

## Exploring the Significance of Social Media on Social Justice Movements Through the Lens of Social Activists in Pakistan

**Huda Imran**

M.Phil. Scholar (Department of Media and Development Communication)  
University of the Punjab, Lahore.  
Email: [hudaimran529@gmail.com](mailto:hudaimran529@gmail.com)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.24312/ucp-jmc.03.01.525>

### Abstract

*Today, social media can be seen as a powerful platform for bringing marginalized voices forward and supporting people affected by injustice. As a democratic tool, social networking platforms dismantle conventional gatekeeping mechanisms and open opportunities to organize previously impossible campaigns. The current study employs in-depth interviews to explore how activists use social media to fight for social justice causes. The goal is to determine how effective these digital platforms are in garnering public attention and support and how well they can be utilized to organize protests and effect change. This study aims to get insight into the perceptions of the activists on social media's impact on social justice, how they tackle obstacles, and how they function as opinion-makers while advocating for specific causes, raising voices for the marginalized, and striving to reach a just society. Guided by the Public sphere theory, this study explores how social networking platforms have become a modern public sphere where activists can speak freely and advocate for social justice movements. The research will contribute to the existing literature and offer practical knowledge to activists, academicians, and policymakers who wish to use technology for change.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Social Justice Movements, Activism in Pakistan, Digital Activism, Advocacy.

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last several years, social media has been critical in social justice movements worldwide. This helps activists disseminate information, mobilize people worldwide, and form coalitions. Many social networking platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, etc., have democratized activism by eliminating institutionalized hierarchical communication channels. This allows activists and marginalized people to make their voices heard, share information, and organize protests and campaigns in real time to bring social change. Social media will enable them to create, post, comment, and interact with other like-minded people in online groups (Earl et al., 2022; Uwalaka, 2024).

Activists use digital activism to call for people's participation in raising their voices and bringing change using digital tools. Activists around the world have successfully used digital activism to fight injustice. For instance, the activism against the brutality of the police and racism in the Black Lives Matter protest movement in the United States shows how activism is conducted on social media (Freelon et al., 2018). They also stated that through hashtags and online campaigns, this social justice movement kept people informed and raised awareness worldwide about the racial issues in the country. On the other hand, Pakistan ranks 150th in the World Press Freedom Index of 2023, which shows limited freedom of the press (Radio Pakistan, 2023).

The socio-political structure in Pakistan is unstable and has tight censorship and restricted freedom of speech, which affects social justice activism. Social justice activists face hurdles in communicating with people and struggle to organize people and share information through conventional media platforms under the state. This raises the need for digital activism, where people can utilize social networking platforms to fight for their causes. There are some significant examples where it has been vital to organize events to unite like-minded individuals facing similar problems, such as the Aurat March, which demanded women's rights and shared stories of oppression. (Maryville University, 2019; Auxier & McClain, 2020; Freelon et al., 2018; Dossa, 2021; Khan & Kirmani, 2018; Pakistan Press Foundation, 2023).

There is a vast body of literature on activism and social networking platforms with quantitative research. However, limited papers use qualitative research to explore activists' complex perceptions and lived experiences. This research seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed analysis of activists' views of social media usage and how they implement various social justice initiatives. The study aims to examine the strategies employed by Pakistani activists, their perceived effectiveness, and how they handle the challenges they face using social media.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

- i. To explore how activists, use social media in Pakistan to highlight the issues of social injustice.
- ii. To scrutinize the advantages and disadvantages of the social media platforms, according to the activists
- iii. To analyse strategies activists employ to counter misinformation and cyberbullying.

## **3. Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How are activists utilizing social media to highlight the issues of social injustice in Pakistan?

**RQ2:** What is their attitude toward the advantages and disadvantages of social media platforms while using them for social justice movements?

**RQ3:** How do activists address issues like misinformation, cyberbullying, and other challenges by sharing their stories?

This research advances the interpretive insights of digital activism with a localized approach and provides concrete strategies for activists and policymakers who want to enhance digital campaigning. It also pinpoints the tangible cues of how activists deal with issues like the slowed internet and cyberbullying (Auxier & McClain, 2020). However, this study has certain limitations as it is qualitative research, and due to the small sample size, the conclusions and findings are not generalizable. Moreover, the results may be biased as the researcher formed themes from raw data sources.

