

POPPING THE FILTER BUBBLE:

THE IMPORTANCE OF ALGORITHMS IN RELATION TO ONLINE ACTIVISM

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Introduction

The uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought enormous amounts of unpredictability and precarity into the lives of many, if not all. Due to the nature of the virus, individuals were urged to stay home, safely isolated and this resulted in a surge in the use of various technologies and social media. In a digitally connected world, despite the conditions of the pandemic, many were still able to enjoy a sort of comfort in knowing they had the ability to continue to connect with friends, family, and even total strangers in a way to rely on them for social interaction to any degree. Social media is not a new phenomenon, as seen in Perrin's (2015) research that showed a ten-fold jump of adults using social networking sites (SNS) in the last decade. With the ability of having such a great deal of connectivity so easily, SNS have become a conduit of much more than just a place to update one's friends and family on what one did over the weekend. Social media have given researchers the ability to gain a much deeper understanding of how different groups form around the various political, climate, and human rights issues through the social movements they create.

My research was conducted over the course of four months, between March and June of 2022. I have employed the method of critical discourse analysis and content analysis to reveal why Instagram has been a historically less political platform than Twitter and gain insight as to why activism seemingly cannot find as much success on Instagram as it does on Twitter. Despite the success of the Black Lives Matter Movement on Instagram, the platform in general does not appear to have the same impact on activism as Twitter. Instagram, as my research shows, is a platform that captures social conversations and curates them into trending topics, but it does not seem to be able to generate political organizing or to be a driver for politically and socially meaningful conversations. As I show in what follows the reasons for that are partly inherent to

the engineering design of Instagram, which privileges video and image sharing over conversations, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, the reasons for the distinctly apolitical nature of Instagram (compared to Twitter, for example) have to do with the predominantly youthful demographics that the platform encompasses, interested in self-promotion through lifestyle videos, travelogues, makeup tutorials, among others. To these demographics, it seems, social justice is a rhetorical concern: it comes strongly in the vocabularies and promotional materials that circulate on Instagram but, ultimately, it remains locked in the commercial logic of products, feel-good activism and market self-promotion.

Instagram is a "free photo and video sharing app available on iPhone and Android;" (Instagram, 2022). This photo and video sharing application allows the upload of content and its wide sharing with followers or a "select group of people," (Instagram, 2022). Users are able to like, view, and comment on posts that are shared by their friends (Instagram, 2022). Furthermore, anyone over the age of 13 may create an account by registering an email address and choosing a username (Instagram, 2022). I chose to observe Instagram for my MRP because as a platform it differs greatly from others such as Twitter in both algorithm and their intended purpose. The mission statement of Twitter (2022) claims that; "Twitter is a service for friends, family, and coworkers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent messages." Simply, Instagram is a platform used for photos and video sharing, whereas Twitter is intended for frequent and quick communication between users. Thus, for four months, I have observed Instagram at 15-minute intervals on the two accounts used for my research. The first being my own personal account that I have been using privately, and the second being an entirely brand-new account created solely for the purpose of my MRP. For four months, I created a routine of observation of the two accounts that would allow me to follow information shared in

the morning, before noon, and in the evening, after six o'clock. More specifically, I have taken a special interest in infographics on Instagram. I wanted to observe how infographics circulate through both my personal account, which is algorithmically biased towards social justice movements, and through the new account, which started as a tabula rasa, and has not been manipulated to reflect any specific social justice concern. Infographics became my special object of observation because their main purpose is to inform and educate audiences on various topics – from health to lifestyle to social justice – that may come across these posts. To put it briefly, an infographic on Instagram is a visual representation of data or information that is presented in a manner that is easy to read (Sharma, 2022). Additionally, infographics are meant to be shared onto people's stories to spread a message, a cause, or the like (Sharma, 2022). In the first month, Instagram continued to recommend my interests on my personal account and recommended very popular and mainstream content on the second account. By the second month, little had changed in my personal account, but in terms of the second account the algorithm began attempting to unveil what my interests were. It seems that it was difficult for the Instagram algorithm on the second account to suggest social justice content for the second account because I did not engage or interact with any posts, comments, or accounts. By the third month, my personal algorithm was behaving as it usually would, but I began to see overlap in content between the two accounts. Lastly, by the final month, it appeared as if my interests on my personal account were being transferred to the second account. The posts became similar, yet there was no content that related to activism in any form. These observations have been simplified and visualized in Table 1 and additional screenshots have been added for the reader's convenience. My hypothesis is that Instagram infographics, while popular at peak times, do not mobilize or circulate in the same ways that Tweets on Twitter do, despite still having hashtags and addressing seemingly the same

social justice causes. I argue that social media networks have an organic way of amplifying concerns in activist circles around racial, economic, environmental, gender, and other struggles. However, while I have been able to observe an organic way of amplifying concerns, this only seems to come during periods of high distress and uproar in communities such as the height of the MeToo Movement or the more recent peak of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020. As a result, Instagram appears to still remain widely apolitical, unlike its counterpart, Twitter, and the consequence of this is that the infographics on the site circulate, but they do not push through the algorithm. Furthermore, since the Arab Springs uprising in 2011, text-based social media like Twitter have been well-studied, meanwhile visual platforms still lack adequate research and this is where my work will fill in the gaps (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). Ultimately, my research suggests that racial and feminist justice infographics remain obscure and not real actors in the social justice movements unless there are certain political or human rights events that motivate and move these communities. It appears that Instagram activism and activists have a dynamic communications system that moves with the daily news cycle. In that way, Instagram is able to give counterpublics a sense of the opinions one would not and does not see on mainstream media but is yet not potent enough to take these opinions to the level of politically impactful and socially engaged organizing.

Additionally, I have collected the nine most popular infographics that circulated on Instagram in 2020 during the #BLM protests. These can be seen in Appendix 1.0 and consist mostly of George Floyd, the #BlackOutTuesday square, the BLM raised fist, and funding info that was pertinent at the time of the protests. During the summer of 2020, these were the posts circulating on Instagram, however, it is interesting to note that none of these infographics or any in general made it over to my generic accounts explore page. It is important to note that these

reached the peak of their popularity during 2020 and now, two years later, users would still have to be sharing, liking, and commenting on these specific infographics in order for them to re-enter Instagram's algorithm. In short, for an activist infographic to remain alive two years after its initial introduction, it needs to be actively reshared and re-engaged. Otherwise, it disappears into the communicative void of the Instagram algorithm. My research shows that the nine most popular infographics in 2020 are largely forgotten today, despite the fact that at the time they were circulating and recruiting publics for the purposes of racial justice and social equity. These infographic messages, of course, could be revived if a new Instagram user is actively searching for them and if they are political in their posts, comments, likes, and the accounts they follow. By contrast, if the given new Instagram user is not political, it is unlikely that they would come across any content related to BLM. It seems that the Instagram algorithm, more so than any other social media algorithm, is not set to recommend topics that Instagram users do not usually interact with. Furthermore, according to Twitter (2020), the #BlackLivesMatter conversation dates back to 2013, but the talk on Twitter surrounding the hashtag is able to help users understand, connect, and ultimately take action around these pressing matters. On Twitter, there is an average of 390 million Tweets in conversation around #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter (Twitter, 2020). #BlackLivesMatter is, therefore, a well-documented event on Twitter and even if the momentum of the initial public demonstrations across North America has passed, the conversation is still alive on the platform. For comparison, Instagram does not provide any statistics on the number of posts hash-tagged with #BlackLivesMatter or #BLM, neither does it release data on the sharing dynamics of such posts. Essentially, it appears that beginning in May of 2020, Twitter was the platform activists took to in order to communicate, share, and organize whereas Instagram appears to be a platform that, while still politically charged at the time, was

not able to do the same things that Twitter, and their users were able to. Additionally, on Twitter's 10-year anniversary, they published a list of the most used hashtags that were related to social causes (Anderson, 2016). At the time, #BlackLivesMatter ranked at number three and Anderson (2016) explains that hashtags evolved from an informal method of highlighting ideas in unformatted text and grow conversation to a way for groups to deliberately use hashtags to promote messages. In the instance of the Black Lives Matter movement, this is exactly what happened as organizers took to social media—with the specific hashtag #BLM or #BlackLivesMatter—as being central to their cause (Anderson, 2016). Interestingly, Anderson (2016) notes that the use of the Twitter hashtags has directly resulted in the movement's growth offline and with the conversations that were occurring online. In the context of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, the specific #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used roughly 47.8 million times on Twitter which averages out to about 3.7 million times a day between May 26 to June 7, 2020 (Anderson, Barthel, Perrin, & Vogels, 2020). On May 25, 2020, George Floyd died in police custody in Minneapolis and on May 28, 2020, there was a surge of 8.8 million uses of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter as national and global protests spread (Anderson, Barthel, Perrin, & Vogels, 2020). Furthermore, the use of the BLM hashtags on Twitter seemed to increase amid global protests such as George Floyd's murder in 2020, Trayvon Martin's murder in 2013, and even during President Donald Trump's call on National Football League (NFL) owners to fire the players who protested during the national anthem in 2017 (Anderson, Barthel, Perrin, & Vogels, 2020). It is abundantly evident that while Instagram, during the summer of 2020, did become politically motivated in its content, it simply could not and did not rival the effectiveness of Twitter. This can be attributed to Twitter's longstanding pioneering and history of hashtags and the convenient, user-friendly platform. As for Instagram, it appears that 2020 was the first time

in its history that the platform became politically active, and the phenomenon of infographics can be the reason for this spike in activity. However, despite the infographics, it is still not thought to be a platform used for advocacy and change like Twitter. This is what my research will continue to examine and delve further into during this paper.

Before I can delve further into my research paper, it is important for me to define the term *activism*. For the purpose of my research, I will be referring to Bart Cammaerts's definition of activism. For Cammaerts, the term activism is relatively new as it was introduced in the mid-1970s and to put it simply, refers to the ability of someone or something to act and make and change history (Cammaerts, 2007). Activism represents a practice of struggling for change and can include forms such as electronic advocacy, hacktivism, and culture jamming as explained by Cammaerts (2007). A point of importance to note is how Cammaerts (2007) observes that media activism plays a *crucial* role in not only the processes of social change, but also in activist strategies. Thus, the term *activism* is of heavy importance in my research, relying on the theories and workings of Bart Cammaerts as I will continue to delve and investigate social media activism and how it plays a role in the social movement of Black Lives Matter. Furthermore, the Black Lives Matter movement was specifically chosen because of its success and its reach on both Instagram and Twitter through infographics. This is a phenomenon that has not been seen before and this particular movement had not only a massive following, but a large social media following. Therefore, the focus of my research will be aimed at the Black Lives Matter movement that occurred on social media, peaking in 2020, while also drawing comparisons and similarities from other notable social justice movements in the past.

As my research deals with certain aspects of activism relating to BIPOC individuals, I feel that it is not only important, but necessary to acknowledge my positionality and privilege in

my own research. I view my positionality as a white, cisgender, settler, woman which greatly affects how *I* view privilege and how I am privileged. My intention in my research is to observe only while not inserting myself in any conversations or taking away the voices of those who are part of the movements. While I consider myself an activist, my research is not meant to be taken as something I am contributing to the movements themselves, but instead, as an exploration into the trends and patterns seen on public social media, offering an insight into the effectiveness of social media advocacy and activism.

Literature Review

To begin, my literature review will be split up into different themes: a history of hashtag activism, analysis of the argument that states that hashtag activism is *not* real activism, analysis of the counterargument, namely the one that suggests that social media activism is important, the echo-chamber and cyber-utopia social media activism has created, and some critiques and criticisms of activism being conducted online through Instagram. My literature review is a comprehensive, up-to-date review that engages with literature that acknowledges and seeks to examine both sides of my argument. The purpose of my own research is to fill in the gaps in literature while also offering an insightful lens into how Instagram as a community contributes to hashtag activism both similarly and differently than Twitter. Here, I examine the scholarship offered on this topic before examining the limitations and gaps in research that, ultimately, my research will hope to fill.

