

How Palestinian-Identifying Users Balance Identity Disclosure and the Threat of Censorship on
Instagram

Miranda Kharsa, MSI candidate

Thesis advisor: Matthew Bui, PhD

University of Michigan School of Information

Introduction

Social media platforms, specifically Instagram, have become a source of news and important information sharing (Ren et al., 2024). However, these platforms have algorithms that are personally curated and not well understood by users (Swart, 2021) and that potentially censor important content from users of marginalized identities and contribute to discriminatory practices (Köchling, 2020). Palestinian-identifying users of Instagram seem to face this daily, and little is documented to understand the patterns of censorship on Instagram, how it impacts their use of the platform, and the personal and systemic consequences of this censorship. For example, in 2017, Facebook, currently known as Meta, approved 85% of the Israeli government's requests to remove Palestinian-related content from the platform (Taha, 2020; Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedom). Furthermore, Facebook has been “*censoring Palestinian content based on Israeli regulations since 2015*,” and social media companies are contributing to human rights violations by complying with this censorship (Taha, 2020).

Meta has a long history of suppressing Palestinian content, as reported by 7amleh, the Arab Center for Social Media Advancement. Between 2021 and 2022, 7amleh (n.d.) found nearly 1,500 digital rights violations across Meta platforms and has reported that the state of Israel “*sends tens of thousands of takedown requests to social media companies a year, and the companies comply 90% of the time*.” As of 2021, 87% of those requests were directed at Meta. More recent instances of Meta’s censorship have been documented during the genocide. According to a 2023 report by the Human Rights Watch, Meta has suspended prominent Palestinian accounts, shadow banned Palestinian content -- meaning a user’s content is not visible as usual, removed Palestinian phrases under spam Community Guidances, restricted the

ability to engage with content, and more. Additionally, according to the Action Network, in February 2024, Meta began to consider a policy which would conflate anti-Zionism (a political stance against the Zionist movement, which is actively working to build a Jewish only state in historic Palestine (Said, 1979)) with antisemitism across its platforms. The social media organization has a history of protecting Zionists and Zionism by removing content which opposes or criticizes the ideology. On the other hand, Facebook has deleted posts that contain words associated with Palestinian political groups without considering their context (Nasif, 2017).

In October 2023, the Israel-imposed genocide in Gaza escalated and social media platforms served as a way for people across the world to view its realities through the lens of Gazans experiencing it firsthand (Fatafta, 2024). Gazan journalists took to social media to show the world the horrors the Israeli Occupation Forces were inflicting throughout the Gaza strip -- a 25-mile stretch of coastal land and the most densely populated place in the world with 2.23 million residents (American Near East Refugee Aid, n.d.). Social media played a key role in capturing the attention of the world and exposing the realities of the genocide, making censorship of Palestinian content even more dangerous and important to understand. This qualitative study seeks to contextualize how Palestinian-identifying users engage with Instagram on a day-to-day basis and with content related to Palestine specifically, especially during the ongoing and decades long Palestinian genocide.

Given this context, this paper details findings from a qualitative study based on 20 interviews with Palestinian-identifying users of Instagram. The study was interested in investigating the intersection of Palestinian-identity and censorship on social media, however the

focus shifted slightly in October of 2023 given the escalation of the genocide in Gaza. Interviews began to focus more urgently on sharing information about the genocide in an attempt to inspire action from followers, as well as a processing of Palestinian identity in online spaces. The study found that: 1) participants strongly identify with Palestinianness and express their identity on Instagram through frequent posting and sharing of Palestinian content, despite high-stakes consequences, 2) participants tend to use Instagram to share news about Palestine to raise awareness amongst those following them. When posting content, they expressed a need to find credible and reliable sources. Moreover, 3) participants are aware of and have experienced instances of perceived censorship on Instagram, and 4) participants use a variety of tactics to work around perceived censorship. These findings illuminate the online behaviors and calculations of self-disclosure one marginalized group navigated during a time when their community and identity were under heightened attack.

In the subsequent sections of this report, we outline the existing literature in this space, our research questions and methodology, and finally, we detail our findings.

Positionality Statement

I draw on my experiences as a Palestinian-American living in the United States, as well as my professional background in social work and human-computer interaction. My own lived and professional experiences have inspired this work and the desire to investigate the intersections of social media use, censorship, and Palestinian identity. I acknowledge that this study may be triggering to Palestinian identifying people everywhere, other Arabs, and our allies who have faced similar impacts of colonial violence. I encourage readers to take care of themselves.

Literature Review

This literature review used a comprehensive approach to gather and analyze relevant literature. Multiple databases were used using keywords such as "Instagram," "Palestinian," "censorship," "social media," and "identity." The review includes studies published between 2006 and 2024, focusing on bodies of work within human-computer interaction, social sciences, and digital studies disciplines. We organized existing literature under three categories: social media use and identity, social media censorship, and social media use and activism.

Social Media Use and Identity

Human computer interaction has shifted focus towards designing environments where people can easily express themselves (Bannon, 2011). Similarly, Van Dijck (2013) argued that social media is a tool for shaping identities. Researchers have found that social media allows for identity expression, exploration, and experimentation. It also provides ways for users to connect with others, allows for quick communication, and offers an opportunity and space for an expansive sense of self-expression (Gunduz, 2017). Current literature has also documented how social media has played an important role for community building and information gathering for people of marginalized identities (Pyle et al., 2023). Scholars found that social media can be an environment where marginalized communities and people facing stigma can offer and receive social support (Andalibi et al., 2018), and a space where people with similar identities can build a sense of community through its various features, such as comments (Andalibi et al., 2017). In this study, we are interested in exploring how a particular marginalized identity informs how

users engage with Instagram. We found it important to understand prior literature on self-disclosure and presentation online.