## **4. Literature Review**

In the current literature from 2018 to 2024, several studies were conducted documenting social media activism regarding the use of social networking platforms to fight for social justice and manage campaigns worldwide and on a smaller scale. The chapter is organized by themes for detailed empirical insights about the topic. Applying the Public Sphere theory made it possible to identify how social networking platforms can be used for public debate and organizing campaigns, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and giving voice to socially excluded groups.

### **4.1 Early Use of Social Media in Activism**

The use of social media in activism started in the early 2000s with Myspace and blogging, which gave rise to grassroots activism (Brandt & Kizer, 2019). Over time, newer platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok embraced visual communication, and activists adopted short reels to promote their cause. These developments made information sharing more democratic, where the marginalized could be heard (McKee, 2022).

### **4.2 Platform-Specific Features and Hashtags for Activism**

The versatility of social networking platforms makes it possible for activist groups to be present on various platforms in different ways. It becomes easy to update their following lists and use hashtags to organize the protests in real-time, as seen with the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Freelon et al., 2018). As a tool, Facebook is effective for community building as it sustains connections for a longer time and is helpful for event planning. Instagram is more suitable for storytelling and raising awareness as it relies heavily on images and videos. TikTok uses engaging short reels to capture young audiences with concise and intense messages. These platform-specific features make the approach to activism more diversified and contribute to reaching numerous audiences with different demographics (Kim & Hastak, 2018; Law, 2021).

These platforms were apparent during major global events such as the Iranian Green Movement in 2009 and the Arab Spring in 2010, which were the epitome of how social media can be used to facilitate mass protests and topple authoritarian regimes. Social media allowed activists to spread information, mobilize for protests, provide updates, and avoid state media censorship while sharing the information with people worldwide (Niakooee, 2020; Kim & Lim, 2019). Similarly, the #BlackLivesMatter social justice movement in the United States, analyzed by Freelon et al. (2018), shows how social networking platforms empower the oppressed to speak and lay the foundation to change political narratives. Social media campaigns like #SayHerName raised awareness of police violence against Black women and racism and sexism simultaneously (Jackson et al., 2020). It can be stated that social media platforms emphasize intersectionality and ensure that each marginalized group's experiences are heard and included in the formation of the overall justice concepts that can improve the efficiency of advocacy (Crenshaw, 2019).

#### **4.3 Role of Influencers in Social Justice Movements**

Influencers and micro-influencers greatly support social justice movements. Social media users, such as influencers, with a considerable number of followers, educate them on concerns, which is a form of advocacy, as observed with the Nigerian #EndSARS protest, which was supported by celebrities. Micro-influencers are highly involved with their specialized audiences, thus giving them authentic and convincing recommendations. They also debunk fake news and ensure the integrity of movements among the target groups (Uwazuruike, 2020; Teixeira, 2023).

#### **4.4 Social Media Activism in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, social media is being used in social justice movements as it plays an important role in organizing protests, telling stories of oppression, and raising support, i.e, the Aurat March and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Dossa, 2021; Khan et al, 2021). Social networking platforms enabled female activists to employ Aurat March to organize specific events, raise awareness,

and foster collective communion about women's rights. Likewise, these social networking sites are used by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement to draw the attention of the global community towards the problems faced by the Pashtuns (Ahmed & Khan, 2022).

#### **4.5 Challenges of Counter-Activism and Digital Repression**

Counter-activism and digital repression also affect social media activism. Some counter-activists produce disinformation and are involved in creating memes and trolling. While engaging in activism, citizens in Pakistan experience challenges like government agencies spying and blocking accounts, restrictions on media freedom, and even the termination of internet access. Online harassment is conducted by non-state actors, which poses a risk of endangering the activists. These tactics put people in a state of fear, which hinders activism. One should form strategies and approaches to prevent counter-activism and digital repression (Shahbaz & Funk, 2020; Sinpeng, 2020).

