

# Activist Use of Social Media: A Case Study

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## Introduction

Social media has become an essential part of modern-day life. This importance has been widely discussed among scholars for years with discussions centering around the various uses for the different social media platforms. One of these uses is for the garnering of support and activism around social justice and other popular movements for change. Examples such as the Arab Spring and Egyptian Revolution are both widely researched examples of social media use in activism.

Greta Thunberg is a climate change activist who actively uses social media to further her fight for change. Thunberg, who began her activism when she was only 15 years old, has quickly risen to become one of the most well-known and effective activists for the climate change movement.

This work looks to extend on the already existing research by analyzing the social media of Greta Thunberg to discover more closely how social media is used by activists today, in an ever-evolving, social media based world

## Research Questions

What themes are portrayed in Greta Thunberg's social media posts?  
How do people respond and react to those themes?

## Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative thematic content analysis. Thunberg's Instagram posts were examined in order to determine themes and purpose. Audience comments on each analyzed post were also examined and separated into themes. The relationship between these themes was then discussed using the Media Ecology Theory.

## Findings

After analyzing the selected Instagram posts from Greta Thunberg, five consistent themes were discovered.

### Climate Information

These posts were solely informational and provided followers with education about specific climate change topics. Often, statistics were used to emphasize these climate issues and a serious, intense tone was used to convey the dire state of the situation.

### Strikes and Protests

These posts depicted Thunberg, sometimes accompanied by friends or fellow activists, taking part in protests and activism events. These posts were usually just a photo with no, or sparse, caption. If a caption was present, unifying language was used. A majority of posts fell into this category.

### Personal

The second most popular category, these posts included personal accomplishments and promotions for interviews and documentaries. A few selfies were also present. While personal, information about the climate change movement was still provided in captions.

### Support for Causes

These posts garnered awareness for causes other than climate change. Captions on these photos were presented as Thunberg's personal thoughts and views on the various situations.

### Call to Action

These posts were direct calls to action from Thunberg to her followers. Captions used intense language and celebrity endorsement was often used as leverage.

Audience reaction varied to these various themes. Each type of post had comments of both approval and disapproval, however most posts had an mostly positive comment section. Personal and Strikes and Protest posts received the most supportive comments, especially from other activists. Support for Causes posts received the most criticism due to concern for the issues she chose to support publicly.

## Discussion

Overall, Thunberg uses her Instagram to be informative and persuasive about the climate change movement and other important social issues. Audience responses varied, but correlated with the content in the visuals and captions of the posts.

One way to analyze the relationship between the posts and comments is through the media ecology theory. This theory has three main assumptions: media is infused in every act in society, media fixes our perceptions and organizes our experiences and media ties the world together. Activism, especially on digital platforms such as Instagram, also works according to the three assumptions of the theory. This suggests that the positive, supportive reactions on Thunberg's posts are the result of media at work with the goal of influencing audience perception of climate change, which is the goal of media ecology theory.

Moving forward, this research could be expanded by studying demographics of commenters. The media ecology connection can be expanded by looking at how commenter perceptions have changed according to their interactions with Thunberg.

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