From the Timeline to the Streets

The Influence of Public Social Media on Street Mobilization During the Lebanese October Revolution

A Master's Thesis

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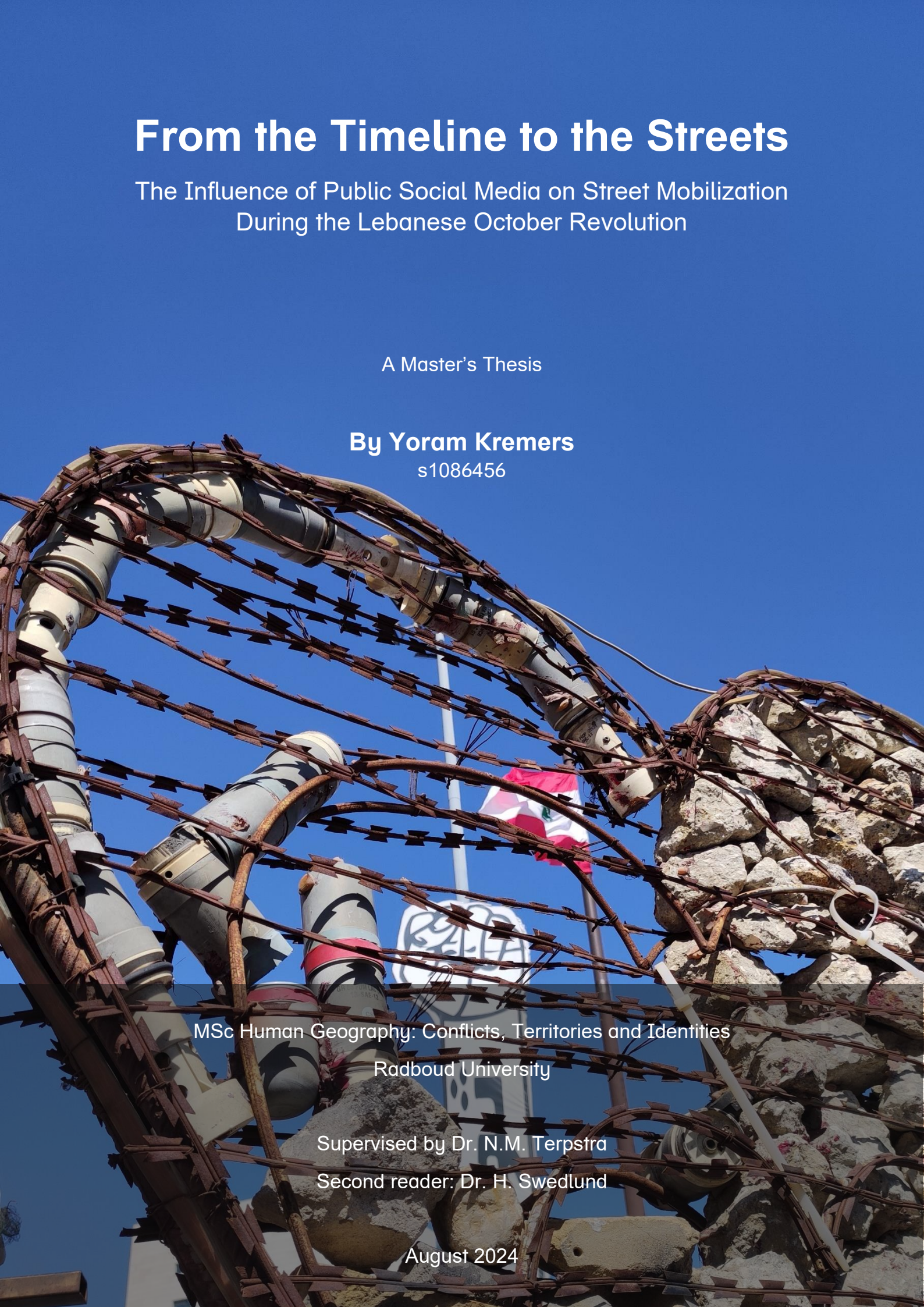

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Picture on the cover page taken by the author on Martyrs' Square in Beirut, October 2023. The image shows a heart made of scrap metal, barbed wire, rocks, and empty teargas canisters. In the background stand the so-called Fist of Dignity, the symbol of the October Revolution, and the Lebanese flag. All other pictures in this report were made by the author as well.

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Abstract

This research explores the role social media had in the development of the Lebanese October Revolution in 2019 and 2020. Initially triggered by the announcement of austerity measures, including a controversial tax on WhatsApp, this popular uprising gripped Lebanon for months, drawing hundreds of thousands of citizens to the streets nationwide in demand of systemic change. This study focuses on how participants of the October Revolution leveraged social media platforms to coordinate their actions and sway public opinion, ultimately impacting the dynamics of offline collective action. Its findings reveal that social media served as a crucial tool for those opposing the regime. Through desk research and interviews with Lebanese citizens who took part in the protests, this research demonstrates that the use of various online platforms enhanced the movement's accessibility and relatability, amplifying its popular and non-sectarian character, while also adding emotional weight to the uprising and giving the protests a more monumental feel. This not only boosted participation in street mobilizations but also sustained the continuity of the protests and the resolve of the participants, thereby shaping the revolution's trajectory.

Keywords: Lebanon, social movements, social media, framing, mobilization

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CHIATHAL ROBIN
ART OF CANCE
2020

1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century, social media has become an increasingly fundamental aspect of our society. In numerous ways, it significantly influences the way we perceive information, communicate with one another, and to a large extent, live our lives. It does so not only in times of harmony, but as the last twenty years have shown, also in times of turmoil. The most conclusive example to corroborate this point undoubtedly is the Arab Spring. As the alleged 'fourth wave of democratization' spread across North Africa and the Middle East, reports and images of the different uprisings flooded timelines worldwide while protesters used Twitter hashtags and Facebook groups to coordinate their revolt. Because of their digital prominence, the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, for example, have frequently been dubbed the 'Twitter Uprisings' or the 'Facebook Revolutions' (Shearlaw, 2016). The question is, however, to what extent the online dimension of the uprisings actually affected the course of events in the Arab world more than a decade ago. Did social media only aid the coordination of the protests, or did platforms such as Facebook and Twitter also serve as instruments of mobilization, and help move people from the timeline to the streets?

Throughout the past twelve years, this conundrum has attracted considerable scholarly attention (e.g., Arafa & Armstrong, 2016; Bruns et al., 2013; Smidi & Shahin, 2017). Moreover, it engendered a new, broader academic debate about the interplay between social media and social movements. Though this debate has gradually gotten broader and more diverse, the vast majority of the existing literature still revolves around the Arab Spring. Consequently, other recent instances of civil unrest remain largely unexplored. One of them is the Lebanese October Revolution, or the 17 October Protests as they are sometimes referred to. In terms of causes, magnitude, and movement heterogeneity – over 2 million people from all ages and social classes participated in the protests – the Lebanese case is analogous to the uprisings of the Arab Spring (Haidar, 2022). Therefore, in pursuing diversification of the research on the effects of social media on social movements, Lebanon presents an interesting and meaningful case to explore.

1.1 The October Revolution

Unlike many of its neighboring governments, the Lebanese administration managed to largely escape the brunt of the Arab Spring. Although some anti-government demonstrations took place in Lebanon throughout 2011 and 2012, these pale in comparison to what was happening, for example, in bordering Syria at the time and failed to effectively challenge the status quo. However, approximately eight years later, came what some refer to as the 'Second Arab Spring'. Once again, civil unrest pervaded the MENA region, with massive protests happening in countries like Morocco, Sudan, and Iraq. This time, Lebanon's regime, perhaps inevitably, failed to dodge the revolutionary bullet.

Problems for the Lebanese government began on 17 October 2019, when it proposed a new set of austerity measures, including a VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) tax that would charge its citizens for using online call services (Al Jazeera, 2019). Immediately after the announcement of this ostensibly trivial 'WhatsApp tax', dozens of people took to the streets in downtown Beirut, the heart of the country's capital, to express their discontent with the proposed measure (France 24, 2019). Confounded by the protests, the government quickly decided to revoke the tax only a few hours later (Al Jazeera, 2019). However, the damage had already been done; the October Revolution, or *thawra* in Lebanese, was born.

Despite the government's hasty cancellation of the measure, in the days following the legislative miscalculation, protests proliferated across the country. Throughout the whole of Lebanon, from Beirut to Baalbek and from Tripoli to Tyre, streets and squares filled up with people covered in red, white, and green, proudly and cheerfully waving the cedar flag (Al Jazeera, 2019). As crowds grew larger day by day, it became increasingly clear that the protests were about much more than the announced austerity measures. In fact, it seemed the proposed WhatsApp tax was no more than the straw that broke the camel's back. For many Lebanese, the tax was indicative of the regime's incessant economic mismanagement and the clientelist structures this dereliction was rooted in (Frakes, 2019). Accordingly, the protesters demanded sweeping financial and constitutional reforms. Embodied in the slogan

killon yaane killon (all of them means all of them), their goal was not only to overthrow the incumbent government, but to overthrow the complete system and end Lebanon's sectarian rule – which they believed was the root cause of their country's adversity (Frakes, 2019).

For months, Lebanon's public spaces were adorned with the country's national colors. However, by the spring of 2020, as discord among the protesters kept on growing, the uprising began to wane (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2021). To make matters worse, Lebanon was hit by a succession of acute crises, hastening the decline: a further collapse of the Lebanese lira; the COVID-19 pandemic; and finally, the devastating explosion in the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020 (Makdisi, 2021). As a result, after months of non-stop protests, by the time a modest group of demonstrators celebrated the first anniversary of the revolution on Beirut's Martyrs' Square – which had constantly been at the heart of the movement – it appeared the uprising had largely drawn to a close (Al Jazeera, 2020). Some claim the *thawra* is still ongoing, arguing that the contentious processes instigated by the uprising continue to evolve (Khatib, 2022). Nevertheless, the days of quotidian street mobilization are clearly over. And so, although the spirit of *killon yaane killon* might continue to live on, the 'real' October Revolution really seems to be a ghost from the past.

1.2 Societal relevance

Social movements are complex phenomena. They exist in various shapes and sizes and in all different contexts. Hence, when trying to understand the interplay between social movements and social media – an intricate concept as well – one cannot rely on a single case, or a small number of interconnected cases: the Arab Spring. Accordingly, diversification of the research is necessary in order to get a greater idea of what the relation between social movements and social media exactly looks like. Lebanon's uprising serves as an ideal starting point for further diversifying the literature on the online dimension of social movements. It presents a unique case that deviates from the Arab Spring, for example

temporally, yet, as mentioned before, it also shares significant similarities with the uprisings of the Arab Spring. This makes it easier to draw theoretical parallels, supporting the development of a more robust theory, which is particularly useful given the fact that the literature on social media and social movements is still rather confined.

It is crucial to better understand the interplay between social movements and social media in order to fathom how contemporary movements communicate. Over the past few decades, scholars have increasingly recognized that communication constitutes a crucial component of social movements. Some, like Obregón and Tufte (2017), even argue that it is at the very core of their existence. Following that reasoning, in order to apprehend how social movements emerge, operate, and what determines their success – the core queries of social movement theory – it is vital to gain a better understanding of their communicative dimension. While in the past, social movements relied on more traditional forms of communication such as public gatherings, the distribution of printed materials, and mass media coverage, movements now have online communication means at their disposal (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014). Hence, when trying to fathom the communicative dynamics of contemporary social movements in the digital world of today, the role of social media cannot be ignored.

Fortunately, over the last few decades, the role of online communication technologies has attracted an increasing amount of academic and public interest (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). Most attention has been directed to the influence of social media on instances of civil unrest, where social movements engage in what Khatib (2022) calls ‘street mobilization’ – as opposed to other forms of social protests such as lobbying, petitions, or boycotts. Considerable focus has been placed on the Arab Spring – the Egyptian revolution in particular (e.g., Arafa & Armstrong, 2016; Bruns et al., 2013; Smidi & Shahin, 2017). While they certainly received the most attention, the Middle Eastern uprisings of the early 2010s are not the sole cases of protest that have been mentioned in this debate. Though to a much lesser extent, instances like the predominantly American Occupy initiative and the Spanish

Indignados movement, which proceeded around the same time, also managed to attract (mostly academic) attention (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016).

Due to the scholarly and popular attention the role of social media in protest has received in the past years (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012; Milan, 2015), it is now an orthodoxy that social media platforms have at least some influence on social movement street mobilization. In fact, the evidence is omnipresent. When the Arab Spring hit Syria in the spring of 2011, for example, 'Facebook' suddenly became the country's third most popular Google search – after being absent from the top ten most popular queries in the years before (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Meanwhile, on Twitter, the hashtags #jan25 and #feb14, used by social movement participants to communicate and coordinate their demonstrations, were among the most popular hashtags in Egypt and Bahrain, respectively (Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015). In other words, it is obvious that contemporary social movements employ online platforms to organize offline protest efforts. As a participant of the Egyptian Revolution put it: "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world." (Shearlaw, 2016). What is less clear, however, is how powerful these platforms really are; whether they merely 'guide' offline participation or also have the ability to effectively cultivate mobilization.

It is vital to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of this matter. If platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are indeed as influential as authors like Shirky (2011) claim them to be, it means they constitute crucial political, and possibly even revolutionary, tools that can be instrumentalized both by social movements as well as by the actors they oppose to foment social change (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). Consequently, fathoming the potential powers of social media is pivotal for interpreting future instances of social movement street mobilization. For academics, but also for activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), policymakers, and even technology companies.

For activists, an increased understanding of the dynamics of social media can provide useful insights into the mechanisms of online engagement, enabling them to create a more

effective digital strategy. At the same time, it also helps them better understand the forces that drive offline movement participation. This can help them bridge the gap between digital activism, or what Milan (2015) calls *cloud protesting*, and street mobilization, and maximize the impact their movement has on the ground. For NGOs, having a clearer sense of the interplay between social media and street mobilization can support their advocacy efforts and help them raise awareness on the importance of a healthy online civic space. Regarding policymakers, a better understanding of the role of social media in protests can help them monitor public sentiment, respond to 'crises', and adapt additional policies – regardless of whether this leaves a positive or negative impression. Lastly, for social media companies, or technology corporations otherwise engaged in matters of online communication, a better understanding of the impact their platforms have on contemporary protest can help them advance a more ethical business approach, stimulating corporate social responsibility. After all, regardless of how consequential their impact precisely is, they willingly or unwillingly play a key role in this issue.

1.3 Scientific relevance

In recent years, various scholars (e.g. Castells, 2012; Gladwell, 2010) have attempted to grasp the impact social media has on our society. Within this discussion, roughly two opposing approaches or 'schools' have emerged: the *techno-optimists* and the *techno-pessimists* (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). The two schools have very different ideas about the revolutionary abilities social media platforms, and online communication technologies in general, possess. While techno-optimists believe public social media have the potential to induce real social change, techno-pessimists believe they "do little to fundamentally transform the way that human beings relate to each other in the real world" (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016, p. 788). Against this background, turning to the impact social media has on the mobilizing efforts of social movements, techno-optimists like Castells (2012) suppose that platforms like Facebook and Twitter help galvanize offline collective action; cyber activism

leads street activism (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). Meanwhile, techno-pessimists like Gladwell (2010) argue that the networks social media produce are very different from the ones that exist among participants of what they call high-risk activism. As such, they do not believe cyber activism, or *slacktivism* as they refer to it, substantially influences street mobilization. In the words of Gladwell (2010) himself: “The revolution won’t be tweeted.”

Both approaches have been subject to criticism. On one hand, techno-pessimists are often blamed for underestimating the novelty of modern-day communication technologies, for overstating the destructive potential of social media, and for denying the agency of its users (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). On the other hand, techno-optimists are often criticized for making groundless predictions, and for overstating the impact of online communication on our society by underestimating the ability of existing structures to adapt to these technologies (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). In light of these criticisms, instead of following either of the opposing schools, this research departs from what Kidd and McIntosh (2016) call the *techno-ambivalence* perspective. This approach draws on insights from both techno-optimism and techno-pessimism; it acknowledges the unique and innovative features of social media and the possibilities they give rise to, while also taking into account the limitations these features entail. Accordingly, the goal of this study is not necessarily to test the claims made by either one of the sides – there is no clear right and wrong – but to explore the middle ground, hoping to reconcile the polarized debate and encourage the development of a more nuanced and robust theory.

That being the case, this study aims to contribute to the endeavors of authors like Gerbaudo (2012) who, in his book *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, also employs a techno-ambivalent approach, discussing not only the Arab Spring but also the Indignado protests and the Occupy movement. This research attempts to enhance his efforts by focusing on a different, more recent, case of civil unrest. Additionally, given that his work was published over a decade ago, this study extends Gerbaudo’s work by examining the current state of social media and taking into account the platforms and

features that did not yet exist or play a significant role at the time of his writing. Instagram is a case in point. When the Arab Spring and the Occupy protests unfolded in 2012, the platform was still in its infancy. Therefore, Instagram did not play a meaningful part in the development of these events. However, in the meantime, the platform has grown to become one of the most popular public social media platforms worldwide, playing a significant role in contemporary activism, as evidenced by its prominence in the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement (Kemp, 2023; Wellman, 2022).

Yet, the aim of this study is not only to advance the academic discussion by exploring a different, more recent case of movement mobilization, it also wishes to augment the debate by using an 'alternative' methodology. The vast majority of the existing literature not only converges around the same cases, notably the Arab Spring, but also employs similar research methods. As Smidi and Shahin (2017) point out, the majority of the (case) studies examining the influence of social media on offline social movement participation rely on quantitative data. This overrepresentation of quantitative analyses is problematic. While they have shown to be rather effective in confirming there is *a* relation between social media and recent instances of civil unrest, they are far less successful in explaining what this relation precisely looks like. Resultantly, as Gerbaudo (2012) notes, the *how* question has so far been remarkably disregarded. Yet, it is this question, which concentrates on the fundamental effects of social media on offline participation, that is vital for furthering our understanding of the communicative dimension of contemporary social movements. On that account, this study employs a qualitative research design.

In addition to the quantitative overrepresentation, Smidi and Shahin (2017) note that most studies express a rather introspective stance and fail to consider broader sociological or communication theories when analyzing their results. However, as they argue, taking these theories into account is crucial to be able to situate one's research and truly make a meaningful contribution to the broader academic debate (Smidi & Shahin, 2017). Hence, in order to enhance its qualitative analysis, this study elaborately reviews the various pertinent

academic debates, discussing notions such as Benford and Snow's (2000) collective action frames, and linking these to the empirical results. This allows for more exhaustive conclusions to be drawn.

