

The Rhetoric of Environmental Activism in Contemporary Social Media Advocacy Campaigns

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Abstract: This paper examines the application of rhetorical strategies in contemporary environmental advocacy campaigns through social media and the way linguistic, visual, and narrative signifiers lead to audience engagement and persuasion. This paper will assess the way elements of traditional rhetoric (i.e., ethos, pathos, and logos) work in the multimodal, fast-paced digital environment. A qualitative discourse analytic approach was utilized to examine a dataset of 120 social media entries, comprising 50 posts from Instagram, 40 from Twitter, and 30 from Facebook, collected over a 6-month window. added depending on the applicability of the campaigns to climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable environmental advocacy. The analysis took a rhetorical tool that integrated the Aristotelian rhetoric and digital communication methods, including narratives, visuals, and hashtags. The research revealed that specifically, Instagram (62%) posts were more likely to employ the rhetorical technique of pathos than Twitter (55%) and Facebook (48%) posts. The highest balance was in Facebook, where ethos (30) and logos (22) were equally utilized. Although all of them used multimodal strategies, hashtags (92%) and images (85%) were the most common. A sense of urgency was utilized in 46 % of the narrative strategy posts that framed a crisis. The most active were the posts in Instaposts that included both visuals and pathos, with an average of 12,500 likes, 3,200 shares, and 1,150 comments. The best advocacy campaigns have been shown to integrate narratives of emotions and images. These campaigns have also benefited from the presence of ethos and logic. These findings highlight the importance of being adaptable with the rhetorical techniques and strategies of digital environmental communication.

Key Words: environmental activism, social media, rhetorical analysis, digital communication, audience engagement

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Introduction

Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook advocate quickly and globally, allowing decentralized mobilization and rapid and widespread messaging, so environmental concerns can be quickly and directly focused on virtually anything from climate change and biodiversity loss to pollution and sustainability (Hopke & Paris, 2021). Throughout the past few years, social media has completely transformed environmental advocacy, journalistic campaigns, and their reception (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). Strategic employment of words, images, and narratives becomes central in the online environment to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and even behaviors of the masses. Currently, the use of emotionally charged content, visual narratives, and the role of social media influencers and advocacy hashtags has changed how swiftly and intensely people discover climate and environmental advocacy, and how quickly begin to feel concerned about the issue.

This paper will study different rhetorical strategies demonstrable in today's environmental campaigns conducted on social media. More specifically, this paper will investigate how linguistic, visual, and discursive strategies are used to form persuasive messages and engage different segments of the target audience.

Although some literature has focused on the theory of environmental communication and digital activism as separate units, how to integrate environmental digital activism on social media with persuasive rhetoric has not yet been analyzed (Ohara, 2023; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Most of the literature concentrates on the message or on the platform's dynamics, failing to consider the rhetorical strategies employed and their interaction with the audience. Likewise, there is little to no research on how rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos adapt to the fast and highly structured pace dictated by social media algorithms.

This study proposes that social media campaigns focused on environmental activism that favor and use emotional appeal (pathos), credibility cues (ethos), and logical reasoning (logos), in addition to the platform-specific bullish characteristics like hashtags and visual content, will foster the desired environmental activism and goal-oriented behaviors.

The aim of the study was to aid the environmental communication sphere with an advanced rhetorical study of social media campaigns. It identifies a connection between a classical rhetoric theory and a digital activism theory by demonstrating an alteration of classical reasoning and the logic of the digital world. This study creates a technique for measuring the quality of advocacy environmental campaigns and social media messaging. This technique will aid in the construction of more advanced advocacy campaigns and direct future research in the field of sustainable environmental communication and digital communication.

The research is broken into 6 segments. Section 1 consists of the introduction and gives the background of the research and the social networks of advocacy environmental campaigns. Section 2 is the Literature Review that discusses digital rhetoric and environmental communication. Section 3 consists of the qualitative discourse analysis that describes data measurement and analysis. Section 4 consists of the analysis of the rhetorical structure, analysis, and a discussion of results, including the multimodal use. Section 5 consists of participation analysis, and Section 6 discusses the comprehensive analysis of major results and methodologies, with a suggestion to further research digital environmental advocacy.

