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„Stop Scrolling and Bear Witness“: Eine Erkundung der #FreePalestine-Bewegung aus stadttheoretischer Sicht

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Abstract

Im 21. Jahrhundert ist Protest von Natur aus hybrid und findet gleichzeitig im verkörperten, physischen (vorwiegend urbanen) Raum und im vernetzten, digitalen Raum statt. Während frühere Konzepte den Cyberspace mitunter als eine losgelöste und ätherische Dimension betrachteten, betont die aktuelle Forschung zunehmend die wechselseitige Beeinflussung von physischen und digitalen Aktionen. Diese Arbeit greift Henri Lefebvres Theorie der Raumproduktion auf und argumentiert, dass sowohl urbane als auch digitale Arenen umkämpfte „öffentliche Räume“ darstellen, die im kontinuierlichen Kampf gegen unterdrückende kapitalistische Machtstrukturen aktiv produziert, hinterfragt und neu verhandelt werden. Diese Erweiterung der Urbanitätstheorie zeigt, wie Aktivisten beide Bereiche durchqueren und die dort bestehenden Barrieren durch innovative Protesttaktiken umgehen müssen. Die wichtigste Taktik ist es, Sichtbarkeit zu erlangen; aufgrund der unaufhörlichen Überwachung und Unterdrückung in beiden Arenen ist Sichtbarkeit jedoch ein zweiseitiges Schwert. Um zu überleben und effektiv zu bleiben, entwickeln Aktivisten Taktiken der Verschleierung und Täuschung, die in dieser Forschung als „Verstecken vor aller Augen“ bezeichnet werden. Sie reichen vom Untertauchen in der Menge und der Verschleierung der physischen Identität bis hin zum Austricksen von Algorithmen durch verschlüsselte Sprache, Selbstzensur, irreführende Untertitel und visuelle Irreführung. So veranschaulichen die Aktivisten der #FreePalestine-Bewegung die kontinuierliche Entwicklung des Protests in gut sichtbaren kapitalistischen städtischen Räumen.

Introduction

In the 21st century, protest is inherently hybrid, existing simultaneously in embodied, physical (primarily urban) space and in networked, digital space. While earlier conceptions sometimes conceived cyberspace as a detached and ethereal dimension, current scholarship increasingly emphasises the reciprocal influence between physical and digital actions. Drawing directly from Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, this thesis argues that both urban and digital arenas constitute contested 'public spaces' that are actively produced, challenged, and renegotiated in a continuous struggle against oppressive capitalist power structures. This extension of urban theory reveals how activists must traverse both realms and circumvent the barriers present in them through innovative protest tactics. The most crucial tactic is to attain visibility; however, due to the incessant surveillance and repression present in both arenas, visibility is a double-edged sword. To survive and remain effective, activists develop tactics of concealment and deception that this research labels as 'hiding in plain sight'. They range from blending into crowds and masking their physical identities to tricking algorithms with coded speech, self-censorship, misleading captions, and visual misdirection. Thus, activists in the #FreePalestine movement demonstrate the continuous evolution of protest within highly visible capitalist urban spaces.

This research argues that cyberspace is now another public space, and hence is subject to the same risks and opportunities as urban public spaces. My contribution lies in utilising Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to illuminate *how* the convergence of online and offline spaces manifests in the context of protest. Through my research, I aim to answer the question: how do activists in the #FreePalestine produce, occupy and negotiate space for protest in physical and digital public space? This will be divided into three subquestions. First, how do activists in the #FreePalestine movement occupy space in a networked/embodied society?

Second, how do affordances of social media limit the opportunities for protest in public space?

Third, how do activists navigate the barriers to protesting in public spaces?

Each subquestion in turn follows Lefebvre's classifications and will go into detail about all the actions that fall into each level of the triad. Each section will reflect on how the production of space in offline and online arenas mirrors each other and has complementary actions. The first section will focus on spatial practices that protestors use to occupy space. The second will focus on representations that inhibit protest. The third section will delve into spaces of representation and tactics used to overcome the barriers to protesting.

The discussion discusses the implications of the convergence of public spaces for urban theorists and the future of social movements.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical review concerns itself with three main questions: what is space, what is cyberspace, and can it be seen as public space? To build upon Lefebvre's work, this thesis must first answer these three questions. The first half of the theoretical reviews deals with the concepts of space, cyberspace, and the second half expands upon the conceptions of the public space. The last section deals with the intersection of both.

What is space?

Lefebvre defines space as an active and political arena¹. Previously, space was conceived as purely geometric and synonymous with empty areas; however, over time, space was seen as both a physical and an abstract arena². Lefebvre defines space not as an empty container, but as a 'social product' intrinsically tied to power relations³. He argues that dominant capitalist ideologies create social space and thus encompass knowledge and means of control. He states that "social space is a social product... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power."⁴.⁵ Lefebvre outlines three actions that produce space: spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation⁶. Spatial practices, referred to as perceived spaces, are the physical architecture that grounds our understanding of a particular space. On the other hand, representations of space, or conceived spaces, are the ideologies of space that are constructed by urban planners and architects. Lastly, spaces of representation,

¹ Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

² Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

³ Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

⁵ Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

⁶ Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

seen as lived spaces, are the symbolic, emotional and experiential spaces inhabited by the residents and users of a space. He argues that dominant ideologies, particularly capitalist ones, actively produce social space, thereby embedding systems of knowledge and control. Space, in this sense, is not neutral⁷. This critical understanding of space is vital because it highlights that all spaces are contested, reflecting ongoing struggles for autonomy and meaning. He states that “space is not simply a physical or passive container, but a social product shaped by human relations and interactions. This thesis investigates the production of space and the power relations that emerge due to it.

What is Cyberspace?

Having solidified the definition of space itself, I will lay out the theoretical underpinnings of my thesis. Since spaces do not need to be physical, this thesis argues that Lefebvre’s concepts can be extended to the online as well. However, before we investigate the actions of activists both online and offline, we must first define what constitutes ‘cyberspace’. There are a plethora of conceptions of cyberspace that can be divided into two dominant strands: the exceptionalists and the unexceptionalists. The former maintains that cyberspace is unique and distinct from any other physical space. On the other hand, the unexceptionalists argue that cyberspace is merely an extension of existing spaces.

The Internet as an ethereal space

The first debates surrounding the creation of a new space emerged as a result of the fax machine and the telephone. The internet and telecommunication technology had shrunk space and time and made instantaneous communication possible. The telephone and the telegram

⁷ Lefebvre, Henri. "From the production of space." In *Theatre and performance design*, pp. 81-84. Routledge, 2012.

created “instantaneous and yet non-proximate communications” that were disorienting, and as a result, people conceived of a third space where these communications were taking place⁸.

Abruptly, time and space were of vastly less consequence than before, and many began to call this the “global village”⁹. Early philosophers like Mark Graham imagined that instantaneous communication would create a “shared space” for all of humanity¹⁰. Initially, the internet was seen as a sanctuary, a haven from the politics of the physical world: a perfect democratic forum¹¹. Allan and Brown attribute this phenomenon to “The networked and the participatory nature of social media [that] created a substantively new forum for the freedom of expression, a forum in which both creators and readers play integral roles in constructing, disseminating, and responding to content”¹². Consequently, William Gibson coined the term cyberspace in 1984 to mean “A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators”¹³. Mark Graham points out that the earliest conceptions of cyberspace imagined it as a space that “does not lie within your borders' and 'ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live”¹⁴. It was frequently cited as an “Ethereal and ubiquitous alternate dimension”¹⁵. In its earliest depictions, cyberspace offers unlimited freedom and possibility¹⁶. Religious groups took this a step further.

⁸ Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 177-182.

⁹ Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 177-182.

¹⁰ Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 177-182.

¹¹ Allan, Diana, and Curtis Brown. "The Mavi Marmara at the frontlines of Web 2.0." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 63-77.

¹² Li, Eric Ping Hung, and Ajnesh Prasad. "From wall 1.0 to wall 2.0: Graffiti, social media, and ideological acts of resistance and recognition among Palestinian refugees." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 4 (2018): 493-511.7

¹³ Zook, Matthew A., and Mark Graham. "Mapping DigiPlace: geocoded Internet data and the representation of place." *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 34, no. 3 (2007): 466-482.

¹⁴ Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 177-182.

¹⁵ Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 177-182.

¹⁶ Zook, Matthew A., and Mark Graham. "Mapping DigiPlace: geocoded Internet data and the representation of place." *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 34, no. 3 (2007): 466-482.

Wertheim, in his book *'The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet'*, argues that the emergence of cyberspace as space is not an "isolated phenomenon, but as the latest iteration of this endlessly metamorphosing concept"¹⁷. The genesis of these mutations is the emergence of cyberspace as a quasi-religious space that would replicate the utopia of Heaven¹⁸. The theological underpinnings of heaven as boundless, disembodied and immortal space have now been extended to cyberspace itself¹⁹. The internet, from this perspective, is 'beyond and above' the material world²⁰. Thus, exceptionalists conceive cyberspace as an empty space that can be filled with new content and new users²¹. It is perceived by religious groups as a "Utopian arena of equality, friendship, and power"²².

However, Graham also rightly points out that an overreliance on the cyberspace metaphor can lead to many misconceptions about the nature and relations in cyberspace. It is not a place where everyone simultaneously logs in, and it has distinct spatial biases that limit the voice, representation and communication of its users²³. Ultimately, Graham argues that "Imagining the internet as a distinct, immaterial, ethereal alternate dimension ultimately makes it more challenging to think through the contingent and grounded ways in which we consume, enact, communicate and create through the internet"²⁴. The internet may be conceived as a collective hallucination, but it has a physical geography dependent on infrastructure. By imagining it as a

¹⁷ Wertheim, Margaret. "The pearly gates of cyberspace." In *Religion Today: A Reader*, pp. 43-46. Routledge, 2017.

¹⁸ Wertheim, Margaret. "The pearly gates of cyberspace." In *Religion Today: A Reader*, pp. 43-46. Routledge, 2017.

¹⁹ Wertheim, Margaret. "The pearly gates of cyberspace." In *Religion Today: A Reader*, pp. 43-46. Routledge, 2017.

²⁰ Wertheim, Margaret. "The pearly gates of cyberspace." In *Religion Today: A Reader*, pp. 43-46. Routledge, 2017.

²¹ Cohen, Julie E. "Cyberspace as/and Space." *Colum. L. Rev.* 107 (2007): 210.

²² Wertheim, Margaret. "The pearly gates of cyberspace." In *Religion Today: A Reader*, pp. 43-46. Routledge, 2017.

²³ Zook, Matthew A., and Mark Graham. "Mapping DigiPlace: geocoded Internet data and the representation of place." *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 34, no. 3 (2007): 466-482.

²⁴ Graham, Mark. "Geography/internet: ethereal alternate dimensions of cyberspace or grounded augmented realities?." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 177-182.

space without any politics, we rob cyberspace of the complexities and connections it exhibits in everyday life.

The Internet as an extension of physical space

The unexceptionalists view cyberspace as an extension of physical space. The internet is classified into Cyberplace and Cyberspace by Devriendt et al.²⁵. CyberPlace is the physical infrastructure and geographical distribution of information technologies²⁶. Cyberspace, on the other hand, is made of the physical layer as well as all the interactions that take place on the internet²⁷. Cyberspace is a layer that is intertwined with the city, and they are both inseparable from the politics of each other²⁸. I argue that cyberspace is the conjunction of spatial practices (the physical infrastructure that grounds the internet), the conceived space (the algorithms and community rules that govern social media) and the lived spaces (the hashtags, language and media shared by protestors and the tactics employed by them to stay relevant). As per Lefebvre, social space is never neutral: “[it] permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others”²⁹. Hence, social space is contested and dominated, much like online interactions. Thus, for my thesis, I will focus on the construction, interpretation and actions *in* and *through* cyberspace.

²⁵ Devriendt, Lomme, Ben Derudder, and Frank Witlox. "Cyberplace and cyberspace: two approaches to analyzing digital intercity linkages." *Journal of Urban Technology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 5-32.

²⁶ Devriendt, Lomme, Ben Derudder, and Frank Witlox. "Cyberplace and cyberspace: two approaches to analyzing digital intercity linkages." *Journal of Urban Technology* 15, no. 2 (2008): 5-32.

²⁷ Gunkel, David J., and Ann Hetzel Gunkel. "Virtual geographies: The new worlds of cyberspace." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 14, no. 2 (1997): 123-137.

²⁸ Zook, Matthew. "The geographies of the Internet." *Annual review of information science and technology* 40, no. 1 (2006): 53-78

²⁹ Lefebvre, Henri. "The production of space (1991)." In *The people, place, and space reader*, pp. 289-293. Routledge, 2014.

The Internet as a networked and embodied space

The problem with both narratives is that they ignore the fact that users of cyberspace are not nameless, shapeless orbs but real people who inhabit physical space, according to Julie Cohen (2004). “The interplay between metaphor and metonymy—between the visible content and experienced architecture of the Web and its metaphorically mediated connection to the network as a whole—defines our experience of cyberspace and ultimately enables us to define cyberspace itself”³⁰. Hence, Cohen argues that we live in embodied space. A comprehensive theory of cyberspace must look at the intersection between embodied space and cyberspace. Real people create, interpret and organise cyberspace; in turn, cyberspace affects their lives and physical spaces. In other words, “Cyberspace is also part of experienced space, and a theory of cyberspace and space must account for this dimension of connectedness”³¹. Understanding the relationship between users, physical spaces, and cyberspace is the key to uncovering its nature. Cohen conceptualises the networked/embodied space nexus to create a better understanding of cyberspace. However, there is little scholarly attention to how space is created within cyberspace itself.

I use Cohen’s conception in conjunction with Manuel Castells’ “networked society”³². He posits that a “network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies”³³. The network society is thus characterised by nodes, which are locations where two networks converge. These can be users, websites, social media, etc.³⁴. The network society is unique because the internet has allowed the “augmentation of the body and mind of human subjects in networks of interaction”³⁵. Thus, he argues that the users of cyberspace are growing more and more

³⁰ Cohen, Julie E. "Cyberspace as/and Space." *Colum. L. Rev.* 107 (2007): 210.

³¹ Cohen, Julie E. "Cyberspace as/and Space." *Colum. L. Rev.* 107 (2007): 210.

³² Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

³³ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

³⁴ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

³⁵ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

autonomous as they realise that “everything that is a collective mental experience is virtual, but this virtuality is a fundamental dimension of everybody’s reality”³⁶. This realisation gives way to a new kind of space, which Castells calls the “space of flows”. More specifically, while space is “the material support of time-sharing social practices”³⁷, the space of flows refers to the “technological and organisational possibility of practising simultaneity (or chosen time in time-sharing) without contiguity”³⁸. Thus, the defining feature of cyberspace for him is the ability to share an experience without necessarily being in the same physical or temporal space. Similar to Cohen, he also argues that space cannot be separated from social practices. Hence, every network society must have its spatial manifestation³⁹. Elaborating on this, he continues that the space of flows is the nexus of “the places where activities (and people enacting them) are located, the material communication networks linking these activities, and the content and geometry of the flows of information that perform the activities in terms of function and meaning”⁴⁰. Thus, to him, cyberspace is defined as the actors/users of cyberspace, the technology used to embed it in physical space and the information that is being shared and interpreted on it. My thesis focuses on the actors/users of cyberspace and how they use the affordances of social media to create and occupy space.

By extending Lefebvre’s triad to the digital realm, my research probes deeper into the relationship between users and the spaces they inhabit, uncovering the intricate ways protest is conducted, hampered, and sustained within this complex networked/embodied reality. This approach allows me to move beyond simply acknowledging the hybridity of online and offline activism to specifically analyse how these interconnected spaces are produced, governed, and

³⁶Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

³⁷ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

³⁸ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

³⁹ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

⁴⁰ Castells, M. "The network society: a cross-cultural perspective Edward Elgar." (2004).

experienced. My theoretical framework integrates Lefebvre's concept of the production of space and Castells' space of flows in conjunction with Cohen's idea of networked/embodied space to understand how public space is created and sustained in the #FreePalestine movement.

This section has laid the essential theoretical groundwork, and the following sections will apply these concepts to explore public space and its interaction with cyberspace.

What is public space?

The terms public space and public sphere are often used interchangeably, but they represent distinct, albeit related, concepts essential for understanding social interaction, particularly in a democratic context.

Peter Marcuse, in *The Paradoxes Of Public Space*, claims public space as having multiple purposes, including "political public space," which he also refers to as "First Amendment Space" in the U.S. context, emphasising rights of free speech and assembly⁴¹. Beyond political functions, public spaces also serve as "Social Spaces" for "a full range of social interchanges [like] recreation, sports, picnicking, hiking, running, sitting, chatting, simply enjoyment, by all people, equally"⁴². These social spaces can be "Convening spaces, where convening for the purposes of political effectiveness may be planned, and Encounter Spaces, where chance meetings and discussion may be take place without prior planning/convening"⁴³. Moreover, the term "Third Space" is sometimes used to describe areas "between home and work" or "neighborhood or community spaces that are not publicly owned nor privately exclusive"⁴⁴. My thesis argues that cyberspace fulfils the functions of both public and third space laid down by Marcuse.

⁴¹ Marcuse, Peter. "The paradoxes of public space." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 38, no. 1 (2014): 102-106.

⁴² Marcuse, Peter. "The paradoxes of public space." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 38, no. 1 (2014): 102-106.

⁴³ Marcuse, Peter. "The paradoxes of public space." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 38, no. 1 (2014): 102-106.

⁴⁴ Marcuse, Peter. "The paradoxes of public space." *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 38, no. 1 (2014): 102-106.

The "public sphere" is a more abstract concept, primarily formalised by Jürgen Habermas. It is understood as "the domain of social life where public opinion is expressed by means of rational public discourse and debate. The public sphere is where citizens "go to analyse, discuss, or argue about public affairs"⁴⁵. Its ultimate goal is "public accord and decision-making"⁴⁶. However, it is much more than public space. As Zizi A. Papacharissi clarifies, "The public sphere involves the public, employs public space, hosts discussions of public affairs, and generates public opinion, but is conceptually distinct from any of those four concepts"⁴⁷. She emphasises that "While public space provides the expanse that allows the public sphere to convene, it does not guarantee a healthy public sphere"⁴⁸. Papacharissi further explains that "the public sphere is best understood as a metaphor" that, when materialised, can take on various shapes and forms⁴⁹.

Thus, the public sphere encompasses public space but is not limited to it. These concepts highlight that public spaces and spheres have always been the crucible for political expression and social transformation. The next section outlines the conceptions of cyberspace as a public space.

Social Media as the public space/sphere

With the advent of digital technologies, the concept of public space has expanded to include virtual environments. As Kate Sangwon Lee and Huaxin Wei note, "cyberspace can be a new type of public space which encourages user discussion and participation"⁵⁰. Papacharissi also

⁴⁵ Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010.

⁴⁶ Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010.

⁴⁷ Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010.

⁴⁸ Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010.

⁴⁹ Papacharissi, Zizi. *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. Polity, 2010.

⁵⁰ Lee, Kate Sangwon, and Huaxin Wei. "Social media as heterotopia: Applying Foucault's concept of heterotopia to analyze interventions in social media as a networked public." *Archives of design research* 33, no. 2 (2020): 5-16.

remarked that "the internet has created a new public space by enabling easier access to information, connecting people from diverse backgrounds and providing a place for discussion"⁵¹. Similarly, Danah Boyd's concept of "networked public" describes social media as a public space, conceptualised as "the space constructed through networked technologies, an 'imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice'"⁵². This implies that social media platforms possess "as many functions and characteristics as physical public spaces have, in addition to being able to trigger people's collective actions promptly and effectively"⁵³. The intersection of people, technology and practice is of particular importance to this thesis.

Furthermore, Boyd identified four key affordances of social media that contribute to shaping any networked public: persistence (content uploaded to social media remains permanently), replicability (content on social media can be easily duplicated, making it difficult to distinguish original from replicated content), scalability (social media gives users the ability to make their opinions public and amplified) and, searchability (content uploaded to social media can be searched, browsed, and explored)⁵⁴. All four of these make social media the perfect place to plan protests and gain visibility. My thesis investigates how these affordances create risks and possibilities for protest.

⁵¹ Lee, Kate Sangwon, and Huaxin Wei. "Social media as heterotopia: Applying Foucault's concept of heterotopia to analyze interventions in social media as a networked public." *Archives of design research* 33, no. 2 (2020): 5-16.

⁵² Boyd, Danah. "Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications." In *A networked self*, pp. 47-66. Routledge, 2010.

⁵³ Lee, Kate Sangwon, and Huaxin Wei. "Social media as heterotopia: Applying Foucault's concept of heterotopia to analyze interventions in social media as a networked public." *Archives of design research* 33, no. 2 (2020): 5-16.

⁵⁴ Boyd, Danah. "Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications." In *A networked self*, pp. 47-66. Routledge, 2010.

My thesis takes these theories as the basis of my argumentation. Extending the production of space to this research, cyberspace is constructed and governed by political forces, much like urban space. Cyberspace is both a networked/embodied space and a space of flows. It can be seen, at least partially, as the networked public sphere, which makes it crucial to activism and mobilisation. However, both realms are intertwined with each other, and the politics of the urban are replicated in cyberspace as well. In the case of the #FreePalestine movement, this affects both the *arenas* and the *methods* of protest. Cyberspace can be seen as a highly visible public space; however, this visibility brings both challenges and opportunities. Thus, the advent of digital technologies, particularly social media, has not replaced public space; it has expanded and complicated it. These platforms become new battlegrounds for the right to assemble, speak, and organise, mirroring the historical struggles for political expression in public space.

In the next section, I will briefly go over the current debates surrounding cyberspace as a space of protest, surveillance and censorship in the public sphere and visual resistance tactics.

Literature Review

Spaces of Protest

If cyberspace is an embodied space intrinsically linked to real people, then users acting within cyberspace will also be connected to the politics of space. This literature review tracks the role of urban spaces in protest and the emergence of social media and urban spaces as centres of protest.

Payal Arora (2015) argues that “spaces initially designed for leisure can be reappropriated as significant sites for political mobilisation, echoing historical precedents of urban parks and squares serving dual functions of recreation and resistance”⁵⁵. Lamnod et al. explain that this occurs because of a “complex interplay between designed urban environments and emergent protest tactics” demonstrating how certain aspects of urban leisure spaces lend themselves to protest⁵⁶. Tussey argues that this occurs due to “Convergence Culture”, where the boundaries are blurred between work and leisure, and between artist and audience, which allows for the repurposing of these spaces for protest⁵⁷. This transformation is evident in how certain public leisure spaces, like urban parks, have historically served as crucial loci for democratic practices despite attempts at architectural control and surveillance⁵⁸. This control manifests in the form of design choices that make these spaces highly visible and accessible. Similarly, the digital realm provides a new frontier for such reappropriation, as platforms originally conceived for social

⁵⁵ Arora, Payal. "Usurping public leisure space for protest: Social activism in the digital and material commons." *Space and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015): 55-68.

⁵⁶ Lamond, Ian R., Esther Solano, and Vitor Blotta. "Leisure activism and engaged ethnography: Heterogeneous voices and the urban palimpsest." In *Leisure, Activism, and the Animation of the Urban Environment*, pp. 96-108. Routledge, 2022.

⁵⁷ Tussey, Ethan. *Digital Media and Convergence Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁵⁸ Arora, Payal. "Usurping public leisure space for protest: Social activism in the digital and material commons." *Space and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015): 55-68.

connection and entertainment become potent instruments for political organising and dissent⁵⁹. Social media platforms are designed to be scalable and searchable⁶⁰ as well, lending to both visibility and surveillance. Thus, the urban and digital spaces are both spaces of leisure that have been utilised by activists to protest.

The Evolution of Protest and the Affordances of Social Media

Having established the link between the physical and digital and their use as arenas of protest, this section delves into the literature on the evolution of protesting due to social media.

The merger of physical to digital arenas underscores a fundamental shift in the possibilities of collective action by removing geographical and temporal barriers. According to Rojo (2018), the interconnectedness of virtual and physical spaces is crucial to protesting, as the appropriation of urban loci of power creates highly visible sites for transgression, while digital platforms enable the rapid exchange of information and coordination among participants⁶¹. The interweaving of activism transforms the traditional urban protest landscape by fostering transnational solidarity⁶². Hatuka dubs this the “choreography of dissent” that as both spaces are utilized to coordinate protest⁶³. This convergence, in turn, fundamentally redefines the protest, allowing for dynamic

⁵⁹ Vromen, Ariadne. "Digital citizenship and political engagement." In *Digital citizenship and political engagement: The challenge from online campaigning and advocacy organisations*, pp. 9-49. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

⁶⁰ danah boyd. (2010). "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications." In *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (ed. Zizi Papacharissi), pp. 39-58.

⁶¹ Martín Rojo, Luisa. "Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements." In *Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements*, pp. 1-22. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016.

⁶² Arora, Payal. "Usurping public leisure space for protest: Social activism in the digital and material commons." *Space and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015): 55-68.

⁶³ Hatuka, Tali. "Public space and public rituals: Engagement and protest in the digital age." *Urban Studies* 60, no. 2 (2023): 379-392.

interactions between digitally mediated narratives and physically embodied acts of defiance⁶⁴.

Thus, this symbiotic relationship between both public spaces is inexplicably intertwined with the history and the evolution of protesting.

Furthermore, Stephania Milan expounds on the affordances of social media and argues that it is the politics of visibility that make cloud protesting such a viable option⁶⁶. She describes cyberspace as an in-between space where all the “soft resources of the movement are stored”⁶⁷. These soft resources include the symbols (memes and language) and the infrastructure (hashtags and links) of the movement⁶⁸. This thesis argues that ‘soft resources’ of the movement become the spatial practices that produce space in cyberspace. In doing so, social media becomes a cornerstone of social action through three mechanisms. First, it drastically reduces the cost of disseminating information, not only reaching those who identify with the movement but also pulling in bystanders⁶⁹. Second, “it makes each person the heroine” by allowing them to share their personalised experience in relation to the movement⁷⁰. Thirdly, the asynchronous nature of the internet allows users to be immortalised in the virtual space. It takes away the need for “co-presence, allowing for a permanent re-enactment of social action in online platforms”⁷¹. This also stretches the lifecycle of movement. Simply put, “Through social media, ‘bodies aren’t practised

⁶⁴ Martín Rojo, Luisa. "Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements." In *Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements*, pp. 1-22. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016.

⁶⁵ AlSayyad, Nezar, and Muna Guvenc. "Virtual uprisings: On the interaction of new social media, traditional media coverage and urban space during the ‘Arab Spring’." *Urban studies* 52, no. 11 (2015): 2018-2034.

⁶⁶ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁶⁷ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁶⁸ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

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Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁷⁰ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁷¹ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

but experienced'; in other words, co-presence is no longer a prerequisite for embodiment, nor a requirement for (collective) experience"⁷². The leveraging of cyberspace to extend activism blends both public spaces into a space for protest⁷³. Thus, the affordances of cyberspace, particularly social media, produce space through spatial practices and reshape protest.

Moreover, the shift from traditional media to citizen-generated content brought about a change in the production and consumption of news during periods of civil unrest⁷⁴. This phenomenon can be observed in how collective identities are forged and maintained within contemporary social movements⁷⁵. An example of this is Paolo Gerbaudo's work on the Occupy Wall Street, the Tahrir Square movement and the Spanish indignados to see how the protest's core values are reflected in the organisation of the protest, both online and offline⁷⁶. These movements have been dubbed 'take the squares movements' or 'occupy movements'⁷⁷. He argues that "social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a 'choreography of assembly' as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling of a highly dispersed and individualised constituency"⁷⁸. Lubin details that the protestors used Facebook and Twitter as tools of organisation for the protests⁷⁹. They created a strong online presence by creating Facebook groups to discuss protest strategies, taking videos of the protests and the police brutality and uploading them to YouTube⁸⁰. Their offline

⁷² Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁷³ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁷⁴ Milan, Stefania. "From social movements to cloud protesting: The evolution of collective identity." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 887-900.

⁷⁵ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

⁷⁶ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

⁷⁷ Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. Pluto press, 2012.

⁷⁸ Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. Pluto press, 2012.

⁷⁹ Lubin, Judy. "The 'Occupy' movement: emerging protest forms and contested urban spaces." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012).

⁸⁰ Lubin, Judy. "The 'Occupy' movement: emerging protest forms and contested urban spaces." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012).

occupation and the online documentation forced mainstream media to acknowledge their presence, to shift the narrative in favour of the protestors⁸¹. Gerbaudo argues that social media was crucial in all of them to "sustain an imaginary of 'friendship' and 'sharing' in their use"⁸². Online interactions create a collective identity through symbols and language that spark offline protests⁸³. It is important to note, however, that he does not believe that cyberspace is devoid of politics but rather it "re-cast[s] the organisation of the spatial and temporal scenes of social life"⁸⁴. He argues that social media not only complements existing protests but also creates "new forms of proximity"⁸⁵. Thus, cyberspace can create what he calls 'virtual proximity' and a sense of community, albeit fleeting⁸⁶.

These affordances made cyberspace, especially social media, instrumental in early 2010s protests. However, as cyberspace evolved, it moved beyond a simple coordination tool and became a space for protest itself.

Occupation of Space as a protest

Specifically, a particular form of protesting is popular in both public spaces. Literature on protests revolves around 'occupying space'⁸⁷. Historically, the urban square or the street was a place utilised to challenge authority; Lubin (2012) argues that by claiming these territories, protestors not only stake a physical or virtual presence but also symbolically reclaim agency,

⁸¹ Lubin, Judy. "The 'Occupy' movement: emerging protest forms and contested urban spaces." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012).

