



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 05, Issue 01, 2026

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>



Cyber Activism and Slacktivism: A Contemporary Force in Social and Political Change

Hussnain Kazmi¹

Student, Department of Linguistics, Higher School of Economics, National Research University, Russia

Correspondence: hussnainkazmi184@gmail.com

Aneeq Ahmed²

Student, Department of Linguistics, Higher School of Economics, National Research University, Russia

Email: aneeq.ahmed035@gmail.com

Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received 2025-12-21

Revised 2026-01-13

Accepted 2026-02-04

Citation (APA):

Kazim, H & Ahmed, A (2026). Cyber activism and slacktivism: A contemporary force in social and political change. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(1), 127-138. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.01.470>

Abstract

The paper investigates the evolution of Pakistani cyber activism as a political and social movement, discussing the way individuals are mobilizing, creating awareness and fighting injustice through digital tools (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). Through the prism of the connective action framework (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) and the idea of power accrual (Leong et al., 2019), this research explores three high-profile instances, that is, #AuratMarch, #JusticeForZainab and #ReleaseGulalailsmail, to reveal how personal accounts and hashtag activism engage in the formation of the society-wide discussion and involvement. Based on discussion on Jeppesen (2021) and Parsloe and Holton (2018), it is discovering that cyberactivism amplifies the underrepresented voice and builds networks of solidarity; still, online harassment of activists, the surveillance of the state, and polarization of society (particularly in relation to women and low earners) take place. Hence, digital activism in Pakistan appears as a key element of contemporary social movements, which fusion with democratic activities is combined with distinct challenges and threats.

Keywords: Cyber Activism, Slacktivism, Hashtag Activism, Social Movements, Pakistan, Social Media.



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share-Alike 4.0 International License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgment of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.

Introduction

The social media has impacted political and social speech on levels never witnessed before in a digital communication era. Digital age has introduced such phenomenon as cyber activism that has been turned into a primary aspect of social change in the 21st century. Tremendous movements of the #ArabSpring or #BlackLivesMatter and young climate activism serve as examples of how social movements can mobilize multitudes of people through online connective action. Technology has also opened up new spaces of protest and democracy because of the combination of hashtags, viral videos and live-streamed protests. This wave of online advocacy is at times criticized as slacktivism which suggests a low effort form of support being given out by clicking. Nevertheless, even these little things can add up to huge visibility and publicity of causes, such as liking, sharing, or signing online petitions, particularly when multiplied throughout networks.

Digital technology has revolutionized the protest tactics and civic participation methods. Activists and movement organizations today do not have to pass through intermediaries (mainstream media, political parties) to reach mass audiences. The fall of traditional collective action has been accompanied by the upsurge of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) refer to as connective action, which is individualized content sharing via digital networks instead of being an organizational member. Cyber activism, Sierra-Caballero (2018) asserts, facilitates alternate forms of decentralized organization that sabotage conventional hierarchical relations of activism and pursue quick-and-global visibility.

The strength of cyber activism can be explained by the recent events. The 2020-2021 racial justice protests around the world following the murder of George Floyd showed how activism via the internet can genuinely mobilize a population around the world in real-time. Such hashtags as #BlackLivesMatter and #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd made it easy to create mass awareness, organize protests, crowd-funding, and political pressure, and youth activists used TikTok videos to educate and inspire millions. Social media has also been a powerful means of political awareness in Pakistan in the last ten years. Campaigns on social media, including the #JusticeForZainab, #MeTooPakistan, #AuratMarch, and #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail, completely bypass the traditional political frames, by breaking the old taboos against child abuse, against sexual harassment, and against enforced disappearances. Indicatively, human rights activist Gulalai Ismail drew the attention of the government by posting on Twitter about human rights violations, and would be eventually pushed into exile, a good example of the effect and the danger of Pakistani cyber activism.

