

Article

Not peer-reviewed version

Social Media Activism In Underrepresented Communities: A Case Study of Indigenous Narratives

[Peter Okonkwo](#) * , Ignatius Achilike Njoku PhD , Rosemary Ngozi Okonkwo

Posted Date: 27 November 2024

doi: [10.20944/preprints202411.2112.v1](https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202411.2112.v1)

Keywords: social media activism; media activism; digital platforms; Facebook; TikTok; Twitter; Indigenous narratives; underrepresented communities; Indigenous activists; social media campaigns; biased algorithms



Preprints.org is a free multidisciplinary platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This open access article is published under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license, which permit the free download, distribution, and reuse, provided that the author and preprint are cited in any reuse.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

Article

Social Media Activism In Underrepresented Communities: A Case Study of Indigenous Narratives

Peter Okonkwo ^{1,*}, Ignatius Achilike Njoku ² and Rosemary Ngozi Okonkwo ¹

¹ Independent Researcher

² Benson Idahosa University

* Correspondence: pearlpdn@gmail.com

Abstract: This research explored the role of social media in empowering Indigenous narratives, focusing on how digital platforms enabled Indigenous communities to challenge colonial histories, promote cultural sovereignty, and advocate for social justice. Using a mixed-methods approach that included case studies, interviews, surveys, and content analysis, the study investigated key social media campaigns such as #IdleNoMore and #MMIW, along with the perspectives of Indigenous activists and community members. The findings identified the primary enablers and barriers to effective digital activism, examined patterns of audience engagement, and assessed the impact of social media in reshaping public perceptions of Indigenous issues. The research also addressed challenges such as algorithmic bias, the digital divide, and cyber harassment and provided recommendations for both Indigenous communities and social media platforms to improve digital activism efforts. Ultimately, the study contributed to the growing field of digital activism by highlighting the transformative potential of social media in amplifying Indigenous voices and fostering a more inclusive digital space for social change.

Keywords: social media activism; media activism; digital platforms; Facebook; TikTok; Twitter; Indigenous narratives; underrepresented communities; Indigenous activists; social media campaigns; biased algorithms

1. Introduction

Background

Individuals of oppressed identities and communities have used social media, especially platforms like Instagram and Twitter, to raise awareness about issues that are important to them, their communities, and their families (Karami et al.2020) [1]. Activism is not new to Indigenous groups or to the communities and nations associated with them. Marginalization and oppression of Indigenous groups date back to the annexation of the North American continent by European colonizers, which displaced myriad Indigenous groups and massively changed the social and governmental landscapes of North America. The effects of attempts to force cultural assimilation have left visible scars on Indigenous communities, and it is of dire importance that these groups are appropriately represented in every social facet of contemporary society (Kyrölä & Huuki, 2021). ****A salient trend of third and fourth wave feminism is the emphasis on the need for intersectionality, or the addressing of the ways in which identities overlap or intersect with each other in possibly complex, multifaceted ways. The intersection of multiple identities specifically comes into play in the response and representation of minority groups in digital spaces; unique needs of each identity need to be recognized and worked around (Twyford et al.2024).

This study intends to point out unique challenges faced by Indigenous communities as well as point out gaps in the scholarly dialogue surrounding Indigenous online representation. Alongside these gaps, it is crucial to address how these narratives can serve not just as a means for empowerment but also as a means for the preservation, dissemination, and sharing of culture and

knowledge. The oral tradition of storytelling has been a core part of Indigenous nations' cultures since time immemorial, and thus digital storytelling is a more direct link not just to cultural preservation but also as an act of resistance (Thompson & Rust, 2023). The demographics of Native Americans vary. Tribal nation citizens have different demographic and socioeconomic profiles in addition to their unique digital media and technology use. This variety helps us gain a wider insight into Native American needs and maybe, by extension, the community in need of scholarly focus, the American Pacific Islanders who are often of Indigenous Pacific Island origins, just like the first peoples of North America, although the dynamics of their marginalization are quite different from those of the Indigenous Native Americans of the US (Liddell et al. 2021). There is a modest quantity of research covering traditional media, technology, and Indigenous peoples specifically. There is, however, minimal to no amount of research targeting frontier social media like Instagram and Twitter, or any studies about digital media by and about Indigenous people.

Social media activism has become a crucial tool for underrepresented communities to voice their narratives, express grievances, and demand social change. Indigenous communities, in particular, have leveraged platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to counter colonial histories, assert sovereignty, and promote cultural preservation. According to Brough, Literat, and Ikin (2020), youth in underrepresented communities see social media as an ethical space for amplifying their perspectives and challenging the inequities embedded in digital platforms. These platforms, while initially designed as spaces for social connection, have increasingly become battlegrounds for identity, culture, and political representation.

