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# Sharing in the echo chamber: Examining Instagram users' engagement with infographics through the frame of digital literacy

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## Abstract

Social media platforms have had a tangible effect on how users share information and their digital literacy skills. Infographics are often shared on Instagram, but they harbour the potential for misinformation. Users do not always research posts before sharing, and the social nature of the site influences user behaviour. Current digital literacy theories highlight the need to integrate digital technologies into traditional information literacy theories, because technologies are increasingly central to everyday life and information consumption. In this article, I investigated digital literacy from a user perspective, examining how users' digital literacy skills interact with their sharing of infographics. I also examined how infographics are used for activism, and the social and visual affordances of Instagram, which helped to dictate the users' relationship with digital literacy. I conducted a qualitative study consisting of interviews with six participants. Participants were asked about their Instagram behaviour, infographic selection, and how they judge the reliability of an infographic before sharing. Participant responses were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Responses revealed that users are familiar with traditional concepts of information literacy, such as referencing sources, but often prioritise other areas, such as the social and personal contexts of an infographic when deciding what to share. Users also dialogue with online followers using visual imagery and activism. These sharing practices are contextualised within Instagram affordances and the behaviours the platform enables and constrains. The study is novel in examining digital literacy as enacted through Instagram, specifically the use of infographics, while also foregrounding the user perspective. The results emphasise the need to consider user perspectives in digital literacy whether conducting research or teaching.

## Keywords

activism; digital literacy; information literacy; qualitative research; social media; UK

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## 1. Introduction

In early 2020, in the wake of the Australian bushfires, a post from Plant A Tree Co. (@plantatreeco) began to circulate on Instagram which claimed that for every repost they would donate money to help with Australian recovery efforts (Exposing Instagram Scams, 2020). The post went viral, with the account's follower count tripling in the course of a month (Social Blade, n.d.). However, questions arose about the company, and many news articles and Instagram pages subsequently exposed them for potentially misleading claims (Cook, 2020; Exposing Instagram Scams, 2020; Hu, 2020; Marlborough, 2021; Wilson, 2021). Despite this, the company continued to receive engagement on their posts and two years later still had a follower count of almost 900,000 (Social Blade, n.d.). This is a perfect example of how Instagram accounts with dubious intentions can go viral multiple times, and it demonstrates the lack of fact-checking by Instagram and individual users before content is allowed to spread across the platform.

Instagram has always been a photo-centric platform. Two of Instagram's main features are the feed and stories. The 'feed' is the platform homepage where users share photos and videos to a permanent space, while the 'stories' feature allows users to post temporary media which is only shared for 24 hours before it disappears. Stories are the main vehicle through which posts, such as the one from Plant A Tree Co., go viral. They are also the method through which Instagram infographics are shared. These are graphic posts shared on Instagram with a specific message, often intended to inform or engage, and generally cover current events. Much like Plant A Tree Co.'s posts, infographics have been used to spread misinformation, particularly when shared through stories because they are temporary and harder for Instagram to moderate (Binder, 2022; Spencer-Elliott, 2022; Weekman, 2022). Instagram could also be viewed as an echo chamber, a space where users mainly encounter views with which they agree, because users curate their own feeds and share content, including infographics, from accounts they choose to follow.

Infographics are often a feature of online activism, providing information to raise awareness or used as a catalyst for action. This article defines activist as any person involved in activism. Activism is defined by Meikle (2018) as including "the widest range of attempts to effect social or cultural change" (p. 2) either in or out of traditional politics. There is potential for misinformation to spread when information is shared online, and the social nature of sites, like Instagram, influences user behaviour. These behaviours are examples of digital literacy practices of social media users. While digital literacy has many definitions, which I will explore in the literature review, when used in this study, it should be taken to mean "those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society" (Jisc, 2014, para 1).

In this study, I investigated digital literacy from a user perspective, examining how users' digital literacy skills influence their sharing of infographics, how they use infographics for activism, and the various affordances of Instagram which help dictate the relationship between digital literacy and sharing. In this area of research, few studies have explored the relationship between infographics and digital literacy from an information studies perspective. This study aimed to rectify that gap by examining what users consider to be important when sharing infographics. With this knowledge, information professionals can adapt their teaching to better reflect sharing behaviours on social platforms and equip students to find and disseminate reliable information.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Digital literacy**

Theories around digital literacy emphasise the need to integrate traditional information literacy practices with digital technologies, while acknowledging the challenges posed by new formats. In 1997, Gilster (as cited in Bawden, 2008), posed some of the earliest theory around digital literacy, positing it as an understanding of ideas around digital technology as well as an ability to use the technology itself. Bhatt and MacKenzie (2019) viewed all IL practices as socially situated. As digital technology is now ingrained in day-to-day life, all literacies are inextricably linked—our social practices move seamlessly between online and offline spaces—so IL must do the same.

Lankshear and Knobel (2015) critiqued research that suggests digital literacy is something users either do or do not possess. Instead, the authors argued that digital engagement is often viewed as a resource for participation in a community, and traditional methods for analysing IL abilities, such as source evaluation, are only possible when considering the context of the information environment. The current study was an opportunity to examine this theory in practice by exploring the digital literacy of participants while accounting for the different contexts surrounding their infographic use. A study of digital literacy practices by Wineburg and McGrew (2019) found that even people described as skilled internet users can mistake biased websites for legitimate sources due to non-digital markers of reliability such as references and glossy

aesthetics. The most effective method for judging reliability in the digital sphere, according to the study, is with lateral reading—using secondary sources to corroborate the information found on a website (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). As social media platforms are designed to keep people engaged for as long as possible, it is relevant to consider whether lateral reading takes place on Instagram.