The ability of cyber activism to mobilize masses has been at its highest point at times of national crises. Following the Peshawar school terrorist attack in 2014, social media became the place of patriotism and shared mourning. One of the first viral activism campaigns in Pakistan called the #WeAreUnited campaign contributed to the creation of a common national identity of resilience and cohesiveness. In the case, researchers Kalim and Janjua (2019) discovered that it is cyber-nationalism that allowed ordinary citizens to take the national discourse in the direction of ordinary people, rather than the government or media elites, during the crisis. Simultaneously, Pakistani cyber activism is a rather fractured phenomenon: the barriers to its unification are language distinctions, gaps in digital access between city and rural areas and ethnic schisms. However, the revolutionary youth movement in Tunisia was more coherent in its beginning, indicating that the digital activism in Pakistan is developing within other societal limits.

The Pakistani youth have increasingly been resorting to cyber activism as one of the means to take part in politics due to disillusionment with formal politics. A survey of scholars in Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa by Khan et al. (2019) established that the use of social media can lessen the problem of political apathy through the establishment of new means of interaction between citizens and the state. As most of the citizens of Pakistan indicate that only a small fraction (around 64 percent) of the population is above 30, most youths who are disillusioned by unemployment levels, inflation, and ineffectiveness of the government are seeking other avenues and digital media have provided young people with a different platform to air their grievances and mobilize around issues of common concern without having to go through the formal institutions.

Literature Review

Cyber activism in Context: Tools, Platforms, and Power

Cyber activism is anchored on how contemporary technological resources interact with the socio-political systems that exist. This has been made possible by the digital age which has enabled activism to no longer be limited by space since the internet space breaks down geographical boundaries and does not require an individual to meet physically to carry out an assembly. With the functionality of social media, individuals are able to turn a mere statement (tweets, posts, and memes) into an instrument that can generate a joint action. Such platforms provide the activists with a two-fold ability: they can reach a large number of people with messages and coordinate and organize the supporters in real time, frequently through emotionally appealing framing to make them act.

Modern cyber activism is very unlike the form it used to take in the early days. As opposed to earlier digital activism which concerned creating an online presence, the modern setting of network influence is the order of the day. Such a shift can be explained on the level of techno politics, as Candandon-Mena and Montero-Sanchez (2021) explain that now the movements develop their own unique digital cultures, languages and visual aesthetics to express their political identity and impact the public opinion. That is to say, movements have gone beyond using digital media as a medium of communication; they have taken control of online cultural discourses as part of their activism agenda.

Global Landscape of Cyber activism

Cyber activism is a global trend, yet it does not have a template that is consistent across the regions. The digital activism style is determined by the media ecosystem and political situation in each country. Online activists are under serious threats in authoritarian environments: state surveillance, internet lockdowns, and censorship are standard reactions to Internet disobedience. In less authoritarian democracies, when censorship is more explicit, activists still have to deal with less obvious censorship methods, including the use of algorithms to suppress content, biases in content moderation policies by corporations, and misinformation wars.

These contrasts are pointed out by historical examples. The Tunisian cyber activists were instrumental in the Arab spring as they aided in overthrowing a dictatorship. As Soengas-Pérez and Assif (2017) note, websites such as Facebook allowed wide mobilization of the masses and eroded the monopoly of information offered by the state, which allowed brief outbursts of protests to become a revolutionary movement. Digital networks helped Tunisians to organize demonstrations and disseminate uncensored information thus weakening the authoritarian regime. The same pattern of swift enlightenment has been noticed in Pakistan with hashtags such as #JusticeForZainab and #AuratMarch trending and making national discourse focus on the problems that had long been hidden under the carpet.

The political revolution of social media is seen by professionals around the globe as a powerful prospect. As an example, an example of a TEDx talk by Amira Chebli (2020) on Tunisian cyber activism, and an NDI panel (2012) questioning the question of whether social media is the motivating factor in youth political engagement, both emphasize that such websites as Twitter and Facebook are not a simple communication tool, which can also stimulate civic turnout and social transformation. The essential concepts of these foreign views echo in Pakistan, where social media stands out as the main source of getting the voice heard and bringing people to the discussion without using the state-controlled media.

