

Obstacles and opportunities: Palestinian youth's uses of social media to promote international solidarity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gmc**Farid Abudheir**

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Abstract

This study explores the extent to which Palestinian media students use social media to promote a pro-Palestinian narrative to Western audiences. Media students at five Palestinian universities were surveyed ($n=282$). The findings showed that a little more than half of the participants reported that they do not address foreigners about Palestine because they lack the necessary contacts or are not interested in the topic. Among those who do address Western societies, most did it by sharing content. The main reported obstacles to sharing information included lack of international contacts, language barriers, and the content moderation policies of some social media platforms.

Keywords

Activism, international solidarity, Palestine, public diplomacy, social media

Introduction

Palestinians have long been subjected to decontextualized, distorted and dehumanizing media representations, which hinders global recognition of their political and national

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rights—including their right to resist occupation and determine their national destiny (Bennett, 2023; Khamis, 2021). In the aftermath of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation conducted by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing Israeli military response in Gaza, the Palestinian issue has attracted an unprecedented level of international attention. But even before this escalation of hostilities, there was evidence that a new wave of international solidarity with Palestinians was emerging, characterized by increased visibility and more humane framing (Khamis, 2021). This emerging movement has been led by young Palestinian activists, who have begun leveraging digital platforms to raise awareness of the occupation's practices (Gil, 2021; Khamis, 2021).

Social media platforms play an important role in amplifying the message of Palestinian resistance, both at home and abroad. These online tools allow Palestinians to connect with people around the world to transmit messages and mobilize support for their cause. This study examines the digital advocacy practices of Palestinian media students who hope to use the affordances of online platforms to create international solidarity and offer a counter-narrative to correct distorted media frames. While this study was conducted before the onset of the Israel-Gaza war, it offers valuable context about the tactics young Palestinians have used to communicate about their lived realities to international audiences.

Literature review

The ability to share news via social media platforms is one of the most crucial—and most studied—aspects of the contemporary news ecosystem. This study's contribution is examining the use of social media among Palestinian youths, who are an understudied but crucial population at the centre of a long-standing conflict with neighbouring Israel.

Social media empowers individuals to practise participatory dialogue in efforts to promote a sense of community (Scott & Maryman, 2016). Interactions among social media users foster understanding, which in turn increases the level of 'fitness' to meet the requirements of the cultural environment, namely, to achieve adaptation between cultures (Sawyer, 2011; Wibowo et al., 2023). However, these tools provide both opportunities and challenges, which increases the necessity of wise use of social media in cultural integration (Wibowo et al., 2023).

The results of a study of private Facebook and WhatsApp groups suggest that communication within groups tends to focus heavily on news, with strong control over privacy and clear standards regarding this communication ruled by social values (Swart et al., 2019). Social media can maintain efforts in the advocacy process, yet it is possible to use the strategies of traditional systems to reinforce social change on the grounds that social media is not sufficient to achieve this goal (Scott & Maryman, 2016).

Digital activism

This study relates to the field of digital activism, which is a topic of growing interest in academic research. Digital activism encompasses a constellation of concepts such as 'cyber-activism', 'hacktivism', 'Internet activism' and 'social media activism' (Fuentes, 2023; Treré & Kaun, 2021). It has emerged as an important form of grass-roots political

organization and mobilization, playing a large role in world events such as the Arab Spring uprisings (Alkazemi et al., 2013; Fuentes, 2023). Karatzogianni (2015: 1) proposed a definition of digital activism, describing it as ‘political participation, activities and protests organized in digital networks beyond representational politics’. This definition includes ‘political conduct aiming for reform or revolution by non-state actors’ as well as ‘social movements, protest organizations and individuals and groups from civil society. . . outside government and corporate influence’ (Karatzogianni, 2015: 1).

While much digital activism research has focused on hashtags and other big data methodologies, Özkula et al. (2023) urged researchers to expand the methods used. This study is survey-based, aimed at understanding the self-reported beliefs of the population under study.

Palestinian social media

Since the emergence of social networks as key tools for the dissemination of news, Palestinian journalists have played a main role in informing people about what is going on in the occupied territories (Abusidu, 2020). Social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become leading sources of news for Palestinians, with ‘citizen journalists’ offering details about the political and social activities and events for many around occupied Palestine (Abusidu, 2020).