⁸² Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. Pluto press, 2012.

⁸³ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

⁸⁴ Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. Pluto press, 2012.

⁸⁵ Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. Pluto press, 2012.

⁸⁶ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

⁸⁷ Martín Rojo, Luisa. "Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements." In *Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements*, pp. 1-22. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016.

transforming sites of everyday life into contested arenas for political expression and social transformation⁸⁸. The act of occupation itself, whether through the physical presence of bodies in a square or the sustained digital presence within online forums, inherently disputes the conventional understanding and designated function of these spaces⁸⁹, which is mainly consumerism⁹⁰. Moreover, Hanna, Langdon, and Vanclay (2015) highlight the inherent performativity of protest, where the act of occupying space itself becomes a powerful message, communicating dissent and fostering solidarity among participants⁹¹. Corrêa (2018) describes this as “scenes of dissensus” that disrupt conventional power dynamics and foreground emerging voices⁹². This can also turn into what Papacharissi (2014) calls ‘affective publics’, which are networked communities mobilised through shared expressions of sentiment that translate into either online solidarity or tangible offline action⁹³. Thus, occupation of space, whether online or offline, frequently serves as a crucial staging ground for organising, educating, and mobilising wider segments of the population.

Having established the importance of the occupation of space, the next section will discuss how Palestinians utilise public spaces for protesting.

⁸⁸ Lubin, Judy. "The 'Occupy' movement: emerging protest forms and contested urban spaces." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012).

⁸⁹ Martín Rojo, Luisa. "Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements." In *Occupy: The spatial dynamics of discourse in global protest movements*, pp. 1-22. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2016.

⁹⁰ Arora, Payal. "Usurping public leisure space for protest: Social activism in the digital and material commons." *Space and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2015): 55-68.

⁹¹ Hanna, Philippe, Esther Jean Langdon, and Frank Vanclay. "Indigenous rights, performativity and protest." *Land Use Policy* 50 (2016): 490-506.

⁹² Corrêa, Laura Guimarães. "Urban interventions in a global city: Dissensus, consensus and ambivalence in the streets of London." *Medijske studije* 9, no. 17 (2018): 48-67.

⁹³ Papacharissi, Zizi. *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Protesting for/in Palestine

To utilise the internet as a platform for protest, the availability of cyberspace infrastructure is crucial. Miriyam Aouragh (2011) traces the history of internet development in Palestine and the subsequent boom of activism websites in her book *Palestine Online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the Construction of Identity*⁹⁴. In 1996, the first internet licenses were given to companies like PalTel and Palestine Online⁹⁵. Following that, infrastructure was built at a record rate to provide internet services to the Palestinian Authority. By 2009, both the West Bank and Gaza had IT ministries; 35 per cent of households and 50 per cent of all mobile phones had internet access⁹⁶. Palestine became the fastest-growing social media adopter in the Arab region⁹⁷. Cyberspace was then seen as a place to escape checkpoints and gain mobility and autonomy⁹⁸. In the early 2000s, Palestinian protesters used internet forums and emails to disseminate information about Israeli apartheid to each other⁹⁹. The forums allowed local protestors to communicate and discuss the injustices happening to them. Listservs were used to deliver the latest advances by Israel and protest locations¹⁰⁰. However, with the advent of social media, the landscape changed forever.

Using camera phones, Palestinians began to record their lives and upload them to cyberspace¹⁰¹. The proliferation of camera phones among the local population allowed them to

⁹⁴ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

⁹⁵ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

⁹⁶ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

⁹⁷ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

⁹⁸ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

⁹⁹ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

film their reality; a reality that was “being produced, recorded, edited and distributed by Israel till then”¹⁰². “The coproductive nature of social media allowed Palestinians and their sympathisers to ‘consume’ and to ‘transport’ their narratives, discourses, and ideologies through the digitally connected space”¹⁰³. This created a challenge to the Israeli propaganda in a space where they were previously unrivalled¹⁰⁴. Thus, the digital realm has become a significant arena for Palestinian youth activism, influencing both online and offline mobilisation processes and serving as a foundational element in their collective consciousness¹⁰⁵.

Allan and Brown (2010) examine the rise of Web 2.0 and the Palestinian voices online¹⁰⁶. They trace the origins back to 2000 when footage of Muhammad al-Dura went viral: a 12-year-old boy died in his father’s arms as the Israeli army pelted them with bullets¹⁰⁷. The moment was watched by tens of millions of people and became a symbol of the atrocities Israel commits. Similarly, on 31 May 2010, Israel uploaded footage of the Mavi Marmara, the Turkish aid ship attempting to break the siege of Gaza, on YouTube and claimed that it had killed civilians in the name of self-defence¹⁰⁸. Despite confiscating footage from the journalists on board the ship and using a media blackout to uphold its narrative, soon videos surfaced on the internet that contradicted the Israeli version of events¹⁰⁹. This was one of the first instances where amateur

¹⁰² Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

¹⁰³ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Dwonch, Albana S. *Palestinian youth activism in the internet age: Online and offline social networks after the Arab Spring*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Allan, Diana, and Curtis Brown. "The Mavi Marmara at the frontlines of Web 2.0." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 63-77.

¹⁰⁷ Allan, Diana, and Curtis Brown. "The Mavi Marmara at the frontlines of Web 2.0." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 63-77.

¹⁰⁸ Allan, Diana, and Curtis Brown. "The Mavi Marmara at the frontlines of Web 2.0." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 63-77.

¹⁰⁹ Allan, Diana, and Curtis Brown. "The Mavi Marmara at the frontlines of Web 2.0." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 63-77.

videos were used to subvert dominant narratives about the Palestinians online. This research posits this as one of the first instances where cyberspace was used as a public space to document offline events.

Moreover, online activism doesn't just supplement offline activism but creates a distinct "Palestine in cyberspace," becoming an important space for Palestinians under occupation and in diaspora¹¹⁰. For instance, the #SaveSheikhJarrah campaign transcended a purely online phenomenon, connecting digital activism with on-the-ground struggles¹¹¹. The protestors used Hashtags to generate attention online and posted videos about the demolition of houses in Sheikh Jarrah, as well as the location of protests¹¹². It utilised the affordances of social media to gain visibility in both public spaces. Thus, cyberspace evolved from a space of news dissemination to a space of visual documentation.

This documentation, however, builds on a long legacy of using documentation and writing as tools of protest.

Visual Resistance In Cyberspace

The idea of documentation as a protest stems from the recognition of writing as an "ideological act of resistance"¹¹³. In Palestine, this act can be observed by the graffitng of the

¹¹⁰ Aouragh, Miriyam. *Palestine online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the construction of identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011.

¹¹¹ Daniele, Giulia, and Sophia Maria Kelsch. "Beyond online and offline activism: # SaveSheikhJarrah and contemporary resistance in Palestine." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1-20.

¹¹² Daniele, Giulia, and Sophia Maria Kelsch. "Beyond online and offline activism: # SaveSheikhJarrah and contemporary resistance in Palestine." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1-20.

¹¹³ Allan, Diana, and Curtis Brown. "The Mavi Marmara at the frontlines of Web 2.0." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 63-77.

Israeli West Bank barrier. Writing on the wall became a symbolic gesture of resistance. Activists have now moved towards cyberspace or what Li and Prasad (2018) call the Wall 2.0¹¹⁴.

Cyberspace has allowed Palestinians to bypass traditional barriers¹¹⁵. Li and Prasad (2018) argue that the strategic deployment of "Wall 2.0" (social media) as a digital battleground enables Palestinians to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, thereby controlling their own narrative and challenging the dominant discourse¹¹⁶. A plethora of Palestinian social media activist groups has emerged, systematically addressing the erosion of Arab-Palestinian rights¹¹⁷. These groups leverage the affordances of various platforms, from short-form video sharing on TikTok for "playful activism" during escalations of violence to image-sharing sites for visual resistance¹¹⁸. The strategic deployment of visual media on social platforms thus became an integral component of digital activism, fostering both awareness and mobilisation by directly engaging users through compelling imagery and live updates¹¹⁹. Activist groups utilise images as a means of survival, with these visuals having "afterlives" within protesting communities¹²⁰. Furthermore, the accessibility of smartphones equipped with high-quality cameras has democratized content creation, transforming ordinary citizens into citizen journalists capable of documenting and broadcasting events as they unfold¹²¹. Thus, cyberspace emerges not only as the public space, but

¹¹⁴ Li, Eric Ping Hung, and Ajnesh Prasad. "From wall 1.0 to wall 2.0: Graffiti, social media, and ideological acts of resistance and recognition among Palestinian refugees." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 4 (2018): 493-511.

¹¹⁵ Li, Eric Ping Hung, and Ajnesh Prasad. "From wall 1.0 to wall 2.0: Graffiti, social media, and ideological acts of resistance and recognition among Palestinian refugees." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 4 (2018): 493-511.

¹¹⁶ Li, Eric Ping Hung, and Ajnesh Prasad. "From wall 1.0 to wall 2.0: Graffiti, social media, and ideological acts of resistance and recognition among Palestinian refugees." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 4 (2018): 493-511.

¹¹⁷ Li, Eric Ping Hung, and Ajnesh Prasad. "From wall 1.0 to wall 2.0: Graffiti, social media, and ideological acts of resistance and recognition among Palestinian refugees." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 4 (2018): 493-511.

¹¹⁸ Cervi, Laura, and Tom Divon. "Playful activism: Memetic performances of Palestinian resistance in TikTok# Challenges." *Social media+ society* 9, no. 1 (2023): 20563051231157607.

¹¹⁹ Fife, Kirsty, Andrew Flinn, and Julianne Nyhan. "Documenting resistance, conflict and violence: a scoping review of the role of participatory digital platforms in the mobilisation of resistance." *Archival Science* 23, no. 3 (2023): 471-499.

¹²⁰ Maimon, Vered. "Surviving images and images of survival: On Activestills' photographs of protest." (2017): 182-95.

¹²¹ Daniele, Giulia, and Sophia Maria Kelsch. "Beyond online and offline activism: # SaveSheikhJarrah and contemporary resistance in Palestine." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1-20.

a space to record and archive daily resistance and challenge traditional media narratives. However, this creates new challenges for protests in our networked/embodyed society.

Surveillance and Repression

The rise of visual documentation also led to more surveillance of social media. In the Arab Spring, media blockades and internet shutdowns were utilised to disrupt coordination between the protestors¹²². More recently, in the Sheikh Jarrah crisis, automated content moderation disproportionately targeted Palestinian activists, leading to widespread removal and restriction of content¹²³. Abokhodair et al. (2024) studied the various censorship methods, including content removal, account restrictions, and even complete account closures¹²⁴. Their research proves that these disproportionately affect Palestinian activists, thereby highlighting the inherent biases within content moderation algorithms¹²⁵. The suppression is often compounded by the lack of clear justifications for content decisions, creating an environment where users feel disempowered and uncertain about the boundaries of acceptable discourse¹²⁶. More covertly, this systemic silencing also manifests as "shadowbanning," where content visibility is subtly reduced without explicit notification, making it difficult for users to gauge the true reach of their messages nor the reasons for their diminished engagement¹²⁷. Furthermore, major social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have been implicated in suppressing protest narratives and promoting

¹²² Lubin, Judy. "The 'Occupy' movement: emerging protest forms and contested urban spaces." *Berkeley Planning Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012).

¹²³ Daniele, Giulia, and Sophia Maria Kelsch. "Beyond online and offline activism: # SaveSheikhJarrah and contemporary resistance in Palestine." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1-20.

¹²⁴ Abokhodair, Norah, Yarden Skop, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, and Houda Elmimouni. "Opaque algorithms, transparent biases: Automated content moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis." *First Monday* (2024).

¹²⁵ Abokhodair, Norah, Yarden Skop, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, and Houda Elmimouni. "Opaque algorithms, transparent biases: Automated content moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis." *First Monday* (2024).

¹²⁶ Lewis, Kelly. "Colonising the narrative space: Unliveable lives, unseeable struggles and the necropolitical governance of digital populations." *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 12 (2023): 2398-2418.

¹²⁷ Daniele, Giulia, and Sophia Maria Kelsch. "Beyond online and offline activism: # SaveSheikhJarrah and contemporary resistance in Palestine." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1-20.

misinformation, exacerbating the digital divide for already marginalised communities¹²⁸. This algorithmic bias, often influenced by keywords and geolocation, paints a bleak picture of intentional suppression, amplifying user distrust in platforms¹²⁹. The opaqueness surrounding content moderation perpetuates existing power asymmetries in a networked/embodied society where social media platforms are crucial arenas for civic engagement. This systematic suppression gives rise to sophisticated workarounds, including the strategic use of alternative platforms, encrypted communication, and community-driven content mirroring to ensure the occupation of space¹³⁰. Thus, this continuous adaptation in the face of digital repression underscores the space of representation in cyberspace.

Ullrich and Knopp (2018) call the strategic deployment of images and videos extends beyond mere documentation as "sousveillance," where citizens actively monitor and record those in power, particularly law enforcement¹³¹. This practice is distinct from traditional surveillance and aims to reverse the gaze, holding authorities accountable and providing alternative perspectives on events that might otherwise be controlled or distorted by official narratives¹³². Moreover, activists already speak in "Algospeak", a way of speaking where activists self-censor words that they think the algorithm doesn't like, by either not saying them at all or inventing brand new

¹²⁸ Olson, Lauren, Emitzá Guzmán, and Florian Kunneman. "Along the margins: Marginalized communities' ethical concerns about social platforms." In *2023 IEEE/ACM 45th International Conference on Software Engineering: Software Engineering in Society (ICSE-SEIS)*, pp. 71-82. IEEE, 2023.

¹²⁹ Abokhodair, Norah, Yarden Skop, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, and Houda Elmimouni. "Opaque algorithms, transparent biases: Automated content moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis." *First Monday* (2024).

¹³⁰ Abokhodair, Norah, Yarden Skop, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, and Houda Elmimouni. "Opaque algorithms, transparent biases: Automated content moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis." *First Monday* (2024).

¹³¹ Ullrich, Peter, and Philipp Knopp. "Protesters' reactions to video surveillance of demonstrations: Counter-moves, security cultures, and the spiral of surveillance and counter-surveillance." *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 2 (2018): 183-202.

¹³² Ullrich, Peter, and Philipp Knopp. "Protesters' reactions to video surveillance of demonstrations: Counter-moves, security cultures, and the spiral of surveillance and counter-surveillance." *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 2 (2018): 183-202.

words¹³³. Thus, the reappropriation of visual media transforms bystanders into active participants who circumvent the limitations placed by algorithmically controlled social media platforms.

This review followed the emergence and evolution of cyberspace as a protest space. It covered the centrality of urban loci, the affordances of social media and their uses, the proliferation of visual media as a form of protest and the opaqueness of algorithmic content moderation. The effort was to give a comprehensive overview of the discourse about opportunities and barriers that have emerged since the convergence of online and offline protesting. This research builds on these theories and provides new explanations about how space is produced and contested in the #FreePalestine Movement.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship details the convergence of both public spaces and the evolution of cyberspace from a tool to an arena of protest. There is a lot of scholarship on identity creation and cyberspace as a *tool* for protest. However, this research there is little research on cyberspace as an *arena* of protest. My thesis bridges this gap by applying Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to cyberspace by examining the infrastructure, actions, barriers and symbols that exist within it. This thesis addresses this gap by extending Lefebvre's critical urban-theoretical lens to cyberspace, particularly the #FreePalestine movement. In an effort to reveal how protest movements produce, contest and negotiate space, both online and offline, in highly visible and oppressive public spaces.

¹³³ Üstün Külünk, Sema. "Gaza speaks through translation: The politics of language on Palestinian social media." *Continuum* (2025): 1

Methodology

Methodological Framework

This research is situated within the interdisciplinary field of digital anthropology, which examines how digital technologies shape, mediate, and are embedded within social and cultural practices¹³⁴. Digital anthropology emphasises that online spaces are not isolated “virtual” realms but extensions and entanglements of offline life, shaped by the same cultural logics, power relations, and social structures¹³⁵. By approaching digital platforms as lived spaces, this study draws on anthropological methods to understand the practices and the people that produce space.

Within this framework, the study adopts virtual ethnography as its principal method of investigation¹³⁶¹³⁷. Virtual ethnography recognises that the internet is both a site and a product of social interaction, requiring flexible, adaptive methods that combine online and offline observations. This approach treats digital environments as integral to everyday social worlds, enabling the researcher to follow connections between content, communities, and embodied practices across platforms and geographies. More importantly, this method “draws on the

¹³⁴ Miller, Daniel. *Digital anthropology*. Routledge, 2020.

¹³⁵ Miller, Daniel, and Don Slater. *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*. Routledge, 2020.

¹³⁶ Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, Tania Lewis, Larissa Hjorth, and John Postill. "Digital ethnography: Principles and practice." (2015): 1-216.

¹³⁷ Hine, Christine. *Virtual Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857020277>.

experiences of the researcher as an important means of insight”¹³⁸. Thus, I will be delving into cyberspace through my own social media.

The empirical design is multi-sited, utilising George Marcus’ (1995) multisited ethnography framework¹³⁹. The project follows the flow of protest discourse on TikTok and Instagram. This was done deliberately to be able to compare the social practices between both platforms. Furthermore, in line with virtual ethnography, the study uses discourse analysis of posts, videos, comment sections, and activist group spaces to capture the dynamics of interaction in real time¹⁴⁰. These observations are supplemented by digital trace data such as hashtags.

By integrating digital anthropology’s ethnographic sensitivity with the methodological flexibility of virtual ethnography, this research seeks to capture the interplay between online political discourse and the production of space.

Case study selection

This research focuses on the #FreePalestine movement to demonstrate the production of space in protest movements, both online and offline. The literature discusses the politics of cyberspace but does not engage in politics within and through cyberspace. This research required a case study that met four criteria: It had to be an urban movement rooted in the occupation of space, it had to have a significant online presence, it had to be easily accessible, and it had to be ongoing. This case study satisfied all 4 requirements.

¹³⁸ Hine, Christine. "Virtual ethnography: Modes, varieties, affordances." *The SAGE handbook of online research methods* (2008): 257-270.

¹³⁹ Marcus, George E. "Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography." *Annual review of anthropology* 24, no. 1 (1995): 95-117.

¹⁴⁰ Postill, John, and Sarah Pink. "Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web." *Media International Australia* 145, no. 1 (2012): 123-134.

First, the #FreePalestine movement is inexplicably tied to the concept of space and occupation. The central tenet of the movement revolves around ‘what is Palestine’ and ‘who gets to live in it’. Moreover, the protests for Palestine largely took place in urban areas, mostly in central and public areas. Even before the encampments began, large swaths of crowds had taken over roads, parks, and squares to amplify their demands.

Second, the movement is deeply connected with cyberspace. Since the provision of the internet in Palestine, activists have been using it to organise. Now, with social media, everything that was happening on the ground was being reported and documented online. This meant that this thesis would be able to compare both forms of protests and the discourse surrounding them.

Third, the #FreePalestine movement is a global movement that has a lot of data available. Activists, journalists, content creators, regular people, everyone was talking about Palestine and sharing content. This meant that this thesis would get a diverse range of voices to work with. The sheer volume of data made it easier to access and analyse discourse surrounding the movement.

Fourth, the movement is still going on. Having a movement that is actively evolving and reshaping itself was pertinent to this research. Often, movements that happened in the past already have a narrative set about them (whether it was a success or failure) and opinions about their strengths and weaknesses. This research wanted to focus on a movement that was dynamic and uncertain to avoid falling into the trap of reiterating established opinions. Thus, the #FreePalestine movement aligned perfectly with my goals to analyse the production of space in public spaces in the physical and online realms

Research design

This research used creative methods for my primary research. To conduct my virtual ethnography, three methods of data collection were employed. The objective was to substitute the weakness of one method with the strength of the other to achieve maximum validity. Since this is not traditional urban research, a slight modification of traditional methods is necessary to collect valid and reliable data.

The first creative method I will use is sociological discourse analysis. This approach examines a piece of media and the resulting conversations surrounding that piece of media as evidence of sociological attitudes¹⁴¹. Discourse analysis is “designed to identify the various ways in which communities and institutions identify social phenomena and the problems associated with these phenomena”¹⁴². In doing this, it reveals perspectives that are marginalised or overlooked”¹⁴³. Most importantly, this approach allows the researcher to look beyond the literal meanings of texts and “research results are therefore not descriptions of a social phenomenon or problem, but rather descriptions of the possible ways in which such phenomena or problems are seen or interpreted by people within a particular cultural context”¹⁴⁴. Thus, it will allow this thesis to uncover the hidden assumptions that are underlying the movement because “It is based on the idea that when people communicate, they may express their own intentions or viewpoints but have to formulate their thoughts based on the background of ‘common sense’ understandings shared by the community”¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴¹ Ehgartner, U. "Sociological discourse analysis." *Methods for change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems. Aspect and the University of Manchester* (2021).

¹⁴² Ehgartner, U. "Sociological discourse analysis." *Methods for change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems. Aspect and the University of Manchester* (2021).

¹⁴³ Ehgartner, U. "Sociological discourse analysis." *Methods for change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems. Aspect and the University of Manchester* (2021).

¹⁴⁴ Ehgartner, U. "Sociological discourse analysis." *Methods for change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems. Aspect and the University of Manchester* (2021).

¹⁴⁵ Ehgartner, U. "Sociological discourse analysis." *Methods for change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems. Aspect and the University of Manchester* (2021).

This thesis used videos/posts and hashtags of Palestinian journalists, content creators, diaspora, awareness pages, fundraisers and sympathisers of the movement for as 'texts' to analyse. Through these texts, this research looked at who is speaking, how they speak, what they talk about, and who they address when they talk. This will help to deconstruct how people conceive and create space during protest. I narrowed the scope of this research to Instagram and TikTok, which were both primarily video-based platforms. The initial plan was to include X as well; however, the frequent changes to X's algorithm during the research period made it ultimately too volatile to gain any consistent results. With Instagram and TikTok, I only included videos that were recommended to me by the algorithm on my Feed and For You Page, respectively. This was done to reduce any selection bias; however, the algorithm is known to suggest content based on what you already like, which is a consideration that will be addressed in the limitations section. This research took care to include perspectives from both verified pages and journalists with large followings and smaller creators with limited followings and reach as well. Moreover, the text was also balanced to include voices from Palestinians on the ground, the diaspora and non-Palestinian supporters. This was done to ensure that no group is overrepresented in the data, and the diversity of the presented opinions reflects the diversity of the sample population. Hashtags were included because they are methods of self-cataloguing by creators online. By studying what hashtags were being created, this thesis would be able to unravel the hidden logics behind the movement. Thus, a wide selection criterion was created in an attempt to encompass diverse voices within the #FreePalestine movement.

The second creative method used was semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' perspectives on the relationship between online and offline activism, the dynamics of political discourse on social media, and their own strategies for navigating platform algorithms and audiences. This method allows for a balance between

having a baseline and also investigating topics as they arise¹⁴⁶. The primary aim of these interviews was to investigate how activists created, negotiated and conceptualised space through their actions. Since the discourse analysis of the posts and videos relied on the researchers' social media, this method ensured that the researchers' biases were checked. This method also helped ground the content that was seen online in everyday resistance practices offline, as well as provide personal and communal context for their actions. Thus, semi-structured interviews provided the necessary details and provided an answer to the elusive 'why' behind their motivations.

An interview guide was developed, informed by the theoretical framework and preliminary observations from social media content analysis. Questions addressed participants' offline protests, use of Instagram and TikTok, their perceptions of the affordances and limitations of these platforms, their experiences with censorship or content moderation, and their reflections on audience engagement and community formation. Interviews were conducted via video call or in-person, depending on location and participant preference, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. This approach allowed this thesis to capture both anticipated and unanticipated dimensions of participants' experiences in the networked public sphere.

Thus, by using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, this thesis aimed to gain a holistic picture of the production of space and protest.

Data collection

For discourse analysis, this research began saving videos on my Instagram and TikTok at the start of 2024. Prior to this, I was logging posts in a OneNote sheet; however, saving the posts directly in the apps, in a dedicated folder, was far easier to do. As these posts were logged, I kept

¹⁴⁶ Kvale, Steinar, and Svend Brinkmann. *Interviews*. Sage, 2015.

a note of any emerging, recurring and interesting themes that I found. These were tracked in my OneNote and kept me updated on the evolutions in the discourse. I noted down my thoughts and corroborated them with what I was hearing in the interviews. After this, I placed each post into a dedicated theme. Some themes were easily placed, while others were left in the miscellaneous section. By May of 2025, a clear picture of the discourse in and about the movement was emerging. I was worried that I would be imposing the idea of space and the occupation of space onto the online arena; however, I was pleased to find an abundance of videos that addressed the creation and occupation of online space. Once I had a rough idea of my themes, I moved on to quantitative analysis.

A thematic co-occurrence analysis was applied to the data. This was done to investigate any quantitative relationships between the themes. This was done to verify the results of the discourse analysis through quantitative analytical methods. Each Instagram and TikTok post/video was catalogued in an Excel sheet with the date it was posted and a summary of its contents, along with any notable quotations. In total, 285 Instagram posts and 95 TikToks were collected over the period from February 2024 to August 2025. Once each entry was logged in, the content was reviewed and tagged based on the themes I had observed earlier. Each entry received a minimum of one and a maximum of 5 tags. Afterwards, co-occurrence analysis was carried out in Excel with the help of a thematic co-occurrence matrix. I initially logged almost 20 different themes, which were later condensed into 10 themes after review. This was done to eliminate an overlap between themes. For example, Documenting Daily Life and Everyday Abuses are essentially recording the same content. I condensed my themes until I was sure that each theme pertained to a unique type of content online. The final themes included Cyberspace As An Archive (recording and preserving something in cyberspace), Cyberspace As A Coordination Tool (using cyberspace to plan protests and fundraisers), Occupying Space Online (posting to achieve virality and/attention), Occupying Space Offline (protesting in physical space to achieve visibility),

Censorship/Surveillance (discourse around content mediation, shadow banning, doxxing and persecution), Solidarity/Community (posting/protesting to express solidarity and building community), Dehumanisation of Palestinians (posts that dehumanise or talk about the dehumanisation, physical and mental exhaustion, and constant struggle to hold our attention), Slacktivism (posts that display or address slacktivism from sympathisers and users of social media), Symbols/Graffiti (symbols references the movement online or offline) and the Aestheticization of Symbols (Turning protest symbols into clothes, jewellery and other commodities). This list is by no means exhaustive, but it was an attempt to categorise all the different kinds of content I was seeing online for archiving and comparative analysis. The matrix allowed me to see the presence and strength of a co-occurrence within themes and glean a deeper understanding of why certain themes were appearing together. However, to comprehend why certain themes co-occurred, I had to analyse the content of the posts themselves and peel back the layers of meaning to reveal why activists were behaving the way they were.

The next step was the interviews. I held off doing my interviews until I had at least some of my themes decided. Since I had settled on semi-structured interviews, I needed to know what I wanted to investigate beforehand. The interview was divided into 4 sections: offline activism, online activism, the intersection of offline and online and the future of the movement. I asked them why and how they posted on social media, how they protest in physical space, the barriers they have experienced in both, how they leverage the affordances of social media for their cause and what they think the future of the movement is. The full interview guide can be found in the annexe. For these interviews, my research kept the focus narrowed on the student activist movement in various European universities. Students who led or participated in Palestine Action Groups or student encampments on their campuses were the main target. The strategy was to first contact students around me (Vienna) and then rely on the snowball effect to gain more interviewees. The first point of contact was students in the Palestine Action Group at the

University of Vienna. From there, I messaged the Instagram pages of UniWien for Palestine, TU Wien for Palestine, Camp4Palestine Vienna, Palästinaforum Austria and SPC Austria. My goal was to get at least one person from each organisation to speak to me. In the end, I was able to speak to four people from the University of Vienna, two from TU Wien and one student affiliated with the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Luxembourg. Having hit a dead end in Vienna, I opened my search to other universities in Europe. I was able to speak to a researcher from VUB, a student from the University of Bern and one at the University of Oxford. In total, I collected 10 interviews. I also contacted pages that ran awareness and fundraising campaigns for Palestine, such as: Operation Olive Branch, Funds for Gaza, Project Watermelon, Celebrities for Palestine, Wear The Peace, Eye on Palestine, Watermelon Relief and Palestine Memorial. Additionally, I also messaged journalists and content creators like Alana Hadid, Jenan Matari and Plestia. Some of them expressed interest, but it was unable to commit, while the majority did not respond.

My final sample of 10 interviewees was balanced in terms of gender, though most of them were students. Moreover, Vienna was overrepresented in my sample because it was where I was able to form connections with the local movements and speak to the participants. It is important to note that pages like Funds for Gaza and TU Wien had more people interested in the project, but did not want to commit for fear of their identities being revealed. Though I recorded the interviews with the consent of the interviewees and anonymised them, many still felt uncomfortable speaking on the record. This is not surprising since one of my interviewees was fired from their job just two days after we talked.

