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Julia Schwab  
*Seattle University*

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Seattle University

**Social Media and Activism in the 2019/2020 Chilean Social Uprisings**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Departmental Honors in International Studies

By

Julia Schwab

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This honors thesis by Julia Schwab is approved

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Dr. Serena Cosgrove, coordinator

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Dr. Marc McLeod, external reader

**Abstract**

As the current 2019/2020 social uprisings continue to sweep over Chile in resistance to neoliberal structural inequality and remanence of Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship, little research explores social media's relationship with the movement. However, as the largest social movement since the dictatorship-era, 21<sup>st</sup> century digital media advancements and youth internet culture have significantly affected Chilean activism. The following paper will use historical analysis, social movement theory, and analysis of Twitter and Instagram posts to explore how social media is being used for social action in present day Chile. Results conclude that social media is a transformative catalyst in triggering spread of information and encouraging activity through a relatable, non-institutional platform. This study supports other research emphasizing social media as the new source of activism.

*Keywords:* Chile, social media, activism, social uprising, 2019, 2020, Instagram, Twitter

### **Social Media Activism in the 2019/2020 Chilean Social Uprisings**

“Those who say that there's no revolution on Twitter don't know anything about #PiñeraRenuncia [PiñeraResign]. It is number one worldwide, now anyone in the world can see

it and find out about the things that are happening in Chile, the things that are not shown on TV,” Chilean Twitter user @detodonada posted on October 20, 2019. Just a matter of days before this post, the Twitter user’s country broke out into the largest social uprising since its dictatorship (1973-1990). Triggered by an increase in metro fares, protestors stormed the streets to challenge current President Sebastián Piñera and to demand change against structural inequalities. By saying that #PiñeraRenuncia was number one worldwide, the user is referring to Twitter’s trending feature, which displays the day’s most popular hashtags (phrases followed by the hash “#” symbol identifying topics in a post). Therefore, @detodonada’s post proves that something as seemingly simple as a hashtag can catch global attention within a matter of 24 hours. #PiñeraRenuncia was just a precursor for the expansive Chilean social media resistance movement to come.

From October 2019 to mid-March 2020, Chilean protesters consistently occupied public spaces every single day with a variety of demands regarding education, healthcare, income gaps, women’s rights, a corrupt constitution, and more. While international observers may condescendingly see a metro fare rise as a small, trivial increase, for Chileans it’s come to represent decades of inequalities and injustices. However, alongside these physical demonstrations exists a constantly expanding online world of social media activism, complementing physical action and aiding in change. In today’s highly digitalized world, Chilean youth in particular are transforming traditional activism to creatively engage in political resistance. Therefore, the following research explores the relationship between social media and current 2019/2020 Chilean social uprising. Results conclude that social media use during the 2019/2020 Chilean social movements benefits social change by spreading information and creatively increasing civic participation in non-institutionalized settings.

### **Research Design**

This paper’s methods include application of historical analysis, secondary source analysis, and primary source analysis of Twitter and Instagram posts created from the beginning

of the Chilean movement in October 2019 to the present day. Twitter posts (tweets) and Instagram posts were selected by scrolling under popular hashtags and key phrases related to the movement and through observations on my personal social media timeline (feed of content from those one follows). I recognize that selection bias is inherently present, as tweets analyzed are not randomized. However, the tweets selected for analysis all have careful connections that create rich conclusions and connections to the paper's final argument.

The majority of tweets and Instagram posts referenced in this study are publicly available, and therefore I cite usernames of the accounts involved instead of leaving the sources anonymous. In the case of private accounts, users have given permission for their posts' use in this study.

## **Literature Review**

### **Characteristics and Uses of Digital Spaces**

To understand the utilization of media by young Chilean activists for the causes they support, it is essential to examine certain factors of digital space that catalyze political activity. Several studies share similar observations on advantages of digital platforms, which include but are not limited to: building a sense of community in large networks, forming personal and group identities, sharing information and news at a rapid rate, and freedom from corporate and government institution.

