Degrees of Freedom: Exploring Agency, Narratives, and Technological Affordances in the #TakeAKnee Controversy

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Abstract
This study extends current research into social media platforms as counterpublic spaces by examining how the social media narratives produced by the #TakeAKnee controversy negotiate technological affordances and existing discourses surrounding American national identity. Giddens’ Structuration Theory is used to explore the nature of user agency on social media platforms and the extent to which this agency is constrained or enabled by the interplay between the systems and structures that guide social media use. Exploratory qualitative content analysis was used to analyze and compare tweets and Instagram posts using the #TakeAKnee hashtag shared in September 2017. Results showed that narratives are dominated by four themes, freedom, unity, equality and justice, and respect and honor. Users actively employ technological affordances to create highly personalized meanings, affirming that agency operates at the intersection of reflexivity and self-efficacy.

Keywords
social media use, user agency, structuration theory, American national identity, qualitative analysis, affordances

“Being American is what brings US all together. Not the things that divides US.” This is one of the many tweets that addressed the #TakeAKnee controversy that erupted in September 2017. The controversy started when, on 23 September, president Trump took to Twitter to critique National Football League (NFL) players such as Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. This tweet prompted multiple football players to follow Kaepernick’s example and led to an overwhelming social media response debating the movement and the values attached to the national anthem and the flag.

What it means to be American has been the center of much debate. Even though one cannot speak of a single “true” American identity, research has identified several values that form the foundation of American national identity: Liberty, equality, unity in diversity, as well as symbols such as the flag (Hutcheson, Domke, Billeudeaux, & Garland, 2004; Kemmelmeier & Winter, 2008). As with any collective or individual identity, US national identity is a construction, and people actively contribute to what it means to be an American through public expressions and interactions (Hutcheson et al., 2004). With the advent of social media, this construction has become more democratic and inclusive, as evidenced by the #TakeAKnee debate, where the hashtag was used to elaborate on social media users’ understanding of Americanness.
themselves on these platforms, that is, act in ways that reflect their individual agency.

This study aims to explore these factors and their impact by investigating the extent to which social media users’ ability to express themselves is constrained and/or encouraged by extant social beliefs and technological affordances of social media platforms through a comparative analysis of Twitter and Instagram responses to the 2017 #TakeAKnee controversy. Relying on Giddens’ Structuration Theory, the study will provide insight into what agency looks like on social media platforms and how this fits with current understandings of agentic actions. Giddens’ theory is especially relevant for this study as its elaboration of the interrelationship between individual reflection and actions on one hand, and the socio-cultural environment on the other hand, perfectly captures the tensions faced by social media users in negotiating their agency on these platforms. While social media users perceive and utilize these platforms as sites of highly individualized self-expression and identity performance, they also show a clear understanding that their actions are part of a larger socio-technological context, both in terms of potential audiences and norms and values as well as technological affordances that they have configure into their behaviors (e.g. Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Vitak, 2012).

In this article, I first discuss how agency has been conceptualized and how extant understandings have been applied to digital media. Next, I present findings from a qualitative investigation that compares tweets and Instagram posts bearing the hashtag #TakeAKnee and posted between 23 September and 1 October 2017 to explore the meanings produced on both platforms and gain a better understanding of the nature of user agency in digital environments.

Defining Agency, Structures, and Systems

Agency centers on people’s ability to choose actions that are based on a consideration of past behaviors and possible future outcomes, and that take place within an environment that influences and is shaped by human decisions (e.g. Barandiaran, Di Paolo, & Rohde, 2009; Cockerham, 2005). Individuals’ relationships with their environment is an essential and controversial aspect of agency. Giddens (1979) unpacked this relationship in his structuration theory. According to this theory, structure, or the “rules and resources” (Giddens, 1984, p. 19) that organize behavior, both enables and constrains agency. People cannot act outside of social norms, rules, and resources and yet these also make it possible for them to act. In fact, structuration, or the process through which dominant rules and norms are reproduced and transformed, and which shapes social interactions or systems, is according to Giddens (1979) a part of even the most radical forms of social change.

