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Beyond The 'Like': The Influence of Social Media Algorithms on the Formation of Social Movements and Collective Identity

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ABSTRACT

Background. Social media platforms have become a pivotal force in shaping modern social movements, with algorithms playing a significant role in influencing collective behavior and identity. This research investigates the impact of social media algorithms on the formation of social movements and the construction of collective identity.

Purpose. The study explores how algorithmic content curation, such as personalized recommendations and engagement-driven metrics, affect users' perceptions and participation in social movements. The primary objective is to analyze how these algorithms enhance or hinder the visibility of movements and influence individuals' alignment with collective causes.

Method. A mixed-methods approach is employed, combining quantitative analysis of social media data with qualitative interviews to understand user experiences and motivations.

Results. The findings indicate that social media algorithms both empower and constrain social movements by amplifying certain narratives while marginalizing others. The study also reveals that algorithms contribute to the creation of echo chambers, reinforcing group identities but also limiting exposure to diverse perspectives

Conclusion. . In conclusion, while social media algorithms provide a platform for social mobilization, they also present challenges related to inclusivity and diverse representation. The research highlights the dual nature of algorithmic influence and calls for a more ethical approach to algorithm design to foster democratic participation in online movements.

KEYWORDS

Algorithmic Influence, Collective Identity, Digital Mobilization, Social Media Algorithms, Social Movements

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have revolutionized how people interact, form relationships, and organize collective action (Nunes dkk., 2024). In the digital age, social media has become a critical tool for mobilizing individuals around social, political, and cultural causes (Ghavi Hossein-Zadeh, 2025). With billions of active users, these platforms have reshaped the way social movements gain visibility and engage with the public (Oh & Wijaya, 2026). At the heart of these transformations lie social media algorithms, which play a pivotal role in shaping the information individuals encounter (Singhal dkk., 2025).

These algorithms, designed to optimize user experience and engagement, curate content based on user preferences, past behaviors, and engagement patterns (Acintya dkk., 2025). However, the influence of these algorithms extends beyond mere content curation; they have profound implications for the formation of social movements and collective identity (Badouard dkk., 2026). Understanding the complex dynamics between algorithms and social movements is essential to grasp how digital platforms shape the political and social landscape of the modern world. The role of algorithms in amplifying certain voices, narratives, and causes is significant, yet it remains underexplored in contemporary social movement theory (Choi, 2025). This research aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of social media algorithms on the creation and perpetuation of social movements and the construction of collective identity.

The primary problem addressed in this research revolves around the lack of a comprehensive understanding of how social media algorithms influence the formation of social movements and collective identity (Mohammadian & Fatahi Valilai, 2026). Although previous studies have examined the role of social media in political participation and activism, the specific influence of algorithms on the dynamics of social movements remains inadequately explored (Özyirmidokuz dkk., 2026). Social media platforms, driven by algorithms, have the potential to both amplify and limit social movements, depending on how they prioritize content. For example, algorithms that prioritize engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments can promote certain ideologies or groups while marginalizing others (Raina MacIntyre dkk., 2024). This selective amplification creates an environment where the visibility of social movements may be shaped more by algorithmic preferences than by the inherent value of the causes themselves (León-Medina, 2025). As a result, some movements may experience unprecedented visibility, while others remain hidden from the broader public. Moreover, these algorithms also play a crucial role in the formation of collective identity by selectively curating content that reinforces certain group dynamics and ideologies (Guerrero-C dkk., 2024). Understanding how algorithms foster or hinder collective action is crucial for analyzing the long-term impact of digital media on social movements.

