Hashtags, VPNs, and Youth Rage: Social Media in Nepal's Gen Z Protest

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Abstract: *Grounded in Karl Marx's conflict theory and Manuel Castells's networked age social movement, this study examines the role of digital platforms as a tool to counter the media monopoly of the state, shape narratives, and foster collective consciousness in the Gen Z-led protest movement in Nepal. By engaging in qualitative digital ethnography, we argue how social media and digital tools empowered the activists by enabling them to bypass state censorship and helping them to coordinate and organize the movement. The Gen Z protest also demonstrates how political instability and inefficiency failed to fulfil the youth's aspirations, culminating in an uprising that resulted in the collapse of the government.*

Keywords: Social media, Digital Tools, Hashtag Activism, Gen Z Protest

INTRODUCTION

Recently, political mobilization across the globe has witnessed a new dynamic in protest, redefined by the transformative power of social media, which has facilitated new forms of civic engagement, particularly among younger generations. Nepal, a country with a predominantly young and digitally connected population, has recently witnessed an unprecedented wave of youth-led 'Gen Z' protest mobilization demonstrations driven by digital activism, which is redefining the landscape of political activism. Within 48 hours, online outrage transformed into mass demonstrations across the country, resulting in widespread disruption and ultimately leading to Prime Minister Oli's resignation. The discontent and grievances among youth due to chronic unemployment, economic precarity, and entrenched corruption that accumulated over decades quickly coalesced around the government's decision to ban 26 social media apps in the country.

The Gen Z activists leveraged digital tools such as VPNs, Facebook, TikTok, Reddit, and Instagram as platforms to coordinate protests, disseminate information, and challenge the state's authority in real time by the young protesters, the 'Gen Z' activists. What began as shared grievances over corruption, unemployment, and governance failures soon translated into a nationwide movement that brought daily life to a halt and exposed the fragile nature of Nepal's democratic institutions. This study examines the role of social media in enabling rapid mobilization, collective identity formation, and coordinated street mobilization, resulting in a complete breakdown of the country, and investigates how social media shaped both digital dissent and street mobilization in Nepal's Gen Z movement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media and Political Activism

Internet-backed social media platforms have reinvented the dynamics of protest mobilization. M. Castells (2012), in his *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age,* posits that digital networks empower the users to organize collective action outside formal institutions, often challenging the state monopoly. Similarly, Tufekci (2017) argues that in a digitally connected society, social media

platforms serve as a platform that facilitates rapid coordination and enhances the visibility of protests among audiences, which further reinforces support mobilization.

Furthermore, according to Gerbaudo (2012), digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), TikTok, and Instagram have been central to building online communities, particularly during resistance mobility. For instance, Hashtag (#) campaign, such as #ArabSpring of 2010, #BlackLivesMatter of 2014, #OccupyWallStreet of 2011, and #Umbrella of 2014 in Hong Kong, have demonstrated how online discourse can influence offline political outcomes.

Generation Z and Digital Protest

Generation Z refers to those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s and are distinguished by their native fluency in digital platforms and willingness to challenge institutional authority through online activism (Twenge, 2017). This generation is characterized by heightened political awareness, individual rights consciousness, and concern for social justice issues (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Generation Z (Gen Z) activists often engage in advanced and innovative digital strategies, blending viral content, humor, and protest symbolism to amplify and disseminate their messages (Jenkins et al., 2016). TikTok and Instagram, for instance, have emerged as influential platforms among young people for political expression, offering visually engaging formats that bypass traditional political discourse (Abidin 2021).

Digital Activism in Nepal

There is a dearth of academic literature specifically focused on digital activism in Nepal; however, Poudel (2020) and Adhikari (2022) demonstrate how Nepalese youth have progressively turned to online platforms to voice political grievances and agitations, especially after the adoption of the new constitution in 2015, establishing it as a federal democratic republic and the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in 2020, during the outbreak of COVID-19, a non-violent youth-led protest movement under the banner of "Enough is Enough" emerged as a result of frustration and agitation among the youth against the Nepal government for alleged mishandling of the pandemic crisis. The protesters used social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to register their voices and disseminate their messages to larger audiences, demonstrating social media as a powerful tool for fostering political expression. Furthermore, digital learning, particularly among urban youth, digital influencers, meme culture, and digital media such as Facebook and YouTube, is gradually fostering political discourse among the youth in Nepal (Sharma & Maharjan, 2021).

