

Analysis of the Functions of Social Media in Social Movements with Emphasis on Workers' and Teachers' Social Protests in Iran Since 2015

Fershteh. Moradi¹, Nazanin. Malekiyan^{1*}, Nowruz. Hashem Zehi¹, Leila. Niroomand¹

¹ Department of Social Communication, ET.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: n.malekiyan@iauctb.ac.ir

Received: 2025-03-21

Revised: 2025-04-21

Accepted: 2025-05-01

Published: 2025-10-14

The objective of this study was to analyze the functions of social media in social movements, with an emphasis on the social protests of workers and teachers in Iran since 2015. The research employed a qualitative methodology using thematic analysis. The statistical population included prominent authors in the field of communication sciences, general secretaries of political parties, and influential journalists. Based on the principle of theoretical saturation, a sample size of 15 individuals was selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that social media, as powerful tools, possess a high potential to enhance social movements and facilitate positive change in the educational system. However, to utilize these tools effectively, it is essential to acknowledge and address the associated challenges and limitations, and to propose strategies to overcome them. Social media play a central role in the formation, expansion, and success of social movements—including teachers' movements—by providing a platform for communication, organization, awareness-raising, and mobilization. These platforms allow individuals to make their voices heard, unite, and strive for social change. Likewise, by enabling rapid and widespread communication, social media empower workers to act on their demands in a more organized and effective manner. These platforms can function as a mechanism for mobilization, increasing awareness and fostering solidarity among workers.

Keywords: *Functions of Social Media, Social Movements, Social Protests*

How to cite this article:

Moradi, F., Malekiyan, N., Hashem Zehi, N., & Niroomand, L. (2025). Analysis of the Functions of Social Media in Social Movements with Emphasis on Workers' and Teachers' Social Protests in Iran Since 2015. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 4(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.4.4.7>

1. Introduction

Social movements are among the most influential phenomena in the modern world. Sociologists regard social movements as key drivers of social transformation and change. These movements first emerged in the latter half of the 19th century, driven by industrial capitalism and the exploitation of labor, which compelled the lower social classes to mobilize in hopes of improving their conditions (Razavi, 2020). Under such

circumstances, labor movements took shape in reaction to the prevailing injustices. Later, ethnic and religious movements emerged with differing goals and operational mechanisms. By the early second half of the 20th century, new social movements had begun to surface (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). These new movements, operating under conditions vastly different from traditional, macro-level movements, aimed to improve aspects of modern collective life through



limited, tangible objectives (Kowsari, 2023). A sociological reflection reveals that both types of movements dream of social change—albeit through different means. While traditional movements pursued foundational transformation, contemporary social movements seek to reform modern structures. The complexity of modern societal frameworks and the emergence of political, social, and environmental crises have laid fertile ground for the expansion of multiple social movements. These new movements have played a vital role in revitalizing the public sphere, expanding democracy, shaping identities, and influencing global policies (Castells, 2012).

New social movements appeared suddenly and rapidly in the 1960s. Their nature is characterized by confrontation and conflict with the prevailing social and political order. Understanding the contextual foundations of social movements is essential, given their powerful role in driving change, fostering identity, and reviving the public sphere. The development and emergence of social movements can be analyzed from both sociological and psychological perspectives. Psychological approaches focus on individual-level factors in explaining collective behavior, while sociological perspectives emphasize collective structural features (Tilly, 2004).

One prominent theory that addresses the context of social movements is the Relative Deprivation Theory. This concept was first introduced by Runciman (1979) and later developed mathematically by Yitzhaki in the context of income inequality. The first systematic research on relative deprivation dates back to Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues' studies of military morale during World War II. They discovered that soldiers' dissatisfaction with military services was based on their comparison with the services received by others. For example, air force personnel were discontented upon perceiving that military police received more benefits, even though services for airmen had also improved. Their perception of unfairness was rooted in the belief that others were gaining more, more quickly. In contrast, military police, who did not compare themselves with other groups, did not feel deprived. These findings led scholars to formalize the concept of relative deprivation (Mahdavi & Norouzi, 2019).

As Nash (2004) asserts, the theory of relative deprivation pertains to the cognitive dissonance

between individuals' expectations and the realities they experience. This perceived mismatch is seen as a central cause for the emergence of social movements. In general, all theories proposing that governments must ensure public contentment to prevent instability—thus deterring people from engaging in collective protests—fall under this theoretical framework. Thinkers such as Davies, Moore, and Gurr belong to this tradition. These views are based on the assumption that certain forms of frustration and dissatisfaction, stemming from structural or functional disequilibrium, manifest in political violence or destabilizing collective action. In this perspective, rapid and sweeping social change is inherently destabilizing, and through specific socio-psychological mechanisms, leads to political protests. In this model, relative deprivation or frustration, particularly among student movements, is referred to as alienation. Relative deprivation, therefore, is a key construct in social science to explain emotional and subjective reactions as opposed to objective discrimination (Ghasemi & Javadi, 2020).

According to Moore (2003), the feeling of relative deprivation comprises two interconnected components: first, individuals must recognize disparities between themselves and others via social comparison; second, they must assess and judge whether such disparities are legitimate. Relative deprivation emerges when expectations—rooted in perceived societal legitimacy—are shattered. Here, "legitimacy" refers to the belief that institutionalized inequality in the distribution of power, wealth, and status is inherently just. The theory of relative deprivation can be examined through two lenses:

1. How deprivation forms in the minds of individuals and the sources of such deprivation
2. How such deprivation manifests in the form of collective political violence, influenced by social variables.

