

Gatekeeping on Social Media During Political Events: The Use of Instagram during the Sheikh Jarrah 2021 Events as a Model

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Abstract: Objective: This study explores the relationship between content moderation policies implemented on Instagram and the sharing of political content during the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events. **Method:** The study employed a quantitative approach, utilizing a questionnaire administered to a sample of 304 participants. **Findings:** The findings reveal the dual nature of Instagram. While it served as a vital tool for disseminating real-time updates, raising awareness, and mobilizing support during the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events, the platform also acted as a gatekeeper for politically sensitive content. A significant proportion of the respondents reported personally experiencing content removal or account restrictions, or witnessing the removal of others' content or a decrease in the visibility of posts related to these events. The results also revealed that popular hashtags such as (#SaveSheikhJarrah) and (#FreePalestine) were frequently targeted by Instagram's algorithms. The study demonstrates that Instagram's moderation policies significantly impacted the visibility of political content related to the Sheikh Jarrah events, and consequently, the associated digital activism. **Conclusions:** Instagram's gatekeeping practices during the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events highlighted fundamental challenges in digital journalism and digital media governance. While the platform provided significant space for citizen journalism and grassroots reporting, its content moderation mechanisms severely restricted political expression and activism, particularly concerning sensitive political issues in regions like the Middle East and Palestine. **Recommendations:** It is recommended to raise users' awareness of content management mechanisms and algorithmic censorship, while encouraging activists to adopt flexible and multi-platform digital strategies, in addition to systematically documenting and reporting cases of censorship, and working to develop policy frameworks that obligate social media companies to transparency and accountability to ensure the protection of freedom of expression and fair access to information.

Keywords: Gatekeeping, Social media, Instagram, Palestine, Jerusalem, Sheikh Jarrah 2021 Events.

حراسة البوابة الإعلامية في منصات التواصل الاجتماعي خلال الأحداث السياسية: استخدام إنستغرام خلال أحداث الشيخ جراح 2021 نموذجاً

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ملخص: الهدف: تبحث الدراسة في العلاقة بين سياسات تعديل المحتوى المطبقة على منصة إنستغرام ومشاركة المحتوى السياسي خلال أحداث الشيخ جراح عام 2021. **المنهج:** اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الكمي، حيث تم تطبيق أداة الاستبيان على عينة مكونة من 304 مشاركاً. **النتائج:** أظهرت النتائج الطبيعة المزدوجة لمنصة إنستغرام؛ فبينما كانت أداة حيوية لنشر التحديثات الفورية، وزيادة الوعي، وحشد الدعم خلال أحداث الشيخ جراح 2021، مارست المنصة أيضاً حارس البوابة الإعلامية على المحتوى الحساس سياسياً. أفاد عدد من المشاركين أنهم شخصياً واجهوا إزالة محتوى أو قيوداً على حساباتهم، أو أنهم شهدوا إزالة محتوى للأخريين أو انخفاضاً في ظهور المنشورات المتعلقة بتلك الأحداث. كما كشفت النتائج أن الوسوم الشائعة مثل (#SaveSheikhJarrah) و(#FreePalestine) كانت غالباً مستهدفة من قبل خوارزميات إنستغرام. بشكل عام، أظهرت الدراسة أن سياسات التعديل في إنستغرام كان لها تأثير كبير على ظهور المحتوى السياسي المتعلق بأحداث الشيخ جراح، وبالتالي على النشاط الرقمي المرتبط بها. **الاستنتاجات:** جسدت ممارسات حراسة البوابة الإعلامية في إنستغرام خلال أحداث الشيخ جراح 2021 تحديات جوهرية في الصحافة الرقمية وحوكمة وسائل الإعلام الرقمية. فبالرغم من أن المنصة وفرت مساحات هامة لصحافة المواطن والتقارير الشعبية، فإن آليات تعديل المحتوى الخاصة بها قيدت بشكل كبير التعبير والنشاط السياسي، خاصة فيما يتعلق بالقضايا السياسية الحساسة في مناطق مثل الشرق الأوسط وفلسطين بشكل خاص. **التوصيات:** توصي الدراسة بضرورة رفع مستوى وعي المستخدمين بآليات إدارة المحتوى والرقابة الخوارزمية، وتشجيع النشاط على تبني استراتيجيات رقمية مرنة ومتعددة المنصات، وتوثيق حالات الرقابة والإبلاغ عنها بشكل منهجي، والعمل على تطوير أطر سياسات تلتزم منصات التواصل الاجتماعي بالشفافية والمساءلة لضمان حماية حرية التعبير والوصول العادل إلى المعلومات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حراسة البوابة الإعلامية، منصات التواصل الاجتماعي، إنستغرام، فلسطين، القدس، أحداث الشيخ جراح 2021.

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Introduction

The media play a significant role in drawing attention to the most pressing social issues. When following up on issues pertaining to citizens' rights people prefer online media over traditional media because they perceive the latter to be far more effective in this area. This is because traditional media must adopt a successful strategy and take more action in this area (Aldamen, 2017). As the internet is considered to be the "heaven of freedom" for citizens suffering under authoritarian regimes, the Arab Spring has provided a new perspective regarding social media news coverage (Galal & Spielhaus, 2012).

