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How Social Media's Rhetoric Shapes The Social Identity of Online Groups: Forming,
Confirming and Reinforcing and The Algorithmic Role

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Abstract

The world has become integrated with technology at a rapid rate. The rhetoric of online platforms, due to technology integration, allows people to connect, converse, and meet others who have common character traits. Eyman (2015) defines rhetoric as an action that intends to persuade and form meaning. These platforms are referred to as "social media," which are online networks made by people who use rhetoric to form, confirm, and reinforce the connections of platform users with common character traits: Hobbies, thoughts, race, gender, or religion. These common character traits make up one's social identity. This study details the findings of an extensive literature review with data used from journals, articles, dissertations, and abstracts from the University of Mary Washington library database; to identify how social media's rhetoric shapes social identity through the formation of online groups and reveal how algorithms aid in the confirmation and reinforcement of social identity. This study also uses critical discourse analysis to compare different social groups with similar social identities, illustrating how social media's rhetoric forms, confirms, and reinforces social identity and provides insight into algorithm's role throughout it all.

Introduction

Social groups have been a part of history since the beginning of time. Stets and Burke (2000) in their study referred to social groups as groups with common social beliefs and values. In earlier times, the presence of social groups had been seen through presidential speeches in relation to a particular party, gatherings for social events, organizations relating to a particular cause, and even in spaces where people have the same interest in sports or religion. In other words, social groups tend to form where there is a shared ideology or shared traits, which is known as social identity.

Like social groups, rhetoric, is a term that has proven to be evolutionary, demonstrated, and observed throughout history. Eyman (2015) discussed rhetoric in his study as synonymous with influence and persuasion. Thanks to rhetoric's ever-evolving nature, rhetoric is able to be adapted to meet contemporary societal needs. Rhetoric is often seen in social groups in several ways. Due to the recent digital shift, technology has become heavily integrated with society and societal needs over the recent years. This means that social groups, which are a part of society, also utilize technology. Technology has significantly advanced, relating to its capabilities and abilities quite quickly, opening the door to creating new ways of forming social groups as well as new uses of rhetoric. Technology enables social groups and rhetoric access to digital platforms, commonly known as social media. This monumental societal shift has enabled people's ability to use not only social media in relation to social groups but also social media's rhetoric in many ways.

For the purpose of this study, the focus of social media's rhetoric will be discussed in reference to how it allows the shaping of social identity relating to online social groups. Before the way social media's rhetoric shapes social identity through online social groups is analyzed,

there needs to be a clear understanding of what social identity is. A more in-depth definition will follow later in this study, but for now, knowing the components that make up one's social identity will suffice. To give a brief definition, one's social identity is established by the traits one most identifies with, which includes but is not limited to: Hobbies, thoughts, race, gender, and religion.

After briefly discussing the longevity of social groups and rhetoric along with the digital era transition and clarifying the meaning of social identity, a question naturally arises: Why do social groups, rhetoric, and technology need to be discussed? To answer that, it should be acknowledged that having similar social identities as others and identifying that, is one of the more prominent ways people connect with each other, typically leading to the formation of online social groups. Davis and Chansiri (2019) mentioned in their study, that the technological shift has led to the increased use of digital platforms, which allows social media's rhetoric to be utilized in ways that help people find others they identify with. With this acknowledgment, the focus should shift to not only social media's rhetoric but also how social media's rhetoric shapes social identities concerning online social groups. Of course, it also begs the question: Though social media's rhetoric shapes the social identity of online social groups through formation, how is social media's rhetoric able to maintain the existence of the particular online social group, and what other factors contribute to social media's rhetoric being able to shape social identities of online social groups?

This literature review explains rhetoric and the digital shift and illustrates how social media's rhetoric shapes social identity through the formation, confirmation, and reinforcement of online groups. This literature review also reveals how algorithms aid in the process of shaping the social identity of online social groups, concerning social media's rhetoric.

This study aims to investigate how social media's rhetoric shapes social identity to bring a better understanding of social media's rhetoric shaping social identities of online social groups, how social groups' social identities continue to remain strong, and the mechanism that gives them the ability to do so.

Review of Literature

Rhetoric and The Digital Shift

Rhetoric has been a term that has existed in practice for as long as humans have existed. It has already been discussed that rhetoric is synonymous with influence and persuasion. Whalen and Hauser (1995) discussed this in their literature review on new theoretical and practical dimensions of rhetoric. The author's stated rhetoric is a vital part of social formation due to its persuasive and intentional nature. They discussed how social groups use rhetoric due to the relationship it creates. Malone (2020) conducted a study that investigated how digital platforms are used for interactions amongst Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPoC). He found that rhetoric works through persuasive measures to allow people to relate through shared identities.

