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Algorithms and Digital Activism: The Impact of Algorithms on Social Movements and Activism on Digital Platforms

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Eda AZAP-ÖZTEMEL
Visual Communication Design,
Istinye University, Istanbul, Türkiye
edaa.azap@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-3218-2078

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Abstract
This study explores the growing influence of algorithmic interventions on digital activism across online platforms. On social media, factors such as content visibility, engagement rates, and the type of information presented to users are largely shaped by algorithms. Through a review of the literature and case study analyses, the research reveals how algorithms shape digital activism, influence the visibility of social movements, and transform their mobilization power. The findings suggest that algorithms can both amplify and constrain activist content. Concepts like the "visibility economy" and "emotional algorithms" are particularly significant, reshaping the forms and strategies of digital activism. The study aims to provide insights for researchers seeking to understand the evolving nature of digital activism, as well as strategic guidance for activists in designing content and mobilization efforts.

Keywords: Algorithmic culture, digital activism, social movements, visibility economy, connective action

Introduction

Digital activism extends beyond traditional forms of social movements and advocacy, increasingly taking shape within the algorithmic logic of social media and digital platforms. Today, the success of a movement depends not only on the content and political context of its message but also on how that content interacts with algorithms, the aesthetic and timing strategies employed, and the engagement practices of users. Social media platforms determine, through algorithms, which content is prioritized, what types of information are shown to users, and the potential for interaction—directly influencing the visibility and impact of digital activism.

Literature reviews and case studies indicate that algorithms can both support and limit digital activism. In this context, concepts such as the "visibility economy" and "emotional algorithms" compel activists to rethink every aspect of their work, from content production to campaign strategy. Activists increasingly rely on engagement-driven content—short videos, targeted hashtags, and striking visuals—to align with algorithmically favored formats. Cross-platform strategies help reduce dependence on a single channel and build resilience against restrictive mechanisms.

This study aims to examine how digital activism is shaped within algorithmic environments and how it can affect the online visibility and mobilization strategies of social movements. By providing observations on content creation and engagement practices on digital platforms, along with conceptual discussions, the research offers a foundational framework for understanding the dynamics of digital activism and evaluating the effectiveness of online campaigns.

Literature Review

Digital Activism: Definition and Conceptual Framework

Digital activism is defined as the use of online platforms by individuals and communities to raise awareness, take action, and demand change on social, political, or environmental issues (Joyce, 2010; Tufekci, 2017). It is not simply the migration of traditional activism into digital spaces, but rather a transformative process in which practices of participation, mobilization, and public engagement are reshaped (Milan, 2015). In the literature, this concept highlights the democratizing potential of digital activism while critically addressing its limitations, such as platform governance, surveillance, and algorithmic mediation (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Kaun & Uldam, 2018).

A notable critique in the literature examining the relationship between information and communication technologies and activism is that some studies are anchored in pre-Web 2.0 contexts, making them inadequate for understanding contemporary digital activism (Anduiza et al., 2009). In response, Earl and Kimport (2011) systematically studied internet-based activism and explained the role of digital tools in social movements through three main categories:

1. E-mobilizations: This category covers instances where the internet is used to support traditional forms of activism. Examples include online petition campaigns, email outreach, or informational and call-to-action activities on social media. Here, the internet functions as a tool that enables existing movements to reach broader audiences more quickly.

2. E-tactics: This approach refers to cases where the internet provides movements with new strategic opportunities. E-tactics involve developing innovative methods that differ from traditional organizing and mobilization practices. For instance, calling for a protest via social media or organizing online solidarity campaigns can be considered e-tactics.

3. E-movements: This category allows individuals and groups to communicate rapidly, share information, and build consensus online. People can self-organize, launch social movements, and sustain them without relying on traditional organizational structures. In this context, the internet is not merely a tool but a central element of the movement, forming the core of organizational processes. Examples include fully online-organized social movements or solidarity networks emerging on digital platforms.

Earl and Kimport's classification helps us understand how digital tools facilitate social movements. It accelerates information sharing, eases collective organization, and diversifies avenues for participation. This demonstrates that digital activism is not only technology-driven but also encompasses organizational and strategic dimensions.

Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) offer an alternative classification, distinguishing

between internet-based activism, which includes actions that occur entirely online, and internet-supported activism, which uses digital tools to organize offline actions. Additionally, digital activism is often conceptualized along three dimensions: network connectivity, emotional engagement, and hybrid mobilization. This highlights the intertwining of online and offline spaces (Chadwick, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2015).

Historical Evolution: From Networked Publics to Platform-Based Activism (2000–2024)

The first wave of digital activism emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the increasing availability of the internet (Karatzogianni, 2015). During this period, the internet enabled users to connect with one another and shape public opinion in online spaces, a phenomenon described by the concept of networked publics emphasized by boyd (2010) and Castells (2012). This concept refers to online communities formed through digital networks where users create, share, and discuss content, offering new opportunities for social interaction and public engagement. Activists coordinated protests and disseminated information quickly via email chains, online petitions, discussion forums, and blogs (Papacharissi, 2015). A prominent example is the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, where digital tools facilitated global solidarity (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Before Web 2.0, the limitations of digital tools constrained the organizational and reach capacity of movements, and activism was often conducted through individual posts and forums (Anduiza et al., 2009; Garrett, 2006). Howard Rheingold (2002) coined the term smart mobs to describe this era. According to Rheingold, mobile devices and the internet allowed individuals to organize rapidly and participate in coordinated actions, enabling social movements to form without traditional hierarchical structures. Networked participation created a culture in which users were no longer passive consumers of content but active contributors, producing and sharing information and engaging in social movements.

By the mid-2000s, Web 2.0 transformed online participation into a more interactive experience, making user-generated content, social networking, and multimedia sharing possible (Papacharissi, 2015). Platforms such as Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), and YouTube enabled decentralized mobilization, real-time communication, and global reach. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe this shift as a transition from connective activism—characterized by loosely networked individuals sharing information—to platform-based activism, in which participation, coordination, and visibility are shaped by the platform itself. This transformation allowed mass mobilizations to organize quickly and disseminate information to wide audiences.

Movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Gezi Park, and Indignados marked a critical turning point in the theoretical framework of digital activism (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Kaun & Uldam, 2018). During these movements, social media facilitated local coordination while also making actions visible globally, highlighting the impact of digital tools on politics and public opinion. They represented a new form of protest that combined traditional methods, like

demonstrations and sit-ins, with digital tools such as hashtags, viral videos, and online campaigns (Vegh, 2003; Gerbaudo, 2012). When linked to Tilly's (1978) work on social movements, these repertoires both reproduced historical forms of action and adapted them for online spaces, reaching broader audiences. In this context, the 2011–2015 movements tested the limits of platform-based activism and networked participation, enriching the theoretical framework from both historical and technological perspectives.

Digital activism has further diversified through forms like hacktivism. Groups such as Anonymous have used cyber tools to carry out digital resistance and actions against state and corporate policies. Today, technologies like artificial intelligence, blockchain, and data analytics hold the potential to make digital activism even more powerful and effective (Chadwick, 2017). However, the use of these technologies also raises ethical and security concerns (Shah et al., 2013).

From the emergence of the internet to the present, digital activism has continuously evolved, playing a decisive role in the digitization of social movements and steadily consolidating its influence. Technological advances have enabled more individuals to take action for social change via online platforms. Consequently, digital activism is expected to evolve into an even more dynamic, participatory, and globally impactful force in the future.

Platform Governance: Digital Activism, the Visibility Economy, and Algorithmic Culture

The effectiveness of digital activism is directly linked to platform governance and political opportunity structures. Platform algorithms, content moderation policies, and corporate rules determine which messages gain visibility and which remain marginalized, creating a visibility-based economy of attention. In this way, they significantly shape the reach and impact of campaigns (Gillespie, 2018; Noble, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Beer, 2017; Serttaş et al., 2025). The visibility economy refers to economic systems in the digital age that generate value through attention, engagement, and visibility. Individuals, brands, or organizations gain both social and material value based on how visible and attention-grabbing they are on digital platforms (Hansen & Sørensen, 2017). While traditional economies produce value through goods or services, in the visibility economy, value is primarily measured by the capacity to capture human attention (Davenport & Beck, 2001). The more a video, post, or piece of content is viewed or shared, the more valuable it becomes.

The visibility economy is built on digital content and platforms. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok encourage users to create and share content, generating economic value through likes, comments, shares, and view counts (Van Dijck, 2013). In addition, the visibility economy produces social power: highly visible individuals or brands gain prestige and reputation (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Hansen & Sørensen, 2017).

In this context, digital activism allows social movements to make their voices heard and reach wide audiences online. Which content becomes more visible is largely

and reach wide audiences online. Which content becomes more visible is largely determined by algorithms. Social media algorithms prioritize posts based on users' interests and likelihood of engagement, turning visibility into a strategic resource. As a result, the messages of digital activists are shaped by the dynamics of the visibility economy and the filtering mechanisms of algorithmic culture. The more attention-grabbing and shareable the content, the greater its societal impact.

Since the 2010s, the proliferation of mobile technologies, the hybridization of online and offline campaigns, and the integration of global networked movements have transformed the dynamics of digital activism (Chadwick, 2017). Hashtag campaigns, viral protests, and digital strikes demonstrate how individuals and groups can mobilize quickly across borders. Examples include the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Greta Thunberg's climate strikes, and online advocacy for digital rights. During the same period, hacktivism gained prominence, with groups like Anonymous using digital tools to challenge corporate and political powers (Shah et al., 2013).

Additionally, Rheingold's (2002) concept of smart mobs highlights the role of mobile devices in facilitating coordinated mass action. These mobile networks allow individuals to act rapidly and in an organized manner, enabling digital activists' messages to reach broader audiences and gain visibility on platforms. Smart mobs thus illustrate how attention and visibility acquire value in digital spaces, showing how mobile and digital tools accelerate the social and political impact of digital activism.

Connective Action Framework

The Connective Action framework explains how social movements are organized in the digital age, how individual motivations translate into collective impact within digital networks, and the mechanisms that facilitate this process (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This makes it an essential theoretical lens for the study.

Unlike traditional collective action theories, Bennett and Segerberg's Connective Action model emphasizes personalized forms of participation rather than centralized organization. This is precisely what underlies contemporary digital activism: users connecting to a movement through personal narratives, visuals, hashtags, and content flows shaped by algorithms.

The framework directly intersects with algorithmic culture, the visibility economy and optimization strategies, media literacy, participation, and digital citizenship. Connective Action suggests that activism is no longer primarily about physical organization but has become a platform-based struggle for visibility. The framework helps examine how algorithms determine campaign visibility, which content is amplified, and which is suppressed. The theoretical process can be framed as follows:

- Individual participation → personalized content creatio

- This content → circulates through algorithmic filters
- Circulation → transforms into collective awareness and action

In this sense, algorithmic visibility emerges not as a vehicle for collective action, but as a driver of connective action.

The framework also addresses how activists attempt to manipulate algorithms to enhance visibility. Connective Action explains this not through a centralized agenda, but through network effects generated as individuals share their own narratives. Hashtag campaigns, personal experience sharing, and viral content strategies exemplify the practical implementation of Connective Action's user-centered mobilization logic. This theory grounds concepts like strategy and optimization in the structural logic of digital participation, rather than leaving them abstract (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Finally, Connective Action argues that participation in political and social processes is changing: personal narratives on digital platforms form an infrastructure for civic engagement. Users no longer act solely in response to organizational calls; instead, they are prompted into action by content encountered within algorithmic flows. Connections are formed through personal identity, emotions, and experiences rather than through formal organizations.

In this context, the Connective Action framework provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how digital activism operates. It demonstrates how algorithmic systems differentiate the visibility of activist campaigns, how individual interactions translate personal motivation and content creation into collective action, and how digital activism functions within a flow-based visibility economy rather than structured organizations. As such, Connective Action renders abstract concepts like algorithmic optimization, user-centered engagement, and digital citizenship tangible, aiding both the analysis of cases and the explanation of why contemporary digital activism is organized around personal narratives (Papacharissi, 2015).