Around nine out of ten Palestinians use the internet (Kemp, 2024). Around 40.5 percent of Palestinians are active social media users, though use has decreased 8.6 percent between 2023 and 2024 (Kemp, 2024), which is likely attributed to the war in Gaza and the serious damage it has caused to communication infrastructure. Facebook remains the most popular social media platform, though usage has declined recently (iPoke, 2023; Kemp, 2024). The next most used platforms are Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, while other platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn are less popular (Kemp, 2024). In an earlier study, Skaik (2014) found Palestinian youth who were heavily engaged in Facebook were especially interested in the issues of prisoners, Jerusalem, colonization and refugees on social media – as well as in the news patterns and formats of these issues.

Social media and information and communication technology services (ICTs) are pervasive, capable of both penetrating and diffusing ideas across countries, transcending the role of borders and legacy media (Monshipouri and Prompichai, 2018). Social media encourages participation, shrinks distances, and empowers younger generations to participate in shaping public political discourse and influencing political and decision-making processes (Abu Yaqub, 2016). It has made individuals not merely consumers, but also producers of content by allowing them to post commentary and images online (Monshipouri and Prompichai, 2018).

Many of these online platforms – such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram – are heavily adopted by young people, including those who are dynamic and savvy activists. There is some evidence that the efforts of Palestinian youths to post on social media and communicate with Western audience have expanded the sentiments of global solidarity (Abu Kmeil, 2024; Hmeidan, 2021). Recent years have seen manifestations of pro-Palestinian solidarity – including large-scale demonstrations in international capitals and

boycotts of the Israeli occupation – that have been facilitated in part by activating social media to communicate with audiences outside of Palestine (Abu Kmeil, 2024; Hmeidan, 2021). The traditional media has been influenced by posts on social media and have reposted and reported on it, broadening the public discourse about Palestine (Abu Kmeil, 2024; Hmeidan, 2021). Consequently, the Palestinian young people have achieved on social media what decades of protests and boycotts did not (Yee and El-Naggar, 2021).

Theoretically, the prevalence of the internet and use of social media have transferred the media message control centre from traditional gatekeepers to the public. Anyone in the world can send and receive information and images with a mobile phone and internet service. However, such platforms are not as open as they are often purported to be. Fear of the power and creativity of Palestinian young people's posts on social media has pushed the Israeli government to ask Facebook for procedures against such communications (Abusidu, 2020).

Social media companies reportedly asked journalists and public figures in Palestine to refrain from posting nationalist sentiments, and systematic deletion of Palestinian content on Facebook began in 2016 (Yaghi, 2020). These measures reflect the occupation's concerns about the increasing impact of Palestinian posts about what is going on in Palestine, especially through communication with Western audiences (Rayhan Uddin, 2021). On the other hand, social media companies have neglected hate posts by Israelis, which reflect the compliance of these sites with the Israeli occupation's demands (Mohammed, 2021). A 2022 study commissioned by Meta, the parent company of both Facebook and Instagram, found that the company's biased censorship practices during the Israeli attacks on Gaza in May 2021 had an adverse effect on Palestinian human rights (Biddle, 2022).

According to a Human Rights Watch (2023) report, censorship of pro-Palestinian voices on Instagram and Facebook has accelerated since the outbreak of hostilities between the Israeli military and Palestinian armed groups. Between October and November 2023, the organization documented more than 1,050 takedowns of content posted to Instagram and Facebook by Palestinians and their supporters (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Almost all of these cases involved pro-Palestinian content, while one case involved a pro-Israeli post (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In one example of such censorship, both Facebook and Instagram were reported to have removed images of the Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital bombing on October 17, 2023, for violating platform policies against nudity or sexual activity, though the images were not sexual in nature (Biddle, 2023).

Because Gaza has been closed to international journalists, Palestinian journalists have taken an outside role in covering the conflict via social media. However, the platforms' content policies have also complicated the work of these journalists. As Fahmy et al. (2024: 175) wrote, 'The reliance on digital platforms and the struggle against algorithmic censorship highlight the intricacies of contemporary conflict reporting, where technology serves both as an enabler and a constraint on journalistic pursuits'.

