

From Conflict Zones to Red Carpets through Hashtag Hijacking: How the Gaza War Entered the MET Gala and Eurovision

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Abstract

This article examines the repurposing of hashtags associated with the major cultural events of the Met Gala and Eurovision, to engage in disputations surrounding the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip. Adopting a cross-modal and cross-platform methodology, the research analyzes 710 posts alongside 1,093 associated audio-visual materials from Facebook and Instagram. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses, the research uncovers platform-specific activity patterns and the unique multimodal narratives promoted by actors on opposing sides of the conflict, highlighting activist practices such as hashtag hijacking, which leveraged the hashtags #Eurovision and #MetGala to amplify awareness of the Gaza War. Furthermore, it examines the varying levels of politicization of these hashtags, anchoring the research in the background of the differing affordances and dynamics of the two platforms, offering insights into the politicization of cultural narratives in digital spaces.

Introduction

The long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine escalated in 2023, culminating in what has been described as “one of the most intense bombing campaigns of the twenty-first century” (Scher, Van Den Hoek, 2025), when Israel launched large-scale airstrikes on the Gaza strip on October 27. On November 14, 2024 the United Nation’s Special Committee announced that “Israel’s warfare in Gaza is consistent with the characteristics of genocide, with mass civilian casualties and life-threatening conditions intentionally imposed on Palestinians” (United Nations, 2024). Despite this strong moral-legal formulation, at the time the study was conducted, both inter- and online community opinion were divided. Many pro-Palestinian organizations were calling for Israel’s actions to be classified as genocide, while international opinion seemed equivocal. The conflict was referred to by various names, including the Israeli-Hamas war, Gaza war, Gaza-Israel conflict and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of the most commonly used terms was Israeli-Hamas war (also adopted by Wikipedia in early 2025); however, this label can be seen as biased, as it frames the conflict primarily around Israel’s actions against Hamas, while downplaying the severe consequences for Palestinians, including more than 65,000 deaths since October 2023 (OCHA, 2025). Therefore, to reflect the heterogeneous narratives circulating at the time of the research, the term Gaza war is employed here as a comparatively neutral designation.

The Gaza war has sparked global outcry, leading to numerous pro-Palestinian protests across Europe and an intense backlash on social media. At the same time, many pro-Palestinian organizations and supporters of the cause have accused international opinion of indifference and inaction. Accordingly, on-the-ground and online initiatives have been launched to raise awareness of the conflict and the suffering of civilians in Gaza. Among

these activities, high-profile events like the Met Gala and Eurovision have been used to draw attention to the ongoing conflict, with the particular focus on the Rafah bombing, which coincided with them. Unexpectedly, those major cultural events became arenas for geopolitical struggle, acting as conduits for the tragedy of war, which many felt was being drowned out by the cacophony of pop-cultural buzz. The venues of the Eurovision Song Contest and the Met Gala became sites of protests and political expression, as activists seized these international stages to voice concerns over social justice and human rights. Hand in hand with those real-time actions were efforts of online advocacy and digital activism. Using event-specific hashtags, social media users leveraged the reach of these platforms by attaching politically-driven commentaries, along with photos and videos depicting the realities of the Gaza War.

In general, Facebook and Instagram remain understudied with regard to digital activism and hashtag hijacking (La Rocca, Boccia 2022)—a practice whereby a given hashtag is subversively repurposed to alter its original intent. Engaging with the digital dynamics of the Gaza War, the aim of this article is to examine how the hashtags #Eurovision and #MetGala were politicized on these social media platforms, particularly through the practice of hashtag hijacking. The study is structured around the following research questions:

1. What are the distributional features of the studied cohort of social media posts?
2. What modes of hashtag usage have been employed to politicize #Eurovision and #MetGala in relation to the Gaza War?
3. What textual and visual narratives have been used according to varying degrees of politicization?
4. What are the distinct characteristics of hashtag hijacking in this specific case of digital activism?

The article commences with a literature review on the political dimensions afforded by social media platforms and the specific modes of their use, particularly in the context of digital activism and its subvariant, hashtag hijacking. We then discuss the employed methodology, detailing the process of extracting posts and screening them for relevance, as well as the coding structure for both the posts and the attached visual content. Next, we present a quantitative analysis of the distributional characteristics of the studied cohort of social media posts published on Facebook and Instagram. We then proceed with a section examining the modes of politicization in the use of #Eurovision and #MetGala, including their associated textual and visual narratives, with a particular focus on hijacking aspects. The article concludes with a discussion on the specificity of this hijacking case as it emerged through the co-opting of these two events, underscoring the importance of hashtag and cross-platform studies in understanding digital activism, as well as ongoing modern technologically-mediated representations of conflicts.

Digital Activism and Social Media Platforms Affordances

The term “digital activism” is inherently problematic due to the absence of a clear definition and the numerous subcategories it encompasses (Özkula, 2021, p. 62). It broadly covers diverse modes of online action, including “different forms of hacktivism, denial of service attacks, hashtag activism, and open source advocacy” (Kaun & Uldam, 2018, p. 2100), as well as “nerd politics”, a subset of digital activism associated with groups such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous (Postill, 2018). Despite its extensive reach and the ability to rapidly pressure authorities or organize protests, digital activism has faced criticism for the low quality of its activities and content, and for perpetuating political apathy (Özkula, 2021, p. 61). Recognizing these definitional challenges, the term “digital activism” is used here in an evaluation-neutral sense to denote a “political activism on the internet or political movements relying on it” (Özkula, 2021, p. 61).

The origins of digital activism can be traced back to the Zapatista netwar in 1994 (Özkula, Reilly, & Hayes, 2022, pp. 3–4). A major turning point for both practice and scholarship was the Arab Spring between 2010 and 2012, which highlighted the profound impact of networked communication infrastructures on political movements in the region (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013). Since then, social media platforms have become critical spaces where the dynamics of numerous conflicts and political events have unfolded, such as the war in Syria (Rohde et al., 2016), electoral campaigns (Liberini et al., 2024) and various episodes of unrest, such as the recent riots in the UK (De Simone, 2024). Notably, recent forms of digital activism often emerge through decentralized, affective or vernacular practices that bear little resemblance to formal political organizing. Examples include everyday witnessing (Divon, Krutrök 2025), algorithmic resistance (Bonini, Trere 2024) or hashtag activism (Dobrin 2020). The last form is particularly relevant here, as hashtag hijacking is likewise a largely spontaneous, bottom-up practice that arises from the specific socio-technical infrastructures of social media platforms. Diana Dobrin’s work emphasizes hashtags as key elements of social movements, treating them as cultural objects capable of carrying profound meanings and social changes (*Ibidem*, p. 12). Following this approach, the present study conceptualizes hashtag hijacking as part of a broader repertoire of social resistance to the genocide in Gaza. The appropriation of event-related hashtags and their combination with images and other user-generated content produces new political meanings, reorienting the circulation of these hashtags from entertainment and celebrity culture toward contentious, justice-oriented communication.

During the early days of the 2.0 network, social media platforms were primarily associated with representing users’ social lives, both at the individual level—such as through “friends” on Facebook—and at the group level, via various “groups” or dedicated chat rooms fostering a sense of belonging. However, with the rise in social media users and

their enhanced accessibility, these platforms have increasingly become almost natural spaces for spreading political messages and are now viewed as highly politicized arenas. The politicization of the web and social networks was initially linked to the hope of achieving more nuanced political representation, facilitated through greater access to the Internet. Yet, with the rise of platformization, the hope of equally representing the voices of those who lacked the opportunity to be seen and heard prior to the era of the 2.0 network was ultimately bid farewell (Bucher, 2018). After all, the political background of social media platforms, along with content sorting and visibility algorithms, largely dictates what kind of content will be displayed to users. This is attributed to the so-called social media affordances, which Bucher and Helmond define as “what material artifacts, such as media technologies, allow people to do” (2017, p. 237). Therefore each social media platform possesses distinct features that enable, facilitate or hinder specific forms of communication, behavior and political participation among users (Theocharis et al. 2022). These affordances encompass both the audience composition, such as that of Twitter (now X), which is characterized by the presence of political elites and content centered on news and politics, and the material infrastructure, such as content-sorting mechanisms, which might influence social polarization (Gaudette et al., 2021). Investigations of digital activism on social media platforms have frequently emphasized the role of platform affordances in shaping activist practices and strategies. For instance, Literat and Klinger-Vilencik (2019) demonstrate how hashtags functions across platforms can construct imagined political communities and audiences. It is also important to note, however, that many users “appropriate and reconfigure” algorithms and platform features to advance their objectives (e.g., Cervi, Divon 2023).

For example, Facebook’s infrastructural features—such as pages and public groups— have been widely used to form and mobilize protest movements (Ansar & Maitra, 2024). These groups have also served as spaces for (re)construction of narratives, as demonstrated by Smit, Heinrich and Broersma (2018) analysis of how the platform’s politics co-evolve with the politics of memory. At the level of user experience, Hase, Boczek and Scharkow (2023) emphasize that Facebook exhibits a high degree of hypertextuality, evident in its extensive linking to external sites, and interactivity, facilitated through features like social buttons such as “like” and emotion-based reactions. This feature was also underscored by Tsatsou’s (2018) study of the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, which revealed that users prioritized Facebook’s information-dissemination affordances over other functionalities. This focus on sharing information proved to be the central mechanism for recruiting new movement members and coordinating offline protests.

