Who Is a Good Digital Activist? Exploring Social Justice Activists' Adaptation to Instagram's Algorithmic Changes

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Through interviews with 16 social justice activists, we explore their challenges of adapting to Instagram, particularly in light of the platform's evolving algorithm. Our findings reveal that the frequent changes in these algorithms significantly impact their ability to engage effectively– and disproportionately impact visibility, especially for those with fewer resources and less algorithmic expertise. Our contributions encompass discussions on activists' challenges in adapting to platform changes, and the strategic shifts towards gaining broader visibility. We also address the expectations of being a *"good digital activist"* amidst algorithmic mediation on Instagram, emphasizing participants' need for navigating platform mediated complexities and maintaining authenticity. Finally, we suggest design implications, advocating features– for both existing platforms and alternative systems exclusively for activism that reduce activists' concerns about quantitative metrics, promote selective privacy, tie amplification to thoughtful engagement, and foster community building through contextual moderation and communication.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **User studies**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Digital activism, platform changes, self-presentation, labor, social media, authenticity, algorithms, sense-making, adaptation

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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent times, online platforms have emerged as powerful tools for social justice causes, affording individuals and communities novel means of advocating for themselves and others. Digital social justice activists have access to a diverse range of online resources to participate in social movements, including hacking, crowdsourcing, blogging, and petitioning (See e.g., [54, 97, 101, 107]). This study focuses on individuals who use Instagram for social justice causes, and particularly fight for the equality of marginalized and historically underrepresented groups.

Several large-scale social justice movements have been led or supported by social media, and this was especially a catalyst for protests ranging from local movements to full-fledged global calls of advocacy [48, 76]– the magnitude of which would have been considerably smaller in the absence of affordances such as swift information dissemination and effective mobilization as provided by platforms [4]. In particular, as discussed by Bennett and Segerberg, social media facilitates *connective action*, giving rise to supportive communities through personalized recommendations

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[8]. The quick formation of networks, a key affordance [57], facilitates cross-movement knowledge exchange and mutual assistance among individuals involved in distinct movements [32, 48].

However, like most technologies, social media also has its pitfalls. Notably, various marginalized groups have called attention to patterns of biased representation [51, 71], which stems from the algorithmic nature of these sites [51]. Algorithms power social media recommendation systems, aiming to deliver personalized user experiences [113]. This primarily involves predicting and sharing relevant content while recommending similar individuals to follow. However, social media algorithms often exhibit a popularity bias, prioritizing content that reflects majority interests due to user engagement patterns and signal boosting by influential actors [5, 53, 66, 95]. As a result, causes important to marginalized groups may be underrepresented [51].

Another issue with the algorithms of recommendation systems is that they keep changing [29, 31] driven by the need to introduce new features, remain competitive, and respond to user feedback [42]. In the case of Instagram, at the time of data collection, the platform had announced that its algorithm will no longer prioritize the recommendation of political content. While Instagram claims that these changes result from user feedback, experts argued that Meta was attempting to reduce perceptions of political bias and the impact its platforms have on misinformation and political extremism [132]. Meta has increasingly faced criticism over the past decade for its role in large-scale political controversies and illiberal activities, such as the data leak during the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the organizing and mobilization related to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol [112, 131].

Social justice activists, like other users, utilize folk theories of algorithms to guide their online work [117]. However, unlike many seeking visibility, these activists' success has broader societal implications as contributors to social justice movements. When changes occur, their previously effective strategies may fail, potentially impacting the progress of movements and hindering substantive political change. We focus specifically on two key changes: 1) the shift from chronological feeds to algorithmic feeds, and 2) the decline in the algorithmic support for political activity [45]. We ask:

RQ1: How do social justice activists perceive changes on social media?

RQ2: What is the impact of these changes on social media on activism more broadly, and how do they influence activists' effectiveness and strategies?

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 self-identifying social justice activists. We reported how participants noticed, interpreted, and made sense of the changes they experienced on Instagram. They described methods for testing their understandings and explained that circumventing these changes often resulted in a misaligned presentation of content, which was in tension with their original goals of advocacy work. Our findings and discussions contribute to broader literature in two major ways. First, we discuss participants' difficulties in adapting to frequent changes on online platforms. Participants expressed concerns about the detrimental effects of relying on entertainment-focused platforms for their activism. This lack of support creates precarity in maintaining visibility, causing activists to prioritize self-presentation tactics, often at the expense of their core objectives. Consequently, we examine what it means to be a *"good" digital activist* amid algorithmically mediated changes. Participants expect a *good* digital activist to navigate platform complexities effectively, ensuring both the visibility and efficiency of their work while maintaining platform-mediated authenticity. The findings also demonstrated that the ability to be a *good* digital activist depended on available resources and social media skills, as not everyone could thrive, especially given the varying impacts and adaptations to algorithmic changes on Instagram. Finally, we conclude with design implications, encouraging both social media platforms and independent–alternative platforms exclusively for activism to implement

features that do not require users, particularly activists, to constantly worry about quantitative visibility metrics.

2 BACKGROUND

In this section, we situate our paper within the literature on digital activism, social media dynamics, and changing platform priorities. We emphasize the importance of online practices for activists and how they navigate challenges in the social media landscape. First, we identify a gap in understanding how activists perceive and use new technologies. Then, we examine recent studies on social media changes and their effects on different user groups, highlighting what digital activism looks like in this evolving context.

2.1 Advocacy via Digital Platforms

Digital activism has facilitated global social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter [99], #MeToo [62, 105], the Umbrella Movement [76], the Arab Spring [102], #1reasonwhy [12], and the Gezi Park protests [64], leveraging social media's networked capacities for mobilization [57]. However, scholars critique its limitations, including *"performative allyship"* [68, 82], low-commitment activism among influencers and creators [43, 55, 139], and *"slacktivism"*, which is politically ineffective [16, 80, 91]. Critics highlight its lack of leadership [49] and its dual role in enabling both pro-social activism and extremist mobilization, exacerbating societal polarization [110, 111]. Algorithmic moderation often fails to distinguish between activism and abuse, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups; for example, Payne et al., [106] found that fat liberation discussions frequently led to bullying rather than support. In response, platforms like Instagram now limit political content to curb misinformation and divisive rhetoric [112].

However, social media remains a vital platform for critical discussions that foster social justice movements, as it allows participation with fewer risks than traditional activism [15, 28, 89, 134]. Conventional activism often requires physical presence at demonstrations and assemblies, which can be inaccessible and unsafe for vulnerable populations [81]. Online activism has also allowed historically marginalized communities to engage in social justice movements that create "counter-spaces" ([44], p.3), while also diverging from traditional collective modes that often focus on high-resource organizations and formal leadership [40, 104]. Activists are able to express themselves uniquely, deviating from societally imposed norms as online activism enables diverse and independent self-presentation [138] and control the level of involvement according to their comfort levels [136]. However, the question of who can effectively participate in this form of activism, given the distinct skills required for relevance on social media, remains underexplored [50, 99].

