Social Campaigns on Online Platforms as a New Form of Public Sphere in Digital Era: A Critical Review

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Abstract

Nowadays with the ever-increasing growth in social media platforms and the creation of different forms of online activism, the word known as "Campaign" has become a familiar and useful term in people's everyday lives. Campaigns with all kinds of social aims especially using Hashtags are run on social media platforms by individuals, charities, NGOs, governments, municipalities and brand companies and with peoples' participation and value co-creation, appropriate results are achieved and the desired changes are made in people's attitudes and the behavior of individuals, businesses, or governments. Therefore, there seems to be a new form of a virtual public sphere where there is action, dialog and social mobilization, which leads to the formation of public opinion and social change in the digital era. In this paper, using a critical review method, we are going to investigate a public sphere's literature and study its core features (1. access, 2. dialog, 3.

action, and 4. public opinion) in digital campaigns and online platforms. Then, in the last part, we are going to map those in a real case study in order to further clarify the arguments and show how social campaigns on online platforms contribute to the formation of a public sphere in the digital era.

Introduction

The term "Public Sphere" was first introduced by Jurgen Habermas, a German socialist and philosopher. In his historical analysis of the 18th and 19th centuries, he displayed how citizens publically discussed and talked about political issues (e.g., in coffee houses) and as a result, how public opinion was formed, which he called the formation of a public sphere. Then in his later analysis, he argued that the civil public sphere was replaced by a commercial mass media public sphere. On the other side, if we look at the historical aspects of Social Media platforms, we see that many of those were first developed by young people with the purpose of sharing and connecting, leading to a participatory culture. However, as the users of these platforms grew in number, big commercial companies bought these platforms with economic interests and as a result, the public sphere formed on these platforms disappeared once again.

Despite that, some authors have argued that one way for public sphere formation is through social campaigns on online platforms (Pedram, 2009). In fact, despite many constraints, there is still space for dialog, action and a public sphere through online social campaigns. However, this relation has not been fully discussed in previous literature and only some characteristics close to the public sphere concept and its impacts of social campaigns have been reviewed. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to elaborate more on this issue and provide more evidence by investigating the core features of a public sphere in online social campaigns in order to show how online social campaigns contribute to the formation of a public sphere.

In the first part of this paper, the role of social media in today's world will be reviewed, then the research method will be discussed. Based on that, the public sphere and its core features will be defined and the impact of social media in the formation of a public sphere will be studied. Following that, Social Campaigns and the impact of social media on social campaigns and a real case study will be given to investigating key features of the public sphere in the digital era.

Role of Social Media in Today's World

The use of various social media platforms has become an everyday routine for many people in different parts of the world. Based on Kaplan and Haenlein's definition, Social Media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the

Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). On the other hand, the concept of Web 2.0 was first introduced in 2004, which refers to websites that allow people to receive, share, save and produce content. Therefore, it could be argued that the main goal of Web 2.0 and social media applications is to allow individuals, users and organizations to interact, share and produce content using these platforms, which ends up in naming them "many to many" media instead of "one to one" or "one to many" (Crosbie, 1998).

Now with the ever-increasing use of social media platforms, questions are raised about the social and political impacts of these platforms. As seen in the past, many social and political movements around the world (the USA, Arab Countries, Egypt, Iran, Ukraine, etc.) were triggered in social media. In addition to that, rapid diffusion of perceived confidential information on these platforms such as WikiLeaks has had impacts in different countries. In other words, many to many, interactional, UGC and rapid diffusion abilities of these platforms has given rise to many social and political changes and resulted in empowering people and civil societies in many cases. Therefore, studying these platforms can deepen our knowledge about today's trends.

Materials and Methods

A critical review as a type of review paper includes a degree of analysis and conceptual innovation. In addition, an effective critical review presents, analyses and synthesizes material from diverse sources and the resultant model may constitute a synthesis of existing models or schools of thought or it may be a completely new interpretation of the existing data. Critical reviews do not typically demonstrate the systematicity of other more structured approaches to the literature, there is no formal requirement to present methods of the search, synthesis, and analysis explicitly and there is no need for formal quality assessment (Grand & Booth, 2009).

The different stages of this research are given in Figure 1. In the first stage, the definition of the public sphere and its relation to the Internet and Social Media is derived within a search in English and Persian academic books and journals (mainly listed in Google Search, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Scopus, Civilica, Noormags, and SID). The keywords used in this stage were as follows: "Public Sphere", "Public Sphere and Internet", "Public Sphere and Social Media" and "Good Governance". Analyzing these sources, core features of a public sphere were derived.