Instagram, by contrast, is marked by a high level of visibility, operating primarily as a platform for sharing photos and videos with comparatively limited reliance on textual content. For much of its development, this visually oriented design meant that Instagram functioned as a medium for curating and showcasing the aesthetics of everyday life (Hase,

Boczek, & Scharkow, 2023). Over time, activist movements have drawn heavily on this aestheticized orientation (Mulvey & Keller, 2023), which underpins Instagram's recurring characterization as a "domesticating technology" within digital activism (Barbal, 2022). In recent years, however, visual posts have increasingly incorporated text, for instance in the form of sequences of images with colorful backgrounds and overlaid writing arranged as a narrative or extended commentary on specific issues (Hase, Boczek, & Scharkow, 2023, p. 1502). These emergent textual forms operate in tandem with Instagram's hashtag system, one of the platform's most deeply embedded mechanisms for organizing and amplifying posts. Initially intended to boost visibility and branding of user-generated material, including influencer and lifestyle feeds, hashtags have been strategically appropriated for political and activist purposes. Campaign-specific tags—such as #WitchTheVote (Mulvey & Keller, 2023), #MeToo (Boyd & McEwan, 2024), and #BlackLivesMatter (Hockin-Boyers & Clifford-Astbury, 2021)—cluster otherwise dispersed contributions, broaden their circulation, and signal collective identification.

Hashtag Hijacking

In the most general terms, hashtag hijacking occurs when individuals or groups repurpose a trending hashtag for goals divergent from its original intent, and can range from benign to malicious and highly disruptive (Willis, 2020; Rosa & Soto-Vasquez, 2022). At one end of the spectrum, it is seen as an opportunistic practice, most often driven by individuals or companies looking to exploit the visibility of a popular hashtag to promote unrelated products or services (Cheah & Chua, 2022). This form of hijacking tends to be transient and is usually considered more of a nuisance than a serious threat, involving minimal harm. In such cases, the act of hijacking is often for personal or commercial gain, taking advantage of viral momentum without necessarily causing long-term damage to the hashtag's original purpose and its primary distributor.

However, a more insidious understanding of hashtag hijacking emerges when the activity shifts from opportunistic marketing to strategic disruption. In these instances, hijackers may use the tactic as a form of retaliation or protest, particularly against brands and their social agendas. For instance, companies such as McDonald's, Chevron and JPMorgan Chase have experienced significant backlash from users who hijacked their hashtags, turning what was intended to be a positive promotional campaign into a public relations disaster (Glikerson & Berg, 2017; Cheah & Chua, 2022). This type of hijacking can have severe reputational consequences, as it undermines the initial intent and amplifies negative discourse around the companies in question.

Most critical here is that hijacking is not always seen as a negative or purely disruptive force; it is often embraced as a method of media activism or digital protest. Activists and counter-publics have used hashtag hijacking as a tool to insert counter-discourses into

dominant narratives. This form of hijacking, linked to a phenomenon of “culture jamming” (Bradshaw, 2023) or subversive media activism, can be a way to challenge the status quo, as seen in cases such as the #CheersToSochi and #MyNYPD campaigns. In the first instance, activists leveraged the 2014 Winter Olympics promotional campaign to draw attention to Russia’s anti-LGBTQ+ laws, transforming it into a platform for human rights advocacy. By hijacking #CheersToSochi to protest corporate sponsorship of the event, they amplified the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights and highlighted global complicity in the oppression of queer communities (Glikerson & Berk, 2017). In the case of #MyNYPD, originally created by the New York Police Department to enhance public relations, activists quickly repurposed the hashtag to expose police brutality and racial profiling (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). This shift in use allowed activists to highlight systemic injustice and the oppression faced by marginalized communities, particularly Black and Latino populations in the U.S., effectively transforming the narrative into one of accountability and social justice.

Yet, the effectiveness and ethics of hashtag hijacking as a counter-discursive strategy remain contested. Although hashtag hijacking can be seen as a counter-hegemonic strategy for those deprived of political agency, it can also be used to dilute the empowering intent of a hashtag, as evidenced by cases of “dark hijacking” (Willis, 2020). For example, in the case of the #DoctorsSpeakUp campaign, hijackers flooded the hashtag with anti-vaccine misinformation, derailing a pro-vaccine effort and undermining public health messaging (Bradshaw, 2023). A similar fate befell #ShoutYourAbortion, which initially emerged as a platform for women to share personal stories of accessing abortion services, aiming to destigmatize the procedure and challenge social taboos surrounding reproductive rights. However, the hashtag was subsequently flooded by anti-abortion groups with moral condemnation, overshadowing its original goal (Willis, 2020). Thus, while hashtag hijacking can empower counter-narratives, it can also lead to unintended consequences, revealing the fragile boundary between constructive protest and defamatory practices as the two sides of the same, digital activism, coin.

With a few recent exceptions (Geboers & Hammelburg, 2024), the majority of studies on hashtag hijacking have been confined to single-platform analyses, predominantly focusing on Twitter due to its unique affordances that facilitate hashtag usage. Similarly, research on digital activism has overwhelmingly centered on Twitter, with less frequent inclusion of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, websites, or microblogs, while cross-platform analyses remain relatively rare (Özkula, Reilly, & Hayes, 2022). Acknowledging the limitations of such approaches, this study innovates by undertaking a comparative analysis that examines multiple platforms and hashtags as instruments of social change within the digital discourse of real-time armed conflicts. By adopting this approach, we aim to diversify the scope of social media research and address gaps in the literature by

exploring social media platforms that have been historically underrepresented in large-scale studies of hashtag hijacking.

Methodology

The methodological workflow utilized in this study is illustrated in Fig. 1. Social media posts were collected from Facebook and Instagram for the period between May 1, 2024 and June 13, 2024 using the public insight tool CrowdTangle. The search query applied to both platforms was identical, comprising the hashtags #MetGala and #Eurovision, along with their 2024 variants. The initial inclusion criterion for each post was the presence of at least one of these hashtags in the post's metadata. The unfiltered dataset included a total of 161,280 posts, with 136,840 from Facebook and 24,440 from Instagram. Given the large volume of data and the high level of noise, manually or even semi-automatically screening for relevancy—specifically whether the posts were related to the Gaza War—was deemed impractical. As a result, the dataset was filtered using conflict-related terms (e.g., war, conflict) as well as geographically specific terms such as Rafah and Gaza, applied across all metadata in the dataset. This process was iterative, with continuous adjustments to the filtering terms to ensure comprehensive retrieval while maintaining maximum precision. After the initial stage of filtering, a total of 1,042 posts remained, comprising 665 from Instagram and 377 from Facebook. The subsequent screening phase coincided with the initial stage of coding the social media posts.

Figure 1. Methodological workflow employed in the study.

Two coders were assigned, one to each platform-specific dataset. The first round of coding was inductive in nature, as the qualitative aspect of the analysis required a more contextual approach. Consequently, a priori unification of the coding strategy was not deemed the most analytically effective. Posts were coded according to the type of account that distributed the post, the event to which the post was related and the side of the conflict to which the post showed allegiance, and each post was further described in terms of the type and manner in which it conveyed its message about the Gaza War. During this stage, close-screening was also conducted, and visual materials were retrieved for subsequent visual analysis. As a result, 710 posts (464 for Instagram and 246 for Facebook) and 1,093 visuals (853 for Instagram and 240 for Facebook) were classified for the final qualitative-quantitative analysis and subjected to additional standardized coding.

In the second stage of coding, one coder was tasked with preparing separate datasheets for each dataset and creating tags that could be used for the quantitative part of the analysis. The coder reviewed not only the post data obtained through CrowdTangle but also the full content of the posts as they appeared on the respective social media platforms. The number of tags, particularly for more diverse categories, was limited, and

each post was coded according to the event, account type, allegiance apropos the conflict, and the degree of hashtag politicization. This last category was newly introduced, as the first stage of coding revealed that the initial assumption of treating certain posts as cases of hashtag hijacking was more complex, because the politicization of Eurovision and the Met Gala in real time significantly influenced and diversified the intended modes of hashtags' usage. Lastly, the two coders collaborated to code each visual material based on the type of message conveyed, aiming to understand the visual patterns in the framing of the Gaza War. Given that social media platforms tend to facilitate engagement primarily through visual content, we sought to identify the visual messaging that could be conveyed independently of the accompanying textual content. As the coding team consisted of only two researchers, we did not compute a formal intercoder reliability coefficient (e.g., Cohen's kappa). Instead, we employed a two-step procedure to enhance consistency: after the initial collaborative coding, one coder systematically revisited and recoded all visual materials, comparing them against the agreed-upon coding scheme and previously coded examples. This process allowed us to refine category boundaries and resolve minor discrepancies, ensuring a coherent and consistent application of the codes across the entire dataset. The final coding structure adopted for the quantitative analysis of both the full posts and visual elements is presented in Fig. 2.

Figure 2. Coding structure adopted for the analysis.

Findings

Distributional Characteristics

An analysis of the normalized tag distribution across Instagram and Facebook (Figs. 3 and 4) reveals substantial differences in user engagement patterns across content categories, indicating that attention to the Gaza War might be organized through distinct platform-specific content ecologies.

On Facebook, Eurovision dominates the event-related tags, whereas Instagram displays a more even split between the Met Gala and Eurovision. This divergence can be read through the lens of platform affordances and logics (Bossetta 2018): Facebook's architecture and algorithmic curation tend to sustain more topic-specific, community-oriented discussion streams, which may foster concentrated engagement around a single, salient event. By contrast, Instagram's visual and influencer-centric logic encourages attention to circulate across multiple high-visibility cultural events, supporting a more diffuse distribution of tags. These interpretations remain tentative and may be attributable to the specific characteristics of this case study, yet they align with broader scholarship arguing that platforms channel political and conflict-related communication through their

socio-technical design features and engagement incentives, instead of operating as neutral conduits (Hastuti et al. 2025).

Figure 3. Bar charts illustrating the distribution of tags on Facebook.

Figure 4. Bar charts illustrating the distribution of tags on Instagram.

