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Don't Marginalize Me: How Organizations Facilitate Social Injustice Via Social Media

Short Paper

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Abstract

One emerging area in Information Systems scholarship is understanding how social injustices are related to social media use. We conduct a theorizing review to offer a theory of social injustice on social media. We examine the current literature at the intersection of social media and social injustice by using a grounded theory method. Our review will result in a theoretical framework. We illustrate one example from our developing framework with propositions related to how organizations facilitate marginalization. We discuss the contributions and implications of our framework for theory and practice, along with future directions such as offering a research agenda.

Keywords: Social injustice, social media, organizational-level affordances, marginalization

Introduction

At one time, social injustices meant tyranny, colonial domination, and apartheid—overt and acute social injustices. As the world has become more democratic, scholars recognize that social injustices are pervasive and embedded in institutional structures (Habermas 1984; Young 2011). Injustice is insidious; it includes “the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often daily interactions, media, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies...the normal process of everyday life” (Young 2011, pg. 41).

Information systems (IS) scholarship has explored various ways technology may be related to these injustices (Aanestad et al. 2021). One emerging area is injustice related to a technology that is embedded in everyday life: social media. Social media—an online platform where users engage with others by continuously modifying content either participatory or collaboratively (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010)—is linked to discrimination and silencing marginalized groups. One example is that women and people of color are “tone policed” (i.e., ignoring the validity of an individual’s statement by attacking the tone rather than the message) and gaslit (i.e., denying the reality that another person is experiencing) more frequently than other people (Bastian 2021). Our research is designed to identify and explore both overt and insidious injustices via social media. Our research question is: how are social injustices facilitated via social media?

To answer this question, we explored social injustice literature and found that scholars question whether social injustices are structural or distributive (Young 2011). Structural social injustices are consequences of

institutional practices and decision-making, while distributive social injustices refer to the unequal distribution of resources including wealth, income, and other material resources among individuals (Young 2011). Considering that social injustices might be structural or distributive in tandem raises a puzzle in social justice literature that a qualitative research methodology could help to solve (Shah and Corley 2006).

In our work, we conduct a theorizing review which requires a comprehensive review and synthesis of research to offer a theory of an emergent area (Leidner 2018). We use a grounded theory method (GTM) to review and analyze social injustice literature in social media—situating this inquiry in the IS literature. We do this because we are interested in how social media facilitates social injustices. Other research areas, such as communications or social psychology, may study social media as a context, but do not focus on the IT artifact, i.e., social media platform, as closely or consistently as IS research does.

We chose GTM for multiple reasons. First, it offers us an opportunity “to extract insights and uncover assumptions that might otherwise be undetectable” and “to create [our] own framework to synthesize the research when existing theory does not effectively capture the literature stream” (Leidner 2018, pg. 556). The social injustice literature suggests that multiple ways to conceptualize social injustice exist—as both distributive and structural. However, our initial review of the literature in IS suggested that injustice issues on social media all use a distributive paradigm (Van Dijk 2020). This research in IS has made progress in helping us uncover social injustice connected to social media. However, this approach fails to explain the root of injustices that are embedded in institutionalized practices, i.e., structural injustices. We speculate that overlooking structural injustices might be problematic because evidence of injustices remains even when resources are equally distributed (Young 2011), suggesting that unequal distribution of resources is a symptom of the problem, not the root. Thus, we conduct a systematic literature review to learn more and theorize how social media facilitates social injustices.

Second, we use GTM because it is well-suited to (1) help researchers focus on ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, democratic process, and status, (2) take a critical stance towards social institutions and consequences of policies, and (3) explore hierarchies related to power and oppression (Charmaz 2014). Moreover, GTM recognizes the importance of sampling literature for social science inquiry in qualitative research. For example, Glasser and Strauss (1967) argued that each body of literature is filled with “voices to be heard” and each publication represents “the voice of an anthropologist’s informant or sociologist’s interviewee” (Charmaz 2014, pg. 46). Thus, we purposefully sampled literature in IS to understand how social injustice manifests on social media.

