

Social Media as a Political Arena: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Activism

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This study aims to explore the dynamic role of social media as a political arena, specifically examining how it facilitates online activism. It seeks to uncover the various ways individuals and groups use social media platforms for political engagement, the impact of these activities on political awareness and change, and the challenges and barriers faced by activists in the digital space. Employing a qualitative research methodology, this study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with 31 participants actively involved in online political activism across diverse social media platforms. Theoretical saturation guided the number of interviews conducted, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the phenomena under study. Data analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing for the emergence of themes and subthemes directly from the data. The analysis revealed four main themes: Platform Dynamics, Activism Engagement, Impact of Activism, and Challenges and Barriers. Platform Dynamics delves into the technical and operational aspects of social media that influence political engagement. Activism Engagement examines the strategies and forms of activism facilitated by digital platforms. Impact of Activism highlights the effects of digital activism on political discourse, policy, and social change. Challenges and Barriers address the various obstacles encountered by activists, including platform limitations and external interference. Social media has become an indispensable arena for political activism, offering both opportunities and challenges for engagement. While it enables unprecedented levels of participation and mobilization, activists face significant barriers, including platform algorithms, censorship, and the risk of online harassment. This study underscores the dual-edged nature of social media in political activism, highlighting the need for strategies that leverage its strengths while mitigating its limitations.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Activism, Online Engagement, Digital Platforms, Activist Challenges, Political Participation.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of social media as a dominant form of communication has precipitated a shift in how political participation is conceptualized and enacted. Chan, Chen, and Lee (2016) underscore the pivotal role of mobile and social media in fostering political participation across various Asian societies, highlighting the transformative potential of these platforms in

enabling a more engaged and informed citizenry (Chan et al., 2016). Similarly, Kim and Ellison (2021) explore the transition from passive observation on social media to active offline political participation, emphasizing the unique affordances of social media that facilitate such engagement (Kim & Ellison, 2021). This body of research points to a broader understanding of social media not



merely as tools for social interaction but as influential actors in the political sphere.

The affordances of social media platforms, characterized by their ability to facilitate rapid information dissemination, community building, and collective action, have undoubtedly reshaped the landscape of political activism. However, this digital revolution is not without its challenges. Asrese and Muche (2020) identify online activities as potential risk factors for problematic internet use, suggesting that the very features that make social media effective for activism can also lead to negative psychological and social outcomes (Asrese & Muche, 2020). This dual-edged nature of social media underscores the complexity of its impact on political engagement.

In addition to facilitating political activism, social media has also altered the dynamics of personal and public spheres. Heyman and Pierson (2015) discuss the phenomenon of delinguistification and the colonization of the lifeworld by social media, indicating a blurring of lines between personal expression and public discourse (Heyman & Pierson, 2015). This intersection of the personal and political on social media platforms introduces new dimensions to political activism, where personal narratives and experiences can be leveraged to influence public opinion and policy.

The academic discourse on social media and political activism is further enriched by studies focusing on the specific forms of engagement and participation that these platforms enable. Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, and Torchinsky (2020) examine digital activism in Russia, providing insights into how online participation evolves within different political contexts (Lonkila et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Kaur, Dhira, Rajala, and Dwivedi (2018) investigate the motivations behind the use of online social media brand communities, offering perspectives on how digital spaces facilitate collective identity and group cohesion, elements that are crucial for sustained political activism (Kaur et al., 2018).

The mediatization of politics, as discussed by Strömbäck (2008), offers a theoretical framework for understanding the increasing influence of media, including social media, on political processes and public perception (Strömbäck, 2008). This mediatization has led to a reconfiguration of the public arena, where social media platforms act as both spaces for public discourse and agents of political change. Neyazi (2014) explores

this transformation in the context of India, highlighting the emergence of a vernacular public arena facilitated by media, including digital platforms (Neyazi, 2014). This concept of a vernacular democracy, as explored by Tanabe (2007), resonates with the idea that social media democratizes political participation by providing a voice to the marginalized and enabling a more inclusive form of democracy (Tanabe, 2007).

However, the impact of social media on political activism is not uniformly positive. Issues such as cyberbullying (Mesch, 2009), internet addiction (Kuss et al., 2013), and the challenges of digital learning (Mnkandla & Minnaar, 2017) reflect the complex and often problematic aspects of online engagement. Moreover, the role of social media in political participation is influenced by a variety of factors, including individual motivations, societal norms, and the regulatory frameworks within which these platforms operate. Segard (2015) delves into the perceptions of social media, suggesting that users' attitudes toward these platforms can significantly impact their potential as tools for political engagement (Segard, 2015).