I. The History of #Hashtag Activism

While the hashtag may not seem like a new, innovative quality of social media, it single-handedly revolutionized how social media began to behave in relation to social, political, and human rights movements. The original purpose of the hashtag aimed to create a

communication medium that had a strict 140-character limit, and the user was to simplify a complex message into one that was much more compact, culturally resonant, but also widely understood (Kuo, 2018). Kuo (2018) notes how hashtags are seldom used on their own, but often appear and are included with other texts. Examples include, but are not limited to: #BLM, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #StopAsianHate, and many others. This is mostly because of their algorithmic construction as they organize, link, and archive conversations while simultaneously making conversations more visible by trending them (Kuo, 2018). This, of course, is in regard to Twitter, but it appears that hashtags operate in a very similar manner on Instagram. Instagram differs from Twitter as the platform is image and video focused, unlike Twitter which is text focused. Due to this, hashtags on Instagram are used to filter, sort, and organize photographs and videos instead of Tweets. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of hashtag activism happens when a large number of postings such as Tweets or Instagram stories appear on social media, hashtagged under a common word, phrase, or sentence with a social or political claim (Yang, 2016). When it comes to matters of social justice movements, especially in promotion of them, hashtags function as a way to connect together salient issues, events, experiences, conversations, and beliefs that document the harsh and unjust realities faced by many individuals and communities that would not be seen on mainstream news sites (Kuo, 2018). Essentially, the hashtag is an "indexing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense," (p. 496) as it is able to file, but also frame comments to add a specific meaning (Kuo, 2018). When it comes to activism, hashtags are used strategically and are often unique to activists because they—hashtags—are intentional actions that are often aimed to drive discourses further in a particular direction and force participants to join on these discussions (Kuo, 2018). Since they are *intentional*, they aim to drive movements further, spurring on groups and individuals within the community to speak out

and let their voices be heard. Thus, hashtags can be used to consolidate a massive number of stories into one online space where users can look through a digital archive for information on specific causes. With the recent development in digital activism in recent years, hashtag activism has become part of the discourse of protest on social media (Yang, 2016). Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #Ferguson have all arisen from an outcry of people joining one another in one collective movement. These cases of online protests are important to examine and consider when looking at how vital the narrative form is in regard to hashtag activism (Yang, 2016). Narrative forms are essential to humans, and they can be defined as the inherent nature of our daily action and self-construction as they are what create and mould our narrative character of life (Yang, 2016). This is important because narrative forms give individuals and groups the ability to tell stories and become incredibly pertinent to everyday life. Essentially, narrative forms are incredibly personal because they have the ability to recall details of an act, phenomenon or event that may be pertinent to discussions of current affairs. However, the power of the narrative form, according to Yang (2016), is that narrative conventions will vary on different platforms. Twitter has allowed for a unique, but critical feature for online, digital activism: the hashtag (Yang, 2016). This then allows for other users to easily search, link, and interact with other like-minded individuals via a single hashtagged word or phrase where stories can be shared instantly (Yang, 2016). Furthermore, these hashtags, more often than not, challenge the narratives seen in mainstream media (Yang, 2016). The idea of counter-publics, then, is incredibly important in hashtag activism because they are a community that is seldom represented in mainstream media but have the ability to be seen and heard on social media. Additionally, these hashtags encourage audience participation through tweets, re-tweets, commenting on tweets or threads, or even posting a tweet with the same hashtag (Yang, 2016).

Social media is a very dynamic environment and as a result, this means that it is very responsive to what is happening in the world. Instrumental to this extreme contemporaneity of social media is precisely hashtag activism, which has been able to capture thousands, if not millions, of users and individuals with a specific social justice cause. Additionally, hashtag activism is able to amplify the voices of those who are often ignored in the mainstream media (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016). An interesting, however important, note that Cumberbatch and Trujillo-Pagán (2016) highlight is that while hashtag activism seems to be attested with terms such as "slacktivism," "hashtavisim," and "clicktivism," this is simply a product of how Americans particularly see and understand social movements. Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán (2016) note that European scholars tend to consider new social movements "less as organizations of common interest and more as new forms of *collective identity* engaged in *discursive struggles* that not only transform people's self-understandings but also contest the legitimacy of received cultural codes and points of view" (p. 79). Thus, social media and movements that appear online are able to create a virtual space that aims to challenge, reframe, and reinscribe representations of who is victimized (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016). In line with this scholarship, I would add that the Black Lives Matter movement challenges precisely what Cumberbatch and Trujillo-Pagán (2016) call the "legitimacy of an ostensibly 'colourblind' judicial system" (p. 79). So, not only has social media and hashtag activism been able to give voices to those not often heard or even recognized by the mainstream media, but hashtags such as #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter have been used to facilitate the organization and even the planning of protests against racial profiling and police brutality in the United States (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán, 2016). Furthermore, since these movements and hashtags appear online and on social media, they also have the potential to build solidarity in different parts of the world (Cumberbatch & Trujillo-Pagán,

2016). This means that social media movements link groups, communities, and individuals together through a single hashtag under the same movement or cause. Additionally, Kuo (2018) talks about how, while Twitter is unable to be the only activist tool for social movements, it still has incredible potential and power to mobilize and amplify messages that go beyond individuals and specific communities. This is because Twitter has the potential for real-time conversation and the overall dissemination as part of a larger protest around racial justice (Kuo, 2018). Still, Cumberbatch and Trujillo-Pagán (2016), Kuo (2018), and Yang (2016) all talk about Twitter primarily and not Instagram as their research comes prior to the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement and protests. There appears to be a lack of research and scholarship when it comes to Instagram and the activism that occurs on the platform. Despite the similarities in both Twitter and Instagram, they offer different experiences and thus, additional research is necessary in order to understand the scope of Instagram activism on movements. This is where my research will fill in the gaps, taking a look at Instagram and its part in hashtag activism when it comes to Black Lives Matter.

II. **Slacktivism ≠ Activism**

While the Internet has given many the opportunity to access large amounts of information, it is also important to remember the limitations social media pose when it comes to the topic of activism. Scholarship cited thus far has outlined the wide range of hashtags on Twitter. It is clear and true that hashtags have the ability and power to mobilize movements, but it is also important to consider the consequences and drawbacks of social media activism. The growing popularity of social networking sites (SNS) such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and so forth has created wide-scale online social participation where nearly everyone is able to have a platform and a voice (Rotman et al., 2011). As a result of this accessibility, Rotman et al.;

(2011) have outlined how *despite* this visibility to issues of public health, political unrest, disaster relief, climate change, and other pertinent and pressing matters, there is little known about the benefits or costs of engaging in social media activism. It is this gap that my research will aim to fill, attempting to bridge this void and offer more knowledge and information on the benefits and drawbacks of social media activism. Furthermore, Rotman et al.; (2011) note that it is evident that technology is able to help raise awareness and create change, however, is it able to produce meaningful change or is it perhaps just creating an echo chamber that *looks* like activism, when it is in fact performative and nothing more than *slacktivism*? The term slacktivism refers to those people who simply "like" a post that details a cause, but they will not be inspired to shift a cause into action (McCafferty, 2011). Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017) also give a brief definition of slacktivism as an online form of self-aggrandizing, yet politically ineffective activism. Moreover, Glenn (2015) adds to the definition of slacktivism by stating that the term itself is a combination of the words "slacker" and "activism" and is used to describe the disconnect between actual awareness and action through use of social media. Furthermore, Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017) note how there are multiple different subcategories of slacktivism: clicktivism, sympathy, political, charity (direct), and charity (by-product of consumption) as this phenomenon manifests in more ways than one. Additionally, they note how slacktivism is not a new occurrence that came with the advent of social media, but instead that the term was created in 1995 as a synonym for what they call "armchair activism" (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017). The term has simply just morphed into being synonymous with social media activism because of the plethora of evidence to suggest that engagement stops after a single "click". Thus, it is noted that contemporary slacktivism has become equated with politically ineffective, online actions, primarily through social media (Cabrera, Matias, &

Montoya, 2017). Rotman et al.; (2011) seek to ask and answer the question of *why* do people participate in social issues through the use of social media? Again, there is a gap in research on this question, a gap that my research tentatively and in a limited way fills. They posit that social media has been proven to be an incredibly useful tool in raising awareness and distributing information that can be quickly and easily spread on a global scale (Rotman et al., 2011). This appeal of a fast, seemingly effective method of disseminating information attracts many and leads those individuals to believe that they are contributing to a movement through the use of their own social media. As McCafferty (2011) reiterates, activism will always come down to people and actions. Examples of successful movements can start with petitions and online posts, but they will always end with organized movement and solidarity in those that participate in true activism. Uses and Gratifications (U & G) is a relevant theory with regards to social media because social media, by definition, allows people to communicate with millions of individuals all over the world (Whiting & Williams, 2013). At its core, U & G theory states that individuals seek out media based on what needs those media can fulfill that will lead the user to the ultimate gratification (Whiting & Williams, 2013). According to U & G theory, users of social media consume media to satisfy seven basic needs: social interaction, information seeking, to pass the time, entertainment, relaxation, community utility, and lastly, convenience utility (Whiting & Williams, 2013). There are a number of reasons why social media is incredibly sought after. When it comes to the top two most popular reasons for social media use, information seeking came in at number two at 80 percent (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Due to the high volume of information available on social media, it is necessary to think about the possible consequences and abilities social media has regarding knowledge mobilization. Many social media activists go to social media to inform audiences, however, there is no guarantee that the information being

posted is accurate or correct which has the potential to lead to misinformation being spread. Furthermore, social media is marketed as being a way to unwind and connect with friends in a space that is meant to be fun, friendly, and relaxing. By contrast, when the social media space is overly politicized, many people disconnect from it. Research shows that individuals may choose to stay offline during periods of high stress in the world and as a result, miss important information. In essence, social media is a vital tool for activists as Kuo (2018) has previously highlighted, however, it cannot be the only tool for activists. Regardless of intentions, change must occur with actions and social media is just one of the steps necessary in order to go in the right direction. The next section of this literature review will now focus on the ways in which scholars believe that social media could influence and cause change in political and social movements.

III. Social Media Activism: The Light at The End of The Tunnel

As shown so far, there are many scholars who outline the potential limits of social media activism. Still, it is evident that social media have the capacity to reach hundreds, thousands, millions, and even billions of people all over the world. This incredible reach/connectivity is one of the unique features of social media because they spread information to a diverse crowd of people (Mallat, 2014). Furthermore, the rapid exposure and visibility is perhaps the greatest advantage social media have to offer (Mallat, 2014). Activists are able to use social media to reach greater audiences as well as target younger demographics because of their reliance on SNS (Mallat, 2014). This exposure could not be possible 20 years ago and there has been an increase in participation in activism from the younger generations *because* of the reach social media offers (Mallat, 2014). As per U & G theory, social media are used as a place where users are able to seek out information and here, younger generations are now able to become informed and up

to date much faster than before through an avenue that has not been offered until recently (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Thus, youth are not only staying connected, but they are staying informed. Not only are social media able to reach younger audiences, but they also have the ability to reach inaccessible, vulnerable, and under-represented populations (Mallat, 2014). Moreover, social media activism could gain the attention of mainstream media coverage both locally and internationally which has, in some cases, helped pass certain laws (Mallat, 2014). This exposure could reach those who are part of the same community and who share the same struggles and thus, come together on a single issue to tackle it. Richer discussions might also happen on social media platforms because people get exposed to a wide range of questions, which concern the self and its relations to others (Mallat, 2014). This is incredibly helpful to social movements as there is information readily available at an individual's fingertips. Proponents of social media's democratizing function believe in empowerment through connectivity to individuals and causes (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). One study notes that social media platforms ease the speed with which a group mobilizes as well as its remarkable ability to share, cooperate with one another, as well as take collective actions against institutions and organizations that are historically and continually rooted in capitalism and colonialism (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). Social media-optimistic scholars see social media as an integral and crucial part when it comes to mobilizing, engaging, and connecting individuals and communities together to stand in solidarity. Furthermore, in their book, *#HashtagActivism*, Jackson, Bailey, and Welles (2020) argue for the importance of digital labour for raced and gendered counterpublics. They state that ordinary African Americans, women, transgender people, and other who align themselves with racial justice and feminist causes have historically been excluded from the elite media spaces, also known as mainstream media sources and outlets

(Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). These historically oppressed groups have repurposed social media spaces, particularly Twitter, to make identity-based cultural and political demands and by doing this, they have effectively changed national consciousness with movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). Moreover, the narratives that arise on Twitter through hashtags have a tendency to evolve much more quickly than they would in the traditional media (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). This urgency is usually seen during the peaks of movements. However, Instagram seems to go through the same cycle. Through this, Twitter as a platform has become one of the major tools for disseminating information into the public sphere in the hopes that particular actions will come (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). Mallat (2014) argues something similar, namely that social media are not only able to reach a diverse group of audiences, but that they do so in a way that is much faster and efficient than the mainstream media. Additionally, hashtags are powerful tools because while they have extended the communicative reach of those who already benefit from the widespread access to the public, hashtags and Twitter also allow for direct and immediate communication of raw images, emotions, and ideas that become widespread (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). Twitter is remarkable for empowering ordinary people on the scene to tweet first-hand accounts while the public must wait for print journalists to narrativize national crises and controversies (Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020). However, when it comes to Instagram, the research is still lacklustre because Instagram has only recently seen a surge in activism on the platform. Thus, while the research on Twitter and activism may be extensive, the same cannot be said for Instagram. Infographics heavily dominate the scene during times of peak unrest in the world, as this is the most effective method for disseminating information on Instagram. Since Instagram is not text-based, but a photo-based sharing platform, users must utilize the audio-visual narrative

language of the platform if they want to create awareness and spread their messages of social justice. As a result, infographics have become one of the main methods used to inform users, advocate for reform, and even point to resources and mobilize protests. Ultimately, my research contributes to the point that Instagram activism operates through the medium-specific method of infographics, which, given the algorithmic structure and the user base, are not as effective as the affective and political structures created by Twitter.