In the next stage, pursuing the aim of the study, within a search in academic journals mainly listed in Google Scholar, Research Gate, ProQuest, Science Direct, Springer, Emerald and Wiley from the year 2010 to 2019, 11 papers about social campaigns on online platforms were analyzed and mapped with the core features of public spheres. the keywords used in this stage were as follows: "social campaign", "social cause", "social good", "social marketing", "activism",

"online activism", "corporate social responsibility-csr", "value co-creation" and "dialog".

In the last stage, an online social campaign based in Iran was reviewed through Interviews with the founder of the campaign, observation and Internet research to show its contribution to the formation of a public sphere in the digital era.
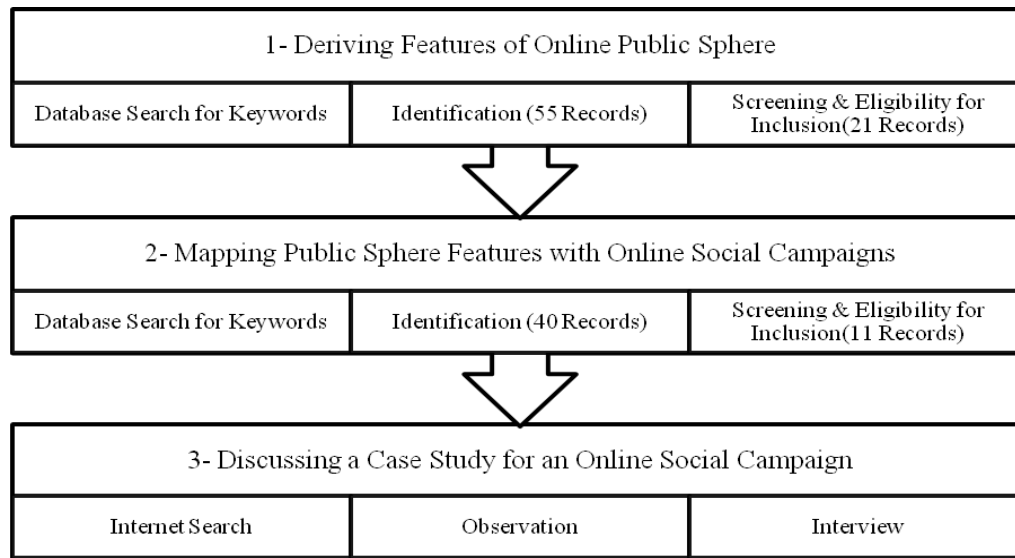
1- Deriving Features of Online Public Sphere		
Database Search for Keywords	Identification (55 Records)	Screening & Eligibility for Inclusion(21 Records)

2- Mapping Public Sphere Features with Online Social Campaigns		
Database Search for Keywords	Identification (40 Records)	Screening & Eligibility for Inclusion(11 Records)

3- Discussing a Case Study for an Online Social Campaign		
Internet Search	Observation	Interview

Figure 1. Representation of Research Stages

Habermas Definition of Public Sphere

Jurgen Habermas, a German socialist and philosopher, first coined the term "Public Sphere". In his historical analysis of the bourgeois in 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain, France, and Germany, he displayed how citizens publically discussed and talked about political and social issues in public places (e.g., in coffee houses) and as a result, how public opinions were formed, which he called it the formation of bourgeois public sphere. He defined the public sphere as "a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1991).

Then in his later analysis, Habermas argued that by entering the 20th century, civil public spheres were replaced by a commercial mass media public sphere, in which media organizations and corporate interests set the agenda and framed the public discourse along economic interests (Kaiser and others, 2017), a process which he called 'the re-feudalization of the public sphere". He believed that through this change, the citizens were pushed back into the private sphere transforming them from a "Culture-Debating to a Culture-Consuming Public" (Habermas, 1991). Accordingly, the quality of the public sphere changed toward "a public sphere in appearance only". Since then, Habermas' notion of the public sphere was criticized from several aspects. For example, it is argued by some that Habermas has not taken into account the issues of minorities and thus they suggested that it should also focus on the inclusion of all voices (Fraser, 1990). In other words, the idea of "Counter Public" was coined by critics. In his later works, Habermas

agreed with some of the criticisms and accepted the role of counter publics. He also adopted the periphery and centrum concepts (Habermas, 1998) and understood the public sphere as being located at the periphery of the political system, transmitted by the mass media.