2.1. Personalized Action Frames

Personalized Action Frames are frameworks that shape individuals' participation in social movements based on their personal motivations and experiences. Unlike traditional collective action frames, they emphasize that participants act according to their own values, stories, and social contexts rather than the overarching identity of the movement.

They are individually focused: participants contribute to the movement through their personal narratives, experiences, and emotions. They have networked diffusion: shared content—tweets, images, or videos—circulates via algorithms to other users, creating collective impact without centralized coordination. They are flexible and customizable: each individual can craft their own narrative and choose their own mode of participation. They have a binding effect: individual contributions trigger participation from others, making the movement visible and impactful. This dimension highlights that activism is increasingly organized around personal

motivations rather than collective identity. Participants spread the campaign by sharing their own stories, experiences, and content. For example, in the #FridaysForFuture campaign, a single user's supportive post on social media can inspire others to participate, generating broad collective impact without central coordination. In this respect, Personalized Action Frames provide a crucial theoretical lens for analyzing digital activism and algorithmic visibility in this study.

Organizationally Enabled Networks

Another dimension of the Connective Action framework, Organizationally Enabled Networks, explains the relationship between individual participation and centralized organization in digital activism. These are networks created by organizations that support, guide, or facilitate individual participation on digital platforms. While encouraging collective action, these networks also provide strategic goals, resources, or coordination, bridging the gap between personal participation and organized movement. Key features of this structure include organizational support, networked architecture, coordination, strategy, and collective impact (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Individual users become part of the movement through the resources and guidance offered by NGOs, campaign groups, or institutions. Participants connect with one another via frameworks, tools, or platforms provided by these organizations. Organizations help coordinate individual contributions, optimize visibility, and maintain message consistency to achieve campaign objectives. As a result, individual actions can reach wider audiences and generate collective impact even without centralized planning.

Hashtag campaigns, in particular, leverage loose and flexible structures that allow individuals to share their own content and contribute to the movement's diffusion. For example, in the #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter campaigns, NGOs and activists encouraged participants to share personal experiences using the affordances of digital platforms, rather than relying on centralized coordination. This approach created broad, dynamic digital networks.

Organizationally Enabled Networks are therefore networks that promote individual participation while providing a strategic, resource-supported organizational framework. Together with Personalized Action Frames, they represent the mechanisms that combine the individual and organized dimensions of digital activism.

Bridging Connective and Platform-Based Activism: From Individualized Participation to Platform-Mediated Mobilization

The Connective Action framework provided a powerful lens for understanding how digital activism spread through individuals up until the mid-2010s. It illustrates how personal motivations can translate into collective impact across digital networks and how this process unfolds (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). However, certain limitations became apparent during this period. Participation often became overly

individualized, movements were loosely organized, and low-effort forms of online engagement—commonly referred to as slacktivism or clicktivism—limited the long-term effects and tangible outcomes of these movements (Tufekci, 2017; Morozov, 2009; Halupka, 2014).

At the heart of these limitations lie platform governance and the visibility economy of digital platforms. Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and emotionally-driven algorithms shape and control access to collective action, determining who sees what and how widely content spreads (Pariser, 2011; Bucher, 2018).

Some movements, such as #OccupyWallStreet, #DirenGeziParkı, and the early stages of BlackLivesMatter, initially spread quickly through the personal networks and shares of individuals. Yet, this spread could be limited by the algorithms and visibility controls of digital platforms. This illustrates that contemporary digital activism requires not only individual initiative but also a strategic approach to leveraging platforms.

Emerging as a subtype of digital activism, slacktivism refers to online engagement through digital and social media platforms. A blend of “slacker” and “activism,” this phenomenon—also known as clicktivism—typically involves low-effort, symbolic online actions. Examples include liking or sharing posts, signing online petitions, or using hashtags.

Critics argue that slacktivism has limited impact if online actions are not accompanied by offline participation and tangible efforts (Gladwell, 2011; Halupka, 2014; Karpf, 2010; Shulman, 2009). Morozov (2009) defines slacktivism as “online activism that makes participants feel good without producing political or social impact,” portraying participants as under the illusion that symbolic engagement alone can create real change.

Slacktivists are criticized for taking minimal risks and exerting little effort. Morozov (2009) labels it “the ideal activism for a lazy generation,” while Halupka (2014) highlights that individuals often engage in such acts primarily for moral satisfaction. Though this form of participation may ease personal conscience, its broader societal impact is limited.

Nevertheless, early interpretations of slacktivism were more positive. Christensen (2011) notes that in periods when young people organized independently and without hierarchical structures, low-cost online participation played an effective, supportive role in grassroots movements. Over time, however, comparisons with traditional activism shifted perceptions, prompting critical evaluation regarding efficacy and impact.

Recent studies question this reductionist view of slacktivism. In hybrid activism models, where online and offline engagement are combined, slacktivism can serve as both a trigger and a supportive mechanism (Rotman et al., 2011; Vegh, 2003). Enjolras and colleagues (2013) link this transformation to the technological evolution

of digital platforms: the shift from Web 1.0's limitations to Web 2.0, and discussions around Web 4.0 today, has expanded opportunities for participation and enabled effective digital campaigns.

Slacktivist actions can function effectively to attract public attention, influence media agendas, and foster collective awareness. For younger generations, such actions can serve as initial steps toward political engagement, laying the groundwork for deeper involvement (Zoonen & De Ridder, 2011; Štětka & Mazák, 2014). Yet, the reality remains that "you cannot save the rainforest with a single click"—slacktivism alone has limited capacity to produce tangible social change.

These limitations, along with the evolving nature of digital activism, suggest that while the Connective Action framework is valuable, contemporary digital activism also demands more organized, platform-based explanations t
hat account for the strategic and algorithmic dynamics of online mobilization.

Shift Toward Platform-Based Activism (2018–2024)

After 2018, digital activism began to move beyond the individual-centered Connective Action approach, adopting a more platform-based orientation. During this period, social media and other digital platforms became central tools that determine the visibility and impact of movements. Individual contributions remain important; however, algorithms, filter bubbles, and content promotion mechanisms play a critical role in deciding which messages reach broad audiences (Pariser, 2011; Bucher, 2018).

