

# “DEAR NIKE, JUST DON’T DO IT!”: A TRANSNATIONAL DIGITAL CONNECTIVE ACTION ON THE ISSUE OF FORCED UYGHUR LABOR AT NIKE SWEATSHOPS IN CHINA

by Tomiris Mashan



Photo: AP-Photo, Richard Vogel



**TOMIRIS  
MASHAN**

Tomiris Mashan is a Master's student in Comparative Social Research at the National Research University Higher School of Economics. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from Nazarbayev University, where she had assisted on research projects related to social media environmentalities and racial and gender representations in the top-ranked movies. Being an alumna of the Study of the U.S. Institutes for Women's Leadership, in 2020, Tomiris founded a multilingual storytelling project [Why We All Need Feminism](#). Her current research interests include collective actions, modern-day slavery, social inequalities, and marginalized communities. For her Master's Thesis, she is planning to dive deeper into the Uyghur crisis.

**December 22, 2021**

Even though the world has been aware of reeducation and labor camps for ethnic minorities, particularly those aimed at the Kazakhs and Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of China (Human Rights Watch 2017), the issue of forced Uyghur labor has not been adequately addressed in academic research. Most data come from reports of human rights violations and mass media interviews, where victims who have escaped from reeducation camps have shared their experiences. For example, a report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Xu et al. 2020, 3) indicates that in the three years between 2017 and 2020, at least 80,000 Uyghurs from Xinjiang were compelled to work in factories across China. This includes underpaid and unpaid work for at least 82 prominent brands, including Apple, BMW, Nike, Samsung, and Sony, among others. Of those brands, Nike has received most backlash in social media, and, therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on Nike, which, despite claiming that the company “does not source products from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)” and denying the presence of workers from XUAR at Qingdao Taekwang Shoes Co. Ltd (Nike 2021), was reported to have employed approximately 600 Uyghur and Kazakh laborers in the beginning of 2020 (Xu et al. 2020, 8).



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

The global community has mobilized in various ways to speak out against the Uyghur-rights abuses and to boycott the products imported from the XUAR. One of the most conspicuous campaigns was the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act passed in the U.S. in September 2020. The Act was intended to prohibit the importation of goods produced with human rights violation in Xinjiang (U.S. Congress 2021). Despite Nike’s assertion that the corporation “has not lobbied against the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act” (Nike 2021), the evidence shows that Nike paid out more than \$1,320,000 for lobbying Congress and outside firms on issues including the Act (Swanson 2020), which undermines the campaign’s loyalty to justice. Therefore, I turn to a more transparent global campaign that mobilized online to speak for the Uyghur sweatshop workers’ rights at Nike factories in China.

In this research, I argue that Instagram posts and comments that raise awareness on the issue of forced Uyghur labor at Nike sweatshops have become global strategies constituting a transnational digital connective action. I consolidate the theories of transnational advocacy networks, discursive opportunities, and connective action into a hybrid theory to analyze three types of data—the artwork by the Uyghur rights activists, the comments under Nike’s Instagram posts dedicated to the Black Lives Matter movement, and the posts by Instagram influencers like Raphaël Glucksmann and Khaled A. Beydoun. All data for analysis are intentionally extracted from different Instagram profiles to demonstrate that the same objective is pursued through different strategies and by different participants, all united in the case of fighting for Uyghur sweatshop workers’ rights. This research answers the following questions:

- How is the issue of forced Uyghur labor at Nike sweatshops framed by the Instagram community?
- How has the “End Uyghur Forced Labor” transnational digital connective action been organized?

Unfortunately, the existent theories on collective actions and transnational advocacy networks do not fully meet the criteria of newly emergent social actions. The literature reviewed in this paper demonstrates that those theories appear outdated and limited: they mainly revolve around Twitter and Facebook, ignoring the value of Instagram as a platform for action, and thus fail to consider relevant and constantly-evolving repertoires of online action. Moreover, none of the existing scholarship address the issue of forced Uyghur labor at Chinese Nike sweatshops through the framework of collective action. Therefore, I propose a hybrid theoretical framework to study a transnational digital connective action and entwine together semiotics and discourse analysis to indicate exactly how the issue is shaped by the Instagram community.

In the first chapter, I present the hybrid theoretical framework. Following this, I discuss the how and when of the data collection and methods. The next three sections focus on exploring how the data gathered on Instagram—artwork, comments, and influencers’ posts, respectively—link back to the primary hybrid theory, revealing the organizing strategies of a transnational digital connective action in the context of the Uyghur sweatshop labor at Nike in China. In conclusion, I discuss the limitations of this study and the implications for future research with regard to the oppressed Uyghur minority.