Bennett and Segerberg [8] introduced the concept of *"connective action"*, which describes how individual identities and personal expression drive participation in digital activism, particularly when reinforced by personalized recommendations on platforms. Several scholars have used the logic of connective action to study social movements animated by social media use. In this case, *"communication becomes organization"*, wherein *"organization"* as an activity becomes dynamic [75]– but the gap remains, *how does connective action sustain when the connecting affordances constantly change?* In particular, while they enhance mobilization opportunities and facilitate personal experiences embedded in cultural narratives, specifically advancing critical, action-oriented activism [137], they can also exert control through algorithms that dictate which forms of activism are promoted and which remain disconnected [78]. This is especially important to investigate, as young people, interested in social justice increasingly utilize digital platforms to connect with a wide audience and mobilize, strategically employing features like hashtags and stories [59].

Algorithms of platforms support linkages between activists for collective action and raising awareness about their causes [40]. They establish the conditions for digital activism, influencing

which political voices and messages are amplified or filtered [40], raising important questions about the consequences of these practices. Like other creators, activists must *"play the visibility game"* by understanding how algorithms function to devise tactics for gaining and building audiences [20], and researchers have called for *addressing the agency of algorithms in organizing* [40]. As, activists learn to *"engage with and act upon algorithms to achieve their political aims and pursue social change"* ([133], p. 8), scholars have called for understanding how this constant learning of changing algorithms impact their work both online and offline [19]. While activists often find creative ways to work with algorithms to increase the visibility of their causes, they also face challenges in understanding these algorithms and developing effective tactics [118, 125, 133]. This has led researchers to call for ways to *legitimize* online activism [108]. This issue is particularly significant because algorithms exhibit a form of 'agnosticism' that implicitly harms various activists among other marginalized communities across the political spectrum who use these platforms for political protest and collective action [71, 120, 133].

We investigate the social media practices of social justice activists on Instagram, focusing on the values and challenges they face amid two significant changes. First, we analyze their adaptation to Instagram's shift from a chronological feed to an algorithmic one. Second, we consider their responses to Instagram's recent explicit non-support of political content, both of which we detail in the following section.

2.2 Platform Change

Platform change is inevitable. Since platforms were introduced, companies have continuously released updates to enhance their functionality, interactivity, and alignment with current user requirements [42]. Each platform aims to incorporate the most successful and popular features to stay ahead [41]. For example, past speculation suggested that Instagram's prioritization of Reels reflects its attempt to replicate TikTok's success [1]. In response, Meta has repositioned its platforms as entertainment-focused, explicitly distancing itself from political content [109, 126], with Instagram stating, *"We aim to show you less Reels that focus on political issues"* [58]. While Instagram attributes these changes to *user feedback*, experts argue that Meta seeks to mitigate concerns over political bias, misinformation, and extremism, given its past links to the Cambridge Analytica scandal and its role in facilitating coordination ahead of the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol building [112, 131]. More recently, Meta has shifted its approach to content moderation, ceasing third-party fact-checks and taking a more permissive stance on topics like immigration and gender identity. Similar to X, it now emphasizes the promotion of "free speech" while distancing itself from the responsibility of content moderation [70].

While acknowledging the dangers associated with extremist speech on social media platforms, it is crucial to recognize that these platforms can and have functioned as valuable instruments for social justice advocacy [61]. The implications of restricting social justice content are complex, as simply mitigating negative expressions overlooks broader discourses on these platforms, especially because prior research also shows that algorithmic platforms may not always *create* extremism [77]– although they may facilitate its spread by algorithmically amplifying pre-existing ideologies [119]. Consequently, there exists a significant gap in understanding the potential impact of these changes on individuals who utilize social media for constructive social change. This concern is illustrated in an article in the Washington Post, where a user explained, "*Some people's entire existence and their perspectives are going to be deemed political, like me as a Black woman*," as she discussed the *vague* phrasing of Meta's rules [87]. This gap warrants critical examination, as the suppression of certain forms of speech may inadvertently undermine the efforts of advocates striving for social justice.

Scholars have examined changes in platforms from diverse viewpoints, for example observing how self-presentation and folk theories shift in response to these changes [29]. Adapting to change

often requires adjusting behaviors and learning new tasks [29], a process that takes time and can be challenging to navigate [23]. Moreover, the larger the change, the longer the adaptation period [128]. This challenge is compounded for user groups like social justice activists, who not only appropriate platforms for their causes but must also simultaneously adapt to ongoing changes [24]. Conversely, if the changes are invisible and poorly understood, coping strategies become more time-consuming and complicated due to a violation of perceived control [10] and the need to alter planned behavior [2]. The resulting costs, including time lost to cognitive automation and frustration from relearning simple tasks, can lead to *"learned helplessness"*, requiring users to invest additional effort and modify their cognitive maps [9]. Understanding change becomes more important when the change is felt but not seen [7]. Additionally, algorithmic changes are often felt but poorly defined, with companies providing only high-level justifications and lacking detailed documentation [114]. This limits users' understanding of recommendation algorithms and highlights the need for research into how those explicitly unsupported by platforms comprehend these changes [21].

When users experience change, they often engage in community-based information gathering to understand and navigate it [29], typically following an initial phase of confusion and negative emotions [20, 63, 65, 98]. Scholars have studied algorithmic sense-making [63, 90], which explains how users interpret ambiguous phenomena [90]. Moehlmann et al., [96] identify three key steps: "focused enactment," "selection modes," and "retention sources," involving information gathering, pattern recognition, and long-term strategy formation. While DeVito [29] explored adaptive folk theorization for platform change, research on marginalized users' adaptation—particularly social justice activists—remains limited.

In the context of activists, who are generally focus on specific affordances that are useful to them, algorithmic changes may not be noticed without an impact being felt [69], especially as people learn about algorithms via prolonged interactions with them [22]. Past research has shown that activists are ready to accept change by adjusting their methods to align with advancements in technology [14], for example, studies specific to online activism have uncovered spontaneous behaviors that may challenge traditional sensemaking heuristics [140]. These behaviors tend to be more flexible and organic, rather than rigidly following a set process. However, the findings regarding explicit or implicit change have been incidental and scattered and warrant further focused exploration, as they contribute to HCI and CSCW research that encourages a holistic review and design of platforms for marginalized groups (for eg., [26, 82, 100, 122]).

As numerous social media platforms, including Meta, undergo substantial modifications, they generate discourse within news and popular culture [47]. For example, Meta's changes to Instagram, which resemble features of TikTok, have prompted user feedback highlighting adverse impacts on content creators who must recalibrate their strategies [123]. At the time of data collection, and analyses, Meta's explicit declaration of non-political positioning, disallowing political content across its platforms, has also prompted concern among various user groups [109, 126]. Exploring activists' experiences in using social media for social justice reveals important implications of platform changes for social change, addressing a gap noted by the HCI and CSCW communities regarding how platformized tech companies often establish rules and power dynamics that undermine diverse voices and hinder advocacy (See for eg., [46, 79, 88]).

3 METHODS

We used semi-structured interviews to answer our research questions. We recruited self-identified activists via purposeful and snowball sampling [18], given the close-knit nature of activist communities. We limited recruitment to participants who primarily used Instagram for activism, as it is recognized as the most popular platform for contemporary activists (e.g., [3, 52, 56, 74, 141]).

Table 1. Self-Reported Participant Demographics.