The extent to which one’s environment can limit one’s actions before these are no longer considered agentic has been the center of some debate. Some scholars propagate the idea that agentic abilities are diametrically opposed to sociocultural frameworks, with the latter limiting and dictating the former (e.g. Kennedy & Moss, 2015). Whenever one’s behavioral intentions do not align with one’s actual behavior because of restraining outside forces, the actions one ends up taking are a form of “constrained agency” (e.g. Damman & Henkens, 2017, p. 225). The idea that agency can be limited by one’s environment is not without its detractors though. Herndal and Licona (2007) take issue with the use of the term “constrain” to designate a situation where actors’ capability to act is limited. They argue that constrained agency, a specific category of agency that occurs when agency and authority intersect, in fact offers plenty of possibilities for action and can be seen as an opportunity to engender change. Others posit that agency refers to the extent to which an individual can curb the influence one’s environment has on one’s actions, implying that true agency entails the ability to create the environment in which one acts (Barandiaran et al., 2009). Others subscribe to Giddens’ original ideas and argue that that people’s freedom to act is inexorably linked to their position as social beings, creating “situated agency” (Weber, 2013, p. 291). This view of agency recognizes the inexorable role played by one’s environment and holds that agency and structures should not be seen as completely independent, but as complementing one another (Kirchberg, 2007).

The key here appears to be reflexivity and choice: It is the reflection on and interpretation of extant structures and the application of these structures to social interactions that results in agency (e.g. Geneve, 2009; Giddens, 1984; Kirchberg, 2007), even if this, as Frairberg (1992) posits, results in the incorporation of hegemonic ideas into one’s actions. Agency is thus not only the freedom or autonomy to make decisions that impact one’s life, but also includes a self-reflexive awareness of the forces that shape these decisions as well as the belief that one is sufficiently empowered to act and create results, or self-efficacy (e.g. Damman & Henkens, 2017; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

Meaning Making, Agency, and Digital Culture

So how does this conceptualization of agency translate to the social media environment? Social media serve as prime platforms for the construction of shared cultural understandings. In his seminal piece on digital cultures, Deuze (2006) envisions the Internet users’ agency as central to the process of creating digital cultures. Deuze (2008) builds his ideas on scholars such as Jenkins (2006), who views digital participatory cultures as made up of engaged, interacting consumers who participate in active meaning-making, that is, “enact their agency” (p. 6). Digital culture and its various building blocks can be seen as the result of human agency, or the “technological, cultural, and social choices made by people” (Shifman, 2012, p. 190). This view of the social media user
as an active creator of meaning, a free agent able to produce, consider, and collaborate at will is reflected in a changing understanding of political agency. Whereas in the past, this agency was evaluated based on physical activities, today, the communication that goes into the creation of a political movement is as much as a sign of political agency as the movement’s performance in a public space (Kavada, 2016).

Some scholars argue that digital media do not just allow people to engage in agentic actions, but that these environments increase individual agency (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012). Digital platforms afford people with unlimited opportunities to connect, share and find information, and take action, allowing them to engage in collective action and creating what Bimber et al. dubbed “technology enabled agency” (p. 187). Collective action has thus become more about individual agency; that is, people prefer to express their civic engagement in ways that are public, yet highly personal and some might argue narcissist (e.g. Papacharissi, 2009), but that do render the groups and institutions that in the past structured and guided people’s social involvement less relevant. In this sense, Bimber et al. ’s view of agency in the digital age reflects Giddens’ (1984) view that agency reflects people’s ability to take action “in the first place” (p. 9), but with the addition that digital media provides people with the opportunity to take more action than ever before.

However, this focus on individual agency as the driving force behind social change ignores the importance of the social, political, cultural, and economic context that guides and shapes individual actions, that is, the structure that shapes and is informed by individual agency (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Sun (2009) wonders whether the use of digital media for communication does not also result in a user “confined to a structure and a system of technologies” (p. 257), creating constrained agency, “which combines opportunities for action with impositions on that action” (Weber, 2013, p. 293). Not everyone views the structures that constitute the digital environment as constricting though. Some argue that agency on social media platforms exists in the interplay between individual behaviors on these platforms and the digital structures that both inform and are informed by these behaviors (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013). Wiggins and Bowers (2015), in their discussion of the creation of memes, argue that structure and systems are an essential aspect of people’s ability to express their creativity (and thus their agency), as memes are created through the collaborative tweaking of extant structures (i.e. rules and resources). In short, an examination of digital structures and how they shape individual behavior on social media platforms is paramount if one is to understand how these platforms inform political change.

This study aims to do just that by examining how individuals use different social media platforms to create meaning. Through an exploratory examination of meanings constructed on Twitter and Instagram in response to the #TakeAKnee controversy, this study aims to answer the question whether the structures and systems afforded by each platform influence the narratives that people create on these platforms. By comparing a picture-based, broadcast-oriented platform such as Instagram to Twitter, a medium that is, in its origin, meant to be mainly textual and geared to be far more interactive, this analysis will shed light on the extent to which people’s responses are shaped and constrained by the affordances of each platform. This in turn will provide insight into how agency is constrained or enabled by the interplay between the systems and structures that guide social media use.