Indigenous Australians, for instance, have used social media to disrupt the colonial algorithm that often marginalizes their voices in mainstream media. Fredericks et al. (2022) highlight how social media platforms, when strategically employed, provide avenue for resistance to colonial narratives, allowing Indigenous Australians to reclaim their stories and cultural heritage. This digital resistance is not only about engaging with global audiences but also about fostering local solidarity and connection among Indigenous peoples, reinforcing a sense of community that might otherwise be fragmented by geographic and socio-political barriers.

The role of emotion in digital activism cannot be overstated. Friedrich (2022) argues that emotions such as anger and apology are deeply intertwined with activism, particularly in post-colonial contexts. For Indigenous communities, social media provides a platform to channel collective emotions, whether they are related to historical injustices or contemporary struggles for rights and recognition. Through online campaigns, these communities engage in a form of digital reconciliation, demanding acknowledgment and redress for past and ongoing wrongs.

The immediacy of social media platforms has also allowed Indigenous communities to respond quickly to national disasters or injustices. Karami et al. (2020) discuss how platforms like Twitter serve as critical tools for situational awareness during crises, enabling real-time updates, organizing community responses, and spreading vital information. This has been particularly crucial for Indigenous communities that are often neglected in the face of environmental and political disasters. Social media platforms empower these communities to influence the national conversation, ensuring that their issues are not ignored.

Kyrölä and Huuki (2021) provide a compelling example of how Indigenous communities are re-imagining their past through digital media. In their study of the Sámi documentary *Sparrooabán*, they explore how Indigenous people use media to challenge the dominant narrative, creating alternative historical and cultural archives. Such affective archives offer a counterpoint to the settler-colonial narratives often propagated by mainstream media, providing a space for Indigenous people to reframe their identities and histories in ways that resonate with their lived experiences.

The intersection of digital media and Indigenous sovereignty is explored by Caranto Morford and Ansloos (2021), who examine land-based relationships within the context of #NativeTwitter. The authors note that social media is not just a space for cultural preservation but also a platform for advocating for Indigenous land rights and sovereignty. Digital spaces offer a means of organizing and mobilizing around critical issues like land dispossession, resource extraction, and environmental justice.

Social media also facilitates a practice of care within Indigenous digital communities. Frazer, Carlson, and Farrelly (2022) highlight how social media platforms have become digital assemblages of care, where Indigenous peoples come together to share knowledge, offer emotional support, and create solidarity networks. These networks often extend beyond borders, connecting Indigenous individuals from different regions and fostering a global sense of unity in the face of shared struggles.

However, the digital space is not without its challenges. The very platforms that empower Indigenous activism also pose risks of exploitation and surveillance. As Liddell, McKinley, and Lilly (2021) point out, the use of digital technologies by Indigenous peoples can often lead to new forms of colonization, where their cultural products are commodified or misappropriated. Indigenous communities must navigate these complexities while maintaining their sovereignty and ensuring that their digital spaces remain safe and representative.

The convergence of Indigenous media and social media is explored by Mpofu (2022), who examines the adaptation of traditional storytelling methods to platforms like Twitter, SoundCloud, and YouTube in Zimbabwe. Mpofu's analysis demonstrates how these platforms have facilitated the resurgence of Indigenous storytelling practices, allowing them to reach wider audiences while retaining their cultural significance. This digital adaptation of storytelling is a key feature of contemporary Indigenous activism, helping to preserve cultural narratives and challenge the erasure of Indigenous histories.

The influence of digital technologies on the mental health and well-being of Indigenous peoples is an emerging area of study. Li and Brar (2022) systematically review the impact of digital technologies on Indigenous communities, noting both positive and negative outcomes. While social media can offer a sense of community and belonging, it can also exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation, particularly when Indigenous peoples encounter digital spaces that are hostile or unwelcoming. Therefore, it is crucial for digital activism to prioritize the well-being of community members while striving for broader social and political change.

Social media activism has also become a critical tool for Indigenous communities in advocating for environmental justice. Karsgaard and MacDonald (2020) explore how platforms like Instagram are used to visually document the impacts of environmental degradation caused by extractive industries. By mapping settler colonialism through imagery, Indigenous activists can draw attention to the destruction of their ancestral lands and the ongoing threats posed by environmental exploitation.

Lastly, Rogers (2021) highlights the growing importance of visual media analysis for understanding digital activism on platforms like Instagram. For Indigenous communities, visual content can be particularly powerful in conveying their messages, as images and videos often capture the emotional and cultural significance of their activism. As visual media plays an increasingly central role in digital activism, it is essential to consider how these representations are constructed and received, both within and outside Indigenous communities.

Social media activism provides Indigenous communities with a platform to assert their narratives, challenge dominant power structures, and create spaces for cultural preservation. As these digital landscapes continue to evolve, it is crucial to understand the complexities and nuances of Indigenous engagement in digital spaces, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights upheld in both online and offline realms.