Challenges and solutions

The most obvious challenges came in terms of the interviewees. I was unable to reach as many people as I wanted. I had wanted the sample to be representative of the diversity I was

witnessing online; however, limitations in resources and time meant that I was only able to interview 10 people. Moreover, the majority of these were university students and not staff, which impacted their views significantly. Given their age, most of them relied heavily on social media to get their messages across and tended to focus their protests at their universities. This limited my ability to gauge whether social media has permeated older activists, too, or if the spaces of protest vary according to age. Furthermore, considering that most of my interviews were focused on Vienna, I was unable to gauge the relationship between other activists and the state. The relationship in Vienna is quite hostile, and that came through in the interviews, but I cannot make any generalisation of the #FreePalestine movement in Europe or even Austria as a whole. I sought to offset this lack of diversity by the volume of data collected through Instagram and TikTok.

The second limitation was the inaccessibility of sophisticated network analysis software. The initial plan was to construct a map of the connections between hashtags and posts. This required the use of hashtag analysis tools like SocioViz or Pulsar. These technologies would allow me to track the connections between each post, user, engager and hashtag and even give me automated themes based on the themes. Unfortunately, they all had paid demos (around 100 euros) and long waiting lists. My supervisor asked for some research funding on my behalf, but it was denied. I also emailed them multiple times asking for access for research purposes, however was unsuccessful in getting a response. The use of these technologies would've allowed me to study a far larger volume of data and conduct a more in-depth analysis. Despite this, I was able to collect and analyse a sizeable amount of data by manual methods as well.

Lastly, the nature of a virtual ethnography is such that the researcher is both a participant and observer in the virtual environment they are studying. In this case, I am both a participant and an observer of the movement online. By virtue of the fact that it is my For You Page and

Feed that is being used to gather data, I am limited by what the algorithm thinks is relevant to me. It reveals as much about my own preferences as it does about the algorithm. It is hard to make generalisations about the algorithms because I am only seeing the content that is tailored for me. This exacerbates the problem of filter bubbles because I am unable to see alternative views and accounts. I cannot speak on the success of the movement, nor can I speak on whether it has raised awareness among people who previously disagreed. I focused this research more on what I observed activists wanted to achieve. What were the motivations behind posting consistently online and archiving every atrocity? Who did the activists assume was listening? Who did they hope to reach? What barriers do they perceive they currently face in terms of content suppression? I was more concerned with investigating the perceptions and objectives behind the content rather than establishing facts. Like any virtual ethnography, due to the fragmentary and individual nature of cyberspace, the researcher can never know the absolute truth; however, I endeavoured to the best of my abilities to uncover the layers in what I was witnessing in *my* cyberspace.

Ethical considerations

Due to my focus on the #FreePalestine movement online, some of the content in this thesis is extremely graphic and disturbing. I am aware that by choosing to write this thesis, I am adding to the spectacle of the Palestinian people. I am unsettled by the idea of using their pain to create knowledge; however, I realise that not studying the movement would also be a disservice to the Palestinian people. Thus, the main concern I have wrestled with is how to study the movement while maintaining sensitivity and respect for the subjects. To ensure this, I avoided adding photos and videos that were particularly graphic and added to the dehumanisation of Palestinians. That content is readily available online and no doubt already branded on our conscience. I also made sure to treat the journalists and the dead with dignity. They are not just nameless Palestinians, and where I could find the name of the person, I was sure to add it. I am aware that I am not Palestinian;

thus, there is an element of exploiting their pain for my academic pursuits. However, in the words of Palestinian poet and journalist Mohammad El-Kurd, it is not wrong to talk about Palestine, so long as you treat them with dignity and cite Palestinian voices¹⁴⁷. Thus, throughout the thesis, I took care to highlight Palestinian scholars, journalists and civilians. Their words and their stories and their theories are the beating heart of this thesis.

¹⁴⁷ El-Kurd, Mohammed. *Perfect Victims: And the Politics of Appeal*. Haymarket Books, 2025.

Results

This thesis laboured to answer the question: how do activists in the #FreePalestine produce, occupy and negotiate space for protest in physical and online public space? To answer this primary question, this research divides it into 3 sub-questions. First, how do activists in the #FreePalestine movement occupy space in a networked/embodyed society? Second, how do censorship and surveillance limit the opportunities for protest in public space? Third, how do activists navigate the barriers to protesting in public spaces?

Each section loosely corresponds to one component of Lefebvre's triad and reveals how space is produced within the #FreePalestine movement. The first section addresses the actions taken by activists to achieve visibility and secure space/attention, revealing the spatial practices that shape current protesting. The second section examines the effects of the (digital) panopticon and how it curtails protests, engaging with the representation of space and the structures that inhibit protest. The third section discusses the strategies to combat this surveillance and the apathy created by new forms of protesting, exploring the spaces of representation and the struggle to protest in public spaces.

As established in the literature, due to the intertwined nature of cyberspace and physical space, protesting must simultaneously occur in both realms. Public space is contested, segregated, and demarcated; occupying it is the ultimate act of resistance. Cyberspace is both embodied and networked; hence, protesting is both embodied in the city and also networked via cyberspace. By applying Lefebvre's urban theory to cyberspace, this research was able to how space was being produced online and how its intersection with urban public space is changing activists' relations to public space. In the case of the #FreePalestine movement, the space that is produced online is both highly visible and easily surveilled, mirroring the patterns of protest in

public leisure spaces. This presents unique challenges and opportunities for protesting. Thus, activists have developed tactics to “hide in plain sight” to avoid surveillance while occupying space.

Spatial Practices of the #FreePalestine Movement

This section concerns itself with answering the sub-question of this thesis: how do activists in the #FreePalestine movement occupy space through spatial practices in a networked/embody society? It focuses on how the affordances of social media and the actions taken by activists to occupy space in both public spaces.

Encampments and Arrests: The Occupation of Space As Protest

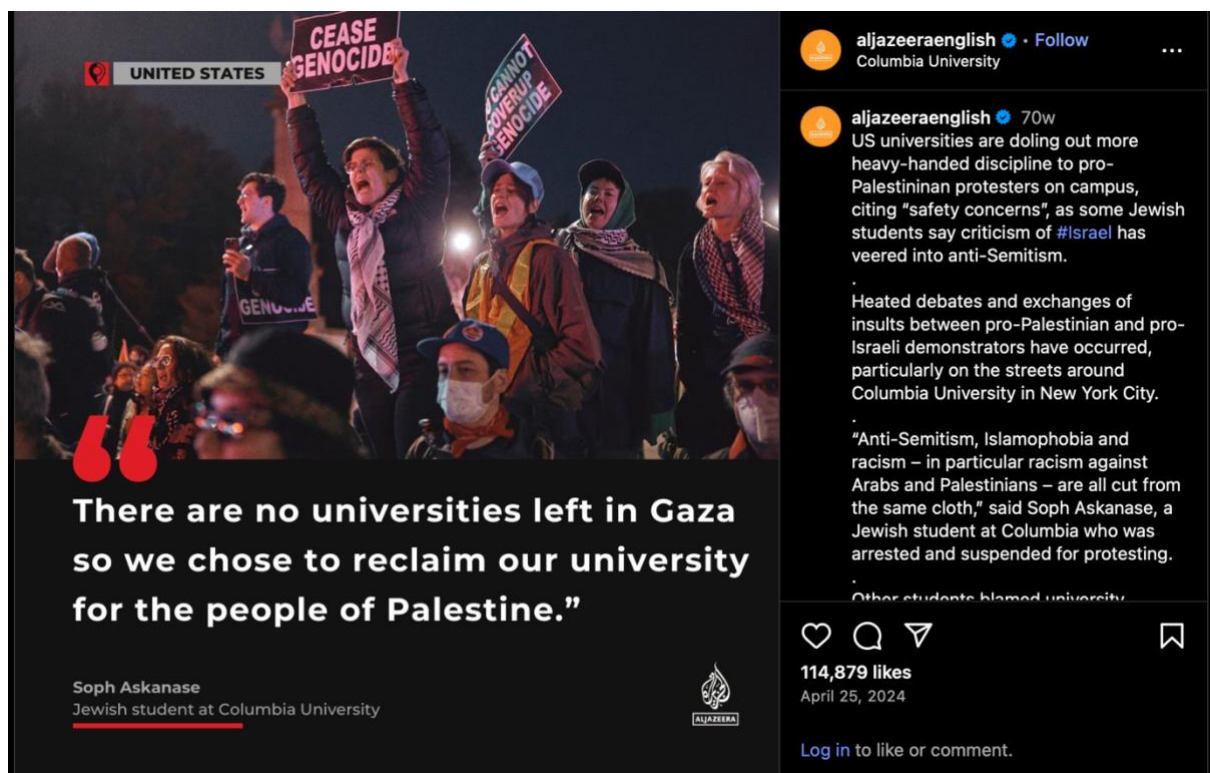


Figure 1: Al Jazeera Reports on the Student Encampment at Columbia University

In the offline space, Palestinian activists build on the legacy of the protest movements before by continuing the occupation of space. Like Occupy Wall Street, Tahrir Square and Spanish Indignados, the Palestinian activists have chosen various public spaces to gain visibility. The space that becomes the site of protest tends to be public, visible, somewhat hostile and easily occupied. Often, these result in protests in front of the Israeli Consulate¹⁴⁸ and shutting down major roads to march for Palestine¹⁴⁹. However, the most fascinating development is the encampments at university campuses around the world. Taking inspiration from the occupation of Hamilton Hall in the 1960s to protest racial segregation and Columbia's investment in the apartheid regime of South Africa¹⁵⁰, students took over Hamilton Hall again and renamed it Hind's Hall¹⁵¹. The name pays homage to 6-year-old Hind Rajab, who was shot 355 times by a tank and killed with her family while waiting for an ambulance¹⁵². Encampments spread across campuses in the US and even the EU, where students camped on university grounds and even inside buildings to demand divestment from Israeli universities and research projects¹⁵³. The

¹⁴⁸ "Jenan Matari: جنان المطري on Instagram: 'Direct Ask from Gaza. Bang the Pots. July 24.'" Instagram, July 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMbcEHuvP8a/?igsh=MTEzbTJ6OXNoaDRzaA>

¹⁴⁹ "Wissam Nassar on Instagram: 'Thousands Have Overwhelmed the Streets in Istanbul, Turkiye, on the First Day of the New Year 2025 in Solidarity with the Palestinian People amidst the Ongoing Israeli Genocide!'" Instagram, January 2025. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DESN7lcOppJ/?igsh=MXJxcDczZDN3YThyNQ>.

¹⁵⁰ Alfonseca, Kiara. "How Campus Protests of the Past May Inform Pro-Palestinian Student Demonstrations." ABC News, May 6, 2024. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/campus-protests-past-inform-pro-palestinian-student-demonstrations/story?id=109907597>.

¹⁵¹ Sumud Coalition, "Sumud Coalition on Instagram: '🚩 tonight 🚩 Photo ID: Black and White Photo of Columbia University Students and Hind's Hall with 5 Lines of Text Reading "Cross Campus 8PM" Map to Cross Campus in Pinned Post.'" Instagram, May 1, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6bc1amrTse/?igsh=bjVqM3I4NW5pNHYy>.

¹⁵² "Slow Factory 🌍 on Instagram: 'on This Day, Last Year, 355 Bullets by the "Israeli" Occupation to Free Palestine.'" Instagram, January 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DFajERfA_pV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

¹⁵³ Wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), "Free Palestine. End the Occupation. 🍉 1. X: Saaaauul 2. X: Vivafalastin 3. @hindkhoudary 4. @shaabanoffilm," *Instagram*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6cdbVyOeb4/?igsh=ODkwcXJyMmpjMWo4>

protestors all faced varying degrees of criminal charges (from trespassing to terrorism) and harassment from the authorities for their actions, despite the university campus being a public space. At UCLA, the state troops were called in by the university president¹⁵⁴, and Mahmood Khalil and others were detained by ICE in connection with the protests¹⁵⁵. They were all an effort to take control of these public spaces. Interviewee 4, a participant and organiser in one such encampment, stated that while choosing a site for protest, they wanted it to have “historic and symbolic meaning, as well as be central enough to not be ignored”¹⁵⁶. Interviewee 2 said they try to protest in the centre or highly visible spaces in Vienna (Like Stephansplatz or Mariahilferstrasse) or places of symbolic meaning like the Israeli Embassy¹⁵⁷. Thus, the Palestinian movement furthers the legacy of the occupation of space by the employing encampments as a tool of visibility and pressure. Similarly, the Palestinian movement now also focuses on occupying online space.

¹⁵⁴ Sandragathmann, “Wondering What’s Happening at US Universities Right Now? Check Out This Quick Explainer. #Gaza #Columbia #Protests,” *Instagram*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6M0rdLNlIaa/?igsh=MWtrNGhxMTZwYWWhyYQ==> #Gaza #Columbia #Protests,” *Instagram*, April 25, 2024, [#https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6M0rdLNlIaa/?igsh=MWtrNGhxMTZwYWWhyYQ==#Gaza #Columbia #Protests,](https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6M0rdLNlIaa/?igsh=MWtrNGhxMTZwYWWhyYQ==)” *Instagram*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6M0rdLNlIaa/?igsh=MWtrNGhxMTZwYWWhyYQ==> #Gaza #Columbia #Protests,” *Instagram*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6M0rdLNlIaa/?igsh=MWtrNGhxMTZwYWWhyYQ==> #Gaza #Columbia #Protests,” *Instagram*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6M0rdLNlIaa/?igsh=MWtrNGhxMTZwYWWhyYQ==>

155 Nationalsjp, “ SEND THE LETTER LINKED IN BIO  A Palestinian Student Activist at Columbia University, Mahmoud Khalil, Has Been Abducted and Detained by the Department of Homeland Security for Over 12 Hours After Months of Targeted Harassment by the University. Demand His Immediate Release Through the Letter at <https://shorturl.at/Lm86S>. This Injustice Cannot Stand for Mahmoud or for Anyone Else! Demand Columbia Keep Its Students Safe and Refuse ICE on Campus!” *Instagram*, March 9, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DG_COkHOscb/?igsh=MTZuMGQ0YXRqZmJqOA==

¹⁵⁶ Interviewee 4, interview by author, June 26, 2025.

¹⁵⁷ Interviewee 3, interview by author, June 24, 2025.

What The Hashtag: Creating Space in Cyberspace

My research suggests that due to as cyberspace and physical space became more intertwined, activism on social media began to mirror the actions taken offline. Thus, activism evolved from using cyberspace *to* protest to protesting *in* cyberspace. While the physical arena is embodied and tangible, cyberspace is intangible, but it is still embodied. Referring to Julie Cohen's theory about the nature of cyberspace helps us visualise the arena and, subsequently, the political actions that populate it. Since cyberspace is neither aspatial nor ethereal, and the actors in cyberspace are embodied users, their actions are constrained and influenced by offline politics. To a certain degree, the actions they undertake in cyberspace mirror and expand on the actions taken in offline space. However, the reimagining of protest also warrants a reimagining of what constitutes protest.

As mentioned in the literature, the internet was initially relegated to a coordinating position. Gradually, the internet was seen as a viable space to record and store visual information regarding a protest. Protest within the online arena involves anything that allows a particular community/topic to gain visibility. For example, posting anything that relates to the Palestinian people, their lives, culture, and struggle is perceived as a protest because it captures people's attention in the online arena. These practices seek to gain visibility on social media platforms that are now perceived as the new public squares¹⁵⁸. Just as the popular movements of the past had sought to occupy physical space, they aim to mark their presence in cyberspace. However, given the vastly different nature of cyberspace, their methods of visibility and occupation are innovative.

¹⁵⁸ Al Jazeera English, “#AJOPINION: ‘Indeed, Even in America, Where Politicians Seem Committed to Protecting Israel at Any Cost, People Have Regularly Taken to the Streets to Demand an End to the Brutal War on Gaza’s Population,’ Writes Majed al-Zeer, Chairman, European Palestinian Council for Political Relations (EUPAC),” *Instagram*, January 14, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEy4_Axsj5n/?igsh=MXZjcDR0Z3NjOGwzZA==

In essence, this paper argues that each post creates a new public space for dialogue. It can be liked, commented on, reposted, and stitched (in the case of TikToks). It in itself becomes both a protest tool and the place to protest. People can agree with the post or disagree with the post, but their attention amplifies it regardless. Each post then leads to new posts that create their own arenas. This creates a multiplicity of arenas for protests. Instead of occupying a single arena, the posts themselves create many smaller arenas that can be contested. However, the multiplicity of arenas creates fragmentation and a dispersal that may be counterproductive to the movement. Hashtags, however, can resolve this issue by grouping all posts about the movement under one space.

Hashtags are a “soft resource” that does more than just archive the movement; they are both a component of the production of space online and a tool for the occupation of that space. Hashtags act as markers in cyberspace. They tell both the users and the algorithm what a particular post is about. They are identifiers and aggregators of data, so that users and algorithms can easily locate related topics. A hashtag may be created to raise awareness about something (a protest, a boycott, an attack) and gain relevance by amassing posts that use the same hashtag. On the other hand, a hashtag may be co-opted to raise awareness as well. Hashtags about pop culture or celebrities have been frequently co-opted by the movement to push their content and break the ‘filter bubble’ (more on that later). They are the phenomena that give solidarity and unity to an online movement. While in the offline arena, it is the number of bodies that determines the strength of a protest, here it is the number of posts. The scalability, searchability, replicability and persistence of hashtags have morphed them into a public space for protest, an archive, a tool and a visibility test all in one. Thus, the hashtag then becomes the public space that is both contested and visible.

#CeasefireNow: The Occupation of Online Public Space

In my analysis, I collected hashtags related to the movement that were being used in the captions on both Instagram and TikTok. I divide these hashtags into 4 main categories: place, action, place + action and statement. This research aims to understand what led to the creation of a hashtag and what effect the users hoped to achieve by looking at the words themselves.

First, most hashtags were rooted in a place. For example, free Palestine, Sheikh Jarrah, Silwan, Al Quds, Al Aqsa, Gaza, Jerusalem, Rafah, and the West Bank. All of these are locations or regions within Palestine that are under attack by Israel. The most recent hashtags related to areas in Gaza where the IDF launched ground invasions, such as Rafah. The duplication of a physical space into an online space through the creation of a hashtag is an act of archiving itself. The hashtag is a marker and a reminder of a space that is both inaccessible and under attack. I collected a total of 49 hashtags, of which 13 were just names of places. Thus, the hashtag serves the dual purpose of both a public space and an archive.

Analysis	Count of Analysis
Place + Action	18
Place	13
Action	10
Statement	8
Grand Total	49

Table 1: Hashtag Breakdown

Second, the action-oriented hashtags like #BDS and #BoycottApartheid focused on a particular call for action against the Israeli occupation¹⁵⁹. They were concise and to the point, and told the user what they were meant to do. They condensed complex actions into one word or phrase in an attempt to mobilise the people. For example, #CeasefireNow, #NoTechForApartheid, #EndTheOccupation, #LetFoodIn, #StopKillingChildren and #EndApartheid. They were recurring and gained popularity whenever a company or celebrity refused to condemn the genocide¹⁶⁰. For example, when activists campaigned to ban Israel from FIFA (#RedCardIsrael), these hashtags were employed in captions on videos that showed supporters holding up red cards at FIFA games¹⁶¹. They were only created as a response to a specific event and were almost accompanied by a parent hashtag like #FreePalestine or #SavePalestine. #CeasefireNow was trending when Israel bombed the tents in October 2024¹⁶², #BlockTheBoat was a response to the ships bringing weapons to arm the IDF¹⁶³ and #LetFoodIn was trending after Israel imposed a blockade of all aid into Gaza¹⁶⁴. It is important to note that none of these hashtags were born in isolation; they were all connected to the urban public spaces, either by referencing an urban space or calling for action in one. They created

¹⁵⁹ BDS.Movement, “Every Day, Palestinians Illegally Held Captive Are Subjected to Horrific Abuses in Israeli Prisons—and Corporations Like Google, Amazon and HP Are Complicit in It. Join the Global Day of Mobilization on 3 August for Gaza and Palestinian Prisoners—and for Escalation of All BDS Campaigns Against Israel, and in Particular the #BoycottHP and #NoTechForApartheid Campaigns, Due to the Direct Complicity of HPE, Google and Amazon in Israel’s Crimes Against Our Prisoners and Hostages. From the River to the Sea: Stop Israel’s #GazaGenocide, Free Palestinian Prisoners!” *Instagram*, August 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-LO2wstIve/?igsh=MWdqWt1YzAwczRjBw==>

¹⁶⁰ Middleeasteye, “‘It’s Not a Big Sacrifice.’ UN Special Rapporteur @francesca.albanese.unsr.opt tells @el.sayed she has closed her Airbnb and Booking.com accounts because of their complicity in the unlawful occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem...,” *Instagram*, July 20, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMVhzhHNQYI/?igsh=enF3NjlxCTZzaTFi>.

¹⁶¹ Angie__mariie, “#fifaworldcup,” *TikTok*, July 17, 2024, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4QUvau/>

¹⁶² AJPlus, “‘It’s Not the First Time That They Burned Palestinians Alive.’ International Law Expert @nouraerakat on Israel Consistently Crossing Red Lines With Its Massacres of Palestinians...,” *Instagram*, October 19, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBSF-2TRpv0/?igsh=Z21pem80dWwxNDN6>

¹⁶³ BDS.Movement, “Dockworkers in Fos-sur-Mer, France, Delay the Nexoe MAERSK Ship, Part of a Fleet Carrying F-35 Parts for Israel’s Ongoing Genocide of Palestinians in Gaza...,” *Instagram*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DlCtEM8BJt-5/?igsh=cGoxbmsyM3h0bDli>

¹⁶⁴ Thegoldenbalance, “Palestinian Fattet Hummus 🍷,” *TikTok*, May 21, 2025, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4kcKK3/>

what Gerbaudo called “virtual proximity”, which was essential in creating a sense of belonging and solidarity for the activists and the Palestinian diaspora¹⁶⁵. This laid the groundwork for the progression of the movement into its present form in 2025. However, all of these prompted some sort of action, but lack any details of who, when and where. I observed that in an attempt to make a message easily replicable and viral, hashtags often become vague. These hashtags are almost always contextual and are meaningless without an accompanying post that explains what is being demanded in full. They make it easy to amplify a message but rob it of any nuance. I recorded 10 unique hashtags that talked specifically about actions. Thus, hashtags are only one part of the spatial practices that produce space.

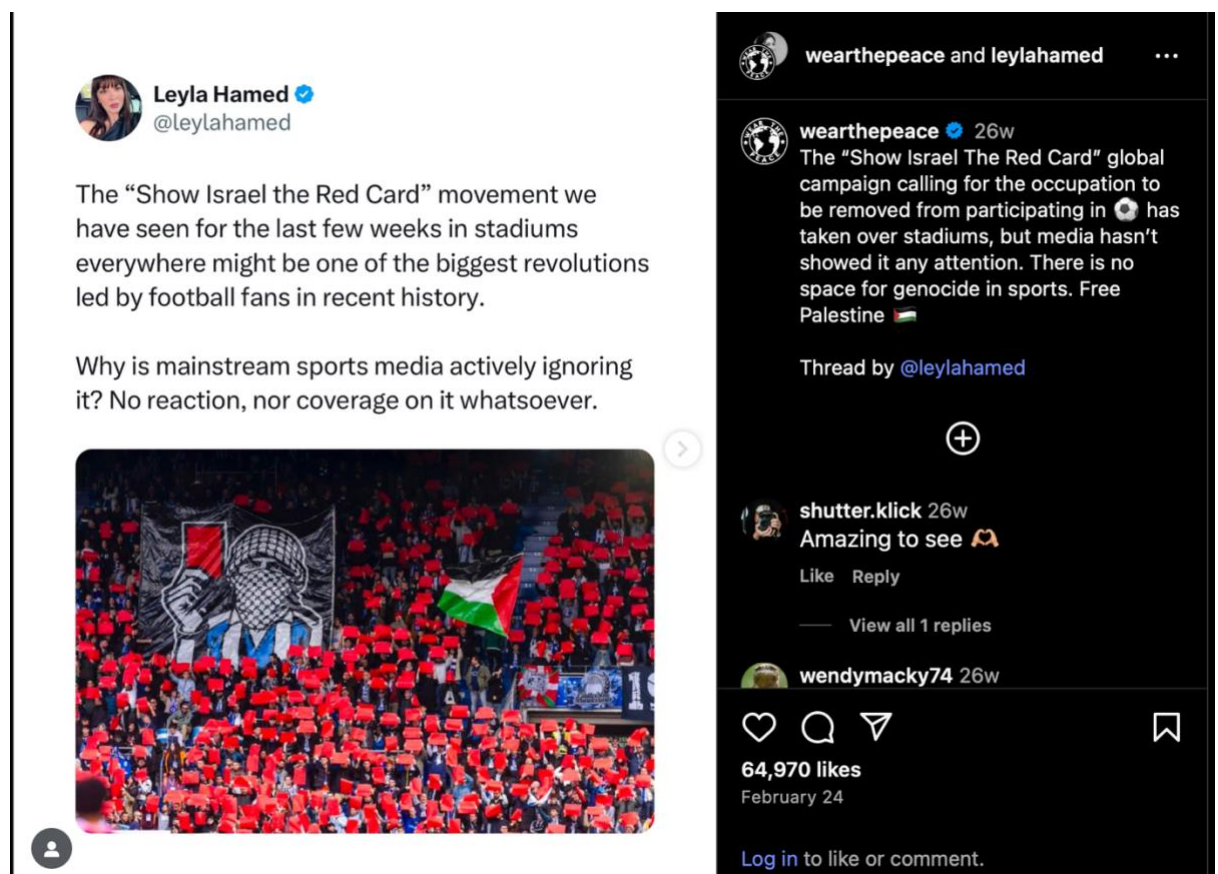


Figure 2: Red Card Israel Football Protest

¹⁶⁵ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

The third category blends both place and action to form a more direct message. These hashtags delivered both the name of the area and the expected action together. For example, #CeasefireForGazaNow, #StopArmingIsrael, #SavePalestine. #HandsOffRafah, #AllEyesOnTheMedleem and #SaveGaza. The most popular post was a photo created by generative artificial intelligence, which was shared countless times and was put up as people's Instagram story¹⁶⁶. The story showed the total number of times the picture had been shared, and the numbers were 30.2 million¹⁶⁷ at the time I took note. These hashtags accomplish the goal of grounding the hashtag in a place and delivering a message; however, the problem of lost nuance remains. 'Save Gaza' from whom? Who needs to keep their 'hands off Rafah' and who needs to 'stop arming Israel? Again, without the accompanying post to provide context, a hashtag is little more than a signpost.

¹⁶⁶ AJPlus, "As Israel Expands Its 'Buffer Zone,' Swallowing More of Southern Gaza, Has the World Turned Its Eyes Away From Rafah?...", *Instagram*, April 15, 2025,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DIewYs9Bp0/?igsh=enRqN3U5ZnV2b2J2>

¹⁶⁷ AJPlus, "As Israel Expands Its 'Buffer Zone,' Swallowing More of Southern Gaza, Has the World Turned Its Eyes Away From Rafah?...", *Instagram*, April 15, 2025,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DIewYs9Bp0/?igsh=enRqN3U5ZnV2b2J2>

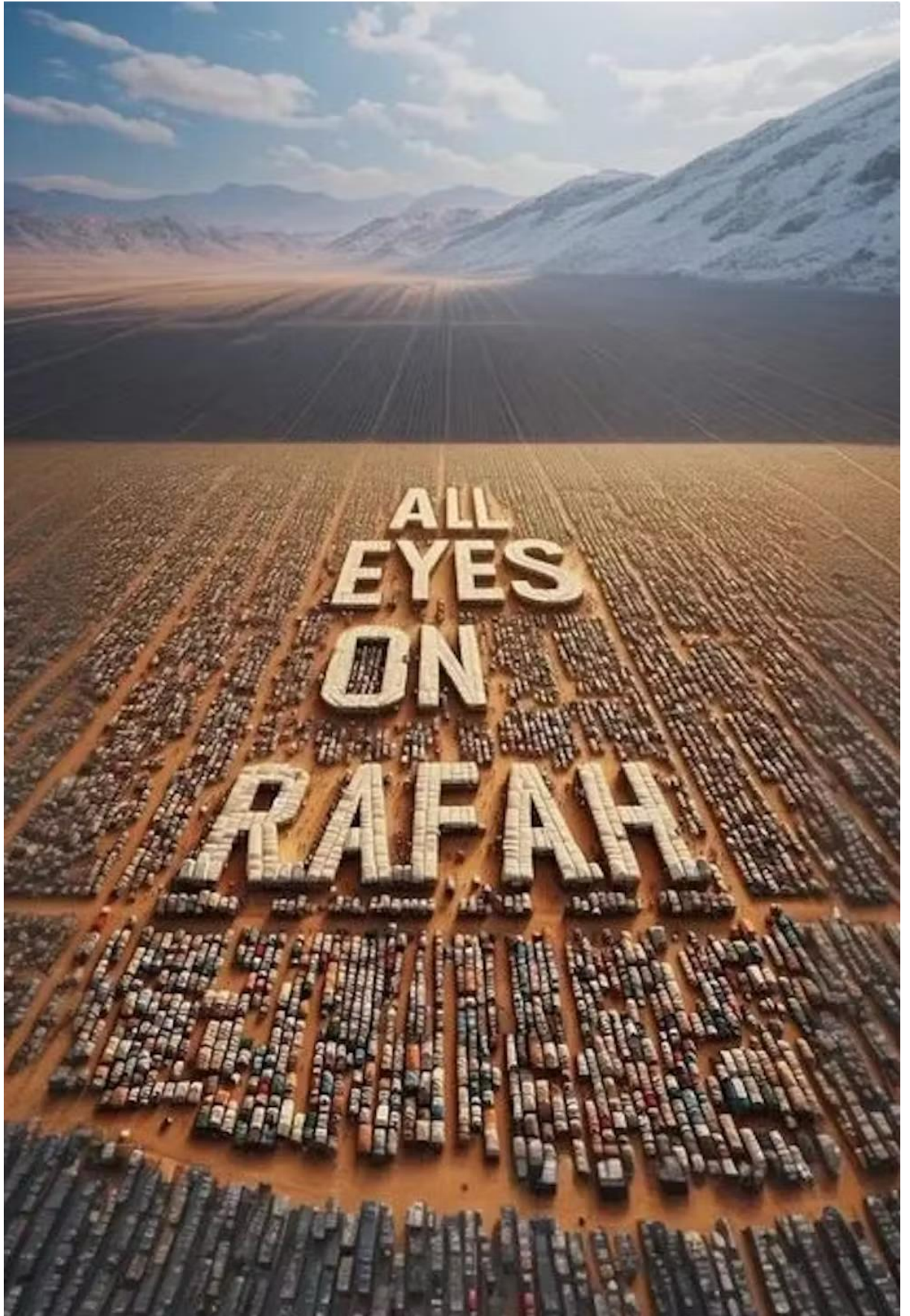


Figure 3: All Eyes on Rafah AI Image

The last category of recurring hashtags delivered a simple statement. They stated facts or current events. For example, #IsraelIsATerroristState, #FromTheRiverToTheSea, #HyundaiSupportsWarCrimes, #IsraelKillsChildren and #IsraelApartheid. Many of these hashtags are also popular slogans and chants that have been converted into hashtags. These perform a similar function to the place-based hashtags, but they focus on the perpetrators rather than the place. They act as records of crimes and actions taken by Israel or companies that are being boycotted. Eight of the hashtags I collected fell into this category. Thus, hashtags turn chants into symbols and then spatial practices to produce space.