Given the widespread nature of the internet and how it leads to an increased network of contacts, internet communities naturally form through shared interests, experiences, and identities. Scherman, Arriagado, & Valenzuela (2015) claim that being a part of such communities creates a tendency towards collective action, which translates into an especially strong platform for political unity. Furthermore, given Jenkin's (2019) claim that people are already constantly constructing identity on the internet by how they choose to display themselves in their media and how they interact with others, several scholars agree that participating in such communities builds a common, united identity and trusting bond for

organizing (Scherman et al., 2015; Valenzuela, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman (2012) also mention the presence of personal identity formation within this collective process, given that individuals choose stances on wider debates and choose how to situate themselves within these collective formations.

For similar reasons of rapidity and wide reach, the internet is also key for spreading news and information. One service of this information dispersion is sharing updates on offline political activity, such as police behavior, and counter-framing news published from traditional media (Cabalin, 2014). Spreading news and updates in this manner challenges institutionalized delivery of information and allows young people to construct their own interpretations of social reality. Additionally, as Valenzuela et al. (2012) point out, the internet is ideal for spreading organizing information, inspiring more youth to join protest movements through a familiar and comfortable medium. While some scholars claim that dispersion of information is beneficial for bringing awareness to those indifferent or on the other side of the conflict (Jenkins, 2019), Holzmann Illanes (2012) reports in his study on 2011 Chilean memes in activism that the internet dialogue he observed was intended for animating and motivating the same resisting audience rather than promoting a dialogue with “enemies.”

Holzmann Illanes’s (2012) study brings other characteristics into the discussion that the previously mentioned studies fail to recognize: the benefits of anonymity on the internet and tendency for parody and irony. Holzmann Illanes describes how the internet’s nature of anonymity unites people to create communities (2012, p. 4). In his study analyzing political memes on the social media platform Tumblr during the 2011 Chilean student protests, Holzmann Illanes proposes that its sense of anonymity can leave room for more willingness to express without pressure of recognition. Additionally, the article argues that this anonymity among other factors like familiarity with internet space and rhetoric create a climate for humor and parody directed at political institutions and figures. From the safety of the internet, student activists can use playful internet language to ridicule and humiliate the political norm.

## **Shifting Traditional Civic Participation**

Ideas involving new youth expression of citizenship are commonly evaluated and formed in related literature on the topic. Several authors analyzing online activism explore the ways in which activist youth reject institutionalized forms of political participation such as poll voting to develop their own autonomous political consciousness and efforts. The concept of “participatory politics” by Jenkins (2019) situates this shift well and will continue to frame the following essay. Jenkins defines participatory politics as “the point where participatory culture meets political and civic participation, where political change is promoted through social and cultural mechanisms rather than through established political institutions, and where citizens see themselves as capable of expressing their political concerns—often through the production and circulation of media” (2019, p. 2). Jenkins uses the concept of participatory politics to explain that voting or formal political party organizing is overruled by youth in exchange for non-traditional methods such as social media use.

The concept of participatory politics strongly relates to findings from Scherman et al. (2015) whose research on social media and student protest movements in 2010 Chile found that despite substantially lower voter turnout for Chilean youth, reported youth interest in politics is not lower than other age groups. Furthermore, Scherman et al. apply the theory of materialism and postmaterialism to partially explain Chilean youth’s transitioned political participation into the digital sphere. They describe materialist values as desire for security and survival through material means such as economic growth and maintaining public order. Postmaterialism, on the other hand, values autonomy and quality of life, with emphasis on free expression and equality (Scherman et al., 2015). Scherman et al. argue that Chilean youth are more likely to utilize postmaterialist civic methods such as direct protesting and online expression rather than institutionalized civic methods such as voting or political party organizing. Therefore, postmaterialist values seem to lead youth to the “participatory politics” Jenkins describes. Ultimately, the study finds that young Chileans with postmaterialist values were more

likely to engage in non-electoral political participation in comparison with other peers (Scherman et al., 2015).