1.4 Research objective and structure

In an attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the previously discussed debate on the interplay between social media and offline social movement participation, this research aims to fathom the impact online platforms had on street mobilization during the Lebanese October Revolution. To advance the scholarly discussion, this study aims to look beyond the coordinative functions of online platforms during this period of civil unrest. It also seeks to examine how social media was used to frame the uprising and the effects this had on offline movement participation. Ultimately, its goal is to understand whether the utilization of social media fostered offline movement participation in the context of the October Revolution. However, in order to avoid adopting an excessively narrow approach and to remain mindful of other ways in which social media potentially affected offline mobilization during the 17 October Protests, the main research question this study revolves around is phrased more holistically, that is:

> *How did the use of social media platforms by participants of the Lebanese October Revolution influence the dynamics of street mobilization during the uprising in 2019 and 2020?*

As noted earlier, views differ on when the October Revolution precisely concluded, or whether it has ended at all (Haidar, 2022). However, in regard to actual street mobilization – which concerns the focus of this research – the height of the revolution is clearly in the past.

In fact, many hold that the peak of the uprising already occurred in the initial weeks of the uprising (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2021). This might suggest that the initial weeks of the protests present the ideal period for this study to concentrate on. However, as Smidi and Shanin (2017) argue, the complexity and momentousness of events such as the Arab Spring, or in this case the October Revolution, ask for an approach that emphasizes how social movement dynamics evolve over time. For that reason, it has been decided to focus on a more extended period of time, taking both the early days and the 'last' phase of the protests into consideration.

As the main research question underlines, this study employs a rather open perspective not only temporally, but also in terms of the platforms it wishes to examine. It focuses not just on one platform, like Facebook, but takes multiple platforms into consideration. The deliberate choice not to focus on a single social media platform relies on the heterogeneity of the contemporary social media landscape. Unlike the past dominance of platforms like MySpace and Facebook, today's landscape is much more fragmented, with numerous platforms each serving unique purposes and operating in distinct ways (Tandoc et al., 2018). In-depth analyses of these platforms are crucial for understanding the unique mechanisms each platform comprises and the influence these have on their audiences. However, to be able to make legitimate claims about the wider influence of social media on our society – which is what this research aims to do – one cannot hinge on only one platform but must consider the broader perspective. Doing so not only enables one to see and compare the various dynamics the different platforms incorporate, but also to observe how they interact with one another, potentially leading to unique insights.

As previously noted, this study approaches its central research question with a qualitative methodology. It starts by examining the existing body of literature pertinent to this research, trying to uncover and elaborate on the theories and notions central to this study. This theoretical analysis is followed by the collection of empirical data, which is gathered through a combination of desk research and, most significantly, one-on-one interviews with

individuals who participated in the 17 October Protests. To guide the collection and the analysis of this empirical data, a set of three sub-questions has been formulated. These sub-questions, collectively answering the main question this study seeks to elucidate, are as follows:

What does Lebanon's contemporary social media landscape look like, and how did this shape the potential influence social media had on the October Revolution?

How did the coordinative use of social media by participants of the October Revolution affect offline movement participation in the uprising in 2019 and 2020?

How did the communicative use of social media by participants of the October Revolution affect offline movement participation in the uprising in 2019 and 2020?

The purpose of the first question is to lay the groundwork and establish the contextual framework necessary for addressing sub-questions two and three. It examines Lebanon's digital environment, particularly focusing on its social media landscape, aiming to determine the significance of online communication in Lebanese society and forecast the potential role social media played during the uprising. Thereupon, the second and third sub-questions assess how social media was effectively deployed by protesters during the October Revolution, combinedly addressing the overarching question this study reviews. The second question zooms in on the coordinative functions social media had during the uprising. While previous research (e.g. Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) has already emphasized these functions, it remains valuable to explore how they manifested specifically within the context of the 17 October Protests and, more importantly, how they effectively impacted offline actions – an issue often overlooked in these prior analyses. Finally, the third sub-question concentrates on the communicative use of social media during the revolution, assessing how protesters employed social media to influence public opinion and how this

affected mobilization. This question is pivotal because it tackles the primary issue that is central to this research, which has been largely omitted in the existing literature.

Moving forward, the next chapter of this report discusses the theoretical framework within which this study is situated. In this chapter, through an extensive reflection of the current academic debate, theories and concepts pertinent to this study are identified and critically examined. Building upon this discussion, additionally, the chapter introduces the conceptual framework on which this research is based. Following this, Chapter 3 outlines the methodology adopted in this study, detailing this thesis' methodological approach, the research methods employed, and any associated limitations. The subsequent three chapters discuss the findings of this research, with each one addressing one of the aforementioned sub-questions. Following this analysis, Chapter 7 summarizes this study's main results and revisits the central research question this research revolves around. It also expands on these conclusions by situating them within the scholarly debate introduced in Chapter 2, and exploring their implications for future research.


WOW
BeiRuT
20xx
YOUNG..
WiLD..
& FREE...
HAPPY REVOLUTION!

2. Theoretical framework

The academic debate concerning the influence of social media on social movements essentially incorporates three larger academic discussions. The first concerns the notion of collective action, expounding on what factors drive individuals to act collaboratively. The second relates to the proximate concept of social movements – a discussion that builds upon the notion of collective action and discusses how movements form and how they foment mobilization. Finally, the third discussion involves the influence of online communication technologies on social interactions and collective action in particular. Considering this academic interconnectedness, this particular study draws upon insights and concepts from all three of these discussions. The following paragraphs examine the key theories and ideas from each discussion that are relevant to this research, moving toward the conceptual framework on which this study is based.

2.1 Collective action problem

As is discussed in more detail later, every social movement is a form of collective action. Therefore, the notion of collective action essentially lies at the very core of this study. Due to this centrality, the concept marks the perfect starting point for an anatomy of the theoretical framework on which this research is based. The concept of collective action, or collective behavior – in the past, some scholars treated these notions as intrinsically different concepts, but in current literature they are generally used interchangeably – constitutes a long-standing topic of interest in a variety of academic disciplines, ranging from sociology and psychology to economics and political science (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). For many years, academics have sought to unravel the motivations that drive individuals to act collectively toward a common goal. While the philosophical roots of the notion can be traced back to scholars like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, the origins of the contemporary debate on collective action

are conventionally ascribed to the work of American economist Mancur Olson, as he was the first to explicitly and elaborately theorize the concept (DeMarrais & Earle, 2017).

In his seminal book *The Logic of Collective Action*, published in 1965, Olson discusses the determinants of collective behavior: how and why individuals decide to form a group in order to pursue shared interests (DeMarrais & Earle, 2017). Olson argued that instead of people naturally cooperating – the prevalent presumption at the time – they typically refrain from contributing to a collective good as they act out of self-interest (Klandermans, 2004). This is what has become known as the *collective action problem*; a notion that remains a central topic in the present-day academic debate (Ostrom, 2000). Nevertheless, the question is: to what extent does Olson's argument truly advance our understanding of the drivers of group behavior? While the collective action problem successfully underscores that collective behavior does not occur spontaneously and emphasizes the importance of individual rationality in joint action, it provides little insight into how collective action can be initiated (Klandermans, 2004). Olson primarily focuses on the factors that hinder collective behavior and strategies to overcome them but hardly explores the conditions that enable collective action in the first place.

Since Olson reinvigorated the academic debate with the publication of *The Logic of Collective Action,* countless scholars from a variety of disciplines have sought to address this 'knowledge gap' and identify the drivers of collective behavior (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Resultantly, collective action theory, along with related discussions such as the one on social movements, has grown into one of the most comprehensive and multifaceted debates in social science. Initially, scholars mainly focused on structural explanations for collective action, as it was perceived as a response to an objective state of disadvantage (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). However, in the last couple of decades, the academic debate has shifted towards a more constructivist understanding of the notion. A growing number of scholars have demonstrated that while objective conditions should not be ignored in discussions of group behavior, they do not inevitably lead to collective action (Van Zomeren

et al., 2008). Instead, as these scholars (e.g. Drury & Reicher, 2000; Klandermans, 2004; Postmes & Spears, 1998) argue, we must look at how individuals perceive these structural adversities. Because, as clearly articulated by Zomeren et al. (2008), “people respond to a subjective sense of disadvantage, which can (to some extent) appear to deviate from, and hence not necessarily flow from, the ‘objective’ physical conditions” (p. 505).

2.2 Social identity model of collective action

Since this sociopsychological paradigm shift, three presumed drivers of collective action have received the most scholarly attention: perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and a sense of identity (Klandermans, 2004). Each of these constructs more or less represents a specific theory or school of thought within the sociopsychological framework on collective action. The notion of injustice, for instance, primarily pertains to *relative deprivation theory* (RDT), which posits that subjective experiences of inequality are the main driver for collective action (Smith et al., 2012). The concept of efficacy, on the other hand, corresponds with propositions grounded in *rational choice theory* (RCT), such as the group efficacy model proposed by Mummendey et al. (1999), which argues that collective action can occur only if people believe it will be successful. Finally, the construct of identity relates to *social identity theory* (SIT), a culturalist approach to the notion of collective action that supposes that collective action arises from the desire of people to maintain a positive social identity and to enhance the status or welfare of the group they identify with (Kawakami & Dion, 1995).

Initially, the three constructs and their respective theoretical foundations were commonly regarded as distinct and sometimes even conflicting explanations for the causes of collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Fortunately, in recent years, attempts at theoretical integration have become more common, proving that the different approaches actually share significant overlap and thus all provide a meaningful contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). One of the

most exhaustive and successful attempts at theoretical integration of the previous decades, and thus one of the most influential advancements in contemporary collective action theory, is the *social identity model of collective action* (SIMCA) by Van Zomeren et al. (2008). SIMCA integrates all aforementioned drivers into a single framework, as illustrated in Figure 1 below, and derives several compelling conclusions.

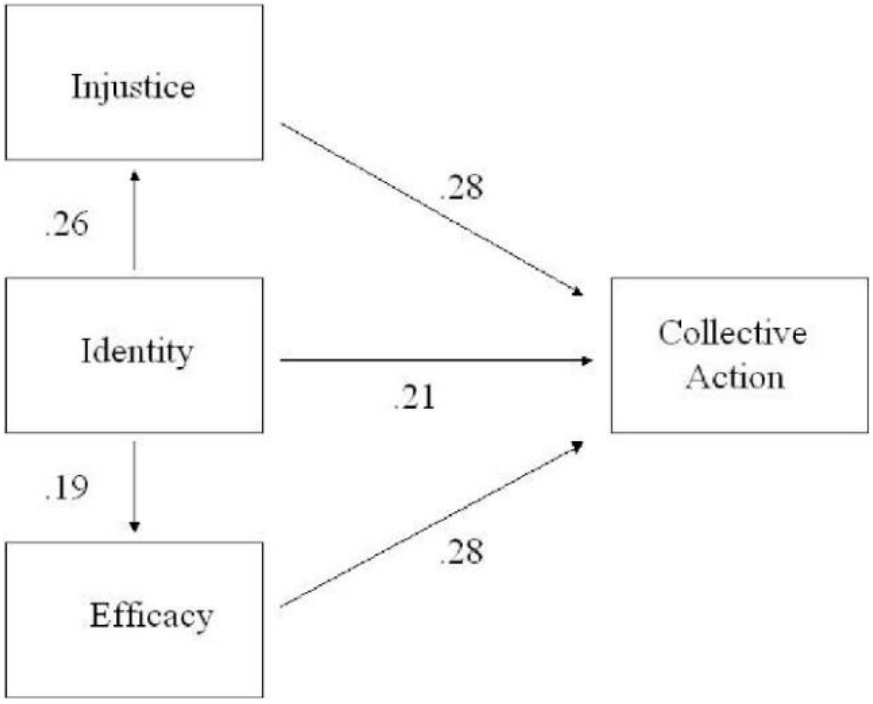

Figure 1. The social identity model of collective action (SIMCA). From "Toward an integrative social identity model of collective action: A quantitative research synthesis of three socio-psychological perspectives", by M. Van Zomeren, T. Postmes and R. Spear, 2008, p. 521

First and foremost, the renowned model by Van Zomeren et al. (2008) confirms that injustice, efficacy, and identity each have a (nearly equal) causal effect on collective action. Therefore, it proves that instead of deploying one particular notion to discuss collective behavior mechanisms, all three constructs need to be reckoned with. In addition, SIMCA underlines the findings of prior integrative analyses (e.g. Drury & Reicher, 2000; Kawakami & Dion, 1995), affirming that the aforementioned concepts not only affect collective action but also demonstrate interdependence, again stressing the need for an overarching approach

(Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Within this interdependence, Van Zomeren et al. (2008) identify the concept of identity to be the connecting construct, bridging the injustice and efficacy explanations of collective action. Moreover, identity is also considered the strongest factor, as it predicts collective action against both incidental and structural disadvantages, while injustice and efficacy primarily correspond with incidental disadvantages (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Finally, the analysis of Van Zomeren et al. (2008) shows that so-called affective injustice presents a more influential factor than non-affective injustice, just as politicized identities are more strongly bound up with collective action than non-politicized identities.

SIMCA convincingly outlines the factors that enable collective behavior to occur – although Van Zomeren et al. (2008) emphasize that this process depends heavily on the social context in which these sociopsychological determinants are situated. However, while the theory of Van Zomeren et al. (2008) successfully ascertains the drivers of collective action, it does not elucidate what is needed for these drivers to translate into real action. This is where the notion of framing comes into play. Perceived injustice, perceived efficacy, and a sense of identity do not automatically lead to mobilization. For collective action to occur, these sentiments must be leveraged, or framed – for instance by a social movement (Steinberg, 1998). The concept of framing has garnered considerable academic attention in the proximate field of social movement studies over the past few decades. The next sections delve further into this notion, after expounding how the broader scholarly debate on social movements has evolved over the years.

2.3 Defining social movements

Before zooming in on the framing perspective in social movement studies, it is imperative to establish a precise definition of what constitutes a social movement. Similar to the notion of collective action, within the academic discourse, social movements have been subject to numerous definitions and interpretations. It is generally accepted that social movements are

a form of collective action (Diani, 1992). Yet, what exactly defines social movements and what features separate them from other forms of collective action remains somewhat ambiguous. Nevertheless, reviewing the vast body of existing literature, roughly four additional properties can be identified: reformative goals or claims; extra- or non-institutional activity; a certain degree of organization; and some degree of temporal continuity (Snow et al., 2004). In light of these recurring features, Snow et al. (2004) accurately define social movements as "collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority . . . in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part" (p. 11).

This definition effectively covers most, if not all, of the fundamental aspects of social movements. Yet, a majority of the social movement scholars would probably contend it is too inclusive. In their conceptualization, Snow et al. (2004) purposely avoid specifying what type of extant authority social movements target. However, many other authors like McAdam (1996), argue that social movements are a type of collective action exclusively targeting political actors, perceiving them as a form of contentious politics. In addition, some academics, such as Tilly and Tarrow (2015) even take it a step further, alleging the need to separate social movements from other manifestations of political contention such as ethnic or religious conflicts, civil wars, and revolutions. While this research follows the supposition that in general, social movements are a form of contentious politics, it does not view them as categorically distinct from other forms of contentious political action. Differentiating between various forms of contentious politics might be considered useful in the sense that it underlines that social movements are not the sole manifestation of contentious politics. However, at the same time, it implies – perhaps unintentionally – that different forms of political contention are mutually exclusive.

Particularly in recent years, this proposition has proven problematic, especially when it comes to delineating social movements and revolutions. As Goldstone and Ritter (2018)

point out, since the 1990s, “the line between social movements and revolutions has blurred, both in theory and in recent events” (p. 683). It has become increasingly clear that the two phenomena share significant overlap, especially when considering how social movements have the ability to evolve into revolutionary movements aimed at regime change – Lebanon being a case in point (Goldstone & Ritter 2018). Therefore, although this study acknowledges that social movements and revolutions are not interchangeable concepts, it does view them as closely interconnected and, in some ways, analogous phenomena. Besides the issue of social movements and revolutions, however, this particular study is not so much interested in how social movements can or should be defined; it is not concerned with whether or not the Lebanese October Revolution can be considered a social movement. Instead, this research focuses on understanding how movements operate and the discursive strategies they employ.

2.4 Resources and opportunities

The communicative dimension of social movements was long neglected in the academic discourse. It was not until the late twentieth century that the first real framing theories started to emerge (McAdam et al., 1996). Yet, the field of social movement studies already emerged as a concrete academic discipline at the beginning of the second half of the previous century – in unison with the reinvigoration of the debate on collective action (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). For a long time, the field was dominated by two ‘grand theories’: *the resource mobilization theory* (RMT) and the *political process theory* (PPT) (Jasper, 2011). While this study primarily draws on insights from the framing perspective in movement studies, it also incorporates discussions from RMT and PPT. Therefore, before delving into the discursive aspects of social movements, this report first provides a brief exposition of these two perspectives.

RMT emerged in the 1970s, and it is often regarded as the first approach to challenge the emotional explanations of the late nineteenth, and early twentieth century (Jasper, 2011). Instead of regarding political contention as an irrational response to grievances, advocates of RMT, such as McCarthy (1996), view contentious politics as rational phenomena, highlighting the agency and the organization present in social movements. Therefrom, RMT theorists fundamentally perceive movements as *social movement organizations* (SMOs), led by "political entrepreneurs who mobilized resources . . . in response to incentives, risks, and opportunities" (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004, p. 173). Resources, in this context, include factors like money, time, technologies, and expertise (Klandermans, 2004). According to RMT scholars, efficacious mobilization of such resources is central to the success of social movements. Nevertheless, although RMT offers compelling insights into the internal dynamics of social movements, it pays limited attention to their external context (Klandermans, 2004). Accordingly, it largely leaves unexplored the interaction between movements and the environment in which they operate. This omission prompted movement scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century to seek additional explanations, catalyzing the development of political process theory.

Political process theory, or the political opportunities perspective as it is sometimes referred to, posits that social movement mobilization is guided by changes in the political environment movements abide in, such as policy alterations, openings within political institutions, or changes in public opinion (McAdam, 1996). In other words, PPT contends that without favorable external conditions, social movement cannot succeed. Due to its institutional approach – as opposed to the actor-centered framework employed by RMT – PPT was initially treated as incongruous with the mobilizing structures perspective (McAdam et al., 1996). However, as the body of research on both perspectives expanded, an increasing amount of scholars (e.g. McAdam, 1996; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Zald, 2000) found that the two approaches are actually rather complementary. As a result, RMT and PPT gradually coalesced into a single inclusive framework that still holds a prominent position in

the contemporary academic debate (Jasper, 2010). However, while it remains a widely held belief that social movements require both political opportunities and sufficient resources to mobilize, insights from the collective action literature have proven that these structural factors by themselves are not enough to spur mobilization (McAdam et al., 1996).

2.5 Framing

As previously noted, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, emotions played an important role in discussions of collective behavior and, by extension, in social movement research (Goodwin et al., 2000). However, from the moment the first 'real' social movement theory emerged – resource mobilization theory – the grievances argument was largely abandoned (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Nevertheless, in recent decades, scholars such as Drury & Reicher (2000), Klandermans (2004), Postmes and Spears (1998), and notably Van Zomeren et al. (2008), have led a resurgence of emotional explanations in the study of social movements. In fact, many contemporary scholars agree that emotions serve as the crucial link between the aforementioned political and economic incentives and actual mobilization. As McAdam et al. (1996) put it,

> "At a minimum, people need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem. Lacking either . . . it is highly unlikely that people will mobilize even when afforded the opportunity to do so" (p. 5).

