# Social Media Activism & Digital Indexicalities:
# The Case of Political Activism in Lebanon

**by**

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 2019

Certificate in International Affairs & Strategy, Sciences Po Paris, 2018

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

Department of French

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2023

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# Abstract

This thesis outlines the confluence between political activism and social media by examining contemporary multimodal approaches to political engagement on Instagram by Lebanese activists. Social media is a site of perpetual identity performances and constant dissemination of (mis)information, calling into question both the authenticity of online discursive content and the authority of users over this content. As the borders between the digital and physical realm become increasingly blurred alongside the progressive integration of technology into social and economic exchanges, the parameters of the public space are expanding to include the cryptic dimensions of the digital sphere. As a result, the following question arises: does there exist a continuum between the online and offline spheres? From a sociolinguistic perspective, this research provides an overview of the digital affordances and limitations of social networks in promoting or hindering political interactions online and calls attention to the important distinction between active political engagement and political passivity in the exploration of what it means to *be* an activist, to *do* activism, and to *do being* an activist in the digital era. This is accomplished through an assessment of the different processes of participation and identification online, the former referring to analytical roles of interaction inspired by Goffman's 'participatory framework' (1981) in the production and reception of speech, and the latter in relation to the discursive means by which users identify and are identified on social media. I challenge scholarship that defend the centrality of code-switching in online Lebanese interactions and conduct discursive analyses of text-based militant initiatives online to present hypotheses delineating the use of juxtaposed monolingual texts of English, Arabic, and French besides indexing targeted addressee(s). I propose to view the clenched/raised fist, both in its physical and digital emoji form, as a performative semiotic device and I question the extent to which mutual understanding of and engagement with the meaning behind this icon of protest can index participatory membership to a 'community of practice' (Eckert, 2006).

**Keywords**:   Digital activism; identification; participatory framework; social media; icons of protest; raised fist; Lebanon

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to acknowledge the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), q̓íc̓əy̓ (Katzie), kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo and Tsawwassen peoples on whose unceded traditional territories the three Simon Fraser University campuses reside. It is on these territories that I work, interact, and learn with respect for the land and for the people who have and continue to reside on this land today.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Cécile Vigouroux, who not only guided me throughout this project, but who has been and continues to be a mentor in my academic career. Dr. Vigouroux's passion for the field of sociolinguistics inspired me to pursue a graduate degree and this thesis would not have been possible without her generous support and expertise.

Lastly, I am deeply indebted to everyone in the French Department for their unwavering support. Thank you for guiding and motivating me throughout my seven years at SFU.

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# Introduction

The digital era is marked by innovations in communication technology as facilitators and mediators to human interactional and capital exchanges. The emergence of such tech and the affordances of the Internet introduce new possibilities for interaction which bypass the limitations of geographical hinderances and instead promote transnational social, political, and economic exchanges. The digital era and the 21$^{st}$ century at large are marked by what Toscano (2017) describes as 'connectivity' (276), meaning the extent of being connected and the inherent means by which interconnections are established. This sociolinguistic research is interested in exploring how technology has contributed to the emergence of new forms of digital connectivity, particularly within the realm of political activism, by reflecting on the ways the Internet and social media (Instagram) have contributed to transforming contemporary approaches to political activism. In other words, what is it like to *be* an activist and to *do* activism in the digital era? These questions necessarily involve issues of identity and action, which are two central topics of discussion in this thesis. To address these matters, I examine the specific mediascape of Lebanese political activism on Instagram.

Lebanon is an interesting case study due to its linguistic diversity exemplified through its regional and religious differences and the people's multimodal approaches to protest. It is also one of the most religiously diverse countries in West Asia and North Africa, inhabiting Christians, Muslims, Druze, and their various denominations. Each religious community uses a vast repertoire of language resources, including different dialects of Arabic and multiple combinations of Arabic, French, and English. The official language in Lebanon is Arabic, but French and English are also widely understood and spoken and can also be witnessed on protest placards, political street art, and in different militant initiative on social media. One of the questions I seek to address in this thesis is the extent to which language resources and linguistic choices in a multilingual context raise issues of addressivity and contribute to processes of identification online.

My interest in Lebanon also stems from my personal connection and disconnections with the country and the culture. As the daughter of first-generation

politicized Lebanese immigrants having been raised in the digital era, the Internet and media were primary sources of accumulating knowledge and news about the political, social, and economic state of Lebanon. As a recreational user of social networks, I too participate in the dissemination of posts through my online engagement with other users and digital content. It is precisely my personal online activity that prompted me to question the extent to which digitally mediated political engagement can bring about significant change in the world. Similarly, my engagement with political content led me to contemplate my own experience performing the role of an activist and to question the parameters of activism and the ways it can be exercised within different realms: the digital and the physical.

The case of Lebanese activists is particularly interesting since "[they are] often regarded as trapped between war and sectarianism" (Aouragh, 2016: 125) where progressive change is hindered by ongoing political and economic instability as well as omnipresent tensions between different religious and political groups. My research challenges this perspective by questioning the extent to which social media provides opportunities for collaboration and allyship between Lebanese people around the globe and the subsequent establishment of what Aouragh (2016) calls 'non-sectarian camaraderie' between politically engaged Lebanese individuals. I chose Instagram since it is a multimodal platform with a wide range of interactive affordances that promote various militant initiatives, such as photo and video sharing, digital survey polls and fundraising resources, the linking of external websites or Internet initiatives, group and private messaging, collaborative posts, and many more. Instagram, one of the major social media platforms of the 21st century, is also a site of perpetual identity performances which creates an interesting context for studying the ways that activists identify and are identified online. My data is comprised of several Instagram accounts, whose activity I observed over a period of approximately two years, as well as fieldnotes containing observations and critical reflections on discursive trends and the construction of interactional and behavioral norms online.

I use my own practice of social media, from a recreational and a research standpoint, to explore the different roles that a user plays online, both in terms of social identities and discursive analytical roles. I conduct digitally mediated interdisciplinary observations from three different positions, which frequently intersect: 1) As a digital ethnographic researcher; 2) as a student in sociolinguistics and political science; and 3)

as a recreational social media user with an experiential understanding of the social implications of online participation and the functioning of the application. These identity categories are also shaped by my cultural heritage, linguistic and academic education, and other environmental elements of my upbringing and social conditioning. These roles are particularly interesting when discussing the conditions of activism and being an activist: as a researcher or as an academic in general, am I considered an activist since I discuss and reflect critically on political and social issues? Am I an activist since I engage and interact with political content online as an everyday social media user? This research answers these questions by conceptualizing activism as a performative act of *doing* of activism and *being* of an activist and by discussing what this looks like in theory and practice.

This thesis is structured as follows: I begin by outlining my methodology which incorporates mixed method approaches to digital and linguistic ethnography (**chapter 2**). I draw inspiration from scholarship on digital ethnography to discuss the advantages and limitations of conducting ethnographic observations of militant interactions and linguistic dynamics on Instagram. This includes a consideration of the practical dimensions and ethical deliberations of social media as a site for fieldwork (Luh Sin, 2015) and the social implications of this emerging ethnographic approach in academia. I then cite Copland and Creese (2015) in elaborating a clear approach to conducting linguistic ethnographic research involving interpretative observations and computer-mediated critical discourse analysis (Herring, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2008, 2011; Androutsopoulos & Staehr, 2018). This chapter also includes an introduction to methods of data construction, data storage in the digital environment, and guidelines for the selection of Instagram accounts whose online activity I observe.

I then present a theoretical framework which involves discussing the conditions of participation online which shape user behaviour and frame the interactional setting (**chapter 3**). In this chapter, I deconstruct conventional understandings of the notion of 'political activism' and conceptualize the identity category of an 'activist' in the context of the digital era. I do so by drawing inspiration from Afromeeva et al.'s study on *Understanding Political Engagement* (2021), where I distinguish between levels of engagement online and define clear parameters for active political participation versus reactive passivity. I then cite Thompson (1997) and Blackstone (2004) in elaborating normative perspectives on 'activism' as noble work and 'activists' as extraordinary

beings to support my conclusions claiming that social movement participants often reject the social label of an 'activist'. To introduce my discussion on identity performances on social media, I discuss politically passivity and evoke Bruzzone's graduate thesis (2017) on 'socially mobilized subjectivity' (Friedmann, 2011 & Purcell, 2013) to theorize the potential of society's desire to be ruled in a philosophical account of agency and online behaviour. I then deconstruct the notion of 'action' and defend political action as fueled by experience (Mcdonald, 2002) and individualism (King, 2004). Finally, I discuss the affordances and limitations of social networks for the promotion of political engagement online and question the extent to which the Internet and social media platforms can truly be considered public spaces. The discussion on space focuses on the relationship between the online and offline dimensions and introduces the notion of *resemiotization* (Iedema, 2001) to defend the existence of a continuum between these two spheres. This chapters lays the foundation for the presentation of concrete data and discursive analyses in the following sections.

To investigate the processes of participation and identification online (**chapter 4**), I adapt Goffman's 'participatory framework' (1981) to the online context and outline the analytical roles of interaction in the production and reception of speech as a way of conceptualizing issues of addressvity, authority, and authorship. This analytical framework premises the discussion on identifying and being identified online where I conduct discourse analysis of text-based militant initiatives such as multilingual education posts and question the extent to which language selection and the hierarchical organization of these selections in a multilingual context raise issues of addressivity, language ideologies, and identity performances. This then leads me to distinguish between *doing* activism, *doing being* an activist, and *being* an activist (Schegloff, 1999 & Bobel, 2007).

Before my concluding remarks (**chapter 5**), I discuss the *entextualization* and *recontextualization* of icons of protest such as the Phoenix and more importantly, the clenched/raised fist in both its physical and digital emoji form (**chapter 4**). I discuss the trajectories of these semiotic materials through the physical and digital dimensions to reinforce previous claims on the influential relationship between these two spheres. I then shed light on issues of mutual engagement and understanding of semiotic material online by introducing the notion of *community of practice* (Eckert, 2006) and proposing to view participants as members of a collective socialized group grasping and interactively

shaping the meaning of icons of protest. I conclude with the idea that the conditions of participating in this 'community of practice' unite individuals from different linguistic backgrounds through the understanding of a digital linguistic code where meaning is constructed through semiotic rather than text-based material.

# Chapter 2.

# Methodological Approaches to Digitally Mediated Multimodal Discourse

In this chapter, I identify and define the digital and linguistic ethnographic approaches to data construction and discourse analysis used for this research. I begin by outlining the spatial and practical implications of conducting fieldwork on social media and address the concerns of this emerging ethnographic methodology (Luh Sin, 2015). I trace the trajectory of my multimodal approaches to digital ethnographic research by drawing inspiration from existing and influential academic contributions to the construction of linguistic data (Copland & Creese, 2015), digital ethnography (Varis, 2016; Pink et al., 2016; Varis & Hou, 2020) and digitally mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2008, 2011; Androutsopoulos & Stæhr, 2018). Finally, I discuss the different ethical questions associated with ethnographic observations on social media and the necessary attention required for new emerging sites for fieldwork outside our traditional approaches to ethnographic research.

## 2.1. Digital Ethnography and Fieldwork on Social Media

As I discuss further in the following chapters when evoking Bruzzone (2017) and McDonald (2002), the centrality of experience as the driving force in constructing consciousness and proximity towards a given event or issue instills genuine motivation for the active engagement towards progressive change. Luh Sin (2015) cites Phillips and Johns (2012) in arguing that experience in the field, meaning the physical presence of a researcher in the field in comparison to writing from the comfort of one's home, is said to "distinguish genuine geographers from mere interlopers" (Phillips & Johns, 2012: 3, cited in Luh Sin, 2015: 677). Luh Sin (idem) argues that research in the digital era, where ethnographic fieldwork involves the Internet and social media as a site for observations and the construction of data, "blurs our notions of what and where the field is" (Luh Sin, 2015: 677). Our social world is increasingly being enabled and mediated by the Internet and social media, thus emphasizing the importance of considering the influence of communication technology on the nature of social and political interactions. As Luh Sin argues, contemporary research methods are not seen "as a substitute for traditional

fieldwork but instead add a complex layer to what can perhaps be apparent to a researcher on the ground" (ibid: 678). What about observations of computer mediated interactions on social media in the fields of sociology, sociolinguistics, and communication?

Luh Sin, among other (offline) fieldwork ethnographers, recognizes that many important works have emerged (I cite a number of them further in the section) in the field of social sciences which defend the possibility of conducting fieldwork on social media: "the inseparability between what happens online and offline suggests that we need to challenge our presumptions about where and what the field is in qualitative methodologies" (Luh Sin, 2015: 683). As an emerging ethnographic approach, it requires the consideration of the methodological, theoretical, and societal issues that the digital realm poses, elements on which I seek to shed light throughout this thesis.

Ethnographers have adapted methods to the digital context which are commonly referred to by various authors as either *internet ethnography* (Sade-Beck, 2004; Sveningsson, 2004), *virtual ethnography* (Hine, 2008), or more recently, *digital ethnography* (Varis, 2016; Pink et al., 2016; Maly, 2018; Varis & Hou, 2020). Pink et al. (2016) define *digital ethnography* as a contemporary ethnographic method "[inviting] researchers to consider how we live and research in a digital, material and sensory environment" (1). Despite the possibility of transferring many ethnographic activities to fit the digital context, Pink et al. (idem) note that conventional ethnographic practices must be adapted to consider the mediated nature of contact between participants who engage with content and interact with other users to various extents and through different digital means (ibid: 3).

Digital ethnography must also consider that social media as a site for fieldwork is complex and "incorporates physical, virtual, and imagined spaces" (Wesch, 2007, cited in Luh Sin, 2015: 678) involving various layers of digital infrastructure, tools of interaction, and disproportionate access due to socioeconomic and national censorship differences. As Varis and Hou argue, ethnographic approaches to studying online interpersonal communication should thus be "user-centered" (Varis & Hou, 2020: 234) and conscious of subjective digital experiences and "multi-situated use of communicative tools" (ibid). For this research, I did not enter in direct contact with users —that is, for the purpose of interviews, surveys, or contextually oriented discussion. Rather, this research

is user-centered in its focus on observing the ways users use the platform and interact online.

To further conceptualize this methodological approach, I draw inspiration from Gorup's *Ethics of Observational Research* (2020) in physical fieldwork settings and adapt many of these reflections to the context of my digital observation practices. For instance, my method can be understood as a form of "qualitative shadowing", defined by Gorup (2020) as "an observational methodology which involves the researcher typically following a limited number of individuals as they go about their everyday tasks" (477).[1] It is a nonparticipant observational approach, meaning that "during shadowing, researchers generally do not participate in their shadowees' activities" (ibid). Shadowing in the digital sphere is similar in its inherent relation to shadowees; however, it is far less "intrusive" since it only follows the speech and actions that the user selectively chooses to share with their followers. The rather "highly unpredictable nature of shadowing" (ibid: 477) in the digital context is characterized by the shadowees' oblivion to their participation in research observations. In other words, the shadowees consciously share content with their followers but may be unaware of the intent behind their followers' presence (this is discussed further in the last section of this chapter on ethical deliberations).

From a more linguistically oriented perspective, Varis and Hou (2020) specify that the "digital" aspect of this ethnographic approach refers to the assessment of communicative events shaped by digital technologies, which can have both online and offline dimensions (ibid: 230). In the case of online activism, digital speech events still involve an offline element whereby users exist, reflect, and organize in the physical realm as a prerequisite or a result of online activity. For instance, digitally mediated ideological discussions or online mobilization efforts could lead to the potential organization of street protests, fundraising events, or other militant initiatives that take place in the physical realm. This prompts the question of where digital discursive content

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[1] I want to emphasize Gorup's precision of "everyday tasks" (2020) in the context of digital activism since communication technology and social media are becoming a central aspect of global and local communication for activists and politically engaged users. Moreover, many activists utilize their personal Instagram account as the main site for militant practices and initiatives, which merges both their recreational and militant usage of the application and embeds both these practices into everyday life.

online starts and ends, as will be discussed in the following chapter and on which I expand in chapter 4.

Varis and Hou specify however that digital ethnography does not necessarily prioritize the 'online' dimension (2020: 229); instead, it can be used as an ethnographic approach to studying digital communication within a particular discursive and social setting involving both online and offline considerations. Thus, digital ethnographers can choose to assess a combination of both online and offline data or to simply focus on the online sphere as an environment for observation (ibid). For this research, I defend the importance of assessing both the online and offline contexts since the two realms are often characterized by an influential relationship where the digital and material worlds collide. As Varis and Hou highlight (2020):

> "…digital ethnography is interested in the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies." (230)

I adopt a linguistic ethnographic approach to studying language dynamics online and the broader social and political implications of these 'computer mediated interactions' (defined in the following paragraph). *Linguistic ethnography*, as defined by Copland and Creese (2015), "is an interpretative approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures" (13). One of the central characteristics of linguistic ethnography is the perspective viewing language and culture as inseparable processes in flux rather than products (ibid: 14). Copland and Creese cite Sapir (1921) in arguing that the study of language must necessarily involve its relationship to culture. This important sociolinguistic perspective is particularly significant to the context of Lebanon, a multilingual country whose rich culture is routed in a complex history of religiously and regionally diverse linguistic practices.

Herring (2004), a pioneer in the theorization of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), defines CMDA as applying "methods adapted from language-focused disciplines such as linguistics, communication, and rhetoric to the analysis of computer-mediated communication" (ibid: 339). She goes on to suggest different ethnographic approaches to "supplement" CMDA such as surveys, interviews, and ethnographic observations, which involve both qualitative and quantitative analyses (ibid). One of the

central aspects of CMDA, according to Herring, is "the analysis of logs of verbal interaction (characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads, archives, etc.)" (ibid). Verbal interactions involve both computer-mediated oral and written speech; the former referring to audio-video content and other auditorily stimulating and digitally produced speech, and the latter including text and various semiotic content such as emojis or images.

Inspired by Herring's linguistically founded definition of computer-mediated discourse analysis, I observe online behaviour through "…the lens of language" (2004: 339). Often, evoking the term "behaviour" prompts psychological considerations, which is not the analytical perspective of this thesis. Rather, the methodological paradigms of this research seek to study spoken and written language online, norms of interaction, and the influence that social media platforms have on these linguistic dynamics in the context of digital activism.

## 2.2. Processes of Data Construction & The Data

As Copland and Creese confute, "unlike some other research methodologies and approaches, linguistic ethnography does not prescribe a set of data collection and analysis tools" (2015, 29); rather, linguistic ethnographic research is characterized by interdisciplinary interests which involve a combination of various approaches to "selecting" and analyzing data. In this section, I outline my approaches to data construction and define the guidelines for the selection of Instagram accounts to observe.

First, it is important to mention that this research does not align with practices of *collecting* data as a process of ethnographic accumulation of knowledge. Instead, I am inspired by my supervisor Cécile B. Vigouroux's teachings which elucidate the problematic nature of data *collection* and argue for a shift towards data *construction*. Data collection emulates the work of an orchardist harvesting their crop as it becomes available, implying the pre-existence of something to collect. For ethnographic research, it implies that data already exists by means of external forces readily available for researchers to locate and apply in defense of their arguments. Data cannot simply exist from an essentialist point of view and is instead constructed through critical reflections and observations of human activity, which is not stagnant, but rather dynamically

negotiated within and influenced by different social contexts, including that of the researcher. Despite this distinction however, one cannot deny the intrinsic biases of research and of researchers who carefully position themselves and their ethnographic approach to benefit their study.

There is a tendency to seek objectivity in research despite the certitude that one's positionality inevitably influences one's ideology and how data construction is practiced. Objective research is a quixotic ambition since, as Bucholtz reminds us, "researchers cannot escape either our social world or our own subjectivity, and methods that aim to overcome one or the other may do more than obscure the workings of social and subjective factors" (Bucholtz, 2000: 1446). Philosophers as early as Aristotle have reflected on the political nature of human beings and as Joseph (2006) states: "disagreement is as natural to human beings as speaking is" (2). My goal is not to remain objective in my observations but rather to be transparent about my positionality and to use this as a facilitator for, rather than an impediment to, my critical reflections.

The data used in this research were constructed using a mixed-method approach, which Androutsopoulos and Stæhr refer to as "strategies of collecting and analyzing data from different sources within a single research design" (Androutsopoulos & Stæhr, 2018: 120). In his contribution to *Digital Discourse* (2011), Androutsopoulos emphasizes that mixed-method approaches which combine qualitative and quantitative analysis of multilingual discourse and code-switching are essential to studying new media discourse and semiotic features online since "participatory and convergent digital environments are characterized by processes of multimodality and multi-authorship" (Androutsopoulos, 2011: 278-81).[2] Constructing data from the digital design of social media requires a consideration of recontextualized media and semiotic modes of communication including images, videos, written texts, colors, symbols, and the different interactive and participatory dimensions of the platform.

Since the beginning of my research, I did not explicitly outline a basis for selection because this process inherently suggests the pre-existence of evidence. Instead, I conducted observations from an open and flexible perspective allowing me to expand my scope of discovery and avoid the application of strict guidelines which would

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[2] This approach is particularly relevant to the analyses in chapter 4 on linguistic selections in multilingual contexts as indicating potential addressivity.

ultimately limit my assessment of such a dynamic digital environment. In the fall of 2020, my methodological practices began on my personal Instagram account from which all my observations took place. I specifically chose to use my personal Instagram account so that I may integrate my experience into my observations and reflections, thus allowing me to consider my own engagement trends in hopes of exposing the structures and broader social implications of online activity.

