

Sabrina Brignoli

Participatory communities or affective publics? Exploring social movements' strategies to promote collective participation within individualistic digital environments

Keywords: digital activism; online communities; collective participation; visibility; social media.

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Introduction and aims

Activism plays a crucial role in democratic societies and beyond, bringing issues to public attention and influencing political agendas. In recent years, activism has transitioned from traditional offline media to digital platforms, initially conceived as free and democratic spaces. However, these platforms are governed by algorithms that promote capitalist and neoliberal values of individual visibility and competition, negatively impacting activism rooted in collective actions.

This research aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on activism and collective political participation in digital environments. By analysing the online practices of social movements on their social media profiles, I want to investigate whether and how they can establish an effective, participatory collective dimension on social media, despite the increasingly individualistic context.

This study addresses a gap in the academic literature by examining the effects of conflicting dynamics of individuality and collectivity on social movements in digital environments. The study may enhance the understanding of the strategies employed by activist collectives on digital platforms, positively impacting broader societal efforts toward social change and justice. Creating a digital space for collective and participatory discussion of societal issues can contribute to political and social improvements, particularly in a neoliberal capitalist society, which fosters polarisation, performativity, and competitiveness for individual visibility and success.

State of the art

Activism and political participation

Research on activism in social sciences has a long history (Martínez, 2023). Activism involves collective actions as a crucial tool for ordinary people to resist and challenge power and authority to achieve social and political goals. Organised sequences of these actions constitute *social movements* (Anderson & Herr, 2007; Tarrow, 2022).

Early social theorists like Marx, Engels, Weber, Simmel, and Durkheim contributed to the first tradition of social movement studies with classical theories observing social movements' emergence, organisation and structure from the late 18th and 19th centuries. Contemporary theorists, including Touraine, Foucault, Habermas, Castells, and Melucci, developed theories on the so-called *new social movements*, focusing more on issues of identity recognition (della Porta & Diani, 2015; Peoples, 2019; Martínez, 2023).

Habermas' (1989) concept of the *public sphere* emphasises the essential role of a space for collective critical debate, in which activists and social movements play a fundamental role, maintaining active critical public debate on political issues to challenge the state and absolute power (Clark, 1998; Staggenborg, 2011). Popular participation has indeed a crucial role in building the public and political agenda in a democracy, shaping government decisions and public policy-making, developing new issues and redefining old ones (Cobb & Elder, 1971).

Digital activism and participatory culture

Scholars of *media activism* explore how media and activism influence each other, with activists using media to increase the visibility and legitimacy of their messages (Mehikle, 2018). The advent of the Internet drastically affected political participation, opening a new digital public sphere and allowing new online forms of political participation (Dahlgren & Alvares, 2013; Schäfer, 2015; Barisione et al., 2019). The democratised access to different actors enabled them to publish material online, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Jenkins, 2006; Carpentier, 2011). This environment became ideal for activism and social movements.

Early descriptions of *cyberactivism* (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003) included online petitions, email campaigns, hacktivism, and online sit-ins. Social media platforms further expanded the repertoire of collective action with tactics like hashtag activism, sousveillance, and call-out practices (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010; Cammaerts, 2015), employed by various *networked social movements* (Castells, 2012) like Occupy, Arab Springs, Indignados, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter.

Research also explores how collective identity and collective action develop on digital platforms, initially applying offline theories to online environments (della Porta & Diani, 2015). Researchers then focused on new dynamics characteristic of the Internet and social media, including Bennett and Segerberg's *digitally networked connective action* (2012) and Papacharissi's *affective publics* (2015), noting the fragile and fluid quality of highly individualised digital publics.

Moreover, similar to Habermas' (1989) critique of mass media, social media platforms, as commodified spaces controlled by private companies, have algorithms that reduce complexity and promote capitalist interests and competitiveness, often suppressing activists' goals. Today, researchers focus on the interplay between digital platforms' opportunities and structural constraints for social movements (Cammaerts, 2015; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Semenzin, 2022).

Leaders and influencers

Leadership is another important dimension in activism studies. While the collective dimension is crucial, individual leaders significantly contribute to mobilising social movements (Morris & Staggenborg, 2002; Staggenborg, 2011; Berberoglu, 2019). Recent studies observe the changing nature of leadership in digital social movements, with "regular people" (Liang & Lee, 2023; Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2024), also known as *social media influencers*, gaining wide and stable influence through their personal branding and engaging content also for monetisation purposes (Abidin, 2018; Ruiz-Gómez, 2019; Leaver and colleagues, 2020).

Today, research focuses on the interaction between movement leaders, opinion leaders and influencers. Celebrities promote political causes (Abidin & Cover, 2018; Jain et al, 2021; Thomas & Fowler, 2023), political actors increasingly adopt influencer behaviours (Gandini et al, 2022), and figures of *influencer activists* are multiplying as intersection between political aspirations and platform constraints that encourage self-branding for visibility and profit (Semenzin, 2022; Munoz, 2021; Alperstein, 2021; Scharff, 2023).

Visibility and performativity

Visibility is a significant issue in digital activism. Activists need media attention to spread their cause (Scalmer, 2022), and with social media visibility becomes even more an expression of political power (Milan, 2015; Barassi, 2018). Social movements can rely on celebrities and media influencers to draw the attention of large numbers of people and amplify their messages (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). Messages through opinion leaders are more likely to influence receivers (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944;

Dubois et al., 2020; Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2024) and reach the political agenda (Alperstein, 2021; Gilardi et al., 2022; Nunziata, 2023).