Social media platforms such as Twitter (X) have become an indispensable tool for obtaining and disseminating information. It was widely used by official accounts, informational accounts, and citizens (Aldamen & Hacimic, 2023). Although social media is often referred to as the 'heaven of freedom', this metaphor has increasingly been challenged by content moderation policies especially in politically sensitive regions like Palestine. According to (Hamouda & Abdallah, 2024) social media is an important means of raising social issues, especially those related to the Palestinian people, and it contributes significantly to shaping political and social public opinion among peoples. Social media platforms are an essential tool for enhancing resilience and providing a platform for digital empowerment, self-reliance, and advocacy (Aldamen, 2025).

Instagram's community guidelines were designed so that its users may assist in nurturing the social platform community. Instagram users are assumed to agree to these rules and terms of service by their use. However, if the user crosses these lines, their account may be removed, disabled, or face additional limitations. Instagram censorship

has occurred in several countries. In the United States of America, Instagram temporarily disabled the "recent" tab on hashtag pages on October 30, 2020, to prevent the spread of false information about the 2020 US presidential election (Carman, 2020). President Donald Trump of the United States was banned from Instagram "indefinitely" on January 7, 2021. "We feel the dangers of permitting the President to utilize our service at this moment are simply too substantial," Zuckerberg said (Tyko, 2021).

Sheikh Jarrah Neighbourhood

Sheikh Jarrah is a Palestinian neighbourhood in the Jerusalem Governorate, located in the eastern areas of the city and was occupied by Israel during the 1967 war (Zeidan, 2024). It is now one of East Jerusalem's neighbourhoods. The majority-Palestinian neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah is located in East Jerusalem, 2 kilometres from the Old City. The area has a long history; it is home to the oldest written accounts dating from the 12th century (Winston, 2024).

In many East Jerusalem neighbourhoods in 2021, violent clashes broke out between Jewish settlers and Israeli police forces and Palestinian demonstrators in response to Israeli court orders foreclosing Palestinian homeowners in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in favour of Israeli settlement associations (Kingsley, 2021). Although inhabitants of the Sheikh Jarrah region retain ownership of the land where they were born and raised, Jewish settlers claim they bought the land from Jewish organisations, who in turn bought it around a century ago.

Based on the progression of events in the neighbourhood, conflicts erupted across the country's territories and towns, prompting the Palestinian resistance in Gaza to retaliate against the Israeli onslaught on the neighbourhood's residents, resulting in the

commencement of Israeli-Palestinian hostilities in 2021.

Literature Review

Several new studies have examined the topic, highlighting their key findings and contributions to the existing body of knowledge. Elmimouni *et al.* (2025) focused on the over-enforcement of content moderation on social media platforms. They investigated how individuals navigated the complex landscape of social media censorship through the analysis of survey responses from 201 users who reported being censored, along with interviews conducted with 14 political activists and influencers. The findings demonstrate the range of strategies activists can use to get around content restrictions from self-censorship to aggressively advocating for policy change.

While Abokhodair *et al.* (2024) focused on transparency and automated content moderation examining how activists and users view the opacity of the content moderation mechanisms used by social media platforms. Pro-Palestinian activists perceive censorship as a result of opaque and obfuscated technological mechanisms of content demotion which make it difficult to prove harm and lack redress mechanisms. The study found that algorithmic harms in the field of automated content moderation were mentioned.

On the other hand, Elmimouni *et al.* (2024) looked at how platforms and activists interacted during the events that took place in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem in May 2021. The study gained a deeper understanding of the wider implications of content moderation on activism by analyzing data from 12 interviews with political influencers and a survey of 201 social media users who reported potentially unfair moderation decisions. The results of the study showed a significant discrepancy between the official justifications that the social media companies provided to the

activists and the ones that users believed to be the causes.

Karamah (2023) aimed to address the question of how the eventual dispossession of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood affected the dynamics of the Palestinian issue. Sheikh Jarrah's problem was not unique to the period or place. It has affected the dynamics and course of the Palestinian issue in a number of ways. This contributed to the problems internalization and increased its visibility.

According to Kelsch (2022), bringing the Palestinian cause unprecedented international attention, the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah symbolizes a generational outcry against the Israeli occupation and settler colonial-related evictions in East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah district. Additionally, the extremely creative and multidisciplinary research methodology which blended digital ethnography with activist interviews made a unique contribution to academic studies on Palestine in Portugal which still represents a significant research gap.

The study of Alimardani & Elswah, (2021) found that Arab activists used a variety of tactics to keep up their online presence after realizing that social media platforms were systematically suppressing pro-Palestinian voices. A concerted effort to lower Facebook's ratings on Google Play and the Apple Store was one of these actions. In order to put pressure on social media companies to stop their algorithmic suppression, they also used petitions, open letters, and published articles. Activists also came up with inventive ways to get around algorithmic censorship like changing Arabic text by adding asterisks between letters, removing letters from words, employing diacritical marks (tanween), or rearranging the letters in posts and hashtags.

