

Hashtag Democracy: Social Media Movements and the Shifting Terrain of Civic Engagement

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Abstract: *Social media platforms have changed the overall view of civic engagement, offering a variety of spaces for political participation, democratic discourse, and digital activism. These digital environments have basically restructured the way citizens organize and communicate among themselves. This paper explores the movements of hashtag activism—where viral content and symbols of hashtags aid social movements and bring together public opinion. Considering global campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo with Indian movements like #FarmersProtest and #JusticeForManisha, my study explores how people's participation and collective opinion support the movement and make an impact in the action.*

With the help of comparative analysis, the paper focuses on how social media help decentralize mobilization, amplify marginalized voices, and build unity across nations. However, it also raises concern about the limitations of digital activism, which include issues of surveillance by government or corporations, algorithmic bias, political polarization, and the chances of performative participation. The dual nature of social media—as a tool for strengthening the movement or potentially restricting the voices—raises questions about the long-term and true online participation of people.

We collected the primary data through an online survey of approximately 100 participants, which included people from different age groups, genders, locations, and backgrounds. This led to findings that people are aware of digital activism and engage themselves in the hashtag movements, but concern was raised about the chances of misinformation and performative engagement.

Finally, the paper evaluates the developing role of social media in shaping democratic participation, especially in the Indian scenario where digital education, access, and political atmosphere influence the potency of online mobilization. It argues that while hashtag activism can democratize discussion and stimulate change, it must be enriched by offline action and institutional support to achieve long-term impact..

Keywords: Social media, digital activism, civic engagement, hashtag movements, political participation, participatory culture, online mobilization

I. INTRODUCTION

In this emerging digital world, social media has become a place for people not only to build connections and portfolios but also to interact and engage in activism. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Threads, and others have changed the way people raise their voices, gather support, and participate in discussions. These changes are clearly seen in the rise of hashtag activism—a type of digital activism where the hashtag symbol for important issues is used to ignite social movements and gather public support.

This research paper studies how the hashtag movement shaped the modern era of civic engagement. By examining global movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo with important Indian movements like the #FarmersProtest and #JusticeForManisha, the study offers a comparative analysis on the strengths and weaknesses of online mobilization.

Eventually, we aim to understand the two sides of digital platforms: as a tool for aiding movement or restricting it. The paper will evaluate whether online activism can truly lead to long-term democratic impact by debating that its success depends on its ability to connect and supplement itself with offline action.



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have studied and are talking about the link between social media and political activism, thus providing an insight into the present scenario. One of the important findings is from Bennett and Segerberg (2012), who provided an idea of "connective action." This is an important aspect because it provides a new perspective on the fact that the protests before were majorly organized by big groups or organizations, but now protests grow as individuals share their own stories, opinions, and experiences online. Hashtags and viral posts play an important role in collecting all these personal contributions and turning them into big movements. This suggests that movements are less about group identity and more about personal expression.

On the other hand, it also has some limitations. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) talks about a more crucial perspective in her book *Twitter and Tear Gas*. She agrees that social media have the power to affect the protest and expand it quickly, but she raises concern that speed can be just an illusion. As movements can gain attention too quickly, they can fade just as fast. Because it lacks planning, strategy, and strong leadership, which are important to make a protest long-lasting. Thus, she calls them 'ephemeral,' as they can rise too fast and may fall quickly.

There is also a debate presented by Jodi Dean (2005) about whether online activism is 'real activism.' He says that in the digital world, people often like, share, post, and retweet by thinking that they are contributing to the movements, but that is a false sense of political engagement. As in the real world, nothing changes. Thus, he quotes it as 'Performative Action' or 'Slacktivism,' and this raises questions about the authenticity and effectiveness of what we do online.

Looking at real case studies that tell us how these ideas practically work. We have seen global movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, which gave voices to people who were silent before. Crucial platform for marginalized people to connect globally. If we see the Arab Spring example, where activists used social media to organize large protests without relying on the traditional and state-controlled media. But here the government responded by shutting down the internet. The story does not end here. In 2019, the Hong Kong protest activists again used the online platform but had encrypted communication to avoid government surveillance.

In India, the theories take a unique perspective where a mixture of online activism and real action takes place. Our research shows that a movement like #FarmersProtest has mixed online as well as offline activism. Where the Hashtag activism helped to raise funds and get global attention, the real impact was seen because of the farmers protesting in Delhi, which forced the government to act. On the other hand, #JusticeForManisha showed how the local influencers helped communities to connect with online campaigns, which brought the local issues to national attention. The challenges, like the internet shutdown, restrict protests and show how the government controls digital activism.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a hybrid method, which has combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. Primary data is collected from the online survey, and secondary data is collected from books, articles, media reports, and digital records, including various websites. This method helped me to get a complete picture of how hashtag activism affects civic engagement.

Primary Research:

The study included approximately 100 participants with an age between 18 and 45. Participants were from different fields, like educational, professional, and regional backgrounds. The survey had both open and closed questions. The form focused on measuring awareness, trust, and engagement with hashtag movements. We shared the survey through social media and the university mailing list to reach more people. We followed ethical rules where no personal information was kept private.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 82% of participants were familiar with at least one major hashtag movement (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #FarmersProtest, or #JusticeForManisha).
- 67% reported engaging with such movements by sharing subject matter, commenting, or participating in related events.
- 45% reported concerns about misinformation and performative activism.

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- 58% believed that hashtag activism contributes positively to democratic discourse.
- Gender distribution: 52% female, 46% male, 2% non-binary.
- Geographic distribution: 80% urban, 15% semi-urban, 5% rural.