DuPuis (2018) conducted a study that explored how social groups have been shaped by current information, communication-based on technology, and social networking sites. He found that the digital rhetoric shift has given rhetoric the ability to be explored digitally through social media platforms revealing social media's rhetoric. Malone (2020) agreed with Dupuis (2018), adding that social media's rhetoric due to the digital shift gives people opportunities to communicate. Pihlaja (2020) conducted a literature review concerning a book referencing authors "Colton and Holmes." Pihlaja (2020) considered social media's rhetoric worldwide and here to stay. With social media's rhetoric so easily accessible and so integrated into many

people's everyday lives, social media's rhetoric allows people who have shared social identities to connect and form online groups, which leads to the next section of this literature review, which will discuss social media's rhetoric in relation to social identity and the formation of online groups with shared social identities.

Social Groups and How Social Media's Rhetoric Shapes Social Identity Through the Formation of Online Groups

Social groups have been around since the beginning of time. Goffman (1963) discussed the relationship between social identity online in his book. He found that the identity presented online is not always the identity that people tend to connect to most in their physical life. He also mentioned that social Identity is how people define themselves by their image or traits. Posard (2015) proposed a theory to explain what people consider when they choose to contribute resources to a group and punish them when they misbehave. Posard (2015) found that social groups consist of a collective group of people who have the same social identity. He adopted this idea based on the social exchange theory. He also mentioned that shared identities, societal norms, pressures, and attempts to fit in are what made social groups in the past form bonds. Understanding the way social groups in the past formed gives a bit of insight into how social media's rhetoric may offer social groups the ability to develop online in various locations of the world and the ability to adopt norms and pressures similar to predigital social groups.

Nicholls and Rice (2017) examined integrated social identity approaches to online communication deviance at a group level and the expectancy violations theory at an individual level. They considered online groups as a group that shares a unique social identity that connects digitally. They inferred that groups formed through social media's rhetoric because people can find others with the same social identity, which gives them a sense of inclusivity and validation.

Wojcieszak (2021) concurred in his study that tested three factors predicting: Selective exposure, information bias, and confirmation bias. He suggested that social media's rhetoric allows people to find an online group that shares their social identity; since people tend to believe information that validates rather than invalidates their social identity and beliefs. This leads to the next section of the literature review, which will reveal how social media's rhetoric confirms the social identity of online social groups.

Social Media's Rhetoric Confirms the Social Identity of Online Social Groups

It has already been explored how social media's rhetoric shapes the social identity of social groups that form. However, this knowledge undoubtedly shifts the focus to the question of how these formed groups who share social identity are confirmed. Hogg and Ried (2006) explained the role of norms within the social identity perspective to theorize ways of communication. In their study, they found that people behave the way they do due to their social identity group norms depersonalizing the individual as an individual while confirming or validating the social identity of the group as a whole. Kaakinen, Sirola, Savolainen, and Oksanen (2020) reported the development of Finnish and English validations concerning identity in their study. The authors explained how some behaviors of online social groups with shared identity through social media's rhetoric confirm their identity. One behavior they pointed out was being socially selective. This occurs when people choose to only identify with those in their social identity.

For example, a biker might choose to follow social media's rhetoric and associate with online groups that only contain other bikers. This, however, can lead to limited information exposure and confirmation bias. The researchers also mentioned members of a shared social identity online fall into social media's rhetoric because they believe the information within the

group that is consistently shared. Davis and Chansiri (2019) suggested that while these behaviors enabled by social media's rhetoric confirm the social identity of online social groups, they also prevent the ability of individuals to expand or potentially change their social identity, which could leave them stagnant in their social identity development, individually and as a group. Just as social media's rhetoric can validate the social identity of online groups, it can also reinforce the social identities of online groups, which is discussed in the following section.

Social Media's Rhetoric Reinforces the Social Identity of Online Social Groups

Social media's rhetoric has many abilities. In this section of the literature review, how social media's rhetoric reinforces the social identity of online groups will be discussed. While there is not much information about this topic, an opportunity is evident for further communication research. An obvious way social media's rhetoric is reinforced, relating to the social identity of online groups mentioned by Malone (2020), is through the likes and chat features provided on digital platforms. Many social media platforms have these features, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok, which allow people to like and comment on others posts aiding in reinforcement.