Prior literature has shown how social media has become an environment for users to express their self-presentation, and that experience is shaped by anonymity, persistence, and visibility (Hollenbaugh, 2022). One study examined self-presentation on dating apps and found the importance of small cues, such as the way a user spelled words as an indication of their education level, and the balance of users accurately representing themselves online while also trying to be desirable or presenting an ideal self. This study shows how representing an accurate sense of self online is a nuanced, complex, and evolving process, particularly for dating applications. It noted this is partially due to constraints imposed by application designs themselves, including default settings for age range and options that limit users access to profiles with images only (Ellison et al., 2006). One literature review of self-disclosure and self-presentation online highlighted how self-disclosure and self-presentation are not mutually exclusive, and some features in online communities discourage self-disclosure, such as multiple audiences, audience feedback, and asynchronicity (Schlosser, 2020).

Another study that examined trans identity disclosure and emotional wellbeing on Facebook and Tumblr found it difficult for users experiencing a life transition (such as a change to one's gender identity) to present all aspects of their identity on existing or singular social media profiles. Rather, the study found that users experiencing a stigmatized life transition disclosed pieces of their identities across multiple social media platforms that held different social networks and argued this may be due to the fact that social media sites do not consider context in a way that meets user's complex needs (Haimson, 2018). Similarly, Van Dijck (2013)

described how different social media platforms offer different opportunities for self-expression. The study found that Facebook tended to be a platform for personal self-presentation while LinkedIn tended to be a platform for professional self-promotion (Van Dijk, 2013).

The current literature suggests that social media platforms play an important role in Palestinian identity expression and exploration, as well as forming communities of support.

Social Media Censorship

Literature shows that current content moderation practices are not transparent to users and include practices such as banning users and removing content with no trace of it or justification for its removal (Scott et al., 2023). Recent literature suggests a trauma informed approach to content moderation, including practices of transparency that outline why content has been removed or kept up. Furthermore, studies suggest that companies and moderators work with local communities to understand their culture, norms, and language to ultimately understand the context of posts prior to removing them or making other moderation decisions (Scott et al., 2023). One study examining the social media behaviors of gang-involved youth in Chicago and how it may impact real-life violence also emphasized the importance of those moderating content to understand the context and community prior to making moderation decisions, to avoid unintended and potentially severe consequences (Patton et al., 2019). This work also revealed the important nuances of content, down to the meaning of emojis within a specific context, further suggesting the need for a deeper understanding of context for posts created by and for particular communities before making moderation decisions.

Content warnings are another form of moderation; recent studies of this practice have shown that it may be ineffective for reducing the spread of fake news and reducing users' engagement with the content, which was its original intent (Ross et al., 2018; Bridland et al., 2022). One systematic review of content warnings and trigger warnings across forms of media, including social media, found that content warnings are intended to warn people of potentially sensitive or distressing content. The work argued that content warnings promote psychological well-being and create inclusive spaces for all audiences (Charles et al., 2022). However, other work has found that this practice may be marginalizing for some users. For example, those who have experienced severe trauma may be more drawn to sensitive content, and thus remain in a perpetual state of being triggered online (Scott et al., 2023). Another study outlined how targeted misinformation campaigns intended to share misleading or false information on social media platforms to shape political narratives (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). A recent report shows how such disinformation campaigns sow discord between marginalized communities, for instance pitting AAPI communities against other colors of community (Asian American Disinformation Table, 2022). Other work has noted how disinformation has been used as a strategy to reinforce white supremacy and power at the expense of marginalized communities (Kuo & Marwick, 2021).

Censorship of content through moderation has been a recent conversation in relation to violations of First Amendment rights and the responsibilities social media platforms have to protect those rights. Scholars have noted how content moderation and moderators' capabilities to censor content are increasingly becoming a crisis for the future of free speech (Langvardt, 2018). This directly relates to Palestinian users on Instagram. (Abushbak et al., 2023) described how

social media platforms' censorship practices that lean towards removing violent content disproportionately impacts Palestinians experiencing and sharing Israeli violence against them online -- which is one necessary tactic for holding the state accountable for such violence.

Social Media Use and Activism

Social media provides an opportunity for its users to reach wide audiences and share events and news that does not appear on mainstream media. Additionally, it has become a vital tool for social mobilization and protest globally - moving beyond simply disseminating information (Poell, 2014; Nabulsi, 2014). Using social media platforms in this way provides opportunities for increasing public awareness and challenging dominant narratives controlled by the West and Israel (Najjar, 2010). Social media has played an important role in shedding light to previous Israeli aggression on Gaza and other Palestinian communities. It has also provided a space for Palestinians within Occupied Palestine to mobilize and connect, often through heightened social media use during an escalation of violence inflicted on their communities. One study looked at a heightened interaction with content through hashtags during local escalations in Occupied Palestine (Huda et al., 2021). Scholars have noted how social media networks like Facebook are incentivized towards profit which directly leads to the silencing of Palestinian content; *“when economic power determines the parameters of freedom of expression and hate speech, content moderation can quickly become an additional tool to reinforce existing patterns of discrimination.”* (Almehdar, 2021).

Social media has long been an avenue for political engagement and social activism. One study conducted by the Pew Research Center found this especially true for Black Americans

during 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. Their survey found that Black Americans are most likely to use social media for political causes and most likely to believe in its effectiveness. Their findings showed that social media users find social media personally important to them for finding community and for getting involved in the movement, and for self-expression (Pew Research Center, 2020). This suggests that social media is an important tool for political organizing among marginalized groups. However, another study that examined social media use during the Tunisian revolution found that Twitter only plays a marginal role in real-life organizing and mobilization; though, it did find that the tool was important for transnational communication about the mobilization (Poell et al., 2012).

Work by Rogers (2012) shows that human-computer interaction studies have shifted focus from users to the context in which technology is used. Given the genocide and ongoing occupation of Palestine, this literature review suggests the need to further understand how Palestinian-identifying users engage with Instagram and navigate the censorship they are experiencing during this particular moment in time. Given prior literature's emphasis on the importance of social media as a space for self-expression for marginalized communities in particular and how Palestinian users may be disproportionately impacted by moderation practices, this study focuses on Palestinian users navigate their identity and cause on Instagram.