Objectives of the study:

1. To examine the digital platforms as tools of resistance

2. To examine the role of digital tools in shaping narrative building

3. To examine the role of digital tools in facilitating street mobilization.

Theoretical Framework:

Karl Marx's conflict theory (1867) and Manuel Castells' networked social movement (2015) are employed as theoretical grounding for the present study. In conflict theory, Karl Marx argues that social inequality arises from the unequal distribution of resources and power controlled by a dominant group (the bourgeoisie) at the expense of the powerless (the proletariat). When inequalities become extreme and social order is no longer considered legitimate, collective consciousness among the disadvantaged can trigger revolutionary conditions, leading to political upheaval if traditional institutions collapse. Manuel Castells, in his "networked social movement," contends that internet communication technologies today intertwine with social movements. The movement integrates online communication with offline action, forming autonomous communication networks that facilitate the coordination of protests and social activism.

Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design that involved content analysis engaging digital ethnography to examine the role of digital platforms as a tool of resistance against media monopoly, to examine their role in shaping narratives and fostering collective consciousness, and to examine how these tools were leveraged for street mobilization in the Gen Z-led protest movement in Nepal.

Sampling

Data were purposively collected from six online news media: Kathmandu Post, Times of India, The Hindu, The Wire, The Print, The Sun, The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and Reuters. These platforms were purposively selected because of their open accessibility, constant updates on the protest movement, and maximum viewership. Furthermore, targeted keyword searches, such as #NepalProtest, #GenZProtest, and #YouthProtestInNepal, were employed to identify relevant content using the search engines of the respective platforms. The opinion pieces and commentaries published on these platforms were treated as data sources and employed to support and develop the arguments presented in this study.

Analysis

The present uprising started on 7th September and culminated on 9th September 2025; therefore, contents were purposively selected from 7th September to 13th September to capture movement dynamics and add validity and depth to the study. A total of 30 online news articles on Facebook related to the uprising were purposively selected, maintaining adherence to a specific time frame of one week after the uprising.

Each identified article was systematically coded using a structured codebook, enabling the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within the dataset, including the origins and triggers of the protest movements; the role of digital platforms as tools of expression for dissent; tools that facilitated a platform breaching the traditional media monopolies; the impact of

economic frustration in intensifying youth movement; the role of wider socio-political issues such as nepotism and corruption in fueling discontent; and the transformation of digital dissent into physical, street-level mobilization.

Ethical Considerations:

This study used publicly available data. However, in some contexts, a synonym was used as an ethical precaution to protect privacy and not disclose personal information.

Limitations:

The present study is limited to content posted on openly accessible platforms. This study may not represent the full diversity of media coverage, and it does not incorporate private and undisclosed communication among activists.

Findings

Who are Generation Z (Gen Z)?

Generation Z, generally referred to as Gen Z, denotes demographics born approximately between 1997 and 2012, although the exact boundaries may vary slightly depending on the source (Dimock, 2019). This demographic cohort follows the millennial generation and precedes Generation Alpha. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), this demographic is characterized by a high level of digital nativity, having grown up in an era dominated by the Internet, social media, and rapid technological advancements. They are often recognized for their values of social justice, inclusivity, and environmental consciousness, as well as their inclination toward diversity and individual expression (Seemiller and Grace 2016). This demographic group is also acknowledged for their fluency and preferences for engaging with digital platforms for communication, entertainment, and information, influencing both social trends and economic behaviors (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Gen Z is digitally empowered and politically conscious, and they believe in asserting their voices. They see protests as an imperative tool for resisting authoritative states and as an essential means of shaping their collective future.