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education	Annual Income	Type of Activism	Type of Activist
P1	24	Female	Black	College diploma	$30,000 up to $39,999	Student organization focused on activism for underrepresented students	Part-time activist
P2	21	Male	Asian	College diploma	More than $150,000	Awareness about various issues	Part-time activist
P3	24	Female	Black	Master's degree	$10,000 up to $19,999	Student government and Identity related activism	Part-time activist
P4	23	Female	White, Asian	College diploma	$50,000 up to $59,999	sharing information about wealth inequality	Full-time activist
P5	23	Female	White	Master's degree	$60,000 up to $69,999	Gun control advocacy	Part-time activist
P6	23	Non-binary	White	Master's degree	More than $150,000	antiracism, union/labor, mental healthcare, disability, gender/sexuality	Part-time activist
P7	26	Female	Black	College diploma	$20,000 up to $29,999	mental health and social work advocacy	Full-time activist
P8	20	Female	Asian	Some college	$90,000 - $99,999	Educational advocacy and political engagement generally.	Part-time activist
P9	23	Female	Black	Some college	$90,000 - $99,999	Climate Activism	Part-time activist
P10	20	Female	White	Some college	$100,000 - $149,999	Insight, promotion, advocacy, education	Full-time activist
P11	21	Female	White	Some College	More than $150,000	Racial justice	Full-time activist
P12	45	Non-binary	Asian, Kalinago	Professional degree	More than $150,000	LGBTQ+ equity, Racial justice, Gender Justice	Full-time activist
P13	N.A.	Female	White	N.A.	N.A.	Wealth inequality advocacy	Part-time activist
P14	23	Female	Asian	Master's degree	$50,000 up to $59,999	Social justice, policy/legislative work	Full-time activist
P15	32	Male	Black	Professional degree	$60,000 up to $69,999	civil engagement and climate	Full-time activist
P16	48	Female	White	Some high school or less	$10,000 up to $19,999	Human rights and mental health using art	Part-time activist

While we ensured that all our participants used Instagram, the semi-structured nature of interviews resulted in our discussions naturally addressing broader social media use and activist practices as well. Finally, we used an iterative, inductive thematic analysis informed by grounded theory [18] to hone themes relevant to our research questions.

3.1 Data Collection

3.1.1 Recruitment. The first author contacted advocacy groups through her email and Instagram. On Instagram, she used common advocacy hashtags (#activism, #stophate, #artactivism, #youthactivism, #stopracism, #ecoactivism, #feministactivism, #stopgunviolence) to randomly select 20 posts under each hashtag. These posts were then manually screened to ensure their relevance to activism (e.g., only those addressing political campaigns and legislations, social justice-oriented art and informational content about social causes), resulting in a final selection of 43 posts. The first author contacted the creators of these posts through the direct message (DM) feature on Instagram, inquiring about their interest in participating in the research study. If they expressed interest, she obtained their email addresses and also inquired about other potentially interested participants for snowball recruitment, where the same process of communication was repeated. Subsequent communication with participants occurred via email, and *a total of six people* subsequently interviewed through this mode of recruitment. A similar recruitment process was followed via email, where the first author reached out to various organizations, she identified through online searches (*"activist organizations", "activists"* and *"activists on social media"*) related to activism. She asked them about their interest in participating in the study, and if they knew of other potential participants. In *both* recruitment methods, participants received a consent form, which included a screening survey to confirm their age (above 18 years) and self-identification as activists. Those who completed the screening survey and were eligible could schedule an interview. In total, *10 out of 37* contacted organizations responded, completed the screening surveys, and one member from each organization– either their head (n=3) or publications chair (n=7)– was interviewed. Demographic information was collected after the interviews were conducted, using a Qualtrics survey (See Table 1).

3.1.2 Interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. We started by asking participants about their motivations for pursuing advocacy work and the particular kind of activism that they pursued to understand more about their backgrounds, motivations and beliefs. We then moved on to their use of digital tools and social media. Particularly, we focused on their use of Instagram and their understanding of how the algorithms worked "for" or "against" them. Finally, we spoke about their expectations from digital platforms, and their understanding of how they perceived

algorithmic and platform change to impact their work. The interviews took place via Zoom and lasted between 40-70 minutes. They were transcribed for subsequent analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis

We used a thematic analysis-based approach [13], starting with open coding and subsequently formulating higher level themes through rounds of focused coding.The first author employed an inductive-iterative process [13] to open-code the transcripts while simultaneously continuing to interview participants. The interviews were consequently shaped by the emerging codes [18] to ensure that the data and context remained grounded in participants' experiences. During this process, the first and second authors met weekly to discuss the codes generated from the initial transcripts and to refine the interview protocol, particularly to focus on topics that participants identified as important. When no new codes arose, the first author conducted four iterative rounds of focused coding, which were concomitantly informed by regular weekly meetings with the second author, aimed at refining the process. At the highest level, focused coding involved classifying codes into two primary categories: the challenges posed by algorithmic shifts and how these challenges contributed to changes in presentation—redefining what it means to be a *good digital activist*. This concept was found to be connected with other codes, such as *"achieving visibility"* and *"surveillance capacities of the platform"*. Likewise, the codes were grouped to answer particular research questions.

4 FINDINGS

Interviews with digital activists highlighted the dynamic nature of their work in response to ever-evolving social media landscapes. Despite benefits of engaging with social media for activism, participants conveyed grievances pertaining to other perceived capabilities, underscoring how they saw social media as a more efficacious instrument in the past but have since observed changes. In this section, we describe activists' engagement in a perpetual state of adaptation, continuously fine-tuning their strategies to navigate the nuances of shifting platforms. Next, we report on the labor-intensive practices undertaken by activists, delving into the creative, emotional, and visibility labor involved, often exceeding their areas of expertise. Finally, we discuss how activists strategically present themselves online, considering the impact of performative actions and ethical considerations in their pursuits.

4.1 Platform Changes: A Challenge to Mediate

Participants found it challenging to understand the complex and dynamic nature of Instagram, expressing frustration at navigating through its perceived algorithmic changes. Specifically, they found it difficult to first identify these changes (noticing), then understand their technical aspects (sense-making), and finally develop strategies to counter and adapt to them– while also acknowledging and in tension with these adaptation practices (interpreting the changes).

4.1.1 Noticing Change. Often, social justice activists did not possess detailed knowledge of the specific changes occurring within social media platforms, but they were aware that shifts were imminent and constant. This uncertainty was articulated by P4, who stated, *"Do I know how they'll change? No [...] I'm sure they add new features, [and then] things will change."* While they recognized that change was a constant factor in their digital engagement, the unpredictability of these alterations necessitated a proactive stance marked by negative anticipation. Though the shift to an algorithmic feed was their key focus, it required constant adaptation due to frequent platform adjustments driven by the constant evolution of algorithms. Many individuals echoed the sentiments of P5, who noted, *"Whenever there's a larger update on a social media platform, it takes*

me a while to get used to it just because, yeah, I'm not used to that." Additionally, P5 noted, how this change might even be a result of the time during covid-19, where "*a lot of issues with social media and activism [arose] because there was a lot of misinformation.*" However, in particular, participants were also worried about *how frequent* the changes were, as, P3 shared,

> *Judging from when I started to now, I feel like the algorithm is very– it's very selective. And I feel like it changes so often that it's kind of hard to understand. First, they say use certain hashtags, and we've done that... But they change it all the time. So, once you understand right now, next month there might be a different scenario.*

Activists employed various methods to notice changes, primarily through the content they encountered and their engagement with it. They closely monitored engagement metrics to gauge the effectiveness of different types of content. P10 illustrated this by noting, *"When I started, Reels were something really new. So everyone who did Reels got a boost on their account,"* highlighting how noticing others implementing new ways of sharing content and corresponding patterns of visibility was an important means of noticing change. The prioritization of Reels was also a change that participants described negatively in relation to their broader activism goals. As P6 articulated, *"If you're prioritizing Reels, then it immediately becomes harder for that important information to get to people."* Likewise, P1 noticed an implicit change, stating, *"I haven't seen as many cases where Reels are used to disseminate important information that people need."* Here P6 and P1 expressed their concern that the platform's focus on Reels emphasized*"entertaining content"* that might overshadow critical messaging. P3 supported this by stating, *"Instagram is so popular now. It's a bit saturated."* This reflected that, in addition to changes within the platform, its recent growing popularity had led to an abundance of content and users, which may have affected the visibility and effectiveness of posts.

