

# The 17 October Revolution of the Lebanese in Arabic ثورة 17 تشرين الأول, (*thawrat 17 tishrīn al-ʿawwal*)

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## ABSTRACT

Revolution rocked Lebanon in October of 2019. Discontent with corruption and bad government led the Lebanese to take to the streets to demand change the day after the government announced a per-call fee to use WhatsApp. Two spaces, the physical and the virtual, became vehicles for protesters to vent their anger and frustration. In the physical space, protesters met, set up living quarters, created art, and developed an intellectual movement. In the digital space, protesters connected with one another, organized their activities, and maintained the momentum of the revolution. These two spaces interacted through mutual reinforcement. The digital space strengthened the conditions of the protesters on the streets, and the protesters in the physical space came to rely on the digital as its organizing principle.

## Author Keywords

urban spaces; social movements; street activism; physical sphere; social sphere; common spaces; shared spaces; digital activism

## CSS Concepts

- Applied Computing--Education—Collaborative Learning
- Social and Professional Topics—User Characteristics—Cultural Characteristics
  - ACM copyright: ACM holds the copyright on the work. This is the historical approach.

Each submission will be assigned a DOI string to be included here.

## INTRODUCTION

On October 17, 2019, the streets of downtown Beirut were flooded with protestors participating in the first of many civil protests that would happen throughout Lebanon over the subsequent six months. The Lebanese had many reasons to be upset at their leaders and their government. Corruption and lack of accountability, as well incompetence in all fields had led to a collapse of the economy and a tremendous increase in unemployment. The Lebanese's beloved country had collapsed on all levels, and they were expressing their anger on the streets. But it was perhaps a 20-cent per WhatsApp call fee announced by the government that was the catalyst for the uprising. Lebanese had come to rely on their mobile phones to connect their physical and virtual worlds, and the sense that they could be losing not just one, but both of these worlds galvanized their action.

## Being There (Physical)

I was at many of these protests and experienced this social movement's appropriation of urban spaces (Fuad-Luke, 2018) and how Beirut experienced urban transformation as its inhabitants claimed their rights to it. Digital media played a powerful role in mobilizing protestors and helped in generating a powerful re-appropriation of these urban environments. The following series of images present a visual narrative of the concerns and the voices of a community with very powerful political concerns. This digital network-

generated political aesthetic started with a physical site that was appropriated by the public, but then was propelled into a much broader one that went beyond the material landscapes of the protest sites all over Lebanon (Tulke, 2021).

I was struck by the spatial dynamics between the physical and the digital social spheres, namely the relationship between the occupancy of the physical urban space and that of the virtual digital space. Photos of physical interventions into public space were circulated in the digital realm beyond their immediate context, thus creating hybrid spaces of resistance. The result was a visual register of protest that began within embedded spatiality, but that was released from it to be networked beyond (Tulke, 2021).

## Being There (Virtual)

Having participated in the protests myself, I was able to witness the effectiveness of social media in strengthening the formulation of a collective identity to the revolution. Social media was helping organizers connect people with similar ideological agendas and helping in the formulation of a resistance against the government (Olzak, 1989). With each shared image on social media, a shared meaning was generated and then circulated. Users contributed to the content of the image bank, making their creative process, together with their thoughts and values, visible to the public.

This virtual communication with others and digital dissemination of values that support the social and political wellbeing of a community is what Graham Meikle refers to as “Distributed Citizenship” (Meikle 2015). According to Meikle, the sharing of ethical ideas that encourage a sense of social and political responsibility through digital networks into the virtual world creates new communities that have altered experiences and an enhanced new awareness of culture.

Social media proved to be an extremely effective way to create powerful social mobilizations that resulted in emotionally loaded forms of opposition. People were aware of meeting points and time which generated large crowds formed of protestors who were already connected to each other both virtually and ideologically. The communication networks and social media platforms became a powerful tool for social resistance and contestation, not only in formulating large crowds, but also in creating spaces for performances, debate, and organized talks and meetings.

The digital shared spaces for socialization succeeded in formulating a new kind of self-initiated citizen participation in the revolution that is highly democratic.