This rediscovery of emotions has sparked what some describe as a cognitive turn in social movement studies (Jasper, 2011). In addition to reacknowledging the importance of emotions in themselves in regard to movement mobilization, scholars have also come to recognize the significance of cognitive mechanisms at play in the dynamics of collective action (McAdam, 2000). However, that does not mean the previously discussed combined RMT and PPT framework has been completely abandoned. While arguments focusing on

concepts such as culture and identity have to some extent replaced the political and economic explanations of the past century, many scholars also emphasize how cognitive processes – such as perception, interpretation, and reasoning – present a valuable addition to the structural understandings of movement mobilization (Buechler, 1995; Zald, 1996).

This renewed focus on sociopsychological processes also brought attention to their emergence and how they can be influenced. As such, the cognitive turn in movement literature also catalyzed a discursive shift in academic debate (Steinberg, 1998). Resultantly, an increasing number of scholars have come to understand social movements as "signifying agents, actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613). This process of meaning production and maintenance is known as framing, which has established itself as one of the central notions within contemporary movement literature (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). The notion of framing first appeared in social movement theory through the efforts of Gamson et al. (1978), who used it to describe how individuals interpret and respond to authority figures, defining frames as "interpretative packages" centered around an organizing idea. Yet, it was not until the work of Snow et al. (1986), who further developed the concept with their theory on frame alignment processes, that the notion truly gained prominence in social movement studies. Since then, the role of framing in discussions of collective action has expanded significantly, engendering a broad and diverse collection of concepts and theories. As a result, framing perspective in social movements now embodies a comprehensive framework, as illustrated in Figure 2, encompassing a wide array of factors and relations (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013).

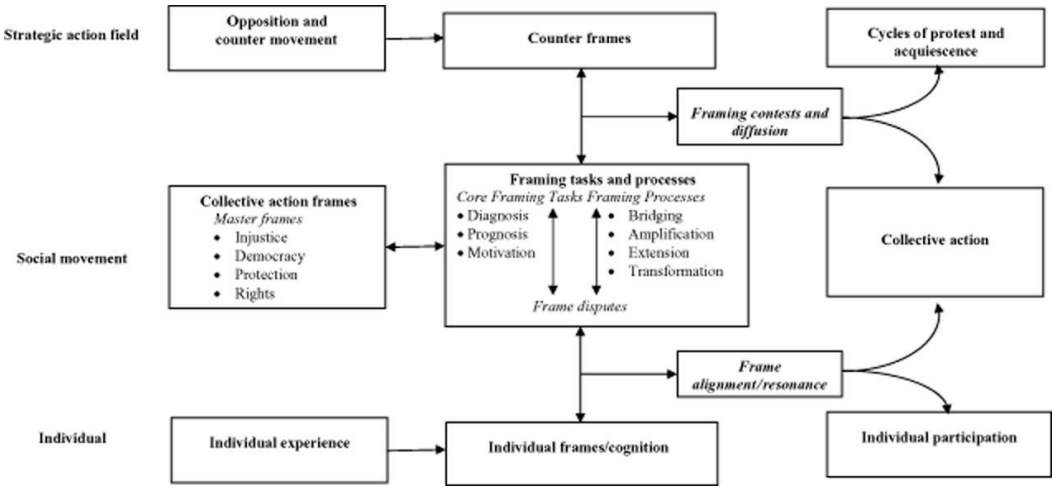

Figure 1. Framing Processes. From "Social Movement Theory, Collective Action Frames and Union Theory: A Critique and Extension", by P. Gahan and A. Pekarek, 2013, British Journal of Industrial Relations, p. 759.

One of the central notions within the complex web of framing dynamics is what is typically referred to as *collective action frames* (CAFs), which are considered to be the resultant product of framing activity (Benford & Snow, 2000). Snow et al. (2018) describe CAFs as "sets of action-oriented beliefs and meanings that legitimize and inspire social movement campaigns and activities" (p. 396). Therefore, CAFs are perceived as the mechanisms that instrumentalize and synergize the sociopsychological, and structural political and economic factors needed for mobilization to occur (McAdam et al., 1996). According to Snow et al. (2018), they do so through two discursive processes: *frame articulation* and *frame elaboration*. Frame articulation is the process of connecting and coordinating events, experiences, and ideological strands in order to create "a kind of collective packaging device that assembles and collates slices of appropriated, observed, experienced, and/or recorded 'reality'" (Snow et al., 2018, p. 397). Conversely, frame elaboration concerns accenting and highlighting particular issues over others with the goal of relegating certain topics to the background (Snow et al., 2018).

The combination of these framing processes serves three main purposes, referred to by Benford and Snow (2000) as framing tasks: *diagnostic framing, prognostic framing,* and *motivational framing.* The first two help create a particular collective interpretation of reality;

diagnostic framing aims to identify a specific social problem to which prognostic framing proposes a solution (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). This is what Benford and Snow (2000) call consensus mobilization (p. 615). Motivational framing, on the other hand, focuses on action mobilization, as it is specifically aimed at fostering and sustaining ‘real’ collective action (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615). While all three framing tasks are relevant to the central query this research revolves around, the concept of motivational framing is of particular interest to this study. After all, this is the mechanism focused on getting people from behind their screens and onto the barricades.

According to Benford and Snow (2000), this process primarily relies on the construction of so-called *vocabularies of motive*. These 'rationales', as they could be described, are intended to motivate individuals to take action by addressing concerns such as overcoming fear of associated risks in collective action and addressing the free-rider problem in Olson’s collective action problem (Ostrom, 2000; Snow et al., 2018). The appeal to or the use of emotions seems to play a crucial role in the construction of vocabularies of motive – and in framing overall (Snow et al., 2018). As posed by Benford and Snow (2000), there a four types of vocabularies of motive: vocabularies of severity, urgency, efficacy, and propriety. These vocabularies respectively accent “the severity of the problem, the urgency of taking action now rather than later, the probable efficacy of joining others in the cause, and the moral priority of doing so” (Snow et al. 2018, p. 397). While the objectives of the four vocabularies of motives are evident, the process of their construction remains rather unclear. What is even more ambiguous is the impact social media has on this construction. This presents an interesting link for this study to consider. In order to be able to accurately conduct such an analysis, it is imperative to first explore the wider existing literature on the relation between social media and social movements.

2.6 Defining social media

Although social media is a relatively recent phenomenon, since its inception, it has garnered substantial scholarly attention, profoundly influencing a variety of academic disciplines and even spawning a distinct field of study. In the realm of collective action research, scholars began recognizing the potential impact of online communication technologies in the early years of the twenty-first century (Bimber et al., 2005; Rheingold, 2008). Yet, it was not until the events of the Arab Spring that the discourse on the relation between social media and collective action truly gained momentum. The aforementioned widespread visibility of the protests online, facilitated by platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, attracted significant attention from both the media and academia, raising questions about how this digital dimension of the uprisings affected their offline development (e.g. Howard et al., 2011; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). As this discussion continued, a novel and more comprehensive academic debate began to take shape, moving beyond the Arab Spring and focusing on the broader influence of social media on contemporary collective action – particularly within social movements (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016).

Before delving into this debate, however, it is imperative to clearly define the concept of social media first. Indeed, the term appears to be inherently obvious. As a result, many scholars – and the general public alike – refrain from providing a precise definition and instead reference well-known platforms like Facebook and Twitter to set the parameters (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In other words, as Carr and Hayes (2015) observe, "there tends to be a general consensus of what tools may be considered social media but without a consensus on what defines these tools as social media" (p. 46). This is problematic for two reasons. In the first place, it prompts questions about the status of other platforms like YouTube or Wikipedia, as well as other online communication methods such as email (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Secondly, the absence of a clear definition hinders a deeper understanding of the essence of social media and thus its impact on our society (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Therefore, a formal definition of social media is needed. Carr and Hayes (2015) provide such a

definition by defining social media as: "Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content " (p. 49). While this definition is insightful, Obar and Wildman (2015) sought to further elaborate by identifying four common aspects of present-day social media as discussed in existing literature.

First of all, social media are Web 2.0 internet-based applications, epitomizing the interactive nature of Web 2.0 technologies compared to the passive consumption model of the early stages of the internet (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Secondly, social media platforms depend on user-generated content, including likes, comments, uploaded videos and images, blog posts, and more. Without it, Obar and Wildman (2015) argue, they would be “a ghost town, a vast, colorful midway filled with games that nobody is playing” (p. 747). The third aspect of social media is that it relies on user-specific profiles, created by individuals or groups, containing identifying information and enabling social network connections between accounts (Obar & Wildman, 2015). In relation to this, the fourth aspect of social media platforms is their capability to foster the development of online social networks by linking profiles to each other or associating them with specific groups or communities (Obar & Wildman, 2015). These four commonalities, along with Carr and Hayes' (2015) definition, do not entirely eliminate the ambiguity surrounding the definition of social media, but they do contribute to a better understanding of the essence of the phenomenon. Furthermore, they help differentiate between channels that should be considered social media (e.g., Instagram, LinkedIn, and even Tinder) and those that should not (e.g., Wikipedia, Netflix, Skype) (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

2.7 Social media and social movements

As previously described, within the debate on the interplay between social media and collective action that has emerged over the past years, roughly two schools of thought can

be identified: the techno-optimists and the techno-pessimists (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). The introduction of this thesis already outlined the core differences between these perspectives and discussed the main criticisms each one faces. Moreover, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) note, “Whether from digital enthusiasts or critics, hyperbole is unhelpful” (p. 760). Therefore, rather than revisiting this debate to determine which perspective is superior, this chapter considers the aforementioned techno-ambivalence approach, concentrating on the (less radical) research endeavors that have actually advanced the academic discussion and enhanced our understanding of the relation between social media and social movements.

As highlighted in Chapter 1 of this report, scholars like Steinert-Threlkeld et al. (2015) and Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) – conducting social media search and hashtag analyses – have convincingly shown that there undoubtedly is *a* connection between social media and contemporary collective action. Therefore, the question is not *if* (or how) social media are utilized by social movements, but rather what impact these efforts fundamentally have on movement organization and mobilization. While the former concentrates on the effects of online communication technologies on the coordination and organization of offline protest, the latter primarily addresses the communicative aspects of social media. Given that the exploration of the organizing and mobilizing capabilities of social media is still in its infancy, unlike the discourse on collective action or social movements, there are no grand theories structuring this debate. Instead, the literature presents a fragmented landscape of smaller theoretical endeavors that focus on diverse aspects and employ different terminologies (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018).

One example is Gerbaudo’s (2012) theory on *choreography of assembly*, which posits that online communication technologies “orchestrate” offline protest not only through the coordination of meeting times and locations – as demonstrated by e.g. Steinert-Threlkeld et al. (2015) and Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) – but also by supporting the dissemination of certain symbols and narratives. According to Gerbaudo (2012), despite the decentralized appearance of contemporary collective action, movement leaders play a crucial role in this

orchestrating process. Milan (2015) disagrees. According to him, the growing prominence of digital technologies, such as social media, has led contemporary action to become more flexible, decentralized, and scalable, thereby reducing the influence of leadership figures (Milan, 2015). Moreover, through the concept of *cloud protesting,* he argues that social media platforms foster offline movement participation not only by circulating discursive information (and coordinative details) but also by allowing these narratives to emerge in the first place (Milan, 2015).

Despite the fact that both Gerbaudo (2012) and Milan (2015) offer intriguing insights concerning the relation between digital technologies and contemporary protest, their work has not achieved the same level of influence as that of Bennett and Segerberg (2012). In fact, Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory on *connective action* stands as one of the most influential contributions in recent literature, and it is widely regarded as the most developed theory on the relation between social media and social movements to date (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018). Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) argument epitomizes the techno-ambivalence approach this study follows, acknowledging the unique aspects of social media and their influence on contemporary activism, while also acknowledging the discrepancy between the dynamics of online and offline movement organization. Specifically, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) differentiate between 'traditional' collective action, as discussed in this chapter, and what they refer to as connective action. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), collective action typically involves formal, centralized organizational structures that require significant resources to mobilize, focusing on rather specific and exclusive goals. Connective action, on the other hand, relies on more decentralized and informal forms of organization facilitated by online communication technologies. It is less resource-intensive and revolves around more individualized and loosely defined "personal action frames", contrasting with the more centralized and structured collective action frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

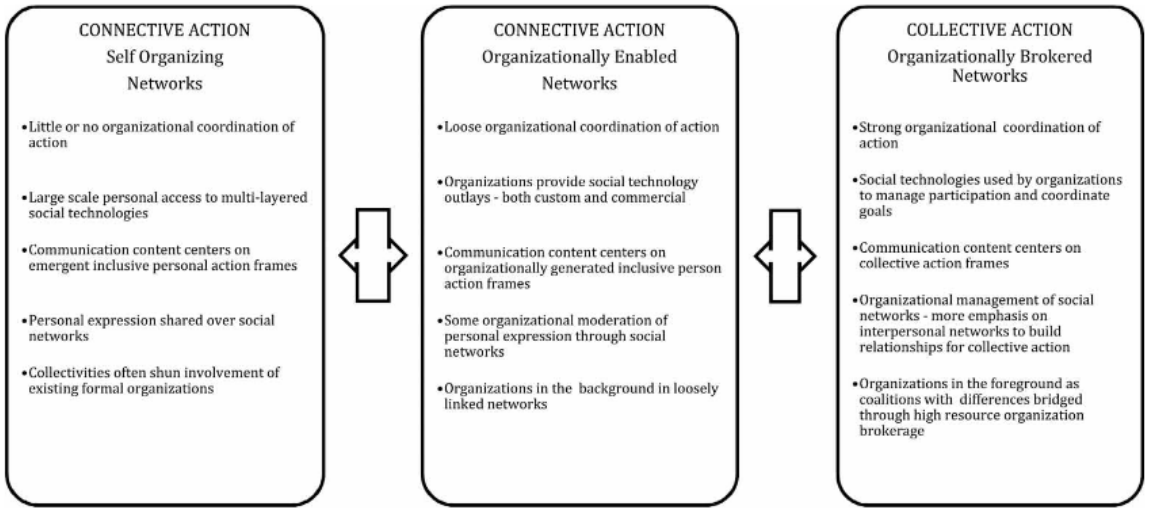

Figure 2. Elements of connective and collective action networks. From "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics", by W. L. Bennett & A. Segerberg, 2012, Information, Communication & Society, p. 756.

Based on this distinction, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) propose three main types of action networks prevalent in contemporary social movements (see Figure 3). Positioned at each end of this model are networks defined by collective and connective action respectively. However, between the centrally organized collective action networks and the decentralized, digitally facilitated connective action networks lies a third type of hybrid model that combines elements from both ends of the spectrum. Networks positioned within this model predominantly utilize a horizontal decentralized structure while also integrating elements of formal organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). By doing so, they leverage both online and offline forms of action and blend specific collective goals with a more inclusive and personalized approach to fostering engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). As online communication technologies continue to advance, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that an increasing number of social movements demonstrate this hybrid model of action – though with varying degrees of emphasis on connective action dynamics or traditional collective action mechanisms.

Some might recognize Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) analysis as a plea for techno-pessimism, arguing their distinction between collective and connective action underscores a

fundamental difference between online and offline activism (Poell & Van Dijck, 2018). However, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) actually contend a different point. Instead, they aim to illustrate that understanding modern social movements and their online components, necessitates moving beyond 'traditional' collective action and movement theories. As they state, "connective action has its own logic and distinct dynamics," and therefore, "it deserves analysis on its own terms" (p. 760). In other words, when analyzing contemporary instances of collective action, instead of fixating on how digital technologies like social media affect the offline actions of social movements, one should first understand the online dimension in its own right, and only then consider comparisons to offline activities.

2.8 Conceptual framework

Taking into consideration the insights from Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) logic of connective action, but also Gerbaudo's (2012) notion of choreography of assembly and Milan's (2012) concept of cloud protesting, this study seeks to explore the relation between social media and offline movement participation within the context of Lebanon's October Revolution. Its goal is neither to confirm nor refute any of the aforementioned theories nor to try and construct an alternative theoretical framework regarding the interplay between the online and offline dimensions of contemporary movements. Instead, this research adopts an exploratory approach, aiming to gain a deeper, more tangible understanding of how social media is utilized in contemporary collective action and its impact on offline mobilization. Despite its practical focus, however, this study utilizes various theories and concepts from social movement and collective action literature to guide its data collection and interpretation, most notably the previously discussed framing theory of Benford and Snow (2000). Together, these elements constitute the conceptual framework on which this study relies. A somewhat simplified version of this framework is depicted in Figure 4, but it can be more elaborately described as follows.

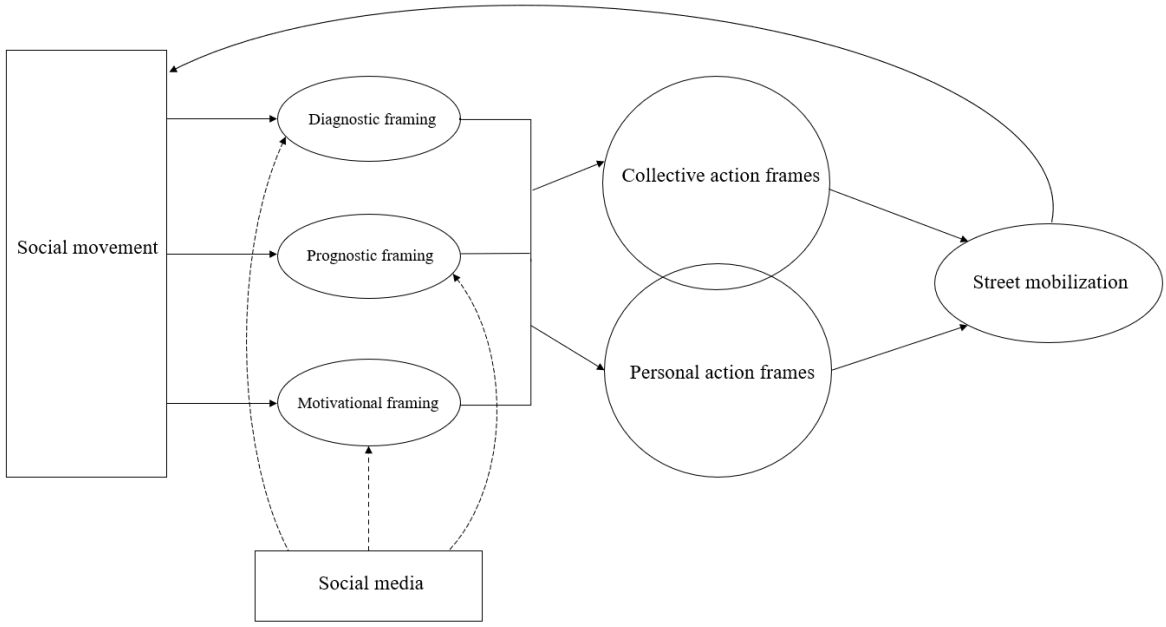

Figure 3. Conceptual framework

This research follows the ideas of Benford and Snow (2000), maintaining that discursive practices are critical to social movements. These framing practices aim to synchronize and capitalize on factors such as collective identity, grievances, and political opportunities, as expounded on by Van Zomeren et al. (2008). They primarily involve two processes: frame articulation and frame elaboration – both of which are not specifically labeled in Figure 4 (Benford & Snow, 2000). These processes serve three key purposes: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Benford & Snow, 2000). It is expected that social media impacts each of these framing tasks. However, this study is particularly interested in its influence on the notion of motivational framing. This interest stems from the fact that this task focuses on action mobilization, which constitutes the primary mechanism this study concentrates on. Moreover, motivational framing involves the construction of the previously discussed vocabularies of motive, which are crucial for addressing the free-rider problem inherent in collective action logic (DeMarrais & Earle, 2017; Snow et al., 2018). Consistent with Benford and Snow's (2000) perspective, this

research maintains that these framing tasks collectively constitute certain collective action frames. Additionally, building on Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory, it anticipates the emergence of personal action frames. The distinction between these types of frames does not imply a definitive separation. Rather, it underscores that framing influences both collective and connective action dynamics, which may not always align. Ultimately, as this research argues, these collective and personal action frames collectively drive and direct street mobilization. The question now is how this manifests in the Lebanese context.


