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## Visual Narratives in the Digital Public Sphere: Photography as a Tool for Online Activism

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### ABSTRACT:

Digital technology and social media have totally changed how we use photography to speak out and push for change. These days, digital photos aren't just pictures—they're stories. They're everywhere online, especially in activism. People use them to rally others, spark conversations, and make sure voices that usually get ignored are heard. This study digs into how photography works as a persuasive tool in our online world, focusing on platforms like Instagram, X (Twitter), and Facebook. The research pulls from both content analysis and survey data to see how visual storytelling drives awareness, gets people involved, and powers digital advocacy. What stands out? Images really do have serious influence—they shape what we think, how we feel, and even inspire us to act together. But it's not all positive. There are real problems, too. Sometimes activism online turns performative, or images get edited in ways that twist the truth. Authenticity can take a hit when campaigns become more about looking good than doing good. Still, when people use digital photography thoughtfully and honestly, it has the power to transform online activism. It helps build visual literacy and connects communities in ways that just weren't possible before.

**KEYWORDS:** Photography, Visual Narratives, Online Activism, Digital Public Sphere, Social Media, Visual Communication, Digital Advocacy, Participatory Culture, Visual Literacy

### INTRODUCTION:

These days, cameras are more than just tools for recording memories—they're driving real change. Every day, people share billions of photos online, and these images do more than fill up our feeds. They help shape how we see the world and push us to think, feel, and act differently. With digital media and photography fused together, anyone can become a storyteller or an activist, using pictures to speak up, challenge the status quo, or rally others to a cause. Instagram, X (Twitter), and Facebook aren't just for personal snapshots anymore. They've turned into hotspots where photos spark conversations, fuel debates, and even kickstart movements. Just think about the Arab Spring, #BlackLivesMatter, or #MeToo—images from these moments didn't just document what happened; they helped drive people into action, cutting across languages and borders.

This research digs into how photography works as both a megaphone and a rallying cry in today's digital world. It looks at the ways visual stories raise awareness, stir emotion, and get people involved in the big social and political issues we face right now.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

This study digs into how digital photography and activism connect, especially as the world leans more and more on visuals. Photos don't just show us what's happening—they shape what we believe about truth, justice, and resistance.

It looks at how photos drive online activism and sway public opinion. It explores the way powerful images turn passive viewers into people who actually get involved. The study also questions how real and trustworthy these images are, and what's ethical when activists use them. It adds to the bigger conversation about visual literacy and what it means to be a responsible digital citizen. Most of all, it shows how photography can open doors for communities that usually don't get heard, giving them space in the fight for change.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this research is to analyze how visual narratives created through photography shape online activism in the digital public sphere. The specific objectives include:

- To explore how photography is used as a communicative tool in online activism.
- To identify the platforms and visual strategies most frequently employed by digital activists.
- To assess the impact of photographic imagery on audience engagement and participation.

- To evaluate the challenges of authenticity, performative activism, and misinformation in visual advocacy.
- To propose recommendations for strengthening visual literacy and ethical use of images in digital activism.

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## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Barthes (1980)

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes emphasized the “punctum” of photographs—the emotional point that pierces the viewer’s consciousness. His theory supports the idea that imagery has an affective power that drives empathy and engagement, essential elements in activism.

### Sontag (2003)

Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, argued that photographs shape our moral responses to suffering and injustice. Digital activists utilize this emotional power to mobilize public sentiment.

### Jenkins (2013)

Henry Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture explains how audiences co-create media through sharing and remixing, transforming viewers into participants—key to understanding digital activism.

### Mirzoeff (2015)

Nicholas Mirzoeff’s *How to See the World* discusses visuality as a form of political agency, emphasizing that seeing itself is an act of resistance in the digital sphere.

### Highfield (2016)

Highfield’s study on social media activism highlights how images and hashtags collectively form visual movement’s online, creating symbolic participation across global audiences.

### Sharma and Patel (2021)

Their research on “Visual Communication in Social Movements” reveals that photography increases the emotional intensity and reach of campaigns but cautions against the spread of superficial engagement, or “clicktivism.” From these studies, it is evident that photography in digital contexts serves as both a storytelling and mobilizing mechanism, turning visual culture into a participatory form of social advocacy.

