Impact of Social Media in Mobilizing the 2018 Road Safety Movement in Bangladesh

Nishat Parvez[*]

[**Abstract:** This article focuses on the impact of social media in mobilizing the road safety movement. On July 29, 2018, two college students died in a horrific road accident in Dhaka. After their death, school and college students across the country started protesting the corruption and mischievousness of the transport sector of Bangladesh. Social media solely mobilized this movement. The study observed how social media helped young students organize and spread their agenda through a successful protest. Using the content analysis method, some of the most shared posts (pictures, videos, words) from Facebook and YouTube were analyzed to understand the impact of social media. By analyzing the posts through Critical Discourse Analysis theory and Protest Logic theory, this study found that it is necessary to engage in activism both in social media and in real life to spread a protest throughout the country.]

Key-words: Road Safety Movement 2018, Social Media, Protest Logic, Critical Discourse Analysis, Social Activism

Bangladesh is one of the deadliest places in the World for walking on the road. Every year an average of 21,000 people die in road accidents, according to the World Health Organization[1] (WHO, n.d.). In 2018, two school students were killed in a road accident. Their peers from the whole country got agitated and started the Road Safety Movement on social media, which finally took to the roads of Dhaka, the capital, and subsequently, the whole country. In the same year, a total of 7,221 people died in road accidents, according to Bangladesh Passenger Welfare Association (Dhaka Tribune, 2019).

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[*]   **Nishat Parvez:** Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342, Bangladesh. Email: *nishatjms@juniv.edu*

1.   http://www.searo.who.int/bangladesh/road-safety/en/

This article worked on social media mobilization in the road safety movement in Bangladesh. Social media mediation or mobilization could help know the relationship between power, politics, and media. The road safety movement of 2018 is one of the most significant student-led movements in the recent history of Bangladesh. The protest focused on Facebook and YouTube, which are the most popular social media in Bangladesh[2].

This paper investigated the social media co-relation of the road safety movement through content analysis and critical discourse analysis of selective Facebook and YouTube posts. It shed light on the process of student-led movement through social media and how it went offline from online. This essay was developed by using protest logic and mediation structure as its theoretical framework.

Background

In the past few years, social media has been used to change social phenomena or bring a more significant change in the society of Bangladesh. This country was amidst a political dilemma till 2008, as two main parties, Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), conflicted in the 1990s. The Awami League (AL) formed government after winning the general elections in 2008. This party also clinched victory in the next two national elections in 2014 and 2018. However, the Awami League received a wide range of criticisms from various quarters including politicians and human rights activists for its undemocratic practices in politics and governance. In many cases, it did not let BNP or other oppositional parties arrange political meetings, processions, or demonstrations. Many Bangladeshis are highly critical of their rule because of corruption, extrajudicial killing, a weak economic system, and eye-washing development propaganda. The pro-government persons do not welcome criticism of the government. It has been difficult for people to express their anger in physical set-ups. Therefore, the citizens, especially the young generation, use social media to verbalize their anger. This anger of the general public of Bangladesh gave rise to worthy movements like Shahbagh Movement in 2013[3], ensuring severest punishment for the War Crimes committed in 1971, and the quota reform movement in 2018[4] for achieving equality in civil service jobs.

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2.   https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/bangladesh

3.   Appendix (1)

4.   Appendix (2)

On July 29, 2018, two college students, Rajib and Diya, were killed, and 12 others were injured by a coalition of two buses in Dhaka. Later, school and college students of Dhaka city took over the streets, demanding justice for their friends. The demonstration became robust on August 4 after they gained backing from university students. On the same day, students clashed with law enforcement agencies and the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), a pro-Awami League student wing. The movement started with the anger and outburst of the school and college children on social media (BBC News, 2018). Even the mainstream media failed to obtain updates from the protestors and had to rely on social media such as Facebook and YouTube. The whole movement was run and mediated through social media.

There were some critical demands of the students, such as killers of the students must be brought to justice, footbridges must be built on roads adjacent to all educational institutions, speed breakers must be set up on roads in accident-prone areas, and unfit vehicles and driving without a license must be banned (The Daily Star, 2018).

The movement ended after the cabinet division led by Premier Sheikh Hasina approved the draft of the Road Transport Act 2018 with the maximum penalty of five years in jail and a TK 500000 fine for fatal road accidents (Mamun, 2018). On December 2, 2019, the Dhaka court gave life imprisonment to the drivers on the death of Rajib and Diya (risingbd.com, 2019).