GHIATH AL ROBIH
L'art ne
vient jamais du
Bonheur

3. Methodology

As described in the introduction of this research report, the central question this study revolves around is: How did the use of social media platforms by social movement participants influence the dynamics of street mobilization during Lebanon's October Revolution in 2019 and 2020? To help answer this main research question, three sub-questions were formulated – which are addressed in the three following chapters – each dissecting a particular component of the central question. This chapter describes the steps that were taken to answer these sub-questions, elaborating on the data collection and analysis methods and attempting to substantiate the procedural and ethical choices that were made throughout the research process. In support of this, it also discusses the methodological approach this study employs. Finally, this methodology chapter expounds on the methodological and operational limitations of this study.

3.1 Methodological approach

The methodological approach of this study can be broken down into two constituents. First, there is the exploratory nature this research embraces. Rather than concentrating on a predetermined issue and analyzing it through hypothesis testing, the objective of this research has been to conduct an open-ended exploration. More accurately, the goal of this study has not been to debunk Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory of connective action or to confirm Gerbaudo's (2012) cloud protesting proposition, or vice versa. Instead, its aim has been to explore the middle ground between techno-pessimism and techno-optimism – something some have dubbed the techno-ambivalence perspective – in order to gain new insights into how social media influences the framing activities that social movements are engaged in (Kidd & McIntosh, 2016). The choice to opt for such an exploratory approach, as opposed to an explanatory approach, mainly relies on the fact the role of online communication technologies in social movement framing processes still is a relatively new

academic domain. Therefore, it was deemed more useful to try and advance new scientific insights, instead of attempting to controvert the rather confined body of theory existing today.

This study combined its exploratory structure with a qualitative approach. The decision to opt for a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach derived from two related considerations. The first reason relates to the social constructivist underpinnings, discussed in the previous chapter, in which this study is grounded. Social constructivism posits that reality is not an objective truth but rather a product of individual and collective interpretations. This subjective understanding of reality asks for an interpretative research approach – considering that interpretivism emphasizes the exploration of subjective meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences (Babones, 2016). Although an interpretivist approach can also be combined with quantitative methods, a qualitative structure provides for a deeper understanding of the reality construction and the interplay between individuals and their environments (Babones, 2016). After all, as Mohajan (2018) notes, qualitative research is a form of social action itself.

Second, as previously noted, the majority of the empirical research on the interplay between social media and social movement mobilization – which is mainly focused on the uprisings of the Arab Spring – uses a quantitative approach (Smidi & Shahin, 2017). Though this body of research has helped us recognize there *is* a relation between social media and contemporary social movements, it has done little to help us understand what the relation precisely looks like. Consequently, it has remained rather indeterminate exactly how and to what degree the use of online communication technologies impacts the dynamics of contemporary collective action. Accordingly, this particular research decided to adopt a qualitative approach, with the objective of diversifying the research methodologically, in order to advance the scholarly debate and help move toward a more comprehensive understanding of the mobilizing capabilities of social media.

The concept of qualitative research encompasses several types of research designs, the most common being: grounded theory, narrative research, phenomenological research,

ethnographical research, historical research, content analysis, action theory, and case study analysis (Mohajan, 2018). As the research design in Chapter 1 presumably already suggests, this study concerns the latter. Mohajan (2018) describes a case study analysis as an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in real life” (p. 33). In the context of this research, the ‘system’ that is scrutinized is the influence of public social media on street mobilization during Lebanon’s October Revolution. There are various forms of case study analyses. This research concerns a singular cross-sectional case study. The choice to focus on a single case instead of multiple ones is based on the presumption that a concentrated approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the case being explored, encouraging a more profound understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Mohajan, 2018). The choice for a cross-sectional approach, rather than a longitudinal structure, mainly depended on matters of practicability; conducting a thorough longitudinal analysis within the desired timeframe for this research was deemed infeasible.

3.2 Research methods

The data in which this study on grounded was gathered through a combination of desk research and the conducting of interviews. The former primarily addressed the first sub-question outlined in the introduction of this report, and to some extent, the second and third as well. Throughout the desk research process, a variety of sources was consulted, including news articles, scientific papers, research reports, and data sets. Concerning the first sub-question, which sketches the contemporary Lebanese social media landscape, the majority of the (statistical) data that was used was retrieved from three sources: the World Bank, thinktank *Pew Research Center*, and data sourcing platform *DataReportal*. Additional data was gathered via media publications, as well as through a variety of local and regional research reports. The second and third sub-questions, which explore the use of social media throughout the Lebanese October Revolution, were addressed mainly via the consulting of

scientific papers and research reports. However, more significantly, these questions were tackled through conversations with those who actually participated in the 17 October Protests.

These conversations were held in the form of one-on-one interviews, which present the primary source of empirical data for this research, and were aimed at exploring individuals' experiences of the October Revolution, both on the streets and online through the use of social media. The decision to opt for individual interviews, as opposed to what is known as focus groups, primarily relied on two considerations. The first revolves around feasibility. As Alshenqeeti (2014) notes, group interviewing generally comprises a "time-consuming and effortful process" (p. 40). In addition, they reportedly require "skillful chairing and attention to the physical layout of the room and group size" (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 40). This posed implications for this research. First, because the timeframe in which this study was to be conducted was relatively narrow, and second, because due to peripheral circumstances, it was not possible to conduct the interviews in an offline manner. The second consideration pertained to the sensitivity of the research subject. Given that this study delves into a rather politically sensitive topic, it was imperative to gather empirical data discretely. This required adopting an anonymous approach to interviewing, primarily to safeguard participants from potential personal or professional repercussions resulting from their involvement. Moreover, anonymity was deemed crucial in ensuring the comfort of the interviewees, thereby providing them with the freedom to express themselves openly and facilitating a more in-depth exploration of the topic. When organizing focus groups, it is simply impossible to ensure full anonymity, and hence, individual interviewing essentially was the only viable option.

When it comes to interviewing as a research method, roughly three forms can be identified: structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured interviews (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Each type of interview has its advantages and possible implications. For this study, it was decided to conduct unstructured interviews, as this style of interviewing

reportedly best matches the constructivist approach this research adopts (Bihu, 2020). In comparison to semi-structured, and particularly structured interviews, unstructured interviews offer an increased level of flexibility and allow for the gathering of more in-depth or rich data (Warren, 2012). That is if they are well-executed. While their adaptability can definitely prove to be advantageous, the absence of a standardized approach in unstructured interviews also increases the risk of interviewer bias, possibly leading to the negligence of critical information and the influencing participant responses. (Warren, 2012). In order to avoid these pitfalls, Bihu (2020) proposes three stages via which unstructured research interviews should be conducted. First, the interviewer must contextualize the participant's experience relevant to the research subject. Then, the researcher must focus on the concrete details of this experience, in order to form a construction of how the participant effectively participated in the pertinent experience. The last stage, as Bihu (2020) marks, "requires the interviewee to reflect on the meaning of the experiences, especially, on how they make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences pertaining to the research topic" (p. 713). In order to overcome the obstacles unstructured interviewing poses, the approach proposed by Bihu (2020) was adopted as a guideline for empirical data collection this research is built upon. Additionally, a rudimentary interview guide was designed to ensure adherence to this approach during the interviews (see Appendix B)

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Initially, it was intended to conduct twenty one-on-one unstructured interviews. Unfortunately, due to circumstances elaborated on in the last section of this chapter, only a sample size of ten participants was achieved. The participants were gathered through what is referred to as non-probability sampling, where some members of the population – participants of Lebanon's October Revolution in this case – have a higher chance of being selected than others (Galloway, 2005). The choice for non-probability sampling was unavoidable, simply because the alternative, probability sampling, was unachievable. As Galloway (2005) notes, in

essence, “probability samples are possible only when there is a complete and up-to-date list of the members (names and/or addresses) of the population under investigation” (p. 859). Clearly, such an inventory was not available for the population this study examined. Instead, the interviewees were gathered via the personal network of the researcher. This was done through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Galloway, 2005). Practically, this meant participants were contacted both directly, and via friends, colleagues, and additional acquaintances. Despite the fact that probability sampling was no feasible option, the objective remained to achieve a diverse sample in terms of gender, age, and occupation, with the aim of accurately portraying the heterogeneous makeup of participants in the October Revolution (Haidar, 2022). The interviewees were contacted either by email or via WhatsApp, where they received a brief explanation of the study and about the purpose of the interview they were invited to take part in. Those who showed interest in participating were sent a form containing a more elaborate description of the research objectives and the data processing methods, which they were asked to sign in order to confirm their consent for participation (see Appendix A).

Both the gathering of participants and the conducting of interviews took place in the period between February and May 2024 (see Appendix C). The interviews were carried out via *Microsoft Teams* – except for one that was conducted via *Zoom* due to technical issues – and all lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded via the recording function that Microsoft Teams accommodates. However, because of privacy reasons, the introduction and the reconfirmation of the participants’ consent at the beginning of the interviews, as well as the cooling-down, were not recorded. In the end, ten interviews were conducted and transcribed, with a sample consisting of six females and four males, ranging from 22 to 38 years old, and from a variety of occupational backgrounds (see Appendix C). After all interviews had been conducted, each was transcribed manually via the transcription website *oTranscribe*, with the support of *Microsoft Teams’* automatic transcription feature. This process was carried out using verbatim transcription in order to avoid accidentally

leaving out vital context or important details. However, in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, possibly sensitive information such as names of people or organizations, and highly specific details, were left out. For the same reason, the interview transcripts are not part of this research report but have been uploaded in a separate environment and are available upon request.

Subsequently, the transcripts were analyzed via the acclaimed computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software *ATLAS.ti*. After all documents were uploaded to *ATLAS.ti*, the transcripts were coded inductively, meaning that they were coded without the creation of a preliminary codebook (Deterding & Waters, 2018). This method was chosen because it best fits the exploratory nature of this study. Compared to deductive coding, it allows for a more adaptable analysis of the collected empirical data, enabling the discovery of new insights that might not have been anticipated beforehand and providing for an exploration of the data free from any predefined assumptions (Naeem et al., 2023). Initially, the inductive coding process yielded 863 codes. Then, through an iterative process of thematic coding, codes that were deemed irrelevant were deleted, while the remaining codes were grouped. In the end, this resulted in a total of 47 codes, representing the most significant patterns that were identified in the empirical data – the codebook can be found in Appendix D. Ultimately, for a comprehensive overview and to highlight the connections between the various themes and notions, the codes were organized into a network, which is included in Appendix E. This network served as a guiding framework for addressing the second and third sub-questions, discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.4 Methodological limitations

No scientific endeavor is free from limitations. All research is conducted in a specific context and within certain parameters, inevitably impacting the research process and thus the results and the way in which these can be interpreted. As hinted at by the details discussed in the

preceding paragraphs, this thesis is no exception. The limitations of this study can be broadly divided into two categories: methodological limitations and those related to the research process. While the former inherently pertains to this study's methodological approach, the latter relates mostly to the operational challenges and practical limitations – some anticipated, others unforeseen – that were encountered during the data collection and analysis process. Acknowledging and explicating these limitations is vital to foster transparency, thereby increasing the study's validity and applicability.

Addressing the methodological constraints inherent in this study starts with a critical assessment of its research design. To begin with, this research concerns a case study. While this approach allows for a detailed and in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under scrutiny — the impact of social media on social movement mobilization — it simultaneously limits the generalizability of the findings (Mohajan, 2018). As a result, the external validity of this study may be considered weak, as different cases could potentially lead to varying conclusions (Hyett et al., 2014). However, given that the aim of this study has been exploratory rather than to draw conclusions based on existing presumptions, the question is to what extent this variability poses a significant issue. Moreover, although its external validity might be limited, the internal validity of this study is rather strong. This is attributed to its detailed exploration of the topic at hand and the use of data triangulation, wherein participant responses were compared with secondary data from previous analyses of the October Revolution to identify any significant inconsistencies.

Besides its case study design, the qualitative approach this study adopts also introduces certain limitations. To begin with, there is the subjectivity of the researcher. Especially since this study relies on social constructivist underpinnings, the collection and analysis of empirical data could potentially be heavily influenced by the researcher's personal interpretation (Ratner, 2002). While some level of subjectivity is unavoidable, proactive steps have been taken to minimize its impact on the research – in addition to acknowledging and critically reflecting upon the issue in this report (Ratner, 2002). First, although unstructured

interviews allow for considerable interpretation, efforts were made to enhance the reliability of data collection by maintaining consistency in questions and probes (see the interview guide in Appendix B) and using member checking to validate participant responses. In addition, the data analysis process has been conducted as systematically and transparently as possible. Rather than instinctively interpreting participants' responses, transcripts were meticulously and iteratively analyzed using *ATLAS.ti*. This process was made transparent through the inclusion of the codebook and network in this report (see Appendices D and E).

3.5 Limitations of the research process

In addition to the aforementioned limitations inherent to the methodological approach employed in this study, there are limitations related to the research process, for instance stemming from choices made by the researcher and practical challenges that were encountered throughout this thesis. To begin with, this research was constrained by both temporal and budgetary limitations. While there was no strict deadline for the completion of this thesis, the researcher faced time constraints as a delay would lead to financial ramifications. This potentially influenced the depth and the quality of the research results. Moreover, this research was conducted without a budget, which imposed limitations for the collection of empirical data – e.g. through travel expenses – and restricted access to secondary data, such as datasets behind paywalls.

In addition, the researcher's positionality and experience also introduced several limitations. First of all, the researcher practically had no prior knowledge about the theories and methods used in this study and was rather unfamiliar with the Lebanese context before commencing this research endeavor. Although efforts were made to address these gaps through preliminary exploration of social movement studies and preparatory research on Lebanon and its 2019 uprising, this inexperience persisted and potentially impacted the review of existing literature, as well as the collection and analysis of empirical data.

Secondly, there exists a cultural divide between the researcher and the participants interviewed for this study. This disconnect inevitably influenced the research process, introducing biases in data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Squires, 2009). To mitigate this impact, the researcher tried to familiarize himself with the Lebanese context as much as possible through desk research and by establishing a local network in preparation for empirical data collection. This was not always easy, especially since this cultural divide was accompanied by a language barrier. This not only meant the researcher relied solely on English sources for his desk research – impeding the depth and scope of the study – but also impacted the sample used for the data collection (Squires, 2009). As the researcher does not speak Arabic, participants needed considerable fluency in English. This resulted in a sample bias, as not all Lebanese who participated in the October Revolution are proficient in English. Contributing to this sample bias was the researcher's lack of a prior network in Lebanon, which hampered the possibility of probability sampling and forced the researcher to rely on convenience and snowball sampling instead.

Although the position and qualities of the researcher undoubtedly imposed important limitations on this study, the events impacting Lebanon and the broader region over the past few months have had an even greater impact on the research process. Ever since Hamas launched a brutal attack on the state of Israel at the beginning of October 2023, the MENA region has found itself engulfed in escalating tensions and severe instability. Responding to Hamas' Al-Aqsa Flood operation, the Israeli army launched a full-scale ground assault on Gaza (Ragad et al., 2023). The offensive, which is still ongoing today, has already killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and reduced most of Gaza to rubble. In addition, amid several other consequences, the Israeli invasion of Gaza has reignited tensions between Israel and Hezbollah. Over the past few months, the Lebanese-Israeli border has been plagued by continuous cross-border fire, resulting in hundreds of deaths and the destruction of many more livelihoods, particularly in southern Lebanon (Jones et al., 2024). While a full-scale escalation has not occurred yet, the threat remains imminent (Jones et al., 2024).

While the significance of this research pales in comparison to the immense human suffering that has struck Gaza and southern Lebanon, it is important to acknowledge that the events too introduced some limitations to this study. Most importantly, the hostilities at the Lebanese-Israeli border and the looming threat of an all-out war forced the researcher to terminate his fieldwork. With tensions rising, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) gradually ramped up its travel advice for Lebanon in the fall of 2023. Eventually, on the 20th of October, the MFA decided to advise against all travel to Lebanon and instructed all Dutch nationals staying in Lebanon to leave the country as quickly as possible (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2024). As a consequence, the researcher, who was staying in Lebanon at that moment, was forced to return to the Netherlands. Besides these developments affecting the researcher's mental well-being, they also impeded his efforts to gain valuable on-site experience with the Lebanese context. Moreover, it directly affected the data collection process.

For one thing, it seriously hindered the recruitment of interview candidates. As previously mentioned, although the sample eventually included ten participants, the original target was twenty. Much of this shortfall can be attributed to the fact that candidates could no longer be approached directly, in a personal manner, but had to be gathered through online methods instead – which is especially challenging in Lebanon, where there is a strong preference for in-person communication. Additionally, the recent situation understandably deterred potential interviewees from participating in this research, with several individuals indicating the current circumstances and their impact on their mental state prevented them from participating.

Furthermore, regarding those who *did* participate in the interviews, it is important to consider the potential impact the recent adversities might have had on their responses. Although the current crisis may not directly correlate with the events that occurred nearly five years ago, there is a significant likelihood that the current state of affairs influenced the participants' answers, whether consciously or unconsciously. This influence could, for

example, encompass their sentiments toward Lebanon's government, the security forces, or Lebanese society in general. Adding to this, the tumultuous last couple of months may have exacerbated the difficulty in recalling the events of the October Revolution, which already occurred quite some time ago. There is a high chance that these factors obstructed the scope and depth of the interviewees' answers, an issue compounded by the necessity of conducting the interviews online rather than in person. Compared to face-to-face conversations, online interviews lack non-verbal communication and increase the likelihood of distractions, making it more difficult for the researcher to create a connection with his interviewee. Especially since this study employed unstructured interviews, these factors likely further shaped the empirical data gathered for this research.


Etoile Suites
مقهى و مطعم

4. Lebanon's social media landscape

Before delving into the coordinative and communicative uses of social media during the October Revolution and their impact on street mobilization, it is essential to establish the context in which these practices occurred. This chapter focuses on the first sub-question of this research: the state of Lebanon's digital environment and its social media landscape. This chapter concentrates on the first sub-question this research centers around, addressing the state of Lebanon's digital environment, and its social media landscape in particular. It starts with a general analysis of Lebanon's online environment, assessing the state of the country's digital infrastructure and the connectedness of Lebanese society by means of internet adoption and smartphone ownership. Subsequently, it examines Lebanon's contemporary social media landscape, discussing what platforms define it, who uses them, and finally, which of these platforms played a meaningful role in the course of the 2019 revolution.