Participants particularly expressed concern that the platform was actively distancing itself from activism-oriented content, reflecting Instagram's *now* published statements about no longer supporting political content [112]. One way they saw this change being manifested was as they expressed concerns about Instagram's shift towards prioritizing entertaining content, particularly Reels, which were perceived as more engaging yet less informative. As P6 noted, *"Reels were far more likely to be entertaining instead of informational,"* emphasizing that while traditional posts conveyed essential information about current issues, Reels often focused on lighter content like dance videos or recipes that could be quickly consumed and forgotten.

Additionally, participants believed that this undermined organizing efforts, as P6 pointed out: *"You couldn't screenshot a reel; you couldn't send it easily to people and get information out quickly."* P6 further asserted that this shift made it *"harder for that important information to get to people,"* indicating a significant challenge for activists who relied on efficient communication to mobilize their efforts and promote meaningful change, leading P4 to speculate that the change they needed was– "*a new feature [..] that would prioritize content from nonprofit labeled accounts*".

4.1.2 Sense-making. Participants employed a range of methods to make sense of the changes they *noticed*. This approach focused on exploring new ways to understand the algorithm through experiences and observations. Participants described practices for validating these insights, which motivated them to adjust their strategies to align with the evolving landscape. By engaging in this iterative process, they sought to ensure that their interpretations of change were coherent and actionable, thereby facilitating more effective advocacy.

P16 elaborated for us on a change she "*felt*" with the algorithm–

> *The algorithm has a specific filter for determining whether to allow your message to pass through. Generally, this filter is based on whether you have an account with millions of*

> *followers; if you do, you can be sure that your post will always be at the top. Not only is it at the top when you post it, but it will also remain at the top.*

To test out this noticeable change, P16 shared that she *discovered it* by–

> *I double-check the hashtag and notice my post reappearing [by using] two devices. I click on it, but as I scroll down, I see that my post, which was published just a few seconds ago, is buried beneath posts that were shared weeks earlier. These top posts are likely from accounts with millions of followers who probably pay for advertising.*

P16's method of "double-checking" exemplifies a hands-on approach to sense-making. By utilizing multiple devices and scrutinizing the visibility of her posts in real time, she aimed to empirically validate her concerns regarding the algorithm's bias toward larger accounts. This perception aligns with previous findings by non-traditional novice creators, who have articulated that the algorithm tends to favor accounts that are already well-established [25]. This practical experimentation not only helped her grasp the nuances of visibility but also informed her strategic decisions moving forward. Like P16, P9 shared her methods–

> *I would notice what kind of posts got the most attention. Was it the ones where it was like very text-heavy because I was transferring something from Twitter, or was it when like you just had like a picture of people smiling and like there was like a caption that was important, but the picture itself wasn't necessarily the big draw. Or like, were we getting more attention on days where I had like 10 things in the story or like 20 things, or was that too much? So I was trying to keep that in the back of my head as I was going about it to be strategic knowing that there is something working either for or against me.*

P9's reflections reveal a nuanced understanding of engagement metrics, demonstrating her strategic awareness of content performance. By analyzing the types of posts that garnered attention, she actively sought to refine her approach, indicating a proactive stance in adapting to the shifting dynamics of audience engagement.

Overall, participants explored various methods to test their theories regarding the platform's transformation and their necessary adaptations, each of which was contextual and aligned with their ultimate goals. This focus enabled them to adopt a *contextual* definition of change—an important aspect, because sense-making has become *open to many possible and plausible interpretations* as technologies have become more complex [6]. Consequently, concentrating on specific cases that were particularly relevant to their understanding of the shifts occurring within the platform became essential for effectively navigating these complexities.

4.1.3 Interpreting. Based on their understanding of changes, our participants *interpreted* the impact of algorithmic recommendations, which they felt increasingly hindered the visibility and dissemination of activism content. This *interpretation* involved both adapting their practices and perceiving the consequences of those adaptations. Participants described various strategies to circumvent algorithmic hindrance, yet many felt that the nature and representation of their activism were deteriorating as a result. In this context, we outline the methods by which participants adapted to what they perceived as Instagram's *prioritization of entertaining content*. We also document how these adaptations, while aimed at fostering activism, led them to express concerns that their practices had become inauthentic.

Most participants expressed concern that they felt pressured to entertain their audiences in order to succeed in their work. For example, P3 exclaimed: *"How do we be eye-catching as an organization where we're mostly posting flyers or recaps? How do we catch people's attention?"* This perspective was based on the observation that Instagram's algorithm gradually became such that it favored

content that was engaging and entertaining. Thus, the perceived imperative to be entertaining and eye-catching often conflicted with the goal of educating and informing.

In creating content they thought would appeal to the algorithm, many activists felt that this ultimately resulted in a favoring of *"controversial and extreme posts"* (P9). In a similar vein, P2 shared,

> *"[Algorithmically mediated activism] will turn activists into extremists or make them seem extreme just because to get attention, they need to be doing things that are perhaps outside of their mission parameter. With today's algorithms, posts become more popularized just based on their interactions. Misinformation and fake news can prevail because things that are more egregious in either direction tend to get more interactions."*

This underscored the challenge activists saw coming up within a system that was algorithmically mediated to entertain. Additionally, P7 shared,– *"It take[s] the spotlight away from activism because, I don't know, I feel like the basis of platforms such as Instagram has become like entertainment."* P4 further shared,

> *It pushes content that receives a lot of interaction out to wider audience [..] But, the content that usually gets that type of intrigue is stuff that is on the extremes, stuff that is often violent [..] and not representative of the views of the people on that platform at large. And so when it comes to politics in particular, the extreme sides of any issue are the ones that get promoted the most.*

P9 likewise shared her personal experiences in this context, noting that *"many post things they wouldn't say aloud to others."* She observed that *"people's posts are definitely very radical just to get promoted or very controversial,"* reflecting on another common strategy to gain algorithmic visibility. P9 mentioned receiving advice to post more controversial content, stating, *"I've been advised even to post more controversial things sometimes because it'll get people to comment."* However, she expressed concern that this approach could be counterproductive, arguing that *"we need to make people see vegans not as extremists, but as just people who are doing what they can to reduce unnecessary animal suffering."* By striving for a balance between algorithmic visibility and an empathetic, informational style, P9 highlighted the tension between gaining engagement and staying true to the movement's goals, asserting that *"creating posts that are radical or extreme goes directly against that goal."* Likewise, P7 acknowledged that she herself may have been under the influence of the algorithm and been conditioned with extreme content that, in turn, instantiated her beliefs and reinforced certain opinions over others, sharing– "*Some people would call me extreme left, and I don't know if social media had a part to play in that, in reiterating my own beliefs to me and not showing me anything other than that, so just reinforcing." (P7)*

Consequently, participants believed that this made it challenging for activists to achieve their activist-oriented goals while competing with radical and provocative content. They further felt that the algorithmic support of *"extreme news"* compelled activists to resort to inauthentic methods to promote their causes. P2 shared that in this context, *"it becomes no longer a fair fight,"* because individuals seeking to engage in *"fair activism"* (P16) cannot compete with those who share extreme content, thereby undermining the foundations of digital activism. Overall, participants interpreted that their circumventing methods added to the tension surrounding the decline of authentic activism.

