Activism, Aestheticized: Instagram Infographics, Visual Politics, and Online Advocacy

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ABSTRACT

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This paper discusses the unique visual aesthetics of Instagram infographics alongside their political effects. The researcher analyzes three distinct infographics as well as interviewee responses, finding that aesthetic choices in graphic design communicate concepts to the viewer about the topic represented and serve as important strategies for attracting and maintaining viewer engagement in the attention economy. However, the aesthetics for conveying serious issues do not typically align with attention-grabbing graphic design, sometimes creating a tension between the topic presented and the aesthetic utilized. Additionally, the research indicates that social media platforms can create unique atmospheres of social pressure, leading viewers to engage with and share information about political topics in ways that they might not have otherwise. However, this initial engagement does not guarantee sustained involvement with or concern for the topic represented in the post. Due to this effect, infographics and other methods of social media activism can serve as useful introductions for viewers to political issues, but should not become a major tenet of activist movements.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In May of 2021, a troubling image began circulating on the social media platform of Instagram. Upon first glance, the image did not appear to be out of the ordinary: it featured many of the traditional mainstays of modern corporate graphic design such as pastel colors, speech boxes, and cartoon figures in conversation.[1] One of the designed characters is seen asking the other to explain "What's going on between Gaza and Israel?", ostensibly presenting the image as an unbiased primer for information on the Israel-Palestine conflict. However, upon closer observation, it became clear that the image did not come from an objective, third-party news source. Instead, the Israel Defense Forces had shared a series of graphics purporting to inform viewers about the current violence in Gaza, presenting Israeli forces as innocent defenders of civilian lives against "terrorist organizations" (Figure 1).[2] In short, the post was an example of graphic design as government propaganda, highlighting the possible dangers of visual information shared through Instagram.

Figure 1

[1] Josh Gabert-Doyon, "Why Does Every Advert Look the Same? Blame Corporate Memphis," WIRED UK, January 24, 2021, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/corporate-memphis-design-tech.
[2] Login • instagram, May 13, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CO0bx7cNzpt/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=loading.

In the age of the Internet and the COVID-19 pandemic, political behavior has noticeably shifted from the physical to the digital realm.[3] Most academic research on social media and activism has focused on the platforms of Twitter and Facebook, which were instrumental in earlier political movements such as the Arab Spring.[4] Many other social platforms, such as the photo-sharing app Instagram, were not similarly utilized to organize and therefore developed reputations for being "apolitical" online spaces.[5] Notably, however, in the summer of 2020 Instagram came to play a large role in the Black Lives Matter movement. On June 2, 2020, over 28 million Instagram users posted a black square to their feeds as part of #BlackOutTuesday, a digital movement designed to protest the murder of George Floyd by Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin.[6] As communications researchers Ho-Chun Herbert Chang, Allissa V. Richardson, & Emilio Ferrarabe note, this movement "likely marks the first time in the history of social media movements that a visual platform — not a predominantly text-based one like Twitter — took center stage."[7] Instagram users no longer felt comfortable remaining silent on the platform, marking the app's shift to a space for political organizing and education.

Following #BlackOutTuesday, Instagram came to be dominated by infographics or "social justice slideshows" on topics ranging from mail-in voting to police abolition. These

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[3] Nora Madison and Mathias Klang, "The Case for Digital Activism," Journal of Digital Social Research 2, no. 2 (April 2020): pp. 28-47, https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i2.25.

[4] Sarah Joseph, "Social Media, Human Rights and Political Change," SSRN Electronic Journal, 2011, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1856880.

[5] Terry Nguyen, "How Social Justice Slideshows Took over Instagram," Vox (Vox, August 12, 2020), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism.

[6] Shannon Ho, "A Social Media 'Blackout' Enthralled Instagram. but Did It Do Anything?," NBCNews.com (NBCUniversal News Group, June 13, 2020), https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/social-media-blackout-enthralled-instagram-did-it-do-anything-n1230181.

[7] Ho-Chun Herbert Chang, Allissa Richardson, and Emilio Ferrara, "#Justiceforgeorgefloyd: How Instagram Facilitated the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests," 2021, https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/bjx4p.

posts feature multiple images that combine text and digital graphics, ostensibly seeking to educate viewers on various pertinent political issues. Notably, these infographics tend to share a specific visual aesthetic, featuring "colorful gradients, large serif fonts, pastel backgrounds, and playful illustrations — design choices intended to pause a user's scroll and prompt them to read the text."[8] These graphics are designed to be visually appealing and attention-grabbing. In fact, many viewers of Instagram infographics have noted that the designs are strikingly similar to many corporate advertisements for millennial, "relatable" brands such as Glossier, Casper, and Tend.[9] The eye-catching aesthetics of these posts have worked incredibly well, as the popularity of Instagram infographics has grown exponentially. For example, one infographic account @so.informed (previously known as @soyouwanttotalkabout) had around 10,000 followers in June of 2020. By August of 2020, the account had over a million followers; as of April 2021, the account has a following of 2.9 million users.[10]

While the infographics visuals might be gratifying, the topics that they typically cover are usually upsetting, focusing on instances of oppression or human rights abuses such as the death of Breonna Taylor, abortion laws in Texas, and climate disasters. For example, one post from @so.informed features the text "So You Want To Talk About Systemic Racism" in a stylized serif font with a teal, pink, and white color scheme (Figure 2).[11] Some users argue that infographics act as a "Trojan horse" for progressive politics, slipping radical messages into appealing images that succeed in Instagram's algorithms. Others have taken issue with the

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[8] Terry Nguyen, "How Social Justice Slideshows Took over Instagram," Vox (Vox, August 12, 2020), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] "So You Want to Talk about... on Instagram: 'Several Top ...," accessed November 12, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CBdFynenavH/.

conflict between the aesthetics of these posts and their topics, arguing that the practice of trying to make digestible, attractive visuals about complex social issues can "commodify tragedy and obfuscate revolutionary messages."[12] Overall, Instagram users and observers have expressed mixed feelings as to the political efficacy of these infographics; while some view the posts as useful tools to raise awareness, others worry that they are simply examples of self-serving digital 'slacktivism'.[13]

Figure 2

As previously noted, the vast majority of existing research on online advocacy, particularly social media activism, focuses on text-based platforms such as Twitter. While these studies offer valuable insights into digital movements more generally, they do not acknowledge the particular effects that visual aesthetics may have on viewer response and political opinion on image-based platforms such as Instagram. This project aims to fill this gap in the existing research by answering the following question: how do the visual aesthetics of Instagram infographics influence viewers' understanding of human rights abuses and affect

[12] Terry Nguyen, "How Social Justice Slideshows Took over Instagram," Vox (Vox, August 12, 2020), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism.
[13] Cierra Bettens et al., "Unpacking the Instagram Infographic Industrial Complex," Lithium Magazine, August 31, 2020, https://lithiumagazine.com/2020/09/14/unpacking-the-instagram-infographic-industrial-complex/.

their desire to take further political action? This research will contribute to ongoing conversations about online aesthetics and the role of social media in activism, highlighting the unique role of Instagram infographics and their unusual online aesthetic.

Chapter 2: The Political Aesthetics of Instagram

To some, the aesthetic and the political may not be obviously connected. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the field of aesthetics is "the philosophy of the beautiful or of art; a system of principles for the appreciation of the beautiful."[14] Colloquially, what is beautiful is thought to be universal; for example, some may believe that the sight of a flower in bloom is always aesthetically pleasing. In this way, art and aesthetics may seem "to speak of the human and the concrete, providing us with a welcome respite from the alienating rigours of more specialized discourses and offering… a residually common world."[15] However, noted philosopher of aesthetics Nelson Goodman argues that art is constructivist; that is, art does not only *represent* the world, but it simultaneously *constructs* our understanding of it. For example, it is culturally understood that pink is a feminine color and blue is a masculine color despite the fact that these shades do not possess any inherent gendered nature. For Goodman, visual art is especially rife with meaning, as every stroke or color exists within an incredibly long artistic context. This context allows art to express and create meaning by referencing culturally understood symbols; in other words, an individual has a visual language as well as a verbal one. As Goodman writes, "that we know what we see is no truer than we see what we know. Perception depends heavily on conceptual schemata."[16]

Art therefore has political implications, both in the political issues it directly represents and in the political values it indirectly expresses. For literary critic Terry Eagleton, the idea of "universally pleasing" aesthetics is inseparable from the development of the middle class and

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[14] "Aesthetics," Home : Oxford English Dictionary, accessed November 13, 2021, https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/293508#eid9579579.
[15] Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 2.
[16] Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 142.