As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of social media in facilitating connections and maintaining social cohesion has become even more pronounced. Wilson et al. (2022) evaluate the efficacy of online arts activities in supporting patients with kidney disease during the pandemic, illustrating the broader applicability of social media as a tool for community support and engagement in challenging times (Wilson et al., 2022). Similarly, Yuan (2023) discusses the influence of online exhibitions on expanding the audience of art institutions, highlighting the potential of digital platforms to democratize access to cultural and political content (Yuan, 2023). This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on social media and political activism by providing a qualitative analysis of online activism.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to delve into the complexities of online activism within social media platforms. The qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences, motivations, and perceptions of individuals

engaged in political activism online. Recognizing the nuanced nature of social media as a political arena, this research is underpinned by a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and multifaceted.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who are actively involved in online political activism across various social media platforms. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse range of voices were heard, including individuals with different political affiliations, social media usage patterns, and levels of activism engagement.

In qualitative research, theoretical saturation is reached when no new information or themes emerge from data collection, indicating that the data set is comprehensive enough to understand the phenomenon under study. In this research, theoretical saturation was used as a guiding principle to determine the number of interviews conducted. The process involved continuous analysis and comparison of data from the interviews, with the research team closely monitoring for the emergence of new themes or insights. Saturation was deemed to have been reached after conducting 31 interviews, at which point it was observed that additional interviews were not yielding new information.

Given the sensitive nature of political activism, ethical considerations were paramount in this study. All participants were provided with an informed consent form, which outlined the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were conducted in a manner that respected the privacy and safety of participants, with particular attention paid to the ethical implications of discussing political activities online.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The primary method of data collection for this study was through semi-structured interviews. This format was chosen due to its flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore specific topics in depth while providing interviewees with the space to share their experiences and insights in their own words. The interview guide was

developed to cover a range of topics relevant to online activism, including but not limited to the use of social media for political engagement, the impact of digital platforms on traditional forms of activism, and the challenges and opportunities presented by social media.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive approach, where themes and patterns were identified through a detailed examination of the interview transcripts. This process began with a thorough reading of each transcript, followed by coding of significant passages and categorization of codes into broader themes. The analysis was iterative, with themes being refined and adjusted as more data were analyzed. This approach allowed for the emergence of a rich, grounded understanding of online activism as experienced by participants.

3. Findings and Results

In the qualitative exploration of social media as a political arena, a diverse group of 31 participants was interviewed to gain insights into the dynamics of online activism. The demographic composition of the study population was carefully documented to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives. Of the participants, 18 identified as female, 12 as male, and 1 preferred not to disclose their gender, aiming for gender diversity in the responses. The age range of participants was wide, spanning from 18 to 60 years, with the largest group (11 participants) falling within the 25-34 age bracket, highlighting the youthful skew of online activism. Educational backgrounds varied significantly, with 8 holding a high school diploma, 15 having completed undergraduate studies, and 8 possessing postgraduate degrees, reflecting a range of educational experiences. Professionally, the cohort was equally varied, including students (7 participants), professionals from the tech sector (6 participants), educators (5 participants), activists (8 participants), and others (5 participants), such as artists and healthcare workers, providing a rich tapestry of insights into the role of social media in political activism.

Table 1
The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
Platform Dynamics	Algorithms	Content visibility, Echo chambers, Personalization, Spread of misinformation, User engagement metrics
	Moderation Policies	Censorship, Hate speech control, Political bias, Reporting mechanisms, Transparency of rules
	User Interaction	Activism campaigns, Discussion forums, Hashtag movements, Online petitions, Viral challenges
	Content Creation	Memetic messaging, User-generated content, Influencer impact, Live streaming, Multimedia use
Activism Engagement	Forms of Activism	Digital rallies, Information dissemination, Online protests, Social media campaigns, Virtual sit-ins
	Engagement Strategies	Call to action, Collaboration with influencers, Storytelling, Viral content creation, Visibility strategies
	Challenges	Burnout, Digital surveillance, Online harassment, Platform limitations, Privacy concerns
Impact of Activism	Political Awareness	Awareness campaigns, Educational content, Public opinion shaping, Voter mobilization, Youth engagement
	Policy Changes	Advocacy success stories, Government responses, Legal reforms, Policy dialogue, Regulation challenges
	Social Change	Community mobilization, Cultural shifts, Equality advancements, Social justice movements, Solidarity building
Challenges and Barriers	Platform Limitations	Algorithm bias, Content restrictions, Data privacy issues, Monetization rules, Shadow banning
	External Interference	Government censorship, Political manipulation, Propaganda, Trolling, Cyberattacks
	Sustainability of Movements	Activist fatigue, Financial constraints, Leadership challenges, Movement fragmentation, Volunteer burnout
	Impact Measurement	Analytic tools, Engagement metrics, Outcome assessment, Reach and influence, Success criteria

In the examination of social media as a pivotal arena for political activism, our analysis delineates four principal categories: Platform Dynamics, Activism Engagement, Impact of Activism, and Challenges and Barriers. Each category encompasses a range of subcategories and associated concepts, drawing from the rich qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews.