Thus, hashtags are more than just a catalogue of posts. They act as calls to action, symbols of places and even archives of the movement. They are the infrastructure that makes up part of the spatial practices of cyberspace. Protestors have taken this affordance of social media has utilised it to produce a public space online. Still, hashtags are only one of the spatial practices that produce space. However, this necessitates that activists occupy both public spaces. Still, they are essential to the occupation of space in a networked/emodied society.

Documentation As Protest

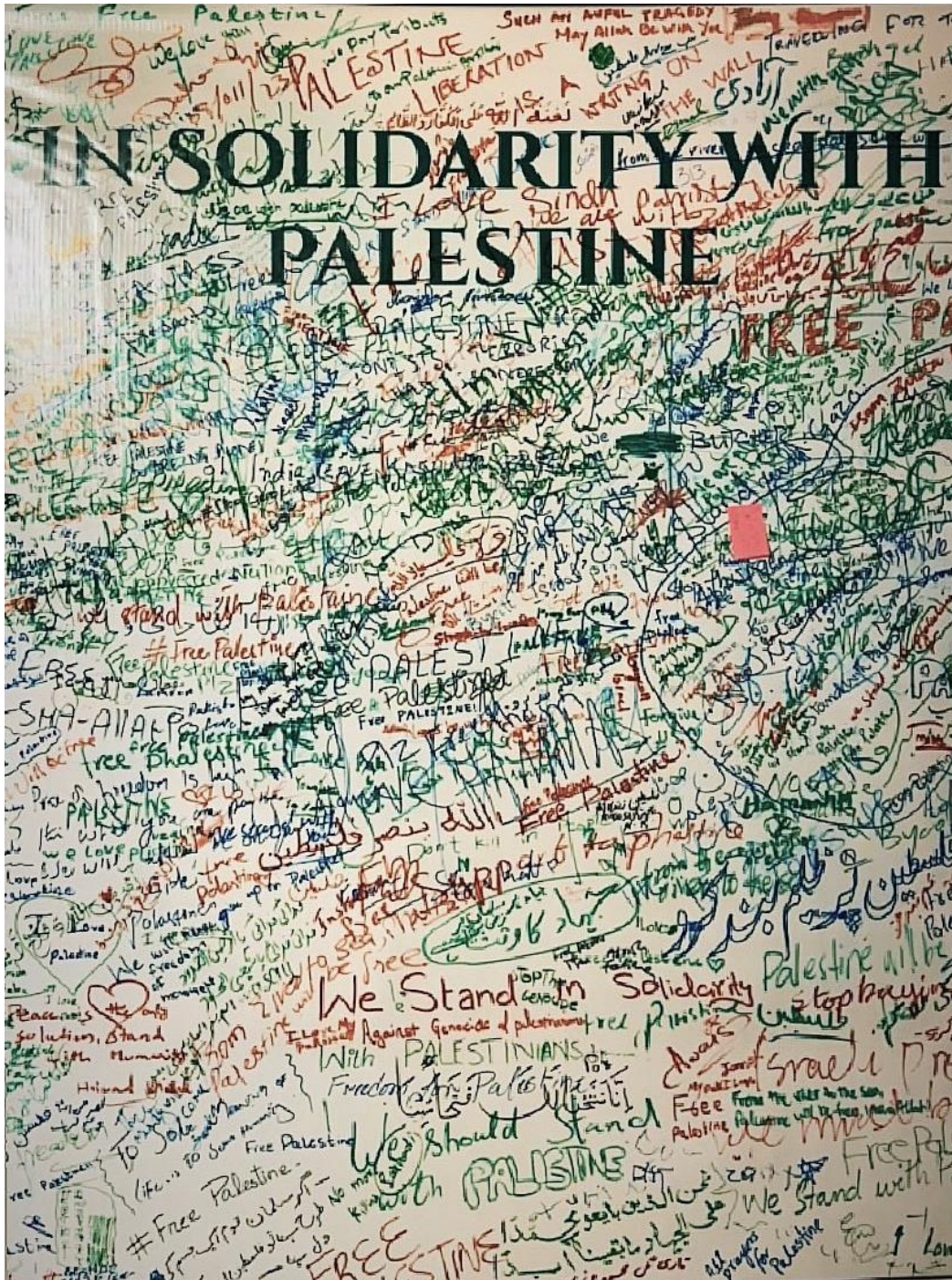


Figure 4: A Solidarity Wall in Barcelona. Photo By Manaal Ahmed. 12th June 2025

The theme of Cyberspace As An Archive appears in 43% of all Instagram posts that I catalogued; hence, it has significance in the #FreePalestine movement. This prompts a detailed foray into the visual documentation as a means to occupy public space. Li and Prasad (2018) argued that leaving graffiti on the wall separating the West Bank was an act of symbolic

resistance because the act of writing and recording, and displaying the presence of Palestinians on the other side.¹⁶⁸ They then argued that cyberspace is now the wall 2.0, and writing on that wall is symbolic resistance. This research takes that claim even further by arguing that the evolution of social media towards video formats has now created a Wall 3.0. The Wall 3.0 is not an inanimate wall to write upon; instead, it is now dynamic, temporal and most importantly, interactive. Graffiti on a static wall is visible to whoever passes in front of that wall; the Wall 3.0, however, morphs continuously¹⁶⁹. You can ‘write’ on the wall, but there is no guarantee that the wall will showcase what you wrote. In a way, both the writers and the wall negotiate what is seen and by whom. For example, your TikTok for you page and your Instagram discover page are all determined by the algorithm. This research investigates the underlying infrastructure and algorithm that runs social media in the next section; however, in this section, it focuses on the actions users of social media are employing to leave their mark on ‘the Wall’.

As technology improves, resistance moves from merely writing to photographs and videos as well. As evidenced by the fact that the largest theme on Instagram was Cyberspace As An Archive, this thesis argues that visual documentation of everyday life has allowed the Palestinian people to both gain visibility for their reality and protest it. The content that is being posted about Palestine can be divided into further subcategories: documentation of everyday

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¹⁶⁹ Wearthepeace, “Free Palestine. End the Occupation. 🍉 1. X: missfalasteenia 2. @wael_eldahdouh 3. @abubakrjg 4/5. X: @yipeng.ge \ JewsSayNo 6. @linajaratat_...,” *Instagram*, January 12, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEttopvu7sc/?img_index=1&igsh=MW92cjlOcTlkdm9leA==

life¹⁷⁰, preserving culture¹⁷¹ and critical think pieces¹⁷². Thus, visual documentation is an act to occupy space in the online public space.



Figure 5: Father bathes his children in Gaza

The first category includes videos, vlogs, and pictures of Palestinians living their life under occupation. These are not necessarily limited to Gaza and are not necessarily limited to after October 7th. For example, a father bathing his children in a bathtub surrounded by the

¹⁷⁰ Reachabed, “PS Hello 🙏 Excuse for the Destroyed Clay Furnace... @reachyusuf,” *TikTok*, September 25, 2024, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4m4vvf/>.

¹⁷¹ Olive.odyssey, “Always Question Why It’s Illegal... Not Allowing the Natives to Forage and Practice Their Traditional Food Practices Has Always Caused a Deterioration of Their Health as a Whole...,” *Instagram*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DG53KjeIss9/?igsh=MW9hcTVvYjNqeWc5eg==>

¹⁷² Israelscrimes, “Goats Are HMS? 🐐 #goat #farm #sheep #goatmilk,” *Instagram*, April 15, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIcuBOupqIM/?igsh=dzdxYzV5cDIwdHE3>

debris of their tent¹⁷³, teenagers in Gaza documenting what it is like to live in a tent for almost 2 years¹⁷⁴ or Bisan Al Owda's daily videos of surviving this genocide, such as the lengths she has to go to post a simple story or get access to food or water or any safety¹⁷⁵. Little girls making videos of how they make food and their favourite dishes when none of the ingredients are available, and how they bring joy to their lives in the middle of the chaos¹⁷⁶. They put their lives, their deaths, their trauma and their silver linings on display for the world to see so that they are remembered. Journalists in Gaza write eulogies for themselves, knowing that they are intentionally being targeted by the Israeli army; they plead with the world not to forget them, not to let them be another number, another casualty of genocide¹⁷⁷. They write poems prophesying their death and their freedom¹⁷⁸. They document themselves in the hopes that by archiving their person and their people, they might have a chance at survival. A Save The Children UK activist took a selfie stick into Gaza and found that people loved taking selfies. They told her "show everyone that you know I was here" and that they want "their memory to live on"¹⁷⁹. This content isn't necessarily an outright protest, but it is a refusal to fade away. It is an occupation of space by existence.

¹⁷³ Eye.on.palestine, "Life in Displacement... A Father Helps His Children Bathe Inside a Tent in Gaza, Using What Little Remains After Losing Their Home," *Instagram*, August 21, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DNnd9mWqZDI/?img_index=1

¹⁷⁴ Shamsabdn, "This Is Shams, and Shams in Arabic Means the Sun, I Can Shine Anywhere and Under Any Circumstances, but Still, I Am Not a Stone... Suffering During War Never Ends, It Only Increases the Pain and Sorrow," *TikTok*, April 27, 2024, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4SY4mv/>

¹⁷⁵ Wizard_bisan1, "It's a Very Long Video, Updating You About... GHF and the Israeli-American Suspicious Aid Foundation; Gaza Blackout; Ground Updates (Starvation, Bombing, Displacement); and the IsraHelli Attack Over Iran," *Instagram*, June 16, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DK-AEM-KpB9/?igsh=ajZ6NjBneW9kdzBi>

¹⁷⁶ Ali.al.burai, "In Gaza, the Most Expensive Dish Isn't Gold-Covered Steak... It's Something Much Deeper—Grape Leaves. Because When Life Is Survival, Every Bite of Tradition Feels Like Luxury...", *TikTok*, May 17, 2025, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4D8DSB/>

¹⁷⁷ Washingtonpost, "When War Once Again Came to Gaza in Late 2023, Palestinian Photographer Fatma Hassona Began Documenting All Aspects of Life...", *Instagram*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIxIL3CsQ3G/?igsh=MXR4ZmQ4OTByNHV4MA==>

¹⁷⁸ AJPlus, "Each Day Was a Battle for Survival: Journalist Hossam Shabat Was 23 Years Old...", *Instagram*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DHmK2w9R0gR/?igsh=MWF4eXk5OGNveTdrcg==>

¹⁷⁹ SaveChildrenUK, "Earlier This Year, Our Incredible Colleague Shaima Visited Gaza for Eight Weeks. Whenever She Met Any Children, They Loved It When She Took Photos," *TikTok*, July 25, 2025, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4Fg2K1/>

The second category is mainly taken up by diaspora activists whose content revolves around the dissemination and preservation of Palestinian culture and identity. These diaspora creators highlight Palestinian Thawbs¹⁸⁰, embroidery (tatreez)¹⁸¹, food¹⁸², folk songs¹⁸³, and flora and fauna¹⁸⁴. This seemingly innocuous content is a stark contrast to the violent and graphic content that is posted by journalists and the international media, which looks at Palestinians through the lens of victimhood and labels them as merely subjects of violence. This content humanises Palestinians and presents their culture to the so-called 'global village'. Thus, in this case, visual documentation in cyberspace is an occupation of space by utilising memory to archive Palestinian identity and culture.

The third category is more obvious in its protest. It comprises think pieces that are written by Palestinians and intellectuals about Palestine and the genocide. These think pieces have a broad range; they can refer to settler colonialism, the history of Israel, the Nakba, the Palestinian resistance, the military-industrial complex, the moral decay at the centre of Israeli society, the politics of appeal, commentaries on college campus protests, the crackdown against activists and the overall suppression of dissent. The think pieces often link Palestine with global protest movements in the Congo and Sudan, and Kashmir, linking the global political economy

¹⁸⁰ Africa4Palestine, "Nina Simone Wearing a Palestinian Thawb (Traditional Embroidered Dress) on the Cover Art for Her Song 'Sinnerman.' Via Mohammed El Kurd," *Instagram*, June 26, 2018,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BkfsfpPgmA-/?igsh=MnnpnMnczazE2YjFs>

¹⁸¹ atreez.with.danduna, "Although Today, May 15th, Marks the 76th Year Since the Nakba... Palestinians Over the Last 76 Years Have Repeatedly Been Forced Out of Their Homes and Villages..." *Instagram*, May 16, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7AlfVQxiLH/?igsh=dG12a3pxNnlrNTR5>

¹⁸² Thegoldenbalance, "Palestinian Fattet Hummus 🍉," *TikTok*, May 21, 2025, video, original sound,

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4kcKK3/>

¹⁸³ Afikra_, "Dana Salah Shares the Story Behind Shu Ma Sar, Inspired by a Palestinian Folk Tradition Where Women Encoded Songs to Send Secret Messages To..." *TikTok*, August 3, 2025, video, original sound,

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4LFLTV/>

¹⁸⁴ Wizard_bisan1, "Me Living My Favorite Memory of My Childhood With My Grandma, May She Rest in Peace 🌟 PS," *Instagram*, February 18, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DK-AEM-KpB9/?igsh=ajZ6NjBneW9kdzBi>

of oppression. When talking to students at the encampment at UC Berkeley, Palestinian poet Mohammed El Kurd said, “our struggles are so so deeply interconnected”¹⁸⁵. By creating an interdependent map of subjugation and resistance, Palestinian activists raise the ceiling for what is allowed to be said and who is allowed to be criticised. He says, “The purpose of talking is to raise the ceiling for what is permissible”¹⁸⁶. Moreover, Activists online blatantly say “I am saving everything” in regards to videos of Israeli’s committing war crimes¹⁸⁷. Others have launched initiatives that use “open source information” to build a database of such atrocities¹⁸⁸ and the Israel Genocide tracker Twitter page that posts videos posted by Israeli soldiers¹⁸⁹. This directly references the concept of ‘sousveillance’ that Ulrich and Knopp (2018) had developed¹⁹⁰. Thus, activists consciously use documentation as a tactic to archive both evidence and scholarship for the #FreePalestine movement.

Thus, online public spaces are used not just for protests but also to archive the movement. This research argues that “talking about Palestine”¹⁹¹ is a protest against the erasure of Palestinian land and identity because it occupies space online. Though most of the activities archived and

¹⁸⁵ Bayareapym, “@Mohammedelkurd Speaks and Grounds the Students and Community Members at the UC Berkeley Student-Led Free Palestine Encampment...,” *Instagram Reel*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6PHiZ4vAHw/?igsh=MWZ3b3h4anAxeTAxMg%3D%3D>

¹⁸⁶ El-Kurd, Mohammed. *Perfect Victims: And the Politics of Appeal*. Haymarket Books, 2025.

¹⁸⁷ Lanzybear, “This Is a Tactic They Know We Can’t Talk About All of It, If You Think It’s Bad It’s Worse. The Time for Outrage Is Past Now It’s Time for Action. Cc: @wizard_bisan1,” *Instagram Reel*, July 26, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9fhq0evkqZ/?igsh=enZveTJqNWZqMTZ6>

¹⁸⁸ Aljazeeraenglish, “The Hind Rajab Foundation Is Using Israeli Soldiers’ Own Social Media Footage as Evidence for War Crimes Investigations. Al Jazeera’s Hind Touissate Spoke,” *TikTok*, August 6, 2025, video, original sound, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSSpr4ARY/>

¹⁸⁹ OnePath Network, “Israeli Soldiers Are Panicking after Being Exposed Online for Their Complicity in War Crimes in Gaza,” *Instagram*, October 31, 2024, video, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBxvaiDSK5e/?igsh=MWFuZ2RkcXllMzYzYg==>

¹⁹⁰ Ullrich, Peter, and Philipp Knopp. “Protesters’ reactions to video surveillance of demonstrations: Counter-moves, security cultures, and the spiral of surveillance and counter-surveillance.” *Surveillance & Society* 16, no. 2 (2018): 183-202.

¹⁹¹ chefjiskitchen, “Palestinian msalfan @canarybasmati. Ingredients: 2 cups of @canarybasmati; 2 onions; 4 chilies; 1 head of garlic; 1 bell pepper; 1 tomato or few cherry tomatoes; 1 spoon yoghurt; 1 carrot; 1 potato; olive oil; 1 kg chicken...,” *Instagram Reel*, June 14, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8MMX-Isrp2/?igsh=dXg1ZWZkc245Y3My>

disseminated through cyberspace occur in physical public spaces. Thus, the occupation of space occurs twice, once when it actually takes place in physical space and then when it is archived in cyberspace.

Operation Blackout and the BDS campaign

On the other hand, exiting public space is also a powerful protest tactic that is used by the #FreePalestine movement. These tactics are by no means new; in fact, the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement directly quotes the South African counterpart as its inspiration¹⁹². The movement was started decades ago to create consumer boycotts around companies that support or benefit from the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian lands. Initially, it targeted weapons manufacturers like Elbit Systems or PUMA, after it sponsored the Israeli Football Federation¹⁹³. The main idea was twofold: use the affordances of social media to create awareness about companies that are complicit in the occupation and create significant consumer pressure to make the companies sever ties with Israel. Over time, its tactics have evolved significantly.

The movement has an official website¹⁹⁴, but it puts on calls to action regularly on its social media as well¹⁹⁵. When homes in Sheikh Jarrah were being destroyed in 2021, it created the

¹⁹² BDS Movement. *Home Page — Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement*, accessed September 1, 2025. <https://www.bdsmovement.net/>

¹⁹³ BDS.Movement, “In BDS Win, @PUMA Forced to Drop Sponsorship of Israel Football Association,” *Instagram*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0vwQ6fMwIN/?igsh=MWo1bnV6dXhvcDNkbQ==>

¹⁹⁴ BDS.Movement, “Despite the massive attacks on several of our platforms, today we are launching our new well-secured website...,” *Instagram*, March 7, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DG5gwJ_gutI/?igsh=MXd6d3liMHQ0MHp0aw==

¹⁹⁵ BDS.Movement, “Dockworkers in Fos-sur-Mer, France, delay the Nexoe MAERSK ship, part of a fleet carrying F-35 parts for Israel’s ongoing genocide of 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza...,” *Instagram*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIcEM8BJt-5/?igsh=cGoxbmsyM3h0bDli>

hashtag [#HyundaiSupportsWarCrimes](#) because its machinery was used to demolish the homes¹⁹⁶. Post October 7th, though, it has put out a detailed BDS strategy with companies that are under consumer boycott, soft pressure and hard pressure¹⁹⁷. For example, companies that have easy alternatives like the website designer Wix are recommended for boycott, along with McDonald's, Coke and Starbucks¹⁹⁸. A list of priority targets, which are companies that are directly complicit in the occupation or built on stolen lands. For example, Carrefour, SodaStream, HP and Dell¹⁹⁹. For products that are harder to find alternatives for, the movement has soft pressure techniques like Google and Amazon²⁰⁰. The movement has become highly organised with trainings, call to actions, pressure tactics and resources available to activists. This thesis argues that by posting about the boycotts in online public space, the BDS movement gains the necessary visibility to prompt both offline and online action against these companies.

¹⁹⁶ BDS.Movement, "States, Institutions, and Corporations Supporting Apartheid Israel Are Not Just Complicit, They Have Palestinian Blood on Their Hands...", *Instagram*, January 29, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CoAUW3aM6OT/?igsh=aWl0aDRzMzdldzJw>

¹⁹⁷ BDS.Movement, "The BDS Movement Has Updated Our Priority Targets, Pressure Targets and Organic Campaign Targets...", *Instagram*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DD7RMSEt2C9/?igsh=M2xwYnczbzFodHR3>

¹⁹⁸ **BDS.Movement**, "The BDS Movement Has Updated Our Priority Targets, Pressure Targets and Organic Campaign Targets...", *Instagram*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DD7RMSEt2C9/?igsh=M2xwYnczbzFodHR3>

¹⁹⁹ **BDS.Movement**, "Every Day, Palestinians Illegally Held Captive Are Subjected to Horrific Abuses in Israeli Prisons—and Corporations Like Google, Amazon and HP Are Complicit in It...", *Instagram*, August 2, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C-LO2wstTve/?igsh=MWdqCWt1YzAwczRjbw==>

²⁰⁰ **BDS.Movement**, "The BDS Movement Has Updated Our Priority Targets, Pressure Targets and Organic Campaign Targets...", *Instagram*, December 23, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DD7RMSEt2C9/?igsh=M2xwYnczbzFodHR3>

Boycott these companies now for their complicity in Israel's occupation, apartheid and genocide against Palestinians.



Figure 6: BDS Targets and Strategy

BDS has also successfully used hashtags like #BlockTheBoat #NoTechForApartheid #BoycottChevron #AXADivest, #MaskOffMaersk, IOFOffAzure and #MicrosoftPowersApartheid to highlight companies that are helping Israel continue the occupation²⁰¹. These bring attention to their crimes against the Palestinians, as well as serving as public spaces for people to post, comment and debate their actions. The hashtags become the basis of info slides, explainer videos and history lessons. It is an archive of the Palestinian people's frustrations and the companies' actions against them. Thus, a hashtag is part of the spatial practices of cyberspace, but it is also a site for memory and protest.

²⁰¹ **noazureforapartheid**, "As Revealed in the New AP Investigation, Microsoft Profits from, Powers, and Accelerates Israeli Genocide!," *Instagram*, February 19, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DGRD_1qxksb/?igsh=czE4bDh2bHd6cDJ6

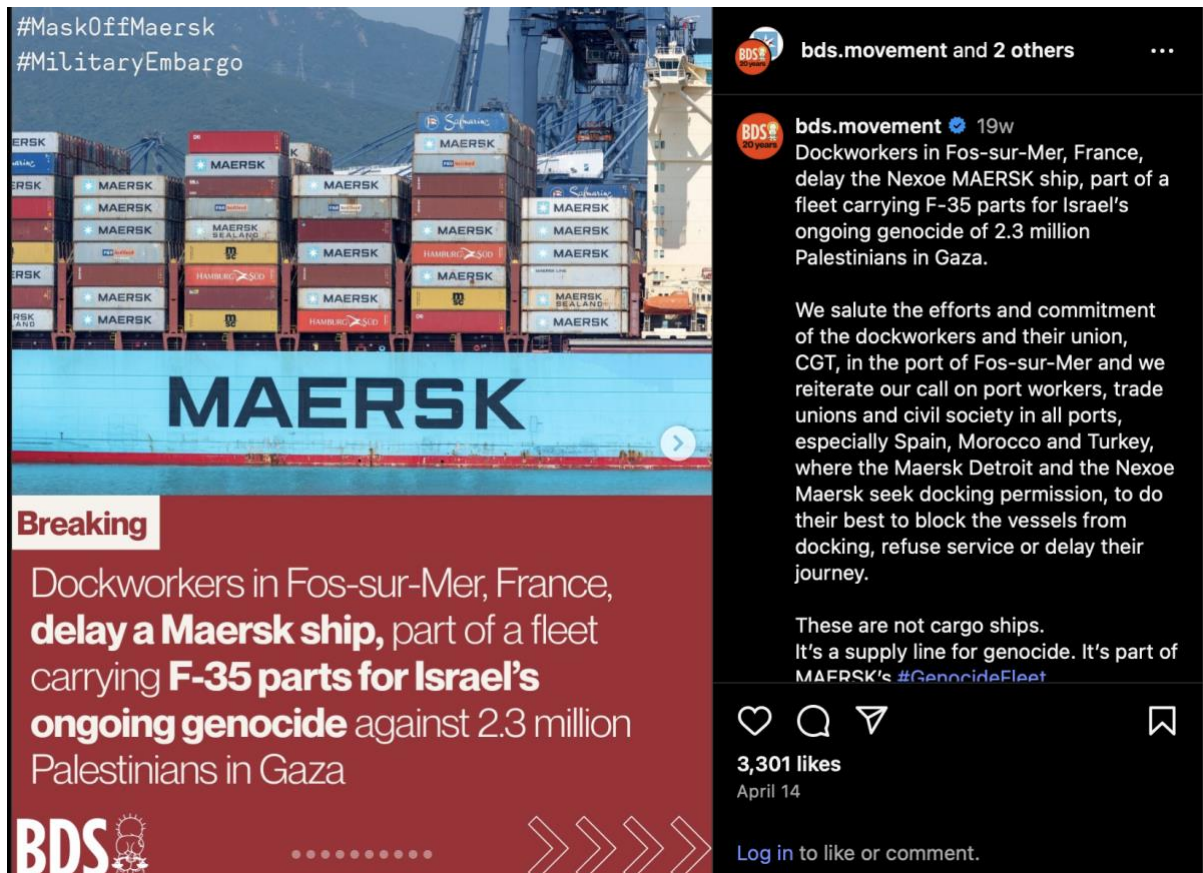


Table 2: BDS Post about #MaskoffMaersk

Furthermore, BDS has also spawned multiple offline protest tactics. The consumer boycotts aim to take away users of a certain product. To streamline this process, multiple applications like Boycat²⁰² and BDNash²⁰³ were created by grassroots organisers. Both websites and applications make boycotting easier by allowing users to scan barcodes, enter product names and search for alternatives; successfully employing digital technologies to further the movement. In this instance, an online movement has concrete offline effects by effectively demarcating which products can be bought or not. Over the years, BDS has been able to get multiple companies to rethink their agreements with Israel and exit the country completely²⁰⁴. It is

²⁰² **Boycat**, *Boycat: Ethical Shopping for Palestinian Rights*, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.boycat.io/>

²⁰³ **Bdnaash**, *Bdnaash: Ethical Consumerism for Palestinian Rights*, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://bdnaash.com/>

²⁰⁴ **BDS Movement**, "Amidst the ongoing US-Israeli genocide against 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza, @disney has repeatedly attempted to normalize the Israeli regime's crimes," May 21, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ7eT-FA9Kf/>²⁰⁴

important to note that all of these campaigns are situated in the urban spatial reality of the occupation of Palestine.

Boycotting is not limited to BDS, however. The #FreePalestine movement understands the importance of visibility for protest; thus, it targets those who have visibility and pressures them to use their platform to elevate the Palestinian movement²⁰⁵. With the idea “silence is complicity”²⁰⁶, the movement seeks to ensure that Palestine is centred in online discourse. This approach is exemplified in the various “blockout” campaigns initiated by activists. The purpose of these campaigns is to block and boycott celebrities that do or have supported Israel in the past. The most popular ones are Project Blockout²⁰⁷ and Operation Watermelon, which provide a daily list of celebrities to block²⁰⁸. Besides them, several pages and activists have also compiled a non-exhaustive, constantly updating list of celebrities to block due to their silence on Gaza or the outright support for Israel²⁰⁹. Alternatively, they might also ask the viewers to comment on a particular celebrity’s profile and ask them why they haven’t spoken up about Palestine²¹⁰. For example, activists urged users to comment on the names of babies and journalists who have been killed by Israel since 2023²¹¹. This occupation of spaces is aimed at bringing attention to the

BDS Movement, “Amidst the ongoing US-Israeli genocide against 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza, @disney has repeatedly attempted to normalize the Israeli regime’s crimes,” May 21, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ7eT-FA9Kf/>

²⁰⁵ **Gaza Freedom Flotilla**, Instagram Reel. “‘Madleen’ sails to Gaza today with twelve humanitarians... Any attack or interference will be a deliberate, unlawful assault on civilians.” June 1, 2025.