Technological Politics and Platform Governance

Although social media platforms have become indispensable to the contemporary activists, they come with new challenges. Digital areas are privately possessed and have algorithms and algorithms, activists are forced to work according to the rules and systems that can weaken their reach. Algorithms can censor activist posts (like demoting posts labeled sensitive), activists can be deplatformed (suspended or banned) due to breaking corporate rules, which is a paradox in itself since those who disagree with Big Tech have to use systems operated by Big Tech, which can go on to reach the interests of the powerful (Radsch, 2016).

In this platformized public, activists are faced with content moderation regimes which are not necessarily democratic. According to Radsch, there is a contradiction to the fact that a corporate social network can be used to achieve social justice at the same time: the tools that allow activists to mobilize the grassroots, can also be used against them, as an instrument of data surveillance and arbitrary censorship. Change activists have to, therefore, always work around the threat of algorithmic invisibility and continue to pay attention to the problem of platform governance.

Theoretical Framework

The paper relies on the theory of media and collective action that elucidates how digital communication is transforming the nature of activism. The Media Ecology Theory can serve as a general context: it implies that every technology of communication (print to social media) brings with it new patterns of human interaction and collective behavior. Within the framework of cyber activism, online space is not a neutral space but a dynamic space that has an impact on the formation of movements, their spread of messages, and their persistence. Instead of being a tool, social media, especially, could be regarded as a new form of social structure where power relations are enacted.

To understand the dynamics of Pakistani digital movements, we employ the concept of the Connective Action that Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have developed. Connective action is founded on individual level engagement, decentralized unlike traditional collective action that relies on an organization and shared ideology. Participants organize themselves by spreading customized content (hashtags, memes, and personal story) through the networks, and not directives of a central institution. This personalized, networked form of activism is manifested by individuals creating and disseminating their own messages and media using a shared hashtag in movements such as the #AuratMarch in Pakistan (and the #BlackLivesMatter movement worldwide), as well as in Facebook campaigns and Twitter social actions. The connective action model can be used to understand why the campaigns of Pakistani activists can keep up the steam despite a lack of hierarchy in leadership, solidarity is created by twittering, sharing, and viral slogans rather than being part of a formal organization.

In analyzing the process of empowerment in the social media movements, we will rely on the model offered by Leong et al. (2019), which proposes two notions, namely Power Activation and

Power Accrual. Individuals and grassroots organizations in digital activism can mobilize power first through using social platforms to speak (get marginalized voice, eyewitness testimonies) and create identity communities. With time, as a result of systematic storytelling, networking, and viral diffusions, they gain power - that is, they expand their base and ability to make a difference. This model can be applied to the analysis of how our case movements (#AuratMarch, #JusticeForZainab, etc.) turned internet activity into a real pressure in the society. Viral content and sustained online networking have the potential to generate sufficient critical mass to compel action on the authorities (as with the social media outcry that resulted in Zainab being taken on by the authorities, or with the steady pressure on social media creating attention on the case of Gulalai Ismail).

In a nutshell, the theoretical perspective integrates connective action (to know participation and organization) and power activation/accrual view (to know how influence accumulates in digital movements). We will base our evaluation of the cases on them, shedding light on the way slacktivism (low-entry online activism) can become legitimate cyber activism and how digital practices can build to social power.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, interpretivist approach to examine the nuanced practices of cyber activism in Pakistan. The design combines case study analysis with content analysis of online media, allowing us to explore each movement in depth and also identify cross-cutting themes in digital activism culture.

Data Collection

We selected three prominent cyber activism campaigns in Pakistan (between 2018 and 2024) based on their visibility, influence, and diversity of issues:

- **#AuratMarch** - focused on women's rights and gender justice.
- **#JusticeForZainab** - centered on child protection and justice reform.
- **#ReleaseGulalaiIsmail** - highlighting human rights and state accountability.