## Literature Review

Collective action is often studied in the fields of political science and international relations (Adi et al. 2018; Dahlberg-Grundberg et al. 2016; Erdem 2015; George and Leidner 2019) and is commonly described as an organization where members share interests, views, goals, and intention to participate in the cooperation (George and Leidner 2019). Due to the development of technologies, the advent of globalization, and the blurring of national boundaries, many scholars have started differentiating between a traditional *collective* and a more digitalized *connective* action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; George and Leidner 2019; Lim 2013; Schuschke and Brendesha 2016).

Connective actions are distinguished from collective ones mainly by the use of technologies and social media that allow for the creation of digital connections (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 744) which emphasize “the role of identity, culture, emotion, social networks, political process, and opportunity structures” in driving the common action (Segerberg, 750). As a result, connective actions are more personalized than a traditional collective action, allowing people to join action for personal reasons without being persuaded to do so. Moreover, connective action does not require the presence of a uniform collective identity, leadership centralization, or a fixed geographic location. Connective action emerges as a result of technological advancement, widespread use of online social networks, and people’s desire to express themselves (Segerberg, 750). This also implies that the movement can be arranged by multiple organizations or cyber activists; a phenomenon known as de-centralization. Nevertheless, connective action theory is not sufficient to describe the digital action taking place in solidarity with the oppressed Uyghur minority in China because it does not elaborate on the repertoire of action. Thus, there is a need to incorporate the theory of transnational advocacy networks by Keck and Sikkink (1998).

Keck and Sikkink (1998) define transnational advocacy networks (TANs) as, “networks of activists, distinguishable by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation” (10). The authors claim that TANs apply the tactics of persuasion, socialization, and pressure through the politics of information, symbolism, leverage, and accountability (Keck and Sikkink, 10). Information politics entail “quick and credible generation of politically usable information and movement of it to where it will have the most impact” (Keck and Sikkink, 24). Symbolic politics means the “ability to call upon symbols, actions, or stories that make sense of a situation for an audience that is frequently far away” (Keck and Sikkink, 24). The strategy of leverage engages powerful actors in the “mobilization of shame,” which undermines the international reputation of the state—in my case, the Nike corporation (Keck and Sikkink, 31). Finally, accountability politics is an endeavor to call on those in charge of corporate social responsibility and change the rights-infringing policies (Keck and Sikkink, 31).

Nevertheless, the theory has a limitation of emphasizing the high costs of TANs’ maintenance due to the remoteness of network activists, cultural and linguistic differences, and the need for air travel (Keck and Sikkink 1998). The End Uyghur Forced Labor campaign, however, avoids the issue of cost because the public space is virtual. Thus, this research embraces the theory of discursive opportunities by Koopmans and Olzak (2004). The concept of discursive opportunities implies, “the aspects of the public discourse that determine a message’s chances of diffusion in the public sphere” (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 202). Since the authors meant mass media as the main diffusor of political agendas, their theory will be adjusted in this work to the realm of social media. Koopmans and Olzak argue that for an issue to become widely talked about, as many

communicative channels as possible should shed light on it. They term this discursive opportunity “visibility”. Thus, mass media act as gatekeepers, determining if and to what extent the issue is widespread and visible. In social media, however, users generate their own content, and, hence, visibility is presented in different conditions. The gatekeeping role is diminished for mass media (Bennett 2004) and, in turn, is assigned to social media algorithms. Social media algorithms determine which messages are visible to whom, grouping people by their interests (Dumitrica and Felt 2019). However, an adverse effect of social media algorithms is that activists may end up preaching to the converted.

Apart from visibility, discursive opportunities involve the resonance and legitimacy of the message being spread (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Both concepts are applicable to my research, since activist actions gave rise to the intense reaction of the Instagram community in the form of likes, reposts, and comments. To elaborate on the idea of resonance and legitimacy, I compare it to the idea of metavoicing, or sharing, reposting, and commenting on social media posts with the aim of supporting certain values and opinions; the success of metavoicing depends on the size of one’s social media network (George and Leidner 2019).

### ***Analytical Framework***

To interpret the meanings of visual symbols in this research, I apply the approach of semiotics, originally defined as a science “which studies the role of signs as part of social life” (de Saussure in Chandler 1994, 9). The approach was popularized due to Roland Barthes’s work *Mythologies* (1957), where he spotlighted the relationship between three aspects of each myth—a signifier, a signified, and a sign (Barthes 1991, 107). I will use modified Barthesian ideas, as discussed in Daniel Chandler’s book *Semiotics for Beginners* (1994). According to Chandler, there are three levels of signification: denotative (a signifier conveying the literal meaning), connotative (a signified expressing the metaphorical meaning), and mythological (a sign communicating the ideology) (Chandler 1994, 95). Hence, the terms denotative and the signifier, connotative and the signified, and mythological/ideological and the sign respectively will be used interchangeably in this essay.