Genesis of the Nepal's Gen Z Protest Movement

The Nepal Gen Z protest movement started off as a reaction to the government's unanticipated decision to enforce a sweeping ban on 26 social media platforms, including major social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, Reddit, and LinkedIn. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology justified the ban on the grounds that these platforms had failed to register with the government by the stipulated deadline of September 5, following a one-week notice issued on August 28. However, none of the major tech companies, such as Meta or Alphabet, or others had complied, prompting the state to enforce the ban (Reuters; India Today).

This decision prompted immediate backlash, particularly from Nepal's digitally connected youth. According to a report published by 'The Kathmandu Post,' approximately 13.5 million people in Nepal use Facebook and 3.6 million use Instagram. These users do not depend on these platforms only for communication but also for business, education, connection, and activism. For Gen Z, the state's decision to ban these platforms demonstrates more than a regulatory decision; it is an authoritarian attempt to suffocate dissent, curb free expression, and restrain access to digital spaces, which is integral to their daily lives. As a 21-year-old woman stated,

"We are frustrated by the authoritarian banning of social media platforms, but that is not the only reason we are gathered here; we are here to protest against corruption that has been institutionalized in Nepal. Banning social media is an attack on our free expression."

What began as opposition to the social media ban quickly evolved into broader protests against systemic issues such as corruption, favoritism, and social injustice, demonstrating the capacity of digital activism to expand in scope and intensity (Omni; Reuters; India Today). The Gen Z members who were majorly affected by the decision voiced strong opposition to the government's decision. Initially, they leveraged digital platforms to express dissent and mobilize resistance against the government's decision. Moreover, these platforms serve not only as tools for coordination and outreach but also as spaces for narrative construction and articulation of collective grievances. The interaction and coordination among Gen Z activists were vigorous and channeled through different personalized digital networks.

Digital Tools challenging the Media Monopoly

Despite the government announcing a ban on 26 major social media apps and imposing complete internet blackouts in the capital city, the young activists swiftly navigated a noble strategy to sustain, coordinate, and intensify the protest mobilization. Gen Z activists skillfully leveraged digital platforms to bypass state censorship, challenging the state's monopoly over information and communication networks, and engaged with Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to escape digital restrictions. Platforms such as TikTok and Reddit, reinforced by VPNs, served as key spaces for information dissemination, community engagement and mobilization. Moreover, Gen Z activists also engaged with less regulated or exempted applications like Viber to coordinate actions and disseminate ground updates among themselves. The engagement of hashtag campaigns such as *#NepoKids*, *#UnbanSocialMedia,* and *#NepoBaby* went viral among digitally connected protesters, creating powerful digital narratives that resonated with a broad demographic and helped galvanize nationwide participation. These online efforts of sharing hashtags (#) and narratives facilitated by digital platforms not only breached or bypassed state censorship but also cemented a sense of solidarity and collective identity among Nepal's digitally connected youth (India Times; Kathmandu Post). The state's decision to ban digital platforms was considered a defensive effort to avoid being exposed, and it was also considered an attack on the voices of the youth.

Social Media Ban as a Catalyst for Escalation

The KP Oli government's sudden decision to impose a nationwide ban on social media apps, citing the

platforms' failure to register with the government guidelines as reasons, not only failed to settle the public disappointment but, in fact, exacerbated it, intensifying long-standing grievances and generational frustration rooted in political neglect and systemic inequality. Among Nepalese youth, the social media ban was the 'last nail' driving them to mobilize a mass protest movement, symbolizing the culmination of over a decade of frustration. As a 21-year-old sociology student from Tribhuvan University stated,

"We were already angry about corruption, nepotism, and lack of jobs in the country; the social media ban is a final call that triggered the already accumulated discontentment."

Subsequently, the issue extended beyond the mere restriction of social media platforms; it represented a broader struggle for the safeguarding of freedom of expression and a demand for fundamental political transformation in the country. As a 22-year-old woman protester remarked, "Oli chor, Desh Chhod (Oli thief, leave the country)" echoed across the streets of Kathmandu, reflecting both anger at political leadership and desire for immediate political change (Kathmandu Post).

