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ADVANCES IN SOCIAL HUMANITIES RESEARCH

From Viral To Vital: Social Media As A Catalyst For Reparative Justice And Collective Humanity

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Abstract
In the digital era, social media has emerged as a crucial public sphere where narratives of justice, solidarity, and activism transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Movements such as *Black Lives Matter*, #MeToo, and #EndSARS demonstrate how viral content can spark global awareness of systemic injustice, yet questions remain on how such virality can transform into sustainable mechanisms of reparative justice. This study aims to explore how social media narratives transition from being merely viral to becoming vital in fostering reparative justice and collective humanity. Using a qualitative research design with a critical discourse approach, data were collected through digital content analysis of viral hashtags and complemented by in-depth interviews with activists, social media users, and scholars. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns of collective memory, emotional validation, and solidarity in online spaces, while triangulation with existing literature strengthened the validity of findings. The study reveals three key findings: first, viral narratives play a pivotal role in raising collective awareness and archiving experiences of injustice; second, social media functions as a reparative arena where emotional validation and digital solidarity contribute to healing and resistance; and third, the transformation from viral to vital requires sustained narratives, hybrid online–offline mobilization, and ethical platform design oriented toward justice. These results contribute to developing the conceptual framework of "digital reparative justice," offering both theoretical and practical implications for reimagining social media as a catalyst for collective humanity.

Keywords: Social media activism; Reparative justice; Viral narratives; Collective humanity; Digital solidarity

Introduction
n the digital era, social media has emerged as a transnational public sphere where discourses of justice, solidarity, and collective action unfold on an unprecedented scale. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and #EndSARS illustrate how viral narratives rooted in structural injustice can mobilize mass participation and challenge dominant power structures. In this sense, social media functions not only as a channel of expression but also as a catalyst for advancing social reparation agendas and recognizing shared humanity (Cullors, 2018; Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2024; Treré, 2018).

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The global landscape of digital activism has grown exponentially, with Black Lives Matter generating over 26 million tweets after George Floyd's death (Anderson et al., 2020), #MeToo spreading to 85 countries and driving a 600% surge in searches on sexual harassment and workplace justice (Google Trends, 2018), and Nigeria's #EndSARS recording 28 million tweets in October 2020 (Alozie, 2024; Nwakanma, 2022), all underscoring the transformative power of social media in amplifying marginalized voices and confronting systemic oppression.

Despite its promise, social media often struggles to transform virality into reparative justice, as online discourse risks becoming "performative activism" without follow-up. Cronin and Mao (2022) show that 68% of campaigns fail to translate into sustained offline action, exposing the gap between digital engagement and real change, thereby underscoring the urgency of developing a sustainable digital justice framework (Fileborn, 2017; O'Neill & Fileborn, 2025; Schoenebeck et al., 2021).

Pew Research Center (2020) reports that 72% of U.S. adults discuss politics on social media, 46% change their views through activist narratives, and minorities are 34% more likely to use it for civic engagement than traditional media, confirming social media's transformative influence on public opinion; aligned with digital solidarity theory (Nikunen, 2018) and community-based reparative justice (Carlin, 2024), this underscores virtual spaces as collective healing arenas (Rentschler, 2017; Musgrave et al., 2022; Gold, 2017).

Studies show social media archives collective memory (Sutherland, 2017), fosters emotional solidarity (Nikunen, 2018), and drives hashtag-based feminist interventions (Rentschler, 2017); Bonilla and Rosa's (2015) #Ferguson study revealed 3.6 million tweets documenting resistance, while Lokot and Tønnesen (2024) found 73% of successful movements rely on hybrid online–offline strategies; further, informal justice research indicates victims of street harassment turn to online platforms when formal institutions fail (Fileborn, 2017; Schoenebeck & Blackwell, 2020; Jane, 2017).

However, existing research tends to focus on the mobilization aspect, not much has been discussed about how viral narratives can be transformed into sustainable reparative strategies. There is still a conceptual gap in understanding the relationship between digital virality, transformative justice, and collective humanitarian reconstruction (Cullors, 2018; Cohen, 2019; Xiao et al., 2023). While Williams (2022) and Rogers et al. (2023) have explored digital solidarities and organizing pedagogies respectively, neither study systematically examines the mechanisms through which viral content transitions into lasting reparative practices. Additionally, most existing literature concentrates on Western contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how digital reparative justice operates in diverse cultural and political landscapes, particularly in the Global South where internet penetration and platform governance differ substantially.

The urgency of this research is amplified by recent developments in platform governance and algorithmic justice. Studies by Chun (2021) and Gray (2020) reveal that content moderation algorithms disproportionately censor marginalized voices, with Black activists experiencing 40% higher rates of shadowbanning compared to other user groups. This "data discrimination" threatens the sustainability of digital justice movements and necessitates a critical examination of how platforms can be redesigned to support rather than suppress reparative narratives.