IV. The Phenomenon of Cyber-Utopia's, *Net Delusion* & The Ultimate Drawbacks

Since social media are such a dynamic environment, there is the possibility of creating a cyber-utopia and delusions where users believe that social media are not a tool for change, but the ultimate solution. Those who oppose social media activism argue that the excitement one feels when reading about, sharing, and posting on activist causes masks the actual reality that social media do very little and arguably, worsen the ability for these movements to mobilize or to incite any positive changes (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). A negative impact is that of the so-called "net delusion". The phrase points to the delusions of a technologically advanced West, living in a cyber-utopia and Internet-centric world that blinds its inhabitants to an evolving Internet landscape that in effect limits democratic possibilities (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). In essence, what critics believe is that social media brings millions of people to a page or a post, but they fail to mobilize into the street to actually effect any change (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). This failure to mobilize is directly tied to social media and this idea of "net delusion" where users *believe* their actions are instilling change, but they are unfortunately not. Furthermore, this notion of a *net delusion* is one that should continue to be highlighted regarding social media, mobilizing movements, and activism because it paints a very gruesome picture of the direction society is headed in. Evgeny Morozov, the pioneer of the term "net delusion" in his 2011 book

The Net Delusion, believes that the *cyber-utopia* many academics, bloggers, activists, journalists, and policymakers have confidence in is nothing more than "a naive belief in the emancipatory nature of online communications that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside" (Shullenberger, 2020, p. 46). Morozov states that the Western world grossly exaggerates the role of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in their ability to mobilize protests (Shullenberger, 2020). The most powerful statement that Morozov makes is when he says, "the West began its quest for Internet freedom based on the mostly untested cyber-utopian assumption that more connections and more networks necessarily lead to more freedom or more democracy" (Shullenberger, 2020, p. 47). This is what Morozov called the *old* net delusion, naive and internally consistent (Shullenberger, 2020). However, the *new* net delusion is fragmented and self-contradictory. Morozov even predicts that not long from now, democracy will be poisoned by social media (Shullenberger, 2020). He points that those who once endorsed platforms such as Facebook and Twitter now denounce them due to their *fake news* and misinformation and as a result, the political leverage that these platforms and the communities formed or communicating via them is even further discredited (Shullenberger, 2020). Essentially, the West has dug its own grave because of its naïve belief in a cyber-utopia, where social media are the answer to all humanitarian, social, political, and economic problems. This is perhaps an example of the dangers that social media activism poses to movements. While information can be easily and readily distributed, it is important to remind individuals that change needs to happen to see reform or a shift in policy. While it is evident that social media *do* have some very important capabilities, they do not emerge without drawbacks. Next, I will discuss some criticism offered by scholars in regard to social media activism, slacktivism, and the overall discussion of hashtag activism.

V. Slacktivism & Activism Go Hand-in-Hand

Activism on social media, while effective to some degree, will always come with the consequences of slacktivism and performative actions. As explained in the previous section, the stance Morozov holds is one where the Western world is often heavily and over reliant on social media and oftentimes distorts and warps its true ability to mobilize movements (Shullenberger, 2020; Morozov, 2011). However, Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017) argue that a key characteristic of 'slacktivism' is political ineffectiveness. Nonetheless, scholars disagree about how to operationalize efficacy as for example, the Human Rights Campaign on Facebook urged users to change their profile pictures to a red logo in support of gay marriage (Cabrera, Matias & Montoya, 2017). This specific action would be seen as performative, and thus, slacktivist in nature, to Morozov and supporters, but scholars have argued that a massive online response actually helped the issue gain prominence in popular discourse (Cabrera, Matias & Montoya, 2017). Regardless of how Morozov and supporters may see this action, it *did* provide many with the support and information on this specific matter. As a result, the movement gained exposure and gained many more supporters in solidarity with the LGBTQIA2+ communities. This, as outlined by Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017), presents a challenge to the societal power dynamics and, in turn, becomes an effective form of online activism. Additionally, this type of mixed assessment research reveals that while video sharing is considered to be a form of slacktivism and not "true" activism, it factors in increases of activism (Cabrera, Matias & Montoya, 2017). Many of those who partake in the seemingly simple activity of "liking" and re-sharing posts online, might be activating for themselves and for others around them a more comprehensive and complex way of assessing political engagement. Evidence does seem to suggest that simple and meaningless (on the surface) acts of solidarity open up an effective form

of activism. Morozov's claims were criticized with the argument that instead of activism/slacktivism being grouped into a category of either/or, it instead tends to be more of a both/and situation (Cabrera, Matias & Montoya, 2017). Once again, this highlights the dynamic environment that social media facilitates. It is noted that actions that tend to be regarded as slacktivism, such as signing petitions or sharing an infographic to an individual's story (on Instagram), are not an end in themselves, but instead, are the means to the end of gaining access to power in people according to Cabrera, Matias, and Montoya (2017). Here, the argument is that while social media activism has the potential to be viewed as "slacktivism," it is more than that. The sharing of information, the gathering of communities together, and in some cases, the mobilizing of protests that end in real change, are all linked inextricably together. The scholarship reviewed here is divided in its appreciation of online activism. Scholars on this topic are both skeptics and utopians but, also, importantly, they point to a current need for more nuanced and balanced approaches to social justice movements that form on social media. For my research, I can see the merit in both the more skeptical and more utopian arguments. Yet, regarding my project, I see the value in combining both the negatives and the positives of slacktivist tendencies on social media to observe and examine the outcome of activism on Instagram. In essence, I must take a look at both arguments in order to fully encapsulate social media's true power and effect pertaining to social justice activism.

Methodology

I. Overview

Choosing a methodology for my research was difficult solely because there *are* no developed methodologies that directly relate to studying infographics on Instagram. There were many factors and aspects I needed to take into consideration before I could begin the collection

of my data. For the analysis of my data, I had to firstly take into consideration the fact that Instagram, as a platform, is incredibly dynamic. Thus, when analyzing a dynamic platform such as Instagram, I determined that I must take on an approach that not only capitalizes on this dynamic aspect, but also that my data is collected in an organic and fluid manner in order to capture a veritable glimpse into Instagram's algorithm and how it functions. As a result of this, I decided that I would approach my research through a qualitative lens which consists in a combination of two criteria: "how to do things—namely, generating and analyzing empirical material, in an iterative process in which one gets closer by making distinct; and the outcome—improved understanding novel to the scholarly community" (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155). However, it is important to note that in the definition of "qualitative", the literature attempting to address its distinctive features is a broad field (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Meaning, qualitative research, in and of itself, is a field that is constantly growing and redefining itself. Thus, qualitative research accepts that the stories people tell about real life hold incredible insights and understandings in ways that connect with something deep inside (Smythe & Giddings, 2007). This is an important aspect of my own research as Instagram activism and social media activism in general, is very dependent on the stories that people tell on these platforms. Before delving further into my methodologies and how I observed and collected my data, it is important to continue to note that there are no developed methodologies on how to study infographics at the time of my research. As a result, my research heavily relies on what methods feel the most genuine while simultaneously trying to locate observations in relevant scholarly literature. Regardless, Instagram is undoubtedly very personal and oftentimes considered to be a private social media as users make public moments of private intimacy: photos with friends, family, and themselves. As such, Instagram has employed an option to have

a "private" account—an account that is not accessible to the public unless the individual accepts the following request from another user. Once User A accepts the following request from User B, User B has access to all of User A's posts and stories. Users A and B will have the ability to interact once they have been granted permission to do so. According to a 2016 study, it is estimated that there are 300 million users of Instagram who have a private account, making up a large fraction of the estimated 1.4 billion Instagram accounts currently active (Gaffney, 2016; DataReportal, 2022). It is important to clarify that my research will not be interacting with any private accounts. Since my interest is in the political effects of social media organizing and the role of infographics, I am not concerned here with private conversations. By contrast, my interest is in the circulation of public discourse, the one channeled through infographics, which are public in nature and are generated with the purpose to reach as many people as possible. Therefore, my research is dependent on the public accounts accessible to all Instagram users. Infographics are interactive, comprehensive, activist-based pieces of information, created to become viral. Since the goal on many social media platforms is for others to see one's posts, I chose to activate a public Instagram account focused on spreading messages, information, and awareness. As a result of this, I have approached my research question by conducting a multi-stage, mixed-method approach that consists of qualitative research in the form of content analysis in addition to critical discourse analysis (CDA). My two methodologies are also heavily informed by findings within the academic literature (Wall, Stahl & Salam, 2015). These mixed methods benefit my research because they suit the dynamism of Instagram. According to Wall, Stahl, and Salam (2015), the frequent goal of CDA is to achieve and identify hegemony and to emancipate marginalized individuals as well as ideas. Furthermore, CDA draws from critical and interpretive research paradigms that are laced with the researcher's judgements and subjectivity.

Wall, Stahl, and Salam (2015) do not see this as problematic because subjectivity and intersubjectivity are principles of critical and interpretive methods. Previously I have commented on my positionality regarding this type of research because it is important to understand that positionality, to some degree, impacts any, including, my own reflection here. Ultimately, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are necessary in CDA and thus, critical reflexivity is also an important feature when considering how a researcher's worldviews may contribute to the framing of scholarly methodologies, and conclusions (Wall, Stahl & Salam, 2015). Since my research is using a mixed-method approach, I also implement content analysis. The latter is a highly flexible research methodology and can be defined as a research technique that is able to replicate valid inferences from texts or other meaningful content to the contexts of their use (White & Marsh, 2006). In content analysis, as noted by White and Marsh (2006), inference is not only valuable, but important. As the researcher, I use what is referred to as analytical constructs, otherwise known as rules of inference, to move from the text to the answers, and lastly, to my research question (White & Marsh, 2006). In content analysis, the texts and the contexts are logically independent, and it is the researcher's goal to draw conclusions from the two independent domains (White & Marsh, 2006). Essentially, the findings of a good study that uses qualitative content analysis does not rely solely on the authority of the researcher conducting the content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006). It is also important to note that contemporary content analyses transcend the traditional notions of symbols, contents, and intents and rather, the focus is on the messages, channels, communication, systems, computation, and grounded in a reality that is discursively co-constructed (Krippendorff, 2018). As a result, my research heavily relies on a multi-stage, mixed-method approach that consists of qualitative research in the form of content analysis and CDA. Approaching my research from a content analysis lens allows me, I argue, to

take a closer, in-depth look at the activism done on social media platforms, but more specifically at how activism manifests on Instagram through infographic posts. Since social media is a very dynamic environment with many intersecting logics, it has become a sphere that has monetized attention and as a result, Tweets, posts, and celebrities push an abundance of social justice talk because of the young demographic on these sites. Furthermore, social media's demographics largely consists of youth populations and young adults. Essentially, social media facilitates the contribution of young individuals to conversations surrounding topics of justice. This youthful involvement, importantly, adds to the circulation of information, engagement in/with social media activism, and a new perspective when it comes to social justice movements. Content analysis allows me to extrapolate important meanings and themes heavily embedded in social media activism. Moreover, content analysis makes the comparison among various platforms politically relevant. Additionally, CDA allows me to approach my research through a critical lens where I am able to analyze, interpret, and *explain* the ways in which discourses are constructed and maintained (Mullet, 2018). This is important because it will allow me to understand the motivations behind infographics on Instagram, and to observe how activism behaves on social media as well. By examining infographic posts on Instagram, this methodology facilitates looking at the data auto-ethnographically, while also framing the analysis as part of broader social media trends. In addition to CDA and content analysis, I have also employed an auto-ethnographic approach to my research. A unique feature of auto-ethnographic research is that it dismisses the "view from nowhere" (Herrmann & Adams, 2020, p. 2). Meaning, there is always a person that is present within the research or representation (Herrmann & Adams, 2020). Therefore, auto-ethnographies rely on the use of personal experiences that reflect on personal artifacts and so forth (Herrmann & Adams, 2020). In my research, I will be using my own

Instagram account in order to examine how activism performs on Instagram by analyzing both a personal and impersonal account to fill the gaps in research. Thus, discourse, content analysis and an auto-ethnographic approach will allow me to look into the underlying themes evident in the posts, and to draw conclusions on what motivates social media activism in general.

II. *Research*

As I briefly explained in the previous sections, my research is focused on collecting data from Instagram in the form of looking at how the algorithm differs between two accounts and what content the algorithm chooses to push and share. Additionally, I will also be taking a brief look at Twitter and comparing how Instagram and Twitter differ from each other in terms of activism and leading action. For example, I want to specifically take a look at posts related to activism. As a result, I have two Instagram accounts, which are not created equally: on the one side, I have my personal account, which is already heavily biased by my own history and searches, and on the other hand, is the brand-new account that I created solely for this project, and which reproduces the experience of a newcomer to the world of Instagram sharing. My personal Instagram account is private, which means that public profiles cannot access it unless they request to follow me, and I accept them. The new account I created, however, is *not* private and anyone can stumble upon it. I decided that it would be best to create a separate Instagram account and then compare it to my personal one already in use because my own account has already been tailored to fit my specific interests. Having a fresh start allows me access to the algorithm as it recreates the experiences of someone who had just created their *own* Instagram account. Thus, I have been observing Instagram for four months in which I would take screenshots of each of the two accounts explore pages. An Instagram explore page is essentially a collection of content that is based on the *user's* individual interests and Instagram's algorithm

curates and shapes this based on accounts similar to those an individual interacts with (Zote, 2022). This explore page consists of photos, videos, reels, and no two explore pages will ever be the same as a result of their interactive algorithm (Zote, 2022). I was able to apply autoethnography when observing both my personal account and a new, generic account made recently. In essence, by combining a CDA and content analysis methodology, I was able to adopt a discursive method by comparing the two profiles and then deriving conclusions based on the monthly findings collected.

