

Social Media and Social Justice: How identifying online influences positive change in contemporary society.

Abstract:

Social media does not simply reflect social life in modern day society but constitutes it. One way we can identify online is by advocating for particular beliefs and values which align with the online community that we belong to. Advocacy, particularly online activism is a relatively new phenomenon that has had a significant effect in influencing change in contemporary society. Whilst there are many papers which argue the negative effects of social media on identity, there are hardly any which highlight its importance in personal and social development. This paper will argue that self-identifying via online activism is a way to extend our real-life values and, with the right intentions, can influence positive change in real life. Recent social and political activism shows how using hashtags, mainly on Twitter, have been effective in influencing offline action and raising awareness to ensure movements remain in public discourse.

With the rise of technology and new forms of social media, virtual communities have become a reality of everyday life, revolutionising the way we self-identify and share aspects of ourselves publicly. These virtual communities are no less real than the traditional forms of community as users still communicate with their peers and experience a sense of belonging, it simply takes a different form (Delanty, 2018). Social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, are at the forefront of virtual communities as they provide a space where people can express themselves and connect with other users that hold similar interests and views, despite distance and other physical barriers. Self-identifying via online activism is a way to extend our real-life values and, with the right intentions, can influence change in real life. Recent social and political activism shows how using hashtags, mainly on Twitter, have been effective in influencing offline action and raising awareness to ensure movements remain in public discourse. These growing platforms expose us to highly stigmatised issues in society, and whilst there are many studies that explore the negative effects this can have, there are also some which highlight the importance of it as an extension of our self-actualisation and the opportunities it affords to influence positive change.

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These studies will be discussed, with reference to the example of the #MeToo movement to support my argument that self-identification and online advocacy through the platform Twitter, influences positive change and strengthen ties in an otherwise 'thin' community.

Virtual communities offer a platform for individuals to share their thoughts, values and beliefs in a format that differs to that of a traditional community. A community, as defined by Wellman (2001, p. 227) is a "network of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity." Whilst Wellman is defining a community in general, this definition also strongly aligns with the attributes of a virtual community; one which operates in a solely virtual capacity, via the internet, as opposed to the type we would usually associate ourselves with in everyday life. Turner (2001) describes virtual communities as 'thin' in comparison to organic communities, as they do not have the strong physical ties and are often fragile in nature due to the interactions being online and sometimes with strangers. However, I argue that these communities, although defined as 'thin', offer affordances to extend our identities and strengthen connections by facilitating discussions and expressing solidarity (Simpson, 2018). Social media platforms can connect people on opposite sides of the world within milliseconds and strengthen ties that would not exist otherwise.

Social media platforms, mainly those that dominate the landscape of the contemporary internet such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter play a central role in the process of identity construction. Although it is often debated that these platforms change our identity, I argue that they emphasise it. Erving Goffman's (1959) postmodern perspective of identity is that it is fluid, fragmented and performed. Goffman's explanation of identity is that it is driven by internal contradictions; suggesting identity is "an individual's effort to act and behave in a way that influences how an audience sees him/her, usually with the intent to create, present, and maintain a favourable image in a social situation" Goffman (1959). This explanation of identity resonates in that our identities cannot be defined by any single structure and are strongly influenced by our peers, including networked publics. Twitter creates a community where our identity can be displayed and extended in an alternate format to how it is displayed in

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everyday life. I argue that this is a positive thing, as our identities are not constructed in isolation and can feed from many types of communication, including online interactions. Twitter is a tool we can use to project our inner thoughts and feelings in an alternate format to language and face-to-face interactions. Arfini et al (2021) explore the concept of identity within online communities in their research, discussing the way our identity is maintained online and the different opportunities to express ourselves. The authors explore the fact that people have the ability to deliberately choose to express certain characteristics to define themselves, consciously sharing content that associates them with topics and accounts. The ability to express ourselves in this virtual capacity is a source of self-expression and can make users feel more connected, strengthening friendships within our virtual communities.