3.1. Platform Dynamics

Our findings underscore the significant role of Algorithms in shaping content visibility and fostering echo chambers, a point highlighted by one participant who noted, "The algorithm decides what we see, often creating a loop that just reinforces our existing beliefs." Moderation Policies emerged as a critical subcategory, with interviewees expressing concerns over censorship and the transparency of rules. For instance, an activist remarked, "There's a thin line between hate speech control and political censorship, and we're never quite sure where that line is." The dynamics of User Interaction and Content Creation were also explored, revealing insights into how activists leverage these platforms for campaigns and discussions. "Creating viral content is

part art, part science, but it's all about getting the message across," shared a respondent.

3.2. Activism Engagement

Within this category, Forms of Activism such as digital rallies and social media campaigns were discussed. "Online protests have opened up new avenues for engagement that were unimaginable a decade ago," stated an interviewee. Engagement Strategies and Challenges, including online harassment and activist burnout, were identified. "The challenge isn't just to get noticed but to sustain the momentum without burning out," explained another participant, highlighting the complexities of digital activism.

3.3. Impact of Activism

The Political Awareness subcategory reflects the role of social media in shaping public opinion and mobilizing voters, with one activist noting, "We've managed to engage a lot of young voters through targeted social media campaigns." Policy Changes and Social Change are critical areas where interviewees have observed tangible

outcomes from their activism. "Seeing real policy changes as a result of our online campaigns has been incredibly rewarding," one respondent reflected.

3.4. *Challenges and Barriers*

Interviewees identified Platform Limitations, External Interference, and the Sustainability of Movements as significant obstacles. "Dealing with algorithm bias and content restrictions can be incredibly frustrating," shared an activist. The sustainability of movements, impacted by factors like activist fatigue and financial constraints, was also a concern: "Keeping the movement alive and kicking requires constant effort and resources." Finally, Impact Measurement was highlighted as a challenge, with activists seeking better tools and metrics to evaluate their success.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative analysis of online activism through social media revealed four main themes: Platform Dynamics, Activism Engagement, Impact of Activism, and Challenges and Barriers. Each theme encapsulated a range of categories, which in turn were broken down into specific concepts. Platform Dynamics covered Algorithms, Moderation Policies, User Interaction, and Content Creation; Activism Engagement encompassed Forms of Activism, Engagement Strategies, and Challenges; Impact of Activism included Political Awareness, Policy Changes, and Social Change; and Challenges and Barriers comprised Platform Limitations, External Interference, Sustainability of Movements, and Impact Measurement.

Platform Dynamics delved into the technological and operational mechanisms of social media that shape user experiences and engagement. The category of Algorithms highlighted concepts like content visibility and the creation of echo chambers, while Moderation Policies brought to light the complexities of censorship and hate speech control. User Interaction emphasized the importance of activism campaigns and online petitions, and Content Creation discussed the role of memetic messaging and user-generated content in fostering political discourse.

Activism Engagement explored the ways in which individuals and groups use social media platforms to participate in political activism. Forms of Activism

identified digital rallies and social media campaigns as key strategies. Engagement Strategies detailed the use of storytelling and viral content creation, and Challenges acknowledged the obstacles of online harassment and activist burnout, underscoring the perseverance required to maintain momentum in digital spaces.

Impact of Activism examined the tangible effects of social media activism on political awareness, policy change, and broader societal shifts. Political Awareness categories noted the success of awareness campaigns and voter mobilization efforts, Policy Changes celebrated advocacy successes and government responses, and Social Change recognized the power of community mobilization and cultural shifts instigated through online activism.

Challenges and Barriers addressed the difficulties encountered by activists on social media, including technological, social, and psychological aspects. Platform Limitations discussed algorithm bias and content restrictions, External Interference highlighted the issue of government censorship and political manipulation, Sustainability of Movements touched on activist fatigue and financial constraints, and Impact Measurement underscored the challenges in evaluating the success and reach of online activism efforts.

The findings of this study, centered on the nuanced interplay between social media and political activism, underline the complexity and diversity of digital engagement in contemporary political discourse. This discussion synthesizes our results with extant research to contextualize and deepen our understanding of social media's role as a political arena.