Differences in account-type distributions further highlight how platform logics shape the contours of Gaza War-related discourse. Despite similarities, Instagram shows a more diversified account-type distribution, with Media Outlets and Advocacy Groups holding more balanced proportions than on Facebook. This pattern aligns with research indicating that Instagram’s visual affordances and influencer-driven attention economy increasingly attract institutional actors seeking visibility in conflict and political communication (Kallio & Mäenpää 2025).

Despite both platforms exhibiting predominantly pro-Palestinian content, Instagram hosts a substantially larger share of neutral posts and a comparatively stronger presence of Political (non-advocacy) tagging, whereas Facebook displays more Digital Activism alongside Hijacking. Taken together, the roots of these patterns may be localized in Facebook’s discussion-centred and community-oriented architecture, which is more conducive to axiologically charged engagement, while Instagram’s visual and mixed-purpose environment supports more “ambient” or lower-threshold forms of political expression. This point, however, applies only to the neutral portion of Instagram’s posts. In this case, stance-aligned content is strongly politically charged, illustrating that Instagram’s affordances for lightweight political engagement coexist with—and may paradoxically amplify—forms of overtly affective and identity-driven communication when conflicts become highly salient. At the same time, these platform-specific patterns emerge within an environment that is far from neutral. Recent analyses by civil liberties groups, including Human Rights Watch’s report on Meta’s “systemic censorship” of Palestine-related content on Instagram and Facebook, document patterns of overbroad removal, down-ranking and “shadow-banning” of posts expressing support for Palestinian rights, often driven by opaque automated moderation and inconsistent policy enforcement (Human Rights Watch 2023). Thus, while our dataset reveals a marked skew toward pro-Palestinian content, it might reflect only the subset of posts that remained accessible at the time of data collection. We are unable to determine how much additional pro-Palestinian material was suppressed or pre-emptively self-censored in response to perceived platform risks. In this sense, the visual ecosystem under study is already filtered through platform-level politics of visibility, in which corporate actors can strategically shape the salience of competing narratives. Our findings should therefore be interpreted as reflecting only the visible portion of a potentially much larger and partly silenced

corpus of pro-Palestinian expression, not a straightforward measure of viewpoint distribution on these platforms.

Cross-tabulation of events and account types (Figs. 5 and 6) shows that Facebook circulation of both Eurovision and Met Gala content is anchored primarily in Personal/Influencer accounts, with Advocacy Groups and Media Outlets playing a secondary but consistent role. Instagram, by contrast, displays a more event-specific configuration: Met Gala content is likewise dominated by influencers, but Eurovision becomes markedly more institutional, with Media Outlets taking on a central role.

Figure 5. Cross-tabulations of selected tag pairs on Facebook.

Figure 6. Cross-tabulations of selected tag pairs on Instagram.

When event tags are cross-tabulated with Side Taken, the Met Gala emerges on both platforms as a predominantly pro-Palestinian vehicle, while Eurovision functions more as a contested and—on Instagram in particular—partially neutral space. Facebook’s Eurovision discourse is split mainly between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel positions, reflecting the platform’s tendency to host stance-taking exchanges. By contrast, Instagram displays a larger neutral segment around Eurovision, consistent with its affordances for aestheticised and informational coverage that does not necessarily crystallise into explicit advocacy.

The hashtag-based cross-tabulations further underscore these platform differences. On Facebook, Digital Activism is used by both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel actors and is broadly adopted across account types. Hijacking on Facebook is likewise shared across camps, suggesting that both sides strategically intervene in broader conversations to insert conflict-related messaging. On Instagram, by contrast, Digital Activism is more strongly anchored in Advocacy Groups, while Hijacking is concentrated among influencers and overwhelmingly aligned with pro-Palestinian content, reflecting the platform’s personal/influencer-driven attention economy. Across both platforms, Media Outlets predominantly employ the Political (non-advocacy) mode, using hashtags to index and report on events rather than to mobilise, which aligns with their professional norms and a more informational use of platform affordances.

The analysis of audio-visual content on Facebook and Instagram across events and sociopolitical contexts reinforces the platform-specific approaches to messaging already observed. Drawing on a functional typology of visual communication—Informative, Supportive, Subversive, Emotive, Derisive, Documentative and Directive—Figure 7 presents representative examples that illustrate how different genres of imagery and video are mobilised to politicize the Met Gala and Eurovision within the wider Gaza War discourse. These categories, derived from recurrent thematic and stylistic patterns,

capture the range of visual strategies through which entertainment events are re-framed as sites of conflict commentary and mobilisation.

Figure 7. Representation of the approximate content of each category, accompanied by a set of representative visuals.

Event-specific cross-tabulation (Fig. 8) indicates that Instagram is more heavily oriented toward Informative visuals, particularly around Eurovision, where a substantial share of content provides contextualisation of protests, boycotts and the unfolding conflict. This aligns with Instagram's affordances for visually packaged explainer content that combine text and image to scaffold issue literacy. Facebook, by contrast, is more strongly skewed toward Supportive and Directive functions, especially in Eurovision-related posts, where visuals explicitly endorse a side and call on audiences to sign petitions, join demonstrations or adopt specific digital actions. In this sense, Facebook operates more as a mobilisation infrastructure, while Instagram functions as a hybrid space where entertainment and conflict are linked through visually driven explanation. For the Met Gala, Subversive visuals—questioning the ethics of opulent celebrity culture during wartime—are prominent on both platforms, but their relative weight is higher on Facebook; a difference partially attributable to Facebook's relatively low volume of Met Gala-related posts overall.

Figure 8. Cross-tabulation of visual tags across Instagram and Facebook.

Cross-tabulation by Side Taken provides additional insight into these patterns. In Pro-Palestine content, Instagram combines Subversive and Directive visuals, pairing critique of institutions and celebrities with explicit guidance on how to act (e.g. boycotts, donation links, protest attendance). Facebook's Pro-Palestine materials, in turn, are distributed more evenly between Subversive and Derisive functions, with a noticeable reliance on sarcasm, memes and ridicule rather than systematic calls to action, suggesting an affective style of contestation that blends moral denunciation with humour. Pro-Israel content reverses this pattern: on Facebook it is dominated by Supportive and Directive frames, emphasising solidarity, security narratives and direct mobilisation, whereas on Instagram it more often takes the form of Supportive and Derisive imagery with limited Directive content, pointing to a preference for emotionally charged, confrontational visuals over explicit organising. Neutral content, although marginal on Facebook, is more visible on Instagram and is split between Informative explainer posts and Documentative materials (e.g. raw footage, on-the-ground clips), indicating that Instagram accommodates a relatively wider space for descriptive coverage even within a highly polarised issue field.

Finally, the analysis of platform porosity (Fig. 9) shows that while Facebook and Instagram integrate a similar overall proportion of externally sourced audio-visuals, they do so through markedly different cross-platform linkages. Facebook draws more heavily on

YouTube and, to a lesser extent, TikTok, reflecting a tendency to embed longer-form video commentary and repurposed short-form clips within its feed and group infrastructures. Instagram, in contrast, incorporates external material primarily from X (formerly Twitter), often in the form of screenshots and short video snippets that are re-contextualised within Instagram's visual vernacular. These divergent pathways of content import underscore that both platforms operate as nodes in a broader, interconnected media ecology, but they plug into different upstream infrastructures and genres of political communication, reinforcing their distinctive roles in the circulation and reframing of Gaza War-related visuals.

Figure 9. Bar chart depicting platform porosity, estimated based on the proportion of visuals originating from external platforms.

Multimodal Narratives across Varying Degrees of Hashtag Politicization

While the distributional analysis uncovered distinct patterns in hashtag usage across events and platforms, it offered limited insights into the audio-visual and textual ensembles articulating and advancing particular political agendas. To address this gap, the following subsection adopts a qualitative oriented reading of selected posts, focusing on emblematic instances of the politicization of the studied hashtags. Here we examine how mixed-media content attached to these hashtags participates in constructing “multimodal narratives” of the Gaza war, paying attention to how specific types of visual material (classified according to the seven categories outlined earlier) are mobilized as affective and symbolic resources. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds the ways in which users appropriate the visibility and attention economies of high-profile cultural events to enact forms of digital contention, and it highlights differences in the hijacking tactics employed by pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli actors.

As noted earlier, the usage of the #MetGala and #Eurovision hashtags was not uniformly a case of “hashtag hijacking” narrowly understood as a redirection of entertainment-related attention. Some instances of usage exemplify a broader process of the politicization of social media platforms, while others align more closely with practices of connective or hashtag activism. Posts that illustrate the politicization of platforms include those in which #MetGala and #Eurovision were used to report on protests surrounding these events, thereby reframing them as sites of contentious politics. Visually, such posts predominantly featured protest footage and screenshots of news headlines, foregrounding the act of witnessing and documentation rather than explicit advocacy.

Figure 10. Representation of the different modes of hashtags together with the image and body of the message.

Within this politicization category, a recurring visual format on Instagram consisted of image-text composites (often referred to as image macros) that combined press or performance photographs with overlaid captions. For Eurovision, these frequently featured contestants such as Eric Saade, a Swedish singer of Palestinian descent, wearing a keffiyeh, or images of Eden Golan accompanied by quotations from organisations accusing the contest of “genocide pinkwashing.” Similar posts appeared as multi-image carousel slideshows, juxtaposing photographs from Eurovision with participants’ statements suggesting that the contest “needs fixing” or criticizing the decision to allow Israel’s participation. Although these posts clearly highlighted conflict-related grievances, they were typically framed in an informational register, presenting quotations and contextual details more in the style of news or commentary than overt calls to action.

A comparable pattern emerged around the Met Gala, where numerous Instagram carousel posts explained the so-called “blockout” movement. These posts combined background images of mainstream pop-cultural celebrities (such as Taylor Swift, Harry Styles, or Kim Kardashian) with textual overlays that described calls to unfollow or “cancel” Met Gala attendees on platforms such as TikTok, often including follower statistics or engagement figures to document the scale of the boycott. Here, the event-related hashtag provided a bridge between celebrity culture and conflict-related information, yet the tone of the posts again tended toward documentation.

