



Differential social media affordances: an actor type-centric, intermediate-level approach using the case of social movements

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Abstract

Social media have profoundly changed social communication practices across a vast range of contexts. To theorize these changes, numerous authors have proposed digital affordances as a conceptual lens. Yet, to date, most accounts of digital affordances either gloss broadly over cross-platform or use-dependent differences in practices; or they are highly context-specific, obstructing theoretical integration. In this article, we conceptualize social media affordances on an intermediate level of abstraction that foregrounds consequential differences in how digital social media platforms structure social communication practices. Focusing on the characteristic communication needs of social movements as an exemplary case, we identify how social media platforms present users with differential affordances for articulating public claims, building collective identities, and mobilizing contentious performances. We examine how key contextual conditions alter the value of differential affordances, potentially resulting in differential communication practices and platform preferences. We conclude by discussing key opportunities of our approach for comparative research and theory building.

Introduction

Social media platforms, messenger services, video channels, and other digital media have profoundly altered social communication practices, from dyadic interpersonal communication to the very structuring of contemporary public debates. Following the rise of social media, researchers have identified deep discontinuities in communication practices across social domains as diverse as unfriending in personal networks (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015), electronic Word-of-Mouth in marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011), and connective action in social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Aiming to conceptualize how the technological configurations of social media enable, shape and constrain collective behavior, researchers have relied on the concept of digital affordances. So far, most studies have focused on broad affordances that are shared across most, if not all social media platforms, such as visibility or anonymity (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Treem & Leonardi, 2013; for a recent overview Ronzhyn et al., 2023). At the same time, this perspective elides the way in which social media platforms differ in how they facilitate specific uses to advance the users' diverse goals (Bossetta, 2018; Li et al., 2024). This conceptual literature is complemented by a vast range of studies that document how specific social media have enabled different kinds of users to adopt distinctive communication practices in a given situation (e.g., Bucher & Helmond, 2018;

Schrock, 2015). Yet, most of these works remain too narrowly case-focused to support comparative analysis and theoretical integration.

In this study, we argue that there is a need for defining social media affordances at a level of abstraction that captures key differences in how social media enable, shape and constrain communication practices regarded as valuable by a broad range of users. Doing so, we introduce a qualified notion of *differential* affordances, which share *that* they afford interested users certain valued practices, but differ in *how* exactly they do so (Bucher & Helmond, 2018)—foregrounding different opportunities, constraints, and costs. Moreover, such differential affordances cannot be adequately understood in relation to all and any users of social media at once but must be conceptualized against the backdrop of those objectives pursued by particular types of actors, which render afforded uses valuable. By proposing a conceptual approach to deriving actor type-centric, differential social media affordances, our article aims to theorize affordances at an intermediate level of abstraction capable of informing conceptual integration and comparative research.

For the purpose of the present study, we focus on social movement actors as a common type of social media users that share characteristic communication needs and therefore derive broadly shared affordances from the use of digital media. We choose social movements as the exemplary case from which to develop our argument for two main

reasons. First, as internally complex, self-organizing social actors (Gerbaudo, 2012), social movements confront an unusually broad range of different communication needs (e.g., addressing the public, selected stakeholders, internal audiences) that extend beyond those of most other actor types. Social movements therefore lend themselves to exploring the variety of ways in which social media impact communication practices. Despite structural commonalities, moreover, social movements' communication strategies and action repertoires are heavily shaped by contextual conditions, such as the polity, society and media environment in which they operate, and the nature of addressed issues, publics, and antagonists. Second, research in social movement studies has dedicated considerable attention to documenting and delineating the various uses of digital media in social movement communication, providing us with a uniquely rich body of records and arguments to draw upon. Using the example of social movements, we demonstrate our approach to deriving actor type-centric affordances that are grounded in the vast conceptual literature on social movements' uses of digital media. In our discussion, we situate our illustrative example of social media affordances for social movements vis-à-vis social media uses valued by other types of social actors, which may share certain affordances with our case, but differ in characteristic ways in their valuation of others. We conclude by discussing how our actor type-centric, intermediate level approach to differential social media affordances can be extended toward different types of actors.

Our article is organized as follows. After introducing digital affordances as a construct, we present our argument for a conceptualization of affordances that takes seriously not only social media platforms' differential technological configurations, but also affordances' dependency on users' differential perceptions and needs. Focusing on social movement actors, we identify the articulation of public claims, the mobilization of contentious performances, and the building of collective action capacities as three key dimensions of shared communications needs, discussing how social media platforms facilitate them in differential ways. We then review how political context conditions—such as the perceived threat of repression, and specific opportunity structures shaping protest—constrain social media affordances in contentious action. Discussing implications of our approach for social movement studies and social media research, we detail how differential social media affordances contribute to facilitating theoretical integration and (cross-national, cross-platform) comparative research.

Social media affordances for comparative research

The conceptual lens of digital affordances

Originally introduced in psychology and design studies (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 1988; Ronzhyn et al., 2023), affordances denote specific opportunities offered by a given environment that are perceived as valuable by users. In communication studies, affordances have inspired a considerable amount of conceptual work and research in the study of digital media (e.g., Bossetta, 2018; Evans et al., 2017; Nagy & Neff, 2015; Schulze et al., 2024). Digital affordances remain relationally dependent on communication infrastructures' technological features as well as users' distinct perceptions and purposes (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Evans

et al., 2017; Nagy & Neff, 2015): they “emerge in the mutuality between those using technologies, the material features of those technologies, and the situated nature of use” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 36). Different users' characteristics, aims and use cultures, socio-technological infrastructures and contexts each give rise to somewhat distinct affordances that highlight a variety of recognized design choices (Willems, 2021). As a consequence, Bucher and Helmond (2018) argued that digital affordances are mostly conceptualized on two very different levels of abstraction. On the one hand, numerous case studies reveal highly specific uses that are difficult to generalize to other cases and contexts (Kakavand, 2024; Li et al., 2024; Schrock, 2015). On the other hand, theoretically oriented work has primarily focused on highly abstracted affordances—most famously, visibility, persistence, editability, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; for a discussion of other, extended lists, see Kakavand, 2024)—that are widely shared across platforms, users and contexts (Bossetta, 2018; Schulze et al., 2024). Such abstract affordances, however, offer limited traction for explaining differential uses and platform choices.