In response to platform transformations, some activists adopted alternative processes that integrated both digital and physical methods, driven by their discomfort with strategies designed to appease the algorithm. For example, P7, dissatisfied with the limited reach of her social media posts, began distributing activism-related flyers through *airdropping* in public places. This approach not only demonstrated her resourcefulness but also complemented her digital efforts, as she often shared images of these airdrops on social media to enhance visibility. Similarly, P8, frustrated

with trying to understand and comply with ineffective strategies, formed an *activist coalition* with other organizations at her university. Through a group chat on a messaging platform, they coordinated outreach strategies that included online posts, physical flyers, and cohesive branding efforts. This collaboration allowed them to disseminate messages across a broader network while engaging in a *collaborative algorithm investigation* to deepen their collective understanding of how their content was being received [27]. Both participants illustrated how digital activism fits into a multifaceted strategy, emphasizing the importance of combining online and offline channels for effective outreach.

This leads to the next section, which examines the implications of these changes and new policies for what it means to be considered a *"good digital activist"* in the current landscape. Participants' interpretations of these shifts are reshaping their perceptions of activism itself. While many have adopted alternative methods, social media remains a vibrant and essential tool for driving change. However, this reliance creates tension around visibility and controversy, as activists navigate the challenges of maintaining their messages amid public scrutiny. In the following section, we will explore how activists present themselves and share their experiences while navigating these rapidly evolving platforms.

4.2 Presenting as a Good Digital Activist

As discussed in section 4.1, participants noticed, made sense of, and interpreted the changes and their consequences. In this section, we examined the strategies participants employed to adapt, along with the effort involved, and how these elements shaped the rhetoric of what it meant to be a good digital activist. Our analysis revealed that presenting content while adapting to the algorithmic precarity involved deliberate and strategic labor, a process intensified by the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the platform's operations.

4.2.1 Tensions with Self-Presentation. The evolving social media landscape altered how activists defined their roles and effectiveness. With the rise of specific and difficult to understand algorithm-driven changes, the need for strategic ways of self-presentation intensified. Activists became increasingly aware that their visibility hinged on the careful curation of their online personas, resulting in a labor-intensive approach that required ongoing adaptation.

Despite taking measures that exceeded her expertise, P10 reflected on the challenges of measuring the impact of these tactics. She noted that the precarious and constantly changing metrics for visibility presented a shift that forced her and others to navigate a landscape where gauging effectiveness became increasingly difficult in the absence of direct interactions and with constraints on who could truly see their work. The ambiguity surrounding what constituted good or bad engagement was compounded by the complexities of adapting to ever-evolving algorithmic changes. She explained:

> *One of the challenges is that since you are not directly interacting with people, you never know. You don't see the impact of your activism as much. So you might think that your activism isn't being as impactful because not everyone who reads a post tell us that the post has an impact on them, and not all of those people will comment on the post and tell you that they've been moved by your posts. Some people do, which is nice. It keeps you motivated, but not everyone does it. So you never know exactly if you're really or how much of an impact you're having. And that can be discouraging because you are working really hard on it. So that's definitely a big challenge, I think, for online activism is not having complete awareness of the extent of the impact you're having.*

This statement highlighted a fundamental challenge for activists as they adapted to the evolving dynamics of social media platforms: the difficulty in gauging the effectiveness of their activism– which they tried to consistently respond to using various self-presentation strategies.

P5 provided further insight into this point, conveying that it gave rise to *"a disconnect"* between the fundamental motivations of individuals using social media for activism. There was uncertainty about whether expressing support for a cause, through posting or sharing content, was a means to affect the cause itself or primarily a method to construct a *"good reputation"* for oneself. In essence, this meant that the authenticity and realness, as well as the impact of social media activism was of concern, because activists' motivations and behaviors could be a result of their perception of how they are viewed by others. In this context, P15 elaborated, *"On my personal stuff, I'm a little bit spicier. Whereas on different organizations, I am a little bit more reserved."* Similar to P15, several of our participants maintained multiple accounts, distinguishing between public and personal profiles. Their conduct and viewpoints on specific subjects diverged across these accounts, influenced by the unique audiences and affordances each of their digital personas could leverage. In particular, many responded to this precarity by employing various ways of presenting themselves, while simultaneously feeling unsure of their tactics at all times.

For example, P6 encapsulated their constant struggle by expressing the challenge of disentangling genuine advocacy from public perception and impression management, noting that the vague and ever-changing metrics of visibility complicated their ability to navigate these dynamics effectively.

> *It becomes really hard to divorce [constantly having all social media activity watched] from just wanting to show up and wanting good things to happen in the world, and getting much more invested in the "How will other people see this and what will it make them think about me? That's just got to be really exhausting for me.*

This precarity of *hyper-visibility*—where everything is visible yet activists remain uncertain about what is ultimately seen [37]– compelled activists to devote additional time and effort to shaping their narratives, often at the expense of authenticity, and still did not guarantee results. In response, P13 elaborated that navigating *confusing changes and new tactics to understand performance* led to a reliance on quantitative metrics, such as likes and shares, as common evaluative standard for assessing activism. She noted that–

> *I suppose I would base it [how good an activist is] on likes, to be honest. So depressingly, yeah, I probably would judge that something's performed better if it's received more likes or comments or engagement from others.*

This highlighted a trend where social approval increasingly dictated the perceived success of advocacy efforts, potentially undermining the core values that originally motivated these activists. The emphasis on superficial indicators diluted the substance of their messages, steering them toward performance-based activism instead of meaningful engagement. Due to this, P10 delved into the ethical nuances of content creation for activism, highlighting the complexities that arose within algorithmically–mediated activism. She acknowledged the algorithm's proclivity for emotionally charged content and interrogated the ethics of intentionally crafting posts designed to elicit anger. P10 noted that *"the algorithm promotes posts that make people feel good or angry because people will share both of those."* She elaborated on this point, explaining that *"If they see something that makes them really angry, they will share it and say, 'Guys, look at this. This is ridiculous.' And if they see something nice, they'll also want to share it, saying, 'Oh, look at this. So cool,' or something funny."* However, she expressed concern about the implications of this dynamic, stating, *"But if you want more balance and don't want to create content that purposefully causes anger, the algorithm will not promote it as much, which is bad."* P10's reflections illuminated the tension between engaging an

audience and remaining true to the core values of activism, emphasizing the ethical responsibility that came with content creation in an age where visibility often trumped substance.

Another participant (P6) made the deliberate choice to disengage from *trends* that could be perceived as inauthentic ways of presenting oneself, attributing this decision to the phenomenon of *"woke competitionism"*. According to P6, this competitive paradigm, particularly prevalent on algorithmically mediated– visual-centric platforms like Instagram, revolved around projecting an image of unwavering commitment to social causes in the *right ways*. Opting for a more authentic and personally resonant form of activism, this disengagement underscored a conscious effort to avoid the pitfalls of performative behaviors often associated with online activism.