Protest-focused imagery further reinforced this informational function. Posts tagged with #MetGala or #Eurovision showed demonstrations taking place around the venues, with crowds carrying Palestinian flags and banners, as well as occasional references to high-profile figures such as Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist, attending Eurovision-related protests. These visuals primarily conveyed the presence, size, and affective atmosphere of the protests, rarely detailing specific policy demands or foregrounding institutional responses. Overall, the conflict tended to be depicted through a binary lens of pro-Palestinian versus pro-Israeli camps, with only isolated images—such as a photograph of a protester holding a “Jews for Free Palestine” sign—visibly complicating this polarity.

Although this neutral-informational mode of hashtag usage was relatively uncommon on Facebook (where it appeared mainly in isolated photographs from protests), it represented a substantial share of #MetGala and #Eurovision-tagged content on Instagram. In this sense, the hashtags operate simultaneously as gateways into popular culture and as conduits for documentary, politically inflected visual testimony that reports on events and contestation without necessarily articulating a clear evaluative position on the conflict.

In contrast, instances in which the hashtags were used as tools of digital activism primarily comprised posts that issued explicit calls to action. On Instagram, pro-Palestinian digital activism frequently took the form of image-text composites and multi-

image carousels that invited users to join mass demonstrations, participate in the “blockout” of Met Gala celebrities, or withdraw symbolic and economic support from specific cultural figures. Some of these posts invoked historically marginalized groups, such as queer collectives, explicitly framing solidarity with Palestinians as an alliance between differently positioned minority communities and as a challenge to entrenched power asymmetries. Historical references—such as the phrase “let them eat cake,” commonly (if apocryphally) attributed to Marie Antoinette—were mobilized to portray the Met Gala as a contemporary symbol of elite indifference to material suffering, thereby linking celebrity culture to longer histories of classed and colonial disconnection from everyday precarity.

Pro-Israeli digital activism on Instagram was present but quantitatively more limited, and it clustered strongly around Eden Golan, Israel’s representative at Eurovision 2024. Posts in this vein foregrounded Golan’s experience of performing under conditions of controversy—referencing, for instance, hostile crowd reactions or perceived unfair targeting—and framed her as an individual unjustly blamed for broader political decisions. Hashtags and captions emphasized support for her as a victim of harassment or scapegoating, redirecting affective identification toward the Israeli performer and, by extension, toward Israel. On Facebook, this pattern was even more pronounced: alongside posts already described in the derisive and memetic register, digital activist uses of the hashtag included videos of users declaring their solidarity with Golan, commentary posts overlaying her Eurovision performance with supportive textual narratives, and clips explicitly affirming Israel in the context of the contest.

At the same time, Facebook also hosted pro-Palestinian digital activism that more directly contested Israel’s participation in Eurovision and the wider normalization of Israeli state policy. These posts included videos describing the “absurdity” of allowing Israel to compete, expressions of support for protesters and statements by former contestants such as Alessandra Mele explaining their refusal to award points in the final as a protest against Israel’s inclusion. In these cases, the hashtags functioned as infrastructures for connective action: they connected geographically dispersed users, public figures, and protest events, linking high-profile cultural events to processes of moral claim-making and collective mobilisation. Overall, while visible support for the Israeli side was more systematically present on Facebook and pro-Palestinian activism was more prominent on Instagram, both platforms hosted instances in which #MetGala and #Eurovision were used to explicitly solicit political engagement and coordinate digitally mediated forms of resistance.

The adoption of hijacking strategies, by contrast, involved leveraging event-related hashtags to disseminate content directly addressing the war in Gaza. On Facebook, one of the most common audiovisual categories within this repertoire was Derisive,

encompassing uses of satire and memetic humour. A recurring example was a post featuring a photograph of Nirvana with the caption “In 1992 Nirvana won the Met Gala with their 60s inspired looks. Google ‘Rafah’ to learn about the designer,” accompanied by the hashtags #MetGala and #AllEyesOnRafah. The choice of Nirvana is itself significant: as a band closely associated with 1990s grunge’s anti-commercial ethos and Kurt Cobain’s outspoken opposition to exclusionary politics, Nirvana functions as a cultural shorthand for resistance to mainstream excess. Invoking the band in the context of the Met Gala layers an internal critique of celebrity fashion culture onto a broader indictment of Western indifference to Palestinian struggles, repurposing a presumably neutral pop-culture reference and apolitical hashtag as an instrument for axiological signalling that both satirizes the event’s superficiality and redirects focus toward the Rafah bombing. This kind of juxtaposition exemplifies a form of visual *détournement*, in which the symbolic capital of a high-profile cultural event is inverted to foreground the disjuncture between entertainment-driven attention economies and war-time suffering.

The disparity between the Met Gala and the ongoing conflict in Gaza was likewise a dominant theme in visual content coded as Subversive. In these posts, users reframed the Met Gala as an emblem of Western opulence and moral distance, juxtaposing its carefully staged glamour with images of devastation and grief in Gaza and the wider Middle East. Videos and photographs often made this contrast explicit through references to *The Hunger Games*—Suzanne Collins’ dystopian universe in which a hyper-privileged “Capitol” indulges in lavish fashion and continuous spectacle while the outlying districts are subjected to structural deprivation and ritualized state violence. In this imagery, the Met Gala is cast as a “Capitol-like” display, with elaborately styled celebrities resembling the exaggerated, baroque-esque aesthetics of Capitol citizens, while Palestinians are implicitly aligned with the impoverished districts and the tributes whose suffering is transformed into entertainment for distant spectators. Such intertextual practices operate as visual counter-narratives that disrupt the event’s celebratory framing, aiming to expose structural indifference and apathy toward Palestinian suffering, and to foreground the stark asymmetries between zones of safety and violence.

Another form of hijacking—particularly prominent on Instagram—mobilized the hashtags to draw attention to fundraising efforts for specific individuals and families affected by the war. In these posts, graphic designs were often rendered in a style reminiscent of event or concert promotions—featuring bold typography and portrait-style imagery—yet repurposed to advocate for an end to the violence in Palestine and to solicit donations. This strategy illustrates a form of connective, humanitarian activism in which users exploit the algorithmic visibility of entertainment hashtags to amplify micro-level appeals for aid. The primary goal of deploying these hashtags was thus tactical: to maximize visibility and engagement, thereby increasing the emotional and material impact of fundraising

messages by embedding them within high-traffic streams of content fueled by late-capitalist digital overconsumption logic.

A relatively large share of Facebook-based hijacking also involved explicitly pro-Israel narratives. Posts supporting Israel commonly operated within the Derisive category, drawing on meme culture and binary oppositions that cast Israel as a “rational” or “civilized” nation and Palestine as a “nation of terrorists.” One widely shared visual featured Eden Golan with the caption “Israel at music festival” juxtaposed with an image of a Hamas fighter captioned “Palestine at music festival.” Hashtags such as #Eurovision and #HamasIsISIS were frequently used to anchor this frame within a broader security discourse that equates Palestinian resistance with global jihadist threats and reproduces longstanding colonial binaries between a self-identified civilized “us” and a racialized, dehumanized “other.” In such representations, Palestinians are rendered primarily as a security problem rather than as political subjects or civilians, which normalizes their exclusion from the “community of grievable lives” (Laïdi-Hanieh 2014) and contributes to the moral rationalization of ongoing and exceptional forms of violence.

Pro-Israel hijacking on Facebook also encompassed more subtle forms of support that, at first glance, might be read as apolitical entertainment. One notable example was a viral video showing a dog performing tricks to a Eurovision song by Eden Golan, accompanied by hashtags such as #BringThemHome referencing Israeli hostages. Another involved a montage of smiling men and women in Israeli military uniforms set to the same musical track, aestheticizing military life as joyful and relatable. These posts demonstrate how political alignment can be encoded into platform-native genres of light-hearted fun—what might be termed “subliminal activism”—by attaching partisan messages to affectively appealing, low-stakes content that circulates easily within everyday practices of content prosumption. In this way, political solidarities are normalized not through explicit argument but through repetition and affective familiarity. By contrast, overt and covert pro-Israel hijacking was essentially absent on Instagram, where most hijacking content associated with the selected hashtags was aligned with pro-Palestinian narratives.

Discussion

The takeover of #Eurovision and #MetGala and their rechanneling as conduits for information about the Gaza War represents a distinctive instance of hashtag activism shaped by real-time controversies and political actions surrounding the physical venues of both events. Whereas most documented cases of hijacking remain largely confined to digital environments (Willis, 2020; Bradshaw, 2023; Cheah & Chua, 2022), this case foregrounds the interdependence of material and digital layers of contention. Protest actions on-site and their mediatization online mutually reinforced one another, producing a conjuncture in which social media activity cannot be analytically separated from the

offline dynamics that animated it. The repurposing of these hashtags was not the only mode through which the Gaza War was addressed, but rather one strategy among many, whose specific articulation varied across platforms and reflected differential opportunities for politicization afforded by their architectures and cultures of use.

As demonstrated in the findings, use of the hashtags was not uniform across the platforms studied. Facebook and Instagram exhibited distinct patterns in the politicized use of #MetGala and #Eurovision, as well as differing modalities of hashtag activism. These divergences can be understood in light of platform-specific affordances and imagined audiences. Facebook is organized around social graphs and group infrastructures that invite circulation within relatively bounded communities (Hase, Boczek, & Scharkow, 2023). The prominence of public and semi-public groups, in particular, facilitates the recirculation of content among ideologically aligned users, enabling the formation of “echo chambers” (Bail, 2021) and the intensification of existing positions. Instagram, by contrast, is structured more strongly around digital objects—hashtags, posts, and stories—which are surfaced through recommendation systems that link users to thematically clustered content beyond their immediate social networks (Hase, Boczek, & Scharkow, 2023). This configuration tends to expose users to a more heterogeneous range of materials under a given hashtag and renders hashtags a central mechanism for visibility and discovery.