Additionally, the current study considered whether users are aware of Instagram's potential influence on their infographic sharing. A recent study by Google suggested that social media sites such as TikTok and Instagram are used as search engines by about 40% of 18–24-year-olds (Perez, 2022). Search engines such as Google are problematised by Bhatt and MacKenzie (2019) who see them as “sponsors of literacy” because understanding how search engines work and being able to navigate them effectively has a huge impact on digital literacy. Since Instagram is used as a search engine for many individuals, one could argue it is also a sponsor of literacy.

## 2.2 Data visualisations

Infographics are a form of data visualisation, and so any study of them must consider how visual imagery conveys meaning. In addition to suggesting that young people are increasingly likely to favour Instagram and TikTok as search engines over Google, Google executives have highlighted the increasing role of visual content in digital navigation (Perez, 2022). Drucker argued that “graphics make and construct knowledge” (2014, p. 9), so they are not simply representations of existing data, but also creating new knowledge. Additionally, Drucker (2014) described graphics as “acts of interpretation” (p.10), and as such, graphics are not neutral, but present a view of data which is specific to a time and place. Therefore, graphics are “potent rhetorical instruments of cultural power” (Drucker, 2017, p. 913), imbued with significance and cultural context. Infographics found on Instagram therefore have specific visual contexts.

Kennedy and Engebretsen (2020) suggested that visualisations are used “for informative, persuasive, and rhetorical purposes in political campaigns, health communication, education, and in newsrooms” (p. 20), highlighting that they are a powerful tool to legitimise information. Kennedy and Engebretsen pointed to the close ties between emotional engagement and the aesthetic aspects of visualisations identified by Drucker (2017). Effective graphics induce viewers' emotions and this emotional response forms part of the power of the graphic.

Some scholars view data visualisations as a component of data literacy, an important skill within digital literacy. Usova and Laws (2021) defined data literacy as, “the ability to find, analyse, interpret and effectively communicate data” (p. 84). This skill becomes paramount for students in a digital world. For Womack (2014), understanding data visualisations “support[s] a range of literacies and should be viewed as complementary to them” (pp. 12-13). Therefore, analysing data visualisations in the current study aimed to strengthen an understanding of how digital literacy functions on Instagram.

## 2.3 Instagram affordances

Instagram users' engagement with infographics is shaped by the technological affordances offered by the platform. Davis and Chouinard (2016) described affordances as “the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects” (p. 241). In the context of Instagram, affordances describe what users are and are not permitted to do on the platform. Additionally, for an affordance to have value, users must understand what it is. Lloyd (2010) viewed affordances from an information literacy perspective, arguing that engaging with affordances “facilitates meaning making” (p. 170) and enables users to become part of a community. Thus, understanding affordances is central to users' ability to navigate Instagram and to participate in the social world offered by the platform.

Davis and Chouinard (2016) argued that users can circumvent the intended functions, or affordances, of an object. Users perceive the restrictions placed on them by a platform but acknowledge their power to renegotiate their relationship with the platform. Scholars such as Norman (1999) theorised there is a difference between real and perceived affordances, with cultural constraints potentially dictating users' behaviour within a system, regardless of the actual affordances offered by a piece of technology. Various affordances of social media have been suggested by scholars (boyd, 2010; Ellison and Vitak, 2015; Evans et al, 2017; Mansour, 2020). Ellison and Vitak (2015) argued that framing scholarship concerned with social media around affordances enables it to stay relevant when new social media sites emerge. Considering affordances in the current study allowed me to prioritise how users engage with the possibilities of the platform and how Instagram might be shaping this, rather than just what those possibilities are.

## 2.4 Social sharing

Instagram's affordances can facilitate community-making on the platform, and infographics circulate within these communities as a method of social connection. Bucher (2018) wrote about the power of algorithms, which create a desired user by rewarding higher levels of engagement with the news feed of social media platforms. boyd (2010) coined the term *networked publics* to describe how social networking sites, such as Instagram, not only serve as a space for people to interact, but create a community that mould the behaviour of those who engage with them. The current research study explored how algorithms and the networked publics might influence a user's digital literacy behaviour on Instagram. However, strong bonds within communities can also create an opposition to a perceived other. That social media spheres are increasingly balkanised spaces is a critique leveraged by MacKenzie and Bhatt (2020), who identified the limited exposure social media users get from alternative perspectives. While social media communities can be isolated from one another, the ideological spaces constructed within them might increase the level of trust participants feel in their community. This study sought to confirm whether this strong social connection influences the digital literacy practices of participants.