> *I think there's also a degree of wokeism or woke competitionism that accompanies that kind of Instagram activism [..] every time I put something up like that, there's a little bit of an element of like, "Oh, look at how good I'm doing. Look at how on top of it and on the right side of social issues I am. Look at how much I care about this thing. Watch me do the right thing." (P6)*

P6 characterized this situation as a *"panopticon of activism"*, highlighting the pervasive visibility of all their activities to others within the digital activism sphere. They elaborated that this awareness of perpetual public viewing led to the status of their work serving as a *"good social justice credential"*. P6 opted to resist the pressure they felt to conform to social media conventions in self-presentation. But like others, both P6 and P10, complained and fell prey to the precarity of visibility, in having to be constantly careful about their online habits, which took a lot of effort, in particular also distracting them from their activist goals. Consequently, their approaches to self-presentation and engagement in activism diverged based on their deliberate prioritization of core values in their activist work.

4.2.2 The Precarity of Visibility. Activism on social media marked a significant departure from the initial expectations of activists, who envisioned it as a low-effort supplementary tool, but the creative and emotional labor involved, compounded by visibility precarity from algorithmic mediation, turned it into a comprehensive and time-consuming undertaking. For example, P11's frustration with low engagement rates, despite a modest following, illustrated the disconnect many activists faced between effort and reward. She explained, *"Honestly, I just wish that my stuff would reach more people. I'm not going to go and be some sort of influencer or anything like that."* This sentiment highlighted the emotional labor involved in adopting influencer-like tasks, as she felt compelled to engage in strategies that were inconsistent with her understanding of authentic activism. P11 further articulated her struggle with metrics, noting, *"I think I have like 1,700 followers on my main account [...] And then from there, it's like I only get maybe 200 views on my posts."* Ultimately, her experiences reflected a broader issue: the perceived value of the creative and emotional labor invested by activists often went unrecognized, complicating their pursuit of visibility and impact in a rapidly changing digital landscape; despite their diligence and understanding of metrics, activists frequently struggled to break through the noise of Instagram and its algorithmic changes, giving a sense that their efforts were futile.

Others also expressed frustration over their inability to achieve meaningful engagement despite the effort they put into creating their content– something they perceived to be beyond their expertise and their role as activists, distracting them from effectively achieving their goals. As P8 explained, even as she *built a brand* for her organization, when it came to facing the changing algorithm–

> *having an algorithm in the first place is it's self-sorting versus making this information disseminate to everyone [..] it almost feels like we're showing it to the audience that we*

> *already are advocating on behalf of or we already know cares, and those aren't the people we want our educational posts to reach necessarily*

Likewise, P13 shared, "*we had an important protest, but the algorithm was silencing us, and my job and my career relied on people seeing my art on my page.*" Here, the efforts both P8 and P13 put in were undermined by visibility precarity, leading to consequences that diminished their effectiveness in spreading their cause. Within this context, P12 noted that the emotional labor required increased significantly as individuals competed for visibility, resulting in diminished empathy and an escalation of emotional burdens.

> *It is really lowering the bar on risk assessment and empathy. And I also see activists who I know in person not exercise that empathy in their interactions on social media. People just say things and they're so rude and inappropriate. There's no etiquette to care about someone else's feelings. And that as an activist and an advocate makes me worried because a lot of that is spilling over into interpersonal behavior in the real world. And I don't know how to change that.*

P12 concluded that they did not know how to change this behavior, expressing uncertainty about how to address the emotional labor associated with the precarity of visibility. They emphasized the challenge of eliminating such behavior, especially as algorithmic shifts made visibility increasingly precarious. The only consistent outcome was that sensationalizing or engaging in *"gotcha"* behavior effectively garnered attention for content. Furthermore, a perception of visibility as the primary metric for evaluating the effectiveness of one's activism provoked inner tensions. For example, P4 shared:

> *The progressive organizing space at large has over-prioritized social media and started to define our goals through the metrics that social media companies give us which are more than likely probably juiced. And we are, instead of defining what successful looks like for ourselves, letting other people define it for us.*

As we will now explain, some interviewees seemed to navigated these changes more seamlessly than others. For those with greater access to resources, social networks, and digital literacy, managing the associated labor became more feasible. Although visibility remained precarious, those with better control over their engagement strategies tended to fare better in this evolving landscape.

4.2.3 Differential Adaptation. The ability to adapt—especially in pursuing efforts and successfully engaging in digital activism—was significantly influenced by the availability of resources. Activists with access to resources and specialized knowledge were often better positioned to identify effective goals on Instagram by navigating changes successfully. For instance, P15's background in data-driven fields enabled him to analyze performance metrics and adjust strategies effectively. He explained:

> *It's [the algorithm is] always changing and doing some stuff. So yeah. Every month, I just took a step back and looked at what posts did the best and what elements created them, and then tried to mimic that the following month and just forever look at the data and pivoted and tweaked a little bit.*

His systematic approach contrasted sharply with the experiences of participants like P2 and P13, who lacked the resources or skills to navigate the complexities of social media effectively. P2's acknowledgment of the insurmountable challenges faced by smaller nonprofits illustrated the systemic barriers that limited their engagement opportunities. He stated, *"It's very hard to get momentum in social media. And for smaller nonprofits, that can be almost insurmountable."* Similarly, P13's explicated a desire for external assistance which reflected a broader reality: many activists

simply did not have the bandwidth or expertise to compete in a landscape where visibility was often corresponds to access to resources and more advanced digital skills. She wished:

> *I would like somebody to do it [handle social media] for me and get proper reach. I don't think I'd get anywhere near enough engagement [if I did it myself]. Because I don't think I've reached as many people as I would have hoped to from the time that it took me to do it.*

In contrast, P8's access to guidance and ability to effectively use resources gave her a leg up, minimizing emotional labor while achieving visibility. She utilized tools such as Adobe and Canva to create engaging graphics for Instagram, which contributed to their outreach. As P8 stated, *"We were really lucky... our past leadership had majored and specialized in social media marketing that and (that) was something that they really were good at,"* indicating that previous experience and access to their counsel played a crucial role in shaping their strategy.

Moreover, P8 emphasized the importance of community engagement and resource sharing, which her past leadership had guided her towards, sharing– *"We want to use our platform to increase and uplift the voices of other people who may not have as many followers."* This approach not only broadened their audience but also strengthened community ties, enabling them to navigate the complexities of social media more effectively.

However, unlike P8, for P15, the challenges of navigating the precarity of visibility were starkly different, largely due to a lack of resources. P15 expressed frustration over the difficulties faced by individual advocates, particularly as algorithmic changes, such as Instagram's shift towards prioritizing video content–

> *Every time Instagram came out with a report [..] everyone in our organization was just like, 'Oh, no. Here we go. Who is going to explain this to us now? This is going to further make things harder for us.*

This sentiment highlighted the mounting pressure that algorithmic shifts placed on those without the backing of a robust organization. Unlike P8, who benefited from a structured support system and access to resources, P15 described the reality for many grassroots organizations: *"I am part of an agency, and they don't have the funding to have a marketing team help them get what they want out there."* This lack of resources meant that individual advocates had to handle all aspects of content creation themselves, from video production to graphic design, often resulting in increased creative and emotional labor that frequently did not lead to success or expected outcomes.

