

## **Meditating the Revolution: Analysis of the Sudanese Professionals Association Communicative Strategies During Sudan's 2018–2019 Revolution**

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In December 2018, a series of protests in several Sudanese cities sparked a nonviolent antigovernment revolution. The revolution succeeded in ousting the country's authoritarian regime in April 2019. The Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) and its social media platforms played an integral role in collective action mobilization during the revolution. This article examines the SPA's communicative strategies and how those strategies contributed to mobilizing its followers. Using qualitative thematic analysis of the SPA's public statements and building on Melucci's work on collective identity, the study contends that the SPA's mediated messages contributed to producing cognitive definitions, as well as relational and emotional components. This interactive and complex process partly enabled participants to identify themselves as a collective. The SPA's communicative strategies entailed highlighting collective claims and thus creating shared cognitions. The SPA also contributed to creating a sense of belonging by constructing collective consciousness and discourse and building boundary markers between movement insiders and those perceived as movement outsiders. Moreover, SPA facilitated the activation of online and offline relational networks.

*Keywords: Sudan, social media, social movements, collective identity, Sudanese Professional Association*

On December 13, 2018, protesters took to the streets in Damazin, a town in southeastern Sudan, over the increasing cost of living. A week later, another protest was ignited in Atbara, northern Sudan, when bread prices tripled overnight. Photos of protesters burning the ruling party's headquarters in Atbara in a symbolic show of people's voice and power went viral on social media. The two protests in Damazin and Atbara ignited a flame that would be difficult to extinguish because further demonstrations erupted in multiple towns across Sudan (Hassan & Kadouda, 2019). Shortly afterward, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an alliance of professional groups and unions, called for a demonstration on December 19, 2018, to protest against steep increases in commodity prices and food and cash shortages. Thousands joined the demonstration, and as expected in a dictatorship, security forces responded with fierce clampdown, leaving dozens dead or injured. Hundreds of videos and photos of the brutal suppression of protesters went viral on social media. Immediately, the SPA, assuming a leadership role, called for another

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demonstration. Within days, what started as a protest against the increasing cost of living in Damazin and Atbara evolved into a full-blown antigovernment revolution. Thousands of protesters marched the streets for months with a resolute call for change. Mass demonstrations against the government spread inside Sudan and in multiple cities worldwide, with the support of the Sudanese Diaspora and other allies. The peaceful movement escalated into a massive sit-in that occupied the front of the Sudanese military's headquarters on April 6, 2019. When the SPA called for a march to the headquarters on that same day, an estimated number of 800,000 people joined (BBC, 2019). Five days later, after months of massive protests, al-Bashir was overthrown and arrested.

Communication technology and new media were two of the critical factors that contributed to the success of the Sudanese Revolution (Abushouk, 2021; Bashri, 2020). The SPA's Facebook page was used as a platform to mobilize and coordinate demonstrations and resistance. The movement's weekly resistance activities were publicized on the group's Facebook page, where the locations, gathering points, and routes of the demonstrations were shared. Protesters also followed these pages for any updates on plan changes. In response to the security forces' violent suppression, many activists had to operate underground, with no access to mainstream media. Digitally mediated communication provided the activists with channels to disseminate their messages and communicate with protesters on the ground. Furthermore, social media played a crucial role as alternative media for activists and protesters to document the protests and security forces' oppressive acts on live videos that rapidly went viral. With the government's tight control over national mainstream media, these videos, in many cases, became the only sources of information from inside Sudan for the world.

Social media's role in the Sudanese Revolution was not unique. Many studies have documented how contemporary social movements have used social media to advance their causes (Bosch, 2020; Castells, 2004, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2015). However, the literature on social media and social movements is "inclined to study organizational dynamics, technological affordances, and transnational connections" (Treré, 2015, p. 904). Moreover, the communicative processes used for building and maintaining collective action remain under-investigated.

Building on Melucci's (1995, 1996) seminal work on collective action and collective identity, this article conceptualizes collective identity negotiation and construction as a "process" and follows Melucci's (1996) call that urges social scientists to understand the process that enables individual actors to define themselves as a collective. The collective identity negotiation and construction process involves cognitive definitions, a network of active relationships, and emotional connections (Melucci, 1985, 1996). This dynamic process often involves dynamic and complex organizational and communicative practices (Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015).

Through a qualitative textual analysis of the SPA's statements published on Facebook, the aim of this study was to investigate how the SPA's communicative strategies and mediated messages contributed to producing cognitive definitions and relational and emotional components that constitute collective identity negotiation and construction. By shedding light on the case of Sudan, this article adds to the literature on the interplay between social media, social movements, and collective action. Furthermore, while numerous

studies have tackled the role of social media during the Arab Spring, few studies have examined how a leading organization frames and mediates its message to mobilize for collective action.