### **Online and Offline Interconnectedness**

Understanding how online discourse affects or influences offline action is also essential in this analysis. Ultimately, many researchers clarify within their work that the online and offline world should not be misunderstood as distinctly separate. Rather, “offline and online actions are complementary forms of participation—not competitive ones” (Scherman et al., 2015, p. 167). Holzmann Illanes similarly explains that “the online world reproduces, recreates, and re-signifies the offline world” (2012, p. 27). An example of this fluid relationship is provided in Cabalin’s research, which notes that 2011 Chilean student street demonstrations involved trends like flash mobs and viral images to actively utilize both the physical and digital space (2014, p. 28).

Furthermore, various surveys have found statistically significant positive relationships between frequency of social media use and physical forms of resistance. For example, Valenzuela’s study during the Chilean 2011 student movement found that “frequent users of social media were nearly 11 times more likely to participate in street demonstrations than were nonusers” (2013, p. 931). Similarly, Valenzuela et al.’s survey of Chilean urban youth in 2010 found that “respondents with a Facebook account engaged in more protest activities than respondents without a Facebook account” (2012, p. 306). Finally, Scherman et al.’s survey among urban Chilean youth in 2011 concluded that having a Facebook and/or Twitter account were variables related to higher participation in the centralized student movement as well as youth environmental protests involving power plant construction in Patagonia (Scherman et al., 2015, p. 163). This evidence ultimately reinforces that online action and offline action are heavily correlated with Chilean student movements, instead of being mutually exclusive. However, it is also worth noting that the three studies overlap in researchers, utilizing similar methods and potential networks instead of a diverse array of methods.

### **Accessibility Factors**

Existing literature on social media and activism seems to agree less when it comes to the topic of online activism's effects on marginalized communities. From Harris-Lacewell's (2006) perspective, the internet's openness allows marginalized voices to engage and participate in the public political sphere with "everyday talk" and without the threat of elite suppression (as cited in Jenkins, 2019, p. 24). In addition to this, more voices are being included as access to social media has substantially increased in Chile, with Scherman et al. (2015) finding that "86% of young Chileans have a Facebook account and 52% of those young people connect to Facebook everyday" (2015, p. 158).

However, this is not to say that inequalities in participation are nonexistent in online and physical activism. Scherman et al.'s (2015) study on social media during the 2011 Chilean student movements found that the high-income group of Chilean respondents was the only socioeconomic group positively related to having participated in the protest movements. Correspondingly, Valenzuela et al.'s (2016) study on social media's potential to deepen or bridge gaps in Latin American political participation found that "protest is more likely among more educated and wealthy individuals" (p. 701). The evidence together creates an image of the young upper-middle class activist who is not necessarily affected as greatly by policies against which they are protesting. Although social media can potentially increase political participation among marginalized groups, it is important to recognize that "Whereas social, economic, and political inequalities have been historically prevalent in the region [Latin America], social media has less than a decade of presence" (Valenzuela et al, 2016, p. 705).

### **Understanding Greater Context and Influences**

Although online media has been a major influence in Chilean student social movements as well as other global 21<sup>st</sup> century resistance, scholars also express the importance of examining the context in which it exists as well as other contributing factors. Digital media obviously is not the exclusive factor enabling success in social movements, and one must consider the greater context of institutions and setting to fully understand its effects (Valenzuela,

2013). For example, Cabalin (2014) explains that “In the case of the Chilean student movement, its prolonged development is explained by structural reasons associated with the reproduction of inequalities in the educational system and the political and cultural reconfigurations of the country” (p. 32). Cabalin supplements this point with the fact that Facebook and other platforms were undoubtedly still key to the 2011 Chilean student movements. Finally, Scherman et al. support these ideas by explaining that “the influence of media is not mechanical; it is part of a more complex process that involves multiple variables” (2015, p. 167). Although other studies provide historical context, they do not explicitly make this essential shared point.

### **Historical/Political Context**

Noting Scherman et al.’s (2015) emphasis on providing historical context, the following sections will situate my research within Chile’s tumultuous political and economic history. With current movements referencing the past dictatorship through slogans like “#PiñeraDictador” (#DictatorPiñera), it has been clear that Chile’s past heavily informs current social action and public perspectives.