We expect this study to contribute to the emerging conversation on whether social injustices on social media are distributive or structural; we find evidence that they can be both. We take this approach primarily because we repeatedly found evidence in our data of how organizations use social media to facilitate social injustices. We use Gibson’s (1979) affordance theory to explain the goal-oriented interactions between organizations and IS. In doing so, we expand the application boundaries of affordance theory in IS. We also expect to contribute to the IS literature by conceptualizing social media affordances at the organizational level and showing how they facilitate structuralized social injustices.

We begin by reviewing social injustice literature and current IS literature to identify key challenges. Next, we discuss how we conduct a theorizing review with GTM. Later, as a result of constant iteration between our findings and literature, we synthesize the findings and describe how social injustices manifest at the organizational level by: 1) explaining our main codes and subcodes, and 2) illustrating one example from our developing framework with propositions. Finally, we provide a discussion to highlight the potential contributions and implications of our findings, along with future directions.

Theoretical Background

The Concept of Social Injustice

Social injustice theories are categorized under two theoretical paradigms: the distributive paradigm and structural paradigm (Young 2011). Theories under the distributive paradigm define social injustice as the morally appropriate distribution of benefits and burdens among individuals (e.g., Rawls 1971) such as materials, rights, and opportunity. Thus, what marks this line of scholarship as the distributive paradigm is to describe social injustice as the distribution of concepts. Theories under the structural paradigm discuss social injustice as the examination of the relationship between individuals and institutional practices (e.g.,

Young 2011). Thus, what marks social injustice scholarship under the structural paradigm is to describe social injustice in terms of social structures and practices that affect individuals' domination.

One of the most influential theories under the structural paradigm is Young's (2011) theory of social justice. Young's theory is built on other critical theorists' ideas such as Habermas's communicative action ethics (1984), but more so her work is developed in critique of distributive justice theories, which highlight the unfair allocation of material goods and distribution of desirable social positions (Lötter 1999). Concern for distribution of resources is important to issues of social injustice, but the distributive focus fails to account for the root of social injustices: structure and processes that uphold power differentials even when resources are distributed equally.

Young's (2011) theory of social injustice thus extends distributive theories by assuming: 1) social injustice is structural—it depends on social relations and processes—rather than the result of individuals' choices or policies (Young 2011); 2) social injustice includes nonmaterial social goods, as social injustices operate dynamically based on changing social relations and processes.

Young's theory argues that social injustices are consequences of institutional practices and decision-making, and thus defines social injustice as “institutionalized domination and oppression” (Young 2011, pg. 15). Institutionalization refers to a set of material practices and symbolic structures that form organizational principles and are available for elaboration by organizations and individuals (Faik et al. 2020). Institutionalized social injustices are relational rather than substantive because injustices are produced and thrive through processes and people outside the immediate power dyad. This brings out the dynamic nature of the institutionalized power as an ongoing process. Thus, Young (2011) conceptualizes injustice around institutionalized domination, which manifests in different “faces” of social injustice, including exploitation, violence, and marginalization.

Social Injustice and Social media

Despite evolving views of social injustice as including structural and nonmaterial factors, the social media literature in IS mostly explores social injustice issues using a distributive paradigm. Some of the studies in this literature focus on the distribution of resource-based capital enabling access to social media (e.g., Mingers and Walsha 2010). Another line of research focuses on how individuals are dominated and oppressed by each other. These studies discuss various social injustice issues including sex trafficking (e.g., Giddens et al. 2021), cyberabuse (e.g., Lowry et al. 2017), and discrimination (Young et al. 2020). These studies investigate how the distribution of power and resources between individuals creates inequality.

Emerging work related to social injustice on social media has discussed how social media platforms facilitate social injustices. These studies focus on oppressive algorithms enforcing discrimination and behavioral control of users (e.g., Kane et al. 2021; Clarke 2019), privacy issues related to data collection and tracking (e.g., Simon 2017), targeted advertising (e.g., Simon 2017), and crowdsourcing platforms as digital sweatshops (Deng et al. 2016; Schlagwein et al. 2018). These studies investigate how the social structures of social media platforms affect individuals' domination.