Though road accidents are common in Bangladesh, the road safety movement stimulated the whole country, and the deserved punishment was given to the accused drivers. This movement was set by the students and led through social media. It showed how the power of the public could be used through social media to gain justice in a disruptive society.

Literature Review

A social movement refers to the collective action of people for a common purpose. It has brought new values, goals, and new norms to society. Social movements are not a new phenomenon but using a networked environment, mainly the Internet and social media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., are not quite as old. As Manual Castells (2015) mentions, networked social movements first spread in the Arab World, and then movements arose in Europe and the United States. Thompson and Tapscott (2013) distinguished grievance, relative deprivation, and resource inequalities could be led to collective action or social movement. They explored the extent of mobilizing public opinions through social networks and the mainstream media, which led to the broader social movement.

So how does social movement relate to social media? Castells (2015) answered this very question: transforming an individual's emotion into action is the primary source of a social movement. This emotional activation ought to connect with others, which requires an effective communication channel. The Pew Research Centre might support the finding of Castells as it shows that Black American social media users say that social media platforms are essential for connecting with like-minded users, circulating images, and engaging in stories about corresponding protests (Auxier, 2020).

Not only in Europe and the United States but social movements in Asia were also influenced using social media. Goh and Pang (2016) distinguished how social media played an essential role in collective action in protest against the government of Singapore. They analyzed 1805 blogs and Facebook posts, and comments to see what frames had been used by the protestors at the time of the movement. However, it is difficult to say if social media is changing the importance of traditional media in terms of mobilization.

In this age of social media, it sometimes evades traditional media. Nowadays social movement starts and is triggered by the social media posts shared by enraged citizens of countries (Mansour, 2012; Van Dijk, 2021). Interaction in social media can enhance the bond of the communities, can make a good plan for taking movement offline, and create a collective identity. An article named social media and Social Movements: Facebook and an online Guatemalan justice movement that moved offline presented how social media can enhance activism in Latin America (Harlow, 2012).

Lack of trust in mainstream media and limited access to those could be a reason for using social media to enhance social movements (Earl et al., 2022 & Andersen et al., 2021). Nowadays, movements throughout the world are using alternative media based on the Internet to bypass the mainstream media to communicate with the broader public against the repressive governments and the social elites (Stein, 2009). However, the author did not strictly follow through Facebook and other social media, and the research was based on Western concepts. In Bangladesh, the media market is similar according to the size of the country. However, there are faith issues based on the objectivity of those media (Alam, 2018), which we found in terms of the Road Safety Movement (2018).

Methodology

This essay is based on two methods: firstly, examining Facebook posts and YouTube Videos most frequently shared by the protestors at the time, and secondly, describing and analyzing them to understand how these posts led

an online movement to offline. I am using the content analysis method to lighten the critical perspective of social media messages (texts, pictures, or videos). Content Analysis is used to analyze non-numerical data; as Hsieh and Shannon (2005) mentioned, the content analysis describes a new phenomenon that prior studies cannot explain. Garcia-Albacete (2022) studied content analysis in social movement communication in Journal Citations Report and concluded that content analysis had become a standard approach in this field. The purpose of using content analysis in this research is to elicit meaning from the collected data to draw a realistic conclusion about social media usage in Road Safety Movement. I search for the most shared posts (text, photo, or video) by searching keywords such as #WeWantJustice, #RoadSafetyMovement, #nirapodshorokchai, #bangladeshstudentprotests, etc.

I chose Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the meaning of the posts and how protestors decoded them. CDA has been used in areas of activism and political communication to understand the language of the political leaders (Gould, 2000; Dobson, 2007 & Chaney, 2014), to understand the persuasive strategies and ideological components (Nadeem, Mahmood, & Mahmood, 2014), to understand tone and themes of campaign discussion (Budge et al., 2001), and to have an idea about ideological polarization among the positive and negative group (Malghani, Akhtar & Farooqi, 2019). As CDA is connected meaning and image, it is the method where all the meanings should be explicit. In this study, CDA is used to examine the language in protestors' social media contents e.g., texts, posters, pictures, and videos.

To understand how the movement went offline, I used the protest logic theory by della Porta and Diani (2015) as they showed how media and communication environments provide opportunities for activists. They pointed out three distinct logics usually taken by the protestors: the logic of number, damage, and bearing witness. Cammaerts (2012) also explained how protest logic justifies specific actions and resistance of the protestors. I used the mediation theory and protested logic to see how the protestors took over the road using Facebook and YouTube posts and videos.

