The Communication Of Controversy: An Examination of How College Students Engage with
Political Debates on Social Media

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Abstract

This thesis explores social media behaviors of young adults when it comes to engaging with controversial issues on social media. Through my investigation of college students and recent college graduates between the ages of 18-25, I set out to answer the following questions: What motivates users to engage, or not engage, in controversial issues on social media? What makes some topical issues more likely to be debated on social media? Do people feel pressure to engage with controversial issues because they are trending topics, or are people genuinely passionate about the topic? Do they believe that posting about controversial issues is effective in solving the problem? Survey data was gathered from 23 individuals through interviews, who spoke more in depth about their social media experiences with controversy. Respondents explained factors that drove them to follow, like, and comment on posts about controversial topics, as well as aspects that encouraged them to get involved with heated discussions online. The responses brought up an interesting contradiction between how people post on social media and how they view the effectiveness of social media. Overall, a majority of respondents found social media to be ineffective in solving controversial issues Most respondents have similar motivations for engaging with controversy on social media, yet they remain critical of their fellow peers who post about contentious topics, calling their actions performative. Ultimately, it is concluded that all kinds of engagement on social media can be seen as performative, as one's image is an unconscious guide to decisions to post or not post. Additionally, the study finds that while most respondents recognize that posting on social media is not going to automatically fix societal problems, raising awareness on social media can still be beneficial in pursuing long term solutions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

When the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown took over everyone's lives in March 2020, people spent more time online than ever before, Pew Research Center reported that 53% of Americans believed that the Internet was essential during the COVID-19 outbreak (Vogels, 2020). With events canceled and businesses shut down, people were stuck at home and spent more time on social media to entertain themselves. As people spent their days on social media, more discourse ultimately came about on these platforms.

The boost in social media usage during a year of political animosity brought out many debates on these platforms about relevant issues, including mask wearing, COVID-19 precautions, racial justice issues, and the 2020 presidential election. These debates on social media seemed to intensify the problems America was facing on a higher level.

My research sought to examine how frequently young adults participate in controversial discussions on social media, if they face any pressure to take part in this discourse, and what motivates them to get involved in engaging with these issues on social media. In this thesis, I analyze the social media culture centered around the communication of controversy. In a world of globalized virtual connections, I studied how social media amplifies the intensity of a controversial topic. I determine what makes certain issues such a question for debate on social media, specifically over other controversial topics. Why do some people choose to engage in political discourse on social media and why do others choose not to? This research delved into how people perceive social media discourse as toxic, while considering how my findings compare with the way scholars perceive online discussions.

Some scholars emphasize positive aspects of online social movements, such as how social media can deliver different kinds of information, spread great awareness about a cause, and build a collective community of people engaging in online activism. Other scholars bring up negative parts of online social movements, as they question how social media algorithms validate people's beliefs, are ineffective, increase levels of conformity, and enforce slacktivism. In

regards to political participation on social media, scholars discuss how social media has influenced users' cynicism and apathy about politics and how it has impacted the way political candidates campaign before elections. These academic studies provide an imperative foundation for my study in understanding how current college students form their views on the role of controversial issues on social media.

My inspiration to conduct this study comes from having worked as a social media intern in the summer and fall of 2020 for the popular culture news site, "What's Trending," during a pandemic, a racial injustice crisis, and a historical presidential election occurring simultaneously. While I was interning for this news site, I was instructed to post content that was related to anything that was trending on Twitter, whether it be political or about celebrities. Based on this experience, another goal of my thesis was to explore what factors cause certain controversial topics to explode on social media. I was interested in looking at conformity present among people when they decide to engage in a social media discussion. For example, do people face pressure to engage with controversial issues if they are trending topics, or are they genuinely passionate about the topic? Do they believe that posting about controversial issues is effective in solving the problem? I studied these research questions by surveying and interviewing a group of college students.

Performative Activism

Erving Goffman (1959) describes fascinating sociological concepts that can serve as a foundation to understand how people behave on social media. Goffman explains that our daily lives are like a performance on stage (Goffman, 1959, p.17). The way we interact with other people, such as family, friends, teachers, and coworkers, is very similar to performing as actors on a stage (Goffman, 1959, p.23). Our behaviors and values change in our interactions with different people, which depends on how we want to present ourselves in front of them (Goffman, 1959, p.7). Goffman also raises an interesting point on "impression management", which is how people take part in certain behaviors, so the world can see them in a favorable light (Goffman, 1959, p.208).

Impression management also connects to how people try to present themselves favorably on social media. It is a major influence that drives people to take part in "performative activism" on social media. With performative activism, people post in order to appear favorable in the eyes of others in supporting a cause and show their followers that they are a "good person," but do not do anything beyond making a post to help create effective change for the issue. Goffman's beliefs apply to the dilemmas of image that face society today, as the more connected we are, the more we try to present parts of ourselves that we want the world to see in a positive light. His ideas seem to align with criticisms of performative activism, as the more a person uses social media, the more one cares about how they are viewed by others on social media. Goffman's interpretations are highly relevant for this thesis, where I will be discussing patterns among respondents in how they criticize the performative activism they witness on social media, including the way people engage in social media trends about a controversial issue for peer validation and to look good among their social media network instead of because of a desire to support the cause.

In doing my research, I came to realize the importance of exploring the recognition of performative activism among respondents. Throughout the thesis, my findings and conclusions will be related to the concept of performative activism, which is a form of activism that is done to increase one's social standing rather than genuine enthusiasm for the cause. Performative activism is such a new concept that not much research has been done on it. It is often used interchangeably with the term "slacktivism," which refers to activism that requires little effort, such as making a post or signing an online petition. The term "performative activism," rose to prominence on social media in the summer of 2020. At that point, articles were published, such as those in Vox (Jennings, 2020), discussing the activity of performative activism among high school and college students on social media. It is often difficult to distinguish which posts are meant to justify one's ego versus who is taking action to help a movement behind the scenes. The concept of performative activism was not originally raised by me in the study, but rather, this

concept jumped out at me because so many respondents were mentioning performative activism during their interviews.

Defining What Is Controversial v. What Is Political

By establishing the difference between controversial and political, I will be able to further establish in the thesis what makes certain controversial topics such widely debated issues on social media currently. To determine what controversial discussions users engage with online, it is important to understand how they define what "controversial" means. Controversy is defined in different ways among young people, as the survey reflects an even division in what people find controversy to be. When it comes to defining controversy and what exactly it entails, college students tend to be divided. 43.47% of my survey respondents believed that some topics are inherently controversial, while 55.43% defined controversy as coming from how people handle topics. This nearly even split highlights that topics that may be viewed by some as controversial might be viewed differently by others and is why "political" and "controversial" can be used interchangeably.

A 21-year-old male, Will[1], brought out the view that topics are not inherently controversial:

> The term "controversial" doesn't mean anything at all because anything can be controversial.

While a 21-year-old female, Penelope, defined "controversial" as an issue that has two sides to it, many other respondents said that matters are "political" if they have two sides to them. One 22-year-old female, Claire, offered her definition:

> If the issue involves politics, it is inherently political. Anything can be made political. If it requires a policy change or an update or government action, it is political.

Her response is very similar to the response that anything can be "controversial." These patterns in responses demonstrate why I use the terms "political" and "controversial" interchangeably.

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[1] All names provided of interview respondents are pseudonyms, modified from their actual names.

One common definition of political is similar to the view of controversy that sees some topics as inherently controversial. One 20-year-old female, Hilary, shares a perspective that supports this idea that political involvement involves controversy:

> Unfortunately, there are a lot of things that are political because they are decided on by politicians when these issues should not be decided on by the government. This regards social issues, such as lobbyists that take part in anti-abortion or environmental bills.

A 21-year-old male, Isaac, adds his insight on how an issue is political if it has to do with power:

> Political issues involve conflict between different parties and covered differently in media, Government disagreement, and anything regarding power.

Therefore, some topics are inherently controversial if they are bound to spark debate, and issues are political if they relate to power or are issues handled by the government. The second definition, "the controversy comes from how people handle topics," shows that people are in control of whether the issue will be up for debate, as opposed to an issue that is bound to have that debate. A political issue is always bound to have at least two opposing views, but it is up to how people utilize and express the issue that determines the level of controversy that the political topic will spark. There may be controversies that are not necessarily related to politics or government, but still command opposing views. Thus, the fate of how controversial an issue will be is up to the people to decide. Some affairs are controversial online, but this same controversy does not translate when in-person.

One example of an issue being argued about more online than in person is mask-wearing. Penelope brings up an observation:

> One can make an argument that posting about wearing a mask is political, but it shouldn't be political.

Penelope noted that mask-wearing is heavily argued about online and made to be "political." However, this same energy does not fully translate offline, at least in locations where people are following mask mandates. Another 21-year-old female, Sarah, pointed out the evolution of politics, while establishing her clear definition of it:

> Since the 1950s and 1960s, politics has become more focused on society. When you take away social issues and politics out of the equation, what do these political parties truly stand for? People like to take social politics and turn it towards the government.

> When it comes to social issues, it is not even a matter of which political party you stand for, but rather it comes down to, 'Are You Woke? Or Are You A Bigot?'

Sarah explains that political parties were first built upon economic principles, and then social issues began to slowly become integrated with political parties. Sarah is wrong about her history here, but her perceptions of history are significant in how she defines what is political. As a result, social concerns became political since they are affairs regulated by the government. If it was not for government involvement in these social affairs, they would still just be controversial problems.

This point brings me to how the two terms, "political" and "controversial," are used in similar contexts. An issue that is in the hands of the government is "political," but the controversy behind it comes from whether this social issue should be solved by the government, and the validity of current policies to address the issue. Tyler, a 23-year-old male, responded that the definition of a political issue has evolved through history:

> For example, the debate on alcohol was political around the time of prohibition, but it is no longer considered to be political by today's standards.

Tyler's point is that alcohol was an issue for debate at that particular time, but it is not as much of an issue of debate now. Therefore, the standard for whether or not a certain issue is political or controversial evolves over time.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the difference between political and controversial. Based on these responses, a controversial issue is a matter that sparks debate, and a political issue is a controversial problem that concerns either power or the government. Therefore, any political issue is controversial, but not all controversial affairs are political.

Methods

This study sought to examine the social media habits of college students and recent graduates when viewing and engaging in political discussions online. The research consisted of two parts: a survey and an interview. The survey provided mainly quantitative data on the frequency of certain activities, while the interviews provided qualitative data about what these topics mean to people. Together, these approaches captured insights into how the events of the

past year have impacted and changed the ways people engage with controversy online. I received approval from the Institutional Review Board to conduct this study.

Survey

174 respondents filled out a 35-question survey on Qualtrics that was emailed to them. Survey respondents were recruited over social media advertising through Facebook and Instagram. Posts were made in the Brandeis University class Facebook groups about the survey, where interested people could comment or message their interest. There were also posts crafted for other college-based Facebook groups to stretch the network of respondents beyond just Brandeis University. Instagram recruitment was done through posting on stories, where interested people could respond. The Instagram following was not just solely a Brandeis following, but included people from other colleges all over the country as well. When a person expressed interest in taking part in the study, a consent form and survey link was emailed to them. All 174 respondents were either college students or recent college graduates from up to three years ago, and between the ages of 18 and 25. 68% of respondents were either current students or recent graduates of Brandeis University, while 32% of respondents did not attend Brandeis University. All of these students attended or are currently attending a four-year American-based college or university, including respondents not originally from the United States or studying remotely in another country.

I decided to focus on college students and recent graduates in this particular study because they are an age group actively engaging on social media frequently. The people who are currently in college and are recent graduates have experienced social media for a long time as well. Additionally, college students may feel very connected to topical issues, since such issues are often incorporated into their studies. People in high school were not as suitable to study because they are not at the same educational level of college students when it comes to learning about political issues and applying what they have learned in school to these issues. Additionally, though older people would be knowledgeable about political issues, they likely would not have as much to say about social media engagement since they may not go on social media

as frequently. College students and recent graduates were the ideal group to survey, since they are both likely to be social media savvy through frequent usage and immersed in an academic environment where topical issues can be incorporated into their studies on higher levels.

The survey consisted of 35 questions inquiring about demographics, general social media habits, definitions of controversy, and specific social media habits when it comes to witnessing and engaging with controversial topics online (see Appendix A). Most questions on the survey were multiple-choice, with a few short answer questions that asked respondents to list topics that they find controversial, which issues they see being talked about the most online, and issues they post and comment about. The survey was meant to identify what people are talking about online, what people are seeing, how controversy is defined, and if political posts affect how often people go on social media.

Demographic Breakdown of Respondents

Table 1-1: Age

18 years old	3.44%
19 years old	7.47%
20 years old	17.18%
21 years old	38%
22 years old	20.7%
23 years old	6.9%
24 years old	2.9%
25 years old	2.3%

Table 1-2: Student Status

First Years	6.9%
Sophomores	8.6%
Juniors	20%
Seniors	40%
Graduated	24%

From what we see in this breakdown, most of the respondents are in the second half of their college careers. The reason for this may have stemmed from the status of my circle of acquaintances who may have been comfortable about taking the survey. Also, younger college students may not be as likely to respond to thesis survey recruitment as older students who may also be working on theses and want to help out. There were more older college students within the social media network used to recruit than there were younger students. I was acquainted with the respondents to different desires. Some of these respondents were strangers who responded to the social media recruitment message, some were former internship coworkers with whom I am acquainted on a professional level, some were fellow club members and collaborators, and some of them were classmates from Brandeis University, Boston University Study Abroad, and high school. The amount of unfavorable information a person reveals to a stranger versus someone they know can vary, which may affect the data in terms of how much information respondents were willing to reveal to me during interviews. Overall, there were even proportions of each acquaintance level I had with respondents. Race and gender composition also reflected the limits of my social media network when recruiting respondents.

Table 1-3: Gender

Female	81.6%
Male	15.5%
Non-binary	2.9%

Table 1-4: Race

Caucasian	71.4%
Asian/Asian-American	16.1%
African-American	2.3%
Hispanic or Latino	2.3%
Biracial: Caucasian and Hispanic	2.3%
Biracial: Caucasian and Asain	1.72%
Biracial: Caucasian and African-American	1.72%
Did Not Identify	1.15%
Middle Eastern	.57%

With a majority of respondents being female, it is acknowledged that the data are more skewed towards a female perspective. Additionally, I acknowledge that there is not much representation on this survey from an African American or Hispanic/Latino population, which highlights the limits of racial diversity within my social circle when it comes to recruiting respondents, as well as the limits of racial diversity within my wider social media following. The survey recruitment message was posted and made aware to everyone in the Brandeis University community who was a member of these Facebook groups and to everyone who was a member of other college-based Facebook groups. However, even with a majority Caucasian response pool, the next chapter will explain how predominant racial issues are as a topic for dialogue on social media. Respondents were also asked to list what they are studying, as shown in the table below.

Table 1-5: Areas Of Study[2]

Related To Social Sciences	49.4%
Related To STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Math	47.7%
Related To Business	14.4%
Related To Humanities	11.5%
Related To Creative Arts	10.34%
Related To Communication	3.44%
Undecided	2.3%

Of all the fields of study listed, the top six majors were Biology; Health: Science, Society, and Policy or Public Health-related fields; Economics; Psychology; Political Science; and Sociology. It is interesting to point out that some of these majors, mainly Public Health, Economics, Political Science, and Sociology, are very much related to some important controversial topics that are discussed on social media. The abundance of students from these disciplines highlights that students with these particular academic interests showed more interest in taking part in a study that centers on issues related to those fields.

Interviews

At the end of the survey, the 174 respondents were able to indicate whether or not they were interested in participating in an interview. 57 respondents expressed interest in being interviewed and were contacted via email. All 57 people were contacted about doing an interview, but only 23 people responded to the interview inquiry email and participated in an interview via Zoom. The interview questions were similar to the survey questions in asking how controversial topics are engaged online, but respondents went more in-depth about their motivations and reasons for whether or not they engage in controversial matters online. The 23 interviews delved in-depth about how they engage with controversy online, how controversial deliberations online

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[2] Note: Respondents listed multiple areas of study, so the % will not add up to a perfect 100

made them feel, and whether or not they believe these kinds of conversations to be effective.
The interviews consisted of 24 questions (see Appendix B) and the duration of each interview
ranged widely, depending on how long each respondent went on to elaborate about their social
media experiences. The shortest interview lasted around 20 minutes and the longest interview
lasted around 72 minutes, but on average, each interview lasted around 40 minutes. Each
Zoom interview was recorded, with the recordings stored on Box.com. The interview responses
were automatically transcribed and typed out while the interview took place.

The composition of the interview respondents differed slightly from the survey respon-
dent demographics. 22 remained the median age, comprising 39% of interview respondents.
Since none of the 24-25 year-old survey respondents expressed interest in being interviewed,
the age range among interview respondents is 18-23 years old, versus the 18-25-year old age
range for survey respondents. The student status proportions from the survey remained relative-
ly the same among the interviews. The interview respondents remained predominantly female,
but less so than the survey, with 65.21% of respondents identifying as female and 34.78% of
respondents identifying as male. There were no non-binary respondents who expressed interest
in an interview. In regards to racial composition, there is only representation from Caucasian
and Asian respondents. There were no respondents of other racial identities who expressed in-
terest in being interviewed. Finally, there is a larger proportion of Brandeis students in the inter-
views than in the survey. 82.6% of interview respondents were either current students or recent
graduates of Brandeis University, while 17.4% of interview respondents did not attend Brandeis.

Analysis

Before analyzing the data for the survey, the percentages of each multiple-choice re-
sponse on the survey were calculated. Demographic data was either calculated for percentages
in a multiple-choice response or manually calculated in an open-ended response format. Other
open-ended responses were grouped according to categories that emerged from the data. Af-
terward, percentages were calculated for each category. In terms of determining interview pat-

terns, transcriptions from each respondent were grouped by each question, so that similar patterns in responses could be determined and unique insights highlighted.

In the end, the methods best fit the overall goals of the thesis by providing direct insight into how recent events over the last year have affected the way college students and young adults approach and engage with social media. The surveys were necessary for gathering a quantitative baseline for how many people are directly impacted by what they see and post about on social media, while the interviews offered qualitative observations on why people choose to engage in controversial disputes online and what they believe is effective discourse. As the following chapters will show, this methodological approach was taken to close a gap in debates presented in the literature. These gaps concern the extent of cynicism and apathy about social media, whether people believe online social movements to be effective, and whether conformity presently exists when it comes to political conversations. My results also help to determine if people acknowledge slacktivism or performative activism (a relatively new concept that has not had much academic research conducted on it) in online social media posts.

Organization Of Chapters

In the following chapters, I will first delve into previous academic studies centered on conformity on social media, cynicism, and apathy towards political media, and online social movements in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I will then outline which topics respondents see being discussed the most on social media and which topics they talk about the most. From these answers, I will analyze what it is about certain topics that make them so highly discussed on social media. Next, Chapter 4 will examine why people engage in controversial discussions on social media. My analysis will look into respondents' motivations for why they post, comment, and involve themselves in heated discussions. Additionally, I will explore what social media platforms people use to engage with controversial issues the most and why users select those platforms for those discussions. A common observation was how interview respondents criticize those who engage in performative activism. I will compare these criticisms of performative activism

with respondents' motivations for why they post about controversial topics on their feed. In Chapter 5, I will investigate why people do not engage in controversial discussions on social media. The discussion will also touch upon what respondents believe to be an effective debate, leading to a concluding Chapter 6 that asks: Why do people post about controversial topics on social media if they believe that posting will not be effective in solving the issue?

While one person may view their posting intentions as positive, another user witnessing their content may perceive that post in a negative, performative light. A look at various motivations for posting among respondents will highlight how all posts are performative towards an audience of followers, even when the posts are not created to bolster one's social media clout online. I will analyze how all forms of posting can be perceived as performative and how the controversial events of 2020 were elevated through social media.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Many perspectives highlight different ways political engagement has been fueled on social media. Some of the literature suggests that common social media practices are created from the desire to fit in with peers, diving into a new realm between who people are in reality and how they present themselves online. This idea connects to what scholars have argued is the formation of the social media persona and how that persona engages online. Most research has consistently shown that external factors are the source that drive people to engage with political discussions. Scholars who center their work on election cycles have concluded that platforms stimulate political interest and bring people together, who might otherwise not be as engaged without this platform. Finally, when it comes to social movements, some scholars regard that social movements provide an online community for people to come together. Others believe that it is important to question social media as a reliable new source of information and to understand how young people form their opinions about movements, given the constant reinforcement through social media algorithms.

Conformity

Donna Freitas (2017) provides insight into how people participate more generally in social media culture and their creation of social media personas online. She offers various examples of how social media dominates daily activities, such as taking pictures, traveling somewhere, and experiencing something, all for the purpose of being able to post about it on social media. Freitas raises an important question to help understand the underlying themes of this thesis: Is the source of online political posts driven by conformity and the desire to present oneself online in a certain way? Freitas suggests an unanswered question: When a person posts something political on social media, how much of that is fueled by the desire to showcase what one is truly passionate about and how much to conform with what others are posting about? The desire for approval is a controlling factor in any kind of social media post, including political ones, and it drives people to participate in activities and experiences that they know will gener-

ate high numbers of likes, comments, and followers for them. The myth that people want social media to dominate their lives and want to post every aspect of their daily life on the Internet is false. Instead, Freitas argues social media fuels anxiety for college students. The selectivity of posts results in social media depicting a mirage of a perfect life. As a result, these "perfect" social media feeds can provoke even the most confident of individuals to question their own lives. Often, people fall victim to cyber-bullying and discrimination on these platforms. Yet, students continue to participate in this social media culture. The temptations and popularity of social media allow others to continually feed into this system (Freitas, 2017).

Therefore, social media exposure online is bound to impact online political discussions. According to Kwon et. al (2015), over half of Americans get exposed to political information on social media, with three-quarters of them finding political posts on their feed with which they do not agree (Kwon et. al, 2015, p. 1418). This study from Kwon et. al. was conducted in 2015, so the size of people exposed to political information on social media has probably increased since then. With the majority of people deciding not to comment or engage with a post that they do not agree with, this triggers the "spiral of silence": the tunnel of social media users who choose to stay silent on social media. Public opinion tends to become a form of social control that leads to people silencing themselves with the fear that articulating their thoughts will lead them to be isolated by disapproval from their peers. The fear of isolation results in people monitoring the social environment to alter their public behavior to the standards that other people are following (Hayes et al. 2011, p. 446).