Gurr based his theory on the seemingly self-evident premise that dissatisfaction is the primary cause of violent conflict. This dissatisfaction, which motivates violent action, is a result of perceived relative deprivation. According to Gurr, relative deprivation is the perceived discrepancy between what individuals believe they are rightfully entitled to (value expectations) and what they believe they are capable of obtaining and maintaining (value capabilities). Value

capabilities are determined by the physical and social environment and reflect the perceived likelihood of acquiring or retaining desired resources. Value expectations are the goods and life conditions that individuals legitimately believe they deserve. Given these definitions, Gurr's theory is psychological and individualistic in nature, as relative deprivation resides in the minds of individuals and may differ substantially from how an external observer views the objective situation (Asgari & Farahani, 2022).

The central question posed by these theories is: Why do uprisings occur more often during periods of social improvement or transition? Their answer is that political revolts and protest behaviors stem from people's subjective mental states. Thus, it is crucial to differentiate between the subjective views of individuals and the objective reality observed by external analysts. From the perspective of the protesting public, conditions may appear to be worsening, even if empirical evidence suggests otherwise (Rahimi, 2020). These theories, by distinguishing between subjective and objective dimensions—or between the actor's and the observer's mind—attempt to address this paradox. Since these theories encompass propositions about the relationship between relative deprivation and collective protest behavior at both individual and collective levels, they can be empirically tested in both domains. At the individual level, this involves analyzing data from representative samples in one or several countries and asking: Do those who perceive higher levels of deprivation participate more in social protests? At the collective level, the unit of analysis is countries at a specific point in time, raising the question: Do nations with higher levels of perceived relative deprivation experience more political unrest and protest? (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

Relative deprivation may take three distinct forms:

- (a) Descending deprivation, in which individuals' expectations remain constant while their capabilities steadily decline.
- (b) Aspirational deprivation, where individuals' capabilities are stable but their expectations rise.
- (c) Ascending deprivation, which occurs after a period of simultaneous growth in both expectations and capabilities; eventually, the growth in capabilities halts or significantly decreases, while expectations continue to rise. The greater the gap between expectations and capabilities, the more intense the relative deprivation,

leading to heightened dissatisfaction and increasing the likelihood and intensity of violence. Relative deprivation fosters dissatisfaction, which acts as a general driver for action against the source of deprivation. The tendency for aggressive responses is biologically embedded in humans, and both humans and animals display an innate biological propensity to attack the source of frustration. Aggressive responses, however, only emerge when externally triggered. In political violence, once relative deprivation and dissatisfaction have been established, and if political leaders are identified as the source of deprivation, collective violence assumes a political nature. The resulting aggression, rooted in frustration, is then directed at those perceived to be responsible. Nevertheless, in the politicization of violence (and the external manifestation of subjective deprivation as collective violence), various social variables play a role—such as cultural or subcultural norms that legitimize aggression, prior success rates, prevalence of symbolic incentives justifying violence, legitimacy of the political system, and perceptions that violence is an effective means to achieve scarce values. Once political actors become targets of violence, the final outcome—victory or defeat—depends on the state's capacity for coercive control, organizational support, and the opposition's coercive capability (Ghasemi & Javadi, 2020).

The social psychological perspective places special emphasis on relative deprivation as a key factor in the emergence of social movements. This perspective is based on empirically supported psychological assumptions, including the well-established frustration-aggression hypothesis. In this theory, the efficiency or malfunction of institutions and structures is not the focus; instead, it centers on the individual's subjective condition—specifically, the perception of misalignment between expectations and reality. This theory has been employed to explain nationalist movements (Jalali, 2021).

Sociological approaches, on the other hand, emphasize structural components and the constraints imposed by dominant political systems. Classical sociologists, shaped by the social conditions of their times and primarily concerned with theorizing at the macro level, generally paid less attention to movements such as the social movements that intensified in the 1960s. Emile Durkheim argued that as societies evolve from mechanical to organic solidarity, traditional cohesion

disintegrates. If new forms of order fail to emerge, a societal vacuum may result, giving rise to collective behaviors such as social movements. Max Weber emphasized the meaning systems and belief frameworks that emerge in response to dissatisfaction with the established order as essential factors in the formation of social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2006).

Castells places special emphasis on macro-level movements. He seeks to explore the contextual roots of fundamentalist, ethnic, and nationalist movements. The core of Castells' theoretical model is the concept of identity and meaning-making. He argues that in the age of globalization, structural factors largely shape identity, and individuals have limited influence over the identity-forming processes. According to his perspective, in the new network society, foundational identities—religious, ethnic, and racial—can become sources of unity and existential meaning. Castells highlights the cultural component of identity formation, asserting that social movements derive activist energy from these identity-based sources (Hosseini & Mohammadi, 2018).

In Castells' theory, the atomization of individuals and the absence of cohesive forces compel them to seek pre-existing identities. While ethnic and national movements in the Middle East have often relied on cultural components—such as language, race, and shared historical memory—the explanatory power of Castells' theory in these contexts is limited. This is because identity illusions and individual atomization have not been the main drivers of these movements. Castells focuses extensively on the networked social movements of the past decade. He argues that such movements in the communication age are of a new type: less hierarchical, more participatory, leaderless, and built on horizontal networks, individual political autonomy, and diffuse solidarity (Shahabi, 2019).

According to Castells, these movements originate on internet-based social networks and spread virally through wireless communication tools such as smartphones, as users share images and text. He contends that the internet has created an autonomous space for information exchange and collective emotional expression—especially anger and hope. In a world interconnected by wireless internet, characterized by viral dissemination of images and ideas, movements spread by contagion. These movements first appeared in places like Tunisia and Iceland and quickly extended

their influence to various social settings around the globe, igniting hope and resistance in a world threatened by greed and environmental degradation (Yousefi, 2017).

From Castells' viewpoint, it is not merely poverty, economic crises, or lack of democracy that ignite multifaceted rebellions. Rather, it is primarily the humiliation caused by the arrogance and egotism of those in power—be it financial, political, or cultural—that compels people to come together, turning fear into anger and anger into hope for a more humane society. Networked movements, however, do not remain confined to virtual space. They require the creation of a public sphere—physical spaces in urban environments where open assemblies can form. This new public sphere must go beyond the internet and manifest in socially visible locations. Thus, these movements often occupy urban spaces and symbolic buildings. Occupied spaces play crucial roles in the history of social change and recent political trajectories. They create communities, and community—rooted in “being together”—serves as a fundamental psychological mechanism to overcome fear. Overcoming fear is a threshold condition individuals must pass through to actively engage in social movements (Shirky, 2011).