Despite the importance and novelty of the previous studies that addressed the Sheikh Jarrah events in digital contexts, this study

sheds light on how the media gatekeeper role was activated on Instagram specifically during the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events, making it a significant contribution to understanding the mechanisms of controlling the flow of information and influencing public opinion.

Theoretical framework

Gatekeeping Theory: Gatekeeping theory addresses the question of why some items are allowed to pass through the “gate” while others are filtered out (Lewin, 1943). While the theory focused on the fact that messages before reaching our personal filter, they are first filtered by gatekeepers in the media. However the gatekeeper is crucial. Due to the abundance of information war is still anticipated. Gatekeeper in online media has made revisions. Significant impact on influencing public opinion (Rusdi & Rusdi, 2020). Gatekeepers are in charge of information filtering, deciding which content can be shared or is limited, and using cutting-edge data management and security technology to protect personally identifiable information.

Gatekeepers in social media function as go-betweens for the public and traditional mass media, frequently taking on the role of opinion leaders who affect the prominence and applicability of content published online. As they accomplish this, they serve as a vital link between the general population and traditional mass media, including radio, television, and newspapers, contributing significantly to the information ecology. As a result, gatekeepers on social media play a crucial role in directing the public's access to information by serving as both amplifiers and filters for news material. Their power as thought leaders can have a big impact on the audience's perception of which stories are relevant and which are not (Li *et al.*, 2022).

Gatekeeping process in the perspective of social media is where journalists and audiences

decide the importance as well as publicity news content would receive post-publication. This post-publication gatekeeping plays out in social interactions like commentary, likes, and shares that can dictate the reception of news on platforms like Instagram. This interpretation links gatekeeping to conversations and social interactions where discussions take place, thus these findings reflect a participatory view of information control in the digital environment (Saloneni & Laaksonen, 2023).

The definition of gatekeeping in a social media context moves from traditional pre-publication analogue news selection by journalists and editors (what we may call institutionalised or ‘industrial’ forms) to post publication virtual (or ‘individualised’) gatekeeping. The evolved viewpoint sheds light on how news relevance and visibility are now dependent not only what journalists publish (object), but also the actions taken by the audience to make sense of content shared with them. These actions also shape perceptions of the news (which in turn both reflect and drive audiences). For example, an Instagram post may have greater visibility through algorithms if it has a large number of likes and comments because these metrics might suggest that the content being shared is more interesting or important (Saloneni & Laaksonen, 2023).

Instagram as a platform and its relevance to gatekeeping: Instagram has given news institutions a direct means to interact with their audiences and at the same time, by amplifying or dialling down user engagement on stories; it involves itself in gatekeeping process. This linkage between Instagram and gatekeeping is equally contingent on the fact that Instagram functions using an algorithm, which dictates how all of this content will be organized and presented to users. User engagement with posts can also determine these algorithms, which in turn affect the gatekeeping dynamics on the platform (Saloneni & Laaksonen, 2023).

Digital gatekeepers have a multifaceted impact on how people view and engage with content, which implies that algorithms influence how people engage with content and how visible it is. According to Rusdi & Rusdi, (2020) the verification process is still an essential journalistic practice to reduce information confusion even in the face of the quick spread of information online. The study draws attention to the difficulties faced by online media professionals who must balance the demands of the competitive media landscape with their adherence to professional ethics which occasionally aids in the dissemination of false information.

On Instagram, social media interactions like liking, sharing and commenting act as gatekeeping mechanisms. Through these exchanges viewers can directly influence news content by letting the media know what they truly find most interesting or pertinent. What counts is the user interaction that posts elicit as this can affect the type of news that is promoted on the platform. The interactions between news media and their audiences produce a dynamic environment for gatekeeping. According to Salonen & Laaksonen (2023), this process entails continuous discussions that have the power to mold the narrative surrounding news content enabling viewers to voice their thoughts and affect how the news is perceived.

Kraidy (2009) emphasized the concept of "hybridity" in Arab media systems, stressing how traditional political control crosses with digital spaces, creating contested zones of meaning-making. Shoemaker & Reese (2014) developed the hierarchy of influences model, suggesting that content framing is shaped by multiple layers: individual journalists, institutional policies and external sociopolitical forces. In the context of platforms like Instagram, this helps explain how moderation and corporate guidelines function as new "gatekeepers," reforming political visibility

and message resonance. According to Tufekci (2017), platforms such as Instagram shape political participation through algorithmic curation, visibility management, and the silencing of dissenting voices especially during crises.

Methodological Framework

Research Problem: Reports indicate that Instagram has been involved in suppressing or removing content about the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events, where Palestinian families face eviction (Alsaafin, 2021). Instagram faced accusations of biased content moderation, particularly affecting Palestinian narratives through actions like takedowns and account restrictions. Incidents such as the malfunctioning of Sheikh Jarrah's Instagram archives and the removal of posts by Palestinian journalists highlight these concerns. Mohammed Al-Kurd reported that his stories were taken down, while his sister Muna had her account disabled, suggesting targeted suppression (De Cristofaro, 2022; Paul, 2021).