These structural differences were especially apparent in the distribution of pro-Israel content. On Facebook, Eurovision-related posts were more prevalent, and pro-Israel advocacy was correspondingly more visible. A considerable share of pro-Israel posts focused on supporting Eden Golan and mobilizing her image as a symbol of Israel, frequently circulated through public Zionist groups. Such spaces created a relatively safe environment for the expression of strong partisan views, with users able to rely on supportive audiences and comparatively limited exposure to dissent. Public Facebook groups, in general, appeared conducive to the posting of more radical or uncompromising content, precisely because the expectation of ideological homogeneity reduces the perceived need to engage with competing perspectives. In this sense, Facebook’s group-based affordances not only amplify particular forms of communication but also structure the conditions under which the hashtags-linked narratives become more polarizing and insular.

From the perspective of hijacking dynamics, pro-Palestinian interventions dominated on both platforms, but the forms they assumed reflected platform-specific affordances. On Facebook, users often employed subversive strategies—pairing the event-related hashtags with sarcastic or ironic visual content—to critique the events indirectly. This mode of expression aligns with Facebook’s group-based architecture, where content circulates within ideologically cohesive publics and where users anticipate supportive audiences

rather than exposure to dissent. Instagram, by contrast, was used more frequently for affective witnessing and mobilization: users shared graphic documentation of the bombing in Gaza, testimonies, and donation links. These practices leveraged the platform's visual orientation, its discovery mechanisms organized around hashtags, and its more diffuse imagined audience, which together facilitate advocacy-oriented content that circulates beyond immediate social circles.

This divergence complicates conventional assumptions about the two platforms. Facebook is often associated with event organization and fundraising, while Instagram has been characterized as a “domesticated” platform focused on lifestyle content (Barbal, 2022). In this case, however, Instagram functioned as the more prominent site of political activism. Its broader user base (Keane, 2025), the looser and more heterogeneous imagined audiences (boyd, 2010), and the centrality of hashtags to its visibility logics—contrasting with their reach-limiting effects on Facebook (Social Media Today, 2016)—all facilitated the circulation of politicized content. In this configuration, Instagram's visual affordances and attention economy are increasingly exploited not only by activists and influencers but also by news outlets and other institutional actors, who strategically position conflict-related and political content alongside everyday posts (Mulvey & Keller, 2023; Kallio & Mäenpää, 2025). In the context of #Eurovision and #MetGala, this convergence of institutional and grassroots voices within hashtagged spaces underscores the extent to which Instagram is progressively functioning as a politically charged platform and a routine instrument of contemporary (digital) activism.

Conclusion

The study focused on examining the social media dynamics of the contemporary Middle Eastern conflict between Israel and Palestine. It explored how prominent pop-cultural symbols and events, such as the Met Gala and Eurovision, were interwoven into the fabric of socio-political discourse or deliberately repurposed into vehicles for political engagement.

In this analysis, we observed seven basic ways of juxtaposing these hashtags with photos. We also distinguished three levels of ways to juxtapose this hashtag with images: social media platform politicization, digital activism and hashtag hijacking. Each of these ways of using hashtags and images on Facebook and Instagram was distinguished by different modes of action and different political messages.

Our analysis reinforced earlier assertions about the importance of cross-platform research in analyzing modern conflicts, given the substantial variation in their representation across diverse technological infrastructures (Hamarowski & Lompe, 2024). Building on these earlier observations, it demonstrated that social media environments not only shape

the visual and textual framing of specific real-time war events but also influence the modes of digital objects, such as the usage and functionality of hashtags.

Future research on political conflicts as represented and unfolded on social media platforms would benefit from adopting a more comparative approach, with careful consideration given to expanding the range of platforms studied to enhance insights into the relationship between social media dynamics and modern conflicts. Within the scope of this case study, it would be advisable to analyze the use of hashtags such as #MetGala and #Eurovision on additional platforms, such as X (Twitter) and TikTok. This recommendation is supported by the presence of material from these platforms in our dataset, which underscores the interconnected and porous nature of contemporary digital ecosystems. Such observations further emphasize the importance of cross-platform analysis in achieving a more nuanced understanding of their broader impact. However, it is acknowledged that such an undertaking might prove challenging due to the data policies of the aforementioned platforms. To assess whether the patterns of hashtag usage and their politicization observed in this study demonstrate any consistency beyond the specific case analyzed, it would be advisable to compare these findings with those on similar events, should they arise. Such an approach would help contextualize the particularities of this case, especially given the unique interdependence and simultaneous occurrence of real-world and digital activism.

Declarations

Author Contribution

M.L was in charge of the research project, funding and data collection. B.H was responsible for developing the coding structure and statistical analysis. All the authors were analyzing and coding data as well as writing and reviewing the manuscript.

Acknowledgement

All data visualizations were made by Matteo Bettini.

Data Availability

The data are available upon request.

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Figures

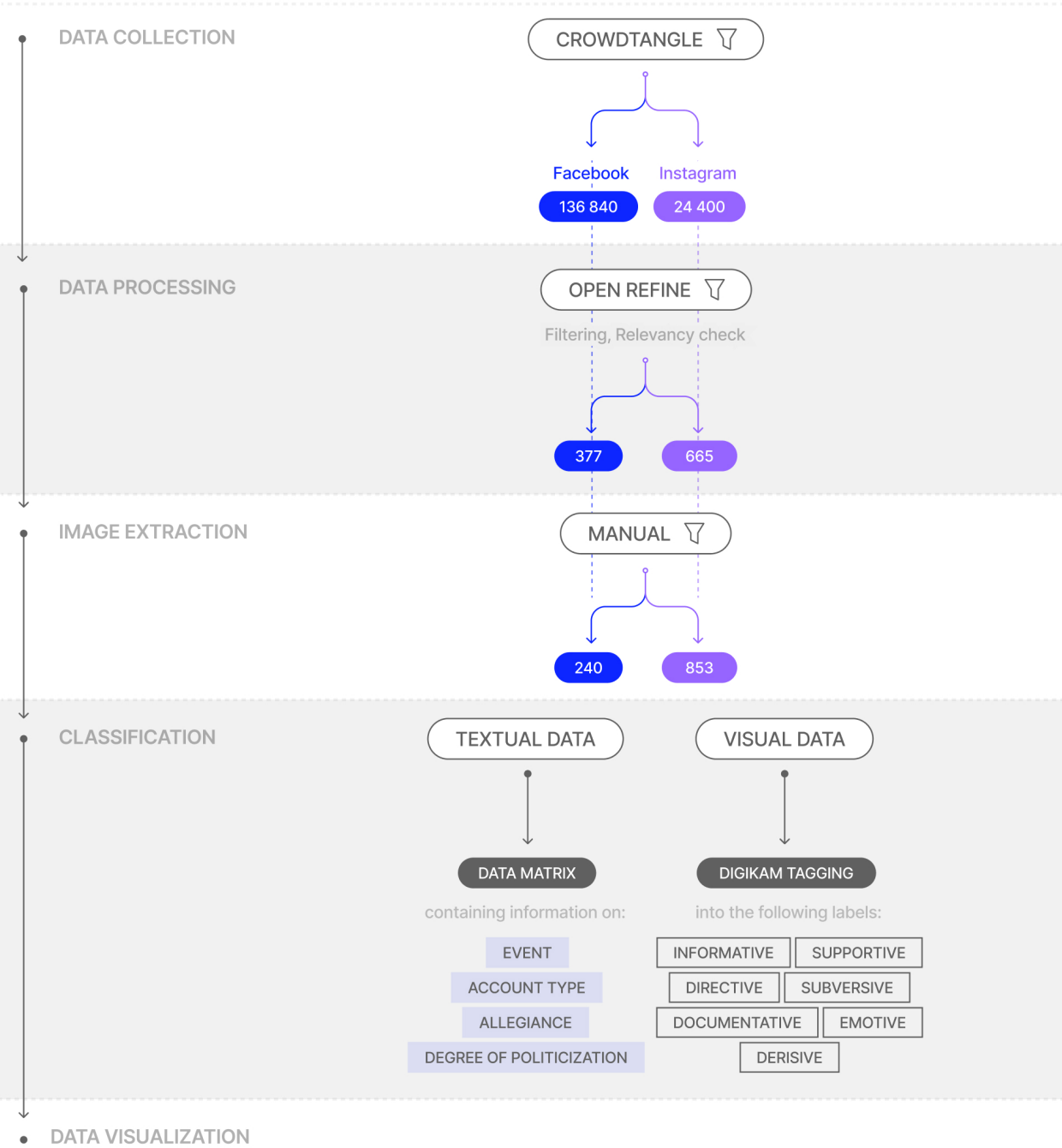


Figure 1

Methodological workflow employed in the study.