Castells also warns against overestimating the role of social media in the emergence of new social movements. While it is undeniable that the internet and digital platforms are the fastest, most autonomous, most interactive, most reprogrammable, and most self-expanding communication tools in history, elevating them to the sole or dominant communication mechanism for social movements may be misleading. For instance, in Egypt and several other Arab countries, internet penetration was still limited at the onset of recent social movements—only 26.4% of Egypt's population was using the internet at that time. Moreover, mass media framing, face-to-face communication, traditional information networks, and interpersonal connections continue to play vital roles in arousing and mobilizing public sentiment. Still, most movements of the past decade did begin in online social networks, and Castells strongly maintains that internet networks have become a new material base for political participation. While Castells' analyses show the internet facilitates rapid mobilization and coordination, other scholars have emphasized that the relationship between social

movements and new technologies remains a topic of ongoing debate. This complex dialectic—between change and continuity, technical and social aspects, and the intersection of old and new political and media dynamics—must be acknowledged in any comprehensive analysis (Karami, 2018).

The news and information shared through social media networks, beyond their role as virtual media platforms, possess the capacity to organize social movements in the physical world. The consequences of these networks in virtual space can provoke concerns and crises across political, social, and economic dimensions. Social movements in Iran over the past decade demonstrate the extent to which the circulation of both factual and non-factual information in cyberspace has had positive or negative effects on the strengthening of these movements. For example, some movements were externally orchestrated, using real and fabricated photos, videos, and news to incite individuals to join and perpetuate them (Alimohammadi, 2017).

Virtual networks have consistently played a significant role in shaping political and social developments in Iran, functioning both as media and as social realities. Media outlets not only convey specific perspectives to their audiences through news coverage but also influence public insight and interpretation. It can thus be argued that much of the public's understanding of social phenomena is a product of media influence (Bagheri & Niknam, 2017).

According to the Basic Science Indicators platform, the number of internet users in Iran reached 56.7 million in 2017, covering approximately 70% of the population, with youth and adolescents constituting over 40% of total social media users (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2017). The latest statistics in 2020 indicate that more than 78,086,663 individuals in Iran use the internet, and the Communications Regulatory Authority reported a 94% internet penetration rate—meaning 94 out of every 100 Iranians are internet users (Mehr News Agency, 2020). These figures reflect rapid internet growth and, consequently, the rising value of information and communication technologies as essential new investment assets.

In another report by the Statistical Center of Iran on the role of cyberspace in Iranian life, three key findings stand out. First, social media membership increased from 53% in 2017 to 65% in 2020. Second, average daily usage rose

by approximately 30 minutes during this period, reaching one hour and 32 minutes per day. Third, WhatsApp and Instagram became the two primary platforms used by Iranian users over the past year.

A detailed examination of official statistics reveals several crucial insights. In 2020, over 65% of Iranians aged 15 and above were members of at least one social media platform—up from 53% in 2017. The average daily engagement of individuals aged 15 and over was 92 minutes and 18 seconds in 2020, compared to 64 minutes in 2017. Among social media users, WhatsApp had the highest membership rate at 88.5%, followed by Instagram at 68%.

The Statistical Center of Iran compared social media usage in 2020 to 2017 using a newly designed survey on household cultural behavior. Conducted across 43,700 urban and 18,860 rural households (a total sample of 62,560 households), the survey aimed to understand household cultural activities for national cultural policymaking. Data were gathered from individuals aged 15 and above, and additional information was collected from individuals aged 19 and older on topics such as books and publications, music, social media, sports activities, nutrition, and social capital. Results showed that in 2020, over 65% of people aged 15 and older were members of at least one social media platform—12% higher than in 2017. The provinces of Alborz (77.1%), Bushehr (75.6%), and Tehran (75%) had the highest membership rates, while Golestan (51.5%), South Khorasan (48.7%), and Sistan and Baluchestan (42.7%) had the lowest.

These figures illustrate the substantial increase in Iranian, especially youth, engagement with digital platforms and tools. The lack of cultural frameworks accompanying this technological leap has exacerbated the social, political, and media-related consequences. In such a space, individuals exposed to social media news may perceive it as more legitimate than verified sources (Aghapour, 2019).

Thus, countering misinformation becomes particularly complex, given that users are often trapped in closed loops of pre-framed information. In the recent past, the means for disseminating information and mobilizing people were limited to underground flyers, which were not equally accessible to all, reflecting a lack of distributive justice. Today, however, digital networks grant this access to almost everyone without restriction.

These platforms, through extensive promotion and the amplification of diverse group ideologies, significantly influence user orientation. They create an environment where movements can easily identify and organize their members.

The November 2017 protests in Iran, for example, began with news about egg price hikes circulated through social media. Similarly, the rise in fuel prices in November 2019 triggered unrest in Tehran and several other cities. The labor and teachers' protests during the 2010s provide additional evidence of how Instagram and other platforms influenced the spread and endurance of these movements. The simultaneous circulation and intensification of information on social media significantly fanned the flames of these protests.

As social media usage continues to rise, it poses increasingly severe threats to cultural, economic, and especially political systems in the long term. Considering the recent protests and the instrumental role that digital platforms have played in either escalating or mitigating them, it appears that Iran's social networks have had substantial effects on shaping public perception and reactions to these events. Social media has the potential to serve as a platform for social, political, cultural, and economic movements and crises. Thus, it is essential to analyze the specific functions of social media platforms—particularly Instagram and Twitter—as incubators of protest and dissent, not only to inform journalists and citizens but also to help social movement actors, policymakers, and governments recognize both the positive and negative implications of these technologies.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this article is to analyze the functions of social media in social movements, with a focus on workers' and teachers' protests in Iran since 2015.