I followed several Instagram accounts of politicized Lebanese artists, news channels, and other Lebanese related media content from a variety of religious and political backgrounds. After the August 4th explosions at the Port of Beirut in 2020, many important Lebanese figures and media outlets discussed the tragedy on their social media pages to bring awareness to the events, urge their followers to donate, or to discuss the political and economic repercussions of the blasts. From there, I was exposed to a wide range of Instagram accounts that varied in categories of identification such as academics, painters, street artists, musicians, writers, and media figures, all of whom use Instagram as an outlet for multimodal forms of political expression. This prompted me to reflect on the notion of *activism* and the role of an *activist*, especially in an environment dominated by the eternal circulation of (mis)information and characterized by passive absorption of content (discussed further in the following chapter).

Once I became exposed to a variety of politically engaged users online, I began to observe the different ways they express themselves online, the digital resources they utilize, and the languages and varieties used in both oral and written speech. This process led to the progressive establishment of "selection" criteria for assessment, such as the necessity for the user to participate in political discussions or engage with content on issues relating to the political, economic, and environmental state of Lebanon or the social progression of Lebanese society. This could range from current events such as the (relatively) recent explosions at the Port of Beirut, the federal elections, or historical events such as the Civil War, the French mandate, and events relating to ongoing tensions between religious groups, political organizations, and Arab countries. It was also necessary for me to select currently active users, meaning accounts who are actively engaging with relevant content in the last 1-2 years. Finally, the accounts must also engage in either one or a combination of the three main languages spoken in Lebanon: Arabic, French, and English. The modes of interaction and the ways the users

navigate the application were unimportant in the selection of accounts but primordial to contextual considerations of computer-mediated discourse analysis.

I chose Instagram as a site for data construction because it allows users from around the globe to interact through multimodal forms of communication, leading me to question the extent to which discursive norms are constructed at the user level. From a research perspective, Instagram offers different opportunities for constructing data and interacting with users as participants, such as story polls, surveys, and questionnaires. From a user perspective, Instagram is the site of my earliest observations of and encounters with digital activism. In the past, I followed many activists and militant organizations on Instagram, I engaged actively in political discussions, and I participated in the dissemination of political information and news through post and story sharing. I began to view online political participation as work and to question its significance in bringing about meaningful change, especially when considering the obscurity of criterions for progressive change. I then began to question the parameters of activism in the digital era and to reflect critically on the identity performances that occur, the discursive norms that are constructed, and the wide range of interactions that take place on the application.

For this thesis, I followed approximately 40-45 Instagram accounts which flooded my personal Instagram feed with political content and discussions on Lebanon. The merging of my research with my everyday social media activity was deliberately intended to construct an environment which promoted the constant absorption of relevant media content to this research. This emulates the digital environment from which many militants engage on social media[3]. Eventually, I narrowed down my selection of Instagram accounts to 12 based on the interpretative and argumentative direction of my analyses. These users all have different approaches to political activism online and engage through various modes and digitally mediated linguistic resources.

In considering my own behaviour and political participation online, I observe the habitus, in both its construction and manifestations in practice from a Bourdieusian consideration of the frames of speech shaped by social structures (Bourdieu, 1980), which in this case, are defined by the digital tools contributing to processes of online

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[3] This claim references footnote 1 on Gorup's precision of "everyday tasks" (2020).

socialization.[4] Embedding myself into this research allows me to gain perspective on the user experience and the external forces, such as digital structures and conventional practices online, imposing controls on the production and reception of online speech (discussed further in chapter 4). Thus, I too capitalize on the privileges of the Internet and of social media, as a user and an ethnographer, to construct data for this research.

To record my observations, I kept a journal where I noted reflections on my own social media activity, digitally mediated sensorial experiences, interactional norms surrounding online social exchanges and political interactions, the use of different communicative tools and semiotic modes of communication, and the production and reception of speech with a particular interest in Lebanese multilingual dynamics. This journal acted as ethnographic field notes where I reflected on and compared my observations. Here are three excerpts (figure 2-1. below):

*August 4, 2021 – 08:23*
- 1 year anniversary of explosions - Port of Beirut
- The body - site for protest
  - Tarek Moukaddem - photographs the bare bodies of victims of the blasts - physical permanence of the events or memory of the events
- "Toxic Nostalgia" – discussion by @the.political.psychologist (Abou Ismail) on Instagram (*See screenshots in folder "Instagram Surveys"*)
  - Suggests that nostalgia is inherently positive and defends the existence of nostalgia that could be detrimental to: 1) individual mental health, 2) community healing - intergenerational trauma
  - Relevance: theoretical discussion on shared experiences and the construction of a common identity + solidarity among a divided nation (?)

*November 1, 2021 – 00:16*
- Likes, comments, story views/reactions: digital tools for the construction of data on interaction trends
  - Platform ultimately designed for the promotion of engagement
  - See Gillespie on platforms as intermediaries
  - Community of social media users = labour force?
- Social conditioning of user behaviour online
  - Cancel culture: canceling as work - phenomena that extends past the parameters of the digital space (does not end there): offline consequences
  - Individualism, competition, work, & processes of social conditioning by users - Marxist theory

*February 22, 2022 – 09:47*
- The significance of the legend of the Phoenix to the Lebanese people
  - See video saved to library (date stamped)
  - Entextualization and resemiotization - Nazer's phoenix sculpture
  - Rebuilding from the ashes - reconstruction of Beirut after port explosion
  - Phoenix - recontextualized symbol of resilience

**Figure 2-1.    (2021-2022) Excerpts from 2020-2022 Reflection Journal highlighting notes from observations and reflections for future analyses.**

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[4] Frame, as elaborated by Goffman (1981), is defined and discussed further in chapter 4.

Digital data storage is a complex and fragile system. The storage of my data library is dependent on the reliability of cloud structures, which is a great limit of this digital ethnographic approach. The vulnerability of communication technology reveals the concerning problematic of human dependence and trust in these digital innovations. For this research, there were two primary means of data storage: 1) Saving posts directly to Instagram (a resource offered by the application); 2) saving data through screenshots. The former refers to content stored in private folders on my personal account which are only as secure and viable as the application. The latter refers to data stored in either my smart phone or desktop photo library and is dependent on the functioning of the technology and the reliability of iCloud storage.

Instagram posts remain on the platform until the user, or the platform, decides to remove them, therefore involving a certain degree of permanence compared to other forms of communicative resources on the platform. For instance, Instagram stories can only be viewed for 24 hours before being archived to the user's personal account storage.[5] Due to the impermanence of these *stories*, I screenshot the stories and save them in a data folder outside the application. Though I acknowledge that this may pose an ethical issue as I am attempting to surpass the ephemeral nature of this interactional tool, it can also be defended that the information shared to the Internet, considered here as a public space (or not —this will be further discussed in the following chapter), is always susceptible to perpetuation through the inevitable interactive dimensions of social networks. The troubling aspect is the profound attachment that users have to their social media accounts, an observation which was made clear to me in experiencing the fragility of the data storage library and unfortunately losing some data during my initial construction process.[6] The delicate nature of social networks characterizes the limitations of data construction for this research which is entirely dependent on the availability and functioning of digital communication technology.

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[5] It is interesting to question the extent to which this short temporality may construct people's narratives as well as the interpretation of these narratives by other users.

[6] In October of 2021, Instagram users were left in the dark after an outage on all Meta platforms sparked global angst. Though it only took approximately 6 hours for the platforms to be reinstated, social media users were reminded of the unreliability of social networks and the concerning dependence humans have on technology as the primary form of connectivity.

## 2.3. Ethical Deliberations

Luh Sin (2015) discusses the practical and ethical parameters of using social media platforms like Facebook in research spaces and argues that "we need to reopen numerous traditional discussions on the ethics of fieldwork and consider how these might or might not apply on social media platforms" (278). In this section, I outline how I seek to contribute to and expand on existing scholarship deliberating the ethics of ethnographic fieldwork by incorporating a digital component to the discussion on observational approaches.

Gorup (2020) notes that researchers conducting observation techniques in social sciences, "whether researchers engage in participant or nonparticipant observation, they will necessarily alter the observed settings due to their presence" (476). Despite the focus of Gorup's contribution on observation techniques for "on ground" fieldwork, this argument is nevertheless relevant in the context of digital ethnography. As mentioned, I did not directly interact with users but that did not erase the influence of my presence as a viewer of the media. My presence is also an important aspect to consider since I am contributing to the increased views of the post and story, which may in turn, contribute to influencing the outputs of digital algorithms. Throughout my observation, I did not like, comment, or share any of the media content; however, as mentioned in the previous section, my approach to data storage defies the temporal and spatial limitations of the social media platform. It can be argued that this alters the meaning of the content by extracting it from its original context; however, I defend that screenshotting and saving the post or story outside the platform are acts that rather freeze the content in time. Furthermore, in combination with fieldnotes and reflections, the initial significance of the media content, which lead to the construction of this digital material as data, is sustained.

I acknowledge that my processes of data construction capitalize on the accessibility of content as public information, but my intention is not to partake in or promote ethical issues surrounding extraction practices. Rather, I seek to emphasize the savable (recoverable) nature and replicability of content online and to expose the new and dynamic realities of digital ethnographic research and the public nature of the social world in the digital era. Moreover, I am attempting to construct a unique methodological

approach to digital ethnographic observations and discourse analysis online from the experience of the social media user.

A potential limit to this approach is the reliance on Instagram as the central entity responsible for gaining informed consent for the potential recontextualization and critical analysis of users' content (e.g., memes). For instance, when content is screenshotted or screen-recorded for posterity, either inside or outside the platform (i.e., content is extracted from the temporal and spatial constraints of the application), users are not notified (compared to apps such as Snapchat where screenshot notifications are sent). Since users' level of proficiency and their knowledge surrounding the functions of the application are outside my scope of understanding, it is uncertain whether users are aware and reminded of the susceptibility of their uploaded content to be saved and used in different contexts without their knowledge.

As a condition for their online participation, individuals must agree to the terms and conditions outlined by the app when their account is created. This contract involves an agreement of the jurisdictional powers of the app over procedures and policies such as censorship, content moderation rights, and privacy. Applications such as Twitter and Instagram provide their users with the ability to control the privacy settings of their accounts, meaning users can choose a public account (the user's information and posts are made public to all other users on the app) or private (hidden from other users whose access has not been granted by the account holder). This, however, does not protect users against the commodification of their information —that is, the use of users' personal information for profitable gains on the part of the application (e.g., selling personal data to marketing companies).

On the platform side, users with public accounts understand that they have consented to the sharing of their information and posts with other users, and yet, are these individuals sufficiently informed of the potential consequences of this publicity? Is it enough to consent to the terms and conditions of the social media platform or should users be constantly reminded of the parameters of their participation? In the context of data construction for this research, where must I draw the line between obtaining informed and uninformed consent from social media users and are the privacy policies outlined by the application sufficient for academic use? Androutsopoulos and Stæhr refer to personal social networks as "limited-access digital spaces", where researchers

must negotiate legitimate access with users (Androutsopoulos & Stæhr, 2018: 121). For "shadowees" of this research, users are aware of the circulation of their posts since they are public accounts; however, the extent to which they are sufficiently informed and reminded of the potential entextualization (defined and discussed in the final chapter) of their posts and opinions is disputable.

When researchers engage with participants, research ethics procedures are necessary to ensure the safety of collaborators, their communities, and their digital practices (ibid). The doctrine of informed consent is one of the many ethical principles of ethnographic research which has troubled my reflections on the process of data construction for this research. Informed consent relates to the freedom of individuals to make choices about their participation and involves a level of responsibility on the part of the researchers to provide sufficient information about the participatory parameters and consequences of the project in which collaborators are taking part. Since the gap between the Internet and "real life" is progressively closing in, due to the rise of polymedia and to the centrality of technology in everyday exchanges (Madianou & Miller, 2012, 2013), a lack of transparency surrounding these participatory conditions is increasingly normalized and rarely met with consequences.

It is important to consider that the power of social networks over communication is a product of a growing digital capitalist society and the subsequent "constant availability of a range of mediational tools for interpersonal communication, each with specific semiotic affordances, participation formats and symbolic meanings" (Androutsopoulos & Stæhr, 2018: 119). Thus, participation in the digital community involves the integration into a digitally stimulated capitalist environment imposing controls on social agents in several different ways (discussed further in chapter 3). As a researcher, it is essential to consider these conditions and to reflect on the ways my research approaches may contribute to reinforcing these realities.

Gorup (2020) admits that "very few clear answers to the identified dilemmas can be given" (490), which characterizes the challenge of ethics of research. The important aspect of these methodological processes is the constant and critical reflection on the ways that we, as researchers, participate in the communities that we observe. While I cannot claim to provide fixed guidelines for ethical conducts towards a methodological approach that is still new and for which there exists limited scholarship, my aim is to

outline a set of practices that will hopefully contribute to minimizing the influence of my presence as an observational researcher, all while posing important questions regarding fieldwork on social media platforms.

First, I do not claim to know or to work closely with my participants (i.e., the users whose accounts and account activity I observe), meaning that the claims I make about the ways they identify or are identified online are solely based on interpretative conclusions resulting from accumulated contextual information and influenced by my academic training. I resist heteronormative gender binaries and refrain from assuming a user's gender by instead using gender inclusive pronouns unless the user explicitly specifies how they would like to be addressed.

Second, I maintain the anonymity of politically engaged individuals who do not publicly associate themselves with an organization or who have not publicly branded themselves as activists or other public figures. The reality of anonymity online is defined by one's ability to navigate the privacy limitations of social networks. So, to avoid contributing to this publicity, I refrain from using images of faces by blacking out any profile pictures with personal images.

Finally, field relations, meaning the position I hold in the digital field of research in relation to my participants, as Gorup (2020) notes, "do not only carry consequences for the ethics of research but also for its methodological integrity, making the acknowledgement of researcher positionality and the significance of reflexivity in shadowing studies ever so crucial" (477). Throughout this thesis, I aim to reflect critically and recurringly on my positionality, privilege, and the effects or influence that my observations and general research could have on my collaborators and their community. Moreover, I aim to regulate and to pay constant attention to my online activity, especially towards the accounts that I am observing. Since the beginning of my observation process and until the end, my use of Instagram is part of my research and should maintain the methodological integrity outlined above.

In the following chapter, I discuss the contextual and conditional implications of online engagement and the digital means by which users identify and are identified online. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical discussion on action,

identity, and space to deconstruct the notion of 'activism' and to redefine this term in the contemporary digital context.

# Chapter 3.

# Activism in the Digital Era

Inspired by Toscano's assessment of the human experience in the current state of digital connectivity (2017: 276), I outline the following four conditions for social agents in the physical and virtual realms: 1) Both the physical and virtual world are sites for identity performances; 2) social interactions are increasingly technologically imposed, occurring largely through the interactive functions of Internet platforms such as social networks as well as through the affordances of other communication technology; 3) there is a growing reliance on Internet platforms as primary sources of information and news; and, 4) as a consequence to the above three conditions, the lines between the digital and physical realm are becoming progressively more blurred (I will be discussing this further in part 3.3.1.). As a result, daily communicative exchanges are transforming and introducing new discursive and behavioural norms, which is particularly interesting in the context of political activism and militant interactions online. This chapter presents a collection of authors and scholarships from which inspiration was drawn for the theorization of the act of *activism* and the role of an *activist*.

## 3.1. Posting as Protesting?

Social media facilitates various militant initiatives, especially in terms of communication and transnational collaboration. However, technology is not simply an accessory to offline activism, it has also contributed to forming new digitally mediated approaches to *doing activism* and calls into question society's normative understanding of the role of an *activist*. The image commonly associated with *activism* is a sea of bodies marching side by side carrying placards and banners while the voices of the masses harmonize in chanting protest slogans. It is the image of mobilized groups occupying public spaces, organizing blockades, and pushing back (both literally and symbolically) against institutional violence and authoritative order. Similarly, an *activist* is understood to be a social movement participant —an individual who campaigns to bring about political or social change by working to mobilize for the purpose of their cause, organizing and attending events, and often risking potential physical harm. The digital world, particularly social media and other interactive platforms, expands the scope of

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action and calls for a revaluation of what activist works looks like in the age of information and technology.

*Activism* derives its meaning from the term "activist," describing one who advocates a doctrine of direct action for change (Online Etymology Dictionary). *Action*, directly translated from the Latin word *activus* and derived from *actus*, describes "a doing" where an act signifies a thing done (ibid). An *activist* is thus an agent of action: "a setter in motion of change according to the imperatives of their ethical framework, their politics" (Shepherd, 2018: 49). Activists agitate social order by defending a perspective that often criticizes conventional doing and proposes direct political change or action towards a progressive solution. Such action has historically taken place in public spaces. However, as discussed later, the parameters of the public space in the digital era have expanded to include the cryptic dimensions of the digital realm.

I define *offline activism* as efforts to promote or shed light on a political, social, economic, legal, or environmental issue with the intention of spreading awareness or seeking reform. This can be exercised through various modes such as marches, rallies, street graffiti, public art installations, strikes, fundraisers, and even the destruction or vandalization of symbolic or historical structures. This understanding of offline activism is uniquely tied to the physical senses where you can see, hear, touch, and smell the manifestations of action, necessarily emphasizing the spatial and temporal dimensions of the body as a vehicle for protest.

In contrast, I define *digital activism* as efforts to spread awareness, mobilize engaged individuals, organize initiatives, and deliver credible information to targeted audiences by means of digital communication platforms such as Internet blogs, podcasts, social networks, and other communication forums. This type of campaigning can be exercised in the form of informative posts or videos; the dissemination of images or videos and/or audio recordings of political events; the organization of online petitions or fundraisers; efforts for community building or mobilizing ally groups; the creation and widespread of hashtags (also referred to as "hashtag activism"); live video interviews or group discussions and debates on specific issues with affected victims, online activists, organization representatives, or academics; and, online questionnaires or surveys allowing users to participate directly through their digital devices.

Part of this research seeks to deconstruct and expand the notion of 'activism' to include the digital realm and the different ways that communication technology is used to promote new means of political action. It is important to acknowledge however that my perspective of online and offline activism is constructed from a Western understanding of militantism and civil rights. Access to technology and the Internet as a tool for protest, for example, is reserved to privileged communities and societies whose voices are seldom limited by legal barriers such as national censorship. It is important to repeatedly consider the fact that the human experience in the digital era is marked by one's socioeconomic background and the democratic state of the country in which one resides. The relationship between the online and offline will be particularly significant in the following sections when discussing the *resemiotization* (Iedema's term, 2001, defined in the last section of this chapter) of protest symbols and icons across digital and physical spheres.

## 3.1.1. Levels of Engagement: Action versus Reaction

For digital activism, *action* necessarily revolves around the dichotomies of active versus passive movement, theoretical reflections versus direct practice, and stagnant discussions versus meaningful progress, prompting the question of whether online activism can truly contribute to or advance offline progressive change. In investigating the differences between online and offline activism, the importance of distinguishing between activism and political engagement became apparent.

In a research project blog posted to Bournemouth University's website, Afromeeva, Liefbroer and Lilleker (2021) argue that confusing *engagement* with *active participation* reduces the cognitive dimensions of these practices to processes that occur due to partisan affiliation or issue salience and is, in fact, an optimistic view of society. The authors define *political engagement* as a cognitive process where the brain becomes stimulated externally, in this case by political content, resulting in the connection of thoughts which process "new information as important and relevant" (ibid). In the digital context, important and relevant information may in fact be synonymous to trending news or currently pressing issues as defined by the media and influential Internet figures. The cognitive process of determining significant events leads to 'attitudinal reaction' which is *necessary* for political participation but does not necessarily *involve* participation (ibid). In other words, *political engagement* is stimulated by social

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obligations or sentiments of guilt or fear, often leading to immediately gratifying impetuous acts of self-establishing political correctness with limited potential for significant change or progress. *Active participation*, on the other hand, must be informed and thus requires an accumulation of credible information and introspective reflection followed by action for the purpose of reform.

Online engagement is a complex issue since social media platforms allow for different levels of digital participation, denoting that users can engage through numerous modes. Therefore, instead of viewing political engagement from a perspective involving the consideration of intent as the central driving force to action (Afromeeva et al., 2021), my research defends a social constructivist approach to viewing *action* which isn't limited to the psychology of moral reflection, but instead emphasizes the importance of considering the digitally mediated contextual elements of interactions and the socially enforced codes of conduct (norms) constructing knowledge and discursive behaviour online.[7] I propose to emphasize the difference between political *action* versus passive *reaction*; the former referring to acts of informed political participation seeking to achieve a certain degree of change or progress, and the latter relating to actions taken in response to other instances of political participation or conforming to social norms of interaction. The importance of this distinction lies in whether the user is *acting on* or *reacting to* political and social issues. Is it a morally deliberate act seeking to challenge the status quo and influence social change, or is it a response to informal social obligations forcing the positioning of social agents on popular trending topics?

Passive reactions come in various forms and are often disguised as genuine reformative initiatives. For instance, the rise of 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' (see Morozov, 2011), understood as the practice of uncommitted political engagement online such as the apathetic sharing of trending content, calls for a pressing need to distinguish between action and reaction. Reactive political participation can be understood as: 1) a self-serving performance of a political persona seeking social validation for the

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[7]There are also other sub-categories of users which do not fall into either passively or actively engaged online users. There are users who are inherently depoliticized or who do not use social media as a means for political engagement. Although refusing to take a political stance is in and of itself a political decision, inaction is difficult to follow through digital ethnographic observations of online interactions since it would require a chronological trajectory of a user's activity coupled with accounts of a user's reflection process during online engagement, either through interviews or a personal reflection journal. Some users may also be consciously refusing to interact with political content online while others do so unconsciously. Since this research is not directly interacting with and interviewing users, the objective will be to focus primarily on differences between passive and active political participation online.

promotion of a trending ideology; and 2) a form of political correctness whereby individuals feel pressured to share information related to a trending political issue. Sharing posts, spreading awareness, and urging others to do the same by means of their social media platform have become conditions of allyship and indicators of one's political stance. These participatory norms and conventions of interaction are characterized by an urgency to categorize users through political labels according to their online political engagement, or lack thereof. Determinations of an *activist* or an *ally* are thus dependent on one's level of political action or inaction online, which consequently drives users to *react* beyond critical reflections a priori. These pressures also force users to adhere to a set of socially embedded behavioral expectations online for fear of being mislabeled (based on how they see themselves or how they want to be seen) or "cancelled".