#### **1973-1990 Dictatorship**

On September 11, 1973, Chile’s dictatorship was born as General Augusto Pinochet led military forces to stage a coup, ousting previous Socialist President Salvador Allende and declaring authority in political leadership. This prompted what would be a 17-year-long dictatorship under Pinochet, marked by terror, abuse, and severe injustice. Shortly after the coup, the military regime “closed congress, suspended electoral rolls, disbanded political parties, and censored press” as methods of suppression (Paley, 2001, p. 60). A later 1991 report by Chile’s National Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported 3,197 disappeared/ murdered citizens (Alexander, 2009, p. 36).

During the dictatorship’s devastation, Pinochet introduced what may be considered as “one of the most comprehensive free market restructurings ever attempted worldwide” (Paley, 2001, p. 7). This restructuring shaped Chilean economy today, and current protestors are

demanding change from these Pinochet implemented structures. Pinochet's reforms involved unraveling former President Allende's nationalization in favor of privatization of industry and public service. Regardless of the government declaring the economic transformation as apolitical, its implementation required meticulous demobilization of social movements and further repression (Paley, 2001, p. 65). Among this repression emerged the "Chilean Miracle," a term coined to describe prosperity in lowered inflation, flourishing exports, availability of loans, and boom in consumerism (Paley, 2001, p. 75). The Chilean Miracle gained international praise as an economic success story, and this perspective still permeates views of the impact of modern Chilean neoliberal policy today. In reality, the Chilean Miracle came at the cost of the working class, as income gaps widened and access to privatized social services such as healthcare and education diminished (Paley, 2001, p. 76). These negative effects are characteristics of modern Chile, infuriating protestors into action.

### **Transition to Democracy**

In the 1980s opposition started to build, breaking the silence of civic fear. This period of time is key to shaping a legacy of activism in Chile. In fact, 1983-1986 became known as *las protestas* (the protests) due the development of mass public demonstrations and large-scale regrouping of political parties. Starting on a small scale within communities, movements transformed to highly organized systems of activism. Various methods were utilized including street theater, volunteer work, political graffiti, road blockages, chanting slogans, beating pots and pans (*cacerolazo*), and starting fires. Such activities were matched by military repression in the form of tear gas, water cannons, detentions, and shooting of rubber bullets. Complex systems of anonymity and disguise were also constructed to protect activists, considering that the government also had *delincuente* government plants as "plain clothes policemen" (Paley, 2001, pp. 73-74). The legacy of such methods has transferred towards current protests.

Eventually, The Democratic Alliance resistance strategized to use Pinochet's 1980 Constitution's terms of a plebiscite on a single candidate to oust Pinochet, which resulted in a

1988 nationwide vote determining if Pinochet would stay in power for another eight years. Citizens could either vote *Sí* (Yes) in favor of Pinochet in office or *No* in favor of a new free election. Both developed strategic campaigns, with the *No* campaign particularly utilizing creative marketing methods of positivity, lightheartedness, and humor. The *Sí* and *No* campaigns were allotted 15-minute television slots for promotion, a precursor to media's role in revolution (Paley, 2001, pp. 118-123).

Although the toppling of the dictatorship was a major victory for Chileans, Pinochet's legacy still left a tight grasp on politics, and return to democracy was not as glorious as potentially imagined by the *No* campaign. For example, the pacts that had to be made for a democratic president to come to office strictly kept dictatorship institutions in place. Ultimately, “changes in political regime—the movement from dictatorship to an elected-civilian political system—have been used to maintain economic and political structures” (Paley, 2001, p. 91). These lasting economic and political structures are what many Chileans condemn today.

### **2011 Social Movement**

21<sup>st</sup> century social movements have become extensions of this civic economic discontent. 2011 was a major turning point in modern Chilean social movement. Two massive protest movements disrupted the state—one related to education and one related to environment. Nearly completely powered by high school and university students, “for the first time since the wave of demonstrations against the military dictatorship in the 1980s, thousands of citizens took to the streets to protest” (Scherman et al., 2015, p.151). The two movements together, then, gained the title “The Chilean Winter,” due to its parallel with the then occurring Arab Spring, a series of complex social uprisings occurring in the Middle East at the time.