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKWkLWtoxQm/>

²⁰⁶ **Greta Thunberg**, Instagram post, June 22, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLNAAdFHC6Rp/>

²⁰⁷ **Block Out Campaign**, Instagram post, “Day 326. Silence, Hypocrisy, Inhumanity. Millions have been wounded, thousands have been martyred yet the world sleeps, humanity is lost,” August 28, 2024,

https://www.instagram.com/p/C_NwfKxs8h9/

²⁰⁸ **angie__mariie**, TikTok video, July 17, 2024, “#fifaworldcup,” original sound by angie__mariie,

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4QUvau/>

²⁰⁹ **Dawn Images**, Instagram post, “Since the Met Gala, TikTok users have started a movement to block all celebrities with massive followings who refuse to use their platforms for the greater good and continuously choose to ignore what’s happening in Gaza,” May 10, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C6yfre5s5BT/>

²¹⁰ **angie__mariie**, TikTok video, July 17, 2024, “#fifaworldcup,” original sound by angie__mariie,

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4QUvau/>

²¹¹ **counternewsnetwork (Dawson Beaux)**, TikTok video, March 11, 2024, “#duet with @Mowgliboy #theoscars #fyp #projectslay its fo time #fypppp,” original sound by Mowgliboy, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQeKULy/>

movement but also pressuring the celebrities to confront their own (in)actions. Thus, visibility again emerges as the core tenet of occupation of space.

Boycotting is complemented by highlighting and praising celebrities who have spoken up about Palestine. Pages like Celebrities4Palestine routinely post about any celebrity who speaks about the plight of the Palestinian people, offline or online²¹². The reasoning behind this is simple: celebrity profiles and pages are highly visible public spaces. This is not just a space for fans of the celebrity to gather; it is a space to promote the celebrity and any associated brands, as well as gain monetary rewards. Each post not only brings about attention but also thousands of dollars in revenue. Thus, unfollowing a celebrity has direct monetary impacts because prices per post are set according to the number of followers and engagement. Unfollowing or blocking a celebrity is effectively boycotting their person and whatever they promote. Whereas, commenting on their posts is the new way to protest ‘in front’ of a company’s shop or office. It must be a targeted and coordinated effort. Hence, there are daily assignments so people can mass comment or block the celebrities for maximum impact. Many celebrities lost thousands of followers due to these campaigns²¹³, and they have been effective in pressuring celebrities to speak out in favour of Palestine, even if all they do is repost a story on their profile.

Thus, while the BDS uses online spaces to power offline boycotts, new #BlockOut campaigns boycott online spaces as well. Both strategies use pressure and consumer boycotts to threaten both monetary and relevance losses to companies and individuals that they deem as being complicit in genocide. Once again, the embodied nature of cyberspace aids the intersection

²¹² **Celebrities4Palestine**, Instagram post, “House of the Dragon star Olivia Cooke (@livkatecooke) shares on Israel's war crimes in Palestine, stories that are censored by mainstream media. #houseofthedragon #oliviacooke #solidarity #celebrities4palestine,” London, United Kingdom, August 27, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DN1TcSY2lz1/>

²¹³ **trtworld (TRT World)**, TikTok video, May 10, 2024, “Why are A-list celebrities losing followers?” <https://www.tiktok.com/@trtworld/video/7367369993891220741?lang=en>

of both forms of boycotting. Boycotts are initiated in urban public spaces, and are replicated and expanded in online public spaces.

Communities And Idols: Virtual Proximity and Community Building Online



Figure 7: Instagram Post with an Art Work of Bisan Al Onda

As per Petray and Gerbaudo, social media allows us to truly globalise protest and to voice support from any corner of the world. This thesis furthers this by arguing that it has

allowed Palestinians to overcome geographical borders and create a transnational sense of community. Through hashtags and pages, the Palestinian diaspora and the sympathisers of the #FreePalestine movement came together to create a shared sense of identity and purpose despite their physical distance. Palestinian educator Jenan Matari talks about in a post: “we have worked hard to create these virtual communities” and that she wants to make a YouTube channel on top of her Meta platforms to have “multiple ways to communicate with our community”²¹⁴. The affordances of social media customise our feed according to our interests; this means that people who sympathised with Palestine were united with others like them²¹⁵. It allowed activists to form networks, debate strategy, and organise offline protests around the globe. The feeling of solidarity is crucial to any movement, especially the Palestinian movement, whose members have long been isolated from the rest of the world. Both the residents of Palestine and the diaspora craved a space to interact and develop a sense of community. Thus, the spatial practices of cyberspace have allowed them to do so.

Gerbardo talks about the choreography of assembly and the virtual proximity that is created around individuals online²¹⁶. These “tweeps” emerge as authoritative voices that share their opinions and tell people where to gather for the protest²¹⁷. For example, on TikTok, the most common pairs were Occupying Space Online and Cyberspace As A Coordination Tool (52.6%), followed by Cyberspace As A Coordination Tool and Fundraising (51.6%), which suggests a link between cyberspace and the organisation of protest. However, since the organisation of the protests largely happens in the background or on more discreet forms of

²¹⁴ **jenanmatari**, Instagram reel, March 14, 2025,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHMH55DvHfw/?igsh=a3dwa2x6dzR2YWFr>

²¹⁵ **Interviewee 1**, personal interview by author, June 15, 2025

²¹⁶ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

²¹⁷ Gerbaudo, Paolo, and Emiliano Treré. "In search of the 'we' of social media activism: introduction to the special issue on social media and protest identities." *Information, communication & society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 865-871.

social media such as WhatsApp or Signal²¹⁸, the internet personalities act as disseminators of that information²¹⁹. Social media is the front-facing side of using cyberspace as a coordination tool; it often shows the results of protests or well-researched calls to action, while most of the planning and coordination is done on or mainly on Signal to avoid surveillance²²⁰. Whether they run a collective page or use their account, they use their visibility to gather people around them and then broadcast important information. Even activists who are sceptical of the role of social media or outright critical of “online activism” agree that it is a “necessary evil”²²¹ that must be undertaken²²². They are cognisant of the fact that the global reach of the #FreePalestine movement and online information dissemination is the reason for the shift in public opinion on Palestine²²³. Thus, activists use the spatial practices of cyberspace to both create a space for themselves and their community and use its public space as a means of broadcasting information.

In doing so, this research argues that activists themselves have emerged as pillars of the #FreePalestine movement. Where their person and persona are intertwined with the movement itself, and their function has moved beyond simply getting the word out about protests. By looking at the volume of comments, the content and the broadcast channels that some of the Palestinian activists have, it is clear to see that they’re at the centre of community creation and virtual proximity. Individuals like Bisan Al Owda²²⁴, Motaz Aziza²²⁵, Jenan Matari²²⁶ and Alana

²¹⁸ Interviewee 9, personal interview by author, 11th July 2025

²¹⁹ Interviewee 9, personal interview by author, 11th July 2025

²²⁰ Interviewee 9, personal interview by author, 11th July 2025

²²¹ Interviewee 8, personal interview by author, 7th July 2025

²²² Interviewee 8, personal interview by author, 7th July 2025

²²³ Interviewee 2, personal interview by author, 24th June 2025

²²⁴ **wizard_bisan1**, Instagram reel, “An apple celebration to break the algorithm,” July 15, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMihWfRKIMO/?igsh=dGNoNW8zNXczYXA2>

²²⁵ yale (@yale), “May Day 1970... Hear from some of the witnesses to these tumultuous times — some of the first women in Yale College,” Instagram post, May 1, 2020,

https://www.instagram.com/p/B_qLCFNlvvI/?img_index=6&igsh=MjdhcTVxOHh4ZTE1

²²⁶ **jenanmatari**, Instagram reel, “Some ‘House Rules’: 1. If you’re new here (aka October 2023 and onward) - watch this video to help you set appropriate expectations for Palestinian pages and to help you stop projecting onto

Hadid²²⁷ have become synonymous with the movement itself. All of them recur in my collected posts repeatedly. In the absence of access to the homeland, and rapidly aggressive suppression of protest, these individuals and their social media have emerged as a public space to meet, organise and debate on Palestine. In contrast to offline community building, which is predicated on presence and synchronicity in a physical space (e.g a protest or an encampment), this form of community is both networked and asynchronous. Thus, in the absence of physical space, the individual becomes both a symbol and a space for the community.

However, it is important to point out that this space is highly variable, unlike a physical encampment or protest. First, it is highly susceptible to algorithmic manipulation. Whether or not you see an activist's post or get notified when they are live is dependent on the algorithm. It can choose to boost or suppress content; as a result, it controls the visibility of the community. Second, a highly individualistic community is volatile and temporary. Deleting the activist's profile, suppressing their views or destroying their credibility also effectively destroys the space they created. More importantly, it lacks meaningful connections between the members. A community is more than a cult of personality; it requires connections among the members. If users are attracted to a person's posts or lives because of what the activist has to say, it is unlikely that they will stay there once the activist is done speaking. While speaking to activists, it was clear that they regard actions like setting up the encampment, protecting each other, bringing food and supplies, and alerting each other to the police as vital activities that forge a sense of community²²⁸. Online, all of that is taken away. Palestinian activists remain idols of the

others. 2. Do not tell me 'now is not the time for this conversation' because it's always the right time to have conversations about identity and community preservation ...” July 15, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9cu5txxV75/?igsh=MTTh3cm15YXVzOHI0dg==>

²²⁷ **lanzybear**, Instagram reel, “This is a tactic they know we can't talk about all of it, if you think it's bad it's worse. The time for outrage is past now it's time for action. Cc: @wizard_bisan1,” July 16, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9fhq0evkqZ/?igsh=enZveTJqNWZqMTZ6>

²²⁸ Interviewee 4, personal interview by author, 26th June 2025

movement, capable of pulling the crowds and delivering information, but the online arena lacks essential elements of community making. Many interviewees stress that the online is not a substitute for on-the-ground activism; it is at best a supplement and at worst just a necessity²²⁹. Thus, in an embodied and intertwined space, offline protests and encampments birth their online counterparts. However, despite the #FreePalestine movement using both in-person and virtual communities to sustain itself, the nature of online community building affects the quality of bonds formed.

This section gave an overview of how space is produced through spatial practices like Hashtags. By examining the actions of activists in both public spaces, it uncovers how it is occupied as a form of protest. The intersection of both spaces has created an evolution of the tools and the arenas of protest. However, visibility remains central to protest. While this section dealt with how activists achieve visibility, the next deals with the barriers associated with it.

Representations of Space and Barriers to Protest

This section explores the representations of space in cyberspace. It endeavours to answer the question: how do affordances of social media limit the opportunities for protest in public space? It looks at the inherent biases, assumptions, and laws that make up cyberspace to uncover the limitations placed on protest. The approach to this section was to excavate the underlying biases behind everyday restrictions and censorship.

To achieve this, I employ Lefebvre's concept of representations of space. These are the rules, regulations and the actual physical infrastructure of a space. In the case of cyberspace, this includes cyberspace, which is the hardware and the networks of intercontinental wires that make up the Internet, but most importantly, it includes the algorithms that create social media. It is

²²⁹ Interviewee 4, personal interview by author, 26th June 2025

pertinent to look into this layer of the production of space because it is not solely the users of cyberspace who determine what is accepted and highlighted on the platforms. Daniele and Kelsch (2024) and Abokhodair et al. (2024) have outlined how these algorithms have implicit and explicit biases towards the type of content that they push to users and the type of content they suppress²³⁰²³¹. Thus, to truly understand the restrictions placed on activism in our networked society, we must investigate these biases along with the laws that govern physical space. This sections discuss online surveillance, then offline suppression and lastly the interconnected nature of censorship in both public spaces.

Censorship and Control In The Virtual Arena

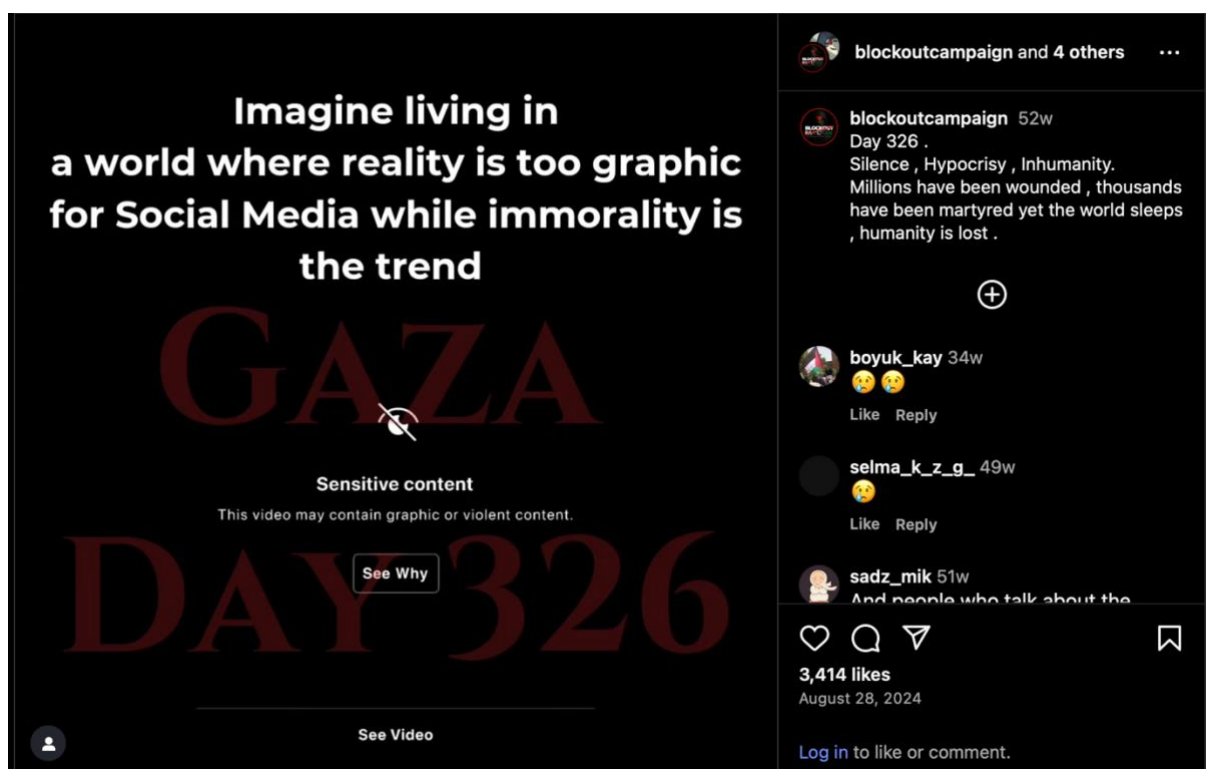


Figure 8: Instagram Post Criticising Content Moderation

²³⁰ Daniele, Giulia, and Sophia Maria Kelsch. "Beyond online and offline activism: # SaveSheikhJarrah and contemporary resistance in Palestine." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 18, no. 1 (2025): 1-20.

²³¹ Abokhodair, Norah, Yarden Skop, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, and Houda Elmimouni. "Opaque algorithms, transparent biases: Automated content moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis." *First Monday* (2024).

Focusing specifically on social media, namely TikTok and Instagram, this research observed that each platform had its code of conduct and community guidelines that governed what content was allowed to exist and thrive on the platforms. Looking at the quantitative data, censorship was the topic of nearly 80 videos on Instagram and 7 on TikTok. Moreover, Occupying Space Online coincided with Censorship/Surveillance 9.1% on Instagram. Instagram and TikTok both have community guidelines that ban any form of nudity, promotion of violence and hate speech. However, TikTok was more stringent in removing videos that seemingly violated its code of conduct because at least 10 of my saved videos are no longer available. Thus, cyberspace has its representations of space and robust mechanisms to filter content based on them.

These rules are codified in the elusive algorithm. The algorithm's job is to suggest content that will get the user to engage and stay on the platform. It optimises our feeds to capture our attention and to keep us interested. For example, TikTok studies how we interact with a video to determine whether or not to show us similar content in the future. It may see if we stopped at the video, if we forwarded or skipped it, did we like, comment or share it? Did we copy the link to send to others? It tracks our attention and suggests content that will also keep us attentive. Instagram reels have a similar tactic. While likes and dislikes of the algorithm are elusive, scholars have guessed that it makes assumptions based on gender, age, location and friend circle²³². Several studies have pointed out how teenage boys are very likely to receive right-

²³² Abokhodair, Norah, Yarden Skop, Sarah Rüller, Konstantin Aal, and Houda Elmimouni. "Opaque algorithms, transparent biases: Automated content moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis." *First Monday* (2024).

wing content in their first half hour on the app²³³. For this research, I focused solely on political content and how platforms responded to it.

Within the first 6 months of the genocide, Instagram released a new feature that would limit political content on your feed²³⁴. This feature was marketed to protect kids and anyone else who does not enjoy political content on their feed; however, Instagram is quite vague on what qualifies as ‘political content’. It is also important not to ignore the context within which this feature was released. It was launched amidst activists using Instagram to talk about Palestine and share videos from the ground of the devastation Israel was wreaking on the Gaza Strip. It came on the heels of many users in the West being confronted with the reality of the American empire and Jews that began to openly criticise Israel. The feature cannot be divorced from the context which gave birth to it. Moreover, an Al Jazeera investigation found that Meta employees are suing the company because they got fired after they blew the whistle on Meta censoring Palestinian content after October 7th²³⁵. Usually, content moderation is left to the discretion of the algorithm and the content regulators; however, immediately after October 7th, the content suppression for Palestine was “amped up to the max”²³⁶. Moderators observed that content was being flagged and removed at the same time without review or oversight, and bypassing protocol²³⁷. It also uncovered that many former IDF soldiers work at high-level positions at

²³³ The Daily Show (@thedailyshow). 2025. “Trucks and dogs that objectify women? Jordan Klepper and @hasanabi find out how quickly TikTok leads young men down a rabbit hole of right-wing.” TikTok video, 19 May. <https://www.tiktok.com/@thedailyshow/video/7506133855133371690>

²³⁴ wearthepeace (@wearthepeace). “Our settings automatically switched this week to limit political content and we’ve been seeing more users report the same. Please make sure to fix your settings so you can see more from Gaza. Free Palestine 🇵🇸” Instagram post, June 26, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8rqZVoOmnS/?img_index=2&igsh=MzdiMnVzN2E4NXNk

²³⁵ hani.amra (@hani.amra). “Ferras Hamad, a former Meta engineer who is Palestinian American, has sued Meta after claiming he was fired for trying to fix bugs that suppressed posts in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.” Instagram post, June 6, 2024 <https://www.instagram.com/p/C72ePtS9QA/?igsh=MXU0bmhmeHFydnFxNA==>

²³⁶ hani.amra (@hani.amra). “Ferras Hamad, a former Meta engineer who is Palestinian American, has sued Meta after claiming he was fired for trying to fix bugs that suppressed posts in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza.” Instagram post, June 6, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C72ePtS9QA/>

²³⁷ ajplus (@ajplus), “Did you know that Israel influences what you see on Instagram and Facebook?” Instagram Reel, October 22, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBcECVoRFFO/?igsh=MXZuOWU0N3FlbnkxZW==>

Meta's content moderation team and that Meta collaborated with a special cyberg unit that flags content that needs to be taken down²³⁸. As of April 2025, Al Jazeera reports that Meta has removed ninety thousand pro-Palestinian posts, and Human Rights Watch estimates it to be at least a thousand and 50 posts that were taken down on Israel's request²³⁹. Online public space is clearly a space for political discourse; however, that discourse is restrained by the companies that own these spaces. Thus, online public space is contested and controlled much like the urban public space.

For decades, Israeli technology has dominated this online public space. Israel proudly boasts that it has an army of internet soldiers both at home and in the diaspora, defending itself²⁴⁰. Be it the Canary Mission, MEMRI, Camera, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) or the various verified accounts the IDF runs on Twitter, TikTok and Instagram. Israel has decades on Palestinian activists and the #freepalestine movement, and it has been systematically pushing out its narrative all the while. Al Jazeera estimated that Israel spent seven point one million dollars on YouTube ads alone²⁴¹. Not to mention the ex-Israeli soldiers who are leading Meta's content moderation²⁴². This research found more than 6 accounts that the state of Israel maintains, including a separate account for English and Hebrew news, with

²³⁸ ajplus (@ajplus), "Did you know that Israel influences what you see on Instagram and Facebook?" Instagram Reel, October 22, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBcECVoRFFO/?igsh=MXZuOWU0N3FlbnkxZW==>

²³⁹ ajplus (@ajplus), "New leaked data sheds light on Israel's efforts to censor pro-Palestinian posts on social media. At the direct request of the Israeli government, Meta has deleted tens of thousands of these posts on Facebook and Instagram since Israel launched its war on Gaza," Instagram post, April 18, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DIlps12xY7I/?igsh=azE3cW5jb3lnZ3Vr>

²⁴⁰ ajlisteningpost (@ajlisteningpost), "The role of activists and influencers in war propaganda has surged in the last 12 months. Nicholas Muirhead reports on Zionist influencers online and how the genocide in Gaza has made their jobs a lot more challenging," Instagram Reel, September 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAem1UpiPdH/?igsh=MXV6bWNuenZ4ZzJrdA==>

²⁴¹ ajlisteningpost (@ajlisteningpost), "The role of activists and influencers in war propaganda has surged in the last 12 months. Nicholas Muirhead reports on Zionist influencers online and how the genocide in Gaza has made their jobs a lot more challenging," Instagram Reel, September 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAem1UpiPdH/?igsh=MXV6bWNuenZ4ZzJrdA==>

²⁴² ajplus (@ajplus), "Did you know that Israel influences what you see on Instagram and Facebook?" Instagram Reel, October 22, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBcECVoRFFO/?igsh=MXZuOWU0N3FlbnkxZW==>

hundreds of others spread across the world. Israeli media dominates traditional forms of media already, but it has recognised the internet as an important space to control as well. Which is why it has a dedicated online Hasbara unit²⁴³. Each of these accounts and the thousands of Israel-trained internet soldiers that tasked with inundating the internet with their message²⁴⁴. From propaganda to history lessons, they produce, share, reproduce and amplify content that is of interest²⁴⁵. Thus, Israel has had a historic advantage in online public spaces due to the resources it has been able to deploy.

Besides this, Instagram and TikTok are notorious for penalising activists for posting political content. Multiple activists have lost their accounts without any explanation and are hoping for retrieval²⁴⁶. Instagram relies on a strike system to determine whether a creator deserves to be on the platform. The strikes can be launched against other users who report the content or content regulators. Once a strike is initiated, the owner of the account has the opportunity to challenge it and provide proof. The strikes can be because either the content or the person is deemed unsuitable by the platform. Many activists have reported that their accounts have been suspended for hate speech or depicting sensitive content, and that their

²⁴³ ajlisteningpost (@ajlisteningpost), “The role of activists and influencers in war propaganda has surged in the last 12 months. Nicholas Muirhead reports on Zionist influencers online and how the genocide in Gaza has made their jobs a lot more challenging,” Instagram Reel, September 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAem1UpiPdH/?igsh=MXV6bWNuenZ4ZzJrdA==>

²⁴⁴ ajlisteningpost (@ajlisteningpost), “The role of activists and influencers in war propaganda has surged in the last 12 months. Nicholas Muirhead reports on Zionist influencers online and how the genocide in Gaza has made their jobs a lot more challenging,” Instagram Reel, September 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAem1UpiPdH/?igsh=MXV6bWNuenZ4ZzJrdA%3D%3D&utm>

²⁴⁵ raseef22en (@raseef22en), “Israel has always been keen on crafting an overwhelming media image... With every video and photo shared, another piece of that myth crumbles,” Instagram Reel, June 24, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DK41Lc2y9uO/>

²⁴⁶ subhi.albiddawy (@subhi.albiddawy), “the Palestinian blood is FLOWING...,” TikTok video, April 16, 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4UXS1h/>

accounts have been suspended without the ability to appeal²⁴⁷. For example, Journalist Motaz Aziza kept getting his content flagged as “pornographic”²⁴⁸. In the best case, the creators get access to their accounts back within a few days, or their account is deleted permanently, and the creator loses all their data. Subhi Taha, a Palestinian diaspora activist whose content revolved around sharing news, think pieces, and preserving Palestinian culture, is the most recent victim in this series²⁴⁹. Perhaps even more concerning is that creators are not only overtly punished for speaking out, but also covertly restricted from reaching their audience. This phenomenon is called “shadowbanning”²⁵⁰. The term originated when creators noticed that their reach had been severely curtailed without explanation²⁵¹. Several Palestinian activists noticed that they were only reaching a fraction of their usual audience, let alone being recommended to new users²⁵². A oft-repeated sentiment is that “The algorithm hates Palestine” and “they want to erase us”²⁵³. This phenomenon is by no means exclusive to the #FreePalestine movement; creators have reported an unexpected dip in their reach for years. However, the use of shadow banning in this context

²⁴⁷ eye.on.palestine (@eye.on.palestine), “Dear our followers... Kindly please share our posts and invite your friends to join us,” Instagram post, July 6, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C9F6DigKJPR/?igsh=MWg4NmlvaTNlbnpjag%3D%3D>

²⁴⁸ ajplus (@ajplus), “This Meta engineer was fired after trying to fix the flagging of Gaza images as ‘pornographic’...,” Instagram Reel, October 31, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBzFWdyRykw/?igsh=MXA0cGJhcHZvNDI3Mw>

²⁴⁹ subhi.albiddawy (@subhi.albiddawy), “the Palestinian blood is FLOWING...,” TikTok video, April 16, 2024,

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4UXS1h/>

²⁵⁰ yalies4palestine (@yalies4palestine), “Y4P is currently shadowbanned... Please check out our post to see how you can help us get our content out to the rest of the community,” Instagram post, October 9, 2024,

https://www.instagram.com/p/DA4aSjrs1eR/?img_index=6&igsh=cnUzNGlndmU2d2Z4

²⁵¹ siicksaadwoorld (@siicksaadwoorld), “When are we gonna get some viable alternatives to these cooked platforms...,” Instagram post, October 14, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBGGZC5SFRt/?igsh=Y3VvYzJ0Y3JvcTdk>

²⁵² khaledalhaj11 (@khaledalhaj11), “Is it possible that I have more than 9,000 fake followers... What's going on here, what's the problem?,” Instagram post, June 11, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8Dx4B0INCl/?igsh=MTQ5YWw0aTF1MXU0YQ==>

²⁵³ jenanmatari (@jenanmatari), “Some ‘House Rules’... it’s colonizers who demand you only focus on surviving physical violence...,” Instagram post, July 15, 2024.,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9cu5txxV75/?igsh=MTh3cml5YXVzOHl0dg==>

reveals how it can be weaponised to silence voices of dissent. Moreover, it feeds into the perception of social media having obvious biases towards Palestine. Thus, the representations of space manifest in myriad of ways that limit and take away activists' platforms.

In this contested public space, Palestinian activists must carve a niche for themselves on the internet and somehow make themselves and remain seen despite the censorship²⁵⁴. Palestinian journalist Plestia posted that she is tired of being “palatable to the algorithm” and “saying things the way the algorithm likes”; she “doesn’t know how to even edit a genocide for the feed?”²⁵⁵. Others complain about the hypocrisy of living in a “reality that is too graphic for social media”²⁵⁶. In this uneven field, silencing the voice of journalists, activists, diaspora artists, sympathisers and even celebrities actively takes away space from the movement. The affordances of social media that are designed to make content visible, however, the algorithm decides which content can be seen.

By policing what is said and who is allowed to speak on social media, these platforms perpetuate the surveillance and censorship that is faced in the offline arena. The biases of the creators are reflected in the content guidelines on social media that become the representations of space. Thus, they limit the possibilities of visibility and, therefore, occupation of space by the #FreePalestine movement.