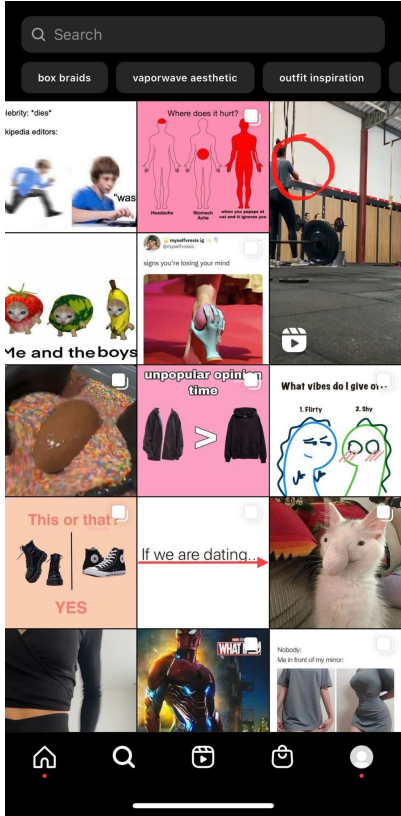
III. Ethical Concerns with Methodology

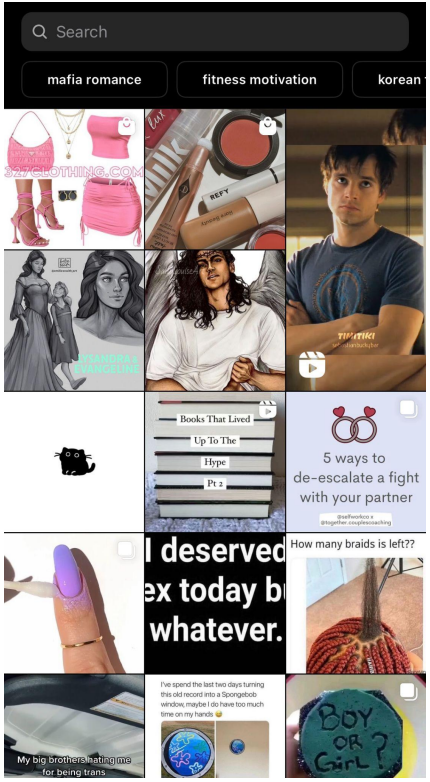
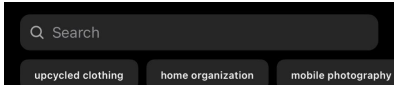
The information my research gathers is heavily reliant on social media, and as a result, there may be some ethical concerns. My project only uses data that is publicly available, so while posts on Instagram are not meant to be researched, Instagram itself is a public connector and as all public media it aims to connect and inform. Furthermore, the infographic posts specifically are interactive ways of presenting information that are meant to be seen, shared, and ultimately, to go viral. Thus, infographics are meant to be seen by as wide a variety of individuals as possible because essentially their function is to inform, i.e., to serve the public square by bringing people closer to certain facts and experiences. None of the posts used in my research are protected by passwords or other access restrictions. Additionally, on November 18, 2021, it was confirmed by the McMaster Ethics Review Board (ERB) that I need not apply for further ethical clearance if using only public posts from Instagram (or any other social media platform). The collection of posts for this MRP has, therefore, involved only posts available to every single Instagram user. In sum, no private posts were researched or viewed for the thesis.

IV. Research Visualization: Table

Month	Duration	Observation	Screenshot
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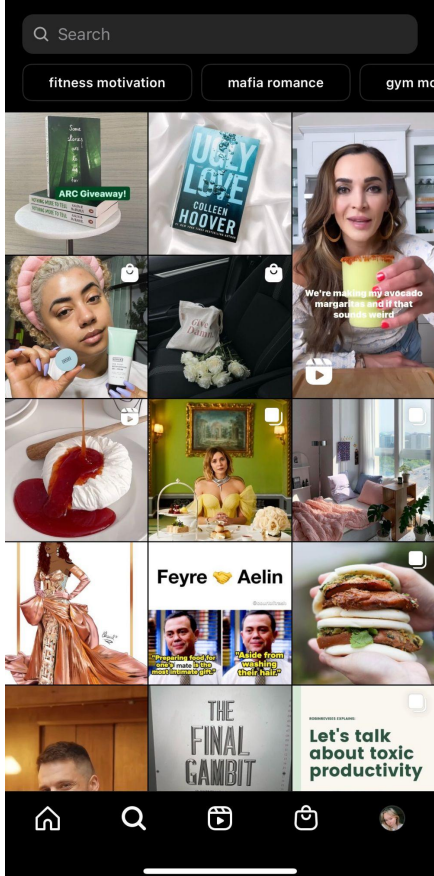
<p>March 2022</p>	<p>15 minutes (AM & PM)</p>	<p><i>Generic Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The algorithm is entirely unsure of what this account's interests are. - They begin with recommending "safe" posts such as nature, landscapes, and cute animals. - On this account, I do not interact with any accounts in any regard to try and challenge the algorithm. - The first month saw a lot of "basic" and "safe" posts. <p><i>Personal Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Instagram's algorithm for my personal account is very accurate. - This is because they have been able to collect data on my interests for months, even years. 	<p>The image displays two screenshots of an Instagram feed. The top screenshot shows a grid of posts including a dog, a beach, a cup of coffee, and a cityscape. The bottom screenshot shows a grid of posts including a couple, a blue bath, prawn toast, a book cover, and a person's hand.</p>
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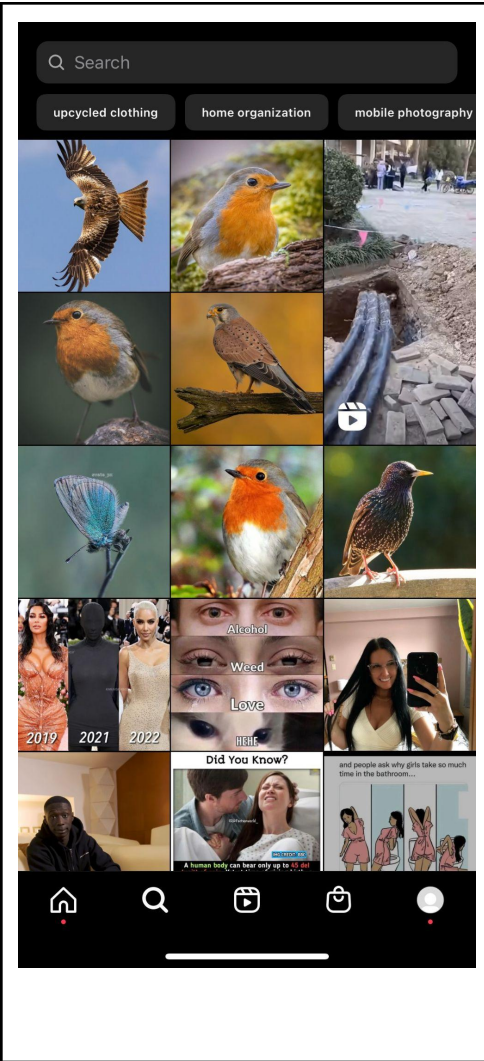
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I regularly interact with many posts on my Explore Page and thus, my personal account appears to be trapped in a "filter bubble" and this is very obvious right from the first month of observations. 	
<p>April 2022</p>	<p>15 minutes (AM & PM)</p>	<p><i>Generic Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The algorithm is still unsure of my interests. - The posts being recommended are still considered "safe" as they are memes and popular content that is currently circulating around explore pages. - Since my generic account does not interact with any posts through comments, likes, or even clicks, it is very hard for the algorithm to determine 	 <p>The screenshot shows an Instagram Explore page with a search bar at the top and several trending topics: 'box braids', 'vaporwave aesthetic', and 'outfit inspiration'. The main content area is a grid of various posts, including memes, educational diagrams, and popular content. Notable posts include a diagram titled 'Where does it hurt?' with a red circle highlighting a specific area, a post titled 'unpopular opinion' comparing two items, and a 'This or that' poll. The bottom navigation bar shows the home, search, explore, activity, and profile icons.</p>

		<p>what to recommend to me.</p> <p><i>Personal Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Once again, the algorithm knows my personal account very well and continues to recommend content such as book's, makeup, and cute animals. - Since I regularly interact with many different posts and accounts on my personal Instagram, the algorithm has placed me in a "filter bubble" that I am locked into. - Simply put, they will continue to show me posts of the things I interact with, but will seldom show me anything outside of my interests. 	 <p>The screenshot shows a grid of Instagram posts. At the top, there is a search bar and three filter buttons: 'mafia romance', 'fitness motivation', and 'korean'. The posts include: a pink outfit from 'UPCYCLED CLOTHING.COM', a makeup tutorial for 'REVE' lipstick, a man's portrait, a woman in a grey dress, a woman in a white shirt, a book list titled 'Books That Lived Up To The Hype Pt 2', a relationship article '5 ways to de-escalate a fight with your partner', a hand with a purple nail, a text post 'I deserved sex today because whatever.', a braided hair close-up, a person's face, a globe, and a green cake with 'BOY OR GIRL?' written on it.</p>
<p>May 2022</p>	<p>15 minutes (AM & PM)</p>	<p><i>Generic Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By May of 	 <p>The screenshot shows an Instagram feed with a search bar and three filter buttons: 'upcycled clothing', 'home organization', and 'mobile photography'. The visible posts include a globe and a green cake with 'BOY OR GIRL?' written on it.</p>

		<p>2022, this became a major turning point for the generic account.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- This was the first month where I saw similarities beginning to overlap between the generic account and my personal account.- The Depp-Heard trial was at an all-time high during this time and it could be a coincidence, however, I got the same video recommended on both accounts through the explore page. <p><i>Personal Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The algorithm continued to regularly recommend the content that I was interested in, but again, I began to see some overlap in what I was	
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		<p>seeing on the two accounts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- This was interesting because while I interacted with a lot of accounts on my personal, I never did that on the generic account. This led me to speculate that perhaps the algorithm realized that the two accounts were linked to the same person and maybe began siphoning interests from one account to influence the other. <p>However, this is just a theory and purely speculation as I cannot prove it.</p>	
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<p>June 2022</p>	<p>15 minutes (AM & PM)</p>	<p><i>Generic Account</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Surprisingly, I never got any more overlap between the two accounts. - During the last month, Instagram still continued to display its safe and popular content to the generic accounts explore page. - This is most likely due to the fact that, like I stated, I never interacted with any posts. - Without any interaction, it is incredibly difficult for the algorithm to successfully pick up on any sort of interests. <p><i>Personal Account</i></p> <p>If anything, I did notice that my personal account's explore page just got more specific in my interests. It is important</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows an Instagram explore page with a grid of 12 posts. The posts include: a book giveaway for 'Ugly Love' by Colleen Hoover; a woman making avocado margaritas; a woman in a yellow dress; a woman in a brown dress; a man's face; a book cover for 'The Final Gambit'; and a post about toxic productivity. The bottom navigation bar is visible.</p>
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		<p>to note that despite my interaction with and following multiple "activism" like pages, I never once got an infographic that pertained to any social, gender, racial, etc...causes or movements. I have gotten the occasional "self-help" infographic that is very popular on Instagram, but nothing related to social justice.</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows an Instagram search grid for the hashtag #mobilephotography. The grid contains 12 images: a hawk in flight, a robin on a branch, a person in a garden, a robin on a rock, a falcon on a branch, a person in a garden, a blue butterfly, a robin on a branch, a starling on a branch, a woman in a red dress, a woman in a white dress, a woman in a white dress, a close-up of eyes with text 'Alcohol', 'Weed', 'Love', 'HEIF', 'Did You Know?', and a woman taking a selfie. The bottom navigation bar is visible.</p>
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Argument

After researching for several months, I concluded that activism on Instagram is vastly different from other types of social media activism, namely Twitter activism. Unlike Twitter, Instagram has not been able to capitalize or take advantage of the hashtag virality like Twitter has. However, hashtag activism as a whole has become incredibly powerful and has been able to change certain aspects in the public sphere, including on Instagram. Moreover, radicalized groups organize on Twitter more than on any other social media platform. This is because hashtag activism, hashtag politics, and social media have had certain impacts into the world of

marginalized groups and the conditions of their struggles. This phenomenon has been able to put their voices in the centre of the public agenda and none of this would have been possible offline. The argument that I propose is that social media is absolutely instrumental to racial and gender struggles, however, the phenomenon of hashtag activism manifests differently on Instagram than on Twitter because the Instagram communities do not seem to be as interested in politics as virtual communities existing on other platforms. Furthermore, Instagram's algorithm is tailored in a way which makes it much more difficult for posts made by smaller accounts to be seen. As a result, Instagram pushes mainstream content that is already popular. Therefore, during the peak of movements, it is likely that users will see various different activist material, but not in between. Simply, the Instagram community will follow certain trends such as #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter and when the trend starts to die out in popularity, so will the interest on Instagram due to a number of factors that will now be examined and explained.

Unlike the Twitter algorithm, the Instagram algorithm is something entirely different and as a result the political impacts are different. Twitter and Instagram populations are largely different despite still having access to and oftentimes *using* the same hashtags in the same manner and for the same purpose. It is important to consider that five years ago Instagram was an entirely different platform than what it is now and even different from what it was back in 2020 (Mao, 2021). Slowly and gradually, Instagram has evolved to become a platform where activists are able to share their perspectives on social justice matters and as a way for youth to receive social justice messages (Mao, 2021). The Instagram infographic activism was a phenomenon that occurred in 2020 for the first time and it proved to be unlike anything the platform had ever seen before. The comparison with Twitter is, again, compelling. Unlike Twitter, Instagram is a photo-sharing app that is dedicated to a certain aesthetic, but now, it has the ability to offer

activists a space where they are able to share infographics through aesthetic templates and ten slide posts (Mao, 2021). This, of course, did not come without its share of criticism as many labelled the aesthetic-driven activism of Instagram ‘performative’. Many claimed that this new wave of activism is not only dependent on *what* is being posted, but on how users choose to interact with the content both on- and offline (Mao, 2021). There are, however, instances of hashtags working together as they travel from one platform to another. This can be seen during the #BlackLivesMatter movement of 2020 or more recently, in #StandWithUkraine, as each hashtag is on both Instagram and Twitter.