Continuing the discussion on the multilevel character of affordances and the concepts' utilization for comparative research (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Schulze et al., 2024), we argue that it is more useful to define affordances at an intermediate level of abstraction, spanning a variety of social media platforms while accounting for their differential design choices, which may enable different valued uses. Moreover, we insist that people use social media in the pursuit of vastly different purposes. Accordingly, they are liable to perceive the same platforms in different ways, resulting in diverse sets of affordances that offer value for intended communication practices. To understand what users value in social media, it is useful to focus on exactly one type of actors at a time, defined by characteristic objectives that inform what value specific uses of social media can offer to their users. By evaluating platform features and user practices against a shared set of valued objectives, we can identify common valued uses that sustain a meaningful conceptualization of social media affordances. For this article, we examine social media affordances from the point of view of social movements, which are selected both for the wealth and context dependency of their characteristic communication needs, and the availability of rich scholarly literature discussing their characteristic uses of social media. Owing to its unique breadth and rich documentation, social movement communication is ideally suited for illuminating a wide range of challenges in the identification of actor type-centric social media affordances, offering strong foundations for future extensions toward other types of actors (e.g., high school students, caregivers, gamers) pursuing different objectives.

The variability of social media platforms

For our investigation of social media affordances, we consider social media as “Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content” (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 49). This perspective usefully highlights the structural commonalities between diverse social media platforms, while acknowledging important dimensions of cross-platform variation, which shape afforded communication practices, supported contents and derived value available to users

(Bossetta, 2018; Frischlich et al., 2022; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

To begin, following Carr and Hayes (2015), social media include not only social networking sites but also room-like platform architectures that are indirectly “networked” by overlapping membership and relational practices. This differentiation holds immediate implications for how platforms structure communication practices: For instance, networked platforms such as Facebook foreground content propagation along structurally unbounded paths across the network, underpinned by personal ties, and emphasizing individual agency (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Room-like platforms (e.g., Telegram) organize visibility in a more community-based, bounded manner and allocate asymmetric agency to room admins/owners. The ways in which users can interact, create and derive value from shared contents vary across platforms, owing to different publicness and access regimes, searchability, shareability, and control of contents and accessibility (Frischlich et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024; Schulze et al., 2024).

Next, different platforms permit and facilitate different kinds of contents, be that with regard to (textual, visual, auditive or multi-) modality or hypertextuality, or in terms of length restrictions or the support for different metadata (e.g., geotagging) and specialized apps (e.g., calendars). Likewise, platforms may present contents and interactions differently, be that sequentially, hierarchically, thematically, or otherwise, in algorithmically curated, customizable or context-independent ways, and augmented by various reputation, engagement and other status markers. Relatedly, platform design foregrounds different strategies for actively highlighting or propagating (respectively suppressing) contents, relying on user engagement, content classification algorithms, or external interventions (e.g., paid highlights). Each technical configuration affects users’ control over creating and sharing, accessing and deriving use from, or controlling the availability and appearance of contents to other users on the platform (e.g., Frischlich et al., 2022; Heft et al., 2024).

With regard to social media’s temporal structuring of communication, Carr and Hayes (2015) emphasize the duality of persistent channels and disentrained communication—that is, social media’s characteristic manner of enabling communication that does not require temporal synchronization between interactants. Platforms vary widely in their facilitation of fast or slow interactions, be that through the presentation (e.g., sequential exchanges quickly demand extensive scrolling), persistence, retrievability, editability and retractability of contents, or by rendering visible other users’ current co-presence on the platform.

Finally, users’ control over their own self-presentation (e.g., using avatars, bios, memberships, displayed ties) and identifiability (e.g., via clear names, displayed or hidden persistent user identifiers, authentication mechanisms) also varies between social media platforms, as does the extent to which a user’s past activity can be observed.

Depending on users’ distinct perspectives, each variation in a platform’s architecture and features enables, restricts or otherwise shapes important opportunities for users to derive value from communicating on that platform. Still, these technological configurations do not constitute affordances per se, rather, their value to users arises only from their capacity to enable intended uses in a given context (Evans et al., 2017).

From differential platform designs to user type-centric social media affordances

If affordances are defined in part by the value they offer to users’ pursuits of their own purposes, it is necessary to consider what users use social media for, and how their uses enable them to actualize valued objectives. Of course, actors’ objectives and uses are legion, well beyond the reach of efficient theorizing. That said, different types of social actors use social media in characteristic ways, in the pursuit of widely recognized objectives. For the purpose of this article, we conceptualize actor types as any group of individuals sharing an occupation or social role that provides them with a set of distinctive, persistent goals that motivate their use of social media. Specifically, we ask how users perceive and make use of social media *as* actors of a given type—while the same individual may still perceive different valued uses unrelated to that role. Actor types are neither exclusive, as the same individuals may use social media in the pursuit of varying goals (e.g., as an activist, a gamer, a student), each time likely valuing different sets of social media affordances; nor are identified affordances exclusive to a given actor type, as they may also be valued by other types of actors (e.g., social movements, advertisers and political campaigners all value networked social media platforms’ capacity to propagate content). Against the backdrop of those objectives characteristically shared among one type of actors, it becomes possible to ask in a meaningful way what valued uses social media offer to high school students or retirees, marketing professionals, propagandists, entertainment content creators, or social movement actors. It is therefore only in relation to such distinctive actor types and their characteristic communication needs that we can determine exactly how differential platform designs and architectures are perceived as valuable by users.