Some scholars have focused particularly on visual semiotics that clarify how images are utilized for communicating certain messages. Valentini et al. argued that “images can provoke certain emotions as they convey meanings and act on individual reminiscence by using specific codes of color, framing and public context” (2018, 4). Other than specific colors associated with unambiguous meanings, what matters in highlighting an image’s meaning is the intentional composition, or order, of the objects portrayed (Valentini et al. 2018, 5).

In addition, Valentini et al. (2018) claim that images have an interactive function which, depending on what and how something is depicted, increases the chance of a viewer’s engagement with it. The decisive factor is the depicted direct gaze which “generates a stronger engagement between the observed subject and the viewer and stimulates the latter into taking action” (Valentini et al. 2018, 6). Another way of reinforcing public engagement with images is through the phenomenon of culture jamming, a central component of which is “the use of emotionally-cultivated brands and logos of corporations and their products to direct attention to the realities of human rights, labor abuses, and environmental degradation that are associated with the production...” (Bennett 2004, 8).

Semiotics, however, is not the only approach used for data analysis in this research—it is combined with discourse analysis. Originally developed by Michel Foucault in the 1970s with the aim of holistically investigating language, symbols, and text, modern discourse analysis has been re-configured to be suited to analyze social media.

The goals pursued by social media users expand daily as new functions and online blogging platforms emerge. Today, social media allows people to not only maintain social relations, but also construct their identity through expressing socio-political views (Bouvier 2015). For instance, social media tools like Twitter and Facebook helped “not only to foster revolution through activism but also to recruit, as well as radicalize protesters and militants” in the Arab Spring protests against authoritarianism (ibid., 158). In addition, social networking has established a participatory environment that allows social-media users to try on the double role of both consumers and producers of content (Bruns 2007 in Oprea 2019). Content-production is manifested in both creating posts that “offer people an opportunity to share mostly unfiltered opinions and allow a greater variety of ideas and opinions to be available in the public sphere” (Bouvier 2015, 155) and writing comments that “are sometimes more clarifying and more complete than the original information offered by the first emitter” (Oprea 2019, 318). Importantly, in the latter case, social media discourse shifts from a monologue or communication with a single information source to the “collaborative writing” (ibid., 318), where users with different positions regarding a certain issue can contribute to the discussion.

## Data and Methods

Instagram was established in 2010 as a social media platform for sharing pictures. Since then, a number of functions have been added, allowing users to also post videos and include captions with up to 2,200 characters. These additions resulted in attracting more than a billion active users monthly (Tankovska 2021). These active users expanded the original aim of the platform from simply sharing personal pictures to promoting businesses and expressing one’s socio-political opinions. The latter is of particular interest to this research since Instagram appeared as a platform for social justice against the use of forced Uyghur labor at Nike sweatshops.

The role of Instagram in forming a digital connective action was facilitated through “symbolic and affective communication” that uses “easily identifiable social reference points which define who is in the community and who is not” (Adi et al. 2018, 328). Hence, Instagram allows people to unite for a common cause by posting visual content accompanied by certain hashtags and tags of certain individuals or companies also represented on Instagram. Depending on which hashtags users utilize or follow and what posts they like and comment on, Instagram’s algorithms generate similar content for them, as well as for their network—the people who follow the user. The most popular content, hence, spreads further, amplifying the message and increasing its visibility through the algorithm; a process equivalent to traditional media gatekeeping (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). These gatekeeping mechanisms not only facilitated the organization and maintenance of the transnational digital connective action for the Uyghur justice at Nike, but enabled me to collect the data. Later, I explain how and when I gathered the project data.

I first learned that Nike allegedly forces the Uyghur laborers to work in sweatshop conditions through the post of @sulu.artco in October 2020. All the rest of the data samples for this study

were obtained through snowball sampling. Although the snowball method is typically applied to searching interviewees in qualitative research through recommendations of those who have already been interviewed (Merkens 2004, 168), I define the use of tags in the comments under the original post and hashtags and profiles that mention “Uyghur genocide in China” or Uyghur rights in any way as snowballing too. I selected the six most “liked” and relevant digital art posts, including the one I initially encountered by @sulu.artco. Each of these posts I identify as artwork in the framework of this research.