However, the drawback of hashtag activism, as explained by Yang (2016), is that hashtags seldom evolve into contentious collective online events. Instead, only the most influential cases of hashtag activism have a recognizable narrative form involving a beginning, the conflict, and the resolved end (Yang, 2016). Despite this, the media being used in democratic societies by the people is not a new phenomenon. Scholars Jackson, Bailey, and Welles, for example, find that all public discourse is political in the twenty-first century because it informs, misinforms, expands, limits, bolters, and even undermines the way individuals understand and respond to political events around them. Hashtag activism, therefore, is something unique to the twenty-first century, but the goals still remain the same as in previous, less connected periods, such as a century ago (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020). This is because it is the ordinary people in society that are challenging, redefining, and ultimately changing the terms of public debate (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020). The counterpublics, a network alternative to the mainstream created by marginalized individuals of the public, have had an incredibly important role in not only highlighting the experiences of those on the margins, but they legitimize those experiences as well. Moreover, counterpublics push for the integration and change in mainstream spaces and

this can be seen online and on social media through various avenues *such as* infographics on Instagram (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020). Essentially, counterpublics maintain a sense of an awareness of their subordinate status in society (Warner, 2002). Moreover, counterpublic discourse addresses strangers as being *somebody* instead of *nobody* (Warner, 2002). In essence, as their name suggests, the counterpublics role is to oppose the mainstream public sphere (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020). Social media's unique ability is that counterpublics are able to exist in a place not bound in space and this was evident during the summer of 2020, but specifically starting on June 2, 2020, when the #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter reached its peak on Instagram with various movements such as posting a black square with the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday to signal support of the movement (Ruchatz & Pauliks, 2021). #BlackoutTuesday was created by Brianna Agyemang and Jamila Thomas, two Black women executives at Atlantic records (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). The original hashtag was first presented as #TheShowMustBePaused and they called on fellow recording artists to use their voices and platforms to draw attention to the blatant and systemic racism by posting a single black square to their social media pages such as Facebook and most notably, Instagram (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). As millions of people joined the initiative, the hashtag had changed and became #BlackOutTuesday (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). Scholars Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara (2021) note, however, that the use of #BlackOutTuesday likely marks the first time in history of a social media movement that performed over a visual platform—Instagram, instead of a primarily text-based platform such as Twitter. The use of #BlackOutTuesday was meant to be seen as an action that showed solidarity with the music industry, however, it quickly turned performative (Wellman, 2022). In addition to users posting the blacked out square, there was an influx of posts detailing the movement and information on resources to help those affected.

While all of this resource and solidarity information was by all means highly inspiring and important, the overuse of the hashtags #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter on posts of *just* black squares eventually overcrowded the practical information and ultimately misplaced it from the overall information flow. Vincent, for example, found the performative overuse of the black square to be counterproductive to the superior social goal of amplifying Black voices (Vincent, 2020). The excessive amount of performative activism is what Dadas (2017) finds as a feature characteristic of hashtag activism. Essentially, hashtag activism is an effort that could simultaneously draw the attention of its audiences to a cause, but the drawback is that it also obscures the important facets of the cause such as the historical background or even the socio-political contexts of a movement (Dadas, 2017). What #BlackoutTuesday exhibited was not only the performative aspect of social media activism, but it also reflected the homogeneity and banality of social media imagery (Ruchatz & Pauliks, 2021). Furthermore, performative activism is exhibited on social media not only by individuals, but also by many large companies. Wellman (2022) argues that, while the #BlackoutTuesday was meant to be a gesture of support, it quickly turned into a performative action where social media influencers, companies, and individuals became nothing more than allies who perform solidarity in order to build and maintain credibility with their followers. According to Jackson, Bailey, and Welles (2020), the black squares that were posted on Instagram became just another, recent, example of ambiguous (both in terms of motivation and result) *hashtag activism*. Therefore, hashtag activism can be observed when a would-be ally participates in the specific hashtags online but does not participate in any other forms of advocacy on behalf of the cause, nor does the person speak up when people are affected (Wellman, 2022). In essence, performative activism can be seen as *empty activism*, and this is usually driven by an individual's need for validation and acceptance

(Wellman, 2022). Additionally, as Wellman (2022) notes, often in hashtag activism we have people who may understand, empathize, and acknowledge the issues and matters that drive social justice protests. However, in practical life situations these people may be unwilling to sacrifice their social or economic capital to challenge the systems that they benefit from. When, for example, companies change their profile pictures during movements such as #BLM or attach to their logos the rainbow flag in June to show solidarity for pride month without any other material involvement in social justice causes, then they participate in pure performative activism.

I. *Findings*

Scrutinizing Instagram and the activist content posted to the explore pages through the methodology described above, showed me that the activism content was not pushed by the algorithm. Here, the algorithm is important to examine in relation to social media activism because ultimately, a platform's algorithm is a crucial component in what content is pushed and seen. In the context of my research, I must analyze how both Twitter and Instagram's algorithm functions in order to better understand which platform is most conducive for activism. The success of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement can be attributed to many things, however, the explosion of infographics on Instagram and discussions on Twitter had much to do with what the algorithms were seeing as relevant and poignant.

Instagram infographics, I observed, simply cannot compare nor compete with content posted on Twitter, especially during the times that are not considered peaks for social justice movements. While social media are instrumental to racial and gender studies, it manifests very differently on the two platforms. Throughout the four months, I took screenshots of the Instagram explore page on both of the scrutinized accounts. My personal account is tailored to my interests, although I do not have much screen time on it. I use my personal Instagram account

to keep up with friends, distract myself with memes on occasion, and mainly, I use it to communicate with my friends. The second account I created, however, was not curated in any way. I do not have any followers, nor do I follow anyone, letting the Instagram algorithm decide what posts I should interact with and what posts I am potentially interested in. As seen in *Image 1*, which was taken in April 2022, there are a few videos and photos along with a reel. All images seen in the image point to Instagram attempting to see what content I may want to consume. It is light, feel-good posts that include travel, pets, and what some may consider aesthetically pleasing images. My personal Instagram explore page looked much different, however, not in an activist sense. Looking at *Image 2*, one can see that there is still the same collection of videos, photos, and reels. The largest reason this page looks so drastically different is because my personal Instagram has been tailored to my likes and interests and therefore, Instagram's algorithm knows exactly what sort of content to push for me. You can see celebrity gossip, tattoo related content, book recommendations, nail art, and some other content that I would not usually search for. My personal Instagram explore page is an amalgamation of my interests and other content that Instagram is attempting to push. An interesting note is that there *is* a single infographic that was suggested to me, one that deals with the topic of mental health, specifically Borderline Personality Disorder, or BPD. While it does not deal with gender or race, it still follows the same format of infographic posts. Furthermore, when I conducted the same test a week later on April 21, 2022, my Instagram explore page was yet again saturated with very similar content as the week before. This included another infographic, but again, it was not related to any sort of activism surrounding race. Instead, the infographic suggested to me dealt with relationship advice on how to handle fights and arguments with one's partner. In the month of April of 2022, I was not recommended for any sort of content that dealt with activism surrounding racial

matters. Instead, the Instagram algorithm was pushing the content it knew I interacted with on a daily basis. Once again, an interesting note is that on my personal account, I follow several accounts that deal with posting solely infographics on matters of race, gender, politics, and other matters of the like. I interact with these accounts regularly, however, Instagram does not seem to push that sort of content to me. A study done by Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara (2021), aimed to analyze Instagram posts during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 with the purpose of understanding the way visual media and user communities drive a social movement. They were able to analyze 1.13 million public Instagram posts that were posted during 2020 at the time of the protests, but they also took a look at how existing meme groups and international organizations stood in solidarity to also assist in information dissemination due to their followings (Chang, Richardson & Ferrara, 2021).

Prior to the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, Twitter was the platform that users sought out to disseminate information regarding matters of activism. It is noted by Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara (2021) that Instagram is mainly used to commodify images and build strong lifestyle brands. Furthermore, Instagram, as a platform, is much more interested in the "experiences" their users are gaining; in production, sharing and interaction with the media that they create (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). Nevertheless, the reason that that #BlackOutTuesday hashtag had such success on Instagram in 2020 was because Instagram content is four times more likely to be geotagged than Twitter content (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). Essentially, according to Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara (2021) Instagram was able to provide the right lens for the protests and movement as many of the #BlackOutTuesday posts on Twitter often linked back to original posts on Instagram. This group of scholars argue that the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 can be split into two distinct periods: the first

being organically driven after the death of George Floyd, and the second being driven purposefully by the hashtag #BlackOutTuesday (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). When analyzing the data, Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara (2021) looked at six of the most common posts during the Black Lives Matter movement on Instagram. The fifth most common type of post were infographics that detailed information on places to donate money (foundations), bail for protesters, or even how to donate to medical fees for those harmed during the protests (Chang, Richardson, Ferrara, 2021). What Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara (2021) note is that unlike Tweets, Instagram posts cannot fit into any one of the four-pronged typologies of content that emerged originally on social media. The prongs are: political mobilization, coordination, information, and lastly, conversation (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrera, 2021). On Twitter, the classification of Tweets relies on the explicit textual semantic information. By contrast, Instagram has introduced a new realm into the conversation: images and other visual communication (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). Furthermore, as Mao observes (2021), using platforms such as Instagram allows for activists to reach audiences that would normally *not* be exposed to these social issues and allow them the opportunity to get involved. While a user's contributions may be limited at the infographic stage, it is their presence that is truly essential to the movement and cause and ultimately, the success of the movement itself (Mao, 2021). A study done by the New York University's Data Science Centre also confirmed the importance of peripheral participants—individuals who surround the small epicentre of protests—because they can maximize the reach of messages from the core participants of a particular movement (Mao, 2021). Essentially, peripheral participants are not as crucial to a movement individually, however, in groups and as numbers rise, they are able to spread a message far beyond the intended or initial audience (Mao, 2021). Thus, Instagram is instrumental in the process of

recruiting peripheral members and thus expanding the influence of the movement because the platform is able to provide a way to reach and alert younger audiences on social justice causes that could otherwise be marginal to them (Mao, 2021). As a result, Mao (2021) argues that Instagram has become an ideal platform for activists to invigorate and cultivate a whole new audience that will lead movements.

Another important insight from Chang, Richardson, and Ferrara's (2021) study is the discovery that alongside many large and influential accounts who contributed daily to much of the conversation surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, there was impressively a large number of everyday users that contributed no less to the movement itself (Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara, 2021). When looking at my own findings, it was incredibly interesting to see how Instagram, despite being credited in scholarship with some of the success of the Black Lives Matter movement, did not seem to push any of the activist content through the algorithms that I observed and analyzed for my MRP. Instead, my observations show that popular media was pushed into the accounts that I observed. One explanation is that the algorithm attempts to constantly guess what would garner clicks on posts, profiles, stories, and in return, pushes customized content on what it guesses would gain the most engagement. Looking at *Image 4*, it is clear that the algorithm is attempting to determine what interests I may have. The majority of the posts seen in this screenshot, taken on April 26, 2021, are memes. This sort of content is popularized over social media, and specifically on Instagram because it is shareable and easy to consume due to the light-hearted nature and the relatability aspect of the post. Furthermore, as CDA notes, it is these influential "top posts" that not only establish, but also reinforce what is seen as mainstream, popular, and accepted. Through my content analysis, it was revealed that the posts that appeared on Instagram's Explore Page were more often than not, posts that received

the most interaction; i.e., likes, comments, and shares. Since CDA focuses on problems rooted in society, but especially the reproduction of power abuse and domination, examining the influence of Instagram and Twitter in relation to social justice movement has unearthed many realities of the platforms (Amoussou & Allagabe, 2018). As a result of this, popular content has a tendency to shape individuals views on a topic, issue, and so forth. A quick example: at the time of writing this paper, Johnny Depp and Amber Heard's trial is not only highly talked about in retro media outlets with certain TV channels transmitting the trial live, but it is also 'an event' highly reported in social media. The two celebrities are in the midst of a defamation suit and as a result, many content creators are speaking up on the matter. *Image 5* shows a video of Amber Heard from the trial being recommended to me on my personal Instagram account. The interesting part is that when I switched to my second account, the exact same video was recommended to me as seen in *Image 6*. Here, it is clearly evident that the Instagram explore page algorithm is indeed designed to push content that is popular in the media or the daily news.