### Intellectual Resistance

Social media succeeded in infusing mobilized political action with a sense of intellectual resistance that engaged highly educated individuals from all walks of life. This collective of minds that bonded over their solidarity for similar issues created an experience of online activism that was expressed through an intense process of image capturing, making and dissemination (McQuisten, 2015).

This bringing together of like-minded people fostered the creation of a genuine intellectual opposition to the government, which added a meaningful and purposeful dimension to the rebellious opposition in the streets (Tarrow, 2005 & 2011). The political dissensus was thereafter infused with the intellectual flair of conferences with goals that could be articulated by informed figures—a meeting of minds so to say. The

following images taken from social media focus on messages that express dissent by avant-garde young professionals, designers and creatives, presenting a snapshot of the mentality being reinforced amongst individuals who were lobbying for the protestors.

I found this dissensus to be the most promising part of the Revolution. Could this cultural opposition, with its stoic stance, possibly lead to change?

### CONCLUSION

The Lebanese Revolution was equally formulated by physical and digital occupation of space, which complemented each other to support the aims of the protestors. This fits into the 21st-century architecture of a revolution where timely connectivity and global reach become essential to the success of the revolutionary ideas, particularly in an environment where strong political forces are invested in maintaining the status quo because they benefit from it.

It is thanks to the digital that already-existing mentalities about identities and representation of the underrepresented can be intentionally amplified, thereby rendering the revolution more effective as a form of social resistance because it becomes more democratic.

It is probably fair to say, however, that the October Revolution of Lebanon has failed in reaching its ultimate goal, namely the creation of a responsive government with the well-being of its people at heart. Similar to other revolutions of the Arab Spring that also created chaos, cultural and sectarian clashes, and disorder (McQuisten, 2015), the one in Lebanon has not been able to secure democracy.

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These are photographs that I took of citizens who appropriated physical space through creating aesthetic expressions of their political ideologies. Most of these visuals were inspired from symbols used in other revolutions, but they had an endearing quality particular to youth, and this quality translated well from the physical space to the digital one.



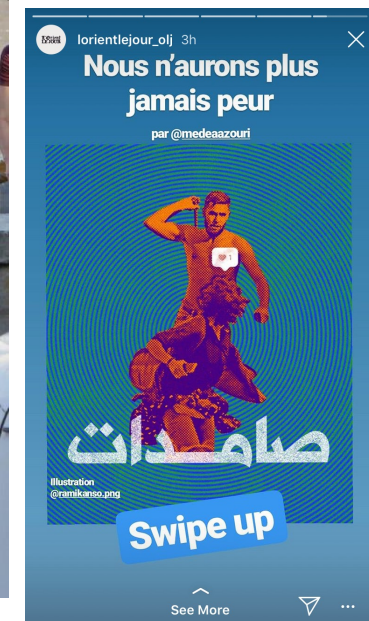


I witnessed the continuous formulation of new visuals on this monument. In some important spots of the city, artists were renewing the graffiti and the art almost daily. The digital space captured the messaging that represented the motivation of the protestors, which changed almost daily in the physical space. The digital memorialized these ephemeral images from the physical.