But such impediments have not undermined the Palestinian activists who have continued posting in the face of deletion and harassment. Instead, they have used a variety of means to overcome the censorship imposed on their posts. Even in the face of the punishing content moderation imposed by the Israeli occupation authorities (Abusidu, 2020), social networks continue to be used by Palestinian young people to interact with Western

audiences. Reflecting this, Ma'touq (2016) called upon youth's expertise in using social media platforms to expose the 'enemy' and 'reveal the falseness of his claims with which he fools billions of people', adding that this was a legal and national duty towards 'the cause of Palestine and its oppressed people', encouraging them to allocate part of their time for this purpose.

Research question

In some ways, the affordances of social media have weakened the traditional communication monopolies maintained by governments and media executives around the world, in terms of control over the flow of information. Using a mobile phone, the public can communicate with the world and send messages that reach large numbers of people in a record time to a degree impossible with traditional tools – though that ability is constrained by the content moderation policies of social media conglomerates that exert control over the platforms.

This study seeks to identify the extent to which media students at Palestinian universities use social media to convey their cause, suffering and national message to audiences around the world – particularly those in politically influential Western states – to influence public opinion, refute the occupation's narrative and mobilize support for the Palestinian cause. Consequently, the problem of this study is represented by the following research question:

RQ: To what extent do Palestinian media students engage with Western audiences on social media about the Palestinian cause?

With this general goal in mind, this study's objectives include learning about the topics users post about, the methods they use to address Western societies, and the challenges that face them in engaging in digital activism.

Methods

Students at five Palestinian universities in the West Bank were surveyed online in the fall of 2022. The study's participants were drawn from media students enrolled at the Arab American University, An-Najah National University, Birzeit University, Hebron University, and Palestine Technical University-Kadoorie. Participants were selected according to the university class. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to the participants. Participants were between 18 and 22 years old. The respondents were 75 percent women and 25 percent men, which is reflective of the gender make-up of the students overall.

A total of 329 responses were collected, but incomplete surveys were discarded, leaving 282 valid responses. Survey responses were received from students at the following universities: Arab American University ($n=38$), An-Najah National University ($n=90$), Birzeit University ($n=43$), Hebron University ($n=31$), and Palestine Technical University-Kadoorie ($n=80$). The 282 responses collected represent 21.3 percent of the 1,325 media students across the five universities.

The survey instrument, which was created and reviewed by a group of Palestinian professors, contained 100 items. These items aimed to capture a holistic picture of the students' social media habits, with particular emphasis on their engagement with international audiences about the Palestinian cause. It also contained questions about social media use and foreign language skills.

The items used a five-point Likert-type scale. Cronbach's *alpha* was used to assess reliability of the survey, with a value of $\alpha=0.88$.

Findings

The majority of respondents (58%) reported that they do not use social media to address foreign audiences about the Palestinian cause, while 42 percent said they do engage in such activism.

For those who engaged in digital activism, the largest motivations for engaging online were to publicize the Palestinian cause and to clarify distorted facts about the situation in Palestine. The respondents reported engaging in resharing foreign content about Palestine and publishing photographs. By far the largest topic posted about by the surveyed students was human rights. Politics, culture, youth issues and social issues were also frequent topics of discussion. Students reported that posting on social media deepened their sense of responsibility for conveying the actual image of the Palestinian cause for foreigners. The main constraints reported by students included fighting social platform content moderation policies and the challenges of translating material into foreign languages (Table 1).

The biggest reported obstacles to using social media to engage in pro-Palestinian advocacy included lack of foreign friends, not knowing how to find foreign audiences to communicate with, and lack of foreign language skills. But, while the first three obstacles were personal, the fourth most reported obstacle was the content moderation policies by social networking companies (Table 2).

Respondents reported abilities in eight languages other than Arabic, including English, Turkish, Hebrew, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%) self-reported a high level of familiarity with English. For the other languages measured, there were much lower levels of familiarity. For the next three languages – Turkish (46%), Hebrew (46%) and French (33%) – students self-reported low skill levels.

Engaging in digital activism requires familiarity with social media platforms, and 72 percent of respondents reported that they use social platforms to a great extent. Almost all the respondents – 92 percent – reported using Instagram. Facebook was next, with 86 percent. The least used social platform was Twitter, at 47 percent (Table 3).