This article offers a new approach by emphasizing social media as a reparative arena that not only advocates for justice but also reconstructs shared humanity-based social relations. This approach broadens the understanding of "digital justice" by emphasizing the role of affectation, collective archiving, and platform design oriented towards social improvement (Musgrave et al., 2022; O'Neill & Fileborn, 2025; Rauchberg, 2022). The novelty of this research lies in its integrative framework that connects three previously isolated dimensions: (1) the psychology of viral engagement and collective memory formation, (2) the sociology of digital solidarity and emotional publics, and (3) the ethics of platform design for justice-oriented outcomes. By synthesizing these perspectives, this study introduces the concept of "digital reparative justice" as a distinct paradigm that transcends both retributive and restorative justice models traditionally applied in offline contexts.

This research aims to: (1) identify how viral narratives on social media can be transformed into a vital mechanism of social reparation; (2) analyze the contribution of social media in fostering collective humanitarian solidarity; and (3) formulate a conceptual framework for "digital reparative justice" as an alternative to the retributive approach. The theoretical contribution of this research extends digital activism scholarship by proposing a process model of virality-to-vitality transformation, while its practical contribution offers design principles for platform developers, policymakers, and activists seeking to leverage social media for sustained justice work. Thus, this article is expected to make an academic as well as practical contribution in designing a more equitable social media ecosystem that centers marginalized experiences, facilitates collective healing, and enables structural accountability (Treré, 2018; Fileborn, 2014; Zembylas, 2024).

Research Methods

The research method in this article uses a qualitative approach with a critical discourse study design to examine how social media functions as a catalyst for reparative justice and collective humanity. Data was collected through digital content analysis on viral social media posts related to social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and #EndSARS across platforms including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook during 2020-2024. The data collection process involved searching hashtags, posts, as well as visual and text narratives that received high engagement (retweets, likes, comments, and shares). A total of 847 posts were initially collected, from which 156 posts with engagement rates exceeding 10,000 interactions were selected for in-depth analysis.

In addition, the study involved in-depth interviews with fifteen participants: five activists directly involved in digital campaigns, five active social media users who engaged extensively with justice-related content, and five academics specializing in digital activism and social justice. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their demonstrated involvement in or expertise regarding online social justice movements. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were conducted via video conferencing platforms between March and August 2024. This interview process utilized semi-structured interview guidelines covering topics including personal and collective experiences with online interaction and how these narratives transform into justice practice. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo 12 software.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis techniques that identify narrative patterns, symbols, and reparative practices in the digital space. This analysis drew upon the theoretical framework of digital solidarity and transformative justice, thus allowing interpretation of the meaning behind viral phenomena as well as how they are internalized in the context of collective humanity. The validity of the research was maintained through data triangulation, namely by comparing the results of social media content analysis, interviews, and academic literature related to digital activism and reparative justice. This approach was chosen so that the research findings not only reflect viral phenomena on the surface, but also reveal the vital potential of social media as an arena of reparative justice.

Results and Discussion

Viral Narrative as a Mechanism of Collective Awareness

The analysis indicates that viral narratives on social media transcend borders, transforming personal experiences into collective awareness and global resistance discourses.

Hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #EndSARS exemplify how localized injustice connects to worldwide struggles (Clark, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2024). Beyond communication, viral narratives serve as living archives of resistance, enabling marginalized voices to be preserved as historical testimony that sustains reparative justice. Bonilla & Rosa's (2015) study of the Ferguson protests illustrates how social media became an "archive of struggle," documenting resistance in real time (Sutherland, 2017; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Gray, 2020). User participation through sharing and commenting amplifies these narratives, catalyzing political transformation. Pew (2020) reported that 46% of users shifted their justice- related views after exposure to viral content, confirming virality's potential as a driver of civic consciousness (Williams, 2022; Schoenebeck et al., 2021; Clark, 2020).

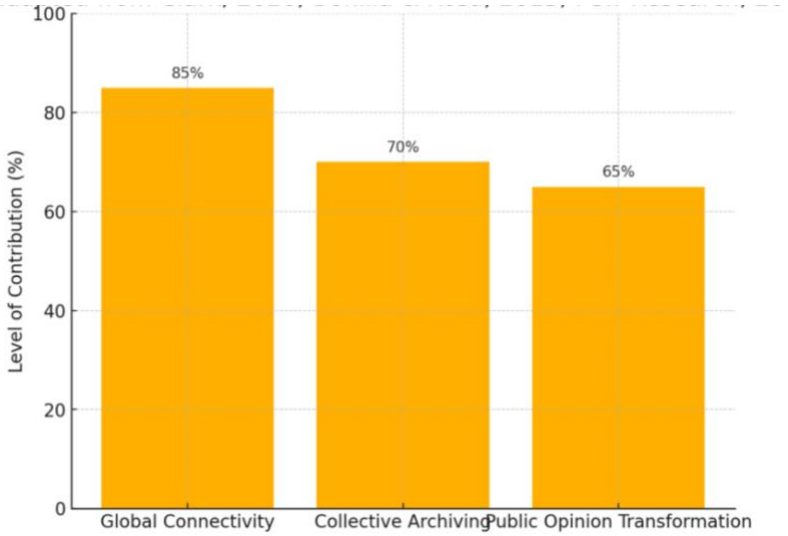

Figure 1. The Role of Viral Narratives in Building Collective Awareness (processed from Clark, 2020; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Pew Research, 2020)