Focusing on the communication needs of social movement actors as our example, we start from theoretical work that defines social movements in terms of their shared objectives and characteristic challenges, giving rise to their characteristic communication needs (e.g., Ancelovici, 2021b; Diani, 1992; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Relying on this conceptual work as a backdrop, we reviewed studies examining any reports of social movement actors’ uses of social media, aiming to identify how doing so added value to users’ endeavors. Recognizing the complexity of social movement communications, which need to address internal and external, sympathetic and oppositional audiences, and do so anywhere from liberal, polyphonic to repressive public spheres, scholars of social movements, social media, and political communication have each developed a rich body of literature that offers a unique wealth of points of departure for identifying possible affordances. We started from a systematic, keyword-based collection of articles and books included in the major academic repositories, adding targeted searches for work on movement types (e.g., neighborhood protests, pro-regime activism, repressed/failed movements), regions (notably, in the Global South, in authoritarian countries) and platforms (e.g., more recent platforms such as TikTok) that appeared infrequently in our initial collection. For our analysis, we first reviewed major works specifically dedicated to the study of social movements’ social media uses, identifying common patterns of needs, practices, and uses (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci, 2017), before

turning to additional works to corroborate recurrent observations and add differentiation (e.g., similar practices documented on different platforms; different uses of the same platforms; Li et al., 2024; Sæbø et al., 2020).

In what follows, we identify eight broad affordances that draw upon key theoretical work on social movements' social media uses. Each affordance is defined by its reliance on distinctive architectural and design choices, as well as its perception as valuable by users, documented in studies pertaining to different kinds of social movements, operating in different regions and regimes, and using different social media platforms. At the same time, there exists considerable variation within each affordance regarding how exactly platforms enable such uses: Depending on differential design choices, features, and other factors, platforms shape social movement actors' communication practices in consequentially different ways. For instance, while many platforms enable social movements to address large publics, they differ with regard to which publics are most easily reached, how movements can control the context of exposure, what kinds of messages best fit the platform, and many other factors. Attaining the same objectives via different platforms may benefit from different messaging strategies, as platforms incentivize specific communication practices, or impose different constraints upon social movements' activities. In addition, each platform offers affordances not only to social movement actors, but also to others whose activities can further or harm the movements' intentions (e.g., opportunities for journalistic amplification, counter-mobilization, surveillance and repression; Earl et al., 2022; van Haperen et al., 2023). As a result, different platforms and contexts shape how exactly, and at what costs each goal can be pursued. In this study, we introduce each affordance by foregrounding how platform features and architectures contribute to enabling it, before flagging selected contingencies in how available platform designs actualize it in differential ways.

Social movements' needs in social media communication

Social movements can be understood as collective actors in contentious politics that seek to advance political demands by means of public communication. Tilly and Tarrow (2015, p. 11) have defined social movements as "sustained campaign [s] of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organisations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities." Based on this definition, we distinguish three constitutive needs of social movements that govern their communication activities generally, including their uses of social media: Social movements need to: (1) *articulate public claims*, raising awareness for their causes; (2) *mobilize contentious performances* as a means of exercising public pressure upon addressed opponents; and (3) *build organizations, networks and/or collective identities*, which enable them to coordinate and sustain their activities over time. While social movements may pursue additional goals in their communication, responding to their differential natures and contexts, all movements need to address these three. Specifically, we ask whether and how social media offer novel affordances in the pursuit of these objectives that valuably complement, transform or extend how social movements were able to address these needs prior to the rise of (or without reliance on) social media. Accordingly,

these goals serve as our point of departure for identifying what affordances may inform social movements' uses of social media.

Articulating public claims

The first core need of social movements concerns the imperative to articulate their claims in ways that raise public awareness of, and support for their causes. Identifying shared grievances, they establish some form of collective action framing (Snow & Benford, 1992). Earlier research emphasized the centrality of journalistic mass media in articulating public claims, while contemporary social movements rely heavily on both legacy media and digital infrastructures. Through our review of extant work on social movements' uses of social media technologies, we synthesized three key affordances that contribute to the articulation of public claims across a wide variety of movements: Social media platforms offer means for *building media relations*; they provide opportunities for engaging in *broadcast-style self-mediation*; and they allow *collaborative storytelling* that renders the protested grievances relevant (motivational framing), explicable (diagnostic framing), and presents specific courses of action aimed to resolve them (prognostic framing; Snow & Benford, 1992). While the first affordance points to the continued relevance of legacy media, the second expands social movements' action repertoire into the digital realm; the third enables uses that were barely available in a non-digital media environment.

Building media relations

Social media offer opportunities for rendering journalists aware of social movement claims and inviting them to interact, either by tagging and directly addressing key media actors, or by exploiting algorithmic features such as "trending topics" (e.g., on Twitter, now re-branded X). Beyond the capacity to link, post, and share current news, background materials or dramatic pictures, the facility for immediate interaction is also critical for media relations (Gerbaudo, 2012). The availability of non-public backchannels on most social media (e.g., direct messages) additionally supports journalists' efforts at verification, while enabling social movements to share exclusive content. Platforms that facilitate the authentication of actors (e.g., Facebook's clear name policy, X's check mark) and contents (e.g., geotagging, picture credits) additionally cater to journalistic production routines (Billard, 2021). That said, platforms' utility for building media relations depends not solely on their technical design, but also on the presence of relevant user groups, such as journalists' tendency to use X, but not Snapchat in a professional capacity (e.g., Usher & Ng, 2020).

Broadcast-style self-mediation

Social media are "channels of masspersonal communication" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 49) that afford social movements the opportunity to render self-produced content visible to large and diverse audiences. At the same time, the nature of this content is constrained by platforms' carrying capacity, modalities (e.g., audiovisual platforms such as YouTube facilitate affective messaging), and in-built length restrictions (e.g., slogans and shoutouts fit well on X, longer explainers work better on Facebook). Platforms differ in the extent to which they permit public sharing and contribute actively to the algorithmic propagation (or suppression) of content.