### **Media Landscape in Sudan**

Sudan's recently ousted authoritarian regime rose to power on June 30, 1989, through a military coup led by Omar al-Bashir and backed by the National Islamic Front, the global Muslim Brotherhood's branch in Sudan. In the past three decades, the regime has engaged in a political project to establish an Islamist state in Sudan. The regime sought to silence all forms of opposition to strengthen its grip on power. Immediately following the coup, all political parties and civil society organizations were outlawed. Moreover, the regime immediately banned the publication of all newspapers and magazines, leaving only the military-run newspaper (Human Rights Watch, 1996). After the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement with southern Sudan, now South Sudan, media outlets (especially print media) began to enjoy relatively fewer restrictions. However, these freedoms were marginal, and Sudanese media remained highly regulated and censored. The National Council for Press and Publication, the Sudanese media regulatory agency, had the power to license, monitor, shut down, and confiscate critical publications without judicial orders. The National Council for Press and Publication derived its authority from the 2010 national security law that prohibits the publication of lies and "false information" and any content that "threatens public peace" or "weakens state prestige"(Reporters Without Borders, 2022, para. 3). In 2019, Sudan was ranked among the lowest five countries in the World Press Freedom Index, scoring at 175 out of 180 (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). To challenge the government's tight control over information and communication, some political activists and opposition leaders attempted to establish media outlets outside the country. The *Sudan Tribune* online newspaper (based in France) and Radio Dabanga (based in the Netherlands) are examples of such efforts (Media Landscapes, 2022). Against this backdrop, Sudanese people turned to the Internet and social media as alternative sources of information and communication. While the open nature of the Internet made it difficult for the government to control published content, blocking websites and Internet blackouts were common practices by the regime.

### **Digital Media and Activism in Sudan**

Sudan's fast Internet connectivity growth (from less than 1% in 2000 to 22.7% in 2013) made the Internet connectivity rate in Sudan one of the highest in the region. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2022), in 2020, almost 30% of the population had Internet access, and 63% of the population had mobile connectivity. Also, in 2020, Facebook was the most used social media platform, being used by 70% of Internet users in Sudan, followed by YouTube and Twitter (20% and 7%, respectively; Global Stats, 2022).

Advances in digital technologies and social networks have provided an alternative space where civil society and activists could bypass government control and reach wider audiences. Sudanese in the Diaspora and inside Sudan have engaged in political debates in online forums such as Sudanese Online since 1999 (Sudanese Online, 2022). With the rise of new media and social media, Sudanese civil society organizations could disseminate messages and mobilize people for collective action (Bashri, 2020).

Political movements such as *Al Taghyeer Ala'an* (Change Now) and *Girifna* (We Are Fed Up) have greatly benefited from the growing online platforms to challenge the government's information monopoly and reach large audiences in Sudan, especially among the younger generation. Moreover, many youth volunteer groups have engaged in apolitical and social justice-oriented initiatives to fill the gap left by the government's failure to provide for its citizens. For example, groups such as *Nafeer*, whose focus was on providing relief to national disaster victims, used digital media (mainly Facebook) to rally support and mobilize their networks. *Nafeer* mobilized more than 12,000 Sudanese volunteers through a horizontal network of citizens participating in a community-led initiative (Bashri, 2014). The efforts of these organizations, even those that are apolitical such as *Nafeer*, contributed to creating an alternative social space, building capacity, and enhancing activists' organizational capabilities. Malik (2022) articulates that these online and offline grassroots civil society organizations "played a significant role in undermining the regime's legitimacy by drawing attention to the regime's corruption and failure to provide necessary services and basic rights to Sudanese citizens" (p. 6).

### **The Road to the 2018–19 Revolution**

Sudan's 2018–19 revolution was not its first. The Sudanese people toppled two authoritarian regimes in 1964 and 1985. Professional organizations, workers' unions, and student groups played important roles in the previous uprisings, each time driving the opposition.

The October 1964 Revolution toppled General Abbood's military regime through peaceful civilian-led protests. Historical accounts credit the Khartoum University students as the initiators of the protests that led to the toppling of Abood's regime. However, the Professional Front, an alliance of professional unions, was the force behind the general strike, which was a decisive factor in the success of the October 1964 Revolution (Hasan, 1967). Similarly, university student unions ignited the first spark of protests in the 1985 uprising. Under the Unions Alliance umbrella, professional associations spearheaded the general strikes that led to overthrowing of a dictator for the second time in Sudan's modern history (Berridge, 2015). In the 1964 and 1985 revolutions, activists and oppositional leaders relied on traditional means of communication such as word of mouth and leaflets, a legacy that came in handy when the Internet was blacked out in 2019. Berridge (2015) provides an account of how professional activists used social relationships to mobilize against the regime in 1964 by going around "the various wedding parties occurring in Khartoum that night that they knew their closest colleagues to be attending, obtaining signatures for their memorandum of protest and arranging the procession that would occur two days later" (p. 102).