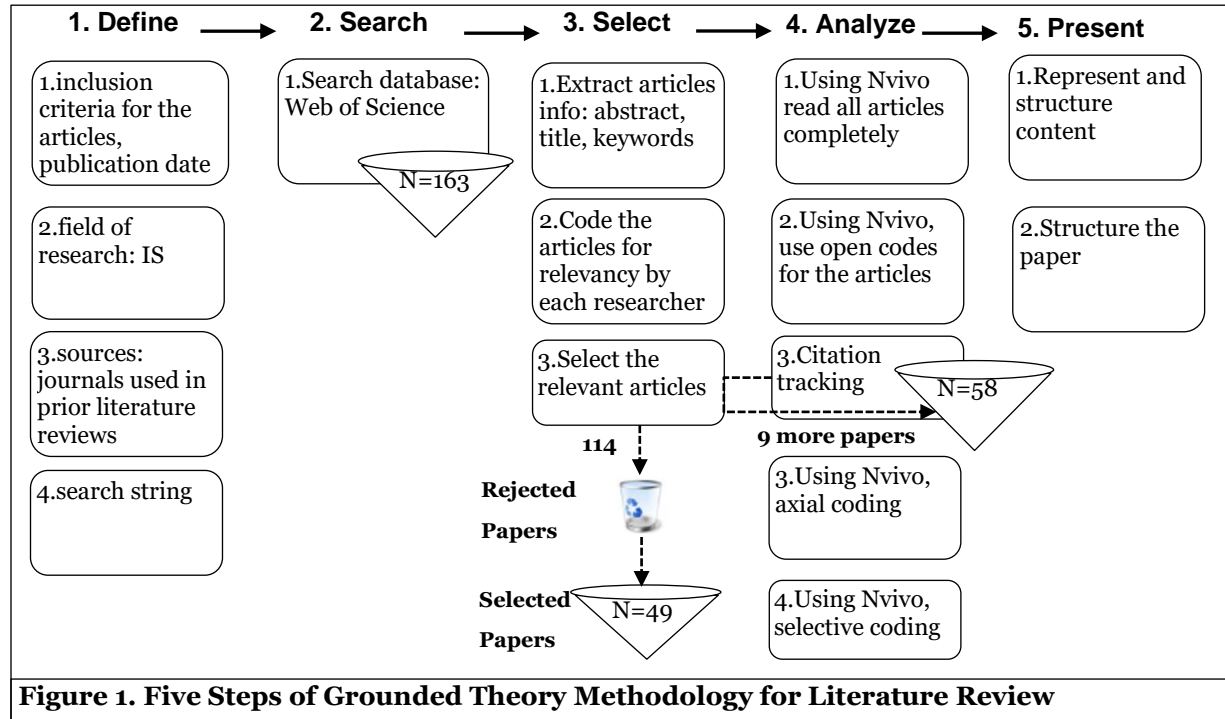
Methods

A GTM literature review has five stages (see Figure 1): 1) defining the scope and inclusion/exclusion criteria; 2) searching the literature; 3) screening the literature; 4) analyzing the literature based on the principles of GTM; and 5) presenting the results (Wolfsinkel et al. 2013). First, we defined the search terms in three main categories: social justice¹, social media, and target journals. We adopted the search terms for social injustice based on prior literature (e.g., Kane et al. 2021). For social media, we selected the keywords and defined the boundaries based on prior social media frameworks (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Karahanna et al. 2018). A list of the most published IS journals², including the AIS Senior Scholars' Basket of Journals, the AIS

¹ The word social justice is also inclusive for the results of social injustice.

² We sample the following journals: European Journal of Information Systems OR Information Systems Journal OR Information Systems Research OR Journal of the Association of Information Systems OR Journal of Information Technology OR Journal of Management Information Systems OR Journal of Strategic Information Systems OR MIS Quarterly OR Management Information Systems Quarterly OR Data Base for Advances in Information Systems OR Information Management OR Information Organization OR Information Resources Management Journal OR Information Technology People OR International Journal of Technology Human Interaction OR Journal of Information OR Communication Ethics in Society OR Communications of the ACM OR Information Society

electronic library, and others that have been used in prior literature reviewed in IS were used as a source (e.g., Wiesche et al. 2017). We solely used journals with publication dates 01/01/2000 to present—collected on January 5, 2022, because the era of social media and the literature related to social media started at the beginning of the 2000s (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).



