists, influencers, and content producers generate posts, videos, and articles about many societal topics[15]. Social media can display any news that is not reported by the mainstream media. One could call it citizen journalism. Anyone with a smartphone can record events and share them to the public[16].

Challenges & Limitation: The cyber-utopians argue that the new social media tools have a significant and positive influence on political results[17]. They concentrate on how these instruments contribute to political communication, involvement, mobilisation, and public sphere expansion in the process of democratization[18]. However, every phase has both positive and negative side. Social media activism faces significant barriers & disruptions due to the spread of misinformation, Propaganda, harassment, Privacy disruptions. Etc.

Misinformation & Polarization: The spread of false information has emerged as a significant threat to international democracy in the current digital era[19]. This is true in Bangladesh, where the spread of malicious propaganda and misleading narratives is threatening democracy and reducing public confidence in institutions. Misinformation spreading is impeding democracy in Bangladesh and harming the nation's progress towards a more open and inclusive society, thanks to sensationalist news outlets and social media echo chambers[1]. The widespread dissemination of false information on social media causes certain movements to lose their validity. False information that circulates on social media greatly diverts attention from the movement. Additionally, it undermines the demonstrators'.

Performative Activism: Slacktivism is the superficial or performative activism where people engage in online-only activities-like sharing posts-that require little effort and result in no change. Real activism is diffused, and this can create an illusion of progress[6]. According to Gladwell M. In The New Yorker (2010), Social media-facilitated "weak-tie" relationships are not effective for sustained activism. According to him, such networks lack the commitment that leads to real change; thus, they create an illusion of progress without a change in systems[20]. In The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom (2011), Evgeny Morozov critiques the role of digital technology in activism, emphasizing the negative aspects of slacktivism. He argues that online activism often creates an illusion of meaningful participation while enabling complacency among individuals who feel they have contributed by merely engaging in low-effort actions like sharing posts or signing petitions[6].

Privacy & Safety Concerns: We can observe significant breaches of privacy on social media. It causes people to worry about their safety. Furthermore, they began to take advantage of them and violate their privacy when activists organized a movement that did not align with the government's narrative[21]. Social media platforms often exploit users' data for commercial purposes. This commodification of personal information not only invades privacy but also creates vulnerabilities for activists[22]. This information can be used by go vernments and corporations for surveillance, especially against movements that threaten their power[19].

Evolution of Activism: Nowadays, the evolving nature of social media activism is exceptionally fast and dynamic. The new technologies, including AI and VR, can enhance the scale and impact of social movements[23]. These tools create new ways to tell stories and connect with audie nces in ways that make activism more interactive and impactful[3]. I present a visualized trend of the evolution of digital activism, derived from the Global Digital Activism Data Set (GDADS)-2013 from the University of Michigan (Table 1). The rapid rise in the number of digital activism campaigns, reflecting the growing reliance on online platforms for social movements. Success Rate (%)-Effective functionality of campaigns over time, in dicating consistent improvement in the feedback as the tools and strategies get upgraded[24].

Table 1: Trends in Digital Activism Success Rates (Based on GDADS 2013 & Projections)

Year	Campaigns Initiated	Success Rate (%)*
2005	50	20
2010	120	30
2015	220	40
2020*	450 (projected)	50 (projected)
2025*	600 (projected)	55 (projected)

Responsibility of the Platform: Due to privacy and information breaches, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and others are under criticism and legal obligations. Parents whose children had access to illegal narcotics on Snapchat received similar condolences from Evan Spiegel, the CEO of Snap Inc. In late 2023, parents of over 60 teenagers sued Snap for allegedly helping their kids legally obtain drugs that were used in deaths[25]. These kinds of problems will have a significant impact on the youth generation's psychology, which will eventually lead to segregation and impede action. Platforms must protect user data, community guidelines should prioritize free expression, and activists' privacy must be protected. Social platforms' extensive data collection exposes children to surveillance, exploitation, cyberbullying, grooming, and harmful content. Inadequate content moderation and safety protocols leave minors vulnerable. Unequal access to technology exacerbates inequalities, and excessive screen time contributes to mental health issues[26].

Ethical issue: Indeed, ethical considerations in the research primarily comprise privacy, informed consent, representation, and effects on the participants[27]. Sensitive information obtained from social media and interviews must remain confidential and be anonymized and stored securely not to be accessed by anyone unauthorized[28]. All the survey and interview participants must give informed consent as an acknowledgment and respect of the autonomy and rights of the individuals. Other factors which concern accuracy in reflecting different views such as biases and allowing fair and just analysis are considered in this particular research[29]. Further, the consequences of the research results for the participants and their movements are carefully thought through to avoid possible damage or unintended negative impact.

Conclusion: Certainly, social media has changed what activism means in the present day. It establishes a forum for the voiceless to be heard. The platform democratized free expression and linked young people and the

general public. However, the activism is severely hampered by false information, propaganda, privacy violations, etc. All platforms should be more cautious about information maintenance in order to address these issues. In the end, social media will serve as a voice for those who are marginalized, debaters, and activists.

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