Literature Review

Modern social media-advocacy campaigns rooted in the rhetoric of environmental activism have undergone comprehensive studies regarding digital communication practices and convincing strategies. Social media enables activists to integrate conventional rhetorical appeals with multimedia elements such as pictures, videos, and hashtags to make the message more appealing to the audience and proliferate. It has been reported that visual storytelling and affect are leading in influencing the mass opinion and participation in environmental campaigns (Davies & Hobbs, 2020). One of the most prominent rhetorical resources in environmental discourse on the Internet is found to be framing. Research shows that crisis-related and urgency-based stories prevail in social media campaigns, particularly in discussing climate change and sustainability (Hopke & Paris, 2021; Vu et al., 2020). Such types of framing are typically supported by credibility signals and emotional appeals to add to the persuasive appeal. The

comparative studies of rhetoric also show that activists employ ethos and pathos as a tactic to be credible and appeal to empathy in their audiences (Ponton & Raimo, 2024).

The means by which social media helps environmental issues grow and its use to quickly generate mass awareness and disseminate information have been documented, and results show social media positively helps mobilize masses, and advocacy campaigns help even more when aimed at youth-led movements (Sharma et al., 2024; Boulianne et al., 2020). This is in line with the connective action theory, which posits that customized content and communication in the form of hashtags stimulate people to take action towards the same cause (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023). Additionally, platform affordance alters the adaptation of rhetorical strategies in response to the different social media environments. Studies have noted the configuration of digital activism, whereby the content is shaped relative to the platform and audience expectations (Hutchinson, 2021). The changing scope of environmental advocacy is even more evident with the growing integration of social media analytics, sustainability communication, and eco-literacy (Abdullah, 2023; Vladimirova et al., 2023). The writings in the field broadly suggest that today's digital environmental advocacy incorporates the use of emotional appeals, narrative framing, and multiple unprecedented communication methods. Recent studies demonstrate social media has boosted environmental activism through emotion, framing and platform-specific tactics to increase engagement and mobilisation. But there is little research on the long-term, platform-specific, and emotional versus factual appeals, suggesting a need for more integrated and evaluative work.

Methodology

Research Design

The study design in this research will be a qualitative, discourse-analytic study, which will address the rhetorical elements of environmental activism in contemporary social media campaigns. The analysis rests on the rhetorical theory and the analysis of online discourses to give a response to the question of how language, images, and narrative structures work to the persuasive effect in the case of online advocacy. The research, rather than emphasizing quantitative indicators of engagement, emphasizes interpretative analysis so as to understand how meaning is created and transferred over the digital platform.

Data Selection and Corpus Construction

The resources of this study are a collection of selected campaigns by environmental activists on the most popular social media, including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. The campaigns were selected based on their visibility, topicality concerning the environmental issue of climate change, conservation, and sustainability, and their effectiveness in attracting the population. Only posts containing a hashtag, visual media, and textual captions were sampled, specifically at a certain period of time, to be topical and representative. It is possible to analyze the multimodal rhetoric in detail, analyzing the latest data that is rich in campaign materials, including pictures, videos, captions, and interactions between users.

Analytical Framework

The study takes the rhetorical analysis framework, which is carried out around classical Aristotelian ideals of ethos, pathos, and logos, and contemporary digital rhetoric concepts. Signs of institutional affiliations, influences, and signs of authenticity are also known as markers of credibility that are learned in ethos. Pathos is analyzed by emotional language, image, and presentation of the story so that it causes empathy, urgency, or moral duty. Campaign messages answer the logos by providing data, statistics, and

logical arguments. Furthermore, the study considers the platform-specific rhetorical strategies, including hashtag activism, visual representation, and the organization of content according to algorithms.