Second, we used the Web of Science to execute the search; this gleaned 163 research articles. Third, for the selection process, we extracted each article’s title, abstract, and keywords and we independently coded the research articles for relevancy. The initial independent intercoder agreement was 80%, an acceptable level of agreement for initial coding (Wolfsinkel et al. 2013). Once the independent coding was completed, we discussed the reasoning for the articles included and reached an agreement for all articles in the corpus. We discussed the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the definition of the types of social media. We decided to eliminate articles related to shared economy platforms. Most of these were found to be unrelated papers that featured the search terms in the reference section but not the main text. After this elimination, 49 relevant research articles remained. Citation tracking produced nine more IS papers (Wolfsinkel et al. 2013). Overall, we analyzed 58 articles.

Fourth, we conducted open, axial, and selective (i.e., theoretical) coding using the qualitative software NVivo. NVivo assisted with manual coding by recording and organizing codes and keeping the record of theoretical memos (Short et al. 2008). We conducted the open coding via constant comparison which allowed us to systematically compare any unit of data with the instance of other units of data (Charmaz 2014). For axial coding, we arranged all codes into categories based on their similarities and differences. Through constant comparison, we grouped the identified codes and their subcategories. We recorded memos during the coding process to note the interpretation, differences, similarities, and relationships between different codes and categories of the data (Charmaz 2014). These tenets of GTM were conducted during both axial and selective coding which helped us to identify categories that were related to the main categories. Selective coding was used to integrate and refine categories based on the integration of the theory. We included our examples and reasons for applying selective coding. We present our results, the fifth step, in the next section.

OR Communications of the Association for Information Systems OR IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication OR IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management OR Journal of Information Science OR Information Systems Frontiers OR Organization Science OR Decision Support Systems OR Human-Computer Interaction OR International Journal of Information Management OR Management Science.

A synthesis of social injustice through social media

Our findings illustrate the main categories related to social injustice on social media and allow us to explore preliminary ideas on how social media facilitates social injustice. We present our results in two parts. First, we present the two main categories which emerged from our analysis: social media affordances and the different forms of social injustice. Second, we synthesize our findings and suggest a framework to explain how social media facilitates different social injustices.

Main Codes

Social Media Affordances: Expanding the theory of social media affordance

Our results reveal that two types of goal-oriented interactions exist: 1) between IS and organizations; and 2) between IS and individuals. These two interaction types merge into two dominant subgroups of codes as individual and organizational-level affordances. During the analysis process, we constantly iterate between the literature and our codes to understand the meaning of our codes from a theoretical standpoint. First, for the individual level, we find users adopt technologies to afford goal-oriented actions. Second, for the organizational level, we find organizations develop and adopt technologies to afford goal-oriented actions.

The iterative approach between our codes and the literature led us to use the technology affordance lens (Gibson 1986) to understand the meaning of our codes from a theoretical standpoint. Affordances are perceived or actual action possibilities permitted by objects (Gibson 1986). The application of the theory of affordance was apparent for the first group of subcodes related to individual-level use, because social media affordances at the individual level are a common conceptualization of technology use in social media literature (Karahanna et al. 2018). An example of an individual-level affordance is *self-presentation* where users reveal information about themselves on social media by posting their photos (Karahanna et al. 2018).

The application of affordance theory to the subcodes at the organizational level was not as apparent as the subcodes at the individual level because prior literature has ignored organizational-level social media affordances. An example of an organizational-level affordance from our analysis is *information tracking* where organizations can store users' information on the platform through cookies (see Table 1). Thus, our analysis led us to a conceptualization for social media affordances at the organizational level. We draw on the affordance literature in IS to explain how organizations develop and adopt these technology-related objects to afford the goal-oriented actions we observed in our data.

This organizational-level affordance lens applies to our organizational-level subcodes because we found that organizations engage in actions, such as *information filtering* (See Table 1), to pursue goal-oriented actions. This affordance emerges when the employees in the organization can perform different tasks, and then, these tasks are aggregated to generate a final goal-oriented action such as manipulating information that users see (Leonardi 2013); this is afforded by different employees in the organization, such as developers who code user interfaces and algorithms, and legal departments that write protocols related to these coding tasks. Results of these tasks are aggregated to generate a final goal of organizations. This exemplifies how organizations can develop and adopt technology affordances to accomplish their business goals.

