

#Hashtag movements and digital activism: exploring cultural and critical perspectives for social change: a scoping review

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Abstract: In this era of digitization, the internet and social media networks serve as modern platforms to promote advocacies and social change, thus giving birth to digital activism. Digital activism can be defined as an act of advocating, promoting, and organizing protest for social, cultural, political, and environmental causes through the use of digital tools, platforms, and technologies. On the other hand, Hashtag Movements are the act of gathering support from the general public through the use of hashtags in social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. Together, Digital Activism and Hashtag Movements have become a powerful tool for social change reaching beyond boundaries, and cultures. Despite the growing popularity and relevance of these movements, the study aims to critically explore the underlying mechanisms of these hashtag movements, its effectiveness, and probable limitations. Additionally, the study wants to gain an in-depth understanding on how algorithms, the general public's behavior and attitude in using social media, virality of the movement, and its overall sustainability affects the people's attitude towards these movements and its outcome. Furthermore, to ensure that the study can contribute meaningfully in the field of digital media, and activism, the study incorporates various theoretical and conceptual frameworks. These relevant theories will help analyze underlying relationships between the hashtag movements, social media users, and digital activism. Ultimately, achieving its goal to contribute to academic discourse and practical strategies in utilizing digital media in motivating social change.

Keywords: Digital activism, Hashtag movements, Social change, Social justice

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Web 2.0, Digital Activism is easily one of the cost-efficient and powerful ways to incite social change, reaching millions and billions of people through the internet and social media platforms (Humanitarian Academy for Development, 2024). At the core of this digital activism are the Hashtag movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #FridaysForFuture. These movements play a significant role in changing how protest and campaign are organized while amplifying the narratives of marginalized communities and other social issues.

This scoping review aims to explore the cultural and critical perspectives about hashtag movements and digital activism in driving social change. This scoping review will synthesize

existing studies to provide a comprehensive understanding and an in-depth insight about hashtag movements and digital activism. This can also help identify the gaps in the literature and studies, ensuring that this study can contribute to the ongoing struggle for social justice.

Statement of the problem

This scoping review aimed to explore the existing studies related to Hashtag Movements and Digital Activism to Cultural and Critical Perspectives. To successfully achieve the objective of this study, it is important to answer these following research questions:

- 1) What are the necessary findings and other academic knowledge about digital activism and hashtag movements in promoting advocacy and inciting social change or justice?
- 2) What are the identified concerns, gaps, and limitations encountered by the existing studies that are relevant in this study?
- 3) What are the approaches and strategies in research towards the study of digital activism and hashtag movements and their relation in driving social change and active participation in activism?

METHODOLOGY

Protocol

Preliminary to conducting this scoping review, a detailed research protocol was developed. The author of this study affirms that this review provides an accurate, transparent, and faithful description of the conducted review. No changes in the protocol were recorded, and if any, there is a change in the study's design, it will be clearly and appropriately described. This scoping review adheres to Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses or PRISMA (Tricco et al., 2018), and the updated methodology for conducting scoping review by Peters et al. (2020).

Search eligibility criteria

In the present review, the problem, concept, and context (PCC) framework was applied to state the eligibility criteria and structure the review. To state the eligibility criteria and structure the review of the related studies and literature, the framework of Problem, Concept, and Context (PCC) was applied.

Studies were eligible if it focuses on individuals who participated, activist, and communities to digital activism and to any hashtag movements (Problem), and if it explores the role of social media, hashtags in social change and its cultural and critical perspectives (Concept), and if it is conducted in the context of social media platforms, specifically X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok (Context). Applying the PCC framework to the eligibility criteria ensures that the review will be able to find relevant studies that explore the field of digital activism and hashtag movements that translates to social change with the use of various social media platforms.

Search strategy

To answer the review questions and answer the objectives, the search was conducted as of January 15, 2025. Various online publications and databases like Jstor, ScienceDirect, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) were thoroughly searched to look for relevant and related studies and literature. The search terms used are all related to Hashtag movements and Digital Activism, specific terms like "Hashtag Movements", "Digital Activism", "Social Media and Activism", "Advocacy in Social Media" and "Hashtags and Activism" combine with terms related to Social Change like "racism", "equality", and "black lives matter". The search also leaned to specific fields of communication, media, and human behaviors that

heavily relates to the study. The author carefully filters and selects studies and literature necessary while keeping in mind that it should be published between 2020 and 2025. All of the relevant documents with full-texts were included in the review.