**Analyzing #TakeAKnee**

The controversial tradition now known as “#TakeAKnee” first started in August of 2016, when NFL player Colin Kaepernick refused to stand during the playing of the national anthem in protest of police brutality against African Americans. While Kaepernick and a handful of other African American athletes continued to kneel during the pre-game rendition of the national anthem, the protest did not become widespread until in September 2017 president Trump tweeted his disapproval of their actions. On 24 September, numerous players across the country joined in the protest, either by kneeling during the national anthem or by linking arms. This created an overwhelming response on social media, with the hashtags #TakeAKnee (as well as variants such as #TakeTheKnee and #TakeAKneeNFL) quickly reaching the top trending lists (Belson, 2017; Heaney, 2018; Hirschfield Davis, 2017).

These particular hashtags form an interesting case study as responses to #TakeAKnee provide insight into how social media construct a shared understanding of what it means to be American. Since the protest took place during the national anthem, it generated a great deal of discussion centered on the meaning of this particular symbol as well as the protest, and subsequently, on the meaning of Americanness. This is not the first time that social media has been used to discuss athletes’ protests and simultaneously (re)negotiate discourses about national identity. Consider, for example, how fans utilize social media to both respond to international sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup and re-enact their national identity (e.g. Billings, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2015). Similarly, #TakeAKnee garnered a wide response, with people performing the American identity through replication and (re)creation of narratives that involved the use of symbols and other cultural references. Through the users’ public identity performances, these interpretations of shared ideas became part of a stock of cultural artifacts that contributed to national understandings of the American identity and provided others with material for their own identity performance (Hogan, 2010).

Furthermore, the analysis of social media responses to the protest also sheds light on the discursive struggle that is common to online spaces. The creation of any national identity always hinges on the “discursive construction of topoi
used to further refine the different themes. This was carried out using individual code. The themes were then refined using an iterative, interpretive, iterative approach similar to that used by grounded theory. Study design and sampling techniques are flexible, informed by the concepts that are derived from the material under study (Corbin, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1994 p. 273). While interpretive content analysis also views the text as a starting point, this study conducted a qualitative content analysis of publicly available tweets and Instagram posts bearing the #TakeAKnee, #TakeTheKnee, and #TakeAKneeNFL hashtags that were posted between 23 September and 1 October 2017. Data collection took place using Twitter’s advanced search function. Publicly available tweets were collected using an html-based web scraper. Collecting publicly available Instagram posts was carried out using the Instagram search function. Since this platform does not allow for the narrowing down of a search by date, all posts bearing the hashtag #TakeAKnee, #TakeAKneeNFL, and #TakeTheKnee were collected. During the content analysis, only those posts that were made public the week after the start of the trend were analyzed.

Interpretive content analysis was used to analyze tweets and Instagram posts. This qualitative method uses an inductive, iterative approach similar to that used by grounded theory. Grounded theory takes empirical data as a starting point, using it to formulate concepts and eventually develop theory through a process known as constant comparison. Study design and sampling techniques are flexible, informed by the concepts that are derived from the material under study (Corbin, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1994 p. 273). While interpretive content analysis also views the text as a starting point, it relies on sensitizing concepts to guide data collection and analysis. Interpretive content analysis sets out to formulate overarching themes that capture latent patterns in a text and shed light on the cultural phenomena under investigation through a close reading coupled with the constant comparison technique (Ahuvia, 2001; Bowen, 2006; Hjimans, 1996). In this study, analysis began with a corpus of 200 tweets and 200 Instagram posts. Each tweet and post was subjected to a close reading and coded for the manifest themes it addressed. Coding considered visual as well as textual material that was part of each message. After coding the first 200 posts and tweets this way, the tweets and posts were grouped into categories or themes that captured the latent meaning of each individual code. The themes were then refined using an iterative process, whereby yet uncoded tweets and posts were used to further refine the different themes. This was carried out until theoretical saturation had been reached. A total of 348 tweets and 396 Instagram posts were analyzed for this study.

Constructing #TakeAKnee: Dissecting Narratives

The narratives that were produced on both platforms centered on freedom as a central tenet to American society, unity as one of the markers and goals of the United States, equality and justice, and discussions on the meaning of respect (for the country). The method by which these narratives were constructed also reflected similar patterns, although some divergences between the two were observed as well. Details on the number of posts coded for each theme can be found in the Appendix.