In platform-based activism, organizations and campaign groups provide tools and strategies that guide users' individual contributions. This allows personal shares to translate into collective impact and increases the movement's visibility without centralized coordination. Hashtag campaigns, visual content, and viral posts emerged as the main instruments of digital activism during this period.

This transformation also responds to the limitations of slacktivism. Low-effort online participation can now be supported by platform strategies to achieve broader impact, with users' contributions optimized algorithmically. Consequently, the 2018–2024 period represents a phase in which digital activism reshaped the balance between individual participation and collective impact, highlighting the importance of platform-based strategies and algorithmic visibility.

Platforms as Gatekeepers

Digital activism is no longer determined solely by participants' motivations; it is increasingly shaped by platforms' algorithmic preferences and governance structures. Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and X control which users see content, which messages spread, and which interactions are prioritized, thereby managing the visibility of digital activism (Kreiss & McGregor, 2019; Klinger & Svensson, 2018).

In this context, platforms function not just as tools but as active actors shaping movements within the framework of platform governance. Algorithms optimize user interactions and content distribution, determining which campaigns go viral and which remain limited in reach. This demonstrates that activists' strategic planning is now heavily dependent on the visibility and restriction mechanisms of digital platforms.

Algorithmic Culture and Mediation of Activist Content

In recent years, the production and circulation of culture have increasingly relied on algorithmic processes rather than human decision-making. Striphas (2015) defines this transformation as algorithmic culture. Today, algorithms determine which information becomes visible, which content is prioritized, and how cultural symbols are classified. This development has shifted the understanding of culture from being shaped publicly and collectively to one in which digital platforms are not merely spaces that host content but active actors that reproduce social norms and values (Gillespie, 2014).

This algorithmic guidance affects not only cultural practices but also the operation of digital activism. The visibility of content—what reaches a wide audience and what remains in the background—is largely determined by platform algorithms (Bucher, 2018). Consequently, the success of a digital campaign no longer depends solely on the quality of its message or its sharing strategy; algorithmic mechanisms have become a critical factor.

This process is referred to in the literature as algorithmic mediation and is one of the central mechanisms shaping the visibility of digital activism (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). By selecting which content appears in user feeds, algorithms indirectly influence the development of public agendas (Klinger & Svensson, 2018). Therefore, the circulation of activist content depends not only on user interest but also on the technical preferences and limitations of the platform.

- Shadow banning: reducing the visibility of content or users without their knowledge,
- Content suppression: preventing certain messages from spreading,
- Moderation bias: some content is disproportionately restricted due to political, cultural, or institutional biases in content moderation processes (Gorwa et al., 2020; Jhaver et al., 2019).

These practices can significantly limit the reach of campaigns, especially those focused on political, environmental, or social inequality issues.

In this framework, digital activism is shaped not only by content production and sharing but also by the datafication of activism and algorithmic visibility processes (Rogers, 2013; Tufekci, 2015). For instance, an environmental campaign promoted through specific hashtags may quickly gain traction, but if algorithmic priorities change, the campaign can suddenly lose visibility.

As a result, activists are now responsible not only for generating messages but also for understanding the platform logic. Producing content that maximizes engagement, developing hashtag strategies, and aligning with platform policies have become essential for sustaining digital activism (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Penney, 2017). However, the structural opacity and constant evolution of algorithms make these strategies inherently unpredictable.

In conclusion, algorithmic culture and algorithmic mediation have become decisive factors in the success of digital activism. Producing content alone is no longer sufficient; how algorithms evaluate content, who it reaches, and which platform rules apply directly shape the visibility and societal impact of digital movements. Consequently, digital activism has increasingly evolved into a strategic and technical practice that must adapt to platform logic (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Tufekci, 2015).

Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Emotional Algorithms

Platform-based activism is closely linked not only to content production but also to how the digital environment users encounter is shaped. Among the key elements of this environment are filter bubbles and echo chambers. Algorithms analyze the content that users have previously clicked on, liked, or shared and then repeatedly show similar messages. As a result, users remain within a content flow that confirms their existing beliefs rather than being exposed to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017).

This phenomenon has a dual effect on activist campaigns. On one hand, messages easily reach an already interested audience and can generate strong engagement. On the other hand, access to groups with differing viewpoints is limited, which can weaken the goal of societal transformation.

Moreover, content flows on digital platforms are shaped not only by information relevance but also by emotional responses. Emotional algorithms prioritize content that elicits stronger reactions such as anger, surprise, fear, or hope (Bucher, 2018; Bozdag, 2013). Consequently, content with high emotional impact gains visibility, while solution-oriented, informative, or more measured messages may remain in the background. For instance, dramatic images in environmental campaigns can spread rapidly, whereas technical information may not achieve the same level of visibility.

These three factors demonstrate that digital activism today involves more than simply producing messages. Activists aiming to make their campaigns visible and reach wide audiences must develop strategies that account for both platform algorithms and user behavior (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Tufekci, 2015).

In short, contemporary digital activism depends not only on crafting the “right” message but also on understanding how that message is circulated by the platform. Consequently, activism has evolved into a strategic process that encompasses analyzing platform mechanisms as much as content itself.

Characteristics of Platform-Based Activism

Platform-based digital activism exhibits distinct mechanical and strategic features that shape the process of generating impact in digital environments. These features require activists not only to produce content but also to continuously engage with algorithms to gain visibility.

Visibility Labor

In platform-based activism, being visible is more than just sharing a message. Activists expend ongoing effort to ensure their content stands out in digital spaces. This labor involves strategically planning the visual aesthetics, rhythm, format, music, hashtags, and even the timing of posts (Abidin, 2020). Such effort is referred to as visibility labor, representing the often invisible yet highly impactful work activists perform to gain digital prominence.

For example, producing short and fast-paced videos on TikTok, using popular sounds, or creating Instagram Reels with trending filters and music can facilitate algorithmic promotion. In other words, activists must carefully plan not only what they communicate but also how they share it.