These cases cover a range of themes (gender equity, criminal justice, human rights) and involve different digital platforms and actor networks, providing a rich comparative spread.

For each case, we gathered data from publicly available online sources, including:

- **Twitter** - hashtag threads, viral tweets, and user engagement metrics (e.g. retweets, likes).
- **Facebook** - posts and discussions in public groups and pages related to the movements (for example, posts from advocacy groups like "Soul Sisters Pakistan").
- **YouTube** - relevant videos such as TED Talks or webinars discussing the activism themes (e.g., Amira Chebli's TEDx talk on cyber activism).
- **Digital news media** - online news articles covering the campaigns in Pakistani media outlets.

In total, approximately 150 social media post (tweets, posts, comments) and 12 online news articles/videos were collected across the three cases. This dataset was then subjected to qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on how each movement uses digital media to frame its narrative, mobilize supporters, and interact with opposition or authorities.

Ethical Considerations

All information was acquired from public sources in the internet. No sensitive personal information was utilized other than that which subjects shared publicly. Inasmuch as the

investigation deals with public movements and public media, moral institutional review was not essential. But we held ethical caution by anonymizing normal subjects of social media in our notes (referring by name to only public characters or organizations) by interpreting materials in the light of their meaning to avoid possible misreport. The analysis was conducted in a manner consistent with the security of the activists - it has, for instance, been borne in mind, that examples of certain individuals' contribution might involve risks. The work is concerned with general trends and discourses rather than individuals, and would appear to be in accord with the ethical conditions laid down for investigations of the kind of the present one.

Findings and Discussions

The findings are organized as three case studies, followed by a cross-case discussion. Each case illustrates different aspects of how cyber activism operates in Pakistan, while collectively they reveal common patterns of connective action and challenges faced by digital movements.

Case Study 1: #AuratMarch (2018–2024)

With social media, the Aurat march which is an annual women rights rally in Pakistan has been significantly enhanced. The analysis of Twitter and Instagram posts about the hashtag AuratMarch has shown that individuals under this umbrella share personalized products, specifically testimonies, artworks, and memes. It is in line with the model of connective action developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012): the participants present their own narration and visions (e.g. placards with slogans) to the bigger campaign rather than the movement being dependent on a certain central message, which is language-dependent. One of the catchphrases, *Mera Jism Meri Marzi* (My body, my choice) was made viral in the online community where individuals uploaded pictures of placards, thus demonstrating just one phrase that was potentially the central message in the movement.

Here, both mobilization and counter narrative production depended on social media. It was the hashtag that helped the planners to organize the logistics of the march annually and opposing parties and proponents to engage in their respective rhetorical battles online. The most notable was that following the ridicule of the Aurat March by conservative media, the supporters rushed to Twitter with good retaliated counter-arguments and re-framing of the narrative which is typical of the use of the counter narrative through cyber-activism outlined by Parsloe and Holton (2018). The online presence of the campaign has contributed to the transformation of a single-day protest to campaign and continuously develop a gender rights movement and demonstrated that digital tools can be applied to the creation of a sustained conversation and community after the actual protest. Having the aim of specifically criticizing the norms of patriarchy in the online space, the representatives of the Aurat March movement reached out to the diasporic Pakistani community and global feminists with the help of the connectivity provided by the internet.

Case Study 2: #JusticeForZainab (2018–2022)

Justice for Zainab movement started in early 2018 following the gruesome rape and murder of 7-year-old Zainab Ansari in the Pakistani town of Kasur. The #JusticeForZainab went viral on social media and reached Twitter and Facebook in a few hours. Apparently, it is quite obvious that this reaction on the Internet compelled a system that was typically sluggish into action. The political leaders began to make statements only upon the vociferation by the people; only 72 hours after the protest, the law enforcers increased their investigation. Several individuals have assumed that the constant pressure by social media contributed greatly to these changes.