Freedom

A number of tweets and Instagram posts centered on the notion of freedom, specifically freedom of speech and the freedom to protest as outlined in the US constitution. Supporters of the #TakeAKnee movement on both platforms invoked the US constitution, decisions made by the US Supreme court, as well as the US Flag Code and the declaration of human rights to justify the #TakeAKnee movement, arguing that every American is free to protest in whatever way they see fit (e.g. “This is what freedom in America looks like”—Instagram, 24 September 2017, a post accompanied by four pictures of kneeling NFL athletes). The First Amendment[4] was specifically invoked as a way to bolster their support of the #TakeAKnee movement. On Instagram, many users did this simply using “#FirstAmendment” in combination with the #TakeAKnee hashtag, whereas on Twitter, people opted to more explicitly address why this protest was legal by linking to videos or newspaper articles explaining relevant laws. Both Twitter and Instagram users often added pictures or drawings of kneeling African American athletes to this message.

People on both platforms linked the idea of freedom to the belief that not everyone is equally free, and that therefore the protests associated with #TakeAKnee, with their aim to render everyone equal, are worthwhile. This unwavering belief that freedom is an inalienable American right that should be accessible to everyone was reflected in a number of Instagram posts that used pictures from the Civil Rights movement and comments that reflect the ongoing battle African Americans have faced to be free. Furthermore, both Instagram and Twitter users elaborated on the freedom trope by arguing that the armed forces (often an integral part of the opening ceremony of any NFL game) exist to these basic American freedoms, including the right to protest:

I served 4 years active duty to allow others the freedom to #TakeAKnee. Americans have the right to peacefully protest &
use their rights. (Twitter, 24 September 2017, tweet included a picture of a US service member aboard a navy vessel)

On both platforms, tweets attacked opponents of the #TakeAKnee movement for limiting the supporters’ freedoms (e.g. one tweet argued that people could not be “for freedom” and “force allegiance! #TakeAKnee”—Twitter, 24 September 2017) arguing that if they want everyone to stand for the national anthem, they should move to a country with a dictatorial regime.

Opponents of #TakeAKnee invoked the trope of freedom to bolster their arguments against the movement. Both platforms showed tweets and posts talking about having the freedom to boycott the NFL—acknowledging that while the United States does give players the freedom to protest, the capitalist nature of American society also means that these people have the freedom to boycott the entire venture:

They have right to #TakeAKnee & we can choose to reject their action & take our hard-earned $$’s elsewhere. We are fortunate 2B Americans. (Twitter, 24 September 2017)

In addition, opponents invoked the shared belief that “freedom isn’t free” (Instagram, 27 September 2017), arguing that kneeling for the flag disrespects the military who gave so much to ensure that Americans today are free. On Instagram, users shared pictures of US troops both in present and past conflicts. The narrative invoking respect for the military will be elaborated on further below.

When examining how these narratives are expressed, results show that both Twitter and Instagram users relied on many of the same techniques. Expressions on both platforms relied on images (especially of kneeling African American athletes and military members) to argue why NFL players are free to protest. Both Twitter and Instagram users utilized the affordances of the platform to the fullest extent. On Twitter, users linked to Instagram posts, videos, images, or outside links on Twitter to extend the then 140-character limit. On Instagram, people used screenshots of text (including Twitter threads, press releases, and quotes) and an endless list of hashtags to further define a message.

However, not all usage was the same. On Instagram, the hashtag was occasionally used to sell or promote a product, something that was not observed on Twitter. In addition, Instagram users chose to create more open-ended messages, and one post about a user’s military service and their support for the movement was accompanied by an image of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example. This added a layer of meaning that was not found among the sample of tweets.

Unity

The notion that America must be united to be successful was addressed on both Twitter and Instagram. Opponents and supporters of the #TakeAKnee movement disagreed on whether the movement actively divided the country or whether all Americans should unite and support #TakeAKnee in its fight against injustice.