Discussion

This study examines the use of social media by Palestinian youths – specifically university media students – to address Western audiences about the situation in Palestine. The use of social media as a tool for reaching international audiences has deepened the sense of responsibility among Palestinian youths for conveying the right image of their cause.

Table 1. Motivations for using social networks to address Western societies about the Palestinian cause (N=282).

Motivations	Percentage (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
Clarifying facts about the Palestinian cause	86.4	4.32	0.81
Fighting deceptive campaigns that distort the Palestinian cause	85.8	4.29	0.84
Participating in the national effort to publicize the Palestinian cause	82.6	4.13	0.79
Expressing opinion on the Palestinian cause	82.0	4.1	0.85
Correcting Palestinian media's failure to convey the reality of the Palestinian cause to foreigners	81.0	4.05	0.93
Identifying foreigners' view about the Palestinian cause	79.0	3.95	0.98
Getting to know new people interested in the Palestinian cause	77.8	3.89	0.97
Investing in social media's potential to convey my view about the Palestinian cause to foreigners	77.4	3.87	0.99
Discussing the Palestinian cause with opposing foreigners	68.2	3.41	1.16
Discussing with foreign friends who want to learn about the Palestinian cause	66.8	3.34	1.29
Seeking entertainment	65.4	3.27	1.2
Travelling to a foreign country to publicize the Palestinian cause	63.6	3.18	1.27

For those who engage in such discourse, their greatest motivation was to clarify facts about the situation in Palestine and to fight misinformation that distorted that cause. Students see themselves as participating in the national effort to publicize pro-Palestinian messages. Students were also motivated by the failure of the traditional/legacy Palestinian media organizations to convey the reality of the Palestinian cause to foreigners. This is a crucial finding, especially because the respondents are studying for future careers in the mass media. Furthermore, this approach to digital activism is best understood by considering the entirety of the Palestinian media ecology. As Treré and Kuhn (2021: 201) write, a media ecology approach to digital activism encompasses 'how activists, through their communicative practices, make sense of, navigate, and merge newer and older media formats, physical and digital spaces, internal and external forms of communication, as well as alternative and corporate social media platforms'. From this perspective, the Palestinian students are intervening via social media in part to make up for the deficiencies they perceive in the legacy media.

In terms of topics, the respondents focused particularly on human rights. This is a crucial but unsurprising finding because of the impact of occupation policies on the majority of Palestinians. It appears that the focus of this digital activism centres on day-to-day life under occupation. Other key topics included youth issues, culture and

Table 2. Impediments to using social networks to address Western societies about the Palestinian cause (N=282).

Reason	Percentage (%)	Average	Standard deviation
I do not have foreign friends	74	3.72	1.3
I do not know how to reach the target audience of foreigners that may listen to the Palestinian view	72	3.61	1.18
I do not have mastery over a foreign language	71	3.55	1.29
Fighting the Palestinian national content by some social networking sites	69	3.45	1.3
I have not found anyone to encourage me to address foreigners about the Palestinian cause	67	3.35	1.26
It takes effort and time	67	3.33	1.14
I just use social networks to talk about the Palestinian cause with Arabic speakers	66	3.31	1.18
I have not thought about this before	60	3	1.34
Parental censorship and reservations about posting political content	58	2.88	1.29
I do not possess content-creating skills about the Palestinian cause on social networks	57	2.85	1.15
I exercise self-censorship while using social networking sites	56	2.79	1.21
I do not like posting political content	54	2.68	1.22
Fear of having my account blocked or restricted	52	2.58	1.25
Fear of harm	51	2.56	1.18
There are other issues I am active in on social networks, which are more critical for me than communicating with foreigners	50	2.52	1.24
Communicating with citizens in Western countries to support the Palestinian issue can be done by specialists in the field of communication and media	50	2.48	1.21
This communication is useless in the presence of public opinion against Palestine and in support of the occupation	49	2.44	1.22
I do not have enough communication skills	48	2.39	1
Conveying the correct image about the Palestinian cause is within the competence of the official bodies only	48	2.38	1.16
This subject is within the competence of big organizations, not individuals	47	2.37	1.23
I do not think about using social networks to address Western societies about the Palestinian issue	47	2.37	1.16
Activity on social networks can never play a role in getting the understanding and support of the international public opinion towards the Palestinian cause.	46	2.31	1.22
I am not educated enough about the Palestinian cause	46	2.3	1.01
Not interested in the topic	45	2.27	1.06

Table 3. Social platforms used by Palestinian media students ($N=282$).