Owing to the roles that professional and labor unions played in both 1964 and 1985, it is not surprising that the al-Bashir regime waged a ruthless war against political parties as well as professional and labor unions to prevent a similar fate for his regime. In fact, some scholars have argued that "the most significant reason for the longevity of al-Bashir's military regime is the ruthlessness with which it pursued its initial assault on the 'modern forces' that had been the principal protagonists in the 1964 and 1985 uprisings" (Berridge, 2015, p. 206).

Building on this legacy of anti-authoritarianism resistance, Sudanese people engaged in years of protests and resistance activities against al-Bashir's regime. The 2018–19 revolution was not spontaneous

but rather the climax of the 30 years of resistance against Sudan's dictatorship. Civil wars in now-independent South Sudan and Darfur drained the country's resources for decades. However, one turning point was South Sudan's secession in 2011. With most of the country's oil fields located in South Sudan, Sudan lost 70% of its national revenue, eliciting an economic crisis (De Waal, 2013). Inflation reached unprecedented levels, which led to skyrocketing consumer prices and poverty rates reaching all-time highs. As a result, the government took dramatic austerity measures such as floating the exchange rate and lifting subsidies for essential goods (de Waal, 2013; Hassan & Kadouda, 2019). Under the weight of high unemployment rates, surging inflation, and rampant corruption, resistance and protests were the only way out of the crisis for many Sudanese. Thus, several waves of protests were organized, some of which were strong and deadly. In 2013, protests erupted in major cities, including Khartoum. Security forces meted out brutality on the demonstrators, leaving more than 200 dead (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Amid these economic and political crises, the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA), an umbrella association of 17 Sudanese labor unions, was born. As Hassan and Kadouda (2019) noted:

Worsening conditions for Sudan's citizens proved a spur to the development of a more robust civil society that was independent of the regime. This renewed civil society poured much of its energy into seeking a reprieve from economic hardship. Professionals began to form shadow unions to mobilize for better pay and better working conditions. (p. 97)

The first attempt to form the organization was made in 2012, but it was established formally in 2016 when three of Sudan's largest professional groups—the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, Sudanese Journalists Network, and Democratic Lawyers Association—drafted and approved a charter (SPA, 2021). Many other organizations and unions joined the SPA and created both a common charter and common goals. However, the SPA was not officially registered with the government. The association's principal declared goal was to defend members' rights and seek improvements in their working conditions.

### **Social Media and Social Movements**

Traditionally, mass media have been a contested arena, as those who have access to media can frame and reframe their messages and amplify their voices. However, with the rise of the Internet and user-generated content, social movements, particularly those excluded from mainstream media, have gained more resources for facilitating communication, mobilization, and overall organization. Although these networked movements have attracted extensive scholarly attention, the literature on the interplay between collective action and social media reveals conflicting and inconsistent arguments and conclusions.

On the one hand, several authors have argued against the techno-optimism associated with social media and the role of digital technology, providing cautionary arguments about issues of surveillance and the lack of collectivity due to the fragmentation of actors and individuality (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; Juris, 2012; Riley, 2020). Earl and Kimport (2011) argued that digital networks reduced the need to co-present physically, undermining mobilization for offline collective action. Along the same lines, Juris (2012) argued that digitally enabled social movements are characterized by "logics of aggregation" as opposed to "logics of networking" (p. 260). Juris (2012) pointed out that digitally mediated movements may

succeed in mobilizing many actors by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and interests (the logic of aggregation). However, the logic of aggregation cannot be equated with the logic of the network, that is, the ways through which collective actors develop means of connection, coordination, and interaction. Many digitally supported movements lack the coherent goals, solidarity, and commitment that often characterize effective social movements. Supporting Juris' (2012) argument, Riley (2020) asserted that digital communication induces individuality and, in the process, might stifle building a sense of belonging and collective identity, leaving a movement fractured and disjointed.

On the other side of the debate, a growing body of literature suggests that digital technologies and social media provide activists and social movements with a repertoire of contention, that is, a set of tools and actions that activists can use to get their message out in making claims (Tilly, 1986, p. 2). These tools help activists overcome institutional, financial, social, temporal, and spatial constraints (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Carty & Reynoso, 2019; Castells, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2015). According to this argument, digital technologies and the various tools of new media have greatly enhanced the abilities of social movements to raise awareness, capture public attention, and mobilize for collective action. The literature advances arguments on digital technologies' financial affordances (Earl & Kimport, 2011), communicative affordances (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Carty & Reynoso, 2019; Castells, 2015), and the ability to negotiate, construct, and maintain collective identity and bonding among social actors (Kavada, 2015, 2018; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2015). Other studies have concluded that social networks operate as organizing agents that replace traditional organizational leadership (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Kavada, 2015).