Based on the framework provided by Leong et al., we would understand this campaign as a manifestation of power activation that was executed using unity and volume on social media. Crowdsourcing outrage, thousands of Pakistanis and a section of the diaspora organized around the internet, to demand justice. This social media voice poked mainstream news and power into action and revealed how cyber activism can mobilize institutional power. According to the principle of power accrual, the long-term hashtag campaign had concrete outcomes; the issue managed to remain in the news weeks later, the rapist was arrested and sentenced, triggering the emergence of the discussion on the child protection policy.

Importantly, even the movement #JusticeForZainab attracted international attention, which demonstrates the borderless character of digital activism. Though the #JusticeForZainab was predominantly an issue of Pakistani local concern, it was used by the influencers and the media in other countries, thus exerting external pressures on Pakistani authorities. This highlights the power of the connective action to cross national borders, a tragedy in Pakistan was felt in the world through the power of listening through empathy, which strengthened the voice of local activists regarding the need to take action. The case is a good example of the speed and magnitude with which cyber activism could work, with accomplishments in days, which otherwise would have taken months of physical campaigning.

Case Study 3: #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail (2019–2023)

The Release Gulalai Ismail campaign is a more controversial human rights case that was playing out largely via Twitter. Gulalai Ismail, one of the most vocal women rights activists, was even driven into hiding as the state harassed her, and fans came up with the hashtag of #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail in an effort to have her free and secure. As the content analysis shows, this movement was a diaspora movement using digital protest: a substantial part of the hashtag traction was provided by Pakistanis and human right activists abroad, as, in Pakistan, speaking about the case online might lead to government surveillance.

Online resources were invaluable in relaying instant updates of the legal status of Gulalai, organizing the global human rights groups, and gaining favor among supporters who were now persecuting her family. The online campaign would have gone a long way to publicize the story of Gulalai, though it subjected those involved to greater dangers. Most domestic Twitter users who expressed support were also reported as having received threatening messages, with some of them having their accounts suspended following mass reporting, implying a collusion between state-based actors and platform enforcement. This shows a more alarming side of cyber activism in authoritarian regimes: as movements acquire power due to visibility, they also become victims of online repression (by hacking, trolling, faking reports to close accounts, etc.).

Regardless of such difficulties, the case of Gulalai Ismail shows that networked activism is able to keep pressure even in a situation when leaders are silenced. The #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail also became international (as global NGOs and the UN tweeted in support of Gulalai) which ultimately helped her to safely escape the country. Nonetheless, it also took its toll on the people on the ground: the most vocal campaign supporters in Pakistan were severely intimidated. It is the same outcome to be seen with regards to the increased power and increased exposure; a common theme with activists who must work in authoritarian shadows.

Throughout the case studies, we establish that Pakistani cyber activism is a mediated kind of resistance, which depends on personal stories, viral hashtags, and platform affordances to effect change. It is true that social media has provided a voice to the issues and groups that are being marginalized, but it is also creating new security threats to the activists. The patterns of

connection that have been seen (e.g. viral personal slogans in Aurat March, quick cumulative outrage in #JusticeForZainab, diaspora networking in the case of Gulalai) demonstrate the way through which digital participation can bypass the traditional gatekeepers. Simultaneously, these movements were forced to face anti-movement on the internet and in the real world, which implies that the success of digital activism is inseparably connected to the political landscape where the movement takes place.

Discussion

Challenges and Risks of Cyber Activism

While cyber activism has become indispensable for political and social mobilization, it faces numerous moral, technical, and strategic challenges. The democratic potential of digital activism in Pakistan is threatened by several key issues, including:

State Surveillance and Repression

Activist's digital communications are subject to monitoring by authorities. As seen in the Middle East uprisings, protesters resorted to pseudonyms and encrypted messaging to evade surveillance. Pakistani activists similarly operate knowing that government agencies deploy advanced AI analytics on social media traffic. Heightened surveillance raises the stakes for online dissent – those who speak out must remain vigilant and often need operational security skills. The #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail case, for example, showed that prominent digital critics can become targets of intense state scrutiny, leading to offline reprisals.