4.1 Internet penetration

Before addressing the social media platforms shaping Lebanon's contemporary digital environment, it is helpful to first delineate the parameters within which this online communication takes place and to review the broader state of Lebanon's digital realm. Both on a regional and global scale, Lebanon can be regarded as a highly connected country. At least, when it comes to the amount of users. Lebanon is characterized by a poor ICT infrastructure. The country's average internet bandwidth is roughly ten times lower than the international average of approximately 75 Mbps (megabits per second), and in terms of broadband speed, Lebanon ranks 130th out of 133 countries worldwide, with an average speed of roughly 6 Mbps (Hassen, 2024). Additionally, internet subscriptions and mobile charges are remarkably expensive compared to other countries (Hassen, 2024).

Nevertheless, a vast majority of the Lebanese frequently use the internet. According to the World Bank's (2021) most recent data, 87 percent of Lebanon's approximately 5.5

million inhabitants access the web on a regular basis. This number has grown significantly over the past two decades; a decade prior to the October Revolution Lebanon's internet penetration only hovered around 40 percent (World Bank, 2021). Although its percentage of internet users does not match those of Israel and the nearby Gulf states – all comprise an internet penetration of nearly 100 percent – it is considerably higher than in other neighboring countries and stands well above the MENA average which sits at 77 percent (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, considering the global context, when it comes to internet penetration, Lebanon – categorized as a lower-middle-income country – can be compared to many high-income countries such as Poland (85 percent) or France (86 percent) (World Bank, 2021).

Given that nearly nine out of ten Lebanese use the internet on a regular basis, web access naturally transcends both genders and is prevalent across all generations and social classes. Nevertheless, zooming in on these various demographic entities, it becomes clear that there are considerable disparities in internet penetration within Lebanese society. A 2019 study by *Pew Research Center* shows that, when it comes to gender, the percentage of adult internet users is more or less the same, with 86 percent of women and 89 percent of men regularly accessing the web (Silver et al., 2019). Focusing on education, however, larger variations unveil themselves. Among Lebanese adults who have enjoyed secondary education, internet penetration sits at 79 percent (Silver et al., 2019). Yet, out of those that have not received higher education, web access reaches a remarkable 98 percent (Silver et al., 2019). Looking at age, the disparities are even greater. Nearly all young adults (18 to 29 years old) and middle-aged Lebanese (aged 30 to 49) use the internet on a regular basis, with internet penetration in both groups reaching 99 percent and 97 percent, respectively (Silver et al., 2019). In contrast, of those who are 50 years or older, only 65 percent frequently access the internet (Silver et al., 2019).

4.2 Smartphone ownership and social media adoption

The internet can be accessed in a multitude of ways, ranging from devices such as computers, laptops, and tablets, to game consoles, smart TVs, and smartwatches. Yet, by all means, the most popular way to access the internet today is through smartphones. This applies to Lebanon as well. As proven by the Pew Research Center study, in 2019, in Lebanon, 86 percent of the adult population owned a smartphone, a number that closely mirrors the aforementioned amount of internet users, which sits at approximately 87 percent of the adult population (Silver et al., 2019). Reflective of a trend seen worldwide, the number of smartphone owners in Lebanon has increased significantly over the past decade. In 2014, for example, not even half of the Lebanese population owned a smartphone (Poushter et al., 2018). The similitude between the amount of internet users and smartphone owners suggests that, with the exception of a few outliers, practically all Lebanese adults who use the internet also own a smartphone.

This proposition is further substantiated when considering more detailed demographic data on smartphone ownership. For instance, the amount of Lebanese men owning a smartphone (88 percent) virtually coincides with the number of male internet users (89 percent) (Silver et al., 2019). The same applies to Lebanon's female population, with 84 percent of Lebanese women owning a smartphone, and 86 percent of them regularly accessing the web (Silver et al., 2019). Looking at education, an identical pattern reveals itself. Of those who are considered lower-educated, 77 percent own a smartphone, which is just two percentage points lower than the proportion of internet users in this group (Silver et al., 2019). Moreover, among higher-educated Lebanese adults, the percentage of smartphone users and internet users is exactly the same, both at 98 percent (Silver et al., 2019). Zooming on Lebanon's various generations presents similar regularities. Within Lebanon's older generation, the percentage of smartphone users stands at 62 percent, once more closely mirroring the number of internet users, which lies at 65 percent in this group (Silver et al., 2019). In congruence with Lebanon's higher-educated population, nearly all of

Lebanon's young and middle-aged adults (18 to 49 years old) both use the internet and possess a smartphone, with adoption rates at 98 and 97 percent respectively (Silver et al., 2019).

Smartphones can be used e.g. to browse the internet or stream multimedia, but they are particularly useful for engaging in social media, as defined in Chapter 2 of this report (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Obar & Wildman, 2015). Through applications, or *apps* as they are more commonly referred to, users can conveniently access channels such as Instagram or Snapchat, but also messaging platforms like WhatsApp, anywhere and anytime. In fact, as Silver et al. (2019) note, "smartphones and social media have melded so thoroughly that for many they go hand-in-hand" (p. 4). This also holds true for Lebanese society, where 97 percent of social media users access their preferred platform or platforms via their mobile phone (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). Similar to smartphone ownership, social media penetration has burgeoned in Lebanon throughout the past decade. While ten years ago, merely 42 percent of the country's adult citizens were using at least one social media platform, today, the percentage of Lebanese adult social media users lies at approximately 85 percent of the population (Poushter et al., 2018; Silver et al., 2019). As can be observed, this number hardly deviates from the percentage of Lebanon's population that owns a smartphone – and the percentage of Lebanese using the internet (Silver et al., 2019).

Again, a demographic dissection of Lebanese society shows a similar interconnection. To begin with, gender statistics show that among both men and women, the percentage of social media users, smartphone owners, and internet users is more or less the same (Silver et al., 2019). A similar trend reveals itself when considering education levels. Similar to web access and smartphone ownership, nearly all higher-educated Lebanese adults use social media – about 98 percent – while only 76 percent of the less-educated population does so – a number also mirroring the earlier discussed findings (Silver et al., 2019). Furthermore, again echoing the data on internet adoption and smartphone possession, statistics prove that social media use is almost universal among Lebanon's

younger and middle-aged adults (18 to 49 years old), whereas Lebanon's older generation (50 years and over) shows a social media penetration of only 61 percent (Silver et al., 2019).

For the majority of Lebanon's adult citizens, the use of social media is not limited to a single platform. Around the time of the October Revolution, only 17 percent of Lebanese adults claimed to be using only one type of social media, while more than one in four was engaged in two different kinds of social media platforms, and over 40 percent even used three or more platforms (Silver et al., 2019).

4.3 Users per social media platform

By far, the most popular platform among Lebanese citizens is WhatsApp. As one participant emphasized, the messaging application holds a significant role in Lebanese society, both personally and professionally, more than any other form of social media: "To apply for jobs, you need WhatsApp. You need to send your CV. You need to talk to people" (personal communication, March 14, 2024). In 2018, 84 percent of the country's adult population was using the messaging app on a regular basis, which accounts for nearly all of Lebanon's social media users, who make up about 85 percent of the country's population (Silver et al., 2019). This explains why a demographic dissection of those who use the messaging platform presents a more or less identical picture to the one on social media users in general. WhatsApp penetration is particularly high among Lebanon's younger generations, with 98 percent and 94 percent of younger and middle-aged adults using the platform, respectively. Among older generations, this percentage drops to 60 percent (Silver et al., 2019). Moreover, WhatsApp is considerably more popular among Lebanon's higher-educated population, with penetration rates of 97 percent, compared to 75 percent among those who received less education (Silver et al., 2019). Yet, WhatsApp is not the only private platform playing a part in Lebanon's social media realm. The photo-sharing and messaging platform Snapchat and VoIP channel Viber are also commonly used, although their popularity is notably lower, with

18 percent and 19 percent of Lebanese adults using these platforms, respectively (Silver et al., 2019).

Following WhatsApp by a substantial margin, Facebook or YouTube emerge as the next most popular platforms, although it is difficult to determine which of these platforms predominates. According to the 2019 *Pew Research Center* study, it is Facebook that is Lebanon's most favored public social media platform. Reportedly, 68 percent of Lebanese adults frequently use the platform, making it the country's second most popular type of social media after WhatsApp (Silver et al., 2019). The distribution between males and females is fairly balanced. However, again, some considerable variations become apparent when zooming in on Lebanon's different generations. Among Lebanon's young adults, aged 18 to 29, 89 percent use Facebook (Silver et al., 2019). Yet, for those that are between 30 and 49 years old, this percentage is only 76 percent, and among citizens over 50, this number lies only at 37 percent (Silver et al., 2019). Looking at education, similar discrepancies reveal themselves. While 87 percent of Lebanon's higher-educated population uses Facebook, the platform is used by only 52 percent of the country's less-educated adults (Silver et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, statistics like these could not be obtained for YouTube. The amount of reliable in-depth data on Lebanon's social media realm is extremely limited, and in the scarce amount of existing research that could be accessed, YouTube was not included. The only data that could be obtained concerns recent commercial statistics, which show that in 2023, advertisements of the video platform had the potential to reach over 90 percent of the entire Lebanese population (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). This leaves the impression that not Facebook but YouTube is Lebanon's most prominent public social media platform. Yet, this sort of data should be treated with caution, primarily due to the fact that it is based on the number of accounts rather than the amount unique users (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). And since the source does not mention a particular margin of error existing between both of these variables, it is rather impossible to determine how many Lebanese use YouTube exactly, now or around the time of the 17 October Protests.

Looking beyond YouTube, it seems that after Facebook, TikTok is Lebanon's most popular social media platform today. Recent advertising statistics show that TikTok has the potential to reach approximately 51 percent of the Lebanese population (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). Again, this number does not reveal how many unique Lebanese users the platform really has – hence it should be treated with vigilance – but it does show that TikTok undeniably is a prominent player in Lebanon's present-day social media landscape. The question is, however, how big of a player TikTok was at the time the October Revolution ignited. Fortunately, for Instagram – another major platform within Lebanon's social media realm – such data was available. According to the 2019 *Pew Research Center* study, approximately one-third of Lebanese adults use the public photo and video-sharing platform on a regular basis (Silver et al., 2019). Therefore, it is just slightly more popular than Lebanon's next most favored social media platform LinkedIn, which advertising data suggests is used by approximately 27 percent of the Lebanese adult population (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2013). The last platform that plays a rather significant role in Lebanese digital society is X, formerly known and still often referred to as Twitter, which is used by roughly 12 percent of the Lebanese population (Silver et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, in contrast to Facebook, there was no comprehensive and robust demographic data available for Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter. However, advertising data provides some insight into the gender distribution for Instagram and Twitter. Regarding the former, the proportion of male and female users is more or less equal, reflecting a trend consistent across Lebanon's digital landscape (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2019; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). In contrast, Twitter exhibits a significant disparity between male and female users, with both 2023 and 2019 statistics indicating that men comprise approximately 70 percent of the platform's users, while women only account for around 30 percent – the most significant gender disparity observed among Lebanon's leading social media platforms (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2019; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023)

4.4 Most prominent platforms in the revolution

In summary, the data discussed above suggests that Lebanon's media landscape is predominantly shaped by nine platforms: WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Viber, and Twitter (Silver et al., 2019; We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2019; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). However, not all of these platforms played an equally important role during the 2019 uprising. In fact, in the interviews conducted with participants of the October Revolution, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Viber were not mentioned once, suggesting that their impact on online and offline movement dynamics during the revolution was marginal at most. To a certain degree, this observation is not surprising. While no specific reasons could be identified for Snapchat and Viber not being mentioned in the interviews, the omission of the other platforms can potentially be explained.

LinkedIn, for example, has a distinct professional focus, which sets it apart from other platforms such as Twitter or Facebook (Ball, 2022). Its content and features are tailored for career-related interactions, making it less suitable for personal communication or the dissemination of politically affiliated content (Ball, 2022). The same more or less applies to YouTube. Similar to LinkedIn, the core functionality and user interaction of YouTube differ quite substantially from other social networking channels (Khan, 2017). While other platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram are centered around social networking, YouTube revolves mainly around the creation and consumption of video content – although limited user interaction is possible (Khan, 2017). Indeed, particular functionality caused YouTube to play a significant role during the uprisings of the Arab Spring (Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). However, as video-sharing has more or less become a standard feature across social platforms, YouTube's once-differentiated value proposition has diminished.

As for TikTok, it is a different story. While it is one of the most popular social media platforms today, TikTok was still in its infancy at the time the October Revolution ignited. The platform's advertising data for Lebanon only extends back to 2023 (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2019; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). Broader statistics, however, indicate that

while the platform was already gaining significant momentum in 2019, its reach was nowhere near the level it enjoys today. To illustrate, the global number of TikTok users in 2019 was over four times lower than in 2023 (Iqbal, 2024). In that same year, the number of users in the MENA region was estimated at approximately 28 million, the lowest compared to other regions worldwide (Iqbal, 2024). In addition, it is estimated that globally, the majority of TikTok's users are pre-teens (9 to 12 years old), further substantiating the platform's lack of influence on the online dynamics of the October Revolution (McCashin & Murphy, 2023).

Based on the experiences of the interviewees, the four remaining platforms – WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter – *did* contribute to online coordination and communication over the course of Lebanon's 2019 uprising. Reflecting the platform's pervasiveness in Lebanese society, WhatsApp proves to have been the most influential social media channel during the October Revolution. All of the participants emphasized the messaging application played a crucial role in the revolution, not only because of its centrality in the inception of the uprising but also due to its significant impact on online coordination and communication efforts. In terms of public social media, Facebook and Instagram emerged as the most utilized platforms among participants of the October Revolution movement. By those interviewed, Instagram was used the most. This can be explained by the fact that, according to several participants, the platform is predominantly used by younger Lebanese – who make up the sample of this study – whereas Facebook is favored more by older generations. Finally, among the social media channels that contributed to the uprising, Twitter appears to have been used the least. Only a few participants reported using the platform during the revolution, and among those who did, most used it only moderately. Interviewees explained their avoidance of Twitter by suggesting that, similar to Facebook, it catered more to an older demographic, with some also attesting they found the platform too political or aggressive. In addition, some participants noted that Twitter has a relatively niche following in Lebanon. As one interviewee explained: "Normal people, people who come from

a poor class you could say, or youth, they won't be using Twitter . . . Twitter was for more sophisticated people" (personal communication, March 14, 2024).


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5. Coordinative use of social media

As outlined in Chapter 1, drawing on existing literature, this study categorizes the functions of social media platforms in regard to offline movement participation into two groups: those related to coordination, and those centered on communicating a particular discourse (framing). This chapter discusses the former utilization of social media – addressing the second sub-question this study centers around. It focuses on three key practices identified within online coordination during the October Revolution: recruitment, geographical and temporal coordination, and the exchange of practical information and support. Based on the empirical data collected for this research, this chapter carefully examines each of these practices, describing what they encompassed and how they affected the coordination and organization of street mobilization during Lebanon's revolution.

5.1 Recruitment

Before zooming in on how protesters used online tools to coordinate themselves, this chapter begins by looking into how social media was used to recruit participants in the first place. In fact, the experiences of those who participated in the October Revolution suggest that this was one of the most significant ways social media was utilized during the uprising. As one interviewee emphasizes, "It [social media] was our way to mobilize our family, our friends, or the people who usually don't move and think that nothing's going to change" (personal communication, March 12, 2024). Before exploring how social media platforms were used for recruitment purposes throughout the uprising, it is important to note that this study differentiates between recruitment and mobilization. While mobilization is interpreted as the broader process of marshaling and coordinating individuals to engage in collective action – the mechanism this study essentially focuses on – recruitment refers to the act of directly inviting people to join the cause. In the context of this research, recruitment is therefore regarded as the act of issuing a concrete and direct 'call to arms'. When taking a closer look

at how these calls to action were transmitted, it becomes clear that online recruitment efforts transpired more or less in two ways: internally, among acquaintances, and more openly, to a broader audience.

As the experiences of the interviewees underline, the first form of recruitment especially played an important role during the first few days of the uprising. Despite the fact that Lebanon's problems were piling up and some participants claiming they felt tensions were rising, the October Revolution ultimately erupted rather 'spontaneously'; no one anticipated things would escalate right then and there, on October 17, 2019, in front of Lebanon's government palace, the Grand Serail (Al Jazeera, 2019). As one participant, who was part of a political student movement at the time, recalled: "I was dumbfounded. I didn't believe that things would unravel very quickly and in the way they unwrapped". An important consequence of this sudden onset of the revolution was that there was effectively no organization present at the time the protests erupted. Although this is not uncommon for popular movements, of which the October Revolution is also an example, it is striking given Lebanon's vibrant civil society and rich history of protesting (Assi, 2021; Misoczky et al., 2017). It is rather remarkable, for example, that essentially none of the organizations leading the 2015 garbage crisis played a role in the development of the subsequent uprising, four years later (Assi, 2021). Even the SMOs that practically orchestrated the 2015 widespread anti-government protests over the shutdown of the Naameh landfill, *You Stink* and *We Want Accountability*, had somehow been unable to retain their support base until the outbreak of the October Revolution (Assi, 2021).

Nevertheless, as a result of the virtual absence of formal organization, the uprising was characterized by grassroots mobilization, particularly in its early phases (Assi, 2021). In terms of recruitment, rather than SMOs recruiting participants in a top-down manner, this meant the movement relied heavily on individuals' intrinsic motivation to join the protests, as well as acquaintances encouraging each other to take to the streets. These interactions happened offline, but they certainly also occurred online. In the first days of the uprising, this

mostly happened through WhatsApp. Nearly all interviewees recalled connecting directly with friends, family, or coworkers over the messaging platform to discuss attending the protests, whether they were encouraging others to join or being persuaded themselves. Hence, as one participant put it, in the initial stage of the uprising, recruitment essentially happened through online “word of mouth” – reflecting the usual Lebanese way of communicating (personal communication, May 16, 2024).

However, as the protests quickly proliferated and became more pervasive, these direct or personal recruitment efforts gradually moved to public social media channels. Multiple interviewees described how their Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter timelines were flooded with calls to protest. As one participant recalled, “We saw a lot of people asking us to join them on the street, asking us to join them to block this road, to block this politician's house”, adding that “there wasn’t a single specific person on social media . . . guiding us. It was just a bunch of people either doing it for their own cause or trying to influence others” (personal communication, March 26, 2024). Another participant explained how she herself shared on-the-ground footage of the demonstrations on her social channels to mobilize others: “I used to post on my Instagram Stories, pictures or videos of like: ‘Hey, join us. Don't stay silent. Don't stay in your house’” (personal communication, April 25, 2024). According to her, this accusatory frame was rather common in recruitment efforts at the time: “There were a lot of posts that were . . . targeted towards people, that said: ‘Why are you still in your house? Do you still accept what's happening . . . You're not making a change’” (person communication, April 25, 2024).