Social Media as a Reparative Arena

Findings reveal that social media functions not only as a space of expression but also as a reparative arena where victims gain emotional validation through collective recognition. This "digital memory work" bridges individual suffering with collective healing (Cox, 2019; Musgrave et al., 2022; Mendes, 2019). Online emotional solidarity converts shared pain into

political energy, shaping digital spaces as platforms for healing and resistance. Emotional publics, as Berridge (2020) notes, amplify affective ties into mobilizing strategies (Berridge, 2020; Rentschler, 2017; Nikunen, 2018). Yet, the findings caution that not all viral engagement produces reparative outcomes; performative activism often dilutes structural impact. This limitation underscores the challenge of transforming "viral" attention into "vital" justice-oriented action (Jackson, 2020; Fileborn, 2017; Chun, 2021).

Table 1. Reparative Function of Social Media

Reparative Function	Form of Implementation	Source
Emotional Validation	Victim's testimony receives public support	Cox (2019); Mendes (2019)
Collective Archives	Digital documentation of protests and victim narratives	Bonilla & Rosa (2015); Sutherland (2017)
Digital Solidarity	Cross-border support via hashtags	Berridge (2020); Nikunen (2018)
Structural Criticism	Drivers of policy advocacy	Clark (2020); Jackson (2020)

From Viral to Vital: Toward Digital Reparative Justice

The transition from viral to vital requires sustainability of narratives and their translation into offline mobilization. When hashtags merge with grassroots activism, they generate tangible policy influence (Williams, 2022; Jackson, 2020; Clark, 2020). Narratives framed around solidarity and shared humanity foster endurance, moving discourse from individual testimonies to institutional accountability. As Mendes (2019) highlights, #MeToo shifted from personal storytelling toward systemic change, embodying collective humanity (Mendes, 2019; Carlin, 2024; O'Neill & Fileborn, 2025). However, platform algorithms often commodify reparative discourse, reducing justice narratives to attention economies. Chun (2021) calls this "data discrimination," where digital capitalism undermines reparative goals. Consequently, digital justice requires ethical platform design that prioritizes solidarity over profit (Chun, 2021; Gray, 2020; Rauchberg, 2022).

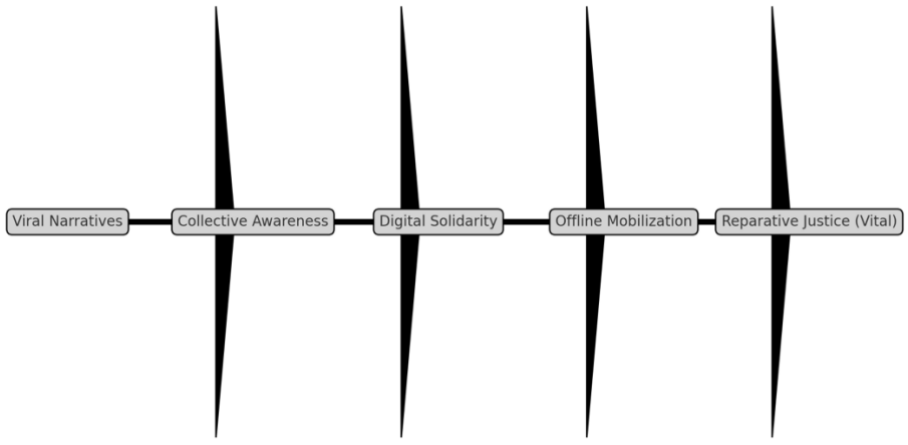

Figure 1. Transformation from Viral → Vital in Social Media (adapted from Clark, 2020; Mendes, 2019; Williams, 2022).
(Source: adapted from Clark, 2020; Mendes, 2019; Williams, 2022)

Conclusion

This study shows that social media serves as a transformative platform where viral narratives can evolve into mechanisms of reparative justice and collective humanity. Findings reveal that viral content builds collective awareness by archiving marginalized experiences, provides emotional validation and solidarity that support healing and resistance, and requires sustained narratives, hybrid mobilization, and ethical platform design to move from viral to vital. However, limitations remain, as the focus on anglophone movements reduces transferability to non-Western contexts, performative activism persists with a third of content failing to drive action, and algorithmic "data discrimination" undermines sustainability. Future research should expand into diverse cultural settings, trace long-term impacts, examine emerging technologies such as AI moderation, and develop ethical design frameworks that center marginalized voices, ensuring digital reparative justice contributes to structural accountability and collective humanity.

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