Habermas (1996) defined the public sphere as: "A network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions."

At the end, we could conclude that this definition is still valid in today's digital era.

Public Sphere, Internet and Social Media

Some authors believe that the Internet and social media platforms have the potentials to reconstruct a public sphere and form a virtual public sphere. In other words, if we assume the core features of a public sphere as 1. dialogs, 2. public opinion, and 3. action, then the Internet and social media can be a platform for the emergence of these features. (Mahdizadeh, 2004)

This is also consistent with the historical aspects of the formation of these digital platforms. Many of these platforms such as YouTube and Facebook were a creative initiative of a group of young people who were interested in connecting and sharing their pictures and videos. Therefore, "participatory culture" without the interference of corporates and governments was first assumed as the main feature of social media. In other words, social media was perceived as platforms to connect, communicate, form communities and develop democracy in the first years of the 21st century (Van Dijck, 2013). Evidence of this concept is the selection of "You" as the person of the year in 2006 by Time's Magazine with this slogan: "Yes you. You control the information age, welcome to your world." (Tapscott & Williams, 2008) In addition to that, "Produsers" was another concept, which was coined by Bruns to explain a new form of user agency in social media platforms both as users and producers of content. (Bruns, 2008)

As the users of these platforms grew in number, many of the platforms were bought by big commercial companies such as Google, Yahoo, Amazon, and Facebook. Therefore, Van Dijck claims in her book that the public sphere that was initially formed on these platforms started to disappear, as these big corporates were more interested in users' data and profit-making than participatory culture. She also gives an example of the selection of Mark Zuckerberg as the person of the year in 2010 by Times magazine (Van Dijck, 2013).

From this point forward, two groups of supporters and critics of social media started to emerge. Supporters who admired social media as a "liberation technology" and promoted democracy and space for the public sphere, whereas others criticized these platforms from different aspects.

Critic's View

From one aspect, it is argued that these platforms instead of "Making the Web Social" are "Making Sociality Technical" (Van Dijck, 2013). In other words, people are reproducing the power of social media owners by producing data about their everyday life stories and losing their privacy by sharing personal data. Some authors call this process datafication or dataveillance (Mayer-Schoenberger & Cukier, 2013). Han (2017) believes that in the era of Big Data, people are perceived as packages of data for economic purposes and therefore people are valued as goods.

Terranova calls the users of social media "free labour", as they are producing data without receiving any money and in the end, the money goes into social media owners' pockets (Terranova, 2004).

Apart from the technical sociality aspect, others have looked at this phenomenon from a social and political perspective. Poster has discussed the relation between the identity of people on these platforms and political change. He argued that in the past, people's identities were defined by their physical interactions which resulted in a more accountable and responsive behavior and more trust. This is different in social media as people's identity is changeable and therefore creating a stable and sustainable political community is not easy (Poster, 1995). Another concept which is coined by Morozov is "Slacktivism" consisting of "Slacker" and "Activism". He argued that activism on online platforms sometimes only results in Slacktivism, making people proud of themselves for taking actions, whereas, in reality, this is just a delusion for making change (Morozov, 2011).

Supporter's Views

Despite the above-mentioned criticism, we should not disregard the role of social media as a provider of opportunity for everyone to take part and engage without the outer pressure from mass media, governments and corporates. As O'Brien (1999) points out, "Internet holds the promise of fostering public discourse on a wide variety of issues related to the common good". Mahdizadeh (2004) demonstrates the Internet features of a virtual public sphere as: 1. Decentralized, 2. Fragmented, 3. Virtual, 4. Global, and 5. Interactive. Shirky as a social media optimist believes that social and digital media have a long-term effect on democracy, a well-developed public sphere and strong civil society: "the potential of social media lies mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere–change measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months" (Shirky, 2011). He also states in his book that "We now have communication tools that are flexible enough to match our social capabilities, and we are witnessing the rise of new ways of coordinating action that take advantage of that change. We are living in the heart of remarkable progress in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations" (Shirky, 2009).