"high culture".[17] The concept of "high culture" values certain artworks over others, presenting them as inherently better or more meaningful. Although the meaning of art may be socially constructed, one's reaction to it is presented as "natural", separate from society. Under this line of thinking, if some pieces of art are naturally better, then the political ideas that they communicate must be superior as well. Therefore, in valuing certain art forms or pieces over others and declaring them to be inherently beautiful, "power has become aestheticized."[18] In this way, aesthetics can be a uniquely self-reinforcing form of political control. The aesthetic is presented as a universal human experience, creating bonding and social cohesion through feeling rather than legal force; it is not a question of obeying a law, but having the "correct" reaction to an aesthetic experience. The power is then based on the viewer's feelings, and "feeling… precedes knowledge; and the law of conscience is such that what I feel to be right is right."[19]

According to Eagleton's theory, the political value of aesthetics makes agitprop uniquely powerful. The emotional impact of propaganda convinces the viewer that they are following their own natural inclinations rather than the desire of the government. Political aesthetics, then, move attention away from substantive action towards feelings and beliefs; the issue is not acting correctly but *reacting* correctly. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher argues that one of the hallmarks of 21st century capitalism is a "turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship."[20] This sentiment is strikingly similar to famed critic Walter Benjamin's description of the aestheticization of politics, in which "the masses have a right to

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[17] Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 3.
[18] Ibid, 20.
[19] Ibid, 24.
[20] Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 5.

change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life".[21] In other words, a focus on aesthetics shifts attention away from the material reality of a political situation to the *spectacle* of it.

If aesthetics are political, then what are the particular aesthetics of Instagram? Online aesthetics are unique to each website; different social media apps have different socially constructed understandings of what is appropriate or pleasing to post, usually depending on the features and context of the platform. For example, Instagram launched a "story" feature in 2016, allowing users to post 10 second photos or videos to the top of their feed that would disappear after 24 hours.[22] Originally, stories offered users the opportunity to post less-polished, quotidian images; as reporter Terry Nguyen notes, the feature used to be known for "relationship reveals or photo outtakes (you know, photos that look good but not that good to be the featured image)."[23] Therefore, these slideshows of complex political concepts are a new and unusual use of the feature, and their subject matter varies greatly from other posts on the app: users are now receiving information on bombings, court decisions, and extrajudicial killings alongside images of birthday celebrations, sponsored content from celebrities, and lunch dishes. Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan famously declared that "the medium is the message".[24] In other words, the medium through which we receive information structures

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[21] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin, accessed October 18, 2021, https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm.
[22] Josh Constine, "Instagram Launches 'Stories," A Snapchatty Feature for Imperfect Sharing," TechCrunch (TechCrunch, August 2, 2016), https://techcrunch.com/2016/08/02/instagram-stories/.
[23] Terry Nguyen, "How Social Justice Slideshows Took over Instagram," Vox (Vox, August 12, 2020), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism.
[24] Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, 1964.

our understanding of it. Therefore, what does the medium of Instagram, specifically the stories feature, communicate about these social justice infographics?

In 2017, Austrian academic Maria Schreiber conducted a study analyzing the online photo-sharing behavior of teenage girls. Schreiber noted the shift in online activity from sharing text to visuals, arguing that "we express ourselves aesthetically when we communicate in and through pictures… What is perceived as beautiful, interesting and worth photographing, showing and sharing is socially and habitually constituted."[25] Schreiber observed that while apps like Snapchat and Whatsapp are used to share funny, casual, or "ugly" pictures, Instagram is reserved for carefully selected, edited, and beautiful pictures which "appeal to a general, standardised sense of aesthetics."[26] The reasoning for these visual differences can partly be attributed to the design of the apps themselves. While Whatsapp and Snapchat allow users to create small, private groups or share quickly disappearing images, an Instagram post is shared to a user's entire following and remains on their profile. Therefore, there is a sense that images on Instagram are more permanent or serious and, accordingly, should be more visually appealing. This sentiment is shared by many users across platforms; in fact, there was a Twitter trend in 2017 in which users highlighted how their professional or pleasing personas on Instagram differed when compared to other apps, as exemplified in Figure 3.[27] In practice, this belief can often perpetuate certain aesthetic standards: as Schreiber notes, "the pictures they share on this rather public platform are iconographically quite conventional. They are relatable and easy to understand for a broader audience, oriented towards a generalised sense of beauty

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[25] Maria Schreiber, "Audiences, Aesthetics and Affordances Analysing Practices of Visual Communication on Social Media," Digital Culture & Society 3, no. 2 (2017): pp. 143-164, https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2017-0209, 145.
[26] Ibid, 158.
[27] "Twitter.com," accessed October 18, 2021, https://twitter.com/GavMemes/status/910322730700099584.

and established visual repertoires, motifs and styles.[28] Overall, the medium of Instagram has been socially negotiated to communicate a standard of traditionally "beautiful" aesthetics.

Figure 3

However, do aesthetics still pose an issue when they ostensibly attempt to promote humanitarian messages? In the particular case of Instagram infographics, if their words are aimed at societal good, then what does it matter if their aesthetics are "pleasing"? In her 2013 book *The Ironic Spectator*, communications scholar Lilie Chouliaraki addresses this exact question. Chouliaraki notes that calls to aid or action are often based in a sense of shared community. In the past, these communities were often sharply delineated, based on shared traits or beliefs such as religion, national identity, or ideology. However, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the so-called "end of history", humanitarian appeals are now based in an

[28] Maria Schreiber, "Audiences, Aesthetics and Affordances Analysing Practices of Visual Communication on Social Media," Digital Culture & Society 3, no. 2 (2017): pp. 143-164, https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2017-0209, 154.

ostensibly "transnational collectivity of universal humanity… It is today the idea of human rights that grounds this secular sense of moral obligation."[29] Furthermore, Chouliaraki argues that this shift to a universal ideology, as well as other historical developments such as the marketization of NGOs and changes in methods of mass communication, have led to large aesthetic changes in how human rights abuses and humanitarian efforts to address them are presented to the public. Previous Western human rights-based campaigns often had a very clear goal and little to no public payoff for those asked to participate, such as Amnesty International's letter-writing campaigns for political prisoners. Modern campaigns, however, often focus on appealing to the personal identity of the viewer; for example, through consumer campaigns such as Bono's (RED) clothing line at Gap or through celebrity ambassadors, such as Angelina Jolie's role at the UN. Overall, Chouliaraki contends that these campaigns mark "the retreat of an other-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about our common humanity and asks nothing back, and the emergence of a self-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about 'how I feel' and must, therefore, be rewarded by minor gratifications to the self."[30] The recent rise of "aesthetically pleasing" political advocacy and information coincides with Chouliaraki's description of the modern surge in viewer-centered, low risk advocacy. In this manner, Chouliaraki asserts, "changes in the aesthetics of humanitarian communication are also changes in the ethics of solidarity."[31] In other words, the aesthetics through which humanitarian appeals are communicated affect the response of viewers to the abuse represented.

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[29] Lilie Chouliaraki , The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 33.
[30] Ibid, 3.
[31] Lilie Chouliaraki , The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 3.

Chapter 3: Social Media, Online Advocacy, and the Growth of "Slacktivism"

The focus on the self that Chouliraki criticizes can also easily be seen in social media activism. As cultural critic Jia Tolentino notes, nearly all social media sites are centered around the individual through a "profile": "the everyday madness perpetuated by the internet is the madness of this architecture, which positions personal identity as the center of the universe."[32] As a consequence of this structure, actions taken on social media are seen as an extension of individual identity, and are constantly visible to one's connections in a panopticon-esque updating feed. Therefore, when sharing a post about a human rights abuse on social media, users are both communicating the information of that post as well as signaling their concern (and, by extension, their moral virtue): the message is not only "here is what is happening", but "here is what *I* think about it."