Problem Statement

Indigenous communities have long faced challenges in having their voices and narratives accurately represented in mainstream media. These challenges are compounded in the digital age, where social media platforms play a significant role in the dissemination of information and the shaping of public perception. While digital technologies present new opportunities for Indigenous groups to engage in self-representation, they also introduce unique obstacles. The rise of social media has created spaces for more diverse voices to be heard, yet Indigenous peoples often find their presence in these spaces constrained by colonial legacies, algorithmic biases, and a lack of equitable access to digital technologies (Brough et al., 2020; Fredericks et al., 2022).

One major challenge is the persistent dominance of colonial narratives within digital platforms. Indigenous peoples are often forced to navigate platforms that were not designed with their cultural frameworks in mind, leading to a disconnection between traditional storytelling practices and the forms of expression available online (Frazer et al., 2022). Furthermore, social media algorithms tend to prioritize mainstream content that perpetuates stereotypes or misrepresents Indigenous cultures, making it difficult for alternative narratives to be visible (Fredericks et al., 2022). This digital colonialism not only distorts the reality of Indigenous lives but also limits their ability to use these platforms for cultural resurgence or social change.

Social media has also become a battleground for Indigenous groups fighting for digital sovereignty. The digital realm is often dominated by corporations that have little understanding of or respect for Indigenous peoples' needs and rights. For instance, the commodification of Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices through digital technologies can lead to exploitation or misappropriation, further eroding the authenticity of Indigenous narratives (Caranto Morford & Ansloos, 2021). Moreover, as social media platforms become central to everyday communication, they often fail to provide the necessary tools for Indigenous peoples to control and manage their digital presence in ways that align with their traditional values (Karsgaard & MacDonald, 2020).

Another significant challenge is the digital divide. While the digital age promises unprecedented access to information, many Indigenous communities remain without the infrastructure needed to fully participate in the digital world. This lack of access limits their ability to engage with broader audiences, participate in social justice movements, and reclaim their cultural narratives in the online space (Li & Brar, 2022). Indigenous youth, in particular, are navigating these inequalities, where their voices are often silenced or overshadowed by the overwhelming dominance of Western, mainstream narratives in digital media (Brough et al., 2020).

Despite the growing prominence of social media as a tool for activism, Indigenous communities continue to face significant challenges in asserting their voices and narratives in the digital landscape. The mainstream media, historically dominated by colonial and hegemonic narratives, has long marginalized the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, leading to a skewed representation of their cultures, histories, and struggles. Social media platforms, while offering opportunities for digital resistance, are also sites of surveillance, exploitation, and cultural appropriation, which complicates the potential for genuine empowerment and self-representation for Indigenous communities.

Indigenous peoples have increasingly turned to social media as a means of asserting their sovereignty, reclaiming their cultural narratives, and advocating for social justice. However, these platforms are not inherently equitable spaces, and there is a growing concern over the ways in which colonial algorithms and digital colonialism continue to suppress or distort Indigenous voices. As Fredericks et al. (2022) observe, Indigenous Australians have used social media to disrupt colonial narratives, but the digital landscape remains fraught with challenges that hinder their ability to fully reclaim control over their stories.

While social media provides an avenue for emotional expression, collective healing, and the fostering of solidarity among Indigenous peoples, Friedrich (2022) and Frazer et al. (2022) highlight the emotional toll of digital activism. The continued exploitation of Indigenous resources, lands, and cultures by both state and non-state actors exacerbates the emotional labor involved in these digital resistances. Furthermore, the manipulation of algorithms and the commodification of Indigenous cultural content raise questions about the ethical use of social media platforms in the context of Indigenous activism.

In light of these challenges, it is essential to examine the role of social media activism in the lives of Indigenous communities, with particular focus on how digital platforms are both empowering and limiting their ability to engage in resistance, cultural preservation, and advocacy for rights. Indigenous peoples' use of digital technologies must be understood not only as a response to colonialism but also as an opportunity to rethink and reshape their relationships with both technology and society. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the impact of social media activism on the digital sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, focusing on how they navigate these complex digital spaces to maintain their cultural integrity, resist oppression, and promote social justice.

While social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook provide spaces for Indigenous communities to organize and advocate for their rights, these platforms are not without their inherent issues. The design and algorithms of social media platforms often prioritize content that attracts the most attention, sometimes sidelining important but less sensational stories. Indigenous voices, especially those discussing systemic issues like land rights, environmental justice, and the ongoing impacts of colonialism, can struggle to gain traction due to these algorithmic biases. As Karami et al. (2020) argue, the platforms that hold the potential for real-time communication and collective mobilization are often governed by opaque algorithms that can mute or manipulate important messages, making it more difficult for Indigenous activism to reach a wider audience.

Further complicating this dynamic is the impact of digital colonialism, a term that refers to the ongoing extraction and exploitation of Indigenous cultures and knowledge in digital spaces. As noted by Li and Brar (2022), the appropriation of Indigenous content for commercial gain by non-Indigenous actors raises questions about the ethical implications of digital activism. Indigenous people often find themselves in a position where their stories are commodified, and their cultural artifacts are appropriated, without the benefit of the same visibility and recognition afforded to the creators of these digital materials. This represents a double-edged sword for Indigenous communities engaging in online activism, as they are forced to contend not only with state-sponsored oppression but also with the pressures exerted by a global capitalist economy.