Reduced privacy impacts the way users deal with pressure to conform to the majority opinion in online discussions, as increased exposure raises fears of isolation. The more people one's opinion could be potentially exposed to, the greater the effort one takes to form an opinion that will be tailored to the majority. The spiral of silence is possible based on the amount of exposure the user could potentially get on a platform (Kwon et. al, 2015, p.1420). Is this discussion forum open to the whole world to see, a large group of followers unknown to the user, or just a small group of friends? This argument makes logical sense as people would be more

careful in the way they portray themselves online when it comes to a larger audience of those they may not know, versus being able to be freer about themselves and more unfiltered around a smaller audience. The reduced privacy effect also varies according to whether one's name is exposed on a public platform or if a person remains an anonymous voice (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 216). Thus, the spiral of silence effect is more noticeable on public sites where real names are exposed, such as Facebook, than on a platform where one has an option to remain completely anonymous, such as Tumblr.

One's follower count on social media places additional pressure for conformity and censorship online. Facebook users are more likely to frequently delete their posts when they have larger followings. Bigger audiences among users lead to increased self-censorship along with people posting less political content, due to more social surveillance that results from more people following their pages. People are comfortable sharing popular opinions with their peers but are still afraid of isolation from those people who do not have the same opinions as them. People would rather express their opinion when they know the person they are interacting with will most likely agree with them and validate their thoughts. People are constantly making careful decisions about what to post and how it could affect how they are perceived in different ways across different platforms (Kwon et. al, 2015, p. 1421).

Additionally, self-perception and opinion variety both seem to enhance self-censorship online. The more someone stresses over their self-image and how they are viewed by others, the less likely they are to participate in political discussions (Kwon et. al, 2015, p.1422). While a greater variety of opinions being discussed online will lead to more social media engagement among users, the more opinions a user is exposed to, the more uncertain the user will be of their own opinion (Kwon et. al, 2015, p. 1422). Therefore, the user will be more careful about what they post online. Self-censorship may be a result of opinion uncertainty rather than social pressures.

Political posting is part of a typical social media endeavor to connect with followers. Not participating in these activities can lead to the fear of missing out, which is the anxiety that a

person is missing out on an important experience that other people are currently having. It could be this particular fear, rather than the fear of isolation, that increases the volume of political posts online. Overall, the fear of isolation holds more normative influence (the desire to fit in and be accepted) over posting, while an array of viewpoints online has more informational influence (the process of going along with the majority opinion of the group) over self-censorship as opposed to posting. The desire for approval affects the way posts are presented and opinions are executed, while exposure to new opinions allows users to question their own viewpoints (Kwon et. al, 2015, p. 1422). These results allow people to understand online conformity pressures centered around political topics and further support the argument that conformity comes with engaging in these discussions (Kwon et. al, 2015, p. 1431).

A young person's experience on social media is heavily influenced by their peers and surrounding companions they choose to follow. Emily Weinstein, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, found that social media usage among young people may in fact not be harmful, since they are in control of who they surround themselves with online. Their social media experiences can either influence them positively or negatively. Positive emotions that teens experience on social media come from sharing aspects of their lives, showing off their interests, and finding humor. Negative emotions that teens experience come from judgement from peers and the desire to feel accepted online (Weinstein, 2018, p. 1618). While many teens use social media to learn and explore more about what they are interested in for their own entertainment, they also describe themselves as passive while scrolling through their feed, meaning they see the content, but do not engage with it (Weinstein, 2018, 1615). Common emotions that teens feel while scrolling through social media can range from entertained to envious. Many teens felt that the wealth of their peers was immensely displayed on their social media feeds, from their peers' clothes to their vacation destinations (Weinstein, 2018, p. 1616). Teens experience the good and the bad through social media, with negative experiences being related to the factor of judgement by others, and the positive experiences stemming from many factors, including interest sharing and internet browsing. They experience this social media seesaw across various

platforms, whose positive and negative experiences vary depending on how long they interact with these platforms and how often they do it (Weinstein, 2018, p. 1618). Social media is both acclaimed and criticized. It thus facilitates a love-hate relationship, and taking a break from social media can relieve the teen of common anxieties of judgement and missing out while also taking away a social opportunity to share and explore interests and meet new people. There is still much ongoing research that must be completed to study the seesaw (Weinstein, 2018, p. 1619). This thesis explores the seesaw, as it looks upon both the positive and negative impact of politics and controversial issues being discussed on social media.

Internet Use and Political Participation

Some scholars argue that there is a weak relationship between cynicism and apathy regarding politics by those who are active on social media, indicating that social media serves as a medium for users to interact and discuss their viewpoints (Yamamoto et. al, 2017, p. 150). As a result, there is an increased sense of community and belonging for social media users who engage in politics, motivating a user to participate in politics. Meanwhile, if a person who is following informational politics only on the news begins to doubt what they see, they will most likely give up on politics. This occurrence showcases the strong relationship between cynicism and apathy for people who are not active on social media. Since social media offers a unique environment for people to connect with one another, people who may have had a cynical distrust about the political climate may feel excited by the new community they have found, increasing their political motivation. The sharing of information online can help connect people who are initially disinterested in political news to people who have that interest. The passions of those interested in politics rub off on the people who were originally disinterested, expanding overall interests and engagement among users online when it comes to politics.

This exposure to political connection and support on social media decreases apathy (Yamamato, et al., 2017, p. 163). For example, Twitter specifically weakened the relationship between cynicism and apathy as the 2012 election season went along. Young people initially felt as though they were not worthy of being involved in politics, decreasing their motivation to par-

ticipate in politics. Social media offered them a community in which to become engaged with political news again. The exposure to diverse information online, along with the social nature of platforms, creates opportunities for young social media users to feel like their voice matters, fueling their drive to participate in politics. There are both positive and negative effects that political social media implements in users. The fears of isolation and missing out can take a toll on online users, discouraging them from expressing their own beliefs online. On the other hand, political mobilization online has allowed users to be given a voice that encourages them to engage with political matters. A desire for approval may impact the way we post, but posting nonetheless has decreased political apathy levels (Yamamoto et. al, 2017, p. 165).

I should also acknowledge creative platforms like Musical.ly (now called TikTok) and their role in politics on social media. Creative social platforms allow young people to express themselves politically in entertaining ways. Literat and Kilger-Vilenchik (2019) offer a definition of collective expression using three standards: imagining an audience with similar beliefs, adding to the voice of that audience by creating content that connects with them, and having that content shared among this audience (p. 1991)**.** This helps us see the importance of hashtags and memetic content for driving collective political expression online. Memes satirize current situations and shared cultural and collective expressions, while the power of a hashtag ignites social conversations because it links together all of the conversations surrounding a certain topic. Hashtags showcase an imagined audience with similar political beliefs and act as an umbrella guiding users to express a variety of content with different kinds of opinions about specific hashtag topics.

The #SayHerName movement is an example of a hashtag based social movement that demonstrates how intersectionality impacts activism on social media. These hashtags have enhanced social relationships among online activists (Brown et. al, 2017, p. 1839). Continued emphasis on the hashtag and the creation of this particular movement shows how significant youth drive can ignite online activism**.** The #Ferguson incident is another example that proved Twitter's necessity in building awareness of racial injustices in the United States. The hashtag be-

comes more significant by not just merely being a phrase people use, but for creators to add text along with the usage of their hashtag to create a unique meaning in their message. While #Ferguson was mainly used to provide breaking news updates regarding the death of Michael Brown by police officers, as it was unfolding, and for people to add their own commentary on the event, most posts affiliated with the hashtag were published as the incident was happening, allowing these tweets to create a story of the incident through hashtags (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015, p. 5). The hashtag gave people the feeling of visibility and a chance to allow users to feel like they were participating in and enhancing the awareness of this event.

Youth have found more creative, unconventional ways to express their views by producing entertaining, sharable content that can be reached by millions of other young people. As a result, creative apps have provided huge opportunities for youth to have unique political participation. TikTok has built a social, political community online through collective expression. Considering that the common demographic for this app consists of users under the age of 18, it serves as a basis for teenagers to feel like they are making a difference in the election process and having a voice, even if they cannot vote (Literat and Kilger-Vilenchik, 2019, p. 2004).

Young people are utilizing social media platforms to express themselves politically outside of traditional means, such as voting. Engaging in political discussion at a younger age heightens interest that can turn into political actions, such as running for office later in life (Keating and Melis, 2017, p. 882). While political social media usage can vary across a variety of age groups, this means of communication is still most likely to be utilized by young people. Though some scholars have discussed how new users with no previous political interest can connect connect with political ideas through social media, other scholars argue that political participation on social media is not extending to a new audience of young adults, but rather building off an audience who already had prior interests in politics (Keating and Melis, 2017, p. 889).

Social media guides the ways to political participation, especially through interests that have been sparked at school and through peers. External political influence from one's family, teachers, and peers during youth affects a user's political participation online. Political cynicism

can be created by a lack of interest from surrounding peers. Those who choose to engage in online discussion are surrounding themselves with people who are also prone to engage in political discourse. Thus, people who participate in online discussions and find a community with similar political beliefs and interests have had their interests sparked externally (Keating and Melis, 2017, p. 891).

Facebook and MySpace were recognized as reviving youth participation and voting in political elections, especially during the 2008 election. At the time, these outlets showcased a new form of media that impacted the way information was delivered, curating a slow cultural shift into the social media era. Political candidates could engage more with their voters through these social media platforms, which was a diversion away from relying on mainstream news outlets. Online political campaigning began as early as the 1996 election with the rise of online news and continued well through the 2004 election. However, the 2008 presidential election was the first election that utilized social networking sites widely as a campaign tool (Takaragawa and Carty, 2012, 76). MySpace even hosted online town halls and webcasts in which students could submit questions. Barack Obama took advantage of this new media and associated social networking to help carry his campaign in 2008 (Takaragawa and Carty, 2012, p. 78). His campaign was able to reach younger demographics who did not engage with traditional media formats, such as print and broadcast news. Obama's 2008 presidential campaign showed how candidates can connect with voters on social media, forming a new, unprecedented kind of relationship. This connection allowed him to develop rapport with young voters, which was crucial in helping win the younger vote (Takaragawa and Carty, 2012, p. 78). The main goal of social networking sites is for each user to build a hub of communication within their social circle, creating a relationship for the user to be both a producer and consumer of social media (Takaragawa and Carty, 2012, p. 77).

Social media use by political candidates has risen due to the ability to connect with an audience of voters on a casual basis, as well as it being an inexpensive way to campaign. Social networking users provided visible support for Obama, emphasizing the necessity of a can-

didate's social media presence. The Obama campaign built communication hubs that helped guide political engagement and discussions offline as well (Takaragawa and Carty, 2012, p. 79). The rise of social networking for political purposes allowed anyone to facilitate a discussion voice about how they feel online. Social media activism provides ordinary users with an outlet to feel as though they have power over how they can express themselves.

Online Social Movements

Another group of literature centers on the key elements that form an online social movement, social media's role in elevating a user's social status through taking part in online social movements, and criticisms of online social movements. There are four processes necessary for social movements: micromobilization, conscientiousness, solidarity, and collective identity (Brown et. al, 2017, p.1832). Intersectionality connects someone's social identities, such as race or class, to a certain level of privilege or discrimination. A collective unit identifies the roots of injustice, which inspires others to take action against this injustice. Consciousness brings about demands for social change by creating united ties within a user's network (Brown et. al, 2017, p.1832).

Social media users play a key role in growing various social movements through digital media. While young people may be disengaged from politics that do not benefit their needs and rights, youth are nevertheless still invested in online activism and having their voice heard by political officers. Participation in social movements stems from a sense of belonging and unity. The way in which we perceive ourselves is based on how we are able to understand our own identities (Campbell, 2017, p.148). The person we are (the self) can be seen as a reflection of our behaviors. The factors that shape our persona online can be impacted by people we do and do not know, as well as morals and rewards that drive our digital behavior. These factors influence our digital selves. On social media, we try to present our digital selves as desirable through the presentation of images, captions, and important life accomplishments. Campbell's points tie back to the main themes of Freitas, relating to how social media users present a "fake" version of their life that is far more elevated and sophisticated than their life in reality. Social

media creates a whole other world for people to present the best version of their lives, when the reality of who they are in person is much more humble. In political movements, ordinary social media users are taken much more seriously online than in real life. Our digital self in a social movement serves as an alter ego who is strong, powerful, and unafraid to challenge current issues. An online persona gives people a fresh start and a new identity they would not be able to otherwise achieve in real life (Campbell, 2017, p.150).

Campbell brings up a fascinating and agreeable point that the Internet has allowed online activists to completely change how they are viewed online versus in real life. In this case, social media cuts out the typical social cues of someone's reality and allows them to be someone completely new in their digital persona. This sense of community fulfills the users who participate in online discussions and allows them to have their words taken seriously in the world of online activism (Campbell, 2017, p. 151). When faced with situations of tension, the user has the power to transform into a digital persona that is often different from who that person is offline. Online political movements give young people an outlet to challenge the problems present within the political system (Campbell, 2017, p.157).

Social media algorithms feed people the information they want to see, skewing the information users are being shown on social media. Since social media algorithms create a feed with social posts and advertisements that directly correlates with a user's previous internet search history and post engagement history, they are being delivered information based on what they have previously shown interest in online. Jonathan Cox supports the argument that social media algorithms continue to reinforce users' existing perspectives with similar news stories (Cox, 2017, p. 1849). While other scholars argue that young people receive a wide range of information online, making their opinions dynamic, Cox questions the opinions of young social media users, emphasizing that their views are one-sided due to an algorithm feeding them unchanging information (Cox, 2017, p. 1852). While Cox's argument examines how algorithms prevent social media users from being exposed to diverse information, it fails to fully take into account other ways media can be consumed socially. The argument also does not acknowledge

the wide range of social media platforms young voters utilize and how their various algorithms can actually lead to a more informed voter demographic. Additionally, this argument does not take into account that algorithms are driven by individuals, based on previous topics with which they have engaged. Therefore, the responsibility of what users see on their feed is placed on the individuals, rather than the algorithm systems themselves.

Many catastrophic injustices that have occurred in the past decade highlight how social media can be both a tool in raising awareness about these tragic matters while also creating the danger of online performative activism. The #Ferguson movement discussed earlier actually received criticism for being ineffective in facilitating online activism, by taking attention away from people taking physical action to solve the issue. Many people criticize social media activism as short-lived (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015, p. 8). The #Ferguson protest showcases how social media serves as an activism platform to unite those experiencing injustice, but it also highlights the ineffectiveness of performative activism through social media.

Many experts debate the ability of technology and social media to provoke effective change in society. While social media analytics centered around social and political issues can be measured and showcase the amount of awareness a post has created, the term "slacktivism" was derived from people being able to click "like" on a post about social issues and not do anything more than that (Mccafferty, 2011, p.1). There are many posts that use a common copy-and-pasted message to get a point across, but whether the act of copying and pasting this message is real activism is questioned. While activism is shown on social media, one cannot tell easily how strong this activism really is. Online activism may come from groups of people who barely know each other, while *New Yorker* journalist, Malcolm Gladwell, pointed out that activism organization requires a strong relationship between participating members. (Mccafferty, 2011, p.1). Many people who participate in online activism admit that they do not really have any sort of evidence for how technology provokes activism in person and how effective changes can be. A user's efforts to do something more "modern" like online activism stem from being in-

trigued by the technology, without making any additional efforts to create change outside of what a user sees or posts online (Mccafferty, 2011, p. 1).

One 2014 study presents online activism in a more positive light. Joel Penney, a professor of Communication and Media at Montclair State University, delves into students' experiences and motivations in the social media campaign surrounding the marriage equality movement, through the act of changing one's profile picture with a red equal sign, (Penney, 2014, p. 52). This action took place on social media less than one year before marriage equality was legalized all over the United States. Penney found that users' engagement in this social media campaign lead to more positive effects than it did to "slacktivism" (Penney, 2014, p.61). Most interviewees shared positive experiences of the campaign. Ultimately, those who participated in a social movement by prompting allies to show their support among a widely used social media platform mainly felt as though they executed a message that is empowering, rather than tiring (Penney, 2014, p.62). Meanwhile, other findings in the study suggested that the campaign expanded to a new group of people to show symbolic support for this movement. For example, if a user posting a red equal sign on their profile picture was both the first time the user got involved with the marriage equality movement, but also the extent to which the user was willing to go in helping this movement, the campaign was still beneficial, as it expanded to a new pool of users who would not have otherwise known about it (Penney, 2014, p.63). Back in 2014, Penney painted these actions in a positive light and dismissed the negative evaluation of any potential "slacktivism" that could result. Additionally, Penney concluded that small symbolic action, such as changing a Facebook profile picture, can go a long way in working to create effective policy change and igniting conversations online surrounding an issue (Penney, 2014, p.64). While this movement was a positive way to show support for the LGBTQ+ community during the quest for marriage equality, these actions would be considered performative by today's standards. Seven years later, my study will showcase how certain social media campaigns and symbolic actions are often criticized. The different observations in these studies manifest a negative evolution that has taken a toll on social media in more recent years.

While performative activism is a central finding in my study, there are not any recent studies or published academic literature about performative activism. This concept is still very new, so there has not yet been much research conducted on this topic.

Conclusion

In summary, literature on the ways political discussions are impacted by social media present the communication of controversial issues in both positive and negative lights. The positive impact of social media happens through decreased political apathy among youth, enhanced relationships between political figures and ordinary users, the ability to amplify people's voices, and the option for everyday people to make creative content that will engage people politically. However, negative impacts include the underlying pressure for conformity. Such pressures that stem from social media trigger more anxieties, such as the fear of isolation and the fear of missing out on life. Having a view that disagrees with popular opinions of the majority leads to self-censorship online, triggered by fear of isolation. Some argue that conformity is the main motivation to post politically while others say it stems from user interest based on the people around them on these online platforms. The literature establishes that there are many reasons to post about something political and controversial. Some scholars argue that social media delivers more diverse information, while others question the diversity of this news and point to social media algorithms in confirming people's beliefs. Meanwhile, while people applaud social media for elevating a cause, others question how effective it can be, and whether it just leads to performative activism. Given these scholarly insights, it is time to explore to what extent the social media experiences of a group of college aged students and young adults are aligned with the ideas of these scholars, especially in light of the more recent political events in 2020 and 2021.

Chapter 3: What Is Being Talked About Online?

Introduction

It is critical to understand the top motivating factors among respondents for engaging in key debates in order to determine why certain issues are so highly discussed on social media. In this chapter, I investigate the most common motivating factors behind why users engage in political discourse online. When I say online, I am specifically referring to social media. I also plan to explore the significance of the top issues that are being discussed online and why those issues are being discussed over others. A top issue is what survey respondents identified as most intensely debated on social media. It is important to highlight both the top issues discussed and the lesser talked about issues to compare differences in a user's motivation to post about certain kinds of issues.

My discussion here will include a look at topics that are more likely to generate a sense of obligation to participate in online talk. Significantly, the top issues that respondents recognize as controversial are not entirely aligned with the top issues they post about, which raises the question of what makes some issues more prone to discussion online than others. Overall, this chapter will determine the kinds of controversy witnessed on social media and how these forms of controversy become so prominent. Throughout the chapter, I am going to explore five particular issues: abortion, racial justice, the 2020 election, disabilities, and the Uyghur camps. By analyzing the context of these issues and ways people talk about them online, we will determine what drives some of these issues to higher levels of social media debate than others.

Why Are People On Social Media?

Table 3-1: What Are Your Main Reasons For Using Social Media?[3]

To Keep In Touch With Family and Friends	80%
To Keep Up With The Latest News	51.1%
To Show People What You're Doing Through Their Posts	37.9%
To See What Other People Are Doing Through Their Posts	63.8%
To Message People And Find Content For Academic/Professional Purposes	31%
Procrastination/Boredom	77.6%
To Find Entertaining Content	75.9%
To Meet New People/Widen Network	18.4%
Other	4%

First, it is imperative to recognize what determinants are bringing users to social media.

My respondents are sitting on social media for multiple reasons. A majority of respondents primarily use social media to keep in touch with family and friends, to procrastinate, and to find entertaining content. Politics is not the dominating forefront for most people in why they visit social media platforms. For example, Ilana, a 22-year-old female, shares that she focuses only on entertaining content:

> I post relatable, funny, wholesome content. I will only post about politics if it is wholesome. I also like to post music recs and selfies.

The same can be said for Harry, a 22-year-old male:

> I mainly just post pictures of food.

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[3] Note: Respondents could select multiple answers, so the % does not entirely add up to 100

Other people mention that they do not post much content at all on social media and mainly just observe the conversation, rather than participate, on these platforms. A 22-year-old male, Eddie, elaborates:

> I don't post at all because I just don't care enough. I mostly just look at other people.

On the other hand, most other respondents divide up which platforms are dedicated for non-political and which platforms are for political content. Claire explains:

> On Twitter, I retweet random stuff about genetic research, politics, and vaccines. On Linkedin, I post things about my education, and on Instagram, I post pictures with my friends and dance videos.

Tess, a 20-year-old female, also divides up which platforms are political for her, but tends to still sprinkle in some politics on her other accounts:

> I have an Instagram account for my dog. Sometimes I do some political ads on my dog's account, like dressing her up in election gear. I also have a food Instagram account, where I don't incorporate any politics into it. However, all of my most recent Facebook posts are centered around politics.

However, Sarah is the only respondent who aims to make all of her social media content completely political:

> 100% of the things I post about are political. Facebook is exclusively political for me and I use TikTok to either post political content or promote my business. My other social media is politicized as well.

It is clear through these different reasons that a variety of factors drive users to social media, but what is it exactly that drives these users to engage with politics on social media if most people are driven to use social media for other purposes?

Top Reasons As To Why Users Engage In Online Debates

It is also important to discuss the principal reasons behind why respondents get involved with online controversial discussion, in order to better comprehend how certain controversies become so popular on social media.

Table 3-2: Top Reasons Listed On The Survey By Respondents On Why They Engage In Controversial Topics

Importance of the issue, To inform others, Spread information, and Bring awareness to an issue	14.84%
If the respondent cares about the issue a lot	7.7%
Utilize their platform to let their voice be heard	4.52%
Only if there is something of value to add to what is being talked about	3.87%
Other people are posting about the issue	2.58%
Stand in solidarity and be an ally	1.94%
Showcase resources and other sources	1.2%
Only if they know enough about the topic	1.3%

According to the survey, the top reason why people engage in controversial discussions on social media is that the issues are of importance to them and they want to spread awareness of these issues to others. These reasons could support why the top controversial issues brought up in this chapter achieved the popularity that they did, as people wanted to provide factual information and update others in real-time, especially as crucial events were taking place. Many respondents shared examples of when they post to spread awareness about certain issues. Alex, a 20-year-old male, points out:

> I make political posts to get people to think about something in a different way and to try and spread awareness on something. I want to bring nuance to a political issue in general that I may not see.