This contention about the role of digital technologies in social movements has demonstrated that the relationship between mediated communication and collective action is multifaceted, complex, and nonlinear. Therefore, many scholars, even among those who value digital networks and the role of social media in social movements, caution against techno-determinism (Castells, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015, 2018). Critical of views that collective action can be powered by digital technologies alone, Gerbaudo (2012) explained that "the choreographing of public gatherings in which social media are involved cannot be reduced to the circulation of practical information or the logistics of organizing protest events" (p. 40). Similarly, Castells (2015) emphasized that the success of these movements lies in their ability to shift from online to offline by initiating collective action, creating a sense of "togetherness" (p. 225). According to Kavada (2015), movements "still need to develop their self-understanding as distinct collectives with their own agency" (p. 883). Creating a sense of togetherness and becoming a distinct collective necessitates "the construction of common collective identifications among participants" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 41). To understand the process of identifying as a collective, the work of Alberto Melucci on collective identity offers valuable insights. The following section provides an overview of Melucci's conceptualization of collective identity construction and its relationship to collective action.

### **Social Movements, Collective Action, and Collective Identity**

Historically, research on social movements until the emergence of what is known as new social movements (NSMs) has emphasized resource mobilization or political processes as the major theoretical frameworks of social movements and collective action (Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). However, both frameworks focus on structural factors contributing to collective action and "the how

of mobilization over the why of it" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 283). The emergence of NSMs, which have included peace, environmental, civil rights, anticolonial liberation, and feminist movements that cannot be classified as class-based struggles, has resulted in a search for a new analytical tool that explains how a movement emerges as a collective and mobilizes for collective action. As a result of this shift, the concept of identity emerged and "replaced class consciousness as the factor that accounts for mobilization and individual attachments to new social movements" (Hunt & Benford, 2004, p. 437).

Melucci's (1985, 1995, 1996) starting point is that a social movement is not a given phenomenon by default but rather a result of the interaction and "integration and interdependence of individuals and group" (1985, p. 793). This point of departure leads to the question of how a social movement becomes a collective actor and how individuals move from the individualistic dimension to organize collectively for action. Collective identity emerged as an analytical tool that provided valuable insights into this question (Melucci, 1985, 1995, 1996). Individual actors might share beliefs, views, or motives about a cause or a "situation." However, these beliefs remain in an individualistic arena until individual actors identify themselves as a collective and act collectively. When individual actors identify themselves as a collective, "the different fragments joining together to form a movement are integrated into a new system of relations in which the original elements change their meanings" (Melucci, 1996, p. 292). Through the construction of collective identity, a social movement can create its distinct agency as a collective.

The processes of collective identity negotiation and construction occur "through a recurrent process of activation of the relations that bind actors together" (Melucci, 1996, p. 70). This conceptualization emphasizes the processual approach to collective identity and stresses that collective identity is not a "thing" but a process. Understanding this process entails analyzing the different dimensions of collective identity construction and its relationship to collective action. Melucci (1985) argued that through this analysis, we could

understand how they are kept together by an "organizational" structure, how a collective identity is built through a complex system of negotiations, exchanges, decisions; how action can occur as a result of systemic determinations and of individual and group orientation. (p. 794)

Melucci (1995) urged scholars to focus on the process of collective identity construction rather than on the product. Responding to this call, this study was conducted to examine the communicative strategies the SPA employed as part of the processes through which the Sudanese protesters' collective identity was negotiated and constructed. This is not to say that SPA's Facebook and other social media accounts were the only arenas for identity construction and negotiation. Indeed, I recognized that collective identity construction and negotiation comprise a dialogical process involving negotiations between different people and perspectives online and offline. However, this article focuses on understanding the SPA's contribution to this process through its mediated messages.

Collective identity, according to Melucci, comprises three dimensions: cognitive, relational, and emotional. The cognitive process is concerned with calculating the means and ends of collective action. Relational elements include networked interactions between collective actors and their environments. Moreover, emotional investment enables individual actors to feel that they belong to a collective (Melucci,

1995). As Milan (2015) noted, Melucci's (1996) approach to collective identity as an interactive construct that comprises not only cognitions but also relational and emotional investments is advantageous when studying social media. Melucci's (1996) emphasis that the process of collective identity is an "interactive, communicative construction, which is both cognitively and emotionally framed through active relationships" places communication at the core of collective identity construction (Melucci, 1996, p. 71). Indeed, the bridge between the individual cognitive identification of a situation and collective action cannot be established without communication. Thus, communicative action becomes the core element in constructing a collective identity that results in collective action. Therefore, "any movement that seeks to sustain commitment over a period of time must make the construction of collective identity one of its most central tasks" (Gamson, 1991, p. 27).

### **Data and Methods**

The objective of this study was to understand how the SPA's mediated messages contributed to collective identity negotiation and construction. The article draws on Melucci's conceptualization of collective identity as an interactive process of constructing a shared meaning among the social actors about the movement's cause, goals, opportunities, and constraints of collective action. This process also involves emotional investment and relationship activation. Conceptualizing collective identity as a social construct of meaning production makes qualitative analysis the most suitable approach for this study. This article employs a qualitative thematic analysis of SPA public statements.