*Cancelling* is a digital form of ostracism where an individual is excluded from a social circle due to their actions or inactions. My ethnographic observations reveal that today's online cancel culture contributes to constructing community enforced codes of conduct embedded into the social conditioning of user behaviour online. *Cancelling* in the realm of political activism is more than simply naming and shaming individuals for their political choices; rather, it is a way of setting the standard for what popular political action should look like. These expectations often lead to passive action and reproduce the cycle of uninformed or ignorant *reaction* on the part of superficial political actors with perfunctory ideologies influenced by sensationalized online campaigns. The freedom to share information and opinions online coupled with the dilemma of sifting through misinformation and propaganda defines the double-edged sword of using the Internet and social networks as a source of knowledge.

### 3.1.2. Political Passivity as Renouncing to the Oligarchy

In Bruzzone's graduate thesis on *The Limits of Social Mobilization in Planning* (2017), he defines political passivity as "the idea that most people do not question the customs and institutions of centralized and cultural power" (2017: 49) and explains this phenomenon through oligarchy. He argues that instead of resisting what Rancière refers to as 'police order' (2001), people prefer to abandon decision-making responsibilities and instead, succumb to being ruled. Political passivity in the realm of social movement participation may not necessarily be the result of oligarchy and could instead point to 1)

ignorance, meaning the state of unconsciousness towards the external forces exercising power over our perceptions and actions online; or, 2) insecurity, describing individuals who doubt their capacity to make independent decisions and prefer to entrust this responsibility to others. Both of which lead to escaping the burden of active mobilized subjectivity by allowing social life to happen *to them*. Purcell (2013) argues that this desire to be ruled stems from processes of indoctrination at the hands of government institutions and new media which create the false image of serving the interests of the people all while coercing the public into believing that their survival depends on these forces. It is all part of complex strategies to keep us "passive, consuming, and governed" (ibid: 94).

Purcell goes on to say that overcoming the desire to be ruled is achieved through the cultivation of an even stronger desire to be liberated, routed in one's experience with a painful struggle. Experience is gained from one's active presence in a given situation from which one derives traumatic, nostalgic, and/or cognitive meaning. In the discussion on passive versus active participation in social movements, experience is the central distinguishing factor. Bruzzone presents discussions on experience which are intertwined with the concept of 'socially mobilized subjectivity' as defined by Friedmann and Purcell's theory (see Friedmann, 1987 & 2011; see also Purcell, 2013). Friedmann (2011) describes socially mobilized society as resisting against centralized rule, whereas Purcell (2013) argues that social agents are influenced by the institutions of power and thus remain in a state of subjective passivity towards themselves, society, and these entities of control (Bruzzone, 2017: 45). As described by Bruzzone, "the essential concept in socially mobilized subjectivity is the distinction between active and passive" (ibid: 48), where active participation is described as "action that constantly resists capital, mass media culture, and leadership structures" (ibid: 48).

Resisting these external forces in the context of digital activism necessitates a critical assessment of the digital realm as an environment of control over speech and social agency. Bruzzone argues that active participation is anarchist since authority and leadership may "lead to passivity and heteronomy" (ibid: 46). This is particularly interesting in the case of social movements which often involve a central leadership that organizes and guides the collective towards achieving a particular goal. Do social movement participants act passively in militant collectives? Is socially mobilized subjectivity achievable outside independent action? In the online context where issues of

authority and authorship are omnipresent and where the foundations of the social media applications are engineered to promote interaction, to what extent is some level of passivity inescapable?

This leads us back to discussions from chapter 2 which defend that experience allows the individual to form genuine empathy, subsequently instilling a need to cultivate change and to actively participate in the cultivation of change as a means of personal fulfillment. The point that Purcell makes is that failing to actively struggle in a painful situation results in a loss of control over the self and the eventual yielding to external forces of power. One who can surpass this hardship or use their struggle to fuel their active participation in social movements and the action of others are activists.

## 3.2.  Conditions of Online Participation

Instagram's format is designed to promote the constant interaction between users and media content, thus placing these digitally mediated communicative acts at the center of the platform's initiatives. As mentioned by the head of Instagram, the platform's news feed no longer operates on the basis of populating content through a chronological approach (Mosseri, 2021).[8] Instead, the platform utilizes user data and algorithmic technology to present personalized content as a means of promoting interaction. In an article posted to Instagram's website titled "Shedding More Light on How Instagram Works", Mosseri explicitly states that the purpose of this algorithmically founded approach is to "make a set of predictions…" based on "educated guesses at how likely you are to interact with a post in different ways" (2021).

Considering the rate at which political content is disseminated and viewed online, users are continuously presented with personalized content and must choose with which content to interact. This process of selective participation is heavily dependent on context, personal experiential implications, and it can also be random. In other words, interaction with political content online is not always a calculated decision, especially on the part of recreational social media users. The participatory infrastructure of these applications and the abundance of circulating content online affect users similarly: they

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[8] It is important to mention that in December of 2021, discussions emerged online about the potential transformation of Instagram's news feed format. This change would apparently return to the chronological order of feed posts with new added features by 2022.

are pressured to position themselves in relation to circulating content, often resulting in impulsive or obligatory *reactions*. In the following section, I draw inspiration from existing research in the realm of the Internet politics and censorship (Poell, 2015; Gillespie, 2018) to discuss the digital context in which my observations of political interactions take place.

Instagram is a private platform with numerous interactive dimensions where user-generated content and business advertisements are algorithmically and/or chronologically organized on a personalized feed. Selective choices for content on the part of the Instagramer prompt concerns regarding the potential for users to end up in a perpetual state of ideological segregation, also known as *echo chambers*. Considering the algorithmic foundations of content generation designed specifically to promote interaction, users are in a constant state of isolated exposure.

Ideological segregation is based on partisanship. For digital activism, this contributes to othering by widening the gap of knowledge between politically engaged users from different ends of the political spectrum. This constructs communities all while simultaneously breeding divide. Echo chambers are not explicitly designed, they are the product of social media's complex system of interactive functionality, making them a social phenomenon (Dubois & Blank, 2018). They are a socially embedded form of control on circulating narratives. As a means of deflecting responsibility and shaping social perspectives, "platforms generally frame themselves as open, impartial, and noninterventionist" (Gillespie, 2018: 199); however, Gillespie argues that: "Platforms do not just mediate public discourse: they constitute it" (ibid). This led me to question the extent to which Instagram can be seen a participant in online interactions considering the influential presence of the platform as a mediator of speech and the power that the platform holds for the type of speech that can circulate.[9]

Censorship and content moderation are two major limits to online activity. The former refers to practices of hindering the visibility of content deemed harmful, inappropriate, or inconvenient based on a set of ideologically founded policies and regulatory guidelines of the platform or the state. The latter refers to the specific suppression of speech, where a user is denied access to the opportunity to express

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[9] I discuss this further in chapter 4 when introducing Goffman's participatory framework (1981) to define and distinguish analytical roles of interaction.

themselves or where a user's speech is erased. Content moderation can therefore be understood as a form of censorship, where censorship refers to an all-encompassing definition of hindering an individual's freedom of expression by means of platform-implemented regulations by the agenda of the application or through state-imposed legal constraints.[10]

Poell (2015) discusses the ways that censorship shapes activist communication online, either through discourse control on the part of the state and/or the social media platform, or strategic self-censorship. The author highlights that "pervasive censorship forces Internet users to become highly self-conscious with regard to how they use language and present themselves online" (Poell, 2015: 195).[11] In an anonymous interview that Poell conducted in 2012 with an Iranian activist, the interviewee stated that "anonymity gives a sense of liberation, it allowed me to say things that I would otherwise not say" (ibid: 95). In countries where users face censorship and state repression, protecting one's identity is an important part of a militant's security.

For instance, @humble_servants is an Instagram account posting about Islam, Palestine, and various Lebanese historical events and crises. Based on the recurring use of the personal pronoun "we" in their captions, it is reasonable to deduce that there are multiple users behind this account and that they speak as a collective. Social media allows for a certain degree of anonymity on which this collective has capitalized to speak freely about controversial political issues in Lebanon without persecution. Despite protecting their individual identities, the account can still be censored or moderated, which seems to be the case in present time as the account no longer exists on Instagram.[12]

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[10] For further discussions on how the regulation and surveillance of speech requires the cooperation between governments and private entities to control the infrastructure of free expression, consult Bakin, 2014.

[11] For instance, users apply strategic coded language such as purposely misspelled words or pseudonyms to protect their speech and hide their identity. Although this was not explicitly relevant in the case of Lebanese digital activism, it led me to question the extent to which emojis could be used to the same strategic degree (I discuss symbolism and emojis in chapters 4).

[12] This proves that without methods of external conservation of data, i.e., saving content outside of the platform, this post and speech on the part of @humble servants would no longer exists due to censorship and content moderation.
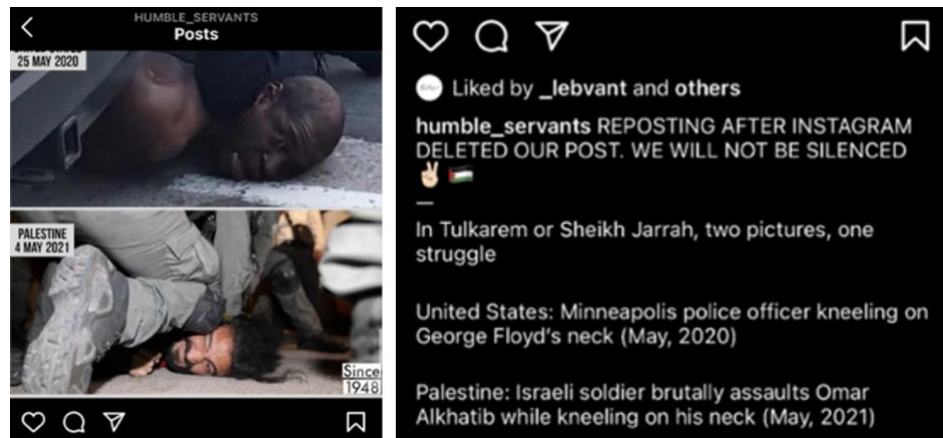
**Figure 3-1.** **(2021) A. Image comparison of police brutality against George Floyd and Omar Alkhatib. Instagram post from @HUMBLE_SERVANTS, May 8, 2021. B. Screen capture of caption from post in Figure 3-1. A.[13]**

On May 8, 2021, the collective reposted a platform-censored image (figure 3-1. A. above) to their Instagram which compared the disturbingly similar images of police brutality against George Floyd in Minneapolis (May 2020) with that of Omar Al-Khatib in Palestine (May 2021). The caption (figure 3-1. B. above) reads:

"REPOSTING AFTER INSTAGRAM DELETED OUR POST. WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED ✌🏽🇵🇸"[14]

This caption reveals the extent to which users must often consider strategic tactics of resistance against platform censorship, such as posting or reposting with persistence, especially those who share heavily politicized content or engage in discussions on controversial topics. Upon clicking on the post represented by figure 3-1.A., I was prompted to consent to the potentially "offensive", "disturbing", or "traumatizing" images that the contents of this post may share. This is a form of soft content moderation that divulges two potential explanations: 1) the post has been flagged and is currently under review; or 2) the users' defiance to platform censorship provoked a reconsideration of the contents of the posts, resulting in a soft moderation warning message rather than a complete omission of the post.

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[13] To avoid confusion, especially when considering the various directions of writing such as in the case of the Arabic alphabet, figures in this thesis with multiple relevant images are labelled through the chronology of the English alphabet from left to right. For instance, figure 3-1. A. would be the left image and figure 3-1. B. would follow on the right.

[14] The significance of emojis in political text is something I discuss in the following chapters.

When Instagram removes a post or story, often a "Community Guidelines" message will provide the user with information on the violation and potentially share instructions on appeal processes. On May 8, 2021, @humble_servants posted a text-based image in response to a "Community Guidelines" notification that they received after the removal of one of their posts.[15] Their response to this notification reads: "the content you are trying to promote does not comply with the agenda of the American government" (@humble_servants, 2021). This statement leads us to believe that the collective defends an anti-American perspective which criticizes the influence of American politics on a transnational scale. It also reveals how the United States government is perceived to be a central entity of control over the Internet, maintaining powerful relationships with major social media companies like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook and ultimately controlling public narratives. Despite the Internet being an infinite cyberspace owned by no one in particular, the involvement of the American government in innovations in global communication technology and the relationship of the United States with other superpowers and major companies like Meta is both relevant and concerning, especially within the realm of state and platform censorship.[16]

Political discourse moderation is particularly interesting since it involves the silencing of voices speaking on issues from a perspective that may be damaging to the reputation of the platform and/or state, or harmful to the personal or professional relationships of the platform stakeholders. For instance, figure 3-2.A. below represents a story post by @daleelthawra, an account labeled as *Community Service* (3.2. B below) which organizes "protests, initiatives and donations" and provides information and resources such as "safety tips" in relation to the "Lebanese revolution" and "Aug 4th relief" (referring to the explosions at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020).[17] The story

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[15] Due to complication with data storage, a screenshot of this post was lost. Further explanation on the loss of this data can be found in chapter 2. Additionally, the Instagram account no longer exists, meaning that a new screenshot cannot be produced.

[16] For instance, Instagram and Facebook have been under fire since May 2021 as employees, activists, and human rights organizations claim that the applications are censoring pro-Palestine posts and shadow banning activists and allies.

[17] Daleel Thawra is Arabic for "Directory of Revolution" (*my translation*). It is "an organization for initiatives and resources providing support, food and donations for Lebanon's revolution" (@*daleelthawra on Instagram*).

shares @mariamkesserwan's Instagram post stating that @lebanonuprising's Instagram account has been disabled:[18]
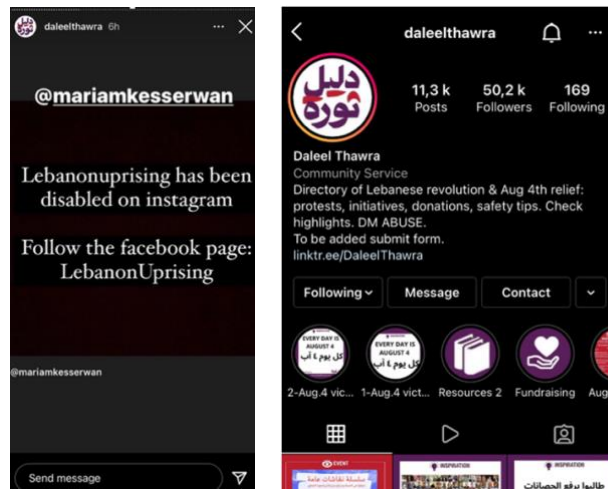


**Figure 3-2.** **(2021) A. Instagram story from @daleelthawra reposting @mariamkesserwan's post about the platform censorship against content from @lebanonuprising. B. Daleel Thawra (@daleelthawra), screen capture of the account profile.**

The account has since been reinstated (3-3. below), continuing to post information regarding the dark realities of the corrupt Lebanese judiciary system and the consequences for the people:
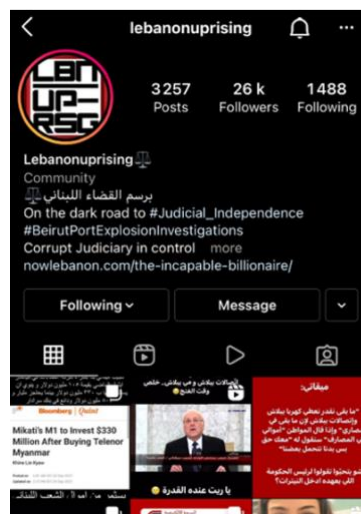


**Figure 3-3.** **(2021). Lebanon Uprising (@lebanonuprising), screen capture of the account profile.**

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[18] Mariam Kesserwan is the founder of *Lebanon Uprising.*

Due to a lack of transparency on the part of the platforms, we cannot confirm that the account was disabled through platform moderation of political content though admittedly, censored accounts are often heavily politicized and are dedicated to posting about state and institutional corruption or violence.[19]

Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that social media platforms, which are designed according to the ideologically founded policies of a group of investors with inevitable political biases, are not objective entities. Gillespie argues that: "we have handed over the power to set and enforce the boundaries of appropriate public speech to private companies" (Gillespie, 2018: 198) —a "cultural power" allowing them to shape, censor, and ultimately control public discourse (ibid, 198-99). This control is not evident, since social networks uphold their image of impartiality by shifting some of the work of content moderation to users through the encouraged use of 'flagging' and 'reporting'. Depending on the context and the severity of the issue at hand, it is common for users to exercise their ability to report inappropriate behaviour or language, violence, or other content that violates the terms and conditions of the platform. It can be understood as a form of citizen participation within the digital community of Instagram, providing the user with a sense of involvement in the overall protection of the digital environment and its users, thus deputizing "users as amateur editors and police" (ibid: 201).

For instance, in a bilingual post (figure 3-4. below) @daleelthawra announces that their account is being censored through strategic reporting by "Aounis" (the pseudonym for the followers and supporters of Lebanon's President Michel Aoun):

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[19] Censorship can occur due to an abundance of reasons. For instance, accounts can simply trigger algorithmic moderation with coded key words. Often the platform does not give specific details regarding censorship, they instead point to the violated clause. These cases can be appealed through a complaint process within the platform.
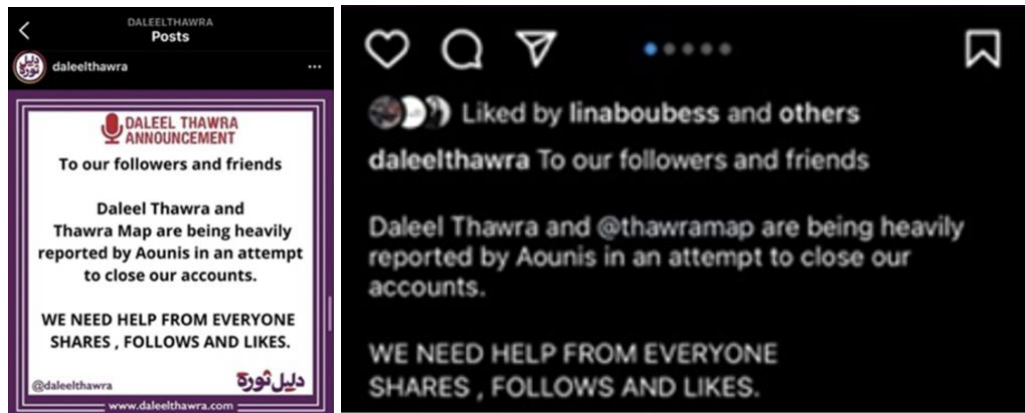
**Figure 3-4.** (2021). A. Instagram post from Daleel Thawra (@daleelthawra) on the censorship of "thawra" content by "Aounis". B. Post caption from the post represented in figure 3-4.A.

This exhibits how reporting accounts and flagging content on Instagram has become a political activity of the oppositions where success is dependent on mobilized collective action. In other words, increased flagging leads to a higher probability that the reports will be seen by the social media team, which in turn increases the chances of post censorship. It is a digital affordance that has grown beyond the scope of maintaining platform and user security. It is means by which users are expressing disagreement with political content or opinions and competing for visibility. Gillespie (2018) argues that "this relationship changes how platforms must conceive of their users, not just as customers and producers or as data commodity, but as an essential labor force" (ibid: 202). Considering the overwhelming rates at which content is being produced and disseminated online, it is no surprise that platforms need additional workers to fulfill the demands of platform and state-imposed censorship policies. Framing the act of reporting and flagging as a positive contribution to platform safety allows the platforms to capitalize on the work of their users as free labour.

In an attempt to save their account from being heavily censored or suspended, @daleelthawra urges their followers to actively interact with their posts by liking, following and sharing their content. This logic stems from an understanding of the functioning of algorithms, whereby users are attempting to manipulate the output of algorithmic censoring through increased interactions. It is a form of strategic content engagement seeking to confuse the algorithm —a common method of retaliation against the suppression of speech online. These participatory dimensions allow platforms to create a false sense of agency for their users who believe that they have the power to

contribute to the moderation of content and the control of circulating discourses when in reality, platforms have the ultimate power over final decisions.[20] This leads us to question whether the digital realm can truly be considered a public space.

### 3.2.1. Conceptions on Space

A public sphere, as outlined by Papacharissi, "connotes ideas of citizenship, commonality, and things not private" (2002, 10).[21] From this, we deduce that a public space is a common space accessible to all, where social agents can express themselves freely. As I have shown in the previous section, this does not characterize the participatory conditions for users on social media. According to Lyotard (1984), the reality of our post-modern world is the reliance on technology and accessible information as sources of power, arguing that anarchy is necessary in the struggle for democratic emancipation. Similarly, Schudson (1997) negates the existence of a genuine public but further argues that conversation is not the soul of democracy since it is seldom egalitarian: "an individual must have 'cultural capital' to participate effectively in conversation" (298). Without this *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1986), individual voices will be drowned out by those with a stronger social membership which in turn, allows them to participate more actively in the public space —a social hierarchy which is just as evident in the digital realm as in the physical.[22]

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[20] When speaking of the platforms in such a general manner, it is important to note that companies employ individuals who specialize in a variety of categories of work. When discussing the overall control that platforms exercise over users and public discourse through platforms policies and censorship, it is certain that the ultimate power lies in the hands of the major stakeholders of the companies. However, when discussing day-to-day work such as content moderation, it is important to recognize that "each social media platform has cobbled together a content moderation labor force consisting of company employees, temporary crowdworkers, outsourced review teams, legal and expert consultants, community managers, flaggers, administrators, moderators, superflaggers, nonprofits, activist organizations, and the entire user population" (Gillespie, 2018: 201). On a micro level, it is interesting to consider the potential decisions of individual workers and the impacts this may have on a larger scale. In other terms, the ideologies of the individual worker may not align with the ideologies of the company, which may lead to micro decisions being made that go against the company's moderation policies and guidelines, leading us to consider the significance of small-scale rebellious acts in influencing change.