Strategic Algorithmic Tactics

Strategies in platform-based activism are developed in alignment with the logic of social media algorithms. These tactics aim to enhance content visibility and maximize engagement:

- Hashtag stacking: Using multiple relevant hashtags to increase the likelihood of content discovery (Penney, 2017).
- Duet / Repost usage: Responding to or sharing other users' content on TikTok or X/Twitter to strengthen viral effects (Cotter, 2021).
- Cross-platform amplification: Sharing content simultaneously across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter to expand reach (Jin et al., 2022).
- Trend hijacking: Associating activist messages with current trends or popular hashtags to gain algorithmic prominence and boost engagement (Bucher, 2018).
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Platform Incentive Structures

Different social media platforms offer structures that encourage specific user behaviors and types of content. TikTok, for instance, promotes creativity and shareability through sound, remixing, and challenge cultures. Instagram prioritizes short, visually focused, easily consumable Reels, while X/Twitter amplifies viral potential and engagement through speed, sensationalism, and discussion-centered content.

Activists who understand these structures can optimize their content strategies according to the algorithmic logic of each platform, thereby increasing both visibility and potential societal impact (Abidin, 2020; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Concrete Examples of Platform-Based Activism

Between 2018 and 2024, digital activism increasingly evolved toward a platform-based structure, a trend supported not only by theoretical frameworks but also by observational data. As discussed in previous sections, the Connective Action approach successfully explains individual-based participation, in which participants come together in a flexible, networked structure without strict hierarchies or central organization. However, excessive personalization, low-effort online participation forms (slacktivism/clicktivism), and algorithmic visibility constraints have highlighted limits to the sustainability and impact of movements (Tufekci, 2017; Morozov, 2009; Halupka, 2014; Bucher, 2018). This reality requires digital activists to do more than produce content—they must strategically understand platform logic, algorithmic governance, and the visibility economy.

#MeToo: The #MeToo movement, a prominent example of feminist digital activism, illustrates fluctuations in visibility through the strategic use of hashtags and viral content. Activists produced content while considering users' sharing behaviors and interactions. Nevertheless, platform algorithms limited the visibility of some content, shaping the scope of the movement (Mendes et al., 2018). This case demonstrates that digital activism operates in direct interaction with platform logic, and visibility is not determined solely by content quality.

#BlackLivesMatter: Campaigns on X/Twitter and Instagram provide key examples of how algorithms shape content visibility. Platform algorithms amplified certain posts to reach wider audiences (algorithmic amplification) while suppressing others (algorithmic suppression), directly affecting how users perceived the movement's message. This demonstrates that digital activism requires strategic engagement with algorithmic processes rather than mere content production (Freelon et al., 2018).

Climate Movements (#FridaysForFuture, #ClimateStrike): Youth-led climate movements illustrate the effective use of visibility labor and algorithmic strategies on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Activists optimized their content in line with recommendation systems and trending mechanisms, successfully capturing young audiences' attention and raising societal awareness (Betsill & Jones, 2021).

Local Case Studies (Turkey): In the Turkish context, the #DirenGeziParkı movement provides an early example of platform-dependent visibility strategies. Activists employed various techniques to optimize content visibility and engagement, such as using multiple relevant hashtags, sharing content simultaneously across platforms, and designing posts with visually and rhythmically appealing elements. These strategies helped ensure the movement's messages reached wider audiences (Kızılçelik, 2020; Güneş, 2021).

These cases collectively show that digital activism has moved beyond purely individual or community-based participation. It has become a strategic process operating in interaction with platform algorithms, requiring deliberate planning to maximize both visibility and social impact.

Case Studies and Empirical Literature Context

This study examines three selected cases to concretize the dynamics of platform-based digital activism. These cases provide a framework for understanding how algorithmic culture, the visibility economy, and platform practices influence activist mobilization, as discussed in academic literature. Each case connects theoretical and methodological insights by reviewing relevant scholarly research.

#MahsaAmini Protests: The #MahsaAmini protests have emerged as a significant area of research in digital activism, generating a broad range of studies across multiple disciplines. Marks (2023) provides a detailed analysis of how the protests were organized via social media and how online communities formed. Similarly, studies published in Open Access Journals demonstrate how the protests spread across digital networks using Twitter data. The online discourse dimension has been further explored by Khorramrouz, Dutta, and KhudaBukhsh (2023) through stance analysis of Persian Twitter content. The social and political context of the movement is discussed by Çalhan (2023), highlighting how the protests redefined state-society relations. Media representation has also been investigated; Esmaeili (2024) analyzes coverage in The New York Times and The Guardian, revealing how international media framed the protests, while Özdemir and Akdağ (2024) examine the relationship between local and international media presentation and social mobilization. Hashtag activism features prominently in the literature: Cai (2023) analyzes the catalytic impact of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign on social media, and Tzampazi (2023) provides a theoretical framework on digital feminism and cyber activism. Supporting this, Turkish studies such as Asa (2023) illustrate the protests as an important example of the intersection between new social movements and social media.

#NoKings Movement (USA): The #NoKings movement, advocating democratic norms and mobilizing against authoritarian tendencies, attracted significant media and public attention, yet peer-reviewed academic studies remain limited. Existing sources largely consist of journalism reports, analyses of the movement's organizational structure, and civil society documents. According to Britannica, on 14 June 2025, millions participated in protests across approximately 2,100 cities. The movement's official website emphasizes underlying democratic concerns and the role of civil society and progressive groups (nokingsmovement.com). Media analyses discuss the size and resources of groups involved in organizing the protests. Press and civil society documentation indicate that the movement adopted a nonviolent protest strategy focused on defending democratic institutions and called for mass participation. However, systematic academic analyses of social media data, including hashtag and stance analysis or long-term societal impact, remain scarce, positioning the #NoKings case as a "research gap" in the literature.