²⁵⁴ ajlisteningpost (@ajlisteningpost), “The role of activists and influencers in war propaganda has surged... how the genocide in Gaza has made their jobs a lot more challenging,” Instagram Reel, September 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAem1UpiPdH/?igsh=MXV6bWNuenZ4ZzJrdA%3D%3D>

²⁵⁵ plestia.alaqad (@plestia.alaqad), “A quick reminder that Israel is still starving and killing Palestinians...,” Instagram post, August 2, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DM2ba2TSvkS/?igsh=MWQ3Zm5hYnFjbzR1eQ==>

²⁵⁶ blackoutcampaign (@blackoutcampaign), “Day 326... Millions have been wounded, thousands have been martyred yet the world sleeps...,” Instagram post, August 28, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_NwfKxs8h9/?igsh=ZmV6aGJweXlmc2dt

“I Wear My Keffiyeh Everywhere”: Symbols of The Resistance And Reminders of Palestine

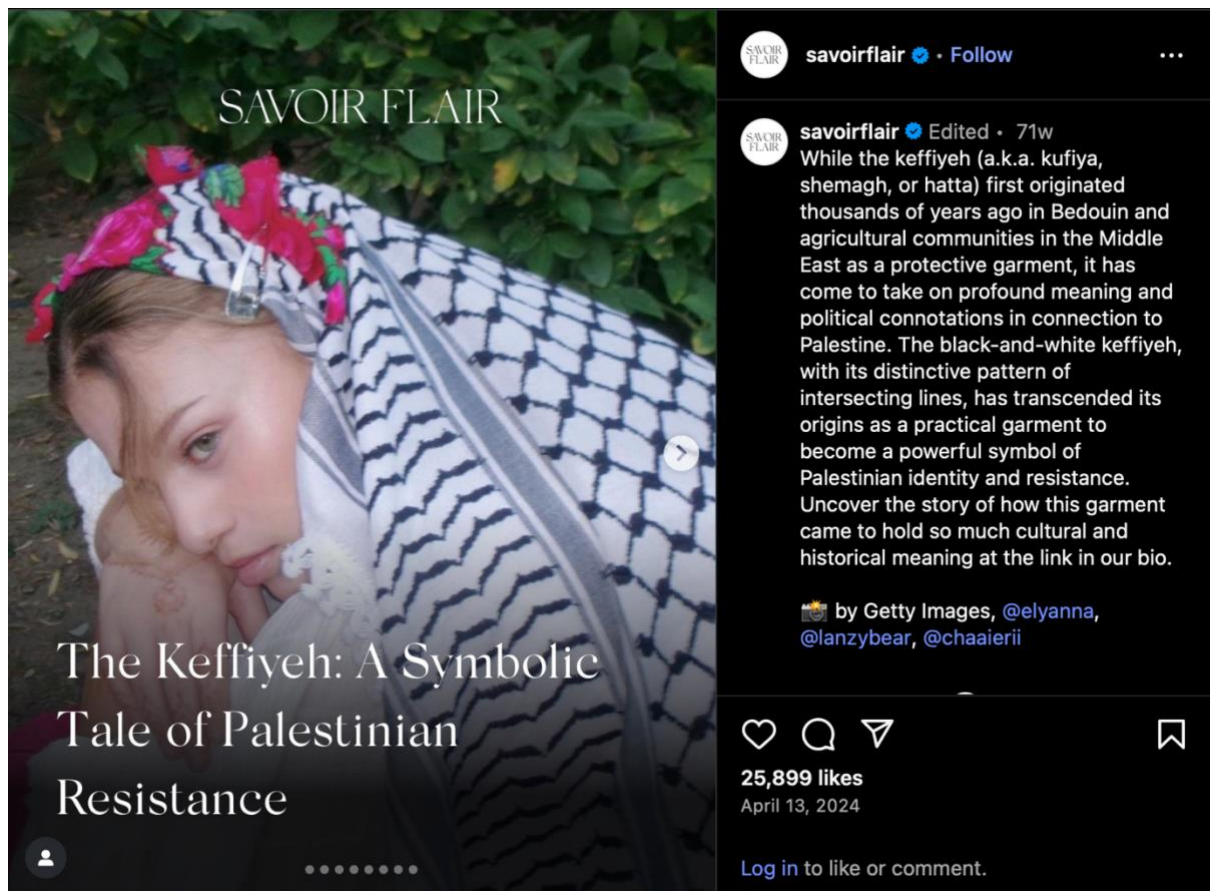


Figure 9: Instagram Post About The Keffiyeh As A Symbol of Palestine

Owing to the censorship and surveillance of public spaces, the #FreePalestine movement has developed symbols to occupy space. It has symbols that are now unequivocally associated with Palestine. The theme of graffiti/symbols came up 39 times in my Instagram posts and 11 times on TikTok. Crucially, these symbols grew out of the suppression experienced in both offline and online spaces²⁵⁷. They defied bans, algorithmic biases, and censorship to say what needed to be said. They are crucial in subverting the suppression activists have faced. However, it is also important to note the unique nature of Palestinian symbols, as the online and

²⁵⁷ ajplus (@ajplus), “Why is the poppy flower a symbol of Palestine...,” Instagram post, June 19, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C8Z0Bi4Jg7f/?igsh=MWdodTcwbmluczRwNw==>

offline worlds are particularly intertwined in this case. Symbols that emerged in both spaces have to continuously adapt to the limitations placed by the other space, and as a result, one symbol has evolved into many different forms. Thus, representation of space forces movements to create symbols to hold space for the movement.

The most obvious symbol is the watermelon, which is now synonymous with Palestine. The symbol emerged when Israel banned the Palestinian flag from being flown or displayed anywhere in the 1960s²⁵⁸. The flag was a symbol of unity for the Palestinian people and the liberation movement, and the ban was meant to suppress any nationalist sentiment²⁵⁹. At that time, the watermelon became a symbol of the Palestinian people because it contained the colours of the flag. However, despite its offline origins, it is online where the symbol became mainstream. Post October 7th, the limits placed on Palestinian content made activists wary of shadowbans if their posts mentioned Palestine. To counter this, they started using the watermelon emoji as a replacement for the word Palestine²⁶⁰. Slowly, the symbol emerged on more and more posts, in captions, in the comments, in people's bios and their usernames²⁶¹. Eventually, there was no need to explain the context; simply placing a watermelon in a comment section or on a post was enough to signal to the audience what the post was about. Slowly, even the word watermelon was used instead of Palestine or Palestinian. Journalists would say they are from "watermelon", or activists would raise funds for "watermelon" or to help

²⁵⁸wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), "In 1967, the occupation forces banned all public displays of Palestinian flags... Our freedom melon design has now helped us raise over half of the total \$660,000 we've donated to Gaza," Instagram post, April 13, 2024 ,

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5tQCOoO50k/?img_index=2&igsh=MWJ1NGN3d29lZ29nbG==

²⁵⁹ wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), "In 1967, the occupation forces banned all public displays of Palestinian flags... Our freedom melon design has now helped us raise over half of the total \$660,000 we've donated to Gaza," Instagram post, April 13, 2024,

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5tQCOoO50k/img_index=2&igsh=MWJ1NGN3d29lZ29nbG==

²⁶⁰ walla_abueid (@walla_abueid), "This Lazy Cat Cake is the ultimate no-bake indulgence...", TikTok video, March 15, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4f66mL/>

²⁶¹ trashcheyenne (@trashcheyenne), "utter trash... Zendaya was obviously the best dressed at the Golden Globes!," TikTok video, January 7, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4PjR9U/>

“Watermelonians”²⁶². In their second life, the symbols then moved back to the offline in the form of graffiti, stickers, shirts, and jewellery²⁶³. The watermelon props up in the most unexpected of places, without explanation and marks the space with its presence. Much like the graffiti that is littered across Europe, artefacts of Palestinian existence are also littered across cyberspace for those who wish to find them and for those who happen to stumble upon them. These symbols are part of the soft resources which emerge due to the restrictions placed on the movement in both spaces.

Another prolific symbol is the flag itself. It was created with the colours of Arab resistance and needed to unify the people of Palestine after the Nakba²⁶⁴. The flag and the colours of the flag invoked a sense of collective identity that was strong enough for Israel to ban the flag. It is flown at protests and worn as a badge or painted onto faces. Now it has evolved beyond a symbol of nationalist identity to a general symbol for support of Palestine. In a similar vein, the keffiyeh has also become a global symbol of arab resistance and anti-colonialism²⁶⁵. What was once a common piece of clothing worn by arab men is now a statement for students, activists and Palestinian sympathisers to signal their solidarity with Palestine²⁶⁶. Other symbols are still highly politicised and, as a result, censored, such as, the chant: “from the river to sea”²⁶⁷,

²⁶² wizard_bisan1 (@wizard_bisan1), “Killing 145 people a day is not enough for IsraHell... they decided to close the only means of life left for Gazans,” Instagram Reel, July 13, 2025,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMDcuKSK38t/?igsh=MXJkZ2FpNXgxaHMzbg==>

²⁶³ thiagoavilabrazil3 (@thiagoavilabrazil3), “This is the fourth day of the journey of the Madleen to Gaza to BREAK THE SIEGE... we have millions and maybe billions of people with us,” TikTok video, April 6, 2025, , <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4rrvJ9/>

²⁶⁴ human1011 (@human1011), “For more on the origins of the Palestinian flag...,” Instagram post, June 24, 2024. , <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS42DnSK/>

²⁶⁵ , tcabolition (@tcabolition), “Teachers College has censored its students... We refuse to let them manipulate history,” Instagram post, May 21, 2024,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7PMPGQuJO4/?igsh=enJyMXJ6cW5nMDR0>

²⁶⁶ subhi.albiddawy (@subhi.albiddawy), “the Palestinian blood is FLOWING...,” TikTok video, April 16, 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4UXS1h/>

²⁶⁷ lanzybear (@lanzybear), “This is a test of the emergency broadcast system... what do you think,” Instagram post, September 5, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_hEWL5vKhm/?igsh=MTJuMWx1cXN1cXNkNg==

Protests were banned from using the chant²⁶⁸, with people even taken in for questioning by the police and labelled as terrorists for continuing to chant “from the river to the sea”²⁶⁹. Thus, symbols from the movement permeate both online and offline spaces, but remain controversial and put the activists in danger either way. Interviewee 6 was harassed at her job, questioned by the police, made to delete her social media and eventually fired from her job for posting the slogan online²⁷⁰. Thus, even as symbols emerge out of censorship, the surveillance that pervades in public spaces morphs them into targets on activists’ backs.

A third symbol that has emerged from the rubble of Gaza is the martyrs themselves. While the sheer volume of casualties makes it impossible to remember and honour each of the dead, many events and deaths have been stamped on our collective consciousness. Either due to the horrific nature of their death or the deeds while they were alive, some martyrs have been reincarnated as symbols of resistance. Hind Rajab, Shireen Abu Akleh and Baby Reem²⁷¹ become reminders of Israeli brutality and Palestinian sacrifices. In 2024, many university students occupied university buildings and renamed them after the martyrs (Hind’s Hall)²⁷². The freedom flotilla names its ships after Palestinian martyrs and fisherwomen²⁷³. Their names are left as comments under celebrities’ posts, and their art is shared online and replicated; their faces are

²⁶⁸ Interviewee 6, personal interview by author, 6th July 2025

²⁶⁹ ajplus (@ajplus), “In Germany, immigrants could lose their chance at citizenship for sharing... pro-Palestinian social media posts,” Instagram post, October 24, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBHk5vAxH2i/?igsh=MWVjMXB4bmsyZGthaw>

²⁷⁰ Interviewee 6, Personal Interview by author, 6th July 2025

²⁷¹ ajplus (@ajplus), “AJ+ spoke with Basil Rodriguez, the niece of slain Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh...,” Instagram post, April 26, 2024, [HYPERLINK "https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6OiIhjrQIG/?igsh=dTk5cjVwNnU1bG55"](https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6OiIhjrQIG/?igsh=dTk5cjVwNnU1bG55)<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6OiIhjrQIG/?igsh=dTk5cjVwNnU1bG55>

²⁷² ajplus (@ajplus), “AJ+ spoke with Basil Rodriguez, the niece of slain Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh...,” Instagram post, April 26, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6OiIhjrQIG/?igsh=dTk5cjVwNnU1bG55>

²⁷³ gretathunberg (@gretathunberg), “The Freedom Flotilla aid mission is about supporting Palestinian resistance... we have yet again set sail towards Gaza – not carrying weapons, but food and medical supplies,” Instagram post, June 2, 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DKaYxMps39y/?img_index=2&igsh=ZXoxYXpxcGpsbjc4

graffiti on walls, and their names are read aloud at protests²⁷⁴. Their lives and deaths are a testament to the genocide, a unifying force in the movement, because their last moments were livestreamed and shared for the sake of visibility. The dead are denied the dignity of rest because their names must be invoked, their deaths relived by those who claim solidarity, for the movement to reaffirm that we are indeed witnessing a genocide. Thus, is the demand of the occupation of space in public spaces; heroes, martyrs, and symbols to be slapped on every conceivable space. It demands constant reminders of our pain for the creation of to counter the affordances of social media. However, as the symbols become mainstream and mass-produced, they risk losing their political meanings.

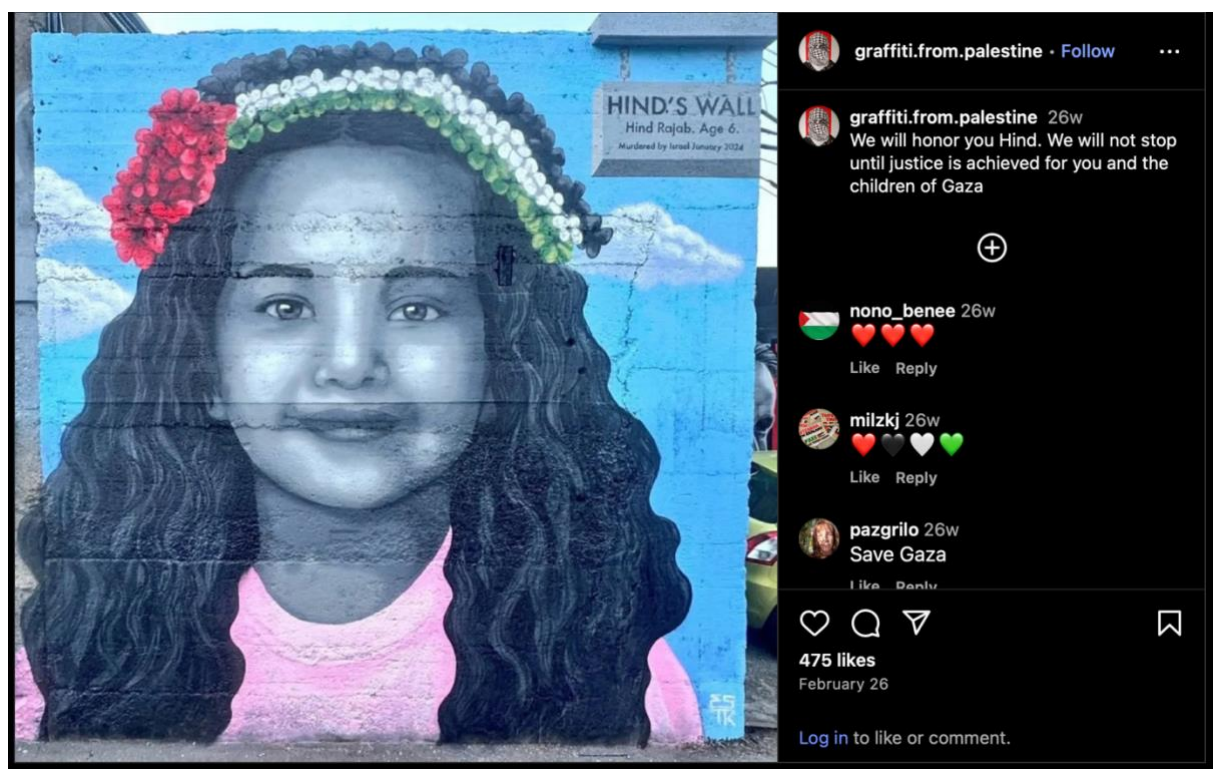


Figure 10: Instagram Post Shows Graffiti of Hind Rajab

²⁷⁴ graffiti.from.palestine (@graffiti.from.palestine), “We will honor you Hind... We will not stop until justice is achieved for you and the children of Gaza,” Instagram post, February 26, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGh92KFCaf-/?igsh=bDY0ajE2a2dyOGVk>

This mass production and proliferation are again a product of the need to continuously occupy space, both online and offline. The more popular the movement becomes, the more diluted its symbols and political message become. What is a Keffiyeh or a Watermelon beyond a symbol meant to signal those on the street and cyberspace of your political leanings? An “Artists for Gaza”²⁷⁵ pin does occupy space at an elite Hollywood function, but just barely. A Keffiyeh dress worn at a Fashion week²⁷⁶, a clothing line featuring watermelons and fishline motifs²⁷⁷ or a Palestine earring on the subway does little to aid the actual movement. I observed that every interviewee had at least one item of clothing or jewellery depicting a Palestinian symbol that they had purchased. Some of them wore them every day, while others chose to only don them for protests. Yet the question remains: Does it bring any meaningful pressure to free Gaza from a blockade and genocide? Or does it simply tell the fans of a celebrity not to cancel them? The space of representation contains all the symbols and the symbolic meanings of the space that is created, but divorcing symbols from actions leads to virtue signalling and little else.

²⁷⁵ jenanmatari (@jenanmatari), “Some ‘House Rules’...,” Instagram post, July 25, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9cu5txxV75/?igsh=MTh3cml5YXVzOHl0dg==>

34. ²⁷⁶ noorunisa (@noorunisa), “I hate that I don’t live here...,” Instagram post, August 9, 2025. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DNIHEwWMTdu/?igsh=MTFhcTE5bWs5Z3h6OQ>

²⁷⁷ wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), “In 1967, the occupation forces banned all public displays of Palestinian flags... Our freedom melon design has now helped us raise over half of the total \$660,000 we’ve donated to Gaza,” Instagram post, April 13, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C5tQCOoO50k/?img_index=2&igsh=MWJ1NGN3d29lZ29nbG==



Figure 11: Instagram Post of Alana Hadid Wearing A Keffiyeh Dress

Again, the networked/embodied space creates an interplay between online and offline symbols. The representations of space censor the public space enough to create these symbols, while the affordances of social media necessitate their continuous use. These affordances, in turn, rob. Thus, the watermelon ends up in all places, but the need to mark space while avoiding censorship means that the watermelon becomes mass-produced and diluted in meaning over time. Europe's public spaces may be littered with reminders of Palestine, but they do little to free Palestine.

Creating the "Palestinian": The Logic of Social Media and the Dehumanisation of Palestinians

It has been almost 2 years since this genocide started, and the number of people talking about Palestine has increased tremendously. We have journalists, within and outside Gaza, Diaspora activists, Politicians, diplomats, activists and even children²⁷⁸ weighing in on the situation. The sheer volume of content online is difficult to fathom. Since this research began consciously documenting content in 2024, it was clear that there was no way it would be able to cover even a significant portion of the content available online. However, what is particularly fascinating is the creation of the Palestinian archetype online due to the volume of content surrounding Palestine.

The algorithm demands a constant stream of content to achieve relevancy. Visibility is fleeting, and activists must post every day to remain on people's feeds. Thus, the internet is proliferated with markers of Palestinian suffering²⁷⁹. This thesis focuses on what, or rather who, those images create and how that affects the #FreePalestine movement. From the collected Instagram videos, Cyberspace As An Archive with the Dehumanisation of Palestinians occurred together 10% of the time. This suggests a clear link between the two.

To outrun the time limit of the algorithm, we have inundated cyberspace with images of Palestinian misery and death. This, in turn, has created an image of the 'Palestinian' that is constantly suffering, displaced and hungry²⁸⁰. Well-meaning as it is, this content has normalised the condition of the besieged Gaza Strip to an extent. While the blame for causing the genocide lies with Israel, the barrage of images from the Gaza Strip has nonetheless equated 'the

²⁷⁸ Sky News (@SkyNews), "‘We want to live as other children live’... Palestinian children have held a press conference outside Gaza's al-Shifa Hospital," Instagram post, November 8, 2023 , <https://www.tiktok.com/@skynews/video/7299227921032449312>

²⁷⁹ motaz_azaiza (@motaz_azaiza), "Running from death to another death... Palestinian family document themselves while trying to survive Israeli airstrikes around them," Instagram post, August 16, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C-ujvhwgslI/?igsh=NTZ1NGZ2OTJ1bTUx>

²⁸⁰ wissamgaza (@wissamgaza), "A terrified little girl, tears streaming down her face... 'We're running away to be safe. They bombed our home,'" Instagram post, May 21, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7O1WTsOG0G/?igsh=MWh5MG1ldHZiZ2Fk>

Palestinian' with the dispossessed, disabled, dismembered and discarded. Recently, an Israeli TV host boasted that they could "kill 100 Palestinians in one night" and no one would care because the world had become "used to" 100 Palestinians dying in one night²⁸¹. Palestinian journalists die with the knowledge that their death would be forgotten soon²⁸², as they become just another body to be buried.

Many journalists hoped that livestreaming a genocide would lead to widespread public outcry and international pressure to cease the operation²⁸³. People waited for the napalm girl image of Gaza, which would stop the genocide like it stopped the Vietnam War²⁸⁴. For example, when Israel bombed tents on the 14th of October 2024, killing babies and refugees, activists posted videos online and urged people to "make it go viral"²⁸⁵. Furthermore, this thesis also analysed which dates were most frequently recorded. Based on the chart and the table below, April and October/November 2024, as well as July 2025, were peaks. Looking at the posts from that period, we can track major events. October/November is when Israel committed the first tent massacre and bombed multiple hospitals and refugee camps, and journalists were scrambling to post videos of the destruction. However, the continued broadcasting for over 2 years has now led to apathy as well. This feeling is encapsulated in a poem shared by Motaz that reads "amidst our daily routines, we swipe through the glowing screens, flicking the disaster up and down,

²⁸¹ doamuslims (@doamuslims), "Israeli MK, Tzippi Sukkot, brags about the killing of 100 Palestinians in a single night...", Instagram post, May 17, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJwRBJCoYck/>

²⁸² mohammed_alassar (@mohammed_alassar), "400 days of war on Gaza... Share if you care PS 🙏", Instagram post, November 9, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCKTkvTuc2M/?igsh=ZnR6YWN5eWpzeWZz>

²⁸³ thegreenmonki (@thegreenmonki), "🇪🇺 did you know the EU has an 'association agreement' with Israel... it represents 30% of the countries' exports," Instagram post, May 21, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DJ58C-Gtr9t/?img_index=12&igsh=Mzh2cHk0b3hwNm12

²⁸⁴ tanciasafi (@tanciasafi), "Enough. Enough. Enough said... Get up, get it done. Not another day," Instagram post, October 7, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAzEuXiiOjv/?igsh=aDdqbWh2aXJsNTF1>

34. ²⁸⁵ call2actionnow (@call2actionnow), "🚨 URGENT ACTION - 12 AND 13 NOVEMBER... A summary of some of the main atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli regime against the Palestinian and Lebanese people," Instagram post, November 15, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCYJtb9CVyL/?igsh=c3dibDFyZ29vOHZ2>

without a trace of blood left on our screen"²⁸⁶. Thus, efforts to gain visibility have led to the dehumanisation of the Palestinian.

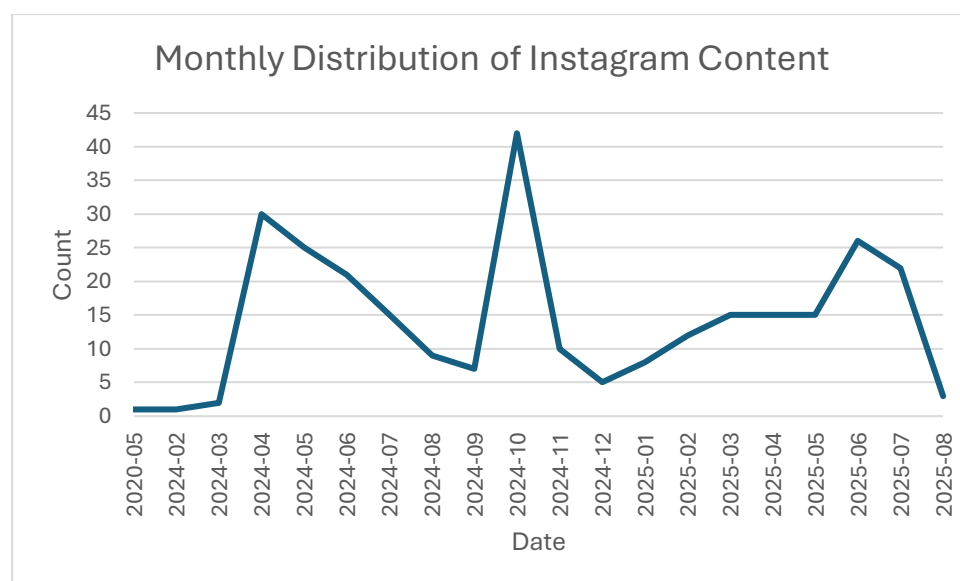


Table 3: Monthly Distribution of Instagram Content

This dehumanisation has, in turn, created more barriers for Palestinian content. First, the creation of the besieged Palestinian subject has set the standard for Palestinian content. For the algorithm to push your content, it must show increasing levels of brutality and misery. This ‘misery porn’, in a sense, is what is pushed most often. Despite it being flagged as sensitive, every new massacre pushes new videos of bodies in despair²⁸⁷. This mode of communication thrives on virality, which is most easily achieved by misinformation²⁸⁸. Since we have already established that all content must fight for attention and relevance, it takes away from other content that may ask the viewer something less inflammatory but still important. For example, think pieces, cultural content, and donation appeals are all forms of content that are devoid of the brutality

²⁸⁶ motaz_azaiza (@motaz_azaiza), “Silent Audience...,” Instagram post, April 20, 2025., <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIrrQv-Ny0d/?igsh=MThod29vMnUxZDg0dw==>

²⁸⁷ wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), “A family bids farewell to their babygirl moments ago... Palestinians can’t even celebrate without occupation bombardment,” Instagram post, June 16, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C8SOypwuewt/?igsh=MW54YmkybHZpczd1OA==>

²⁸⁸ etymologynerd (@etymologynerd), “I just posted a longform piece on substack...,” Instagram post, November 11, 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4acHLT/>

that has become synonymous with 'Palestine'. Thus, even if activists specifically engage with Palestinian content, the algorithm may prioritise one kind of Palestinian content over the other.

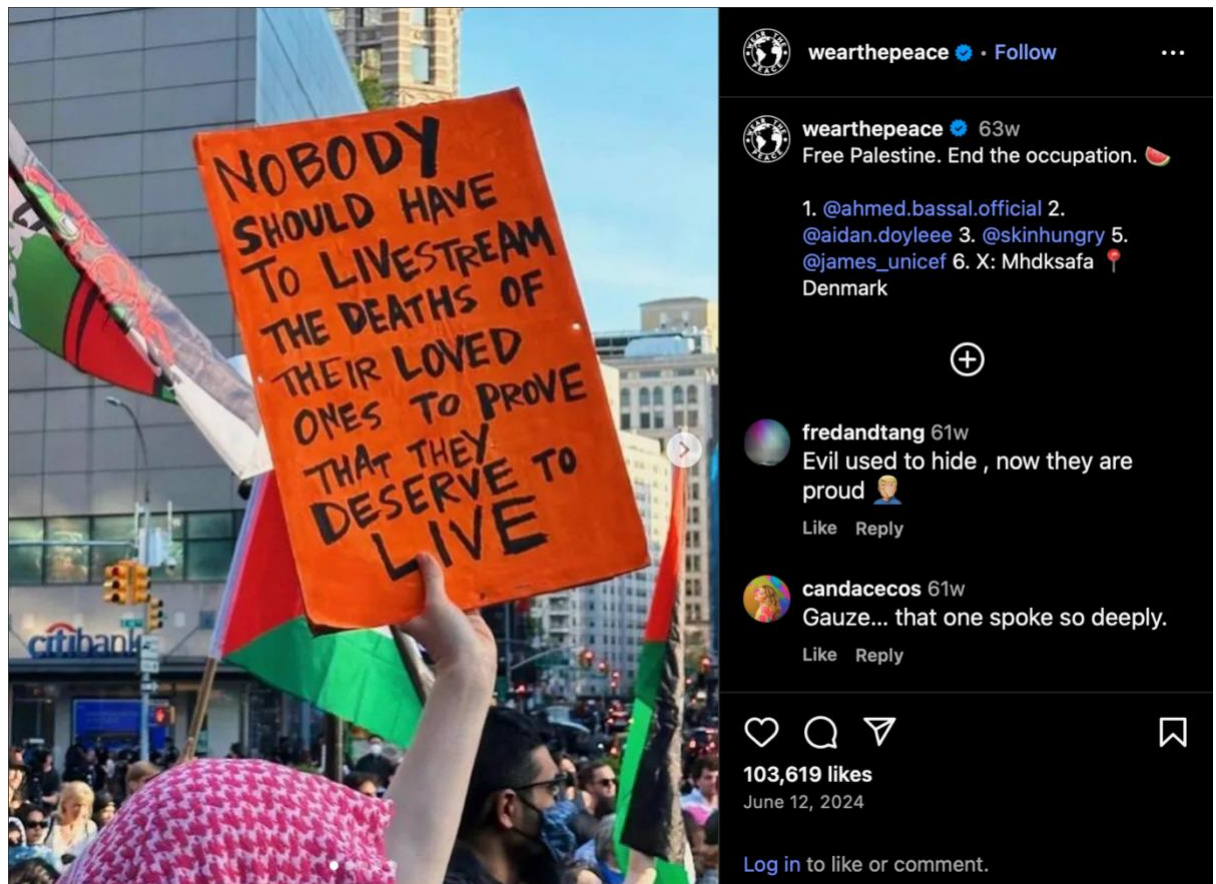


Figure 12: Instagram Post from Wear The Peace

Second, this dehumanisation has also presented new challenges in occupying and maintaining visibility. The algorithm is designed to boost the next trend; hence, after a few weeks, it is already looking for the next viral hit. Within the first six months of the genocide, there were a lot of activists talking about “don't let Palestine be another trend” and “do not stop speaking about Gaza”²⁸⁹. Bisan implored people to make their videos “go viral like any other

²⁸⁹ ajplus (@ajplus), “Each day was a battle for survival’... Journalist Hossam Shabat was 23 years old and was killed on March 24,” Instagram post, March 24, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DHmK2w9R0gR/?igsh=MWF4eXk5OGNveTdrcg==>

trend”²⁹⁰. They are aware that the space that they are occupying is hostile, contested, and most importantly, fleeting²⁹¹. The contradictory nature of social media is such that everything is recorded and archived; however, everything fades away. The space a single video can create can be measured by its reach and engagement; however, both these metrics are temporal. All content has an ever-shrinking window of virality within which activists have to achieve their desired level of visibility. Thus, a video can be an instant viral sensation and be both a space for protest and an act of protest in itself, as well as being a virtual archive of the Palestinian condition and still only be a momentary space. For example, fundraisers often mention that if users do not engage with their content, “you will kill us”²⁹². That is to say, it will no longer be deemed relevant enough to be pushed by the algorithm and will not appear on anyone’s screens anymore. Unlike offline spaces, where a protest or an encampment can hold a space for a period of time and make themselves visible, Palestinians online must create that space every day. To be relevant, they must make content and hope that it goes viral every day, because what they talked about yesterday has become irrelevant the next day. They're locked in a cycle of having to generate content around their annihilation to have a chance of survival. This sentiment is echoed in videos where the activists say, “I know you are tired of seeing dead babies”²⁹³. Thus, the affordances of social media turn the viewer into a witness to the atrocities committed against Palestinians while the Palestinians are forced to livestream their own genocide²⁹⁴.