Research Questions

Building upon the existing literature, this study explored questions to understand how Palestinian-identifying users experience Instagram, and censorship in particular. Our research questions are as follows:

RQ1a: How do Instagram users of Palestinian identity navigate the tension between raising awareness on their platform and their awareness of censorship?

RQ1b: What behaviors do they participate in to navigate censorship? What trade-offs do they consider?

RQ2a: How are Palestinian-identifying users navigating self-disclosure online and the threat of censorship?

RQ2b: Is there a difference between the type of Palestinian content that gets censored? (i.e., does it seem to be the use of the word “Palestine,” when Israeli state violence is being exposed, or when content is coming from specific users?)

RQ3: What are the consequences of censoring content, from the perspective of Palestinian community members?

These questions are an important framework for our study to help illuminate the nuances of participant self-disclosure, experiences of censorship, and behaviors on Instagram given what we know from prior literature about the complicated landscape of Instagram for this particular community.

Methods

We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with Palestinian-identifying Instagram users to understand their behaviors and attitudes around engaging with Palestinian related topics and content on the social media platform. We chose to conduct in-depth interviews in order to capture the nuances of participants’ online experiences, to shed light on how our sample cognitively experienced Instagram in relation to Palestinian content and censorship, and to not limit our learnings through quantitative methods. Given instances of censorship can be quantified, we wanted to provide a holistic, nuanced understanding of what that means for users in online spaces and how that might impact how they engage in online spaces. A component of

our interview was a “cognitive interview” (Memon & Higham, 1999) where we were better able to understand how participants make decisions about whether or not to post Palestinian content that is going viral on Instagram or on their feeds, their attitudes and beliefs about it, and a description of the Palestinian content they are exposed to on their Instagram feeds. Other questions focused on participant’s general behaviors on Instagram, their behaviors, and decisions around sharing Palestinian content specifically, their experiences of censorship, and their perspectives about the greater consequences of censorship as it relates to the Palestinian cause. This study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan for review and deemed exempt.

We piloted the protocol during the month of August with five initial participants to ensure questions resonated with participants, the interview could be conducted within 60-minutes, and to adjust any components of the protocol that were confusing to participants or did not answer our research questions. Following the pilot, we learned that the protocol worked well, and no revisions were needed. We continued to conduct interviews following the pilot, and all interviews were conducted virtually between August and December of 2023 and lasted up to 60-minutes. Participants were compensated with \$35 upon interview completion.

Participants were recruited on an ongoing basis from August to December of 2023 through social media and email outreach by the research team. The main researcher is a Palestinian-American and connected to various Palestinian organizations and people on social media; she recruited through various channels, including personal and professional networks, to reach the desired sample size.

The recruitment post included a link to a short questionnaire, from which participants were screened on various criteria to determine eligibility for the study. To be eligible for participation in the study, participants needed to be: 1) at least 18 years or older, 2) an active Instagram user, 3) identify as Palestinian, and 4: be fluent or conversational in English. Participants were then prompted to schedule their interview during their desired date and time.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To ensure systematic analysis, we developed a codebook prior to conducting any data collection. Initially, pre-existing codes were generated based on our interview protocol and were refined through iterative reviews by the research team. We used a generative approach, meaning we continuously refined these codes during data collection, to account for emerging themes. All transcriptions were analyzed using the refined codebook.

Summary of Participants

All participants in this study identified as Palestinian to varying degrees. Many noted language, food, and culture as ways they connect to their Palestinian identity. Of the 20 participants that participated in the study, 10 self-identified as female, 9 self-identified as male, 1 self-identified as nonbinary. Participants ranged from 19 to 42 years old and had between 134 to 1,700 followers on Instagram (see Table 1. for more details). Seven of the participants (35% of the sample) were students at the time of the study. Only 3 considered themselves influencers -- although, not in the contemporary understanding of a social media influencer but rather because

their followers reply to their stories, ask questions, and repost the content they are sharing. One of the 3 participants shared that they believe they are an influencer because they are their followers' only representation for a Palestinian -- the only Palestinian person they know or might be following. All remaining 17 participants did not identify as an influencer for reasons such as not having enough followers, not taking Instagram that seriously, or because they have no desire to be one.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant ID	Gender identity	Age (in years)	Number of Followers on Instagram
1	Male	28	413
2	Male	34	423
3	Male	31	600
4	Female	39	327
5	Female	29	514
6	Female	42	275
7	Nonbinary	31	391
8	Female	24	321
9	Male	25	581
10	Female	31	308
11	Female	20	1,700
12	Female	25	585
13	Male	28	987
14	Male	33	301
15	Female	27	1,047
16	Female	34	300
17	Male	19	999
18	Male	33	134
19	Female	31	830
20	Male	26	746

Participants shared a range of other identities that are important to them and thus may inform their online experiences and perspectives. Based on their responses, they called attention to national identity (e.g., being born and raised in Israel and currently living in the United States, being born and raised in the United States or Canada); regional identity (i.e., being from the Global South); relational identity (i.e., being a mother); religious identity (i.e., being of Orthodox Christian or Catholic faith); and sexual identity (i.e., being bisexual).

Findings

Based on our 20 interviews with Palestinian-identifying Instagram users, we found four main themes organized into the following categories: 1) Palestinian identity and online self-presentation, 2) Palestinian identity and online sharing of Palestinian-related content, 3) awareness of experiences of censorship, and 4) tactics employed to navigate instances of censorship. In this section, we described these themes and our findings in more detail.

Palestinian Identity and Online Self-Presentation

Generally, participants strongly identify with Palestinianness and express their identity on Instagram through frequent posting and sharing of Palestinian content, despite high-stakes consequences.