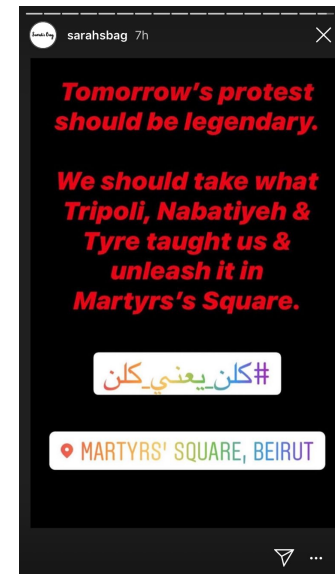




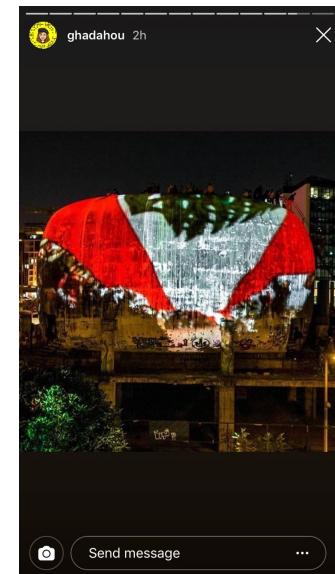
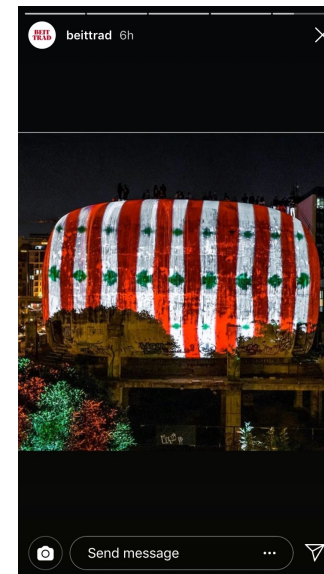
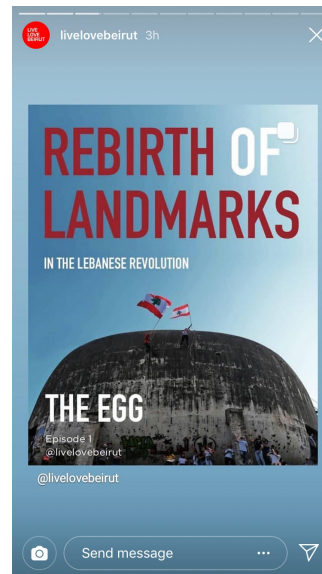
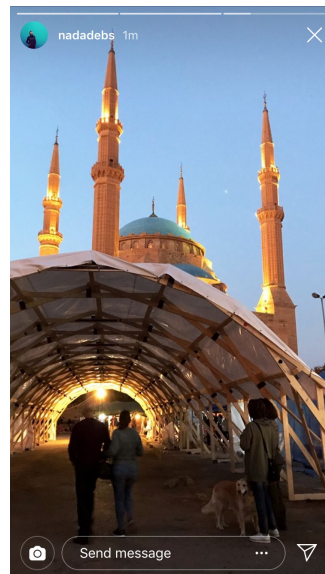
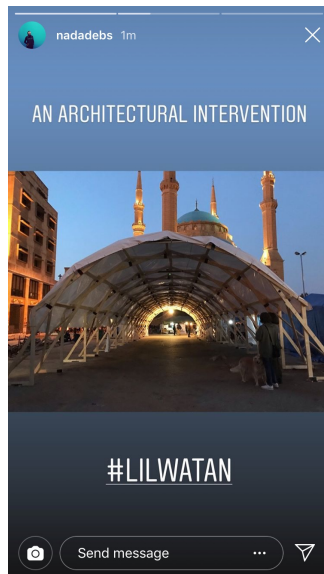
People immortalized fleeting moments in the physical world and created basic, but powerful, interpretations that became a strong symbol of courageous women standing at the forefront of the revolution against the thugs of the regime. The first image says, “let’s attack them,” which in Arabic has a powerful connotation of “taking someone out.” The second image says, “we as females are standing firm.” The actions portrayed by the photographs in the physical space that captured fleeting moments were then transformed into intuitive and strong graphic illustrations that became memes in the digital space.



These images are screenshots of Instagram stories that caught my attention during the revolution. Instagram stories last only 24 hours. My screenshotting them allowed the fleeting moments of the revolution to inform our understanding of what happened then, and what is happening now in ways that the ephemeral stories in the digital space could not do. These are stories from bloggers and creative minds who were coming with their own values and influencing the public. The followers of these social media accounts are subsequently influenced by the opinions of the creators.