Digital rights organizations like 7amleh have documented numerous instances of content removal, tracking nearly 500 cases where Instagram was involved in half of them during a specific period (7amleh, 2021). As part of a campaign called "Facebook, We Need to Talk", 7amleh and over 30 other human rights groups were calling for greater transparency regarding Instagram's decision-making, especially related to Palestine (Paul, 2021). They reported that deleted stories accounted for 45% of all Instagram violations, with users receiving no notifications about these removals. Although Instagram acknowledged these concerns, much of the content removal reports came after the issue was thought to be resolved (Smith, 2021).

According to Meta Transparency Center (2021), since 2016, Meta used a strategy called "remove, reduce, inform" to manage content

across Meta technologies. They mentioned that they remove harmful content that goes against their policies. They didn't explain what harmful content, raising concerns about the commitment to free speech and fair moderation. Instagram attributes content removals to automated moderation and technical issues. Recent algorithm changes that prioritize original content may have unintentionally diminished the visibility of activist content.

Citizen journalism is important, especially in authoritarian areas, but Instagram's moderation techniques limit its effectiveness by restricting politically charged content (Horoub, 2023). Social media has helped share the truth about people's suffering (Aldamen, 2023a), but critics argue this overlooks the negative impacts of moderation, particularly on Palestinian voices. The Palestinian journalist Hind Khoudary noted that several of her posts about Sheikh Jarrah were not loading, with some restored but others missing. Users often received messages claiming they violated community standards without clear explanations. As citizen journalism gains importance in conflict areas, Instagram's moderation challenges pose significant barriers (Gebeily, 2021).

Hypotheses of the Study: The study's central question is: How much do Instagram's content moderation guidelines affect sharing and posting about political events specifically the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events?

Depending on the above central question, the hypotheses of the study are as follows:

(H1): There is a statistically significant relationship between the political sensitivity of Instagram content and the likelihood of its removal or restriction by the platform's moderation system.

(H2): Posts related to the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events experienced significantly lower

reach and engagement metrics (views, likes, shares) compared to non-political or neutral content during the same period.

(H3): Instagram posts that include specific keywords, hashtags (e.g., #SheikhJarrah), or political imagery are significantly more likely to be flagged, removed, or shadow-banned compared to posts without these elements.

(H4): The users who engaged in digital activism during the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events reported a statistically significant higher frequency of account restrictions, content removal, or decreased visibility compared to users who did not engage in political content.

Significance of the Study

- The Theoretical Significance: The study contributes to a broader academic conversation about social media's role as a digital gatekeeper in political events. Additionally, it could increase our understanding of how digital platforms impact the formation of public opinion and the dissemination of political information.
- The Practical Significance: The study helps policymakers and human rights organizations understand and manage digital censorship mechanisms. Moreover, it supports lobbying efforts to increase the accountability and transparency of social media platforms policies.

Limitations of the Study

The study has the following limitations:

- Time Limitations: The events involving Sheikh Jarrah in 2021, and their impact on Instagram content moderation are the main theme of this study.
- Geographical Limitations: The study's focus is on content moderation in relation to digital activism in Palestine, particularly as it relates to the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.
- Platform-Specific Limitations: the study only looks at Instagram and ignores content

moderation procedures on other platforms during the events such as Facebook, Twitter (X) and TikTok etc. which might have different rules and procedures.

Research Approach: The use of statistical analysis, structured hypotheses, and numerical data from a questionnaire clearly indicates a quantitative research approach.

This study is based on the following key variables:

- Independent Variables which are the policies and practices of Instagram's content moderation (including post removal and account restrictions).
- Dependent Variables which include the visibility and reach of posts related to Sheikh Jarrah events, user engagement with political content on Instagram, the extent of digital activism facilitated or hindered by Instagram's policies, the perceived censorship and suppression of content by Instagram users.

Statistical Processing: SPSS was used to analyse the collected data. The following statistical techniques were used in the data analysis:

1. Frequencies and percentages to describe the responses of the study sample.
2. Descriptive statistical techniques including means and standard deviations.

Data Collection Tool (Questionnaire): This study's tool is based on a questionnaire that was used in Rayyan's study (2022), and it was re-analyzed in this study to test new hypotheses and new questions within the new theoretical framework. Some questions were selected and adapted to suit the objectives of the current study. This study differs from the original study in its hypotheses, theoretical framework, and analysis, thus allowing for a new interpretation of the data.

The axes of the questionnaire, which were used, were as follows:

1. Demographic data of the respondents.
2. Using Instagram platform.
3. Interacting with hashtags and participating in publishing.
4. Content moderation and restrictions.