The configuration of posts in social media
The road safety movement started with the Facebook posts of the students. Students of the Shaheed Romijuddin Cantonment College, Dhaka, started protesting after their classmates' death, and then they shared photos of the protest asking for justice which went viral on social media. The protest mainly sparked after the Minister of Shipping and the Executive President of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation, Shahjahan Khan

commented in a press conference: "a road crash has claimed 33 lives in India's Maharashtra; but do they talk about it like the way we do*?*" (The Daily Star, 2018). He stated this around an hour after the road accident that killed a college student in Dhaka. His comment and smile were first telecast in the media, which then became viral through social media. After that, the students from different schools and colleges in Dhaka city joined the students of Shaheed Romijuddin Cantonment College.

Students started their movement because there was no law to ensure justice for the victims. They used social media as their mediation tool and asked their friends to join. Then they blocked the roads and checked licenses from the public, private, and even VIP transports. They gave flowers to those with driving licenses and asked the police to punish the drivers who did not have fitness licenses for their transports. Brown and Wilkes (2012) distinguished that the public has learned collective action through media. In the case of the road safety movement, mainstream media needed to get updated with the movements as the protestors were continually working with social media. However, mainstream media had shown the video of the minister's speech that agitated the protestors.

From Facebook, two graphics with a slogan and a picture have been chosen. The following pictures contain the slogan in Bengali -- *Jodi tumi voy paw tobe tumi sesh, Jodi tumi rukhe daraw tobe tumi Bangladesh* (If you are afraid, you are finished. If you stand up/fight back, you are Bangladesh.)

Picture :1

Courtesy: Facebook

These posters were viral at the time of the movement. The one on the left is produced by Mita Mehedi (Mita Mehedi, 2018), a famous graphic designer from Bangladesh, and an anonymous artist produces the one on the right (Bengali Bhai, 2018). Mita first shared the left one on her Facebook profile. Then it went viral.

The picture on the left shows students wearing their school/college uniform with school bags on their backs. These bags symbolize students from secondary and higher secondary educational institutions in Bangladesh. In the context of understanding who the protestors were and their ages, it is necessary to clarify the education system of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, a student starts education at five and finishes higher secondary or college education at 16-17. Then he/she starts his or four years of undergraduate study at a university. The students started protesting with their bags and uniforms representing their institutions.

Their body language implies that they are protesting. Upon their head, a slogan appeared: "if you are afraid, you are finished. If you stand up/fight back, you are Bangladesh". The red color is trickling down towards the asphalt on the road pitch, implying the blood of the teens who died in the brutal road crash.

The picture on the right side shows three students with three randomly positioned road cones. The sun behind them depicts new hope, which denotes that as these teenagers take responsibility, the future of Bangladesh still has hope. The random position of these road cones shows that they need to be used regularly and adequately on the roads, for which many students die every year.

The protestors were using this slogan in their social media campaign. These pictures were viral on Facebook. Those pictures were among the most shared ones at the time of the movement.

Picture-2

Courtesy: Facebook[5]

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5.   This picture was collected from a random Facebook profile and the person who shared the post is now unavailable. So no link or reference is given for the post.

In this photo, a student painted the following slogan on his body *We want Justice: '52 te peyechi, '71 e peyechi, '18 tew pabo* (We want justice: we got justice in 1952, 1971, and we will get justice in 2018). This body painting mentions the struggle for language in 1952 and the war of independence of 1971. In 1952, when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan (Bangladesh was East Pakistan then), West Pakistan (now Pakistan) wanted to make Urdu the state language of both Pakistan. Most of the population of East Pakistan used Bangla in their regular communication. Students of East Pakistan started a demonstration against the decision of West Pakistan, and around 20 students were killed to establish Bangla as their official language. Besides, 1971 was the most critical year in the lives of Bangladeshis because they fought a nine-month-long war and almost every family in the country lost their near and dear to get rid of oppressive West Pakistan. Three million Bangladeshis were killed, and 0.2 million women were raped by the soldiers and helpers of West Pakistan. Even now, independence is the most glorious incident in a Bangladeshi's life. "We got justice by sacrificing our lives, and we are ready to do that again," which was mentioned in the lines written on this boy's body.

As the language movement and the war of independence were formulated mainly and advanced by the students of Bangladesh, the students who had taken part in the road safety movement were confident about the result of this movement.