## 2.5 Social media activism

The communities developed on social media sites, such as Instagram, can be a source of digital activism through which infographics function as a way to spread information. Scholarship around digital activism focuses on how recent activist campaigns have harnessed the tools offered by social media sites as a method for marginalised groups to vocalise their views when mainstream media may have previously silenced them (Amgott, 2018). Infographics can be a tool to communicate these perspectives. Additionally, Amgott (2018) described the way campaigns have combined digital activism with concrete actions offline to build communities and create change. Lim et al. (2021) noted that advocacy campaigns, such as the "defund the police" movement defy popularity metrics by calling for material change rather than the traditional self-promotion for which social media sites are known. However, Lim (2021) warned of the potential for digital activist spaces to be monetised. Lim (2021) used the term *personal identity economics* to describe the social media practice of individuals using their marginalised identities for personal gain, whether social or economic. This indicates the necessity of examining how users understand the relationship between digital activism, such as sharing activist infographics, the potential for social gain, and the possibility of enacting change outside of the platform. Few studies have analysed this relationship from a digital literacy perspective.

This review of literature indicates the increasing focus paid to digital and data literacy and the breadth of research on social media, particularly affordances and activism. The research I conducted for this study aimed to bring these strands of scholarship together by studying the digital literacy behaviour of Instagram users.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Methods**

This study used qualitative methods to provide a rich picture of participants' experiences after interacting with Instagram infographics. This was particularly useful as I was interested in digital literacy practices and conducting interviews allowed me to engage with participants' lived experience and the meaning they make of that experience, as described by Seidman (2019). Moreover, a semi-structured interview format let each interview develop in a way that stayed loyal to the study aims while tailoring the interviews to the thoughts and ideas expressed by each participant (see Appendix 1). I also used visual research methods, described by Rose (2014) as "methods which use visual materials of some kind as part of the process of generating evidence" (p. 25) and which can identify implicit knowledge. These methods were essential for considering how the visual elements of infographics impacted how they were perceived. The fact that the methods led to "more representative narratives about the shape and meaning of information within everyday life" (Hicks and Lloyd, 2018, p. 229) makes them a suitable choice for my research, which is focused on the everyday use of Instagram. These methods allowed participants to focus on the aesthetic qualities of infographics and helped to further develop the interview discussion.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The six participants I interviewed were all between the ages of 20 and 25 and English-speaking. To qualify for the study, participants needed to use Instagram multiple times a week and previously shared and/or created an infographic on the platform. Studying a demographic of those who have grown up with social media platforms enabled me to understand how digital literacy practices are enacted in a setting familiar to people of this age group. I recruited participants using a snowball sampling method, as described by Pickard (2017). I posted on Instagram and asked for participants, who then recommended other participants. I stopped after conducting six interviews as this gave me an appropriate amount of data to analyse for the length of the study.

#### **3.3 Ethics and data protection**

To ensure participants were comfortable being involved in the study, they received an information sheet and consent form. When collecting infographics to use in the study, I ensured they came from public Instagram accounts and did not show data which identified individual users. Finally, using visual research methods can elicit a greater reaction in participants (Franzke, et al., 2020), so I did not include infographics with sensitive or violent imagery. Data was collected pseudo-anonymously, with all participants given a pseudonymous code in the final research stage. The file linking codes to personal information was kept on secure cloud storage. Audio recordings and transcriptions were also stored on secure cloud storage hosted by my institution.

#### **3.4 Data collection**

I conducted six interviews with an average length of 49 minutes during June and July 2022. The interviews were conducted online using video-conferencing software. I asked a variety of questions ranging from general questions about participants' Instagram use and behaviours, and what they considered when sharing infographics, to their emotional responses, activism, and the social aspects of sharing. I also showed participants examples of Instagram infographics. I chose three infographics from the past two years which had different authors, features, and visual narratives. Some contained references, data, and calls to action, while others contained quotes or were mainly visual (see Appendix 1). I audio recorded the interviews and used automatic captioning software to produce a transcription. For the process of

qualitative data analysis, I annotated transcripts by hand, coding thematically using a grounded theory approach (Pickard, 2017) to find themes across my data and draw out meaning.

### 3.5 Limitations

Research shows online interviews can make the researcher appear less interested (Seidman, 2019); it is harder to read body language and convey enthusiasm. Some of my interviewees chose to keep their cameras off, which could have removed some of the non-verbal clues received when conducting face-to-face interviews. (Archibald et al, 2019). Additionally, I recruited using my personal Instagram account and used a snowball sampling method, so my participants were from a limited pool. I did not ask questions about the participants' gender, location, socioeconomic status or education level, all of which might have affected their responses.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 What participants consider when sharing

#### 4.1.1 Instagram authority markers

The presence of a verified badge (a blue tick) on an account, issued by Instagram to denote the authentic accounts of public figures or organisations (Meta, n.d.), was seen by four out of the six interviewees as a marker of authority, if not reliability. Participant 3 (P3) said:

I know this isn't a reason to say that it's reliable, but there is a little—there's the blue tick and it's got a lot of likes, which means that I would have—I'm more likely to think that it holds some weight in terms of its views on things.

Despite disavowing the reliability of the verified badge, P3 indicated that the badge does make them trust the content of the infographic more. As such, we can see how Instagram confers authority through verification and likes.

#### 4.1.2 Social relationships

The social relationships that users have are a major factor in sharing choices. Being familiar with either the account that originally posted the infographic or the account which shared it is important to most participants, such as Participant 4 (P4), who commented on the third infographic: "The account is a public figure who's widely known, and because I know of her, I don't think it would be that likely for her to share something that wasn't verifiable."