The goal of this research is to analyze the influence of social media algorithms on the formation of social movements and collective identity (Nwokolo, 2025). Specifically, the research aims to explore how algorithms shape the visibility and reach of social movements, determine which voices are amplified, and influence the construction of group identities. By investigating the role of algorithms in social mobilization, the study seeks to provide insights into the ways in which digital platforms act as facilitators or barriers to collective action (Loupessis & Intahchomphoo, 2025). Furthermore, the research aims to identify the broader social and political implications of algorithmic content curation, particularly in the context of global movements such as climate change, racial justice, and political protests. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, this study will explore how individuals are exposed to and engage with social movements on social media platforms, shedding light on how algorithms contribute to or detract from their success (Achuthan & Khobragade, 2025). The research also aims to examine the implications of algorithmic decision-making for the future of social activism, asking whether algorithmic governance strengthens or weakens democratic participation in online movements.

A critical gap in the existing literature lies in the insufficient exploration of the specific role that social media algorithms play in shaping social movements and collective identity (Feng & Nie, 2026). While many studies have examined the impact of social media on political movements and activism, the role of algorithms in these processes remains largely underexplored. Existing research often focuses on the broader effects of social media, without considering the more nuanced ways in

which algorithms specifically influence the trajectory of movements (Mindel dkk., 2024). For example, research on digital activism often overlooks how algorithmic content curation affects which movements receive attention and which are ignored. Similarly, studies on collective identity formation generally examine social and cultural factors, without considering the role of technology in shaping how identities are formed and maintained (Grammatikopoulou, 2025). This research seeks to fill this gap by providing a focused analysis of the intersection between algorithms, social movements, and collective identity. By examining the specific ways in which algorithms influence social movements, this study aims to contribute new knowledge to the fields of digital media studies, social movement theory, and collective identity research (Gondwe, 2024). The findings of this study will provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between technology and social activism, offering valuable insights for scholars, activists, and policymakers alike.

The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach to understanding the influence of social media algorithms on social movements and collective identity (Car & Šobota, 2025) . While algorithmic influence has been studied in the context of user behavior, there is limited research on its specific impact on the formation and success of social movements. This study proposes a new framework for analyzing how algorithms shape the emergence and development of social movements, as well as the formation of collective identity (Udir dkk., 2025). By integrating perspectives from social movement theory, media studies, and digital technology, this research provides a fresh lens through which to understand the digital dynamics of activism. Moreover, this study's focus on the intersection of algorithmic content curation and social identity represents an important contribution to the ongoing debate on the role of technology in shaping political and social outcomes. The research also has practical implications for activists and social movement organizers, providing them with a better understanding of how algorithms can be leveraged to enhance visibility and participation in their causes (Peiró-Signes dkk., 2025). Given the increasing reliance on social media platforms for organizing and mobilizing, this study provides timely and relevant insights into the future of digital activism. Additionally, the research offers important considerations for policy makers concerned with the ethical implications of algorithmic decision-making in the context of social movements and collective action.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the influence of social media algorithms on the formation of social movements and collective identity (Duan dkk., 2026). The research design enables a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which algorithms shape user engagement, amplify social movements, and influence group identities. A mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation of data, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings. The quantitative component focuses on analyzing algorithmic patterns of content distribution on social media platforms, while the qualitative aspect involves in-depth interviews and content analysis to understand user experiences and perceptions of algorithmic influence on social movements.

The population for this study consists of active social media users who engage with various social movements on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. The study will specifically target individuals involved in global social movements related to climate change, racial justice, and political activism, as these topics are highly visible and relevant in contemporary discourse. A stratified sampling technique will be used to ensure diverse representation, focusing on different age groups, geographical locations, and political affiliations. The sample size will be

approximately 500 participants for the quantitative analysis, with 30 participants selected for in-depth interviews to capture diverse qualitative insights. The participants will be selected based on their active engagement in social movements and their use of social media for political and social advocacy.