Through tags on posts by @sulu.artco and @campaignforuyghurs, I also came across the profiles of @raphaelglucksmann (Glucksmann) and @khaledbeydoun (Beydoun), whom I designate as influencers. Raphaël Glucksmann is a French journalist and European Parliament deputy and Khaled A. Beydoun is an Egyptian-American writer and Associate Professor of Law at the University of Arkansas School of Law. The rationale behind designating Glucksmann and Beydoun as influencers is their occupation, the number of their Instagram followers, as well as the number of likes and comments on the posts selected for this research. An influencer is defined as “someone who is able to persuade a lot of other people, for example their followers on social media, to do, buy, or use the same things that they do” (Collins English Dictionary n.d.). Hence, I assert that @raphaelglucksmann with 601,000 followers and @khaledbeydoun with 273,000 followers (as by March, 2021) have an influential impact on calling their online audience to engage in metavoicing (George and Leidner 2019), or spreading the message by means of likes, comments, and shares. Although both influencers had been raising the issue of the Uyghur minority in China since 2019, I only selected two of their earliest posts that accused exclusively Nike in using Uyghur forced labor from each influencer’s page.

Finally, because each selected post was targeting Nike, I deemed it necessary to examine if and how people directly interacted with Nike regarding the issue. I, therefore, checked the comments under four official Nike posts that emphasized Nike’s advocacy of equality, especially the corporation’s solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. After viewing the comments under Nike posts, I downloaded and took screen shots of the artwork, and the influencers’ posts on January 7, 13, and 26, 2021. All the data analyzed in this paper is publicly available through the links attached in the references. It is also important to note that all of the captions and comments quoted in this research contain their original spelling and grammar.

To download the comments, I utilized the @getcombot Telegram bot. There were several reasons behind choosing this bot. Firstly, the bot was free and user-friendly—it did not require setting up special apps and could be accessed through both smartphone and desktop versions of Telegram. Secondly, it downloaded the maximum number of comments in comparison with analogous services available on Google. While the latter only allowed to download 100 comments for free and up to 10,000 comments in paid versions, @getcombot allows the download of up to 33,000 comments from certain posts. However, in using the bot I noticed that it did not download all of the comments. Summary statistics for comments are available in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary statistics for the number of comments in the sample.**

Date the post was released	Total comments by January 7, 2021	Downloaded comments
30 May, 2020	42,152	33,370
13 June, 2020	15,541	10,177
30 July, 2020	14,966	11,061
27 August, 2020	5,662	2,894
	<b>Total: 78,321</b>	<b>Total: 57,502</b>

**Figure 1. Sulu.Artco, 2021.**

## “Free Uyghur”: the role of artwork in symbolizing connective action

The first image is a piece of digital art posted on @sulu.artco on July 17, 2020. The page @sulu.artco introduces itself as the “artist collective raising awareness about disappearing Uyghur artists, intellectuals, scholars, entrepreneurs & many more under the Chinese regime” (Sulu.Artco 2021). The image of interest (see Figure 1) denotes a grey shoe box with a red lid and a white “Nike” written above the Nike Swoosh. The lid is “decorated” with a thorny prison fence and has Chinese writings on its frontal bend. The lower part of the shoe box has bars, behind which are about a hundred people turned with their backs in dimmed blue clothes. People seem to sit on benches or at the tables by groups of five. The image’s background is a similar dimmed blue shade as the people’s clothes.

Delving deeper into the message of the poster, the Nike shoe box connotes a prison—a labor camp—which is unescapable for prisoners because of the thorny fence. Blue clothes copy the

clothes of the Uyghur captives. Photos of these captives are available in the Australian Strategic Policy Institute report (Xu et al. 2020, 8–9), and the post caption references this source. While red is a classical color for Nike shoe boxes, the background color must have been chosen to capture the cold and gloomy ambience of the prison-camp. Moreover, the artist may have intended to attract the viewers' attention by bringing out the contrast between the red lid and the blue background. The sign, or ideology, underpinning the image is modern-day slavery, where Nike is a slave-owner operating under the Chinese authority. In addition to visual signals, the Instagram post transmits a verbal message in the caption. The visual signals and verbal message all qualify as leverage and accountability politics expressed through culture jamming. For instance, appeals like "Just #dontdoit #nike !" and "Hey #nike, If you think you are a defender of #BlackLivesMatter movement, you should also denounce this crime against humanity !" mock Nike's prominent slogan and human rights advocacy campaign. The comments are written with the aim of undermining Nike's reputation and calling the company for positive change. In addition, the caption includes a thread of calling-for-action hashtags like #boycottnike, #standwithuyghur, and #closethecamp, to name a few.

