

A Comparative Study of Social Media Activism Across Generations

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Abstract: This study explores the generational evolution of social media activism, emphasizing how digital technologies have reshaped the dynamics of collective action from the Baby Boomers to Generation Z. Drawing on secondary data and grounded in Manuel Castells' Network Society Theory, the research examines how different generations utilize communication technologies to mobilize, express dissent, and construct digital publics. Special attention is given to recent youth-led movements such as the **Nepal Gen Z Movement (September 2025)**, characterized by protests against social media restrictions, corruption, and nepotism, and amplified through hashtag activism like **#NepoKids**. The study reveals a clear transition from structured, ideology-driven activism to decentralized, visual, and instantaneous forms of mobilization facilitated by digital networks. While social media democratizes participation and amplifies marginalized voices, it also introduces challenges such as algorithmic bias, digital surveillance, and superficial engagement. Ultimately, the research underscores that generational activism through social media represents both a technological and sociopolitical evolution in how power, identity, and resistance are negotiated in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media activism, Generation Z, digital mobilization, network society, Nepal Gen Z Movement.

Introduction - Social media is a digital ecosystem of interactive platforms and applications that facilitate the creation and sharing of user-generated content, enabling individuals, communities, and organizations to connect, collaborate, and exchange information on a global scale. It is fundamentally characterized by its capacity to transition users from passive consumers to active producers and participants.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), "Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

The core essence of social media is built upon three foundational pillars:

1. Networked Connectivity: It constructs and maintains virtual social networks where users establish a digital identity, form connections, and engage in a dynamic flow of information. This architecture allows for the rapid and widespread dissemination of content, bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of mass media.

2. User-Centric Content Creation: The model is decentralized, empowering any user to generate, curate, and distribute their own content. This includes text, images, videos, and real-time broadcasts, which form the basis of a self-perpetuating cycle of interaction and feedback.

3. Real-Time Interaction and Collaboration: Social media supports a two-way, multi-directional communication model. Unlike one-way broadcasts, it encourages instantaneous

feedback through likes, comments, and shares, fostering a collaborative environment that can shape public opinion, mobilize action, and build consensus in real time.

Social media activism: Social media activism is the strategic use of digital platforms to promote a social or political cause. Social media activism has emerged as a powerful tool for shaping public discourse and driving social and political change. By enabling the swift dissemination of information, it educates communities, combats misinformation, and provides a global platform for marginalized voices. Hashtag activism, seen in movements such as **#BlackLivesMatter**, **#MeToo**, and the **Arab Spring**, has proven effective in unifying conversations, building momentum, and influencing political outcomes.

The evolution of social media and activism reflects a dynamic interplay between technological innovation and sociopolitical engagement. In the early 2000s, digital activism primarily emerged through email campaigns, online forums, and blogs that facilitated issue-based networking and community building. As the 2010s unfolded, the rise of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube transformed activism into a participatory and viral phenomenon, enabling rapid information dissemination and mass mobilization across transnational boundaries. By the 2020s, newer platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram further accelerated the pace and reach of activism through highly visual, interactive, and algorithm-driven content. These shifts illustrate how each generation has

adapted its modes of protest and participation to the communication technologies prevalent in its formative years, thereby reshaping the strategies, visibility, and impact of social and political movements in the digital age.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) highlighted how social networking platforms create spaces for individuals to connect, share, and mobilize around shared causes, laying the groundwork for digital activism. Building on this, Kietzmann et al. (2011) examined the functional aspects of social media, emphasizing its role in fostering participation, co-creation, and collective action through user-generated content. More recently, Tufekci (2017) explored how digital platforms have amplified protest movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, demonstrating both the power of social media to organize large-scale mobilizations and the challenges activists face from state repression and algorithmic control. Together, these studies reveal that while social media is an effective tool for raising awareness and mobilization, its long-term impact depends on sustaining offline actions and overcoming structural barriers.

Research Design: This study adopts a comparative and descriptive research design to analyse patterns of social media activism across different generations. Rather than generating primary data, the research relies exclusively on secondary sources, including academic publications, policy reports, media articles, and case studies of prominent social movements.

Limitations:

1. Reliance on existing literature may omit emerging or less-documented movements.
2. Online activism's short-lived trends may not reflect long-term impact.
3. Cultural and regional variations are underrepresented in global studies.

Theoretical Framework: This study is grounded in **Manuel Castells' Network Society Theory**, which explains how communication networks enabled by digital technologies reshape power, culture, and social movements. Castells (2012) argues that in a "network society," power is diffused through networks rather than concentrated in institutions, and this allows new forms of resistance to emerge. Network Society Theory provides the lens to understand why activism looks different across generations:

Baby Boomers and Gen X use social media to extend their existing activist traditions into new digital spaces.

Millennials blend offline protest with online mobilization, embodying a transitional phase.

Gen Z fully embodies Castells' concept, using decentralized, personalized, and global communication networks as the foundation of their activism.

Table 1 (See in last page)

Comparative Analysis: Activism has taken different shapes across generations, yet certain themes such as justice, equality, and community well-being run through all of them. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and

Generation Z have each engaged in activism shaped by their social contexts and the tools available to them, from street marches to digital networks.

For **Baby Boomers (1946–1964)**, activism was born out of powerful historical struggles like the civil rights movement, Vietnam War protests, and feminist campaigns. As they adapted to the digital age later in life, their activism moved onto Facebook, often focused on healthcare, retirement rights, and local community causes. Their approach is more formal, issue-centered, and text-based, reflecting the traditions of earlier protest methods.