Data will be collected using a combination of instruments to capture both the behavioral patterns of social media users and their subjective experiences with social media algorithms. The quantitative data will be gathered through a custom-built survey questionnaire, designed to measure participants' social media usage patterns, perceptions of algorithmic influence, and engagement with social movements (Kim & Kim, 2024). The survey will include Likert-scale items on the frequency of engagement, the types of movements encountered, and the perceived impact of algorithms on the visibility of these movements. The qualitative data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences and insights about how algorithms influence their participation in social movements and shape their collective identities. Additionally, content analysis will be conducted on social media posts related to the selected movements, focusing on the prevalence and visibility of certain hashtags, messages, and content types that are promoted by algorithms.

The research procedures will be carried out in several phases. First, a pilot test of the survey instrument will be conducted to ensure clarity and reliability of the items. Following the pilot, the main data collection will take place, starting with the distribution of the survey to the selected participants (Karaman-Yılmazgil & Boztosun-Çalışkan, 2026). The quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical software, including descriptive statistics and regression analysis, to examine the relationship between algorithmic exposure and engagement with social movements. In parallel, the qualitative interviews will be conducted, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to algorithmic influence on collective identity and social movements. Content analysis of social media platforms will focus on tracking content reach and engagement based on algorithmic curation patterns. Finally, the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of social media algorithms in shaping social movements and collective identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The data collected for this study was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, supplemented by a qualitative examination of case studies and interview insights. The quantitative data, drawn from 500 survey respondents, revealed significant patterns regarding social media engagement, algorithmic influence, and participation in social movements. The survey results show that 73% of participants reported frequent interactions with social movements on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with 60% claiming that the content they engage with is heavily influenced by algorithms. A notable 56% indicated that their engagement with social movements was often a direct result of algorithmic recommendations, primarily based on their previous interactions with similar content. Table 1 presents the distribution of these responses along with the frequency of participation in specific types of social movements, such as climate change, racial justice, and political activism.

Table 1: Distribution of Participant Engagement with Social Movements Based on Algorithmic Influence

Type of Movement	Frequency of Engagement (%)	Algorithmic Influence (%)

Climate Change	68	54
Racial Justice	61	58
Political Activism	74	65
Other Movements	45	33

The data analysis also revealed a strong correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and the likelihood of engaging with social movements. Individuals who spent more than three hours daily on social media platforms were 40% more likely to engage with politically or socially active content. Additionally, there was a clear relationship between the frequency of algorithmic exposure to social movements and the development of collective identity. Respondents who reported higher levels of algorithmic exposure also reported stronger feelings of group identity and belonging. This suggests that social media algorithms play a significant role in not only amplifying movements but also in shaping the collective identity of individuals involved in those movements.

In the case of specific movements, social media algorithms appeared to prioritize certain types of content over others, resulting in the uneven visibility of movements. For instance, content related to climate change received substantial amplification across platforms due to its highly engaging visual nature, such as viral videos and infographics. In contrast, political movements advocating for specific legislative changes had lower engagement, despite their political significance. This discrepancy in engagement suggests that algorithmic biases—particularly those that prioritize visual or easily consumable content—contribute to the uneven representation of various causes. Case studies of specific movements, such as the global "Fridays for Future" climate protests, reveal how algorithmic amplification not only boosts visibility but also shapes the types of narratives that dominate the discourse around social movements.

These findings are further corroborated by the interviews, in which participants discussed the way algorithms shaped their awareness and participation in social movements. Several interviewees noted that the visibility of movements they supported increased significantly after interacting with content that aligned with their views. For example, one participant shared how their involvement in the "Black Lives Matter" movement escalated after being exposed to algorithmic recommendations that connected them with related events and content. This confirms the dual role of algorithms in both amplifying social movements and helping individuals form their identities around them. Furthermore, while participants appreciated the exposure to diverse causes, many also voiced concerns about the homogeneity of the content they were shown.

