DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND PUBLIC SUPPORT IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW (2015–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Digital activism has emerged as a prominent mode of political engagement in the post-truth era, where misinformation, emotionally charged discourse, and declining trust in institutions complicate democratic participation. This study examines how digital activism gain public support under such conditions by conducting a mixed-methods systematic review that combines bibliometric analysis with thematic synthesis. Drawing on 1,311 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025, retrieved from the Scopus database, the analysis focuses on studies published in English that address both digital activism and public support. The data were examined through bibliometric visualization using VOSviewer and thematic coding to extract core qualitative insights. The findings reveal that digital activism is shaped by affective narratives, identity politics, and algorithmic governance. Emotional storytelling and credibility cues mediate how public support is cultivated, while the affordances of specific platforms influence modes of civic engagement. Notably, the concept of disconnective action has emerged, where activists intentionally withdraw from co-opted digital spaces as a form of resistance. Furthermore, the analysis highlights significant asymmetries between Global North and Global South contexts. While the former tends to emphasize issues of governance and ethics, the latter focuses on resilience and resistance within repressive regimes. These findings suggest that digital activism in the post-truth era is increasingly driven by emotional engagement and mediated by algorithmic infrastructures rather than factual consensus. This dynamic underscores the need for interdisciplinary approaches and globally inclusive perspectives to navigate the complexities of trust, visibility, and sustainability in digital political participation.

Keywords: digital activism, public support, post-truth, algorithmic governance, emotional narratives, disconnective action, platform affordances.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital platforms have fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of civic and political participation worldwide. From the Arab Spring to movements like #MeToo and Fridays for Future, the rise of digital activism has become a salient feature of contemporary political life. These developments mark a departure from conventional forms of participation mediated by institutional gatekeepers and mass media, as networked communication technologies have enabled marginalized voices to gain visibility, foster rapid mobilization, and amplify dissent on an unprecedented scale (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013)The expansion of social media use has moved beyond a space of casual engagement to one where narrative formation, policy influence, and ideological contestation take place (Tufekci, 2017). Amid this technological reconfiguration, the nature and quality of public support its emergence, durability, and consequences have become a central concern for both scholars and practitioners.

Complicating these transformations is the emergence of the post-truth era, characterized by a communicative environment in which emotional resonance frequently eclipses empirical accuracy. In such contexts, digital platforms not only serve as tools for civic empowerment but also as vectors for misinformation, polarization, and epistemic fragmentation (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, Cass R., 2018). As traditional institutions lose their authority and algorithmically curated content increasingly structures public discourse, the foundations of informed political deliberation are called into question. Consequently, digital activism operates within a paradoxical domain, simultaneously enabling collective action and exacerbating societal divides. Understanding the mechanisms through which public support is activated and shaped in these environments has become a critical endeavor.

The literature on digital activism, though expansive, continues to grapple with several unresolved questions. Chief among them are inquiries into what drives public participation online, how digital infrastructures mediate activist intentions, and whether these engagements yield substantive political outcomes. On one hand, scholars highlight the democratizing potential of digital technologies in lowering barriers to participation and expanding political inclusion. On the other hand, critiques point to the prevalence of superficial or performative involvement— popularly termed "slacktivism"—as evidence of digital activism's limited efficacy (Dean, 2019; *Gladwell*, 2010). The tension between these perspectives underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between digital mobilization and meaningful civic engagement.

Several theoretical models have been developed to interpret the complexities of digital activism and its public resonance. The concept of connective action, for instance, emphasizes the role of personalized content sharing and decentralized networks in contrast to traditional collective action models grounded in formal organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Papacharissi (2014) explores the notion of affective publics, where emotional expression becomes central to engagement and identity formation in digital spaces. Furthermore, scholars like Gillespie (2018) have drawn attention to the role of platform logics and algorithms in shaping what content gains visibility and traction. While each of these perspectives contributes to the broader discourse, they often function in isolation and rarely account for the epistemological disruptions associated with post-truth conditions.

Recent empirical studies have sought to bridge these theoretical divides by examining the specific mechanisms through which digital activism garners public support. Suwana (2020) investigates the Save KPK movement in Indonesia, revealing that intrinsic motivations, identity affirmation, and resistance to misinformation were key drivers of youth engagement. Fatima et al., (2025) examine the digital activism of Dalit communities in India, emphasizing the interplay of digital literacy, collective identity, and strategic communication in overcoming socio-political marginalization. In Mozambique, Tsandzana (2023) documents how youth activists utilized digital platforms to respond to the Cabo Delgado crisis, even within constraints of limited connectivity

and governmental repression. These case studies provide critical insights into the adaptive strategies of activists and the socio-technical infrastructures that enable or hinder their success.