Based on evidence from our review, we conceptualize the goal-oriented interactions between organizations and IS in our data. We define social media affordances at the organizational level as perceived or actual goal-oriented action possibilities permitted by *technology* or *IS* to actualize their organizational business model. Based on this conceptualization, our review of the IS literature suggests four social media affordances³ at the organizational level, as shown in Table 1.

³ Due to the in-progress status of our paper, we currently only define our social media affordances at the organizational level.

Affordances	Definition	Example Affordances in Prior Literature	Example Features for Affordances
Information filtering	This refers to the affordance that allows organizations to filter and manipulate information that users interact with on the platform.	Framing (Miranda et al. 2016); Information filtering (Kane et al. 2021); Social recommender systems (Manca et al. 2018); Ranking algorithms (Pennycook et al. 2020)	-Using AI (machine learning and deep learning algorithms) -Using protocols -Using platform interfaces -Using network architectures -Exploiting users' activity in a social bookmarking system
Information tracking	This refers to the affordance that allows organizations to track and store users' information on the platform.	Computerized surveillance (Clarke 2019); Online monitoring (Moon 2015); Evaluation (Lowry et al. 2017)	- Using servers and raw log files (e.g., time spent on the service, the click behavioral patterns), - Using cookies and tracking technologies such as web-bugs/tracking pixels
Information trading	This refers to the affordance that allows organizations to sell users' data to third parties.	Covert secondary data selling (Clarke 2019); Targeted advertising (Simon 2017)	- Sharing and using individuals' behavioral data with third parties as a business model - Using metadata of the users - Using digital footprints
Profiling users	This refers to the affordance that allows organizations to categorize users based on user information.	Advertisement targeting and individual decision making (Clarke 2019); Profiling (Simon 2017)	- Categorizing users based on class, age, race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation or other characteristics and behavioral data of the users
Table 1. Organizational-Level Affordances Linked to Social Injustice			

The Faces of Social Injustice

Through iterating between the literature and our codes, we identify subcodes related to different categories of social injustice. Initially, we suspected that social media affordances at the individual level are related to these unjust outcomes due to how resources, such as social capital and influence, are allocated at the individual level. However, through our review, we identified different categories of social injustices on social media resulting from the decision-making structures and practices of organizations. This led us to apply Young's critical theory of oppression⁴ (1990) to explain our codes and findings.

The subcodes of our main injustice code pertain to these three categories of social injustice: marginalization, violence, and exploitation. In the next section, we illustrate a brief example from our developing framework which explains how social media affordances at the organizational level facilitate *marginalization*.

Preliminary Framework : Marginalization

Marginalization occurs when there is deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions related to recognition, participation, and interaction (Young 2011). In social media, organizational-level affordances such as information filtering may create conditions for excluding some individuals from recognition, participation, and interaction on social media.

Affordances such as *information filtering* give some individuals little opportunity to participate and meaningfully engage. Indeed, the information filtering affordance exaggerates the marginalization of disadvantaged individuals (Gotterbarn 2010; Naidoo et al. 2019; Schulzke et al. 2014; Kane et al. 2021). For example, social networking and content community organizations actualizing information filtering affordances (using algorithmic features) may lead to biased decisions towards these individuals. The

⁴ To be consistent with our terminology, we will refer Young's theory of faces of oppression as faces of social injustice.

information filtering affordance used by Facebook has been criticized for proliferating racial bias and “weblining” (i.e. electronic form of blacklisting) through their algorithms (e.g., Clarke 2019; Gupta et al. 2021). Individuals from certain race, gender, and religious groups have been unable to view Facebook’s targeted marketing advertisement on credit, employment, and housing services because of the information filtering affordance Facebook used (Akter et al. 2021).

Bias against marginalized individuals may be even higher for leaner social media such as Twitter because of deindividuation and cue capacity limits of information filtering (Miranda et al. 2016; Young et al. 2020). For example, Twitter’s information filtering is found to be associated with misgendering, and excluding certain individuals from seeing or not seeing content such as advertisements (Fosch-Villaronga et al. 2021; Miranda et al. 2016). This effect is prominent for transgender and non-binary users who reported being misgendered by Twitter (Fosch-Villaronga et al. 2021). Thus, actualizing this affordance may result in prejudicial treatment and exclusion of minority identities (e.g., Akter et al. 2021; Gupta et al. 2021; Kane et al. 2021).

