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Interpersonal Justice and Social Media: A Computationally Intensive Investigation

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Abstract

Social media usage in a social justice seeking movement entails far more than sharing diverse viewpoints and concerns. As these digital dynamics in a justice seeking movement have not been extensively investigated, we examine the process of seeking justice in a social media trial.

We examine the major themes emerging from three key injustice events of a student movement that received international attention after the arrest of students on charges of sedition. These social movement participants adapted social media to facilitate engagement and action to sustain and advance their movement in a fair and respectful manner. The display of respect, politeness, and dignified treatment is considered interpersonal justice (Colquitt, 2001).

The existing scholarship on digital social justice is siloed and lacks interdisciplinary engagement (Powell et al., 2018). The interdisciplinary history of the IS discipline can potentially integrate and advance the knowledge being generated in various fields, such as computer science, sociology, political science, and media studies. Even though social media spaces have the potential to promote fairness, they have become sites of injustice, especially related to gender, caste, and race (see e.g., Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2020).

Our data collection and analysis approaches are informed by the computationally intensive theory construction genre (Miranda et al. 2022, p. iii). Given the research focus, our analytical approach was guided by our objective of surfacing interesting patterns in terms of content categories and subcategories and the associations between them. To that end, we adopted multiple analytical techniques for triangulation and corroboration purposes (Miranda et al., 2022).

We applied a topic modeling approach to Twitter data and identified the main discussions in relation to the focal phenomenon. We generated topic models for the three events using the Latent Dirichlet Algorithm (LDA) (Blei et al., 2003). We examined the meaning of individual topics and the associated words and tweets to label distinct themes or categories (Hannigan et al., 2019).

Interpersonal justice pertains to the process of seeking justice. Our LDA analysis illustrates the themes that can emerge after each injustice event. Our semantic network analysis will illustrate the associations between themes that can emerge after each injustice event.

Our case could serve as a motivation to further scholarly work on the digital dynamics of social justice. In the social media trial, as one would expect in a normal course of justice, the students would have been treated as innocent until proven otherwise. Our case, building on research on collective engagement (Vaast et al., 2017), social protest cycles (Tarafdar & Ray, 2021), and trolling (Bharati et al., 2018), has the potential to explicate the digital dynamics of social justice in social movements. As movements seek justice, they are challenging the power structures and the dominant ideologies (e.g., casteism, patriarchy, or islamophobia) that are being used to oppress them.

The case also illustrates the digital contention dynamics of social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Tesi et al., 2019) and the conflict between the key emergent themes. The digital dynamics of interpersonal justice, which pertains to the respectful treatment in these encounters (Bies, 2005; Colquitt & Shaw, 2005), will also be illustrated with a temporal analysis of theme evolution and network associations and presented at the conference.