Censorship and Content Moderation Bias

Cyber activists effectively operate at the mercy of tech platforms whose moderation policies can be inconsistent or biased. There have been instances of content removal that appeared to silence activist narratives – for example, content about the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah evictions in Palestine was reportedly deleted on Instagram and Twitter, prompting global concern about corporate censorship. Activists in Pakistan have observed that posts critical of powerful institutions sometimes mysteriously vanish or get “shadow-banned.” Moreover, platform algorithms prioritize engagement and ad revenue over democratic deliberation (as noted by Sierra-Caballero, 2018), which can skew visibility in favor of sensational or commercially viable content. This means activist messaging that doesn't fit the algorithm's preferences may struggle to reach broad audiences.

Misinformation and Co-optation

The openness of social media allows not just activists, but also counter-movements and malicious actors, to disseminate content. Misinformation can spread as rapidly as truth, undermining activists' credibility. Many movements face coordinated trolling and hashtag hijacking campaigns wherein opponents flood the tag with false information or propaganda to confuse the narrative. Automated bots and fake accounts often amplify these tactics, diluting genuine messages and sowing doubt among onlookers. For instance, during the Aurat March campaigns, organizers had to continuously debunk fake news (such as fabricated slogans) that aimed to delegitimize the movement. This constant battle against disinformation diverts activists' energy and can erode public support if not effectively countered.

Activist Exhaustion and Burnout

The fast-paced, always-on nature of digital activism can lead to participant fatigue. Activists and engaged citizens may feel pressured to be in a perpetual state of online vigilance, reacting to

every development and fending off trolls around the clock. Especially in protracted campaigns like Aurat March (now spanning years), core organizers risk burnout due to the emotional toll of exposure to harassment and the sheer volume of work needed to keep social media campaigns alive. Movement momentum can thus be hard to sustain over time – spikes of activity are often followed by lulls as volunteers need breaks. This challenge means that campaigns must find ways to rotate responsibilities, practice self-care, and perhaps integrate periods of rest, or risk attrition of their most dedicated digital advocates.

In conclusion, while cyber activism bypasses many traditional barriers to collective action, it introduces new fragilities. Movements must strategize not only about how to harness digital tools for growth, but also how to mitigate surveillance, navigate platform politics, maintain message integrity, and care for the well-being of activists in a high-pressure information environment.

Cyber Activism, Slacktivism, and the Future of Civic Participation

The emergence of cyber activism, or its less serious counterpart, slacktivism, is doubtless changing the nature of civic engagement in Pakistan and elsewhere. On the one hand, the digital space has reduced the bar to entry into politics: an individual can join a cause without leaving a few clicks or social media hashtags, which critics may deem as having a non-effectual result (so-called slacktivism). Conversely, our discussion indicates that such micro-engagement practices when connected by networked around connective action can become snowballs of important socio-political pressure. Slacktivism may be a bridge, in that it attracts a wide pool of individuals who may not necessarily participate in a street demonstration, but can participate online and show their support, raising the profiles of the movement and may potentially graduate some members to the next level of involvement.

In the future, it is probable that cyber activism will become even more integrated in the functioning of the civil society in Pakistan. With the growing number of internet users and a new generation of online-age political participants who are growing older, we expect to see more movements using hybrid tactics to move online and take physical action. It will not end the blurring of the boundaries of what can be considered legitimate political activity, a tweet about a cause or a viral video may be just as politically important as a rally and one should not ignore the impact of the online behavior on the policy or social opinion. Local struggles are being internationalized through the digital activism. It does not take much time before causes that start in a single city or province find supporters throughout the world (as in the case of #JusticeForZainab or #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail), not just putting pressure on local governments, but also bringing the Pakistani social issues to global human rights discussions. This connectivity on a global scale can empower local activists, but it can also bring about nationalistic backlash of those who understand international criticism as meddling in national affairs.