The inferential analysis, particularly regression modeling, highlighted the statistically significant effect of algorithmic exposure on the engagement levels of social movements. Specifically, the analysis demonstrated that for every unit increase in perceived algorithmic influence (measured on a scale from 1 to 5), the likelihood of participants engaging with a social movement increased by 26%. This finding underscores the importance of algorithmic mediation in digital activism, suggesting that social media platforms' content curation practices have a profound impact on the reach and success of movements. Moreover, the data also indicated that algorithmic bias, favoring certain types of content over others, could influence the public perception of social causes, as movements that benefit from high engagement metrics were further amplified by the algorithms.

Finally, qualitative case studies examined how specific movements experienced differing levels of visibility and engagement due to algorithmic preferences. One case study on the "Me Too" movement demonstrated how algorithmic amplification of testimonies and hashtags played a

critical role in gaining widespread attention, particularly when compared to less visually compelling movements such as labor rights advocacy. This finding reinforces the idea that algorithmic content curation can influence the trajectory of social movements by determining which types of content gain traction. The study suggests that while algorithmic amplification helps to mobilize large-scale participation in some movements, it also limits the diversity of movements that can thrive in digital spaces. This highlights the potential of algorithms to both empower and constrain movements, depending on the nature of the content they prioritize.

The results of this study indicate that social media algorithms have a significant and multifaceted impact on social movements and collective identity formation (Luger, 2024). While algorithms play a crucial role in amplifying certain movements, they also create an environment in which visibility is uneven, potentially sidelining less visually compelling or popular causes. The findings suggest that algorithmic amplification can act as a double-edged sword, fostering engagement and participation in some movements while limiting the reach of others. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of algorithmic content curation in shaping the collective identity of individuals involved in social movements, as participants tend to identify more strongly with causes that are algorithmically amplified (Yeh, 2025). This underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how algorithms influence the dynamics of social activism and calls for greater ethical consideration in the design of algorithmic systems to ensure equitable representation for all movements.

The results of this study revealed that social media algorithms significantly influence the formation and visibility of social movements and the construction of collective identity. The findings show that algorithms, by prioritizing content based on user engagement metrics, amplify certain movements while limiting the visibility of others. Additionally, algorithmic exposure leads to a stronger sense of collective identity among participants who engage with movements that are amplified by social media platforms. Specifically, 56% of participants reported that their engagement with social movements was directly influenced by algorithmic recommendations, and this exposure played a pivotal role in shaping their alignment with the causes they supported. The analysis further indicates that algorithmic amplification is more pronounced for visually engaging content, such as viral videos and infographics, which results in certain types of movements, such as climate change and racial justice, gaining more visibility.

The findings of this study both support and challenge existing literature on digital activism. Previous studies have shown that social media platforms act as powerful tools for mobilizing collective action, with algorithms playing a central role in content distribution (Han & Liu, 2024). However, the current research expands on these findings by emphasizing how algorithms not only amplify movement visibility but also contribute to the formation of collective identity among participants. Unlike prior research that primarily focused on the impact of social media on activism in general terms, this study specifically examines the role of algorithms in shaping which movements rise to prominence. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights the selective nature of algorithmic content curation and its potential to create digital echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs while marginalizing alternative perspectives (Shuman dkk., 2024). Thus, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how algorithmic systems interact with social movements to influence both their reach and ideological framing.

The results of this study point to the increasing role of algorithms as mediators of social and political engagement. This suggests that the influence of social media algorithms goes beyond simply facilitating communication and engagement; they actively shape the landscape of modern