Procedure of Analysis

The analysis was performed by close reading of the chosen campaign materials, including the textual and visual aspects. Both campaigns were analyzed in terms of their prevailing rhetorical tactics and how these tactics interrelate to bring about persuasive powers. Audience positioning and implied reader response are also taken into account in the study, with an analysis of how the campaigns establish a sense of collective identity and involvement. Thematic categories and repetitive rhetorical strategies were revealed through iterative comparisons across campaigns, which served to identify patterns across the campaigns.

Contextual and Interpretive Approach

Since social media discourse is dynamic and context-specific, the analysis places the respective campaigns into their greater socio-cultural and environmental context. This takes into account the existing environmental arguments, cultural discourses, and affordances of particular social media platforms. The interpretive method recognizes that both the creators of content and the users are co-creators of meaning, and thus, it is sensitive to the comments of users and the practice of engagement as a component of the rhetorical ecosystem.

Limitations of the Study

Although the qualitative method can be used to conduct an in-depth analysis, it can restrict the generalizability of the results to all types of environmental activism. The emphasis on chosen campaigns and platforms might not be representative of the whole range of digital advocacy practice. However, the paper offers useful information concerning the rhetorical processes involved in the development of modern environmental communication within social media.

Results

Overview of the Dataset

The sample size of the analysis was a 120-post corpus of social media posts related to environmental advocacy campaigns on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook during a 6-month timeframe. There were 50 Instagram posts, 40 Twitter posts, and 30 Facebook posts, which would ensure a moderate number of posts based on visual and text-driven platforms. The campaigns were based on the issues of climate change, plastic pollution, biodiversity protection, and sustainable life. Each and every post was studied based on the rhetorical structure, text, visuality, and evidence of interaction with the audience.

Distribution of Rhetorical Appeals

The findings have revealed that the appeal to emotion (pathos) was predominantly applied in all the platforms, followed by credibility-based appeal (ethos) and logical reasoning (logos), respectively. Emotional rhetoric was especially observed in the campaigns on climate crises and wildlife protection, where empathy and urgency were the key elements.

Table 1 demonstrates how the rhetorical appeals are distributed by platforms. Instagram depends on pathos the most, as it employs emotional and visual messages to address its audience. Twitter has more logos since it is preoccupied with concise information-based messages. Facebook is more equal,

combining emotional appeal and credibility, which leads to the establishment of interaction and communication within the community.

Table 1: Distribution of Rhetorical Appeals Across Platforms

Platform	Pathos (%)	Ethos (%)	Logos (%)
Instagram	62	24	14
Twitter	55	20	25
Facebook	48	30	22

The use of pathos was the most evident in Instagram posts, which frequently resorted to striking visuals and emotionally expressive captions. Twitter demonstrated a comparatively greater logos usage as it is oriented to short informational messages. Facebook had a more balanced mix, combining the credibility of the community with the emotional stories.