More importantly, the future of cyber activism will be determined by the ability of the activists to adjust to the challenges outlined above. Platform responsibility is on the rise - international as well as Pakistani activists are demanding greater openness in the regulation of the content and greater protection to users who are being harassed. This may make the digital civic space more robust and efficient in case there are more effective privacy controls by platforms (e.g. against doxing or bot attacks) and the users are more literate about the media.

Lastly, point is to think of the way in which the reaction of the Pakistani state to the cyber activism may change. So far, the government has been alternating between co-option (social media is used to promote their own stories) and repression (censorship, arrest on the grounds of cybercrime). The balance of power can be shifted based on the changes in regulations - such as

a new internet governance legislation or the implementation of the data localization can affect the reach of the activists and their safety. On the other hand, further encryption and decentralized platforms would provide activists with additional opportunities. Cyber activism (or even slacktivism) has created some channels of participation that never existed previously, giving Pakistan a new voice and allowing a quick collective mobilization. It is a modern movement of social and political lead, which works simultaneously with the traditional institutions and even in contradiction to them. To keep this force an affirmative one, it will continue to be monitored regarding the ethical and practical concerns of digital activism, and innovative approaches to maintain momentum in a swiftly becoming information society.

Conclusion

Pakistan has witnessed the strength of cyber activism in promoting social and political change, but at the same time, it has been observed to be a two-sided sword. On the one hand, it gives the citizens more power, particularly marginalized groups such as women and the young people to escape the traditional gatekeepers and influence people directly. The examples of the online movements presented by the case studies of the local movement of the activists, called the #AuratMarch, the #JusticesForZainab, and the #ReleaseGulalaiIsmail shows that online movements could lead to the results that go beyond the increase in the national awareness or impacting the policy discussions up to the pressure on the authorities to act. These movements used individualized narrative, the use of hashtags, and networked communities to turn individual acts of slacktivism (shares, likes, tweets) into a movement force. This bridging process that is enabled by social media has, therefore, become the part and parcel of contemporary demonstrations and activism in Pakistan, which seamlessly fuses with on-ground activism to become a hybrid demonstration.

Nevertheless, our discussion also indicates that there are some major issues that moderate the influence of cyber activism. The digital campaigns in Pakistan are run under the baggage of state-surveillance, censorship and the looming specter of crackdown that might curtail the free internet involvement. Moreover, other inner problems like misinformation, fragmentation of the movements and burnout of the activists may affect the success and sustainability of these campaigns. Essentially, the technology has offered activists with effective new tools, but it has not removed power disparities and risks that always existed with activists prior, but it has shifted them to a new field. To ensure that cyber activism grows to become a democratic change agent in Pakistan, the stakeholders need to deal with these challenges. Activists should keep producing smart media tactics (e.g. fact-checking alliances against fake news, security trainings against surveillance), and maybe even talk with the policymakers about digital rights protection. On their part, the tech platforms must acknowledge the large user base of Pakistan and invest in the context-sensitive content moderation, which can distinguish between dangerous content and essential political speech.

The cyber activism and slacktivism have become deep-rooted within the Pakistani social-political sphere. They also provide a way of reviving the civic life in a nation where the conventional political procedures tend to avoid the populations. It will be in the next few years that the real gage of their success will be measured: will digital movements be able to go beyond the temporary trend of hashtag movements and develop lasting initiatives that result in the implementation of changes in policy, culture, and more robust democratic processes? What is evident is that the Pakistani people have heard the voice of their people better than ever before, and it will only get to influence the direction of the country in the digital era with the help of keyboards and smartphones.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has limited to begin with, the examination was limited to three dominant case studies and a subset of internet material; therefore, the results might not be applicable to all types of digital-based activism in Pakistan (or elsewhere). Future studies can extend to look into more movements (even those that do not have large followings) to allow us to have the comparative take on what makes a campaign successful or not. It would also need more quantitative analysis, such as network analysis of hashtag campaigns or surveys of participants, to supplement what we have learned qualitatively and quantitatively estimate the impact on a tangible scale.