2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis and semi-structured interviews conducted with elite individuals, including professors in the fields of communication and political science, party elites, and prominent journalists. The interviews were conducted through purposive and, in some cases, snowball sampling methods using semi-structured questions. The criterion for identifying elite participants was based on their professional experience and

background. The statistical population consisted of top authors in communication sciences, party secretaries-general, and well-known journalists. The sampling method was purposive, and during the twelfth interview, data saturation was identified; however, three additional interviews were conducted to ensure greater confidence, resulting in a final sample size of 15 participants based on the principle of theoretical saturation.

Inspired by the theoretical framework and literature of the study, several thematic axes were formulated to guide the interviews with selected experts. These axes were consolidated under the broader theme of the role of social media in social movements and shared with the interviewees. The duration of each interview ranged from 40 to 120 minutes. Purposive sampling, a non-probabilistic method, was used for participant selection. In qualitative research, purposive and snowball sampling implies that the researcher selects individuals and sites that are believed to significantly contribute to understanding the research issue.

The criteria for identifying interviewees included their knowledge, experience, and sufficient familiarity with social media, communication, and news. Sampling continued until theoretical sufficiency was achieved. The judgment criterion for ending data collection was theoretical saturation, meaning that interviews continued until no new theoretical insights emerged from subsequent samples. The primary data collection tool was the semi-structured interview.

The data analysis began with examining the verbal statements of participants in the form of concrete examples, metaphors, and concepts. Through repeated readings, these were distilled into initial concepts and related categories. After reviewing each interview transcript, excerpts relevant to the research questions and objectives were identified as preliminary codes and categorized as initial concepts. Common questions across interviews were thematically analyzed, and corresponding basic, organizing, and global themes were extracted, coded, and interpreted. Patterns were then designed for each question, and conclusions were drawn accordingly.

3. Findings

Basic themes refer to core and specific ideas or subjects that are directly derived from the data. These themes represent key concepts and issues expressed in

participants' responses and can be used as initial, more detailed phenomena in the analysis. In this study, basic themes include phrases such as "information and organization through social media" and "absence of

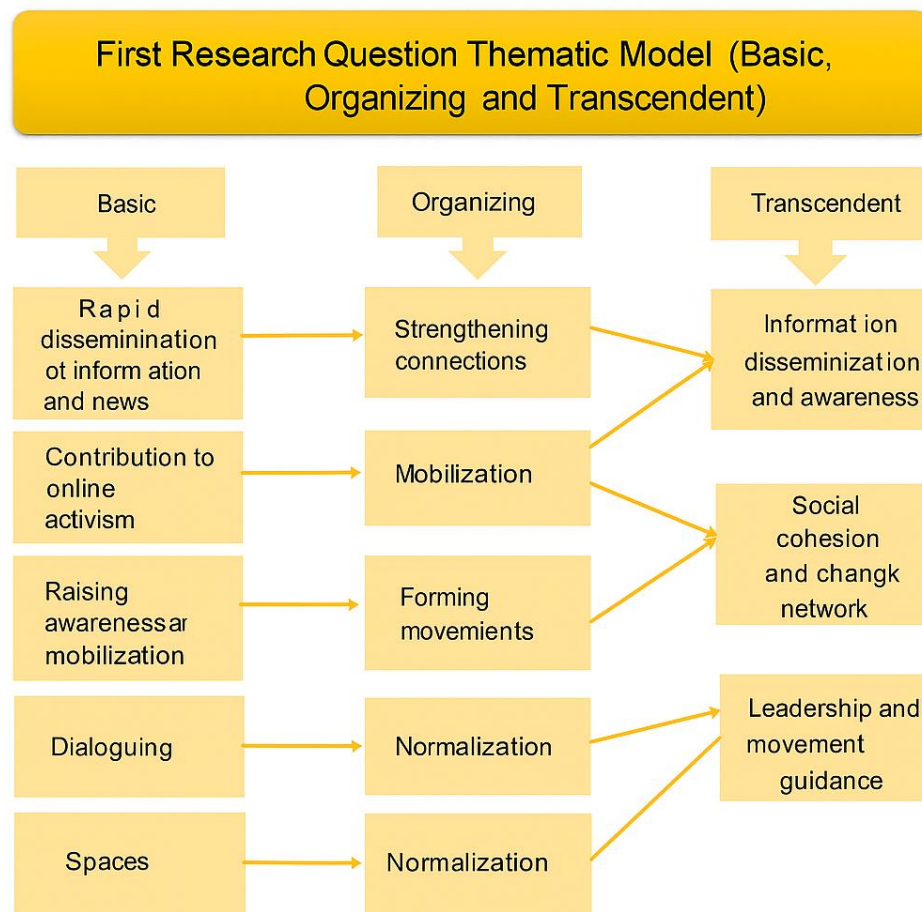
charismatic leadership." These describe specific aspects of social media activity and their effects on social movements.

Table 1

Final Themes Extracted from All Interviews Based on the Question: What Are the Functions of Social Media in Iran's Social Movements?