Scholars have previously noted the unique reactions provoked by social media activism. With the growing popularity of social media networks, many have decried digital activism as 'slacktivism'. Slacktivism is commonly understood as a "a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change."[33] Common examples of slacktivism include signing and sharing online petitions, changing one's profile picture to reflect a social campaign, or retweeting a social justice hashtag.

While forms of slacktivism have evolved with the Internet, criticism of it remains largely the same: first, observers are concerned that digital political behavior is narcissistic and requires little to no sacrifice, allowing users to reap the rewards of self-promotion without

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[32] Jia Tolentino, Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion (New York, NY: Random House, 2020).

[33] Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White, and John Peloza, "The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action," Journal of Consumer Research 40, no. 6 (June 2013): pp. 1149-1166, https://doi.org/10.1086/674137, 1149.

creating tangible change. Users feel a pressure to publicly post support for causes for the sake of their social image rather than a direct moral imperative; this pressure is exemplified in the popular tweet seen in Figure 4, in which a user's follower urges them to post less music and more "social justice infographics".[34] This focus on individual identity can lead social media causes to have an incredible amount of nominal support with very little substantial action. For example, the Facebook group for the cause "Saving the Children of Africa" boasted over 1.7 million members, but only raised about $12,000 (less than one hundredth of a penny per person).[35] In contrast to these concerns, proponents of digital activism have argued that traditional activists could absolutely be behaving in self-interested manners as well, and are rarely questioned about their motivations in the same manner. Furthermore, they assert that digital activism is a valuable tool for raising awareness, and that it should be evaluated on its own terms rather than being compared to more traditional methods.[36]

Figure 4

However, both supporters and opponents of digital activism are concerned by the possibility that slacktivism can act as a "substitute" for later political behavior, deterring users from taking more tangible action later on. This phenomenon is thoroughly observed and tested

[34] Sc Tap Water Fan Account Greenville, "Pic.twitter.com/Tf4tyXgYpl," Twitter (Twitter, October 4, 2021), https://twitter.com/absinthefather/status/1444886679408447490?s=12.
[35] Evgeny Morozov, The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2012).
[36] Nora Madison and Mathias Klang, "The Case for Digital Activism," Journal of Digital Social Research 2, no. 2 (April 2020): pp. 28-47, https://doi.org/10.33621/jdsr.v2i2.25

in a 2013 study from Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White, and John Peloza. While previous research on slacktivism had simply studied whether or not users were likely to engage in political action after sharing online posts, this study focused on the factor of social observability. In a series of five studies with varying levels of control and manipulation, researchers found that consumers who previously engaged in a *private* act of token support are far more likely to engage in later, more significant assistance than those who participated in small *public* acts.[37]

Researchers hypothesized that this result was due to a combination of impression management motives and a desire to remain consistent with one's own values. They argued that, in public situations, consumers seek to engage in positively-viewed behavior in front of others. However, after the token gesture, "as a result of these impression-management motives already being satisfied, consumers will not be particularly motivated to contribute to the cause when a subsequent request for more meaningful support is made."[38] This effect is supported by research in moral licensing, in which previous prosocial actions are taken as "license" to engage in less moral behavior. Alternatively, in private situations, participants are more likely to self-reflect and seek to maintain their personal values; therefore they are also more likely to

[37] Kirk Kristofferson, Katherine White, and John Peloza, "The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action," Journal of Consumer Research 40, no. 6 (June 2013): pp. 1149-1166, https://doi.org/10.1086/674137.
[38] Ibid, 1150.

accept later requests for support. This finding aligns with research in self-consistency, "which predicts that once individuals have engaged in a particular behavior, they will be more likely to engage in congruent behaviors in the future."[39] Overall, researchers found that token support in public situations is less likely to lead to subsequent action, a result that clearly has large meaning in the incredibly public sphere of social media.

One major concern for critics of slacktivism is the fear that the substitution of traditional methods of organizing for digital political behavior will erode activist structures and prevent future tangible change. Sociologist Zeynep Tufeckci notes that one major change between traditional and digital movements is the hierarchy: while traditional movements, like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, often have clear leaders and membership requirements, online activism is horizontal, non-institutional, and leaderless.[40] While this might initially appear to be a positive and democratic development, it can also inhibit the ability of movements to negotiate, deliberate, and sustain themselves. As social media scholar Evgeny Morozov argues, this lack of a dedicated and concentrated structure has often led mass movements to protest without clear goals or demands.[41] Leftist activist and organizer Angela Davis also commented upon this phenomenon, noting that "mobilization has displaced organization, so that in the contemporary moment, when we think about organizing movements, we think about bringing masses of people into the streets."[42] Ultimately, critics are concerned that slacktivism might detract from or destroy the infrastructure of traditional movements, drastically inhibiting the ability of activists to demand social change.

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[39] Ibid, 1151.

[40] ZEYNEP TUFEKCI, Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest (S.l.: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021).

[41] Evgeny Morozov, The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2012).

[42] Angela Y. Davis, Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire Prisons and Torture (Readhowyouwant, 2010).

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

With a focus on political aesthetics and trends in social media activism, this project sought to investigate common themes in the graphic design of Instagram infographics alongside viewers' reactions to the information presented. In order to study the connection between aesthetics, perception of political issues, and online activism, I combined visual analysis and qualitative interviews to investigate the impact of visual aesthetics on Instagram users and their political behavior.

First, I visually analyzed three different infographics covering the human rights abuses in Sheikh Jarrah in May of 2021. These infographics came from three different accounts with varying name-brand recognition: @washingtonpost, the Instagram for the newspaper[43]; @humanrightswatch, the Instagram for the non-governmental organization (NGO)[44]; and @so.informed, an Instagram solely devoted to posting social justice-related infographics.[45] In these analyses, I compared the visual aesthetics of each post, the text utilized, and the engagement received, paying particular to the ostensible objectives of each post, the aesthetic choices made and how they relate to the objective, and the reaction the post received from users.

Additionally, I conducted ten qualitative semi-structured interviews with current Instagram users, ranging in age from eighteen to forty-eight and geographically based in New York and Texas. Participants were asked to compare the three infographics and express their reaction to each in a process of art elicitation, as described by Jacqueline Adams in her article

[43] Login • instagram, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CO2_a1JBFCX/.
[44] Instagram, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CR1wpKuF4Vy/.
[45] Login • instagram, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/COq-_WunG9m/.

"Using Visual Methods in Human Rights Research".[46] As Adams notes, art elicitation seeks to "produce data about the art work, the techniques used in making it… the situation or circumstances depicted in the artwork, or about similar artworks and similar situations."[47] Participants were also asked a series of questions regarding their social media use, political behavior, and understanding of human rights-related issues. However, several interviews included unanticipated conversations, based on the answers given. As Alan Bryman's "Interviewing in Qualitative Research" details, in semi-structured interviews the interviewee's response tends to direct the conversation in unanticipated directions, "perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in interviews."[48] Participants were recruited through Instagram to secure a group of interviewees that were consistent and current users of the platform. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed for common themes.

[46] Jacqueline Adams, "Using Visual Methods in Human Rights Research," Journal of Human Rights 17, no. 5 (2018): pp. 674-684, https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2018.1517039.
[47] Ibid, 679.
[48] Alan Bryman, "Interviewing in Qualitative Research," in Social Research Methods (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 470.

Chapter 5: Visual Analysis

In this section, I compare a traditional visual analysis of the three selected infographics with interviewee responses, noting key similarities and differences between a technical understanding of these aesthetics (involving research in color psychology, brand recognition, and trends in graphic design) and a typical, colloquial viewer response. The goal of this comparison is to evaluate how well academic understandings of the "visual language" of aesthetics correspond with the interpretations of an average viewer, including any effects on the perception of the infographic's information and ostensible message.