However, these findings also illuminate limitations in the current literature. Many studies remain contextually bound or thematically narrow, often failing to consider broader systemic factors such as algorithmic governance, political polarization, and affective manipulation. As Van Raemdonck et al., (2025) demonstrate in their analysis of climate activism on Instagram and Twitter, platform affordances significantly structure user engagement through mechanisms of visibility and group identity. Just et al., (2025) introduce the concept of "disconnective action," wherein activists strategically withdraw from digital platforms as a form of resistance to co-optation and surveillance. These perspectives underscore the increasing sophistication and diversification of activist strategies, while simultaneously exposing the lack of a cohesive framework that integrates micro-level motivations with macro-level technological and political structures.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to systematically examine the relationship between digital activism and public support in the context of post-truth politics. By conducting a bibliometric and thematic analysis of literature published between 2015 and 2025, this research aims to identify prevailing trends, theoretical innovations, and conceptual gaps in the field. The core contribution of this work lies in its integrative approach, synthesizing diverse strands of scholarship to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital activism as both a mode of civic engagement and a field of ideological contestation under conditions of epistemic uncertainty. In doing so, the study moves beyond isolated case analyses to propose a more unified theoretical orientation that acknowledges the socio-technical and affective dimensions of contemporary public mobilization.

This research focuses on English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles sourced from Scopus, covering both empirical case studies and conceptual papers. While maintaining a global perspective, particular emphasis is placed on literature from the Global South to address prevailing geographical imbalances in scholarly representation. The study's findings are expected to inform ongoing academic debates and policy considerations concerning the ethical, practical, and strategic dimensions of digital activism in an era increasingly defined by disinformation, algorithmic mediation, and institutional distrust. Ultimately, this research endeavors to offer an evidence-based contribution to understanding how digital activism operates, transforms, and challenges the nature of public support in the post-truth era.

METHOD

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates bibliometric analysis with qualitative thematic synthesis. The rationale for this dual approach lies in the interdisciplinary complexity of digital activism, which demands both structural mapping and interpretive depth. Bibliometric analysis is employed to trace the evolution and architecture of academic discourse

on digital activism between 2015 and 2025. In parallel, thematic analysis offers interpretive insights into the ideological framings and conceptual patterns present in the literature. Together, these methodologies facilitate a comprehensive inquiry into how digital activism correlates with public support in the post-truth era.
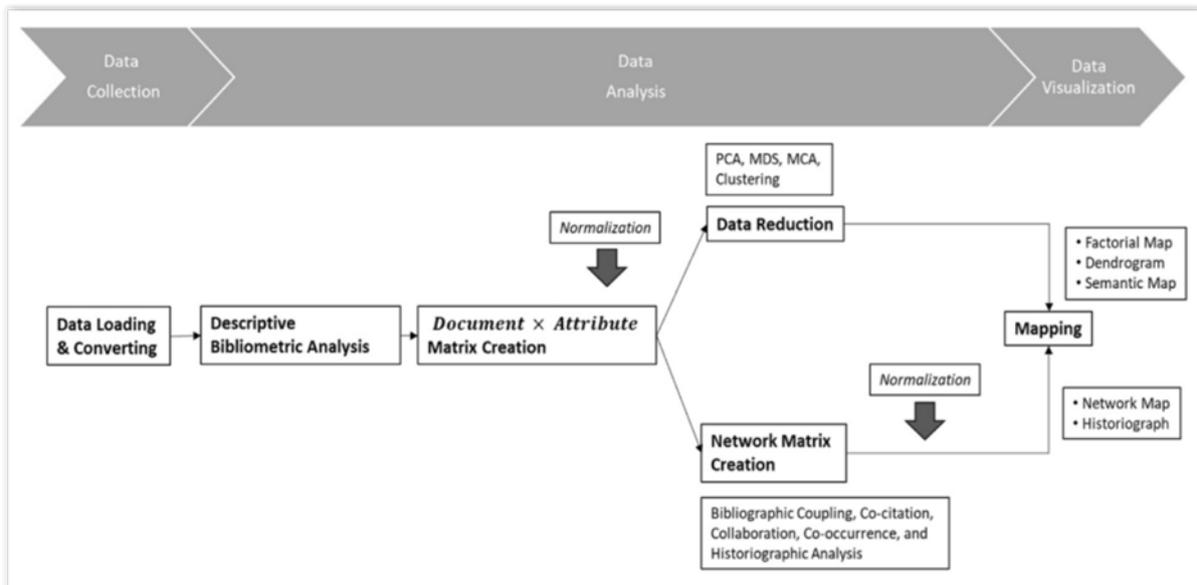