Related Quote	Basic Theme	Organizing Theme
Social media have influenced social changes not only through information but also by organizing and shifting the audiences of movements.	Social media as tools for information and organization	Facilitating organization and information
These networks have made movements leaderless in appearance, but actually involve multiple micro-leaders.	Networked movements with multiple leaders	Transformation of leadership structures in movements
Social media reduce inequality and enable visibility of minorities, as seen in the Mahsa Amini case.	Enhancing minority visibility	Expanding media justice and representation
One reason for the failure of some movements is the lack of clear organization and charismatic leadership.	Absence of charismatic leadership	Limitations and constraints of social media
Due to rapid and widespread information flow, social media have fueled protests.	Accelerating protests	Provocation and intensification of protests
Since 2009, these platforms have been used for information and coordination during protests.	Informing and coordinating protests	Facilitating information and coordination
Social media escalate protests through mass reposting of news and images.	Spread and intensification of protests	Provoking and stimulating dissent
They serve as tools for rapid message dissemination and public engagement.	Public participation mobilization	Tools for engagement and interaction
Opposition groups—internal and external—use these platforms to guide protests.	Opposition use of social media	Political exploitation of social media
In professional protests like those by teachers and workers, they helped raise awareness and link various factions.	Awareness and linking of professional circles	Strengthening professional connections and awareness
Social media facilitated broader interaction between different social groups.	Facilitating social interaction	Enhancing group cohesion and interaction
These platforms amplify the voices of marginalized groups.	Amplifying marginalized voices	Raising awareness and attention to minority issues
They have played key roles in protest planning and coordination.	Coordinating and planning protests	Facilitating protest actions
They rapidly disseminate information nationwide.	Rapid information dissemination	Accelerating communication and awareness
Social media have been tools for mobilization and protest coordination.	Mobilizing and coordinating protests	Facilitating mobilization and organization
They help quickly highlight the demands of movements.	Highlighting movement demands	Enhancing the visibility of demands
Individuals can share personal experiences and foster solidarity.	Sharing experiences and creating solidarity	Strengthening social solidarity
These platforms are used to spread information and raise public awareness.	Broad dissemination of information	Increasing public awareness
Opponents also use them to organize and influence protest dynamics.	Opponent use of social media	Political and social exploitation
They have diversified news sources and challenged state media authority.	Role in media dynamics	Diversification and challenge to state media power
Their capacity for message transmission and mobilization has been remarkable.	Social mobilization role	Power of mobilization and communication tools
In the 2009 election, Facebook played a central role both during and after the protests.	Role of social media in protest movements	Facebook as a central protest platform
This phenomenon undermines the authority of parties, media, and governments.	Impact on power structures	Undermining traditional authority
Social media networks are nonexistent unless banned by the state.	Government-social media relationship	Banning and filtering of social media
The 2013 and 2017 presidential campaigns used Viber, Telegram, and Instagram.	Social media and elections	Use of social media in political campaigning
Mahsa Amini became a symbol of nationwide protest synergy.	Symbol-making in movements	Turning individuals into protest symbols
These networks created essential links between protest narratives, messaging, and mobilization.	Creating links between factions	Formation of virtual protest networks

They impacted the ruling authorities so deeply that even the heads of all three branches were rendered inactive.	Impact on state authority	Exerting pressure on governance
The recent uprising did not lead to collapse—no political or social breakdown occurred.	Preconditions for revolution	Revolutions and regime collapse



By analyzing different themes, an overarching theme regarding the impact of social media on social movements can be articulated as follows: Social media have functioned as key tools in mobilization, organization, and information dissemination within social movements, contributing to increased public participation, the visibility of minorities, and the transformation of leadership structures. These platforms have not only facilitated communication and rapid dissemination of information, but also played a fundamental role in the structural and political changes pursued by these movements.

This theme implies that in an era characterized by rapid social and political transformation, social media have become indispensable tools. At the same time, alongside their many benefits, these tools also present challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and issues related to users' media literacy.

Organizing themes refer to broader concepts used to structure and group basic themes. These themes usually represent combinations of several basic themes and aim to explain one or more phenomena from multiple perspectives, examining them as comprehensive units. In this study, organizing themes include phrases such as "facilitating organization and information dissemination" or "transformation of leadership structure in movements." These themes act as bridges that connect various basic themes and enable integrated analysis.

The basic and organizing themes in this study illustrate the significant role of social media in movements and social protests. They all highlight the diverse effects of social media on social transformation, from rapid organization and information sharing to influencing leadership structures and social norms. Furthermore, they show that social media simultaneously generate

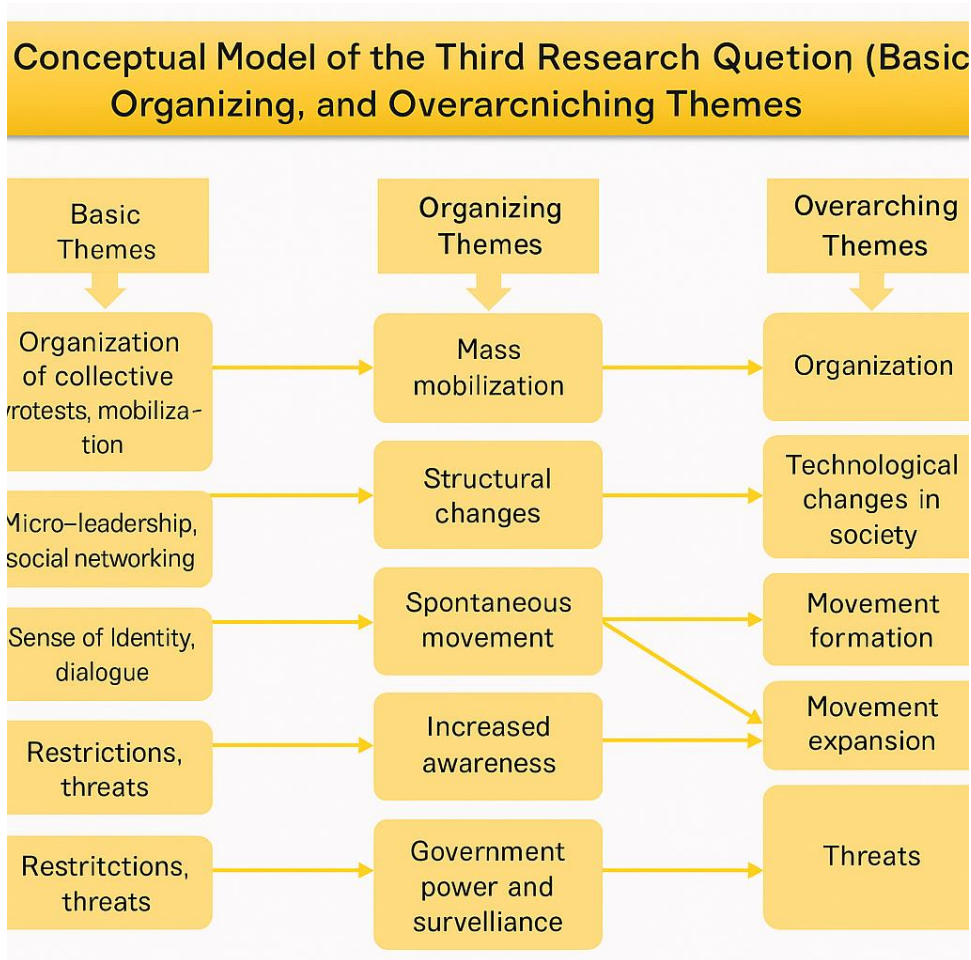
both opportunities and challenges in achieving the goals of social movements. While social media have served as essential tools in modern movements and protests, deeply impacting mobilization, organization, awareness-raising, and social change, they cannot replace formal