[21] Papacharissi (2002) makes an important distinction between the public space and the public sphere online, the former relating to a forum for deliberation and gathering, and the latter as an entity promoting a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions: "a virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy" (11). However, for the purpose of this thesis which only briefly poses the question of whether social media can be considered a public space, I do not emphasize this distinction.

[22] As discussed with Cécile B. Vigouroux, it would be interesting to explore how *cultural capital* is increasingly becoming less relevant in the establishment of legitimacy on social media platforms and is

One of the most pressing concerns with regards to new technology is the greater influence that it has on human life and the potential of the virtual reality to replace the physical one. Even though social media promotes global connectivity and diminishes the geographical distance between humans, it has also perversely created distance between social agents and the physical world, meaning that users are increasingly experiencing life through digital spaces rather than through genuine connections to the physical ones. As communication technology becomes increasingly integrated into political affairs and commercial and social exchanges, the gap between the digital and physical realms progressively narrows and the start and end point of speech becomes more blurred. This leads me to question the existence of a continuum between the online and offline spaces.

The relationship between the online and offline spheres is important in discussing the movement of discursive content, particularly in questioning where this trajectory starts and ends (Blommaert et al., 2005, 2003). To exemplify this trajectory, I present the example of the raised/clenched fist and the phoenix as icons of protest. *The Fist* is a tall billboard-like structure of a clenched/raised fist which reads in Arabic "Thawra", meaning "revolution" or "uprising" (figure 3-5. below). Images of the giant public installation circulate online through various Lebanese militant social media accounts, social movement organizations, as well as televised Lebanese media channels as a symbol of the 'thawra':

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instead being replaced by *experience*. In other words, one's lived experiences legitimize their speech and their authority to speak on said issue.

**Figure 3-5.** **(2021). Screen shot of an Instagram post of *The Fist* sculpture in Beirut's Martyr Square, pictured in front of the waving Lebanese flag. Instagram account hidden due to account with personal information.**

In 2019, *The Fist* went up in flames after a petrol bomb was thrown to set fire to the sculpture and activists, scholars, journalists, and locals took to social media to express their anger. These acts of destruction on the part of opposing groups reveal the extent to which the political meaning and historical significance of the clenched/raised fist as a symbol of revolution is understood by others outside the community of progressive activists (this claim is addressed further in chapter 4). In other words, if the symbolic meaning of the fist was insignificant or misunderstood by the opposition, what motivating would exist for its destruction?[23] This not only shows a social consensus on the meaning of the clenched/raised fist as a symbol of protest, but it also reaffirms *The Fist*'s materiality and its power over body performances. It shows how objects, as material items, shape the actions of the social agents around them. In other words, the existence of *The Fist* as a concrete object, one with agency in its material form, is not inert and can influence the social behaviour and political performances of the people.

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[23] To recall discussions from the previous section, the destruction of *The Fist* sculpture leads us to reflect on the existence of digitally mediated counter protests: can censorship and speech moderation be considered counter protests and destructive to the advancement of militant initiatives online?

*The Fist* was constructed alongside Nazer's *The Phoenix* sculpture (see figure 3-6. below), a public art installation that stood in Beirut's Martyr Square before it was destroyed:[24]



**Figure 3-6.    (2019). Screenshot of an Instagram post by @jomhourietna showcasing *The Fist* and *The Phoenix* sculptures (the latter was constructed by artist Hayat Nazer) in Beirut's Martyr Square.**

*The Phoenix* was constructed primarily of materials from broken tents that were left after a separate political art installation was destroyed by anti-demonstration groups.[25] *The Phoenix*'s cultural and historical significance to the Lebanese people lies in ancient mythology which depicts the Phoenix as having received its name from the Phoenicians —people from the region of Phoenicia, a civilization of the Levant primarily located in present-day Lebanon. The success of the Phoenicians bred hostility among other groups who invaded, looted, and burned the most prominent cities to ash. As peaceful people disinterested in conquest or war, the Phoenicians rebuilt their cities as a united people and became known in the ancient world for their extraordinary resilience and their ability to rise after a devastating loss —an act of rebirth from death,

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[24] After the destruction of *The Fist*, Charlotte Karam, scholar and author took to Twitter to say: "we will make a bigger one! This time a woman's hand" (AlJazeera, 2019). The gendering of the recontextualized *The Fist* may be interpreted as the potential call for all women to join the revolution. Moreover, this comment points to the historical and contemporary circulating narratives of resilience and reconstruction which emulate the tale of the mystical phoenix.

[25] Noteworthy is how the materials used in a political art installation in Martyr Square, Beirut's center for protest, are now being reused in another political art installation. Could this be considered a form of entextualization?

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reconstruction from destruction, life from the ashes. The legend of the Phoenix told the story of a mystical bird with wings of resplendent plumage of red, orange, and gold that was consumed by fire and left to ash. It was named after the Phoenicians for its capacity to be reborn after devastation. This legend resonates with contemporary Lebanese struggles and their ability to rebuild themselves after the tragic losses of their cities and their people —a result of many years of war and conflict.

Images of Nazer's *The Phoenix* circulated online after the October 4th explosions at the port to remind the people of their ancestors and to promote the reconstruction of Beirut and its port. Lebanese from around the world used images of *The Fist* and *The Phoenix* to show solidarity and spread awareness of the Lebanese cause on a transnational scale. For instance, after the destructions of the public installations in Martyr Square, a reproduction of *The Fist* and *The Phoenix* were constructed on the beach in California (see figure 3-7. below) alongside the carved words "injustice" and "corruption" in the sand:



**Figure 3-7.    (May 5, 2021). Image posted by Hayat Nazer (@hayat_nazer_v), sharing a reproduction in the sand in California of *The Fist* and *The Phoenix* sculptures.**

*The Fist* and *The Phoenix* are politically and culturally significant symbols that have travelled through time and space to be reappropriated in the contemporary Lebanese revolution. As I show in chapter 4, material symbols are also often

transformed into digital icons, such as the case with emojis, which is particularly significant for the clenched/raised fist. The trajectory between spaces leads me to question, what transformations do these semiotic materials undergo while travelling through time and space and does there exist a continuum in the trajectory between the offline and online?

To answer these questions, I evoke Iedema's notion of *resemiotization* (2001), which refers to the semiotic transformation from "temporal kinds of meaning-making, such as talk and gesture, towards increasingly durable kinds of meaning-making, such as printed reports, designs, and ultimately, buildings" (Iedema, 2001: 24). *The Fist* and *The Phoenix* can be considered resemiotized symbols of solidarity and resilience constructed from specific historical contexts and recontextualized in contemporary political struggles. The symbol of the clenched/raised fist and the legend of the phoenix are thus semiotic materials susceptible to transformation in their temporal and spatial trajectories, hence the existence of a continuum between the online and offline spheres. The ambiguity of this relationship however, is defined by deliberations on time, i.e., when does the trajectory of discursive material start and end?

The answer to this question lies in establishing primordiality which inherently raises issues of authority and authorship. I elaborate further on these issues in the next chapter where I analyze the different analytical roles that a user assumes in production and reception of speech online. To do so, I adapt Goffman's participatory framework (1981) to the context of the digital sphere. I focus on user profiles and present the findings of my linguistic ethnographic research on the processes of participation and identification online, meaning the digitally mediated discursive means by which users identify and are identified.

# Chapter 4.

# Processes of Participation & Identification on Instagram

Inspired by Goffman's participatory framework (1981), the first section of this chapter examines discursive implications of online participation, meaning how discursive content is produced and received, and the different analytic roles that these processes involve. In the other section, I analyze the processes of identifying with the social category of an 'activist' and being identified as such. The following analysis of English, Arabic and French multilingualism in militant posting enables me to tackle the issue of addressivity while revealing the implicit language ideology that informs the clear-cut language boundaries in the posts. I present several different digital tools available for users on Instagram and I use my personal experience with the application and my attachments to Lebanese culture and language to discuss the potential social and political implication of these identity categories. I then distinguish between *doing* activism, *being* an activist, and *doing being* an activist —an analysis which is routed in an understanding of activism as an act, the activist as the setter in motion of the act, and the performative grey areas within these processes of identification. Finally, I evoke emojis as a tool for identification and communication and explore what this implies for political activism.

## 4.1. Goffman's Participatory Framework in the Digital Context: Addressing & Being Addressed

Participants of an interaction are social actors who play different analytical roles throughout the speech event according to pre-inscribed interactional norms. Goffman's term 'participatory framework' (1981) refers to the ways in which participants position themselves in relation to other participants and to the utterance itself. Goffman's original framework (idem) relates to spoken utterances and in the context of this research, must be adapted to the digital realm where participants are at a spatial and temporal distance. Drawing inspiration from the work of Hutchby (2006) and Eisenlauer (2014), I adapt this approach to analyzing speaker roles in the production and reception of speech to fit the

online context and to answer the following question: to whom are these activists addressing their messages?

Hutchby (2014) extends Goffman's framework to "incorporate those within 'perceptual range' of written or otherwise mediated linguistic emissions" (87) and calls attention to how "different genres of media talk have their own frameworks of participation and dynamics of address that operate within, and necessarily shape, the 'message' that reaches the audience at home" (Hutchby, 2006: 21). Hutchby adapts the framework to specifically address the production and reception of speech in the context of radio and television talk by narrowing the range of actions in which each participant can partake. In Eisenlauer's study (2014) on (semi-)automated participation framework on social networking sites, one of the notable adaptations that the author makes to Goffman's original framework is the introduction of a digitally fabricated and moderated author by questioning the role of Facebook and positioning the platform in relation to its users, their behaviour, and the production of their speech. Eisenlauer argues that Facebook as a "third author" in the analytical roles of interaction is relevant due to the platforms "close collaboration with their users" and the frequently updated platform functionalities (76).[26] In the case of both these studies, one of the main concerns is the ratification of participants online which Eisenlauer (idem) argues can only be affirmed in the case of the creator of the post versus "those who remain unnoticed" in the production of speech (ibid: 76).

Production refers to the act of producing speech and the ways in which the speaker does so. Inspired by Hymes' Model of Speaking (1967), Goffman emphasizes the importance of considering the external forces exerting influence on the production of speech (also see Blommaert et al., 2005). This involves contextual elements such as physical environment, participants, and norms of interaction, which expose political and social indexicalities of the speech event. Moreover, such characteristics bring to light issues of authorship (see Vigouroux, 2009), leading us to question the different roles that speakers play in an interaction. Goffman notes the problematic nature of the term "speaker", arguing how "it can be shown to have variable and separable functions, and the word itself seems to demand that we use it because of these ambiguities, not in spite

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[26] This scholarship, alongside other authors such as Gillespie (2018), inspired my analysis of Instagram as an interactional participant in chapters 3 and 4.

of them" (Goffman, 1981: 167). To define such ambiguities, he distinguishes between three principal roles (ibid): 1) *the animator* —one who ensures the sound transmission of the message, meaning they "can be identified as the talking machine"; 2) *the author* — one who has "formulated and scripted the statements that get made"; and 3) *the principal* —one "who believes personally in what is being said and takes the position that is implied in the remarks" (can also be referred to as *the responsible*). Goffman understands speakers as participants in a speech event whose variable role in the interaction is constructed locally and whose position can shift based on negotiations between interlocutors. These analytical roles allow us to distinguish between the shifting positions constructed throughout the interaction and the indexical meaning that derives from these dynamics. In adapting Goffman's participatory framework to digitally mediated utterances, one must consider the influence of digital tools on the production of speech to conceptualize how analytical roles are constructed in the online context.

For instance, the animator may not always be the "talking machine" since speech online can be produced in the form of written text (captions or comments), posts (audio-video recordings, images, or pictures with or of written text), and stories (time-sensitive audio-video recordings, images, or written text). Thus, I redefine the animator in the digital context as one who ensures the dissemination of the message, which in the case of Instagram, would be the user who posts the content online. The author is the one who conceives the written speech online, implying that they are the original authors of the speech being posted.

This should not be confused with the role of the animator who may not have authorship over the text, hence the importance of distinguishing between the construction of a post and the scripting of speech, both of which involve different relations to authorship. In the construction of a post or a story, the animator uploads audio and/or visual content often accompanied by written text such as captions. The contents of the post (written text and audio/visuals) may not belong to the animator and could be borrowed from the work of another individual who would be considered the author. In many cases, the author and the animator may be the same person just as the individual could also simultaneously assume the role of the principal. Even so, the importance of distinguishing between levels of participation in the production of speech online lies in the ambiguities of what Boyd (2011) refers to as: 1) persistence: "online expressions are automatically recorded and archived"; 2) scalability: "the potential

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visibility of content in networked publics is great"; and replicability: "content made out of bits can be duplicated" (46), which recalls processes of entextualization. Take figures 4-1., 4-2., & 4-3. for example:



**Figure 4-1.** **(2022). Ayah Bdeir (@ayahbdeir) image of the users' Instagram profile biography.**

Ayah Bdeir (@ayahbdeir on Instagram, see figure 4-1. above) identifies as an "Inventor. Technologist. Social Activist" on their social networking biography. The user posted a carousel of information pertaining to the 2022 parliamentary elections which included a combination of audio and/or visual content and text in a single post.[27] The first image in the carousel (4-2. below) titled "Daily Calendar" seems to be endorsed or scripted by *Daleel Thawra* since the organization's Instagram handle and website address are cited on multiple occasions in the image:



**Figure 4-2.** **(May 5, 2022). Slide 1 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "Daily Calendar – Election Day".**

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[27] A carousel on Instagram is a post containing a series of two or more photos and/or videos posted in a series to a user's account.

As mentioned in their biography, Bdeir is a cofounder of *Daleel Thawra* which indicates potential direct access to the organization's resources and mobilization projects. It is also possible that Bdeir may work directly with the *Daleel Thawra* in the scripting of such information posts and the accumulation of resources for protestors and voters. It is thus reasonable to conclude that Bdeir assumes the role of animator of the discourse as well as the potential author of the contents in the post. As a founding member of *Daleel Thawra* and an affiliate to the larger community of militants, one can deduce that Bdeir's message is constructed for the Lebanese people, urging them to participate in one of the most important democratic elections in Lebanon's contemporary history.

The third slide in the carousel (4-3. below) is the video on blank voting which includes an English narration accompanied by audio-visual details where a brief visual of the *Sawti* logo is observed at the top of still shot:



**Figure 4-3.    (May 5, 2022). Slide 3 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "Voting blank is bad for Lebanon".**

The original video on blank voting was posted to the @sawtivoice Instagram page where the animator credited the narrator in the captions: "voiceover by @agathaezzedine". In considering the role of the narrator I call into question the analytical category of animator in the context of online speech production since content can be animated through multimodal forms. For instance, @agathaezzedine (a Lebanese artist based in London) may have been asked to narrate the content of the video but may not have been involved in or responsible for the scripting of the text. In this case, they would assume the role of animator of the written speech —a role that has

been adapted, as Hutchby exemplifies, to "incorporate those within perceptual range of written or otherwise mediated linguistic emissions" (2014: 87).

The recording is then uploaded to the @sawtivoice Instagram through the construction of a post on the part of the social media account coordinator(s), who then animate(s) the entire video and not simply the written text as in the case of the video narrator. This investigation proves that Bdeir's animation of the blank voting video is in fact a repost of the original —an instance whereby a second animator is reanimating the work of the original animator (the account coordinators for @sawtivoice). This prompts the question of whether this can be considered an instance of recontextualization. Although the video is being posted to a separate account which consequently involves new interactional participants, it still fits within the macro context of the digital sphere and the micro contexts of discussions regarding blank voting for the Lebanese general elections.

Posting and reposting on social media is in fact a way of entering in conversation with the original written or oral speech and the participants of this antecedent. Are the participants of the original speech event aware that they are being interacted with? Social media offers many interactive affordances, and some are more evident than others. For instance, in Instagram posts and stories, users can *tag* other users by generating a type of hyperlink leading to their account. Based on a user's conventional understanding of *tagging* as a practice, it can be seen as 1) an attempt to enter in explicit conversation with another user; 2) a sign of affiliation with a particular text, individual, or organization; or, 3) a form of citation where users credit the original author(s) or animator(s*)* of a text. In all cases, it allows users to solidify their affiliation with other public figures and with the larger community of activists for example. Can the act of tagging thus be considered a form of animation?

Tagging as an act of animation is not the case with Bdeir's Instagram carousel since no other accounts were tagged, but this may also be due to the user's existing affiliation with *Daleel Thawra*. In the case of the video on blank voting in Bdeir's carousel, *Sawti* was not directly credited (although the *Sawti* logo is quite evident in the video). This depicts the unjust reality of posting and reposting online which again aligns with discussions on authority and authorship. Our knowledge of the origins of the video, however, allows us to conclude that Bdeir is indeed an animator of this speech. It is also

possible that Bdeir be considered a principal in the context of the carousel post. In the last slide of Bdeir's carousel (4-4. below), the activist shares a list of personal voting opinions for each district in Lebanon:



**Figure 4-4.    (May 5, 2022). Slide 6 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "My personal opinions".**

This confirms two things: 1) Bdeir is not voting blank since they are openly endorsing candidates from each voting district; and 2) with the aid of election resources and voting information, Bdeir accumulated significant knowledge and educated themselves enough to select a representative from each voting district and openly endorse them on social media. Finally, as cofounder of *Daleel Thawra*, it is appropriate to assume that Bdeir is a Lebanese social activist closely involved in the organization of and participation in militant initiatives such as mobilization and the sharing of resources and other information. According to Goffman's definition of "the principal" (1981), Bdeir not only personally endorses the message but also assumes the "position implied in the remarks" (167), signifying that they are indeed leading by example in the accumulation of election knowledge and the exercising of their right to vote.

I find the characteristics of the "principal" in the context of digital activism to be problematic since they require an assessment of authenticity in an environment of perpetual performance and mass circulation of misinformation. Goffman explains that the "principal" is "someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken… someone who is committed to what the words say" (ibid: 144), but what level of

commitment is required to hold responsibility over speech? In other words, does commitment imply that one's action must follow the intent behind their talk? This would in fact be impossible to qualify since the ethnographic observation methods applied in this research are not equipped to explore the depths of one's psychological reflection processes and subsequent course of action. In considering my previous discussion on political passivity in chapter 3, the parameters of Goffman's definition of the *principal* adapted to the digital context is limited, especially within the realm of activism. Moreover, one must also consider the fact that speech and actions are heavily influenced by the digital environment and the speech and actions of others, which calls into question the true authenticity of subjective ideas.

For instance, as discussed in chapter 3, the realities of Instagram's influence over speech and circulating narratives constructs the platform as an interactional participant in the production of speech. It is reasonable to assign Instagram with the role of the animator considering the ability of the platform to ensure or to limit the dissemination of the media content and thus to assume the responsibility of the "talking machine" (Goffman, 1981: 167). However, as previously argued, questions of authenticity and authorship as well as censorship and speech moderation policies define the ambiguities and dynamisms of these analytical roles online and prompt us to question, to whom does this speech really belong? The inability to provide an answer to this question depicts how the additional layer of digital infrastructure contributes to the equivocality of speech events and produces additional ambiguity in the assessment of interactional roles online, thus reaffirming the active role that Instagram plays in influencing the production of speech.

These different analytical roles give indexical meaning to the linguistic choices of interactional participants online and allow us to define the extent of their participation. Although these roles are constructed locally and can change as shifts in the speech event occur, users may be more conditioned in recurring positions which points to what these analytical roles reveal about the type of activism that is being done. An animator, as formulated by Goffman (1981), is someone who elevates the voice of another or uses their voice to propagate another's message. As we've seen in the online context, the act of speaking on behalf of another can take many forms.

The act of posting and reposting has two potential deliverances on Instagram: 1) The original text is reposted to one's story, either through a story/post tag or through the sharing of another's publicly visible post; or 2) the original text is saved outside of the application to one's device through methods such as screenshotting and is then reposted to the application on one's story or through a post. The latter is characterized by a travelling through spaces where the original text is first reproduced through the screenshot, moving outside of the application and into the device (which is then susceptible to potential editing), and then reconfigured to the social media application (where it may require further editing or formatting). Through this process, the animator of the original text has now claimed some sort of authority over the post as it has travelled through their device and gone through entextualization; however, they are still not the authors of the original text.

The intent of this analysis is to shed light on the numerous methods to which users can resort for participation in social media activism. Some construct their owns texts and share their opinions through their own words, whereas others dedicate their account to sharing the speech of others. It is important to remember however that despite recurring constructions of the same role, these roles are fluid and must be considered within their contexts since shifts in analytical roles occur alongside shifts in speech. Do shifts in analytical roles occasion shifts in social roles? This would potentially mean shifting outside of the social category of activist to another social role, or even shifting within the category of activist since there exists many approaches to and types of activism.