General Social Media Attitudes and Behaviors

We learned that most Palestinian-identifying users generally tended to use Instagram to share pictures of their daily lives, or something more monumental, such as vacation, with their friends and family. Most participants described that they rarely post pictures to their profile's grid, more often posing in Instagram's story function. In addition to connecting and sharing

content with loved ones, many shared that they tend to use Instagram as a means for obtaining and sharing news. By engaging with news on the platform, participants shared that they use Instagram to reshare that news, especially to raise awareness of injustices happening throughout the world. When asked what content they tend to reshare, one participant described: “*mostly injustices of different kinds, like anti-imperial colonial stuff, and: like, I mean, you know, drawing attention to stuff that isn't getting enough coverage.*” This participant alludes to the comradery with other oppressed groups that many participants expressed, and how that contributes to their online behaviors.

While participants were prompted to share how they engage with Instagram outside of Palestinian content, most shared that they often use the social media platform to raise awareness about the injustices Palestinians have faced over the years and news of present-day events, especially participants that were interviewed during or after October 2023. This may be because Palestinians have been silenced for decades and Instagram may be a place where they can express themselves and this part of their identity. Additionally, Israeli aggression against Palestinians heightens often - so it may also be that Palestinian users are posting Palestinian content often because there is plenty of news to share. The next section more deeply examines how Palestinian identity related to the sharing of content related to Palestinian politics and news.

Awareness of Identity on Instagram

As noted in the introduction, all participants expressed a strong affiliation with their Palestinianess, even those with a mixed identity. One participant shared, “*So I am half Palestinian. My mom is Palestinian, and my dad is white. So, I guess **I am a mixed person. But I strongly identify with my Palestinian identity.***” All participants shared that they were mindful of

their sense of being Palestinian and how that impacted their experiences on Instagram. Most participants shared that their profiles are private, and they are careful about who they accept as friends. Even so, Palestinian-identifying users described the mental calculations they need to consider when deciding to share or not share Palestinian content on their Instagram. When sharing content, they are deeply aware of the consequences they may face, including the inability to visit Palestine due to complications at the Israeli-border when attempting to enter, being added to the black-list site Canary Mission which doxes Palestinian activists and falsely frames them as antisemitic, potential job loss, and not knowing the impact of what sharing today might have on their future. One participant shared: *“I'm just really worried it'll be traced back to me, and I won't be allowed into the country [Occupied Palestine]. So, I want to share that information. But also like I don't want my Instagram being flagged, and also like I have to be mindful of if I'm friends with like coworkers, because I don't know how they feel about it and like where I work, can be super strict about a lot of things, and I don't know where they fall on this topic. So, I just have to always err on the side of caution.”* This participant highlights the tension many other participants faced between wanting to share critical information about the realities of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the fear of that content being traced back to them somehow or being perceived incorrectly by people that follow them, and then suffering extreme consequences as a result - such as not being allowed into their ancestral homeland.

Another shared:

“I hate to admit it, but I think a big part of it comes from being scared of the surveillance aspect, especially since, like I said, I grew up in Palestine, but it is technically Israel, where I grew up and I do have Israeli citizenship. So, I have to go through the airport to get there, and it just like it gives me so much stress. I'm like, every time I post something I'm like and I think I am a little more, I'm definitely more paranoid than I should be, but I am constantly thinking about how this could come back to affect me? Will this ever be

used against me? I think I'm just much more conscious about not only what I post, but who I follow and what I like and what I save. And even just like watching something. I just know that, you know, Instagram is very much able to track all of that data, and they're very much able to analyze this. And whether or not they willingly give that information up to other people or companies, I feel like a lot of people have access to that information. So I think, yeah, I do think a big part of it is just, I guess, fear of surveillance and just kind of not just the fear of surveillance, but just like the like, not knowing how it can come back to affect you, because that information just stays up forever. So, I don't know if, like, maybe in today's world, that doesn't matter. But maybe in 10 or 15 years down the line, I don't know how something might come back to me. I don't know how someone might use that data."

This participant highlights the consequences of how social media use and behaviors can impact future versions of themselves, and how intrinsically Palestinian content of any sort has been historically perceived in an extremely negative light. This participant also alludes to elements of mistrust in social media companies that may be connected to how these companies have made decisions about Palestinian content in the past. Participants illuminated the complications of disclosing their Palestinian identity in online spaces; they cannot simply exist online without having to consider how their decisions to disclose might severely impact them.

Most participants described a deep sense of awareness of how their Palestinianess may be perceived online. All of them shared the need to be cautious about sharing their Palestinian identity, especially when preparing for educational or professional opportunities. One participant described that when applying to law schools, they opted to remove the Palestinian flag from their Instagram profile's biography as an attempt to not get rejected from schools because of it. Others that work in corporate jobs shared that they are particularly careful about what they post about Palestine because of what assumptions their colleagues might make and how that could be shared with their boss or supervisors, potentially impacting their employment. Two participants were teachers at the time of this study and shared they are especially concerned about how their

student's parents might obtain and perceive them posting about Palestine. These participants did not mention the use of particular visibility settings, such as using the "close friends" function to share Palestinian content with a specific network. Despite these concerns and consequences (and related behaviors in publicly communicating their identity), all participants described finding ways to express their Palestinianness on Instagram and emphasized the importance of it.

Palestinian Identity and Online Sharing of Palestinian-Related Content

Participants tend to use Instagram to share news about Palestine to raise awareness amongst those following them. When posting content, they expressed a need to find credible and reliable sources.

How Palestinian users share content about Palestine

Prior to the escalation of the genocide that began in October 2023, most participants were posting relatively infrequently, ranging from once a year to once a week. However, pre-October 2023, most participants reported posting more frequently when there was an escalation of Israeli aggression against Palestinians. After the genocide began, participants described how they began posting to their Instagram stories multiple times a day, and often described turning to Instagram to obtain the latest news as the first act to start their day each morning. Participants shared that Instagram became one of their main sources of news during the genocide because they could see first-hand accounts from Gazan journalists, which was not reaching mainstream news in the US. The subsequent findings address our second research question: *How are Palestinian-identifying users navigating self-disclosure online and the threat of censorship?*

Many participants noted that when posting Palestinian content that they tend to make sure that the content that is credible, coming from or developed by sources they have vetted or that

has verification from Instagram itself. They also shared that they try to share content that has the full context, is factual, is non-religious in its arguments in order to not further perpetuate the false narrative that there is a religious conflict in the region, and content of first-hand accounts or testimonies. One participant described, ***“I make sure it’s sourced properly; I try to find the [original] source. There’s such scrutiny and I don’t want to harm my credibility.”*** This participant highlights how curated and thoughtful Palestinian-identifying users need to be, even during -- or especially during -- a crisis such as genocide.