Figure 1. Bibliometrix and the recommended science-mapping workflow

Scopus was selected as the sole database due to its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the social sciences, communication, and humanities. The database was last accessed in May 2025. A total of 1,311 documents were retrieved using a combination of keywords including "digital activism," "public support," "social media movements," "post-truth," and "political participation." The search was filtered to include only peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings written in English and published between January 2015 and May 2025. Documents were excluded if they were duplicates, inaccessible in full text, not thematically relevant to activism or civic engagement, or if they lacked conceptual or empirical contributions (e.g., commentary or editorial pieces).

The inclusion of articles was conducted through a two-stage screening process. Initially, all retrieved records were screened for relevance based on titles and abstracts. Two reviewers independently performed this screening to ensure reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Full texts of eligible studies were then assessed for inclusion by the same reviewers working independently. No automation tools were used in this process. Data from included studies were extracted manually by the same two reviewers, who worked independently to capture variables including study objectives, methodology, key findings, and thematic relevance. No additional contact with authors was undertaken for missing data.

The analysis focused on outcomes such as the evolution of publication trends, thematic clusters, and conceptual innovations in digital activism literature. Each study was reviewed for contributions to predefined outcomes such as identity politics, platform affordances, algorithmic

visibility, and misinformation. All compatible results relevant to these outcome domains were collected without selective inclusion. Additional variables recorded included geographic scope of case studies, institutional affiliations of authors, and levels of collaboration (e.g., international co-authorship).

To assess the risk of bias, each included study's methodological rigor was appraised through qualitative judgment rather than formal scoring tools. As this was a literature-based study, no effect measures like risk ratios or mean differences were calculated. Instead, influence was gauged through citation counts, co-authorship density, and thematic prominence. Studies were grouped for synthesis based on thematic convergence and chronological trends. Bibliometric visualizations were used to tabulate and display patterns across co-authorship networks, citation trajectories, and keyword clusters, using VOSviewer. Qualitative coding of full texts was conducted manually, and thematic maps were developed through literative reading and comparative synthesis to illustrate narrative convergence.

Thematic synthesis was chosen for its flexibility and depth, allowing a narrative integration of empirical and conceptual studies. No meta-analysis was performed due to the heterogeneity in study designs and data types. Heterogeneity was explored through comparative analysis across regions, publication periods, and disciplinary orientations. Sensitivity analysis was conducted informally by re-checking theme representation against the full dataset. Risk of bias due to missing results was considered minimal, as all accessible and eligible literature from Scopus within the timeframe was included. Confidence in the evidence was bolstered by triangulating findings from both bibliometric and thematic lenses and by applying rigorous methodological standards throughout the review process.

In summary, the methodology employed in this study integrates structural mapping with narrative interpretation to explore the evolving relationship between digital activism and public support. The careful selection of sources, transparent screening, rigorous thematic coding, and the combination of bibliometric and qualitative tools ensure a comprehensive and reliable synthesis of knowledge in this critical field of inquiry.

RESULT

1.1 Overview of the Publication Landscape (2015-2025)

The dataset for this study, compiled from the Scopus database, comprises 1,311 scholarly documents published between 2015 and 2025. This corpus reflects the maturing academic interest in digital activism, particularly in relation to public support within post-truth political contexts. Analysis of annual publication trends reveals a gradual decline in growth rate, calculated at -4.84%, suggesting that scholarly enthusiasm has plateaued, potentially due to topic saturation or a redirection towards adjacent themes such as algorithmic governance and disinformation. Despite this deceleration, the literature maintains strong academic influence, as indicated by an average of 17.19 citations per document. These patterns reinforce the continued relevance of

foundational works such as those by Bennett & Segerberg, (2013), whose framework of connective action remains central to ongoing debates.