Sample's Type and Size: The sample of the study was selected using the "snowball sampling" method (Goodman, 1961) due to the difficulty of directly accessing politically active Instagram users. Social sciences studies frequently employ this sampling technique to target particular online communities or populations that are difficult to reach through random sampling, such as users who interacted with politically sensitive Instagram content about the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events.

The sample size was 304 individuals, which is considered adequate according to the standards followed in descriptive studies that employ quantitative analysis (Roscoe, 1975); (Sekaran & Bougie, 2017), especially since the objective is not statistical generalization, but rather analytical understanding of the phenomenon.

Validity and Reliability Tests: To ensure the validity of the study's tool, its apparent validity was verified by presenting it to a group of arbitrators specializing in digital media and quantitative studies. Reliability was also verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values reaching:

- For using Instagram platform axis: $\alpha = 0.82$
- For the interacting with hashtags and participating in publishing axis: $\alpha = 0.79$
- For the content moderation and restrictions axis: $\alpha = 0.85$

All of which were considered high and reflect good reliability of the tool.

Results and Discussions

Quantitative Results

Axis One: Demographic Data of the Respondents.

Table (1): Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample.

Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)	Category	Variable	
54.3%	165	Male	Gender	
45.7%	139	Female		
100%	304	Total		
69.1%	210	18 – <29	Age	
24.7%	75	29 – <40		
3.9%	12	40 – <51		
2.3%	7	51+		
100%	304	Total		
4.3%	13	Less than Secondary	Education	
30.9%	94	Secondary School		
46.1%	140	Bachelor's		
15.1%	46	Master's		
3.6%	11	PhD		
100%	304	Total		
48.68%	148	Arab countries (excluding Palestine)		Region
6.91%	21	Palestine – West Bank		
3.95%	12	Palestine – Gaza		
2.0%	6	1948 occupied Palestine		
28.95%	88	Türkiye		
4.6%	14	Europe		
3.3%	10	Asia (non-Arab)		
1.31%	4	North/South America		
0.3%	1	Africa (non-Arab)		
100%	304	Total		

A total of 304 participants responded to the questionnaire, with 54.3% identifying as male and 45.7% as female. The majority of the respondents (69.1%) were between the ages of 18 and 28, coinciding with Instagram's most active demographic (Statista, 2021). This age distribution suggested a digitally native sample likely to engage with social media as a source of news and activism. Such findings are consistent with (Kraidy, 2009) and (Wazzan & Aldamen, 2023) who emphasized how youth

use social media to maintain transnational political awareness.

On the educational level, 46.1% held a Bachelor's degree, and 30.9% had completed secondary school. The sample's relatively high level of education supports the assumption that respondents were capable of critically engaging with content and navigating the digital environment consciously.

Axis Two: Using the Instagram Platform.

Table (2): Descriptive Statistics of Instagram Usage Among the Sample.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Rarely	14	4.6%
Little	24	7.9%
Medium	86	28.3%
A Lot	100	32.9%
Very Much	80	26.3%
Total	304	100%
Mean = 3.68 SD = 1.09 Importance Level = High		

The data indicates that Instagram is a highly used platform among respondents. With a mean score of 3.68 and nearly 60% reporting usage as "A Lot" or "Very Much", Instagram is shown to be a central platform in participants' daily digital routines, particularly during politically relevant events.

Table (3): Frequency of Viewing Instagram Posts About Palestine.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	6	2.0%
Rarely	42	13.8%
Little	52	17.1%
Medium	77	25.3%
A Lot	71	23.4%
Very Much	56	18.4%
Total	304	100%
Mean = 3.10 SD = 1.37 Importance Level = Medium		

The respondents displayed moderate engagement with Palestinian-related content on Instagram. While 41.8% reported viewing such content "A Lot" or "Very Much", the overall mean indicates moderate interest or presence of such topics in their Instagram feeds.

Table (4): Frequency of Viewing Posts About Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	7	2.3%
Rarely	28	9.2%
Little	47	15.5%
Medium	69	22.7%
A Lot	66	21.7%
Very Much	87	28.6%
Total	304	100%
Mean = 3.38 SD = 1.40 Importance Level = Medium–High		

The respondents had relatively higher exposure to the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah-related content, with over 50% viewing such posts "A Lot" or "Very Much". This suggests the event was highly visible and timely on Instagram. Importantly, even minimal discrepancies in responses such as the 0.3% difference between those who had never seen posts about Palestine versus Sheikh Jarrah, can be attributed to differences in the specificity of the questions and memory recall. The Sheikh Jarrah question was both time- and location-specific, while the Palestine question was broader. Such minor statistical variations are common and fall within acceptable error margins (Field, 2018).

Table (5): Type of Knowledge Gained from Instagram About Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Knowledge Acquired	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Further updated via Instagram	152	50.0%
First heard about it via Instagram	96	31.6%
Did not gain any knowledge	33	10.9%
Not sure	23	7.6%
Total	304	100%
Mean = 2.24 SD = 0.9 Importance Level = Moderate		

Half of the respondents were further informed about the events through Instagram, and nearly one-third learned of it for the first time via the platform. This is consistent with the findings of (Aldamen, 2023b) and (Mohammad & Aldamen, 2023) that social media platforms have various gratifications including information access and providing news and knowledge. A minority reported not

gaining any information, while a small percentage were unsure. The average knowledge acquisition score is 2.24 out of 3, with a standard deviation of 0.94, indicating moderate variation among responses. This suggests a moderate level of awareness gained through Instagram. While the platform contributed significantly to informing users about the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events, it was not the sole source of knowledge for all users.