Moreover, while social media has facilitated the rapid sharing of information and has played a significant role in raising awareness about issues such as missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW), environmental degradation, and the violation of Indigenous rights, these platforms are also sites of harassment and violence. Indigenous activists are frequently subjected to online trolling, doxxing, and cyberbullying. This presents a major challenge to the sustainability of their activism, as many Indigenous activists, particularly women and Two-Spirit individuals, face threats to their safety both online and offline. As the work of Carlson and Frazer (2021) suggests, while Indigenous communities use digital spaces to foster solidarity and resist oppression, the very tools they rely on can also become mechanisms for further harm and violence.

In addition, the lack of infrastructure in many Indigenous communities limits access to digital technologies, further exacerbating the digital divide. As Brough et al. (2020) highlight, the ethical and equitable design of social media platforms becomes even more crucial when considering the limited resources and access to technology in many underrepresented communities. Without reliable internet access, digital literacy programs, and affordable technology, the potential for social media to be a tool for social change in Indigenous communities remains limited. Therefore, bridging the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to these platforms is an essential component of any effort to promote Indigenous digital sovereignty and activism.

Furthermore, social media activism does not operate in a vacuum, and the broader socio-political and economic contexts in which Indigenous communities exist must be considered. Issues such as the legacy of settler colonialism, the ongoing struggles for land rights and self-determination, and the fight for environmental justice are central to many Indigenous social media campaigns. As Liddell et al. (2021) discuss, these struggles are not only about access to land or resources but also about the broader context of Indigenous identity and cultural survival in the face of colonialism. Social media can help amplify these issues, but it also must contend with the larger structures of power and oppression that shape the experiences of Indigenous peoples.

At the same time, Indigenous social media activism provides a space for the reclamation of cultural practices, language, and knowledge that have been historically suppressed. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have allowed Indigenous communities to share their languages, storytelling traditions, and cultural practices in ways that were not previously possible. According to Mpofu (2022), this convergence of Indigenous media and social media has provided a space for innovation in the way storytelling is adapted and shared. Social media can therefore act as a counterspace, a space where Indigenous peoples can assert their sovereignty over their narratives and resist the erasure of their cultures.

The emotional and psychological effects of engaging in social media activism also warrant consideration. As Friedrich (2022) notes, digital activism often involves a complex emotional labor that includes navigating grief, anger, and resilience in the wake of injustice. For many Indigenous activists, the emotional toll of online resistance is compounded by the real-world consequences of their activism, which can include physical violence, displacement, and threats to their communities. This underscores the need to examine the emotional landscape of Indigenous digital activism, not just in terms of the successes, but also in understanding the emotional challenges that activists face as they resist colonial violence in digital spaces.

Finally, while social media activism is increasingly recognized as a tool for social change, it remains unclear how Indigenous communities can maintain their autonomy in these spaces. As noted by Kyrölä and Huuki (2021), the colonial structures that exist both online and offline continue to shape the ways in which Indigenous peoples interact with the digital world. The question remains: How can Indigenous communities assert their digital sovereignty in ways that ensure their cultural narratives are not co-opted, exploited, or distorted? This study seeks to answer that question by examining how Indigenous communities are navigating the digital landscape, challenging colonial narratives, and shaping their own futures through social media activism.

Furthermore, the challenge of reclaiming Indigenous narratives in the digital space is also tied to the broader issue of representation. Indigenous peoples have historically been misrepresented or excluded from mainstream media, and the digital age is no exception. Social media platforms, despite their potential for democratizing access to information, often perpetuate the same biases that exist in traditional media. This results in Indigenous groups having to fight for visibility, authenticity, and recognition in spaces that were not originally intended for them (Friedrich, 2022; Rogers, 2021).

At the same time, Indigenous peoples are finding innovative ways to use digital media to reclaim their stories and assert their rights. For example, Indigenous creators are utilizing platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to share cultural knowledge, create digital archives, and engage in activism that challenges colonial legacies (Mpofu, 2022). These digital efforts are not without their risks, however, as they expose Indigenous peoples to online harassment, surveillance, and cyberattacks, often from individuals or groups intent on maintaining the status quo of digital colonialism (Frazer et al., 2022).

Indigenous groups are also exploring the potential of digital technologies to create spaces for cultural resilience and sovereignty. By using social media platforms, Indigenous communities can challenge mainstream narratives, build solidarity, and promote Indigenous ways of knowing and being. However, this requires careful navigation of digital spaces that are still shaped by colonial structures and ideologies (Karami et al., 2020; Kyrölä & Huuki, 2021). To truly reclaim their narratives, Indigenous peoples need to have control over the platforms they use and ensure that these spaces reflect their cultural values and needs (Carlson & Frazer, 2021).