5.1: The Washington Post and the Aesthetics of Traditional Journalism

The first infographic to be analyzed was uploaded to the Washington Post's Instagram (@washingtonpost) on May 14 of 2021.[49] The infographic features six slides of text that purport to answer the question "What's behind the violence in Israel and Gaza?", as seen in the post's first image (Figure 5).[50] The rest of the post details "unrest", "tension", and "conflict" between Palestinians and Israelis following the planning and subsequent rerouting of a contentious march through the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah (Figure 6).[51] The post does not feature any photographs; each slide simply features text overlaid on an alternating black-and-white background underneath the bolded title "What's behind the recent unrest in Jerusalem?".

[49] Login • instagram, accessed December 7, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CO2_a1JBFCX/.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

Figure 5

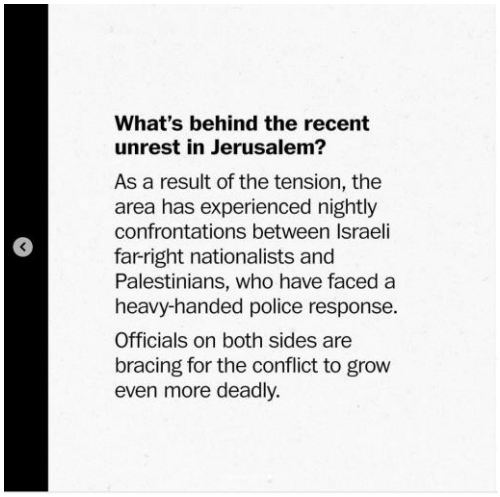

Figure 6

Previous research on the psychological effects of graphic design, particularly color psychology and brand recognition, can provide more information as to the ostensible purpose of this post and its intended effect on the viewer. According to a critical review of the field from TW Whitfield and TJ Wiltishire, color psychology is the study of various tints as determinants of human perception and behavior.[52] Research within this field suggests that colors can elicit specific and unconscious physiological responses in viewers (such as brown M&Ms being perceived as being more chocolate flavored than green M&Ms)[53] and develop unique cultural contexts and associations, particularly in advertising (such as the perceived "femininity" of the color pink being utilized by Victoria's Secret and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation).[54] Therefore, the colors featured in graphic design can have large impacts on how the viewer perceives the information presented, whether in traditional

[52] TW Whitfield and TJ Wiltshire, "Color Psychology: a Critical Review," *Genet Soc Gen Psychol Monogr.*, November 1990, pp. 385-411, https://doi.org/https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2289687/.
[53] Maya U. Shankar et al., "The Influence of Color and Label Information on Flavor Perception," Chemosensory Perception 2, no. 2 (2009): pp. 53-58, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12078-009-9046-4.
[54] Lauren I. Labrecque and George R. Milne, "Exciting Red and Competent Blue: The Importance of Color in Marketing," Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 40, no. 5 (2011): pp. 711-727, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0245-y.

advertisements or political messaging. Additionally, color selection and other design choices such as font and sizing can serve as foundations for a "brand personality", or the consistent manner in which a brand is viewed by consumers. According to Lauren Labrecque and George Milne, design choices form a brand's visual identity and desired image, shaping brand recognition, "influenc[ing] consumer preferences and usage, transform[ing] user experiences, and serv[ing] as a building block for relationship building, trust, and loyalty."[55] Therefore, any brand that wishes to build a large and loyal consumer base, including media companies, charitable organizations, and advertisement-driven websites, has a vested interest in cultivating an appealing and consistent aesthetic.

In regards to the specific infographic from the Washington Post, the black-and-white color scheme suggests the desire to present a serious, "neutral", and journalistic aesthetic. According to several studies on color associations, the use of black hues calls to mind power, status, elegance, glamour, and dignity; overall, black lends a design an air of sophistication, similar to the idea of a "black-tie event".[56] Alternatively, white is associated with purity, simplicity, and peace, giving a visual the feeling of sincerity and truth. Combined, the use of black and white imbues the infographic with a sense of authority and veracity, two obviously important traits for a news source to embody, particularly in regards to a contentious and controversial issue such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. Additionally, utilizing black and white alongside each other communicates the concept of a two-sided issue, as the colors are often placed in opposition to each other (as in the concept of yin and yang, for example). In this specific instance, this color scheme may reflect the Post's desire to seem impartial, as if it is

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

communicating “both sides” of the conflict. This desire can also be seen in the language utilized throughout the post, such as when the infographic purports to describe the violence in “Israel and Gaza”, using both terms for the disputed territory, or in the descriptions of “confrontations between far-right nationalists and Palestinians” and “officials on both sides of the conflict”, language that equalizes the dispute (Figure 4, Figure 5). Finally the use of this color scheme alongside text in conventional, easy-to-read fonts reflects the typical aesthetic of the Washington Post and newspapers more generally, calling to mind black typeface on white newsprint. This aesthetic not only fits within the brand personality of the Post, a concept that is notably important to the paper[57], but it also suggests the ideals commonly associated with journalism, such as the general unbiased reporting of facts.[58] Overall, the general aesthetic of the infographic suggests that the Post is trying to present information rather than persuade, or at least seem as if it is an impartial descriptor.

The aesthetic similarities of this post to a news article may help direct readers to a full article on the Post’s website; for example, the final line of the infographic’s caption tells viewers, “Here’s what you need to know. Read more by clicking the link in our bio.” This is an understandable tactic for the newspaper to adopt, as they build advertising revenue based on the number of visitors that their website receives. Notably, however, this post does not feature many traditional “attention-grabbing” techniques such as primary colors, pull quotes, or even photographs. While the lack of these elements may lend an additional air of neutrality and credibility to the graphic, they may have also led to the post receiving less engagement than

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[57] WashPostPR, “The Washington Post Releases First National Brand Campaign,” The Washington Post (WP Company, October 28, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2021/10/28/washington-post-releases-first-national-brand-campaign/.

[58] Ebenezer Francis Umor, Review of Communication 1, no. 3 (November 2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311084616_AN_ASSESSMENT_OF_THE_AESTHETIC_FORMS_IN_THE_PRESENTATION_OF_NEWS_IN_SELECT_NATIONAL_NEWSPAPERS

other infographics covering similar content. For example, while this infographic had received 16,244 likes as of April 2022, a similar post from @washingtonpost on May 16, 2021 featuring an image of a woman standing outside rubble and the title "Israeli airstrikes kill 42 as world urges ceasefire" received 32,502 likes, nearly double (Figure 7).[59] This difference in engagement suggests a tension between a media outlet's need to neutrally inform viewers versus its financial incentive to draw as much attention to its product as possible.

Figure 7

Notably, the interviews reflected many key similarities between viewer perception and this technical visual analysis, despite interviewees having no prior knowledge of color psychology and aesthetic research more generally. Nearly all of the interviewees commented on the infographic's black-and-white color scheme. Several noted the basic utility of this design: for example, one viewer stated that the contrast between the background color and font made the graphic "easier to digest", while another argued that the overall design was "straight to the point, simple, and easy to read." However, interviewees also made several inferences regarding the intended meanings of these colors. One viewer argued that the colors used reflected the infographic's "serious topic". Another saw the color scheme as a choice to send

[59] "Instagram," May 16, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/.

“the message that this is a clean cut, clear issue as opposed to [one with] more complexity. It looks like they mean a black and white issue, literally.” Finally, yet another interviewee suggested that the design is “an interesting choice, because I feel like the way that the information is being presented is also very black and white. Like, there's the right side, there's the wrong side.” These observations reflect the research conclusions that associate black and white hues with simplicity, sophistication, and veracity. Importantly, however, the conclusions also highlight how typical viewers of these graphics draw these associative inferences, making judgements about a post’s intended message based on its aesthetics.

Furthermore, interviewees also noted the infographic’s similarities to the Washington Post’s overall brand design. One viewer commented that “I read the Washington Post and I see a lot of the graphics, so this one I immediately recognized”, while another interviewee observed the use of “black and white, their kind of signature colors.” Another viewer noted that the design “really seemed like they tried to make [the infographic] as much like an article as possible, something you'd read on the website.” Through these observations, it is clear that the infographic’s design communicates the brand of the Washington Post, as well as the aesthetics of media more generally. This aesthetic may contribute to the feeling, as noted by one viewer, that the infographic presents “just a series of facts. It's trying to just inform you without being too biased…Like, they're trying to give you the facts of the situation without necessarily being too biased [towards] your choice.”