#### **4.6 Psychological Impact of Social Media Activism**

Social networking platforms have their pros and cons. It can negatively impact the psychological state of activists by exposing them to distressing content, such as violent or graphic images, pictures, and videos of abuse, and content tagged with threats, slurs, or harassment. This can cause burnout, anxiety, and depression (Gorski, 2019). In Pakistan, female activists experience more social challenges, such as stalking and risks of defamation, as well as threats to their security, which can cause them psychological strain (Dossa, 2021). On the other hand, online communities can also act as positive mediums by offering companionship, emotional support, and advice in demanding situations, which makes activism easier to deal with (Dumitrica & Felt, 2020).

There is an emerging literature on the quantitative effects of social media and activism in Pakistan. However, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that capture the personal views and participation of the activists, giving an interpretive stance. The existing literature on digital

activism centres more on general trends and effects of digital activism and less on the experiences of the activists. The current research proposes to meet the gaps by conducting a qualitative study on social activists in Pakistan. By assessing the complexity of activists, this study explores their use of social networking platforms for social justice, the difficulties they encounter, and the methods they adopt to tackle them. This approach will undoubtedly give a broader perspective of digital activism in Pakistan for scholarly debates and the advancement of social networking platforms for social justice.

## **5. Theoretical Framework**

The Public Sphere theory, formulated by the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1991), states that the public sphere is an ideal communication space where citizens come together openly, rationally, and critically to discuss matters of general interest outside the domination of either state or capital. This space is important for democracy since it forms public opinion.

Social networking platforms are the modern continuation of the public sphere, where activists can talk about issues, rally people, and fight for justice. It is helpful in the democratization of traditional gatekeeping as it represents the voices of marginalized groups and shapes the opinions of societies (Kruse et al., 2017). This framework helps understand the intricate details of opinion formation and activism in the social media environment in Pakistan. Moreover, it gives an insight into the challenges the activists face, such as misinformation/disinformation and cyberbullying, among others, and the advantages/disadvantages of employing social networking platforms to fight for justice and the rights of individuals and groups with special needs.

## **6. Research Methodology**

This chapter highlights the research method employed to investigate the role of social media in social justice activism by Pakistani social activists. The study is based on interpretivist epistemology by focusing on the activists' perceptions. The qualitative research method followed an inductive approach

to obtain detailed information about the subjects under study, including their personal experiences and approaches.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with five social media activists who represented diverse areas of activism, i.e., environment activist, Shia community activist, education activist, student activist, and women activist. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their background in social justice movements and social media advocacy. The study employed a small sample size, but the participants were chosen using purposive sampling to broadly represent the participants' insignificant areas of activism in Pakistan. The activists were five people who advocated environmental, women's education, student, and minority (Shia) rights. Such a strategic choice enabled the study to cover various experiences and digital advocacy practices in the Pakistani socio-political environment. Although the sample cannot be generalized, it represents diverse views of influential activist groups who participate in social justice movements on the Internet.

The data collection was cross-sectional and was gathered by conducting face-to-face interviews through Google Meet with the selected activists, depending on their schedules. The interviews were semi-structured and varied between 30 minutes; the total was 2 hours. The qualitative nature of the study made it possible for the Activists to elaborate on their subjective experiences about activism on social networking platforms in terms of raising awareness, mobilizing for rallies and policies, and tackling challenges such as fake news and harassment. The interview data were recorded digitally and analysed by familiarization, coding, and theme identification. To comprehend the data, a thematic analysis was conducted, where themes emerged, including social media use in activism, activists' strategies, and obstacles encountered. Ethical issues were considered, and the safety of the Activists was ensured. Their identities were not disclosed, and the interviews were conducted in a manner that did not emotionally harm the Activists.



**Table 6.1** *Participant Details*

<b>Sr. #</b>	<b>Activist</b>	<b>Activism Area</b>	<b>Social Media Platforms Used</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>
1	A	Environmental activism	Twitter	1
2	B	Advocacy for the Shia community	Facebook, Twitter	1
3	C	Education activism	Facebook, Instagram	1
4	D	Student rights activism	Facebook, Twitter, TikTok	1
5	E	Women's rights and security	Instagram	1

## **7. Results**

This chapter outlines the interviews analysed using thematic analysis, which entails familiarization, coding, theme identification, and reviewing and refining the data. This extensive procedure unveiled several significant themes, which helped to understand better the position and role of social networking platforms in modern activism in Pakistan.