Given that this post appeared on both my personal account and the brand-new account, it is evident that here Instagram behaves like a tabloid gossiper, circulating celebrity news and pushing them as widely as possible through the Instagram explore page. Another interesting finding is that the screenshots of the explore pages on the new account (@cnmresearch) in the beginning offer very generic posts (see Appendix). I posit that this is because the Instagram algorithm is attempting to push what is already popular among a wide range of users while, simultaneously, attempting to discover the interests of the specific individual behind any given account. Thus, it is clear and evident as the months progress that Instagram's algorithm does not only attempt to learn what a user likes based on interaction, but it also substitutes what it does not know with popular posts. This claim is supported by Kollyri (2021) who states that in 2016,

Instagram began integrating what they called “a personal algorithm” into its system. The promise here was that Instagram had vowed to showcase the moments its users cared about the most (Kollyri, 2021, p. 104). However, this has created what Kollyri (2021) explains to be a "filter bubble" which occurs due to Instagram's personalization logic and commercial nature which, in return, raises questions and concerns about "individual realities" and "filter bubbles". As we know from media scholarship focused on the political economy of social media, commercial algorithms privilege topics that reflect the market, which is to say that users' experiences are secondary to capital practices of control and surveillance. In essence, a "filter bubble" is a term that was coined by Eli Pariser over a decade ago to signal the decrease of information diversity that people receive online (Kollyri, 2021). Back in March of 2016, Instagram released a statement in which they said "...To improve your experience, your feed will soon be ordered to show the moments we believe you will care about most," (Kollyri, 2021, p. 103). This was the birth of the personalized algorithm and since then, Instagram has only become more algorithmic and increasingly computational (Kollyri, 2021). Through the years the announcement of the personalized algorithm has sparked conversations in media scholarship around the implications of this specific type of algorithm which can lead to stereotyping behaviour and polarization of social media users (Kollyri, 2021). While there are proponents that believe that a personal algorithm is designed to be neutral because it is derived from users' interactions, many critiques of this presumed neutrality argue that users fall victim to "filter bubbles" that isolate them and have severe repercussions in terms of the range topics, conversations, and interactions that the algorithm allows (Kollyri, 2021). Additionally, it is important to note that there have been many studies since on the "filter bubbles", specifically when it comes to platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Instagram, however, is seldom comprehensively researched, which makes a look into

its algorithmic logic pertinent to investigate. My own research, for example, points to the fact that my personal Instagram account has fallen into a "filter bubble" as all the posts that appear in the explore feed deal exclusively with my likes and the type of posts I personally interact with. With each refresh of my explore page, I get more and more suggestions and recommendations on topics based on what I like and interact with. Clearly, unlike the second account, I have fallen into the "filter bubble" and as a result, I have stopped seeing posts outside of this metaphorical, but very literal, bubble. This is not only concerning, but very important as Instagram was created with the intention of informing people about the world around them (Kollyri, 2021). The very goal of the platform was to keep its users informed and up to date with the current events in the world. It appears that many accounts still attempt this feat, most notably those accounts created for the purpose of educating and informing individuals through infographics or other informative posts. So, what happens when an algorithm becomes increasingly personalized? In essence, when an algorithm is personalized, it becomes possible that users will begin to encounter content that is based on their previous online actions and history which then renders them to being enclosed in a predetermined and endless loop of information as explained by Kollyri (2021). However, when it comes to Instagram, since there is not yet enough research, the concept of "filter bubbles" on the platform is unfortunately underexplored. The research that I conducted for the MRP makes it abundantly clear that "filter bubbles," to an extent, do exist on the platform. My own account confirms that expectation. Moreover, popularity and affinity are two essential criteria when it comes to the content that the Instagram algorithm shows to its users (Kollyri, 2021). Kollyri (2021) outlines specifically how the algorithm works in the explore page. Here, Instagram's algorithm recommends content that is tailored specifically to each user; this is what is known as affinity. According to Instagram, the way these posts are selected are "automatically

based on things like the people you follow or the posts you like," (Kollyri, 2021, p. 105). Likewise, Instagram also claims that the most significant factors needed for a post to be recommended relies heavily on the user's history of interacting with the specific account of who posted, information about them, and lastly, the user's overall activity on the platform (Kollyri, 2021). In addition to affinity, popularity is another integral aspect to the algorithm. Popularity is essential because it is arguably the most important component when it comes to a post becoming viral on Instagram. Kollyri cites the Instagram instructions on the matter of achieving visibility: "...The more comments and likes you get, the likelier you are to find your place on the Instagram Explore page," (Kollyri, 2021, p. 105). Popularity is so sought after on the platform that there are many "tips and tricks" on how to go "viral" on Instagram where various individuals additionally to what the platform suggests try to list the steps that popularity takes. Thus, as Kollyri has outlined, likes and comments on a post are incredibly important as the posts with the most interaction will then garner the most visibility. This, however, does not take into account the "filter bubble" that does, to a degree, exist on Instagram. For example, an infographic detailing foundations and organizations where individuals can donate for a social justice cause may get many shares, likes, and comments, however, if one's own Instagram has fallen victim to the "bubble" where the information one sees is no longer diverse, this post and content will not come across one's own Instagram explore page.

Another important factor to my own personal research is that, in Canada, Instagram has removed the number of likes displayed on posts (Keith, 2021). This means that users can no longer see the number of likes on their own or on others' posts. Users are still, however, able to see how many likes they get on their own posts if they choose to do so by selecting an option that lets them display the number of likes. Instagram explained that the reason behind this was that

they hoped "that by making the number of likes private, people will be able to focus more on the photos and videos posted and that this will ultimately drive deeper, more meaningful engagement," (Keith, 2021, para. 3). To note, this is a beta-test and if it is successful, Instagram will look at adding this feature globally on their platform (Keith, 2021). The reactions thus far have been mixed: some users find this to be the step in the right direction while others are petitioning for Instagram to bring back likes on posts (Keith, 2021). The Canadian Instagram feature has made it so that as a researcher, I am unable to see the number of likes on any post on either of my Instagram Explore pages. In lieu of likes, the message that appears when I click on a post is shown on *Images 7* and *8*. For privacy reasons, I have blurred the username of the poster, even though the posts are public and available to each user. The post I clicked on for this example was the top middle one of the row of books. I am unable to see the number of likes on this post. On Canadian Instagram it is only the original poster who can see this information. This presents a limitation of my own research because I am simply unable to see the number of likes on any post on my Instagram Explore page. However, despite my inability to see the number of likes on specific posts, Kollyri (2021) goes further to state that one of the suggested practices to having a viral post is to exploit the popular hashtags. Another phenomenon that appears on Instagram aside from the "filter bubble" is the "popularity loop" in which popular content and hashtags seem to circulate at an overwhelming rate compared to other content (Kollyri, 2021). In addition to the "filter bubble," Instagram also facilitates what is known as the "commercial filter bubble," according to Kollyri (2021). On Instagram, at the time of this paper, there are roughly 25 million brand accounts who are also using the algorithm to their advantage (Kollyri, 2021). It is known that brands on Instagram use the algorithm to engage users with their brand and, in turn, increase their visibility (Kollyri, 2021). An important aspect to Instagram's algorithm is that

it does not differentiate between advertisements and brands from the content shared by ordinary users (Kollyri, 2021). As there are over 25 *million* businesses and brands on the platforms, the recommended content ordinary users may see can be affected by the brands' visibility strategies (Kollyri, 2021). Once more, the peculiar mixture of personal accounts with commercial accounts raises concerns that come from the domain of political economy of media. It is yet unclear how personal and market logics intersect and by what mechanisms exactly brands and ads reach personal users who do not seek market information on Instagram (Kollyri, 2021). While the concerns around the "personal filter bubble" have to do with how people learn new things that come out of environments that they do not know, the "commercial filter bubble," is concerned with how market information reaches people who do not inhabit Instagram consciously as customers. As shown in the previous section, scholarship on Instagram in the last couple of years, has recognized the platform as one of the available tools for engaging with social movements, political content, and topics that surround social advocacy and human rights (Kollyri, 2021). However, while the platform is able to give users a space to discuss such matters, it is yet to design a mechanism that protects these important conversations from capitalist interests.

Importantly, Kollyri (2021), presents a study that shows how commercial accounts exploit the popularity of social movements' hashtags, such as #MeToo or #BLM, to increase products visibility through attaching social justice hashtags to promotional messages. One in five posts sampled with a hashtag related to the #MeToo movement had some sort of commercial aspect attached to it (Kollyri, 2021). Kollyri's (2021) conclusion indicates that Instagram users are much more likely to encounter more mainstream and commercial content regardless of their own specific interests. This means that Instagram's personalized algorithm is not so much

personal, but instead, capitalistic in nature. Furthermore, the "filter bubble" has been shown to exist on Instagram and that users who follow softer topics and engage with those are much more likely to be enclosed in such a bubble (Kollyri, 2021). Despite this, users who have been shown to have a much more diverse range of interests have also been found to be urged to engage with mainstream content (Kollyri, 2021). Diverse range of interests, therefore, does not mean immunity to a "filter bubble". Instead, users recognized as 'diverse' are often trapped in their own version of a "filter bubble" that consists of mainstream, commercial topics presented in such a manner that "an ideal life" comes to them with the temptations of material consumption (Kollyri, 2021). Here, the commodification of the platform is evident as users are seeing an increasing and alarming rate of posts that equate satisfaction with commodities and are turned into an ideal representation of consumer society today (Kollyri, 2021). Furthermore, Kollyri (2021) also found that users cannot easily "escape" their filter bubble. The example given here is that when User A searched for specific keywords such as "black," "party," or "body," Instagram's algorithm would suggest content that was related to their interest and their interests alone (Kollyri, 2021). In contrast, User B, who had a much more diverse range of interests in their content was found to have recommended accounts and posts that amplified Black voices (Kollyri, 2021). It is apparent that it is difficult and oftentimes, nearly impossible, for users to "pop" their filter bubble and find information that is entirely unrelated to their interests, *especially* if they are those individuals who are invested in mainstream topics (Kollyri, 2021). In line with Kollyri's findings, my own research also shows that it is, indeed, difficult for the Instagram algorithm to push any sort of content that is related to activism unless some prior personal activity of the user points the algorithm in that direction. By contrast, messages that are popular, gossipy, or already commercial in nature (around brands and lifestyle), find their way

easily into the explore page of the newcomer. So far, all images on the second account that I follow for the purposes of the MRP have not shown a single post or video related to activism. For comparison, my personal Instagram account appears to be in its own "filter bubble" wherein the algorithm has been able to compare what content I like and interact with and as a result, it has placed me in a bubble where the only recommended posts are those that deal with soft, mainstream topics. Yet, the second account created solely for the purpose of this research has also seemingly fallen victim into a bubble. Perhaps not a true "filter bubble" as I have not interacted with a single account there, but instead, the Instagram Explore page showcases the popular, mainstream content that has already been popularized on the platform, thus, it has the most potential to be seen on users explore pages. Instagram's co-founder, Kevin Systrom, has stated "I want to see not just content from my friends but my morning news on Instagram, from multiple channels," adding "to be the place I learn about the world," (Kollyri, 2021, p. 118).

Despite Systrom's aspirations, it is not an exaggeration to say that Instagram is not there yet. Instead, Instagram, is a platform today that is heavily involved in promotion of an ideal reality that continues to neglect social issues and news through which users could have the opportunity and ability to learn about the world from (Kollyri, 2021). Kollyri (2021) then outlines two possible repercussions of the "filter bubble" phenomenon: the first being that the more of a spectator a user becomes, the less one lives and as a result, the individual will begin to identify with the dominant images of need rather than those needs about their own life and their own desires. Being constantly shown images of overwhelmingly expensive items, travel destinations, and high-tech gadgets will ultimately have an impact on individuals' needs and lead them to desire *more* (Kollyri, 2021). This is simply a by-product of capitalism where Instagram is a platform that drives consumer society by generating algorithms of desire and want. (Kollyri,

2021). The second repercussion that Kollyri (2021) discusses is to what extent non-popular and non-viral accounts have the possibility to disseminate their own content and reach a broader audience. If the content that users see is somewhat linked to their own likes, then the majority of the content that is seen and interacted with is mainstream, popular content shaped and distributed by the algorithm (Kollyri, 2021). Little space, therefore, is left for the formation of counterpublics and social justice causes that come from the non-consuming, non-connected, not interested in capitalism publics. Kollyri (2021), however, does conclude on a somewhat positive note by stating that in the future, Instagram users may begin to see much more diverse content due to the logic of personalization. For example, the penetration of already non-mainstream content in a widely commercial platform can be viewed as an opportunity for users to break through the mainstream bubble, and lastly, even can be done despite the largely commodified sociotechnical environment that is Instagram.

To conclude, it is evident that social media is not only a powerful actor in everyday life, but it is an especially powerful actor in the social movement atmosphere. The argument that I present here is that while social media is an instrumental tool to racial and gender studies, Instagram, as a platform, differs vastly from Twitter and hashtag activism does not behave the same on the two platforms. Unlike Twitter algorithms, the Instagram algorithms are entirely different. On Instagram, the focus is not on the user, but on popular and mainstream content. This means that despite the algorithm being personalized, users will most likely not see content that is related to their interests, but instead, whatever is being pushed by the current algorithm. When it comes to activism, unless a movement is at its peak, like the #BlackLivesMatter movement of 2020, posts will not be recommended to users. This can be seen in 2020 when the #BlackOutTuesday hashtag took off in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement and as a

result, not only saturated the #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, but also users feed and Explore pages. While it may seem like social media platforms are working together, such as Twitter and Instagram, due to the nature of similar hashtags, Instagram communities do not seem to be as interested in politics or movements like those on Twitter do. Certain topics will trend, but those movements will always die out and with their death, so does the interest in them. With lost interest from users the algorithm will then stop pushing that content because it is no longer seen as viral. Once users stop liking, commenting, and interacting with certain posts, those posts will stop receiving attention in the algorithm. While social media is a very dynamic environment, it simply cannot compete with an algorithm that is trained to push and value capitalism over knowledge and information. This is not to say that social media and hashtag activism has not had a powerful impact on our world because it *has* changed certain things in the public sphere. This can be seen on Twitter as racialized groups often organize on Twitter more than on any other social media platform. Hashtag activism and hashtag politics have had certain impacts on the world of marginalized groups and the conditions of their struggles. Through social media messaging and organizing marginalized groups have been able to place themselves in the central public agenda and none of this would have ever been possible without the immediacy and virality of hashtags, citizen journalism, enraged stories “from below” and infographics. However, as stated earlier, the limitations of social media are that they are very performative. While activists can share their stories and have a voice on social media platforms, in order for change to happen, groups must mobilize and show that they can fight for the changes that they demand. As seen in my own research, the two accounts I have been observing are wildly different from one another. As my research has progressed, it is clear that neither one of these accounts are safe from falling victim to the “filter bubble” and being subjected to the same mainstream content as a

result. The algorithms governing the accounts, regardless of their differences over the four months, have not recommended or pushed any sort of content related to Black Lives Matter. I must repeat that I am deeply committed to racial justice and in my own personal account I have been involved with these conversations when they were viral in 2020. Two years later, as the momentum of the movement on Instagram subsided, the algorithm of my personal account directed me to softer topics, only tangentially related to social justice. The algorithm on the newcomer account did not even attempt to show me an information, video or infographic related to Black Lives Matter. This is perhaps the biggest evidence of Instagram's faulty algorithm as it is not only incredibly difficult to access social justice content (even if in the past one has shown interest in the topic), but it is also incredibly hard to break free of the bubble and actively search for "unrelated" content to one's own interests. Instagram's algorithm not only recommends mainstream content, but when searching for content unrelated to one's interests, the algorithm will *still* push content that is current and gossipy or very closely related to your own most recent history regarding posts that have been recently liked, commented on, or simply clicked on. This is where the problem lies, as Instagram has the possibility of being a platform not only dedicated to video and photo sharing, but a platform that allows creators to have their own unique voice that is not hidden from users. The #BlackLivesMatter movement of 2020 had such a wild success on Instagram because many of the viral posts got hundreds of thousands if not millions of clicks, likes, and shares. Exposure is such an integral part of social media activism and hashtag activism, yet Instagram's algorithm continues to limit these posts. Though, the argument made by Mao (2021) is that Instagram activism is able to provide a platform that is much more accessible than a traditional venue such as newspapers, academia, publications, and even broadcast news. This is especially important and applicable to marginalized voices because historically, media

outlets are known to show clips of violent police interactions that consequently dull activists' messages and make it far more difficult to communicate the movements' goals (Mao, 2021). Furthermore, many outlets and traditional sources attempt to stay apolitical (much like Instagram itself) so activists are simply unable to utilize these outlets to spread their messages (Mao, 2021). As a result, social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have given activists a venue to share their stories and experiences, distribute information, but also organize movements and protests successfully. According to the Pew Research Center, Instagram offered more opportunities for expression especially with communities of colour (Mao, 2021). Furthermore, Persons of Colour were found to more likely believe that social media platforms such as Instagram are crucial and important in getting politically involved than white people (Mao, 2021). This is because on Instagram, users are able to tell their unfiltered truth and expose the players in their stories, making it more personal by giving a first-hand account of their experiences (Mao, 2021).