Alex's insight into spreading awareness on an issue through different angles reflects why the most discussed issues online rose to their fame. Penelope stresses the importance of posting to educate people about certain issues:

> Education is the most important in motivating me to post something politically and opening up a conversation. People can disagree with me, but at least they understand the other side. I post on a more educational base rather than a forceful opinion, even if my educational opinions are still biased.

Penelope stresses the importance of educating others but also recognizes her biases on certain issues. Her acknowledgment about posting opinionated messages highlights an underlying motivation of wanting the public to believe her opinion on the matter, even if she is claiming that her posts do not contain forceful opinions.

The second highest reason why people engage in controversial issues is because they care about the issue. As a top issue listed by respondents, it similarly aligns with the reasons behind why lesser-known issues are brought to light on social media. Will makes an effort not to post controversial content and to stay out of these online discussions. He talks about what would motivate him to post in the instance he had to post something controversial:

> If I did post something, it would have to be something that I cared about and was trying to support to do everything in my power to advocate for it, which would include posting.

Will's response suggests that this reason attracts the users who do not engage in controversial topics that often. If a person barely posts about politics, the issue must hold significance to them for them to post about it. Hilary adds:

> When it comes to politics on social media, I'm very quiet and I like to soak in the atmosphere. It is not that I don't care about what is being said, but I will mainly post about something that I care about and am worried about, such as Black Lives Matter and white supremacy.

Hilary's motivations are another example of posting because one cares about an issue. However, when people post because they care about an issue, those issues tend to be either the highest discussed issues online or the ones that are less likely to be discussed. For example, Hilary's motivation to post comes from her passion for the most highly discussed topic online, racial justice.

Other respondents brought up that their motivations to take part in online controversial discussions stem from wanting to have an intellectual debate. Sarah, who is very active in posting political content on her social media feed, explains her reasoning behind why she is motivated to post:

> I post because I work well with constructive criticism...I want to be called out and I want people to get me to think about the other perspective. Lately, there has been a lot of harsh criticism, so I also like the positive reinforcement of my ideas.

Sarah is willing to have her ideas challenged and thoroughly enjoys the rush that comes with that. She wants to be actively involved in conversations online regularly. Her insight displays how some approach political discussion as something enjoyable versus as a serious undertaking. For Sarah, having these discussions has come as a part of her routine. Similarly, Vivienne, a 22-year-old female, found the confidence to engage more with political discussions online due to changes in her personal life. She elaborates:

> Getting out of a relationship with someone who didn't believe in my political views prompted me to post more politically. I didn't post about issues related to feminism earlier because I was afraid of what my boyfriend at the time would say.

Vivienne found the experience of posting about politics on social media liberating after her breakup, as it provided an outlet for her to express herself freely after her relationship. Social media was a positive outlet that ultimately managed to help this respondent feel empowered. These concerns of her image in front of her boyfriend held her back from originally posting about these topics. After her breakup, she no longer had a reason to be concerned about how her boyfriend viewed her. This shows how people's current relationships can impact their online engagement. Based on these examples, I plan to further present how these motivations to post drive the discussion about certain issues on social media.

How Political Content Affects One's Social Media Habits

Table 3-3: How is your social media participation affected by the political content you see online?

I create more posts (Political)	I create more posts (Non-Political)	I create fewer posts (Political)	I create fewer posts (Non-Political)	There is no impact on the frequency of my posting patterns
25.3%	5.7%	10.34%	16.7%	31%

I comment more on posts (Political)	I comment more on posts (Non-Political)	I comment less on posts (Political)	I comment less on posts (Non-Political)	There is no impact on how I comment on posts
17.4%	5.17%	6.9%	5.7%	23%

I go on social media more often when I see more political content	I go on social media less often when I see more political content	It depends on the political scenario whether or not I go on more or less	Political content present on social media does not affect how often I frequent it
16.09%	15.51%	30.5%	15%

Respondents were asked how much of the content they see while scrolling through social media they consider to be political. The highest fraction that respondents answered was that political social media content took up about one-third of their feed. On average, while political content does not take up the majority of one's feed, it does account for a significant portion of it. Respondents were also queried about how the presence of politics on social media impacts how often they frequent social media. When analyzing these responses, there is no clear trend for how people's overall social media habits are impacted by witnessing political content on social

media. The vital nature of witnessing political content online affects individuals differently and how they perceive the content they are viewing. Nonetheless, the majority of respondents had their social media habits impacted by political content to some extent.

Context On The Events Of 2020

Next, it is necessary to provide some background on why certain issues become so topical in 2020. In late 2019, knowledge of a novel coronavirus increased as the news reported on disease outbreaks in China. Not long afterward, this virus spread across the world, causing a nearly worldwide lockdown beginning in March 2020. For over a year, COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus, has infected millions of people worldwide. The pandemic led to increased physical, mental, social, and economic distress as a result of physical distancing measures implemented by state and federal governments. Online controversy about the pandemic spread over social media with debates about public health guidelines, including mask-wearing and vaccine safety, as well as berating people who were posting about holding or attending large gatherings during the pandemic.

In addition to the civil unrest caused by the pandemic, pressing social issues sparked online discourse. On May 25, 2020, a Black man named George Floyd was murdered while in police custody with a video of the incident proliferated on social media. Outraged by the violence and blatant abuse of power, thousands of demonstrators marched to protest against police brutality and demand justice. The racial justice movement that re-ignited during the summer of 2020 started debates about pressing political and social issues, including decreasing funding for police, white privilege, and cancel culture, among others. Social media became the primary place to share information about other instances of racial injustice following Floyd's murder, including educational slides and fundraising resources, resulting in the explosion of conversations about these issues from both true and performative allies.

Social media also became a space to protest the injustices and raise awareness for important issues. On June 2, 2020, the Internet became a center of protest with #blackouttuesday. Many Instagram users posted a photo of a black square, with the caption "#blackouttuesday."

While this was originally intended as a day to support Black creators and artists in the entertainment industry, this became an instance where performative activism proliferated Instagram.

With the racial justice movement dominating social media in the summer of 2020 amid a pandemic, the fall of 2020 saw social media users preparing for the upcoming election. The incumbent president Donald Trump ran against former vice president Joe Biden, and many consequential Senate races in states like Kentucky and Georgia occurred. Issues about government policy, the Supreme Court nomination of Amy Coney Barrett, the two political candidates, important Senate races, and voting were discussed during the fall of 2020.

Top Issues Discussed Online

Table 3-4 shows the most popular issues mentioned by survey respondents. The issues shown in this chart were listed on the survey by more than one respondent. Not all issues listed by respondents are included on this chart; those issues not listed had only one respondent mention them.

Table 3-4: Top Issues Of Discussion On Social Media[4]

Provide an example of a topic that is often controversial	What political issues do you see being talked about the most on social media?	If you post about politics, what do you post about the most on social media?	What are the one or two political issues you have posted about that got the biggest reaction in terms of likes and/or comments?	If you do comment on posts, what issues do you tend to comment on the most on social media?
Abortion - 31.86%	**Racial Justice -** 62.5%	**Racial Justice -** 46%	**Racial Justice -** 41.35%	**Racial Justice -** 23.3%
Racial Justice - 13.75%	**Politicians and Elections -** 47.5%	**Politicians and Elections -** 25.4%	**Politicians and Elections -** 25.56%	**Women's Rights -** 14.16%
COVID-19 - 9.2%	**COVID-19 -** 26.88%	**Women's Rights -** 15.87%	**COVID-19 -** 9.77%	**COVID-19 -** 10%
Israel v. Palestine Conflict - 5.75%	**Women's Rights -** 14.38%	**Covid-19 -** 11.11%	**Women's Rights** - 9%	**LGBTQIA+ Issues -** 9.2%
Politicians and Elections - 5.75%	**The Economy -** 11.25%	**LGBTQIA+ Issues -** 11.11%	**Anti-Semitism -** 6.77%	**Politicians and Elections -** 8.3%
LGBTQIA+ Issues - 3.75%	**LGBTQIA+ Rights -** 11.88%	**Issues Related To Judaism -** 8.7%	**LGBTQIA+ Rights -** 4.51%	**General Healthcare and Policy (Non-Covid Related) -** 4.16%
Gun Control - 2.5%	**Immigration -** 7.5%	**General Healthcare and Policy (Non-Covid Related) -** 6.35%	**International Conflicts -** 4.51%	**Ableism and Disability Justice -** 4.16%
Immigration Policies - 1.87%	**Climate Justice -** 6.88%	**The Economy -** 4.76%	**Climate Justice -** 3.76%	**Issues Related To Judaism -** 4.16%
Religious Issues - 1.87%	**Gun control -** 3.88%	**Basic Human Rights -** 4.76%	**Ableism and Disability Justice -** 2.26%	**Anything With Misinformation -** 4.16%
Gender Discrimination - 1.25%	**Gender Discrimination -** 3.13%	**Climate Justice -** 3.4%	**General Healthcare and Policy (Non-Covid Related)** - 1.5%	**Climate Justice -** 3.3%
Climate Justice - 1.25%	**Anti-semitism -** 3.13%	**Immigration Policies -** 3.17%	**Capitol Riots -** 1.5%	**The Economy -** 2.5%
	Israel v. Palestine Conflict - 2.5%	**Ableism and Disability Justice -** 2.38%	**"Small Town" and Local Politics** - 1.5%	**Body Positivity -** 2.5%

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[4] Note: Respondents listed multiple issues, so the % will not add up to a perfect 100

Respondents were asked to list a topic that is often considered to be controversial. The top issue mentioned was abortion (listed by 31.86% of respondents). While these choices were mainly focused on what respondents considered to be controversial at face value, the proportions begin to change when they are asked to state the issue that they see being talked about the most online. The top issue in this category was racial justice, with over 62.5% of respondents listing this issue as the one they witness the most discussion about in their feeds. Other issues mentioned frequently included politicians and elections and Covid-19. Issues related to racial justice remain at the top of what people post about online, with 46% of respondents indicating that if they were to post on a political topic, this would be the one. Issues relating to government officials were the second most popular issue people post about. Matters relating to women's rights were the third most common issue posted about on social media. Survey respondents were also asked to describe their political post that was most liked or commented on. Racial justice again remained the top topic with 27.82% of respondents indicating that their most popular political post centered on this topic. In a close second, 25.56% of respondents indicated their most popular political post related to government officials in some sort of way, whether it be the presidential election or a politician. Finally, when survey respondents were asked about what political issues they are most likely to comment on, the top choice remained racial justice, which 23.3% of respondents indicated they would comment on. The other topics people said they would most likely comment on were issues related to women's rights and Covid-19.

When certain issues are talked about more than others, it is very telling of the priorities and issues in modern society. An issue with greater discussion appeal over others indicates that users with many kinds of social media habits engage with these issues. Each person engaging with these issues online, however, has different reasons behind their involvement.

The determination of how performative a person's post is depends on how long that issue remains in the social media spotlight and if social media users practice what they are preaching offline. The abundant media coverage on a topic triggers a social media response, and the amount of time that this topic remains a relevant social media trend determines which

particular users were drawn to that topic solely because it was trending. If a user participates in a social media trend, the actions that this user takes after its peak is a determinant of whether their posts were performative. For example, users could continue to speak out about this issue after it is no longer trending or take offline action to help the cause. Through an analysis of the most popular and least popular issues of debate, we will determine the motivations of individuals for posting about these trending topics.

Abortion: Not A Strong Middle Ground To Debate About

It is worth noting that while racial justice remained the most engaged issue on social media among survey respondents, it was not immediately at the top of the list when people were asked to name a controversial issue. Rather, abortion was the most named controversial topic, yet it is not *discussed on* social media as much as other issues. This phenomenon suggests a very important trend. Abortion is an issue that is deeply polarizing and contains limited middle ground; most people are either for abortion or against it. It is important to acknowledge that there are some more center-leaning views on abortion. For example, some people may be pro-choice, but only if a women is a certain amount of weeks into her pregnancy. However, these middle ground views of abortion are not as broad nor engaging compared to the middle ground debates connected to racial justice. Since the middle ground is more narrow, abortion also has less of an entry point on social media for convincing others to change their minds. It can be more difficult to change someone's mind from one extreme point of view to another, especially if the central-leaning views are not as broad. Issues with a more restricted center-ground and that are more polarizing than others may be better suited for debate in-person rather than online. Isaac tries to stay clear of controversy on social media, emphasizes:

> I'm happy to do political discussions in person. I can say what I want around my friends, especially with different kinds of controversial issues, like abortion.

It is difficult to debate issues that contain a more narrow middle ground on social media. Many respondents choose not to engage in intense debates because they know they cannot change another person's view on a topic, especially if the issue is polarized. Granted, respondents felt exhausted in debates about all sorts of controversial issues, but especially with issues where

positions are so narrowly defined, that there is less middle ground to allow someone to change their mind.

Additionally, the sub-discussions that abortion can spark, such as health care access and birth control, are not as highly discussed because they are limited in scope and do not allow for uplifting discourse. The overall issue of abortion is not as broad of an umbrella as racial justice is. Racial justice sparks many sub-discussions about police brutality, equal representation, and cancel culture, but it still has room to incorporate uplifting discourse through people sharing works from people of color and advice on how people can stay safe at protests. It is very difficult to bring awareness to issues surrounding abortion in creative ways like these.

Abortion was barely brought up by respondents in interviews. One 19-year-old female, Debbie, explained why she doesn't post about abortion on social media:

> The issues that I post about are racism, Black Lives Matter, antisemitism, homophobia, the coronavirus, and public health because these issues affect a wide range of people and they are more macro-level issues....Abortion is also just an issue that I don't see being talked about.

This quote raises an interesting reason as to why abortion does not match up as a highly discussed issue on social media despite being so widely recognized as controversial: people may be more focused on issues that are topical in the news, and there are no current news stories that would fuel a discussion of abortion online. A significant pattern seen in the top issues talked about online is that they correlate with current news stories, provoking more social media posts and debates. If there is not much news about abortion, there is nothing there to ignite a large discussion of it online. People tend to stick more to the hot topics they witness being talked about in terms of posting. If there is no trigger for abortion to be a discussion online, it may be overlooked by others as an issue to post about.

Vivienne, shares a different perspective on why she does not post about abortion:

> I would feel guilty and like a bad ally if I didn't post about BLM. I would not feel called out by my followers if I didn't post about disabilities or feminism, since I am affected by those issues. I would just feel like a bad ally for not posting about issues that don't affect me, such as BLM, and would feel like an odd one out for not posting about that.

Vivienne's reasons for choosing to post about Black Lives Matter is indicative of virtue signaling, which will be talked about more in the next section. As I will discuss shortly, racial justice is such a topic for debate because it can ignite so much performative activism. Vivienne does not post about feminism, which is an umbrella over the issue of abortion, because she feels no need to take part in virtue signaling with this topic. One reason abortion may not be as much of a topic for debate is because it does not inherently provoke as much performative activism as racial justice does.

The more divided beliefs about abortion, its long-term debate, its lower relevance in the news currently, its concealment, and lower rates of virtue signaling may be the reasons abortion is not as present of a topic for online debate compared to others, despite it being listed as a top controversial issue.

Racial Justice: Multiple Angles To Discuss The Issue

Issues with more complexity that grew in prominence in 2020 open up multiple opportunities for debate with different angles that appeal to people with all kinds of social media habits. Racial justice is one of these issues and is a complicated topic that has sparked many sub-discussions, including conversations about Black Lives Matter, protest ethics, diversity, discrimination, police brutality, white privilege, and representation of people of color. While discussions about abortion have remained more or less the same over several decades, discussions surrounding racial justice have been dynamic. The problems of racial injustice existed long before the summer of 2020, but attention on social media was inconsistent. Social media elevated awareness of racial injustice in 2020.

Unfolding events surrounding racial justice, whether it be from a protest or an instance of police brutality, were being discussed online as they were happening. According to the Pew Research Center (Shah and Widjaya, 2020), social media discussion on Black Lives Matter has increased dramatically since the death of George Floyd, especially on social media accounts for those in Congress, with uses of the hashtag being used more on social media than at any point in history. More Democratic lawmakers use the hashtag than Republican lawmakers (Shah and

Widjaya, 2020). These patterns continued for lawmakers in other countries as well. Over half of

lawmakers in the United Kingdom tweeted about Black Lives Matter after George Floyd's death,

between May 26, 2020, and June 10, 2020 (Shah and Widjaya, 2020). The usage of this hash-

tag peaked 16 days after George Floyd's death (Shah and Widjaya, 2020). In the 17 months

before George Floyd's tragedy, the Black Lives Matter hashtag was only used by 4% of legisla-

tors across the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Shah and Widjaya,

2020). These statistics emphasize how much this incident ignited discussion on social media.

The hashtag reached this peak and was a basis for discussion as a result of this tragedy.

The event provoked awareness of racial injustice in ways that some people had not previously

recognized or realized. George Floyd's murder provoked thousands of protests that were

broadcast on social media, the #blackouttuesday incident on Instagram, and social media influ-

encers being critiqued for racial comments they made in the past. The racial justice crisis domi-

nated social media to a point where it may have been the only topic one saw on their feeds, and

it appeared in debates about defunding the police and the justification of riots. What made this

movement so dominant on social media was perhaps that it was the dominant story in main-

stream media at the time. Being the main topic discussed in the news at a particular moment in

time led it to be the prime topic online, especially when there were no other news stories large

enough to overshadow it. However, as a result of this social media dominance, there was much

criticism and tension among social media users about exactly how people were crafting their

posts about racial justice.

My interview respondents spoke out about why they post on issues related to racial in-

justice. One 20-year-old female, Paige, explained she posted about racial justice because it was

topical:

> I don't post much on social media, but if I post about something controversial, it is be-
> cause it's popular at the moment. Whether it be Black Lives Matter or the Trump and
> Biden election. While there are different sides to each issue, people post about these
> online because they feel obligated to, due to the popularity of the issues.

Paige is motivated to post based on what is topical, whatever issue that may be. Therefore, one

reason racial justice was so widely present online is because people witnessed others post

about the issue. As a result, the pressure was placed on Paige to post about the topic too. Paige

mentioned that she tries to limit her social media activity but experiences immense pressure to

post about what her friends are posting about as well. A key reason for why racial justice rose to

dominate people's social media feeds are the social media trends it ignited and the way those

trends further created more controversy, such as the #blackouttuesday movement. The domi-

nance of #blackouttuesday posts in people's feeds provoked criticisms of people who were not

posting, but also led people to seek validation by posting about racial justice as well. Penelope

elaborates about these social media tensions:

> Black Lives Matter became trendy over the summer where everyone posted a black square, but it was so performative. It would have been better to post something more informational and to take a day to reflect instead of posting a black square since it accomplishes nothing, but is rather performative. After that day, Instagram hasn't been used to accomplish other works of activism. While the trend was performative and accomplished nothing, at the same time, you don't want to be accused of not posting a black square, but you had to do it if it was trendy. I almost didn't want to post it for the performative reason, but I did it anyway because I felt as though I would be criticized for not posting one. Overall, the conformity of #blackouttuesday took away purpose from the Black Lives Matter movement.

Penelope brings to light the concept of performative activism, which, as previously discussed, is

social media activism done to elevate one's social media presence and following rather than to

help the cause. Paige also adds:

> One incidence of difficulty when deciding to post about a trending topic was the Blackout Tuesday squares. It was so difficult to tell what you were supposed to post or not. You really had to do your research to see what would help and be a positive post that day. Many people thought the posting was good, but it was hurting the movement by cluttering up resources, but people who didn't post at all were criticized. It just created more tension with the movement.

Respondents believed that the incident of #blackouttuesday did more harm than good for the

racial justice movement. No respondents spoke about the #blackouttuesday movement in a

positive light. Claire contributes her views on the #blackouttuesday movement:

> 97% of people who post about a trending issue are performative, such as Blackout Tuesday. People were posting to make it look like they cared about the Black Lives Matter movement when they just sat there. Younger people just want the pat on the back on social media as they sit and do nothing….A lot of people post for applause and high fives. Social media is self-centric, which people use to get accolades from other people.

With the dominance of black squares in one's feed, people felt pressured to post their black

square as well, without doing anything to help the racial justice movement beyond just the post.

Another 22 year-old female, Ellie, also adds:

> A friend did call me out for not posting about BLM, which is how I started posting about
> that.

When it came to posting on a topical issue, like Black Lives Matter, she posted about it due to

being scolded for not doing it, which is how that pressure motivated her to post on the topical

issue. Even though she tries to avoid posting for performative reasons, this pressure highlights

a toxic nature of social media. Calling out others for not posting on a topical issue ignites per-

formative activism, furthering discussion on that topic online. Therefore, Ellie is not immune to

the pressures that performative activism entails. While #blackouttuesday is infamous for bring-

ing the term "performative activism" to life, the movement stood out from other kinds of posts

made over the summer.

Other people, however, posted about the racial justice movement for different reasons.

Some interview respondents said they post about a topic if it holds great significance to them

and they have a genuine interest in the topic. Tyler explains:

> I post about Black Lives Matter….I will post about an issue if it is something of impor-
> tance to me...I am more careful about what I post when it's trending. I will only post if I
> agree with what is being said. I won't post if I disagree.

So while racial justice was a trending subject, Tyler is engaged with the topic because he

agreed with what was being said and what was going on. The circulating news of racial injus-

tices motivated him to post for the reasons that these issues of injustice were of great impor-

tance to him. Other respondents post about racial justice to showcase underrepresented voices

from people of color. For example, Ellie highlights:

> I follow Black creators for Black Lives Matter to diversify the perspectives of the posts
> that I share, in order to spread their messages and point of views of the movement. I
> used to feel pressured to post a lot when people are posting about the same thing, but I
> am trying not to do that anymore since I don't want to come off as performative.

Ellie purposely tries to add value to the trending topic by sharing posts from different perspec-

tives in order to order to avoid performative activism. This motivation highlights the different

strategies and various ways people can post about this topic. People can post pictures about

protests, facts about protest safety, the diversity of Black creators and Black-owned businesses,

and many other positive factors about racial justice. However, Ellie is still conscious of her social

media image when she posts about this issue, as she does not want her posts to be perceived

as performative.

Ilana, who tries to stay away from posting controversial topics on social media, has an

exception to her rule:

> If I post something political related, it's because I want to promote a positive part about
> the issue. If I hear that a Black Lives Matter protest is going to happen, I will do some-
> thing about it on social media encouraging people to be safe. I will post about any politi-
> cal event that encourages the safety of the people attending. Overall, I try to keep my
> social media pages wholesome.