However, calls to action were not only sounded directly among acquaintances. As the movement continued to expand, its organization grew increasingly structured and comprehensive. As a result, recruitment efforts also expanded and became more ‘refined’. For instance, one participant explained how she found out a friend of hers was single-handedly creating and distributing online protest ‘invitations’:

> We were on a laptop, and he opens a folder, and I see so many different visuals of the protests. I was like: 'Are you documenting these? Do you want to keep them? What are you trying to do with this?' And he laughed, and he was like: 'I do this.' Then I was like: 'What do you mean, you do this?' And he said: 'When there's a call for protest and I feel like people are not going I start creating other types of visuals and just making everyone feel like there are a lot of people mobilized. (personal communication, March 12, 2024)

As the interviewee emphasized, "It was purely an individual's initiative to create momentum. It was not dictated by any political party, civil society organization, or anything" (personal communication, March 12, 2024).

Another striking example of the recruitment efforts expanding was the unofficial national call to protest that inundated Lebanese social media four days after the uprising had begun. Several interviewees emphasized that this call played a crucial role in recruiting new participants and was instrumental in facilitating the movement's expansion from Beirut to all corners of the country. This is underscored by the experience of one participant, who remarked,

> I joined on Sunday, October 20th, because I remember there was a national call, organized by the protesters . . . It was all over WhatsApp groups, Twitter, friends texting each other. Everybody was going like: 'Let's go to the streets, protest with the rest.' It was a big thing at the time. (personal communication, March 26, 2024)

Reportedly, the call not only spread on social media among protesters themselves. Instead, civil society organizations, political groups, and 'alternative' news platforms – elaborated on later – also disseminated it among their followers. This highlighted an evolving trend where, as the protests advanced, SMOs increasingly took on a role in recruitment practices.

Although the October Revolution consistently maintained its leaderless and horizontal network structure – shaped by its initial reliance on grassroots organization – as the uprising

progressed, numerous SMOs began emerging and integrating themselves into the protests (Assi, 2021). Unlike the *You Stink* and *We Want Accountability* campaigns in the 2015 garbage crisis, these SMOs never fully took control of the revolution (Assi, 2021). Nevertheless, their presence impacted the dynamics of the October Revolution, influencing matters like recruitment. One participant, for example, described how her university's secular group, of which she was a member, utilized its Facebook and WhatsApp groups to encourage followers to join the protests, acknowledging that she sensed "political campaigns started taking over" (personal communication, April 25, 2024). Another interviewee was positioned on the opposing side, tasked with managing the social media strategy of the political student movement to which he belonged. He described how and he and his colleagues deployed a combination of their movement's public Facebook page and mass WhatsApp texts to consistently disseminate "a variety of frames, and images, and videos, and using that for recruitment purposes" (personal communication, March 1, 2024).

5.2 Geographical and temporal coordination

Recruitment efforts, whether conducted privately or publicly, commonly included providing details on meeting times and locations. This relates to the second, equally significant type of practice for which social media was deployed during the October Revolution: geographical and temporal coordination. The fact that online coordination of meeting times and locations played a considerable part in Lebanon's uprising is hardly surprising. As mentioned before, various scholars (e.g. Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) have demonstrated that in present-day instances of civil unrest, social media are customarily used to circulate meeting times and locations. Nevertheless, it is useful to explore what this practice looked like in the context of the 17 October Protests. After all, each social movement embodies unique characteristics, including its own methods of temporal and geographical coordination. Moreover, due to the rapid evolution of online communication technologies,

conclusions drawn from past analyses might not be applicable to more recent instances of social movement mobilization.

Similar to recruitment, in the case of the October Revolution, geographical and temporal coordination occurred mainly in two ways: among acquaintances, via direct messaging and intimate WhatsApp groups, and more publicly through large-scale group chats and public social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. While the former method of coordination played a significant role throughout the uprising, it was particularly prevalent during the initial days of the protests, when broader, more formal organizational structures had not yet been established. One participant, for example, described how she had a WhatsApp group with her cousins where they coordinated when and where to meet in those first couple of days. Another interviewee shared a similar experience, but instead of her family, she coordinated with her coworkers: “I was texting my colleagues, and we were like: ‘Okay, are you guys going down?’ ‘Yes, we're going down.’ ‘Okay, we're going to meet up’” (personal communication, March 12, 2024).

As the revolution gained momentum, however, this personal style of temporal and geographical coordination increasingly gave way to a more expansive and structured approach. One participant, who was working for a civil society organization at the time, explained how this shift occurred rather naturally, out of necessity: “It started that way. Really, very organically, just from the need of, you know what? Since it’s here to stay . . . we need, at least, to have a bit of operation and a system in place to move on” (personal communication, March 12, 2024). The materialization of this “system”, as the interviewee refers to it, was most noticeable on WhatsApp, where large-scale group chats were starting to form. In some cases, these groups were centered around a specific organization, like the secular student organization mentioned earlier. In most cases, however, these WhatsApp groups concerned broad, open groups, formed through a snowballing process with acquaintances adding one another, and via the dissemination of mass invitations. One interviewee illustrated what such an invitation would look like: “You’d get a link on WhatsApp

[with a message saying]: ‘Join this group. They’re giving live details and information about what’s going on, which roads are blocked, which streets have protesters…’” (personal communication, March 26, 2024). As another participant explained, these groups were often managed by certain “admins” – it was not clarified how these admins were affiliated – who were the only ones authorized to send messages. Therefore, these admins were in charge of the meeting times and locations: “We joined, and there’s [sic] all these people. You knew no one. And then they [the admins] would send: ‘This is happening at 1.00. Be there. Be many’ . . . That sort of stuff” (personal communication, May 16, 2024).

Despite the fact that WhatsApp played a pivotal role in the online scheduling of meeting times and locations, it was not the only form of social media through which geographical and temporal coordination occurred. This practice also transpired on public social media platforms. However, instead of displaying separate mechanisms of coordination, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were often used to further disseminate the times and locations agreed upon in the aforementioned WhatsApp groups. As one interviewee recalled,

> It was easy to know where people were meeting because there were WhatsApp groups that would tell you where to go and where to be at . . . Then, a lot of it would go also [*sic*] viral on social media, like: ‘Today, we're going to meet at this time and this place, and then we're going to walk to this place.’ So you could always know where people are going because it was readily available to everybody. (personal communication, April 23, 2024)

In a way, public social media thus functioned as an amplifier for the aforementioned WhatsApp groups. As the participants' accounts revealed, this process occurred both informally, with individuals reposting details on their Twitter timelines or Instagram Stories, and more formally through SMOs disseminating the coordinative information among their networks, primarily via Facebook groups.

In addition to the intentional sharing of meeting times and locations, geographical and temporal coordination on public social media was also sustained somewhat serendipitously by the online output of Lebanese news outlets. As one participant disclosed, the updates and reports from news platforms – which they frequently shared on social media – inadvertently facilitated coordination by informing individuals about when and where the protests were happening. Reportedly, platforms like *Political Pen* and *Megaphone* played a particularly important role here: "They [*Political Pen* and *Megaphone*] were sharing, let's say: 'In Tripoli, this square is being blocked right now. This road is being blocked in Beirut. In Saida, we have this protest' . . . So we got a lot of our live updates from these channels" (personal communication, March 26, 2024). These relatively new media platforms – established around the time of the revolution – portray themselves as nonpartisan alternatives to Lebanon's mainstream media and many interviewees underlined the significant impact they had on the October Revolution (Internews & Maharat Foundation, 2021). However, despite their apparent considerable influence on the coordination of the demonstrations, the participant quoted above stressed that he did not recall these alternative platforms explicitly advocating for mobilization: "I don't think *Political Pen* was calling for people to join the protests. Their job was just to keep us updated and tell us: 'Okay, there's a protest there. There's a protest here. This road is blocked. This street is blocked'" (personal communication, March 26, 2024).

5.3 Exchanging practicalities and providing support

As some quotes above already suggest, the dissemination of geographical and temporal details of the protests customarily coincided with the exchange of additional information, such as road closures. However, traffic updates were not the only type of practical information shared among protesters on social media. As the interviewees' accounts highlighted, participants of the October Revolution used the digital realm to disseminate and exchange all sorts of practicalities. Similar to the process of geographical and temporal

coordination, the exchange of practical information related to the protests mainly took place in a clustered manner, primarily through WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These groups were sometimes organized around a specific organization or a predefined crowd. However, as one participant explained, in most cases, they were arranged based on geographical location:

> The protests started in a way where there were different locations. One in Beirut, one in Jounieh, or whatever. You had different groups for each place. So if I was someone who was going to the [Beirut] Souks protest and I needed a ride, I could say in that group: 'Hi guys, I need the right. Please, can someone come pick me up?' And it worked out . . . It was so nice to see how people were helping, you know? And this example of the ride is a very small example of what we did, what Facebook could do, what social media could do. (personal communication, January 31, 2024)

This demonstrates that, while practical details were also distributed in a top-down manner, via popular Instagram pages or by admins of the previously discussed mass WhatsApp groups, much practical information was exchanged reciprocally among the protesters.

While it seems to have constituted an important form of practical organization at the time – various interviewees also mentioned the practice – carpooling was not the only manner in which protesters deployed social media to support one another. For example, individuals also discussed how to coordinate supplies. As one participant noted, there was regular communication among her group regarding what to bring to the protests, including essentials like backpacks and water bottles. Another interviewee shared how she and her friends coordinated the purchasing of Lebanese flags for the demonstrations. However, more urgent matters were also addressed. One interviewee, for instance, remembered coming across posts on public social media seeking blood donations for those injured in the protests. In fact, such online exchanges, regarding matters of safety, were rather common during the uprising.

As the participants noted, safety measures were widely disseminated throughout the revolution, via public platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as within large-scale WhatsApp groups. One participant, for example, recalled how there were Instagram pages providing the protesters with protective advice: “You'd find profiles with a list of ways to keep yourself safe, like: ‘Write your number on your hand. Wear a [face] mask. Wear plain clothes. Go with a gas mask too’” (personal communication, January 31, 2024). Another interviewee described how social media was also utilized for conducting risk assessments: “This [social media] is where you’d read updates, like: ‘Go there. Don’t go there. Here it’s more safe [*sic*]. Here it’s not safe.’ This is where people used to get most of their updates” (personal communication, April 25, 2024). Accordingly, as a second interviewee emphasized, “It just influenced where I could go and not go” (personal communication, February 8, 2024).

Yet, social media not only served as a means for exchanging safety advice; protesters also deployed as a protective tool on the ground. For one thing, despite reportedly poor reception, individuals primarily relied on WhatsApp to stay connected with each other during the demonstrations. Furthermore, protesters used social media strategically as a defense tool, making use of their smartphone's recording function. One interviewee described how this played out:

> We started filming a lot, documenting a lot, and posting a lot on social media, just considering it our only real weapon, basically. Even on the street, like, if you're going to be beating someone up, we all have our cameras on. Eventually, we're going to know who you are. Eventually, there are going to be repercussions. (personal communication, March 12, 2024)

Indeed, it appears that, at least in some instances, these actions *would* have consequences. One interviewee recalled how she and a number of other protesters were cornered by a hostile militia when they were ‘saved’ by another group of protesters who had come across their emergency calls on social media: “This is how much Facebook was affecting people. People would come when you were in distress at that time” (personal communication, March

14, 2024). Consequently, as noted by one participant, during the course of the uprising, as “social media coverage decreased, violence increased” (personal communication, February 27, 2024). Not only because social media lost its protective capabilities for the movement participants, but also because decreased online coverage meant the social control that mitigated the protester’s offline actions more or less disappeared.


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6. Communicative functions of social media

This research is not only interested in the coordinative functions social media platforms had during the uprising; its goal is also to explore their communicative aspects throughout the revolution. This chapter delves deeper into these aspects, guided by the third sub-question of this research: How did the communicative use of social media by participants of the October Revolution influence offline movement participation in the uprising in 2019 and 2020? Concerning the communicative use of social media during the revolution, three main purposes were identified: increasing the protests' visibility; propagating the cause and reiterating the demands; and countering opposing narratives. This chapter explores each of these functions and discusses how they impacted the dynamics of offline movement mobilization.

6.1 Increasing visibility

The first key communicative function social media had during the 17 October Protests was enhancing the visibility of the revolution. Especially at the beginning of the uprising, the uprising enjoyed massive online exposure. First of all, Lebanese media outlets extensively covered the protests through their online platforms. Again, alternative media organizations played a prominent role. Not only did their significant online presence cause them to reach a larger audience than many traditional news platforms, particularly among Lebanon's younger generations, but due to their progressive and rather activistic focus they were also more proactive in reporting on the unfolding events of the revolution (Internews & Maharat Foundation, 2021). More importantly, in addition to providing extensive exposure to the uprising, alternative platforms reportedly presented a divergent narrative from other conventional media. As one interviewee underscored, due to the country's deeply rooted sectarian divides, Lebanon's traditional media landscape is highly political: "If you watch *MTV*, you're from a certain political or religious party. If you watch *LBC*, if you watch

Annahar, if you watch *Al-Manar*... It's very subjective news coverage" (personal communication, February 27, 2024). In contrast, platforms such as *Political Pen* and *Megaphone* present themselves as non-affiliated, allegedly causing them to offer a more "objective, fact-based coverage" of the protests (personal communication, February 27, 2024). According to several interviewees, this style of reporting supported the revolution's non-sectarian nature and enhanced its accessibility.

While online news coverage evidently increased the revolution's visibility, even more impactful were the protesters' own actions in sharing on-the-ground pictures and videos of the demonstrations on social media. All participants highlighted how their social media was dominated by footage of the protests, especially during the initial weeks of the uprising. As one interviewee recalled, every day, "there used to be [Instagram] stories, like fifty stories, and they were all about the protests" (personal communication, May 16, 2024). As outlined in the previous chapter, some of these images were part of direct recruitment efforts, paired with messages straightforwardly urging others to join the protesters. However, a much larger part of the pictures and videos shared by the protesters did not contain such direct calls to action; instead, they simply portrayed events unfolding in the streets – though this does not necessarily mean there were no underlying intentions. As one interviewee underlined, "A lot of people were just filming what's happening on the street and what's going on . . . They used to show a lot of footage, like amateur footage they took" (personal communication, May 16, 2024).

Due to its visual focus, Instagram unsurprisingly stood out as the most prominent platform in this context. One participant, for instance, shared how, almost every day, she posted pictures in her Instagram Stories, featuring fellow protesters dressed in the nation's colors or waving the Lebanese flag. Another interviewee described how she consistently shared videos to encapsulate the atmosphere at the protests: "I would post videos from wherever I am at, and go like: 'Look how many people there are.' . . . I used to post us, like, chanting . . . I used to show them how nice and cool it was" (personal communication, April

25, 2024). Of particular significance was the live feature on Instagram – and consequently on Facebook, due to their connection. Nearly all interviewees emphasized that live streaming on social media was an essential aspect of the October Revolution's online dimension. It served not just for protection, as mentioned earlier, but crucially to provide uncensored coverage of events. As one participant put it, "the live aspect of social media changed everything, because it's really as if we had our TV" (personal communication, March 12, 2024).

Based on the participants' responses, the widespread visibility of the uprising online had three significant consequences. First of all, it boosted confidence and morale. This was particularly noticeable during the early phase of the uprising. This marked a time when the atmosphere at the protests was characterized by sentiments of elation, hope, and togetherness. As one interviewee recalled, "It felt like: 'Okay, it doesn't matter where from Lebanon you're from, what's your sect, what's your religion.' Literally, everybody was protesting, holding the Lebanese flag, and just protesting for a better future in the country" (personal communication, March 26, 2024). Another second participant emphasized, "It was something I don't think I can ever feel again . . . Seeing so many people out [*sic*] and fighting for one cause . . . That feeling of unity between Lebanese people. It is not something you can find commonly" (personal communication, January 31, 2024).

Due to the extensive online exposure of the protests, with footage of these massive cheerful crowds inundating Lebanese timelines, the sentiments experienced on the streets resonated on social media as well. As several participants emphasized, the sense of unity – as highlighted by the interviewee quoted above – reverberated particularly strongly on social media. This not only strengthened online solidarity but also influenced street mobilization. Various interviewees underlined how sentiments of harmony and hope evoked by images of thousands of fellow Lebanese out on the streets cultivated a sense of optimism about achieving something significant, prompting more individuals to join the protests and motivating existing participants to attend more frequently. Sometimes, social media even served a double purpose, as Figure 5 wittily demonstrates. As one of them illustrated,

“People started seeing the videos everywhere . . . and they started getting encouraged because of the fact that there's a lot of people going . . . which made more people go there, and go more” (personal communication, April 25, 2024).

Figure 5. Image of a protester in Tripoli holding up a sign that says: 'We are the people who watch YouTube in 1080p even if the WiFi is slow, so I don't think we'll get bored of this. Picture from participant’s personal library, 2019.

However, the images of the buoyant masses in the first weeks of the protests, shared widely online, not only bolstered confidence and morale but as one participant put it, it also generated a certain “hype” around the revolution – provoking the feeling that the protests were something one wanted to be part of. As another participant explained, “When everybody is down to protest and they start posting pictures, videos, stories, etcetera, there is this effect of: ‘I want to be there.’ Like FoMO [Fear of Missing Out], you know?” (personal communication, March 12, 2024). According to her, this FoMO effect unquestionably fostered the gathering of participants, thereby supporting the growth of the revolution. However, she

also highlighted there was a downside to the phenomenon: “At the same time, it was annoying, because you're like: ‘It's not a festival. It's not about going, posting a picture, and putting it on your story’” (personal communication, March 12, 2024). A second interviewee agreed, arguing that the hype social media engendered fostered a form of low-effort mobilization that obstructed ‘real’ on-the-ground organization: “Social media was important because it was the primary tool used by youth in the protests in order to engage and organize people . . . On the other hand, it compensated [sic] for bad capacity building . . . and grassroots organizing on the ground” (personal communication, March 1, 2024).

Another way in which the increased visibility of the revolution online impacted street mobilization was by fueling feelings of dejection and frustration. As previously described, at the beginning of the uprising, footage on social media primarily incited and amplified positive emotions. However, as the movement progressed, reflecting the change of atmosphere on the ground, images of cheerful protesters progressively gave way to poignant scenes and violent footage, and feelings of anger and sorrow prevailed. While some participants admitted that this imagery discouraged them, many others emphasized that it only fueled their determination and strengthened their resolve to take to the streets. One interviewee, for example, recalled how she came across a video of a soldier crying supposedly because he was forced to confront the protesters despite believing in their cause: “I remember that made me really, really mad. It made me want to go down more . . . That video drove me insane. I was like: ‘No, I have to go there.’ For them, you know? (personal communication, April 23, 2024). Another participant recounted seeing a picture of policemen holding a little child’s hand, or a video of an elderly woman expressing her frustration with the situation in the country and urging everyone to join the demonstrations:

> All of these really helped. Like, telling the stories of these people on the ground. Then you’d start getting attached to these people. You start recognizing them. Seeing them . . . It changes your whole emotion and perspective of the image itself. (personal communication, March 12, 2024)

Therefore, whether intentionally or not, it appears evident that the emotions stirred by online footage considerably influenced street mobilization in the October Revolution. However, this was not the only manner through which the communicative utilization of social media impacted offline movement participation.