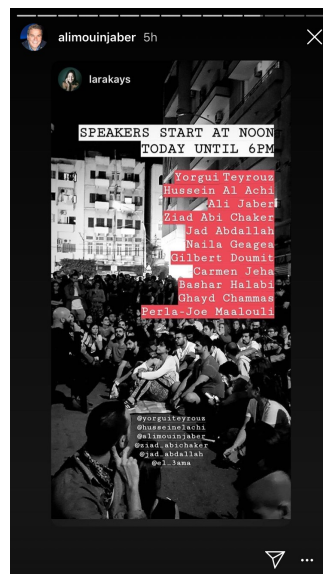
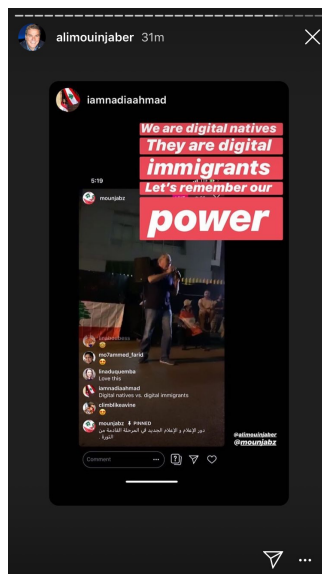


The Lebanese quickly appropriated urban spaces, thereby giving meaning to the built environment. Different areas within Lebanon's major cities became synonymous with the political agenda of the protestors. An example of such a place is Martyrs' Square in the heart of Beirut. Digital media helped formulate a special aura to many buildings that became blank canvases on which projected images appealed to the emotions of people on social media. The first two images are my screenshots of the story posted by a product designer who photographed a tent built by an architect within the physical world so people could congregate and create a hub of communication and place of habitation. The first image has the hashtag, #lilwatan, or "for the nation," which shows how text is used to influence emotions. The final two images are stories of a patriotic lightshow presented on "The Egg," a planned movie theater that was never completed and is a ruin from Lebanon's civil war.



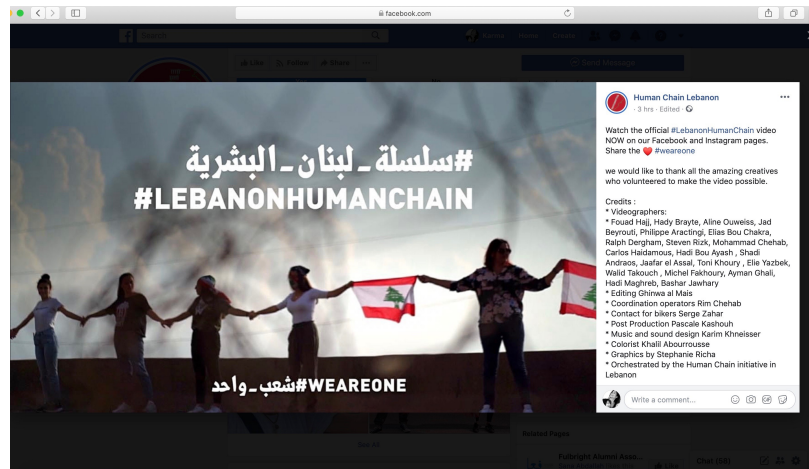


These images present stories posted by intellectuals who became part of the revolution. Social media helped propagate and share news about conferences, meetings, and organized talks around the city. Assemblies were created both within symbolic plazas of the city and within other debate spaces scattered around downtown Beirut. The intellectuals announced events where people would debate ideas about the revolution, and then keep their followers aware of the progress toward the event, its time, and its location.