Similarly to the production of speech, Goffman distinguishes between the participants in the reception of the message (Goffman, 1981: 131): 1) *Ratified participants* —the primary recipient of the message or the targeted audience; and 2) *Unratified participants* —those who do not directly participate in the interaction but who "might still be following the talk closely". The former is also understood as the "addressed", especially in a dyadic interaction since the other is "the one to whom the speaker addresses his visual attention and to whom, incidentally, he expects to turn over the speaking role" (ibid: 133). Ratifying participants online is a complex inquiry since the nature of the digital environment is based on a certain level of ambiguity regarding the individual(s) behind the screen and the extent to which the content will be disseminated, replicated, and recontextualized. Thus, ratified participants are those with direct access

to participation in the interaction, meaning those who are present in the physical realm as receivers of speech.

For instance, without explicitly labeling themselves as such on social media, @theworldsucks.lb is an aid initiative organized by Lebanese volunteers and funded by the donations of social media followers and other supporters. The main objective is to provide cash to the locals through in-person, recorded, interview-style interactions and quick gaming questions. The interviewees could be considered ratified participants in the reception of the interview questions; however, when the interview is posted online, their analytical role shifts as the mode by which the utterance is disseminated becomes technologically imposed. The interviewee was a ratified participant during the interview, but when viewing the audio-visual recording of the interview on Instagram, they no longer perform the same analytical role. They are now part of the *audience* in the reception of the digitally mediated utterance (I elaborate on this in the following paragraphs).

The latter, unratified participants, can be understood through one of the following sub-categories (ibid: 132): 1) The *eavesdropper*, meaning that the interaction was engineered to be heard by others outside the target audience; 2) the *overhearer*, referring to those who are unintentionally listening; and 3) the *bystander*, describing an individual or a group who are in the "visual and aural range" of the encounter. The final sub-category is particularly interesting in the context of the digital sphere since posts and stories are made available to all users of the platform, excluding those uploaded from private accounts. This indicates that despite the targeted audience, the nature of the digital public sphere allows for a wider range of viewing and *reviewing* of posted content, which in turn, attests to a large community of bystanders. However, despite their accessibility to the visual and aural contents of speech, can these online users be considered bystanders if the temporal ambiguities of social networks hinder these participants from witnessing the talk in live action?

Goffman distinguishes between the sub-categories of non-ratified participants and the "audience", affirming that the former "…are coparticipants in the social occasion, responsive to all the mutual stimulation that provides" (1981: 138), whereas the latter (the audience) is only living vicariously through the experience of live witnesses. To take the example of live interviews proposed above, when speech is produced live in the

physical realm and documented through audio-visual recordings to then be posted to social media, the audience (in this case, social media users) is no longer experiencing the speech event within the same temporal frame as ratified and non-ratified participants of the original live utterance. Instead, they are living vicariously through the experiences of ratified and non-ratified participants.

As outlined by Hutchy (2014), "much internet-mediated interaction is asynchronous, in the sense that participants leave messages or 'content' that can be retrieved at any time by others" (88). The temporal and spatial distance between the live utterance and the online audience creates another event within a new realm of time and space, subsequently occasioning further analysis. In other words, there exists the original speech event with ratified and unratified participants; then, there exists a sort of meta-discursive event occurring in the digital realm defined by the encounter of the audience with the content (the content meaning the result of the digitization of the speech event, the post).

One of the strongest forces of the Internet and social media is its temporal framing which allows users to maneuver through time, viewing content of past events in present time through the affordances of their smart device and applications. This signifies that the audience does not always receive the message instantly, compared to ratified and non-ratified participants receiving the utterance in the physical realm. Therefore, the reception of speech on the Internet, particularly on social media platforms, is temporally ambiguous since the circulation of content is interminable. Depending on the format of production, the reception of speech on social media can take many forms. For instance, direct messages are addressed to chosen individuals and the reception of speech is reserved to the users invited to the location where digitally mediated conversation takes place, whereas posts or stories are propagated on a much larger scale, reaching users beyond the target community. This reinforces the importance of considering the contextual elements of the interaction since in this case, the digital environment influences the means of production and reception of speech, which in turn produces varied interpretations.

Content posted during the Lebanese general elections for example, could be received by users after the fact (post-elections). Depending on the political and social environment in which the content is received, interpretations will vary. Consider this

hypothetical situation where a Lebanese citizen may have already selected a district representative for whom they will vote. The citizen is also an active user on social media who follows militant organizations and political engaged Lebanese individuals who discuss topics relating to the parliamentary elections and other political events. The user has great respect for the work and has affinity with Bdeir's political perspectives —an online militant with whom they have interacted and have been following for numerous months on Instagram. When Bdeir posted their opinions on the best representatives from each district (figure 4-4.), the users found that their selections did not align, which led the user to question both their own selection and the political opinions of the Lebanese militant.

This situation represents an important consideration of how the supposed legitimacy of digital activists can contribute to shifting audience perspectives and influence the speech and actions of others. Indeed, this hypothetical scenario does not allow us to consider the contextual elements contributing to the politicization of the user and the elements contributing to influencing their original selection for a parliamentary representative. However, it calls attention to how reception of speech online is further legitimized through the assumed social roles and the interactionally constructed analytical roles that social agents play online. The over-legitimization that we award to active social media users reinforces the shifts in behaviour and opinions due to the accumulation of new information.

To echo the arguments presented in chapter 3, users impose responsibility on activists as sources of credible and sound information, and when this relationship is agitated there is an immediate need to socially expel or ostracize the user. These processes of online 'cancel culture' are a means of re-legitimizing the role the user as a mediator of speech and a judge of political correctness. Thus, "those who audit the talk by listening to their set" (Goffman, 1981: 138), meaning the social media users that act as an audience to the original speech event, "…can only vicariously join the station audience" (ibid). In a sense, the users of the distant audience are part of a large community of social media participants that mediate speech, control acceptable circulating discourse, and subsequently contribute to influencing the production and reproduction of speech.

## 4.1.2. Identifying and Being Identified

In contextualizing the processes of participation on Instagram, I have laid the foundation for the discussion on identifying and being identified which are processes driven by the production and reception of speech. From one's speech and the analytical roles that they assume, we can make interpretative deductions on the way the participant seeks to be identified and how they are identified by others. Similarly, the frame of identification in which the participant positions themself intimates to whom they are addressing their message. In this section of the chapter, I analyze four Instagram accounts with the aim of making deductive claims on the ways that these politically engaged users identify and are identified on Instagram. I then assess a fifth Instagram account by questioning the extent to which language selections and the hierarchical organization of these selections in a multilingual context can help tackle the issue of addressivity.

The digital realm presents new ways of performing identities. In addition to a personalized account handle and name, users can now choose a label by which they would like to be identified from a list of categories such as 'activist', 'scientist', 'artist', 'video creator', etc.… On the one hand, these labels are useful in identifying activists online since, as we will see, one can perform the identity of an activist through different artistic means, thus evoking the simultaneous performance of merging identities (discussed further in the following section). On the other hand, however, these labels confine users to social categories of identification by other users. Additionally, many social networks such as Instagram and Twitter, offer the ability to share a biographical description to the user's profile which often provides label clarifications or highlights other affiliations.

As an example, Myriam Boulos (4-5. below) prints their name in both the English and traditional Arabic alphabet, does not specify a label, but identifies as a "Photographer" and "Photo director" in their biography:



myriamboulos ✔  [Message]  [≗+]  [∨]  [...]

397 posts     33.9K followers     7,423 following

**Myriam Boulos** ميريم بولس
Photographer @magnumphotos
Photo director @alhayyamagazine
aperture.org/editorial/myriam-bouloss-visceral-images-of-lebanon-at-a-tim...

Followed by depotventebeirut, plastik, carlahenoud + 19 more

**Figure 4-5.** **(2022). Myriam Boulos (@myriamboulos), screen capture of the users' Instagram profile biography**

The user also specifies their affiliation to other users or organizations by tagging their Instagram handles and linking each affiliation to a particular identity category. Jessy Moussallem (4-6. below) identifies as a *Film Director* through their Instagram label but decides against a biography:



**Figure 4-6.** **(2002). Jessy Moussallem (@jessymoussallem), screen capture of the users' Instagram profile biography**

Biographies and labels are a visual and organizational resource for categorization, networking, and community building, allowing users to quickly identify commonalities. The It is also a form of self-legitimization, self-promotion, and a means by which users can participate in an increasingly globalized and competitive digital capitalist environment.

Individual legitimacy is an interesting dimension of online identification, especially for digital activism since the success of contemporary social movement is increasingly reliant on the capacity of individual social actors to disrupt social order, critically assess information and news, and create change on a personalized level (King, 2004; McDonald, 2002; Lichterman, 1996). In a digitized and globalized society, the way that users construct their identity as activists provide insight into the ways that contemporary multimodal social movements are being practiced on a micro and macro scale. In other words, collective action is often limited to a struggle for subjectivity, sociality, representation, and power, defending "an experience of the self and other" rather than an "ethic of us" (McDonald, 2002: 125). The success of contemporary social movements is thus becoming more reliant on individualism and shared personal experiences rather than a notion of 'collective identity', where identity should be considered from a more culturally personalized approach (see Bobel, 2007; Gecas, 2000). This does not imply that collective action and mobilization are irrelevant in contemporary social movements.

Rather, this approach to viewing action is based on an understanding of individualized society (I expand on this discussion in section 4.2.). The following data seeks to shed light on how the omnipresence of identity performances on social media characterizes the ambiguity in differentiating between individual action for the purpose of collective progression from individual action seeking to validate the self.

Instagram offers two types of accounts: personal (for recreational use) and professional (for businesses and brands). There are also two sub-categories of professional accounts: business accounts (appropriate for anything from a small business to a large corporation) and creator accounts (best suited for independent entrepreneurs such as artists, influencers, actors, and other celebrities). For an account to be professional, either as a business or a creator, it must be public, meaning that other users do not have to request permission to follow. Professional accounts can label themselves according to a list of recommended categories or based on a personalized label, as mentioned in the above chapters. These labels act as digital tools by which users can identify themselves and identify with others, which in turn, allows them to integrate themselves with a community. Labels, despite the lack of screening or any form of review, can be understood as a means by which users legitimize the frame of identification.

For instance, @hayat_nazer_v labels themself on Instagram as an *Artist* (4-7. below):



**Figure 4-7.** **(2021). Hayat Nazer (@hayat_nazer_v), screen capture of the users' Instagram profile biography.**

Nazer specifies in their biography that they are not only an artist but also an activist who has created numerous political public art installations such as sculptures and graffiti. They also share a link to their YouTube account videos about their art, their militant work, and their appearances on different news channels can be found. The label acts as a means by which the user is positioning themselves within the frame of an artist. The references to several initiatives and affiliations can be seen to legitimize the label with concrete evidence of their efforts.

Despite their art being directly correlated with contemporary Lebanese struggles (this will be further discussed in the following sections), Nazer does not explicitly mention their affiliation to Lebanon or to any Lebanese social movements. Instead, they share their current location by inputting the "pin" emoji (📍) followed by the UAE abbreviation for "United Arab Emirates". The users profile portrays an attachment to the Lebanese struggle through frequent posts of artistic and militant initiatives, as well as interviews and television appearances to discuss the political symbolism behind their sculptures and the significance for the Lebanese struggle. This relationship, however, is not affirmed discursively in the account biography compared to the other users (such as those represented in figures 4-8., 4-9., 4-10. below). This invites us to question to whom these labels are addressed. Certainly, Nazer's work is routed in a profound attachment to Lebanon and to the current economic and political struggle; despite this, are their efforts addressed at the local Lebanese community or the international one at large (including the diaspora)?

The Instagramer @the.political.psychologist (4-8. below), formally known as Ramzi Abou Ismail, brands himself[28] as a *Scientist*, then showcases his various professional and academic titles and affiliations (some written both in English and Arabic), as well as a link to his personal website:

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[28]@the.political.psychologist chose to specify his pronouns, which is why I chose to identify him as such, as outlined in Chapter 2.3. It is important to note these details since we cannot assume fragments of a user's identity based on deductions made from the information accumulated from what the user selectively chose to showcase on their social media account.

**Figure 4-8.     (2021). Ramzi Abou Ismail (@the.political.psychologist), screen capture of the users' Instagram profile biography.**

Similarly to figure 4-7. above, this user shares what appears to be their legal name (just above the label) and selects two flag emojis, the Lebanese (LB) and British (GB) flags, which could indicate either citizenship, cultural background, or even current location. Although the meaning(s) behind emojis is socially embedded into our communication practices through recurring uses of these icons, there still exists different potential meanings depending on contextual elements of the interaction and the combination of various emojis. With that in mind, we, as an audience, are left questioning the indexical meaning behind these national affiliations. The significance of emojis as communicative icons and tools of digital identification, particularly in the context of militant interactions, will be discussed in the following chapter.

Figure 4-9. below represents the @uniteddiasporalb Instagram account which identifies as a *Community Organization*, defined in the biography as "A global network mobilizing a unified Lebanese diaspora. We are the revolution abroad":
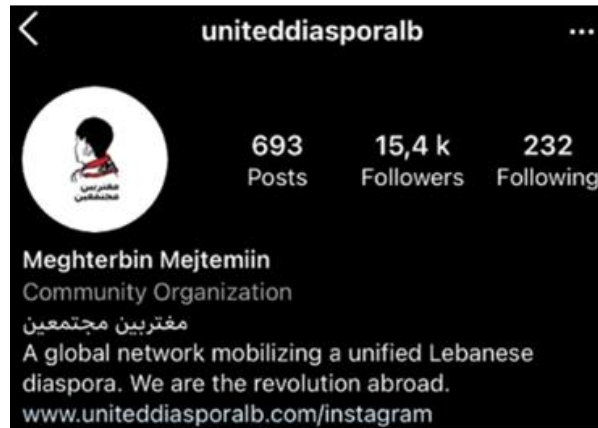
**Figure 4-9.** **(2021). Meghterbin Mejtemiin (@uniteddiasporalb), screenshot of the users' Instagram profile biography.**

The difference between them and the users from figures 4-7. and 4-8. is that this organization does not share a personal name above the label, but rather what seems to be a slogan, or a sub-title written in transliterated Arabic (defined and discussed further in this chapter) which reads: *Meghterbin Mejtemiin*, "immigrants reunited" (*my translation*). The same thing is written in the traditional Arabic alphabet below the label which suggests that the user(s) may be seeking to address their message to Lebanese with various linguistic capabilities in Arabic (i.e., those who do not read traditional Arabic but can understand transliterated Arabic).[29] Considering the account's biography, the above slogan provides us (the audience, the following) with details regarding their definition of "diaspora". We can now reasonably conclude that the objective of the *Community Organization* is to address their message to Lebanese people from around the world and to cultivate solidarity among locals, immigrants, and generations of Lebanese. This inference is reinforced when considering the link to the organization's website where users can locate voting resources for Lebanese immigrants and other political efforts abroad.

Other users share biographies which are less detailed and personal, revealing a potential desire to maintain a certain level of anonymity. For instance, the public account @gs.jnoubi (4-10. below) who does not have a name displayed:

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[29] Since this is an organization, it is not clear how many users are behind the account.

gs.jnoubi

9 Posts · 379 Followers · 346 Following

Shami + writer
Southern Lebanese

**Figure 4-10.   (2021). Screenshot of a users' Instagram account profile biography, @gs.jnoubi on Instagram.**

Instead, the user chose a candlestick emoji (🕯) which could be interpreted in numerous ways such as the mourning of a lost soul or perhaps affiliations with the title of "writer" (in the biography). Although their biography appears to show little personal information, there is indexical meaning that can be extracted from the text. For instance, the user's account handle may signal the initials "gs". The word "jnoubi" is a transliterated Arabic word meaning "one from the south" (my translation).[30] This speculation is then confirmed in the biography when the user identifies as "Southern Lebanese" —meaning which is only accessible to those who understand Arabic. In view of the complex tensions between North and South Lebanon due to historic and ongoing sectarian and regional tensions between opposing religious and political groups, it is significant that the Instagramer chose to specify on two occasions their affiliation to the South.

El-Jnoub (the South) is a region of Lebanon inhabiting a community of many marginalized groups such as Shi'a Muslims, Druze, and refugees from surrounding Arab nations. It is a territory where the influence of HizbAllah is the most prominent and where live strong ideologies against the government and against Lebanon's historical affiliations with the colonial state of Israel due to the ramifications of past wars.[31] Thus, within this frame of identification, the user is positioning themself in relation to their followers by establishing a fragment of their cultural identity which carries political and

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[30] In Arabic, "jnoub" means "South", often referring to the South of the country. "Jnoubi" is thus someone from the South.

[31] In transliterated Arabic, many different spellings are valid. This particular spelling of the political party better showcases the English translation of the name: "Party of Allah".

historical significance. Finally, this user identifies as a "writer" and "Shami"; the latter referring to one who identifies with or comes from Balad el-Sham, a historical region in West Asia on the Mediterranean Sea which, depending on regional and political ideologies, may include Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Kuwait. It is also a term attached to irredentism, alluding to the user's potential advocacy for territorial restoration —an ideology often defended in Southern Lebanon.

Understanding much of these biographical details is dependent on experience of accumulated knowledge. Thus, answers to questions of addressivity are routed in linguistic competence and historical perceptions on the matter. These enigmatic components contribute to what Goffman defines as the "frame" (1974) in which the text is being shared with other users. Goffman (1974) defines the frame as the contextual elements which structure an individual's culturally determined perspective of reality. Frame necessarily involves elements of space, i.e., "an active, agentive aspect of communication" (Blommaert et al., 2005: 203) and an influential dimension of social behavior and speech. The frame is what defines the experience of the social agent and in the case of these Instagramers, their discursive identity performances frame their speech within a specific ideological context that in turn, positions them in relation to their followers. The audience, the user's following, also positions themselves in relation to the user as they enter in contact with discursive material with which they either identify or not. In considering these fragments of identity presented through text (in both Arabic and English) and emojis, the question of identifying and being identified arises.

The four above users have discursively constructed images establishing themselves within specific ideological contexts and social categories. However, the ways in which a user identifies and is identified by others online are not synonymous. As I've argued, the way a user chooses to identify reflects numerous fragments of their social conditioning, political affiliations, linguistic training, and/or cultural ties. Similarly, the way this user is identified by others reflects the same fragments listed above but on the part of the individual who is doing the identifying. In other words, our analyses, interpretations, and perspectives are the product of our own subjectivity. This is what legitimizes our inquiry regarding to whom these Instagramers are addressing their message, since only those with similar trajectories will truly grasp the indexical meaning of the text.

In this section, I tackled issues of addressivity in digitally mediated forms of online identification to present inferences on the ways user identify and are identified online. To expand on this discussion, the following section focuses on militant posts and questions the extent to which multilingual choices in the context of Lebanese militant initiatives can expose information about the addressee(s). I use *educational posts* (defined in the following paragraphs) on Instagram during the 2022 Lebanese Parliamentary elections and focus on Bdeir and Abou Ismail as the primary active voices spreading awareness and information pertaining to the electoral process (individual slides represented by figures 4-11. – 4.16. & 4-17. – 4-18. below).

## 4.1.3. Multilingual Posting and Addressivity

In May 2022, the highly anticipated Lebanese democratic elections were held amid an uprising organized in response to ongoing political instability and an economic crisis exasperated by the 2020 chemical explosions at Beirut's port that devastated the country in all sectors. Voting was open to all Lebanese locals and immigrants —a political event that was heavily mediatized in major cities around the globe. Many took to Instagram to document the turnout and their personal experience at the voting polls which consisted of live videos of the electoral events, discussions surrounding the popular hashtag #votethemout, and circulating images of an inked thumb.[32] Lebanese activists and organizations shared resources and information online in Arabic, English, and French to promote voting among a multilingual society. Since the elections extended voting to the Lebanese diaspora, a multilingual community with a historically complex linguistic background, this led me to reflect on questions of addressivity in militant posts on Instagram.

As previously mentioned, Bdeir posted a carousel to their Instagram highlighting "things you need to know re: the upcoming parliamentary elections in Lebanon", which features the following slides:

1) a voting day calendar per country (4-11.);

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[32] During the 2009 elections, the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections introduced a final step in the voting process which required voters to dip their thumb in blue ink as a way of identifying voters and to inhibit voters from voting more than once.

**Figure 4-11.   (May 5, 2022). Slide 1 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "Daily Calendar – Election Day".**

2) the number for the election hotline handling all issues, questions, or violations in Lebanon or abroad (4-12.);
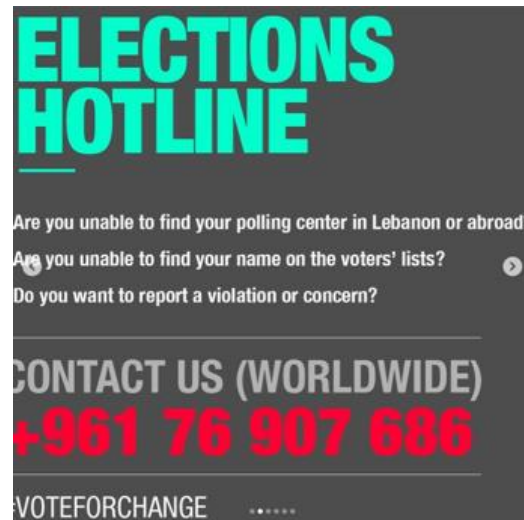


**Figure 4-12.   (May 5, 2022). Slide 2 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "Elections Hotline".**

3) an information video on voting blank (still shot represented in figure 4-13.);

**Figure 4-13.** **(May 5, 2022). Slide 3 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "Voting blank is bad for Lebanon".**

4) information on *Daleel Elections*, a platform of all lists, candidates, voting districts, and programs (4-14.);



**Figure 4-14.** **(May 5, 2022). Slide 4 & 5 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post: A. "Daleel Thawra Announcement". B. List of districts.**

5) and finally, the user's own personal opinions on voting per district (4-15.).