6.2 Propagating the cause and reiterating the demands

The second main communicative practice for which social media platforms were used throughout the uprising was to propagate the cause of the October Revolution movement and circulate the demands of the protesters. Therefore, social media was utilized not only to depict *what* was happening but also to explain *why* it was happening. Before discussing how social movement participants utilized social media platforms to disseminate their cause, it is beneficial to first briefly explore what this cause actually was. Indeed, the revolution initially ignited over the announcement of the aforementioned VoIP austerity measures. However, since the WhatsApp tax was canceled just a few hours after the protests erupted, it is evident that this was not the true reason Lebanon's citizens took to the streets in such massive numbers and for such an extensive period (Al Jazeera, 2019). In fact, all interviewees highlighted that although it undoubtedly was the straw that broke the camel's back, the VoIP tax was not the true cause of the revolution. What, then, was the true impetus behind the October Revolution, and how did this translate to the protesters' demands?

In trying to uncover what factors drove Lebanon's population to collectively revolt on the 17th of October 2019, one could go back as far as the 1990 Taif Agreement; the accord that ended Lebanon's fifteen-year-long civil war and laid the groundwork for the country's modern-day political system (Vértes et al., 2021). In fact, one could go back even further, before the Lebanese civil war. However, although its turbulent history, marked by sectarianism divisions and widespread corruption, strongly influences Lebanon's contemporary sociopolitical climate and underpins most of its current adversities, the

effective causes for the October Revolution were more proximate (Della Porta & Tufaro, 2022). One participant, for example, pointed to the sweeping forest fires that struck her country just days before the protests erupted, with widespread criticism aimed at the Lebanese government for its lack of preparedness and inadequate response (Azhari, 2019a) Another participant mentioned Lebanon's earlier referenced perpetual garbage crisis, which came to a climax in the summer of 2015 but was still tormenting the country in 2019 (BBC News, 2015). Although these might seem like distinct explanations, they both come down to one single, substantial underlying cause: the monumental financial crisis Lebanon had been stuck in for years – and still is today.

After years of severe financial mismanagement and a cumulation of unfortunate economic setbacks, in 2019, the Lebanese state had effectively gone bankrupt (Daher, 2022). Among numerous other things, this was causing sweeping utility disruptions, as well as a progressive depreciation of the country's currency, the Lebanese lira. Both the existing literature and the experiences of the interviewees underscored that this is what truly catalyzed the October Revolution and enabled the announced austerity measures to trigger such an excessive and enduring response (Daher, 2022; Makdisi, 2021; Youssef, 2020). The question, however, is how these adversities translated into the objectives pursued by the uprising's movement. While it stands to reason that the protesters' ultimate goal was to reverse Lebanon's economic decline and improve their financial well-being, what specific demands did they adopt to achieve this? Furthermore, what role did social media play in disseminating these demands?

Both the accounts of the participants and the literature underscored that, at the beginning of the uprising, the objective was rather straightforward: to force the resignation of the incumbent government. In the eyes of the protesters, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his administration were responsible for exacerbating Lebanon's economic crisis, and to a larger extent, the government, which comprised the country's main political parties, was viewed as symbolic of everything that was wrong with the country (Makdisi, 2021). Moreover, the

government, composed of the country's main traditional political parties, was seen as symbolic of everything wrong with Lebanese politics, from sectarianism to clientelism (Makdisi, 2021). As one participant noted, "That was the clear message . . . It was clear and obvious that our politicians are liars . . . They're corrupt . . . They are stealing money from us and they are not using them [*sic*] for the sake of the country" (personal communication, March 14, 2024).

According to several interviewees, this "clear message", focused on the corruptness and incompetence of Lebanon's politicians, also dominated social media, at least in the early stages of the uprising. Especially on public platforms, there was widespread dissemination of posts, videos, and even memes (see Figure 6) portraying Lebanon's political leaders as incapable and denouncing the sectarian and clientelist nature of Lebanese politics. Based on the interviewees' accounts, this sort of content was generally generated and distributed by individuals themselves. As one interviewee noted, Instagram and Twitter were particularly prominent: "They [Twitter and Instagram] played a very, very important role for organizing spheres and the articulation of an anti-establishment public opinion" (personal communication, March 1, 2024). Another participant explained this anti-establishment discourse was not only meant to rally fellow citizens behind the cause, but also to attract attention from beyond Lebanon's borders: "Especially that it got to the masses outside, and to other countries . . . That's what mattered the most. For people to know that the country is corrupt, the government was corrupt – still is corrupt" (personal communication, January 31, 2024). Regardless of the objective, it is evident that the initial discourse on social media was mainly problem-oriented, focusing on what the protesters were *against* rather than on what they wished to achieve. According to several participants, through the initial 'hype' of the revolution, this narrative was sufficient to motivate people to take to the streets.

Figure 6. Meme satirically criticizing Lebanese politics' sectarianism and corruption. Instagram post by @kilonya3nekilon, 2019.

In any case, it did not take long before the demonstrators obtained their primary objective – their first 'victory'; on 29 October, after approximately two weeks of uninterrupted nationwide protests, Prime Minister Hariri and his government decided to resign (Azhari, 2019b). The resignation triggered a wave of euphoria and fulfillment that swept through the uprising. One participant vividly remembered the moment she saw on TV the administration had stepped down: "I was jumping around, I was excited, and I started crying of [*sic*] happiness" (personal communication, April 23, 2024). Yet, Hariri's retirement also meant the movement had to revise its objectives. With the incumbent government gone, the protesters were forced to shift their focus to the bigger picture: the structural problems plaguing Lebanon and the broader system said to be sustaining these. As one participant, working for a civil society organization, noted, this transition from concentrating on rather "primitive" goals to "more systemic" objectives posed serious challenges for the movement: "At the beginning, it was: we want . . . Saad Hariri to leave . . . Then he left, and then… What is

actually what we want?" (personal communication, March 12, 2024). Consequently, the interviewee highlighted, "We needed to really unify in terms of the demands in question" (personal communication, March 12, 2024).

As several participants emphasized, social media played a crucial role in articulating and disseminating this revised, more structural, and solution-oriented narrative. However, while the concise anti-establishment discourse that dominated the initial weeks of the protests was primarily disseminated in a bottom-up and horizontal manner, the spread of this new, more structural narrative was mainly driven by (SMOs) and prominent activists. In fact, as one participant noted, if there was one key role that SMOs played during the October Revolution, it was this:

> The primary role of anti-establishment social organizations, and left-leaning and progressive, new alternative organizations and groups, is their ability to steer the discourse once material conditions are put forth. They exploit the political opportunities which emerge, and impose a particular discourse in the midst of their exploiting of these political opportunities. But the ground itself is not necessarily materially shaped by these alternative organizations, because they are institutionally weak and they have low capacity-building. (personal communication, March 1, 2024)

Therefore, while on the ground, the movement sustained a decentralized structure, online mobilization efforts increasingly amalgamated. As another interviewee noted, this required a careful balance between providing structure and avoiding excessive control: "This is always the trick, in any revolution. To have a sort of unification without, at the same time, having a full-on organization. Because then you feel like you've become a political party, when you're too organized" (personal communication, March 12, 2024). This raises the question: what exactly did this online communication strategy encompass?

Several interviewees, for example, noted the presence of 'influencers' – both Lebanese celebrities and grassroots activists who gained significant followings during the

revolution – who would consistently use their Instagram pages to reiterate the cause of the uprising and share lists of demands, which were often widely reposted. As one of them illustrated, “Every region had their ‘influencers’, if you want; people within the revolution that would live stream, that would tell you that X and Y and Z is happening. They would coordinate and started to have a certain agenda” (personal communication, March 12, 2024). Additionally, one interviewee, who was part of an SMO at the time, for example, explained how he and his colleagues used Facebook to share what appeared to be “individual opinions” in order to promote specific "ideas" and "frames" about where they thought the movement should head. Another participant described how SMOs even collaborated to organize on-the-ground talk shows, which were then live-streamed on social media:

> There was this format that was created on the square [Martyrs’ Square] downtown. It was called a space for debate, for argumentation. Every time there would be a topic, and there would be different types of experts within this topic. People would gather randomly, just sitting down. We just had a mic and a big speaker, and we would talk about politics. Real politics . . . We were really talking about public policy, about reforms, about our real problems, why they're happening. (personal communication, March 12, 2024)

This example concretely demonstrates that, despite their distinct organizational structures, the online and offline dimensions of the October Revolution regularly intersected. This was likewise the case regarding the final communicative function of social media in the uprising: promoting political discussion and facilitating an ‘information war’.

6.3 Countering opposing narratives

It is evident that participants of the 17 October Protests widely used online platforms to reiterate their demands and advance a particular discourse. However, social media was not only utilized by the protesters to promote their own cause but also to counter opposing

narratives. These practices were particularly apparent later in the revolution, coinciding with the rising controversy of the protests. As the uprising progressed, more and more Lebanese began to feel detached from the movement or even started opposing it. The participants' experiences suggest that this was either due to the escalating violence of the protests or, conversely, to the increasingly festive atmosphere they adopted. While on one hand, almost all participants underscored that on-the-ground violence was becoming more frequent and extreme, paradoxically, many interviewees also described the revolution as increasingly transforming into a "festival" or "carnival". As one interviewee illustrated,

> Two weeks, three weeks into the protests, you'd see people just going there for fun. You'd see people there, smoking nargileh, shisha, having a drink or two, parking their cars on the road just to have it parked. Even companies, they made big profits out of this. You had Dunkin Donuts nearby. They were selling Donuts for free, just because people were there. It's insane. (personal communication, January 31, 2024)

Other participants noted the presence of DJs performing, yoga sessions taking place, and even a marriage ceremony being held. As one interviewee reflected, "It began as [sic] teargas, protests, and chants, and so many people. And then . . . it became a carnival, and this is when people started feeling it had lost its value" (personal communication, April 25, 2024).

Alongside the growing external criticism, internal divisions also intensified. Despite attempts to unify the movement's demands after Hariri's resignation, discord among the protesters began to emerge regarding their objectives. Although the objective remained to 'change the system', it became increasingly clear that there was no consensus on what 'change' truly meant, and how Lebanon's structural adversities were to be addressed (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2021). Consequently, as one interviewee put it, "in-groups" began to emerge. Rather than revolving around a specific sect, these groups were centered around political beliefs. As the uprising unfolded, this political fragmentation deepened, a trend further propelled by established political parties 'infiltrating' the revolution,

as highlighted by multiple interviewees. One participant illustrated this through an anecdote about encountering her father at the protests:

> My dad belongs to a specific political party, which I'm not a part of. The moment I saw him go down on [*sic*] the street, I knew it was politically affiliated. I know my dad. He would never participate in anything like that if they hadn't told him to go there . . . I literally saw him walk up to me, and I was like: 'Oh shit, this is over' (personal communication, April 23, 2024).

The growing political tensions led to heightened agitation on the ground. As several interviewees noted, both verbal and physical conflicts among protesters became more frequent, while the chants grew increasingly political. As one participant sharply put it, it became "everyone means everyone [killon yaane killon], except my guy" (personal communication, May 16, 2024).

However, the changing shape of the protests and the progressive political fragmentation not only exacerbated tensions offline, but also altered the discourse on social media. As internal and external tensions grew, opposing narratives proliferated online, questioning the morality of the uprising as well as the political goals the protesters were pursuing. For example, one participant noted that people increasingly began asking questions like, "Who is leading the movement? Who is behind it? Is it being controlled, or is it truly grassroots?" (personal communication, February 8, 2024). A second interviewee recalled individuals sharing footage of protesters drinking beer or kissing, as well as making claims about drug use during the demonstrations, "just to say: 'This is what the protests are about. It's about losing our morals'" (personal communication, March 14, 2024). Another underlined, "a lot of people were sharing, posting about, what happened, like: 'This is bullshit. Why is it becoming like this?' . . . There was a lot of fights online" (personal communication, April 25, 2024).

Those who remained true to the October Revolution movement sought to counter this online criticism primarily in two ways. To begin with, protesters sought to counter condemnatory voices by engaging in political and moral discussions with their critics. Sometimes, these exchanges happened between acquaintances. Several interviewees mentioned they frequently noticed people arguing with one another in WhatsApp groups, or on Facebook timelines and in Instagram comments. One participant admitted that she would sometimes also engage in these discussions herself, stating that she did so primarily to "educate" others:

> There would be some comments that would make me go crazy. So many people didn't know that it's not written in our constitution to have a president who's Maronite, a head of parliament who's Shia . . . These are things that people assume because of ignorance or lack of knowledge, and this would drive me crazy. So it was really, in terms of education . . . Just to raise awareness. (personal communication, March 12, 2024)

While some interviewees felt that engaging in online exchanges such as this one was pointless – actively choosing to avoid them – others believed it was important to have these discussions to understand the positions of the people around them. In fact, several interviewees even admitted to unfollowing individuals when they discovered they did not support the revolution. One participant explained, "People that were against it . . . were immediately disregarded from our lives. We unfollowed them, we lost contact with them . . . If you're pro-political party and if you're pro-system, we do not want you in our lives" (personal communication, February 27, 2024).

However, discussions on social media were not limited to acquaintances. Protesters also corresponded with fellow citizens they did not know, as well as with prominent political figures. The participants' accounts suggest that these exchanges predominantly took place on Twitter. One interviewee attributed this to the platform's inherently political character. Another emphasized that on Twitter, users could more easily (directly) connect with a larger

audience while enjoying a considerable level of anonymity: “Twitter was a much more wider [*sic*] and more aggressive platform . . . On Twitter, you could say things and nothing would happen to you. No one would know you even [*sic*]. It was just much more private than Instagram” (personal communication, January 31, 2024). Although Twitter's ‘aggressive’ and politically charged atmosphere discouraged some interviewees from using the platform, others regarded it as their primary venue for discussing the uprising – some even downloaded it specifically for that purpose. One participant, for instance, mentioned she used Twitter to try and engage with Lebanese MPs. Another interviewee articulated he regularly used the platform to participate in what he referred to as politically fueled “Twitter wars” with people critical of the uprising.

Yet, not all disputes on social media involved ‘honest’ exchanges of differing political ideas or opinions about the righteousness of the revolution. Another prominent way in which both protesters and their opponents used the online space to counter opposing narratives was through the dissemination and rebuttal of false or sensitive information. Therefore, social media not only served as a platform for debate, but also as a battleground for a significant information war. According to the interviewees, it was primarily those opposed to the revolution who fueled this online struggle, engaging in personal harassment of the protesters and disseminating manipulated images and misleading information to cast a negative light on the movement. However, since this study specifically focuses on the online actions of the movement participants – rather than their opponents – this analysis concentrates solely on how the protesters contributed to this information war. Nonetheless, one of the primary strategies protesters employed to counter opposing narratives online was in fact rebutting personal harassment efforts and misinformation campaigns. One participant, for example, described her constant struggle to block individuals whom she believed were part of “Hezbollah’s digital army”, who frequently infiltrated her Instagram comments and even her personal inbox. Another interviewee described how she repeatedly attempted to combat fake

news by ‘correcting’ individuals who shared flawed information, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

However, movement participants also engaged in the distribution of fake news and online intimidation themselves. One of the most striking examples of the latter concerns *Thawramap*, a seemingly controversial Instagram page referenced by several interviewees. The account, managed by a group of anonymous activists, initially served to inform protesters when and where demonstrations were taking place. Over time, however, the page transitioned to exposing Lebanese politicians through sharing sensitive information, notably their live locations. As one participant who was rather critical of the page explained,

> They’d go like: ‘This member of parliament is at this restaurant while people are protesting. Let's go and block his car. Let's go and, I don't know, make his life a living hell . . . These were the types of posts . . . They were causing quite some trouble and… They were too extreme, you know. (personal communication, March 26, 2024)

In addition, protesters also engaged in the dissemination of misinformation and fabricated footage. While most interviewees claimed it was primarily the opposing parties responsible for such actions, one participant acknowledged that protesters were equally culpable. To illustrate his point, he explained how demonstrations were often depicted with unwarranted optimism, inflating their perceived impact and attendance numbers. Furthermore, he recalled instances where violence was portrayed as being initiated by the security forces when allegedly, it was really the protesters who had instigated it. To him, these misconceptions generally arose from the “narrow scope” of the footage that was shared on social media: “It’s taken out of context . . . You don't know why this happened, nor when, nor where, nor how . . . You only watched a video of one minute, and that's enough for you to judge the situation? It's not” (personal communication, May 16, 2024).


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7. Discussion

The goal of this study has been to try and advance our understanding of the influence of social media on the offline actions of contemporary social movements. Specifically, it has sought to move beyond the established role of social media in coordinating offline mobilization efforts and also take into account its communicative aspects, trying to fathom how the use of Web 2.0 features fundamentally impacts the dynamics of offline collective action. Correspondingly, within the context of the Lebanese October Revolution, this study explored how social movement participants utilized online platforms in relation to the protests and how this affected street mobilization throughout 2019 and 2020. This chapter addresses this central research objective by discussing the most significant conclusions drawn from the findings presented earlier. Additionally, it revisits the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 2, evaluating the implications of this study's main findings for the contemporary debate on social movements, and what this means for future research.

7.1 Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that social media constituted a critical factor in Lebanon's October Revolution and had a major impact on the dynamics of offline collective action. To a certain extent, this is not surprising. Despite the poor quality of Lebanon's digital infrastructure, its population is highly connected; nearly nine out of ten Lebanese citizens regularly access the internet, own a smartphone, and engage with at least one social media platform (Hassen, 2024; Silver et al., 2019; World Bank, 2021). As Lebanon's most widely used type of social media, WhatsApp appears to have had the most influential role in the uprising. However, Facebook, Instagram, and, to a lesser degree, Twitter were also used extensively by those participating in the protests (Silver et al., 2019). Social media practically facilitated two types of networks – that were often interconnected: proximate ones, where acquaintances interacted in a small-scale and personal manner, and public networks which

encompassed broader and diverse audiences, and generally displayed a more ‘formal’ structure. Nonetheless, reflecting the grassroots character of the street protests, online networks were generally marked by a horizontal and leaderless structure, with SMOs only playing a moderate role.

As anticipated, both types of networks utilized the aforementioned social media platforms in two key ways: for organizing and coordinating street mobilization, and for framing the protests to shape public opinion. The former, in which WhatsApp played a particularly vital role, encompassed three main practices: recruitment, geographical and temporal coordination, and the exchange of practical information and support. The findings of this research suggest that these practices directly affected the dynamics of offline movement mobilization. The dissemination of online calls to action, often adopting an accusatory tone towards those who remained passive, was crucial in driving the grassroots recruitment efforts upon which the revolution depended. The online coordination of meeting times and locations allowed protesters to mobilize quickly and efficiently, a trend further aided by the exchange of practical details, ranging from carpooling arrangements to distributing safety advice

Contrary to the coordinative functions of social media during the October Revolution, the communicative use of Web 2.0 platforms was primarily conducted through public channels. Zooming in on the communicative aspects of social media, three main practices reveal themselves. First of all, movement participants deployed online platforms to increase the visibility of the protests by persistently sharing (live) footage of the street protests among their proximate and public networks. Second, protesters used social media to propagate the cause of the uprising and reiterate their demands. This occurred in various forms, including the dissemination of brief lists of demands, the creation of memes highlighting the causes of the uprising, and even the broadcasting of political talk shows held in the middle of Martyrs’ Square. Additionally, social media played a crucial role in countering opposing narratives, with movement participants getting engaged in online political discussions and making efforts to disseminate and rebut false or sensitive information.