Furthermore, powerful meme-driven narratives, which contrasted the lavish lifestyles of political elites' children with the economic and social deprivation and marginalization experienced by ordinary youth, were constantly shared on digital platforms. The content contrasted images of returning political heirs with luxury goods such as Gucci bags with the tragic return of migrant workers' bodies in coffins, symbolizing the stark social inequities of the country that were constantly circulating and discussed on social media platforms. As one widely circulated post summarized: "The leader's children return from abroad with Gucci bags; the people's children in coffins." According to D. Ghimire, a sociology student, such digital storytelling represents a 'creative and powerful' mechanism through which Gen Z is reframing inequality and exposing deep-seated corruption within the system, which reinforces the sentiment of political betrayal, corruption, and nepotism within the system among the youth. Furthermore, rather than silencing the youth's dissenting voices, the government's social media ban catalyzed a wave of creative resistance movements, predominantly led by the youth. The resistance movement by the youth underscores the potential power of digital tools in the contemporary digital age (The Guardian). However, the social media ban was not the sole triggering factor for the Gen Z uprising; there were other socio-political and economic underlying factors that added more gravity to it*.*

Nepotism and Corruption as Catalysts of Discontent

Along with economic marginalization and disenfranchisement, the protest movement was also an outcome of the deep-seated nepotism and corruption that many perceive as defining features of Nepal's political and administrative systems. Protesters criticized a system in which political privilege and nepotism, rather than merit, determined access to opportunities. As S. Pyakurel, former commissioner of the National Human Rights Commission, speaking to journalists, shared,

"Everywhere you look, it's the sons, daughters, and nephews of politicians enjoying all accessibility. The common citizens constituting the majority populations of the country are left to struggle for crumbs because they lack political connections."

This narrative reverberated strongly among the people, particularly the youth, who increasingly perceived public institutions as inaccessible to those without political connections or background. The alleged nepotism, corruption, and systemic favoritism ingrained deep in Nepal's political setting have created a sense of alienation and deprivation among the youth. As S. Thapa, a 23-year-old woman entrepreneur who runs a small design studio, expressed the frustration shared among her peers:

"Either you leave the country or you live here with no dignity. We are educated, skilled, and potential, yet ignored, We call it soft exile."

Thus, the perception of political betrayal, sense of deep embedded nepotism and alienation among the youth from the system simmering for decade culminated in an uprising. The social media ban was only a safety valve to reignite deep-seated political discord, demonstrating that the protests were not merely a reaction to an isolated event of social media banning, but an outcome of broader socio-political crisis demands for structural reform, transparency, and social equity (The Print). Digital platforms, particularly Facebook, were online spaces where narratives of nepotism, corruption, and institutional favoritism were posted, shared, and discussed among the youth.

Digital Dissent translating to Street Mobilization

The physical mass mobilization witnessed on September 08, 2025, in Kathmandu, the country's capital, was the outcome of discontent and dissent among the youth (Gen Z) mounting in the digital space. Initially, the protesters mobilization was led by school and college students clad in uniforms and carrying placards and banners displaying their discord messages, gathered at Maitighar Mandala to march toward Parliament, marking a symbolic confrontation with state authority. The protest, which started as a peaceful mobilization, intensified rapidly, with images and footage depicting protesters breaching the police barricades, followed by the deployment of tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets, and, in some instances, live ammunition beginning to circulate. The movement, which began as a peaceful youth protest, soon transpired into a violent confrontation, clashing with the security forces, resulting in significant casualties; reports estimate between 19 and over 30 deaths, alongside hundreds of injuries. Protesters also targeted state symbols and figures, vandalizing government buildings, including Parliament, the Judiciary, and the Prime Minister's residence, and physically assaulting political leaders, including Sher Bahadur Deuba and members of his family. The scale and intensity of the youth uprising generated extensive political pressure, which ultimately resulted in Prime Minister Oli's resignation. Subsequently, in an effort to deescalate the prevailing crisis in Kathmandu, Prithvi Subba Gurung, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology of Nepal, announced that the government had ordered the concerned agencies to start the process of resuming the social media sites as per the demands of the 'Gen Z', which spearheaded a massive protest in front of the Parliament in

the heart of Kathmandu(Katmandu Post, Indian Today, Reuters, The Sun).The government's decision to roll back the social media ban is a demonstration and acknowledgement of the fact that social media platforms as a *public sphere in the* contemporary era are crucial in a democratic setting. The Gen Z uprising demonstrated that any effort perceived to be invading the '*sphere*' will not only be resisted but also raise rigorous protest mobilization among the people to safeguard it.