Tweets and posts by supporters of the movement focused on uniting behind the players and showing solidarity with those who kneel. On Instagram, posts included #unity, #standunited, or #itsaboutus as hashtags combined with #TakeAKnee (or variations thereof) to indicate that unity is an essential element of the movement (e.g. “take a knee in unity. United we stand divided we fall #dowhatsright #united”—Instagram, 23 September 2017, accompanied by a picture of an empty football field). A popular drawing that circulated on both Twitter and Instagram featured the Statue of Liberty in a kneeling position, which on Instagram was accompanied by the hashtags #itsaboutus and #together, and on Twitter included the text, “If ur a true American patriot then you must fight for my right to protest even when it feels hard. #TakeAKnee or don’t protect me if I do, I would do the same for you.” Both centered on the idea that the Statue of Liberty, a major American symbol, represents unity above all. Responses on both platforms focused on how unity was an essential element of being an American:

Being American is what brings US all together. Not the things that divides US #TakeTheKnee #TakeAKnee #TakeAKneel. (Twitter, 24 September 2017)

Opponents of the #TakeAKnee movement who mentioned unity were mostly found on Twitter, where they argued that the movement was yet another strategy to divide the country. According to this narrative, one should not let something like this protest, distort, or divide the country as ultimately all that matters is that everyone is united through their American identity (“’United we stand, divided we fall. We’re Americans, & that is all’, #TakeAKnee #boycottNFL @ nfl”—Twitter, 29 September 2017). Tweets that were categorized into this theme often reflected a color-blind ideology, which argues that racism is no longer an issue, as everyone has equal chances (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Doane, 2007). This theme was repeated in a number of tweets, echoing findings from other studies that found that color-blindness is a position commonly used in social media posts to argue against online social justice movements (e.g. Carney, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2018).

Again, expressions on Twitter and Instagram appeared to rely on similar strategies to convey this particular narrative. What was particularly interesting about this theme was that only a few of the Instagram posts included in this study that opposed the #TakeAKnee movement focused on unity, and the few that did, did so solely through the use of hashtags such as #letsunite. In general, it appears that Instagram users relying on the unity narrative were much more likely to support the movement, relying on ideas and images also used on Twitter.
Equality and Justice

The majority of the tweets and Instagram posts analyzed for this study addressed the movement’s focus on equality and justice (or lack thereof). Large numbers of tweets and Instagram posts in support of the #TakeAKnee movement pointed to the racial injustice that formed the reason behind the movement. On both platforms, users addressed the facts surrounding police brutality and institutionalized racism, mentioning the lack of good education, mass incarceration, and especially the killing of unarmed African Americans by police officers. Both Instagram and Twitter users expressed frustration with the current situation, but Instagram users utilized pictures of civil rights protestors when expressing their support for the #TakeAKnee protest, asking their followers “what would Dr. King do?” (24 September 2017), in some cases merely adding the hashtags #TakeAKnee and #MartinLutherKing. On Twitter, users were more likely to link to news articles that provided evidence of racial injustice and police brutality toward minorities. Instagram in that sense could be seen as a platform for the digital archiving of historical artifacts as a way to justify the movement, whereas Twitter is a space where people share and discuss in real-time, providing insight into the currently evolving public consciousness.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that among supporters of the #TakeAKnee movement, equality and justice was viewed as a part of the American national identity. Tweets called Lieutenant General De Silva (the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) leader who told recruits that any racist beliefs were not welcome at the academy) a “true Americanhero.” (Twitter, 29 September 2017) and quoted the Washington Post, “Patriotism is recognizing that folk #TakeAKnee coz some citizens suffered from systemic inequality for centuries” (Twitter, 28 September 2017). Similar sentiments were observed on Instagram, with posts that contained screenshots of tweets arguing that patriotism is not blind obedience but means “asking your flag and anthem to mean what they claim to mean #TakeAKnee” (Instagram, 24 September 2017). Posts such as these reflect a belief that America is synonymous with equality and justice, and that action must be taken if not all Americans are treated equally.

On Twitter, this seems to have led to a backlash, with tweets arguing that the fact that everyone is American means that everyone has equal opportunities, reflecting the colorblind ideology discussed above. Kneeling for anything is perceived as a refusal to see this, as exemplified by the following tweet that argues that #TakeAKnee is offensive to Americans because:

> We are all Americans that is all that can unite us. There is a framework for equal justice for all. (Twitter, 28 September 2017)

Several users took this reasoning a step further and argued that the #TakeAKnee movement panders to minorities and is a form of race-baiting, that is, an attempt to render a topic that has nothing to do with race, racially charged, an argument common to neoliberalism and colorblindness (cf. Shafer, 2017). Moreover, on Twitter, the #BlueLivesMatter hashtag, created in response to #BlackLivesMatter, was used as a form of “content injection” (Conover, Ratkiewicz, Gonçales, Flammmini, & Menczer, 2011, p. 94) in response to allegations of police brutality. Opponents of the #TakeAKnee movement invoked this hashtag to share news stories of police killed in the line of duty and news stories about Colin Kaepernick donating money to a “group honoring convicted cop killer” (Twitter, 29 September 2017). The general theme here appeared to be that police officers are not the cause of the inequality and injustice that pervades American society but are in fact victims of unfair treatment and representation themselves.