However, as I have discussed so far, the platform could still be critiqued on multiple accounts. The most prominent being the spread of misinformation and misrepresentation (Mao, 2021). Mao (2021) explains that when an infographic is made and posted onto Instagram, there are virtually no systems of checking to ensure that the information presented is correct and factual. Thus, when an infographic that contains misinformation goes viral, many individuals and users become misled about a movement and the cause (Mao, 2021). The biggest reason for this phenomenon is not because the creators are maliciously attempting to mislead their audience, but simply that creators attempt to oversimplify complex geopolitical issues into a short, ten-slide post (Mao, 2021). Ultimately, social media are limited in the sense that they are only vessels that provide users with content and information. While sharing an infographic may give an individual

the ability to learn about a certain movement or cause, activists cannot guarantee the success of their movements through social media alone (Mao, 2021). It is up to the individuals to take control and participate in rallies, protests, and petitions. Simply put, online activism has become a sort of steppingstone for real life action. When a cause resonates with people, they are more likely to take part in the larger movement (Mao, 2021). In conclusion, while movements have been able to see success on Instagram, the platform itself is not yet a viable option for hashtag activism due to the technological failures of its algorithmic design. Without fixing the algorithm to incorporate what users like, but also what is happening in the world, there is no way for users and individuals alike to see Instagram for anything more than what it is now: a platform for selfies, memes, and the occasional post on current events.

Conclusion

I am vehemently committed to social justices, specifically racial justice. I am also an avid Instagram user. My MRP research attempted to put two of my passions together to answer the question if activism and social media go hand in hand. They do, sometimes. But Instagram figures in complex and still ambiguous ways in the struggle for a more just world. Instagram, as the domain of young people who dream about justice may seem like the perfect place for activism; at the same time, other defining features of youth are naivety, narcissism and falling prey to various promises – commercial or propagandistic – that have little to do with justice. My research, limited certainly by time and scope, confirms many of the observations about the best and the worst of social media activism that exist in scholarship.

Between February 2022 and May 2022, I spent four months observing the social media platform, Instagram. In this time, I aimed to answer the question that pertains to social media activism, or *hashtag activism*, and why Instagram does not have as much success in garnering

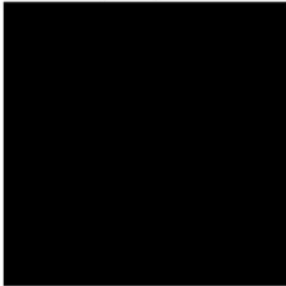
support as Twitter does. Twitter, as a platform, has been widely known and used for social, political, and human rights movements ever since the Arab Springs uprising in 2011. While I specifically set out to examine and analyze infographics on Instagram, none of them were recommended to me by the algorithm on either of the two accounts I used over the four months to observe the platform. My work attempts to fill in the gaps in research concerning Instagram and social media activism since there is a limited amount of published scholarship that precisely explores this intersection at the time of writing. In my paper, I have looked at the history of hashtags and hashtag activism, coming to the conclusion that hashtags are instrumental not only on Twitter, but on Instagram as well despite the platform being video and photo based. Furthermore, there are many scholars who do not believe that activism on social media is *true* activism and instead, criticize those who partake in social media movements for justice without taking any other necessary or meaningful steps to help. Despite these critics, there are many proponents of social media activism who state that social media is not only a powerful tool for activists, but it is instrumental in garnering support and even mobilizing movements. Thus, for my research, I decided to use a qualitative approach and conducted a multi-stage, mixed-method approach that consisted of both content analysis and critical discourse analysis. In my own research, I found that the algorithm truly does push and prioritize content that is popular, mainstream, and very similar to a user's likes. Unfortunately, as a result, users are then trapped in a "filter bubble" that is difficult to escape as they are subject to a "content loop" where they continue to see the same type of content with limited options for searches of new or different posts. It is not that users of Instagram are not interested in topics surrounding social justice, it is that political topics have the tendency to trend on the platform and during their peak, there will be lots of interaction with subjects like matters of racial justice. However, once that peak begins

to die down, the algorithm quickly picks up on it and begins to search for the next "viral" matter to push. As a result, Instagram's algorithm is not conducive to a positive, healthy, or even helpful environment for movements or activists. Moreover, the highly commodified Instagram Explore page has only taken away important content from its users and instead, replaced it with highly idealized, unrealistic content meant to lure individuals in with the promise of a lifestyle that they can have and achieve with the simple purchase of a product. As explained by Mao (2021), Jackson, Bailey, & Welles (2020), Chang, Richardson, & Ferrara (2021), and Kollyri (2021), Instagram does have the ability to bring bouts of change, it does not have an algorithm that is concerned *only* with material pertaining to social causes and movements. Furthermore, the largest difference between activism on Instagram and Twitter is not only that Instagram is a photo sharing platform, but the technological design, too, which employs the image-based algorithm for purposes different from deep or contested conversations. While Instagram is focused on the content its users create, Twitter is a space designed for its users to have quick interactions with each other and use hashtags in order to group certain conversations together for ease. Neither algorithm is the same and thus, they produce different results. This is seen in the way that Twitter is a much more political platform compared to Instagram. Essentially, the purpose of Instagram's algorithm is to use affinity to deduce what a specific user wants to see and interact with (Kollyri, 2021). In addition to affinity, the timeliness of a post is incredibly pertinent to the algorithm. Meaning newer posts appear first so this could be an explanation as to why in my own research I did not see any infographics related to Black Lives Matter (since the peak of the movement has passed already). The limitations of my study include the fact that it was conducted over a very short period of time. Ideally, this study should be ongoing with multiple different accounts with drastically different interests that will be able to showcase the

way the Instagram algorithm treats different accounts. Furthermore, a more comprehensive study should be conducted in a region where Instagram permits a user to see the number of likes on posts in the Explore page. This is important information allowing deductions on what content, specifically Instagram's algorithm prioritizes content that, in turn, becomes widely popular through likes and comments. While social media activism and hashtag activism do have several drawbacks, especially on a platform such as Instagram, it would be nonsensical not to point out the positives, too. Another limitation is that it is impossible to measure an infographics impact. There is no unit of measurement that can tell me, as a researcher, the impact a certain infographic has on its demographic. As a result, my research has heavily relied on existing literature, first-hand accounts of the algorithm, but also the lasting impact the Black Lives Matter movement has had on social media activism. The work that is done through social media is powerful and important, being an incredible tool for many of those seeking to have their voice heard. The Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 was a ground-breaking event in the realm of social media and hashtag activism because it revealed the inspiring potential of social media. Instagram, on the other hand, has the attention of the youthful and driven by social justice causes audiences. I hope that the platform will capitalize on this enormous privilege not just by making more profits but by mobilizing youthful imaginations for the sake of a better, just and shared future.

Appendix 1.0

BlackOutTuesday
26,631 posts



BLM Greyscale
3,043 posts



GF Floral
824 posts



BLM Yellow
1,209 posts



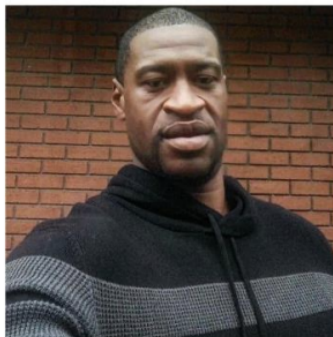
GF Portrait
429 posts



Funding Info
366 posts



GF Original



Protest Photography



BLM Raised Fist



Chang, H. H., Richardson, A., & Ferrara, E. (2021, September 18). #JusticeforGeorgeFloyd:

How Instagram Facilitated the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests.