**Figure 4-15.** **(May 5, 2022). Slide 6 on Bdeir's Instagram (@ayahbdeir) carousel post, "My personal opinions".**

Apart from Arabic names and organization titles, the contents of this post are written entirely in English including the narrated video presented on blank voting. The caption, commonly offering additional information pertaining to the post, is also written in English (4-16.):



**Figure 4-16.** **(May 5, 2022). Post caption from Bdeir's (@ayahbdeir)Instagram carousel post about the 2022 elections, represented by figures 7-1. - 7-5.**

An instance of code-switching can be observed in figure 4-11. above: "Come with your Passport or Tazkira". Heller (1988) defines code-switching as "the use of more than one language in the course of a single communicative episode" (1), where languages are intertwined in a combination of cultural and linguistic histories within a given interaction. It is best understood in "the double context of the speech economy of a multilingual community and of the verbal repertoires of individual members of that community" (ibid). 'Tazkira' is a transliterated word which phonetically sounds like the Arabic word for identification, referring to a legal document such as a driver's license or a birth certificate.

Transliteration refers to the process by which one written linguistic system is transformed into another written linguistic system by means of phonetic commonalities. The romanization of Arabic, for instance, transcribes the spoken and traditionally written alphabet, which possesses more letters than the English alphabet, into a fusion of Latin script and numbers. The numbers represent the additional letters in the Arabic alphabet and are associated with those specific sounds. This linguistic code is an informal Arabic dialect most used on the Internet and social media and is often referred to as the "Arabic chat alphabet". The use of transliterated Arabic is interesting since it is a linguistic code made accessible to a larger community of interlocutors who may not have the capacity to read formal Arabic but who understand the oral language.

Transliteration is uncommon in Abou Ismail's posts: he posted several times to his Instagram about the elections in either Arabic or English. For example, on May 8, Abou Ismail captioned a video compilation of clips from his journey to the voting poles with Willie Nelson's song titled "Vote Them Out" playing in the background:

> "Drove for 2 hours and waited 4 to vote. Not because I am delusional but because tipping the status quo requires every single bit of effort. If you don't like those in, vote them out... I know there's a problem, I know elections might not fix it, but if you don't have a solution, something you can actually do, get up, get out, and vote."

In this post, Abou Ismail shares his motivations to vote and urges his followers to act by exercising their democratic rights as a means of seeking change. In other posts however, Abou Ismail addressed his audience entirely in Arabic, using the formal Arabic alphabet (figure 4-17. below):

Figure 4-17. رسالة لكل شخص ما
بدو يصوت لأنو ما في
حدا بيمثلو من
المرشحين

**Figure 4-17. (May 4, 2022). Example of an Arabic Instagram post by Abou Ismail (@the.political.psychologist): A. Arabic post. B. Arabic caption.**

This choice, in comparison to using transliterated Arabic, leads us to question whether Abou Ismail was specifically addressing his message to a community of Lebanese locals, immigrants, and/or expatriates who read and understand formal Arabic.

It is important to consider the availability of translation resources on the application which allow users to instantly translate captions on Instagram (figure 4-18.):

Liked by rim.istanbouli and others
the.political.psychologist A must and must. Today in a country there is no electricity, no water, no medicine, no economy, no balance, no job opportunities, no censorship, no accountability. As a Lebanese citizen living in Lebanon or on Mars, you are paying for this equation if not directly with your family, friends or jokes. If you don't like someone, it doesn't mean you don't vote. When you don't vote, you are making it easier for the old to come back, you are contributing to the situation getting worse as it is. You Like The Status Like What Is It ? You don't have to vote and say I don't care, there is no one like me. You don't have to fulfill your dreams in the elections, what is required is that you like to change if you are upset with the asphalt situation. And what could it get worse the worse it could be. I wouldn't vote in a list if not two for the opposition, the revolution and the changeists. Heck Heck, calculate yourself in the equation, there is still another voice, there is still a voice that improves the situation, because if you don't go down, for sure, no one will represent you, and the situation will not get better. What and after work, if there is no one like you and you do not have to vote because there is no one else like you and you know when you do not vote, you make it easy for the base, you will remain sitting, what is your problem for the next four years you will say it is not my business, I did not vote, it is your problem, it is your fault because you did not vote. New Year's Eve at #لبنان# انتخابات_لبنان
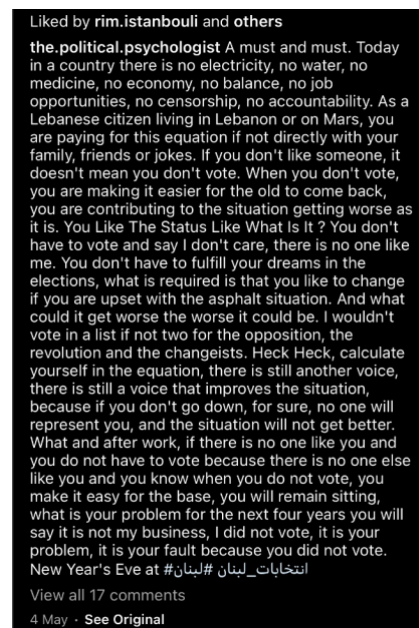View all 17 comments
4 May · See Original

**Figure 4-18. (May 4, 2022). English translatation of the caption from Abou Ismail (@the.political.psychologist)'s Instagram post represented by figure 4-17. above.**

This technological affordance expands the reach of the post by providing users from different linguistic backgrounds access to posts written in a foreign language, subsequently surpassing language barriers and promoting interactions amongst different speech communities on social media. Translation, however, is a complex process of ideological selection with potential political consequences (Bucholtz, 2000; Bird, 2005), and despite its execution by the machine, digital translation cannot render meaning understandable from one language to another. Meaning is defined by a subjective experience and is often routed in historical and cultural affiliations. Thus, one must consider the ideological foundations that govern the infrastructures of social media applications and the subsequent design of the mechanisms of digital translation.

As previously discussed, activism can be exemplified through multimodal forms of action which are considered instances of militantism when enacted for the promotion of change or progress. During the 2022 Lebanese elections, one of the most common forms of activism was what I refer to as *educational posts*, which can be understood as the sharing of information and resources through digital text-based images and/or narrated audio-visual content to exchange knowledge, share opinions, and spread awareness on a given issue. Educational posts are not always credible sources of information; they must be critically assessed to the same extent that all users should question their digital environment.[33] In the months leading up to the election, these posts often provided information on topics such as voter registration, candidate information for different voting districts, important dates, emergency contacts for democratic violations or abusive behaviour, and information videos or lectures on various electoral and political topics.

My observations conclude that excluding some minor instances of code-switching, *education posts* by independent activists or militant organizations were often written in one of the three languages: English, Arabic or French. However, the exact post is also often translated, replicated, and reposted in each individual language —an approach that is particularly common among *active* militant organizations.[34] For instance, figure 4-19 shows the chronological order of posts by @sawtivoice (temporally

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[33] This, again, defines the circulation of (mis)information online and the concern towards the increasing reliance on social media platforms as sources of information and news.

[34] Active here refers to militants who are consistent in their work in the online context, particularly on their Instagram.

organized from right to left), providing information and debunking misconceptions on voting cards:



**Figure 4-19.** **(2022). First example of a post from Sawti (@sawtivoic)e, posted in English, and replicated in Arabic, and French —versions which were posted in that order.**

*Sawti* is an initiative created by the non-profit organization *Impact Lebanon*, which seeks to provide information, promote engagement, and mobilize Lebanese citizens around the globe (@sawtivoice's biography on Instagram).[35] In this series of posts on voting cards, @sawtivoice posted the information in English first, then in Arabic, then in French (figure 4-19. above).



**Figure 4-20.** **(2022). Second example of a post from Sawti (@sawtivoic)e, posted in English, and replicated in French and Arabic -versions which were posted in that order.**

Figure 4-20. above shows another series of education posts titled "Breaking News" which were posted (uploaded) in the following order: English, French then Arabic.

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[35] The word "sawti" is the phonetic depiction of the Arabic word meaning "my voice", a confirmed translation when considering the groups English slogan: "My voice. My vote.".

These individually translated posts provide equal opportunity for all members of a linguistically diverse community to access the resources necessary to participate in Lebanese democracy. Since such organizations represent a large community of people, they have a responsibility to prioritize the equal accessibility of their posts by adapting to the linguistic differences of said community. Despite the availability of many of the posts in all three languages, I defend the importance of reflecting on the potential political and social implications of the order of languages posted to Instagram. The order of posting in English, Arabic, and French and the subsequent privileged visibility of one post before the other could be a conscious selection rather than a random one. Does the construction and posting of the English carousel before the Arabic and French versions point the potential predominancy of English both in the context of Lebanese society and in the digital realm? If the former is true, these findings contribute to current discussions on the potential decline of the French language in Lebanon (see Kazwini-Housseini, 2015 & 2018). If it is the case, are militants adapting their work to fit the hierarchization of languages online? To what extent is the use of English primordial in the dissemination of information and the propagation of voices through social media?

Before addressing these questions, it is important to mention that these inquiries are founded on the chronological order of posts as they are uploaded to Instagram and not as they appear on the page. Unless pinned, meaning the post is prioritized and elevated to the top of the page for users to view first, Instagram posts appear in chronological order with the most recent posts at the top of the page and the older posts at the bottom. In the case of figure 4-19., the first post uploaded to Instagram is in English and the first post visible to users on the page is in French. Similarly, for figure 4-20., the first post uploaded is in English whereas the first post visible to users is in Arabic. Users who are trained in the aesthetic and strategic organization of posts on their Instagram page surely reflect on the more advantageous approaches to posting content as means of promoting visibility and boosting interactions. Analyzing the significance of the chronological order of linguistic versions posted to Instagram necessarily correlates privilege with either temporality or visibility. Considering Instagram's algorithms, it is possible that the temporal differences between posts have little effect on visibility since the application generates posts that fit within the user's particular needs. Thus, the order may be irrelevant unless considered within the specific context of the author's page (*Sawti*'s page for instance).

The predominance of the English (see Banat, 2020) language online and the status of English as a 'passport to privilege' (an expression borrowed from Haidar, 2019) on an international scale is an avowed reality of our increasingly globalized capitalist society. America's contribution to technological progressions and the simultaneous expansion of the parameters of the digital realm prompt the investigation of the extent to which the use of English on social media may also be privileged in reaching larger audiences. Despite its global status, English may not always prevail in the localized Lebanese context since "multilingualism is not what individuals have and don't have, but what the environment, as structure determinations and interactional emergence, enables and disables" (Blommaert et al., 2005: 197). Blommaert et al. (idem) discuss such hierarchization in terms of scale, arguing that "hierarchical relations between scales are unpredictable: when there is a conflict between local and transnational (globalization) pressures on a government, for instance, it is by no means sure that the transnational influences will prevail" (ibid: 202). This is particularly interesting in the digital realm where local and transnational spaces merge —a space where social and linguistic hierarchies collide and shift, thus also occasioning shifts in scale (ibid: 204).

Despite the extensive use of code-switching in Lebanon as documented in the literature (Banat, 2020; Yahiaoui, et al., 2021), code-switching online within the Lebanese community was rarely present in text-based posts, captions, or comments, and can instead be witnessed more frequently in oral performances, whether that be in conversation with other interlocutors or in a monologue speech or videorecording. This represents unmarked codeswitching, whereby locutors speak according to habitual norms of code alternance, meaning that the unmarked codeswitching is a matter of conventional practice rather than calculated linguistic choices.

Online written political posting mainly displays a juxtaposition of monolingual texts, as illustrated in the educational posts discussed above. One may wonder to what extent this language practice indexes a language ideology that constructs written texts as linguistically normative where languages are treated as bounded entities that do not enter in contact with each other. The language fluidity that activists embrace when speaking, as seen in some of their videos, seems to be restrained when they produce written content. Do activists consider codeswitching in written text as an impediment to understanding? Does the one-language-one-educational post practice serve to index the legitimacy of the information posted? The juxtaposition of English, Arabic, and French

promotes political participation among a linguistically diverse local and diasporic community and emphasizes the cultural significance of each language in contemporary Lebanese society. However, one may wonder whether keeping these three languages separate is not a way to avoid triggering cultural and religious tensions that are often embedded in languages as already mentioned in previous chapters. At this state of my research, I cannot provide any answers to these highly relevant questions.

In the following section, I expand the discussion on processes of identification by exposing issues of identity construction and performances through the distinction between *doing* activism, *doing being* an activist, and *being* an activist.

## 4.2. *Doing* Activism, *Doing Being* an Activist, & *Being* an Activist

Over the years, as society's understanding of activism has transformed alongside advancements in technology, the characteristics and expectations of an activist must also be redefined and adapted to the digital context. Moreover, 'activist' is a social category, which indicates that it is a role that an individual performs at a given time. An activist is not born an activist, nor do they ceaselessly play the role of an activist daily. Instead, it is a process of *becoming* attuned to the realities of the world and acting upon them for change. It is a process of awakening leading to "everyday acts of defiance, which, by extension, expands the definition of activist" (Bobel, 2007: 283). Thus, a critical assessment of action is limited when failing to consider personal and common experiences.

As previously discussed, action, as theorized by McDonald (2002), is an act of "shared struggle for personal experience" (125), which inherently positions the activist in relation to others. He defends the necessity to move past the notion of 'collective identity' since "it does not allow a conceptualization and exploration of critical dimensions of action and identity merging in contemporary globalization conflicts" and instead proposes to view the relationship between individual and collective experiences through *fluidarity* (2002: 109). This derives from the rejection that "the telos of social movements is the constitution of solidarity" (ibid: 124) and instead proposes to focus on the "public experience of self" since collective identity does not breed collective action (ibid).

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This leads us to question the extent to which activism, understood here as an extension of the self and of one's experiences beyond the confines of the mind, could serve as a method of therapeutic reconciliation allowing one to heal themselves from intergenerational trauma and make peace with the world and with others, and which subsequently fuels the potential for community healing. This is particularly relevant in the case of Lebanon, a country whose history is marked by sectarian violence, institutional corruption, and the traumatisms of war. To what extent can the common experiences of the Lebanese people unite them under one nation and promote healing and reconciliation among divided groups?

Shared experiences also prompt the question of the potential for common identities. King (2004) invokes Melucci's notion of 'metamorphosis', which conceptualizes the maintenance of continuity through an activist's changes in identity. As long argued by sociolinguists (Goffman, 1959; Davies & Harré, 1990; Bucholtz & Kira Hall, 2004, 2005; Omoniyi & White, 2009; Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2014; Blommaert & De Fina, 2015) among many others, identity cannot be understood from an essentialist perspective —that is, a combination of categories that make up one's character. Identity is fluid and runs through streams of multifaceted plains of characteristics which define the way we want to be perceived at a given time. For instance, an activist may perform a different identity when working to mobilize and call for action compared to the identity that they perform as a parent in their home. Depending on the context and the relationship between interlocutors, individuals will perform fragments of themselves to fit the social setting, indicating that identity is in fact a social process involving locally enacted negotiations between social agents on the basis of various social and contextual elements of interaction.

This process is also (re)negotiated within a given interaction: a mother agrees to bring her child to a political protest, thus entering an environment where two identity performances, the activist and the mother, merge into one setting and lead to multiple instances of mask-switching. Thus, activists are constructing and managing multiple identities all while negotiating such identities in different social realms and contexts. Negotiation, as outlined by Pavlenko and Blackledge (2006), "is viewed as a transactional interaction process, which individuals attempt to evoke, assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images, in particular ethnic identity" (4).

Such negotiations are particularly interesting in the case of Lebanese society comprised of various religious and cultural backgrounds that define cultural identities. Pavlenko and Blackledge (idem) cite Giles and Byrne (1982) in referencing the development of "a theory of ethnolinguistic identity which considers language to be a salient marker of ethnic identity and group membership" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2006: 4). Moreover, the authors also argue that "languages may not only be 'markers of identity' but also sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity" (4). The relationship between language and identity is relevant to the conceptualization of digital activism since the shared experiences of the Lebanese people construct collective resistance and motivate mobilized action.

As proven in the previous section, users perform fragments of themselves through the digital affordances of the social media platform, allowing them to construct a subjective identity based on how wish to identify and be identified. This leads to further ambiguity regarding the social category of an 'activist' since this identity can be performed in a multitude of ways, as shows in the data from the previous section. Noteworthy from this data is the reality that the term "activist" was rarely claimed explicitly and was never labelled (as an Instagram label), raising questions not about whether these users view themselves as activists, but rather about how they perceive the identity category of an activist. I propose two potential explanations for the above observation.

On one hand, this rejection may be due to an understanding of activism as part of normative social membership. Bobel (2007) names Rupp and Taylor (1987), Klandermans (1994), Taylor and Raeburn (1995) and Whittier (1995) as authors who have called attention to how the experiences of social movement participants transform their perspectives on the world and on themselves (2007: 148). In the previous chapter when evoking Bruzzone's conceptualization of experience and 'socially mobilized subjectivity' (2017), I emphasized the importance of lived experiences in motivating genuine action. In the case of Lebanese activists, especially locals who continue to live through the struggle firsthand, it is interesting to consider how experience may be constructed differently compared to members of the diasporic community or to allies of the struggle, subsequently shaping perspectives on activism and on themselves as "activists". In other words, the rejection of the label of 'activist' may point to feelings of obligatory social movement participation as part of normalized citizen participation and

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social belonging. Activism as individual acts of resistance against corruption, inequality, and working towards progressive change may thus be an integral part of existence, belonging, and (in particularly dangerous political situations) survival.

On the other hand, the rejection of such labels may be due to social glorifications of activists as extraordinary characters. Thompson (1997) and Blackstone (2004) built on the findings of Rupp and Taylor (1987), Klandermans (1994), Taylor and Raeburn (1995) and Whittier (1995) in studying the rejection of the label "activist" due to feelings of inadequacy and pressures related to the exceptional standards imposed on social movement participants and well-known militant personalities. This perspective views an activist through the lens of alterity —that is, the view that social and political reform are accomplished by the "other". In glorifying the role of an activist, one also diminishes the efforts which do not meet the extraordinary standards set by the most notable instances of historic revolutionary acts. Moreover, it also creates the illusion of a 'standard citizen': the fabricated idea of an individual with a certain degree of privilege to live according to the conventional routines of a capitalist society and who portrays a false sense of normality. In the latter case, an activist would thus be seen as someone outside of this standard.

This is indeed a falsity since activists are social actors who are simply more politically engaged at a given time, denoting that their contribution to social movements extends beyond the scope of everyday political interactions and instead, is part of a larger goal and potential lifestyle towards change. The idealization of activists thus places them outside the norm and creates a false sense of unattainability surrounding the probability of realizing social and political reform on the part of an "ordinary" citizen. These inferences lead me to question the difference between *doing* activism and *being* an activist (Bobel, 2007; Thompson, 1997), especially in a society ruled by doings being done by the machine.

Darcy (2014) discusses the rise of post-new left political vocabulary which emerged roughly in the 1990s as "the product of a new sensitivity to key issues" (2). He explains how these words entering contemporary militant spaces are not new, but rather it is their meaning and political significance which have recently emerged alongside developments in progressive militant approaches. He fails to emphasize however the need to situate the difference between new left and post-new left political vocabulary

within their specific historical and political contexts, since developments to militant political speech are often the result of the emergence of new perspectives towards *doing* activism.

For instance, post-new left political vocabulary includes "calling out", defined as "an approach to challenging folks who show a lack of insight or concern about issues of privilege, in which they are confronted by peers and urged to check their privilege" (Darcy, 2014: 2). This is a practice necessarily involving an expectation to recognize one's own privilege, to be conscious of one's social position, and imposes responsibility on citizens to raise the social consciousness of their peers. These guidelines are socially enforced according to a code of conduct for citizens regarding the ways of speaking politically (based on political correctness) and *doing* activism. Moreover, they also reinforce a repertoire of politically correct vocabulary and expressions and depict one's legitimacy in *being* an activist. Thus, the expectations and pressures imposed on activists to speak and behave according to a socially developed and enforced code of conduct depicts the reluctance of politically engaged individuals to claim this title. It also reveals the power that the people have over the inclusion or exclusion of individuals from social settings.

The following data exemplifies how users discursively affiliate themselves with a social movement or perform the identity category of activist without implicitly claiming this identity label. For instance, the @the.political.psychologist, describes himself as a political psychologist and a Ph.D. researcher and lecturer at the University of Kent (figure 4-8 above). Although he may not identify as an activist, I regard him as such in my research for a multitude of reasons that will become clearer in the following paragraphs.

The user's first post on Instagram is a series of informative slides titled "What is Political Psychology?", defining the discipline as "an interdisciplinary science… considered to be a branch of social psychology…focused on understanding politics and political behaviour from a psychological perspective" (@the.political.psychologist, December 14, 2020). He goes on to explain that "by doing so, it helps us understand what influences or motivates people to act in a certain way" (ibid), providing the examples of how groups behave towards other groups or the justification of inequality or injustice. In identifying himself as a scientist, the user may be attempting to legitimize the

position he plays online as a credible source of information. This inference is reinforced when considering the user's biographical description including his academic and professional title (viz., self-described political psychologist, researcher and lecturer holding a Ph.D.) as well as his affiliated institution (University of Kent), links to his social networking platforms, and his research.

As information and news circulate on social media, users must decipher between credible information and misinformation. For users who dedicate their social networking accounts to sharing news and information, there may be a need to position oneself as a legitimate and reliable source. For instance, stating one's level of education and their affiliated institutions subjects the individual to being perceived and categorized on a social and professional hierarchy based on their *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1986) in a society that tends to value academic and other professional credentials.