**Figure 2. Uyghurs Today 2020**





The next image follows the subject matter set by @sulu.artco. Posted by the @uyghurstoday page on July 29, 2020, the picture shows a Nike sneaker colored in red, white, light pink, and deep blue (Figure 2). The red laces smoothly turn into four strings of flowing blood. The background is black, with white text “Uyghur Just Do It” and the Swoosh above the sneaker and “Made in Camps” below it. The author’s signature “yette.su” and the date of creation are placed to the right of the sneaker. While the sneaker is the signifier, grueling and even deadly forced labor is the signified. The image implies that products made by the Uyghur community at Nike sweatshops are made through torture and blood. The black background traditionally signifies tragedy, and the white color of the text is used for color contrast. Again, the Nike slogan is culturally jammed. Now, however, it does not have a clear accountability subtext, but rather a shaming and denouncing tone like in a leverage tactic. The post’s caption includes two new hashtags [#UyghurGenocide](#) and [#uyghurholocaust](#) that, despite not targeting Nike directly, convey the catastrophic sentiment of the situation. On the third level of semiotic analysis, the post indicates the idea of homicide and forced labor.

The next three images were posted by @freeuyghurnow, “a student coalition advocating for the freedom and rights of the Uyghurs and Turkic people in forced labor and internment camps” (Free Uyghur Now 2020). All of the images are photographs of people wearing Nike clothes modified either by paint or through digital edits. The first one dated July 20, 2020, shows a woman posing in a dusty pink color Nike sweatshirt; the phrase “freeuyghur” is painted above the Nike logo. The photo is surrounded by phrases in a dark-red-color: “Call out Nike. Just do it. It can’t wait.” and repeated the “free Uyghur” slogans.

The photo from July 25, 2020, portrays a man in a Nike jacket with a painted star and moon, “Free Uyghur” in writing, and a message in the Uyghur script—all in a light blue color (Figure 3). The background is also light blue with the recurrent phrase “Free Uyghur” followed by the Nike Swoosh; the star with the moon is layered above the text.

**Figure 3. Free Uyghur Now 2020**



The last post, from August 8, 2020, is a thread of three pictures. The first picture in the thread shows a head-scarved woman squatting in front of a crossroad in a green Nike hoodie. The Nike Swoosh is crossed out with red color via digital edit. The white text layered on the image states: “FREE UYGHUR. Boycott Nike.” The next two pictures in the thread display white text on a green background. The first one says, “‘Those who are silent when others are oppressed are guilty of oppression themselves.’ - Hussain Ibn Ali #FreeUyghur.” And the second one, with the Nike Swoosh crossed out, says, “To take the pledge to boycott companies that are complicit in forced Uyghur Labor, send in a photo to be posted to our page along with a quote or personal statement. @FreeUyghurNow.”

The two photos, the one with the woman in the head scarf and the one with the man in the light blue jacket, depict people with a direct gaze, which Valentini et al. (2018), argue encourages the viewers to take action. The message is further strengthened by complementary text that utilizes the imperative mood, demanding Nike to ensure freedom to the Uyghurs. This demonstrates both leverage and accountability strategies. Modified Nike clothes express the denouncement of Nike’s use of Uyghur labor. Most importantly, the moon and star iconography, illustrated both on the background and on the man’s jacket in a light blue color, represent the Uyghur flag, signifying shared community and history. The inscription in the Uyghur language also signifies a shared language and culture—the Uyghurs stand together. The common ideological message of these posts is a sense of community support in the fight for justice.

One must also note that social media content is created within a digital ecosystem (Oprea 2019), and pictures should not be separated from captions in analysis. The post captions clearly convey personal feelings by the portraits’ authors, but they were also intentionally used to mobilize the Instagram community to a transnational connective action, such as calls for actions like boycotting Nike and signing the petition for the passage of the Uyghur Forced Labor Act (Free Uyghur Now 2020).

The last piece of art I visually analyze is the post by @raphaelglucksmann from August 3, 2020. On a denotative level, the post displays a black Nike Swoosh with the text “Free Uyghurs” on a white background. Leverage and accountability politics aiming to call out the Nike corporation play the role of the signified here. This minimalist image communicates the ideology of modern-day slavery since the text suggests that Nike should liberate the Uyghur workers. In the French-language caption, @raphaelglucksmann uses an English-language hashtag [#FranceforUyghurs](#). It signals the nation’s solidarity with the Uyghur community to non-francophones, those who do not speak French. In other words, the author assumes the transnational character of connective action. He also persuades his Instagram network to “continue to share and work on awareness” / “Alors continuez à partager et à travailler les consciences” (Glucksmann 2020), encouraging the creation of resonance and visibility around the message, as suggested by Koopmans and Olzak (2004).