### **7.1 Thematic Analysis**

#### **7.1.1 Platform Versatility and Multiplatform Advocacy**

Activists use various social media platforms to increase their reach and impact. Activist A mentions that they use Twitter due to its outreach and real-time nature: “I actively engage with Twitter as it has reach and immediacy.”

Activist B uses both Facebook and Twitter: “I use both Facebook for detailed posts and building communities and Twitter for quick sharing of content and raising awareness.” Activist C mentions that they post videos on both Facebook and Instagram. Activist E mainly engages with Instagram because of the visual component, thus aligning with their professional background in design.

### **7.1.2. Real-Time Reporting and Mobilization**

The exact nature of organization through social networking platforms entails prompt communication and rallying of groups required for ‘events’ like strikes and protests linked to climate change. Activist A emphasizes the importance of real-time mobilization, allowing activists to respond quickly to crises. Activist B elaborates on the value of updates during tragedies: “During tragedy, like the one happening in Parachinar, real-time updates are critical, and with the help of social media, I was able to document and share some of the incidents as well as raise awareness”. Activist D added, “Social networks have added a new element of speed and diffusion to the process that helps organize a protest shortly and easily while broadcasting it to the entire world.

### **7.1.3. Community Building and Global Reach**

Social networking platforms enable activists to establish strong support systems and worldwide coverage. Activist C has accumulated a community of supporters, shareholders, and volunteers via Facebook and Instagram, which helps them fund education initiatives at the global level. Likewise, Activist D uses social media to develop a supportive student and equity-conscious community and increase global awareness and support for student rights. Activist B said, “My team is raising awareness for the Shia genocide in Parachinar and is getting support and global reach.”

### **7.1.4. Educational Outreach and Storytelling**

Activists harness social networking platforms to pass information and share experiences that impact society. Activist A shares informational content through Twitter, and Activist C shares the stories of girls who overcame

various obstacles to get an education. They elaborated: “Storytelling is a powerful tool. Sharing the struggles and successes of girls fighting for their education may prompt others to take action.” Such strategies help create a knowledge-aware society. Activist A also stated, “Educational content helps create a knowledgeable community aware of the environmental issues.”

#### **7.1.5. Collaborative Efforts and Hashtag Campaigns**

Raising awareness and making changes can be done by joining forces with other activists and creating hashtags that help increase coverage. Activist A uses #ClimateActionNow to unite the community for a common cause. Activist B uses hashtags to bring attention to their cause: “Hashtags such as #StopShiaGenocide are effective tools because they ensure that our struggle is recognized on a wider scale and people are brought together under one cause” Likewise, Activist D, who uses #StudentsForRights, to get more reach and support. Activist A even supported making things graphic, if needed, “If one in real life person comes, because you posted it to your 600,000 followers, it is 1000% worth it to make that graphic, 1000% worth it to make that post”. Activist E highlighted the issue of Noor Mukadam, created pink flags, and used hashtags like #JusticeForNoor.

#### **7.1.6. Challenges of Misinformation and Online Harassment**

Activists A and D claim that misinformation is a never-ending struggle that complicates their work. Activists A and B are often threatened and harassed online, especially when advocating for causes that stir up negative emotions in opposing parties or against large companies. Activists E and D describe 'stalking' and 'fake news' as constant obstacles they face. Activist E was concerned about women's safety and said, "Living through these times where you have to use social networking platforms to give live updates makes it necessary for activists to be very cautious when posting their locations as they can be preyed upon, especially women." Activist B showed the most concern as they belong to a minority and have faced various threats online and offline due to their religious beliefs. They said, "My family and I have been trolled and threatened online as well as offline because of my religious beliefs;

people can be cruel sometimes." Activist C added, "Social media has given the oppressed a gift, but once it falls into the wrong hands, bad things are bound to happen."

#### **7.1.7. Evolution of Movements and Increased Visibility**

Due to social media, small events have become significant movements, and the limelight on different causes has shifted. Activist E discusses the evolution of Aurat March from a small event to a significant movement, mainly due to social networking platforms' influence on people. They stated that social media has facilitated Aurat March to evolve from a mere cycling event: "I saw Aurat March through social media only, and it has turned into this big movement now." Activist B acknowledges that their community issues are visible today because of social platforms, and they have some impact on policy-making as well.