<https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/bjx4p>

Appendix 2.0

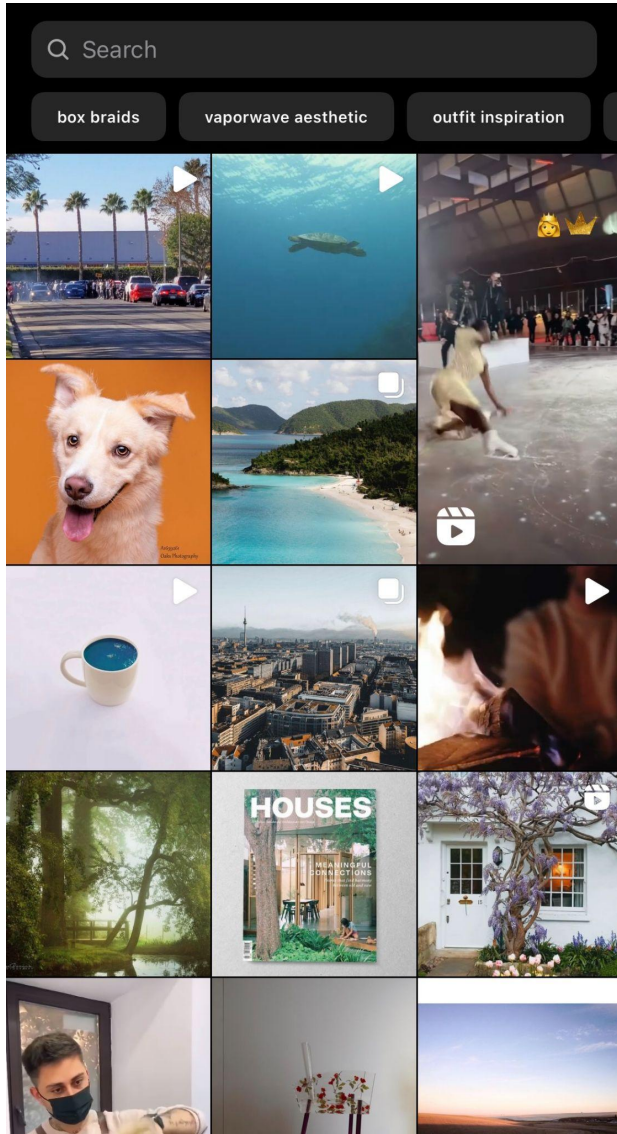


Image 1

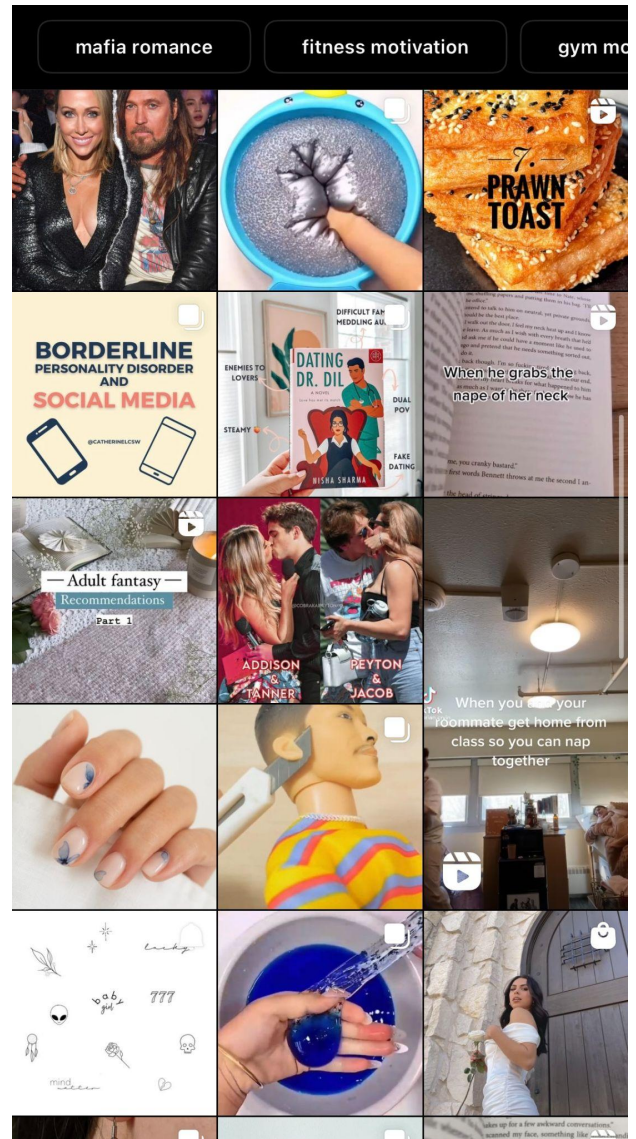


Image 2

Image 3

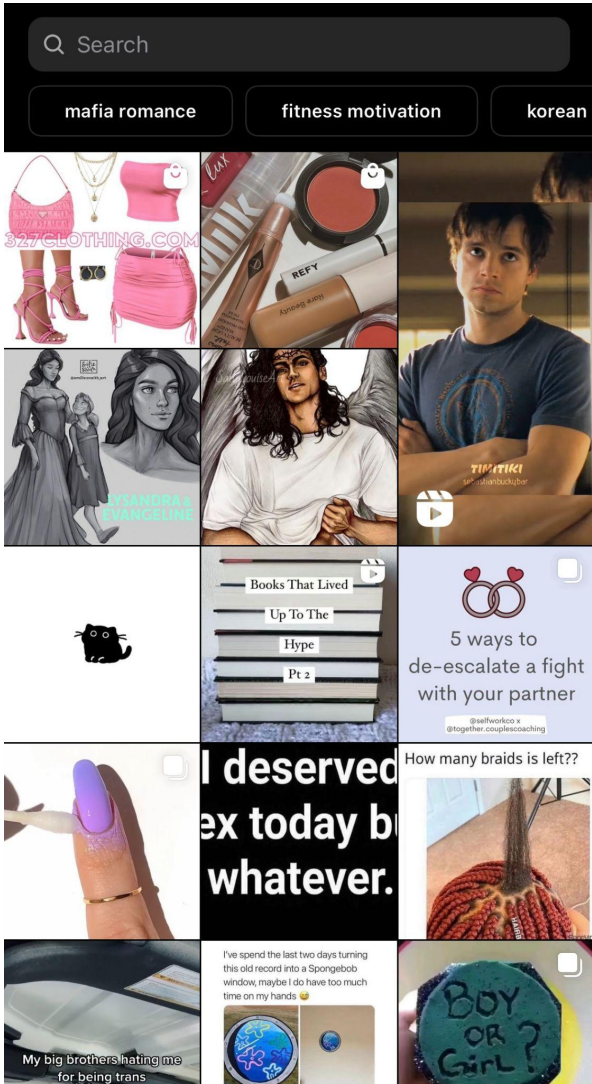
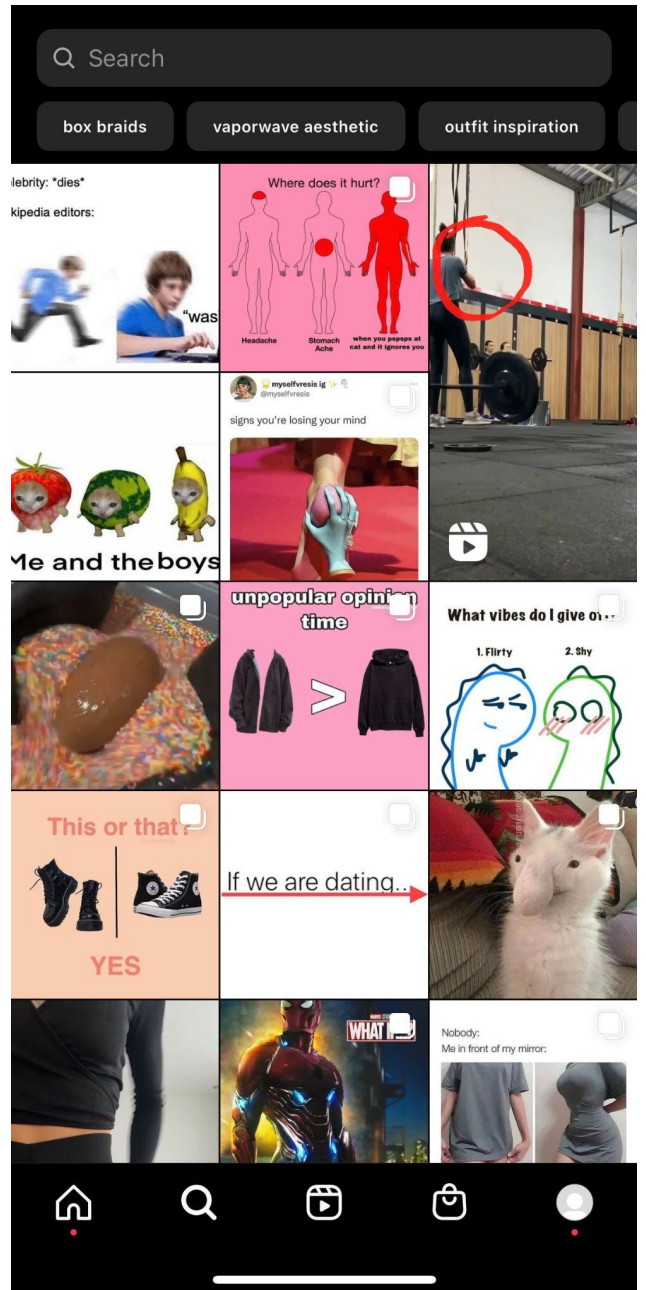


Image 4



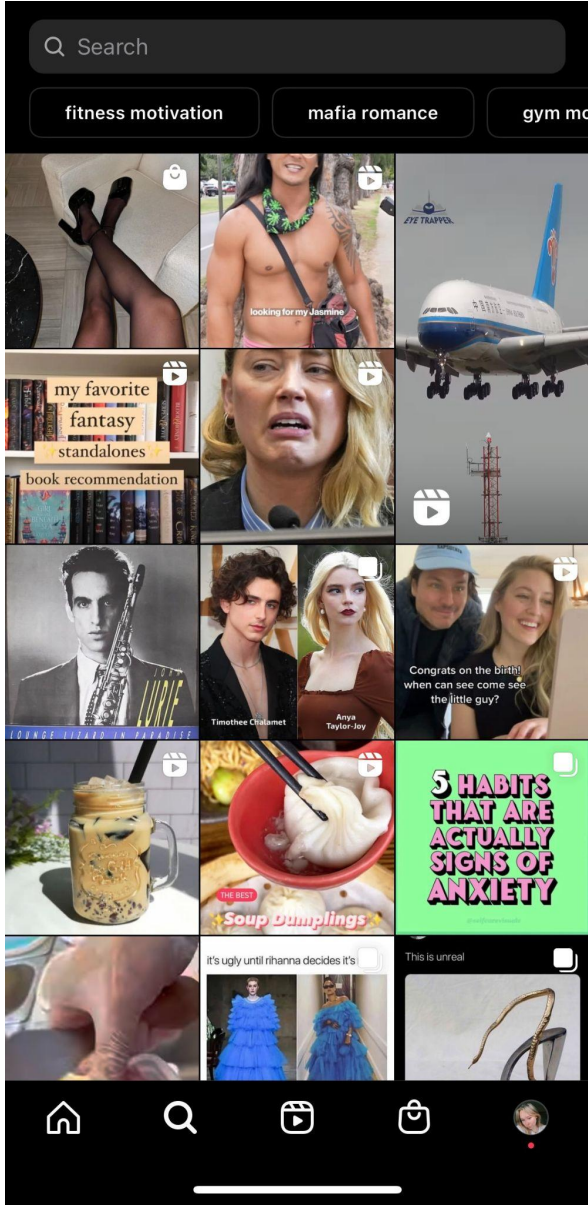


Image 5

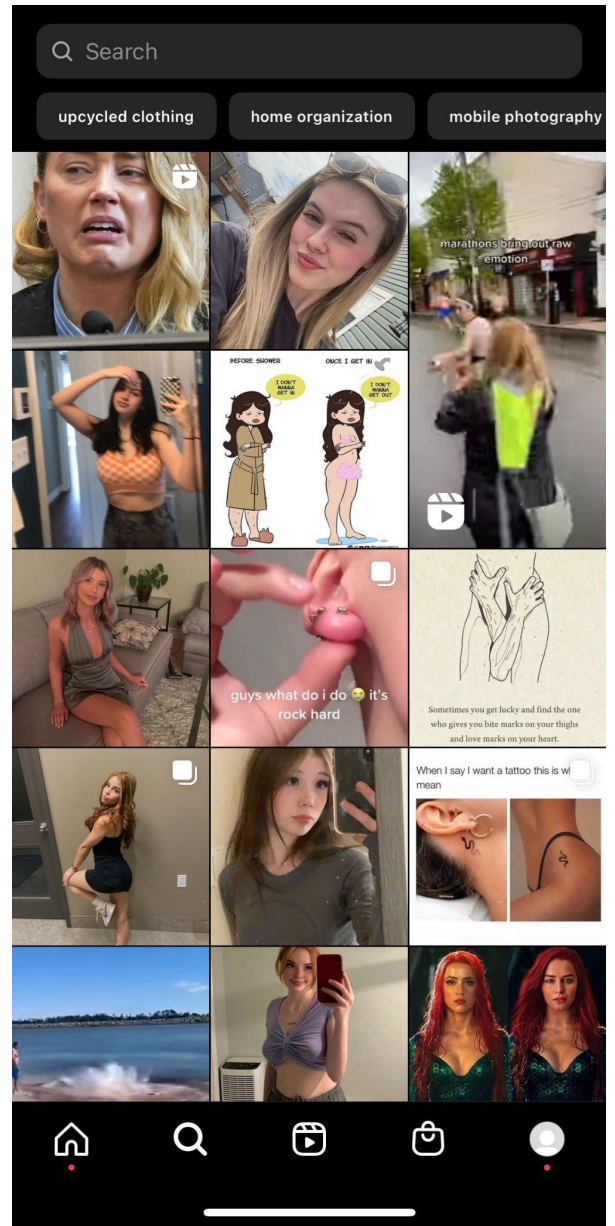


Image 6

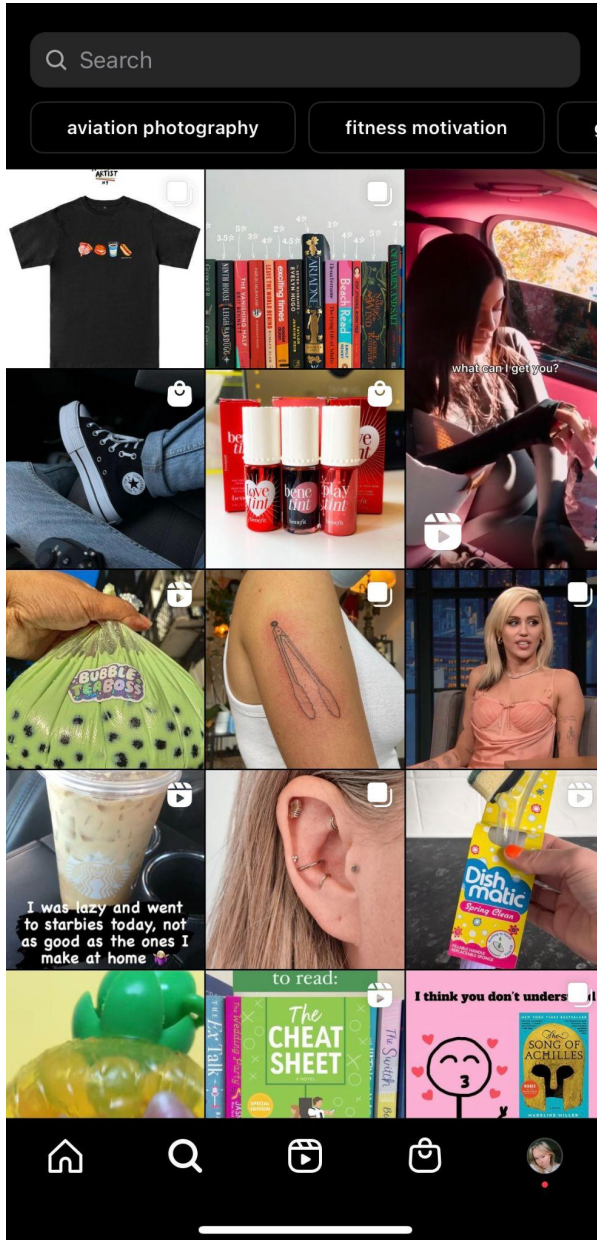


Image 7

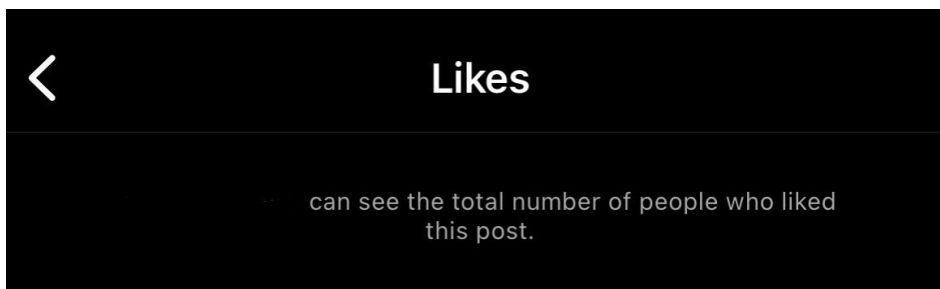


Image 8

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