Table (6): Means of Following Sheikh Jarrah Events on Instagram.

Method of Following	Frequency	Percentage (%)
By following influencer Instagram pages	91	29.9%
By following hashtags on Instagram	33	10.9%
By following news channels' Instagram pages	32	10.5%
Influencers + Hashtags	55	18.1%
Influencers + News channels	22	7.2%
Hashtags + News channels	8	2.6%
Influencers + Hashtags + News channels	63	20.7%
Total	304	100%
Mean 3.94 SD = 2.01 Importance Level = Moderate		

The findings in this axis showed that Instagram had a good effect in keeping the users updated with the events, as more than 80% of the study sample did not know about the things occurring during the event in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood or were further informed about it via Instagram. More than half of the study sample watched and followed up on the live videos that covered the events in the neighbourhood. These findings align with (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), who proposed that users on digital platforms can act as "audience gatekeepers," selectively amplifying certain content. However, concerns were raised about the spread of outdated or misleading visuals, highlighting the double-edged nature of citizen reporting (Kwon *et al.*, 2012).

Axis 3: Interacting with Hashtags and Participating in Publishing.

Table (7): Most Frequently Encountered Hashtags During the Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Hashtags	Frequency	Percentage (%)
#Gaza	73	16.8%
#حي الشيخ جراح	63	14.6%
#انقذوا حي الشيخ جراح	61	14.0%
#SaveSheikhJarrah	55	12.7%
#FreePalestine	53	12.2%
#GazaUnderAttack	46	10.6%
#Palestine	40	9.2%
#الأقصى	30	6.9%
#StopTheGenocide	13	3.0%
Total	434	100%
	* Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer	

The respondents most frequently recalled encountering the hashtag #Gaza (16.8%), followed by #حي الشيخ جراح (14.6%), and #انقذوا حي الشيخ جراح (14.0%). These findings highlighted the diversity of hashtags circulating around the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events, indicating widespread digital attention and engagement across both Arabic and English terms.

Table (8): Hashtags Used by Respondents During the Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Hashtags	Frequency	Per cent
#Gaza	68	16.6%
#حي الشيخ جراح	57	14.0%
#انقذوا حي الشيخ جراح	53	13.0%
#FreePalestine	52	12.7%
#SaveSheikhJarrah	47	11.5%
#GazaUnderAttack	44	10.8%
#Palestine	39	9.5%
#الأقصى	21	5.2%
#StopTheGenocide	15	3.8%
Other hashtags	7	1.7%
Did not share hashtags	5	1.2%
Total	408	100%
	Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer	

The respondents most frequently reported using #Gaza (16.6%) and #حي الشيخ جراح (14.0%) during the the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah

events. Only a small proportion (1.2%) said they did not share any hashtags, indicating widespread participatory behavior via hashtag usage.

Table (9): Watching Instagram Live Videos About the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	200	65.8%
No	60	19.7%
I do not remember	44	14.5%
Total	304	100%
Mean= 2.46 SD = 0.71 Importance Level: High		

The average engagement score for watching live videos related to the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events is 2.46 out of 3, indicating a high level of user engagement. With over 65% of respondents confirming they had watched live content, Instagram served as a vital tool for real-time coverage and visual storytelling. This underscores the platform's role not only as a social space but also as a vehicle for citizen journalism, particularly during politically sensitive events. Social media users are no longer passive recipients. Rather, they have become active citizens who possess the tools to effectively participate in the public sphere (Hamouda & Abdallah, 2024).

Table (10): Frequency of Sharing Instagram Stories About Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	19	6.3%
Rarely	49	16.1%
Little	57	18.8%
Medium	76	25.0%
A Lot	56	18.4%
Very Much	47	15.5%
Total	304	100%
Mean =3.80 SD = 1.42 Importance Level: Moderate to High		

Instagram story sharing was slightly higher than regular posts, with a mean of 2.80. This suggests that many users preferred temporary forms of sharing, which may feel more immediate or less risky. The average engagement score with Sheikh Jarrah stories is 3.80 out of 6, with a standard deviation of 1.42,

indicating a moderate to high level of interaction among users. The distribution shows that while a segment of users interacted lightly or rarely, a large portion (nearly 59%) engaged with stories at a medium to very high level. This reflects the relevance of visual and short-form content (like Instagram Stories) in driving awareness and connection to political events.