#### **7.1.8. Safety Measures and Vigilance**

Subjects were unanimously concerned with safety and privacy issues related to Internet use. Activists B and E encourage new activists to be safe while encouraging people to take necessary actions to avoid dangers. "New activists should always prioritize their safety and be aware of their surroundings." The threats are real and constant," says Activist B. Activist C stresses consistent engagement and building strong networks to sustain their safety. Activist E said,

“Another thing that most new activists do not know is that if you go to a protest or any public place to support your cause, you take a picture or two and share it on social media, your location can be tracked as well as the identity of anyone whose face you might have captured in that picture”.

### **8. Discussion**

This chapter discusses the findings regarding the themes generated and the research questions, while contextualizing the answers with the Public Sphere Theory.

**RQ1: How are activists utilizing social media to highlight social injustice in Pakistan?**

The study also showcases that activists in Pakistan are smartly using all the networking apps to get the maximum results, which depicts platform versatility and multiplatform advocacy. Each social media platform, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, is chosen for specific reasons. People turn to Twitter primarily for real-time communication, as this platform is suitable for sharing information and discussions in the shortest time possible. Due to the symbolic nature of the platform, activists with art-related backgrounds gravitate towards Instagram as it provides a means to convey intricate messages within images and videos. Such selective and strategic use of different platforms allows the activists to connect with the target groups, develop a larger support base, and advocate for their ideas for the cause.

Another important function of networking platforms is real-time reporting and mobilization. Through platforms such as Twitter, activists can easily organize a protest and respond quickly to crises, guaranteeing that their cause gets the support it deserves. This capacity to gather communities swiftly is helpful in a country like Pakistan, where dynamics in the political and social realms can be unpredictable. Social media is helpful in community building and global reach as well, which means that through engaging supporters both nationally and globally, activists can transcend geographical limits. This global reach is essential in advocating for and garnering international support for local matters, as demonstrated by activists who reported having established a very robust network and the capability of sourcing funds to support their various causes.

**RQ2: What is their attitude toward the advantages and disadvantages of social media platforms while using them for social justice movements?**

Some of the issues highlighted in the study were misinformation and online harassment in navigating social networking platforms for activism. Disinformation is a common problem that challenges the credibility of

activists. Those against the cause sometimes actively spread misinformation, neutralizing activists' efforts. The ongoing battles to counter these initiatives are necessary. The different forms of abusive conduct present in online environments are primarily aimed at women and minorities. They are threatened with personal safety, which requires protective and defensive behavioral solutions.

Nevertheless, the evolution of movements and increased visibility also have advantages despite all these difficulties. Small-scale events have now turned into significant events through social media; for instance, the Aurat march has become a nationally recognizable event compared to what it used to be. The accessibility of social networking platforms allows the movements to reach a wider audience and brings key issues to the attention of policymakers to be more effective.

**RQ3: How do activists address misinformation, cyberbullying, and other challenges when sharing their stories?**

The campaigners use several techniques to overcome these hurdles, which can be seen from the two themes: collaborative efforts, hashtag campaigns, safety measures, and vigilance. Working with other activists and hashtags increases the potential of messages and cultivates a sense of empathy in people, making them stand against fake news and malicious intent. For instance, Activist A's #ClimateActionNow and Activist B's #StopShiaGenocide clearly show how strategic and connected campaigns bring people together to address a particular issue and gain global support. In combating various forms of cyberbullying, activists highlight the need for safety measures and vigilance. It is highlighted that users should be more careful when revealing personal information on the Internet. The findings also reveal that one has to pay special attention to females and representatives of minorities, as they often become targets for attacks. The study also points out the need to maintain contact with various agencies as a key strategy for promoting and encouraging people despite opposition.