Platform architectures facilitate reaching out to different audiences, with networked sites (e.g., Facebook) typically enabling wider, more diverse distribution, while room-style platforms (e.g., Telegram) offer more control over addressing specific user communities (Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). At the same time, social movements need to consider which audiences are actively using a platform, and for what purpose. For instance, X facilitates addressing either broadly supportive or hostile audiences since it is used disproportionately by a politically expressive segment of society; by comparison, Instagram audiences are less politicized, and Gab is mostly populated by users skeptical of mainstream society (Breuer & Farooq, 2012; Frischlich et al., 2022; Jasser et al., 2023). Widely-used platforms with large user populations (notably, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) tend to be more valuable for broadcast-style self-mediation, while niche platforms support reaching specific audiences (Bossetta, 2018; Frischlich et al., 2022).

Collaborative storytelling

Numerous studies observe how user-generated content has enabled social movements to adopt a new strategy for developing collective action frames (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2012; 2024; Papacharissi, 2016). In place of centralized communication strategies designed by movement organizations, social media enable supporters to contribute actively to the articulation of claims. In this practice, movements provide a broad framing of key grievances, inviting others to share their stories (Alfonzo, 2021). The messages of many are woven together into a collaborative narrative by means of shared hashtags, bridging and integrating diverse experiences, concerns, and claims (most famously, #metoo; Bossetta, 2018; Frischlich et al., 2022; Gerbaudo, 2024; Li et al., 2024). Collaborative storytelling depends on platforms' capacity to render dispersed audiences aware of ongoing debates (e.g., via algorithmic content propagation, user-based resharing, or trending topics), and the ease of publicly contributing to such debates (by including hashtags or pointers, replying to messages). Likewise, opportunities to amplify and endorse messages contribute to this affordance (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). (Audio-)visual platforms such as Instagram or TikTok help build emotional engagement and interaction (Papacharissi, 2016). Persistent contents that are easily searched and accessed support the incremental development of a common narrative, especially if platforms point users to similar contents (e.g., TikTok's algorithm; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Moreover, platforms' quantification of engagement with movements' hashtags fosters a sense of widespread concern and belonging to a large community. Networked platforms appear to facilitate the inclusion of diverse voices, widening appeal, while room-based architectures seem conducive to shaping consensus among more homogeneous communities of activists and sympathizers.

Mobilizing contentious performances

The second core need of social movements concerns the mobilization of contentious performances in the form of collective or connective action. Through such events, movements mobilize a variety of legitimacy resources, from popular support and resonance to the urgency and intensity of grievances, to moral authority, sectoral expertise, and occasionally, formal sanctioning power (Klandermans, 2022; Snow & Benford, 1992; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Some movement

events take place offline, whereby social media serve as "organizing agents" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Online connective action rests on a fast-growing range of social movement activities located partly (e.g., crowdfunding) or entirely within digital media (e.g., email campaigns, online petitions, hacktivism). In the mobilization of contentious performances, social media have most saliently been documented affording movements novel and expanded opportunities for raising sympathizers' *participation motivation*. A second common affordance concerns their use as a means for *decentralized action coordination*, which may involve coordinating geographically separate performances (Herasimenka, 2019; Buehling and Heft, 2023), offering real-time tactical information to participants, or directing supplies and services to where they are needed (e.g., medical assistance; Tufekci, 2017). Both affordances augment social movement activities that would otherwise take place via non-digital media, in a much more laborious, less efficient manner.

Participation motivation

Extant research has documented how social media have altered the way supporters engage in social movement activities. Digital technologies allow recruiting participants for on- and off-line performances through the combination of mass-personal communication and interpersonal social ties (Anderson, 2021). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that connective action rests on personal action frames that underpin self-motivating participation, which are shared on social networking sites such as Facebook or BlueSky. Room-based social media such as Telegram or WhatsApp groups, by comparison, promote communication that mobilizes shared identities (Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). In both cases, platform architectures facilitate the presentation of motivating messages in a supportive social context. Efforts to motivate participation are additionally shaped by the balance of public visibility vs. privacy and access restrictions afforded by the platform. On one end of the spectrum, social media that enable users to register and render visible their intended participation (e.g., clicking "Going" in Facebook's event application) help by projecting sizable numbers of expected participants and drawing in supporters' networks of personal ties (e.g., Tufekci, 2017). Likewise, logging activities and tagging past participants can help create the expectation that future events will be well-attended. On the other end, especially among controversial movements, mobilization may be aided by social media's capacity to create shielded communication spaces where activists can evade repression and public backlash (to some extent; Frischlich et al., 2022; Herasimenka, 2019). In both cases, mobilization strategies benefit from users being non-anonymous to one another (e.g., on platforms that require clear names, such as Facebook; user cultures that emphasize portraits as avatars; Khazraee & Novak, 2018) and a sociable user culture of dense personal interactions (e.g., WhatsApp; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

Decentralized action coordination

Numerous studies note how social media enable social movements to efficiently organize and coordinate decentralized and sprawling contentious performances (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). This affordance rests on social media's disentrained communication style (Carr & Hayes, 2015), which supports both rapid and delayed interactions among

dispersed populations. Accessing downloadable campaign material, protesters can self-enroll in contentious performances (e.g., printing posters at home; contributing to online campaigns) while the movement maintains coherent appearances. Using rapid communication modes (direct messages, tweets), social media enable activists to continuously update and direct contentious performances as they are happening: Real-time information on events and locations (e.g., flash-mobs, supply stations), but also messages about threats (e.g., police activities), needs (e.g., for reinforcements, medical supplies) and opportunities (e.g., media presence) can be shared (Lee et al., 2022; Ting, 2020; Tufekci, 2017; Urman et al., 2021). Digital services that offer geotagging (e.g., Facebook, FourSquare) support organizing the choreography of offline protest events. Acting as “organizing agents” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), social media support the management of complex protest logistics, improve the allocation of resources, and maximize contentious performances’ visibility and impact.