Figure 2. Publication Landscape of Digital Activism

1.2 Authorship and Collaboration Patterns

The literature involves 2,534 individual authors, with an average of 2.14 co-authors per document. Notably, 483 documents are single-authored, indicating the persistence of individual research in a field increasingly shaped by collaborative norms. International collaboration accounts for 19.07% of the total publications, a figure that, while modest, points toward the globalization of scholarly inquiry into digital activism. Influential contributors include Lindgren and Yang, both of whom appear across multiple thematic clusters and exhibit extensive collaborative networks. However, the data reveals a largely regional collaboration pattern, with limited cross-regional integration. This fragmentation may reflect the local specificity of case studies or the infrastructural limitations that hinder transnational research.

Figure 3. Authorship Collaboration

1.3 Thematic Mapping and Conceptual Clusters

A keyword co-occurrence analysis using VOSviewer uncovered 3,519 unique author-specified keywords, resulting in five dominant thematic clusters: (1) identity and affective politics, (2) digital infrastructure and algorithms, (3) misinformation and post-truth dynamics, (4) mobilization and civic participation, and (5) regional and comparative contexts. These clusters highlight the convergence of technological, social, and epistemological dimensions in the digital activism literature. Thematic overlaps suggest that discussions of identity politics

are frequently situated within broader debates about algorithmic visibility and misinformation, reinforcing the post-truth condition as a defining context of contemporary activism.

Figure 4. Keyword Mapping

1.4 Regional Distribution and Case Study Emphasis

While the geographic scope of the literature is diverse, there is a notable emphasis on the Global South. Key studies include Suwana, (2020) on the Indonesian Save KPK movement, Fatima et al., (2025) on Dalit digital mobilization in India, and Tsandzana (2023) on youth-led activism in Mozambique. These cases underscore how activists operate under conditions of limited infrastructure, digital surveillance, and sociopolitical repression. Conversely, studies from the Global North tend to focus on platform governance, media literacy, and algorithmic accountability (Gillespie, 2018; Van Raemdonck et al., 2025). This asymmetry suggests a contextual differentiation in research priorities: resilience and identity are central themes in Global South literature, while regulation and digital rights dominate discourse in the North.

Figure 5. Regional Distribution and Case Study Emphasis

1.5 Temporal Shift in Conceptual Focus

Temporal mapping of keywords reveals a discernible evolution in thematic concerns over the decade. Between 2015 and 2018, research was primarily concerned with connective action, social media affordances, and hashtag activism. From 2019 to 2021, the literature expanded to include identity politics, political polarization, and affective mobilization. Between 2022 and 2025, the discourse shifted toward algorithmic governance, epistemic

fragmentation, and strategic disengagement, exemplified by the emergence of concepts such as disconnective action (Just et al., 2025). These changes mirror external political developments and technological shifts, particularly the role of digital platforms in mediating contentious narratives.

Figure 6. Temporal Shift in Conceptual Focus

1.6 Forms and Modalities of Digital Activism

Thematic synthesis of selected studies reveals three primary forms of digital activism. Instrumental activism, such as online petitions or advocacy hashtags, is goal-oriented and often linked to policy influence. Expressive activism focuses on identity performance and community building, often through symbolic acts such as memes or shared stories. A third modality, tactical withdrawal or disconnective action, involves the strategic disengagement from digital platforms as a critique of corporate co-optation or surveillance. Public support tends to be strongest for instrumental activism, especially when emotionally resonant narratives are deployed. Nevertheless, expressive activism is crucial for long-term cohesion and identity formation, particularly in repressive environments.

1.7 Epistemic Challenges and Public Trust

The literature consistently identifies epistemic instability as a critical obstacle in mobilizing informed public support. Algorithmically driven curation mechanisms are shown to reinforce confirmation bias and filter bubbles, as observed in studies on climate discourse and political crises (Van Raemdonck et al., 2025; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Activists frequently respond by leveraging credibility signals such as expert endorsements, emotionally engaging stories, and peer validation to counteract disinformation. The tension between affective mobilization and factual persuasion remains a central theme, emphasizing the complex interplay between emotion, truth, and public engagement in the post-truth era.

1.8 Platform- Specific Engagement Patterns

Comparative studies of digital platforms reveal differentiated activist strategies. Twitter is favored for real-time coordination and political discourse, especially in Global North contexts. Instagram excels in visual storytelling, facilitating identity-based movements among younger demographics. WhatsApp, prevalent in the Global South, is used for secure, closed-group mobilization in environments characterized by censorship and surveillance (Chukunzira, 2025). Each platform's affordances shape both the form of activism and the modalities of public support, demonstrating the technological contingency of activist practices.