The data that were categorized into this theme showed that while users on both platforms relied heavily on pictures to bolster their ideas and tended to cross-link to other social media platforms, there were some differences in how users expressed themselves. First, Twitter users were more likely to link to news stories in their tweets, while Instagram users had a tendency to share pictures from the civil rights movements to make their point. Second, opponents of the #TakeAKnee movement were more likely to use Twitter to express their disapproval of the movement and its claims about racial injustice. Finally, this particular category also revealed the importance of the use of hashtags on Instagram. Many of the Instagram posts that fell into this category did so solely because of the hashtags they used (e.g. a picture of a kneeling athlete with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter), which provided a specific semiotic frame for their post (cf. Rosenbaum, 2018).

Respect and Honor

Respecting the country and its symbols and what this respect should look like formed a considerable part of the tweets and Instagram posts analyzed for this study and this was frequently tied to a militaristic narrative.

One of the main critiques of the movement, voiced by opponents on both platforms, is that kneeling during the national anthem does not show the respect this national symbol deserves. Using hashtags such as #TakeAStand and #StandForOurAnthem, Twitter and Instagram users argued that by refusing to stand, NFL players are showing the ultimate disrespect. On both platforms, this lack of respect was commonly linked to the sacrifices made by the military. Using hashtags such as #FreedomIsn’tFree, social media users argued how the freedom that is central to the American identity is only possible thanks to the armed forces. On Instagram, pictures of the US military in action were often accompanied by comments such as this one:

> Thank you all who have served. I will never kneel during the American anthem, unlike @nfl, the American military are our true heroes. (Instagram, 27 September 2017)
Similar sentiments were expressed on Twitter, although without images, where users discussed how military members have, at times, sacrificed their lives for the United States, and that this should be respected by everyone, including NFL players. To these Twitter users, the link between the ideals represented by the flag and military sacrifice are natural. Tweets reference family members who have lost their lives in the Second World War to bolster their argument that they stand during the anthem because “it represents the best ideals of our country” (24 September 2017). As found in other work (e.g. Rosenbaum, 2018), tweets often expressed the belief that the military and other uniformed professions, such as the police, have become one of the symbols that represent the United States, on a par with the flag or the anthem.

Proponents of the #TakeAKnee movement appeared aware of the counterarguments that kneeling while the national anthem is played could be construed as disrespectful. Instagram and Twitter users alike took great care to explain how the movement is not about the anthem or the flag but is about fighting institutionalized racism. Especially interesting is the use of the word “our country” or “our nation” on both platforms. On Instagram, one user shared a note that draws parallels to roller derby and adds, “our nation has an injury at its heart, and it needs to be seen to quickly and safely. If one is down, so is all” (24 September 2017). Similarly, one tweet mentions how the same people who see kneeling as disrespectful to “our country” are those who fail to respect the individuals living in it (29 September 2017). This use of quotation marks references the competing discourses about whether non-White Americans can count themselves as part of the United States, with the quotation marks in the tweet marking the fact that this debate is still very much unresolved, especially on Twitter where opponents of the movement were far more active.

Another argument utilized on both platforms by users who supported the movement is the tension between conservatives’ use of national symbols and their criticism of the #TakeAKnee movement. On Instagram, users shared screenshots of the various clothing items adorned with the American flag that one can buy at stores like Walmart, questioning how wearing Star Spangled underwear is acceptable, but taking a knee is “un-American” (24 September 2017). Instagram and Twitter users alike shared pictures of confederate flags flown by many of the groups who disapprove of #TakeAKnee (e.g., National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) fans) and critiqued how these same people allegedly find kneeling for the American flag disrespectful. On Twitter, users relied on actual pictures, while Instagram posts that adhered to the same argument more commonly used cartoons or drawings of White people flying confederate flags.

Recognizing the centrality of “respecting the troops” to the American identity, #TakeAKnee supporters used both Instagram and Twitter to argue that kneeling during the national anthem is in fact not disrespectful to the US military. Veterans took to both platforms to share their support for the movement. At times, these messages were accompanied by links to pictures of the poster in uniform or in a clearly military setting, or images of Kaepernick kneeling. An overwhelming number of posts and tweets shared images of veterans kneeling, including a picture of White veteran kneeling in his backyard with the words: “My grandpa is a 97 year-old WWII veteran & Missouri farmer who wanted to join w/ those who take a knee: ‘Those kids have every right to protest’” that was shared on both platforms. On Instagram, a popular image that accompanied this narrative was a cartoon that features a kneeling Kaepernick and White people behind him yelling, “Get up Kaepernick, men died for your right to stand,” and two soldiers off to the side with the caption, “Actually, we died for his right to sit or stand.”