Although P4 does not know this public figure personally, they trust what she posts because she is a well-known person. That P4 is predisposed to believe that the account that posted the infographic has good intentions perhaps points to the importance of the social contexts of Instagram.

#### 4.1.3 References

The participants consistently pointed to references in an infographic as a marker of reliability, which makes them more likely to share a post. Participant 5 (P5) noted the importance of sources in the second infographic:

It's really good that it's got the references in the end so that you can follow it up and check with potentially other sources that you think are more reliable. [Rather] than, kind of, a face value, you know, look at something on Instagram.

Therefore, participants indicated that infographics can be unreliable and should not be taken at face value, but that secondary sources alleviate this unreliability. Beyond the simple factor of having sources, the type of source was identified as a key marker of reliability. Participant 6 (P6)

recognised some of the sources in infographic two as reliable news sites, which made it seem “well researched”. This demonstrates the importance of traditionally authoritative sources in judging reliability.

However, despite participants agreeing that sources are a clear marker of reliability, five out of the six interviewees also said that they do not usually follow up with the sources to check whether they were legitimate before trusting or sharing an infographic, as P4 stated:

Generally [I wouldn't] unless it's something that I really want to learn more about. Partly because if it's just on an infographic, I can't just click on the source, I would have to go and type in the full website, which can be quite time-consuming if I'm just looking at Instagram on a break [at work] which is what I usually do.

This response raises two important points. First, in revealing that they do not regularly check to see if sources are legitimate, they suggest that the performance of reliability is enough to render infographics reliable. Second, it shows the way Instagram's affordances discourage users from leaving the platform—only posts in stories can contain a direct hyperlink, and even then, not more than one per image shared. So, when reading a feed post, if a user wants to check a source, they have to copy the source link, exit the application, open their browser and then paste the website into the search bar to access it. As P4 indicated, this is impractical when using Instagram for short periods of time. Even if they do want to check a source, the process is complicated enough to discourage them from fact-checking.

P3 acknowledged this issue, and when they see a post has sources, they assume it is “more likely to be legitimate than not”, although they say this assumption is not a “good thing”. Thus, P3 corroborated P4's understanding of sources, implying that the post creator taking the time to include references is enough to increase the reliability and make them more likely to share it, although they simultaneously acknowledge the flaw in this idea.

Additionally, P3 noted that not all posts need references to be reliable, such as in the case of infographic three: “If it's a personal experience or something, there might genuinely not be references to back that up and that obviously doesn't mean that what they've said isn't valid and reliable and accurate.”

Several other participants commented similarly, highlighting the unique place of lived experience within infographics. Personal narratives can still be a vital source of information although they may not be referenced in way that would be considered reliable in traditional academic spaces.

#### **4.1.4 Temporality**

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, rely on the promise of new, up-to-date content to draw in their users, and this was reflected in participants' sharing choices. Participant 2 (P2) evidenced this in their comments about sharing older infographics: “I guess it's harder to find relevance in older infographics. I think there is definitely a timeliness to the content and everything because the facts also keep getting updated as well.” Two factors stand out in this statement. First, infographics lose their relevance as they age. This shows how connected infographics are to current events. Even if the information in them is still correct, they might not be relevant to the current information trends on the platform, and thus become less desirable to share. Second, the facts of an event can change as people gain more knowledge. This is particularly true if an infographic is providing information on a very recent event, where the full context of the situation might not yet have been discovered.

#### 4.1.5 Personal context

One consistent theme which appeared throughout many of the participants' discussions of sharing infographics is the importance of personal context when deciding what to share. P3 illustrated this when commenting on the first infographic:

Usually, when I see infographics, I have a frame of reference. So even if I don't know about the specific issue, it's drawing on things that I've heard...I feel like that usually helps me in my belief of whether or not it's reliable.

P3 uses the context of the infographic to determine if it is reliable and thus if they should share it. This reveals the way prior knowledge helps participants determine what to share on a platform where, as demonstrated by the importance of temporality above, decisions about whether to repost something are often made very quickly. Additionally, P3's comment indicated the insularity of Instagram, or the idea of an echo chamber. In order for P3 to have a "frame of reference" about a topic, many of the infographics they are seeing must be in a familiar area. Infographics need to contain enough explanation and references to other issues to situate themselves within the wider political or social context so that they can be understood by users.

Indeed, personal context can lead participants to disregard factors such as the inclusion of sources and familiarity with the account which posts the infographic. P5 revealed that these are not always prerequisites for sharing when discussing a content creator critical of the U.K. conservative government, Danny Price (@dannyyfuckingprice):

A lot of his don't have any sources, they're just, kind of, his own personal little rant on whatever's happening in the news...And I don't know who the hell this guy is, to be honest, but...I would be more inclined to share stuff like his because...it's just very obviously an opinion, if that makes sense?...I don't mind sharing stuff like that when it's something I agree with.

In this case, although P5 follows the account, they appeared to not know much about Danny Price but do not regard this as necessary to share Price's infographics because it is "very obviously" his opinion and not factual information. However, this is subjective, as what is clearly opinion and easy to categorise for one person may be viewed differently by another with less contextual understanding. A key difference may be that P5 holds the same views as Price, as they acknowledged, and thus the lack of sources becomes less important as they can use their prior knowledge to determine if it is accurate.