#StopAsianHate Campaign (USA, 2021–present): The #StopAsianHate campaign exemplifies platform-focused activism, visibility labor, and emotion-driven participation. Lyu, Fan, Xiong, and Komisarchik (2021) demonstrate, through Twitter analysis, that the rise of the hashtag showed geographic and demographic variations linked to societal perceptions of hate crimes. Tong, Li, Bei, and Zhang (2022) analyze #BlackLivesMatter and #StopAsianHate together, showing that while both movements intersect through emotional themes, solidarity calls, and social justice narratives, platform interaction dynamics differ. Cao, Lee, Sun, and De Gagne (2022) conducted qualitative content analysis of 31,665 tweets from May 2021, identifying five dominant themes structuring the movement's online discourse. Jeon and Kim (2023) applied network analysis to examine interactions between #StopAsianHate and #BlackLivesMatter following spa attacks in Atlanta, showing that user engagement concentrated on specific topics. Shahin and Hou (2025) highlight how actors like BTS and right-wing digital provocateurs shaped engagement levels. Beyond Twitter, TikTok has become a critical space; CTDA-based studies show Asian/American women creating digital solidarity through emotion- and experience-based video content. Xie, Liu, and Cheng (2023) identify "reflection" strategies as a prominent form of activism, while Lee and Jang (2024) demonstrate that negatively emotional tweets are more likely to be retweeted, with collective anger and concern playing a central role in digital circulation.

This cumulative body of literature shows that the #StopAsianHate movement demonstrates a multi-layered digital activism practice across Twitter and TikTok, encompassing emotion, visibility, community-building, and algorithmic attention structures. It provides a significant empirical basis supporting the theoretical framework of digital activism adopted in this study.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and conducts a comprehensive content analysis grounded in the literature on digital activism, platform governance, algorithmic culture, and the attention economy. Both theoretical literature (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Tufekci, 2017; Striphas, 2015; Noble, 2018) and empirical studies on selected contemporary international hashtag campaigns have been examined.

The methodological framework of the study aims to evaluate how the #MahsaAmini, #NoKings, and #StopAsianHate cases gained visibility within the digital ecosystem, interacted with platform algorithms, and shaped political and social mobilization. Therefore, the case analyses do not merely provide descriptive accounts but integrate concepts derived from the literature to establish a cohesive analytical framework. Each case is examined in relation to platform-specific algorithmic rules, user strategies, and political opportunity structures.

Case Study 1: Mahsa Amini Protests (Iran, 2022) – Algorithmic Culture and Digital Activism

The death of Mahsa Amini while in the custody of Iran's "Guidance Patrol" on September 16, 2022, sparked widespread protests across the country. Centered

around the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom," this movement organized not only in the streets but also within digital spaces provided by social media, forming a hybrid model of protest that combined physical and digital mobilization. Symbolic acts, such as women cutting their hair, burning their headscarves, and challenging religious authorities, created a profound impact both domestically and internationally.

The protests were predominantly led by Generation Z, whose technological literacy, digital strategies, and networked culture shaped the movement. According to reports from the Iranian Human Rights Activists News Agency, 530 protesters lost their lives, and young female activists became targets due to their social media activity (e.g., Hadis Najafi, Sarina Esmailzadeh, Nika Shakarami). These outcomes underscore the direct intersection of digital activism and physical risk.

With a median age of 31.7, Iran's Generation Z—born after September 11 and largely distant from state narratives—developed a collective identity grounded in freedom of expression, digital rights, bodily autonomy, and individual liberties (Dagres, 2022). They engaged with global cultures via the internet, shaping political imagination. Low voter turnout in the 2021 elections (48.8%) and high rates of invalid ballots highlighted the regime's legitimacy crisis (Statista, 2023a–b). Additionally, an estimated 4 million Iranians in the diaspora amplified the movement globally via TikTok and Instagram, increasing its visibility (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009).

TikTok as a Protest Space:

Figure 1. Screenshot of a hair-cutting act that went viral on TikTok (4.8M likes, 28.1K comments, 22.9K shares), representing one of the symbolic digital representations of the Mahsa Amini protests

TikTok's short-video format (15 seconds–3 minutes) and algorithmic recommendation system played a critical role in the protest process. Interactive features such as "Duet" and "Stitch" enabled rapid replication and memetic reproduction of content (Shifman, 2013). Memetic culture refers to the spread and sharing of cultural ideas, behaviors, or symbols through memes—a collective form of digital cultural expression.

For young activists, TikTok became more than a content-sharing or entertainment platform. It allowed participants to safely display physically risky acts, such as cutting hair or removing headscarves, thereby expressing a "hidden self" while simultaneously contributing to collective goals like raising social awareness and enhancing global visibility. Thus, TikTok functioned as a platform where personal experiences were made visible, and political and social messages could circulate (Fan et al., 2023).

The use of music further reinforced the emotional dimension of protest in the digital space (Danaher, 2010; Taylor, 2000). English subtitles enabled the movement to transcend national borders, reaching international audiences and facilitating the emergence of affective publics—communities united around shared emotions that could collectively participate in the movement (Lee & Abidin, 2023).
Despite TikTok being banned in Iran, young activists accessed the platform via VPNs, while diaspora participants helped circumvent censorship by sharing content. This dynamic highlighted the tension between algorithms and state surveillance (Salartash, 2022).

Algorithmic Culture and the Visibility Economy:
The Mahsa Amini protests provide a concrete illustration of algorithmic culture and the visibility economy. As Striphas (2015) notes, algorithms are an inseparable part of cultural practices, determining which content becomes visible. Gillespie (2018) and Bucher (2018) emphasize that platform algorithms shape political processes by amplifying or suppressing content. Tufekci (2017) argues that digital mobilization relies on users operating within experience spaces shaped by algorithms.

In the Mahsa Amini case, activists employed strategies such as hashtag campaigns, coded language, and alternative platform usage to enhance visibility and circumvent censorship. These practices demonstrate how algorithms function as critical actors in determining content prominence (Striphas, 2015; Milan, 2015). The case highlights that digital activism extends beyond content creation, requiring a strategic understanding of algorithmic logic.

In conclusion, the #MahsaAmini protests offer a holistic view of the technical and social dimensions of digital activism. They reveal how algorithms influence political, cultural, and emotional outcomes and demonstrate how the integration of platform strategies can increase global visibility and resist censorship mechanisms.

Case Study 2: #NoKings – U.S. Digital Infrastructure and Evidence-Based (EB) Activism

Emerging during Donald Trump's reelection campaign in 2025, the #NoKings movement represents a digitally organized protest against government overreach and disinformation policies. The movement employed a hybrid activism model, combining online and offline mobilization, and serves as a significant case for analyzing the role of digital activism in modern democratic debates and social movements (Tufekci, 2017; Milan, 2015).