The narratives across both platforms are thus fairly similar, with users relying on similar imagery and hashtags to make their points. One interesting difference, however, was Twitter users’ tendency to rely on actual pictures compared to Instagram that more commonly featured cartoons with a similar message. The types of images shared appear to be tied to a social convention specific to each platform.

**Discussion: Agency and Social Media Use**

The starting point for this study was an attempt to establish which, if any, social and technological elements of social media use constrain or encourage user agency, utilizing the social media responses to the #TakeAKnee movement as a case study. Interpretive content analysis of 396 publicly available Instagram posts and 348 tweets that used this hashtag in September 2017 revealed that the narratives on both platforms could be grouped into four categories, freedom, unity, equality and justice, and respect and honor. Each category revealed the different ways in which social media users constructed American national identity and the strategies they used to create these narratives.

Narratives that touched on the freedom trope revealed that supporters of the #TakeAKnee movement view freedom to protest as an inalienable right protected by the US constitution, and one that the military has fought to protect. Opponents also viewed freedom as essential element of the American identity and used it to explain why they boycotted the NFL. Tweets and Instagram posts that centered on unity addressed the importance of unity to the American identity. On one hand, supporters discussed the importance of uniting behind kneeling NFL players and each other and used images of the Statue of Liberty to express how Americans needed to stand behind people who need it. Conversely, opponents argued that #TakeAKnee was divisive and that people should focus on what unites them: Being American. Supporters of #TakeAKnee used both platforms to argue that lack of equality and persistent racial injustice were the reason behind the movement and posited that a large part of the American national identity centers on equality and justice for all. In spite of the similarity in the narratives, Twitter users frequently linked to news stories
while Instagram posts were more likely to rely on pictures from the civil rights movement to make their point. Finally, opponents argued that kneeling during the anthem showed disrespect for the military who fought to keep the country free. Conversely, supporters claimed that the movement is not disrespectful toward the country or the armed services as #TakeAKnee centered on equality and freedom, which is the reason behind all military sacrifices.

Interestingly, the narratives within all four categories used similar strategies, including relying on the same images and cartoons and cross-linking to posts and tweets on the other platform under study. However, the data also revealed some divergence, with Instagram users sharing pictures that were less directly tied to the actual events and allowed for a more open interpretation, such as political cartoons, while Twitter users were more likely to link to news stories and images. In addition, hashtags played a very important role in attaching meaning to posts on Instagram: Often, the posts would contain nothing more than a picture of kneeling athletes and relied on hashtags such as #equality to render meaning to the image. Moreover, opponents of the movement only used Twitter to argue a color-blind ideology and express their support for the police using content injection in the form of hashtags such as #BlueLivesMatter. In addition, it was very common for Twitter users to share a tweet, news story, or other media expression they did not agree with, and use their own 140 characters to comment on the tweet. While posts on Instagram did feature reposts, none of these included posts that the poster did not agree with. This meant that the conversations observed on Twitter were far more agonistic (and in some cases antagonistic —see Mouffe, 1999, 2000) while expressions on Instagram contributed mainly to the creation of a safe, exclusive networked counterpublic (boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002, 2009).

These results reveal the centrality of reflexivity and choice to the performance of agency on Instagram and Twitter. Users actively employed dominant understandings of American national identity to debate ideas and positions that are not automatically part of the generalized American narrative. Supporters of the #TakeAKnee movement relied on extant shared discourses, calling on slogans (e.g. “united we stand”) and beliefs (e.g., America as the land of the free) that have been accepted as an inexorable part of American identity to construct a narrative that pushes back against the post-racial discourse that dominates American conversations about race. The usage of these dominant narratives to inform and bolster supporters’ opinions reflects Giddens’ (1979) views that structuration, that is, the reproduction of dominant rules, is an essential part of any form of social change. Moreover, through their active interpretation of structures, that is, their use of dominant narratives about American identity to create countercultural arguments in this particular debate, these social media users show the ability to enact their agency in an online environment (Giddens, 1984; Kirchberg, 2007).