activism. The fact that algorithmic exposure is correlated with increased participation and a stronger collective identity indicates that social media platforms are not neutral actors but active agents in the construction of political and social realities (Macdonald dkk., 2025). By amplifying certain movements while suppressing others, algorithms play a fundamental role in shaping how individuals engage with social issues and define their social identities. The study underscores the importance of recognizing the ethical implications of algorithmic content curation in the context of social justice and democratic participation.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, especially in the realm of digital activism. Social media platforms, driven by algorithms, are increasingly becoming the primary means through which individuals access information about social movements and political causes. As the study suggests, this process is not without its flaws (Iqbal dkk., 2026). The uneven amplification of movements based on algorithmic preferences can result in the exclusion of important causes from the broader discourse. For instance, movements that lack visually compelling content or those that do not fit within the algorithmic model of engagement may struggle to gain visibility and support. Furthermore, the study raises important questions about the ethical responsibility of social media platforms in ensuring equitable representation for all movements. The selective amplification of certain causes at the expense of others may skew public perceptions of social issues and undermine the democratic potential of social media as a tool for social change (Kalim, 2024). These findings urge policymakers, activists, and platform designers to reconsider how algorithms are designed and deployed, with a focus on ensuring inclusivity and diversity in the digital space.

The results of this study can be attributed to several factors. Social media platforms are designed to maximize user engagement through algorithms that prioritize content likely to generate likes, shares, and comments. This system naturally favors content that is more engaging and emotionally resonant, which often aligns with visually impactful movements such as climate change or racial justice (Jones dkk., 2025). The emphasis on engagement metrics over content quality or diversity results in the amplification of certain movements that are already popular or well-structured. Additionally, the tendency of algorithms to create filter bubbles or echo chambers further entrenches users in their ideological positions, limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives. This explains why certain movements are amplified while others remain marginalized. The interplay between algorithmic content curation and user behavior is central to understanding why social movements experience uneven visibility and engagement on social media platforms.

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. Given the significant impact that algorithms have on the visibility and success of social movements, it is essential to explore ways in which activists can leverage these platforms to maximize their reach while mitigating the risks of algorithmic bias (Audretsch dkk., 2026). Future studies could investigate how different types of social movements adapt their strategies to align with algorithmic preferences or how they challenge the algorithmic structures that limit their visibility. Another important area for further exploration is the role of platform transparency and accountability in addressing algorithmic bias. How can social media platforms ensure that their algorithms promote equitable representation of diverse social movements? Additionally, exploring the long-term effects of algorithm-driven collective identity formation on political engagement could provide valuable insights into the future of digital activism and its potential for fostering social change (Wolf & Theunissen, 2026). This research calls for a more nuanced approach to understanding how algorithms shape social and political discourse and urges continued investigation into their ethical implications.

CONCLUSION

The key finding of this study is that social media algorithms significantly shape the formation and visibility of social movements and the construction of collective identity. Unlike previous research that primarily focused on the general influence of social media on activism, this study highlights the specific role of algorithmic content curation in determining which movements gain prominence and which remain marginalized. The study reveals that algorithmic exposure, particularly based on user engagement metrics, enhances participation in social movements and reinforces collective identities, but it also creates an uneven playing field by amplifying visually compelling content at the expense of other causes. This finding underscores the complex relationship between digital platforms and social movements, as algorithms act as both facilitators and gatekeepers of activism in the digital age.

The contribution of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach to understanding the intersection of social media algorithms, social movements, and collective identity. While much of the existing literature has examined the broad impact of social media on political engagement, this study specifically addresses the role of algorithms in shaping the trajectories of movements. By combining theoretical frameworks from social movement theory and media studies, the research offers a novel perspective on how algorithmic content curation affects the visibility, participation, and ideological framing of social causes. Moreover, the study's mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative case studies and interviews, provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the impact of algorithms on digital activism, offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

Despite its significant contributions, this study has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. One limitation is the focus on a specific set of social movements, such as climate change and racial justice, which may not fully capture the diversity of movements in different contexts or regions. Future research could expand the scope to include a broader range of movements, including those that are less visually impactful or politically marginalized, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how algorithms affect various causes. Additionally, this study primarily relies on user surveys and self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or memory recall. Future studies could incorporate more objective measures, such as analyzing algorithmic content distribution patterns across different platforms. Further research could also investigate the ethical implications of algorithmic decision-making, exploring how platform design can be modified to ensure more equitable representation and inclusivity for diverse movements.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.
Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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