1.9 Gaps, Contradictions, and Future Directions

Despite its richness, the literature exhibits several limitations. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies examining the sustainability of public support beyond viral peaks. English-language dominance and Global North-centric perspectives also limit epistemic diversity. Moreover, the field remains divided between digital optimism and critical analyses of commodification, surveillance, and activist burnout. Addressing these gaps requires integrative, cross-regional, and interdisciplinary approaches that consider both the affordances and limitations of digital activism in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

1.10 Synthesis of Key Findings.

This chapter has mapped the structural and conceptual terrain of digital activism literature from 2015 to 2025. Key findings include: (1) digital activism is a multi-scalar, dynamic field shaped by technological affordances, sociopolitical context, and identity dynamics; (2) public support is influenced by affective narratives, identity resonance, and the credibility of activist messaging; (3) the post-truth condition introduces epistemic complexities that hinder informed participation; and (4) scholarship remains fragmented, necessitating a more integrated research agenda. These findings form the empirical foundation for the interpretive discussion presented in the following chapter**.**

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate the evolving complexity of digital activism within the sociopolitical contours of the post-truth era. Rather than functioning merely as a tool for mobilization, digital activism now operates as a contested discursive field, where actors compete not only for visibility but also for legitimacy and trust. This reframing is necessary in light of the epistemological instability that defines contemporary media environments. As Lewandowsky et al., (2017) and Van Raemdonck et al., (2025) argue, the widespread dissemination of emotionally charged misinformation has weakened public confidence in institutions, placing digital activists in a precarious position where communicative strategies must both engage and persuade, while fending off counter-narratives.

Digital platforms, once idealized for their democratic affordances, have become sites of epistemic tension. As highlighted in the bibliometric and thematic mapping results, thematic clusters such as misinformation, algorithmic visibility, and identity politics suggest that the terrain of activism is shaped not only by content but by the infrastructural and algorithmic logics that govern what is seen and what remains invisible. Gillespie, (2018) emphasizes that the algorithmic design of platforms like Twitter and Instagram modulates user exposure, incentivizing virality over veracity. Similarly, Noble, (2018) illustrates how algorithmic infrastructures systematically reinforce racial and gender biases in search results, raising concerns about structural inequalities embedded within seemingly neutral technologies. Pasquale, (2015) further elaborates on the "black box" nature of algorithmic governance, which conceals decision-making processes from public scrutiny while shaping political discourse and civic visibility. Consequently, activism on

these platforms is mediated by technological conditions that may amplify certain voices while marginalizing others

Within this mediated landscape, emotional narratives have emerged as a dominant strategy for generating public support. The literature reveals a growing reliance on affective storytelling, where the emotional resonance of content often supersedes its factual rigor (Papacharissi, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). This is particularly evident in expressive forms of activism that utilize memes, personal testimonies, and symbolic imagery to cultivate affective publics. Highfield (2016) illustrates how visual and textual formats like memes serve both expressive and mobilizing functions within digital activism. While such strategies can galvanize rapid support, they also risk reinforcing echo chambers and deepening ideological polarization, especially when emotional resonance replaces deliberative engagement (Boulianne, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

The study also underscores the impact of platform-specific affordances on activist behavior and audience reception. Twitter's capacity for real-time discourse through hashtags contrasts sharply with WhatsApp's closed-group structure, which fosters intimate, localized organizing. As Chukunzira, (2025) illustrates, platforms like WhatsApp are particularly valuable in repressive contexts where public discourse is constrained. These variations indicate that digital activism is not a homogeneous phenomenon; rather, it is contingent upon the technical and cultural logics of the platforms through which it unfolds.

Epistemic fragmentation, exacerbated by platform algorithms that prioritize engagement metrics, presents a formidable challenge to informed public discourse. Studies such as those by Sunstein, Cass R., (2018) and Lewandowsky et al., (2017) reveal how filter bubbles and confirmation biases hinder consensus-building, complicating activists' efforts to present persuasive and truthful narratives. In this regard, public trust is often secured not through objective verification but via peer endorsement, expert affiliation, and emotionally compelling storytelling. This creates a paradox wherein the mechanisms that facilitate mobilization may simultaneously compromise informational integrity (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

Nevertheless, limitations persist in the evidence reviewed. The reliance on English-language, peer-reviewed literature may exclude valuable insights from non-Anglophone or grey literature sources, potentially narrowing the representativeness of findings. Furthermore, the selected studies often employ qualitative or case-based methodologies, which, while rich in depth, may lack generalizability. The review process itself, although systematic, did not include a formal meta-analysis or multi-database triangulation, which could have strengthened robustness.