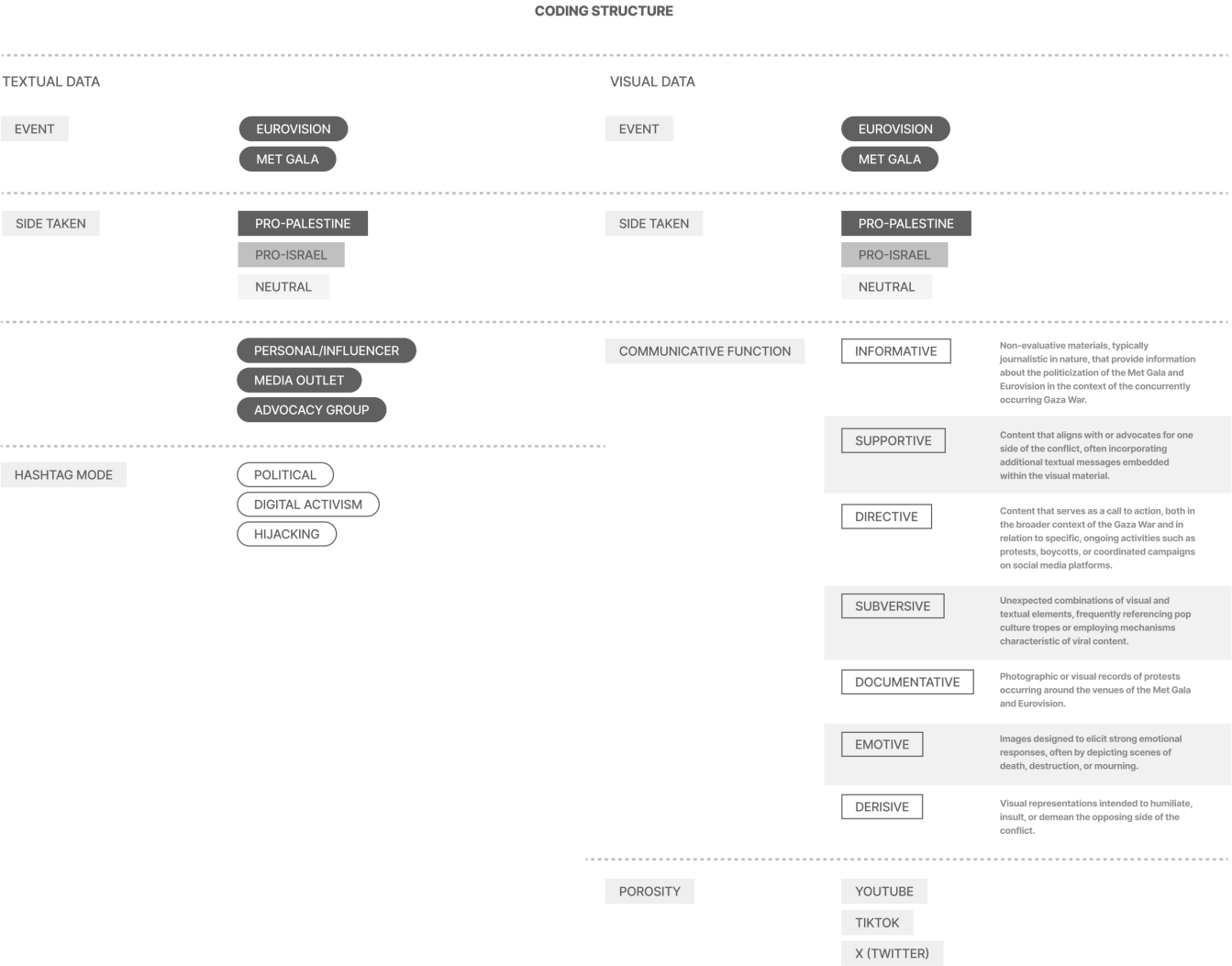


Figure 2

Coding structure adopted for the analysis.

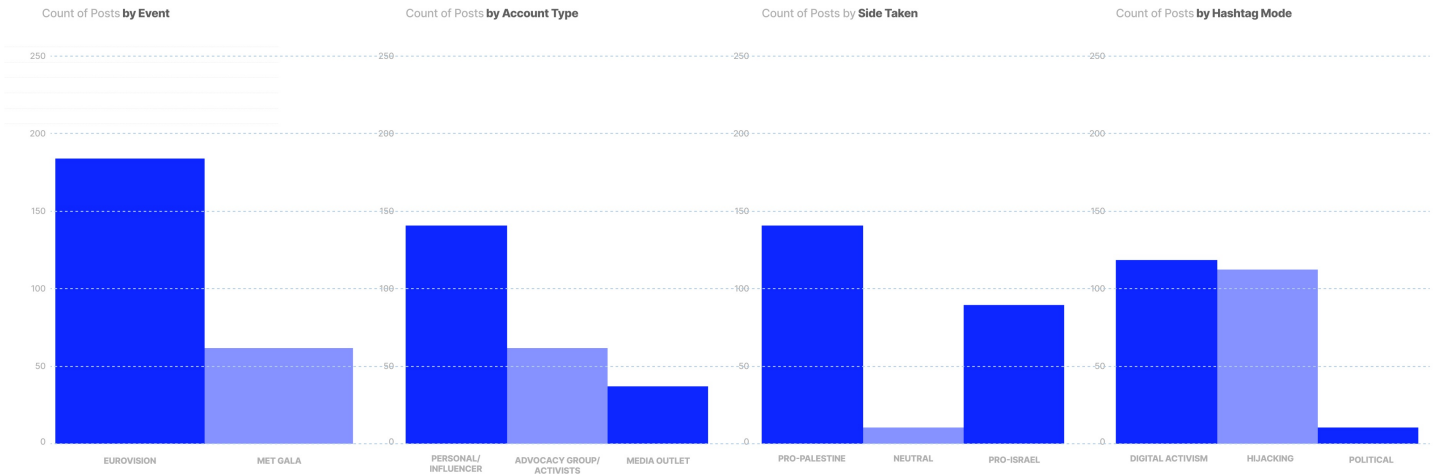


Figure 3

Bar charts illustrating the distribution of tags on Facebook.

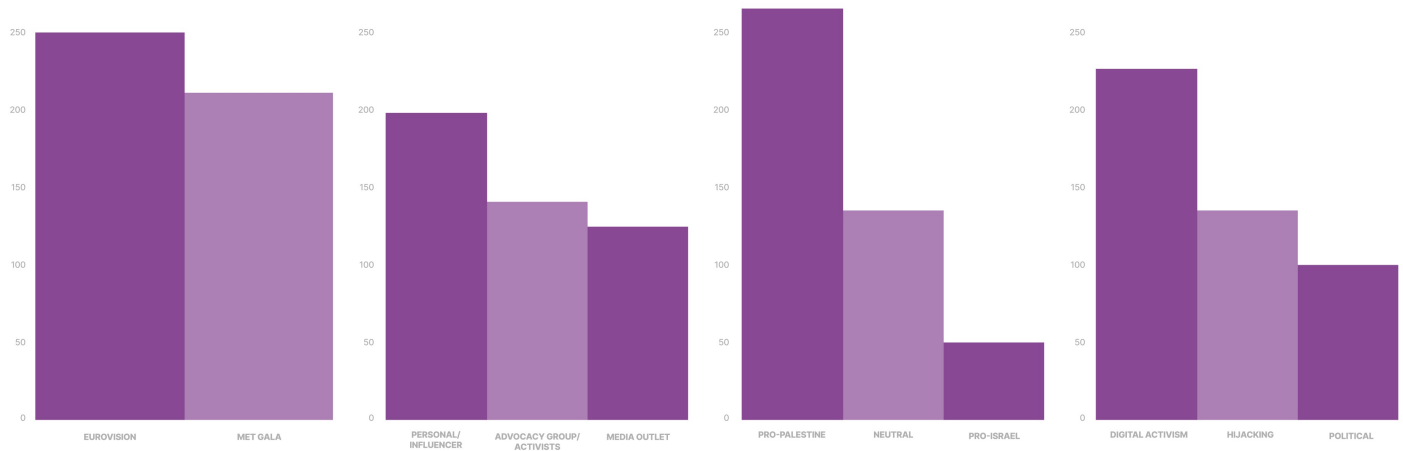


Figure 4

Bar charts illustrating the distribution of tags on Instagram.