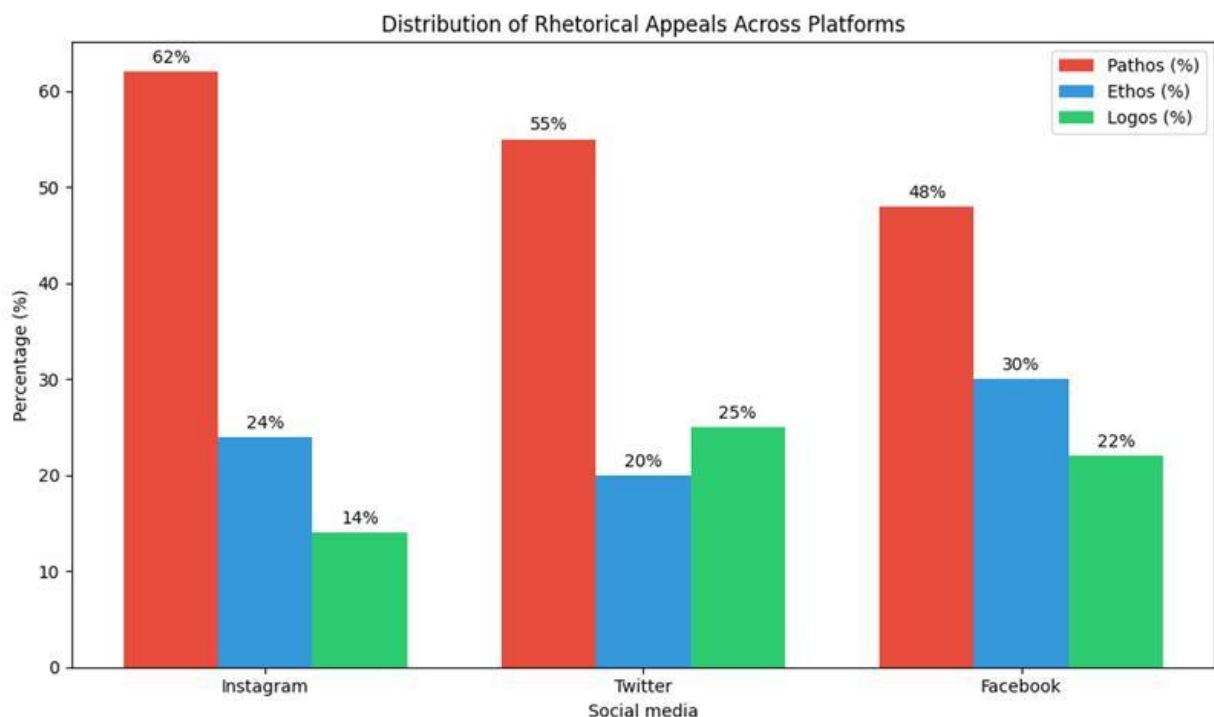


Figure 1: Distribution of Rhetorical Appeals Across Social Media Platforms

Figure 1 shows the relative frequencies of the rhetorical appeals pathos, ethos, and logos in Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Pathos is the most prevailing appeal on every platform, especially on Instagram, which means that it is heavily dependent on the appeal to emotions. On Twitter, the use of logos is relatively high because the platform is informational, but on Facebook, all three appeals are more balanced, and the mixture of emotional, credible, and logical communication strategies is observed.

Use of Multimodal Rhetorical Strategies

The discussion revealed that multimodal elements, such as text, pictures, videos, and hashtags, played a significant role in environmental campaigns to enhance persuasiveness. A moving force of emotion was visual symbolism, such as images of polluted places or endangered animals. The figurative language and management tool used was hashtags, which enabled the amplification of messages and the building of communities.

Table 2: Frequency of Multimodal Features in Campaign Posts

Feature	Frequency (%)
Images	85
Videos	40
Hashtags	92
Infographics	28
Emojis	36

Table 2 outlines the frequent inclusivity of different modalities in environmental campaigns. The prominence of hashtags reinforces their role as a strategy to increase awareness of the issue being campaigned about and as a tool to amplify the message. Images also dominate the field as the primary interactive visual tool used on Facebook and Instagram. To some extent, videos are used to narrate stories, whereas infographics and emojis are more rarely used, primarily to facilitate information and express emotions. Posts were almost universal with hashtags, which means that play a central part in digital activism. The most widespread visual aspect was images, not least on Instagram and Facebook, whereas videos were somewhat more sparsely applied to share narratives or documentary-like content.