The effects of the communicative use of social media during the uprising were less obvious at first glance, but the findings of this study reveal that they still had a profound impact on the dynamics of offline collective action. On one hand, the widespread online visibility of the protests, with images of jubilant, chanting crowds flooding Lebanese timelines, fostered a sense of hype around the revolution. This not only boosted those already involved in the uprising, but also created a certain FOMO effect, enticing more individuals to join the movement. At the same time, with emotionally charged footage inciting feelings of anger and sorrow, the revolution's significant online visibility fueled a sense of urgency and commitment, further encouraging offline movement participation. Both dynamics were further amplified by the widespread dissemination of politically charged content, enabling protesters to spread their message and counter opposing narratives swiftly and without interference from external influences like the sectarian biases typically present in Lebanon's traditional media outlets.

Overall, this research indicates that the use of social media by participants of the October Revolution significantly impacted street mobilization over the course of the uprising. Despite some findings indicating a clear separation between the online and offline dimensions of the revolution, the two shared similar discursive elements and maintained a strong connection. Most notably, the use of social media by movement participants influenced offline mobilization by leveraging the relatability and accessibility of the uprising, enhancing the popular and non-sectarian character of the revolution. Furthermore, social media amplified the emotional weight of the uprising, making the protests feel more monumental and impactful than they already were. The combination of these two processes fostered not only greater participation in street mobilization but also bolstered the continuity of the protests and the determination of the participants. At the same time, however, some argue that the revolution's substantial online dimension hindered the development of on-the-ground capacity building, exacerbating the movement's already weak formal organization and hastening the eventual downfall of the uprising once the initial hype had waned.

Nevertheless, this study reveals a broad consensus that social media had a predominantly positive impact on street mobilization and, consequently, on the development of the October Revolution – at least from the protesters' perspective. Some findings even propose that social media was integral to the movement's viability. Therefore, as one protester put it, rather than Beirut's Martyrs' Square, it might have been social media that served as the true heart of Lebanon's *thawra.*

7.2 Implications

The conclusions drawn in the section above should not be treated in a vacuum, and have broader implications for both research and society. When discussing the meaning of this study's results, it is important to consider its limitations, as outlined in Chapter 3 of this report. Foremost among these limitations is the fact that this research is based on a case study with a relatively small and homogenous sample. As indicated earlier, this hampers the generalizability of its findings, and thus different outcomes might emerge from analyses of other demographic groups or alternative cases outside the context of the Lebanese October Revolution. Nevertheless, as emphasized in Chapter 3, the limitations of this study do not undermine the value of its results, which do hold several important implications for both theoretical understanding and practical applications.

To begin with, from a research perspective, this study has sought to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing scholarly debate about the relation between social movements and social media, as described in Chapter 2 of this report. It has aimed to build upon the foundational work of scholars such as Gerbaudo (2012), Milan (2015), and particularly Bennett and Segerberg (2012). In addition, it has tried to integrate the framing perspective of Benford and Snow (2000) into the scholarly discussion on social media and social movements, hoping to support the development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework regarding the role of Web 2.0 technologies in the dynamics of contemporary

movements. Analyzing this study's key findings reveals that it enhances the development of such a framework in a number of ways, adding new insights and valuable augmentations to the existing body of research.

First of all, the results of this thesis corroborate earlier research (e.g., Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2015; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) that identifies social media as a key tool for social movements for coordinating offline mobilization However, while previous studies have mostly examined the role of social media platforms in geographical and temporal coordination, this thesis suggests that online coordination extends beyond these aspects, additionally encompassing functions such as the exchange of practical information and safety advice. In other words, this research demonstrates that social media not only aids in the planning of street mobilization but also supports the additional logistical processes that are crucial for organizing offline collective action on a large scale.

More importantly, however, this study's findings validate the claims made by scholars like Gerbaudo (2012) and Milan (2015), who assert that social media is more than a mere coordinative instrument for collective action. Yet, unlike Gerbaudo (2012), this research does not attribute a significant role to movement leaders in orchestrating online collective action. Although SMOs and prominent activists were definitely involved in the online dimension of the October Revolution, their influence was relatively limited. Instead, the networks visible on social media predominantly relied on grassroots efforts, mirroring the horizontal and leaderless structure of the street protests. Consequently, the findings of this study align more closely with Milan's (2015) perspective, which suggests that social media fosters a decentralized network structure and promotes this decentralization in the offline dynamics of movements – though this research does not establish a direct causal relation.

Yet, most notably, the results of this research corroborate Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory on connective action. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), although online and offline collective actions are characterized by distinct dynamics, they have increasingly become intertwined. This dynamic was clearly evident in the 17 October

Protests. While the online and offline dimensions of the revolution were not perfectly aligned, they still exhibited similar thematic and discursive trends. This pattern reflects the hybrid model outlined by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), which highlights networks that merge the structured elements of collective action with the inclusive aspects of connective action. Correspondingly, these networks are characterized by loosely linked networks where organizations only play a secondary role, and where there is a focus on individually-centered framing processes. This mirrors the online dimension of the October Revolution, which consisted of numerous interlinked, loosely knit networks where SMOs played only a moderate role, and which encompassed an inclusive and relatively personalized discourse.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe this type of discourse through the concept of personal action frames, a key element in their theory of connective action. According to them, these discursive packages are the 'end products' of connective action, thereby replacing the traditional collective action frames, which are more characteristic of conventional forms of movement mobilization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The findings of this study suggest that such personal action frames played a significant role in the online dimension of the October Revolution. For instance, online recruitment efforts often targeted individuals, focusing on personal responsibility – such as exposing people who refrained from joining the demonstrations – rather than addressing the broader structural issues that motivated the protests. Additionally, much of the social media discourse centered around social identity rather than political ideology, framing the revolution as a form of personal expression, as though it was a ‘lifestyle’, rather than a purely political movement. Moreover, the non-sectarian nature of the protests – at least as the participants intended – was also widely emphasized online, helping to bolster the inclusive image of the uprising. The findings of this study indicate that these personal action frames successfully enhanced the accessibility and relatability of the revolution, which in turn boosted (initial) participation.

However, as anticipated – and consistent with the hybrid network model described by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) – personal action frames did not entirely replace conventional

collective action frames in the online strategy of Lebanese revolution participants. While collective action frames were relatively absent from social media in the early stages of the uprising, they gained considerable prominence later in the revolution. As the initial hype of the uprising began to fade, leading to a decline in attendance, and as the movement experienced increasing internal fragmentation, the discourse on social media gradually shifted from a personal and inclusive tone to a more structured, group-oriented, and politically charged narrative. In an effort to unify the movement and reestablish a sense of purpose, the focus shifted from talks of social identity to political commentary and detailed lists of demands. Correspondingly, the revolution was increasingly framed not as a form of self-expression but as a battle of 'us versus them'. Therefore, it appears that collective action frames gradually supplanted the personal action frames that dominated social media at the beginning of the uprising.

This finding is particularly intriguing, especially since it appears not to have been documented in the existing literature. It suggests that while personal action frames are compelling and effective in the early stages of contemporary collective action – typically characterized by its popular nature and decentralized structure – their effectiveness tends to wane as movements mature. As popular movements evolve, there seems to be a growing need for more structured organization and a strategic framework with well-defined goals – requirements that personal action frames often cannot fulfill. Hence, movement participants turn to the articulation and elaboration of 'conventional' collective action frames. While these frames may not address the initial needs of popular movements as effectively, their structural nature is better suited for sustaining group cohesion and articulating a clear strategy. In other words, this research suggests that while personal action frames are vital for initial mobilization, collective action frames remain essential for sustaining and steering collective action effectively over time.

Finally, regarding the precise creation and content of both personal and collective action frames, this research reveals that online framing practices closely adhere to the

‘traditional’ framing dynamics as outlined by Benford and Snow (2000). This is one of few areas where this research fails to confirm Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory, which states that connective action operates under fundamentally different dynamics than collective action; the two can intersect but not fully merge. In both the coordinative and communicative online efforts of the protesters, the three framing tasks proposed by Benford and Snow (2000) – diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing – were clearly present. As anticipated, motivational framing played a particularly prominent role; much of the social media content focused on what Benford and Snow (2000) refer to as ‘action mobilization,’ while problem- or solution-oriented discussions were subtly integrated into the overall narrative. In other words, online framing activities were predominantly aimed at the protests themselves, whether being focused on coordination, increasing their visibility, or directly increasing their attendance.

Within these processes of action mobilization, the vocabularies of motive discussed in Chapter 2 were prominently featured. Protesters used social media not only to highlight the severity of Lebanon’s adversities and the urgency of immediate action but also to emphasize the efficacy and propriety of this action; the online discourse was strongly characterized by sentiments of hope, suggesting that Lebanon’s problems could be resolved, as well as a strong sense of duty, stressing the moral obligation to join the cause and criticizing those who did not. Moreover, this research suggests the existence of a fifth type of vocabularies of motive: belonging. In addition to the previously discussed vocabularies, cultivating a sense of belonging and leveraging a fear of missing out played a crucial role in the online discourse advanced by the protesters, further enhancing the effectiveness of online framing, and amplifying its impact on mobilization efforts.

7.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings and implications of this research, several key recommendations emerge to advance the debate on the role of social media in social movements. These recommendations are aimed at deepening our theoretical understanding of both contemporary movements and the dynamics of online communication, broadening the scope of empirical research, and addressing emerging technological trends that will likely impact the dynamics of connective action in the future. First and foremost, future research should pursue further theoretical integration between digital communication or media studies and social movement studies. Although the relationship between these two fields has been increasingly explored in recent years, they remain somewhat detached from a theoretical perspective. Developing a comprehensive theoretical framework is essential for advancing our understanding of the communicative dimensions of contemporary movements and for fully grasping the role of Web 2.0 technologies in instances of contentious political action, now and in the future.

Secondly, it is vital for future research to remain attuned to the continuous and rapid evolution of Web 2.0 technologies and their implications for the field. For one thing, future studies should make sure to include emerging, or yet-to-be-founded, social media platforms in their analyses. Platforms like TikTok, which are increasingly influential in shaping public discourse, particularly among younger audiences, must be examined for their unique functionalities and impact. Each platform offers a distinct functionality and attracts a particular audience. By integrating these new platforms into future research endeavors, scholars can gain insights into their unique features and how these influence online communication, and thus how they potentially impact processes of connective action. Additionally, future studies should consider broader technological advancements, particularly in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI). Recent strides in AI are reshaping the digital landscape and potentially our society as a whole. Research should explore in what ways AI-driven technologies, such as automated content generation, algorithmic amplification, and

predictive analytics, impact our use of social media and how this influences the online strategies of social movements in the future.

Finally, future research would benefit from focusing not only on the dynamics of connective action within social movements but also on the dynamics within the actors they oppose. As Klandermans (2004), and many other authors, argue, movements do not operate in a vacuum; their actions and success are influenced by the environment in which they operate. In this research, (too) little attention was paid to the parties opposing the October Revolution, such as the Lebanese government and non-governmental or semi-governmental counter-movements. Yet, the findings of this study indicate that the actions of these actors significantly influenced the actions of movement participants on social media. Future studies should address this research gap by considering these opposing forces. Analyzing how adversarial groups use social media to challenge, disrupt, or co-opt the efforts of social movements, and how they structure their own online strategies, will provide a more balanced view of the online dynamics in instances of civil unrest. By addressing these recommendations, future research can foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of social movements in the digital age and help us better fathom the relation between the timelines and the streets.

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Appendix A

Consent form

Information about the study *From the Timeline to the Streets: The Influence of Public Social Media on Street Mobilization During the Lebanese October Revolution*

Introduction

You have been invited to participate in a scientific research project at Radboud University. Before you decide whether you want to participate in this study, you will receive an explanation of what the study entails. Please read this information carefully.

What is the study about?

This study examines how public social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) affected the 17 October Protests in Lebanon. The study specifically focuses on the online behavior of those who participated in the protests to see whether and how their use of public social media influenced their offline actions during this time of social unrest.

What is expected of you?

In this study, you will be interviewed by me, Yoram Kremers. If you consent, an audio recording of this interview will be made to ensure the accuracy of the study. The recording will be used as research data. The interview will take approximately one hour. In the interview I will ask you questions about your participation in the 17 October Protests as well as your public social media behavior during that time.

Voluntary participation

You decide whether to participate in this study. Your participation is voluntary. You may say no at any time. You do not have to answer questions you would rather not answer, and you can stop your participation and withdraw your consent at any time during the study. You do not have to indicate why you are stopping. You can also have your research data and

personal data deleted up to two weeks after participation, by sending an email to [redacted]

What will happen to my data?

Your participation in this study is confidential. Recordings are deleted as soon as the interview report is finished. The interview notes are pseudonymized, meaning that it is nearly impossible to trace data back to you. I do this by removing all information leading to you as an individual from the research data (such as your name, contact information, or any other mentioned individuals). Only your gender, age, and a basic description of your occupation will be used as data for this research (if you wish to exclude this information from the research, please indicate so in the box at the end of this form). The pseudonymized data will not be used for other studies unless you give your explicit consent. The notes will be stored on the Radboud network for ten years to ensure scientific integrity. The list of participants will be deleted at the end of the study.

Do you have any questions about the study?

If you would like to know more about the study or processing of the research data please ask me now, or contact me later via email at [redacted] or by phone at [redacted]

Consent

If you want to participate in this study, I will ask you to sign the following consent form. Your written consent indicates that you have understood the information and agree to participate in the study.

Informed consent form for the study *From the Timeline to the Streets: The Influence of Public Social Media on Street Mobilization During the Lebanese October Revolution*

Statement of consent

I have been informed about the purpose of the study. I was able to ask questions about the study. I am participating in the study voluntarily. I understand that I may stop at any time during the study if I wish. I understand how the data from the study will be kept and what it will be used for. I agree to participate in the study as described in the information document.

In addition, I consent to (please check the appropriate box):	
Yes	**No**
☐	☐ making audio recordings
☐	☐ storing notes internally for a period of 10 years to ensure scientific integrity
☐	☐ use of data about my gender
☐	☐ use of data about my age
☐	☐ use of basic data about my occupation

Name of participant:

Date:

Signature:

Name of researcher:

Date:

Signature:

Appendix B

Interview guide

Interview guide for the research *From the Timeline to the Streets: The Influence of Public Social Media on Street Mobilization During the Lebanese October Revolution*

Introduction

Introduction of the study:

- Reiterating the focus of the study
- Reiterating the purpose of the interview
- Repeating the contents of the consent form
- Thanking the participant
- Ask about possible questions or concerns

Warm up:

- Could please tell me a bit about yourself?
- Who are you?
- How old are you?
- What do you do for a living?

Participation in the protests

Can you take me back to 2019? What was your life like back then?

How did you first hear about the protests?

Initial reaction to the protests

When and why did you personally decide to join the protests?

What was it like to take part of the protests? (atmosphere, emotions, etc.)

Role in the protests

How would you say the protests changed over time? (atmosphere, message, government response, etc.)

Effective use of (public) social media

The influence of social media on the decision to participate

Following the news and gathering intel (type of channels, nature of the footage, etc.)

Active dissemination of information (sort of information shared, purpose, form, platforms, etc.)

Interpersonal communication (channels, shape and nature of communication, etc.)

Perception of (public) social media

How would you say social media influenced your personal view of/participation in the protests? (change?)

In your view, how did the use of social media influence the overall dynamics of the protests? (scale/shape, form, intensity, etc.)

Positive or negative impact?

Challenges or concerns (misinformation, privacy issues, etc.)

Government response (censorship)

What role did social media play in shaping the aftermath of the protests?

Last impact of social media use during the October Revolution

Closing

- Asking participant again for possible questions or concerns
- Informing participant about the data processing process
- Thanking participant one last time

Appendix C

List of participants

Participant	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Interview date
A	[redacted]	Female	22	Graphic designer	31-01-2024 18.00 GMT+3
B	[redacted]	Male	38	Organizational consultant	08-02-2024 19.00 GMT+3
C	[redacted]	Female	24	Social worker	27-02-2024 18.00 GMT+3
D	[redacted]	Female	29	Insurance consultant	14-03-2024 17.00 GMT+3
E	[redacted]	Male	25	PhD candidate Political Sociology	01-03-2024 15.00 GMT+3
F	[redacted]	Female	28	Marketing consultant	12-03-2024 17.00 GMT+3
G	[redacted]	Male	23	Human rights analyst	26-03-2024 15.00 GMT+3
H	[redacted]	Female	23	Nurse	25-04-2024 17.30 GMT+3
I	[redacted]	Female	27	English teacher	23-04-2024 11.00 GMT+3
J	[redacted]	Male	20	Bachelor student Psychology	16-05-2024 11.30 GMT+3

Appendix D

Codebook

Code	Grounded	Density
● Aftermath of the uprising	18	1
● Causes	50	1
● Change of atmosphere	51	1
● Communicating with acquaintances	16	1
○ Conclusion	0	3
● Coordination	36	1
● Coordination and organization	0	8
● Demographic divisions among platforms	10	1
○ Development	0	7
● Discussion and dissemination	0	10
● Division between online and offline	7	1
● Downside of social media	9	1
● Effects of social media	0	11
● FOMO effect of social media	9	1
● Footage of the protests	11	1
● Fragmentation	30	1
● Government response	5	1
● Importance of Facebook	8	1
● Importance of Instagram	12	1
● Importance of Twitter	11	1
● Influence of social media on participation	7	1
● Influencers	8	1

● Initial reaction to the protests	23	1
● Live footage	20	1
● Live updates	10	1
● Message of the uprising changed	23	1
● Misinformation	19	1
● Motivations to quit	39	1
○ Movement structure	34	5
● Objectives	10	1
○ October Revolution	0	2
○ Offline collective action	0	6
● Offline discussion	4	1
● Online content inciting emotion	14	1
● Online discussion	34	1
○ Origins	0	4
● Participation driven by emotion	27	1
● Perceived advantages of social media	19	1
● Physical violence	22	1
● Privacy issues	4	1
○ Public social media	0	5
● Reasons for participation	10	1
● Role of conventional media	11	1
○ SMOs deploying social media	24	2
● Social media as a call to arms	26	1
● Social media as a news platform	49	1
● Social media as a weapon for the weak	8	1
● Social media guiding offline actions	12	1
● Social media shaping the uprising	29	1

● Social media to spread the message	27	1
● Social media used by countermovement	9	1
● Tone on social media changing	11	1
● Types of platforms	0	6
● Uprising getting political	25	1
● WhatsApp groups	16	1

Appendix E

Network