### **2019/2020 Social Movement**

The 2011 social movement demonstrated that, like during the dictatorship era, public protests could be utilized to make powerful statements and demand change. When President Sebastián Piñera announced that Santiago's metro fares would rise by 4%, equating to a 30

peso rise (\$0.04) on October 9, 2019, high school students organized to storm metro stations, jumping over turnstiles and joining in chants. From these first moments of action blossomed Chile's greatest social movement since the dictatorship era (Garcés, 2020, p.2). For example, on October 25 more than one million people gathered in Santiago, making it a historic sized protest (New Yorker, 2019). Protests specific to certain marginalized groups' needs have also emerged, as women and indigenous Mapuche people both establish their own related movements. Therefore, what started as a fare increase exploded into an expression of total discontent with the government and structural inequality in Chile.

Following this spark, more people took to the streets, eventually leading to more destructive protest methods. Events included looting of supermarkets, burning of metro stations, and destruction of property, which some citizens claim the government had a level of responsibility in staging. The government responded with force, declaring a state of emergency which gave public order power to the military. Alarmingly, the military response closely mimicked military repression during the dictatorship, as *carabineros* (police and military) enacted curfew, mobilized tanks, and used water cannons, live ammunition, and tear gas.

One of the main demands demonstrators emphasize is the creation of a new constitution, which would replace Pinochet's 1980 Constitution maintained since the dictatorship. Although Piñera first proposed a new constitution completely written by Congress, demonstrator push back led to a scheduled upcoming referendum on April 26, 2020, now alarmingly delayed due to COVID-19 changes.

### **COVID-19 Mandates**

Physical, public protests continued to occur every day since the October 2019 social outbreak until mid-March 2020, when the Chilean government announced restrictions on public gathering to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Gradually, different Santiago *comunas* (administrative city subdivisions) went in and out of quarantine measures until May 19, when the Chilean government enacted a mandatory total quarantine for the entire city of Santiago (U.S.

Embassy in Chile, 2020). Curfew was re-implemented in March and remains in place, and *Santiaguinos* (Santiago Chileans) are only allowed to leave their homes for essential reasons such as buying food and medicine. Government mandated permits are required to do so, and citizens can be arrested for being in public without proper permits. However, public protests have not stopped completely. For example, on May 18, 2020 protestors gathered in the low-income neighborhood of El Bosque, expressing frustrations about hunger and lack of government support for food security (BBC, 2020). Protests that have occurred under the mandates have typically been met with military violence. Because of public gathering restrictions, online activism is becoming an even more popular and essential method of resistance, which will be applied in the following analysis.

### **Application to 2019/2020 Movement**

#### **Spread of Information**

Related to Jenkins' (2019) previously mentioned idea of digital information dispersion being useful to alert other countries of human rights violations or wrongdoings, Chileans have recently utilized social media in various ways to gain international attention towards their movement and abuse from the government. For example, an October 18, 2019 tweet from a Chilean twitter user reads: "Okay, I felt the need to make a fast thread in English so the people who aren't from this country know what's going on in Chile #EvasionMasiva #EvasionMasivaTodoEIDia" (@distressedahem, 2019). A "thread" on Twitter is built when the same user replies to their own tweets in order, creating a full story or continued stream of thought. The user's thread consists of 22 following tweets, using English to explain details of economic inequality average Chileans face while also providing photos and videos of protests and military repression to emphasize its reality. Similarly, within these revolutionary online movements Chilean social media users have encouraged each other to use English hashtags among Spanish ones to reach a larger audience. For example, users will put #PiñeraLies and #PiñeraMiente in the same post to catch the attention of English and Spanish speakers alike.

Hashtags like #ChileViolatesHumanRights opt for a more direct call to attention for the international community. The use of hashtags on Twitter can also be particularly impactful due to the platform's "Trending" feature, which is a page that shows which hashtags are surging in popularity at the time.