P15 articulated how these constraints made effective engagement difficult, stating, *"If you want to create videos to get your information out, and you're not comfortable in front of a camera, that already puts you at a disadvantage."* The need to find someone else to assist with video content further complicated the process, as many potential collaborators also felt uncomfortable or lacked the necessary skills. Again, in contrast to P8's strategic branding, P15 emphasized the personal challenges many activists faced, reflecting on how lack of experience could undermine their communication skills: *"You can have somebody that will be really good about speaking about a topic [..] but as soon as you put a phone in front of their face to record it [..] they completely start messing up and get nervous."* This highlighted the emotional toll and visibility challenges that those without adequate support or resources encountered, ultimately underscoring the disparities in how different activists leveraged their creative labor for visibility.

P3 echoed similar sentiments regarding the challenges of engaging audiences effectively. She noted, *"I've also gone through at least three PR people... that's why I didn't just send someone to you to do this conversation for me. (pointing to the lack of specific skill that was needed to adapt to the rapid changes among those in her organization)"* This highlighted the instability many activists face in securing consistent support to help navigate algorithmic platforms. She further emphasized

the difficulty of capturing attention with static content, saying, *"Our flyers [..] people just don't be reading... we would post a flyer, and we would get messages that I feel like are answered on the flyer."* P3 elaborated on the need for compelling visuals to engage viewers: *"Unless there's something that grabs someone's attention, maybe a picture of a food item or a famous person... people will just stroll—it's like a reflex nowadays."* However, she needed guidance on how to implement effective strategies and validate her observations to ensure her platform thrived. As discussed in section 4.1.2, this was crucial for making sense of the changes–

> *But there's so much stuff happening, it's hard [..] but I am not a PR person, so honestly all of these are things we have to do– but it's hard to, I guess, pick what do I care about right now, and what do I not care about right now.*

Unfortunately, as the leader of a smaller organization, she found it challenging to access that support because she wore many hats and had to prioritize her tasks, limiting her ability to engage in activities that others with larger teams could afford.

5 DISCUSSION

In our study, we examined how social justice activists utilize social media amidst change, focusing specifically on Instagram. We described participants' perceptions of two main changes: Instagram's shift from a chronological to an algorithmically mediated platform and the algorithmic changes that deprioritized political content. We further documented how they noticed, made sense of and interpreted these changes in relation to their advocacy goals. Through our interviews, we observed concerns arising from the platform's algorithmic changes that prioritized entertaining content over substantive political information. Some participants struggled to adapt, while others with more experience and resources fared better. Perceptions of the algorithm's preference for controversial content also raised concerns about activists adopting extreme positions for visibility, and additionally challenged activists' authenticity under public scrutiny, where engagement metrics played a significant role in evaluating impact. Consequently, we argue that the alterations observed in social media platforms have redefined the prerequisites for being a proficient or *good* digital activist.

5.1 Implications of Algorithmic Change

Meta's explicit focus on reducing the presence of political news and promoting entertainment-oriented content [109] bring in new demands for activists. The demand for being engaging increases activists' workload, further widening the access gap in the platform's audience and influence, favoring those with more resources to adapt successfully. We find that this perceived understanding of platform changes to focusing on *"entertaining"* [109] and *"eye-catching"* (P3) content led participants to perform their work in ways they believed would attract attention from the algorithm and in turn other potential audiences. P5 noted a *"disconnect,"* where activists no longer participated simply to raise awareness and build support; instead, they were driven by the necessity to adapt their strategies to the digital landscape. This aligns with Bishop's [11] discussion of *influencer creep*, a phenomenon increasingly impacting social media users, particularly marginalized individuals such as artists of color, who must self-brand within platform constraints to conform to *ideals of visibility*. This pressure has also been found to widen gaps in access and inequality. Likewise, our participants also saw effective digital activism as dependent on visibility metrics and the ability to engage and provoke audiences.

5.2 Who is a Good Digital Activist?

Consistent with scholarship emphasizing the value of social media for activism [135], particularly in contrast to discourses about *"slacktivism"* [89] or *"performative allyship"* [28], our study highlights well-intentioned and deeply committed participants with nuanced views on the performativity of online activism. They felt the need to tread carefully, always aware of how they would be perceived in a performance-driven environment– as also shared by our participant P6, who termed this as a *panopticon of activism*. This aligns with prior research on *imagined surveillance* on platforms, which suggests that such scrutiny contributes to additional labor [35]. Furthermore, prior work has also explicated the *authenticity bind* which compels marginalized individuals to navigate the delicate balance between visibility and vulnerability [36]. Likewise, for participants, this precarious situation required them to demonstrate their activist credentials according to and constrained within the platform's logic. Thus, for our participants, *"good digital activism"* meant ***navigating the complexities of platform structures, to ensure the efficiency and visibility of their work, while accruing and maintaining a certain level of platform-mediated authenticity as activists to do so***.

Scholars have observed the relationship between modes of self-presentation and activism [67]; for example, Liu et al., [86] highlighted that online self-presentation itself constitutes a form of activism. This assertion is grounded in the understanding that individuals' decisions regarding self-portrayal and expression convey political statements, thereby contributing to broader activism. Our findings align with research on disability activism that demonstrates that visibility poses paradoxical challenges, as presenting oneself is a complex and consequential act [115]. Similarly, our study reveals that the self-presentation tactics required by digital platforms at times hindered participants' ability to effectively engage in activism and decreased their perceived authenticity– *differentially*. Presenting oneself in different ways to pursue activism on social media is in line with prior research that has investigated self-presentation as both shaping user behavior and experiences on platforms [30]. Likewise, based on our findings, we recognize that participants' preferred diverse modes of self-presentation as a crucial means to enhance one's efficacy as an activist.

5.3 Who Can Afford to Continue Digital Activism?

We found that digital activists face precarity and uncertainty due to constant changes in Instagram's algorithmic prioritization of content irrelevant to activism, compelling them to adjust their strategies to enhance visibility. This precarity stems not only from the activists' operational understanding of algorithms [34], but also in their ability to continually develop new skills and perform additional labor in order to be effective.

Similar to the concept of *algorithmic competencies* developed by Jarrahi and Sutherland [63], which elucidates how gig workers navigate and manipulate algorithms, activists also engage with change through a process of noticing, sense-making, and employing self-presentation tactics to adapt to evolving algorithms. However, we find that the effectiveness of these strategies varies. Some participants effectively adjusted their self-presentation strategies; for instance, P8 hired videographers and formed coalitions to align with algorithmic trends, similar to findings from research on LGBTQ+ communities, which showed they engaged in collaborative efforts to navigate unfriendly algorithms [27]. Additionally, P15 utilized his data-driven insights for viral trends. In contrast, those lacking resources faced greater challenges. They resorted to alternative approaches like airdropping flyers (P7) to disseminate information. Here, they refused to "play the visibility game" [20], instead finding alternative means of reaching an audience that did not require them to focus on generating engagement for visibility. Yet, even so, they were unable to fully utilize social media as an effective supplemental tool in their activism. Recall for instance, P13 who

struggled to gain reach, but due to a resource constraint could not hire professionals to maintain her organization's social media.