Even for someone who makes an effort to avoid posting on controversial topics online, there are

ways to post about positive, seemingly uncontroversial sides of the movement. Therefore, racial

justice can provoke a range of posts and angles that issues like abortion just cannot do.

My respondents of color spoke out about what motivates them to post about racial jus-

tice as well. Hilary, who is also a person of color, explains how she has gotten more confident to

speak out about this topic.

> I engage with issues about Black Lives Matter, capitol rioting, and white supremacy….I
> have gotten braver in posting my stances online… I am more comfortable posting on so-
> cial media if there is a group to stand with. For example, if someone in a Facebook
> group makes a post condemning police actions, I would feel comfortable with making a
> post in that group, along with a similar topic….I want to give the people the time to get
> their voices heard before coming back to other issues. The main conflict within minority
> groups is believing the spotlight is being taken away from them.

Hilary's comfort with posting about a controversial topic like this comes from watching the peo-

ple around her post as well. She wants to be a part of a collective unit in engaging with this topic

online, rather than feel as though she is the only one talking about these issues. She also be-

lieves that it is important for minority groups to have their voices heard. If she is engaging in an

issue because it is trending, it is that trend that provokes her confidence to post, which is some-

thing that she may not have done otherwise. Thus, the popularity of a topic evokes more dis-

cussion for Hilary because she feels more comfortable speaking out when she is a part of a collective unit.

Therefore, racial justice is an issue that appeals to social media users of all posting habits, those who post under pressure and conformity, performative activists, those who have a passion for the topic, those who try to bring important perspectives and share resources, and those who usually try to avoid posting about controversy. There is something about the movement for all kinds of social media users to post about. Other issues may not have so many angles that can appeal to such a broad audience of social media users to engage with.

Politicians and The Election: Non-Controversial Ways To Refer To Controversy

The second most viewed and posted topic on social media centered on issues related to politicians and elections. Unlike racial justice, the election did not provoke a social media event, like #blackouttuesday, that received criticism for being too performative. It seems as though the election and debates about politicians were elevated to the top of people's feeds due to the huge significance of the 2020 election given its historical context, giving users a greater obligation to post. Ellie explains how a significant event is one motivating factor for her to post:

> What motivates me to post about controversial matters if it is a big event or marker, such as the election….I mainly use social media to focus on big life events and public events….While I try to avoid being performative, I do feel obligated to post about big events like the election.

Similar to racial justice, the election has elements that appeal to social media users who normally try to stay away from controversial topics and keep their social media accounts positive. For example, Ilana, who tries to keep her content positive and encouraged her followers to be safe at Black Lives Matter protests, posted election-related content with a similar tone:

> During the election, I posted uplifting content encouraging people to vote and celebrated Biden's win when he won the election.

Many other respondents indicated that they focused on posting about the election in terms of encouraging people to go out to vote. So while the election was much discussed online, there were many ways to post about this controversial topic in a non-controversial way that would not lead to heated debates. As a result, this topic can appeal to a wide range of social media users.

However, posts about politicians and elections remained relevant in the aftermath of election day. As Trump called for recounts of votes after losing both the popular vote and the electoral college, people continued to take to social media and witness posts about voter fraud, where discussions became heated. Alex explains how he got involved in an intense online discussion about election fraud:

> Back when Trump's campaign was alleging all of this fraud and the conspiracy theories and lawsuits that emerged from it...And one person posted this discussion of all of these factors that led Biden to win the election. I commented that this isn't evidence for fraud because Biden won certain counties and that this just isn't evidence of anything. The person just continued to freak out saying it's all circumstantial evidence and then proceeded to say 'I don't support Republicans at all, but I only care about our democracy because this is clearly fraud'. And I said, 'If you cared about democracy you wouldn't be alleging these because you would also see that oftentimes Republican judges and secretaries of state dismiss these lawsuits and if they thought there was evidence of fraud, they wouldn't have.' And then the discussion really just went downhill from there. It really wasn't productive.

The election fraud aftermath continued when it was made official that Trump was defeated in the 2020 election, and a mob of Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021 in a series of violent attacks. My survey was originally made public and sent out on December 20, 2020, before these attacks occurred. However, the interviews began to be conducted on January 11, 2021, when the Capitol riots were fresh in people's minds. The Capitol riots also dominated the social media world, provoking many heated debates and discussions. Thus, while the Capitol riots might not have been listed in the survey, they were a popular topic of discussion in interviews.

Respondents described its dominance on social media as "exhausting" and "completely static, with every post just being the same." Debbie described how the Capitol riots showcased a danger among social media:

> Social media gives people who shouldn't have a platform to talk about issues. White nationalist people incite violence and hate. The capital riots happened because of what was incited on social media. Those people should not have a platform. There are tons of people who should not be posting on social media because they incite violence. It is a double-edged sword.

Trump was banned from Twitter shortly after the Capitol riots, which met with much debate online. The ban was due to Trump's false remarks on a 'stolen election' inciting the attacks

on the Capitol through his social media platforms and threatening to continue to incite this sort of violence. A coalition of civil rights organizations has been working to ban hate speech from all social media platforms and Trump permanently from the rest of the social media sites, through the movement called #BanTrumpSaveDemocracy (PR Newswire, 2021). While the coalition has intentions to rid this "hate" on social media, it creates controversy about whether or not this ban is a violation of First Amendment rights to Freedom of Speech and Expression (PR Newswire, 2021). Lawmakers criticized social media sites for not catching the repeated warnings being given about the attack of the Capitol (Romm, 2021). These social media companies are now going to be held liable for these actions, leading to more security measures being taken on sites like Twitter (Romm, 2021). Twitter acknowledges that world leaders receive special treatment on the platform to heighten their communication with citizens in urgent times, but does agree that the intent to cause harm should be taken into consideration (Romm, 2021). These new accountability policies that social media giants might implement could affect what people see in their social media feeds, which impacts how people engage with politics online. These measures can potentially alter people's social media algorithms and the issues they witness on social media, bringing about different topics for discussion.

During his term in office, Donald Trump was always a hot topic of discussion online. As a controversial world leader, many of his actions provoked extreme reactions from both those who supported and those who did not support him. An 18-year-old female, Nadia, raises a very interesting reason as to what makes Trump such a major topic for debate:

> On social media, people are very pro-Trump or against Trump. Politics online is very polarized overall. There is no one who is in between.

While views on Trump seem to be inherently polarized, what makes this particular issue rise to the forefront is that there were so many different controversies that Trump was involved with during his presidency. These controversies dominated news sources, which made their way to dominating social media news feeds. One 22-year-old female, Wendy, mentions that she never felt overwhelmed by politics on social media until Trump's presidency:

> I never felt overwhelmed on social media until Trump went into office. It is because he is constantly in the news to the point where the news you see on social media is so exhausting and so in your face.

Thus, Trump himself as a topic of discussion has increased social media discussions overall in the last four years through his controversies. While one can be either for or against him, every issue he is involved in ignites much debate.

Disabilities: What Makes Non-Topical Issues Up For Debate?

While the top social media issues discussed and witnessed among students are topical, there are many lesser-known issues that people talk about online, which they feel as though they have a personal connection to. A couple of respondents mentioned that they like to try to focus their political posts on disability rights because they feel as though they have a personal connection to these issues, despite the issue not being talked about as much as other topical issues. These motivations stem from personal connection and a desire to bring awareness to issues that do receive much attention. These efforts help bring underrated issues to light. Wendy likes to solely post about disabilities and elaborates on how she will only post about something topical if it relates to disabilities:

> I will post anything surrounding disabilities to help people become more aware of that. I will never post anything about Trump or Biden unless it's related to disabilities since this is an issue to which I feel a direct connection. Like one time I made a post about Joe Biden's stutter.

Having a disability herself, she posts about a topical issue only if it ties into a matter that she is passionate about and that directly affects her. Blending a popular issue with a lesser talked about issue still elevates the status of a trending political figure or issue, while also bringing awareness to the lesser-known issues. Ellie emphasizes that she will only post about something political when she feels a connection to it, such as those with disabilities:

> I post when there is a connection. Since I have a learning disability, I post about disabilities. I like to show my support for things. I hope it doesn't come off as performative, so I try to be cautious in how I post….I feel obligated to take public stand disabilities since I have a disability and feel connected to it.

Based on this response, Ellie felt a passion to post about disabilities, as it is an issue that affects her directly. Underrated topics of discussion stem from a genuine passion for the topic

among users. Granted, discussions of topical issues are also created through a connection to the issue, but it is mixed with performative activism. Thus, the motivations behind posting on underrated topics are due to a connection or passion for the topics by the users. However, while many of these respondents remain critical of those who engage with performative activism, they are still performing a public stance when they post about these issues. They are still utilizing social media as a way to show that they care about this issue, while also keeping their image in mind by not coming off as performative. This situation also applied to other respondents who post about lesser-known issues.

Uyghur Camps: Posting About A Topic Without Feeling Pressure

Another topic of discussion that was barely mentioned in the survey and only brought up by one interview respondent was the genocide of Uyghurs currently happening in China. One 22-year-old female, Macy, explains the reasons why she takes part in political discussions, particularly about the Uyghur genocide:

> I normally try to stay out of politics, but if there are issues I don't want to stay out of because I feel strongly about it, I will post…. I don't feel the need to post about something trending unless I have something to add or else I don't feel like I will add any value with what I have to say….I just post about Uyghur camps in particular because I care a lot about this issue and I want something positive to happen. I want people to be aware that this is going on, so that they are frustrated too. The more people who speak up and bring awareness to the Uyghurs can help reduce the injustice. I post about this issue because it is not talked about a lot in mainstream media and I want other people to care.

She seeks to raise awareness about an underrepresented issue, due to deep care and connection to the issue. Macy feels more motivated to post about this topic because she doesn't feel the pressure to do so. There is no external pressure placed on Macy to post about these underrated issues.

As a result, Macy believes that she is engaging in "counter performative activism." Her motivations for posting about this topic are opposite of those who post to "feel like a good ally" or for approval from others. In Macy's mind, not too many people know about the Uyghur camps in China. She brings up that if she is able to educate people on this less-known issue, she can make an impact and help the situation by making people more aware about what is happening.

Additionally, since Macy does not experience pressure to post about the Uyghur camps, it further supports why she believes her posting motivations to contrast with performative activism. She claims that people do not care about the issues they discuss though the remarks from other respondents suggest that this is not the case. Macy adds:

> I feel an obligation to post about the Uyghur camps because I actually care about the issue, as opposed to other issues where there is pressure to post, such as the Blackout Tuesday trend. I do not even see how the Blackout Tuesday trend helped with anything when there was so much pressure to post about it. I would just rather focus my energy to post about issues where I do not face pressure.

The problem with placing pressure on others to post about social issues is that it just creates repeated noise on the issue, where one post after another is the same and there is nothing more meaningful to add. Fewer posts on lesser-known subjects allow people to become informed about an issue rather than wade through an echo chamber of the same social media posts. While any controversial post is subject to debate, posting about an issue without pressure creates a less stressful social media experience for the user. Though the lack of pressure to post about these smaller issues mixed with the lack of media representation are the reasons these issues are not as dominant compared to the more topical issues of racial justice and politicians, these are the reasons people are motivated to post about them online in the first place.

While Macy believes her actions counter performative activism, her stance can still be viewed as performative because she is still using social media as an outlet to show that she knows about this particular issue. I will elaborate more in the last chapter why Macy's actions, as the well as the actions of other respondents, can still be viewed as performative even if their motivations show otherwise.

Conclusion

In the end, the top reasons people engage with politics online are to spread awareness and information about an issue and because users generally care about the issue at hand. These motivations fuel both engagement with the most talked-about issues as well as the ones that are not discussed frequently. The issues that provoke discussion online are the more com-

plex, open-ended issues, where one does not necessarily pick one side or the other. While most respondents acknowledge the most polarized issues as controversial, others issues with higher levels of complexity attract the most social media users, allowing these issues to be the most discussed ones.

The lack of discussion about abortion on social media, despite it being a widely recognized controversial issue, highlights how people shy away from topics on social media that contain more narrow middle ground. Other reasons why abortion is not as highly discussed on social media is because abortion is such a private for others to talk about, it is not as relevant in the news currently, and people may feel less of an obligation to post about it in general.

Racial justice not only demonstrates how social media discussions are reflective of what is currently in the news, but also raises interesting dilemmas in how to respond to a trending topic and the formation of a public image on social media. These dilemmas raise the criticisms of performative activism among respondents, especially with the #blackouttuesday trend. Respondents were so critical of performative activism because they believe people were not putting in much effort to help solve the problem through simple posts, were virtue signaling to their followers, and did not do anything further to benefit the cause offline. Nonetheless, racial justice is the top issue for discussion among respondents, since this issue attracts all kinds of social media users. The topic appeals to those looking to take part in a trend, people who are looking to educate their followers, and those seeking to post uplifting content.

Social media posts on the election highlight ways people could create non-controversial content about a controversial topic. However, the election does not trigger as much criticism for being performative as racial justice did. Engagement with lesser-discussed issues, like disabilities, illustrates how non-topical subjects can still spark an interest in discussion when there are personal connections to the topic. Other lesser-known issues that are still topical, like the Uyghur camps, can be up for discussion when there is no external pressure to post about it.

The topical issues that are most complex are often the controversial issues that are brought to light. Meanwhile, lesser-known issues are posted about by users simply because

these topics are underrated and the pressure to post is erased. Overall, a majority of respondents had their social media behaviors impacted by witnessing political content online. While most individuals do influence their habits based on what they see on social media, how they change their behavior is highly dependent on the issue at hand, the emotions one feels on this issue, and how they feel affected by the issue. Given this base data, I will now transition our focus as to how social media shapes political discussions in order to better understand how these conversations continue to be elevated by respondents.

Chapter 4: How Does Social Media Shape Political Discussions?

Introduction

Social media has played an integral role in how political discussions are elevated and executed. If offers many features that invite engagement in posts, such as likes and comments. The comments component of social media invites discussions to take place, especially when it comes to politics. This chapter will also include an analytical look into the types of platforms where users engage with politics, and how social media platforms generate public discussion to create an environment where people can air their views the most easily. I will explore how a user's network on a certain social media platform shapes the political discussions that a user has on that social networking site.

Additionally, I will discuss how heated debates occur online and how respondents feel about them. I will also discuss how algorithms are another important feature that shape political discussions because they determine the content that a user will see in their feeds. Based on a user's previous engagement, a user is likely to see posts at the top of their feed with which they are likely to engage. As a result, algorithms have a tremendous impact on the discussions that will arise. While some respondents blame the algorithms for one-sided information in their feeds, I will explore whether this outlook shifts responsibility from their circle of friends onto the algorithm. When evaluating how social media has elevated controversial discussions and furthered them among a wider audience, Claire's perspective provides the best summary of how most respondents were feeling:

> A pro is that people are more aware of engaging with social issues at a younger age and they can develop their own sense of opinion at an early age. A con is that social media has created a more divided intensity that proliferates the spread of misinformation through social media and algorithms. This leads to an increasing division among political parties.

Just like Claire, some respondents praised social media for spreading information about controversial discussions. While these people believe social media is ineffective in creating lasting change, they still believe that it has done a good job in helping people become aware of issues.

These beliefs are exactly why the top motivating factors for why users engage in controversial topics on social media are educating others.

Both Paige and Vivienne applaud social media for allowing people to expand their network and spread pertinent information. Paige elaborates:

> Social media made important topics more known. It has made the youngest generation more aware of important issues, especially if they are more active about these issues...It is easier to get information about any topic. I usually learn about things on social media first. My TikTok feed is very political where I get a lot more specific information about issues that I never would have thought about, such as child labor and detention camps in China.

Isaac continues to admire social media for its ability to organize effective offline events with ease:

> It has done well with awareness. People can post something for free, which has created cheap marketing for people. Social media creates a platform to promote important ideas and organize protests too.

Ellie also supports social media for making it easier to organize events, but does point out one flaw:

> Social media has ultimately made it easier to organize, especially marches. However, it makes things look like trends when they are legitimate issues.

The point she raises about trends serves as the basis for why respondents have consistently denounced performative activism throughout my study. The #blackouttuesday movement is a primary example of how a social media trend detracted from the actual discussion of an important issue. The "trendiness" of an issue also leads to why people are not in favor of online political discussions, believing that social media has made everything more polarized overall.

Tess refers back to the ideas of the echo-chamber and how that has led to a divide on social media:

> Social media has made us into a more partisan world. It has divided us more through the echo chamber. People are ready to jump at each other. More people are working to yell at each other rather than explaining things politely.

Tess's negative views about social media also derive from the arguments that people get into, drawing on the toxic environment other respondents pointed out.

Overall, this chapter attempts to break down the various features of social media that invite users to participate in political discourse.

Why People Become Involved In Heated Discussions

Only 7 of the 23 respondents disclosed that they were once part of an online discussion that was very heated and intense. One 22-year-old male, Paul, explains why he was motivated to get involved in his intense discussion:

> While it was a very futile discussion, I find it interesting to see how people have different views and to understand their perspectives. I like to have my own views challenged.

This response is very similar to that of Sarah, who also pointed out that she engages to have her views challenged. Sarah adds her thoughts on what motivates her to take part in intense political discussions online:

> Activism takes off from that moment when you have heated debates. We are facing modern issues and not paying enough attention to them is how they became issues in the first place. Social media brings awareness to these issues, which is why it is important to have debates about them.

These comments seem to indicate a view of debate as intellectually interesting, without the need for emotional investment. This serves as a contrast to those who post because they care a lot about an issue. As a politically active user online, Sarah finds debating to be more of a hobby, and she can have a solid discussion without the need for her personal feelings to get in the way. When it comes to evaluating whether the conversations are effective, Sarah holds a less positive view:

> Nothing comes of it though because nobody budges. It just allows people to think that they're right all the time.

So while Sarah takes part in online conversations as a way to raise awareness among a wide audience about an issue, she still does not find her conversations to be productive. Tess shares similar but distinct thoughts on her motivations for taking part in heated online debates:

> I get involved with intense discussions because they are necessary. From a young age, I grew up in a political environment. Debating has come naturally to me ... Sometimes I feel like these heated discussions are productive and sometimes they are not ... Other people should learn ... What I am doing could make a difference and matter. It's just important to share issues for people who do not know as much about a topic, which can raise awareness on these issues.

Both of these women discuss how important taking part in debates is for them, bringing up a rare positive point of view about intense discussions. Both Sarah and Tess seem to get involved in these discussions in a way that is less emotionally invested in the way they debate with others, allowing them to have rational arguments on social media. Like Sarah, Tess finds her heated discussions necessary, since they raise awareness on an issue. Tess adds:

> I don't think social media can solve the problem, but it can make more people aware of the issue.

Even though Tess does not always find her debates on social media to be productive, she still feels as though what she is doing can make a difference. Thus, while she knows that posting on social media will not solve the problem, she still considers educating others on social media to be a form of effective activism. Sarah and Tess overall do not find their heated discussions positive, but they still see debates as a crucial part of getting their voices heard and educating others about something they may not have otherwise known. However, they never felt themselves as under attack from the other side, but rather were just frustrated if they could not get someone to see the other side of an issue.

Will was in a very similar situation, where he found satisfaction in a heated discussion when it came to educating the person he was debating with, but did not find it to be effective:

> One time I got in an argument with someone on Reddit. I was correcting someone for being wrong. It was a small enough place to do it that it wasn't too public or even get buried. Correcting someone still doesn't do anything to help the cause. It just helps you feel better. Or worse if they don't change their mind.

The small size of the platform helped motivate Will to get involved with the discussion, but he admits that these heated debates remain ineffective. This point shows that the impact of posting to correct or educate someone is no different than the impact of taking part in performative activism, as both of these motivations are found to be ineffective by participants. Other respondents who had admitted to taking part in an intense discussion had only been involved in one discussion and did not get involved any further. Tyler explains his melancholic feelings about the heated discussions he got involved with:

> I get involved when I see something that I don't like ... It doesn't make me happier. I get a little upset afterward.

Though his involvement in discussions makes him feel worse, Tyler still continues to get involved despite not liking them, because he wants to speak out on something he does not like. Unlike Sarah and Tess, it seems as though Tyler's emotions inhibit his ability to take part in discussions on social media, which diminishes his interest in it. Hilary was also upset after she got involved with an intense discussion:

> One time, I got into a discussion about the confederate flag ... I got shit on by a bunch of white supremacists who refused to believe they were wrong ... I got involved in the discussion because I knew they were wrong and that I was right. I felt qualified in what I was talking about since this was an issue that affected my family, and it was such a heat of the moment discussion ... I felt upset, but once you post something, it is there forever. It was the first and last time I ever engaged in this discourse. One day, an employer will check these receipts.

Hilary is not usually one to engage much, but like Will, she chose to get involved to correct someone. Additionally, she got involved with the discussion since she witnessed misinformation on an issue that affected her personally. The outcome of the discussion, however, lowered her hopes. It not only upset her, but it discouraged her from engaging in these debates in the future. The public display of these discussions and the potential for employers to see her exchanges also dampened her motivation to participate in intensive disputes on social media moving forward.

There are various motivations for becoming involved in a heated debate. Some respondents were driven by the need of an intellectual conversation about an issue to raise awareness on the topic, while others wanted to correct people on misinformation or educate others on the issue. Whereas those who spoke about how these discussions are fundamental tended to stick to having an intellectual discussion with little to no involvement of personal emotions, the users who felt emotionally distressed by these discussions let their feelings get involved, especially if they felt personally affected by a certain issue. Those who admit to getting involved in heated debates can do so because they are not getting emotionally overwhelmed and do not interpret online opposition to be an emotional attack. The ones who have an emotional investment in their discussions are the ones who feel under attack. As a result, it is important to consider

whether engagement in heated debates is any different than the performative activism that is often criticized among respondents. Either way, people do not find these discussions to be productive, even if they find it essential.

Why Do People Comment On Posts?

According to the survey, 28.92% of respondents comment on people's political posts, while 71.08% of respondents do not comment on other people's political posts. Only 3 of the 23 interview respondents indicated that they comment on other people's posts and provided insight into their motivations for doing so. Wendy, who is not very politically active, addresses why she still enjoys commenting on other people's political posts:

> I usually comment on a post if it is something that I have questions about, then I will comment to ask my questions. I do so because I feel like a part of the conversation.