However, while the post’s simple design may lend it some credibility, viewers also noted that they did not find it particularly exciting or appealing. One interviewee argued that “I actually don't really like [this graphic]; I've never liked the Washington Post ones. It's very dry also, and it's text with no breakups and photos or anything.” Similarly, another viewer

observed that "I would probably not read [the Washington Post infographic]…That one's boring. Like, it doesn't really do anything for me. The text stuff doesn't really pull me in." Collectively, the interviewees' responses suggest a dichotomy between aesthetic choices on Instagram: one can choose to communicate trustworthiness and reliability with simple design choices, or draw attention with more ostentatious visuals.

5.2: Human Rights Watch and the Aesthetics of NGOs

The next infographic to be analyzed was posted by the well known non-governmental organization Human Rights Watch on July 27, 2021. Upon first glance, this post bears many similarities to the design of the Washington Post's graphic: both slideshows possess a largely black-and-white design featuring text in a bolded sans serif font and no photographs or other outside images. However, the Human Rights Watch graphic notably utilizes blue accents such as quotation marks, a rounded background, and the organization's own logo. Additionally, while the Washington Post's text was a third-person recounting of the violence in Sheikh Jarrah, the Human Rights Watch graphic only presents four slides of quotes, both from organizational leaders and Palestinians themselves (Figure 8, Figure 9).[60]

[60] "Instagram," July 27, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/.

Figure 8

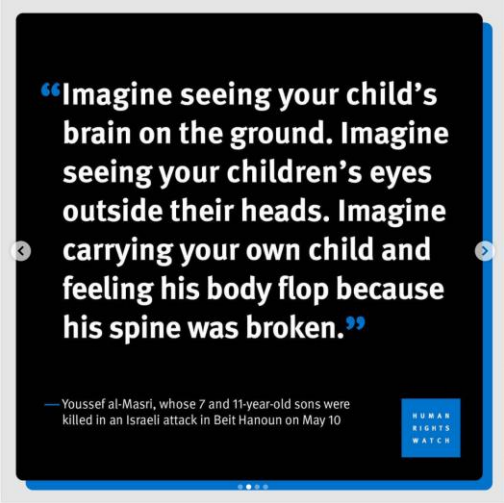

Figure 9

As with the Washington Post’s color scheme, the use of black and white in Human Rights Watch’s post gives the infographic a general sense of refinement, simplicity, clarity, and truth.[61] However, the addition of blue also lends the design a sense of competence, as the color is “associated with intelligence, communication, trust, efficiency, duty, and logic”, as in the phrase “true blue”.[62] Overall, these three shades combine to give the information presented an air of integrity and accuracy. While these are two especially important associations for any presentation of a political conflict, a sense of credibility is particularly necessary for this post, so that viewers are inclined to believe in the credibility of the quotes featured. Unlike the Washington Post graphic, the text of this infographic is not presented in the detached and objective third-person perspective. Instead, both statistics and personal experiences are

[61] Lauren I. Labrecque and George R. Milne, “Exciting Red and Competent Blue: The Importance of Color in Marketing,” Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 40, no. 5 (2011): pp. 711-727, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0245-y.
[62] Ibid.

presented through specifically attributed quotes; therefore, it is particularly important for the post's objectives that the viewer trust the information presented.

Additionally, the infographic features the Human Rights Watch logo in the bottom right corner of each slide. The logo is in the same shade of blue as the post's accents, giving a sense of consistency to each slide and the color scheme overall. Placing the logo in each slide of the post ensures that the viewer sees it, no matter which specific image is currently being viewed or shared on a user's story. The consistent use of the logo reminds the viewer that this information is coming from a trusted human rights organization, but it also ensures that the NGO's branding is both maintained and furthered. According to a study conducted by Nathalie Kylander and Christopher Stone on "The Role of Brand in the Nonprofit Sector", branding has become increasingly important for nonprofit organizations in the 21st century. As one nonprofit consultant noted, "a strong brand helps bring greater credibility and trust to a project quicker, and acts as a catalyst for people to want to come to the table."[63] Therefore, featuring the logo allows Human Rights Watch to capitalize upon its existing credibility while also expanding brand recognition.

Finally, the use of blue as well as the quote selection of the Human Rights Watch post draw the viewer's attention. The use of blue alongside black and white acts as a splash of color, drawing the viewer's gaze to the post– the color is even utilized as a layer behind the black background, helping the text "pop" off the page.[64] The quotes themselves are also particularly impactful, and are presented in a large, bold font that immediately catches the eye. One especially heart wrenching account from a Palestinian father asks the viewer to "imagine

[63] Kylander, Nathalie, and Christopher Stone. "The Role of Brand in the Nonprofit Sector." Stanford Social Innovation Review 10, no. 2 (2012): 37–41. https://doi.org/10.48558/NV6C-3A31.
[64] Ibid.

seeing your child's brain on the ground. Imagine seeing your children's eyes outside their heads. Imagine carrying your own child and feeling his body flop because his spine was broken" (Figure 9). The graphic nature of this quote shocks the viewer, gaining their attention and hopefully engaging their sense of pathos. Unlike the Washington Post graphic, the objective of this post does not seem to be to present the details of the conflict in a straightforward, "objective" manner. Instead, the Human Rights Watch infographic focuses on the specific violence caused by Israeli airstrikes, ostensibly seeking to persuade the viewer that "the International Criminal Court should investigate possible war crimes", as detailed in the post's fourth slide.[65] The attention-grabbing effects of this design can be seen in the post's engagement: the infographic received 17,110 likes as of April 2022, more than the Washington Post graphic despite a significant disparity in their account's followings (the Post has 5.8 million followers[66] and Human Rights Watch has 1.1 million[67] as of April 2022). This suggests that the attention-grabbing design techniques and persuasive objective of the Human Rights Watch post received more sustained attention than the simpler design of the Washington Post infographic.

As expected, nearly all of the interviewee responses specifically mentioned the use of blue. Two viewers described the color as "poppy", while another noted that "the blue background makes it look like it's coming at you." The blue also seemed to particularly stick in the interviewees' memories; for example, when asked about the infographic later in the interview, one viewer first recalled that "the Human Rights Watch one was that blue." Furthermore, several interviewees also made note of the use of blue alongside the Human

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[65] "Instagram," July 27, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/.
[66] Login • instagram, April 2022. https://www.instagram.com/washingtonpost/?hl=en.
[67] Login • instagram, April 2022, https://www.instagram.com/humanrightswatch/.

Rights watch logo, specifically observing how this branding establishes the post's credibility. As one viewer argued,

> I think these are the colors of Human Rights Watch, right? Like, that's the logo. So it's clear that they're trying to show that it's them, it is *the* Human Rights Watch. And that's why you should pay attention to this graphic, because they know what they're talking about.

Another viewer stated that with "Human Rights Watch, I feel more confident that I don't have to do the fact checking myself because it's from an outlet that stands [on its own]." Overall, viewer responses indicated that the use of blue drew attention to the post and connected the post to the nonprofit's overall brand.

Additionally, viewers took particular note of the infographic's use of quotes. Nearly every interviewee made note of the graphic nature of these quotes, describing them as especially attention-grabbing and emotionally impactful. For example, viewers specifically referenced the text's "bloody and grotesque imagery" and the "brutality and gore of it all." Many interviewees called attention to the fact that two of the quotes featured came from those directly impacted by the violence. As one interviewee noted,

> I think the words and what the actual civilians are saying is a lot more graphic and definitely invokes more of an emotional response. This is really disturbing, to imagine seeing a child's brain on the ground, imagining their eyes outside their heads. And I feel, like, pretty bad about this, compared to the [Washington Post].