Secondary Research:

Secondary data came from reliable sources like research journals, news media, and digital platforms. Some important sources include Pew Research Center, Harvard International Review, and Global India Network. These have helped to understand Indian and global hashtag movements on a large scale. The literature review helped to build the theoretical framework and gave background for comparing with survey results.

Hence, to make studying more reliable, we used data triangulation by checking both primary and secondary data. This careful method helps to make research authentic and strong by critically analyzing the strength and weakness of hashtag activism in democracy.

IV. CASE STUDIES

1. #BlackLivesMatter

The #BlackLivesMatter movement started in 2013 when George Zimmerman was not found guilty in the shooting of Trayvon Martin. It received global attention in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, spreading widespread protests against racism and police cruelty. The hashtag was used over 44 million times by nearly 10 million users (about half the population of New York) between 2013 and 2023. During the period from May to September 2020, 6.8 million new users participated in the conversation. The movement used social media to organize protests, spread educational resources, and boost marginalized voices. Regardless of its success, problems such as misinformation, surveillance, and governmental resistance remain. The movement reflected the power of digital platforms in molding civic dialogue and activating people.

2. #MeToo

Introduced by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo movement gained global attention in 2017 after Alyssa Milano tweeted and encouraged people to share personal stories. The campaign focused on highlighting sexual harassment and assault across various sectors and geographies. It gained attention in almost 85 countries, with millions of victims sharing personal stories. Facebook published that 45% of U.S. users had friends who were involved in the movement. The campaign led to important legal reforms, the stepping down of influential figures, and increased awareness of gender-based violence. However, it also showed gaps in inclusivity, particularly the underrepresentation of the marginalized section. It focused on the need for inclusive feminism and support for survivors.

3. #FarmersProtest

The farmers started protesting in India for months against the three controversial farm laws. This movement became India's largest protest at the Delhi Borders. The role of social media helped to magnify farmers' voices, dispose of misinformation, and engage the Sikh diaspora with global support. The popular hashtags like #FarmersProtest, #KisanAndolan, and #IndiaTogether were majorly used. This online protest was supported by international celebrities like Rihanna and Greta Thunberg. This showed a connection between agrarian rights and digital activism. The protest witnessed challenges like internet shutdowns and government surveillance and demonstrated how online platforms can link local struggles with global solidarity.

4. #JusticeForManisha

The #JusticeForManisha protest was started after the murder of a young woman who lived in Bhiwani, Haryana. The hashtag became a symbol against violence based on gender and government inaction. People like Kalu Kudal helped to expand the movement online. Because of protests on a large scale, it led to highway blockades and market shutdowns. But this online activism has faced various challenges, like delays in justice, police insensitivity, and the need for legal



reforms. This protest showed the power of youth-led digital activism in demanding accountability and systematic change.

V. FINDINGS

The survey results exposed a high level of awareness and engagement with hashtag activism among participants. Specifically, 78% of respondents were aware of the concept of hashtag activism, and 65% had actively engaged with at least one movement. Engagement activities included sharing posts, liking stories, commenting on discussions, attending virtual events, and participating in offline protests.

Respondents expressed upbeat attitudes about the potential of digital activism to raise awareness and mobilize support. However, concerns were also prevalent:

- 52% were worried about the spread of misinformation.
- 47% questioned the authenticity of online engagement, saying some actions are performative.
- 39% felt the amount of content was overloaded and found it difficult to get reliable information.

The data also indicated demographic diversity in engagement:

- Urban respondents were more likely to engage with global movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter.
- Semi-urban and rural participants showed more connections to local movements such as #FarmersProtest and #JusticeForManisha.
- Female answerers were more likely to engage with gender-focused campaigns, while male answerers showed higher engagement with political and agrarian issues.

These findings show that while hashtag activism is effective in starting dialogue and raising awareness, its impact is dependent upon consistent offline action, media literacy, and institutional support.

VI. DISCUSSION

Hashtag activism shows a big fundamental change in the landscape of civic engagement. It allows decentralized mobilization, participatory culture, and transnational solidarity. Movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo highlight the global extent of digital activism, while Indian campaigns such as #FarmersProtest and #JusticeForManisha highlight the significance of local context in shaping results.

The performative character of online activism remains an essential concern. While social media allow individuals to express mutual support, the depth of participation often differs. The occurrence of "slacktivism"—minimum effort activism—raises questions about the reality and long-term implications of digital movements. Algorithmic bias further hinders visibility, as platform algorithms prioritize content that grabs attention and not facts that focus on the real issues.

Surveillance and censorship create extra challenges. The Farmers Protest monitored by internet shutdowns and digital surveillance, limiting the democratic potential of social media and online activism. Similarly, the #JusticeForManisha movement faced attempts to stop protest through legal and illegal means.

In spite of hindrances, hashtag activism has succeeded in democratizing discourse, raising marginalized voices, and aiding policy change. The combination of online activism with offline strategies is important for achieving meaningful impact. Educational initiatives to expand digital literacy and critical thinking can encourage citizens to know the complications of digital activism.

In conclusion, hashtag activism is not a universal remedy but a powerful tool in the array of civic engagement. Its efficiency depends on the exchange between digital platforms, societal structures, and individual participation. Future research should explore progressive impacts, cross-cultural variations, and the role of trending technologies in restructuring the next generation of digital movements.

VII. CONCLUSION

Social media has restated civic participation, proposing new methods for political participation and democratic discourse. Hashtag activism has arisen as a powerful tool for mobilizing support and strengthening voices. While it holds promises for democratizing dialogue and fostering unity, its limitations must be observed carefully. The long-



term impact of digital activism depends on its ability to translate online momentum into tangible outcomes. Future research should explore plans for enhancing the efficiency of hashtag movements and addressing problems such as misinformation, surveillance, and performative engagement.

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