DISCUSSION

Nepal's Generation Z-led protest mobilization, which was triggered by the government's abrupt decision to ban 26 major social media platforms, marks a significant shift in the political landscape of Nepali youth. To them, it was a collective resistance struggle against the authoritarian attempt to suffocate dissent, curb free expression, and restrain access to digital spaces, which is integral to their daily lives. Protest mobilization also highlights the central role that digital platforms play in determining contemporary youth identity, political discourse, and activism, while simultaneously exposing deep-embedded corruption, nepotism, and economic exclusion prevailing in the system. Furthermore, the Gen Z protest demonstrates a conjunction between digital dissent and street mobilization, exemplifying how Nepal's younger generation is redefining the mode of political participation in an era of increasing socioeconomic uncertainty and challenged democratic governance.

Through a theoretical lens, the Gen Z protest can be critically analyzed as a blend of two theoretical frameworks: structural inequality and mobilization in the digital era. Insights from Marx's Conflict Theory: The protest uprising demonstrates a classic class struggle in which the youth (Gen Z), largely from working- and middle-class backgrounds, revolted against the political elite who have held and monopolized political power, privilege, and resources for decades in Nepal. The strategic engagement and amplification of mass-appealing anti-corruption rhetoric, particularly the virtual "#NepoKids" and "#CorruptionBaby," through digital tools deepened the narrative of systemic exploitation and deep-rooted socio-economic division, illustrating Marx's notion of class consciousness and the inevitable conflict that arises when the oppressed become aware of their exploitation.

Insights from Castells' Networked Social Movement, the way in which the young activists skilfully leveraged decentralized communication tools such as VPNs, social media, encrypted messaging apps, and digital forums to bypass state censorship and organize in real time also aptly aligned with the digital nature of the contemporary networked age mobilizations as prescribed by Manuel Castells in his theory of Networked Social Movements. These digital platforms facilitated a space for shaping collective identity, sharing grievances, and coordinating direct action without formal leadership, demonstrating their alignment with the hallmark of Castells' networked movements. The Nepal government's efforts to suppress these networks through social media bans only intensified and escalated mobilization, indicating that in contemporary digital society, power and resistance flow through digital connectivity.

CONCLUSION

Nepal's Gen Z activists have redefined the landscape of civic engagement, ushering in a new era of digitally mediated activism. The tech-savvy Nepali youth protesters steered a technological way to bypass or breach the state's digital restrictions, reflecting both technological fluency and strategic mobilization capacities. Even when the ousted government enforced a blanket ban on the Internet to de-escalate the uprising, the activists effectively countered the ban by leveraging digital tools like Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), alternative apps like Viber, and less-regulated platforms such as TikTok and Reddit to communicate and disseminate messages and to coordinate among the youth. Furthermore, the hashtags (#) campaign, such as #NepoKids, #UnbanSocialMedia, #NepoBaby, and #Carruption, demonstrates how digital spaces were not only engaged for resistance against the state monopoly over narratives but also utilized for constructing shared narratives and identities that galvanized the movement. These digital narratives became instrumental in fostering collective consciousness and a shared identity, which later translated into collective street mobilization. Furthermore, the widespread narratives facilitated by social media platforms that political privilege, rather than merit, open access to opportunities in Nepal, have also generated a deep sense of alienation and political betrayal among the youth. Testimonies from protestors, "*The leaders' children return from abroad with Gucci bags; the people's children in coffins, encapsulated* the resentment and strengthened the horizon of protest mobilization. In the present context, social media platforms serve not only as tools for entertainment and communication but also as shared public spheres where individuals participate in broader discourse, construct narratives, shape collective opinions, and cultivate a shared identity—elements that can ultimately mobilize mass movements.

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