The work that MacKinnon has done in investigating the blogosphere of China is of particular importance. She argued that "the Internet generally and blogs more specifically can potentially be a medium and tool for political change in China." In addition, MacKinnon finds Chinese bloggers surprisingly optimistic: "Many Chinese bloggers hold the view that the real story going on in the Chinese blogosphere is not one of the oppressed victims who are waiting to be liberated. It is a story of tenacious optimists, slowly and patiently pushing back the boundaries, believing in the end, history is on their side." (MacKinnon, 2008).

Fung and her colleagues in their research stated that technological interventions are almost insufficient unto themselves to set into motion social forces and reactions that result in increased accountability and responsiveness (Myers, 2013). Instead, the more common pattern is that a technological intervention "aggregates information that increases accountability by inserting itself into the public discourse of political campaigns and mass media" and "relies upon interpretive intermediaries such as advocacy organizations and journalists." Even more commonly, they say, "there is a specialized partnership between technologists who can provide specific information and communications tools on one side and entities such as NGOs or governments whose goals [are] advanced incrementally through those tools on the other." (Fung et al., 2013).

Khaniki and Alvandi, by investigating public sphere in online communities, claimed that Internet nowadays provides a place for social activist and opposition groups to state their protests freely and even have an impact on mass media, whereas in the past, these counter media were not taken serious (Khaniki & Alvandi, 2010).

Diamond and Plattner have stated that"The balance of potency between ICTs as democracy-boosters and ICTs as repression-enablers remains dynamic and fluid." (Diamond & Plattner, 2012). In other words, they are optimistic about liberation technologies' potential to raise democratic consciousness and to promote democratic transitions in authoritarian regimes, but in the end, "technology is merely a tool, yet to the extent that innovative citizens can improve and better use these tools." (Diamond & Plattner, 2012). Therefore, as stated earlier, investigating the social and political aspects of social media is of particular importance and is still valid in today's trends.

From the above literature, it could be realized that we cannot disregard the importance of these technologies in the formation of a virtual public sphere in today's world. We should accept that the virtual public sphere is fragmented and different from the Habermasian public sphere. Therefore, it has its own features and functionalities and completely borrowing and mapping the traditional public sphere to virtual spaces has its own implications.

We could conclude that core features of a public sphere are as follows: 1. Access, 2. Dialog, 3. Action, and 4. Public Opinion. As some authors have argued that one of the ways of forming a

public sphere is through social campaigns on online platforms, we will also define social campaigns and investigate the features of a public sphere in different social campaigns. In fact, despite many constraints, there is still space for dialog, action and public sphere through online social campaigns.

Social Campaigns on Online Platforms

These days with the ever-increasing growth in social media platforms and the creation of different forms of online activism, the word known as "Campaign" has become a familiar and useful term in people's everyday lives. Campaigns with all kinds of social aims especially using Hashtags are run on social media platforms by individuals, charities, NGOs, government, municipalities and brand companies and with people participation, appropriate results are achieved. Three definitions of a social campaign that are derived from social advertising literature are given below:

"Social campaigns are defined as intensive communication activities addressed to a specific target group, whose goal is to increase public knowledge, or persuade changes in thinking or behavior. Such messages often inform about facts and issues that are difficult to publicize." (Hernik & Dziadas, 2013).

"Social campaigns promote desirable social norms of behavior, acceptable models and induce a change of thinking" (Bogunia-Borowska, 2004). "They talk about divergences between the ideal behavior set by social norms and the reality" (Kowalik & Sęk, 1999)

With the advent of social media and online platforms as a two-way and "many to many" media, social campaigns have also changed in form and characteristics. Guidry and his colleagues believe that in the past, social campaigns were implemented to change individual's behaviors, whereas now in social media, it goes beyond the individual level and each person by sharing the message with him/her friends can act as the promoter of the campaign. In addition, there is space for dialog on social media that affects social campaigns (Guidry and others, 2014). Another author has pointed out the transformed version of social campaigns on online platforms and states that the main features of the digital era are Value Co-Creation and Dialog (Lefebvre, 2012). Another feature that is added to social campaigns by online platforms is the ability of individuals to act as social activists and invite others to join their campaigns for social or political purposes.

Related Works about Social Campaigns, Activism, Dialog and Value Co-Creation on Online Platforms

in this section, the previous studies related to *social campaigns*, *activism*, *dialog* and *value co-creation* on social media platforms have been reviewed. In addition to "*social marketing*" and

"*social campaign*", the words "*social cause*" and "*social good*" were also used in the database search.