Nearly all participants shared that they tended to repost content that is simple and to the point, typically infographics or an image with just a bit of text. Additionally, they described tending to repost short reels or videos but are careful to repost long videos to not lose the attention of the viewer. Some participants shared that they refuse to post vulnerable images of Palestinian suffering. One described: ***“I refuse to show the suffering of Palestinians, because if your support of Palestine is contingent on, you know, seeing a body count or a death count, then that’s it. I don’t want your support at all. That’s how I feel personally. So, I will just share updates of what’s going on, in Gaza and the West bank and add, like my own little 2 cents on it as well, too. And then how people can help, like, call your senator, call your elected officials.”***

Participants expressed opposing views on sharing vulnerable content - others described that sharing vulnerable or gruesome content was necessary to capture attention, and that we all had a responsibility to bear witness to it. This tension between participants’ views on sharing hyper visible content seemed to be activated in this particular moment of crisis; this theme only arose between participants interviewed in and after October 2023.

Activism Through Social Media

All 20 participants shared that, especially given the role social media plays as a primary source for consuming information and news, raising awareness about the realities of Palestine is imperative to them. Participants shared many reasons for believing in the importance of using Instagram as a tool for their activism. Some described how many people don't know or care enough to find this information on their own, others shared that it is intrinsically important given their Palestinian identities - they described feeling a sense of duty to share, as one participant described: *"First of all, there's a personal aspect. I have the survivors' guilt, and I feel like I'm not doing enough for my people. So, the least thing that I could do is just raise awareness and educate people, whether it's on social media or in my daily life. [...] I feel like it's my duty to post about Palestine, because that's the least that I can do for my people."* Others described that social media has become an important tool for amplifying voices on the ground - especially since mainstream media rarely covers what's happening. One participant shared, *"I believe that the whole movement for Palestinian freedom wouldn't be where we are today if it weren't for Instagram. It is revolutionary; the fact that we are for the first time ever able to see on the ground."* Many participants noted the important role Instagram has played during the genocide, and how social media has long been a tool for sharing the Palestinian story with the world. It seemed as if Gazan journalists were predominately and most frequently posting Instagram stories and grid posts over other social media platforms.

However, many participants also noted that when sharing content about Palestine, they open themselves up to criticism for being perceived as "antisemitic," even though they all noted they were actively working to avoid sharing anything that amplifies antisemitic content. Some participants noted that they are especially intentional to describe how their posts are not

antisemitic to their followers and actively work to educate their followers about the conflation of Zionism and antisemitism. This phenomenon seems to be linked to the consequences described above - that sharing Palestinian content is perceived as antisemitic and problematic, ultimately resulting in fears around job and opportunity loss.

Awareness of Experiences of Censorship

Generally, most participants are aware of and have experienced instances of perceived censorship on Instagram. This awareness was especially prevalent post October 2023.

Experiences and Awareness of Palestinian-Content Censorship

A few participants who were interviewed before October 2023 described a meta understanding of censorship of Palestinian content on Instagram. They noted that they are aware it happens but were unsure of clear and persistent patterns or how it may manifest in practice. Some noticed a reduction in their story viewer counts in the past but didn't seem to clearly draw on other salient memories of censorship. One outlier was an interviewee that managed the Instagram account of a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter in college. This participant was able to draw on clear patterns of censorship of many forms, that are outlined in the subsequent paragraphs and that other participants described experiencing during the genocide. Participants that were interviewed after October 2023 were much more aware of how they have experienced such censorship on a day-to-day basis or were making general observations of censorship across the platform through their networks and the people they turned to for information during this time.

Many participants described instances of perceived censorship of Palestinian content on Instagram. Several described how when they reshare an Instagram story from another account that is related to Palestine, it will receive significantly less views than their stories of non-Palestinian content. One participant in particular shared that he has 413 followers on Instagram and typically sees his story viewer count in the 200 range when posting non-Palestinian content. He described that when he posts Palestinian content, that viewer count can drop to as low as 60. He shared, *“there are times I don't even break like 70 [viewers], and I'm not, you know, it's not because I'm popular or anything. **But if I'm getting 200 on one, why am I only getting 70 now?**”* Another participant with 1,700 followers shared that her story views are typically in the 500 range when posting non-Palestinian content but has noticed the viewer count drop to as low as 86 when posting about Palestine. Other participants shared that they and their friends have experienced “glitches” with content they are sharing, such as a video of an American politician speaking about the issue but only the sound would play.

Others described noticed patterns around what is posted on Instagram - not necessarily what they are resharing or posting themselves - that has seemed to garner some level of censorship. Some participants shared that they notice a “content warning” label, where users need to opt in to seeing the content, when the content is showing Israeli military aggression against Palestinians. One shared, *“if it's just like a group of Palestinians I don't get a warning on it, it's as if Instagram wants you to see them being the villain. **But when it's Israel doing something bad, they're like, oh, no, don't look at this, it's bad. You don't want to see it.**”* Despite these reported instances of perceived censorship, all participants shared it does not deter them from sharing Palestinian content on Instagram. These findings present evidence for our first

research question: *How do Instagram users of Palestinian identity navigate the tension between raising awareness on their platform and their awareness of censorship?* It seems as though raising awareness was more important than the potential consequence of posting and being shadowbanned.

Tactics Employed to Navigate Instances of Censorship

Participants use a variety of tactics to work around perceived censorship.