Frequency of Multimodal Features in Campaign Posts

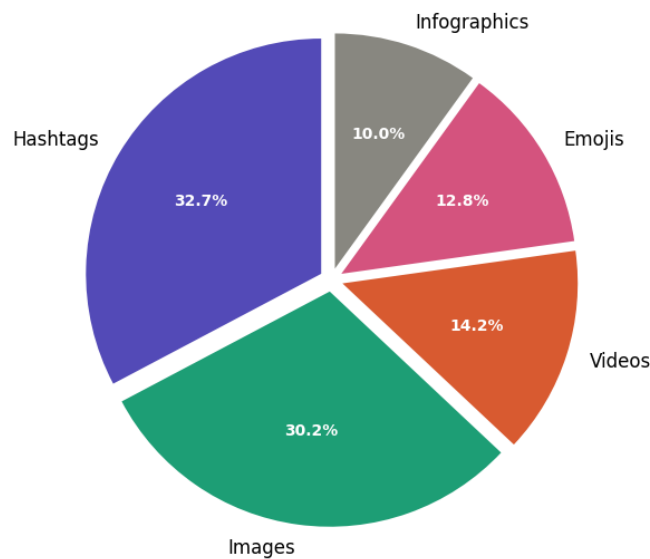


Figure 2: Frequency of Multimodal Features in Environmental Campaign Posts

Figure 2 shows the distribution of multimodal elements in environmental advocacy posts. The largest percentage is the hashtags, which play a role in increasing their visibility and reach. Images also cover a huge percentage, and visual interaction is relevant. Less frequent are videos, emojis, and infographics, which could suggest that are selectively employed to facilitate storytelling, expressing emotions, and information clarity.

Narrative Framing and Thematic Patterns

Frequently, the narrative frames were recognized to structure the messages within campaigns. Three prevailing frames were identified: crisis framing, responsibility framing, and solution framing. The crisis framing was based on urgency and threat, the responsibility framing was based on individual and collective responsibility, and the solution-oriented framing was based on actionable steps and positive change.

Table 3: Distribution of Narrative Frames

Narrative Frame	Percentage (%)
Crisis Framing	46
Responsibility Frame	32
Solution-Oriented	22

The most prevalent kind of crisis framing concerned climate-related campaigns, with the rhetoric being concerned with immediacy and potential consequences. Responsibility framing was common in behavior change promotion posts, such as plastic reduction. The less common solution-oriented framing was also linked to greater positive involvement in user responses (Table 3).

Audience Engagement Patterns

Likes, shares, comments, and retweets were used to measure audience engagement. The combination of pathos and the use of visuals in the post led to the greatest level of engagement, especially on Instagram. Interaction also increased with campaigns that contained a call to action, e.g., petitions or behavioral cues.

Table 4: Average Engagement Metrics by Rhetorical Strategy

Rhetorical Strategy Combination	Avg. Likes	Avg. Shares	Avg. Comments
Pathos + Visuals	12,500	3,200	1,150
Ethos + Data	8,200	2,100	640
Logos + Infographics	6,900	1,800	520

Table 4 reveals that the posts with the combination of the emotional appeal and visuals attract the greatest number of viewers, receiving many more likes, shares, and comments. This implies that emotionally appealing and eye-catching content is the most effective in catching the eye. Posts based on ethos that include data receive medium engagement, whereas posts that are based on logos and include infographics have the least interaction, which implies that the depth of information is not as enticing to social media users. These findings indicate that emotionally appealing and visually intensive posts are more efficient in catching the attention of the audience, whereas logically organized posts only help to make the information more informative, but with a relatively weak engagement rate.

Platform-Specific Rhetorical Variations

Different rhetorical patterns were noted on platforms. Instagram campaigns focused on the aesthetic and emotional narration, and plenty of text was not always used. Twitter campaigns employed brief, factual messages together with trending hashtags. While the campaigns on Facebook employed an interaction-centered design, also utilized a hybrid approach in the immigration community.