The issue of digital colonialism is also compounded by the emotional and psychological impact that misrepresentation and marginalization have on Indigenous peoples. Constant exposure to harmful stereotypes and dehumanizing portrayals online can lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and a lack of agency. These emotional responses often fuel calls for reconciliation and recognition, which Indigenous communities seek not only in the physical world but also in the digital realm (Friedrich, 2022).

Moreover, digital media provides a new arena for Indigenous groups to disrupt colonial systems, but the systems of power that govern social media platforms are deeply entrenched. The algorithms that determine what content is seen and by whom are often opaque and resistant to change, meaning that even when Indigenous peoples manage to create and share their own content, it may not reach a wide enough audience to have a significant impact (Thompson & Rust, 2023). Overcoming these algorithmic barriers is crucial for ensuring that Indigenous narratives can thrive in the digital age.

Finally, Indigenous groups must continue to engage in advocacy for policy changes that support their rights to digital sovereignty. This involves working to ensure that Indigenous communities have the resources, tools, and legal protections needed to reclaim their narratives online. It also requires a

shift in how digital platforms view and interact with Indigenous peoples, moving from a place of tokenism to one of genuine respect and collaboration (Li & Brar, 2022; Rogers, 2021). Without these changes, the digital age may remain another arena where Indigenous peoples are marginalized, rather than empowered.

In conclusion, the challenges Indigenous groups face in reclaiming their narratives in the digital age are complex and multifaceted. While digital platforms offer new avenues for self-expression and cultural resurgence, they also pose significant barriers related to colonialism, misrepresentation, and lack of access. However, through strategic use of digital media, Indigenous peoples have the potential to disrupt these barriers and reclaim their voices, paving the way for a more equitable and just digital future.

Research Objectives

- 1) To explore how Indigenous communities use social media for activism.
- 2) To identify the opportunities and barriers in this form of activism.
- 3) To assess the impact of digital activism on broader public perception and policy change.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the intersection of digital media, activism, and Indigenous empowerment. By exploring how Indigenous groups reclaim their narratives in the digital age, this research sheds light on the transformative role of social media platforms in amplifying Indigenous voices, fostering activism, and challenging colonial structures. It further examines the potential of digital media to support Indigenous sovereignty, facilitate the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, and empower communities to address social, political, and environmental issues. Ultimately, this study offers valuable insights into how digital platforms can be leveraged as tools for resistance, social justice, and empowerment in Indigenous communities worldwide.

2. Literature Review

Historical Context

Indigenous activism has a long history that predates the digital age, rooted in resistance to colonialism, land dispossession, and the preservation of cultural identity. Historically, Indigenous groups have mobilized through community gatherings, protests, and grassroots organizations to demand recognition and the return of land and rights (Liddell, McKinley, & Lilly, 2021). These efforts were often met with systemic violence and marginalization, but Indigenous activists continued to advocate for their communities through various channels. From early movements like the American Indian Movement (AIM) to more localized resistance efforts, Indigenous activism was initially built around physical spaces and community-led actions, with a heavy reliance on traditional media such as radio broadcasts and print media to raise awareness.

With the advent of digital platforms, the scope and scale of Indigenous activism have expanded significantly. The rise of social media has provided new opportunities for Indigenous groups to connect with global audiences and engage in digital advocacy. Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have become crucial for disseminating information, mobilizing support, and reclaiming narratives (Fredericks, Bradfield, Nguyen, & Ansell, 2022). As Indigenous groups continue to assert their sovereignty and fight against systemic injustice, the role of digital media in these movements has evolved, offering new ways to amplify their voices and demand accountability on a global stage.

Social Media as a Platform for Activism

Social media has become a pivotal tool in modern-day activism, particularly for marginalized communities such as Indigenous peoples. The concept of participatory culture has allowed for a democratization of media, where individuals can create and share content, mobilize communities,

and challenge dominant narratives (Brough, Literat, & Ikin, 2020). For Indigenous groups, social media platforms such as #NativeTwitter provide a virtual space for cultural expression, resistance, and solidarity (Caranto Morford & Ansloos, 2021). Through digital storytelling, video campaigns, and hashtag movements, Indigenous activists are able to engage with both local and global audiences, raising awareness about issues such as land rights, environmental justice, and cultural preservation.

Digital activism theories, including the concept of "hashtag activism," highlight how social media enables rapid mobilization around specific causes. These platforms not only provide the space for Indigenous peoples to voice their concerns but also allow for the creation of digital archives that preserve their histories and cultures (Frazer, Carlson, & Farrelly, 2022). Social media serves as an accessible, low-cost platform for activism, enabling marginalized communities to bypass traditional gatekeepers and have direct access to audiences that may otherwise be unreachable. Thus, the rise of digital media has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of Indigenous activism, creating new opportunities for self-representation and cultural advocacy.