Building organizations, networks and collective identities

The third core need concerns the *building of organizations, networks, and collective identities*. While the form of contentious action has changed profoundly over past decades, both collective and connective action continue to depend on the availability and maintenance of shared identities (Gerbaudo, 2012). Accordingly, social movements strive to foster not only supporters’ identification with a common cause, but also their sense of belonging to the group and campaign (Diani, 1992). Social media have facilitated various forms of relational movement communication, from polycentric networks involving numerous more or less formal groupings, to decentralized structures of self-identified supporters (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Yet, even decentralized movements require some kind of governance structure in order to integrate diverse claims and communities self-identifying with the common cause and enable coordinated action (Gerbaudo, 2012; Herasimenka, 2019): Indeed, where organization-centered movements build collective identities through membership and achieve collective agency with low input of digital media, networked movements cannot do without social media at all. Based on our review of existing research, we propose three affordances related to collective identities: First, social media support *integrative identity building* based on trustful relationships despite heterogeneous membership; second, they support *emergent and fluid hierarchies*; and third they facilitate *distributed decision making* in movements that lack a formal governance structure.

Integrative identity building

Social movements organize around shared, salient symbols that are recognized across diverse communities of supporters (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). While symbols may arise on social media themselves (e.g., hashtags such as #metoo; brands such as Anonymous; Alfonzo, 2021; Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020) or refer to offline events that are merely reflected in social media (e.g., sites like “We are all Khaled Said”; Querdenken; Buehling and Heft, 2023; Tufekci, 2017), they can be easily referenced in user-generated contents. In particular, social media’s meme-saturated user cultures encourage resonant content creation (Shifman, 2014). At the same time, different user communities may

appropriate the same symbols differently. Supported by the homophilic visibility regimes of many social media platforms (e.g., networked echo chambers on Facebook, community-focused Telegram channels), diverse user communities can simultaneously perceive the integrative force of shared symbols, embedded into a discourse attuned to the community’s distinctive values and beliefs (Papacharissi, 2016), while other communities’ discourses around the same symbols remain relatively invisible. As a result, movements can foster integrative identities that symbolically unite heterogeneous activist communities (Snow & Benford, 1992; Urman & Katz, 2022)—an affordance that is especially valuable where movements adjoin communities that disagree on many issues other than the movement’s shared cause (e.g., anti-COVID lockdown movements, which united left-wing alternative groups with anti-system right-wing populists; Buehling and Heft, 2023; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023). In these heterogeneous activist networks, movement-sponsored identity markers (e.g., hashtags, symbols for inclusion in personal bios or usernames) also permit individuals to publicly communicate their belonging to a movement. The same is true for multimodal content features, which invite users to engage in “symbolic visual performances” (Khazraee & Novak, 2018) tied to a common movement identity (e.g., superimposing movement symbols over one’s profile picture).

Emergent hierarchies

In the absence of formal hierarchies, as were more typical of past social movement organizations, social media facilitate the emergence of de-facto hierarchies among networked activists (Gerbaudo, 2012; Herasimenka, 2019). Social media offer a variety of metrics and tokens that document users’ differential centrality in the community or network—from follower counts to activity metrics or persistent records of past contributions, to reputational status hierarchies. Thus, rewarding dedicated members with visible status, social media help broker the emergence of an informal hierarchy wherein local opinion leaders and community organizers can be recognized and transform their recognition into legitimate influence (Urman et al., 2021). In addition, some platforms enable social movements to endow selected users with layered privileges, such as the right to post, evaluate, or moderate others’ contributions (e.g., on Facebook pages, Telegram channels). Platform-enabled authentication regimes contribute to this affordance, allowing users to link their online persona to offline activities, and building trust among other users by demonstrating enhanced accountability.

Distributed decision making

Social media afford social movements rich opportunities for interaction among geographically separated users, who can participate in collective decision-making (Gerbaudo, 2012). Existing work documents how social movements have experimented with a wide array of technologies ranging from open and non-hierarchical user polls to online meetings of more or less formally constituted leadership boards. Distributed decision making may take place in virtual co-presence where platforms support fully synchronous or live, audio-visual interaction, or in discussion boards or other disentrained forms of opinion aggregation. Discussions may take place publicly or, if platforms support this, in access-restricted spaces (Telegram channels, WhatsApp groups, Facebook group chats), differentiating users’ privileges to attend,

comment, contribute, vote or advance motions. Platforms may require users to navigate unstructured collections of contributions or offer decision-making features that permit ex-ante or emergent structuring (e.g., thematically differentiated threads). In any case, decision making procedures on social media require the availability of reliable identification mechanisms or restricted membership spaces. Similarly, platforms' support of privileged, authenticated accounts, sites or channels supports social movements' capacity to communicate and implement collectively made decisions (Lee et al., 2022), as does the capacity to store persistent records in a privileged place.

Taken together, each of the eight affordances detailed above captures a distinct way in which the design and technical features of social media platforms support social movements' efforts at articulating public claims, mobilizing contentious performances, and building collective identities and agency. Of course, interactions between social media affordances and social movement strategies are complex. On the one hand, differential choices in the design of digital platforms used by a social movement may facilitate or obstruct specific movement tactics or inspire specific adaptations in its communication behavior. On the other hand, social movements may also choose to make use of specific platforms whose affordances cater well to their needs and strategies or even try to self-implement (or lobby platform developers for) specific features perceived as valuable. Either way, recognizing the differentiated ways in which key affordances can be actualized presents social movement actors with rich opportunities for making tactical choices and devising suitable strategies for addressing their distinctive communication needs.

Social media affordances in different political contexts

Social movements' perceptions and evaluations of digital affordances are influenced in important ways by the nature of the movement and the context in which it operates. Many context conditions that empower or constrain the activities of social movements have been discussed using the lens of political opportunity structures (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1988). Movements resort to different tactics and use media differently depending on the characteristic opportunity structures that they face (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). For instance, political systems may be comparatively open to non-institutional challengers, facilitating protest movements' public claims making (Kitschelt, 1986); or they may narrowly restrict the space of contested politics, requiring movements to invest resources to build public attention and legitimacy (Kulichkina et al., 2025). Professional media, political cultures and institutions may vary in the degree to which they recognize protest as legitimate. To extend this approach beyond its classical focus on opportunity structures offered by formal political institutions such as the state, Ancelevici (2021a) has proposed to adopt a Bourdieusian framework. In his understanding, "field opportunity structures" include a wider range of ways in which diverse institutions, cultural contexts and social relations shape how social movements can and need to act. Field opportunity structures respond to the distribution and value structure of particular kinds of (social, economic, cultural, reputational, etc.) capital that matter toward those goals of participating actors in the field.