Social media has also been valuable in spreading information in the form of images displaying violence from the state in particular. From the outbreak of protests to now, images of police *carabineros*, or *pacos* in common slang, physically abusing protestors have flooded Twitter and Instagram. In networked social movements "the power of images is paramount... particularly meaningful are images of violent repression by the police or thugs" (Castells, 2015, p. 252). These images not only shock viewers and ignite greater attention, but they also serve as documentation and proof that these abuses are actually occurring if they were to be denied. One revolutionary account that has been influential in sharing many images of violence is @nomasabusos on Instagram. With around 70,600 followers, the account translating into "no more abuses" has videos and images produced by ordinary citizens documenting police/military violence with thousands of views and likes. "For reports contact us through DM or at nomasabusos.chile2019@gmail.com," their bio (space for account description) reads. Therefore, any citizen with access to Instagram can "DM" (direct message) proof of abuse to the account to be publicized. For example, a post coupled with a graphic video from November 15, 2019, reads: "URGENT: Today around 6:30PM the police shot a woman near one eye. The incident occurred in La Plaza de Independencia in Concepción, after the police dispersed the people with tear gas." A comment on the post reads "HELP PLEASE," while tagging (adding account names in a way that notifies the account) UNICEF Spain, UNICEF, United Nations, National Institute of Human Rights Chile, and several official BBC news accounts. With evidence of state violence, Chileans can digitally put pressure on international human rights organizations or pressure international news outlets to bring attention to their crisis.

Similarly, social media has been key to dismantling misinformation reported by government biased news sources as well as giving typical Chilean citizens a platform to tell their own stories on their own terms. This aligns with Cabalin's (2011) findings that "One of the elements that helped to explain this massive popular support was the ability of the students to frame their message of transformation and to control the media agenda during movement" (p. 27). In terms of wider theory, this also is a clear example of Jenkins' participatory politics, given that Chilean social media users are leaning towards deinstitutionalized information dispersion in rejection of institutionalized news outlets. For example, again in English, one Chilean user tweeted on October 27, 2019 in the following format:

"Chileans: we are protesting against neoliberalism

Bourgeois media: here are some theories on why Chileans are protesting

Chileans: i just told you we are protesting against neoliberalism

Bourgeois media: maybe the economy is doing too well" (@petcrierbonanza, 2019)

This playful tweet not only pokes fun at the institutionalized "Bourgeois media" for skewing the narrative, but also works to clarify opinions through the accessible format of social media. It's worth noting that this tweet is also nuanced within the context of Pinochet's lingering neoliberalism involving the lasting legacy of "The Chilean Miracle."

A specific example of social media users countering misinformation during these 2019/2020 demonstrations is in regard to the villainizing of demonstrators, such as blame for setting fire to the Enel Chile high-rise building, the corporate headquarters for a major energy company. While mainstream media and the government publicized this as an act of civilian radicalism, protestors had a different narrative to share. When news on this as an act of civilian violence circulated, some Chilean social media users worked on bringing awareness to potential government interference. For example, when a foreigner's tweet about Chilean protestors

causing the fire gained popularity, some Chilean Twitter users were quick to reply with reasons they believed protestors were not behind the incident. The foreigner used their commentary to reply to his original tweet with corrections:

“UPDATE from @cmonaylin:

‘the emergency staircase fire started in the 11th floor, nobody has access to it except the people that work there’

Suspicious are that the fire was set on purpose so that a state of emergency could be filed.” (@benjancewicz, 2019).

As other users replied, the foreigner compiled their pieces of evidence to distribute on his platform. As a result, the Chilean Twitter users were successful in shifting the narrative to show a non-institutionalized perspective, even if this is on a somewhat small scale.

