

Assignment #1

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Instagram And Its' Functionalities to Facilitating Advocacy on Contemporary Social Issues

ABSTRACT:

With the growth and dependency usage of social media, there has been major shifts of how people use social media, whether that would be using it as a tool to communicate with friends and family, or using it as a tool to keep up with the current affairs going around in the world. Instagram has been a hotspot for people to be able to express their voices, opinions and thoughts on current issues. Throughout the paper, there are multiple links between the benefits of using social media platforms and being an advocate. Such as, using Instagram as a platform to facilitate important conversations in regard to basic contemporary human rights issues. Firstly, mental health stigmas are a large reason as to why people who are suffering not seeking help from a professional. Due to COVID-19 and the dependence of social media, ordinary people are using their platform to raise awareness and help flatten the stigma. Secondly, throughout history, women have been frowned upon when trying to voice about their heinous sexual assault and rape experiences. Linking Instagram feminist activist accounts and hashtag such as; #metoo; this has helped women feel empowered and confident enough to speak up about their experience. Lastly, the notion of Asian hate has been extremely prevalent in the last 12 months, using Instagram hashtags such as; #StopAsianHate, has helped aid the importance and awareness of what is going around in the United States, in regard to discriminatory acts towards Asians.

Due to social isolation in 2020, there was an increase of people relying on social media as a communication tool, interestingly enough, some users used it more as a tool to keep up to date with news and information. In recent years, social media platforms have been used as an outlet to express people's opinions, thoughts and ideas on current affairs (Croucher, Nguyen, & Rahmani, 2020). Instagram is one of the most commonly used social media sites at the moment, data analysts claim that Instagram is the fastest growing social media platform (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Instagram is a photo sharing social media platform which currently has about nine million users (Humphrey, 2016). It first started as a tool that people used to purely communicate with friends and family, in recent years, social media platforms have been used as an outlet to express people's opinions, thoughts and ideas on current issues (Croucher et al., 2020). Through the use of social influencers, hashtags and Instagram pages, these are all different aspects and examples in which Instagram has allowed its users to encourage advocacy for social change on contemporary social issues such as; mental health and the stigma around seeking help, feminist movements such as, the #metoomovement and cultural issues, specifically around Asian hate.

With the increasing use of social media, it is also becoming more widespread for people to suffer a mental health disorder. According to World Health Organisation (WHO), there has been a 13 percent rise in mental health condition in the last decade. Schooling, work performance, relationships between friends and family are some of the many reasons as to why mental health disorders is on the increase (Organisation, 2021). In history, there has been a large stigma around mental health. According to the authors, a stigma or stigmas can be defined as; *“a spoiled belief that discredits a person in society”* (Mak, Poon, Pun, & Cheung, 2007). Stigma’s represent a negative emotion, usually a prejudice view and discriminatory behavior towards a certain group or individual due to a belief that has been skewed or been taught to a group or an individual. It involves deprecating activities such as; labelling, stereotyping and discrimination towards the individual/group (Mak et al., 2007). For example; a stigma around mental health could be a person being too afraid of going to therapy because they do not want to be viewed as weak. However, in recent years, the stigma around mental health is still common, but it is being accepted more in today’s society. Digital spaces such as Instagram, have allowed and provided a safe outlet for its users to express their voices on important issues, such as; mental health issues (Feuston & Piper, 2019). A relevant case study is through a news article ‘The Rise of Mental Health Influencers.’ The article uses Divija Bhasin as an example, who is a girl that used her profile as a platform to raise awareness and help her followers who suffer from mental health disorders, later then attracted attention and gained a mass of followers, which then gave her an identity, as she now has a ‘platform’ to raise awareness and help the people who need guidance or advice in regards to mental health (Bhatt, 2020). She did this through creating short creative videos on reels that help people know how to cope with specific mental health illnesses. Another reason as to how social media allows its users to advocate on what they think is important. Recently, therapists around the world are going on Instagram to create awareness for mental health during the pandemic by also creating short videos, or reposting ‘memes’ and resource posts on their pages or similarly on their stories (Bhatt, 2020). This is a progressive form of creating an identity as traditionally speaking, mental health professionals, would not utilise social media as a means to educate people on the Internet. An example of mental health stigma and therapy being slowly accepted is using Whitney Goodman, a ‘therapy influencer,’ who is a qualified therapist. She states “I think every time I’m showing up online as a therapist as a real human, therapy becomes more normalised, because more people are showing me that they are willing to take the measures and courage to seek help” (Li, 2019). Earlier in 2021, Instagram partnered up with ‘National Eating Disorder Association in National Eating Disorder Awareness Week, they also partnered up with a small population of Instagram ‘influencers’ which used their platform create small videos on reels and pictures on their feed to influence the opportunity to open conversations about ‘perfectionism, body image and also facilitated conversations that the pictures and posts users see on the platform are not always reality (Tshinkel, 2021). We can see through the use of micro influencers, therapy influencers resorting to social

media to promote mental health issues, we can also discuss other ways of advocating other issues through; feminism movements.