Furthermore, with both platforms producing similar narratives, the technological affordances that define each platform do not appear to limit people’s agentic capabilities. When looking at how different users utilize the various affordances, it becomes clear that people are aware of the various technological options available to them and actively choose to use the affordances in a way that best suits their needs, including linking to posts on other platforms, using screenshots to bypass the character limit on Twitter and render Instagram posts more text-based, and including pictures and videos on Twitter. Social media users thus actively engage with the structures that guide interactions on both platforms, utilizing these in ways that best serve the Instagram or Twitter user. In doing so, their behavior reflects Giddens’ (1979, 1984) argument that structuration is part of all social change, revealing how people use their agentic capabilities to shape the socio-technical environment in which they are active (cf. Barandiaran et al., 2009).

Agency as expressed on Instagram is also more about the creation of a collective identity away from dominant discourses and the attacks that are part of the interactions between counterpublic and dominant groups (Shaw, 2012). Although Twitter does afford people this same kind of agency, as evidenced by the dominance of narratives that supported #TakeAKnee, people active on Twitter appear to choose to engage with others more than they do on Instagram. The decision whether to repost or not shows an awareness of the options available to them (i.e. self-reflexivity) and embodies a choice, implying that choice and awareness are central aspects of the agency observed on Twitter and Instagram.

Social media users are thus capable of incorporating, co-opting, and elaborating on extant structures to create a belief system that reflects their world view, utilizing technological affordances to their fullest potential, revealing how people utilize extant structures to construct their expressions. Social media usage thus appears to further Giddens’ (1979) idea that structures are an essential part of any action, and not just limitations on people’s choices and subsequent actions, providing support for the connected concept of “situated agency” (Weber, 2013, p. 291), wherein rules and resources are an automatic part of one’s agency as enabling and constraining tools. In fact, Barandiaran et al.’s (2009) idea that true agency means shaping one’s environment through one’s actions is shown to be partially correct as people’s responses to #TakeAKnee on Twitter and Instagram do take place within a predefined environment, but the analysis conducted shows that they can and do circumvent environmental constraints to best express themselves, creating similar expressions on different platforms.

While social media platforms are characterized by authority in the form of the technological forces and social values that shape a medium, users’ expressions on these platforms show that they know how to bend these constraints to best suit their needs. To call these kinds of agentic actions “constrained” does not do justice to the possibilities of change engendered as a result of these expressions (cf. Herndl & Licona, 2007). The reflection and interpretation of extant structures (both in the form of social meanings and technological affordances) is a
defining notion of agency, and the extent to which users tweak and push extant technologies and discourses demonstrate that their agentic capacities are no more limited on social media than they are in the outside world.

Conclusion

This study investigated how social media users utilized Instagram and Twitter to discuss the #TakeAKnee movement and through those discussions negotiate extant discourses about what it means to be American. Through the comparison of a text-based (Twitter) and a picture-based (Instagram) platform, this study showed that user agency is not as limited by technological affordances or extant social discourses as previous work might lead one to expect. Similar narratives were produced on both platforms, implying that the structures that form these platforms do not constrain agency. The one difference that was observed between the two platforms, namely, the level of interaction between opponents and supporters, was not the result of technological affordances, as both platforms allow for the retweeting or reposting of all ideas, but of the users’ choice, furthering the idea that social media platforms enhance individual agency.

Agency can be said to exist at the intersection of reflexivity and self-efficacy; it is formed by an awareness of the structures that inform one’s behavior, and the outcome of the ability to make conscious choices. The kind of agency observed on social media platforms can thus best be described as situated agency, wherein one’s agency is inexorably tied to the surrounding structures. The social media users observed in this study will push the social and technological affordances (or structures) as far as they need to make their point, underlining their agentic capacities.

As an explorative, qualitative study, these results can only provide an idea of how agency operates in online environments. Future work should consider how social media users themselves view their activities on social media. Deducing reflexivity from online activities is not as powerful as gaining insight into the decision-making process that informs people’s online behavior. In addition, to better understand how social media inform and shape agency, future work should consider examining topics that are not as controversial and which might inspire more collaborative, less agonic interactions.

In short, this exploratory qualitative content analysis shows that technological affordances and social discourses do shape the meanings created by the users. However, users choose how they use the technological affordances available to them and actively tweak extant narratives to inform their oppositional ideas. In other words, agency in the social media environment is very much user-driven and far from constrained.

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Note

1. The First Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech. It reads as follows:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”. (US Constitution)

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**Appendix**

**Posts coded per platform.**

| Theme               | Instagram | Twitter |
|---------------------|-----------|---------|
| Freedom             | 50        | 92      |
| Unity               | 64        | 24      |
| Equality and Justice| 208       | 158     |
| Respect and Honor   | 74        | 74      |
| Total               | 396       | 348     |