Moreover, body paint has been a famous protest language or sign in Bangladesh since the 1980s. In the 1980s, General H. M Ershad was the president of Bangladesh. Political parties opposed him as he had declared that an autocratic government was declining the democracy of Bangladesh. On November 10, 1984, all political opponents came together to block Dhaka. Noor Hossain, a motor driver, and a political activist painted his body with the slogan *Soirachar nipat jak, gonotontro Mukti pak* (Down with autocracy, let the democracy be free). He was shot dead by two other protestors. After that, he became a public figure of activism for democracy in Bangladesh. The boy with body paint shows the same fierce energy as Noor Hossain, and he wants justice for his friends who died in the road accident. The other boys surrounding him, wearing the uniform of different schools and colleges, are uttering *we want justice* with him.

I found a few comments regarding pictures 1 and 2 on Facebook. They were "we want justice", "we are supporting," etc. Most of the posts are hidden by Facebook users may be for fear of the Digital Security Act[6].

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6.   Digital Security Act 2018 is a law to deal with digital devices and software. Amnesty international (2018) mentioned it as a serious harm against freedom of expression.

YouTube:
Video-1
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANXEFvkiOj0 (What the police officers are saying to the students?)

Picture Courtesy: YouTube

The protestors were blocking the roads in Farmgate intersection (Dhaka's one of the busiest roads) and calling out their slogans when police came to a stop and took them away from the place. They were arguing with the police and asking the police officers to let them demand justice for their friends. At first, the police officers tried to placate them. They asked them to arrest and take them to court. One of the police officers asked them to fight in court as well. The students were so agitated that they shouted, "if we go to the court, justice will not be served because you will release the verdict before we reach there."

Bangladesh is one of the most corrupt countries in the world[7] (Transparancy International Bangladesh, n.d.). Bangladeshis do not trust their public sectors, such as law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, because corruption binds them tightly. That is why the students

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7.   https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018

did not believe the police officers. The officers asked them to leave, but they sat on the road and started echoing, *we want justice*. They were not afraid of the law enforcers and others.

The comments section is full of sentences like *Andolon cholche, Cholbe* (This movement is running and it will go on), *We want justice*, *Police na mastan* (Are they police or goons?), *Amra police chai na* (We do not need police), *Amra tomader pashe achi* (We are with you) etc. These comments show how the public is not trusting the law enforcers and how they are supporting the students.

Video-2
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ29Rb53nD0 ('BCL men' attack students at Jigatola, Dhanmondi-The Daily Star)

Picture Courtesy: YouTube

This video is uploaded by The Daily Star online, one of the leading news portals of Bangladesh. It also went viral at that time. There were some other videos of beating the school students, but they were unavailable because of the report by the government and BTRC (Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission).

BCL is the short form of Bangladesh Chhatra League (Bangladesh Student League), the pro-Awami League student wing. AL has been in power for more than ten years in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the BCL has heavily been cticized by citizens for the rowdy roles of the members of this organization across the country. Nowadays, BCL members use motorbike helmets to hide their faces while torturing their opponents. As the road

safety movement by the students backlashed the government, the BCL and the police started beating the students at Jigatola on the eighth day of the protest in Dhaka. One hundred fifty students were injured, and gunshots were also fired at them (Daily Star, 2018).

In this video, a woman's voice was heard as she captured the video of BCL's men in action. They aggressively asked the woman (probably a journalist) to switch off the camera. She was asking 'why?', then some of the BCL's men approached her, and the video stopped. Then the camera moved to the streets at Jhigatola; The video showed BCL's men holding sticks in their hands. They were talking to the rickshaw pullers aggressively. They held sticks and blocked the way so the protestors could not walk further. In the video's last scene, the protestors were shown (wearing school dresses) gathering at a distant site and trying to help their friends, whom BCL's men beat.

On that day, a few journalists taking photos were beaten and assaulted by BCL's men too. Even the students with the uniform were beaten mercilessly. During all the student movements before, the students tried to lead their procession peacefully, but the government (whomever it was) never liked the students raising their voices. Our history shows that every student movement had a significant impact on society, and these movements also affected the ruling party. The ruling party wanted to send the students back using their student organization. The structure of the student alliance of the political parties is not supposed to carry any arms, but they were using wooden sticks, rod sticks, guns, etc. Moreover, as they do not want their identities to be disclosed, nowadays they are using motorbike helmets, and the police are helping them by watching their action from a distance.