For example, sticking to the biker reference, if a biker who belongs to an online group with a shared social identity posts an image of a bike and himself, he would most likely receive likes and comments from members of his group. This would reinforce not only his social identity from the likes and comments he would receive but the group social identity as well from observation and reaction of the initial post. While social media's rhetoric is able to form, confirm, and reinforce the social identity of online social groups, there is a mechanism behind the scenes that provides social media's rhetoric the ability to do so, which is discussed in the last section of the literature review.

Algorithmic Role Concerning Social Media's Rhetoric Shaping Social Identity of Online Social Groups: Forming, Confirming, and Reinforcing

The previous sections discussed rhetoric, the digital transition, social media's rhetoric, and how social media's rhetoric shapes the social identity of online groups concerning forming, confirming, and reinforcing. However, it would be foolish to assume that social media's rhetoric is acting alone in contemporary times. Kaakinen, Sirola, Savolainen, and Oksanen (2020) reported the development of the Finnish and English validations concerning the Identity Bubble Reinforcement Scale (IBRS), which further defined and highlighted the challenges of social identification, homophily, and information bias. The IBRS concluded that social media and group behavior positively correlate. They noted through article reviews that social media allows access to shared identities through groups formed based on shared interests, reinforced by algorithmic filters. The authors believed this could lead to socially selective people, information bias, and confirmation bias. Pariser (2011) examined the consequences of the filter bubble in his study and agreed, extending that social media's rhetoric with algorithmic aid reinforce social identity concerning how it enables people to search for and find information to validate their social identity.



On the other hand, Literat and Brough (2019) analyzed auto ethnographies created by underrepresented youth to find out more information concerning the design of digital platforms. They explained a potential negative impact of algorithmic influence on social media's rhetoric concerning online social groups. The authors mentioned that people felt isolated by algorithmic filters and revealed that different social media platforms have distinctive designs to influence people's social identity differently. Dahlgren (2021) concurred in his critical review of Pariser's (2011) filter bubble. Dahlgren (2021) said people look for information to confirm their social

identities. He found that this was possible due to the reinforcement algorithms and social media's rhetoric supplementing each other.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The table below is a discourse analysis that examines the comparison of National Association Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Black Lives Matters (BLM). The table illustrates how social media contributes to social identity. Both the NAACP and BLM applauded the confirmation of the new Supreme Court Justice. However, they differ in their approach: NAACP focused on scholarship and education and BLM focused on activism and protesting. Despite the agreement on the confirmation their similar social identities are portrayed differently.

Figure 1. Dataset: Analysis and Images of NAACP and Black Lives Matter from Instagram.

<p>Analysis: Both NAACP and BLM have a shared social identity and express it similarly in terms of honoring the new Supreme Court Justice and protesting for social rights within their identities. However, NAACP focused on scholarship and life improvement of those with the same social identity as theirs through education. BLM focused on Speakers with the same social identity and immediate action-based justice for their Social Identity.</p>	<p>Image: Account: NAACP Source: Instagram</p> 	<p>Image: Account: Black Lives Matter Source: Instagram</p> 
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Research Questions

RQ1: How is social identity shaped by social media rhetoric through the formation of online social groups?

RQ2: How is the social identity of online social groups confirmed by social media's rhetoric?

RQ3: How is the social identity of online social groups reinforced by social media's rhetoric?

RQ4: How is social media's rhetoric able to form, confirm, and reinforce the social identity of online social groups?

Method

In this study, the methods used were an extensive literature review and critical discourse analysis. In relation to the literature review, journals, articles, dissertations, and abstracts were used; to search for information from sources that would benefit the study and its purpose by examining how social media's rhetoric shapes the social identity of online social groups concerning the formation, conformation, and reinforcement as well as the algorithmic role; the mechanism making this possible. The literature review consisted of topics relating to the study and the findings and discussion for further research.

For the sources, Ebsost and JSTORs were used with access from the University of Mary Washington library database. In light of the literature review, a critical discourse analysis was conducted through the use of the social media platform: Instagram. Screenshots from

accounts including the social identities of Black Lives Matter and NAACP were taken 1) to demonstrate that although social media's rhetoric shapes social groups, common social identities can vary in terms of group formation and purpose; 2) to illustrate how social identities of social groups are confirmed by allowing the suggestions of following other groups with common social identities on social media; 3) to reveal how social media's rhetoric reinforces the social identity of online social groups; and 4) to identify that algorithms serve as the mechanism that allows social media's rhetoric to form, confirm, and reinforce the social identity of online social groups.