Extending our gaze beyond those communication needs shared by all social movements, accordingly, we investigate to what extent such field opportunity structures alter social movements' reliance on those affordances laid out above or give rise to additional affordances that become valuable only due to specific contextual challenges. Broadly following Ancelevici (2021b), we focus here on two key dimensions that account for important differences in social movements' uses of digital tools. On the one hand, numerous studies document how the perceived repressiveness of an embedding political system alters social movements' uses of social media, chiefly by constraining how readily the movement can rely on public forms of digital communication to meet its objectives (Chen & Moss, 2018; Earl et al., 2022). On the other hand, movements' valuation of social media affordances is conditioned by their interdependencies with other actors endowed with key capitals within the field of contest: Whether social movements confront unified, autonomous actors (e.g., corporations), publicly accountable agencies (e.g., political institutions), or a heterogeneous field of loosely coordinated agents (e.g., consumers); but also their ties with potential allies or supporters; each constellation holds implications for their uses of social media.

Perceived repression

Social movements operating in authoritarian political systems are typically exposed to repression, which requires them to circumvent government restrictions in their communication, shield activists from retaliation and build up legitimacy (Chen & Moss, 2018; Poupin, 2021). In democracies, ideally, social movements require no such strategies, as protest is viewed as legitimate political expression. That said, some movements also face considerable public backlash in democracies, either by authorities (e.g., extremist movements; Frischlich et al., 2022; Uрман & Katz, 2022), or by opposing interest groups, which are likewise free to mobilize (Brändle et al., 2024; van Haperen et al., 2023). Even where repression is de facto limited, movements may still perceive themselves to be exposed to intense pressure, as was the case with anti-vaccination protests (e.g., Volk & Weisskircher, 2024) that misinterpreted widespread public disagreement as state-led repression. Inversely, not all movements are threatened in authoritarian settings, and some may even be endorsed by authoritarian elites, enabling them to communicate with liberty (Kulichkina et al., 2025). Accordingly, we argue that it is the degree of *perceived* repression that forms a key element of the field opportunity structure (Brändle et al., 2024).

To the extent that movements perceive repression, all of social movements' communication needs come under pressure. Regarding the articulation of claims, restricted access to the public underscores the role of social media as a masspersonal channel for self-mediation, while relations with (perceived hostile) mainstream media are seen as unlikely to advance movement goals (Bodrunova, 2021; Cammaerts, 2012; Chen & Moss, 2018). Collaborative storytelling remains a core affordance, but has to operate under conditions of limited publicity. Especially among radical movements, platform-based content moderation is commonly perceived as repressive, motivating a preference for platforms adopting a hands-off approach.

Regarding the mobilization of contentious performances, the orchestration of logistics becomes crucial, as pushback necessitates elaborate efforts of planning and organization

(Tufekci, 2017). In consequence, movements may prefer to engage in connective action outside the public mainstream, on platforms beyond the reach of believed oppressors, or relying on darknet platforms outside the searchable part of the Internet (e.g., Gab; Jasser et al., 2023; Discord: Heslep & Berge, 2024). Examples include anti-vaccination movements in Western countries, but also pro-democracy groups in authoritarian countries such as Russia or Belarus (Bodrunova, 2021; Slobozhan et al., 2023).¹ In many cases, movement communications migrated to Telegram not only to avoid government repression, but also mainstream platforms' feared submission to governmental demands for content moderation or surveillance (Rogers, 2020; Uрман & Katz, 2022). Where governments engage in far-reaching digital surveillance, movements resort to encrypted platforms (e.g., messenger apps such as WhatsApp, Signal or Viber) or even develop their own social media tools, as seen in Hong Kong (Lee et al., 2022; Ting, 2020). At lower levels of perceived repression, where backlash is primarily identified with a hostile public, opposing movements, or a non-cooperative institutional setting (e.g., campus protests), private channels and groups within mainstream platforms may serve the movement.

Distribution of capital

Opportunity structures for social movements vary also depending on the distribution of capital—that is, the constellation of protested and opposing, allied and other actors in the field of contest, as well as their respective control of key resources relevant to the cause of the social movement. Most obviously, actors' control over protested grievances directly shape the communication needs of social movements; in addition, also their access to publicity, legitimacy, or sanctioning power, as well as their capacity for unified action and binding negotiations play a role (Ancelevici, 2021a; Cammaerts, 2012): For instance, where social movements address corporate actors that exert discretionary control over protested grievances, effective pressure tends to arise from altering opponents' cost-benefit balances (e.g., blocking factory gates; consumer boycotts; Luders, 2006). This enables movements to focus on motivating the participation and coordinating the performances of specific publics capable of disrupting organizational performance (e.g., workers, key stakeholders). Likewise, movements need to develop capacities for collective decision making (e.g., to present unified demands via collective bargaining). As the resources controlled by the public and political institutions are less critical, the need for mass mobilization, public outreach and legitimacy is reduced (King, 2008; Luders, 2006). Such uses fit well into limited-access, room-style social media (e.g., Telegram channels, WhatsApp), which are geared toward integrating limited-size communities of committed activists, while their limited support for public self-mediation or collaborative storytelling constitutes no major obstacle.