Her remarks undercut the assumption that only those who are very politically active will comment on other people's posts, when in reality, any type of social media user may have the motivation to do so. However, Sarah and Tess, who engage in the comment section on posts, are both very politically active online. Sarah explains her passion for the comment section:

> I have this mantra that I like to stick with. It goes like, 'tolerance of intolerance is intolerance'. And I feel as though if I were to just be a bystander in every single situation where something could be said then I would be doing wrong, not only to myself but to marginalized groups of people. So if I can say something, I will. Like if someone is just being openly racist on social media, I'll be like, 'Come on! Stop that'. Or just recently with posts about Covid and mask-wearing, I'm like, 'This is the whole reason we're still doing this is that a whole entire year ago, you couldn't just wear a mask and stay inside for three straight months and here we are a year later.'

Sarah's motivation stems from wanting to stand up for others online, especially because she cares about the issues she is commenting about. Her examples of what she comments on concern recent issues, although she does post and comment on a variety of topics. Overall, Sarah aims to point out/condemn speech that is promoting societal harm, such as racism or anti-masking, for others to be aware that engaging in this behavior is unacceptable. She is motivated to comment on other posts so she can stop this speech that encourages others.

While Sarah sees online behavior as speech that should sometimes be halted, Tess sees online speech as a set of opinions that can be changed:

> I want to convince others of another point of view ... We live in this society where every single issue is bipartisan.

Tess is the only respondent who expressed interest in trying to change other people's minds on social media. However, it is not very common for people to change their minds on social media. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, only 23% of adults in the United States have changed their views on an issue from social media (Perrin, 2020). While people can have their views changed online, this Pew Research study shows that it does not work most of the time. Perhaps users understand this since my study shows that there are not that many people looking to change other people's views through social media.

On Which Social Media Platforms Do People Find And Engage In The Most Discussion?

Table 4-1: On What Platforms Do Respondents Post Political Content?[5]

Facebook	35%
Twitter	23.6%
Instagram (Stories)	54.6%
Instagram (In Feed Posts)	10.34%
Snapchat	5.7%
Linkedin	1.7%
TikTok	3.4%
Other (Respondents listed WeChat, Tumblr, Reddit, and Zhihu under this category)	11.5%

It is common that most respondents have set aside and dedicated one app for political discourse, while they tend not to engage in political discourse on other apps. Everyone has different reasons for choosing one app over another. 54.6% of my survey respondents posted political content on Instagram Stories, making it the most popular platform where users engaged in political discourse. The second-most cited platform was Facebook, with over 35% of respondents naming it. In the interviews, there was much debate about why people prefer to post on

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[5] *Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so the % does not add up perfectly to 100

Facebook versus Instagram and why their preferred platform was more beneficial for political discourse. Overall, the interviews highlighted both the abilities and inadequacies of each social media platform to maintain civil discourse. Debbie praised Facebook as her preferred platform due to it being a good resource to post about political topics and facilitate cordial discussion:

> Facebook has family members and people I am close with. I am more inclined to make a political post on Facebook to allow for a more interactive interface.

Meanwhile, Debbie saw Instagram as a platform where she tries to avoid being political:

> I don't post controversial topics on Instagram, since it is made up of people I'm not close with ... It is a lot harder to post political stuff on Instagram.

The platforms Debbie chooses to utilize depend on the strength of her relationships with those people she is connected with on those platforms. She leans towards the platforms containing those who are already in her core circle and avoids larger networks of people outside of her core circle of real-life interactions. These tendencies seem to support the spiral of silence theory. Kwon et.al's (2015) study holds that the more exposure one has on a social media platform, the more likely one is to stay silent due to the fear of isolation.

> Other respondents condemn Facebook as an inadequate platform for political discourse. Vivienne explains how her network of connections leads her to avoid political posts on Facebook:

> I don't post much on Facebook in general, so I feel like it is pointless to post controversial issues if I don't post at all. I am also the only queer person in my family, and a lot of my extended family is on Facebook, so a lot of the issues I would post about would lead to disagreements. I prefer to use Instagram more for controversial posts.

In Vivienne's case, her fixed network (her family) discourages her from using Facebook, in contrast to Debbie, whose connections to her family encouraged her to use Facebook for controversial posts. The difference is due to the relationships and connections that a user has with the people they are connected with on the platform, especially Facebook. Sarah explains her reasoning for not enjoying Facebook as a platform for engaging in controversial discussion:

> I post on every platform, but there are more angry comments and backlash on Facebook through my posts since there is an older generation of users that use that platform. People are more receptive to Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which are more utilized by the younger generation.

Thus, the demographics of the app play a big role in how users decide what platforms they engage with on political topics. Since TikTok attracts a younger audience and rewards users for how creative their videos are, Sarah enjoys posting political content there. This finding is similar to that of Literat and Kilger-Vilenchik (2019) who discuss how this platform builds a collective audience through creativity. Still, TikTok is not a popular platform for posting political content, with only 3.4% of survey respondents indicating that they post political content on TikTok.

Ilana points out why she does not post political content on TikTok:

I do not post anything political to TikTok because I don't know what side of the app I am going to end up on.

The uncertainty about how the algorithm plays out and who her video will be shared with turns her away from posting on the app. This is because, unlike other apps where posts are only made to be seen by a user's network followers, TikTok can show a user's video to anybody who uses the app through the "For You Page" as long as the user has a public account. This can be a major barrier to people engaging politically on TikTok, as the potential exposure of their video is out of their control. It can be shared by anyone and show up in anyone's feed. A user's "For You Page" on TikTok is customized according to a user's interests through the type of videos that the user engages with. For example, if users engage with political videos on TikTok, such as liking or commenting on them, they will more likely have political videos show up in their feed. If a user posts a political video, it can be exposed to other TikTok users who engage with political videos. Ilana is concerned that if she posts something political on TikTok, her video could be shared on the "For You Page" of a user who does not share her political views, potentially creating backlash and arguments in the comment sections with people who disagree with her. The uncertainty about TikTok's algorithm and the potential increased exposure could hinder one from posting political content, as would be predicted by Kwon et. al's (2015) ideas on how increased exposure creates more silence online.

The nature of the discourse centered on an issue can also play a role in how users decide which platforms to use, which certainly plays a role in users' decisions about using Twitter for political discourse. Twitter is a popular platform for political discourse though not as strong as

Instagram Stories and Facebook, with 23.6% of respondents indicating that they post political

content on Twitter. Claire elaborates more on her preferences for posting on Twitter:

> I am more likely to post and retweet stuff on Twitter because I read more about politics on that platform along with social issues, which are presented in a much [more] light-hearted way ... I don't post on Instagram stories because everyone in my circle who has posted about an issue will share the same posts on their stories to the point where I wouldn't be able to add anything new to the conversation. I also just don't post much on Instagram and Facebook because of the data mining on those apps, in addition to Facebook being more combative ... Instagram is also a big echo chamber, so I don't post anything there either.

Claire's perception of Instagram as an echo chamber further illustrates why people do not en-

gage in political discussions online, especially if they know it will be belligerent. The next chap-

ter will go much more in-depth about the concept of this "echo chamber."

A 21-year-old male, Ben, has this same perspective and expands upon why Twitter is his

preferred app for political discourse:

> I more commonly post about income and equality and racial justice on Twitter because you curate the friends you have on that app and can meet new people through discussions … I don't post on Facebook or Instagram because I don't think there is a positive discourse in those places. Facebook is especially toxic in the way people give a discourse to each other.

Ben relegates his online political discourse to Twitter and agrees with the points other respon-

dents made about Facebook being an outlet of backlash and harmful dialogue. More respon-

dents pointed to Facebook as an ominous place for debate, while only one respondent, Ilana,

observed these same patterns on Twitter:

> I don't like putting political stuff on Twitter because I believe it should be used for more fun content and not hate. The app is used so much for hate and drama when it comes to politics.

While Twitter was not criticized as much as Facebook, this comment shows that any social me-

dia platform is susceptible to hateful discourse when politics are being discussed. Since more

people post about politics on Facebook than Twitter, according to my study, it is more common

to witness vicious debates. However, that is not to say these kinds of debates cannot happen on

other platforms, but are more common when the platform is used more. The wider generational

reach of Facebook and to a lesser extent Twitter also impacts the way social media users are

feeling as though the discussions are more combative. While Instagram Stories are popular out-

lets for political posting, users cannot comment on those stories in a public way, but rather must

reply to posts in a private discussion. Facebook is the most used app, where all comments that

are made on a post are public, which leads to more users witnessing heated arguments.

Ellie justifies her choice of Instagram as her primary outlet for political content, which

very much aligns with the patterns above regarding why others choose Instagram over Face-

book for posting:

> I post the most on Instagram since my friends and followers tend to be more liberal
> there. I'm warier about posting on Facebook because I have more family there and I am
> worried about conflicting views. I post more about the positive on a controversial topic
> rather than the negative.

Her statement continues to reflect the patterns we have witnessed from other respondents, in

terms of the nature of the relationship that one has with their social media connections and set-

ting aside a primary platform for political engagement.

Only two interview respondents pointed out why they do not use Instagram. Tess speaks

about why she prefers Facebook:

> I like to post on Facebook since the content is wordier than what can fit into an Insta-
> gram story graphic.

 Having unlimited words on Facebook as opposed to a pre-fixed Instagram graphic provides

Tess with more control over and customization of the message she wants to send about a cer-

tain issue. Other than that, Instagram was not criticized and was not singled out for igniting

heated political arguments.

Only a couple of respondents said that they posted political content on Snapchat. If they

did post, it was mainly due to having followers who are younger and within their peer circle of

close friends. Ilana applauds Snapchat for being her primary platform for political content.

> I post on my Snapchat story about political issues since it's mostly my friends following
> me and it is mainly uplifting content.

Once again, the strength of Ilana's relationships on the platform is an influencing factor that

draws her to use it for political content. Snapchat is not as used for political content as much as

other platforms, with only 5.7% of survey users indicating that they post political content on

Snapchat. A core reason that Snapchat may not be used on a political basis as much as other

platforms is that most respondents indicated that they either do not post much on Snapchat in general or will only post on their Snapchat story if something funny happens in their life. The primary tone of the app is very casual and carefree, and not often used as a public forum of discussion.

LinkedIn is not a common platform for political content either, with only 1.7% of survey respondents indicating that they post political content on LinkedIn. While respondents do not post much political content on Snapchat due to it being such a casual app, LinkedIn has some effect for opposite reasons since it is a professionally-oriented platform. It is very hard to take part in a controversial discussion on a platform meant to enhance professional relationships, as this discord could impede the formation of those relationships. Will indicated his sole reason for why he would post political content on LinkedIn:

I will only post political content on Linkedin if it will help me out job-wise.

Nora pointed out:

I will sometimes post about something political on LinkedIn, depending on the level of professionalism involved.

Therefore, the main motivating factor for users to post on a professionally-oriented platform like LinkedIn is if engaging with political issues will help them in their careers.

Given that controversy can impede professional relations, as Tyler explains:

I try to stay away from posting political and controversial content on LinkedIn, as I'm trying to get a job and I don't want to mess things up with potential employers.

The fact that only two interview respondents could see a reason for posting information about politics on LinkedIn shows that it is very rare for people to find political content that will help them professionally, especially because of the expanded networks utilized on that platform.

Besides these core social media apps, there are other apps with which respondents like to engage, such as WeChat and Reddit. An 18-year-old female, Isabelle, prefers to use WeChat to post political content for reasons that are very similar to why other users prefer certain apps:

I mostly post on WeChat because I don't really use other social media platforms and most of my friends are familiar with the use of this app.

Isabelle feels most comfortable with using WeChat because that is where she feels closest to the connections in her network. Ultimately, the relationships within one's social network play a huge role in how people choose which platform they use to engage in politics.

Ben talks about why he likes to use Reddit to engage in political discourse:

I like using Reddit because it allows room for anonymous debate ... Reddit doesn't have the biggest public presence since the discussion is small.

The anonymous nature of Reddit allows respondents to rid themselves of their identities to engage with online discussion, making the discussion feel less public when nobody knows the true identities of other users. In this case, it is the absence of relationships that matters in how this social media platform manages to encourage online debate. However, other interview respondents pointed to Reddit as a platform for heated political discussions. Eddie says:

I don't engage too much with politics because people can't fight you if you don't post. I see way too many people arguing back and forth on Reddit, that it's not worth it.

Similar to why users avoid posting political content on certain platforms, he aims to avoid toxic discourse.

Overall, the platform that a user chooses to engage in political discourse is all dependent on the types of the relationships they have with the people they are connected to on that social platform.

Algorithms

Many interview respondents point out that the presentation of certain issues in their social media feeds boils down to their algorithm. A social media algorithm determines the order in which posts are sorted on a user's feed based on their relevance for that user and how likely it is that the user will engage with a post, rather than ordering according to the time that the post was made. Algorithms are like a recipe set up by the computer. However, while respondents blame the algorithm for customizing their page, most people do not know how algorithms work and the technical logistics behind how they are generated. Claire claims that much of her Facebook algorithm skews her news about issues regarding antisemitism and the Israel-Palestine conflict to a Jewish perspective. She recognizes that because she engages with left-leaning

posts, the algorithm will ultimately show her social media posts that are left-leaning on issues. She adds that a major downside to social media is that algorithms have led to misinformation on people's feeds and that one-sided algorithms feed into the increased division on issues.

This point supports what I discussed in Chapter 2 regarding Johnathon Cox's (2017) arguments about how people's beliefs are validated through their social media algorithms. Penelope says that she will only see the liberal-leaning side of controversies based on accounts she follows. Macy indicates that her Facebook algorithm never shows her political posts in her feed since she never tends to engage with those kinds of posts. When she does see political news on her feed, she does not want the news to be manipulated by a social media algorithm. Macy prefers to seek out news from other media sources because they are not manipulated by an algorithm, while Ilana prefers to get her news on social media because she can take the initiative to look up facts about the issue in lieu of relying on news sources that she believes to be biased. These various insights highlight that respondents have different views on what types of sources they believe to be trustworthy.

However, online news sources are still susceptible to an algorithm. It is the slant of online news sources that may fit better in some people's algorithms over others. There seems to be a divide among my interview respondents about whether they prefer to get their news from social media directly or from other news sources. The ultimate reason why a respondent chooses one source of news over another is to avoid receiving skewed or biased information. Across the board, respondents wanted to feel in control of the news they receive and take initiative to ensure they get a well-rounded perspective on pressing issues. The idea that some believe social media is better as a general news source illustrates how people hold more positive perceptions of social media as a general news source than they do of people making political posts.

In this particular scenario, it seems as though these respondents are blaming the algorithms instead of their close circle of peers for why they see more left-leaning views in their feeds. It shifts the responsibility of what they see online away from one's online circle of friends and places that responsibility onto an invisible algorithm. The respondents who choose not to

follow political news on social media because they believe what they see is being manipulated by an algorithm are potentially making conclusions about an aspect that they may be able to control. It is a possibility that the subjects are correct in their assumptions about algorithms. Users are monitored across the Internet through different websites or links they click, through a series of data cookies that record our history. This data is manipulated to show users certain advertisements in their feed and predict future social media behavior. These strategies are especially used by Facebook and Amazon. However, these algorithms have done little to influence voting decisions. A platform like Facebook makes it easy to be exposed to diverse viewpoints through one's social circle, despite the algorithm. The misinformation that users may see on Twitter stems from anyone, but users can still find a way around this misinformation by looking at other sources. So while the algorithm is influential in what people see, the way a user interacts with social media beyond just what is in their feed, such as doing general searches about topics, is just as important in their posting decisions. Thus, the respondents are incorrect in the way they shift responsibility for the political issues they witness onto the algorithm, rather than their social circle, as it takes more than just an algorithm to affect how one will engage online.

Conclusion

Based on these findings, there appear to be several factors that are shaping political posts on social media. Most respondents clarify that they want to bring value to the posts and only engage with the topic if they feel as though they will add something meaningful to the conversation, in the hopes to avoid performative activism.

While few respondents get involved in intense, heated discussions, their motivation comes from an increased desire to spread information about a certain topic and because they find it necessary to hold discussions about these controversial topics. These reasons are similar to why people comment on other people's posts. While a small sample of respondents comment on posts, they do so to take part in the conversation, challenge other people's views, and have their views questioned. Other people may get involved in an intense discussion if they find misinformation, if they do not like what they see, or if the issue affects them personally. Those who

let their emotions get involved in heated discussions are the ones who tend to not get involved again, while those who continue to take part in these debates do not let their emotions take over. While the people who get involved in heated debates regularly find these conversations necessary to educate others, they do not find this discourse to be productive all the time. The same thing goes for people who were involved in a discussion once and never got involved again since they were upset by the whole conversation. Since there is substantial evidence of people criticizing performative activism, but little evidence of people admitting that they take part in performative activism, it is worth noting whether or not certain behaviors on social media should also be considered performative, especially if these behaviors are ineffective in creating change. If all ways of engaging in political discourse are ineffective, then there may not be that much of a difference between becoming a part of intense discussions and performative activism.

With Instagram Stories and Facebook being the top platforms where users participate in political discussion online, the results show that the platform a social media user chooses to engage with depends on the nature of the relationship that the user has with their connections on that social media platform, the overall user demographics of that social media platform, the level of exposure that one's post could receive on a platform, and how much heated discourse occurs on that platform. Most respondents tended to lean more towards platforms where they felt the closest with their network of followers, that had a younger user demographic, that had lower post exposure to people outside of their core network, such as potential employers, and that had less argumentative communication overall. Other people prefer platforms where they can curate the people they interact with and find relationships with people with whom they are bound to agree, or platforms that allow room for anonymous debate, where relationships are absent.

In general, these relationships play a major role in how a social media user determines their dominant platform for engaging with politics. This decision in choosing a platform where one feels as though they have the best relationship with their followers is indicative that users make an effort to steer away from conflict with others when they want to post about a controver-

sial topic. They also want to choose a platform where the audience will be the most receptive to their content.

The respondents found that posting for the purpose of bringing awareness to an issue is a positive factor in talking about controversy online, even if online discussions as a whole are not directly effective in creating change. Even if the posts are not entirely effective, the respondents still perceive their efforts to be positive, as long as the posts come along with the purpose to educate their followers.

Respondents believe that the social media algorithms often skew the perspective of news one sees on their timeline, but other people turn to social media for their news anyway as an escape from the more "biased" news sources. Meanwhile, other individuals prefer to get their news from the news media because they want to avoid "biased" algorithms. While the algorithm can contribute to the angle of news a user sees in their feed, these skewed algorithms could also be due to a user's circle of friends on social media and previous issues with which the user has engaged. All outlets of media consumption hold their flaws of potential misinformation.

Since educating others about an issue is the top motivating factor behind why people post, then choosing a platform where users feel as though they have the best relationship with their followers and feel as though their followers will be receptive to their content, is crucial as it shows that users are trying to optimize their content on social media and make it as effective as it can be. If a user knows that their followers on that specific site will perceive their content positively, they have the satisfaction of knowing that they created an informative conversation that will best raise awareness of the issue they are trying to promote. Even if their post is not directly effective, the selection of their platform helped them best promote awareness of the cause they are trying to advance. Promoting awareness of an issue is still a positive way to encourage people to take action on social media. Therefore, the relationships that a user has with people on certain platforms are crucial in determining how awareness of an issue will be promoted on that platform.

Chapter 5: Why Do People Not Engage In Online Debates?

Introduction:

When interview respondents were asked about the emotions they experience from online political discussions, the most common ones brought up were "frustration," "exhaustion," "anger," "disappointment," and "sadness." These are all negative emotions that users experience, which can be a telling factor in why users are discouraged from engaging in online discussions. Not a single respondent indicated that they experienced a positive emotion from political discussions. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center in August 2020, 55% of social media users feel 'worn out' from the number of political discussions they see on social media (Anderson and Auxier, 2020). This statistic is a dramatic increase from 2016, when only 37% of respondents reported feeling 'worn-out' from politics on social media. Users on social media in 2020 were also more likely to describe political conversations as negative than they were in 2016 (Anderson and Auxier, 2020). Just as in my study, the majority of respondents in the Pew study described political conversations they witness as "stressful" or "frustrating," rather than positive (Anderson and Auxier, 2020). The negative emotions reported in both the Pew Research study and mine express the low spirits and cynicism in the face of political discussions on social media, decreasing desires to join in online discussions.

In this chapter, I will look at the top reasons why people choose not to engage in social media discussions about controversial issues, highlighting why people choose to stray from trending topics, political topics, and commenting on political posts. Additionally, I will analyze how the consciousness of one's social media image drives users to not get involved in social media trends. The limited effects of conformity and external pressure to post on social media will also be examined. I will do an analysis of people's judgments of those who do not post on social media, highlighting how these judgments can lead to other people giving into pressure, but also compare them to respondents who do not judge people who do not discuss controversial topics online. These findings will demonstrate a common theme in how the concerns about one's own and others' social media images leaves an impact in how users decide not to engage on social

media, even when they critique performative activism. Ultimately, I will highlight the cynicism and negative outlooks that respondents have regarding social media debates concerning controversial topics, which lead them to not engage in this discourse.

Why People Do Not Engage In A Trending Topic

First, it is important to define a trending topic. A trending topic is a matter of discussion that has a quick, sudden growth in popularity for a short amount of time. These topics provoke the largest amount of conversation on social media, until their popularity inevitably fades out with the surge in popularity of new topics. The following table is a list of reasons why respondents choose not to engage in trending topics.

Table 5-1: Why Do You Choose To Not Engage In A Trending Topic On Social Media?

1. **Want To Avoid Performative Activism**	9.67%
2. **Not Effective Or Productive**	9%
3. **Want To Avoid Conflict**	7.7%
4. **Don't Like To Engage In Politics Online**	7.7%
5. **Don't Care/Not Interested/Not Inclined**	7.1%
6. **Would Rather Engage In Discussions/Activism In Person**	7.1%
7. **Don't Post Often In General**	6.45%
8. **Avoid Negativity**	5.16%
9. **Preserve Own Mental Health**	4.52%
10. **Don't Feel It Is Necessary To Engage In Politics**	3.87%
11. **Don't Have Anything Of Value To Add To The Conversation**	3.23%
12. **Don't Want Employers To See It**	3.23%

According to the survey, the top reason users gave for why they do not engage in discussing a controversial topic that is currently trending on social media is because they want to avoid performative activism. A close second reason was that participants did not believe that posting about a controversial trending topic will be effective or productive in addressing the issue. In other words, respondents believed that the creation of the social media post itself will not cause direct change and solve the issue. For example, Harry explains:

> Social media does not solve real issues. At the end of the day, you have to talk to someone. You have to do niche and complicated things offline in order to get things to actually change.

Harry's clarification is a typical representation of respondents' answers for why they do not believe making a post on social media will create direct change.