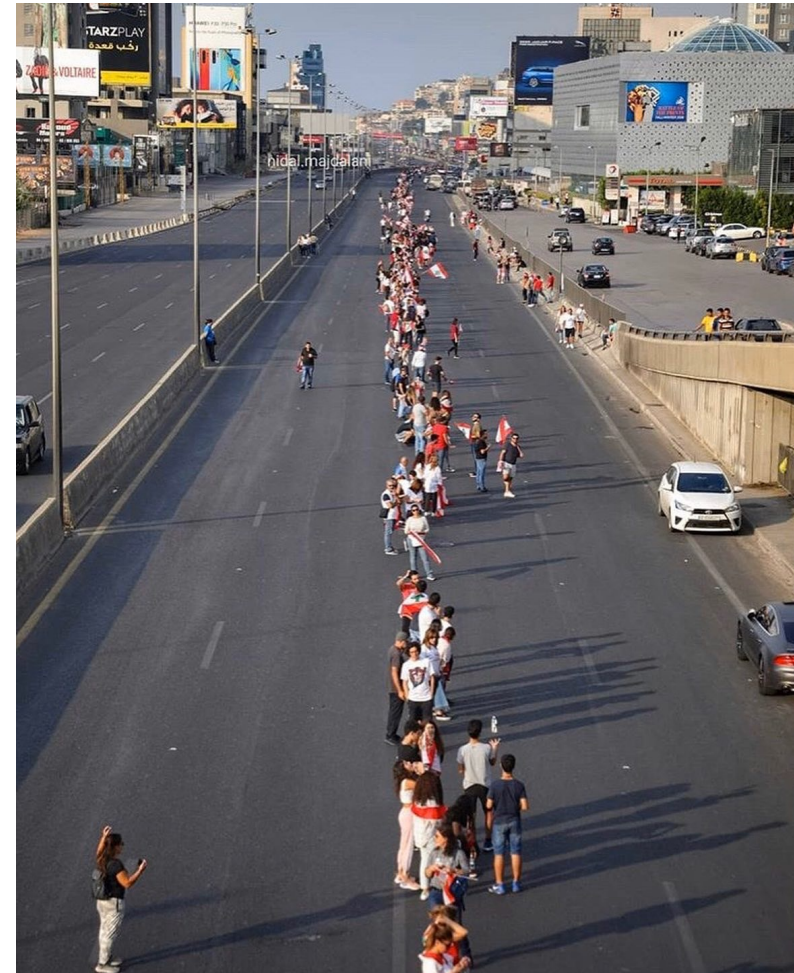


## Activated: Decentering Activism in and with Academia

The human chain across Lebanon created solidarity, both physically and virtually. Here the organizers or designers of the event, as well as the participants, were equal partners in formulating this form of resistance. The chain was successful because the information about meeting points was effectively channeled through social media, and was able to mobilize not just activists, but regular citizens and their families.



TEI'22: February 13-16, 2022, Virtual



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These images are screenshots of posts and stories. In the first image, Khaled Mouzanar and his wife Nadine Labaki, Lebanese film celebrities, are pictured at the protests. The subsequent two images are stories posted by L'Orient le jour, Lebanon's most prominent French-language newspaper, about the two celebrities and their participation in the protests. Networked solidarity and support of famous artists, actors and musicians helped formulate a particularly strong sense of unity of purpose. The fourth and fifth images also show prominent creative minds (product designers, fashion designers, and artists) strengthening support for the revolution through their stories.

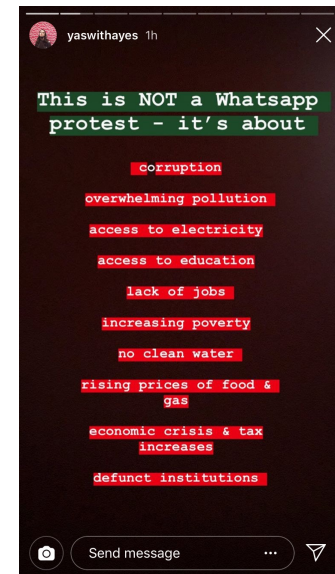




The first three images are created by a prominent journalist among the younger generation who is digitally connected. The last image is by a well-established fashion designer. The revolution was referred to as female. These images reinforce that view. The first three images have women in the forefront of the protests, while the final image refers to the fashion runway where those in the front row are the most important.



These images are taken from the account of a Lebanese expatriate. In them, she held the media accountable for either not telling the whole story or telling the story in a way that did not focus on the real motivations for the uprising. Namely, the revolution was not about violence, even as some violence was a by-product of the people's desires for good government and basic civil society and rights.





Newspapers, designers, and expatriates, among others, posted images of initiatives that allowed many Lebanese to demonstrate their elevated sense of civic engagement and their ability to organize public works without the help of a government. The message was clear that if the citizens can do this, Lebanon needs a government who can do it on their behalf.