#### 4.1.6 Emotive language

Another aspect of infographics that received a mixed reaction are emotive infographics, particularly where exaggerated language is used. P5 was unfamiliar with the subject of the first infographic, and critiqued it for its use of language: "The way it was written made it sound maybe less...factual, somehow?...Like they're trying to rile people up and make it sound worse than it is." Evidently, for P5, the antagonistic language they perceived renders the infographic less factual, an attempt to play on users' emotions which falls flat. This could suggest that P5 finds less emotional language more appealing. However, P5 praised the third infographic for its use of emotive language: "I know how serious of an issue that is and that it is an emotional issue and how seriously it affects people. So...people need to, kind of, feel the reality of it because it's so pressing." When it comes to infographic three, the emotional language is a useful method to impress upon users the severity of the situation. The difference between P5's readings of these two infographics appears to be their awareness of the issue. Once they are familiar with the cause, they can understand why emotive language is used. Thus, one can see how the reception of an infographic is highly subjective, with the same tactic being disparaged or praised depending on participants' existing knowledge.

#### 4.1.7 Aesthetics

The aesthetic element of infographics is key to how they are understood and shared. Almost all participants commented positively on the use of appealing images as adding to the power of an infographic. P2, when describing their preference for the second infographic said, “because there's more visual elements to the infographic, it's definitely more engaging and you can kind of put faces to facts”. Using images of people humanises the issue and makes the infographic more captivating. Participants are thus more likely to share it; in fact, the second infographic was the only one all participants said they would share.

Infographic design is seen as an important way to make them more legible, and the textual content of an infographic influences participants' decision to share. P3 noted clear images are more engaging and commented, “maybe it's my attention span—I always favour infographics with fewer words. Because I probably won't take the time to go through [it all]”. Thus, images can be a vital replacement for text as they can more efficiently convey information. Indeed, they are perhaps more important than text when captivating an audience, which is essential when sharing.

The final aesthetic decision participants provided feedback on is the idea that some infographics can appear too polished. When comparing the three infographics, Participant 1 (P1) negatively described some of the infographics as “quite aesthetic” and said, “To be honest, infographic[s] one and three were really well designed. But there's something about a badly designed infographic that can kind of make it seem more authentic sometimes.” The messier style and design are therefore markers of reliability, suggesting the infographic has been made by a smaller organisation. A slicker infographic might place a lot of emphasis on appealing design and could look aesthetically pleasing on an Instagram feed or story. For that reason, however, it might read as more superficial—designed less to encourage action and more to garner attention or virality on the platform.

## 4.2 Why participants share

### 4.2.1 Appealing to audience

When posting infographics, P1 shares them with a knowledge that most people viewing their story are friends, and so they share to increase their friends' awareness of an issue. Moreover, two participants said they moderate their posts when they are concerned about sensitive issues, as P4 explained:

If I see certain content that I'm not prepared to see, I can find it quite distressing. So, in turn, I don't really want to share that on somebody's social media where they might just be using that to relax.

Therefore, they will not share content that they find difficult to watch, with an awareness that Instagram is used in many ways by users and an empathy for how content they share might be perceived. P4 noted that users can be overwhelmed by lots of content and thus tries not to share too often so that their followers will not “just skip past” the posts. Thus, in moderating what they share they try to ensure that infographics are well-received by their audience.

### 4.2.2 Impacting off-platform

Most participants want to share infographics that can have an impact off the platform, encouraging their followers into activism. P3 said, “If I'm gonna post an infographic, it's more because I have a specific thing that I want people to do rather than just raising awareness of something.” This is echoed by other participants, suggesting that activism is an integral part of their sharing choices, and that they see infographics that do not contain a call for action as less valuable to share. Although P4 used to share posts simply to raise awareness and “express outrage” they say they now post fewer infographics that just contain information. “It kind of feels

like a passive form of protest... So rather than sharing infographics now, I'd usually share petitions where somebody could actually do something." Infographics are therefore deemed the passive option if they do not contain a specific action point that users can take. All six participants indicated they have taken action, such as signing a petition, attending a protest, or donating to a cause after seeing information about it on Instagram, revealing that infographics can be a method of activism.

#### **4.2.3 Creating community**

The interviews showed that participants are using infographics to create community. P6 uses infographics to socialise with their friends and said, "my engagement is very much a dialogue with people. Like a little way of communicating, 'oh I saw this thing. That was really cool.'" Infographics, therefore, become a language in their own right; a way to share information and converse indirectly with others. This also demonstrates an assumption that only some of their followers will be engaging with their story in a deliberate way, as opposed to the majority who will engage fleetingly.

#### **4.2.4 Democratising**

For participants, sharing infographics can be a democratising force. P1 uses infographics to amplify marginalised perspectives and stated they would share the second infographic because "I'd want to amplify causes that don't get much attention. So, like the SDS one, they'd have the least number of followers and they're local." P1 recognises inequalities in exposure on Instagram and is seeking to address those imbalances when posting. In a similar manner, participants will not share infographics they feel are already overexposed, as P4 illustrated, "If I saw lots of people sharing it, I'd probably be less likely to share it because I would assume that people would have already seen it." They do not want to echo what many others are saying, perhaps in the knowledge that people might skip past their stories or lose interest if it seems repetitive.