SPA's Facebook page was the central platform the organization used to communicate with its audience. Soon after the first protest in December 2018, the page was transformed into an alternative media platform through which protests were mobilized and organized on the ground. Through the Facebook page, political statements from different oppositional groups were published, plans for different demonstrations were shared, and most importantly, live videos and updates from protests and the brutal government response were broadcast. Considering the central role of the SPA Facebook page in the organization's communication, the statements published on the official page constitute the primary source of data for this article.

The author collected and translated the SPA's public statements issued between December 13, 2018 (the first demonstration), and April 6, 2019 (the beginning of the military headquarters sit-in). Altogether, 86 statements comprised of 29,872 words (including hashtags) were collected. A thematic analysis was performed following the six phases of thematic analysis introduced by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2017). The SPA statements were coded line by line and recoded to identify patterns. These patterns were organized into broader categories and investigated to identify the three main dimensions of collective identity construction stipulated by Melucci: cognitive, emotional, and relational. I applied a multidimensional approach to identify themes and categories. In each statement, the thematic analysis focused on different dimensions, such as the master narrative, the language choice and phrases used, cultural and historical metaphors, and target audiences. Based on the identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics, themes were categorized in relation to their contribution to constructing cognitive, relational, or emotional elements of collective identity.



Communicative strategies that contribute to calculating the means and ends of collective action were recognized as contributing to the cognitive process. Participating in activating relationships and networks was identified as relational elements. However, communicative strategies that contribute to fostering a sense of belonging and we-ness are deemed as emotional elements (Melucci, 1995). It is worth noting that the process of identifying themes was iterative, and the boundaries between these elements were fluid.

Although the analysis of this article focused on the SPA's statements and not on the audiences' comments, the author has been a keen follower of the page since December 2018. Qualitative research is by nature a reflective process, and the qualitative researcher is not only the field worker but also the writer and, eventually, the interpreter of qualitative data. Hence, It is important to note that the thematic analysis was supplemented by periods of online participant observation of the SPA's social media pages, and as such, the data interpretation was influenced by the broader context of the political climate in Sudan during the revolution.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### ***Collective Claims***

The December 2018 protests in Damazin and Atbara were spontaneous and leaderless. The protesters' demands focused on the increasing prices of daily necessities such as bread and fuel. The SPA immediately capitalized on these protests and assumed leadership, calling for a mass demonstration on December 25 in front of Parliament. The initial demands were "to improve living conditions and end the suffering represented in the inability to obtain necessities of money, bread, fuel, and transportation, in addition, to raising the minimum wage to 8,664 pounds" (SPA, 2018a). However, the SPA's demands were not spontaneous, as the association had been working for years to mobilize for better working conditions and wages for union members under its umbrella. When protesters in Atbara burned down the ruling National Congress Party's local headquarters on December 19, it became clear that the protesters' demands went beyond economic hardships and escalated their goal to regime change. The SPA quickly shifted its economic demands to political demands following the protests in Atbara (and other towns that followed suit within days). The SPA issued a new statement on December 20, specifying that the December 25 march was not about increasing wages but rather about political change:

In the name of the Sudanese Professionals Association, we call on you to come together and unite at this challenging moment in the country's history around our common goals and aspirations; we call on you all to rise above the differences and dispersion and to direct our voices and our strength *toward ousting this regime* that has decimated us and divided our country and squandered our wealth for three decades. (SPA, 2018c; emphasis added)

The December 25 demonstration drew thousands of people to downtown Khartoum, making it one of the largest protests in the regime's resistance history and positioning the SPA as the movement's de facto leader (Hassan & Kadouda, 2019). With the impressive success of the December 25 demonstration, the SPA called for another one on December 31, leading to the Independence Day celebration on January 1, 2019. Its Facebook page acted as the organization's public media platform. The SPA's aforementioned first statement on December 17 elicited 360 comments and 14 shares. After the December 25 demonstration,

shares jumped to 1,300 for a subsequent statement on December 28. Subsequent posted statements elicited thousands of comments and shares.

After the December 25 demonstration, the SPA became the center of planning and organizing for the demonstrations and the movement's voice. Different political groups and civil society organizations were heavily involved, but the SPA and its social media accounts became the movement's public organizing platform for the various protests.

However, the SPA's assumed leadership was built by following the Sudanese people's calls and sentiments, and it amplified their voices rather than directed their moves. To maintain momentum after the massive success of the first two or three demonstrations and, the SPA began organizing weekly centralized demonstrations in two or three major sites in Khartoum and several selected towns outside the city. During the week, protesters engaged in localized resistance activities. This trend continued for months until the massive military headquarters sit-in on April 6, 2019, which led to the ousting of al-Bashir on April 11, 2019.