As COVID-19 has swept over Chile, information on how to protest at home is now being distributed through social media. The idea of online protesting in different capacities is now surging in popularity, not only in Chile but in a number of countries. For example, On March 23, 2020, an art collective on Instagram with the username *depression.intermedia* uploaded a *Manual para Protestar desde Casa* (Manual for Protesting from Home) with 2,800 likes and counting. Colorfully illustrated ideas are presented, ranging from decorating one’s balcony with protest related ornamentation to *cacerolazo* (banging of pots and pans). While *cacerolazo* has a traditional protest legacy, the manual also presents a newer idea titled *ciberactivismo* (cyber-activism). The translated description under *ciberactivismo* is to “share and distribute information only from reliable sources.” Aligning with the idea of countering potential misinformation, this definition of cyber-activism encourages citizens to stay alert and active within the movement by informing oneself and others.

Just as information to physically organize on social media was previously valuable to the movement, information to digitally organize has gained traction in exchange. Social media posts planning hashtag protests have surfaced, during which people are encouraged to flood social

media with a certain hashtag at the same time. This strategy is also being popularized by young environmental activist Greta Thunberg, who began the hashtag protest of #DigitalStrike under COVID-19 to continue bringing awareness to climate change (Greenpeace International, 2020). Instead of #DigitalStrike, social media posts have encouraged the use of #PiñeraVirus and already frequently used *#PiñeraRenuncia*. A March 17, 2020 Instagram post from activist account difusion.valpo proposed a national hashtag movement specifically starting at 10:00PM that night. Part of the digital poster displayed translates to “National Hashtag #PiñeraVirus, all together to flooding Piñera’s social networks using the hashtag #RenunciaPiñera.” This echoes earlier mentions of interconnectedness of online and offline landscapes. While protests are typically imagined as physical gatherings of some sort, perceptions of protests are shifted as digital protests emerge.

### **Youth, Internet Rhetoric, and Humor**

Interestingly, humor and particular internet vocabulary have also played a crucial tool in appealing to youth for political engagement. Youth have been incredibly valuable to igniting social uprisings and change in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chile, given that the 2011 and 2019/2020 protests were started by high school students in particular. A dimension of participatory politics includes the fact that “a more playful style of activism is emerging through this appropriative and transformative dimension of participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2019, p. 2). Therefore, Chileans are using content like “memes” or other humorous, playful formats to deinstitutionalize political opinion and expression. Holzmann Illanes (2012) defines memes on a larger, conceptual scale as “a humorous institution which creates a series of rules that standardize humor on the internet” (2012, p. 19). Although some may interpret this online political humor as trivial with a lack of seriousness to important issues, young people engaging in these practices are expressing resistance in ways that feel comfortable and applicable to them and relatable in a digital landscape.

One common characteristic of memes and humor in the current Chilean movement is a dichotomy logic of oppressor versus oppressed. As Holzmann Illanes concluded, memes optimizing this dichotomy can result in an encouraging vision of the oppressed as *luchadores*, “fighters,” active in the revolution (2012, p. 37). The humor delivering this concept may contribute to building a type of camaraderie between young people, uniting them in ideas for necessary social change. Humor against authority has been present in hashtags and popularized phrases like *#PiñeraCuliao* or *#PacosCuliao*, *culiao* being a Chilean-specific explicit word to call someone. Within these memes and humor, the dichotomy typically exists between President Piñera and/or police *pacos* against average Chilean citizens. This is exemplified in a post from Instagram account *@gatitesproletaries* (*@proletariatcats*) followed by roughly 34,600 people, which posts several political memes including some of cats in humorous circumstances. One in particular from October 19, 2019 counting 2,657 likes shows a photo-shopped cat standing upright with muscular arms and a cloth around its mouth. Overlaid text reads: “traiganme a Piñera,” meaning “bring me Piñera.” This comical image represents the oppressed *luchador(a)*, even including the scarf around the nose and mouth common to protestors protecting themselves. Multiple replies include an emoji (a small digital image used to express an emotion or idea) of a raised fist in solidarity with the concept and their beliefs represented in the meme. Therefore, an image like this that some may scoff at as immature and irrelevant may actually actively promote community between like-minded Chileans.