Additionally, the ease of sharing is a factor in participants' decisions to post, because, as P1 said, "there's not a cost barrier." In other words, anyone can voice their opinion on an issue relatively easily. This could be seen as making Instagram a more democratic platform as all users have a voice. The democratised nature of the platform also means information can be shared before news media has the chance to report it. Although P1 said they do not rely on Instagram as a source of news, they also commented: "I have some friends who are journalists too, or friends who are activists in particular communities. So, they sometimes share things... from where they live and their perspective and that's before news media even shares anything." Instagram infographics can be a way to amplify marginalised voices, and they give the opportunity for breaking news to spread rapidly from first-hand accounts before traditional media can post about it.

#### **4.2.5 Performing**

Finally, participants acknowledged the aspect of performance on Instagram and how that factors into the infographics that they post. Posting becomes a way of performing solidarity with a cause for their followers and the people they follow, as P6 showed:

Being on social media is about being perceived by other people, and people's perceptions are important. And so if the person that's sort of, got good politics has posted something, if I repost that, they're just gonna see it... Am I only there to impress them? No, but it kind of feels like that sometimes.

P6 shares infographics to communicate to others that they agree with a post and validate their existing opinion. They suggested there is a social currency gained by expressing the "right" viewpoint, which might positively affect relationships with people they admire. They acknowledge the performance inherent in Instagram; the choice of what users share is a

reflection of what they value and a demonstration of “good politics”. Additionally, this illustrates a certain social pressure to share, which P3 corroborated when describing a discussion with one of their friends who posts on Instagram a great deal, “For her, because she posts things so regularly, she was like ‘well, if I don’t post things about BLM [Black Lives Matter]...the silence is quite, is a clear message in itself.” The friend’s commitment to posting becomes a self-imposed burden to consistently demonstrate her awareness of different political issues, or risk being seen as in disagreement with or perhaps even prejudiced against a certain group because she has not posted about them.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Digital literacy**

#### **5.1.1 Platform-specific digital literacy practices**

Participants in this study engaged in digital literacy practices specific to platforms like Instagram. They considered elements such as the number of likes on the post and whether the account is verified when choosing what to share. This corroborated research by Addy (2020) that concluded views and likes are often taken as evidence of reliability. However, the current study differs in that Addy argued that users are unaware of digital literacy; whereas, the participants in my study understood that verified profiles and high numbers of likes are not markers of authority but choose to share them regardless. The conscious choice to consider metrics of popularity may be due to time pressures; it is far easier to consider the likes and a verified badge on a post than to check every single source that is referenced. Participants also highlighted trust of friends’ accounts as a factor influencing whether they share material from them, which may be linked to the setting of Instagram as a social platform. Tarullo (2021) found university students favour reading news articles which circulate among close online networks, and this study upholds this finding in the context of infographics. Finally, participants’ personal context and understanding enable them to contextualise a post and decide whether to share it. This can be seen as a learnt behaviour in the community of practice afforded by Instagram (Lloyd, 2010). If participants must make quick decisions about what to share to ensure their sharing stays relevant, and because they are using the platform for short bursts of activity, then relying on prior knowledge, trusted friends, and the community to share accurate information becomes a pragmatic use of the platform and the affordances it enables. This could be seen as a form of platform literacy.

#### **5.1.2 Emphasis on personal responsibility**

Participants tended to blame their own attention span for their decision to not fully evaluate the material they share. Several scholars are critical of users’ perceived lack of digital literacy (Addy, 2020; Wineburg and McGrew, 2019), with Rose-Wiles (2018) blaming an “abdication of personal understanding, judgement, and responsibility” (p. 203) for this skill shortage. However, this allows platform creators to evade responsibility and fails to acknowledge the ways users already demonstrate platform literacy. If platforms such as Instagram become “sponsors of literacy” (Bhatt and MacKenzie, 2019) and their affordances engender certain behaviours, then they have a responsibility for the digital literacy practices learnt on their platforms. Indeed, if users are not engaging with vital methods of confirming reliability in infographics such as lateral reading (Wineburg and McGrew, 2019), as this study shows, then the platform bears some responsibility for this. In fact, one might even say that it is not a conscious choice to disengage, since, for example, Instagram makes it difficult to add hyperlinks to posts so that users can check secondary sources, and participants were aware that failing to check sources is “not a good thing” (P3). P4 commented on the difficulty of escaping the platform when pointing out that Instagram makes it time-consuming to check sources. Scholars of digital literacy on social media platforms must take these constraints into account. While the literature does acknowledge the power of the algorithm (Boler and Davis, 2018; Fouquaert and Mechant, 2021; Henderson et al., 2020), much research still places responsibility on the user to improve their

digital literacy skills rather than recognising the ways they are already digitally literate but are hampered by Instagram's affordances.

### **5.1.3 Critical information literacy practices**

The practices of participants also followed some approaches of critical information literacy. In prioritising marginalised perspectives when choosing what to share, they recognise the power imbalances in traditional media and the importance of diverse perspectives which is an essential component of critical information literacy (Critten, 2015). In a similar vein, P3 said that personal experience retold, such as in infographic three, does not always need a referenced source to make it reliable or valid. Middaugh (2018) suggested young people look for sources with this personal narrative and this act should be encouraged in media literacy education. This is key to understandings of critical information literacy, which sees authority as constructed and recognises the bias of those who determine what is considered to be authoritative sources (Cope, 2010). As such, Instagram infographics can be used as a way to transgress traditional notions of authority.