Figure 2. Screenshot of the YouTube livestream page on the #NoKings official website (nokings.org).

The movement centralized its online organization through the nokings.org website, which provides participants with information on movement goals, current activities, and resources. The site exemplifies core features of evidence-based (EB) digital activism, including:

1. Host Toolkit and Educational Materials: The site provides local organizers with event planning guides, graphic materials, QR codes, and "Know Your Rights" handbooks. These resources demonstrate that digital activism extends beyond message dissemination, offering infrastructure to organize participants and facilitate safe protests (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

2. QR Codes and Hybrid Mobilization: QR-coded materials are employed both in physical spaces and online, integrating offline and online mobilization. This strategy enhances the movement's digital visibility and creates a sharing network aligned with algorithmic recommendation systems (Beer, 2017; Noble, 2018).

3. Symbolism and Visual Identity: The color yellow is used as a symbol of unity and solidarity on the website, transforming into a memetic strategy that enables rapid recognition and viral potential on social media (Shifman, 2013).

4. Livestreaming and Continuity: Features such as live streams and "What's Next" sections support the movement's continuity and engagement across online and offline dimensions. This highlights the role of digital activism in sustaining long-term mobilization (Lee & Abidin, 2023).

5. Security and Participant Rights: "Know Your Rights" guides and security planning tools inform activists about potential legal and safety risks in digital and physical spaces. This illustrates the strategic application of EB-based activism in contexts with limited democratic freedoms and civil liberties (Salartash, 2022).

Hashtag Strategies and Digital Visibility:

#NoKings extended its activism across platforms such as BlueSky, Reddit, and Signal. Al-Khateeb et al. (2025) found that the movement utilized 6,079 different hashtags simultaneously, forming 68 distinct online communities. PageRank analysis revealed that the most central hashtags structurally shaped the movement's narrative, indicating that users collectively produced meaning within algorithmically mediated environments. In this way, the website and social media platforms together materialize the visibility economy and algorithmic culture aspects of EB-based digital activism (Striphas, 2015; Tufekci, 2017; Milan, 2015).

In conclusion, the #NoKings website functions as a central infrastructure that integrates the movement's digital and physical mobilization strategies. Toolkits, live streams, educational resources, and symbolic content combine the technical and social dimensions of EB-based digital activism, enhancing the movement's global visibility. This case demonstrates that digital activism extends beyond content production, showing how integration with algorithmic recommendation systems and participatory infrastructure can amplify the impact of social movements.

Case Study 3: #StopAsianHate Movement – U.S. (2021–Present)

The #StopAsianHate movement emerged in response to rising hate crimes and racist rhetoric targeting Asian and Asian American communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Atlanta spa shootings on March 16, 2021, in which eight individuals were killed—six of whom were Asian women—served as a catalytic event that significantly increased the movement's visibility. Organizers declared March 26, 2021, as the "National Day of Action and Healing" and provided participants with a Day of Action Toolkit, including guidance for online actions, sharing strategies, and educational resources.

Figure 3. #StopAsianHate: Hashtag Activism.

The movement employed data-driven and strategically planned digital activism using social media and digital tools. The #StopAsianHate hashtag was widely used across Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms, enabling community members to share both personal experiences and collective responses, fostering societal self-awareness (Fiveable, 2025; NCSU, 2023). Structural analyses indicate that the movement is organized around social justice, emotional responses, and collective action themes. Accordingly, the movement's digital strategies exemplify evidence-based (EB) digital activism, where content production and sharing are intentionally designed to enhance visibility, engagement, and societal awareness rather than functioning solely as spontaneous reactions.

Hashtag Activism and Social Media Use:

- The #StopAsianHate hashtag was extensively utilized across Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms (Fiveable, 2025).
- Hashtag usage facilitated not only expressive acts but also collective sharing of emotional experiences, reinforcing societal self-awareness (NCSU, 2023).
- Structural analyses using LDA and topic modeling reveal that the movement is organized around themes of social justice, emotional response, and collective action (Tong, Li, Li, Bei, & Zhang, 2022).

Education and Resource Provision:

- Institutional actors, such as the USC Equity Research Institute, provided informative digital resources for community members (USC Dornsife, 2021).
- Artistic and personal content shared via Instagram and other platforms strengthened community solidarity and emotional expression (Imaginations Journal, 2022).

Celebrity and Cultural Influence:

- Support from prominent Asian and Asian American figures increased the movement's visibility and contributed to wider community awareness (DOAJ, 2022).
- Fan communities and digital networks amplified the campaign's message to broader audiences.

Algorithmic Culture and Visibility Economy:

- Hashtag-based content was amplified by platform algorithms, increasing overall visibility.
- Celebrity endorsements and the simultaneous structural deployment of hashtags enhanced the movement's algorithmic visibility and viral potential (Tufekci, 2017).
- Integration between digital actions and physical protests enabled the visibility economy to function across both online and offline spaces.

Societal and Institutional Impacts:

- The movement drew public attention to anti-Asian racism and stimulated national-level dialogue (RSN, 2023).
- Activist pressure contributed to support for legal initiatives addressing hate crimes (DOAJ, 2022).
- Academic research highlights the critical role of digital actions in fostering social awareness and emotional solidarity (NCSU, 2023).
- Long-term visibility and sustainability remain debated; some analyses indicate that the hashtag's impact diminished following its initial viral surge (Anthro Magazine, 2023).

In conclusion, the #StopAsianHate movement demonstrates how social media and hashtag activism, within an EB-based digital activism framework, can play a central role in amplifying both testimonial and collective action efforts. Celebrity support and community engagement enhanced algorithmic visibility and viral potential, while integration between digital and physical activism increased both symbolic and tangible impact. Nevertheless, long-term sustainability and integration with institutional structures remain ongoing challenges.

Findings

This study analyzed the post-2010 transformation of digital activism, with particular attention to the visibility-driven, platform-based activism model that has become increasingly prominent between 2018 and 2024, through the examination of three cases: #MahsaAmini, #NoKings, and #StopAsianHate. The findings indicate that each movement exhibits hybrid and multi-layered mobilization shaped both by user strategies and by the algorithmic functioning of platforms.