Ways Users Navigate Censorship

We learned that participants employed a few tactics themselves or have seen other Instagram users use tactics to get around the censorship of Palestinian content on Instagram. These findings address our research questions: 1b: *What behaviors do they participate in to navigate censorship? What trade-offs do they consider?* and 2a: *Is there a difference between the type of Palestinian content that gets censored?* Tactics included misspelling words like Palestine, Israel, and Israeli Occupation Forces by adding the asterisk or other characters, “sandwiching” Palestinian content in between non-Palestinian content, adding text to their posts when resharing content, and sharing images from their phone’s camera roll instead of reposting content already on Instagram. One participant described, *“if you share a post containing something to do with Palestine, it doesn't get enough views. So, I'll share an Instagram post that I found, and then I'll put in my own photo that I've taken where it's not an Instagram post from a different profile 'cause that's what I noticed that turns off this - messes with the algorithm. So, they just think it's a normal photo. They don't know that it has to do with Palestine. And then my story gets more views that way. That's what we did when we ran [the] University's SJP [Students for*

Justice in Palestine] Instagram.” This participant was involved in a Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapter at their college several years ago, and describes in this quote the history of censorship - this is not a new phenomenon.

Another participant shared that adding polls, songs, and stickers to their posts tend to “break the algorithm.” They described, “*the thing that will break [the algorithm is] posting random pictures, putting like stickers, or like posting a poll, or like adding a song, I tend to do that -- adding stickers and posting a poll.*” Despite needing to find ways to avoid shadowbanning and to get their content viewed by their followers, all participants shared that their awareness of this censorship did not change the frequency or the content of their posts. In other words, they did not compromise the stories they were hoping to tell, rather just employed these tactics to ensure those stories could be shared. Additionally, beyond noticing a slight spike in the censorship of gruesome content, participants reported having to use these tactics for *all* Palestinian content they posted or reshared – there did not seem to be a difference in the type of content that was censored. In summary, participants noted the following tactics to work around experiences censorship:

- “Sandwiching” Palestinian content in between non-Palestinian content
- Misspelling words, such as Palestine, Israel, and Israeli Occupation Forces
- Adding text, polls, stickers, songs, and other elements to story posts
- Posting images directly from their own camera roll

Despite these additional behavioral burdens Palestinian users need to employ to ensure their content is shared and available to their followers, participants described how these experiences embolden them to keep sharing – or even share more. One participant described how even if the content reaches a small audience, it is still impactful: “*I just keep posting, it doesn't prevent me. It's fine. If 200 don't see it, the 50 are going to see it. So that's still good.*” This sentiment was

shared across a few other participants. They noted that because their accounts are private and mostly friends and family, they still found it impactful to share despite the content reaching a smaller audience.

Perceptions of the Consequences of Censoring Palestinian Content

All participants noted several personal and systemic consequences to censoring Palestinian content on social media. Personal consequences included having the burden of educating followers about their existence and experiences and news in Palestine, feelings of being silenced, experiences of anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian discrimination, complications to their sense of self, and feeling ostracized.

The most common systemic consequence participants noted was the illegal occupation of Palestine continuing and therefore leading to an erasure of Palestinian society, culture, and its people. One participant shared how censorship on social media has allowed Israel to control the narrative around their occupation of Palestine, ***“I think Israel and Zionism work best when people are in the dark about what's going on with Palestinians. [...] And also not seeing Palestinians as humans. I think when you control a narrative, it's much easier to literally control the narrative.”*** This sentiment alludes to the importance of providing online spaces where Palestinian stories can be shared and humanized, to provide a holistic picture of the realities in the country. Additionally, it shows the danger of allowing one dominant voice and skewed perspective to take up all of the space of what users are fed online. The personal and systemic consequences noted by participants answered our final research question: *What are the consequences of censoring content, from the perspective of Palestinian community members?*

Discussion

In summary, our findings provide a nuanced picture of how Palestinian-identifying Instagram users engage with the platform, navigate, and express their personal identities in online spaces, raise awareness about the Palestinian cause, and experience and navigate instances of censorship. These findings shed light on how the social media platform further marginalizes its Palestinian users through instances of shadow banning and through policies it has implemented or is considering implementing that would further exacerbate the censorship of Palestinian content on the platform.

Our first two findings, categorized as 1) Palestinian identity and online self-presentation and 2) Palestinian identity and online sharing of Palestinian-related content, broadens the understanding of Palestinian-identifying users' experiences online and within Instagram specifically. Similar to prior literature, we found that social media has been a space where Palestinian-identifying users feel like they can express themselves, build community, and organize (Pyle et al., 2023; Poell, 2014; Nabulsi, 2014). Our findings emphasized how Palestinian-identifying users view social media networks, and Instagram in particular, as a crucial tool for Palestinian liberation. Our work adds to existing literature on self-disclosure and self-presentation online. We found that this group tends to use Instagram to share their Palestinianness and educate their followers usually, but especially during times of escalated violence. We also learned that Palestinian-identifying users need to make particularly complicated decisions about what to share and not share in order to maintain credibility, an accurate self-image, and to avoid online and offline discrimination. Our study found that it might be especially difficult for Palestinian-identifying users to make such decisions about self-

disclosure and presentation, as they need to consider severe consequences with each post and online interaction, such as being doxed, losing employment and educational opportunities, and accusations of being antisemitic. These findings build on existing literature that highlights the challenges of self-presentation given the limitations of how social media platforms are designed (Ellison et al., 2006), which Palestinian users are also subject to, in addition to the added hurdles our findings illuminated.

Our third and fourth findings, categorized as 3) awareness of experiences of censorship, and 4) tactics employed to navigate instances of censorship, highlight how this community seems to be disproportionately impacted by content moderation policies that censor Palestinian content and their acute awareness of this censorship, especially in times of heightened state violence. This aligns with existing literature which has documented the history of censorship of Palestinian content online (Abushbak et al., 2023; Nabulsi, 2014; Najjar, 2010). We found that participants in our study had to employ tactics to work around such censorship, potentially adding additional cognitive burden to these users. What we learned aligns with prior literature (Poell, 2014) about how important social media has been for political organizing and raising consciousness among participants' followers and therefore the public who may only be engaging with western or Israeli media. Finally, we found that, from the perspective of Palestinians-identifying people, the censorship of Palestinian content on social media platforms has dangerous implications for the Palestinian people - ultimately further allowing Israel's illegal occupation of the land and genocidal acts to continue without witness or account.