Other viewers also described a similar emotional impact, and noted that this effect made them more likely to read the rest of the post. As one viewer responded,

> I feel like I would be more likely to read this one just because of the pathos…I like how they're obviously appealing to emotions, but instead of the author or writer just saying his opinion on it in a biased way, he's using an actual quote from a community member. I'd be more likely to be interested in someone who has experiences directly saying it, rather than someone who really has no ties to it just writing about it.

Importantly, no interviewee thought that this infographic was attempting to describe the Israel-Palestine conflict in an "objective" or "unbiased" manner. In fact, many viewers observed that this post seemed to be particularly designed to make the viewer sympathetic to the Palestinian victims. However, many interviewees appreciated the infographic as an example of nonprofit work in particular, featuring "storytelling" techniques and "the human element". One viewer considered the post to be

> very on brand for [Human Rights Watch], particularly from a nonprofit organization as opposed to a journalistic group. This type of language is necessary…I think it could be really easy to say, oh, the Washington Post article brought a lot more complexity and nuance to the situation, but I don't entirely think that this content is out of place, if that makes sense, because it is part of the reality.

This important distinction highlights that many infographic viewers do not expect each post to be an objective description of facts, but that many are understood to be methods of persuasion.

5.3: @so.informed and the Instagram Aesthetic

Finally, the last infographic to be analyzed was posted by the well-known infographic account @so.informed on May 9 of 2021. The post features ten slides, containing significantly more text and information than the previously analyzed graphics and presenting a mixture of historical context for the Israel-Palestine conflict, personal narratives from evicted Palestinians, and international human rights law standards (Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13).[68] Importantly, the post is also the only infographic analyzed that features photographs and mixed media, as it utilizes images of Sheikh Jarrah's skyline, a photograph of a Palestinian woman and her home,

[68] "Let's Talk about What's Going on in Sheikh Jarrah. - Instagram," May 9, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/COq-_WunG9m/.

and a tweet from U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders (Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 14). Aesthetically, the infographic largely features beige slides with bolded black text of varying sizes. The post also utilizes colloquial language, such as the opening slide that reads “So You Want to Talk About: What to Know About Sheikh Jarrah” (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

Unlike the designs from the Washington Post and Human Rights Watch, the so.informed infographic does not utilize a traditional black and white color scheme. Instead, the majority of the post's slides consist of black, bolded text against a pale tan background.

While the contrast between these hues still enables the post to be easily read, the shade of brown presents very different color associations to the viewer than the other posts. According to Labrecque and Milne, shades of brown are related to the concepts of seriousness, reliability, and support.[69] Like the Washington Post and Human Rights Watch, this color communicates a sense of credibility to the viewer. However, this sense of trustworthiness is especially necessary for @so.informed which, as a private account, has a need to prove its information in different ways than established media and nonprofit organizations (as seen in the sources listed at the bottom of several slides) (Figure 12, Figure 13).

Interestingly, brown is also associated with feelings of ruggedness, earthiness, and an overall sense of nature.[70] This shade, especially when displayed alongside the actual images of homes, is particularly useful in presenting information about Sheikh Jarrah as a physical place, a neighborhood in a *land* dispute (Figure 11). Furthermore, the use of a *pale* tan is reminiscent of both millennial marketing tactics and the colors commonly found in popular social justice infographics. As one reporter noted about the @so.informed account, the content tends to utilize a "subdued palette of creamy pinks, yellows, and blues. [The] overall strategy and content packaging are similar to brands that speak to corporate-minded, girl-boss feminists."[71] Through this strategy, @so.informed and other popular infographic accounts are attempting to specifically appeal to young Instagram users, hoping to "stop the scroll" with aesthetically pleasing designs. As the owner of @so.informed herself argues, "I'm trying to appeal to the

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[69] Lauren I. Labrecque and George R. Milne, "Exciting Red and Competent Blue: The Importance of Color in Marketing," Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 40, no. 5 (2011): pp. 711-727, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0245-y.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Terry Nguyen, "How Social Justice Slideshows Took over Instagram," Vox (Vox, August 12, 2020), https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism.

apolitical people, the ones who'd rather stay out of it and enjoy, like, mimosa pictures…I'm also trying to reach women my age, millennials who aren't participating in the conversation because they don't know where to start."[72]

This infographic features many other aspects of design specifically meant to cater to young Instagram users, grabbing their attention and possibly convincing them to share the post in their own stories. For example, all of the graphic's text-based slides feature sentences of varying sizes and emphasis. Therefore, even if a viewer is mindlessly scrolling through their feed or swiping through stories, they can still easily see and consume the most important aspect of the information presented. For example, in the post's ninth slide on evictions as a human rights abuse, the sentence "per the United Nations, the forced evictions violate international law" is larger than any other piece of text, and the phrase "may amount to a war crime" is bolded (Figure 13). Therefore, viewers that are interested in learning more can click on the post and read the unemphasized, while viewers who simply scrolled past likely digested at least those two quotes. This suggests a sophisticated understanding of how most young Instagram users act on the app in terms of scrolling versus legitimate engagement. Other aspects of the infographic also seem designed to specifically appeal to young progressives, such as the inclusion of a tweet by Senator Bernie Sanders, a politician with notable youth support.[73] Unlike the previous graphics, some of these slides do not necessarily need to be read alongside the others to be understood. For example, the slide featuring a photo of a Palestinian woman's family home or the tweet could ostensibly speak for themselves. As most users simply select one slide from an infographic to share to their stories, these slides also suggest a

[72] Ibid.
[73] Tara Golshan, "Bernie Sanders's Real Base Is Diverse - and Very Young," Vox (Vox, March 7, 2019), https://www.vox.com/2019/3/7/18216899/bernie-sanders-bro-base-polling-2020-president.

comprehension of how a typical Instagram user views and shares a post– the infographic offers several possible options for users to select from. Overall, through its color scheme, sizing, and references, the post seems designed to draw the attention of young people who regularly use Instagram. This intentionality may be reflected in the popularity of the post as compared to others analyzed: as of April 2022, the post received 207,766 likes, over ten times the engagement of the Washington Post and Human Rights Watch infographics, and without the brand recognition of either organization.[74]

As with the previous posts, interviewees took immediate notice of the infographic's color scheme. Two users specifically felt that the use of tan was reminiscent of the Middle East, or at least cultural perceptions of the region. One called attention to the "sepia tone, like …in movies when they show the Middle East, where it's like it doesn't look like a real place, like it looks like it's supposed to look different from the US or Europe." Another noted that the color "definitely reminds me of desert sand, flowing cloth… I don't want to say that it's like a Middle Eastern color, but it's kind of similar." Viewers also noted the post's adherence to the traditional aesthetics of popular Instagram infographics, specifically observing the similarity of the post to other infographics made with the popular design tool, Canva. For example, one interviewee stated that the graphic was "pretty, like a classic Instagram, Canva type situation." Additionally, viewers appreciated the attention-grabbing visuals of the post: nearly every interviewee referred to this graphic as "the one with pictures", and one viewer specifically highlighted the post's inclusion of "an image of the actual neighborhood that they're referring to… It's definitely a lot more visual in this way by having a picture of the neighborhood." Furthermore, several viewers specifically noted that the inclusion of Bernie Sanders lended a

[74] "Let's Talk about What's Going on in Sheikh Jarrah. - Instagram," May 9, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/COq-_WunG9m/.

level of credibility to the post and the narratives that it presents. As one twenty-one year old interviewee commented, “if there was a political figure that people our age would want to align themselves with, it would be Bernie Sanders. Because if you don't believe in what Bernie Sanders believes in, then you're probably a bad person [laughter].” Overall, viewers felt that this post was aesthetically pleasing and most closely resembled the infographics that they commonly saw on Instagram.

However, despite recognizing the aesthetic appeal of this post, many viewers also expressed a concern that the design choices did not accurately reflect the severity of the situation described. One interviewee argued that “I think it's trying to be more artsy and pretty. But I don't think the message always gets across as well, considering the type of story it is, right?” Similarly, another viewer noted the inherent tension between trying to get attention in Instagram’s visual environment while also maintaining a respect for the seriousness of the topic, positing that the graphic

> broadly seems to aestheticize…really serious issues. And whenever I clicked on [the post], it always felt a little weird. But, I also understand the way to get people to click is by making something that draws your eye when you're scrolling. So it's like, on the one hand, you want something that stops people, but on the other hand, you don't want to make this look like every other social media post to the point where its severity is reduced.