structures or organized movements entirely. The success of these movements depends on the effective combination of digital tools with other movement resources and structures.

Table 2

Final Themes Extracted from All Interviews Based on the Question: What Are the Functions of Social Media in Labor Movements?

Related Quote	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes
Social media have played an important role in the formation of social movements.	Social media, social movements, formation	Technology and society, social change
Social media are effective in organizing movements.	Social media, organization, movements	Technology and society, power
Social media contribute to creating micro-leadership in movements.	Social media, micro-leadership, movements	Movement structure, democracy
Labor movements face various challenges.	Labor movement, challenges, social structure	Economy, politics, civil society
Social media can help raise awareness and mobilize labor movements.	Social media, awareness, mobilization, labor movement	Technology and society, economy
Due to their professional nature, labor movements are less widespread.	Labor movement, professional, limited scope	Social structure, economy
Radicalism can weaken movements.	Radicalism, movements, weakening	Ideology and politics, social movements
Workers can coordinate their protests more effectively through social media.	Organization, solidarity	Technology, communication
In the Haft Tappeh protests, social media played a role.	Repression, control	State power, surveillance
A weakness of social media in labor movements is the lack of representation.	Weakness of social media, lack of representation	Civil institutions, organization
Social media can be a threat and hinder beneficial developments.	Threats, limitations	Negative and threatening aspects of social media
Social media have been effective in mobilizing the masses for political and social action.	Mobilization, political activism, social media	Role of social media in mass mobilization and political participation
Social media have led to the emergence of unorganized protests alongside structured associations.	Movement diversity, role of social media	Role of social media in diversifying movements and spontaneous actions
In the absence of active parties and unions, social media have expanded the scope of activism.	Organization, activism	Role of social media in organizing and expanding activism without traditional institutions
Social media have created spaces for dialogue and deeper understanding of issues.	Dialogue, deeper understanding	Role of social media in fostering dialogue and increasing public awareness
This space has untapped potential that the world has yet to recognize.	Potential, unknown	Social media have unknown potentials for social transformation that remain unexplored



In this analysis, basic themes and organizing themes have been specifically identified to understand the role of social media in labor and social movements. In the qualitative analysis process, both levels of themes (basic and organizing) are interconnected and together facilitate a deeper understanding of social phenomena. Basic themes reflect the initial concepts and detailed perspectives of interviewees, while organizing themes create broader patterns from these data, helping to explain and structure the research findings.

Regarding labor and social movements, basic themes clarify the various roles of social media in mobilization, organization, and strengthening of movements, whereas organizing themes represent the structural and overarching impacts of these platforms on society and social movements. Social media, as highly powerful tools, can play a significant role in supporting labor movements. However, these tools alone are not sufficient, and achieving fundamental change also requires additional factors such as strong organization, effective leadership, appropriate socio-political

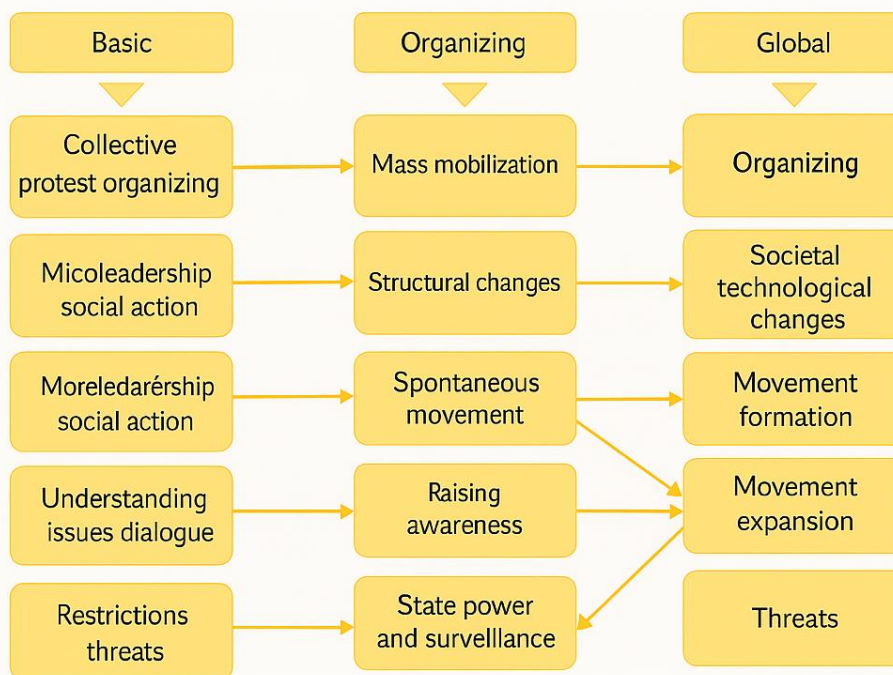
conditions, workers' level of media literacy, economic structures, and the degree of prior organization within groups—all of which influence the success or failure of such movements.