The other shortcoming is that the data used is publicly available and might cause selection bias. Viral content is easily available, and less noisy work behind the scenes or discussions in closed Facebook groups or WhatsApp (e.g., a small circle of friends) was out of view. Interviews with activists or ethnographic observation of movement organizing might help to enhance the perception of dynamics that cannot be identified using the publicly available posts only. The other one is that study do not deny the fact to have primarily looked at the advocacy aspect of cyber activism; an additional research may look at the state perspective or tactics (including digital counter-narratives by authorities) to give a more comprehensive picture of the online contention space.

Nevertheless, in spite of those restrictions, the study provides important benchmarks to the scholars and activists. It highlights the significance of digital stories and personal narratives to develop movement identity, which might be addressed in other research studies by researchers in other cultural settings or other languages in Pakistan (had only predominantly unilingual or Urdu online discussions). Furthermore, due to the dynamism of the social media (as new platforms and functions are created almost daily), an ongoing research must be conducted to monitor the evolution of cyber activism. To illustrate, the trends of connective action experienced through Twitter and Facebook will persist or will new paradigms be formed as Pakistani activists tend to use newer channels such as Instagram, TikTok, or encrypted messaging apps.

Practical recommendations on this are that activists ought to invest in digital literacy and security training among the inhabitants of their communities in order to alleviate some of the challenges mentioned in the discussion. Training the supporters on how to detect misinformation, how to protect their online privacy, and how to handle online harassment can enhance the resilience of a movement. Furthermore, forming coalitions with reporters, technology experts, and government officials may be the way to turn the online movement into an offline one - the way to turn the mere awareness about a topic into tangible policy results. Ultimately, cyber activism in Pakistan is a field ripe for further inquiry, and it remains a moving target. This study provides a snapshot of a pivotal moment where digital advocacy is coming of age.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

References

- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>
- Candón-Mena, J., & Montero-Sánchez, D. (2021). From cyber-activism to technopolitics: A critical take on historical periods and orientations in the use of digital technology by social movements. *International Journal of Communication, 15*, 2921–2941.
- Inspire Dialogue Foundation. (2020, June 29). *Cyber activism and the Tunisian Revolution – An insider's testimony* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqUulEn7uxs>
- Jeppesen, S. (2021). Intersectional technopolitics in social movement and media activism. *International Journal of Communication, 15*, 1961–1983.
- Kalim, S., & Janjua, F. (2019). #WeAreUnited, cyber-nationalism during times of a national crisis: The case of a terrorist attack on a school in Pakistan. *Discourse & Communication, 13*(3), 297–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481318771448>
- Khan, M. Z., Khan, Q. U., & Nawaz, A. (2019). Role of social media in civic-state engagement and political apathy in new public sphere: A survey of faculty/research-scholars from Gomal & Qurtuba Universities (DIK Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan). *Acta Universitatis Danubius. Communicatio, 13*(1), 5–15.
- Leong, C., Pan, S. L., Bahri, S., & Fauzi, A. (2019). Social media empowerment in social movements: Power activation and power accrual in digital activism. *Information Systems Journal, 29*(4), 775–813. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085X.2018.1512944>
- National Democratic Institute. (2012, October 22). *Does social media and the Internet fuel youth political engagement?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDmWz-GFpD0>
- Parsloe, S. M., & Holton, A. E. (2018). #Boycottautismspeaks: Communicating a counternarrative through cyberactivism and connective action. *Information, Communication & Society, 21*(3), 388–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1301514>
- Radsch, C. C. (2016). Cyber activism and social movements. In *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (pp. 179–206). Springer.
- Sierra-Caballero, F. (2018). Cyberactivism and social movements: The oppositional public space in contemporary technopolitics. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social, 73*, 1292–1308. <http://www.revistalatinacs.org/073paper/1292/RLCS-paper1292en>
- Soengas-Pérez, X., & Assif, M. (2017). Cyberactivism in the process of political and social change in Arab countries. *Comunicar, 25*(53), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C53-2017-05>