By contrast, movements that lobby for legislative or regulatory change depend on public legitimacy (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and therefore need to invest into public claims-making and organizing public performances (e.g., via Facebook, Twitter; Radi, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). In the political arena, movement success depends on the capacity to demonstrate widespread concern and committed support, to the point of threatening representatives' electoral prospects (or, in authoritarian settings, the legitimacy and survival of the regime;

Klandermans, 2022). At the same time, public claims making primarily plays an instrumental role, leveraging pressure to force political institutions to negotiate movement claims.² Accordingly, all affordances related to the movements' action coordination, emergent hierarchies and decision-making capacities remain important. The same is not necessarily the case for movements that primarily address dispersed populations and aim to motivate changes in private behavior (e.g., #metoo; Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020). In this field, some movements forego building strong, central organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), relying almost entirely on broad, decentralized networks. In such movements, collective identities are formed not via internal channels of organization building, but via public claims making, inviting supporters' self-identification with a movements' aims and their self-enrolment in its activities. Absent a formal arena wherein the movements' demands could be negotiated, collaborative storytelling and the projection of emergent consensus well beyond the movement constitutes a critical means for exercising normative pressure (notably, public shaming; Dawson, 2020) capable of affecting individuals' behavior. Consequently, movements confronting such field opportunity structures tend to rely on platforms that facilitate collaborative storytelling (e.g., #metoo on Twitter; climate activism on TikTok; Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Dawson, 2020).

While the distribution of capitals relevant to a movement's activities is to some extent constrained by the nature of protested grievances, much depends on how exactly a movement defines its cause and demands: For instance, both climate change and anti-GMO protests have at times addressed industry actors, political institutions and consumers, as each actor group controls resources that bear in different ways upon protested grievances. Similarly, despite the #metoo movement's emphasis on sexual harassment as personal behavior, the same issue was likewise put forward addressing governments, demanding regulatory action (Carroll, 2021). Even union protests occasionally escalate their contention to involve political institutions and public outrage if this promises to bolster their position (King, 2008). While each field, once chosen, presents movements with a prior capital value-structure and distribution, conditioning their communication needs and choices, movements retain some choice over the fields in which they contest.

Interacting opportunity structures

The degree of perceived repression and the field's capital distribution are but two factors among many qualifying the field opportunity structures for contentious politics (Ancelevici, 2021b). Different opportunity structures generate different communication needs, which render specific social media affordances critical, and lead movements to prioritize some affordances at the expense of others. Most saliently, movements' need for shielded communication spaces regularly collides with affordances for addressing wider publics. Consequently, we suggest that movements operating under low perceived repression are relatively free in their use of social media platforms. Prioritizing those needs that are most relevant for responding to a field's capital structure, we expect them to prefer open, networked platforms such as Twitter for mobilizing public consensus regarding personal behaviors (e.g., #metoo; Fridays for Future; Dawson, 2020), and to rely on a combination of feature-rich platforms such as Facebook for pressuring political institutions (e.g., Black

Table 1. Interactions of opportunity structures shaping movements needs and prioritized affordances.

	Low perceived repression <i>e.g., mainstream movements in democratic regimes</i>	High perceived repression <i>e.g., authoritarian regimes, extremist movements</i>
Concentrated capital distribution <i>e.g., addressing corporate action</i>	Focus on action coordination, participation motivation, organization building <i>e.g., union protests, consumer boycotts</i>	Focus on action coordination, participation motivation, organization building, protection needs <i>e.g., workers' protests in China; Sea Shepherd</i>
Intermediate capital distribution <i>e.g., addressing political action</i>	Focus on all affordances <i>e.g., Black Lives Matter, Indignados, Occupy</i>	Tension between collaborative storytelling, self-mediation, identity building and sheltered communication space; <i>e.g., Umbrella movement, Gezi Park, PEGIDA</i>
Dispersed capital distribution <i>e.g., addressing cultural norms, collective behavior</i>	Focus on collaborative storytelling, self-mediation <i>e.g., #metoo, Fridays for Future</i>	Dilemma between collaborative storytelling, self-mediation and sheltered communication space <i>e.g., Saudi feminists; anti-vaccination movements</i>

Lives Matter; Indignados; Ficha Limpa, a Brazilian anti-corruption campaign; Breuer & Farooq, 2012; Mattoni & Odilla, 2021; see Table 1).

By contrast, if perceived repression is high, social movements need to weigh the need for visibility and inclusiveness offered by mainstream platforms against the need for protection, which is better served by less visible or limited-access platforms (Herasimenka, 2019; Poupin, 2021; van Haperen et al., 2023). This conflict is least felt for movements opposing corporate action, which requires limited public exposure, and may result in similar communication practices regardless of perceived repression. However, in fields where public visibility, legitimacy, and widespread participation constitute key resources, difficult trade-offs arise. Movements may resort to anonymized forms of self-mediation (e.g., anti-vaccination protesters' use of YouTube), compromising their capacity to build communities underpinned by visible social ties; they may prioritize the formation of collective identities on hard-to-restrict (e.g., foreign-owned) alternative platforms such as Telegram, at the cost of diminished affordances for articulating public claims (Frischlich et al., 2022; Slobozhan et al., 2023); or they may choose to rely on multiple platforms for different needs, trying to capitalize on their differential affordances. Movements confronting resourceful authoritarian governments (e.g., dissident movements in China or Iran) additionally face the constraint of online surveillance, raising the risk of engaging in public-facing communication (Lee et al., 2022; Poupin, 2021). In response, protesters have made use of self-created and darknet platforms for internal communication, while employing non-digital means (e.g., graffiti, flash mobs) and encrypted channels for public outreach (e.g., Umbrella movement in Hong Kong; Ting, 2020). One cost of the need to evade perceived repression is that collaborative storytelling, a key affordance for addressing wider publics, becomes prohibitively costly, as it inevitably exposes supporters to possible pushback. Especially movements campaigning for socio-cultural change thus face considerable obstacles if they perceive a need to protect themselves from repression (e.g., anti-vaccination movements during COVID-19; feminist movements in Iran; Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023).