Furthermore, our work argues that it may be especially important for social media companies that are incentivized to censor Palestinian content (Almehdar, 2021) to consider

employing trauma and culturally-informed approaches to content moderation and engaging with Palestinian communities to understand the context of their content prior to making moderation decisions, similar to recommendations by Scott et al. (2023) and Patton et al. (2019). Given the prevalence of tactics employed by participants in our study in parallel to the policies Meta implemented or considered during the time of this study, it seems imperative that Palestinian communities' concerns and experiences on social media platforms are considered moving forward.

Conclusion

This study highlights many instances of perceived censorship of Palestinian content from the perspective of Palestinian-identifying Instagram users themselves, and how that complicated users' decisions around self-disclosure of their Palestinian identity. Censorship took shape in the form of reduced story viewers, glitches in the content when shared, and sensitive content warnings which required users to opt-in to engaging with the content. Participants in the study described several tactics to combat this censorship, including posting original content they've made, adding text or other additions to pre-existing content, "sandwiching" Palestinian content in between non-Palestinian content, and misspelling words. Despite perceptions of censorship and needing to employ tactics to combat it, all participants described how important it was for them to share Palestinian content on Instagram, especially in this particular moment where there is a heighten and active genocide taking place in Gaza.

This scope of this work is confined to the experiences of 20 Palestinian-identifying Instagram users and thus findings cannot be generalized to the experiences of all people who

identify as Palestinian. Palestinians are a diverse people and live all over the globe. While two participants have experience living in occupied Palestine, all were based in the United States at the time of this research. Future research may capture the experiences of censorship in occupied Palestine for those living there today, and where social media use that seeks to amplify the Palestinian experience or the realities of Israelis military aggression and occupation is punished by the Israeli government. Additionally, this work gauged perceptions of censorship and shadow banning. There is an opportunity for future research to more systematically document accounts of censoring Palestinian content on the platform. Lastly, future work can consider exploring culturally appropriate approaches to content moderation for Palestinian content specifically.

References

1. Abbasi, A., & Arif, A. (2021). The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict on Instagram: A Comparative Analysis of Narrative Strategies. *Media International Australia*, 179(1), 97-114.
2. Abushbak, A. M., Majeed, T., & Sinha, A. (2023). INSTAGRAM, CENSORSHIP AND CIVILIAN ACTIVISM: THE DIGITAL PRESENCE OF THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT NARRATIVES. *NIU International Journal of Human Rights*, 10(1).
3. Action Network. (n.d.). Meta: We need to talk about genocide. Retrieved from <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/meta-we-need-to-talk-about-genocide?sourceid=1001761&emci=74d44e0d-0fd7-ee11-85f9-002248223794&emdi=d07bdf8-23d7-ee11-85f9-002248223794&ceid=679764>
4. Almehdar, A. (2021). Freedom of Expression on Social Media Platforms: Facebook's Moderation Behavior on Palestine's May 2021 Movement. *NYUJ Int'l L. & Pol.*, 54, 207.
5. Al-Rawi, A. (2017). From Revolution to Fizzling Out? Social Media Use during the 2011 Protests in Egypt and the Impact of Government Counter-Narratives. *Journal of International Communication*, 23(2), 153-170.
6. Andalibi, N., Haimson, O. L., De Choudhury, M., & Forte, A. (2018). Social Support, Reciprocity, and Anonymity in Responses to Sexual Abuse Disclosures on Social Media. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 25(5), 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3234942>
7. Andalibi, N., Ozturk, P., & Forte, A. (2017). Sensitive Self-disclosures, Responses, and Social Support on Instagram: The Case of #Depression. In *Proceedings of the 20th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. New York, NY, USA: ACM
8. American Near East Refugee Aid. (n.d.). How Big is Gaza? American Near East Refugee Aid. Retrieved from <https://www.anera.org/how-big-is-gaza/>
9. Asian American Disinformation Table (2022) “Power, Platforms, Politics: Asian Americans and Disinformation Landscape Report.” August 2022, www.AsianAmDisinfo.org
10. Baker, M. (2020). Digital Resistance in Palestine: Rhetoric, Agency, and Public Opinion. *Media International Australia*, 177(1), 48-64.
11. Bannon, L. J. (2011). Re-framing HCI: From Human-computer Interaction to Human-centred Interaction Design. In *Proceedings of the 9th ACM SIGCHI Italian Chapter International Conference on Computer-Human Interaction: Facing Complexity* (pp. 17–18). New York, NY, USA: ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2037296.2037304>
12. Bridgland, V. M. E., Bellet, B. W., & Takarangi, M. K. T. (2023). Curiosity Disturbed the Cat: Instagram’s Sensitive-Content Screens Do Not Deter Vulnerable Users From Viewing Distressing Content. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 11(2), 290-307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026221097618>
13. Charles, A., Hare-Duke, L., Nudds, H., Franklin, D., Llewellyn-Beardsley, J., Rennick-Egglestone, S., Gust, O., Ng, F., Evans, E., Knox, E., et al. (2022). Typology of content