The majority of his posts on Instagram are informative posts or audio-video recordings of lectures and interviews which seek to: a) define and deconstruct theories in political psychology; b) provide statistics and other information related to news; c) debate political topics in Lebanese current events; d) discuss political and philosophical questions related to the Lebanese struggle such as belonging, nostalgia, unity, and various topics related to identity; e) and/or expose and discuss corruption and violence at the hands of the Lebanese state, police, and army. The user also regularly conducts surveys on his Instagram story which allows followers to participate in political discussions and in the construction of data and which aims of its use are not disclosed (see figures 4-21. A-D):
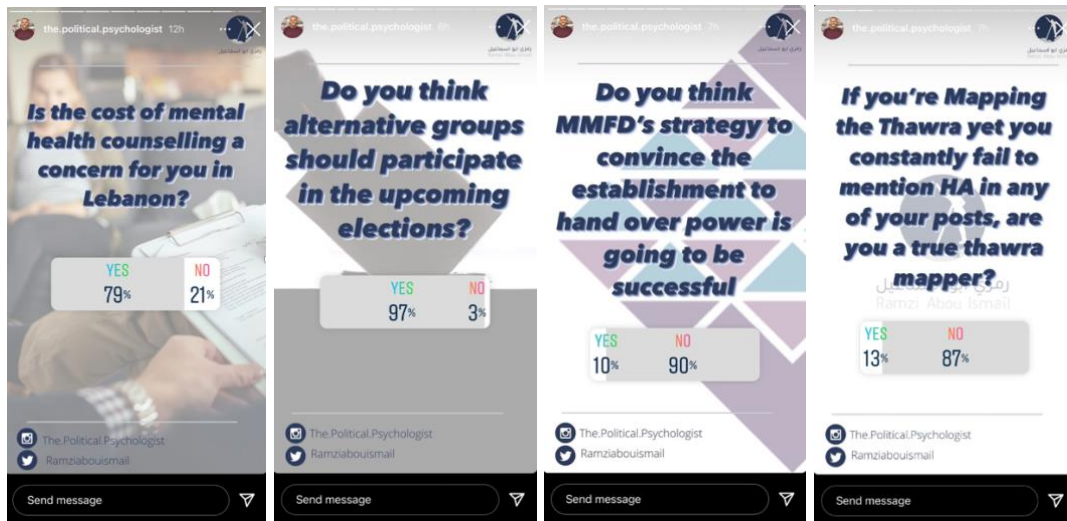
**Figure 4-21.** **(2022). Abou Ismail's Instagram story (@the.political.psychologist): A. Poll on the cost of mental health counselling in Lebanon; B. Poll on alternative groups in the 2022 elections; C. Poll on MMFD strategy in Lebanon; & D. Poll on Mapping the 'Thawra' & HizbAllah affiliations.**

Considering the potential intent behind his Instagram account (as outlined above), it is reasonable to assume that he wants to be perceived as an academic or a researcher. This further explains the intent behind a user's professional assertion online, since claiming credibility on a platform ridden with performances and (mis)information requires some level of legitimate proof. It is important to consider however that despite one's attempt to prove one's legitimacy, falsity online is almost inevitable, and can seldom guarantee the credibility of a user online.[36]

In discursively positioning himself as a professional in his field, Abou Ismail ultimately constructs the image of an academic who has been trained in political psychology and whose opinions are founded on this education. The label of *scientist* could thus act as a legitimizer of his professional role on the social networking application, or it could also be seen as a signifier of his participation in social movements. I propose to view his Instagram activity as an academically founded militant approach intended on providing his followers with information and topics of discussion in politics, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to initiate debate and raise social consciousness on given issues. This approach is also technologically imposed, involving

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[36] For instance, Instagram is one of the platforms that offers the blue checkmark, a verified badge, which means that the Instagram account has been authenticated. It is mostly used for public figures, celebrities, brands and popular organizations or associations.

the use of social media as the primary method of interaction with politicians, his followers, the people (specifically Lebanese people), and other activists. This can be understood as a form of *distant militantism* where action is taken online to achieve offline results. Taken at a distance from the physical realm (where social and political issues often take place), I argue that this action could be seen as form of active political participation where the individual engages in theoretical discussions, political debates, and the sharing of credible information by means of digital communication and content sharing platforms (see post example represented in figure 4-22. below).



**Figure 4-22.   (July 25, 2022). Five part Instagram information carousel by Abou Ismail (@the.political.psychologist) on Collective Violence.**

Abou Ismail's approach to *doing* activism is different than that of other activists. Take @linaboubess for instance (a fifth account added to the analysis of this chapter), who is a Lebanese social movement participant often referred to as "The Mother of the Revolution" online (in English, French, Arabic).[37] Boubess' militant approach is closer to our conventional conception of activism and is focused on offline mobilization and collective action. The majority of Boubess' posts are images and videos related to street protests; news and updates regarding current political events and militant initiatives; instances of violence at the hands of the police and the army; victims of tragedies; and political slogans, art, and messages of solidarity and calls to action: (see figures 4-23. & 4-24. below).[38]

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[37] The significance of Boubess' Instagram account and activity will be further discussed in the following section of this chapter.

[38] In fact, many of the images of street protests and on-ground militant initiatives include 'The Mother of the Revolution' (see figure 4-11.A. below, Boubess is seen wearing red), revealing that they are indeed an active participant on the field of Lebanese activism.

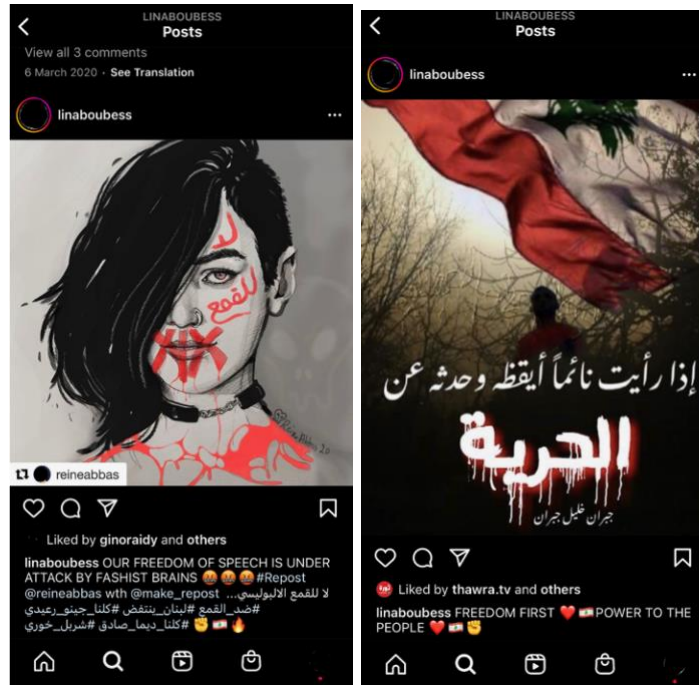**Figure 4-23.** (2020). Two separate Instagram posts by Lina Boubess (@linaboubess): A. Political art repost from @reineabbas, posted to Boubess' Instagram on February 23, 2020. B. Posted on July 16, 2020.
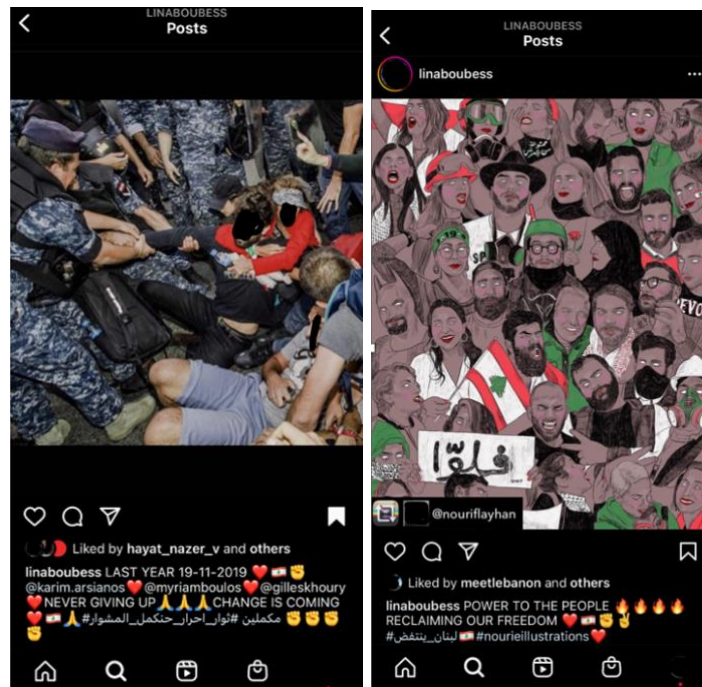


**Figure 4-24.** (2020). Two separate Instagram posts by Lina Boubess (@linaboubess): A. Image from November 19, 2019 of Boubess & Gilles Khoury, posted November 20, 2020. B. Illustration by @nouriflayhan, posted January 20, 2020.

In comparing Boubess' online participation with that of Abou Ismail, it is clear that Boubess utilizes social media as a means of participating in political discussions and the circulation of political content online, since the majority of their posts are reposts (see figure 4-23. A. and 4-24. B. for example), opinions, or information about current news and upcoming political events.[39] Although Boubess' content differs from that of Abou Ismail's, the intent behind their posts, deduced from my critical interpretations, subjectively emulates objectives and characteristics of an activist —someone who is passionate and informed about an issue and who is "consciously and strategically… staging actions designed to raise awareness and challenge" (Bobel, 2007: 151) through multimodal forms of digital expression.

Schegloff calls attention to the concern of identificatory practices in "[insisting] into relevance these categories and the bodies of common-sense knowledge organized by reference to them" (1999: 565). Social actors are not restricted to these categories since identification is a process that inherently involves *stepping into* an identity that we perform within a specific situational context. This is what Schegloff (idem) refers to as "doing being members of that category" (ibid), where *being* refers to the temporal and spatial frame in which a social actor is discursively identifying as such and *doing* as the enactment of the associated category terms. For instance, Schegloff uses the example of a doctor and patient, arguing that "not everything that happens in the examining room has one party doing being 'doctor' and the other doing being 'patient'" (ibid: 565). These identity categories are not fixed and the act of stepping into these categories is a social activity manifested through contextually relevant interactional terms between interlocutors.

By the same token, activists may also be caregivers, instructors, or athletes within those given contexts and can step in or step out of an identity category at any time, which I reaffirm as a discursively enacted process. Despite identifying Abou Ismail as an activist, he is not bounded by these category terms (Schegloff, 1999) and instead, performs this identity alongside 'doing being' other identities such as a 'Political Psychologist' or a 'A. Lecturer' (@the.political.psychologist, Instagram biography, reference to figure 4-8.). I make assumptions on when and how Abou Ismail 'does being'

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[39] A repost is when a user posts the image and/or caption of another user. It is a form of sharing except by one's individual post on their own account.

an activist based on discursive choices —a process that can also be understood as 'mask-switching'. It is interesting to consider potential overlap in the observation of the temporal and spatial forces that drive mask-switching, often also being shaped by the speech and 'doing being' of another social actor.

In the following sections, I expand on this discussion of inexplicitly identifying as an activist by illustrating how users resort to discursive hints or icons with political significance, such as emojis, to allude to their involvement with social movements. I do so by defending the entextualized raised/clenched fist as a digital icon indexing performative acts of activism.

## 4.3. Digital Symbols of Identification: The Case of the Entextualized Clenched Fist

Despite a gap in the extant literature on historical recollections of social movement symbols and recontextualized militant aesthetics, James Stout, historian and writer for the National Geographic, recalls the first instances of the raised or clenched fist in American socialist and communist movements in the early 1900s. Stout claims that it was first exemplified by a founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World in a speech preaching working-class solidarity across all races and trades (Stout, 2020): "Every finger by itself has no force," he said, lifting his hand to the crowd. "Now look," he said, closing his fingers into a fist. "See that, that's the IWW."



**Figure 4-25.    A. (1848) Daumier, H. *L'Émeute*. B. (1917) Chaplin, Ralph. Drawing of a fist being held by numerous industrial workers who are depicted as the foundation for this act of solidarity. Retrieved from Davidson & Blair, 2018.**

The raised fist has also been depicted in art from the 1800s during representation of European Revolutions, such as *L'Émeute* (1848) by Honoré Daumier (4-25. A. above) and has since been a symbol of unity and political solidarity in social movements around the globe. Ralph Chaplin drew the raised fist in 1917 (4-25. B. above), depicting a giant fist with numerous industrial workers acting as the foundation and the veins that flow through the wrist and arm of the fist, like roots of a tree (Davidson & Blair, 2018: 3). Denney (2017) creates parallels between the fist and the hammer, leading us to question whether the former has been a symbol uniquely appearing in leftist progressive social movements. The hammer particularly symbolizes proletarian solidarity, whereas the fist has been used and reused in various historical and contemporary social movements. The most prominent association of the fist to social movements is the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and 1970s where it was used in protests and rallies as a symbol of resilience, power, and unity. It was also a recurring motif in political art such as the graphic work of Emory Douglas. Finally, the fist can also be observed in quiet protests where it is raised in silence like in the case of the 1968 Olympics when medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists after the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King (Denney, 2017: 4). Such protests and instances of the public raised/clenched fist reveal the powerful significance of this symbol of revolution —one which does not need to be explained with words.

To present a more contemporary example, in October 2019, the Lebanese took to the streets to protest the dramatic increase in gasoline and tobacco taxation, as well as the crippling state of Lebanon's economy and political instability. Tensions increased after the chemical explosions at the port of Beirut in August 2020, leading activists to organize and mobilize on larger scales in what is now referred to as the *October Revolution*. In response to these street protests, Lebanese authorities ordered the installation of metal barricades secured to the ground around the multiple entrance doors to the Parliament to prevent access. This physical barrier between the people and the state represents the inaccessibility of the Lebanese people to decisions regarding internal politics and the democratic progression of their country. The people refer to the obstruction as *The Wall of Shame*, emulating the history of the Berlin Wall and referencing The Wall as a dishonorable act of separation and elitist control over the national politics. In May 2022, after the results of the parliamentary elections, politician and speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, ordered the removal of The Wall.

On July 2, Ayah Bdeir (@ayahbdeir) posted to their Instagram a carousel of images (from where figures 4-26. A. & B. were collected) accompanied with the emotional caption: "I received the most incredible gift from an incredible human being". Bdeir was gifted a piece of the *Wall of Shame* (4-26.A.) for their militant work during the Lebanese revolution.[40] It was gifted to them by Maya Ibrahimchah, founder of *BeitelBaraka* (tagged on Instagram in figure 4-26.A. below), one of the largest Lebanese non-profit organizations.



**Figure 4-26.  (July 2, 2022). Instagram carousel (two parts) by Ayah Bdeir (@ayahbdeir). A. First slide on carousel representing an image of the piece of The Wall of Shame that was gifted to Bdeir for their militant work during the Lebanese revolution. B. Wall of Shame Badge. C. Close up of the image in the tag represented by figure 4-26.B. Image shows two "thawra" fist creating a pathway for the people to the Parliament.**

The gift was accompanied by a badge noting the erection and destruction date of The Wall, alongside an image (4-26.C. above) that circulated through the media and the Internet after its destruction. The image shows two hands gripping the barriers surrounding the Lebanese Parliament and pulling them apart to create an opening to the Parliament building. Both arms read the Arabic word "thawra", representing how the revolution led to the liberation of the people from the constraints of government control through democratic elections. Moreover, the gripping hands resemble clenched fists (specifically *The Fist* sculpture in Martyr Square) and create a path for the people —a metaphorical avenue towards democratic freedom and choice. Using icons of protest,

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[40] Bdeir notes in their caption that "the concrete walls themselves were removed as they were, but this is a piece of stone from the area immediately surround it".

this image represents the result of collaborative militant initiatives and the collective resistance of the (often divided) people against the state.

As we've seen, the raised/clenched fist is a resemiotized symbol of protest that has been entextualized and reappropriated in various contemporary social movements such as Black Lives Matter, movements advocating for Indigenous communities, the #Metoo movement, and contemporary protests in Lebanon. Entextualization, as defined by Bauman and Briggs is "the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit –a text– that can be lifted out of its interactional setting" (1990: 73). It is a process which involves recontextualization and inherently necessitates trajectories between digital and physical spaces. The significance of entextualization lies in the focus of separating discourse from its original situational context (decontextualization) and recontextualizing discourse within a new context (see Androutsopoulos, 2014; Giaxoglou, 2009; Park and Bucholtz, 2009; Vigouroux, 2009), which in the case of protest symbols, is a process that travels through both the online and offline spheres. Texts, as characterized by Vigouroux, "are not immutable entities that remain unchanged or 'untouched' during their trajectories across new contexts" (2009: 617). Instead, the context in which they are newly inscribed provides a new set of framing elements (see Goffman, 1974).

Bauman and Briggs (1990) highlight that "basic to the process of entextualization is the reflexive capacity of discourse, the capacity it shares with all systems of signification" to become an object of itself (73). This object of analysis must be assessed along the micro/macro continuum, the former relating to the specific interactional frame and the latter to the larger political context in which the interaction is taking place and to which topics of discussion are referring. Androutsopoulos (2014) calls attention to the necessity of adapting one's understanding of entextualization to fit the analytical context of social networking sites, since sharing, recontextualization, and the reproduction of speech are digitally motivated and involve different dimensions than offline discursive processes.

For instance, in the digital context, written text is often resemiotized into digital text or images, taking a different form depending on the semiotic resources offered to users by the social network (ibid: 5). Androutsopoulos cites Jones (2015), who explores how young people entextualize speech events through keyboards, cameras, audio, and

video recorders, and transform social activities in the physical realm which are then materialized as new units of analysis in the digital realm (Jones, 2015). Similarly, the participatory dimensions of social media application allow users to "maintain a certain degree of agency over their representations of self within the constraints of the media environments and against the risk of unpredictable responses by the networked audience" (Androutsopoulos, 2014: 6). This means that entextualization occurs at the hands of the user through the affordances of the technology. These affordances can also be considered digitally mediated modes of transcription —a form of entextualization and a "*sine qua non* activity in the analysis of real-time interaction" (Vigouroux, 2009: 616).

Perhaps one of the most interesting instances of entextualization and resemiotization, and which is most relevant to this research, is the clenched/raised fist emoji (✊). The clenched/raised fist emoji as a digital icon is a decontextualized semiotic object of the historically significant physical clenched/raised fist, travelling from the spatial dimensions of the physical to the digital realm and being recontextualized within various discursive and political contexts (as briefly mentioned in chapter 3 in the case of resemiotized semiotic material). Despite these transformative processes, the fist as a digital icon of protest carries core semiotic significance across political contexts and discursive sites (as argued in chapter 3's discussion on the destruction of *The Fist* in Martyr Square and the mutual understanding towards its semiotic political significance).

As outlined by Alfano et al. (idem), an emoji is a digital image used to convey meaning and emotion through semantic content which can be used alone or to compliment text. In the context of this research, emojis can be considered pictograms since it is a digital object which uses pictures to represent data. The authors consider emojis to have become "an increasingly popular form of communication" (ibid) which carry historical, political and/or culturally significant information. This research builds on the authors' theoretical conceptualization of emojis, treating these digital icons as entextualized semiotic material and data in and of themselves which carry indexical meaning based on the context in which they are used. Moreover, I propose to view the use of the raised/clenched fist emoji as indexing identity performances of the political engaged individual. In such a case, the digital image is treated as an "affiliative gesture, drawing attention to the author…and demonstrating their bona fides within their group" (Alfano et al., 2021: 1). Take @linaboubess on Instagram for example (4-27.):

**Figure 4-27.** **(2022). Lina Boubess (@linaboubess) image of the users' Instagram profile biography.**

Boubess does not have a biography or a label on their Instagram account; instead, their name appears next to a red heart emoji (❤️), an emoji of the Lebanese flag (LB), followed by the clenched fist emoji (✊). Additionally, the fist appears most frequently in Boubess' post captions (see figure 4-28. below), and various instances of metadiscourse exemplified primarily in the comments on their posts:
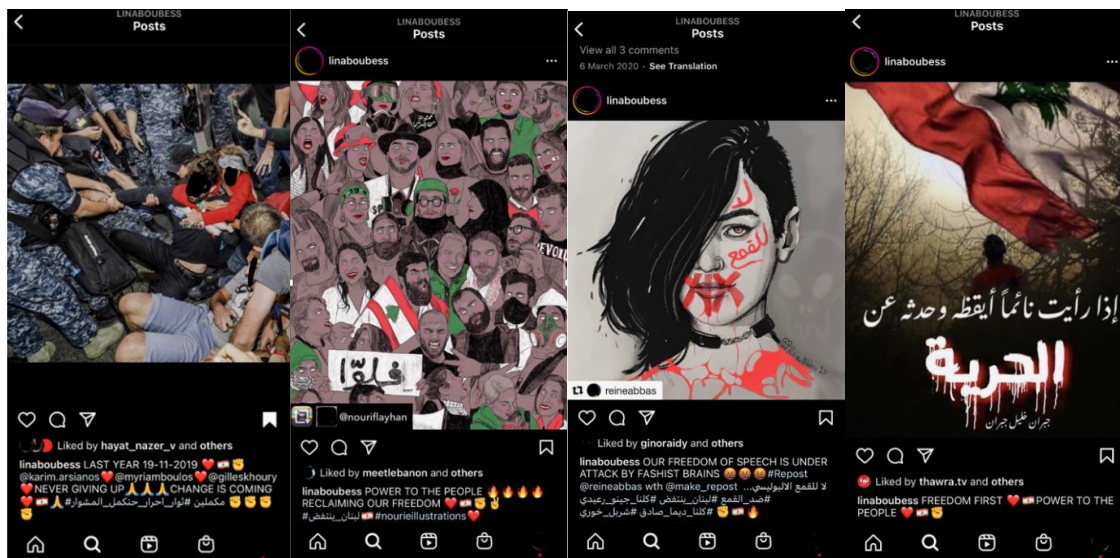


**Figure 4-28.** **(2020). Examples of four different Instagram posts, including captions, by Lina Boubess (@linaboubess): A. Image from November 19, 2019 of Boubess & Gilles Khoury, posted November 20, 2020. B. Illustration by @nouriflayhan, posted January 20, 2020. C. Political art repost from @reineabbas, posted to Boubess' Instagram on February 23, 2020. D. Posted on July 16, 2020.**

The specific use of the clenched fist emoji in militant interactions on Instagram has led to the hypothesis that there exist various ways of performing the role of activist

without directly using the term as a label of identification. The conscious selection of the raised/clenched fist emoji is an indication of the way the user wants to be portrayed online, especially considering the weight of this political symbol. The user is either, 1) indicating that they stand in solidarity with a particular social movement; or, 2) implying that they identify with a social movement, meaning they act towards the progress of a particular cause which extends further than the mere stance of solidarity. This form of online identification through emojis is interesting since it reinforces a coded digital language that only users familiar with the indexical meaning of these icons can fully grasp.