The December 25 demonstration was the turning point through which the SPA, echoing protesters' demands, escalated the movement's intent from economic to political. The movement called for the regime to step down immediately so that a transitional civil government could take over. These became the collective claims around which the SPA rallied protesters. Melucci (1996) envisioned collective identity as the socially constructed "processes which enable actors to define a 'situation' as a field of shared action" (p. 16). Through this dynamic process, the SPA created the "cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and field of action" for the movement by articulating the movement's collective claims as its goals (Melucci, 1995, p. 44). The SPA's social media platforms acted as the movement's public voice by amplifying protesters' voices and claims. For instance, two of the most prominent protester slogans, "*Hurriya, Salam, wa Adala*" ("Freedom, Peace, and Justice") and "*Tasqut Bas*" ("Just Fall"), became the unifying movement's rallying cries. They were simple, dynamic, and powerful phrases that elegantly summarized the movement's collective claim: no negotiations, boosted wages or engagement in policy changes will stop the movement short of the regime's fall, fulfilling the people's demands. The two slogans acted as the cognitive anchor for the movement's collective claims. The SPA used different channels to disseminate its calls, but social media, particularly the group's Facebook page, were the primary media used to rally the people (Bashri, 2020). Most social media statements used these claims as hashtags around which protesters could rally. Owing to these hashtags, the movement's claims became trending in cyberspace and on the ground.

Furthermore, through its communication with the masses, the SPA leadership organized and coordinated the means and field of action to achieve collective goals. The weekly protests, nonviolent resistance activities, and the creation of grassroots resistance committees all created a field of action for the movement. The SPA mobilized the translation of political slogans into action in physical spaces through political organizing. These collective goals transformed the "situation" of dissent against Sudan's dictatorship, produced and shared by individuals, into action. The SPA distilled the masses' diverse claims into a set of coherent, collective claims of a political nature that could be achieved only by toppling the regime. By highlighting the masses' collective claims, the SPA contributed to creating a sense of "we-ness." Protesters recognized that they had a shared definition of the situation and their goals and acted collectively on that basis.

### ***Emotional Investment: Collective Discourse and Rituals***

The role of communicative action in the process of constructing collective identity cannot be reduced to simple information sharing and the cognitive definitions of the movement's goals and means. Emotional ties constitute an integral part of the collective identity construction process. Emotional investment in a movement enables individuals to identify themselves as part of a collective and foster a sense of "we-ness" (Melucci, 1985; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow & Corrigall-Brown, 2015). Highlighting the importance of discourse in identity negotiation and construction, Hunt and Benford (2004) argued that "collective identities are talked into existence" (p. 445). Kavada (2015) emphasized the importance of developing common practices and codes in the process of forming a collective identity (p. 879). Similarly, Treré (2015) asserted the importance of internal language or "communicative resistance grammar" in building identity among activists (p. 901). Strengthening the cognitions built with collective claims, the SPA capitalized on collective discourse and rituals, building a symbolic repertoire of contention and resistance. While some slogans such as "Freedom, Peace, and Justice" were not new and were used by the protesters before the 2018–19 protests, they became the manifesto for the movement's collective message. Other slogans, such as "*Tasqut Bas*" ("Just Fall"), were born during the 2018–19 movement. The power of these slogans stemmed from the fact that they were organic and spontaneous. Most phrases and slogans of the movement were created by ordinary people and used the Sudanese dialect. The SPA's role involved using the slogans in its statements, publicizing them through social media hashtags, and transforming them into robust collective discourse. Slogans such as "Freedom, Peace, Justice" and "Just Fall" became an everyday mainstream language.

Moreover, SPA used cultural narratives to convey political messages. For instance, campaigns that used youths in neighborhood cleaning and maintenance were named "*Hanabnihu*" ("We Will Build It," after a popular song), and female protesters were called *Kandakas* (after ancient Nubian queens). Snow and Corrigall-Brown (2015) explained that using slogans, songs, music, and other symbolic bricolages could be politically and emotionally evocative, resulting in the sense of belonging to a common collective.

Collective consciousness and discourse also included rituals. To keep the protests spark ignited, without wearing out the masses, particularly during violent responses by the security, the SPA spaced out big demonstrations, which became a weekly ritual. The SPA scheduled big demonstration(s) on Thursdays, and during the week, it used different nonviolent resistance tactics, from strikes to dispersed sit-ins to hanging up flags on top of houses at a specific time. However, the Thursday demonstrations consistently started at 1:00 p.m. The SPA's statements termed this time "1:00 revolution time." As the locations were publicized, security forces often occupied these locations, waiting for the protests to begin. Before 1:00 p.m., protesters would gather individually or in small groups around the agreed-upon location, mostly public squares, or markets, mingling casually with shoppers or other passersby on the street. Gathering individually was a tactic to make it more difficult for security forces to round up protesters. It became such a ritual that precisely at 1:00 p.m., any female in the vicinity ululated (released the sound of *zagroda*, a traditional Sudanese ritual expression of joy and victory), signaling the start of the demonstration. Immediately, everyone in proximity would gather and start chanting. The use of *zagroda* acted as a symbolic ritual of resistance and contention and "a collective voice of dissent" (Ahmed, 2020, p. 244). The SPA did not invent this ritual, and the collective agency created around the movement came up with its own rituals.