Discussion and conclusion

Social media platforms have profoundly changed those communication infrastructures, action repertoires and opportunity structures available to diverse types of social actors, not only those of social movements. While digital affordances have been proposed as a conceptual lens for theorizing these changes, most available approaches remain ill-suited to this endeavor. On the one hand, common taxonomies of affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Khazraee & Novak, 2018) gloss over important differences both with regard to what users intend to do with social media, and regarding how different platforms enable, shape and constrain such efforts (Kakavand, 2024). On the other hand, countless works—not only in social movement studies, but also in other fields of study—have identified valued uses and opportunities offered by specific platforms to particular users but remain too fragmented and context-specific to sustain broader theoretical claims. To address this lacuna, our article advances an actor type-specific, intermediate-level approach to social media affordances suitable for informing cross-platform comparative research and substantive theory-building in the study of social media, social movements, and beyond. The contribution of our article is threefold:

First, we invite scholars to take affordances seriously as *perceived* opportunities (Nagy & Neff, 2015) that can only be adequately understood against the backdrop of both technical design choices *and* use- and user-dependent perceptions, needs and purposes (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). By conceptualizing affordances for *specific actor types*—in our case, social movements—we propose that social media affordances may be most usefully understood in relation to common communication needs and purposes for which people use digital media. Whether individuals approach digital media in a professional capacity (e.g., as marketing campaigners, journalists, or political representatives), in the pursuit of variegated societal roles (e.g., as activists, voters, or students), or indeed in any way that gives rise to characteristic, common needs and purposes, social media present themselves in different ways, offering different affordances. At the same time, none of the discussed affordances are unique to a user type: Like social movements, for instance, political parties and public relations professionals clearly value social media's

opportunities for public claims making, each facing slightly different constraints that may necessitate adjustments in the exact definition of affordances. Given their different organizational logic, however, neither parties nor PR professionals are likely to place much value on the identification of emergent hierarchies, or the opportunities for distributed decision making—in contrast to fan communities, for instance, which might regard these affordances as useful. By focusing on uses that are demonstrably valued by a given type of users, our approach facilitates investigating important commonalities and differences in how people make use of social media, depending on their present roles and objectives.

Second, we argue that there is a need for defining *differential* social media affordances at an intermediate level of abstraction that captures key variation in how social media platforms enable, shape and constrain common uses (Kakavand, 2024; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). Our approach strikes a balance between overly abstract conceptualizations that focus on the commonalities shared by most social media, and approaches that foreground the unique architectures and current feature sets of specific platforms. Focusing on how diverse, fast-evolving socio-technical configurations converge to enable, shape or bar specific intended uses, we obtain a level of generality suitable for comparing and theorizing social media affordances across actor groups, platforms, contexts of use, and over time. At the same time, we maintain sufficient nuance to identify meaningfully differential affordances, which identify not only what valued uses certain platforms enable, but also highlight important variation in how exactly they do so, enabling us to explain differential practices and platform preferences.

Third, we have shown that affordances depend on many *context- and situation-specific factors*: As affordances are translated and adapted to different contexts, they gain or lose value (possibly to the point that it appears advantageous to shift key activities fully into or out of social media), or foreground different qualities in how intended uses are enabled, shaped or constrained. Using the example of social movement actors confronting different degrees of perceived repression and capital distributions in their field of contention, we have discussed how the same affordances shift in meaning and offer different value as contextual conditions change, resulting in differential practices and potentially different platform preferences. There are many other potentially influential contextual conditions that merit consideration in the context of social movements' uses of social media (e.g., local or transnational scope of mobilization; degree of contentiousness; social media penetration; Ancelevici, 2021a; Tarrow, 2010; Willems, 2021), and additional contexts matter for other types of actors and uses. As social media affordances are conceptualized relative to distinct political-institutional, socio-cultural and communication contexts, they open up rich opportunities for understanding differential practices in comparative research.

That said, our systematization naturally comes with certain limitations: For this article, we have focused on social movements and their characteristic communication needs. Considering different user groups—which may share some, but not all affordances valued by social movements, shifting emphasis and adding different needs—will inevitably result in meaningful revisions to our proposed affordances. Beyond our discussion of social media affordances for social movements, we believe that a key contribution of this article lies in

our approach to identifying differential, context-sensitive affordances at an intermediate level of abstraction, which can be valuably transferred to other user types, uses, and contexts. Next, by focusing on the ways in which platform architectures and features enable, shape and bar valued uses, we have deliberately overstated the transparency of technically enabled uses, as well as the extent to which rational, strategic choices guide social movements' uses of social media platforms. In actuality, uses depend on a whole host of additional factors—such as the presence of relevant user groups and cultures on different platforms (e.g., some journalists continue to use X, others have migrated to other platforms following Musk's acquisition of the platform); the public image of platforms (e.g., avoiding platforms associated with specific groups or ideologies); economic factors (e.g., privileging free platforms); or simply activists' familiarity with specific platforms, their availability in a given locale, and other factors related to the legacy of prior uses. We also acknowledge that social movements, as well as other types of actors, frequently combine several social media platforms, using different channels to address different needs and purposes.

Clearly, social media affordances offer but one explanation for how and why users use social media as they do, selecting and combining platforms to meet their respective communication needs. That said, our approach to identifying differential, intermediate-level social media affordances defined in relation to specific user types offers a valuable tool for advancing research and theory in social movement studies and beyond. By putting users and their needs center stage, we identify affordances at a level of abstraction that highlights informative variation while permitting meaningful generalization, enabling comparative analyses, knowledge accumulation and theory building across cases, platforms, and over time.

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NOTES

- 1 Ironically, Western anti-mainstream movements' reliance on Russian-owned platforms (e.g., VKontakte) is thus analogous to Russian dissident movements' use of Western-owned platforms (notably, Youtube). Following Herasimenka (2019, p. 238), "the same affordances can both have democratic potential and become a tool in the hands of authoritarian elites," enabling social movements to operate under authoritarian rule or facilitating extremist mobilization in democracies.
- 2 Not all movements that address political institutions are capable of, or even interested in entering into negotiations themselves; however, movements' limited capacity at collective decision making typically compromises their capacity to maintain control over key demands as these are processed within the political system (e.g., Occupy; Fridays for Future; Gerbaudo, 2012; Mattoni & Odilla, 2021).

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