To ensure the information was relevant for the study, images of both groups do not extend further back than March 2022. For a clear understanding of the analysis concerning the images used for the study, the analysis and images were arranged in a 3x1 table labeled Figure 1.

Findings

The literature review found that first, rhetoric allows people to relate through shared identity, which is a key part of group formation. Social media's rhetoric was increasingly observed as the digital era set in, making technology advance rapidly. Social media's rhetoric is here for good because it allows communication between people. Second, Social identities can vary from what is displayed online versus in person by an individual part of an online social group. Social identity is a trait or belief representing someone's image; when many individuals with the same image connect and interact, it is a social group. Shared identities, pressures, norms, and wanting to belong are reasons social groups form. Online groups have the potential to develop due to those same contributing factors, however, virtually. Online groups connect digitally and share social identity due to social media's rhetoric, leading to a sense of belonging and satisfaction. However, social media's rhetoric could lead to selective exposure for social identity confirmation. Third, group norms formed from social media's rhetoric also depersonalize

individuals of online social groups with shared identities, confirming their identity as a whole. Behaviors like selective exposure, confirmation bias, and information bias also contribute to the confirmation of social groups; however, these are not particularly positive contributions, when malicious intent is involved. Information shared within groups prevents expansion. Fourth, the like and chat features on digital platforms tend to reinforce the social identity of online social groups. Finally, Social media's rhetoric is a compelling force. Still, it does not act alone.

Algorithms allow social media's rhetoric to shape the social identity of online social groups. Social media's rhetoric provides access to shared identities forming groups, confirming them, and reinforcing them; however, algorithm filters aid in this process due to selective information, information bias, and confirmation bias being filtered by algorithmic observations of preferences. Algorithms and social media's rhetoric provide searches and the information provided in the search, filtering to fit within the individual's social identity that connects them to their formed group, validating their social identity and the groups. However, algorithmic filters trap people in their social identity. This occurs because people look for information that confirms their social identity, due to the reinforcement social media's rhetoric and algorithms provide each other.

The critical analysis revealed that while the NAACP and BLM share similar online social identity, online groups with the same social identity do not always portray, express, or share their identities with others by using the same strategies. While both groups protested and shared the recent historical announcement of Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson receiving her place in the Supreme Court, their spread of awareness for other information varied. On the NAACP page, they focused on scholarships and ways they could aid in others with the same social identity lives

for improvement. Black Lives Matter, however, concentrated on speaker announcements and petitions concerning their social identity and justice.

Conclusion

This study gave a detailed investigation on how social media's rhetoric shapes the social identity of online social groups and the mechanism that enables it to do so. Rhetoric and social groups have always existed; however, due to the digital shift and technological advances, both rhetoric and social groups have been able to be explored online through social media. Social media is rhetoric that can shape social identity by forming online groups due to people's desires to be validated and fit in. It should be noted that both pre-digital groups and post-digital groups formed due to rhetoric, shared identity, and purpose.

However, people's will to conform to group norms depends on their level of commitment to their group and their social identity. Most people who are part of a group conform due to social identity confirmation and reinforcement; social media is rhetoric that enables people to find others with the same social identity to form groups and confirm and reinforce their group social identity. Social media's rhetoric allows people with a shared identity who live in various places or have other methods of creating awareness of their identities a space to connect.

Many articles pointed out both beneficial and adverse effects. Social media's rhetoric has the potential to form, confirm, and reinforce social groups, but it also has the potential to lead to selective social connections, limited information, information bias, and inescapable algorithmic processes. While there is room for more research on social media's rhetoric concerning its ability to reinforce the social identity of online social groups, the like and chat features were identified as tools used on digital platforms as forms of reinforcement.

To conclude, social media's rhetoric is immensely powerful, but it is not a driving force that operates independently. Algorithms serve as the mechanism that provides social media's rhetoric with the power it has to form, confirm, and reinforce the social identities of online social groups. Due to time constraints, there were limitations to this study in terms of sampling. However, further research should be done comparing more social groups with similarities concerning how they spread awareness of their online social group's identity. More research should be done as well on how social media's rhetoric causes adversities while shaping social groups.

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