### ***Boundaries as Emotional and Relational Markers***

The literature on social movements stresses the importance of boundaries in forming and strengthening collective identity (Kavada, 2015; Taylor & Whittier, 1999). Boundaries “promote a heightened awareness of a group’s commonalities and frame interaction between members of in-group and out-of-group” (Taylor & Whittier, 1999, p. 176). While the SPA and oppositional political parties had their own official membership records, social media platforms served as unofficial records and helped define support for the SPA and the movement. The SPA Facebook page is public, and the numbers of likes and comments are visible. As such, the page served as a communication platform and an unofficial public support and popularity measure.

The SPA employed different communicative strategies to build boundary markers, such as naming and labeling and developing collective action involvement affordance. Earlier on, the SPA and its supporters adopted distinct naming and labeling to create clear boundary markers. From the onset of the movement, the SPA established that the December movement was a “revolution,” setting it aside from the popular discourse about “uprisings” that dominated Sudanese political discourse for years. From this point of departure of a revolution, a new discourse emerged. Protesters became *thuwar* (revolutionists) and *Kandakas* (ancient Nubian queens), creating a sense of “we-ness,” belonging to, and ownership of the revolution. These labels not only helped build collective discourse but also acted as boundary markers. This labeling set a clear boundary between those calling for radical change (revolution) and reformists who, over the three decades of the regime, called for reforms from inside the regime and thus were in and out of alliances with al-Bashir and his party. Cultural and historical narratives, such as naming female activists *Kandakas*, as explained earlier, were also used. This naming and labeling acted as identification for the movement, forging a process in which those who self-identified as revolutionists were insiders, and this identification carried cognitive and distinct emotional weights. From a cultural perspective, there was the pride of being a *thuwar* or *Kandakas*, as opposed to the stigma of being viewed as an outsider. Belonging to a movement of revolutionists also entailed the responsibility of participating in resistance activities and protecting fellow activists under violent circumstances. This cognitive and emotional identification, “which enables individuals to feel like part of a common unity, is required in the definition of a collective identity” (Melucci, 1995, p. 45).

Moreover, through its statements and practices, the SPA strived to employ inclusive discourse that enabled involvement and participation affordances. Identifying with the movement was made accessible to everyone who embodied resisting the regime, regardless of political identification, gender, social status, religion, or other identity markers. This accessibility and inclusivity were prevalent in the language used in the planned statements and resistance activities.

The discourse employed in SPA statements emphasized the unity of *Al-Sha’ab Al-sudani* (“Sudanese people”) and *Jamaheer Sha’bana* (“masses of our people”) against the “repressive regime,” “tyrant rulers,” and “security mercenaries.” These markers left no gray areas for potential fence-sitters; one was either a revolutionist who stood with the people or a sympathizer of the regime oppressing the people. SPA statements often addressed the masses using the “we” and “our” markers, stressing the sense of belonging to a shared collective, the revolution:

Let us direct our voices and our strength toward the ousting of this regime that has oppressed and devastated us, divided our country, and squandered our resources for three decades, during which the Sudanese state retreated and deteriorated to become today a completely collapsed and failed state. (SPA, 2018b)

As the protests intensified, SPA statements started to emphasize distancing oneself from the regime and choosing between the regime on one side and the Sudanese people on the other. In one call for the April 6, 2019, demonstration, SPA called for participation from "all groups, including the armed forces, except for those who chose to subdue themselves to the regime and be humiliated by serving the dictator" (SPA, 2019d).

Melucci (1995) and Taylor and Whittier (1992) emphasized the importance of participation in collective mobilization rituals and activities as boundary markers. The weekly demonstrations and localized resistance activities were designed for participation affordances. Protesters were given the agency to engage individually or collectively in resistance activities that were flexible enough to allow everyone who identified with the movement to participate. Examples of these resistance activities include the flag campaign launched on March 16, 2019, in which everyone was called upon to fly the nation's flag outside their homes or cars or carry a flag as a form of resistance. Another example was the neighborhood public square sit-ins on February 5, 2019, in which residents from each neighborhood gathered in small groups in the nearest public square. For those who could not participate in protests or public sit-ins for whatever reason, the SPA asked that they "stand in front of their homes to cheer (on) protesters, or honk their cars' horns, or bang on utensils... [because participation in] the revolution is for every Sudanese against this regime" (SPA, , 2019a).

Sudan's past two uprisings in 1964 and 1985 culminated in national general strikes that paralyzed the country and led to the toppling of the regimes. The SPA and its allies planned the same for the 2018–19 revolution. To build-up for a national general strike, the SPA planned a series of smaller strikes. Participation in these strikes was made flexible, as the risks involved could be high for some people. A statement made on March 4, 2019, called for a strike. Nevertheless, the SPA stipulated different levels of participation, from not going to work to clocking in but "carrying out the strike after reaching [the] workplace" (SPA, 2019b). For those whose full participation in the strike would carry a level of risk beyond their tolerance abilities, participation could simply be wearing a label indicating support for the strike. This involvement and participation flexibility provided involvement affordance, broadened the circle of participation, built a sense of solidarity, and, more importantly, marked a boundary between supporters of the movement and supporters of the regime. Moreover, planning and participation in resistance activities helped build the emotional and relational aspects of collectivity, enabling the movement to test its capabilities and limits.