²⁹⁰ wizard_bisan1 (@wizard_bisan1), “CALL TO ACTION!!... Strike and stop the genocide!,” Instagram post, May 20, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ3uJAKs5UQ/?igsh=MTlmbGxuZ29qZnJoag==>

²⁹¹ motaz_aiza (@motaz_aiza), “Silent Audience...,” Instagram post, April 20, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIrrQv-Ny0d/?igsh=MTlod29vMnUxZDg0dw==>

²⁹² fluraa8091 (@fluraa8091), “#f_a_l_e_s_t_i_n_e #freepalestine... #boycottisrael #savefalestine #falestinianfood,” Instagram post, July 12, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQfaHEt/>

²⁹³ aseel_ibrahim65 (@aseel_ibrahim65), “It’s just a pan... It’s been a year and my family and I have been suffering... Please give what you can do, interact, post, comment, donate,” Instagram post, October 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBtcIpyofGz/?igsh=OWxkYjJjNG8xNW0y>

²⁹⁴ wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), “Free Palestine. End the occupation...,” Instagram post, June 12, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8F_FAQhQQA/?igsh=dHY0d3hkeijvemJm

Third, the emotional fatigue and apathy caused by seeing dead bodies on your homepage for two years have very real consequences for the #FreePalestine movement. Videos of donations now begin with “Please don’t like and skip”²⁹⁵ and “Why are you just liking the video?”²⁹⁶. This shows that the vast majority of viewers who are being suggested Palestinian videos, specifically donation appeals, are skipping or doing the bare minimum to engage with the video. Some videos now even start with “I know you are tired.... We are also tired of living in this reality”²⁹⁷, centring that emotional fatigue that viewers are feeling and connecting it to the mental and physical duress that the Palestinians are under. They allude to the fact that the creator of the video is aware that, despite sympathy for their plight, viewers are simply overwhelmed and may want to skip the videos in the moment. Some of the videos even explicitly say, “I know there are so many videos asking for help”²⁹⁸, again trying to connect with the viewer and assure them their exhaustion is understood. Interviewee 10 also spoke about this exhaustion and how they feel hopeless and are not even sure why they post about Palestine anymore, but they don’t know what else to do²⁹⁹. Their entire feed is about Palestine and fundraisers, to the point where they feel nothing makes a difference anymore³⁰⁰. Occupying space online is thus riddled with traps because social media is essentially a leisure space, and occupying this space for 2 years means risking the apathy or annoyance of users. It also alludes to the slacktivism that arises in social media. Especially where fundraising videos ask the users to complete simple tasks, but viewers are skipping or just liking and skipping the videos. On TikTok, the Slacktivism theme appeared 13.7% of the time, mainly on fundraising videos, where the posters were dismayed by

²⁹⁵ nafez.gaza (@nafez.gaza), “please don't forget to donate to us via the donation link...,” Instagram post, March 9, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4fdDQY/>

²⁹⁶ fiveinatent (@5inatent), “Family of 5 from 🍌... Living in a 🏠 Help us survive,” TikTok video, March 11, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4ycMRU/>

²⁹⁷ aseel_ibrahim65 (@aseel_ibrahim65), “It’s just a pan... It’s been a year and my family and I have been suffering... Please give what you can do, interact, post, comment, donate,” Instagram post, October 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBtcIpyofGz/?igsh=OWxkYjJjNG8xNW0y>

²⁹⁸ abuthaher.family (@abuthaher.family), “Abuthaher Family | from Gaza 🍌 Lost our home... Every bit of help counts,” Instagram post, June 13, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS42oMsc/>

²⁹⁹ Interviewee 10, Personal Interview by author, 24th July 2025

³⁰⁰ Interviewee 10, personal interview by author, 24th July 2025

the lack of engagement on their posts. Thus, the visibility gained in online public space is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, it lowers the barriers to participation and makes it easier for people to join a cause, but it also reduces the actions to such a minuscule scale that they are no longer meaningful. You can “Like” a video or a post, but what does it really do for the person or the Palestinian cause other than virtue signal to your bubble that you are part of that community? If a Palestinian asks you to “use my audio” and you simply like the video and move on, have you really contributed to the movement? As one creator put it, “Do you understand how sad and dystopian it is that people in Gaza have to make clickbait videos in order to capture 15 seconds of people's humanity?”³⁰¹. Thus, the temporary nature of cyberspace and its propensity to virality create a unique challenge for activists protesting in public space: it leads to fatigue for those posting about Palestine, and apathy for those watching videos about Palestine.

Caught In the Web: The Interconnectedness of Surveillance

Crucially, this research argues that by observing censorship tactics used to suppress Palestinian content in online public spaces, we can learn more about the nature and risks of protesting in urban public spaces. As protest occurs simultaneously in both spaces, activists are now victims of the digital panopticon and face persecution in and through both spaces. As Julie Cohen argued, physical spaces are inhabited by networked and embodied individuals³⁰². Hence, the consequences of visibility are both networked and embodied. This presents unique challenges to protest for the #FreePalestine movement.

³⁰¹ hunterkaimi (@hunterkaimi), “And people will comment something about a chocolate bar...,” TikTok video, April 18, 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4Uq6K2/>

³⁰² Cohen, Julie E. “Cyberspace as/and Space.” *Colum. L. Rev.* 107 (2007): 210.

In the offline space, journalists in Gaza are targeted and killed by Israel³⁰³. Motaz Aziza, Hind Khouray, Plestia Alaqad, and Bisan Al Owda have all received threats asking them to cease their activities online³⁰⁴. Their movements, both online and offline, are being surveilled, and despite being journalists, they are targets for the Israeli army. In fact, Gaza has been the deadliest conflict for Journalists in the 21st century³⁰⁵. In November of 2024, over 400 journalists had already been killed³⁰⁶. From Shireen Abu Akleh to Anas Al Sharif, the list of journalists killed by Israel keeps growing. Many journalists expressed online that they knew they would be killed sooner or later because of the massive threats they faced, and that Israel was already manufacturing a pretext for their assassination³⁰⁷. The sheer number of journalists killed in the last two years alone suggests that there is some element of deliberateness on the part of the Israeli army. Thus, occupying space online has offline consequences that are often deadly for Palestinian activists and journalists. The embodied and networked activist cannot escape the reality of the rifle.

Activists are well aware of the target the affordances of social media place on their back. Many activists have recently made videos, advising protestors to leave their phones at home³⁰⁸.

³⁰³ Wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), “We were speaking to @nahed_hajja99 today... They are being starved to death as the food dwindles and the occupation continues... Open the borders!,” Instagram post, July 18, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DMQ337IB5cX/?igsh=MWF4ajczanRiZ2x1bA==>

³⁰⁴ Women4pal (@women4pal), “Independent Palestinian journalist Saleh Al-Jafarawi says he’s receiving death threats... Since the start of the genocide on Gaza, Israel has deliberately assassinated over 240 journalists,” Instagram post, August 16, 2025. https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNa1z7NII_i/

³⁰⁵ Plestia Al Aqad (@plestia.alaqad), “Slide 1/ This video was on 10/10/2023 when I went to Press House Palestine to borrow the press gear, I saw these...,” Instagram, August 15, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DNYMqE6SEW4/?img_index=2&igsh=MWZqYWpuZnQ4YWlrBA%3D%3D

³⁰⁶ Plestia Al Aqad (@plestia.alaqad), “Keep sharing the truthPS,” Instagram Reel, November 18, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DChg_qAHQh/?igsh=MXM1cnBwenl3anp0dw%3D%3D

³⁰⁷ Plestia Al Aqad (@plestia.alaqad), “Keep sharing the truthPS,” Instagram Reel, November 18, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DChg_qAHQh/?igsh=MXM1cnBwenl3anp0dw%3D%3D

³⁰⁸ SugarPill (@sugarpillseattle), “Leave your phones at home. Write important numbers or other info you might need somewhere on your body with a sharpie...,” Instagram Reel, April 5, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIC6Cbxy2W/>

While this feels counterproductive to the coordination and choreography of the protest, it is essential to appear anonymous in the offline arena. While communities have been built around the content of Palestinian activists, the necessity to remain unidentified in physical space remains. Similarly, proximity to a protest may be used to detain and deport other activists. In the global north, especially in the USA, association with an encampment alone can be a cause for legal proceedings. The state used photos and videos of Mahmood Khalil to prove that he was present at protests at Columbia University and gave speeches to the student body³⁰⁹. As previously mentioned, Interviewee 6 was called into questioning and fired for her social media posts³¹⁰. Furthermore, a new Instagram feature automatically shares your location on a public map, which is being criticised as a measure to surveil and target activists³¹¹. Though the constant connectivity afforded by cyberspace has made it easier to arrange flash protests and coordinate, it has also made activists' bodies constantly available for surveillance. Thus, the affordances of social media place a target on their back in offline public space and vice versa.

The surveillance of suppression of protest has gradually increased over the course of the genocide. In Germany, many students have been targeted simply for wearing a “keffiyeh, map, necklace or saying free Palestine”³¹². Moreover, the Trump administration has decided to check the social media of students who apply for a student visa to the US³¹³, and the UK has decided to

³⁰⁹ National SJP (@nationalsjp), “ SEND THE LETTER LINKED IN BIO  A Palestinian student activist at Columbia University, Mahmoud Khalil, has been...,” Instagram post, March 9, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DG_COkHOscb/?igsh=MTZuMGQ1YXRqZmJqOA%3D%3D

³¹⁰ Interviewee 6, personal interview by author, 6th July 2025.

³¹¹ European Legal Support Center (@elsclegal), “ Vienna Administrative Court Declares Police Raid of Palestine Solidarity Encampment Unconstitutional...,” Instagram post, February 24, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGdhU10MNPn/?igsh=dzN6cWs5aHA1encw>

³¹² Unpublished (@unpublished.de), “The @elsclegal in collaboration with @forensicarchitecture and @counterinvestigations launched a platform that contains...,” Instagram reel, May 14, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ0TfchNlrn/?igsh=MTM4a25hdmImMzc3ag==>

³¹³ Geātan Dauphin Nzowo (@gaetan_nzowo_official), “ BREAKING: The U.S. government now requires all student and exchange visa applicants (F, M, J) to make their social...,” Instagram post, June 24, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DLS_rglh_MX/?img_index=7&igsh=bXMybDI2OTgyNGh0

name Palestine Action as a terrorist group³¹⁴. According to the new UK law, following the Palestine Action page or wearing a free Palestine T-shirt can be grounds for suspected terrorist affiliation³¹⁵. Due to this, Interviewee 3 said they made a new social media account before applying for their PhD in the US³¹⁶, and Interviewee 6 made their accounts private upon advice from their employer³¹⁷. All other interviewees only post from their private accounts or from the pages they run, effectively choosing to remain anonymous in public space for fear of repercussions. Thus, despite visibility being vital to the occupation of space, it is now being weaponised for the sake of surveillance in both public spaces.

This section laboured to investigate how the affordances of social media inhibit opportunities for protest. It achieved that by observing the representations of space in cyberspace. Cyberspace simultaneously demands and weaponises visibility. The representations of space manifest in censorship and content moderation for activists. At the same time, the temporary nature of social demands a constant stream of content that leads to dehumanisation. Looking at the pitfalls of visibility and surveillance, a concerning picture has emerged. Far from Wertheim's cyberspace exceptionalism of the early 90s³¹⁸, the #FreePalestine movement tells a story of public space convergence. Where the online and the offline self-converge into one another, and the actions of one amount to penalisation for the other. Anything you say online can and will be used against you offline. There is no more safety or relative anonymity left on social media; your profile, regardless of its public or private status, is a means of surveillance. Thus, public spaces are highly visible and contested arenas for protest.

³¹⁴ Amnesty UK (@amnestyuk), "CALL TO ACTION: SIGN THE LETTER... Peaceful protesters have all been labelled as terrorists... We need to urge them NOT," Instagram post, August 22, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNpzc5mq05p/>

³¹⁵ Amnesty UK (@amnestyuk), "Next week the UK government is moving to ban Palestine Action under anti-terrorism laws...", Instagram post, June 28, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLb94Kjv0U1/?igsh=MWppbDdhejdvdTVkbw==>

³¹⁶ Interviewee 3, personal interview by author, 25th June 2025

³¹⁷ Interviewee 8, personal interview by author, 6th July 2025

³¹⁸ Wertheim, Margaret. "The pearly gates of cyberspace." In *Religion Today: A Reader*, pp. 43-46. Routledge, 2017.

Spaces of Representation And the Evolution of Public Protest

Having established that the panopticon is always watching and always counting the strikes, this section details how activists create spaces of representation and, in turn, produce space in cyberspace. This is answered through the question: how do activists navigate the barriers to protesting in public spaces? The double-edged nature of highly visible spaces like city centres and social media has led to activists innovating their protest tactics. Having established the challenges mounted against the #FreePalestine movement in the previous section, this section now endeavours to look at the strategies activists employ to overcome them. It observes the strategies that are born out of the unique set of challenges that arise as a result of the convergence of public spaces.

Evading The Eyes: How To Hide in Plain Sight

The number of protestors present in any given space can determine whether the protest is deemed a success or not³¹⁹. However, due to the prevalence of surveillance, protestors must innovate to make their voices heard, but their faces hidden.

³¹⁹ Interviewee 1, personal interview by author, 15th June 2025.



In the urban public spaces, protestors resort to covering their face to hide their identity from street cameras, drones and policemen. Interviewee 6 says they wore a keffiyeh and sunglasses to hide their face³²⁰. It is also helpful if you are caught on video by another protester and somehow end up online. Interviewee 10 said they were too afraid to even go near a protest because they were afraid of being photographed and arrested by the police³²¹. Protestors may cover their faces with bandanas, balaclavas, face masks or even full costumes. These tactics are meant to shield them from location tracking and maintain plausible deniability about their whereabouts³²². Another tactic, employed by those at encampments, is to protect the most vulnerable by placing them in the innermost circle³²³. Interviewee 4 detailed how the protestors protected the migrants and international students by sitting them in the innermost circles at protests and encampments so that they were least likely to get arrested³²⁴. Interviewee 2 detailed

³²⁰ Interviewee 6, personal interview by author, 6th July 2025

³²¹ Interviewee 10, personal interview by author, 24th July 2025

³²² Interviewee 9, personal interview by author, 11th July 2025.

³²³ Interviewee 4, personal interview by author, 26th June 2025.

³²⁴ Interview 4, personal interview by author, 26th June 2025.

how it was best to only go to planned protests with at least more than 100 people to ensure your relative invisibility to the police³²⁵. They explained that you are far more likely to be arrested at a smaller spontaneous protest than a large-scale one, so organisers make sure to warn migrants and international students of the risks involved and prioritise European protestors over them³²⁶. Interviewee 9 also said that it is best to disperse if the crowd gets too thin, because that is when the police will go in and arrest people³²⁷. This reveals that though visibility is crucial, not everyone can afford to be visible in public space. Thus, activists are well aware of the constant eyes on them and the pervasiveness of surveillance in urban areas and devise strategies to shield themselves in numbers to maintain their anonymity.

Similarly, in the online arena, activists maintain the same ideology of gaining visibility but hiding their identity. However, there is almost always a trade-off between gaining visibility and maintaining privacy in the online arena. For example, if they were to make a TikTok or Instagram account, they would have to provide an email address and/or a phone number. Furthermore, the platform also tracks your location. In theory, they can create a profile that does not have any personal identifiers; however, they then run the risk of being flagged as a bot and deleted by the platform. Activists warn each other on social media that “always assume your posts are public, even on private accounts, because facial recognition software can always access your data”³²⁸. Do not use university or work emails; stick to VPN and encrypted software like Signal are other frequent warnings³²⁹. Unlike Web 1.0, which thrived on anonymity, social media

³²⁵ Interviewee 2, personal interview by author, 24th June 2025.

³²⁶ Interviewee 2, personal interview by author 24th June 2025.

³²⁷ Interviewee 9, personal interview by author, 11th July 2025.

³²⁸ Palestinelegal (@palestinelegal), “This week’s Know Your Damn Rights video is about doxing. Here, we provide some ways you can be digitally secure when...,” Instagram Reel, November 27, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0Kii0bJXfh/>

³²⁹ Palestinelegal (@palestinelegal), “This week’s Know Your Damn Rights video is about doxing. Here, we provide some ways you can be digitally secure when...,” Instagram Reel, November 27, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0Kii0bJXfh/>

demands your persona to be on display. In this circumstance, activists have come up with creative tactics to gain visibility, bypass algorithmic bias, and avoid surveillance.

Firstly, all activists now maintain a backup account. This is something that influencers started as a response to frequent hacking and reporting by trolls, but has now been adopted by online activists as well. This strategy is meant to save all your data in case the platform decides to delete your profile or restrict your access³³⁰. Additionally, it ensures that the creator does not have to start from scratch and has some amount of following to fall back on, even if they lose access to their main account. Cyberspace is a volatile and unpredictable space; activists must create multiple spaces to protest if they hope to avoid the wrath of the algorithms.

Second, activists play into the algorithmic biases of the platforms. Instagram and TikTok both promote content that is sexualised or marketable. For activists who get shadowbanned, one of the most common tactics is to post pictures of themselves, usually “showing skin” or dancing around³³¹. This content, particularly from women, is boosted by the algorithm and often breaks down the limits placed on their reach. Other content can be pictures of their day³³², their food³³³ or their outfit³³⁴, etc. Anything that can be deemed as non-political can earn the activists back their visibility. Another tactic is to pretend to sell products online³³⁵. Activists now post videos

³³⁰ Jenan Matari (@jenanmatari), “Some ‘House Rules’... it’s colonizers who demand you only focus on surviving physical violence...,” Instagram post, July 15, 2024.,

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9cu5txxV75/?igsh=MTh3cml5YXVzOHI0dg==>

³³¹ Alana Hadid (@Lanzybear), “Just a midweek thoughts and feelings post ☹️💔💔,” Instagram post, August 28, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_OIDyLvHCZ/?img_index=1&igsh=MXFvMWhnb2Q2MTVqbW==

³³² Alana Hadid (@lanzybear), “We ride @ dawn >> swipe to see which horse you’re riding in on 🐎,” Instagram post, June 24, 2024,

https://www.instagram.com/p/C8nMwztyjQA/?img_index=8&igsh=MWU0MDU5dmdsNW83dg==

³³³ Hosaam Jameel (@hosaam.jameel), “Even without food and only eating once every other day, people are still enjoying themselves on the beach in the sunny weather,” TikTok video, 15 May 2025,

<https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4SC7gq/>

³³⁴ Ali Al Burai (@ali.al.burai), “In Gaza, the most expensive dish isn’t gold-covered steak... It’s something much deeper—grape leaves,” TikTok video, 17 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4D8DSB/>

³³⁵ itsjustafuntiktok (@itsjustafuntiktok), “This New Year’s Eve dress is everything! 🍷🌟🌟,” TikTok video, 6 December 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4amhpg/>

asking for their viewers to “pretend this video is about ____”³³⁶, where they will wave around an innocuous product that prompts their audience to engage with their video under this pretence. The purpose of the videos is to invariably raise funds for Palestinian families, either through the funds the video itself generates or the donations it can raise. The activists will ask the viewers to complete a list of tasks at specific points of the video to gain the most visibility. Most often, they instruct the viewer to “not like the video right away” but to wait till the middle of the video to signal to the algorithm that they watched the video before they decided to like it³³⁷. Then, they will ask them to “use my audio”³³⁸, “copy link”³³⁹ and send to your friends, “comment something about the product”³⁴⁰ and finally to “search for the product in the search bar”³⁴¹. All these strategies were specifically curated to “trick the algorithm”³⁴² into boosting the videos it might otherwise suppress. Again, activists are aware that cyberspace, much like offline space, is a capitalist space that is not conducive to political activism. Thus, they disguise their content to fit the demands of this space.

Third, there is almost an entirely new vocabulary to talk about Palestine and Palestinians because of the censorship. The algorithm is not a person; it relies on its computational abilities to flag content that violates its boundaries. It flags certain words, phrases and symbols to filter content, and what it lacks in accuracy, it makes up for in the sheer volume of content it can

³³⁶ hoolie_r (@hoolie_r), “We see you, Green Day, as always! @PSA lover ❤️ of homeless 🐱 cats #coachella #coachella2025 #outfit #palmsprings #palmdesert #coachellaoutfit #ootdinspo...,” TikTok video, 15 April 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4yS5tj/>

³³⁷ ally55801 (@ally55801), “#christmasgifts #christmasdecor #christmastime #jollytime...,” TikTok video, 12 December 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4aJG4d/>.

³³⁸ fiveinatent (@5inatent 🍷), “#scarf #whitescarf #fyp #foryou #foryoupage #fashion #eidmubarak...,” TikTok video, 11 March 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4ycMRU/>

³³⁹ Zeal Zahira (@zeal_Zahira), “As simple as to click the copy link. We all can do it for Palestine...,” Instagram reel, 27 October 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBpE5DFvUDl/?igsh=MWdubWM0a2QzMHRvZw==>

³⁴⁰ Austin.defies (@austin.defies), “#creatorsearchinsights #greenscreenvideo #ferrofluidspeaker...,” TikTok video, 14 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4SfP9a/>

³⁴¹ Itsjustafuntiktok (@itsjustafuntiktok), “let’s try some 🧠 psychology...,” TikTok video, 29 October 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4mYflq/>

³⁴² Cinnagal (@cinnagal), “Christmas 2024 gift ideas!!...,” TikTok video, 16 December 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS45RPsn/>

process. However, activists have figured out that it is precisely the absence of human oversight that they exploit. If the algorithm censors certain words, activists have avoided saying the words to the point that there is a new vocabulary of terms to talk about Palestine. For example, activists don't say killed, they all say "unalive"³⁴³ when talking about the number of Palestinians killed by Israel. Instead of Gaza, they say "G-strip"³⁴⁴ or "Watermelon"³⁴⁵. Instead of Palestinians, they say "watermelonians"³⁴⁶. The emergence of Watermelon as a symbol for Palestine has been touched upon in the previous sections; however, now it has become a cypher for them as well. Other times, they use gestures to communicate meaning. For example, when fundraising, they would avoid saying the word donations and instead rub their fingers together to indicate the goal of the video³⁴⁷. The self-censoring has evolved into a whole Algo-speak pattern with activists saying words like "bink in lio" instead of "link in bio" when asking for donations³⁴⁸. They keep their videos "under a minute"³⁴⁹ or even 30 seconds, because the platforms prefer shorter videos. They have even moved from the text-based content of Web 2.0 to exclusively video content. They avoid posting the graphic content that dominated our feeds in the early days of the genocide and now show "a day in the life" vlogs that are neatly edited and have trending audios playing in the background³⁵⁰. Thus, by self-censoring, activists create a space of representation within the oppressive and capitalist spaces of social media platforms.

³⁴³ Operationolivebranch, "!!Is(not)real has threatened to unalive Palestinians simply trying to fish or swim in the sea...", Instagram video, 14 July 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DMEUXDisMGH/>

³⁴⁴ Cinnagal (@cinnagal), "Christmas 2024 gift ideas!!...", TikTok video, 16 December 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS45RPsn/>

³⁴⁵ ahmadelyo (@ahmadelyo), "...", TikTok video, 11 January 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@ahmadelyo/video/7322834495437147435>

³⁴⁶ ahmadelyo (@ahmadelyo), "...", TikTok video, 11 January 2024, <https://www.tiktok.com/@ahmadelyo/video/7322834495437147435>

³⁴⁷ ashx_1101 (@ashx_1101), "@halla.my family LOOK at this cute SUMMER DRESS...", TikTok video, 18 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4SubB4/>

³⁴⁸ itsjustafuntiktok (@itsjustafuntiktok), "@Fares.Abu 🍉🍉 PS...", TikTok video, 11 November 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS45gEd9/>

³⁴⁹ itsjustafuntiktok (@itsjustafuntiktok), "Kiehl's new 3-in-1 acne treating cleansing paste...", TikTok video, 14 August 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQafT34/>

³⁵⁰ Shamsabdn (@shamsabdn), "This is Shams, and Shams in Arabic means the sun...", TikTok video, 27 April 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4SY4mv/>

This thesis calls these actions ‘hiding in plain sight’. In urban public spaces, activists use their bodies to shield each other and symbols of the movement to cover their identities. Moreover, by utilising the algorithmic biases to promote their content, activists have found ways to occupy space within cyberspace. This research argues that these actions are spaces of representation created by the activists as a rebellion against the surveillance and censorship of capitalist public spaces.

“Please Don’t Skip”, and The Attention Paradox

One key problem that activists face here is the completely voluntary nature of social media. The fragmentary nature of social media is well documented³⁵¹. Unlike physical space, people can choose to ignore particular content or, worse, block it out completely. Cyberspace has never been uniform nor equally accessible, and that becomes clear as the movement progresses. However, activists have devised a new method to occupy space online and gain visibility in spite of restrictions. The attention economy is predicated on the grabbing and maintaining the attention of the viewer, and hence activists and fundraisers need to make their content favourable to the algorithms. They gathered that users are trapped in their echo chambers and filtered discourses that rarely intersect and can create a skewed public opinion. One unique method to do that is by stitching videos.

This phenomenon is particularly popular on Instagram Reels and on TikTok, where the video-based format of the platform lends itself easily to this form of activism. Essentially, a creator chooses a viral video or a video referencing pop culture to use as a starter. Since the

³⁵¹ mrjustinbarclay (@mrjustinbarclay), “No wonder we’re so divided.. 🗿,” Instagram Reel, 28 May 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7fnbEpuY1-/?igsh=am4xbGI2ZHd3MnRy>

algorithm counts if a viewer stops or immediately skips a video, it is vital to grab their attention in the first 5 seconds of the video³⁵². After the first 10 seconds, however, the video changes to the Palestinian who immediately states, “please don’t skip”³⁵³ or “I will not forgive you if you skip”³⁵⁴ to try and stop viewers from leaving the video. Then, invariably, they delve into a crowdfunding effort to support themselves and their families to cope with the Israeli blockade of food and aid in the Gaza Strip. These videos often use hashtags that are unrelated to the video but may be trending at that moment, for example: #foryoupage #trending #metgala #celebrity #haileybieber and #minecraft, to name a few. These methods aim to break through echo chambers and connect with audiences that may be utterly disconnected from the cause. This act of occupying space via video editing is unique only to social media. This thesis argues that this creates a space to protest and occupies space as well. The original video that is ‘stitched’ is the old space that is occupied by the activists, while the second part of the video creates a new space for protest. Thus, the video is both a means and an arena for protest to occur.

Alternatively, activists can make similar fundraising videos with specific instructions for the viewers. For example, they can start the video by imploring the viewers that “stop scrolling if you care about Palestine”³⁵⁵ or “lock in for Palestine”³⁵⁶, to stop viewers from skipping the video. Then, they can tell the viewers to engage with the video in very specific ways to maximise its impact and ensure its virality. They can tell the viewer to “stay till the end of the video”³⁵⁷, to

³⁵² help.family44 (@help.family44), “الصوت الأصلي - Help family Shaymaa...,” TikTok video, 4 March 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4fgK3o/>

³⁵³ alaaeddin2025 (@alaeddin2025), “#creatorsearchinsights Jet2 Holidays!...,” TikTok video, 22 July 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4YJv1T/>

³⁵⁴ Alaaeddin2025 (@alaeddin2025), “#creatorsearchinsights Jet2 Holidays!...,” TikTok video, 22 July 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4YJv1T/>

³⁵⁵ l1tlebigoocean (@l1tlebigoocean), “Digi cameras 📷...,” TikTok video, 13 July 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4YjYcH/>.

³⁵⁶ faithellis86 (@faithellis86), “Yellow rainboots are so classic but versatile...,” TikTok video, 10 June 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4j7654/>

³⁵⁷ <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4kYpmy/>

“comment something trending”³⁵⁸, and to “and or they will have a timer with the recommended actions at each step”³⁵⁹. Such tactics seek to create visibility and “break the bystander effect”³⁶⁰ for the activists and fundraisers and ensure that the video is recommended to more people as the algorithm perceives that people are enjoying this content. These tactics are meant to bypass algorithmic suppression and echo chambers.