Some memes currently circulating within the Chilean social movement use humor to directly promote political activity, rather than just alluding to it. This is the case for the trend of *Yo Apruebo* and *Sí Po Apruebo* memes. The phrases *Yo Apruebo* (I Approve) and *Sí Po Apruebo* (Yes [po is a Chilean emphasis word] I Approve) are in reference to voting the *Apruebo* option on the upcoming ballot in regards to the new constitution. Chileans that vote *Apruebo* are voting in favor of the *convención constitucional* (constitutional committee), which would consist of a group of completely elected citizens to write the new constitution. The alternative is

*convención mixta* (mixed committee), which consists partially of elected citizens and partially of government appointees. Online groups and individuals who are part of the current resistance tend to favor the *convención constitucional*, encouraging others to vote *Apruebo*. Therefore, after the vote was announced, *Yo Apruebo* memes and promotions flooded social media. Considering that voter turnout tends to be low for young people in Chile, it seems that young Chileans are using a non-institutionalized platform to promote necessary institutionalized activity. Potentially recognizing the importance of this materialist practice of voting (Scherman et al., 2015), young activists can first look towards the postmaterialist, non-traditional social media space that stands to be more attractive to increase voter turnout.

Furthermore, the *Yo Apruebo* meme movement creates an interesting comparison with the 1988 *No* campaign removing dictator Pinochet. The *No* movement was innovative for using comedy and lightness in its video media advertisements, and people are already linking *Yo Apruebo* and *No*. The *Yo Apruebo* meme movement may be a way to reimagine *No*, which has a meaningful legacy for Chileans, by guiding this playfulness into a 21<sup>st</sup>-century relevant entity to which youth can relate. For example, one circulating meme is a video of several animated pop culture characters comically dancing around the words *Yo Apruebo*. As Jenkins (2019) observed, “creative activists” often speak to each other through images borrowed from commercial entertainment but remixed to communicate their own messages; “they are often deploying social media platforms, sometimes in ways that challenge corporate interests; and they are forging communities through acts of media circulation” (p. 60). A video like this may be sent to friends for a laugh or circulated around Instagram and Twitter for attention. Instead of an political party-backed campaign, this popular meme is independently created, allowing youth to engage despite their distrust of political institutions.

### **Limitations and Further Considerations**

It is important to properly address the limitations in this research, as it cannot represent the entirety of digital social media space and its complex nature. One recognition is the lack of

exploration into pro-government social media landscape. However, due to the extreme vastness of online Chilean resistance discourse alone, this paper's specific focus allows for a more concise, in-depth analysis of one movement. Additionally, resistance content seems to be more plentiful on Instagram and Twitter. For example, while *#YoApruebo* is currently mentioned in 32,500 Instagram posts, *#YoRechazo* (*#IReject*) is mentioned in only 6,607. A further study comparing right wing versus left wing Chilean social media use could be an insightful addition to the topic of Chilean social media.

Similarly, this paper does not explore social media's potential to produce argumentative dialogue instead of unity. Within my limited but intentional research I saw very few instances of disagreement or conflict in replies. I conclude, as Holzmann Illanes did in his 2011 study, that Chilean social media in resistance seems to create more of a dialogue internally to those who share similar views than to address pro-government users. This concern could be addressed in potential research mentioned above.

## **Conclusion**

The current 2019/2020 Chilean social movement continues to expand online every day. As the uprising continues, social media will also continue to react, change, and generate rapidly in adaptation to developments. For example, as the COVID-19 virus has recently impacted world order and Chilean social organizing, social media has stepped in to create activist trends that keep resistance from ceasing. This exemplifies the power of digital space to persist and its unique characteristics allowing it to do so.

This paper has shown the beneficial effects social media has on Chilean activism, adding to academic inquiry on the 2019/2020 uprisings in an innovative way. Through review of related academic work and social theory, consideration of historical and political context, and primary source analysis of Twitter and Instagram posts, I have concluded that social media has played a significant role in uniting and igniting current Chilean resistance efforts. From effectiveness and variety in spreading information to internet rhetoric and humor, social media

has allowed for citizens to participate politically removed from untrustworthy institutions. It is essential to give proper attention to movements developing online instead of disregarding them as trivial and intangible, as digital space can be considered the new global activism.

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