Thus, when filtered through the Public Sphere Theory, the results and analysis highlight the importance of social networking sites in the newly emerging public sphere, especially in the socio-politically restricted contexts of Pakistan. The theory claims that social networking sites are the contemporary version of the public sphere since people in marginalized groups can freely discuss issues and seek support through reasonable debate beyond the state's or corporations' influence. The versatility of using the various platforms in real-time to mobilize, build communities, and go global also illustrates how activists utilize social media to speak for the voiceless on social justice issues. Similarly, the problems of fake news and cyberbullying prove continuous tension in keeping the information space credible and safe. Moreover, collective actions and hashtags display the tenacity of these social networking platforms. Therefore, the study supports the Public Sphere Theory by arguing that social networking platforms are important public spheres through which activists can counter hegemonic discourses, mobilize support, and seek social change.

**Table 8.1** *Key Findings*

<b>Activist</b>	<b>Activism Area</b>	<b>Key Challenges Faced</b>	<b>Strategies Employed</b>
A	Environmental activism	Misinformation	Real-time mobilization
B	Advocacy for the Shia community	Online harassment, censorship	Hashtag campaigns
C	Education activism	Lack of resources, misinformation	Storytelling, community building
D	Student rights activism	Online harassment	Educational outreach
E	Women's rights and security	Online harassment, safety risks	Visual advocacy, safety measures

**Table 8.2** *Themes Identified*

<b>Sr#</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Detail</b>
1	Platform Versatility	Activists leverage multiple social media platforms to maximize reach and impact.
2	Real-Time Reporting and Mobilization	Social media enables rapid updates and community mobilization during crises.
3	Community Building and Global Reach	Social media helps build strong support networks and reach a global audience.
4	Educational Outreach and Storytelling	Activists use social media to educate the public and share compelling personal stories.
5	Challenges of Misinformation & Online Harassment	Activists face significant challenges in combating misinformation and dealing with online harassment.
6	Collaborative Efforts and Hashtag Campaigns	Collaboration with other activists and influencers and effective hashtag campaigns amplify messages and broaden reach.
7	Evolution of Movements and Increased Visibility	Social media transforms small events into significant movements and increases the visibility of various causes.
8	Safety Measures and Vigilance	Online safety and privacy are critical concerns for activists, requiring precautionary measures and vigilance.



## **9. Conclusion & Recommendations**

This chapter summarizes the findings, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research. The activists' views highlighted the importance of social networking sites in today's activism, including the opportunities and difficulties of using social networking platforms.

The study aimed to understand the use of social networking sites in social justice activism in Pakistan, including the strategies activists employ and the challenges they face. Consequently, the study indicates that social media platforms are crucial to activism, allowing for forming groups, mobilizing, and raising awareness. There are challenges, such as fake news and cyberbullying, with which activists should be vigilant and wise. The study responded to the research questions by explaining how activists utilize social networking platforms to highlight the issues of social injustice, their attitudes toward the advantages and disadvantages of social networking platforms, and how they address the challenges while fighting for their cause. The results prove the relevance of the Public Sphere theory in the context of modern-day activism in Pakistan, as it outlines how social networking platforms can democratize the public sphere and empower minorities. This theoretical contribution helps explain the dynamics of digital activism in a socio-politically restrictive country such as Pakistan.

The study offers practical implications for activists and policymakers. It suggests strategies for activists to amplify their voices to spread their messages where local media is subdued. To counteract the challenges of fake news, activists should use fact-checking protocols, cooperate with other non-governmental organizations, and be cautious while sharing their data. This research aimed to address the gaps in the existing knowledge by conducting a descriptive qualitative study of the perceptions and experiences of activists in Pakistan. As opposed to the previous studies, which merely focused on the quantitative data, this paper ensures a better understanding of the problems faced by the activists, the steps they took, and the effectiveness of social networking sites for activism. However, this research enhances knowledge of social media platforms' usage in social justice movements in Pakistan; the

study has limitations. A significant factor that could have affected the findings of this study is the small and purposive sample size, which restricted its generalizability. Since the research is qualitative, the findings might be biased due to the researcher's perspectives. Time constraints might have also limited the scope of the study.

Future research should enlist more people in the sample and include people of varying ages, backgrounds, experiences, and genders. The quantitative approach can also help to better understand social media activism in the country with a larger sample size. Longitudinal studies can also offer detailed insights into the impact of social networking platforms on social justice campaigns. A comparative analysis between several countries can also reveal certain aspects of activism from broader perspectives.

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