In the same vein, organizational-level *profiling* affordances can lead to marginalization on social media (Deng et al. 2016; Schulzke 2014; Animesh et al. 2011). For example, some crowdsourcing platforms profile crowd workers based on their experience and grant them special status (i.e., Master status) (Deng et al. 2016). This affordance might seem to empower crowd workers due to the fact that they seek this status because it gives them the opportunity for better-paid tasks. However, this affordance also leads to institutional marginalization (Deng et al. 2016). Profiling crowd workers may restrict newcomers from gaining experience, because job requesters reject crowd workers without master status (Deng et al. 2016).

Proposition 1: The marginalization face of social injustice on social media is institutionalized and facilitated through social media affordances at the organizational level: *information filtering* and *profiling*.

Future Directions and Contributions

Our theorizing review examines the literature at the intersection of social media and social injustice to understand how social media facilitates social injustices. Our completed work will produce a framework that describes how social media facilitates social injustices and offers several contributions.

First, we will contribute by bringing a structural view of injustice to a literature that has heretofore relied on a distributive paradigm. Most of the existing social media research on social injustice adopts a distributive paradigm, such that research focuses on how technology facilitates injustices at the individual level (Mingers and Walsham 2010; Van Dijk 2020). This can lead to unresolved social injustice issues because injustices thrive when structure and processes that uphold power differentials remain (Van Dijk 2020). For example, individuals marginalize each other both online and offline (Van Dijk 2020). However, social injustice scholarship ignores how organizations and policymakers use information filtering and profiling affordances to uphold structures that oppress marginalized groups (Van Dijk 2020). We apply this structural perspective of social injustice to the IS literature. Thus, this work contributes to this line of research by expanding the focus to structural injustices, to identify how organizational-level social media affordances manifest social injustices.

Second, we will contribute to the literature by explicating the structural faces of social injustices on social media. Most of the research in IS focuses on the distributive paradigm and thus injustices are considered substantive processes stemming from unequal distribution of resources (Van Dijk 2020). While this is true, only focusing on the distributive paradigm limits our understanding of social injustices that different individuals endure, and it neglects the dynamic nature of social injustices as a function of social relations and institutional processes. For example, IS scholarship conceptualizes the influence of individuals as substantive and discusses the hegemonic power of popularity of the users in creating differential treatment and spreading falsified information (Gunarathne et al. 2018; Miranda et al. 2016). However, how organizations facilitate falsified information and differential treatments between individuals, and which type of social injustices (i.e., violence, marginalization, exploitation) they proliferate online are not the focus of social injustice scholarship in IS (Van Dijk 2020). Thus, explicating different faces of social injustice on social media provides a comprehensive understanding facilitated by different types of organizations and by social media affordances.

Third, we will advance the social media affordances literature by identifying social media affordances at the organizational level. Research in IS has advanced our understanding of social media affordances at the individual level (e.g., Karahanna et al. 2018), while our work stands out as the first to consider social media affordances at the organizational level. Thus, we extend social media affordances research to deepen our understanding of how organizations contribute to social injustices.

Finally, analyzing the literature will allow us to offer an agenda for future research of social injustice on social media. Our research agenda will be based around three themes: 1) bright spots and dark spots in our understanding of how social media enables different forms of social injustice—i.e., where is more research needed?; 2) uncovering unrecognized social media affordances that enable social injustice—i.e., what have we missed seeing entirely?; and 3) understanding the mechanisms that ameliorate or amplify the relationship between affordances and social injustice, particularly through design solutions and user awareness—i.e., what can we do about it? We expect our research to spark new pathways of exploration into social injustice on social media.

In addition to the theoretical implications, our work offers implications for practice and society. Our findings shed light on how the faces of social injustice result from institutional practices of organizations. We hope that our findings urge society and policymakers to help organizations be more value-sensitive and create emancipatory designs that limit social injustice.

Conclusion

This research set out to examine how social media facilitates social injustices online. Leveraging Young's critical theory of oppression and affordance theory, our work theorizes about dynamics between social media affordances and the faces of social injustices. This will provide important extensions to both social media and social injustice literature.

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