## **5.2 Perception**

### **5.2.1 Performance of identity**

Although participants indicated they share infographics for their audience, this interpersonal influence viewed by Smith and Taylor (2017) was mostly in the service of self-interest. By sharing content which has a real impact or call to action, within a sphere of friends who behave in a similar way, participants might be performing an activist identity. However, studies propose that sharing of posts can be a conduit to further activism (Amgott, 2018; Chon and Park, 2020). Participants all said they had taken action outside of Instagram because of something they had seen on the platform and thus, regardless of their reasons for sharing, the infographics had an impact.

### **5.2.2 Social pressures**

Additionally, sharing is a demonstration of the participants' values. Indeed, P6 explicitly said that "social media is about perception" and that they are conscious of how their infographics will be received. This way of validating their opinions through sharing reaffirms their own identity, and in the context of political activists, Barassi (2018) sees this as constructing an identity narrative. However, an awareness of how they will be perceived can have negative impacts. Participants noted the social pressure to share on certain issues, and one could see P3's friend who felt obligated to share content to maintain their reputation as being "trapped by their own online identity", as observed by Brandtzaeg and Chaparro-Domínguez (2020, p. 171) in a study of young journalists' social media presence. Therefore, the current study indicated that while sharing can be conducive to developing one's own identity and signalling one's values, it can also be restrictive and lead to self-policing on the platform.

### **5.2.3 Assumptions about audience**

There is a stark difference between participants' perception of their audience and their perception of the people they follow, despite an assumption that both groups are mainly comprised of their social circle. The participants were highly critical of their followers while simultaneously highly trusting of the judgement of those they follow, assuming they will share reliable infographics. This tension might perhaps be explained by the audience of an infographic described as an invisible audience (boyd, 2010), whom participants can imagine but not be concretely sure of, despite potentially being made up of friends. The lack of certainty regarding their audience thus leads participants to be more sceptical of their level of engagement. However, when choosing who to share from, they are aware of the individual page from which the infographic originated, and so can engage in affinity practices which centre social relations (Lankshear and Knobel, 2015). This highlights a gap in the literature regarding the differences between perceptions of users' audiences and the accounts they follow.

## 5.3 Visual aspects

### 5.3.1 Individuality of visual interpretation

On Instagram, visual components function as a reflection of cultural values (Drucker, 2017). Although all participants favoured infographic two, some admired it for its “badly designed” appearance which granted it authenticity (P1), while others praised the “clear images” (P3). This indicates the impact of infographics as enunciative instruments (Drucker, 2017). When participants viewed the images, they brought their own interpretation of the meaning of different elements and thus different aspects of an infographic will be appealing. In general, infographics with more visual elements were more positively received by participants, with the presentation of information directly affecting how it was perceived. In some cases, the presentation is even more relevant than the message, as Shabani and Keshavarz (2022) found in their study of students’ evaluation of reliability on social media. Thus, this research indicates that in Instagram spaces, the quality of the written message is not enough on its own—the visual message also factors into participants’ decisions to post, although they may interpret it differently to their followers depending on their cultural context.

### 5.3.2 Power of the visual

Additionally, participants were aware of the power of visual images, with some being reluctant to post sensitive or potentially triggering images because of their possible impact. In a platform with potentially collapsed contexts (boyd, 2010), where any of their followers might be viewing their content, users have to cater to their lowest common denominator (Hogan, 2010), or the widest range of people. This might mean censoring much of the content one posts to avoid sharing controversial infographics. However, participants also wanted their followers to act after seeing posts and understand the visual power of an infographic to show the severity of a situation. Indeed, Middaugh (2018) found that U.S. high school students highlighted emotional impact as one reason why they share content. Thus, participants must balance their understanding that emotive infographics are more likely to be shared with a sensitivity towards their audience. These findings reinforce ideas of the centrality of emotion to visual images and the importance of social contexts to the choice of what infographics to share.

## 6. Conclusion

This article aimed to discover how Instagram users interact with infographics on the platform, examining their digital literacy practices and the ways Instagram’s visual and social affordances feed into activism. The findings suggest digital literacy plays an important role in infographic usage. Participants engaged in specific digital literacy practices which Instagram affords, incorporating an understanding of Instagram’s authority markers, their social networks, and their personal context to determine reliability when sharing infographics. Digital literacy is enacted through the affordances of Instagram, which both engenders and constrains their sharing. The participants’ digital literacy practices also accommodated an understanding of critical literacy principles and the potential for non-academic sources to provide reliable information.

My research suggests that users prioritise sharing infographics that have a tangible action for followers to carry out off the platform. Although they avoid content which could be controversial, they still strive to share visually stimulating infographics which will provoke an emotional reaction to gain people’s attention and pressure them to act. The sharing of activist infographics both reaffirms their own identity and is perceived to improve one’s status among friends. Users also share with an awareness of their audience, posting infographics which they believe their audience will find engaging, while they are highly trusting of the accounts from whom they share.