These works of art, inherently exemplifying symbolic politics of the transnational advocacy network, suggest that the issue of forced Uyghur labor at Nike factories in China became increasingly visible on Instagram through the politics of leverage and accountability. Moreover, the choice of certain languages and hashtags in the captions that accompanied pictures demonstrates that action is indeed connective and transnational. The most salient takeaway, however, is that images speak louder than words or statistics in rallying people to advocate for human rights.

## “Uyghur Lives Matter”: Transnational Resonance and Creative Framing of the Uyghur Labor Issue in the Comments Section

To interpret the comments as collaborative writing, I borrow the “techno-discursive” approach to studying online discourse analysis from Delia Oprea (2019). Oprea argues that meanings on social media are created not only within socio-historical circumstances, but with regard to the digital resources offered by the online platform and in response to other discourse-setters (ibid., 317). I, therefore, first examine the content with which the users interacted—the original posts by Nike that determined the comments’ discourse direction. I selected four posts by Nike that addressed the issues of racism, but with reference to the Black community—these posts provoked much discussion in the comments as to whether Uyghur lives matter, too. Of the four posts, two were videos and two were text-based. The first video, from May 30, 2020, had white text on a black background that read: “For once, Don’t Do It. [...] Don’t turn your back on racism. [...] Don’t sit back and be silent. Don’t think you can’t be part of the change. Let’s all be part of the change.” The following video from July 30, 2020, involved a variety of individuals with diverse skin colors, sexes, genders, perceived religious affiliations, and sports that they practice conveying the message: “Nothing can stop what we can do together.”

**Table 2. Number of times Uyghur (spelled six different ways) was mentioned in comments and percentage of Uyghur references of the downloaded comments (for each post and total).**

Nike Post date	Uyghur	Uighur	Uigur	Ouïghour	Ouighour	Ouïgour	Total	% of downl. comm. / post
30 May, 2020	335	64	2	92	35	24	552	1.65%
13 June, 2020	1,296	357	3	447	182	113	2,398	23.56%
30 July, 2020	729	175	0	281	84	26	1,295	11.71%
27 Aug., 2020	318	49	1	54	13	10	445	15.38%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,678</b>	<b>645</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>874</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>4,690</b>	<b>8.16%</b>
% of total downl. comm.	4.66%	1.12%	0.01%	1.52%	0.55%	0.30%	<b>8.16%</b>	

The two posts, from June 13 and August 27, 2020, were text messages written in white on a black background. The first said: “BLACK LIVES MATTER. How Nike Stands Up For Equality,” and the second said, “WE REMAIN COMMITTED TO ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF SYSTEMIC RACISM EXPERIENCED BY THE BLACK COMMUNITY.”

I searched through 57,502 downloaded comments, applying six different ways of spelling the word “Uyghur” (see Table 2). Overall, Uyghur, in some form, appeared 4,690 times, with “Uyghur” (2,678) and “Ouïghour” (874)—the correct English and French spellings—being the most popular. This can be explained by the transnational character of the Uyghur rights defenders’ network. Users that apply various spellings expressed their thoughts in both English and French. Although I cannot argue for causation, I hypothesize that the Francophone activity in the comments under Nike’s posts may be related to the activism of Raphaël Glucksmann, a French journalist and European Parliament deputy, who promoted the [#ouïghoursarmy](#) hashtag (discussed in the next section). In fact, the first time @raphaelglucksmann denounced Nike for using Uyghur forced labor was on June 29, 2020. In the comments under the Nike’s post from June 12, 2020, 438 out of 447 “Ouïghour” references had been made since June 29, from which I conclude that the authority of a public figure and digital opportunities of the movement helped a culturally and geographically distinct community to mobilize.

In Table 2, I illustrate that the number of Uyghur references made up approximately 8.1% of the total number of downloaded comments. It must be noted, however, that the number of times the Uyghurs were mentioned did not represent the number of comments in which the Uyghurs were mentioned, because some comments referenced the Uyghurs more than once. Nevertheless, considering that Nike did not touch upon the Uyghurs in any of these posts indicates that the issue of forced labor of the Uyghurs gained significant resonance and visibility on Instagram. This was reinforced through the social media algorithms that allow the most liked and commented posts to spread further and appear in the “Explore” section of a person’s Instagram feed. When Instagram users encounter a new post, they first see the most relevant comments—the ones written by the users they follow. Commenting not only helps the message become more visible, but also increases the likelihood of other users in the commenter’s network joining connective action, especially if an action’s goals resonate with an individual’s emotions and passions (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