Alfano et al. (2021) highlight that "…various emoji are frequently used together to refine a user's stance, attitude, or sentiment" (3) since each emoji contains its own information and the meaning behind emojis is made visible within its context. For instance, when Boubess selected and communicated the combination of the clenched fist (✊), the Lebanese flag (LB) and the red heart emojis (❤️), the indexical meaning within the frame of militantism constructed discursively on their Instagram is different than if they had shared just one of the three emojis. This combination reveals how the user is positioning themself socially, in relation to their followers and to the Lebanese political struggle. The Lebanese flag emoji alone alludes to nationality, cultural affiliation, or location (as seen in previous cases, specifically referencing figure 4-8.). Whereas in combination with the red heart and the clenched fist emojis, I surmise that Boubess is: 1) showing solidarity with the Lebanese political struggle; and/or 2) reinforcing their title as an activist and as 'Mother of the Revolution'.

Additionally, it is interesting to note how these emojis are placed in the user's profile name as opposed to the biography, prompting the question of whether the combination of these emojis in this specific location holds further significance to the way Boubess is seeking to be identified. This question inherently distinguishes between the meaning behind text in the profile name versus text in the biography section; the former referring to the title or the pseudonym by which the user identifies and is identified, and the latter as information regarding the user's credentials, professional title or position, location, nationality, and/or group or community affiliations. The positioning of text on one's social media profile is a significant question of identification since "performance heightens awareness of the act of speaking" (Alfano et al., 2021: 3) and renders speech susceptible to interpretation and criticism from the audience. In other words, I suggest

that the selection of these combined emojis placed next to the user's name may point to a profound attachment to the struggle which characterizes the user's identity performance online.

Performance, as defined by Bauman and Briggs, is "a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood" (1990: 73). Through processes of identification, one performs an orientation of the self by positioning the self in relation to their interlocutor(s) in a speech event. Bauman and Briggs (idem) consider sharing on social networking applications to be a type of performance since the act of sharing necessarily involves the consideration of a target audience as well as an ideologically founded selection process. Androutsopoulos (2014) breaks this process down into parts: "sharers orient their contributions to a networked audience, paying attention to not just what is being shared (selecting) but also how this is done (styling) and expecting feedback by this audience (negotiating)" (17). Regardless of Boubess' intention behind the selection of the combined emojis, the conscious choice to share this information is an instance of political performance whereby the user selects information that orients their position in relation to their audience.

Styling, in this case, is about *how* the text is shared. The combination of emojis in the order of appearance and the location in which they are being communicated are relevant to the style of speech. The act of sharing inherently involves the orientation of the self towards the audience who "has the background knowledge that is needed in order to fill gaps in the shared representations and interpret the meaning of the sharer's communicative acts" (Androutsopoulos, 2014: 17). The linguist calls attention to the distinction between a 'sharer' and a 'sender', defending that the former involves a negotiation between "both the sharer and responding members from their audience, whose feedback encourages and at times shapes future sharing activities" (ibid: 17).[41]

In a time of political and economic instability in Lebanon, the fist still carries its symbolic representation of unity and solidarity for a political and social cause. However, my observations conclude that the fist emoji can have alternate meaning when recontextualized as metadiscourse. Bauman and Briggs (1990) illustrate that "the

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[41] This recalls a similar logic to Goffman's (1981) conception of the producer and receiver of speech.

metalingual (or metadiscursive) function objectifies discourse by making discourse its own topic" (73). For instance, many of Boubess' followers interacted with posts by sharing the clenched fist emoji in the comment section (4-29 below).



**Figure 4-29.** (2020). Examples of comments on several of Lina Boubess' posts (@linaboubess).

Three potential inferences can be deduced: 1) The audience is reaffirming Boubess' original use of the clenched fist emoji (in the account name) to legitimize Boubess' role as a militant or as 'Mother of the Revolution'; 2) the audience is reaffirming the significance of the clenched fist as a symbol of protest, solidarity, and unity; or 3) the icon is being recontextualized and ultimately, redefined as a way of solidifying agreement on a given political opinion (in certain contexts, this may be synonymous to the clapping hands emoji (👏), the thumbs up emoji (👍), or as seen in figure 4-30. below, the flexing emoji (💪)); and/or 4) the responding members of the audience in the comments section are also positioning themselves in relation to the political struggle, thus sharing instances of identity performances. The text, meaning the icon of the clenched fist in combination with other emojis, is recontextualized as metadiscourse and is a new object of analysis.



**Figure 4-30.** (2020). Examples of comments on several of Lina Boubess' posts (@linaboubess).

All the above inferences have potential validity and it is possible that members of the receiving audience are sharing the clenched fist emoji according to all these potential explanations. An interesting detail to consider is how the fist is almost always used in combination with other emojis, the most common combinations being the fist and the red heart and/or the Lebanese flag. This specific combination is a recontextualized replication of Boubess' original use of the three emoji (figure 4-31. A. below) and recalls Androutsopoulos argument on how speech, especially when shared online with a degree of permanence and susceptibility to entextualization, is shaped by the speech of others, thus reinforcing the notion of negotiation between sharer and responding members of the audience (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

## 4.3.1. Skin-Tone Indexicalities

In figure 4-31. A-C. below, the users use different skin-tones of the clenched fist emoji, leading us to question the significance of these selective differences in the process of online identification:



**Figure 4-31.   A. (2022). Lina Boubess (@linaboubess) image of the users'**
**Instagram profile biography. B. (2020). Example of comments on one**
**of Lina Boubess' posts (@linaboubess). C. (2020). Example of**
**comments on one of Lina Boubess' posts (@linaboubess).**

In 2015, Apple began to introduce skin-tone options to their emoji library, allowing users to select a skin-tone that best describes the way they want to be

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identified. Halverson (2021) argues that emojis were designed to be "universal, usable across multiple languages and platforms" (ibid: 14); however, in attempting to create a 'universal', this problematic concept sparked a desire for diverse range of melanin representation.[42] In observing different skin tone options used for the sharing of the clenched fist, I began to question whether users select the skin-tone emoji that best describes them or whether they pick an option that represents how they want others to perceive their racial identity. In a time where whiteness and privilege are central topics of discussion in political milieus online and where white-passing individuals are increasingly taking to social media to discuss the social implications of their whiteness alongside their cultural heritage and ethnicity, it is interesting to reflect on the problematic notion of performative skin-tone selections.

For instance, Halverson begins his study on *Skin-tone modified emoji and first-person indexicality* (2021) by presenting a Tweet from American celebrity Kendall Jenner who tweets, "sister power…girl power 👊", with what Halverson calls "a medium skin-tone fist emoji" (2).[43] This skin-tone selection triggered rage among Twitter users and sparked discussions on the use of emoji and skin-tone selections as sites of "intense metapragmatic scrutiny, a crucible for emerging and conflicting norms of usage" (ibid: 2). Halverson (idem) calls attention to the sociolinguistic interest in studying skin-tone modified emojis which is characterized by the encryption within these emojis of racialized information regarding the ways a user is seeking to be identified online. Furthermore, Halverson rightfully highlights the "already-existing linguistic means" (2021: 15) available to users to construct their racial identities, such as biographies, labels, and other digitally mediated sites of speech sharing. Skin-tone modified emojis however, present a unique opportunity for social analysis into the ideological and subjective perspectives on racial identification and images of the self. They also "represent a robust example of the complex ways language and culture are bound together dialectically" (ibid: 1) and how this is communicated through digital icons.

Alfano et al. (2021) conducted a study on the affiliative use of emojis and hashtags in the BLM movement which led them to explore trends in emojis used by different activist groups. The authors identify several categories of activists ranging from

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[42] The universal skin-tone emoji is discussed further below and represented in figure 4-29. A. & B.

[43] This is not the raised or clenched fist, but rather the "fist bump" emoji: 👊

politically engaged individuals who advocate for and discursively align themselves with a specific cause such as BLM, to high profile individuals and organizations such as politicians, media outlets, and non-profit organizations defending various political ideologies (Alfano et al., 2021: 2). The way the authors categorize these politically engaged individuals is interesting since it defends the argument that the identity group of "activist" extends beyond the scope of progressive movements and can be appropriated by individuals and groups from across the 'political spectrum'. Despite the study lacking consideration for how groups *choose* to identify and representation for ally communities with little media visibility, the distinct categories of the study call attention to the prevalence of political polarization in digital landscapes.

In a conclusive chart on the conditional probability of community membership through the use of the raised/clenched fist emoji, the study finds that the emoji is considerably diagnostic of cluster membership for individuals categorized within more progressive and politically liberal groups compared to right-wing social movement participants or conservative politicians (ibid: 5). For instance, the probability of belonging to the group of right-wing media outlets such as Fox News and individuals who defend conservative politics, conditional on using the raised/clenched fist emoji, is 0% whereas the probability of belonging to the group of "heterogeneous collection of individual activists" who defend more progressive politics on the same conditional use ranges between 35% and 65% depending on the melanin levels of the emoji options (see figure 4-32. below) where the probability of belonging *increases* with the rise in melanin levels (ibid).

**Figure 4-32.** (2022). A. Apple emoji library. B. Zoom on the Apple emoji library skin-tone options for the raised fist emoji.[44]

In contrast, the potential of belonging to the group of "high-profile individuals and organizations" that generally support progressive and popular movements such as BLM, conditional on using the raised/clenched fist emoji, ranges from approximately 40% to 65% where the probability of belonging *decreases* with the rise in melanin (ibid). This denotes that this group of individuals tens to use lighter skin-tones and the default yellow fist (✊).[45]

From the results of the study, we draw a few notable inferences: 1) First and foremost, there exists an important correlation between the selection of skin-toned emojis and one's ideological positioning denoting that skin-tone selection is in fact a political choice which alludes to modes of digital group identification; 2) the raised/clenched fist emoji is not correlated with belonging to groups including right-wing media outlets or individuals and organizations defending conservative ideologies, which leads us to believe that it may in fact be a prominent political symbol and icon of protest among more liberal, progressive, or leftist groups; 3) individuals categorized within more politically progressive, on the other hand, belong to more pigmented skin-tone communities; and, 4) the yellow raised/clenched fist emoji, considered a default icon without an affiliation to skin-tone, appears most prominently among groups of high-profile individuals and organizations, meaning that members of this group tend to use

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[44] These are the 5 skin tone options in the Apple emoji library as of 2022.

[45] The yellow raised-fist may be considered a default since it existed before skin-toned emojis were introduced. Moreover, the yellow appears as a neutral option since it is classified outside the categories of melanin levels (see figure 4-29. B.).

the raised/clenched fist emoji without explicitly positioning themselves within a particular skin-tone community.

The last observation is particularly interesting in considering Boubess' biographical use of the recontextualized emoji since although the 'universal' yellow fist may not be claimed by a specific skin-tone community, Boubess' selection and recurring use of this emoji may carry political significance: in a country ravished by sectarian tensions inhabiting people with multiple melanin levels, to what extent could the activist be seeking to maintain a neutral position in the face of different skin-tone communities to avoid exclusivity and to instead promote unity among a divided nation?

Despite the findings of Alfano et al.'s research, I found that the raised/clenched fist as a physical symbol has indeed been used by right-wing public figures like Donald Trump; however, the political and historical significance of the fist may not be synonymous in these different ideological contexts. Davidson and Blair (2018) call to attention how Trump raised his fist to the crowds "at various rallies to seemingly signify a resistance to mainstream politics" (6). The fist in conservative ideological settings may not hold the same political significance as the "semiotic resilience of the Raised Fist as a sign of resistance and protest" (ibid). Instead, it is reappropriated in many settings by the political right, as a strategic form of resilience against mainstream uses of the clenched fist by using the tools of the opposition to delegitimize progressive initiatives and instead, fuel their objectives. This reinforces the idea that discursive material should be analyzed within its specific interactive context, which in this case, requires a consideration of ideological motivations and group perspectives.

It is important to emphasize that the use of the clenched/raised fist is not a condition of activism nor is it an absolute signifier of the identity category of activist. As I have shown, particularly in the case of metadiscursive material in Boubess' comments, the fist is appropriated by heterogeneous groups to show solidarity or to position themselves in relation to a political or social issue. The analysis of my data and my own practice as a politically engaged social media user with training in discursive analysis reveals that users mutually engage and agree upon the use of the raised/clenched fist in both its physical human bodied form and as a digital icon (emoji). It is reasonable to conclude that individuals excluded from these digitally mediated political settings with limited knowledge on the history of the raised/clenched fist in social movements are not

socialized in the understanding of the political meaning behind this icon of protest. Throughout this thesis, I have shown how the political significance and meaning the raised/clenched fist is carried along the trajectories through different contexts and made evident through mutual engagement and understanding towards its definition. This leads me to question the extent to which we should refer to this group as a 'community of practice' defined by Eckert (2006) as "a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor" (683).[46]

Eckert outlines two conditions for a community of practice which she describes as prerequisite to the construction of meaning: "shared experience over time and a commitment to shared understanding" (2006: 683). Participants within this community of practice engage mutually according to a "common verbal nature" (Bakhtin, 1987: 61) resulting in the development of a linguistic style that embodies their common understanding and interpretations of their practices, of themselves, and of other communities (Eckert, 2006: 683). I use the notion of 'community of practice' as a way of conceptualizing the correlation between online discursive activity and social meaning where "social meaning comes to be embedded in language" (ibid: 684) through common practices of committed community engagement.

The irony surrounding the use of the clenched/raised fist as an identifier of a community of practice of politically active individuals who mutually engage and agree upon its political significance is characterized by the reluctance of social movement participants to claim the identity label of an 'activist', thus reinforcing previous arguments on identity performances, genuine approaches to active political participation, and "what the speaker actually does in using language" (Bauman & Briggs, 1990: 78). The ambiguities of active and informed political engagement online and the subjective interpretations regarding the definition of *activism* and of an *activist* characterize the inability of elaborating participatory membership in for a 'community of practice' of activists. Instead, I focus on performative practices of politically engaged individuals such as the use of digital icons of protest to index affiliative membership. I am insisting on a 'common verbal nature' among politically engaged individuals who discursively

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[46] The difference between communities of practice and speech communities (Hymes, 1967) is that the latter is centered around individuals and their common characteristics whereas the former relates to social grouping by means of shared practice.

perform the identity of an activist and for whom processes of socialization have conditioned them to be increasingly receptive to these discursive indexes. Hence the significance of distinguishing between analytical roles of interaction, particularly in addressing issues of authority and authorship where discursive performances and animations become more visible.

# Chapter 5.

# Conclusion

In this thesis, I defined online political activism in terms of active political participation versus political passivity on social media, the former referring to informed and active engagement for the purpose of change and the latter defined as reactive behaviour to other instances of political engagement or trending current events. I argued that although there exists a relationship between the online and offline spheres, it is not the case that "protests and counter-protests have partially migrated to the digital space" (Alfano et al., 2021: 1). Instead, through exemplary processes of resemiotization and entextualization, I have proven the existence of a continuum between these two spheres. One cannot deny that the state of global health amid an ongoing pandemic coupled with the rise in digital communication technology and social networking applications have driven social interactions to take place online; however, online and offline political protests occur in spaces of different sensorial stimulation which involve various contextual elements and contrasting modes of interaction. Many movements such as BLM and #Metoo protest both online and offline and although the relationship between actions in these different spheres may not always be causal, they are not disconnected.

It is important to acknowledge that although there exists a multitude of possible manifestations of conscious and informed political expression, geo-political and socio-economic factors contribute to the hierarchization of these different approaches to activism, subsequently privileging certain communities over others. For instance, online activism, which utilizes the Internet and social networks to disseminate information quickly around the globe, is reserved to communities who have access to the Internet and to digital devices. Moreover, some communities have less access to the Internet than others and do not have the freedom to openly share their opinions or information pertaining to political events and governance. Thus, state and platform censorship are two major hinderances to digital activism and have been proven to affect communities disproportionately (Gillespie, 2018; Ashokkumar et al., 2020; Pasquale, 2015). Therefore, digital activism is a privileged approach to political engagement and humanitarian aid requiring a certain level of financial and political freedom.

This reality constructs my perspective on the ability of digital political activism in bringing about significant, progressive, offline change. I believe that digital activism, in its most active and genuine forms, must facilitate and compliment offline political organization and mobilization. Although online activism is becoming more prevalent in the digital era, it is important to continue considering the significance of offline militant initiatives and the necessity of actions in the physical world to bring about changes in the physical world, especially for communities with limited or no access to these digital technologies.

In this thesis, I questioned the extent to which the digital realm is considered as a public space where open political discussion can take place. I conclude that although an ideal public sphere may never truly exist, public freedom requires resisting the controls imposed on society by corporate governance. This is particularly relevant to the consideration of the control that social media and communication technology hold over the construction and circulation of public narratives, as well as access to "free" information (both in the sense of liberation and in capital). I outlined the advantages and limitations of social media in facilitating political activism, arguing that censorship, which is part of ideologically founded digital infrastructures, is the primary hinderance to political expression online and could even be considered a form of counter-protest and digital destruction. Moreover, I reaffirmed Gillespie's claim that (2018) "[social media platforms] do not just mediate public discourse: they constitute it" (199), and I argued how digital environments control the circulation of public narratives and influence perceptions on the world.

As the borders between the digital and physical world become increasingly blurred, we, as social media users, as social agents, as human being, are becoming more and more desensitized to images of colossal destruction and death. In the age of information where privileged communities have (almost) unrestricted access to a wide range of shared ideologies, news, digital libraries, and images and videos of both terrifying and beautiful world events, we, as a privileged society, are no longer in need of efforts to spread awareness online. Instead, political and social consciousness should be the responsibility of everyone and we, as a society, should be encouraging everyday acts of individual progression such as open processes of unlearning and relearning. This is similar to what Bruzzone (2017) calls 'socially mobilized subjectivity', where active political engagement involves daily acts of resistance against "capital, mass media

culture, and leadership structures" (48). These individual acts of resistance and rebellion also allow us to reimagine contemporary activism and dismantle the rigid and complex parts that create the social image of 'the activist'.

I adapted Goffman's participatory framework to the digital context as a means of analyzing the analytical roles that users assume in militant interactions on social media. This prompted me to tackle issues of authenticity and authorship which recall the performative dimensions of digital activism discussed in chapter 3. Issues of performative political engagement remind us of the prevalence of political passivity online and ambiguity surrounding community identification and the development of genuine action for significant progressive change. Analytical roles of interaction in the production of speech also prompt questions of the addressee which I conceptualized by examining the specific case of language selection in multilingual contexts of militant initiatives on Instagram. I found that codeswitching in written posts was rare compared to actual language practices in Lebanon. I ventured a few hypotheses that may explain the use of juxtaposed monolingual texts of English, Arabic, and French besides indexing the targeted addressee(s) and providing indications on the way users identify and are identified online.

I then conducted further discursive analysis of user Instagram profiles to reflect on how users *do* activism, *do being* an activist, and *are* activists through computer mediated discursive means such as biographies, labels, and digital icons. I discussed the entextualization of icons of protest, such as the raised/clenched fist and the phoenix, and expanded on the discussion of icons of protest as means by which processes of identification can occur by discussing how the selection of skin-tone emojis can be indicative of political and social identities. In observing trends in the skin-tone selection of emojis, I deduce that these choices may not always be representative of one's racial identity but could instead suggest how the individual is positioning themselves in relation to the struggle. Finally, I conclude by questioning the extent to which mutual understanding and engagement of the meaning behind icons of protest can point to community membership, ultimately pointing to participatory affiliation to a community of practice of politically engaged individuals with a mutual understanding of the meaning behind this semiotic material.

Despite months of data construction, conversations with family members in Lebanon, and countless hours of reading and writing, I made little progress in understanding the experiences of the Lebanese people or contributing to the fight for change. This, however, was not the goal. The objective of this thesis was to epitomize the transformations in approaches to political activism in the digital era and to call attention to processes of political participation and identification online. The intent behind using Lebanon as a case study was also to challenge the conventional perspective that Lebanon and the Lebanese people are living in the inescapable reality of the imminence of war and instead propose the possibility of common experiences and a 'common verbal nature' in unifying a divided nation, hence my evocation of the concept of 'community of practice'. My aim was to present an overview of Lebanese activists' multimodal approaches to liberation such as resisting control, reconstructing their cities, and forging solidarity among a divided nation through discursive and digitally mediated means.

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