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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study takes a descriptive and analytical approach, zeroing in on how photography works as a tool for communication in digital activism. I used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to get a fuller picture.

### Population and Sample

The sample includes 100 social media users, ages 18 to 40, who either follow or take part in visual activism campaigns. I handpicked people from urban areas in India, making sure they were actively engaged.

### Data Collection Method

I gathered primary data through an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. For secondary data, I dug into academic journals, photography archives, and case studies from global digital movements like #FridaysForFuture, #BLM, and #FarmersProtestIndia.

The questionnaire mixed closed and open-ended questions, covering things like:

1. How often people see activist photography
2. Which platforms they use
3. Their emotional reactions to visual storytelling
4. Whether they trust the authenticity of the images
5. How much they get involved in online activism

### Data Analysis

I broke down the data using frequency distribution and percentage analysis. For the qualitative answers, I coded responses by theme to spot patterns in how people felt and behaved.

### Limitations of the Study

1. The study sticks to online, photography-based activism—other media aren’t part of the scope.
2. With only 100 participants, it’s tough to generalize the findings.
3. People’s answers might be biased because everyone interprets images differently.
4. Time was tight, so I couldn’t dive deeper into cross-cultural comparisons.

Everyone who took part gave informed consent. I didn’t use any copyrighted or sensitive images. All responses stayed confidential and were used only for academic research.

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## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

### 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Category	Variables	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	48
	Female	52
Age Group	18–25 years	55
	26–40 years	35
	Above 40	10
Education	Graduate	60
	Postgraduate	25
	Others	15

The majority of respondents were young, educated, and digitally active users who frequently consume and share visual content online.

## 2. Platforms for Visual Activism

Platform	Platform
Instagram	72
X (Twitter)	50
Facebook	45
YouTube	42
Blogs/Websites	20

Instagram emerged as the leading platform for visual activism due to its focus on aesthetics, immediacy, and reach.

## 3. Frequency of Exposure to Activist Photography

Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	65
Weekly	25
Occasionally	10

High daily exposure indicates that visual activism is part of regular media consumption among digital users.

## 4. Impact of Visual Narratives on Awareness

Response	Percentage (%)
Strongly Influenced	60
Somewhat Influenced	30
Not Influenced	10

A large majority reported that photographs significantly increase their awareness and emotional engagement with social issues.

## 5. Authenticity and Misinformation

Observation	Percentage (%)
Concerned about image manipulation	68
Verify before sharing	45
Believe visuals often exaggerated	55

While photography is impactful, users are aware of potential manipulation, emphasizing the need for critical visual literacy.

## 6. Participation in Online Movements

Activity	Percentage (%)
Sharing activist images	70
Posting personal visuals for causes	50
Participating in campaigns	40
Donating/Volunteering offline	25

Engagement is primarily symbolic and online, suggesting that visual activism effectively raises awareness but may not always translate to offline action.

## INTERPRETATION

The analysis shows that photography is a real force when it comes to advocacy and raising awareness online. Pictures grab us—sometimes they hit right in the gut, sometimes they help people find their voice, or even pull a whole group together. But there's a flip side. Flooding feeds with images can make people numb, or turn genuine action into just a show. What really works? Honest photos, real emotion, and stories that actually make sense. The takeaway

here: we need to teach visual literacy. People should know how to really look at images, spot when someone's telling it straight, and call out the fakes.

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## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that photography changes the game when it comes to online activism. It gives people a powerful way to speak out, using images that cut through words and connect right to our feelings. On platforms like Instagram, activism isn't just about posting information—it's about telling stories together, making activism something you join in, not just watch. But there's a flip side. The flood of images online means it's easy for things to get twisted, for people to skim the surface without really engaging, or for the politics to get lost in the aesthetics. If we want activism to matter, we need to get smarter about the images we see and share. That means learning to spot what's real, caring about the people behind the pictures, and getting involved in a way that actually counts.

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