The most popular discourse in the comments was to leverage and hold Nike accountable for the exploitation of the Uyghurs, “locked in concentration camps in China.” Leveraging, or shaming Nike, is evident from recurrent comments that call Nike “hypocrites,” “part of the problem,” and the supporters of slavery and genocide. Commenters responded to and turned over the original Nike messages, expressing disbelief in Nike’s intentions to “stand up for equality” and “be part of the change.” This indicates the collaborative nature of commenting on social media; certain users actively engaged with the ideas communicated by Nike and other commenters. Calls for corporate social responsibility can also be tracked from numerous comments that ask to release the Uyghurs: “We have the responsibility to make this world a better place, YOU ARE ALSO RESPONSIBLE, free the Ouïghours!” Calls for corporate responsibility can also be tracked via the use of hashtags like #freeouïghours and #freeuyghurs. Longer comments appealed directly to Nike, questioning their morality: “How can black lives matter if you don’t care about Uyghur people and continually exploit them?”, “How about to hold up to the values you’re propagating and start engaging in a sustainable and human rights respecting supply chain #YouCantStopUs #uighur,” “Standing up for equality, black lives matter, but in the meantime you are exploiting Uighur in sweatshops...you have to stop

contributing to Uyghur genocide, one good action doesn't erase this cruelty." It is clear that transnational digital activists connect in Nike's comments section and utilize the tactics of leverage and accountability to attempt to influence the situation.

In addition, I would like to emphasize the role of emojis that accompanied some allusions to Uyghur forced labor in framing the issue. Some commenters expressed their attitudes towards Nike's unethical actions via the use of vomiting (🤢🤮), aggressive (😡), clown (🤡), and hand gesture (👎👉) emojis that all have negative and disapproving connotations. The clown emoji, in particular, is used as a metaphor to fooling the customers and Nike's Instagram followers, as it is evident from comments like "Don't turn your back on uighurs 🤡🤡🤡" and "Hypocrites! Very well made fake ad 🤡🤡 #freeuyghurs." However, some other emojis, irrelevant at first sight, appeared in the context of the Uyghurs as well: fairy (🧚) and sparkles (✨). A couple of comments were phrased like "🧚🧚 STOP FORCING MUSLIMS IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS TO MAKE YOUR PRODUCTS .I DEMAND YOU CUT TIES WITH UYGHUR CONCENTRATION CAMPS 🧚🧚," which led me to pay attention to other comments such as, "It's the ✨ performative activism ✨ for me" and "Nike also supports ✨ genocide ✨ and ✨ concentration camps ✨ it seems But go off sis 🧚." Even though the latter comments do not directly mention the Uyghurs, they allude to the Uyghur oppression issue that Nike allegedly turns a blind eye to. In this case, the utilized emojis are probably meant to attract attention because they do not fit with the content of Nike's posts. Other users who scroll the comments do not expect to see emojis like 🧚 and ✨, and might stop to read the message. This hypothesis aligns visual semiotics—images can influence the viewers' emotions through certain colors, composition, and public context (Valentini et al. 2018). Thus, emojis attached to the ideas addressing Uyghur forced labor at Nike sweatshops reinforce the construction of a negative frame around the widely spoken issue.

The analysis of the comments of these posts confirms that connective action for ending Uyghur forced labor was organized through the strategies of leverage and accountability; it overcame geographical barriers and became a truly transnational action. In addition, the addition of emojis to the comments allowed the users to express their personal sentiments and construct the issue of Uyghur exploitation through negative connotations.

## The role of influencers in mobilizing the digital community

In this section, I complement the discussion by examining posts by Instagram influencers Raphaël Glucksmann and Khaled A. Beydoun. I selected two posts from each influencer. The posts by @raphaelglucksmann were dated June 29 and July 1, 2020; the posts by @khaledbeydoun were dated July 11 and 12, 2020. I must note that @raphaelglucksmann's original posts were released in French, therefore, I analyze the discursive opportunities markers from his French posts, while interpreting textual messages from the identical posts released in English on his second page [@raphaelglucksmann\\_english](#).

The thread-post by @raphaelglucksmann from June 29, 2020, depicts a mail letter addressed to the General Director of Nike France. The following pictures in the thread show the letter content, the explanation of the issue, and the accusation of Nike's subcontractor Taekwang in employing the Uyghurs. Glucksmann refers to "corporate due diligence" and asks "what measures [the

corporation] is taking to put an end to this abjectness”—examples of the accountability and leverage tactics. By referring to the forced activities in concentration camps, Glucksmann generates timely and credible background to the issue, employing the information politics strategy. In addition, his French caption starts with a phrase “[#ouighoursarmy](#) Appel à la mobilisation!” (“[#Ouighoursarmy](#) Call for mobilization!”) which, as argued earlier, may have inspired commenters to mobilize under Nike’s posts. By January 26, 2021, when the post was recorded, the French version of it had 74,467 likes and 27,399 comments. The numbers indicate how well [@raphaelglucksmann](#)’s ideas disseminated and resonated in the digital space.