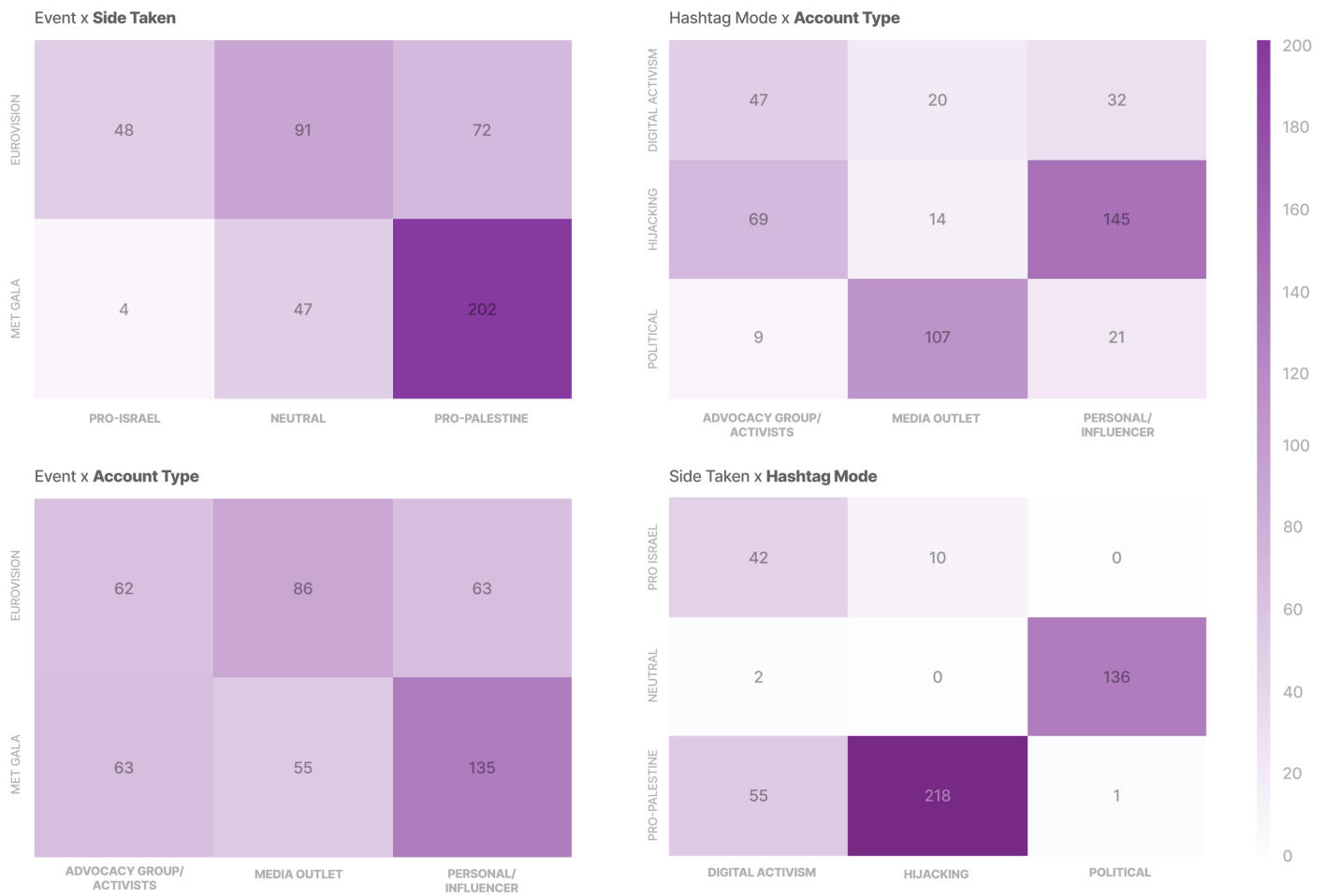


Figure 5

Cross-tabulations of selected tag pairs on Facebook.

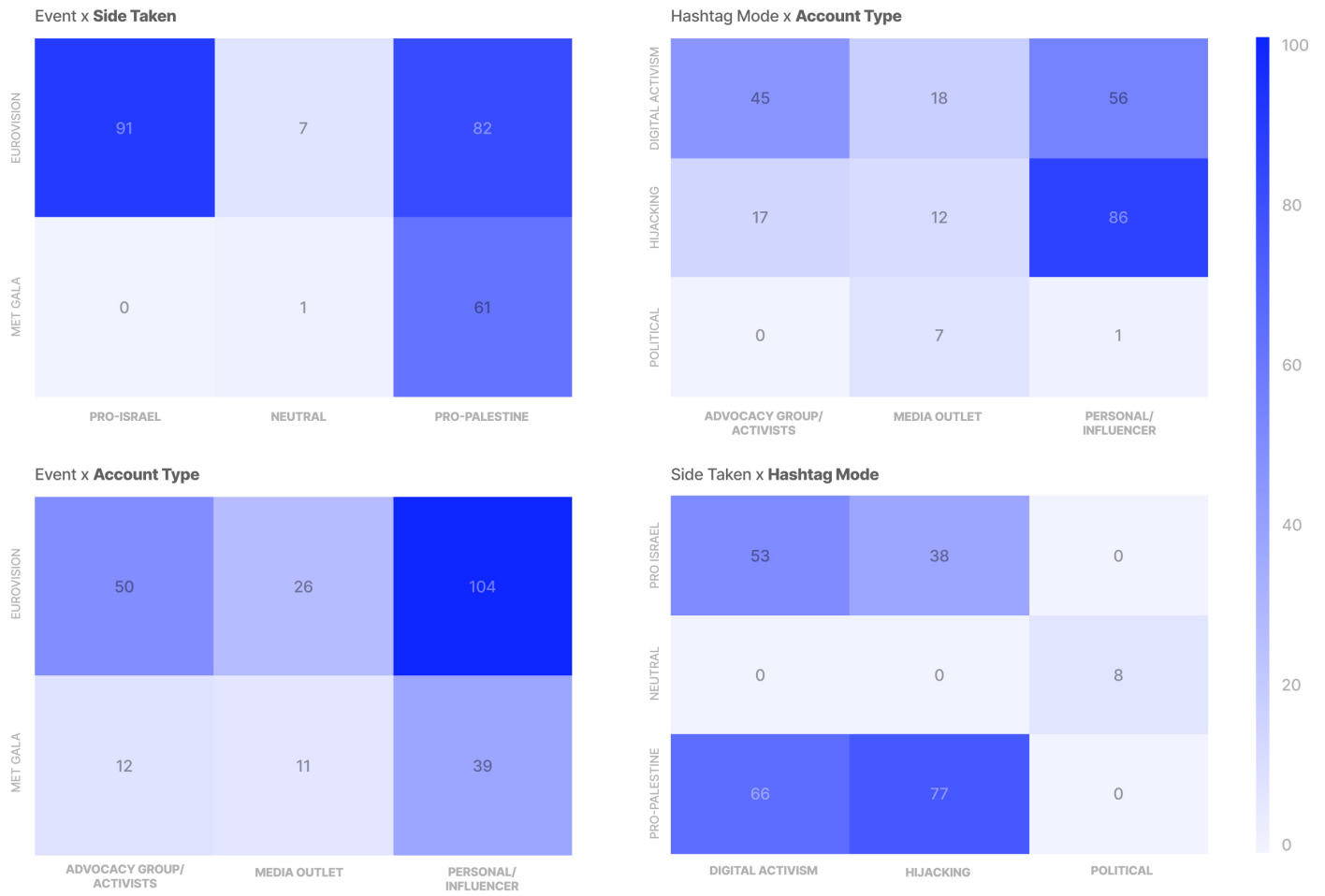


Figure 6

Cross-tabulations of selected tag pairs on Instagram.

Representation of the approximate content of each category, accompanied by a set of representative visuals

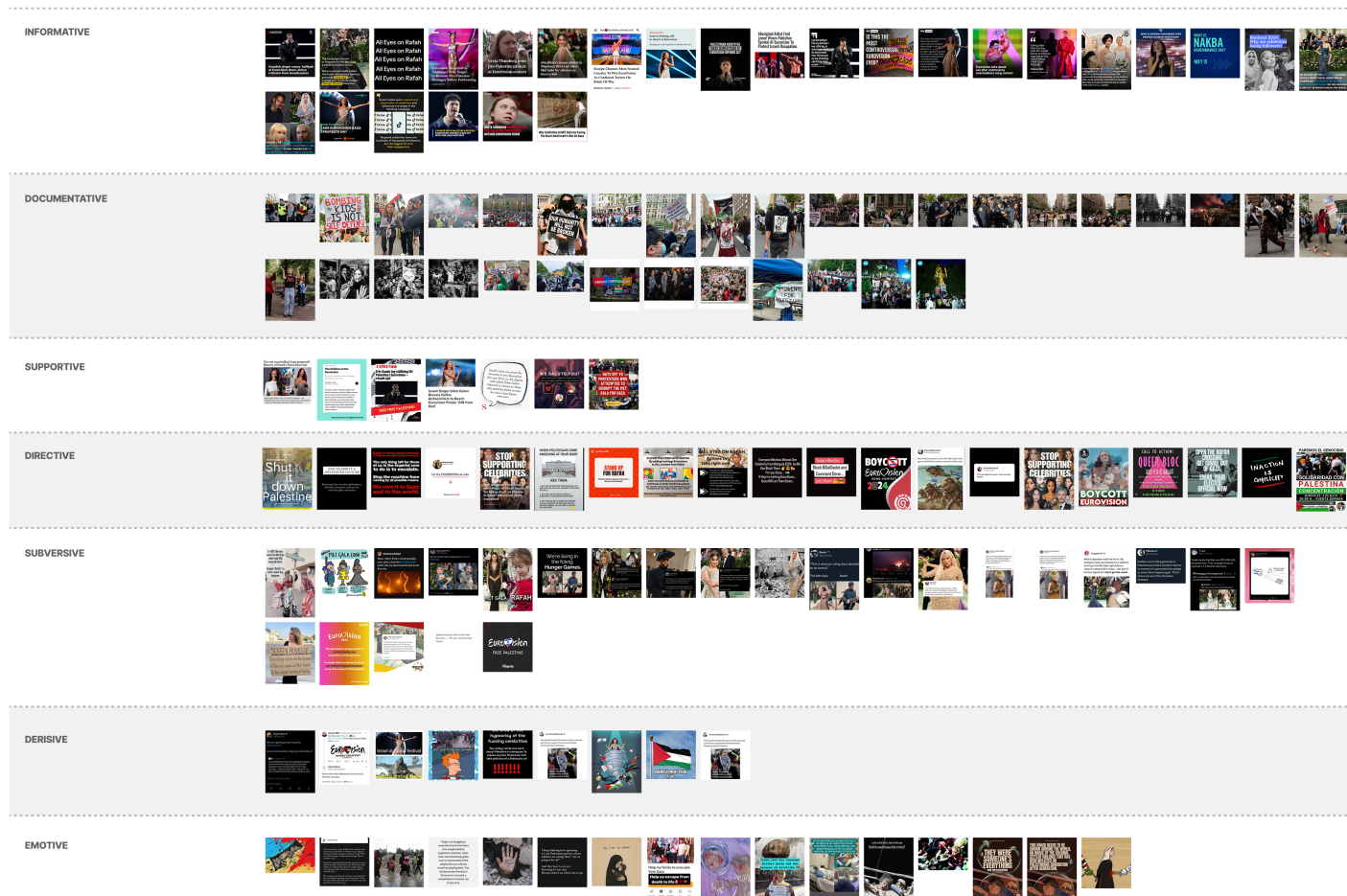


Figure 7

Representation of the approximate content of each category, accompanied by a set of representative visuals.