Additionally, while many interviewees guessed that the infographic had received the most engagement of the three, they also expressed many doubts that all of the post’s information was read and digested by the viewers. For example, one interviewee observed that the post “has lots of slides…I don’t really believe most of the people who posted [one slide] swipe through all of them.” Another viewer expressed that they themselves would not likely read through the entire post if they saw it on their feed, saying that “I'm not going to lie, I wouldn't read any of that. It's too wordy, like reading an essay on my Instagram.” Overall, interviewees

both noted the aesthetic appeal of the post while expressing a discomfort with the tone and readability of the design.

5.4: Seeking Viewers in the Attention Economy

Overall, the technical visual analysis of these three infographics, alongside interviewee responses, highlight the ways in which aesthetic theory and design choices impact the way infographics are received and interpreted by viewers. Furthermore, these observations revealed a tension between the ostensible objectives of infographics to inform viewers versus the necessity of eye-catching visuals to initially attract users. For example, while traditional or muted design choices, such as those made by the Washington Post, may convey a sense of professionalism and gravity to the situation described, they appear to attract less engagement than the aesthetically pleasing tactics of accounts such as @so.informed. Alternatively, the pastel hues and bold text of Instagram's popular infographics may miscommunicate the severity of the issue presented.

In sum, these design tactics reveal a larger issue with the role of Instagram, and social media more broadly, in the attention economy. According to Diana Zulli, with the rise of the Internet, "attention is one of the most valuable resources in modern-day capitalism".[75] An increase in viewers equates to an increase in profit for news media sites, social media influencers, television channels, and essentially all other industries that rely on advertising revenue. Therefore, while scrolling through social media is often considered a "leisure" activity, in actuality "attending to mediated content is a capital enterprise."[76] However, social media is not only a site of the attention economy, but it is also reshaping it. Previously, there

[75] Diana Zulli, "Capitalizing on the Look: Insights into the Glance, Attention Economy, and Instagram," Critical Studies in Media Communication 35, no. 2 (October 2017): pp. 137-150, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1394582.
[76] Ibid.

was some separation between various types of content and the topics they represented or described; viewers likely did not consume the nightly news, a family sitcom, the trailer for a horror movie, and a friend's birth announcement sequentially. With social media, however, all of this information is often being taken in in one site and time period, as sites like Instagram function as personal networks, centers of pop culture, fashion, and celebrity updates, and major sources of news. Every single one of the interviewees listed social media as their main source of news, indicating that many people are now learning of and about major world events, human rights abuses, and other notable topics directly alongside memes, pictures of their friend's food, and other less "serious" or consequential updates. This shift in the attention economy means that many news sources must now adapt to compete with flashier content, with some utilizing strange methods to draw viewers: for example, one interviewee even described "this fish account… on TikTok, where it's like the fish from SpongeBob, like a news anchor. It comes across my For You Page sometimes, but obviously the topics are really serious, even coming from a fish. It makes people listen and they present it in a really digestible way."

However, the constant inundation of information on social media also leads many users to feel exhausted by the amount of knowledge and content that they are presented with. Some users expressed that they often felt unprepared to address serious topics when opening the app. For example, one interviewee noted that "I can't focus on what I'm reading…I just feel like I'm not taking in the information. For me, I'm reading all the facts and stuff and having a hard time concentrating. I'm thinking about other things, getting my week organized in my head…So that's, like, where my head is at." Another viewer expressed similar feelings of frustration, stating that

> there are so many huge global conflicts going on that your brain isn't equipped to deal with all of them… to do all the research is really draining. I mean, obviously that's

> important. And that's wrong of me to say, like, I'm not taking time to look into your suffering…I mean, if we're not and we're supposed to be engaged students, how is everyone else in the United States possibly doing that?

In sum, the transition of news consumption to social media platforms has necessitated new aesthetics of information presentation in order to compete in the attention economy. However, the presentation and sheer amount of news on these platforms can also lead to viewers feeling overwhelmed and inattentive, suggesting possible burnout and avoidance of "political" topics.

Chapter 6: Panopticon and Performance in Social Media Activism

In addition to commenting on the three infographics, interviewees were also asked to answer a series of questions related to their social media use, political involvement, and previous engagement with Instagram infographics. Within the responses to these questions, two trends emerged. First, many interviewees expressed a feeling of social pressure to share infographics related to certain social issues on Instagram, describing a social atmosphere of observing and being observed similar to philosopher Michel Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon. Second, although every single interviewee had engaged directly with infographics previously, many expressed doubts in the efficacy of these posts for social change and in the sincerity of those who shared them.

First, many interviewees viewed Instagram, as well as social media more generally, as a public environment in which users are constantly performing for the approval of others. For example, one interviewee expressed that "I think because Instagram is such a visual app, there's pressure to follow certain trends of what your posts should look like. And so you don't want to be the odd one out and you want to post similar things to what your friends are posting." Interestingly, this interviewee emphasized the *aesthetics* of what one posts, highlighting how some infographics may be shared or read more than others simply because they adopt a popular design strategy. This sense of social pressure extends to the app's political content, as well; another interviewee noted that "I would say like 80% of the Instagram stories that I see are reposting infographics. And a lot of the time, it's actually interesting that it's usually the same infographic posted by multiple people, so there's a lot to unpack there. I feel like if you see your friends posting something and you don't post it too, they'll think that you don't believe in it." This social atmosphere resembles Michel Foucault's conception of the

panopticon, a structure in which one could theoretically be watched at any time, and therefore constantly behaves as if observed. Notably, there is a key difference between social media and the panopticon: as described by Matthew Stein, because users can choose what, when, and whether or not to post, there is "a caveat of selective performance [on social media]… Self-regulation occurs when one chooses whether or not to post. Posts are not neutral but are virtual extensions of the individual."[77]

Due to this ability to selectively perform, one would assume that a user could avoid social observation by simply choosing not to post. However, as many interviewees noted, the rise of infographics on the platform created a new social atmosphere in which silence was interpreted as disagreement: for example, if one did not share a post in support of Black Lives Matter, it was assumed that one was against the movement altogether. As one viewer noted,

> there was an expectation of a public display of political beliefs, and if you chose to not make that public display that was also indicative of something. That's the only time in my life where I felt like if I didn't directly speak about something, people would assume something else…I think that definitely changed my opinion of what was expected of [a user on] social media and also what was expected to help a cause.

Furthermore, after posting one time about one cause one can feel obligated to consistently post about every major social issue. As another interviewee expressed, "I've had a lot of interesting conversations with people about, 'Oh, like they posted during Black Lives Matter, but not Stop Asian Hate. And I think I feel a sort of paralysis sometimes about messing up… And I don't want my silence to infer that, like, I don't care." Overall, the development and subsequent ubiquity of Instagram infographics led to a social environment on the platform in which silence was also interpreted to be a political signifier.

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[77] Matthew Stein, "Michel Foucault, Panopticism, and Social Media," New York State Political Science Association Annual Conference, April 2016, https://doi.org/https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328887158_Michel_Foucault_Panopticism_and_Social_Media.

As one may expect from this general feeling of social pressure, all of the interviewees had read and shared Instagram infographics prior to being interviewed. However, despite participating in the phenomenon themselves, they did not feel confident that the posts were truly enacting positive social change. First, many interviewees expressed a belief that users who shared these posts were "virtue signaling", or signaling their moral superiority without engaging in the labor typically required of activist work. As one viewer expressed, "people share infographics without reading them and just want to appear as if they're doing some sort of activist behavior." Similarly, another interviewee noted that, "people just love to be like, yeah, I'm an advocate."