- warnings and trigger warnings: Systematic review. *PLoS ONE*, 17(5), e0266722. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0266722>
14. Dajani, N. (2019). Palestinian Online Activism: Negotiating Identity, Censorship, and Resistance. *Media International Australia*, 173(1), 49-64.
 15. Elmasry, M. (2015). Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011. *Media, War & Conflict*, 8(3), 262-280.
 16. El Saheli, A. (2021). The Digital Intifada: Online Activism and Media Practices among Palestinian Youth in Israel. *Media International Australia*, 180(1), 96-113.
 17. El Zein, H., & Abusalem, A. (Year). Social Media and War on Gaza: A Battle on Virtual Space to Galvanise Support and Falsify Israel Story. *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications*, 1(2), 109-120. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajmmc.1-2-2>
 18. Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415–441. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x>
 19. Fatafta, M. (2024, March 20). Genocide in the digital age: What role do social media companies play? APC Talk. <https://repository.ghumanrights.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/cdc7ea07-bb61-41f0-9a13-785aadb54b97/content>
 20. Gündüz, U. (2017). The Effect of Social Media on Identity Construction. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(5), 85-92. DOI: 10.1515/mjss-2017-0026
 21. Haimson, O. L. (2018). The Social Complexities of Transgender Identity Disclosure on Social Media. *UC Irvine*. ProQuest ID: Haimson_uci_0030D_15024. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m5bp506z. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19c235q0>
 22. Hildebrandt, K. A. (2016). Digital Diaspora and National Identity in Palestine. *Media International Australia*, 160(1), 106-119.
 23. Hollenbaugh, E. E. H. E. E. (2021). Self-presentation in social media: Review and research opportunities. *Review of communication research*, 9.
 24. Huda, M. N., Nurmandi, A., Qodir, Z., Sutan, A. J., Misran, & Utaminingsih, N. (2021). Social media role to support Palestinians on Palestine–Israel conflict. In D. Mutiarin et al. (Eds.), *ICOSI-HESS 2022, ASSEHR 710* (pp. 901–913). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-65-7_71
 25. Human Rights Watch. (2023, December 21). Meta’s broken promises: Systemic censorship of Palestine content on Instagram and Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metatas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>
 26. Köchling, A., Wehner, M.C. Discriminated by an algorithm: a systematic review of discrimination and fairness by algorithmic decision-making in the context of HR recruitment and HR development. *Bus Res* 13, 795–848 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-020-00134-w>
 27. Kuo, R., & Marwick, A. (2021). Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, Politics. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*.
 28. Langvardt, K. (2018). *Regulating online content moderation*. *Georgetown Law Journal*, 106(5), 1353-1390.

29. Memon, A., & Higham, P. A. (1999). A review of the cognitive interview. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 5(1–2), 177–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10683169908415000>
30. Meta - The Center for Equality for Palestinian and Arabic Citizens of Israel. (n.d.). About. Retrieved from <https://meta.7amleh.org/about>
31. Mustafa, S., & Hanafi, S. (2019). Social Media and the Arab Uprisings: Politics, Activism and Society. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(2), 211–228.
32. Nabulsi, M. (2014). “Hungry for freedom”: Palestine youth activism in the era of social media. In *Wired Citizenship* (pp. 105–120). Routledge.
33. Najjar, A. (2010). Othering the Self: Palestinians Narrating the War on Gaza in Social Media. *Journal of Middle East Media*, 6(Fall), 1–28.
34. Palestinian Centre for Development and Media Freedom (MADA), ‘Study on Challenges of Digital Rights in Palestine’ 43 Retrieved from <https://www.madacenter.org/files/image/2019/digitalrightsstudy.pdf>.
35. Patton, D. U., Leonard, P., Elaesser, C., Eschmann, R. D., Patel, S., & Crosby, S. (2019). What’s a threat on social media? How Black and Latino Chicago young men define and navigate threats online. *Youth & Society*, 51(6), 756–772.
36. Pew Research Center. (2020, December 11). Social media continue to be important political outlets for Black Americans. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/12/11/social-media-continue-to-be-important-political-outlets-for-black-americans/>
37. Poell, T. (2014). Social media activism and state censorship. In *Social media, politics and the state* (pp. 189–206). Routledge.
38. Poell, Thomas, and Kaouthar Darmoni. 2012. Twitter as a Multilingual space: the articulation of the Tunisian revolution through #sidibouزيد. *NECSUS - European Journal of Media Studies* 1. <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/twitter-as-a-multilingual-space-the-articulation-of-the-tunisianrevolution-through-sidibouزيد-by-thomas-poell-and-kaouthar-darmoni/>.
39. Pyle, C., Ellison, N. B., & Andalibi, N. (2023). Social Media and College-Related Social Support Exchange for First-Generation, Low-Income Students: The Role of Identity Disclosures. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 7(CSCW2), Article 296. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3610087>
40. Radsch, C. C. (2017). Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First. In C. C. Radsch (Ed.), *Understanding the Arab Spring: Culture, Media, and Protest* (pp. 1–16). University of Texas Press.
41. Ren, J., Dong, H., Popovic, A., Sabnis, G., & Nickerson, J. (2024). Digital platforms in the news industry: how social media platforms impact traditional media news viewership. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 33(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085X.2022.2103046>
42. Rogers, Y. (2012). HCI Theory: Classical, Modern, and Contemporary. *Synthesis Lectures on Human -Centered Informatics*, 5(2), 1–129. <https://doi.org/10.2200/S00418ED1V01Y201205HCI014>
43. Said, E. W. (1979). *The Question of Palestine*. Vintage Books.
44. Schlosser, A. E. (2020). Self-disclosure versus self-presentation on social media. *Current opinion in psychology*, 31, 1–6.

45. Scott, C. F., Marcu, G., Anderson, R. E., Newman, M. W., & Schoenebeck, S. (2023). Trauma-Informed Social Media: Towards Solutions for Reducing and Healing Online Harm. In *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '23)*, April 23–28, 2023, Hamburg, Germany (pp. 1-20). ACM.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581512>
46. Swart, J. (2021). Experiencing Algorithms: How Young People Understand, Feel About, and Engage With Algorithmic News Selection on Social Media. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211008828>
47. Taha, S. (2020). The Cyber Occupation of Palestine; Suppressing Digital Activism and Shrinking the Virtual Sphere. *Global Campus of Human Rights*. Retrieved from <https://repository.gchumanrights.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/cdc7ea07-bb61-41f0-9a13-785aadb54b97/content>
48. Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press.
49. van Dijck, J. (2013). ‘You have one identity’: performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2), 199- 215.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443712468605>