Promoting positive behaviours and actions on social media can sometimes raise the question; does this reflect offline good intentions, or are users doing this to enhance their social standing within their virtual community (Buil, Chernatony, Wallace, 2018). I argue that promoting positive behaviours online, even if it's just promoting it, can still influence positive change by educating other networked publics. The importance of advocating online is often overlooked in reference to our collective identity building in studies and research. Our collective identity, as defined by Melucci (1996) refers to aspects of ourselves that are derived from belonging to certain groups where people can connect and identify a place for themselves within specific social categories such as gender, ethnicity and culture. Therefore, virtual communities can support us in building our collective identity by offering a platform where we can connect with each other and ourselves. To strengthen these connections, we often use online activism as a tool to build on where we stand within a contemporary virtual community (Gerbaudo, Trere 2015). The social media tool Twitter is often specifically used for online activism, and has become a huge part of how we connect to specific topics and issues around the world. Activism has become a key part of how we protest our identities online to strengthen our own beliefs and values (Gerbaudo, Trere 2015). Twitter offer is an opportunity for members to interact with each other about topical issues and educate themselves and others in the effort towards achieving change internally and externally to these communities.

Activism comes in many different forms; there have always been uprisings, revolutions and protests, but social movements and the rise of trending topics on Twitter are far more recent and considerably important for sharing information. Twitter has a low barrier for entry and is relatively safe in comparison to physical forms of activism (Simpson, 2018). The fact that these movements can involve different people from across the world of all ages and demographics is hard to overlook when discussing the value these movements bring about in influencing positive change. Twitter offers a voice to those who previously lacked a platform to speak and be heard. This concept is explored in detail in Bouvier's (2020) studies which depict the impact of hashtags such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter and how the process around these hashtags brought injustices to a much wider public view, ultimately creating pressures to make perpetrators accountable. Encouraging others to share their stories and reaching masses of people to educate them on a societal issue is invaluable in the era of social movements, resulting in countless positive outcomes.

An issue which often arises with social advocacy online is that users can fall into a trap of focusing on the performative aspects of these social movements online, such as sharing trending posts simply to maintain their social status or follow their peers rather than actually involving themselves in the root of the issue. Although this can be perceived as a shallow and ineffective, it is unlikely this is the result of malicious intentions. Getting involved in a movement because the online community that you identify with is supporting it can be beneficial for the movement in gaining traction and educating the wider community. A term that is often associated with this behaviour is 'virtue signalling', defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media." I argue that this isn't necessarily bad thing, as long as users do their best not to spread misinformation or take part in a way that would harm the groups they're advocating for. Sharing information can still educate others and we should constantly seek to engage in conversations and reflect on how we can better perform our identity in the offline world.

Popular micro blogging platform Twitter has been the catalyst for a number of social movements that are identifiable by a single hashtag. One issue that has been at the

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forefront of the media both online and otherwise is the #MeToo movement which came to light in recent years to expose the unfortunate sexual abuse of individuals from different backgrounds (Manikonda et al, 2018). Looking specifically at the #MeToo movement as an example of how online advocacy has influenced positive change and strengthened ties in online communities, this movement demonstrates that, despite background, social stance and ethnicities, people were and still are able to share their stories and advocate for justice. Manikonda et al (2018) analyse how as well as spreading awareness, Twitter has enabled individuals to share their experiences via the hashtag #MeToo and show empathy and encouragement for each other to continue the movement and make perpetrators accountable. Their research states that disclosing their abuse resulted in positive psychological impacts. Irrespective of the negativity towards different aspects of these personal experiences, the platform was positively utilised to bring about real change in the current society and strengthen ties in an online capacity.

Often, the tool Twitter is underestimated in terms of its usefulness in influencing positive change in contemporary society. Virtual communities offer certain affordances for users to self-identify online, extending their views and advocating for issues that their values align with. These virtual communities bring people together in ways that were unconceivable before the rise of social media, which has changed the fabric of our society. Activism online is an important aspect of self-identification, as it creates change that is reflected in the real world. While I agree that social media can be used to perform identities online, I also agree that an identity can be performed offline. Therefore, it is important to recognise the positive influence that self-identification and online activism contributes to strengthening ties in contemporary society.

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