However, the quest for visibility on platforms implies negative effects. Attention is a scarce resource on the Internet and social media and everyone competes for it (Simon, 1971; Davenport & Beck, 2002; Terranova, 2012). Influencers need to engage in *visibility labour* (Abidin, 2016), conforming to social media platforms' logic and algorithms (Cotter, 2019; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020), which prioritise certain discourses and values and reinforce individualism and competitiveness (Beer, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Bucher, 2012; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Semenzin, 2022), requiring individuals to perform strategically to attract attention.

Competition for visibility relates closely to *performativity*. Sociologists observe how contemporary technological conditions shape performativity, incentivising perfection, consistency and constancy without sacrificing authenticity (Leeker et al., 2017; Taylor, 2022; Dean, 2023). Even activism becomes performative (Thimsen, 2022; Morozov, 2009), combined with influencer culture and the purpose of seeking visibility rather than collective action for social goals (Alperstein, 2021; Wellman, 2022; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022; Semenzin, 2022).

Current evolutions of online communities

Moreover, individual influencer activists attract *publics* of dispersed collections of isolated followers, rather than forming real *communities*, as places of collective debate and discussion with a durable attachment to a shared identity (Arvidsson, 2013; Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). Research on collective dynamics in social media activism observes the rise of highly individualised publics and leaderless movements with fluid and weak networks, on the logic of *connective action* rather than *collective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; 2013; Castells, 2012; Liang & Lee, 2023).

Barisione defined the increasingly widespread phenomenon on social media of *digital movements of opinion* (Barisione, 2022; Barisione et al., 2019), consisting of masses of isolated digital citizens, often triggered by social media elites, mobilised by a common emotional response to a highly resonant event and characterised by short duration and single expressions of opinion (Barisione et al., 2019; Arvidsson et al., 2016), in contrast with structured social movements.

Gap and research question

Studies on social media activism highlight the reduction of collective power within digital social movements, due to social media platforms promoting competition, individualism, and performativity also in activism. Research on political leaders and influencers confirms similar dynamics, with individual figures driving political participation, leading to emotional, uncritical opinion movements rather than structured collective discussion for political and social change.

A gap exists in research reconciling these conflicting dynamics of individuality and collectivity and understanding their implications for social movements on digital platforms. Social movements must balance the need for active political participation and collective debate with the need to adapt to platforms' performative, competitive and exclusionary nature to increase visibility and spread their messages. Thus, the research question is:

- How do social movements navigate the tension between promoting effective collective participation and pursuing individual visibility within online social environments?

Three sub-questions guide the methodological investigation:

1. How do social movements use their social media pages to facilitate constructive debates and create online community spaces, rather than merely accumulating passive followers?

2. How do they comply with the requirement to adapt to the logic of platform algorithms, crucial for gaining visibility for their messages but promoting individualisation?
3. How do social movements effectively bring attention to their causes by influencing the content and discourses of other political or media leaders?

Methodology and project design

To address these issues, an ethnographic approach will be employed. This qualitative methodology enables the description of specific aspects of a social phenomenon, observing people's actions and conversations in everyday contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), in this case, social movements within digital environments. Two principal methods will be used: ethnographic content analysis of digital data and interviews.

Content analysis and digital methods

Ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Krippendorff, 2013) is a qualitative technique for analysing texts in their context, extracting manifest and latent content to understand their original meaning and effects. Caliandro & Gandini (2017) applied this to digital environments, following the *digital methods paradigm* (Rogers, 2013), to develop a natively digital method to map everyday practices of social actors and social formations.

My research will focus on the social media profiles of online activist collectives and their behaviour on digital platforms. Profiles will be selected based on criteria such as topics addressed, number of followers, and content volume. Geographically, the study will focus on European profiles, in particular from Italy and Spain, to compare how activists in these two countries, which are similar in socio-demographic terms but politically opposed, develop their online strategies.

Content analysis will target platforms like Instagram, X, TikTok, and Threads, focusing on textual and visual content posted by activist collectives. Topics addressed, predominant sentiments, and engagement strategies will be analysed, together with user interactions and comments under selected posts to understand how social movements build online communities and foster debates.

To explore visibility strategies, I will compare collective activist profiles with those of individual influencer activists, to identify similarities and differences in self-presentation, content production, and audience engagement. The aim is to observe how collectives engage in influencer-like behaviour to enhance the visibility of their messages while avoiding the individualistic tendencies typical of influencers. Furthermore, I will compare content, topics and sentiments from activist collectives with other political social media elites, including politicians and traditional media profiles, such as those of newspapers or TV channels, to assess each other's influence on political discourses.

Posts, comments and digital data from social media platforms are easily accessible from social media platforms through *scraping software*. Ethical considerations are important, especially regarding the privacy of digital data. Researchers must manage data rigorously, avoiding privacy violations and ensuring data is used solely for scientific, non-commercial purposes (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017).

Interviews

I plan to conduct interviews to enrich the ethnographic content analysis with a direct investigation of participants' perceptions, opinions and beliefs through in-depth conversations and discussions. Participants, selected from the previously observed activist collectives, will be interviewed through semi-structured interviews covering the three main themes of the research. Thematic analysis will

identify recurring themes and patterns of meaning, starting with the results of the content analysis and then refining the insights from the interviews.

Ethical considerations include informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Knott et al., 2022), but also the potential emotional distress and vulnerability of individuals actively engaged in political activism.

Project work plan

	I semester	II semester	III semester	IV semester	V semester	VI semester
Literature review						
Subjects selection						
Digital data collection						
Content analysis						
Interviews						
Interviews analysis						
Writing						

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