There are several areas highlighted by this study which would benefit from greater exploration. The area of visual imagery and digital literacy could be further explored to examine what specific imagery is regarded as the most emotive. Additionally, a study of digital literacy on

Instagram which used a different method, such as participants keeping a diary of what they share and when, would enable researchers to find out in what ways participants' interviews map on to their real-time behaviour. Finally, other social media platforms such as TikTok are highly visual and have also been accused of spreading misinformation (Spencer-Elliott, 2022), so it would be valuable to investigate if this study's findings could be replicated on that platform. As a qualitative study, my research uses a small sample group in a specific age range. As such, a larger sample group which accounts for other factors such as gender, location, and age might encounter different findings.

Based on the findings of this study, when conducting research, I recommend that information professionals recognise the specific affordances of each platform, such as users' constraints when determining reliability. Information professionals should design learning that incorporates these platforms with a user-focused approach, accounting for the specific contexts of their students and the ways they engage online.

My research shows the value of visual literacy to information studies and the importance of considering the visual when thinking about digital literacy in platform studies. Few studies have considered digital literacy on Instagram, and none have previously examined digital literacy and Instagram infographics. My research also highlights the agency of users and the value of interviewing them about digital literacy; they are often talked about in studies of digital literacy on platforms but are rarely asked about how they perceive their behaviour. As shown in this article, centring users in research is essential to understand and affect digital literacy practices on platforms.

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## Appendix 1 - Interview questions

*Key: italics denote interviewer notes and are not questions.*

### Instagram introductory questions

- Are you between 20 and 25 years old?
- Do you use Instagram?
- How often do you use the platform?
  - Multiple times a day
  - Daily
  - Weekly
  - Monthly
  - Other – please clarify
- How do you use Instagram?
  - Post/share your own content

- Repost content
- View and engage e.g., like and comment on others' posts
- Lurk without engaging
- A mix of these options
- Do you use it for work, personal use, a mix of both, or another reason?
- Why do you use Instagram?
  - Have you ever used it as a news source?
    - If yes, when and why?
  - Have you ever found out new information from Instagram?
- What do you think the purpose of the platform is?
- Do you think Instagram is a good platform for sharing information?
  - Why or why not?

### Infographic introductory questions

*Briefly show three examples of infographics to clarify what they are:*

- [Hate Zine \(January 28, 2022\)](#)
- [NHS \(April 20, 2022\)](#)
- [Livekindly Home of Sustainability \(June 8, 2022\)](#)
- Do you follow any accounts that mainly post infographics?
  - Why or why not?
- Have you ever reposted and/or created an infographic?
  - How often do you repost and/or create infographics?
  - Do you remember the first time or the first few times you shared an infographic?
    - Why did you start?
  - Did COVID-19 impact your sharing behaviour or the types of infographics you share?
    - Why or why not?
  - Do you tend to share infographics to your Instagram feed, or to your Instagram story?
    - Why do you think this is?

### Infographic examples

*Show three examples:*

- [Slow Factory \[theslowfactory\], June 8, 2022](#)
- [SOAS Detainee Support \[sds\\_noborders\\_noprison\], April 20, 2021](#)
- [Munroe \[munroebergdorf\], August 16, 2021](#)

*For each infographic, ask the following questions (clarify it is not a test of their memory or analytical skill):*

- What do you think is the message of this infographic?
- What are your general thoughts about this infographic?
- Are you familiar with the account that posted the infographic?
- Does it seem reliable?
  - Why or why not?
- Now, thinking about the three infographics as a whole:
  - Would you share any of these three infographics?
    - Why or why not?
    - Which one(s) would you share?
  - Do any of these three infographics seem more reliable than another?
    - Why or why not?

### How content and source affect sharing

- What type of infographics do you share?
  - Are there topics that you're more likely to share infographics about?
    - Why or why not?

- What motivates you to share an infographic?
  - How do you decide what or when to share?
- Is there anything that would make you more or less likely to share an infographic?
  - Would a certain type of author (e.g., group vs individual), the infographic coming from a certain account and your relationship to that account affect your sharing?
    - Why or why not?
  - Would the style and/or image used in an infographic make you more or less likely to share it?
    - Why or why not?
- Is there anything you look for in an infographic that you would consider to be reliable?

### **Emotional responses to infographics**

- Have you ever changed your mind or perspective about an issue after seeing an infographic?
  - If yes, when and why?
  - If yes, does this happen often?
- Have you ever changed your mind about sharing an infographic you have already posted?
- Have you ever deleted an infographic you have posted?
  - Why or why not?
- Have you ever questioned an infographic you've seen or seen things that seem less reliable?
  - If yes, when and why?
  - If yes, does this happen often?

### **Moving beyond infographics**

- How do you feel about infographics that include sources?
  - Do you consider them to be less or more reliable?
  - If an infographic has a source linked, do you try to find the source?
    - Why or why not?
- Have you ever taken action outside of Instagram because of something seen on the platform, e.g., donated money, attended a protest, or emailed your MP?
  - If yes, when and why?
  - If yes, does this happen often?

### **Social sharing**

- Do you feel like others' (the people you follow) behaviour and/or sharing of infographics affects what you share? Why or why not?
- If a lot of your friends shared something, would it affect whether or not you shared it?