### ***Activating Relational Networks Online and Offline***

Collective identity construction entails activating relational networks between actors. Social media as an open space provided that platform for SPA and its supporters as an open space. The SPA's Facebook page became an open space through which actors could communicate and interact frequently and thus became a "constitutive part of the social relationships" (Melucci, 1996, p. 71).

However, the SPA's contribution to building relational networks was not limited to online platforms. Early on, the SPA encouraged the building of horizontal networks in residential neighborhoods and workplaces to facilitate a sense of togetherness and create resistance cells on the ground. These cells were labeled *Lijan Muqawama*, or resistance committees, which were crucial in organizing and mobilizing these localized activities. On March 11, 2019, the SPA (2019c) stated: "One of the important tools in the process of organizing collective action to reach its climax in the political strike and comprehensive civil disobedience is the process of building resistance committees in neighborhoods, workplaces, and educational institutions." This statement was a reflection of the networks that were built through grassroots localized resistance activities such as Flag Day, which were discussed in the previous section. One contributing factor to the success of the SPA and its political allies was the leadership fluidity afforded to horizontal grassroots networks in planning and executing resistance activities. The shared sense of belonging and solidarity is "constructed and negotiated through a repeated process of 'activation' of social relationships connecting the actors" (Melucci, 1985, p.793). While the resistance committees had autonomy and a bottom-up and participatory decision-making process, the SPA and its allies loosely provided a framework for planning the protests. The SPA centrally mobilized a larger number of people, which would not have been possible if left to grassroots organizing only. The SPA performed what Gerbaudo (2012) termed the "choreography of assembly" (p. 5). Residential proximity, social ties, committee membership, and connection to a shared cause became rich catalysts of solidarity and common identity formation (Diani, 2004).

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Analysis of the study data revealed that the SPA's mediated communication constituted a complex process of communicating a sense of collective identity by creating a shared cognitive understanding of the goals and means of collective action by highlighting and amplifying the movement's collective claims. Furthermore, the SPA's social media was not simply a hub for information sharing but rather a symbolic space where emotional and relational connections were fostered. The SPA's communicative strategies involved constructing collective consciousness and discourse through which rituals, labels, cultural narratives, and artifacts became a symbolic repertoire of resistance and contention. The collective discourse and participation affordances were crucial factors in building boundary markers between movement insiders (including activists and oppositional groups inside Sudan and in the Diaspora) and those perceived as outside, such as the ousted regime supporters and sympathizers. This boundary-marking process resulted in strengthening the sense of togetherness and solidarity. While social media afforded the activists a space for communication and interaction, The SPA's relational networks were not limited to online and virtual spaces. The grassroots resistance activities, resistance committees in neighborhoods, and work and educational places; were equally crucial in activating the relational networks.

As discussed earlier, Melucci (1995) conceptualized collective identity as a cognitive, relational, and emotional process of identification. One major factor that helped transition protesters from the cognitive to the action aspect was capitalizing on the emotional and relational elements of collective identity. Protesters were well aware of the situation at the cognitive level, but the SPA mobilized the masses by highlighting collective claims and working with activists to define the Sudanese political "situation" as a field of shared action. Furthermore, through movement-built solidarity among members, an emotional and relational element was added to the already-built cognitive element. These activities were essential contributors to

sustaining the movement, culminating in the mass sit-in on April 6, 2019, which eventually led to the ousting of al-Bashir five days later.

Scholars critical of techno-optimism regarding social media have advanced the argument that social media and digital technologies fail to foster strong ties and, at best, aggregate a number of participants who come together without coherent goals and eventually fail to elicit meaningful change (Gladwell, 2010; Juris, 2012). The case of the SPA provides evidence that mobilization for collective action indeed cannot be reduced to information sharing through social media but also involves negotiation and the construction of a shared identity that enables participants to identify themselves as a collective. However, the role of social media cannot be ignored in this process. The SPA facilitated social media to mobilize for offline collective action on the streets and other public political platforms.

While the role of social media cannot be ignored in the Sudanese Revolution, it is important to point out that what led to the overthrowing of the regime was not Facebook or Twitter activism but rather offline protests, resistance activities on the streets, and the thousands who marched and occupied the military's headquarters on April 6, 2019. Nevertheless, the SPA used social media as a symbolic public space to create what Gerbaudo (2012) termed the "choreography of assembly" (p. 5). As such, we can argue that social media played the role of mediators, bringing people together to interact, communicate, and negotiate common identities. This process is dynamic, iterative, and nonlinear. However, further research with activists on the ground will illuminate this dynamic process and contribute to a further understanding of the impact of the SPA's communicative strategies and other factors that led to collective identity construction and offline collective action.

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