In the comments section, the commenters used slang against the BCL, some comments are: *F*ck BCL*, *Sei Sangbadikke Salam* (hail that journalist), *these BCL goons are ruining our society*, *what a shame! Why you people are attacking kids*, etc. Besides, they were praising the Daily Star for uploading this video.

Collective action on the streets
The two photos from Facebook and two videos from YouTube were some of the most shared posts (photos/videos) at the time of the road safety movement in Bangladesh in 2018. Cammaerts (2012) distinguished the self-mediation issue in social movements as protestors invest more resources in social networks. They are making pictures, posts, slogans, or songs focusing on their thoughts with their mobile devices cost-effectively. In developing countries like Bangladesh, taking the roads to start a social movement is

still essential. Mass demonstrations/political violence is a way to be visible in the mediation process. Symbolic acts of civil disobedience like blocking the road and smashing the tires are not threatening, as mentioned by Cammaerts (2012).

Most people still need to start using social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, so they depend on mainstream media. Nevertheless, mainstream media, as they are owned by the elites (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), tries to show the demonstrators as the culprits, which is why the demonstrators show their disobedience to traditional media, and instead use their spokesperson, the social media, sometimes with the involvement of the international media to show their protests. When their content started banging the societies both in social media and real life, then mainstream media took the issues seriously. The video of the police arguing with the child protestors was spread within a moment, and college and school children from different areas of Dhaka started protesting. Similar things happened in other parts of Bangladesh as well. I kept the protest logic in the context of the road safety movement as follows:

The logic of numbers: Tens of thousands of children with uniforms joined the protest. They sat on essential roads and intersections and stopped the city of millions.

The logic of damage: The protests were neat in the first few days. The students knew little about the traffic system, but they started controlling it. After that, the protest got violent, and the pro-government organizations clashed with the students. The government (The Telegraph, 2018) wanted them to go back to the police forces started action. BBC (2018) mentioned, "Since Saturday, police have reportedly used tear gas and rubber bullets, injuring scores of teenagers - although the authorities initially denied this."

The logic of bearing witness: According to Cammaerts (2012), public performance and civic disobedience are some tactics of this logic. The protesters used slogans, placards, and body paints to show their demands and stopped vehicles by taking positions on the road.

Conclusion

From entertainment to communication and political awareness on social movement in every sphere, we can feel the impact of social media. In this road safety movement, the video clips and pictures outraged, mobilized, motivated, and inspired the students at different schools and colleges to take the road and raise their voices to fight against the government. Still, no movement can get momentum without protesting in real life. This study highlights the way of mobilization in the road safety movement by analyzing social media content through critical discourse analysis and

protest logic theory. The finding that social media impacts mobilizing social movements need further attention. Future researchers should explore the generalizability of the findings of this study. More exploration is necessary to understand the efficacy of social media usage in social movements in different contexts.

Declaration of conflicting interest
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest in terms of research, authorship, and publication of the article.

Funding:
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of the article.

Orchid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9300-454X

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Appendix:

1. **Shahbag Movement (2013):** Shahbag Movement (2013) is a civil resistance movement to ensure capital punishment for the War Criminals of 1971 in Bangladesh. Bangladesh gained independence after fighting a nine-month-long battle with Pakistan in 1971. Some of the Bangladeshis worked as collaborators for Pakistan at that time. They joined in killing, raping, and torturing fellow Bangladeshis. On February 5, 2013, "thousands of protesters took to the streets of Bangladesh on Wednesday to demand the execution of a leader of the country's biggest Islamist party after he was sentenced to life in prison for war crimes committed during the 1971 independence conflict" (Ahmed, 2013). Amidst the movement, Bangladesh's cabinet changed its war crime law "to ensure opposition leaders on trial for alleged atrocities during the nation's 1971 independence war can be swiftly executed if convicted" (Alam, 2013).

2. **Quota Reform Movement (2018):** Quota Reform Movement is a student movement in Bangladesh to reform civil service recruitment policy. It began in Dhaka and spread throughout the country. Before that movement, in government jobs there was 56 percent of the entry positions in the civil service were reserved for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren, ethnic minorities, women, district-based populations, and disabled persons (Mahmud, 2018). Most Bangladeshi students were deprived of joining first-class jobs based on merit. There were protests in 2008 and 2013 to reform policies, but they failed. In 2018, students all over the country started protesting to reform the quota again. As a result of this movement, all the quotas in government service were demolished by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Prothom Alo, 2018).