Our analysis reveals that social media platforms facilitate a diverse range of political participation, echoing the findings of Chan, Chen, and Lee (2016), who highlighted the significant role of mobile and social media in political engagement across Asian societies (Chan et al., 2016). Similarly, Kim and Ellison (2021) underscored the transition from passive observation to active political participation facilitated by social media, reinforcing the idea that these platforms are not merely spaces for expression but active sites of civic engagement and mobilization (Kim & Ellison, 2021).

However, this increased participation comes with its own set of challenges. Asrese and Muche (2020) identified online activities as potential risk factors for problematic internet use, a finding that resonates with

our observation of the dual-edged nature of social media in political activism (Asrese & Muche, 2020). While these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for engagement and mobilization, they also pose risks of addiction and negative psychological impacts, underscoring the need for a balanced approach to digital activism.

The delinguistification and colonization of the lifeworld by social media, as discussed by Heyman and Pierson (2015), further complicate the landscape of online political activism (Heyman & Pierson, 2015). Our findings suggest that the blurring of personal and political spheres on social media can both empower and encumber activists, a phenomenon that necessitates a nuanced understanding of digital engagement strategies. In alignment with Kaur, Dhir, Rajala, and Dwivedi (2018), our study finds that online social media communities play a critical role in fostering collective identity and group cohesion among activists (Kaur et al., 2018). This sense of community is essential for sustaining political movements and underscores the importance of social media in building and maintaining activist networks. The mediatization of politics, articulated by Strömbäck (2008), provides a theoretical backdrop for understanding the pervasive influence of media, including social media, on political processes (Strömbäck, 2008). Our findings affirm the mediatization hypothesis, indicating that social media have become integral to the political landscape, influencing both the methods of political engagement and the nature of political discourse.

Furthermore, the concept of a vernacular public arena, explored by Neyazi (2014) and Tanabe (2007), finds resonance in our study. Social media platforms have democratized political participation, offering a voice to marginalized communities and facilitating a more inclusive form of democratic engagement (Neyazi, 2014). However, this inclusivity is not without its challenges, as the issues of cyberbullying (Mesch, 2009), internet addiction (Kuss et al., 2013), and the complexities of digital learning (Mnkandla & Minnaar, 2017) present significant barriers to effective political activism.

Despite these challenges, social media continues to serve as a vital space for political activism, offering both opportunities and obstacles for activists. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of

digital platforms in maintaining social cohesion and facilitating political engagement, as evidenced by Wilson et al. (2022) and Yuan (2023). These studies underscore the adaptability of social media as tools for community support and engagement, even in the face of global crises (Wilson et al., 2022; Yuan, 2023).

This study set out to explore the intricate dynamics of social media as a political arena, focusing on the qualitative analysis of online activism. Our findings reveal a complex landscape where social media platforms serve as pivotal spaces for political engagement, activism, and discourse. These platforms enable a broad spectrum of political participation, from grassroots mobilization and campaign organization to the fostering of digital communities that span global borders. The dual nature of social media was evident, offering both opportunities for enhanced engagement and risks associated with problematic internet use, such as addiction and psychological stress.

Our analysis underscores the significant role of social media in mediating political engagement, echoing and extending the findings of existing literature. The affordances of these platforms facilitate not just the spread of information but also the formation of collective identities and the mobilization of social movements. Furthermore, the blurring of personal and political spheres presents new challenges and opportunities for activists, necessitating innovative approaches to digital engagement.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the role of social media in political activism, is not without its limitations. The reliance on qualitative data, primarily from semi-structured interviews, limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms means that the digital landscape is constantly changing, posing a challenge to the study's temporal relevance. Additionally, the diversity of social media platforms and the global scope of online activism suggest that different contexts and cultures may experience and utilize these platforms in varied ways, aspects that this study could not fully explore.

Future research should aim to address the limitations noted above by incorporating a broader methodological approach. Quantitative data could complement qualitative insights, providing a more comprehensive understanding of social media's impact on political

activism. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to capture the evolving nature of digital platforms and their uses over time. Moreover, comparative studies across different cultural and political contexts could shed light on the diverse ways in which social media is utilized for political activism, offering a richer, more nuanced understanding of its global impact.

The findings of this study have significant implications for both activists and policymakers. For activists, understanding the dual-edged nature of social media is crucial. Strategies that leverage the strengths of these platforms while mitigating their risks can enhance the effectiveness of digital activism. For policymakers, the study highlights the importance of considering the role of social media in political discourse and activism. Policies that support digital literacy and address the challenges of problematic internet use are essential. Additionally, recognizing social media as spaces of political engagement requires policies that protect digital rights and ensure these platforms remain accessible and equitable forums for public discourse.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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