Table (11): Frequency of Sharing Posts About Sheikh Jarrah Events.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	27	8.9%
Rarely	45	14.8%
Little	53	17.4%
Medium	78	25.7%
A Lot	53	17.4%
Very Much	48	15.8%
Total	304	100%
Mean = 2.80 SD = 1.47 Importance Level: Medium		

Post sharing was reported at a moderate level, with a mean of 2.75. While 58.9% of respondents shared content to some extent, only 33.2% shared "A Lot" or "Very Much", indicating a gap between passive viewing and active dissemination.

Axis Four: Content Moderation and Restrictions

Table (12): Personal Experience of Post Removal.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	% of Eligible Respondents (n=277)	% of Total Respondents (n=304)
Yes	109	39.4%	35.9%
No	168	60.6%	55.3%
Total	277	100%	91.1%
Mean = 1.39 SD = 0.49 Importance Level: Low			

This question was directed only to those respondents who reported having shared posts related to the Sheikh Jarrah events (n=277). As a result, only 91.1% of the total sample (n=304) responded to this item, while 8.9% were excluded based on their earlier answers. Statistically, the mean score (on a 2-point scale: 2 = Yes, 1 = No) was 1.39, suggesting a low level of content removal on average, despite the significant 39.4% affected. The standard

deviation of 0.49 indicates moderate variability among the responses.

Table (13): Experience of Being Blocked or Restricted from Posting or Commenting.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	% of Eligible Respondents (n=277)	% of Total Respondents (n=304)
Yes	69	24.9%	22.7%
No	208	75.1%	68.4%
Total	277	100%	91.1%
Mean = 1.25 SD = 0.43 Importance Level: Low			

This question was directed only to those respondents who reported having shared posts related to the Sheikh Jarrah events (n=277). Although 1 in 4 users reported being restricted, which is not insignificant, the overall average response suggests that direct account-based punishment by Instagram was not the dominant experience. But the fact that such acts still occur still raises serious questions regarding the right to free speech especially in situations involving politics or conflicts. This finding supports findings from other tables (like hashtag suppression and content removal) suggesting that Instagrams moderation approach might give content suppression precedence over explicit user restrictions.

Table (14): Knowing Someone Blocked or Restricted Due to Event-Related Posts.

Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	240	78.9%
No	64	21.1%
Total	304	100%
Mean = 1.79 SD = 0.41 Importance Level: High		

A substantial portion (78.9%) of the respondents knew someone who had been blocked or restricted on Instagram for sharing content related to the events. The data indicates a strong and consistent agreement among respondents regarding the survey item, with a high level of importance attributed to the topic. This suggests that addressing this area could be crucial for stakeholders or decision-makers aiming to align with the perspectives of the majority.

Testing the Hypotheses

The study's findings indicated that 39.4% of the respondents who posted content related to the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events had their posts removed from Instagram, while 24.9% reported being blocked from posting or commenting directly. Although the mean restriction experience (1.39 out of 2) indicated a relatively low level. This percentage was considered high within the sensitive political context of the event, reinforcing the existence of a relationship between the sensitivity of political content and an increased likelihood of restriction or deletion. Furthermore, 78.9% of the respondents confirmed that they knew people who had been restricted due to their political posts. These findings confirmed that the sensitivity of political content was a key factor in the platform's decisions regarding removal or restriction. These findings as well, supported the Hypothesis (H1) that there was a statistically significant relationship between the political sensitivity of Instagram content and the likelihood of its removal or restriction by the platform's moderation system.

Human Rights Watch, (2023) and 7amleh (2021) found systemic censorship on Meta platforms. Instagram changed its algorithm to prioritize original content over reshared posts after accusations of bias during the Gaza conflict, which resulted in decreased visibility for pro-Palestinian messages. Instagram stated the algorithm aimed to showcase unique stories from friends, not suppress opinions (BBC News, 2021). This situation was termed algorithmic erasure, affecting already marginalized narratives (El-Khaldi, 2024).

The findings showed that approximately 31.6% of the respondents said that they first learned about the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events via Instagram, indicating that the platform was a primary means of disseminating information. However, many users noted a significant

decline in engagement with their posts about the event compared to other content. This decline could not be separated from the content moderation policies implemented during this period, as the heavy use of political hashtags was accompanied by a significant decline in reach and engagement rates. Therefore, the study's findings clearly indicated a significant decline in engagement with Sheikh Jarrah posts compared to non-political content, supporting the second hypothesis. This supports Hypothesis (H2) that the posts related to the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah events experienced significantly lower reach and engagement metrics (views, likes, shares) compared to non-political or neutral content during the same period. Visual content such as photos, videos, and stories were also widely used, indicating that multiple content formats were subject to moderation.

The findings in the Tables 7 and 8 showed that the hashtags related to the Palestinian cause, such as #SaveSheikhJarrah, #FreePalestine, and #Gaza, were the most commonly used among the respondents and were frequently reported as hashtags that were restricted or hidden by the platform's algorithms. Additionally, the use of visual media, such as live broadcasts (65.8%), images of raids, and videos of confrontations, accounted for a significant portion of the content targeted for deletion or reduced visibility. This pattern confirms that content containing linguistic or visual elements of a political nature was more likely to be restricted than regular content, supporting the third Hypothesis (H3) that Instagram posts which include specific keywords, hashtags (e.g., #SheikhJarrah), or political imagery are significantly more likely to be flagged, removed, or shadow-banned compared to posts without these elements.