Cyberactivism

Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2004) have emphasized the transformed version of activism on social media named as "cyberactivism 2.0". The main features of that compared to "cyberactivism 1.0" and "traditional activism" are being 1. self-directed, 2. independent and 3. constant flow of data, 4. instant, and 5. global. Then in their research, they provided a model for distinguishing stages in the development of social protests. The stages are as follows: 1. trigger event, 2. media response, 3. viral organization, and 4. physical response.

Wanjiru has investigated the role of social media in social mobilization in Kenya. He mentioned that being active on at least two platforms, having a proper call to action, stimulating sympathy and emotions and also promoting campaigns by social media influencers will contribute to the success of campaigns. Therefore, he accounts for four variables influencing the diffusion of the campaign message: 1. Credibility of the campaign inviter and his/her audiences, 2. Message quality, and 3. Channel (Wanjiru, 2016).

Hsiao investigated the role of social media in forming a collective action in Taiwan from the Socio-Psychological view. He pointed two hypotheses for the reaction of people in social media toward social mobilization. 1. information hypothesis, and 2. expression hypothesis. The first hypothesis assumes that social media provides more information which leads to more awareness and social mobilization, whereas the second hypothesis assumes that only when people express their views, this results in a dialog and civic communication which in turn affects social mobilization. After the research was done, the second hypothesis was approved. This means that dialog and expression on social media are of great value for social mobilization and only consuming information is not that effective (Hsiao, 2015).

Value Co-Creation

Roncha and Thomas have demonstrated the power of social media networks, namely Instagram, in building brand communities and co-creating value for brands through social campaigns. By analyzing the 2015 social campaign #withoutshoes by TOMS, the authors intended to demonstrate how the value creation process can be extended to involve all stakeholders and raise the effectiveness of a brand's communication campaign. The campaign took place on 21 May 2015. For the two weeks ahead of the day, TOMS was determined to raise awareness for children's health and education by challenging consumers to post a photo of their bare feet. For every photo tagged on Instagram, the brand would give a new pair of shoes to a child in need. The given framework used to analyze the campaign has its key elements in the five crucial value co-creation sub-processes that are: 1. learning, 2. sharing, 3. co-developing, 4. socializing, and 5. advocating. These sub-processes are interconnected as a network and are not necessarily linear

(Roncha and Thomas, 2016). In a similar work, Sorensen provided a framework for value co-creation sub-processes of NGOs on online platforms. The author defined the following sub-processes for value co-creation in social organizations: 1. co-developing, 2. acknowledging, 3. rewarding, 4. sharing, 5. advocating, 6. adding momentum, and 7. learning. He also stated that platform, tone, and language are the post characteristics and affect the process of value co-creation (Sorensen, 2015).

Dialog

In the era of social media, many companies are encouraged to be present on these platforms and make a dialog with their potential stakeholders to gain legitimacy along their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plans. Based on this concept, Korschun and Du presented a framework to explain how CSR dialog in virtual platforms leads to value creation both for the company and society (Korschun & Du, 2013). Following that, Jurietti et al. (2017) applied their framework in a case study carried out on Unilever Sustainable Living Lab, which was a platform for dialog about sustainability. They noted the constraints and missing features that could have affected the participation in dialogs.

Etter (2014) in another paper investigated three CSR communication strategies on social media which were previously developed by Morsing and Skalts which are: 1. broadcasting, 2. reacting, and 3. engaging. The author found out that many companies are still practicing broadcasting and reacting strategies, but to create stronger bonds with their stakeholders they will accept engaging strategies.

Apart from CSR dialog, some features of social media influence dialog. Honeycutt and Herring have investigated the role of tags and mentions (@) in forming conversations on social media (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Laucuka investigated the communicative functions of hashtags (#) on social media and studied how hashtags are used in social campaigns (Laucuka, 2018).

Discussion about the Reformation of Public Sphere in Digital Era

From the above literature, it could be concluded that the importance of social media in the formation of a virtual public sphere cannot be disregard in today's world. We should accept that the virtual public sphere is fragmented and different from the Habermasian public sphere. Therefore, it has its own features and functionalities and completely borrowing and mapping the traditional public sphere to virtual spaces has its own implications.

Some authors have argued that one way for the formation of a public sphere is through social campaigns on online platforms (Pedram, 2009). In fact, despite many constraints, there is still space for dialog, action and public sphere through online social campaigns.