Social platforms	Percentage of users
Instagram	92
Facebook	86
YouTube	78
Twitter	47

freedom, which were in the second degree of importance. Topics like the economy, health, religion and personal issues ranked much lower.

Sharing foreign content and posting images about Palestine were the most common activities carried out by users. Respondents also participated by giving ‘likes’ to posts. Meanwhile, the other methods, especially streaming events and producing videos in foreign languages were less common. This may be a function of the infrastructure in the region – from slow bandwidths to frequent power cuts – which may impede users’ ability to engage in these types of communication. At the same time, participants follow and respond to foreign pages that post deceptive narratives in order to offer a Palestinian counter-narrative.

More than half (52%) of the respondents do not use social media to engage in international advocacy online. However, very few of the surveyed students reported that they were not *interested* in doing so. Rather, they faced a series of obstacles. At the personal level, respondents identified obstacles such as not having foreign friends, not knowing how to reach international audiences, or lack of competence in foreign languages. Linguistic abilities beyond Arabic are necessary for Palestinians to communicate with outsiders on social media. The bulk of the students reported a high level of English skills, with some amount of acuity with other languages as well. Nearly half of the respondents reported some level of Hebrew language ability, which can be attributed to living under Israeli occupation and their closeness to Hebrew speakers. The popularity of Turkish television programmes and an increase in students studying in Turkey are the main reasons for their familiarity with Turkish. French is taught in many Palestinian schools and universities.

Platform content moderation policies that lead to the removal of pro-Palestinian content served as another impediment for disseminating information. This was one of the most visible constraints faced by users, which raises significant freedom of expression concerns among the participants.

Conclusion and future research

This study was completed before the escalation of hostilities following Hamas’ Al Aqsa Flood operation of October 7, 2023, and Israel’s massive military response in Gaza. Given the scope of the devastation, these results may describe a reality that no longer exists. Still, the insights remain useful and serve as a benchmark or snapshot of a moment in time.

This study's main contribution is in examining the role of the Palestinian public in influencing the public opinion in the West. Social media has opened the door for Palestinian social media users to connect with people around the world to mobilize support for the Palestinian cause. This cause, which involves an existential conflict with the state of Israel, has been ongoing for more than a century, since the British Balfour Declaration of 1917 proposed Palestine as the location of a new Jewish state. But with contemporary technology, it takes no more than a mobile phone and data service to connect beyond borders. Amidst the devastation in Gaza – which has been closed to international journalists – Palestinian content creators have taken on a pivotal role in providing information to a newly interested global public. Previous research on a 2012 round of Israeli attacks on Gaza suggested that increased social media attention had the potential to decrease conflict intensity (Zeitsoff, 2018). However, posts that are removed or algorithmically de-emphasized don't reach their intended audience, blunting their impact.

These results have important implications for Palestinian media education. For example, 57 percent of respondents indicated that they did not engage in online advocacy about the Palestinian cause because they lacked the content creation skills necessary to engage in such communication. Our results suggest that important skills include knowing languages other than Arabic (especially English) and having the ability to create compelling content. This may point to a gap in media education across institutions. As the primacy of legacy media outlets recedes, students need to develop the skills to use the affordances of emerging media platforms. Images and stories posted by Palestinians provide an immediate view that audiences can't get from traditional media outlets. Future researchers should examine student creative competencies to identify opportunities to improve education.

Finally, future researchers should look at how the escalation of the war on Gaza post-October 7, 2023, has changed student attitudes about using social media to address international audiences about the Palestinian cause. Another potentially useful future study would be an examination of the form, content and tone of the social media posts about the Palestinian cause shared by university students to see how they are constructing messages on the issue. However, conducting such a follow-up study is complicated by the difficult situation at Palestinian universities. All the universities in Gaza have been destroyed, while the institutions in the West Bank experience frequent disruptions such as class cancellations or switches to online modality.

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