The study's findings revealed that users who engaged in political posting during the events

were more likely to experience restrictions. A percentage of 24.9% of the respondents reported experiencing direct account restrictions, 39.4% reported having their posts removed, and 78.9% indicated they knew people who had been restricted. These percentages reflect a significant relationship between engaging in political digital activism and an increased likelihood of experiencing restrictions, compared to users who did not engage in political content. Furthermore, engagement rates for political stories and posts were lower than expected, despite widespread interest in the topic. This reinforced the hypothesis that Instagram's policies have negatively impacted Palestinian freedom of expression and digital activism, which supported Hypothesis (H4) that the users who engaged in digital activism during the Sheikh Jarrah events reported a statistically significant higher frequency of account restrictions, content removal, or decreased visibility compared to users who did not engage in political content. These individual experiences highlight the emergence of what scholars call algorithmic resistance; the act of navigating and subverting platform rules to maintain political expression (Klinger & Svensson, 2018). As the gatekeepers in social media platform or news account decide whether the information was worthy to be shared or not (Lewin, 1943), that is what makes some content go viral. Instagram's limitations on political content undermined Palestinian digital activism and freedom of expression.

Conclusion

Media platforms play a key role in choosing and displaying news, which shapes public policy and opinion. Their way of presenting stories helps form collective memory (Aldamen & Abdul Jaleel, 2024a). They frame events, spread information, and create spaces for public discussion. As well as, the media could form stereotypes and fuel resentment

towards certain groups, which are already marginalized or misunderstood (Aldamen & Thasleem, 2025). Studies showed that media and social media are vital sources of information about global events and significantly affect audience views on political and humanitarian issues (Aldamen & Abdul Jaleel, 2024b).

In the Middle East, where mainstream media often supports the regimes, social media platforms act as an important tool for citizen journalism and activism. Abdallah & Hamouda (2023) highlighted crowd-sourcing journalism's role and its support from digital audiences. Regarding Palestine's issues, Instagram's gatekeeping has been even more vividly and urgently on display. Pro-Palestine activists have accused the photo-sharing platform of systematically removing content about their cause (El-Khaldi, 2024). Human Rights Watch (2023) said that a wave of takedowns by Meta had been silently monitoring the posting of photos and videos of Palestinians 'suffering', thus continuing a long process of erasure (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). The findings highlight Instagram's evolving role from a passive platform to an active curator of political discourse. While it enables mobilization, it also enforces boundaries, especially in contentious geopolitical contexts like Palestine.

The findings clearly reflect how algorithms and platforms themselves have become the new gatekeepers, operating in an invisible but effective manner to regulate, categorize, and block content based on unspoken commercial or political criteria. Thus, the concept of the "gatekeeper" has not disappeared in the digital environment, as some might think. Rather, it has been reproduced digitally in algorithmic form, with platforms like Instagram directly controlling the type of political content that reaches the public.

The findings demonstrate that Instagram is now an active participant in influencing political discourse rather than a neutral platform. Its moderation policies have significant ramifications for digital activism and collective memory in addition to individual expression. These findings also emphasize the need for more accountability transparency and context-aware moderation in the handling of political content particularly in areas of conflict. This emphasizes how social media is important for political awareness particularly given the constraints of traditional media. Notwithstanding algorithmic suppression users exhibited adaptive behaviors like relying on influencers utilizing alternative hashtags or moving to visual formats (live videos stories). This type of algorithmic resistance demonstrates how digital activists' tactics are changing in constrained environments.

Recommendations

The findings of this study support the worries expressed by journalists and advocates for digital rights demonstrating how Instagram governance has a substantial impact on the dynamics of digital activism information access and free speech. In order to get around limitations activists and users should create resilience strategies that use alternate techniques like infographics visual storytelling and platform switching. To combat digital silencing and promote content cooperation with journalists and influencers can be beneficial. To promote policy reform, it is essential to systematically record and notify advocacy groups and digital rights organizations of instances of censorship. It is also necessary to monitor and control content moderation by creating frameworks for policies that hold social media companies responsible for their politically biased moderation practices.

Longitudinal studies will be useful in examining how content moderation affects public opinion and digital activism over the

long run in conflict areas. It is crucial to inform users about algorithmic filtering censorship and content moderation procedures. This understanding enables users to successfully navigate and use digital spaces during pivotal sociopolitical moments.

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- **Ethical approval and consent to participate:** Informed consent and voluntary participation were obtained. All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation in this study.
- **Author Contributions:** This study utilizes field data that were previously collected as part of a master's thesis defended by Omar Rayyan under the supervision of the corresponding author in 2022. The dataset has been reanalyzed in the present study to examine new hypotheses within a different theoretical framework. The corresponding author contributed to the development of the current manuscript, including the formulation of the revised theoretical framework, hypotheses, data analysis, and the integration of updated references.
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