By enabling fast and widespread communication, social media allow workers to act on their demands in a more organized and effective manner. These platforms can serve as mechanisms for mobilization, helping to raise awareness and foster solidarity among workers. Nevertheless, governments and security institutions also utilize social media to monitor opposition activities and suppress protests. They may identify and arrest activists, spread false information, and create division among protestors, thereby weakening labor movements. Therefore, the success of labor movements depends not only on the effective use of social media but also on other factors such as strong leadership, support from civil society and labor organizations, and the ability to resist repression.

Table 3
Functions of Social Media in Teachers' Movements

Related Quote	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes
Social media play an important role in the formation of social movements.	Social media, social movements	Technology and society, social change
Social media are effective in organizing movements.	Social media, organization, movements	Technology and society, power
Social media help create micro-leadership structures in movements.	Social media, micro-leadership, movements	Movement structure, democracy
Social media can assist in raising awareness and mobilizing teachers.	Social media, awareness, mobilization	Technology and society, economy
Workers can coordinate their protests more effectively through social media.	Social media, organization, solidarity	Technology, communication
Social media have effectively mobilized the masses for political and social action.	Social media, mobilization, political engagement	Role of social media in mass mobilization and increased political participation
Social media have led to spontaneous protests alongside institutionalized unions and associations.	Social media, protests, social movements	Role of social media in creating diversity in movements and spontaneous actions
In the absence of active parties and unions, social media have expanded the scope of activism.	Social media, organization, activism	Role of social media in organizing and expanding activism in the absence of traditional institutions
Social media have created spaces for dialogue and deeper understanding of issues.	Social media, dialogue, understanding issues	Role of social media in creating spaces for dialogue and raising public awareness

Exemplar Thematic Analysis Question 3 Model (Basic, Organizing, Global)



Social media are not merely tools; they act as driving and reinforcing forces in the formation, growth, and success of social movements. These platforms allow teachers to connect and build expansive support networks beyond geographic and institutional boundaries. Rapid and

large-scale mobilization enables the organization of protests, campaigns, and other collective actions in a short time. Enhanced awareness and communication make it possible to quickly share information and news

related to educational issues, increasing public knowledge.

Creating open and free dialogues provides spaces for discussion and exchange of views on educational matters, contributing to the emergence of new discourses. Moreover, organizing and coordinating actions allows protest and activism efforts to be planned and executed in a structured and cohesive manner. The ability to shift narratives and exert pressure on authorities through broad protest waves compels governments and educational institutions to respond to demands.

Social media also impact political, social, and cultural dimensions. They allow teachers to engage in political discourse and influence education policy. These platforms help foster solidarity and collective identity among teachers. They also aid in the production and dissemination of culturally relevant content about education, thereby influencing the educational culture. However, this model faces several challenges and limitations. Social media algorithms and filtering policies may restrict access to information and hinder organization. The spread of misinformation and rumors can negatively affect public opinion and decision-making. Social media use may lead to violations of individual privacy, and overdependence on these platforms can reduce face-to-face interactions and weaken interpersonal communication skills.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the functions of social media in social movements, with a particular emphasis on the social protests of workers and teachers in Iran since 2015. The findings revealed that social media, as powerful tools, possess significant potential to strengthen social movements and promote positive change in the educational system. However, to utilize these tools effectively, their limitations and challenges must also be addressed, and strategies to overcome them should be proposed. Social media platforms, by providing avenues for communication, organization, awareness-raising, and mobilization, play a central role in the emergence, expansion, and success of social movements, including those of teachers. These platforms allow individuals to voice their demands, unite, and strive for social transformation. Additionally, by enabling fast and widespread communication, social

media allow workers to act on their demands in a more organized and effective manner. These platforms can function as mobilization mechanisms to raise awareness and build solidarity among workers.

The findings of the present study are aligned with the results of prior studies ([Alimohammadi, 2017](#); [Asgari & Farahani, 2022](#); [Bagheri & Niknam, 2017](#); [Della Porta & Diani, 2006](#); [Rahimi, 2020](#); [Razavi, 2020](#); [Shahabi, 2019](#)). Interpreting these findings, it can be stated that recent transformations in Iran's social landscape—especially since 2015—demonstrate the emergence of a new form of activism among social classes such as teachers and workers. This activism, facilitated by modern communication technologies, especially social media, has generated new forms of organized, spontaneous protests that lack traditional structures.

The study further showed that social media have evolved beyond mere communication platforms to become functional and structural tools for organizing and sustaining social movements. In line with Charles Tilly's theory ([Tilly, 2004](#)), social movements are more likely to survive and exert influence if they can mobilize necessary resources, recognize structural opportunities, and implement effective strategies of action. Social media have played a role in all three dimensions: they have provided informational and communicative resources, created opportunities for increased participation, and facilitated creative strategies for social action.

At the first level, findings indicated that social media have played a fundamental role in informing and raising awareness. In a context where official state media primarily follow top-down political agendas and offer limited coverage of professional protests, social media have become platforms for alternative narratives—narratives often produced and redistributed by the activists themselves. This has not only enhanced public awareness of professional demands but also, by highlighting inequalities, has reinforced the legitimacy of those demands in the public consciousness ([Castells, 2012](#)).

At the second level, social media have played a key role in mobilizing and organizing actors. According to Resource Mobilization Theory ([McCarthy & Zald, 1977](#)), the ability to gather and coordinate forces is a crucial element in the success of social movements. Messaging platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp have enabled

rapid coordination, dissemination of calls to action, and alignment of slogans and protest tactics among teachers and workers nationwide. For instance, the nationwide gatherings of teachers in 2021 and 2022 were largely organized through Telegram groups.