Throughout the due course of history, women who have tried to speak up about their sexual allegations such as rape or sexual assault experiences have been 'punished' and received negative reactions when they speak about their experience (Ahrens, 2006). The negative reactions usually result to the victim being silenced. Being silenced in essence, *is seen as something or someone that is 'powerless'* and unfortunately, women have been seen as powerless, due to the fact that they did not have basic human rights for an extended time period. They are usually silenced to stop rape victims from talking about their experiences to the general public as this would create a negative spotlight on the attacker (Ahrens, 2006). Hence, why a large population of victims have remained silent. Multiple famous feminist scholars have articulated that *"rape serves an active function of reinforcing women's powerlessness and 'keeping women in their place'"* (Ahrens, 2006), however, more women, about two thirds, find the courage and strength to break the silence and voice their stories on social media (Ahrens, 2006). Social media and photo sharing platforms, such as Instagram, has changed the nature of what it is fundamentally created for. As stated throughout, Instagram is turning into an advocacy hotspot for contemporary issues, and that is extremely relevant to feminist movements for anything sexual assault related. Throughout the platform, there is a vast amount of information and content available in regard to feminist content, which people can engage and educate themselves with (Mahoney, 2020). Furthermore, to make it even more simple for users to access information on feminist discourse, Instagram has created hashtags and 'friendly' terms for these movements. There are a few viral hashtags that are commonly used, to name a few; #metoo (which is explicitly used by women to share their sexual harassment experiences), #timesup (which is used for sexual harassment, assault and workplace discrimination in the workplace) (Mahoney, 2020). Focusing on #metoo movement, it started in 2006 by a civil rights activist, Tarana Burke, who first used the phrase on social media to raise awareness around sexual assault. However, the phrase became 'viral' in 2017 when actress and activist Alyssa Milano, used her platform to advocate about sexual assault and if any of her followers had been affected by or related to the stories being shared they could reply to her Instagram story with a #metoo (Acquaviva, O'Neal, & Clevenger, 2021). Another way in which Instagram has facilitated conversation and awareness around female sexual assault experiences and harassment, is through the 'metoomvmt' page on Instagram. This page essentially posts about current affairs around sexual harassment amongst women around the world, relevant facts/information about sexual harassment and has story highlight tabs on 'act too,' which is a new movement, they have created and survivors tab, which outlines the survivors name and their story and experience with sexual abuse, harassment and rape (Instagram, 2021). This is a relevant example as pages like these, in this instance, the metoomvmt account allows people who are interested in feminist movements and especially women who have been affected by sexual assault or harassment to re-share on their feed or their story to raise awareness to their followers, friends and family about such issues. Through the use of activism

accounts on Instagram and hashtags, this has enabled women to feel empowered and not discriminated towards if spoken about their issue. Similarly, this ties into cultural issues and how Instagram has facilitated resources for those affected.

Racism has been around for a long period of time. However, it is appearing a lot more prevalent in the media in the last 12 months, due to the prejudice views towards Asians around the world. With the ongoing COVID global pandemic, there has been a significant increase amount of racism, discrimination and violence against Asians, particularly in the United States. There has been over 100 cases of hate crimes reported per day. Some of which that have been reported are; racial slurs, wrongful workplace termination, physical violence and extreme social distancing (Croucher et al., 2020). A way in which Instagram and its features allows its users to stand against the Asian discrimination during the outbreak is through the messages and campaigns that are being used as hashtags on hashtags or image posts. The hashtags/campaigns that are used to fight against Asian hate amid the breakout was: #IAmNotAVirus (Croucher et al., 2020). This hashtag essentially facilitated the conversation and allowed users to click on the hashtag to see all the unjust resources of how Asians are being treated during COVID-19. Another recent relevant case study is in regard to the Atlanta shooting. Earlier in March 2021, there was several different shootings taken by one extremist man, targeting directly at different Asian owned massage parlours. Eight people were confirmed dead, six of which were Asian women that were staff at massage parlours. The attack according to a US senate, *"looked really motivated, racially motivated"* (Sarah Lynch, 2021). Furthermore, this attack had led to important and large discourses on Instagram around the discrimination acts towards Asians. Using Eva Chen, she is Instagram's director of fashion partnerships, she used her platform to congregate a conference on Instagram Live, with a couple Asian ladies who work in different industries to discuss the increased unfair and unjust treatment they have seen in the last 12 months in their workplaces. Primarily, discussed the importance of stopping anti-Asian hate that is extremely widespread in the United States (Liu, 2021). Similarly, #StopAsianHate was a trending hashtag globally, in which famous celebrities such as; BTS and Kris Jenner used to promote the stopping of the hatred.

In conclusion, the increased use of social media platforms, like Instagram is not only used solely as a communication tool, in recent years, it is evident to see that platforms such as Instagram, are capable of being a place for people to shape their own identity through advocating what they deem as important, and creating opportunities for social change. The use of media 'influencers,' Instagram reels and memes are being utilised to help aid the stigma around mental health and reaching out to seek professional health from a therapist or doctor. Though the use of hashtags and certain Instagram feminist profiles, these have encouraged women and people to speak up about their experiences around sexual harassment and rape. Finally, through the use of celebrities and hashtags, this has facilitated conversations about the discrimination acts towards Asians, specifically Asians in the U.S. By celebrities utilising these functions, this has helped

create and raise awareness around the unjust acts that have occurred. To conclude, Instagram is more than just a recreational platform in today's society.

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