67.47% of survey respondents indicated that they will not post about a controversial topic if it is trending. There are many interesting conclusions to draw from these responses. Both of the top two reasons are very similar in the sense that they center around the belief that posting about a trending topic will not directly benefit a cause. This highlights the chunk of respondents who focus on the overall effectiveness of a post, something I will discuss in greater detail in the concluding chapter. Indeed, a majority of respondents find the communication of controversial issues on social media to be ineffective in solving an issue. The people who choose not to post so as to avoid being performative are those who are trying to avoid being part of a bandwagon when it comes to trending topics. When a trending controversial issue becomes performative, people lose sight of the origins of the injustice behind the issue. The trending nature of an issue merely turns it into a colorful graphic for people to share to highlight their awareness of the issue. When no action is taken beyond that, the issue becomes a means for users to achieve status on social media, to show off that they are "in" on things. Performative activists take advantage of the injustices that were brought about in a community and use them for their own social benefit, while the need to take action to solve an injustice gets buried in the sand.

Why People Do Not Want To Get Involved In Performative Activism

The reasoning for "effectiveness and productivity" seems to build off of "performative activism" in recognizing how an issue discussed too much on social media can be counter-productive. Wendy highlights how excessive posting can hurt a social movement:

> People post the same thing over and over. That annoys people rather than helps, which creates a danger in being counterproductive.

Wendy explains that too much posting can burden social media users to a point where they are not motivated to help the cause, which shows how dangerous social media can be in regards to activism. Additionally, the original incidents that brought the topic into the limelight get lost following repetitive posts that contribute to the trending nature of the topic. It gets to the point where engaging in the trend will not help the issue and even drown out important posts that could benefit the cause.

Posts that would be beneficial include links to educational resources, places to donate, or a list of creators or businesses to support. Seeing too much discussion on a topic causes the topic to lose its emotional value, with users no longer feeling sympathy for the problem, but merely seeing just another trend. This loss of emotion and sympathy regarding the issue leads to it quickly fading out of relevance, unresolved. This phenomenon highlights a key dilemma in people's emotional investment in certain topics. Respondents post about a controversial topic because they have an emotional investment in it, but when this topic is talked about too much, it can desensitize an audience and decrease a user's emotional investment. It is therefore important to achieve a balance in how often an issue is discussed. Emotional investment in the issue allows people who are passionate about the topic to bring awareness to it, but a balance must be established with how much attention the issue receives, before it becomes so much that it desensitizes others. This desensitization is also dependent on how other occurrences are covered in the news. If attention is constantly focused on tragedy, users become desensitized to what is going on. It is important to sprinkle in comic relief and uplifting stories to help prevent the emotional burnout that comes with constantly solemn news.

The criticism of and backlash to the #blackouttuesday trend is a prime example of a trending topic that turned into merely a digital trend rather than an emotional topic of discussion for the Black Lives Matter movement. Wendy even had to take a short break from social media after #blackouttuesday since social media no longer was a place where she could gather practical information on the Black Lives Matter movement:

> If only one thing is being posted on social media and nothing else, that is when I have to take a break from it. I had to take a break when there were black squares constantly on social media. I was more interested in reading about what was happening than I was at seeing these squares. I couldn't learn anything about the movement from only seeing these squares.

Wendy's response indicates that not only does information overload take away from the emotional response of an issue, but it also blocks crucial, educational information from being delivered. As a result, it hinders one's ability to inform oneself about the issue. Merely seeing a black square in one's feed holds no value in solving the issue or furthering the conversation on how change can be made.

However, that is not to say that people become disinterested in the issue if they decide not to engage. Wendy, and most other respondents who were critical of #blackouttuesday, still expressed an interest in learning more about Black Lives Matter and wanting to help out but chose not to engage in this trend due to its performative nature. They believed that taking part in it was not going to help anything. Will adds a bit of insight on why he doesn't post much about controversial topics in general and especially why he does not engage in trends:

> I don't have a large platform of followers on social media, so I don't post because I know it is not going to reach many people, so I am not going to generate new and original content...I never feel a sense of conformity to post about a trending topic. Especially since the black squares for #blackouttuesday were such an empty gesture….Being that there are ways to make a change with direct action, posting a black square on social media doesn't do anything. It is more pragmatic to not post at all and to take real action instead...I am not trying to build followers, so I don't really think about posting or care to do it.

Will's point about how not engaging in the trend is more pragmatic illustrates how a significant number of people who do not partake in trends do so because they care about that issue. Additionally, his comment about the squares being an "empty gesture" continues to support the

ideas on how those who continue to contribute to trends drown out the issue with repetitive noise. Additionally, Will's point about why he is not trying to build followers seems to imply that those who are looking to build a social media following engage in controversial discussion.

Macy further emphasized these points:

I felt an obligation to take part in the Black Out Tuesday trend, but I didn't post a black square because I kept questioning how the trend actually helps. I feel a greater obligation to post about certain issues where I do not feel the pressure to do so.

Macy's conclusions demonstrate the counterproductive nature of large social media trends. While trends are perceived as a way to promote causes, they can also turn people away from them, especially if these trends are not serving their intended purposes. In the case of #blackouttuesday, the trend failed to serve its intended purpose in promoting Black creators in the entertainment industry, and instead turned into a blockade of black squares that covered up any information on Black creators. Claire adds that more needs to be done to strengthen the effectiveness of working to fix an issue beyond just a trend:

There are a lot of things that need to be done off social media to make lasting change. It requires more than just posting a black square to fix the inequities.

Claire's observations highlight how a social media trend has the power to distract from what needs to be done offline to address an issue. The #blackouttuesday trend faced criticism for having an image of the black squares, with the #blackouttuesday hashtag and the #blacklivesmatter hashtag in the caption of the post. Usually, when users click on a hyperlink behind hashtags, it takes them to a photo gallery of all posts made with that particular hashtag. During the trend, if a user clicked on the hyperlink to #blacklivesmatter, the user was taken to a gallery of Black squares, which buried posts in that gallery that contained important information about protests, petitions, Black creators, Black-owned businesses, and other ways people could take offline action.

In addition to avoiding performative activism, many respondents had something to say about how they do not post about controversial discussions because they know it will not be ef-

fective or productive. Macy adds other reasons she doesn't engage much in online controversial discussions:

> I have opinions, but I try to stay out of the discussions because I don't want to get into the heated mess or I will not post if I don't have anything to add. I don't feel like engaging in online discussion is effective. I will click a like on posts about or if a post brings about a novel idea.

Macy's points suggests how certain users like to engage with information that is new and that is not being talked about. This is consistent with Macy's earlier remarks that she will post about issues if not enough people are talking about it, like the Uyghur camps. Macy is a part of a group of social media users who are opposed to trends and prefer to bring new ideas and perspectives on issues, or just new issues in general, to the forefront. For people like Macy, contribution seems meaningless if it is the same thing being said by everyone else. Repetitive information just leads to ideas being drowned out and ignored, since the information being delivered is so excessive. An issue can stand out if it is novel or if the perspective on it is brand new.

> Another similar, yet fascinating, point is brought up by Penelope:

> I don't really engage with controversial discussions on social media because I don't like performative activism. I believe that it is meaningless and doesn't help. I will only post about something that isn't being talked about to educate someone with something that someone doesn't know. This makes for a more meaningful post than doing something broad that people have seen before. I want to help people learn things, instead of accusing people of not posting….I do think about posting since it will lead to some degree of peer validation and the feeling of "I have to post about something if everyone else is". Before I post though, I think, "Am I posting this because it's going to add something or because everyone else is?". I am not a big creator of original content on controversial matters...If I see something well worded, I will share it.

Penelope's reasoning is in line with both the criticisms made about performative activism and the reasons why people do engage that were discussed in the previous chapter. Her reasoning for why she doesn't like performative activism and strives to add novel ideas to a conversation shows her dedication to a certain issue, which she expresses by finding new information to educate her followers. As someone who does not engage much, Penelope shows that it is alright to be picky when choosing what to post, for one's words will have a stronger impact than constant

regurgitation of what other people are saying. She overcomes conformity pressures to post, by not posting at all.

Debbie brings up very similar reasoning in her views on performative activism and when social media posts can be educational:

> It would have to be an issue that is very important to me, so important that it is something that I am willing to enter backlash for. I don't like to post stuff that is too performative. While I want to share content about important issues, a line must be drawn between how much posted content is productive and too much. I would rather stay silent on social media and be educated on an issue than post about it. People create noise on social media to say they are a good person, but they aren't doing anything. For example, the people who post on social media telling people to donate to a movement are also broke college students who do not have the financial means to donate...The motivations behind posting about a trending topic are selfish. I try not to post much about trending topics because then it turns into a validation-seeking exercise. People will always post and use that to take credit for helping out with the movement without doing anything else.

Debbie's commentary of staying silent during a trend to educate herself highlights that she remains interested in the issue on which she seeks to be educated. One flaw in Debbie's reasoning is that she assumes the people who are posting about donating are not donating at all when it is impossible to keep track of what they are doing offline. However, Debbie aims to disapprove of those who post requests to donate and then end up not doing it themselves. Those are the prime performative activists since they further promote this fake image. If anything, most respondents find it problematic that people post about a trending topic and earn validation that they are a good person. A user's followers can perceive them as caring about the cause and wanting to help, even if the user does not take any other action. This idea is the root of why respondents are very critical of performative activism, with not one single respondent praising the #blackouttuesday trend.

Paul brings up another interesting term that serves a role in the criticism of performative activism:

> I don't believe it is useful to post anything on social media since it mostly results in an echo chamber.

The term "echo-chamber" gets to the root of how people criticize performative activism and why they believe the discussion of controversy is ineffective. Views are constantly reinforced by oth-

ers holding the same ideas, so that everything being talked about may seem similar in the end. As a result, it is difficult to identify which posts are accurate and are coming from genuine intentions. It is difficult to make social media posts effective, which everything being talked about is so similar. Paul does not believe that he would add enough value to the conversation to break the echo chamber. Harry adds his reasoning for why he tends to stay out of controversial issues on social media:

I don't really because I wonder how much would posting actually help the issue. Harry's points further emphasize the ineffectiveness and unproductiveness that lead respondents to not engage in this discourse.

Other Reasons Respondents Choose Not To Engage

Extending beyond performative activism and effectiveness, there are other observations made by respondents about why they choose not to engage in online debates. For example, Isaac chooses not to engage in these topics online, at least publicly, because of the potential to hurt his chances with future employers:

> I don't really engage with controversial ideas on social media because of employers, but if I post do post something controversial, it will be on an anonymous platform, such as Brandeis Confessions...I will only post about something if it is anonymous since I do not want to jeopardize my chances with future employers. But I am happy to talk about controversial topics online, as long as my name remains anonymous.

Isaac has a justified reason for not engaging and is perhaps especially conscious of his social media presence since he is an undergraduate senior. However, this seems to be the only factor holding back Isaac from participating. As this suggests, a common theme among respondents was how their social media image influenced decisions about making a post. Granted, those who do not engage in performative activism may not be as conscious of their image as people who do take part in performative activism, but they still have enough image-consciousness in that they do not want to be perceived as "fake" when posting about the issue.

There is a double standard from both sides when it comes to performative activism. People take part in it because they are very image conscious and want to show their followers that they care about an issue; however, those who are aware of performative activism taking

place will question the views of the people taking part in the trend and the extent to which those users care about an issue. Thus, when they decide against posting about something, they do not want to be judged as the ones "who are posting for the likes" or "the status" or judged for not caring about an issue either. At the same time, people who choose not to engage can still be judged as being "complicit" for staying silent, even if they are not posting because they do not want to be viewed as just "posting for the likes." Thus, all participants are guided by their social media image, no matter what they decide to do.

Meanwhile, many remaining reasons for why people choose not to post about controversial topics come down to trying to avoid conflict and not wanting to get involved in heated arguments. Debbie, who usually posts a lot about the uplifting side of controversial topics, tries to focus on not making her posts too political:

> I don't want to get political because I don't want to get backlash or to be shut down. I mainly post about corona safety, but I try to not make those posts too political to avoid this backlash.

Other respondents share Debbie's desire to avoid conflict online. Ilana explains why she does not engage with controversial discussions online:

> I tend to not engage because anytime that I have seen people engage, it is met with a lot of hate and harsh response. There is no middle ground.

These three respondents look to not create a backlash from their posts, which was the third most cited reason on the survey for why people do not engage in controversial issues on social media. While Eddie does not post much about controversial topics, both Debbie and Ilana try to focus on more uplifting content in the moments when they do post. However, Debbie also pointed out that if the issue is really important to her, she is willing to accept backlash for it.

Those who are looking to avoid conflict will either try to focus on more positive sides to the issue or they will not post at all. Nora also chooses not to engage in controversy much to avoid conflict:

> I don't really post about politics so much. I either will get yelled at because people disagree or I just don't need to echo what people are already saying.

Nora's explanation also demonstrates the concern about repetitive information forming an echo chamber. Alex elaborates on how the development of a story will impact his decision to post about it:

> I will avoid posting about a controversial issue if the topic or story is still developing or if it has the ability to alienate itself.

In his perspective, all of the facts should be in about a certain topic before posting about it. He does not want to make a post without all of the information in place. Alex never mentions the concept of "performative activism" in his interview, but he does seem to avoid it as well. He does not post just to post, but rather will post when he feels comfortable and informed enough to do so.

Debbie provides additional reasons for why she does not engage with political topics online, beyond just not wanting to partake in performative activism:

> I'm too busy reading the actual news and checking in with a close circle of friends to post about politics.

Earlier, I discussed how one's relationships with followers impact the social media platform people use when they post. Debbie values her relationships when she decides to post, knowing the platform will contain the network of people with whom she is closer. However, her valuing of these relationships leads her to prioritize those relationships before making a post, such as checking in with them when a sensitive political event occurs instead of just posting about it. Again, Debbie will only post if she is willing to endure backlash for it, so her desire to enhance her relationships by checking in with people holds more importance than taking to the internet to make a political post and dealing with the backlash on a post.

Why People Do Not Engage In The Comments

Respondents also had very pessimistic views on the comments sections as a whole. 71.08% of survey respondents indicate that they do not engage in commenting on other people's posts, while 63.47% of survey respondents communicate that they have never been involved in an intense controversial discussion on social media. Eddie's response is exemplary of the low outlook among respondents:

> I read the comments, but I will never post my own comments because I don't think it is worth my time.

Eddie shows that he has other priorities than getting involved with the discussions, showing his discouragement and high doubts about these conversations.

Paige also demonstrates the pessimism towards engaging with comments, especially after facing immense pressure from her circle of peers on social media:

> I don't post comments because I am afraid that someone that I am friends with would judge me or think I am just doing it for attention. People at Brandeis are very picky and judgy with the way they decide to be friends with each other.

Like others who choose not to post because they do not want to come off as performative, Paige is considering her social media image. She avoids posting to not be perceived as "wanting attention." While Paige was one of the only respondents who seemed to give in to peer pressure to post a trending topic, being fed up with the peer pressure also motivates her to not comment on posts. Either way, peer pressure guides the way she engages with controversial topics, feeding into why she posts about trending topics and why she doesn't comment.

Hilary remarks that commenting on someone's post is pointless, as nobody's mind is going to change:

> I don't comment because nothing ever gets accomplished. The comments are just a never-ending cycle of 'I'm right and you're wrong.'

Hilary's reasoning aligns with the effectiveness and productivity reasons for why people do not engage in controversy. Hilary's response is similar to Eddie's, with both highlighting skepticism about commenting on people's posts. Paul's reference to an echo chamber highlights the cynicism of people who decide not to engage in comments on someone's posts:

> It's really hard to change someone's opinion. I don't want to be an echo chamber in the comments since it won't do much. You can't anticipate the language of the discussion when the conversation isn't face to face.

Paul's view further supports a pattern of people finding comments on posts to be ineffective. In addition, he notes how an online discussion is more difficult than debating someone face to face. There are many distinctions between an online and face-to-face discussion. People who

get into a heated debate with someone online may not know the person with whom they are debating, whereas an in-person discussion would most likely be with someone with whom the person is familiar. In-person discussions allow one to hear the tone of someone's voice and see their facial expressions, which cannot be replicated in online debates. Debbie explains that she does not get involved in social media comments and these discussions because she has taken alternative offline action:

> Life is too short to get wrapped up in political drama...I make a change by volunteering, creating my own organizations, and planning events. I don't need to post on social media.

Debbie brushes off social media, downplaying its necessity. Social media is not an essential part of the activism work she wants to accomplish.

This cynicism about engaging in the comments section was heard from other respondents. Nora refers to conflict avoidance in explaining why she does not engage in the comments on people's political posts:

> I do not comment on things because I can't spend the time arguing. I get frustrated because it's hard to read into what other people are saying.

Nadia shares a similar view:

> Commenting on a political post is just a recipe for disaster. I watch people being attacked in the comments and people being accused of being things that they are not. I don't owe anyone my opinion.

Both Nadia and Nora acknowledge that there is toxicity when commenting on posts that serves to turn them and others away when deciding whether to join in on the discussion. The backlash from the comments distracts from the main points people are trying to get across, as well as important information that could be beneficial for addressing that issue. As long as this discourse remains toxic and argumentative, they will refrain from commenting.

When Does Social Media Become Too Much To Handle?

While only five interview respondents admitted that they have taken a break from social media due to being overwhelmed, 65.87% of survey respondents indicated that they have taken a break from social media due to feeling overwhelmed. Meanwhile, 86.23% of survey respon-

dents admitted that they feel distressed by the controversial discussions they witness on social media. Ben talks about an instance when he had to take a break from social media:

> I had to take a break at the tail end of the presidential campaign in the middle of Covid when masks were political. It was so demoralizing in a time that was so bad. I tried to go on less and didn't post...I try not to seek out negativity, but I still want to keep up with what is going on.

For Ben, the negativity and the interruption of big events with small political arguments are what upset him, leading him to take a break. It is this negative energy that was the cause of him stepping back on social media.

There was also another instance when the post-election period overwhelmed a respondent enough to the point where she had to take a break. Tess reflects:

> I had to take a break from social media a little bit after the election. I had just taken medicine that provokes hormones, so I began crying over everything on Twitter that was criticizing Biden after the election. I posted something that people found offensive, but I didn't mean for the post to be offensive, which caused me to have a panic attack. Afterward, I just saw a lot of depressing content all over Twitter to the point where I needed time off.

It was not just social media that contributed to Tess's decision to take a break, but outside factors as well, such as the medicine that provoked her to feel even more overwhelmed. The timing of these external factors thus impacted her social media behavior. Alex also mentioned that he took a break from social media due to being overwhelmed with information overload:

> I had to take a break during the summer with the protests overwhelming my feed and I also had to take a break after the rioting on Capitol Hill took place, since it all depressed me. I just didn't want to see conspiracy theories about the Capitol riots all over my feed.

Mental health played a major role in why Tess and Alex decided to take their breaks from social media. As the burden of information about the same topic on social media negatively affected them, it was best to take this break for their mental well-being. The echo-chamber of social media has also led people into taking breaks from social media, especially since it discourages participation from people who know they will likely get backlash from their opinions.

In contrast, Vivienne brings up that she takes breaks to avoid the temptation to post, especially when she knows it may lead to backlash:

> I have gotten better at developing a thicker skin to intense reactions and I have learned to pick my battles. Sometimes it is not worth getting involved with the discussion. If I know my take won't be accepted, I will just log off to remove from my temptation in joining the discussion and then being involved with the dogpile of backlash for my opinions.

Though Vivenne takes a break from social media to reduce the urge to broadcast her opinion, she is nevertheless subject to the fear of facing backlash. Debbie also does not take breaks from social media because she is overwhelmed by the information being displayed. Taking breaks from social media is a natural habit for her:

> I always take little breaks from social media regardless because I don't want to deal with social media all the time. I would rather just live my life. I want to focus on myself and my own life, rather than being wrapped up in toxicity.

For Debbie, social media is not a priority nor a necessity. This factor is what accounts for her distance on social media, especially when it comes to posting about controversial topics. She takes breaks from social media since it is part of her general lifestyle.

Conformity Online

When I began this study, one thing I was looking to explore was whether the fear of judgment by one's social media followers was a motivating factor in why people take part in online discussions. However, very few people expressed a sense of being judged for not posting about an issue. The respondents claim that other people are motivated to post about topical issues in order to conform and feel validated, but not as many respondents report giving in to conformity on social media as originally predicted. Only 2.58% of respondents indicated that they post about controversial issues because other people are doing so. Only a minority of interview respondents admitted to succumbing to conformity and performative activism, while a majority of survey respondents condemn these actions. Of the 24 interview respondents, 14 reported pressure to post about a certain controversial topic, but only three of those 14 respondents succumbed to this pressure and ended up posting about the topic. The rest of the respondents criticized those who give in to conformity as performative.

Tess, who engages a lot in online politics, explains how she does not necessarily face a sense of conformity per se, but feels a moral obligation that encourages her to partake in online political discussions:

> There is a vibe of conformity online, but I feel like it is more of a moral responsibility to post. I am too overwhelmed to be at protests, but I do what I can online. I just think it is important to share issues that people who do not know as much about and to raise awareness on topics...If an issue is trending, then there is more of an urgency to post about it. I don't think we should shy away from these hard topics. We need to have these discussions.

Her response about why she engages in political discussions ties back to the top reason for why respondents in this particular study engage in online debates in the first place. This respondent denies the strength of conformity that others face, by considering it instead as a moral responsibility to post. However, these are the kinds of judgments that drive some other users to post about a topic. Paige, who admitted to giving in to the pressure to conform online, was driven to post out of fear of judgments like Tess's:

> The interest of the matter is with what my friends and people at my school are posting about. If I don't post about this view, people will think that I am against it...I definitely feel that way most of the time. Being at Brandeis, I feel forced to post.

Paige acknowledges that the pressure to post online comes not only through the random accounts she follows, but her circle of friends and peers with whom she attends university. While this level of conformity was rare, it does indicate that external pressure from one's closest connections in life still influences the way one presents oneself on social media.

Claire, however, does feel the expectation to conform, but provides her insight for why she does not succumb to these pressures:

> I do feel that sense of conformity, but it all ties back to performative activism. Don't post if you are not going to do anything. Only post about an issue if you are really passionate about it. I don't care too much about what people think of me...I use social media as a way to educate myself.

Debbie has a similar idea, but still finds herself giving in to these pressures differently:

> Yes, I do feel a sense of conformity to post about something online, but I do not post much anyway....I don't care what a random person online thinks of me. Only my friends know my politics. At the end of the day, I can only do so much with what people think

> about me. If it is a big issue like George Floyd's murder, but the same content is being posted about this issue, me posting the same content will not add anything to the conversation and will not help the terrible situation. I worry that people will call me out for not posting, so I post about the service work I am doing offline to help social movements.