The case studies demonstrate that the visibility economy has become a central dynamic of contemporary digital activism. Across all three movements, strategic practices aimed at increasing visibility were systematically applied: preference for engagement-enhancing formats (short videos, emotional narratives, text–image combinations), use of trending sounds and popular hashtags, alignment with platform traffic, and cross-platform amplification (simultaneous sharing across Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter). These practices suggest that digital activism is no longer merely about message production; rather, it entails visibility labor, requiring activists to align their content with the algorithmic logic of platforms. The unpredictability of which content will be amplified or suppressed compels activists to develop strategic sharing practices to maximize reach.

Algorithmic culture emerges as a critical mechanism shaping content dissemination. In all three cases, algorithms act as the most powerful actor determining the audience and reach of activist content. Even when posts have viral potential, mechanisms such as algorithmic suppression, shadow banning, political content restrictions, and prioritization of emotional content directly influence visibility.

During the #MahsaAmini protests, many TikTok and Instagram posts went viral quickly, yet the reach of certain videos fluctuated. This prompted users to adopt tactics to circumvent censorship, including coded language, translation subtitles, and migration to alternative platforms.

The findings also show that Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action model remains relevant today, though now intertwined with platform-based activism. In all three cases, sharing personal stories, experiences, and emotional reactions, combined with networked, individualized campaign structures rather than centralized organizations, created viral effects as personal narratives propagated through digital networks, enabling movements to reach broad audiences. This phenomenon is especially evident in the #StopAsianHate campaign, where content in the form of videos, texts, and memes allowed the formation of affective publics.

The case studies further reveal a hybrid mobilization model in which digital action occurs in parallel with physical protests:

- In the #MahsaAmini protests, street actions by youth were globalized through TikTok.

- İn the #NoKings movement, livestreams, toolkits, and QR codes provided digital infrastructure for physical protests.
- In the #StopAsianHate campaign, online solidarity integrated with national-level physical demonstrations.

This hybrid structure indicates that digital activism has transcended the online/offline divide, operating across both virtual and physical spheres to achieve collective impact.

Discussion

The findings indicate that digital activism has evolved from the interaction-focused participation characteristic of the 2010s into a structure increasingly dependent on platform logic. Hashtag campaigns remain significant; however, visibility is now largely shaped by algorithmic priorities. As a result, activism has become inherently dependent on strategic timing, trend hijacking, aesthetic and format compatibility, and the generation of emotional intensity. While these conditions allow for rapid mobilization, they also render activism more fragile and contingent.

The study further suggests that slacktivism, long criticized in the literature, can function

as a triggering form of participation within the digital ecosystem. Specifically, affective solidarity in the #StopAsianHate campaign, rapid information dissemination in the #NoKings movement, and global awareness generation during the #MahsaAmini protests illustrate that low-effort online engagement plays a critical role during the early stages of campaigns. While slacktivism alone does not produce social transformation, it provides momentum that amplifies the reach and visibility of movements.

At the same time, the research highlights structural risks arising from activism's dependence on algorithms. These risks include the potential suppression of content for political reasons, the shaping of movements by platform policies, the over-amplification of emotionally charged content leading to polarizing narratives, restricted exposure to diverse perspectives due to filter bubbles, and the increasing burden of visibility labor on activists. Collectively, these dynamics suggest that the democratizing potential of digital activism is mediated—and in some cases constrained—by the control exerted by platform companies.

By integrating the connective action framework with platform-based activism theories, this study proposes a comprehensive model explaining the emerging logic of digital activism. According to this model, activism operates through a combination of individualized participation, algorithmic mediation, visibility labor, and platform governance. This approach demonstrates that understanding contemporary digital activism requires not only a social movement perspective but also an interdisciplinary reading that incorporates media studies, platform economics, and communication ecology.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, understanding the algorithmic logic of platforms is crucial for the effectiveness of digital activism. Producing content that aligns with recommendation and ranking systems can enhance the visibility and viral potential of campaigns (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018). Cross-platform strategies and simultaneous mobilization increase reach while reducing dependence on a single platform, thereby strengthening resilience against restrictive mechanisms (Tufekci, 2017). Interaction-oriented content, such as short videos, compelling visuals, and targeted hashtags, increases the likelihood of being amplified by algorithms, expanding the participant base for campaigns (Bucher, 2018).

Given the dynamic nature of platform policies, regular monitoring of content moderation, shadow banning, and censorship is critical for the operational effectiveness and sustainability of campaigns (Noble, 2018; Beer, 2017). Collaborations with civil society organizations, academic institutions, and media actors can further enhance both online and offline visibility, reinforcing the transformative power of digital activism and the link between digital mobilization and tangible societal impact (Milan, 2015).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how digital activism has transformed, showing that contemporary social movements are increasingly dependent on the operational logic of platforms. The findings clearly indicate that activists adapt to the attention- and engagement-driven structures of platforms to gain visibility, and that algorithmic culture has become a central factor shaping the direction of mobilization.

Evidence from the three case studies reveals that contemporary digital activism constitutes a holistic ecosystem characterized by: personalized narratives at its core, algorithmic visibility as a determinant of campaign success, a hybrid structure integrating online and offline activities, structural constraints imposed by platform governance, and a transformative potential capable of reaching broad audiences rapidly.

In conclusion, digital activism can no longer be understood merely as a traditionally organized movement. Instead, it operates as a visibility-driven struggle mediated by algorithms, shaped through individual participation, and requiring constant strategic optimization. This study contributes to both theoretical and practical understandings of this transformation, highlighting the interplay between platform dynamics, collective action, and the evolving mechanisms of digital mobilization.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on three major platforms (TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter/X), leaving activism practices on other digital platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Discord, and Bluesky outside the scope. In particular, in the Iranian context, platform policies, content removal practices, and state-sponsored censorship limited access to original posts, making it difficult to fully track fluctuations in visibility. The reliance on qualitative methods also restricted the

ability to quantitatively examine hashtag density, network relations, or algorithmic recommendation mechanisms. Furthermore, the rapidly evolving nature of platform algorithms means that the findings may not fully generalize to future digital ecosystems. Finally, the study considers only three cases; including additional examples from different geographic and political contexts could provide a broader comparative perspective.

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