Existing research has highlighted the influence of class disparities on online participation in activism, shedding light on how socioeconomic differences impact individuals' involvement [60, 116]. Research has also elucidated the way social media algorithms are often perceived as exhibiting disproportionate bias against individuals from historically marginalized social groups [33, 71]. Our findings corroborate this, with **perpetual algorithmic change** as an additional factor that contributes to an uneven playing field for social justice activists on social media.

Historically, traditional mass media played a role in shaping collective public opinions on significant matters [84, 85, 92, 93]. Though social media was once touted as a democratizing tool that could upend structural barriers to information dissemination [38, 124, 142], our study affirms more recent findings showing that individuals possessing significant resources can more effectively broadcast their information to a wide-ranging audience. Algorithmic changes impacting those with limited resources and algorithmic knowledge can steer digital activism on social media toward mainstream traditional media narratives [39]. As a consequence, a select few who achieve success in this endeavor have the capacity to steer discussions and potentially influence the setting of public agendas [94].

5.4 Designing for Effective Activism

Our participants felt compelled to adopt specific behaviors for optimal efficacy while navigating a constant state of surveillance on social media. The awareness of being watched undermined the authenticity of their actions, distorting their messages—similar to the *managed authenticity* described by Symon and Whiting [127], where the pursuit of authenticity conflicts with meaningful presentation for their work. Influenced by the desire for approval or broad reach, the genuine intent and impact of their advocacy may be diluted, especially under pressure to conform to dominant views. This dynamic creates tension for activists as they seek to balance their presentation constrained within the pressure to strategically modulate their self-presentation. To address this, we emphasize the need for systems that support activism with more nuanced privacy controls. Participants also expressed reliance on quantitative metrics to gauge effectiveness, often straying beyond their expertise and deviating from their activist goals. While social media platforms may not consider activists their main clientele, they want to maintain their reputation as spaces for free and diverse expression [143, 144]. Thus, we offer design implications for social media platforms that aim to foster effective spaces for diverse ideas, while also encouraging researchers to recognize these features as essential for creating alternative algorithmically mediated spaces exclusively for activism.

In particular, we offer qualitative design implications that align with our findings and past research highlighting how quantitative engagement metrics contribute to a culture where individuals feel compelled to *"out-do"* one another in extreme ways. This phenomenon is a key driver of hate on algorithmically mediated online platforms [73]. Thus, we propose thoughtful feedback and community-oriented moderation to also actively counter the misuse of platform spaces to spread hate, harassment, and propaganda under the guise of free speech. By fostering an environment that encourages meaningful dialogue and accountability among users, we reduce the risk of harmful behaviors taking hold, creating a buffer against the negative appropriation of tools that have often compromised social justice activists' efforts [103]. While we have discussed how the misappropriation of affordances may have led Instagram to take a stance against supporting political activity, by emphasizing community-driven strategies and promoting respectful interactions, we aim to protect the integrity of online spaces, making them more conducive to effective activism and preventing their exploitation that has historically made platforms challenging for advocacy.

5.4.1 Privacy Controls. In response to the challenges faced by activists, we propose a hybrid privacy model that balances public visibility with nuanced private settings, which is useful for platforms aiming to foster inclusive and authentic conversations. We suggest tools to selectively conceal or highlight activities, such as hiding likes and shares on posts and ensuring the identities of users engaging with or creating these posts remain invisible in the feed. Instead, this information would only be accessible if someone clicked through to the profile. This hybrid model accommodates activists' dual requisites: sustaining visibility for advocacy objectives and ensuring greater control over their digital footprints. Previous research has primarily endorsed the concepts of *"obscuring"* and *"opting-in"* design strategies to shield marginalized communities from excessive visibility on social media [17, 83]. Likewise, this tool could potentially help Instagram and similar platforms better support marginalized communities as well– and beyond Instagram, future tools exclusively for activism could leverage this model to enhance community engagement and resource sharing.

5.4.2 Algorithmic Modifications. Algorithmic mediation remains a key feature of platforms, designed to extend beyond known content and recommend new options. Consistent with prior research, we advocate moving beyond quantitative metrics as the primary means of structuring user behavior [121]. In particular, while Instagram and other profit–motivated platforms may not implement this feature, future platforms developed for serving activism-oriented goals should adopt a contextual approach that prioritizes content quality over engagement. For instance, implementing a nuanced rating system could allow users to evaluate content based on relevance, accuracy, educational value, or impact, rather than simple like/dislike reactions. Emphasizing interactions should involve assessing depth, constructiveness, and empathy, encouraging algorithms to promote thoughtful discussions and meaningful comments. A "Thoughtful Comments" section could facilitate insightful input through prompts or guidelines, paralleling Instagram's "pinned comments" feature, where algorithms highlight considerate remarks for the author to label as a model for future discourse.

However, while Instagram is unlikely to change its algorithm due to profit motivations, it could implement a labeling system for nonprofit accounts to enhance equity for all types of content, ensuring that everything other than entertaining content is not deprioritized. As one participant noted, *"a new feature to label nonprofit accounts that would also freely prioritize content from nonprofit labeled accounts"*– this label could allow users to engage with such content in a more user-centered form of algorithmic filtering. However, rather than requiring users to opt in to see nonprofit content, the default should ensure visibility for all users, with an option to limit exposure if desired. Given that most users are unlikely to actively enable nonprofit content, a default setting that prioritizes it would better facilitate incidental exposure to news and political content, which is a crucial factor in developing political consciousness [72, 130]. Research indicates that those most likely to engage with and see political content are already politically interested, reinforcing the need for platforms to promote exposure rather than relying solely on active user engagement [129]. As a democratic good, platforms should strive to facilitate incidental exposure to political content while providing users with more nuanced controls over when and how much they see [72, 129].

6 LIMITATIONS

Our research is not without limitations. Our findings are based on interviews with 16 activists, based in the North American context, with high levels of education. Due to global policy differences, activists in various countries may have distinct social media concerns. Additionally, we conducted interviews with activists who were advocating for various different causes under the broader heading of social justice. We deliberately chose this approach to make sure we gathered a wide range of viewpoints from users with different requirements and concerns. Consequently, while

our findings may offer valuable insights for this particular domain of activism, they may not be applicable to activists working different ideological spaces. For example, those aligned with anti-vaccine or #StopTheSteal movements may differ from our interviewees in their experiences or perceptions of digital activism amidst platform change. Still, we see this study as useful for working towards a more in-depth understanding of the evolving landscape of digital activism amidst diverse interests and causes of individual activists.

7 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study exemplified participants' perceptions of Instagram's algorithmic changes for online activism. We found that the constant adjustments posed frustrations, prompting the need for strategic adaptations and exploration of alternative avenues for activism. Activists demonstrated awareness of these changes and a commitment to their advocacy goals by using alternative channels and performative elements while maintaining authenticity, highlighting disparities in platform capabilities related to available resources and algorithmic expertise.

Future research should consider investigating what resources and socioeconomic conditions allow certain activists to thrive over others. Moreover, we urge scholars to study how changes in online platforms correspond (or not) to evolving perceptions of activism among average users when they encounter such content. We also encourage researchers to investigate how less pro-social activists navigate and interpret these changes, especially in their responses to the proposed design modifications. This is important to ensure that more thoughtful affordances are not misappropriated. Finally, it is crucial for future research to adopt a comprehensive and nuanced approach that considers the complex interplay between socioeconomic conditions, digital platform changes, regulatory frameworks, and evolving community dynamics to better understand the multifaceted nature of contemporary digital activism and its various influences.

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