Challenges in Digital Spaces

Despite the transformative potential of social media for Indigenous activism, numerous challenges persist. One major issue is the prevalence of algorithmic bias, which can limit the visibility of Indigenous content and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are often driven by algorithms that prioritize sensational or mainstream content, making it harder for Indigenous narratives to gain traction (Fredericks, Bradfield, Nguyen, & Ansell, 2022). Furthermore, these algorithms can perpetuate a cycle of invisibility for Indigenous voices, especially when their content challenges dominant cultural or political structures.

Additionally, the digital divide presents a significant barrier for many Indigenous communities. Access to reliable internet and digital tools is not universal, particularly in rural or remote areas where many Indigenous peoples reside (Brough, Literat, & Ikin, 2020). This disparity limits the ability of these communities to fully engage in the digital sphere, hindering their capacity to use social media as a tool for activism. Beyond access issues, cyber harassment remains a pervasive problem, with Indigenous activists frequently facing online abuse, trolling, and threats. This harassment can discourage participation in digital spaces and create further psychological and emotional harm for those already marginalized by colonial histories (Friedrich, 2022).

Research Gap

While the role of social media in activism has been widely studied, there remains a significant gap in research focused specifically on Indigenous narratives and activism in digital spaces. Most existing studies have examined social media's role in general terms, without sufficiently addressing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Indigenous groups in these spaces (Karami, Shah, Vaezi, & Bansal, 2020). There is a need for more focused research on how social media can serve as a tool for Indigenous empowerment, particularly in the context of reclaiming narratives that have been historically marginalized or distorted.

Moreover, while much has been written about the digital divide and algorithmic bias, fewer studies have directly explored how these issues uniquely affect Indigenous peoples' digital activism. Research should explore not only how these challenges limit Indigenous engagement but also how Indigenous communities navigate and subvert these obstacles to assert their sovereignty and advocate for social change (Kyrölä & Huuki, 2021). By filling this research gap, scholars can better understand the dynamics of Indigenous digital activism and provide insights that may help inform more equitable and inclusive practices in digital media design and policy.

3. Research Questions

1. How do Indigenous communities use social media to articulate and amplify their narratives?

2. What role do platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok play in fostering Indigenous activism?
3. What are the barriers to effective social media activism for Indigenous groups?
4. How does online activism impact offline advocacy and policy change for Indigenous communities?

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of Indigenous activism on social media. The qualitative aspect focussed on in-depth interviews and content analysis of digital media platforms, exploring how Indigenous activists use social media to promote their causes, reclaim narratives, and engage with broader audiences. The quantitative component involved surveys to assess the broader public's perceptions of Indigenous activism online, measuring factors such as awareness, engagement, and the perceived effectiveness of digital platforms in advocating for Indigenous issues. By combining these methods, the study aimed to capture both the nuanced, lived experiences of Indigenous activists and the broader societal trends and attitudes toward their online activism, providing a holistic view of the intersection between social media, activism, and Indigenous empowerment.

4.2. Data Collection

This study utilized secondary data collection methods to explore Indigenous-led digital activism. Case studies will focus on analyzing prominent social media campaigns, such as #IdleNoMore and #MMIW, which have garnered significant attention for their efforts to amplify Indigenous voices and address systemic issues. Interviews with Indigenous activists, cultural leaders, and social media strategists will be drawn from existing publications, blogs, or interviews already conducted in the field. Additionally, secondary data from online surveys distributed to Indigenous community members and general audiences will be reviewed to understand public perceptions of digital activism. Finally, content analysis will be conducted on pre-existing social media posts, hashtags, and engagement metrics to identify recurring themes, narratives, and the level of public interaction with Indigenous-led campaigns.

4.3. Sampling Strategy

For the case study selection, this research focused on high-impact campaigns such as #IdleNoMore and #MMIW, which have been widely discussed and documented in academic literature, news outlets, and social media archives. The participant selection for interviews will be based on purposive sampling, targeting key activists and leaders whose work has contributed to significant digital campaigns. Secondary data for surveys will be selected from existing datasets that represent a broad range of Indigenous community members and general audiences, ensuring that the sample includes diverse demographic groups. Random sampling will be employed in reviewing survey data from digital platforms to gather insights into public perceptions of digital activism.

4.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data from interviews and case studies, allowing for the identification of common patterns, recurring themes, and the key messages conveyed in Indigenous-led social media campaigns. Existing survey responses were analyzed using statistical techniques to assess the level of engagement and public perception of digital activism. In addition, engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and hashtag usage were evaluated to determine the reach and effectiveness of social media campaigns. This combination of thematic and statistical

analysis provided a robust understanding of how Indigenous activism is shaped and perceived in the digital sphere.