Debbie demonstrates the reasoning behind why some decided not to post despite facing pressure to do so. These respondents recognized the dangers of performative activism and how detrimental the phenomenon can be towards a cause. While at first, Debbie's response indicates that more people are confident about their social media presence than originally anticipated, Debbie is not exactly immune to these pressures. She still worries that people are going to call her out for not posting, so she takes a safer alternative route by posting about the service work she is doing, rather than just a generic post. Macy explains similar criticisms of performative posting when it comes to conformity:

> Facing conformity to post about a certain issue is one of the things I hate about social media: People are accusing people who don't post as being silent and complicit. People take posting a lot about something, with the amount they actually care about in real life. It is like you have to show off your activism all the time, even if you are doing a lot of activism behind the scenes. People who engage in performative activism get more credit than people actually working to make change offline.

Macy furthers validates my findings in how respondents denounce performative activism.

Hilary also talks about how she was questioned about her political views after not posting about the Black Lives Matter movement:

> When it comes to posting about politics, I'm not as outward as I could be, but it doesn't mean that I don't have my own thoughts just because I am quiet online...I felt pressure to engage in Black Lives Matter online especially after I was questioned on being conservative, which is not the case.

Hilary faced judgments about her character and was suspected of having a different view because she was staying silent on social media. These character judgments for not taking part in a particular discussion often distract from the movement and instead place attention on those who are posting about it. Judgments like what Hilary faced end up toxic both for the social media user and the social movement as a whole. Nadia chides those who accuse others on social media of being complicit by not posting about a certain issue:

I absolutely face conformity to post about a certain issue. We should talk about these issues of course, but we blame social media users too much for problems on a structural level. Not every person needs to be posting about this. Of course, we understand that something needs to be done about this issue, but this pressure online ends up provoking performative actions.

The drive to satisfy other social media users by posting about political topics will end up generating more harm than good for the social movement as a whole. While few people in this study succumb to pressure from others, those who do give in to pressure continue a never-ending cycle of pressure to post. If anything, the pressure discourages users from wanting to take offline action, as the build-up of pressure places more emphasis on the user to post and engage with the issue online than to do anything beyond.

How Do People Feel About Those Who Do Not Engage In Online Debates?

Only four respondents revealed that they do judge the people they follow for not posting about a controversial topic. The rest of the 19 respondents said that they do not care whether or not a person they follow chooses to participate in posting about a controversial topic. However, while not many people are judgmental of others who do not engage with controversy in this particular study, it seems as though these judgments do drive the behavior that is often seen on social media. Sarah provides her insight on those judgments:

Before 2020, I wouldn't care if people didn't post anything political. However, now that it is quarantine and people aren't doing anything, I feel like there is a duty to post about these issues. I think that if people are able to say something, then they should say something.

Tess is understanding about why people do not post, but does point out an interesting factor about why people may not feel the need to do so:

I understand why some people do not post, but it is sort of a privilege to be able to walk away and not post. I understand why people might not want to post, but they should.

It may be true that people who shy away from an intensely controversial topic of discussion may not be directly affected by it. A majority of my respondents were white and therefore unaffected by these racial injustices in our country. Nonetheless, Tess, who is also white, fails to take into account the positive intentions behind why my respondents are not engaged in controversial

topics on social media. Both Tess and Sarah have high expectations for what people should be doing on social media, and do not account for why people may not want to engage in controversy. A majority of my respondents recognize injustices and genuinely want to help the cause, but they believe social media is not the place to do it. My white respondents even specifically say that if they have nothing new to add to the conversation, then they do not want to create clutter in people's social media feed, especially since it will leave room for people of color who are directly affected by racial injustices to get their voices heard.

As a result, the same respondents who are critical of performative activism are the ones who do not judge others for not posting about a certain controversial topic. Claire does not judge people who do not post about politics because she believes that people have the freedom on social media to do what they want:

> I couldn't care less if someone doesn't post about politics. It is their page, so people should post whatever they want. If someone is passionate about a certain issue and they want to post about it, that is awesome! People can do whatever they want. The purpose of social media is to communicate with people, not to talk about politics.

Therefore, forcing other people to post about politics diverts away from what social media is trying to create, which is a general communicative environment about anything. Politics should not be the primary or dominating factor. Macy is also very nonchalant about people who do not engage in online controversy. In fact, she gets more annoyed with people who do post about these issues:

> I don't really care if people don't post about politics. I'm not gonna accuse someone of being a horrible person if they don't post about it. In fact, I'm more sick of people who constantly post political topics. They post about these topics, but they don't do anything to help. If they want to make people aware of something happening, it can be done in one or two posts, rather than a dozen. Having too many posts about something backfires, since it makes people feel bombarded.

Macy believes that posting about political topics just creates more performative actions on social media. The effect is reversed, with Macy being more judgmental of those who constantly engage in these controversies. Eddie also holds positive views about those who do not post about controversial issues online:

> I do not care if someone does not post about politics. In fact, I think they are using their time efficiently by not doing so.

These respondents believe that not engaging in politics on social media is a more positive factor, which is a major explanation for why such few respondents face online conformity. More people view not posting as positive, rather than a source of negative judgments.

> Penelope doesn't even notice if someone she follows is not posting about controversy:

> I'm not really keeping track of people. I do realize that a lot of people over the summer were called out for not posting. I understand that people don't want to be social media activists...I understand that social media is not for everyone when it comes to speaking about controversy.

Penelope's comment shows that there are people on social media who are not keeping track of who is and who is not posting about a controversial issue and are therefore not judgmental. Nora also does not tend to notice who is not posting about controversy and also admits to feeling annoyed from political posts:

> I don't really notice it if someone doesn't post about something political. It actually bothers me more when I see political posts.

In this study, people find it more positive when political discussions are not occurring on social media, as it promotes freedom for social media users, keeps social media as a primary means of communication, and maintains the platform as a place where people post about topics because they hold a genuine interest in the issue, not because they feel pressure to do so or judgment if they do not engage. Most respondents support this view of social media overall.

Conclusion

People tend to not engage in online debates because they want to avoid performative activism, do not find that posting will be effective, and try to stay away from conflict and backlash. Most people do not engage in the comments section on political posts and have low enthusiasm about the comments section overall. They do not take part in commenting on people's political posts mainly because they believe that commenting on the post will be unproductive, it will not change anyone's minds, and it will only provoke more toxic discourse. People were more likely to be overwhelmed and take breaks from social media after a major political event

has occurred, such as the 2020 election, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the Capitol riots. Very few respondents seem to relay judgment against people who do not post about political topics and very few respondents succumb to conformity pressures on social media when it comes to controversial topics. Those few respondents held those judgments because they believe it is crucial to have discussions on controversial topics. The few people who gave in to the pressure to post did so because they feared judgments from others. However, this was still a rare phenomenon in the study. Although rare, it demonstrates a driving factor for why people do take part in performative activism online.

Most respondents remain critical of performative activism. They prefer people not posting political content all of the time since too much political information can be excessive. Sometimes, they do not even notice if someone is not posting about something political. These respondents seemed more judgmental of those who engage in performative activism than those who do not post about controversial issues at all. The findings from the study also suggested that not many respondents give in to conformity online, in the hopes to avoid performative activism. This resolution to not give in to conformity seems to contradict common ideas that people are trying to show off on social media.

The consciousness of one's social media image serves as a guiding theme in how people decide not to post. When users decide not to engage in performative activism, they keep their social media image in mind, as they do not want to be perceived as performative by their followers. Other factors for why people do not post, such as not wanting to damage their relationship with future employers, is another way that people consider social media image when deciding against posting about a controversial topic. Yet, respondents still express concern over those who only post to enhance their social media image. Both the respondents who decide to engage in social media debates and the respondents who decide against it share the same concerns over image, but they take those pressures differently. While many people engage in order to educate others or because they have a passion for the topic, they are still thinking about their social media image when they post, as they want to show to their followers that they

are educated about this issue or passionate about this topic. Therefore, both the people who post about controversy and the people who do not are coming from the same place of wanting to have a favorable social media image. By acknowledging the existence of performative activism, people make an effort to avoid it, which could potentially reduce performative posting in the long run once people are more aware of this common social media pattern. These judgments about performative activism and cynicism about the effectiveness of posting are the main driving factors into why people choose not to participate in political discussions on social media.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Do People Believe Social Media Debates Are Effective?

When I began this project, one thing I planned to explore is whether or not respondents find social media debates to be effective and why. My study shows that a majority of respondents find social media debates ineffective, with 67.6% of participants believing this to be the case. Meanwhile, 32.4% of respondents found social media discussions to be effective. Yet, 90.29% of respondents still follow and pay attention to political news online, with only 9.71% of participants responding that they do not pay attention to online political news. Most interview respondents consistently found online discussions to be ineffective overall. Still, most of those people continued to take part in online discussions anyway. I will explore insights into whether users find their motivations to post about politics as valid driving factors in creating effective change on social media.

How Does My Data Compare To The Literature?

Many of my findings both support and offer new perspectives beyond the literature. Freitas' (2017) book, *The Happiness Effect,* highlights how students constantly feel pressure to present the best version of themselves online. While Kwon et. al (2015) also touches upon self-censorship, where individuals choose not to speak about an issue because of "fear of isolation" from peers, they move on to explain how conformity greatly affects the way users communicate with information on social media. Meanwhile, my findings suggest that while pressure is present, most students do not succumb to conformity on social media. Other studies, such as Yamamato et. al (2017), highlight that social media support during key political elections decreases apathy and cynicism among users, especially for people who were very cynical about politics before using social media. My study, however, highlights that the polarizing nature of political discussions on social media promote levels of cynicism to rise among users. The majority of respondents find social media to be ineffective, in that making a post on social media does not create direct change towards an issue. This cynicism has provoked apathy in some respondents, who choose not to engage on social media because they know it will not be effective. Meanwhile,

other respondents continue to participate in these political discussions, despite being cynical about their lasting effects.

Nonetheless, hashtags and creative based social movements discussed by Literat and Kilger-Vilenchik (2019), Brown et. al (2017), and Bonilla and Rosa (2015) have still been able to spread awareness of movements, which our respondents spoke about positively. The way respondents praised social media for helping make issues more visible for younger people are similar to the ideas of Keating and Melis (2017), who show how social media provides young people with an opportunity for political engagement. Campbell (2017) touches upon social media image and activism in a positive light, by arguing that social media allows people who would not be taken seriously offline to have their voices heard and elevated on social media.

Takaragawa and Carty (2012) discuss how the Obama campaign took advantage of new social media platforms to connect with voters during the 2008 presidential election. During the 2020 election season, both major presidential candidates, Biden and Trump, used social media for their campaign strategies. However, Trump took advantage of his social media platforms to spread misinformation about a "false election" that provoked an attack on the Capitol from his supporters on January 6, 2021. In the past, scholars wrote about social media strategies for presidential candidates in a positive light, whereas the current events have highlighted the negative effects of social media in the aftermath of election season.

Many respondents in my study believe that social media is ineffective because they have their ideas validated by an algorithm tailored towards their interests, supporting exactly Cox's (2017) argument that one's views are verified through their algorithms. They criticize that ego and validation of their image is what provokes people to post, which is called performative activism. Penney (2014) speaks positively about social media movements and unconsciously praises performative activism. McCafferty's (2001) critiques of "slacktivism" are similar to the way respondents judge "performative activism", as both highlight how people engage with political issues online and do not do anything beyond to help the cause. These similar interpretations

have become a dominating theme in my study, highlighting a crucial role that social media image plays in how people decide to engage in a social media debate.

If most respondents acknowledge that posting on social media is ineffective, then why do they decide to do it?

In Chapter 3, I discussed how the top motivation for why people engage in controversial topics on social media is to educate and raise awareness of issues. There are several reasons why respondents may still choose to engage in controversial discourse on social media, from clicking a like button to writing out a post, despite its unproductiveness.

Ben thinks of engaging in these discussions as a risk-reward balance. Posting about an issue risks a toxic, inept argument, but there is a potential reward if a meaningful conversation can come out of it:

> Posting about a controversial topic sheds a light on the issue, but a 50 comment thread is not helpful. If it is a conversation, it has value, but if there is an argument involved, it is toxic.

While Ben sees social media discussions as a playing field where things can be gained and lost, Tyler views the realm of social media discussions as a neutral playing field:

> They are effective, but not effective. Posting doesn't help the issue, but it doesn't make the issue worse either.

Despite recognizing social media discussions as somewhat ineffective, Tyler continues to post, because while there is nothing to be gained from them, there is nothing to be lost either.

Penelope explains that there are many positive aspects social media has encouraged given what is going on in the news, even though it is still ineffective in solving the issues at hand:

> The news thrives off of negativity. Social media is a space for people to come together and show the beautifulness of support and has some positive views compared to news media. The performative side of social media isn't necessarily positive or negative. Posting just to post in a sea of valuable information doesn't add anything to improve the cause. The negative side is that you are getting a repetitive narrative, which gets people nowhere. More interaction can improve things if people have the drive to do so, to share facts and information, and have a discussion. There needs to be more conversation to create effective change, instead of hoping for things to get solved.

Penelope's comment provides a potential insight on why people post about controversial topics on social media, despite being generally ineffective. People may find posting ineffective, but social media can shed a positive light on the negativity happening in the world.

However, other people criticized social media as being too negative with these discussions and creating a toxic environment. Macy describes the outcomes of controversy on social media:

> It's a double-edged sword. There is a way that posting can help in making people aware of an issue, but it is more often harmful since people are saying horrible things to each other. It creates more toxicity than it does making people more aware of the issue. You see misinformation on social media to the point where the harm outweighs the benefit.

While Macy sees the interaction in controversial discussions on social media as more negative, she does see value in posting to help bring awareness to an issue. Since she leans more towards posting about lesser-known issues, like the Uyghur camps, she posts to help this issue become more well known. In a way, Macy also sees the world of social media discussions as a risk-reward relationship, much like Ben. It is good to let people know about an issue, but the risk of igniting a toxic discourse still lingers.

Is there much of a difference between educating an audience and performative activism?

Earlier, I raised the question of whether or not there is a significant difference between educating an audience and performative activism. The truth of the matter is that those who post to educate an audience versus those who take part in performative activism may not be all that different if both strategies lead to an ineffective outcome in the end. Throughout this thesis, we have heard respondents criticize those who take part in performative activism with very few people admitting to taking part in it themselves. In Chapter 5, I emphasized how the awareness of one's social media media image and the critiques of other people's images both contribute to why people choose not to engage in online debates. The consciousness of one's image is also an indication that there is not much of a difference between posting to educate an audience and general performative activism. Goffman's (1959) ideas on the presentation of self describe the phenomenon of how people present themselves on social media in a performative manner.

Goffman's ideas of constant performance align with the complex world of social media and the ways people present themselves online.

The truth of the matter is that nobody knows another's motivations for posting on social media unless someone says it directly. For example, I would never know anyone's motivation for taking part in these discussions if it were not for these interviews. Are people just accusing any content they see in their feed as performative, especially if they do not truly know the motivations behind why that user is posting content? Most people post for the purpose of educating others, but acknowledge that while these posts raise awareness, they do not solve the issue. As discussed in Chapter 3, some people post about lesser known issues in order to bring awareness to them. The respondents do not recognize their actions as performative, as they believe they have added value to the cause by raising awareness of it. However, the same defense can be said for anyone who posts about a controversial topic just for virtue-signaling: at least they were spreading awareness on the issue. People may be accusing each other of being performative without knowing the motivations behind the posts on their feed. Let's use an example of two of the interview respondents.

Vivienne says that she posts about Black Lives Matter on social media because she would feel like a bad ally if she did not post. This motivation, in a way, is still performative, as she wants to feel and publicly appear like a good ally for posting about the movement. However, she does care about the issue and believes that bringing this issue to light is a step in the right direction for creating change. While she does not fit the mold of the way people have described those who engage in performative activism of "wanting social gain," Vivienne's actions overall can still be considered performative if she does not engage in offline activism.

The same can be said about Macy, who was a critic of performative activism throughout her interview. She posts about the Uyghur camps since it's an issue she cares about and wants people to be aware. She says that making people aware of this issue can potentially help with the recognition of the issue, but she does not speak of any offline action she has taken, such as donating money. In a way, while she cares about the issue, and while she is not just joining in a

discussion that everyone is talking about online, one could still accuse her posts of being performative. This can especially be the case depending on if her followers are close enough to her to know whether or not she is taking offline action to help the issue. For all I know, maybe she has been doing that. This is what remains fascinating when it comes to accusing people of performative activism. Nobody knows what people are doing offline to help the cause. Claire and Debbie, for example, are also huge critics of performative activism. If they both make posts separately about a controversial topic, they may accuse each other of being performative in their actions. This can be a possibility especially if they do not know each other well, they do not know each other's motivations behind why they post, and they do not know what each person is doing offline to help the cause.

Performative activism seems to stem from what people believe is going on. In a sense, there is no difference between those who take part in performative activism and those who post to educate their followers. In the end, most people are posting to educate others and bring awareness of an issue, but their followers could potentially view their actions as performative, especially if they do not know that person well. Nevertheless, the actions of posting on social media are still performative, but respondents do not admit that they are also taking part in the performative activism that they criticize.

Are there some forms of activism that lead people to claim performative activism more than other kinds?

Some forms of performative activism are obvious and some are less obvious. Some forms of activism that lead people to call performative activism are social media trends around a popular topic that are pretty easy to take part in. As I discussed in Chapter 3, issues centered on racial justice and political officers are some of the most discussed topics on social media, as they both reflect what is happening in the news. Whether or not the post is accused of being performative is dependent on the content of the post. For example, the #blackouttuesday was a very obvious form of performative activism because so many people were taking part in it. After all, it was so simple to just post a black square. The ease of this trend shows how people could

take the easy way out by just posting a square and moving on with their lives, without taking further action. This was the reason that the trend faced so much criticism.

Trends seemed to excite people because of the minimal effort needed to participate. The black squares were an easy way to participate in a trend expressing solidarity for Black Lives Matter, but respondents found it was a dramatic, empty gesture with nothing behind it. Claire emphasizes the low effectiveness of the whole #blackouttuesday trend:

> Social media is a great way to bring awareness. There is a lot more legwork to make real change. A lot of resources are given on social media to spread awareness. There are a lot of things that need to be done off social media to make lasting change. It requires more than just posting a Black square to fix the inequities.

Debbie blames this overall ineffectiveness of social media on performative activism:

> Posting on social media is not effective. It is just a way to seek validation. Yes, it spreads awareness, but if people post the same things to people with the same beliefs and are resharing the same things without doing anything, it is not going to make an impact.

When people are given the same information and then project that information on people who are already aware of those facts, it is not providing anything unique to move the issue forward. According to Debbie, people post to present themselves as good people. This worry about seeking validation takes attention away from the social movement, and allows people to take advantage of an issue and use it for their image gain.

However, Debbie still falls victim to this validation exercise, as she did admit earlier she posts about what she is doing offline to help the cause, as a way to present herself favorably. So while Debbie remains a critic of performative activism, she is not necessarily immune to the practice herself. In a way, all of the respondents who admit to engaging in politics on social media fall victim to the performative practices they criticize. This does not necessarily mean that the respondents are lying or what they are doing is hypocritical per se, but it does mean they are constantly, unknowingly "performing" on an online stage when they do post on social media, much like the one Erving Goffman (1959) describes.

It was established in Chapter 4 that relationships tend to drive which platforms users select to post about controversial issues. Based on this point, users still work to present and share their passions with whom they feel closest. As a result, they are able to comfortably share and

educate, yet are still performing in front of their closest peers. This highlights the ways in which users "perform" on this online stage with the image they want to curate towards their devoted network. The respondents view their motivations as different from those who they criticize. However, they may be chastising people who have the same motivations as them to post.

While my respondents criticize the negative execution of #blackouttuesday, it is important to highlight the rationale behind the social media trend. The #blackouttuesday event was originally created by two African-American music industry executives, Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang (Mitchell, 2020). After witnessing racial injustice and white music industry executives profiting off of music from Black artists, they believed that a day of reflection and conversation was essential. Their intention was not to get people to post black squares, but rather to encourage people to have conversations, both online and offline, about how people can support the Black community, hold people accountable, and reflect on the systemic racism currently present in our society. These women encouraged people to have these conversations through the hashtag, "#TheShowMustBePaused" (Mitchell, 2020). On May 31 and June 1, 2020, many major music industry companies made social media posts indicating that June 2 will be a day where they will be observing "Blackout Tuesday" (Truong, 2020). Their posts indicated that the companies will be taking a day to reflect on the systemic racism in society, in light of the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. However, it was celebrities outside of the music industry that began posting a black square with the caption, "#blackouttuesday," on June 2, 2020. As the event gained traction, ordinary social media users began doing the same thing. As the number of black squares being posted skyrocketed, people on social media became angry that the plethora of black squares was covering up crucial, informative posts about the Black Lives Matter movement. These informative posts included places to donate, locations where protests were happening, and educational resources. This was the moment where the event first started getting criticized for drowning out the voices of online activists. Posts were also circulating around social media stating that if a user only posted a black square, they should be doing more than merely that in order to bring value to the movement (Truong, 2020).

While #blackouttuesday had heartfelt intentions, its "trendiness" created a dangerous performa-tive alliance that cluttered up important information on how to support Black Lives Matter and encouraged virtue signaling (Nicewarner, 2020).

The purpose of #blackouttuesday was about creating a united front of people outside of one's social circle. The event had a benevolent rationale to spread awareness about the racial problems that Black people face in society today. It was not intended to create a negative echo chamber, but rather to bring to light racial injustices that are faced every day in America before moving back to regular posting activities. Many people did not participate in this event with the intention to be performative; rather, they found value in bringing awareness of these injustices and encouraging others to create change. While there were many users who participated in this trend because everyone was doing it, many others still participated in this movement with the objective to educate their followers about police brutality, racism, and the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole. Therefore, while this movement faced backlash for encouraging perfor-mative activism, these were not the intentions behind why this social media event occurred.

Thus, when users criticize events like #blackouttuesday, it is difficult to get inside the minds of everyone who participated in this trend. There were some people who took part in the trend because everyone else was doing it. Nevertheless, other people who engaged in the trend were very passionate about this movement and wanted to help educate others on the problems of systemic racism. While these people were not posting to seek validation, their posting habits could still be viewed as performative in how they use these posts to display to their followers that they are passionate about this issue. Since the trend was so popular and received so much criticism, those people who posted out of passion were criticized in the same light as the people who posted to seek validation. The #blackouttuesday movement presented a serious dilemma because there was no right answer of what to do: if a user did not post content on that day, the user might have worried about being condemned for not posting about the issue. However, if a user did post content that day, they might have been criticized for being performative.