As stated earlier, some authors have argued that when social media platforms were bought by big corporations that were pursuing economic interests, the public sphere and participatory culture that was first formed on these platforms started to fade away. This is somehow true but reviewing works on CSR dialog and value co-creation with stakeholders on social media platforms demonstrates a new form of corporates' social involvements and having social impacts by using engaging strategies. Therefore, it seems to be beyond economic interests and subsequently we seem to be facing a new form of the virtual public sphere.

Based on the above-mentioned literature on public spheres we can derive four features for the virtual public sphere: 1. access, 2. dialog, 3. action, and 4. public opinion. Following that, in the literature of social campaigns, we could see a combination of these features sometimes with different wordings. For example, value co-creation and social mobilization contain dialog, action and public opinion. In addition to that, parameters influencing the diffusions of the campaigns and social media platform features such as hashtags are related to access (access of people to campaigns). In the below table the public sphere core features more emphasized in the above literature are given.

Table 1. Public Sphere Features in Online Social Campaign Literature

Related Works	Access	Dialog	Action	Public Opinion
Lefebvre (2012)	-	✓	✓	-
Korschun and Du (2013)	-	✓	✓	✓
Etter (2014)	✓	✓	-	-
Guidry et al. (2014)	-	✓	✓	-
Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hsiao (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sorensen (2015)	✓	✓	✓	-
Roncha and Thomas (2016)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wanjiru (2016)	✓	-	-	-
Jurietti et al. (2017)	-	✓	✓	✓
Laucuka (2018)	✓	✓	-	-

In conclusion, social campaigns on online platforms have the potential to reform a public sphere in the digital era. A case is provided below to further illustrate the given arguments.

Empirical Illustration of How Online Social Campaigns Contribute in the Formation of Public Sphere: The Case of Car Free Tuesdays Campaign

Car-Free Tuesdays is a social campaign in Iran initiated by a young Iranian on social media in the year 2015 with the aim of having cleaner air by promoting the use of public transportation, walking and riding bicycles instead of driving cars. In an interview with a news media, the founder mentioned that "at first, we started to produce content on social media to introduce different alternatives for cars and then on the second week we received support from different

cities. We also printed information and pictures and started to distribute them in the streets while talking to people and asking them to take pictures of their Car Free Tuesdays and sharing it with us on social media. After a short period of time, through people, NGOs, and social activist's participation, the campaign became viral in the whole country."

Nowadays, after four years from the initiating date of this campaign, its hashtag and slogan are promoted on city billboards by municipalities, volunteer events on Tuesdays are held for gathering and riding bicycles, the city infrastructures and requirements for bicycle rides are discussed in online and offline forms, a sharing platform for bicycles has started as a startup company and finally, the mayor of Tehran, the capital of Iran, commutes to work on a bicycle on Tuesdays to show his support.

Mapping campaign's data with the above literature, we could conclude that when different groups of people, NGOs and social activists around the country encountered this campaign's message, they not only supported it but also took part and promoted it's by value co-creation sub-processes (action), a conversation or dialog about this concept was generated through hashtags by influencers and news media (dialog). This demand influenced public opinion and eventually, following its co-operation with municipalities and the mayor supporting the campaign, changes in public policy and infrastructures were demanded.

Conclusion

Nowadays with the ever-increasing growth in social media platforms and the creation of different forms of online activism, the word known as "Campaign" has become a familiar and useful term in people's everyday lives. Campaigns with all kinds of social aims especially using hashtags are run on social media platforms by individuals, charities, NGOs, governments, municipalities and brand companies and with peoples' participation and value co-creation, appropriate results are achieved and the desired changes are made in people's attitudes and the behavior of individuals, businesses, or governments. Therefore, there seems to be a new form of the public sphere where there is action, dialog and social mobilization, which leads to the formation of public opinion and social change. This paper has aimed to elaborate on the relationship between the public sphere and social campaigns and provide more evidence for this relation. We investigated the public sphere on online platforms and what social campaigns on online platforms are and how they contribute to the formation of a public sphere. Ultimately, a social campaign was given as a case for further clarity of the arguments.

Suggestions for future research are as follows: 1. Doing a multi-case study to more deepen the discussed issues, 2. Developing a conceptual model for explaining the occurrence process of online social campaigns with either qualitative or quantitative methods, and 3. Designing a social media platform specific to social campaigns.

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