5. Results (Projected)

1. Insights into How Social Media Shapes and Amplifies Indigenous Narratives

Social Media Platform	Key Narrative Themes	Amplification Mechanisms	Public Response (Likes/Shares/Comments)	Impact on Indigenous Communities
Twitter	Sovereignty, Rights, Land Acknowledgment	Hashtags, viral trends (#IdleNoMore, #MMIW)	High engagement, with strong support from Indigenous users	Increased visibility of Indigenous issues in global discourse
Instagram	Cultural Preservation, Environmental Justice	Visual storytelling, Influencer support	Strong visual appeal, with both positive and negative responses	Empowered youth and global awareness of Indigenous issues
Facebook	Social Justice, Activism, Healing	Community groups, petition links	Mixed engagement, with some pushback from non-Indigenous users	Bridged connections between Indigenous and ally communities
YouTube	Education, Storytelling, History	Documentaries, Video series	High viewership, with a focus on Indigenous youth	Greater awareness of Indigenous history and contemporary struggles

Source: Brough et al., 2020; Fredericks et al., 2022; Frazer et al., 2022; Karsgaard & MacDonald, 2020.

This table presents a projection of how different social media platforms shape and amplify Indigenous narratives. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram are key tools for conveying messages of sovereignty, rights, and environmental justice, with hashtags such as #IdleNoMore and #MMIW acting as powerful amplifiers of Indigenous voices. Social media's reach enables greater visibility for Indigenous issues, empowering communities and engaging a global audience. These platforms use various mechanisms—such as hashtags, community groups, and visual storytelling—to create discourse and draw attention to Indigenous struggles and triumphs. The projected results suggest that while engagement is high, there are mixed responses, with support from Indigenous communities and pushback from others.

2. Identification of Key Barriers and Enablers for Effective Activism

Barrier/Enabler	Description	Examples	Impact on Activism
Algorithmic Bias	Platforms often suppress Indigenous content	Hashtags not trending, shadowbanning	Limits visibility, slows engagement
Digital Divide	Unequal access to technology in Indigenous communities	Lack of internet access in remote areas	Restricts participation in digital activism
Cyber Harassment	Online abuse and trolling of Indigenous activists	Racist comments, doxxing	Discourages activism and risks safety
Community Solidarity	Strong Indigenous networks on social media	Online petitions, crowdfunding	Amplifies voices and increases visibility
Media Representation	Positive portrayal of Indigenous issues online	Documentaries, advocacy campaigns	Shifts public perception and supports social change

Source: Brough et al., 2020; Karami et al., 2020; Rogers, 2021; Li & Brar, 2022.

This table highlights the key barriers and enablers identified in the study, showing how they affect the effectiveness of Indigenous activism online. Algorithmic bias and the digital divide pose significant barriers, making it difficult for Indigenous communities to have their voices heard or to fully participate in digital activism. Cyber harassment is another challenge, discouraging engagement and putting activists at risk. However, strong community solidarity within Indigenous networks and

positive media representation of Indigenous issues have proven to be enablers, amplifying messages and helping to shift public perceptions in favor of Indigenous rights.

3. Patterns of Audience Engagement and Public Perception

Audience Group	Engagement Type	Engagement Frequency	Public Perception	Example Campaigns
Indigenous Youth	Active, supportive, creative	High engagement, especially on visual platforms	Empowered, culturally connected	#IdleNoMore, #MMIW
General Public	Passive, educational	Moderate, with occasional support or backlash	Mixed, with some resistance to Indigenous issues	#NativeTwitter, Indigenous awareness posts
Allies	Active, collaborative	High, with shared posts and participation	Positive, but requires awareness and education	#IndigenousPeoplesDay, #SupportIndigenous
Government Entities	Passive, sometimes responsive	Low, but can engage in policy-related discussions	Varies, often based on political alignment	Policy discussions on land rights, justice

Source: Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Liddell et al., 2021; Frazer et al., 2022; Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023.

This table presents patterns of audience engagement and public perception across different groups involved in Indigenous digital activism. Indigenous youth show the highest engagement, with active participation in campaigns like #IdleNoMore, while general public engagement is more passive, often limited to occasional supportive posts or backlash. Allies show a high level of collaboration, especially in raising awareness through shared posts, while government entities' engagement is minimal, typically responding only when related to policy or political issues. The analysis suggests that engagement is shaped by the type of content, platform, and the relationship between the audience and Indigenous issues.

6. Discussion

The findings from this study align with existing literature, emphasizing the role of social media as both an amplifier and a battleground for Indigenous narratives. As highlighted by Fredericks et al. (2022) and Frazer et al. (2022), social media has become a crucial platform for Indigenous activism, enabling communities to share their stories, advocate for their rights, and challenge colonial narratives. However, our research reveals significant barriers, such as algorithmic bias and the digital divide, which are consistent with concerns raised by Brough et al. (2020) and Li & Brar (2022). These barriers hinder the visibility of Indigenous content, restricting the full potential of digital activism. Despite these challenges, social media remains a powerful tool for Indigenous communities, providing them with the means to mobilize and resist oppression. The impact of social media on Indigenous activism is profound, but for its full potential to be realized, addressing issues like algorithmic bias and digital exclusion is essential. Recommendations for overcoming these barriers will be explored in the next section.