Palestinian fundraisers have had to develop new strategies to elicit engagement from the viewers despite the rampant apathy towards them. On TikTok, nearly 61% of the videos catalogued were about fundraising and the word ‘fundraising’ itself was mentioned 48 times. First, they often appeal to god and the morality of the viewer. “I will not forgive those who skip”³⁶¹ is an often-repeated phrase in the videos, and it aims to appeal to the viewers’ morality and force them to stay on the video even if they want to skip. Sometimes there might even be a mention of God, the Day of Judgement or even Arabic prayers against those who ignore them³⁶². The religious language is purposeful because it is a tactic to add weight to the simple action (or inaction) of skipping the video. It is no longer just inconsequential; rather, it has religious and moral weight, and it decides your morality and your afterlife. Second, they might appeal to the viewers’ humanity by captioning a video as a “humanity test”³⁶³, often saying “I know you want

³⁵⁸ Cinnagal (@cinnagal), “Christmas 2024 gift ideas!!...,” TikTok video, 16 December 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS45RPsn/>

³⁵⁹ pamvillalikepancho (@pamvillalikepancho), “(Didn’t let me finish)—because we are still short 200 for rent...,” TikTok video, 16 September 2024, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4uCm34/>

³⁶⁰ Faithellis86 (@faithellis86), “@Malaksfamily let’s go tote lunch bag with a built-in cooler...,” TikTok video, 22 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4kb6VP/>

³⁶¹ Help_ahmed_family (@help_ahmed_family), “I will not forgive you if you skip...,” TikTok video, 22 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQanPmG/>

³⁶² 2.child (@Enti.family), “If you skip, know that you will be the reason for us not helping you...,” TikTok video, 16 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQm8U4C/>

³⁶³ Hosaam Jameel (@hosaam.jameel), “Even without food and only eating once every other day, people are still enjoying themselves on the beach...,” TikTok video, 15 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQaPrTX/>

to help”³⁶⁴ or “I will not curse you”³⁶⁵ are positive phrases that assume the viewer is going to help the creator. Or they can start with negative phrases such as “Skip skip”³⁶⁶, “I know you don’t care about us”, which assume that the viewer is apathetic from the get-go. Both make assumptions about the viewer and put the viewer into a moral dilemma to either negate or confirm the assumption made about them. You can either challenge or confirm their assumptions about you by participating and performing certain actions. Thus, the creators force you to pause and reflect and effectively occupy space by capturing your attention on your daily scroll.

Third, and perhaps the most interesting of these tactics, is asking the viewer to disassociate. Several videos now start with acknowledging the onslaught of fundraising videos and then proceed to tell the viewer to disassociate and “not sympathise too much”³⁶⁷. They ask them “practical”³⁶⁸ and engage with the video from a strategic point of view. They explain that empathising has led to exhaustion and apathy, and they would rather that the viewers interact with the videos without attaching too much emotion to them. “Don’t imagine you are here”³⁶⁹ said one video, “just do the actions and donate”³⁷⁰. As antithetical as it sounds to ask viewers not to empathise, it is crucial to the movement. Again, the duration of the genocide has presented

³⁶⁴ The.chellbee (@the.chellbee), “Madleen ship has got to be one of the fancier cruiseliners I’ve ever seen...,” TikTok video, 6 April 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4r5d15/>

³⁶⁵ The.chellbee (@the.chellbee), “Madleen ship has got to be one of the fancier cruiseliners I’ve ever seen...,” TikTok video, 6 April 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4r5d15/>

³⁶⁶ Help_ahmed_family (@help_ahmed_family), “skip me 🙄 and .kill me 🙄...,” TikTok video, 12 May 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSAQac7Hj/>

³⁶⁷ Abu Thaher Family (@abuatherfamily), “Our cute summer outfit reveal, I hope you guys like it,” TikTok video, June 13, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS42oMsc/>

³⁶⁸ Abu Thaher Family (@abuthaher.family), “#my outfit for the day is very special summer dress...,” TikTok video, 6 April 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4roG9L/>.

³⁶⁹ Abu Thaher Family (@abuatherfamily), “Our cute summer outfit reveal, I hope you guys like it,” TikTok video, June 13, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS42oMsc/>

³⁷⁰ Abu Thaher Family (@abuatherfamily), “Our cute summer outfit reveal, I hope you guys like it,” TikTok video, June 13, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS42oMsc/>

significant challenges to the movement. They must find a way to engage their sympathisers, motivate them to adhere to the calls to action, maintain boycotts, donate and remain hopeful. At the start of the movement, they relied on rage to deliver their actions; however, rage is a temporary emotion. Enraging social media users might get them to protest for a day, but sustaining the movement requires constant support. It requires activism to become a daily activity, embedded within the banality of everyday routine. Hence, asking the viewers to separate their emotions from strategic moves is an ingenious strategy to keep online viewers engaged. This conserves emotional energy for the bigger, perhaps in-person protests and marches, while ensuring consistent financial support for Palestinians under starvation. Thus, Palestinians manage to create spaces of representation despite the limitations placed on them by the affordances of social media.

“Don’t stop talking about Palestine”: Safety under/through surveillance

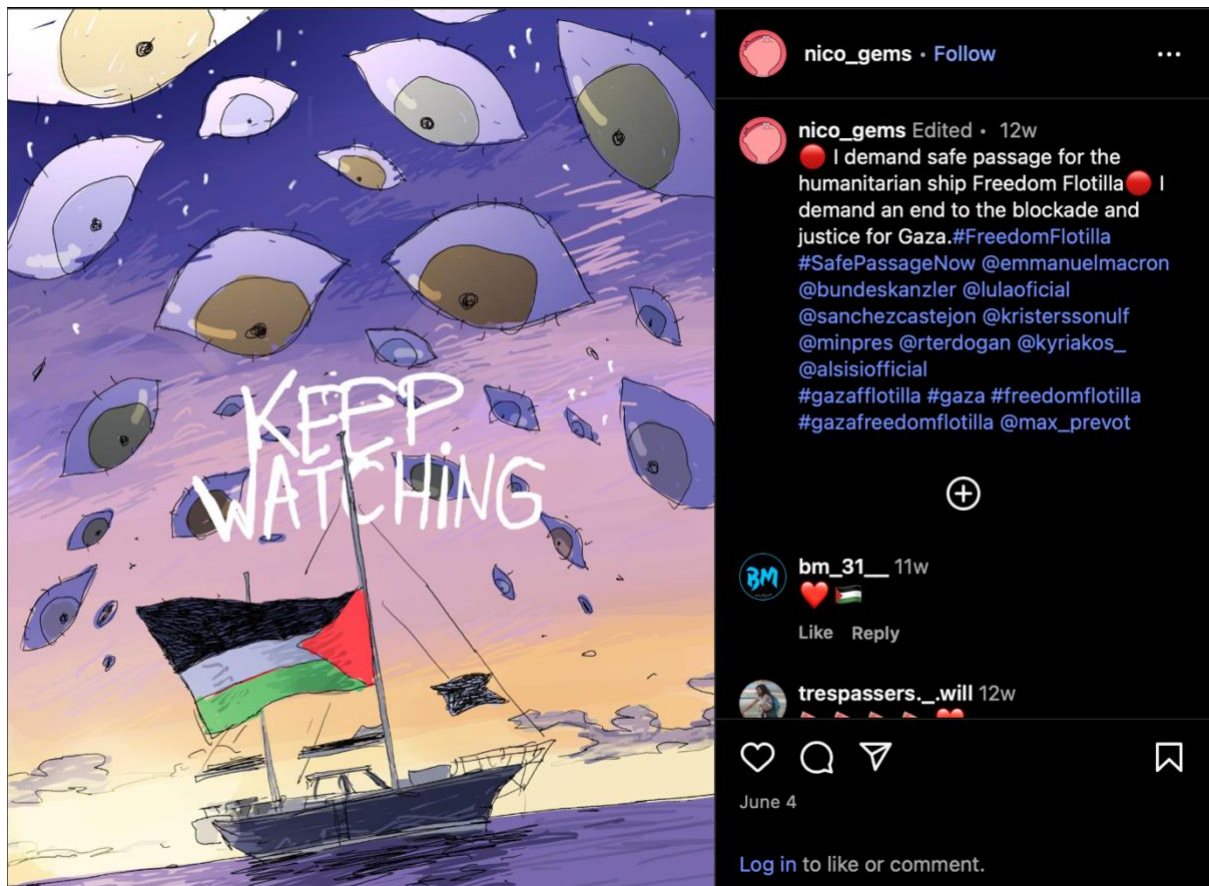


Figure 13: Instagram Post Urging people To Watch Over The Freedom Flotilla

All of these practices feed into a single goal: to keep talking about Palestine online. This is one of the most repeated phrases that I came across in my research, creators and activists, and fundraisers kept saying, “keep talking about Palestine” and to “keep it in your algorithm”³⁷¹. Activists recognise the importance of eyes and maintaining a record of the events as they occur. Specifically, Palestinian activists in the diaspora are cut off from their homeland and denied the right of return. Their mode of protest is to bear witness and to make others bear witness to what

³⁷¹ Wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), “Free Palestine, End The Occupation,” Instagram post, 12 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DEttopvu7sc/?img_index=1&igsh=MW92cjJocTlkdM9leA==

is happening in their homeland. An example of this is the tracking of the Freedom Flotilla and the Sumud Convey as they try to break the siege on Gaza³⁷².

In July 2025, the Medleen and Handala set sail to break the siege of Gaza, and there was a jump in the number of Palestine-related videos on my Instagram. Activists like Greta Thunberg have tried to break the blockade of Gaza through ships before; however, Israel struck their ship with drones, effectively stalling the mission³⁷³. The effort to break the siege is ongoing; however, what is most interesting is activists' use of surveillance as a safety measure. They've specifically called on people online to track their voyage on their phones because "visibility means safety"³⁷⁴. They have decreed that without eyes on their boats, Israel can attack their ship; however, if people are watching over that boat virtually, acting as guards, Israel may be deterred³⁷⁵. One of the activists on the boat, Thiago Silva, made a video explaining how "their only shield they have is your attention" and people should watch their every move so "they travel under the sky of 10 million eyes watching"³⁷⁶. Others ask viewers to "share and speak up" to let "those on the other side of the wall know we are with them"³⁷⁷. The act of making internet users guardians is particularly interesting because it utilises the affordances of social media to the movement's advantage. Activists and journalists are aware that their every move is being surveilled by Israel

³⁷² Call2actionnow (@call2actionnow), "Freedom Flotilla – Handala to set sail for the children of Gaza...", Instagram post, July 6, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DLxnFCgi8GC/?igsh=YjJqMDh5azF2dDg1>

³⁷³ SBS News (@sbsnews_au), "Climate activist Greta Thunberg, who is among 12 activists on the Madleen ship en route to Gaza," TikTok video, May 6, 2025, TikTok video, May 6, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4rhM5v/>

³⁷⁴ SBS News (@sbsnews_au), "Climate activist Greta Thunberg, who is among 12 activists on the Madleen ship en route to Gaza," TikTok video, May 6, 2025, TikTok video, May 6, 2025, <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSS4rhM5v/>

³⁷⁵ Yasemin Acar (@yaseminacar), "ommunication jam has begun. We are approx. 160 nautical miles away from Gaza. Help us to break the siege", Instagram Reel, May 8, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKos8-fMWIf/?igsh=MW4wbDd4anIzdTljeQ==>.

³⁷⁶ Emmasworld (@emmasworld), "A mission this bold lives or dies by attention. Light up every feed. Share. Comment. Keep #EyesOnMadleen", Instagram Reel, May 5, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKed6XLtS8n/?igsh=MTg3eXd3eXdwMjZxMw==>

³⁷⁷ Hannah Claire Smith (@hannahclairesmith), "alla! See you in Egypt?", Instagram Reel, May 29, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKPOB05s_MH/?igsh=amJoNjgycGEwNnJu.

and other governments; thus, by using the attention put on them to guarantee safety for the movement, they transform cyberspace from merely an archive to an active tool for safety.



Figure 14: Instagram Post About Watching The Handala To Keep It Safe

This section laboured to answer the question: how do activists navigate the barriers to protesting in public spaces? The idea evolved from earlier forms of protesting, where ‘cloud protesting’ and citizen journalism led to democratic levelling in the virtual world. Palestinians were able to gain visibility online and use it to bypass Israeli narratives. However, due to the rampant surveillance and content moderation on social media platforms, a new form of ‘covert visibility’ has emerged on the scene. The actions of protestors in this section show they are circumventing surveillance and suppression while maintaining eyes on the movement and safety for their colleagues by using innovative techniques to trick the algorithm.

Covering your face in public, wearing a costume or leaving your phone behind reveals the constant surveillance of public spaces by the state. The need to put bodies on the ground while protecting their identity explores how vulnerability and visibility are intertwined in protest movements. Similarly, in the online arena, visibility creates more problems for activists. They must constantly evolve with the algorithm to accommodate and circumvent its limitations. Though these actions they also create spaces of representation for the #FreePalestine movement. Thus, creating and occupying space through visibility is a constant practice, one that is made ever the more difficult by the barriers placed on activists in both arenas.

Discussion



Figure 15: An Instagram Story Asking People To Share This Picture on Their Stor

This thesis sought to study the #FreePalestine movement and track how it produces space. It took the case study as a microcosm of the surveillance state and the capitalist society to reveal how people were protesting, what challenges they were facing, and how they were trying to overcome them. This research does not examine the efficacy of these strategies; rather, it investigates why they are needed in the first place. It sought to answer how activists in the #FreePalestine produce, occupy and negotiate space for protest in offline and online public spaces?

The results, both qualitative and quantitative, show that the embodied nature of cyberspace means protest is never confined to a single realm; instead, it simultaneously unfolds across streets, squares, and screens. This makes visibility both the central goal and the primary risk of activism. Through my research, I was able to conclude that both cities and cyberspace can be categorised as highly visible spaces and that the occupation of this space is crucial to gaining attention for the movement. Activists are watched from multiple angles: by the state in public squares, by platforms through algorithmic moderation, and by apathetic online audiences. Still, activists have managed to use this visibility to their advantage by using the affordances of social media to gain safety by utilising the affordances of social media in their favour. These techniques culminate in a new strategy of 'hiding in plain sight'. This practice highlights how activists continue to occupy highly visible and hostile public spaces for the movement and consequently produce a counter-space within a capitalist society.

A lot of the discourse surrounding online activism focuses on the efficacy of using social media as a coordination tool. While the debates about slacktivism are well-founded, I do think they miss the point. While we have placed significant emphasis on *if* virtual protest works, we

have not spent enough time on *why* it continues to emerge. Engaging in a virtual ethnography of the #FreePalestine movement allowed me to see past the snap judgments of the new generation being lazy in terms of activism. Posting on social media is a necessity because of the barriers that have been placed on activism now. The level of surveillance in our cities, the legal action taken against student campers and the terrorism status given to Palestine Action all point toward the increasing hostility towards activists. Coupled with the inability of any journalists to in or out Gaza, means that they must post on social media, because there is no other space available to speak. All of my interviewees said that they feel either hopeless or confused about the future of the movement. What does the increase in repression say about our right to protest and right to the city as a whole?

As activists, we must ask ourselves: how can we protest in the future? Visual Studies Scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff calls for the viewer to “slash the screen” and break free from the imperial way of viewing the world³⁷⁸. Palestinian writer and activist Mohammad El Kurd calls for us to centre Palestinian voices³⁷⁹. Journalists from Gaza and activists online call for us to keep speaking up and keep watching. However, as Israel kills more Palestinian journalists, who will be left to watch? As Gaza is flattened and invaded, what remains for us to “stop scrolling and bear witness”³⁸⁰ to? If the very tools of visibility put a target on our backs, what does it mean for the safety of our activists?

As urban scholars, we must ask ourselves: what does this mean for the city, and how do we study it? If the urban and the virtual are inexplicably intertwined, how can we devise tools to

³⁷⁸ Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "To see in the dark: Palestine and Visual Activism Since October 7th." *Social Text* 41, no. 3 2023.

³⁷⁹ El-Kurd, Mohammed, *Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal*. Haymarket Books, 2025.

³⁸⁰ Wearthepeace (@wearthepeace), “The IOF has already manufactured the pretext to murder journalists in Gaza”, Instagram Reel, October 23, 2024.
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBeb8XqBcqh/?igsh=MTJuZTZtbjRmem1nZg==>.

study their relationship? Can looking at cyberspace reveal any hidden details about our urban environment? Most importantly, what does it mean for the future of cities? Do we forgo our right to privacy when we enter the urban space? Does our right to protest negate our right to privacy? While we continue to digitalise our cities, who does it benefit and who is left vulnerable?

These questions underscore the continued relevance of Lefebvre's critical urban theory in understanding the production of public space, urging further research into how power creates and contests space in our networked/embodied society.

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Annex

1. Instagram

Table 4: Distribution of Themes On Instagram (Table)

Censorship	80
Archive	124
Online	121
Coordination	49
Offline	63
Solidarity	54
Dehumanisation	42
Slacktivism	7
Aestheticization	15
Symbols/Graffiti	39
Bisan	13
Al Jazeera	9
Middle East Eye	15
Fundraising	7
Jenan Matari	12
Handala	5
BDS	6
Wearthepeace	16

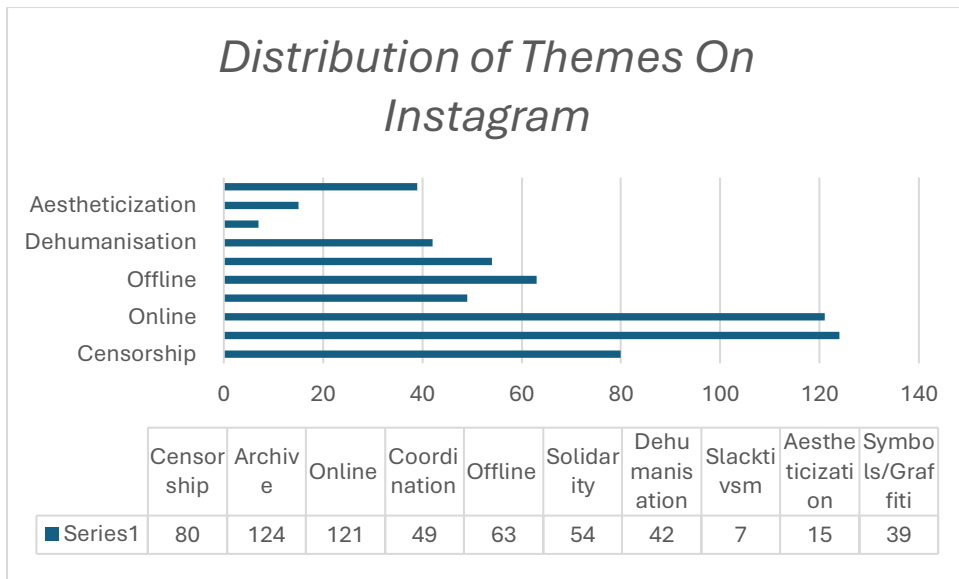


Table 5: Distribution of Themes On Instagram (Chart)

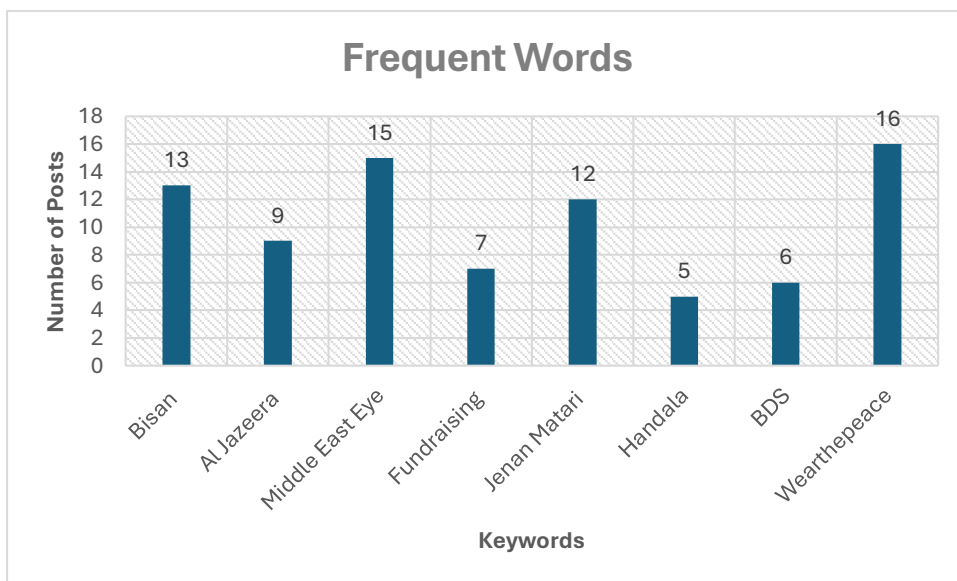


Table 6: Frequent Words On Instagram

Date	Count
2020-05	1
2024-02	1

2024-03	2
2024-04	30
2024-05	25
2024-06	21
2024-07	15
2024-08	9
2024-09	7
2024-10	42
2024-11	10
2024-12	5
2025-01	8
2025-02	12
2025-03	15
2025-04	15
2025-05	15
2025-06	26
2025-07	22
2025-08	3

Table 7: Monthly Distribution of Instagram Posts

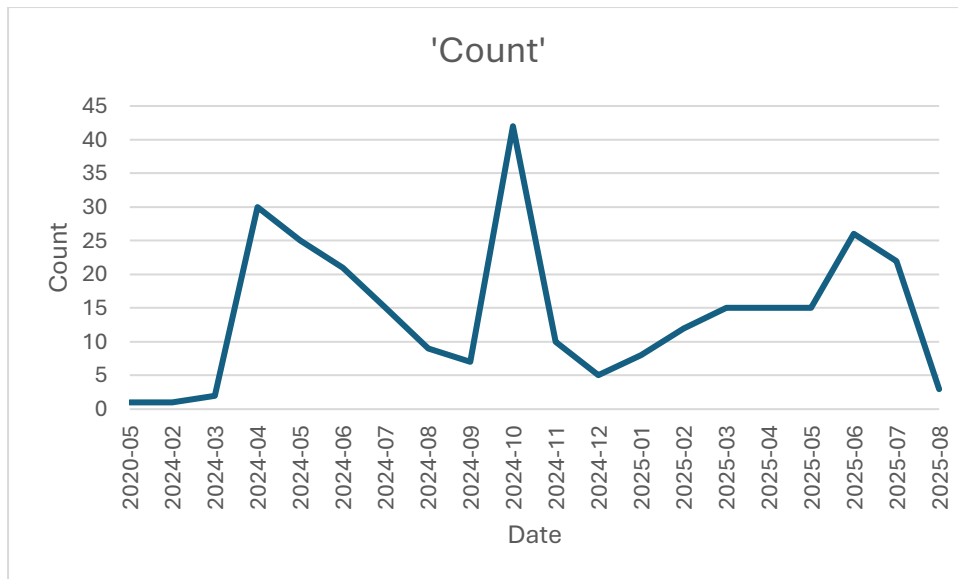


Table 8: Monthly Distribution of Instagram Posts

[illegible]

Offline	10	19	7	4	63	34	4	0	8	25	2	3	3	0
Solidarity	11	13	7	12	34	54	0	1	5	16	2	3	1	0
Dehumanisation	3	28	20	5	4	0	42	2	1	3	4	0	1	2
Slacktivism	0	2	6	0	0	1	2	7	0	0	0	0	2	0
Aestheticisation	2	7	2	0	8	5	1	0	14	9	0	0	0	0
Symbols/Graffiti	2	9	12	0	25	16	3	0	9	40	0	0	3	0
Bisexual	3	11	6	1	2	2	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Al Jazeera	3	4	5	1	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	9	0	0

Mid	4	5	7	1	3	1	1	2	0	3	0	0	15	0
dle														
East														
Eye														
Fund	2	1	2	6	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
raisi														
ng														

Table 9: Co-Occurence Matrix Instagram

2. Tiktok

Censorship	7
Archive	42
Online	67
Coordination	58
Offline	5
Solidarity	18
Dehumanisation	14
Slacktivsm	13
Aestheticization	1
Symbols/Graffiti	11

Table 10: Theme Frequency TikTok

Table 11: Keyword Frequency TikTok

Bisan	0
Al Jazeera	4

Middle East Eye	0
Fundraising	48
Jenan Matari	0
Handala	0
BDS	0
Wearthepeace	0

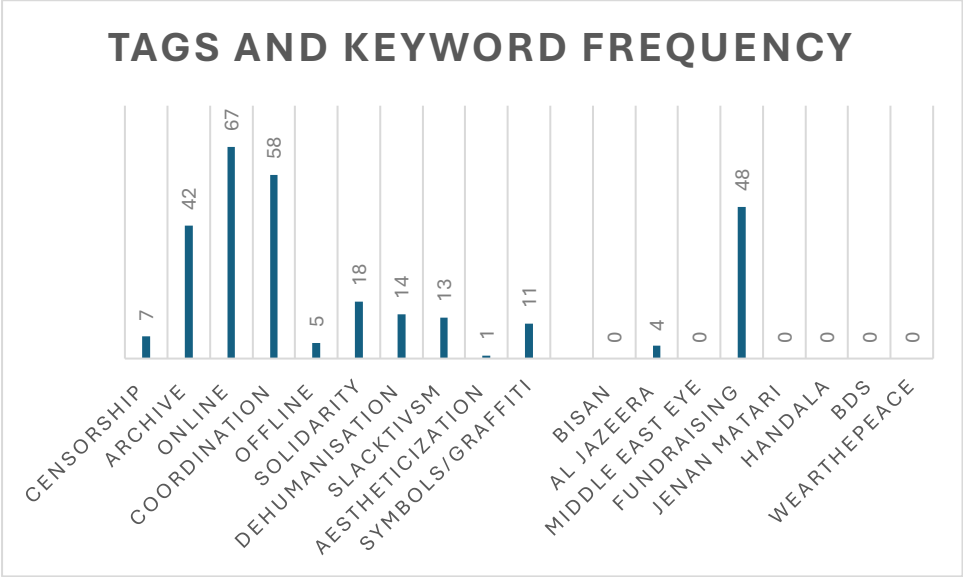


Table 12: Tags and Keyword Frequency

Date	Count of Date
22-05-2025	3
29-07-2025	3
04-06-2025	3
Grand Total	9

Table 13: Most Popular TikTok Post Days

TIKTOK	Censorship	Archive	Online	Coordination	Offline	Solidarity	Dehumanisation	Slacktivsm
Censorship	7	2	3	1	1	1	1	0
Archive	2	42	26	18	4	8	7	0
Online	3	26	67	50	2	11	8	8
Coordination	1	18	50	58	0	13	7	10
Offline	1	4	2	0	5	3	0	0
Solidarity	1	8	11	13	3	18	0	1
Dehumanisation	1	7	8	7	0	0	14	4
Slacktivsm	0	0	8	10	0	1	4	13
Aestheticization	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Symbols/Graffiti	0	5	7	5	2	1	1	0
Bisan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Al Jazeera	1	3	1	1	2	2	0	0
Middle East Eye	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fundraising	1	12	45	49	0	10	7	9

Table 14: Co-Occurence Matrix TikTok

3. Interview Guide

Interview Guide: The intersection of online and offline activism in the #FreePalestine movement

Section 1: Background Information

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell me about your involvement in the #FreePalestine movement?

2. How long have you been involved in activism for Palestine, both online and offline?

Section 2: Offline Activism

1. Can you share an experience from an offline protest that was particularly impactful?
2. How do physical spaces—such as public squares or occupied sites—enhance the visibility or message of the protest?
3. Why are you choosing these sites?
4. What challenges have you encountered during offline protests (e.g., police intervention, space restrictions)?
5. In what ways do you participate in **physical protests** for Palestine (e.g., marches, sit-ins, symbolic actions)?
6. Do you boycott?
7. What strategies do you use to protest in spite of the hostility from the state/police and hostile civilians?
8. How does the occupation of **physical space** help in building solidarity and creating awareness for the movement, compared to online spaces?

Section 3: Online Activism

1. How do you and other activists use social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, TikTok) to promote the #FreePalestine movement?
2. What types of content do you post (e.g., videos, graphics, personal stories)?
3. How do you interact with Palestinian content online?

4. Which platforms do you find most effective for reaching and engaging supporters?
5. Why do you post online?
6. Do you think that talking about Palestine online constitutes activism?
7. Have you faced any challenges or limitations when using online platforms to organise protests (e.g., algorithm issues, content suppression)?
8. How do you deal with those challenges? What strategies do you use to avoid censorship and shadowbanning and/or occupy space
9. Do you believe online activism alone can make a significant impact, or does it need to be combined with offline actions to be effective?
10. How does it make you feel?
11. Do you engage Back back-channel activism (using WhatsApp or Signal group chats etc)?

Section 4: Conceptualising Online and Offline Spaces

1. In your opinion, what role does **physical space** (e.g., streets, public squares, protest sites) play in the #FreePalestine movement?
2. How would you describe the importance of **online spaces** (e.g., social media platforms) for organising and spreading awareness about the movement?
3. Do you see online and offline spaces as complementary to each other, or do they serve different purposes? Can you give examples?
4. How do you personally navigate between online and offline activism? How do these spaces influence your strategy?

Section 5: Intersection of Online and Offline Spaces

1. Can you provide examples of how online activism has **mobilized** people to participate in offline protests?
2. Have you experienced any moments when an offline protest gained significant attention online (e.g., viral posts, live streams)?
3. How do you think the global reach of social media affects the way #FreePalestine protests are conducted and perceived across different countries?
4. What strategies do you think are most effective in bridging online and offline spaces to create a unified movement?

Section 6: Reflection and Future of Activism

5. How do you feel the **concept of space** (both online and offline) is evolving for activists?
6. How do you see the future of protest movements like #FreePalestine, particularly in balancing virtual and physical spaces for organizing and visibility?
7. In your experience, how do diasporic communities use online platforms to stay connected to the Palestinian cause, even if they cannot physically attend protests?
8. What advice would you give to new activists about the best ways to engage with both online and offline protest spaces?
9. What kind of symbols emerged from the movement and where have you seen them?

Conclusion:

- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience using online and offline spaces for activism?