Study selection

In the process of selecting studies, the author searched the research publications (ScienceDirect, ERIC, Jstor, and Sage Journals). The author used the filter option (date of publication, subject area, language, etc.) to mention research publication. Next, the author proceeded to the screening process. The author first screens the title and abstract of the retrieved studies, then the author decides whether the document will be included or not. The document will be excluded if it fails to pass the PCC for eligibility criteria. After that, the full text of each included documents were thoroughly read and analysed. To ensure that these documents are tracked properly, the author using notes and google documents recorded each document.

Data extraction

To ensure that the data extraction is accurate and only relevant data will be listed, the review questions were developed using the PCC framework. Additionally, pre-protocol searches were done to help the author formulate a basic structure in reporting the extracted data for the review. Ensuring a systematic and organized process in collecting data:

- 1) Data from the reviewed documents relating to the hashtag movements and digital activism to promote and advocate social change;
- 2) Data from the reviewed publications regarding effectiveness, challenges, and limitations regarding the utilization of social media for activism and the other cultural and critical matters that affects it;
- 3) Data from the articles under review containing information on how social media algorithm helps mobilize digital activism, the social media users behavior in using social media, and the necessity of virality and sustainability of the advocacy to effectively cause a change.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Search and selection results

The search results for the scoping review were finalised as of February 15, 2025. At first, the author found a total of 1,250 initial documents from ScienceDirect, Sage Journals, ERIC, and Jstor. Due to the broad number of documents, the author applied search filters (publication year, keywords, language, and field of study) to narrow down the number of documents, totalling to 291 documents. Finally, the documents were screened (title and abstracts) and removing the irrelevant, leaving the author with a total of 36 documents. The full-texts of the found documents are accessible thus they are eligible for the scoping review, and the author was able to analyze them.

Documents ultimately included in the review

From 1,250 documents, the author was able to narrow it down to a total of 42 research articles and journals, and one book review passed the eligibility criteria and the objectives of this scoping review.

Bibliometric characteristics of the research field

In this section, the 43 documents included in the scoping review were analysed on the following aspects: publication year; types of documents; authors; and field of study.

Hypothetical thematic clusters

Thematic clusters are important in organizing the different studies and their findings in order to create a comprehensive review of all related literature and studies. Understanding this, the author identified potential thematic clusters during the pilot-searching phase, which includes the search, screening, identification, and exclusions of documents found in the databases. The initial thematic clusters were revised to fit the final number of documents that passes the eligibility criteria of this scoping review. The following are the final thematic clusters: (1) Digital Activism, Hashtag Movements and Social Change; (2) Hashtags as tools for Empowerment, and Justice in Social Media; (3) Cultural Impacts of Hashtag Movements; (4) Critical Perspectives on Digital Activism. The role of Digital Activism and Hashtag Movements in driving Social Changes is all covered in Cluster 1 and 2. On the other hand, Cluster 3 and 4 covers all the concerns, limitations, and challenges that surround digital activism and hashtag movements. The clusters were able to answer the review question and covered the prominent findings of all the 43 selected documents.

Discussion of the findings

The findings reveal significant themes, trends, and implications. The review associates digital activism to social change with the help of hashtags movements primarily used in platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. Most studies examine the prowess of hashtags to amplify the voice of marginalized communities while educating the public. Additionally, there are also studies which examine the impact of these hashtags movements to change the stigma surrounding social issues and its effectiveness on calling the government action.

These findings align with the objective of the research, revealing that digital activism and hashtag movements do create social change. Despite a lot of related studies showing positive outcomes, it is also important to note that hashtag movement have various effects across different sectors, cultures, populations, and age groups. This suggests that the effectiveness of digital activism and its success to create change may be affected by various factors like age, gender, culture, media consumption, literacy, and the benefits they might gain from joining the movements.

Upon reviewing the studies, the author was able to identify several research gaps, particularly in communication techniques and users media consumption and behavior. While there are a lot of studies that prove that hashtag movements can cause significant change in society, fewer studies assess the importance of communication techniques, vitality and sustainability of these movements to actually cause social change and how it impacts cultures. Thus, proving the necessity to conduct this study to hopefully fill in these gaps with grounded and context-based findings based on the related theories and studies.

CONCLUSIONS

This scoping review aims to explore the existing knowledge about digital activism and hashtag movements in relation to social change, focusing on leveraging social media to mobilize protests. Additionally, this scoping review highlights the ability of social media and activism to motivate people to participate in advocacies and calls for change, but it also reveals relevant gaps. Relevant research gaps like the role of social media platforms where movement is conducted, the duration (virality and sustainability) needed for movements to actually reach a wider audience and influence, and the importance of different communication techniques to maximize the effectiveness of these movements. In conclusion, this scoping review will serve as a guide to the study to address the presented gaps to be able to contribute meaningful insights to the field.

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