Generation X (1965–1980) acted as a bridge between traditional activism and the digital world. They were influenced by anti-globalization and environmental protests, making early use of blogs, email chains, and online forums in the 1990s. With time, they incorporated platforms like Facebook and Twitter into their strategies. Their activism is hybrid in nature, blending offline demonstrations with online campaigning, as seen in the continuation of anti-globalization protests into the digital sphere.

In contrast, **Millennials (1981–1996)** emerged as the first generation to integrate social media fully into activism. They mastered the use of Twitter storms, viral videos, and online petitions to bring attention to global issues. Their role in movements such as Occupy Wall Street (economic justice), #MeToo (gender equality), and Black Lives Matter (racial justice) illustrates their ability to combine inclusivity, mass mobilization, and global solidarity. Compared to Boomers and Gen X, Millennials rely more heavily on digital platforms to connect online activism with real-world protests.

Generation Z (1997–2012) represents the most digital-native form of activism. Their movements are fast-paced, highly visual, and often global in scale. Using TikTok, Instagram, and memes, Gen Z activists are creative in reaching audiences and shaping conversations. From Greta Thunberg's climate strikes to TikTok disruptions of political rallies and Nepal's 2025 Democracy Movement, their activism is intersectional, visually striking, and rapid in mobilization. Unlike older generations, they rely less on formal petitions or long campaigns and more on viral, creative content that spreads quickly.

Taken together, these findings show a generational shift from **text-heavy, formal activism (Boomers)** to **hybrid protest strategies (Gen X)**, to **viral and global campaigns (Millennials)**, and finally to **visual, fast-paced, and highly digital-native activism (Gen Z)**. While their styles differ, all generations share a common thread of using available tools to challenge inequality and demand social change.

Impact and challenges of social media activism: Social media has significantly transformed the landscape of civic engagement by democratizing participation and amplifying marginalized voices, thereby allowing diverse communities to influence global discourses on justice, equality, and human rights. The interactive and decentralized nature of digital platforms has facilitated large-scale mobilization and

the rapid dissemination of information, making activism more accessible and immediate than ever before. However, these advancements are accompanied by complex challenges that shape the efficacy and ethics of online activism. One major concern is **algorithmic bias**, wherein platform algorithms may inadvertently suppress activist content or privilege commercially driven and sensational information, thus reinforcing existing social hierarchies and inequalities (Noble, 2018). Additionally, the pervasive **digital surveillance** employed by both state and corporate actors poses a threat to privacy and freedom of expression, as activists' online communications are routinely monitored and analysed for political control (Zuboff, 2019). Another critique centres on **clicktivism** or "slacktivism," which refers to the superficial participation of users who engage in online activism primarily through likes, shares, or hashtags without meaningful offline involvement, potentially diluting the impact of genuine social movements (Morozov, 2011). Despite these limitations, social media remains an indispensable instrument for awareness-building, mobilization, and transnational solidarity, providing a critical infrastructure for contemporary activism in the digital public sphere.

Conclusion: The trajectory of activism from the Baby Boomers to Generation Z encapsulates a profound transformation in how social change is imagined, organized, and enacted. What began as physically embodied movements driven by collective gatherings and face-to-face mobilization has evolved into a digitally networked form of resistance that transcends geographical, cultural, and institutional boundaries. Each generation's activism reflects not only its socio-historical context but also its relationship with prevailing communication technologies—shifting from print and broadcast media to the decentralized immediacy of social platforms. Social media has redefined the meaning of participation, blurring the distinction between the personal

and the political, and enabling ordinary individuals to become agents of collective action. While Baby Boomers championed structured, ideology-driven campaigns, Generation X and Millennials bridged the physical and digital spheres, and Gen Z has fully embraced activism as an interactive, real-time, and global phenomenon. Yet, this evolution also underscores the need for critical reflection on the sustainability and depth of digital mobilization in an era of algorithmic control and information saturation. Ultimately, generational activism through social media signifies not merely a change in tools but a reconfiguration of power itself—where voices once marginalized can now challenge dominant narratives and shape the contours of global social justice.

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Table 1: Generational Patterns of Social Media Activism

Generation	Introduction	Social media activism style	Activity (Year)
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Grew up with print & broadcast media; adopted digital media later in life. More familiar with traditional activism (marches, unions, protests).	Primarily offline activism during their youth (marches, rallies, petitions).	Civil Rights Movement (1960s); later adapted to online advocacy for anti-war campaigns (Iraq 2003) and healthcare reforms.
Generation X (1965–1980)	Transition generation between analogue and digital; adapted to internet and early social networks.	Used news media, email chains, and early online forums for activism	Arab Spring (2010–2012); engaged in early online petitions and civic campaigns.
Millennials (1981–1996)	Digital adopters; came of age with internet & early social media (Orkut, Facebook, YouTube).	Heavy users of blogs, early social networks (Orkut, MySpace,).	Occupy Wall Street (2011); #MeToo Movement (2017).
Generation Z (1997–2012)	Digital natives; first generation fully immersed in smartphones, apps, and social networks.	Highly visual, viral activism on TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp Snapchat.	Nepal Gen Z Movement (Sept 2025 – protests against social media ban, corruption, nepotism; hashtag activism like #NepoKids, youth-led street protests).