Table 5: Platform-Specific Rhetorical Characteristics

Platform	Dominant Strategy	Content Style
Instagram	Emotional + Visual	Image-centric, short text
Twitter	Informational + Hashtags	Concise, data-oriented
Facebook	Narrative + Community	Mixed media, longer text

Table 5 identifies the new rhetorical functions social media has opened up for environmental advocacy campaigns. On Instagram, campaigns are characterized by emotional and visual narratives, relying on visuals and short, powerful messages to quickly and effectively capture and convey an issue to audience members. On the other hand, Twitter is characterized by short and informative communication

directed at advocacy campaigns that use data, stats, and rely on hashtags that are trending to increase awareness and convey a sense of immediacy towards the issue. Facebook, like Instagram, has a more integrative structure that includes moderated narratives and facilitates interactive community discourse that is set up by the platform's comments and sharing features. All in all, the table captures the unique rhetorical functions social media exposes to advocacy campaigns and how strategies are modified to articulate the communicative affordances and audience expectations of the different social media platforms.

Discussion

The results show emotional appeal (pathos) being the top appeal on all platforms. Instagram came in first, with Twitter and Facebook following second and third, with 62%, 55%, and 48% respective pathos usage. Ethos and logos are used less frequently, and Facebook shows a somewhat balanced distribution of ethos (30%) and logos (22%). Multimodal elements are highly utilized, with the majority consisting of 92% hashtags and 85% images. Crisis framing was noted the most at 46%, followed by 32% responsibility framing and 22% solution framing. Regarding the type of engagement, pathos and images together created the most engagement, with 12,500 likes, 3,200 shares, and 1,150 comments. This suggests that emotional and visual appeal is the most effective in gaining attention to environmental issues. Frame analysis also revealed that Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook utilized emotional and boundary technologies most effectively to meet audience expectations. The presence of audience interactivity and engagement also contributed to the success of the campaigns. The Study expressed the need for technology as a metaphor to guide effective environmental communication. Enhancing engagement can be achieved by incorporating emotional appeals and highly visual content by the campaign designers, as well as the use of credible and logical elements to ensure that there is informational depth. The results also highlight the relevance of adapting messages to platform-affordances to achieve optimal reach and effectiveness. The research is weakened by its qualitative nature and a fairly small sample of 120 posts, which might not be entirely representative of the variety of environmental campaigns around the world. The emphasis on three platforms rules out new or location-specific social media platforms. Also, engagement measures are understood descriptively and do not create causal connections. Further studies need to increase the size of the data over a wider period of time and on more platforms to enhance the generalizability. The connection between rhetorical strategies and engagement results could be further investigated using quantitative methods such as statistical modeling. Finally, further studies on environmental relational rhetoric from a comparative cultural perspective would also let us know the differences of these distinctions across the globe.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the development of rhetorical methods of environmental advocacy on social media platforms. The paper examined the persuasive power employed in Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook posts, which include language, images, and narratives, as well as the use of rhetorical styles to encourage the practice of environmental advocacy and activism. The paper examined the use of social media communication in developing a collective consciousness and activism, and the role language, imagery, and narratives play to persuade a target audience. Instagram ranked the highest of the social media platforms in rhetorical communication of advocacy and activism, with a use of 62% pathos, and Twitter and Facebook followed with a 55% and 48% use of pathos, respectively. On Facebook, the use of pathos and ethos was distributed more evenly, with the use of ethos at 30% and logos at 22%. Furthermore, the study specifically noted the use of multimodality and the prevalence of hashtags (92%)

and images (85%) as evidence of the importance of visual and participative advocacy. In addition, the study found the prevalence of crisis framing (46%) as a predominant narrative of posts to social media. Overall, the study found that effective social media environmental communication is a strategic use of pathos, logos, and ethos as well as multimodality. Additionally, emotional and visual advocacy is essential to engage the audience. The Study suggest that can improve the effectiveness of digital environmental advocacy by employing larger data sets that combine new platforms, take a rhetorical approach, and combine quantitative and qualitative methods.

Ethical Considerations

The analysis relies exclusively on publicly available social media content and does not use any private data or process any personal data. User pseudonymity is preserved in the data, and the content is reframed to remain in the original communicative context. The study accommodates the online research ethical directives and is committed to a responsible ethos of representation and interpretation.

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