Cross-tabulation of visual tags across Facebook and Instagram

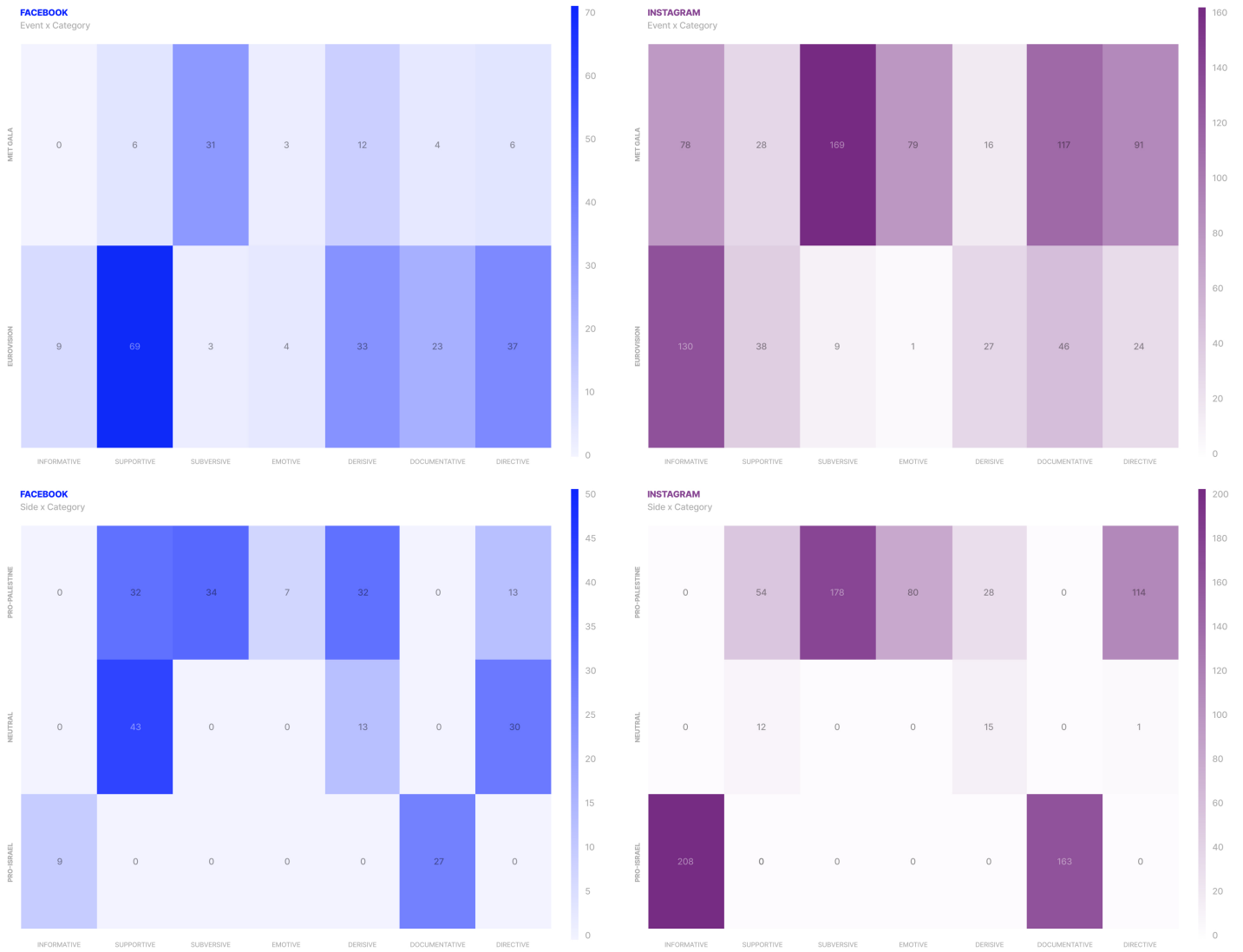


Figure 8

Cross-tabulation of visual tags across Instagram and Facebook.

Comparison of Porosity Between Facebook and Instagram

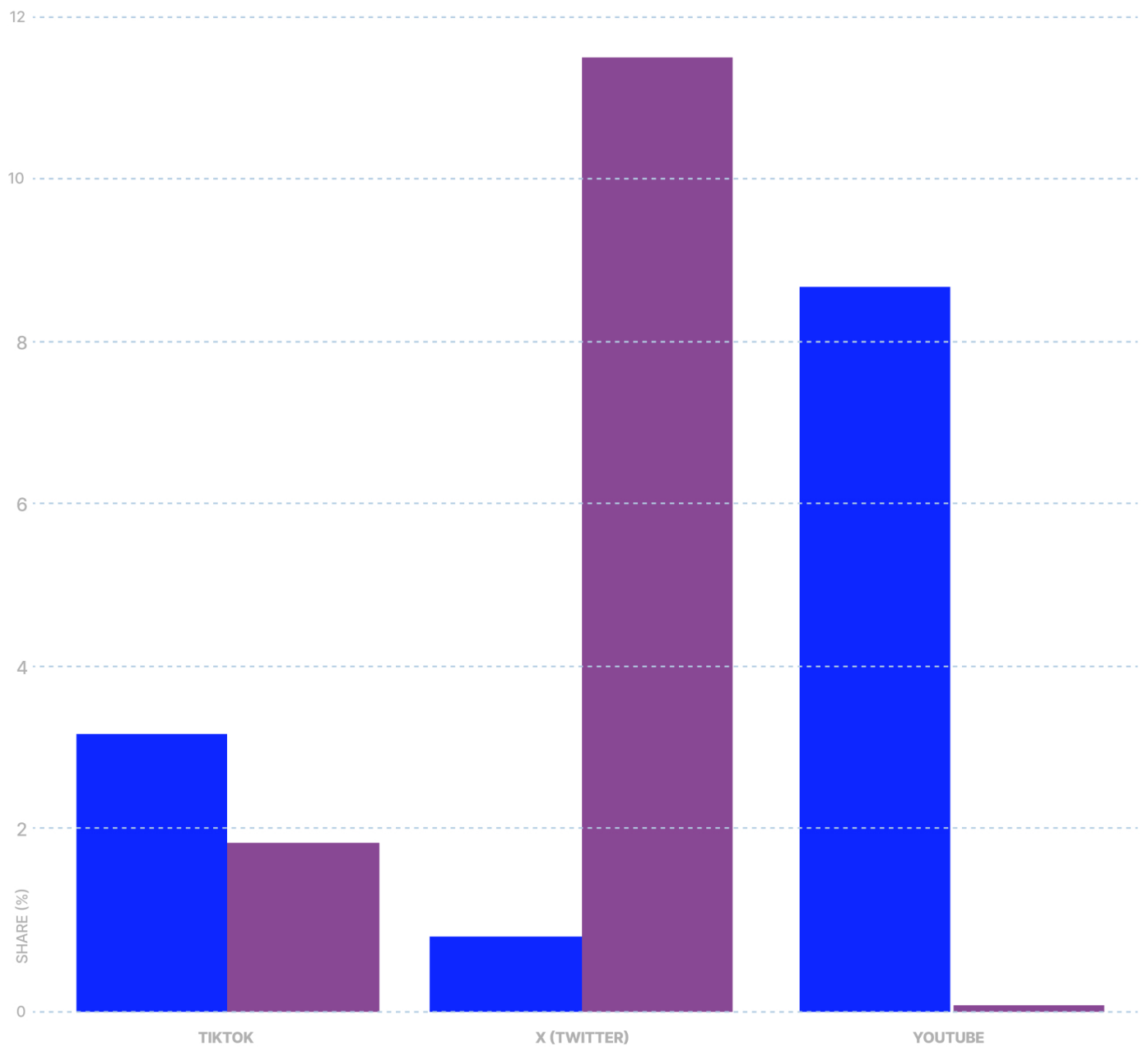


Figure 9

Bar chart depicting platform porosity, estimated based on the proportion of visuals originating from external platforms

Representation of the different modes of hashtags together with the image and body of the message

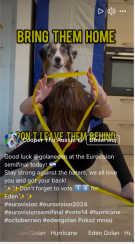
IMAGES	HASHTAGS	BODY OF THE MESSAGE	SIDE TAKEN	MODE OF HASHTAG USAGE
	#eurovision #eurovision2024	"The rules of the Eurovision song contest are clear: no politics. That might not seem hard for a pop-music showcase, but when contestants represent their countries, politics tends to get involved. This year's contest is the most politicized yet. In February the European Broadcasting Union considered disqualifying Israel because the lyrics of its entry, "October Rain", seemed to refer to Hamas's terrorist massacre. The deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Israel's subsequent invasion of Gaza led Scandinavian media outlets to petition the EBU to ban the country, as it banned Russia in 2022 after its invasion of Ukraine."	Neutral	Political
	#eurovision	"March this Saturday from Writers Square to the BBC calling for a Boycott of Eurovision."	Pro-Palestine	Digital Activism
	#eurovision #stopantisemitism #standwithisrael #stopterrorism #alwayswithisrael #racism #stophate #terror #supportisrael #rockyoulikeahurricane	"Congratulations to Eden Golan on advancing to the Eurovision grand final on Saturday!"	Pro-Israel	Digital Activism
	#metgala #alleyesonrafah	"In 1992 Nirvana won the Met Gala with their 80s inspired looks. Google "Rafah" to learn about the designer."	Pro-Palestine	Hijacking
	#eurovision #hamasisisis		Pro-Israel	Hijacking
	#metgala	"Rich people thriving in joy and feast while people are dying but just like in the Hunger Games, justice will win and the rebellion (everyone supporting Palestine) will end all horror ! This isn't fiction. This is real life and we need to stop this madness. We're not afraid and we won't be silenced."	Pro-Palestine	Hijacking
	#eurovision #eurovisionsemifinal #eurovision2024 #hurricane #vote14 #octoberrain #edengolan	"Good luck @golanelen at the Eurovision semi-final today! Stay strong against the haters, we all love you and get your back! Don't forget to vote 14 on Eden!"	Pro-Israel	Hijacking

Figure 10

Representation of the different modes of hashtags together with the image and body of the message.