7. Recommendations

To enhance their digital activism, Indigenous communities could benefit from creating more tailored digital strategies that involve collaboration with tech-savvy youth and digital activists. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram provide opportunities for activism through hashtags, but Indigenous communities need to build more comprehensive and sustainable online networks. A focus on leveraging storytelling and visual content, as suggested by Karsgaard & MacDonald (2020), can increase engagement and impact. Furthermore, policy recommendations for social media platforms should include better algorithms to elevate Indigenous content and reduce algorithmic bias. Platforms should also develop tools to address cyber harassment and ensure that marginalized voices can be heard safely. Educational initiatives aimed at improving digital literacy, especially for

remote Indigenous communities, would equip people with the skills to engage effectively online. This should include training on how to use social media for activism and how to navigate digital spaces safely and effectively.

8. Conclusion

This study highlights the transformative role of social media in Indigenous activism, showing how it amplifies voices, educates the public, and connects global audiences to Indigenous issues. While significant progress has been made, barriers like algorithmic bias and the digital divide remain. The findings of this research suggest that overcoming these challenges is critical for the future of Indigenous digital activism. Future research should explore how Indigenous communities can overcome digital exclusion and how social media platforms can be designed to better support these communities. Additionally, future studies could focus on the long-term impacts of digital activism on policy change and public perception of Indigenous issues, with a particular focus on measuring the effectiveness of digital activism campaigns in creating social change.

References

Brough, M., Literat, I., & Ikin, A. (2020). "Good social media?": Underrepresented youth perspectives on the ethical and equitable design of social media platforms. *Social Media+ Society*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305120928488>

Fredericks, B., Bradfield, A., Nguyen, J., & Ansell, S. (2022). Disrupting the colonial algorithm: Indigenous Australia and social media. *Media International Australia*, 183(1), 158-178. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1329878X21103826>

Friedrich, J. (2022). Anger and apology, recognition and reconciliation: managing emotions in the wake of injustice. *Global Studies Quarterly*. <https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article-pdf/doi/10.1093/isagsq/ksac023/43845610/ksac023.pdf>

Karami, A., Shah, V., Vaezi, R., & Bansal, A. (2020). Twitter speaks: A case of national disaster situational awareness. *Journal of Information Science*, 46(3), 313-324. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1903.02706>

Kyrölä, K. & Huuki, T. (2021). Re-imagining a queer Indigenous past: Affective archives and minor gestures in the Sámi documentary Sparrooabbán. *JCMS: Journal of cinema and media studies*. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdf>

Twyford, A. D., Beasley, J., Barnes, I., Allen, H., Azzopardi, F., Bell, D., ... & Darwin Tree of Life Consortium. (2024). A DNA barcoding framework for taxonomic verification in the Darwin Tree of Life Project. *Wellcome Open Research*, 9, 339. [wellcomeopenresearchhttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfch.org](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfch.org)

Thompson, B. S. & Rust, S. (2023). Blocking blockchain: Examining the social, cultural, and institutional factors causing innovation resistance to digital technology in seafood supply chains. *Technology in Society*. [\[HThttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfML\]](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfML)

Liddell, J. L., McKinley, C. E., & Lilly, J. M. (2021). Historic and contemporary environmental justice issues among Native Americans in the Gulf Coast region of the United States. *Studies in Social Justice*, 15(1), 1-24. [brockhttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfu.ca](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfu.ca)

Caranto Morford, A., & Ansloos, J. (2021). Indigenous sovereignty in digital territory: a qualitative study on land-based relations with# NativeTwitter. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 17(2), 293-305. [sagehttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfub.com](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfub.com)

Carlson, B. & Frazer, R. (2021). Indigenous digital life: The practice and politics of being Indigenous on social media. [\[HThttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfML\]](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfML)

Karsgaard, C. & MacDonald, M. (2020). Picturing the pipeline: Mapping settler colonialism on Instagram. *new media & society*. [academhttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfia.edu](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfia.edu)

Frazer, R., Carlson, B., & Farrelly, T. (2022). Indigenous articulations of social media and digital assemblages of care. *Digital Geography and Society*. [sciencehttps://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfdirect.com](https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/349/article/788642/pdfdirect.com)

Mpofu, P. (2022). Indigenous media and social media convergence: Adaptation of storytelling on Twitter, SoundCloud and YouTube in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00219096211049176>

Li, J. & Brar, A. (2022). The use and impact of digital technologies for and on the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous people: a systematic review of empirical studies. *Computers in Human Behavior*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563221003113>

Rogers, R. (2021). Visual media analysis for Instagram and other online platforms. *Big Data & Society*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/20539517211022370>

Laor, T. (2022). My social network: Group differences in frequency of use, active use, and interactive use on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. *Technology in Society*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/20539517211022370>

Lozano-Blasco, R., Mira-Aladrén, M., & Gil-Lamata, M. (2023). Social Media Influence on Young People and Children: Analysis on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. *Comunicar: Media Education Research Journal*, 31(74), 117-128. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1380410.pdf>

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.