Additionally, interviewees communicated doubts about the ability of infographics to effectively inform someone or change their opinion on a topic. Instead, viewers posited that users likely typically saw infographics that they already agreed with due to Instagram's algorithm and their own social circles, mirroring academic research showing that, on social media, "news now does less to inform than affirm, following emotional and affective motivations."[78] As one interviewee expressed, "I feel like our feeds are like lowkey catered to us. We follow people with similar views, and so usually what I see is stuff that I already think. It might be stuff that I don't know about, but it usually falls within the same choices that I would already make." Even if an infographic did successfully inform or persuade a viewer, another interviewee questioned the material results of "educating" audiences in general, especially those so removed from the actual conflict. As the individual stated,

> I don't think [engaging on social media] does anything. If I go read infographics, who does that actually affect? Like, sorry, but if this is all happening in Palestine, all of us in America reading these infographics, that literally does nothing. Like, yeah, you're

[78] James Morris, "Simulacra in the Age of Social Media: Baudrillard as the Prophet of Fake News," Journal of Communication Inquiry 45, no. 4 (March 2020): pp. 319-336, https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859920977154.

> educated. What's going to come from it? Awareness, but it's not like we're fixing it or helping.

Overall, despite participating in the infographic trend, many interviewees did not feel confident in the ability of social media activism to enact genuine material change in the lives of those that it purports to advocate for.

Finally, although many interviewees did take some form of direct action after viewing an infographic, this action usually did not result in sustained work for or engagement with a cause. After viewing, reading, or sharing an infographic on a political topic, many interviewees donated to an organization, signed a petition, emailed a political representative, or spoke about the issue with their friends. However, these viewers also recognized the limitations of what they felt compelled to do after viewing the post; as one interviewee noted, "I donated money a few times, not to be like 'I'm a saint', but I have done that. I definitely sent a few emails because of an infographic, but I will say I've never made a call because of an infographic. I have drawn the line there [laughter]."

Interestingly, the most significant political engagement in each interviewee's life typically took place through participation in in-person, deliberately organized and hierarchically structured groups with regularly scheduled meetings, like the traditional movements described by Zeynep Tufekci.[79] For example, one student stated that

> my most significant political activity is Students for Sanctuary, which is a group of undergraduates at Columbia. Our main focus is a monthly clinic that we have in collaboration with synagogue, and we usually help people file work permits. They're usually people seeking asylum, but sometimes they're also people who are applying for temporary protected status or green cards.

Another interviewee specifically tied political concepts to their volunteer work, stating that

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[79] ZEYNEP TUFEKCI, Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest (S.l.: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021).

> I work at the soup kitchen and the food pantry, and a conversation always comes up, like, me and my coworkers will talk about how horrible it is that we even have to do this in the first place. Like why is it that certain people don't have access to food? And we just talk about capitalism, the large houseless population in New York City. And I feel like, sadly, all of those things are very politically intertwined.

Overall, although the interviewees had engaged with politics on social media, the causes that they devoted the most time and interest to often took place offline, in traditional activist or volunteer spaces.

Through each of these conversations, it became clear that engagement with Instagram infographics did not lead most of the interviewees to sustained political participation in the causes that the posts detailed. However, this does not mean that it is impossible for social media outreach to contribute to traditional movements altogether. In one instance, for example, an infographic did introduce one interviewee to a new topic, piquing their interest and eventually resulting in them doing traditional activist work for the cause. As the interviewee details,

> I remember seeing a lot of infographics about people being detained in ICE facilities and all of that, and infographics were the way that I was introduced to the topic. Then when I started reading into it, I was like, oh my God, that's really horrible, and I eventually ended up volunteering at an immigration clinic.

Notably, the interviewee's deeper engagement with immigration rights began after they took the additional step of doing research off of social media, "reading into [the issue]." This suggests that activism can pull viewers in and introduce them to an issue, but may have a difficult time convincing users to take additional steps to contribute off of the platform. Therefore, while social media activism itself may not generate consistent political behavior, these observations do indicate that Instagram infographics can serve as eye-catching, useful introductions to traditional activism such as volunteering and group membership. The social pressure engendered by Instagram and other platforms can lead people to engage with or share

content that they might not otherwise. However, this original engagement does not guarantee sustained involvement or even concern for an issue; any further action taken appears to be dependent on the viewer's own personal political inclinations and motivations.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Overall, this paper aimed to investigate possible connections between the particular visual aesthetics of Instagram infographics and their political effects. Through a combination of a visual analysis of the graphics themselves and a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, this research revealed several distinct conclusions regarding the unique phenomenon of visual online activism. First, the aesthetic judgements of the interviewees largely matched inferences supported by aesthetic theory, indicating that design choices can deeply impact how a viewer receives political information. Next, the consolidation of content on social media forces all users, including traditional media sources, to compete for a finite amount of engagement in the attention economy. This competition leads many accounts, particularly those dependent upon engagement for revenue, to utilize eye-catching design choices with the hope of capturing more attention. Finally, the panopticon-esque nature of Instagram and other social media platforms can lead users to engage with and share content that they might not otherwise. However, this initial engagement has limited material impact and does not guarantee any further commitment to the cause represented in the post.

First, the interviewees' aesthetic perceptions of the three analyzed infographics substantially corresponded with previous research findings in color psychology and marketing studies. The black-and-white aesthetic of the Washington Post produced connotations with gravity, sincerity, and print journalism, reinforcing the newspaper's brand as a trustworthy news source. Although utilizing many similar aesthetics, the Human Rights Watch graphic also utilized blue accents and graphic personal accounts to capture viewer's attention while . In contrast, the @so.informed infographic featured a pale tan color scheme, photographs, and text sizing to specifically attract the engagement of young and adept users of Instagram. In sum, the

agreement between previous research findings and interviewee responses affirms Nelson Goodman's assertion that "perception depends heavily on conceptual schemata", highlighting the ways in which design choices can communicate alongside written language.[80]

Additionally, the visual analysis of these infographics revealed a consistent concern for branding and engagement in the attention economy. As social media platforms have become a major site of news reporting and political behavior, traditional news sources, nonprofits, and activist organizations all share content on these sites. However, the structure of social media consolidates varied forms of content onto one "feed" that the users scrolls through, meaning that complex, nuanced, and often violent topics are competing for viewership alongside celebrity gossip, advertisements, and the posts made by the friends and family of an average user. To attract more attention, many accounts may choose to utilize eye-catching aesthetic choices such as bright colors, large fonts, and graphic illustrations. However, these design strategies may not accurately communicate the gravity of certain topics, particularly complex political issues rooted in systems of historical expression. Therefore, many infographic designers face a conflict of interests: should one utilize the aesthetic strategies that most effectively communicate the tone of an issue, or should one attempt to attract as many viewers as possible, even if the topic and aesthetic do not seem to align?

Additional interviewee responses also revealed the ways in which social media platforms like Instagram can exert social pressure to engage with social justice infographics and political issues more generally. As viewers described, the public nature of social media creates a panopticon-esque environment in which viewers are aware of their actions as a performance, meant to be viewed by others. One might assume that this performativity can be

[80] Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 142.

avoided by simply not posting. However, in moments of social crisis such as the height of the Black Lives Matter or Stop Asian Hate movements, viewers expressed that silence can also be interpreted as a political stance. Therefore, the performativity nature of Instagram can lead users to engage with topics that they might not have otherwise. However, this engagement does not necessarily lead to a long-term concern for the issue depicted; some users may donate to a cause, do further research, email or call a representative, or speak with their friends and family about an issue, but there is a large concern that many simply share the post and move on. While many of these actions may lead to a viewer becoming more informed about a topic, it is also unclear to what extent these small actions create material change in the situations described. Despite this, infographics still have the ability to serve as primers to introduce viewers to an issue, leading particularly concerned or motivated users to more sustained engagement through traditional movements.

Ultimately, infographics can be utilized strategically by activists to draw motivated viewers to a movement. In order to encourage users to engage in more concrete action on an issue, infographics should include clear and specific directives such as links to donate, numbers to call, and, most importantly, information on how to join relationship-driven traditional organizations. Through these inclusions, infographics can serve as entries into sustained activism rather than a one-time action with limited material effects. Importantly, however, activists should not allow online efforts such as Instagram infographics to overshadow or replace traditional, long-term movements– social media must be utilized as a tool for modern activism, and should not become the site of the totality of political efforts.

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