That is a problem that social media presents when executing trends meant to unify people. It is both the self-consciousness and the criticism of one's image on social media that minimizes important values and objectives of certain movements. Feminista Jones, an African American author, activist, and social worker, was quick to criticize the #blackouttuesday movement (Jennings, 2020). Jones reported to Vox:

> This performative ally stuff is not helping, and this really catered to the people who want to show that they care. They thought this little black box was going to be solidarity. I'm like, 'This is not how movements work. This is not how we're supposed to be using social media.' And people fell for it because it takes minimal work and minimal effort.

She also pushed for anyone who participated in any social media trend to research its origins and what their potential post with the trend would achieve before they decide to participate. Jones not only criticized the black squares as performative, but she also criticized Instagram story challenges tagging people to show support for Black Lives Matter. Overall, she encouraged people to use social media for direct, tangible action for this movement instead of performative posting (Jennings, 2020).

Though criticisms abounded, #blackouttuesday nevertheless was praised for bringing awareness and education on social media about problems of policing, racism, white privilege, and other racial issues. The event reflects a collective form of activism, similarly to that praised by Brown et. al (2017). However, the uncertainty of how one would be viewed by their followers on social media, no matter if they decided to post a black square or not, is what prevented this event from being effective. Since this event took place on social media, it presented a complex dilemma on what was best for people's social media image. Respondents were worried about how they would be perceived, and these uncertainties about their image distracted people from reflecting upon the original intentions of the movement. Thus, #blackouttuesday was counterproductive by not only encouraging constant performative activism, but by provoking people to reflect more about how their decision to post or not post would benefit their social media image than the racial issues faced today in society.

Is posting for the purpose of education effective?

Respondents continue to praise posting about a topic in order to spread awareness. As was previously established, the top reason users post about controversial issues is to spread awareness about them and educate their followers.

Isaac suggests these educational activities can be effective if they have an end-goal and are working to create an offline project that will serve to help the cause, like organizing an event:

> Posting can sometimes be effective. If you know what the goal is and you are doing it as part of a larger effort, then yes, it is effective...Such as organizing events. Other people are using social media to insult other people, which I don't believe is effective.

However, Isaac's points stress that social media activism is only effective when it encourages an offline action, something that respondents criticize performative activism for lacking.

Nadia perfectly sums up the main points of controversial discussions overall:

> Posting on social media is effective in getting the word out, but it doesn't do much to solve it...You can learn about the problem, but there is no way to solve the problem on social media.

Nadia's explanation represents how a majority of respondents feel about engaging in controversial topics. As I have mentioned, people believe that controversial discussions on social media can get lost in an echo chamber and may be counterproductive.

Vivienne still supports what social media has done for politics, despite not believing it is entirely effective:

> Social media has done a fantastic job. It has allowed everyone to get out of their intermediate echo chambers and bubbles and allowed everyone to see different groups of people that they wouldn't be able to encounter otherwise. I don't need to actively seek it out, but I can if I need to. Social media is a passive avenue where I don't need to put in emotional labor to find people who agree with me. It has also allowed me to interact with people I wouldn't normally meet, such as Israeli Jews.

Unlike many others, Vivienne believes social media liberates people from their echo chambers. Therefore, there is a dichotomy between whether people believe social media improves or worsens the echo chamber.

Ilana suggests that while spreading awareness can be helpful with solving an issue, too much posting can be harmful to the movement:

> Posting on social media is not effective in solving the issue, but it is effective in bringing awareness. Bringing awareness can help solve the issue, but too much awareness can be harmful to the movement.

Paige also brings up a similar perception:

> Posting definitely helps. There has to be a moderate amount of posting. If people are spamming with posts, it is not only counterproductive, but people will be spiteful and won't want to support that movement...Too much posting turns people off even more and people are less likely to listen to your argument.

When people post too much about the same idea, it can lead to desensitization to what is happening in the news, since people are so used to processing this information. In Chapter 5, I discussed how posting too much about a subject can cause this topic to lose value and emotional investment. There must be a reconciliation to balance out how emotions motivate a user to post about an issue, but at the same time, not have this issue discussed so much that the emotional value is lost. As a result, users may have less sympathy for the issue at hand. Hilary raises a similar conclusion:

> We are the digital generation, so taking a break from social media is hard. We are just all so desensitized to the conflicts going on.

If people are used to receiving certain information, it becomes part of a routine. With decreased sensitivity to what is happening due to bombardment of information about the same topic, it is bound to not inspire others to take the effective work necessary to solve the issue.

Tyler believes that relying too much on social media allows people to retain misinformation:

> It is easier for more opinions to get out. There is more inaccurate information as a result. Everything on social media should be taken as an opinion and not as truth.

Tyler brings up a disadvantage about the way controversial issues can be brought to light on social media and highlights the dangers that come with people believing false information. Too much information creates desensitization and encourages the spread of misinformation, indicating an underlying issue within the realm of social media that is beyond individual control.

The desire to educate others and to bring awareness to certain issues is the top driving factor for why people choose to engage in social media discussions. However, it is also worth noting whether users see their engagement with online discussions as useful and if so, why they find their posts to be educational. Overall, respondents reported that posting to raise awareness

does not lead to direct change, but is still useful in helping people learn about an issue. Participants criticized performative activism for certain kinds of engagement, but there is little evidence that people admit to taking part in performative activism. Most respondents post to educate their audience without trying to come off as performative. While these people post to raise awareness on a subject, how effective they believe their efforts to be is the key to understanding if their actions on social media are any different from the performative activism they criticize.

Alex finds that the motivation of the user is a key determinant in whether or not the post will be effective:

> It depends on the goal of the person posting it. If their goal is to spread awareness, then yes, it will be effective. If they want to start chaos, then no, it will not be effective.

Vivienne explains that posting in general is not effective, but is still a gateway to creating change:

> I do not necessarily think posting is effective, but it is a step in the right direction. Posting about a controversial topic is living proof that people can learn from what they read online ... It only goes so far and works for political takes if they are easier to swallow. The best way social media works is to rally together with an opinion.

Vivienne's comment of people rallying together on social media implies that social media trends are important in educating the public that change needs to occur. Ellie brings up a similar point:

> Posting on social media doesn't solve the issue, but it is a good way to bring up conversations. It opens up the door for people to see other opinions, which is good since we're all in a bubble.

In other words, Ellie claims that social media is acceptable in helping people understand the opposing side to an issue, especially if their existing opinions are validated by their surrounding peers.

Sarah praises posting on social media to raise awareness and create change when the platforms are used by a younger demographic:

> Those younger people reevaluate what is going on ... Posting on social media is effective on the platforms used by younger people. I use Instagram and TikTok to educate myself more, and overall find them to be more effective than Facebook, which is used by the older generation.

Sarah finds that people's interactions with certain issues on social media are effective for them to create change, implying that older people are less likely to appreciate what younger people have to say online. In a sense, it seems as though Sarah's definition of effectiveness is people being in agreement with each other, which unites people together in creating change. Sarah builds a collaborative environment in raising awareness on issues on Instagram and TikTok, because these platforms are used by younger people. Younger generations are more open-minded in wanting to educate themselves, which is why Sarah finds the platforms mainly used by this demographic more effective.

Hilary still supports the benefits of posting on social media to educate others, but she raises an interesting point that many social media posts are never destined to create official change:

> I think posting is a lot more effective than people give credit for. It does spread awareness. When the same 50 people comment on a single, political issue, it should be given credit for raising awareness. Is it effective in creating full-on change? Yes, but no. Lawmakers are older than us and do not have the platforms that we have. We do a good job of reaching people our own age through posting, but reaching the actual officials who make the changes is hard. This requires offline work, such as calling representatives.

While Hilary finds spreading awareness on a topic to be effective, she points out that no matter what, posting on social media is not going to reach key personnel in Congress who can work to change policies. By recognizing that posting on social media will not lead to official change, one could therefore interpret all forms of social media posting to be performative, even if someone is posting to educate others and not for validation. Either way, posting will not lead to direct change, so this raises the question of if there are differences in performativity between people who post for social clout and those who post to educate others.

Wendy expressed frustration about those who post only to spread awareness, accusing this reasoning to be performative:

> I feel a lot of frustration from online political discussions. People post things to be considered 'PC' instead of doing anything. Yes, it spreads awareness, but they aren't doing anything else beyond posting. It is somewhat fake.

The top issues of discussion, specifically racial justice, does incorporate performative elements, which is potentially what Wendy is referring to as to why spreading awareness on an issue is

not effective online activism. It shows how performative activism is incorporated into the desire to post, even if it is not a direct motivation.

However, its efficacy is dependent on the motivations of the users. If a user's motivating factor to post about a topic is because everyone else is doing so, then the post will not lead to change because it will not generate anything unique that would benefit the cause. If a user intends to start an informative conversation and share essential information about an issue, then the post can be an effective way to help create change, as it provides valuable data that can enhance the cause. However, most respondents who post to spread awareness believe that their current efforts are positive in moving a cause forward, even if it does not lead to direct change. Because they believe that they are providing a step in the right direction for the cause, they do not consider their efforts to be considered performative activism or their motivations for posting to stem from performative activism. Most respondents whose motivations to post are from wanting to educate others and have a meaningful conversation believe that what they do can still have a positive impact on the movement, even if it does not spur direct change.

The Polarization Of Social Media

Alex also believes in the social media divide and further emphasizes how little effort is required to pay attention on social media:

> Social media has made people more divided. When I post an article, I also share a headline, when most people don't even read the article. It has definitely shortened people's attention spans and made issues more polarizing.

Therefore, social media has made us lazier in not only how we make a simple post and move on, but also in how we do not thoroughly process the information in our feed. This demonstrates how social media has led to people taking the easy way out when it comes to interacting with controversial topics on social media. These reasonings show why respondents are so critical of performative activism, especially since it does not require much effort to make a post.

Other negative aspects of social media elevating controversial discussion include how these sites continue to validate one's opinions. Sarah explains that people's views are not only legitimized on social media, but that reinforcement of views reflects a social media divide:

> Social media can lead to engaging discussions, but it radicalizes people. It validates your opinions and pigeon-holes you into one-sided things. YouTube has been called out to allow people to fall into the trap of far-sided ideology.

Penelope raises a similar concern as Sarah, explaining why this validation has created a divide on social media, by specifically blaming the algorithm:

> Since everyone I follow is liberal, I get a false sense of the world that everyone agrees with me. I hear information I want to learn about, but the algorithm validates what I want to hear and what I agree with. I still follow conservative people, but their voices get washed out with liberal information. It still keeps people informed, but it also gets rid of the other side's argument. I don't understand why people who have opposing views get into arguments. It is beneficial to hear both sides to the argument, but the algorithm makes it hard to see different viewpoints on social media, which creates a non-inclusive full picture. I just get biased information...It still creates unity among certain groups of people who spread positivity and who support your views. It all depends on the platform you use. Social media is good and bad overall.

As I brought up in Chapter 4, users place responsibility on their algorithms for displaying the information that they see, when it is really the users' activity that creates the algorithm. Therefore, if users actively interact with more liberal posts online, the algorithm is ultimately going to deliver them more liberal content than conservative. This phenomenon leads to the divide in opinions online, as the more that people interact with a topic of interest to them, the more tailored their algorithm will be towards their interests and existing opinions. Algorithm systems based on users' previous activities represent a flaw in the social media delivery system. The operation of generating an algorithm based on a users' interests, rather than generic content, showcases how a user can unintentionally create a polarizing social media experience for themselves. Thus, one's social media activity is responsible for the divide that is witnessed on social media.

Online forums may present opportunities for political posts and are good at providing a way for people to engage in self-expression. However, these forums end up not being effective because it upsets people. Everyone interprets motivations for posting in a different way. If people are unable to figure out others' objectives, political discussion forums are not as productive. In Chapter 4, I discussed how respondents who participated in heated arguments found themselves arguing back and forth, leading to no central agreement. They walked away from their conversations discouraged with its ineffectiveness. This was a key reason as to why most respondents who had previously been involved in a heated discussion never got involved in them

again. If respondents did not find these forums to be all effective and they cannot discern the posting motivations of the people they follow, these forums may be of no use overall, since respondents perceive the content in their feed as performative, rather than as educational. Even if they post with the motivation to educate, other people can perceive their actions as performative. Either way, it is difficult to feel as though one's participation on social media is productive. In Chapter 5, it was established that not many respondents give into conformity. Few respondents gave into pressures to post about a controversial topic, but conformity still served as a motivating factor for why they decided to go ahead and post. Most respondents did face conformity, but decided against giving in to it.

Concluding Thoughts

In the end, a majority of respondents do not find social media to be effective in creating lasting change for pressing social and political issues. Nevertheless, they still find it helpful in raising awareness and educating the public on an issue. However, if posting to educate on social media is just as ineffective as posting to be performative, then all posting can still be considered performative in a sense due to its ineffectiveness and the desire to curate a positive online image. With little evidence of people admitting to engaging in performative activism, but much evidence of people condemning the practice as a whole, it is possible that people happen to be criticizing people who intend to educate. Since people do not know others' motivations for posting and are often unaware of their offline actions, especially if they do not know a person well, people may just consider everything they see as performative. When people are unaware of a poster's intentions, it emphasizes that there is not much of a difference between educating an audience and performative activism.

Posts that others criticize are often associated with common trends and require less effort to execute. For example, the ease of posting a black square as part of a trend faces more criticism for being considered performative than writing a descriptive, educational post about racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. While the more educational post provides more value to the overall conversation and does more to move the cause in a good direction, posting

alone does not create change. Thus, posting on social media, regardless of the motivation, is performative in general. The #blackouttuesday event highlighted the flaws of social media. This event was created to help people to reflect upon racial injustice issues faced in society; however, it ended up causing people to either worry more about how they would be perceived on social media for taking part in this trend or not, or to criticize others either for not posting at all or for taking part in performative activism. In Chapter 5, I explored how one's social media image still plays a role in why people do not engage in online debates, since people also do not want to be seen as "performative" by their followers. The shift of the #blackouttuesday trend's focus towards social media image and away from the original intentions of the movement is the key reason for why this trend was ineffective.

People in general have praised social media for bringing awareness of serious issues people may not have known about otherwise, especially to a younger audience, for allowing people to expand their network, and for providing an easier way to plan and advertise offline events, such as protests, that will serve to benefit a cause. However, social media has faced criticism for validating people's opinions and providing biased information through algorithms, creating a greater divide between people of different views, spreading false information, and being merely a means for people to seek social validation. Additionally, social media has served as a means for people to take the easy way out when it comes to engaging in controversial issues, whether it be the little effort that comes with making a post or the short attention span people have when scrolling through social media.

People post on social media, even if they believe that posting will not be effective towards solving the issue, to educate and bring awareness to crucial issues. In a sense, all forms of posting on social media are performative and people can still view educational posts as performative if they do not know the poster's intentions. The communication of controversy is a complex matter with a culture based on judgment and blame. The controversial issues at hand have had their underlying causes and purpose washed away through trends, enforcing an environment of criticism, through both arguments and how people post.

In the end, people will continue to post for their reasons of education even if they find it ineffective because they keep hoping something good could come out of it. Education and awareness can nevertheless still be a valuable end in and of itself. Posting on social media cannot directly change an issue. However, there is no way to tell if spreading awareness is changing someone's offline behaviors. It is possible that people could be changing the way they interact with others and approach their daily activities differently. As a result, these little changes can have long-lasting effects. There are innumerable ways that education can affect people's behaviors beyond what can be objectively measured. Even though social media is performative, there are still many benefits to it. As Isaac and Ellie mentioned previously, social media can be grounds for organizing offline events to create change, such as Black Lives Matter protests. There are ways social media can be leveraged to have a positive impact. In the words of Martin Luther King, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope" (Sutton, 2021). When King spoke these words, he meant that while people may struggle in the short term, they should continue to persevere in their quest for Civil Rights. At the time he spoke, much of the legislation to improve civil rights, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, were slow to pass (Sutton, 2021). Much of this historical context reflects similar situations faced today, but there is still room for hope. While the effectiveness of posting on social media for education may not be achieved in the short term, if the goals are virtuous, they can succeed.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

First, I would like to ask you for some background information:

1. Age:
2. Race:
3. Gender:
4. What is your student status:
    a. First-year
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. Graduated (year)_____
5. Major:

Now, I have some questions about your social media use:

6. Do you use social media?
    a. Yes
    b. No
7. What platforms do you use? Check all that apply
    a. Facebook
    b. Twitter
    c. Instagram
    d. Snapchat
    e. Linkedin
    f. TikTok
    g. Other:
8. How frequently do you go on social media each day?
    a. 0-1 times a day
    b. 2-3 times a day
    c. 4-5 times a day
    d. 6-7 times a day
    e. 8+ times a day
    f. Once a week
    g. 2-3 times a week
    h. Once a month
    i. 2-3 times a month

9. What platform do you find yourself spending the most time on?
    a. Facebook
    b. Twitter
    c. Instagram
    d. Snapchat
    e. Linkedin
    f. TikTok
    g. Other:

10. What are your main reasons for using social media? (Check all that apply)
    a. To keep in touch with family and friends
    b. To keep up with the latest news
    c. To show people what you're doing through your posts
    d. To see what other people are doing through their posts
    e. To message people/find content for academic/professional purposes
    f. Procrastination/boredom
    g. To find entertaining content
    h. Meet new people/Widen network
    i. Other_____

11. Do you pay attention to news about political issues on social media?
    a. Yes
    b. No

12. Do you rely on social media for news about political issues?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Finally, I will ask you questions about controversial discussions online:

13. How do you define online controversy?
    a. Some topics are inherently controversial
    b. The controversy comes from how people handle topics

14. Provide an example of a topic that is often controversial

15. What political issues do you see being talked about the most on social media? (short answer)

16. How frequently do you post political content on social media?
    a. Frequently
    b. Occasionally
    c. Never

17. If you post about politics, what political issues do you post about the most on social media? (short answer)

18. On what platforms do you post political content? (Check all that apply)
    a. Facebook
    b. Twitter
    c. Instagram (posts)
    d. Instagram (stories)
    e. Snapchat
    f. Linkedin
    g. TikTok
    h. Other

19. Do you ever feel a sense of obligation to take a public stand on an issue by posting about it?
    a. Yes
    b. No

20. Do you perceive any content you post about to be political?
    a. Yes
    b. No

21. How much of the content that you see while scrolling through social media do you consider to be political?
    a. Almost none
    b. One Quarter
    c. One Third
    d. One Half
    e. Two Thirds
    f. Three Fourths
    g. 100%
    h. Other:

22. What are the one or two political issues you have posted about that got the biggest reaction in terms of likes and/or comments? (short answer)

23. On what platforms do you see the most controversial discussion?
    a. Facebook
    b. Twitter
    c. Instagram (posts)
    d. Instagram (stories)
    e. Snapchat

     f. Linkedin

     g. TikTok

     h. Other

24. If you were to engage in political discussion, what platform is the most comfortable for you?

     a. Facebook

     b. Twitter

     c. Instagram (posts)

     d. Instagram (stories)

     e. Snapchat

     f. Linkedin

     g. TikTok

     h. Other

25. Do you engage in the comments on other people's political posts?

     a. Yes

     b. No

26. What issues do you tend to comment on the most on social media? (short answer)

27. Which platform would you engage in the comments on controversial issues the most?

     a. Facebook

     b. Twitter

     c. Instagram (posts)

     d. Instagram (stories)

     e. Snapchat

     f. Linkedin

     g. TikTok

     h. Other:

28. Have you ever been involved in an intense controversial online discussion?

     a. Yes

     b. No

29. If you see a trending controversial topic, do you post about it?

     a. Yes

     b. No

30. Why or why not? (short answer)

31. Do you feel a sense of obligation to post about a certain political topic when it is trending? (short answer)

     a. Yes

     b. No

32. How is your social media participation affected by the political content you see online? (Check all that apply)

     a. I create more posts (political-related)

     b. I create more posts (non-political related)

     c. I create fewer posts (political-related)

     d. I create fewer posts (non-political related)

     e. There is no impact on the frequency of my posting patterns

     f. I comment more on posts (political-related)

     g. I comment more on posts (non-political related)

     h. I comment less on posts (political-related)

     i. I comment less on posts (non-political related)

     j. There is no impact on how I comment on posts

     k. I go on social media more often when I see more political content

     l. I go on social media less often when I see more political content

     m. It depends on the political scenario whether or not I go on more or less

     n. Political content present on social media does not affect how often I frequent it

33. Do you ever feel distressed by the controversial discussions you see online?

     a. Yes

     b. No

34. Have you ever taken a break from certain social media platforms due to being distressed?

     a. Yes

     b. No

35. Do you believe that posting about controversial topics online is effective in solving the political issue?

     a. Yes

     b. No

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Tell me more about the controversial issues you witness on social media.

2. Elaborate more about the controversial issues you engage with on social media.

3. Elaborate more about the controversial topics you post about. How do the type of social media platforms that you use affects which issues you post about? If you don't post, why is that the case?

4. What factors motivate you to post about controversial matters (or not)?

5. How does the status of a trending controversial issue affect your decision to post (or not post)?

6. Does social media affect the way you view your news and political data?

7. What kind of content do you usually post on each platform you use - general content?

8. Do you post about political topics online? Why do you consider these topics to be political?

9. What motivates you to make a political post (or not post)?

10. Do you engage in the comments on other people's political posts?

11. Why or why not?

12. Do you ever feel distressed or overwhelmed or fed up by online discussions about politics? Why or why not?

13. Have you ever taken a break from certain social media platforms due to being overwhelmed?

14. If yes, explain the incident.

15. What emotions do you experience from online political discussions?

16. Do you ever feel a sense of conformity to post something that is controversial? For example, do you feel as if you might be accused of "staying silent" and not "caring about the issue" if you do not take a stance on an issue?

17. Do you ever feel a sense of obligation to take a public stand on an issue by posting about it?

18. If yes, explain those instances.

19. How do you feel about those who do not post controversial issues on their timeline?

20. What do you believe social media has done to elevate the communication of controversial issues over the past decade?

21. Have you ever been involved in an intense, impassioned political discussion online?

22. If so, how did you feel about it? If not, why don't you get involved in the discussion?

23. What motivated you to get involved with this discussion?

24. Do you believe that posting about controversial topics online is effective in solving the political issue? Explain your answer.