The next post by [@raphaelglucksmann](#) contained two textual posters with the following messages: “Thank you! Urgent : NIKE just responded to our mobilisation. I have a meeting tomorrow at 6pm. Thanks to you. This is only the beginning, let’s keep on fighting!” and “To support this campaign, please continue to [share](#) and [notify Nike](#) in the comments. Great crimes need great silences. Let’s [break this silence!](#)” Gaining slightly less resonance, the post had 63,072 likes and 13,473 comments. On both denotative and connotative levels, there is an idea of a strong collective effort. By appealing to break the silence, Glucksmann implies that the Uyghurs are not heard, their voices are suppressed, and he hence calls on his audience to speak out for the oppressed. The hashtag [#ouighoursarmy](#) and the call for “fighting” connote the contentious nature of connective action.

The two posts by [@khaledbeydoun](#) are screenshots of his Twitter posts. The one from July 11, 2020, intends to clarify Nike’s accountability: “Dear [@Nike](#), I love my Air Maxes and runners. But I’m hoping that they’re not being made in Uighur Muslim prison camps. I’ve read that Uighur Muslim concentration camps are part of the [@Nike](#) product supply chain. Is this still true?” On Instagram, the post was liked 14,045 times and commented on 489 times. His subsequent post, also a thread with the tweet’s screenshots, applies the information and leverage strategies: “Nike proudly declares ‘Black Lives Matter’. Meanwhile -- [@Nike](#) shoes are being made by Uighur Muslims in prison camps.” “A factory in eastern [#China](#) that [makes] shoes for Nike is equipped with watchtowers, barbed-wire fences and police guard boxes.” Leveraging in this case is expressed through publicly shaming Nike’s selective support of the social justice campaign. The thread also includes the screenshot of Nike’s post on “Black Lives Matter” from June 13, 2020 (discussed in chapter 3) and a picture of two men walking in a garment factory full of workers. The clothing item with a Chinese script in the last image suggests that the garments were made for the Chinese manufacturer. The image was probably meant to add legitimacy to the author’s statement—another aspect of digital discursive opportunities (Koopmans and Olzak 2004). Finally, the thread had even greater visibility and resonance than the previous post with 16,502 likes and 415 comments by January 26, 2021.

This section reveals that the “End Uyghur Forced Labor” transnational digital connective action has been organized not only through the symbolic, leverage, and accountability tactics, as previously argued, but also through information politics. Timely and legitimate information provided by influencers, along with other strategies, helped the issue to gain international visibility.

Conclusion

## Conclusion

This research has shed light on the various strategies employed by the Instagram community to address the issue of forced Uyghur labor at Nike sweatshops: symbolic posters that conveyed the ideology of modern-day slavery, multi-language leveraging comments that targeted Nike and the company's campaigns, and informational posts that mobilized Instagram users to connective action constituted the organizing principles of a transnational digital connective action. The issue of forced Uyghur labor was communicated through various Instagram mechanisms, yet the main frame was denouncing Nike as a slave owner and supporter of the Uyghur genocide.

There are four caveats in this research that should be noted. Firstly, semiotic and discourse analyses conducted for this study remains subjective due to the author's socio-cultural background. Secondly, the role of Instagram algorithms in the construction of connective action's discourse should not be diminished. Thirdly, this study is limited by the check of only six variant spellings of the word "Uyghur" in the section discussing comments. It is possible that the number of references to the Uyghur community in the comments under selected Nike's posts is higher. Fourthly, I do not deny the possibility that some of the comments analyzed in the fourth section could have been written by specially trained and/or sponsored Instagram "trolls." Nevertheless, desk research on the topic of Uyghur social media "trolls" and Nike showed no relevant results, meaning that either the topic had not been studied or making it likely that the comments had not been written by online "trolls".

This research suggests that contemporary collective actions evolve together with technology, requiring the establishment of new theoretical frameworks. The novelty of this research lies in revealing that rallying for social causes is possible even when borders shut down and mass gatherings are prohibited (as in the case of the current COVID-19 pandemic). Moreover, this research lays the groundwork for addressing connective action based solely on Instagram data. The hybrid theory derived for this research fills the gap in the current scholarly literature on contentious actions, while the central topic of this research pioneers raising the issue of forced Uyghur labor at Nike sweatshops from the academic, not mass media, perspective. Fellow scholars could apply this new hybrid framework in various other opportunities, such as analyzing other contemporary connective actions, investigating the issue of Uyghur forced labor from a myriad of approaches beyond connective action, and conducting a comparative analysis of Nike boycotts in China and elsewhere.

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