At the third level, social media have had a significant role in reinforcing collective identity and social solidarity. According to Habermas's theory of the **public sphere**, communicative platforms that enable free and horizontal dialogue serve as catalysts for the formation of collective will (Habermas, 1989). These digital spaces have facilitated ongoing interaction, synergy, and identity-based belonging among teachers and workers—especially in a context where holding in-person meetings has been restricted due to security concerns.

Despite these capacities, the study also revealed that the use of social media in professional movements faces several challenges and limitations. The first challenge is infrastructural and political: widespread filtering of platforms such as Telegram, Twitter, and Instagram, along with frequent internet shutdowns during protest periods, represent major barriers to sustaining professional communication (Rahimi, 2020). The second challenge concerns **security and infiltration**. While social media offer open and broad access, they also serve as entry points for security forces to identify and track activists. Many arrests and summonses of professional activists have been based on their virtual activities. This has undermined trust among movement members, leading to self-censorship or reduced participation in digital spaces.

The third challenge is **overreliance on virtual space** and insufficient connection with the real world, which can reduce professional movements to symbolic and discursive actions. The experience of teacher protests in certain years showed that in the absence of strong professional institutions and with a lack of on-the-ground coordination, many actions remained at the level of calls without translating into effective protest.

The fourth issue is the **digital divide** and unequal access to information technologies among workers, particularly in disadvantaged regions. This has excluded some potential activists from decision-making and organizational processes, potentially leading to internal fragmentation and weakening the movement's mobilization capacity in the long term.

The functions of social media within the context of Iran's social movements can also be analyzed through **Network Theory**, which emphasizes the importance of horizontal links, non-hierarchical relationships, and rapid information dissemination (Wellman, 2001). Digital social networks—particularly in Iran—have enabled the creation of such structures, leading to the emergence of informal, fluid, and responsive organizations among teachers and workers. From the perspective of **Habermas's communicative action theory**, it can be said that social media have reconstructed the **public sphere**—a space for dialogue, exchange of views, and collective decision-making around professional demands, free from formal constraints and media censorship.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that social media serve as effective tools for social movements, particularly in the domains of teachers' and workers' professional activism in Iran. They have facilitated processes of awareness-building, organization, identity formation, and soft pressure on formal institutions. Nevertheless, these tools remain vulnerable to infrastructural, security-related, and structural limitations.

To optimize the use of social media in such contexts, the following actions are recommended:

- Enhancing **media literacy** and **digital security awareness** among professional activists, particularly teachers and workers;
- Creating **systematic links** between online and offline actions through coordination with formal and informal professional institutions;
- Developing **secure, localized platforms** to strengthen internal communication;
- Continuously **monitoring and evaluating** the impact of digital spaces on social movements by scholars in communication, sociology, and labor studies.

In conclusion, although social media cannot fully replace unions, political parties, or civil society organizations, in the unique socio-political context of Iran, they have played an **irreplaceable role in sustaining the vitality of social movements**, and they are likely to remain among the most effective tools of social activism in the coming decade.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

References

- Aghapour, M. (2019). *Virtual Social Networks and the Transformations of Social Movements in Iran*. Sociologists Publishing.
- Alimohammadi, F. (2017). The Use of Social Media in Facilitating Teachers' Advocacy. *Quarterly Journal of New Research in Social Sciences*, 5(1), 91-104.
- Asgari, N., & Farahani, A. (2022). Politics and Social Media: Digital Activism in Contemporary Iran. *Politics Quarterly*, 52(2), 87-112.
- Bagheri, M., & Niknam, S. (2017). Examining the Role of Social Networks in the Social Mobilization of Teachers. *Comparative Education Quarterly*, 7(2), 45-63.
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2013). *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139198752>
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Polity Press.
- Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006). *Social movements: An introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Earl, J., & Kimport, K. (2011). *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the Internet age*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262015103.001.0001>
- Ghasemi, M., & Javadi, R. (2020). A Sociological Study of Teachers' Professional Protests. *Iranian Sociology Journal*, 20(4), 213-234.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. MIT Press.
- Hosseini, Z., & Mohammadi, N. (2018). The Impact of Virtual Space on Social Cohesion Among Working-Class Groups. *Social Science Research Journal*, 25(1), 67-88.
- Jalali, R. (2021). Representation of Professional Demands in Social Networks: A Case Study of Iranian Teachers. *Applied Sociology Quarterly*, 31(3), 109-132.
- Karami, E. (2018). The Role of Virtual Space in the Formation of Social Movements: A Case Study of Teachers' Protests. *Cultural Strategies Quarterly*, 8(2), 33-56.
- Kowsari, M. (2023). *The Education System and Teachers' Professional Activism in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Education Research Institute.
- Mahdavi, R., & Norouzi, P. (2019). Network Analysis of Workers' Protests in Iran. *Iranian Political Sociology Quarterly*, 6(1), 65-88ER -.
- McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212-1241. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226464>
- Rahimi, B. (2020). Cyberpolitics in Iran: New media and civic activism. *Iranian Studies*, 53(1), 1-20.
- Razavi, K. (2020). Professional Activism of Teachers in Iran: From Formal Structures to Informal Virtual Networks. *Education Quarterly*, 36(4), 21-39.
- Shahabi, L. (2019). Discourse Analysis of Social Networks in Professional Protests. *Studies in Modern Media*, 10(1), 55-78.
- Shirky, C. (2011). The political power of social media. *Foreign Affairs*, 90(1), 28-41.
- Tilly, C. (2004). *Social movements, 1768-2004*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Wellman, B. (2001). Physical place and cyberplace: The rise of personalized networking. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25(2), 227-252. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00309>
- Yousefi, B. (2017). Digital Activism and Structural Transformations in Professional Advocacy. *Communication Studies Journal*, 23(3), 101-124.