These limitations notwithstanding, the implications for practice and policy are substantial. For practitioners, the study emphasizes the importance of tailoring activist strategies to platform affordances and being mindful of the emotional dynamics that shape public engagement. For policymakers, there is an urgent need to regulate algorithmic opacity, support digital literacy, and safeguard activist freedoms in both authoritarian and democratic contexts. For researchers, the findings point toward the necessity of interdisciplinary inquiry that bridges micro-level user behavior with macro-level technological and institutional dynamics.

Regional asymmetries in digital activism further complicate the analytical landscape. The literature reveals distinct patterns between Global North and Global South contexts. In the Global South, digital activism often emerges under conditions of political repression, infrastructural scarcity, and social marginalization, necessitating creative and secure forms of engagement (Fatima et al., 2025; Suwana, 2020) For example, Dalit activists in India have utilized encrypted messaging and symbolic online campaigns to circumvent caste-based oppression and state surveillance (Fatima et al., 2025). Similarly, Indonesia's Save KPK movement strategically leveraged digital platforms to mobilize public support in the face of authoritarian rollback (Suwana, 2020). In contrast, scholarship from the Global North tends to prioritize issues of governance, platform ethics, and algorithmic regulation. For instance, Milan, (2015) explores how European climate justice movements use open-source tools and collaborative platforms to promote participatory democracy and institutional accountability. This divergence reflects differing material and political constraints, but also points to the need for decolonizing the discourse on digital activism and foregrounding South-to-South knowledge exchanges.

Finally, the discussion highlights the urgent need for integrative frameworks that bridge micro-level user behaviors with macro-level institutional and technological structures. While the current literature is rich in case studies and theoretical reflections, it remains fragmented along disciplinary and regional lines. This study, by combining bibliometric analysis with qualitative thematic synthesis, contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital activism and public support co-evolve in the post-truth era. The findings advocate for a more reflexive, interdisciplinary approach to future research one that accounts for the affective, epistemological, and infrastructural dimensions of digital political engagement.

In sum, digital activism today is a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon shaped by a convergence of emotional narratives, technological affordances, and sociopolitical asymmetries. It offers novel opportunities for civic engagement and resistance, while simultaneously contending with the structural challenges of misinformation, algorithmic opacity, and public distrust. Navigating this complexity requires both critical scrutiny and methodological pluralism, ensuring that scholarly inquiry remains attuned to the rapidly shifting terrain of digital collective action.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the intricate relationship between digital activism and public support within the contested terrain of the post-truth era. Drawing on a systematic bibliometric and thematic analysis of literature from 2015 to 2025, it reveals how digital activism has evolved into a complex and dynamic form of political participation influenced by emotional narratives, algorithmic affordances, and epistemic fragmentation. The findings underscore that public support is increasingly shaped by affective resonance and platform structures rather than rational consensus, posing both opportunities and challenges for democratic engagement.

The analysis has shown that digital platforms, once celebrated for their democratizing potential, now function as sites of epistemic contestation. Emotional storytelling, symbolic imagery, and peer-driven credibility cues have emerged as central strategies for mobilizing public support, while the strategic use of disconnection illustrates activist agency in resisting commodified digital participation. The study highlights that regional differences, particularly between Global North and Global South contexts, significantly shape the forms, affordances, and constraints of digital activism. These asymmetries reveal both the localized creativity of marginalized movements and the ongoing epistemological inequalities in scholarly discourse.

By integrating insights from political communication, media studies, and digital sociology, this research contributes to a holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of digital activism. It emphasizes the importance of analyzing not only activist behavior but also the socio-technical structures within which that behavior unfolds. The incorporation of themes such as affective publics, disconnective action, and algorithmic governance enriches the theoretical framework for future studies on digital political participation.

To advance the field, future research should investigate the longitudinal dynamics of public support, particularly in the aftermath of viral campaigns. There is also a pressing need to include underrepresented voices—especially those from non-English-speaking and Global South contexts to diversify and deepen the discourse on digital activism. Methodologically, combining large-scale bibliometric mapping with critical qualitative synthesis provides a replicable yet interpretive approach that can guide future scholarly inquiry.

In sum, digital activism in the post-truth era embodies both promise and peril. It offers novel avenues for civic engagement and identity expression while confronting the structural challenges of misinformation, algorithmic control, and fragmented publics. Navigating this terrain requires critical, context-sensitive, and theoretically integrative approaches that can accommodate the contradictions and complexities of contemporary digital activism.

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