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Collective Action in Digital Activism: How Hashtags Mobilize Social Movements

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Abstract

In the digital era, social movements increasingly take place on online platforms where hashtags function as tools for mobilization, identity, and solidarity. This study explores how hashtags encourage collective action among Indonesian netizens by examining participation patterns, perceived impacts, and barriers to digital activism. Using a mixedmethod design, data were gathered from a survey of 400 respondents across Indonesia and supported by digital content observation and case studies. Results show that youth aged 21-30 and students are the most active participants, mainly using Twitter and Instagram. Most engage weekly, and sharing or reposting hashtags is the dominant form of participation, while offline involvement remains limited. Hashtags are considered highly effective in promoting awareness and unity but less influential in shaping policy outcomes. Challenges include short-lived attention, misinformation, and online harassment. The findings highlight that hashtag activism in Indonesia strengthens collective consciousness yet struggles to achieve structural change, emphasizing the need to integrate digital advocacy with community-based and offline initiatives for sustainable impact.

INTRODUCTION

Social movements are no longer limited to physical locations like streets, town halls, or community centers in the digital age (Anshori & Nadiyya, 2023). Rather, they are becoming more prevalent in digital spaces where people and organizations communicate, exchange data, and plan activities (Young et al., 2019; Ellison et al., 2015; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Hashtags have become one of the most effective tools for digital activism out of all the tools accessible in this context. Their capacity to unite disparate voices under a common banner has revolutionized the mobilization and maintenance of collective action (Obregón & Tufte, 2017).

According to Purnamasari et al. (2025), hashtags are tools for mobilization, solidarity, and group identity in addition to being indicators of popular subjects. They offer a linguistic and symbolic instrument that facilitates the discovery of online material, links geographically separated people, and creates common understandings of social issues (Nani, 2024; Ito et al., 2018). Activists may mobilize

supporters worldwide, elevate underrepresented voices, and ignite public discourse with a single phrase or word preceded by the "#" sign.

The emergence of campaigns like #FridaysForFuture, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter shows how hashtags may cut across national borders, political structures, and cultural settings (Zahra, 2024). These digital initiatives demonstrate that hashtags are essential infrastructures of contemporary activism that connect virtual involvement to tangible action, rather than merely serving as symbols of online debate (Rosmilawati et al., 2024; Clark, 2016; Goswami, 2018; Rahayuningsih et al., 2025).

Hashtags represent the dynamics of collective action in the digital age, according to sociology. By helping members see themselves as part of a broader community, they unite disparate individual manifestations into a cohesive movement (Haenfler, 2004; Calhoun, 1998). By doing this, hashtags both conform to and adapt classical conceptions of collective action to the realities of digital communication. In countries where there are limited physical locations for protest, the mobilization process made possible by hashtags is very important. Hashtags offer comparatively safer platforms for criticism in authoritarian or semi-democratic countries where state control restricts protests (Khoo, 2025; Al-Khater, 2025). Digital channels turn becoming forums for organizing opposition, voicing grievances, and fostering global solidarity. At the same time, new dynamics of speed, scale, and exposure are introduced by the usage of hashtags for activism. Through viral posts and international media attention, mobilization that formerly required weeks or months of planning can now happen in a matter of hours and reach millions of people (Jalloh et al., 2020; Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2018). The durability of digital movements, the genuineness of involvement, and the harmony between symbolic visibility and concrete results are all significant issues brought up by this acceleration. The sociopolitical environment, the algorithmic mechanisms of the platform, and the tactics activists use all affect how effective hashtags are as mobilization tools (Treré & Bonini, 2024). For instance, Instagram places more emphasis on images that support the emotional appeal of campaigns, while Twitter (now X) gives priority to trending hashtags, which enables specific causes to quickly garner attention (Akram et al., 2025). Platform-specific characteristics therefore influence the course of collective action.

Digital activism critics contend that hashtags run the risk of fostering a culture of "slacktivism," in which people participate merely symbolically liking, sharing, or posting hashtags without making a commitment to more meaningful engagement. Nonetheless, data from current movements indicates that hashtag activism may serve as a springboard for more tangible forms of involvement, such as public protests, volunteer work, and fundraising (Briones et al., 2016; Fohring & Horsfield, 2023). Additionally, hashtags facilitate intercultural communication and the localization of worldwide movements (Suk et al., 2024). For example, although #MeToo originated in the United States, particular cultural and legal conditions led to its adaptation and contextualization in nations such as India, Japan, and Indonesia. Because of their versatility, hashtags have a worldwide reach while maintaining a local resonance, which strengthens their place in contemporary collective action. It takes an interdisciplinary approach that integrates knowledge from political science, communication studies, sociology, and digital media study to comprehend how hashtags might inspire collective action. Scholars might gain a better understanding of hashtags' significance in influencing modern activism by looking at how they are used as instruments for agenda-setting, network-building, and identity creation.

This study looks at the roles, dynamics, and results of hashtags in digital activism in an effort to better understand how they mobilize social movements. It draws attention to hashtags' dual function as symbolic and useful instruments of group

action that can promote solidarity, influence public opinion, and close the gap between online and offline activism. By doing this, it hopes to advance knowledge of how digital technologies are changing the face of social movements in the twentyfirst century.

METHODS

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines how hashtags in Indonesian digital activism inspire collective action by integrating quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. This method enables a thorough examination of the deeper sociological meanings underlying hashtag-driven movements as well as the statistical patterns of online participation. 400 respondents from different parts of Indonesia participated in a survey that served as the main means of gathering data for the study. Age, gender, occupation, and social media usage patterns were among the demographic data collected by the poll, which concentrated on how frequently users interact with hashtags on sites like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The study also asked participants about their sorts of participation (such as reposting, signing petitions, and attending offline protests), how effective they thought hashtags were at bringing about social change, and any obstacles they had when pursuing digital activism.

The study used content analysis in addition to the poll to look at hashtag usage and virality on various social media sites. This approach entailed gathering information on user engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments), popular hashtags, and network patterns of user activity. The study team was able to gauge the extent and impact of hashtag activism as a result. The study's qualitative component involved focus groups and in-depth interviews with activists, content producers, and participants in well-known hashtag campaigns. Participants' reasons for participating in digital activism, opinions on the efficacy of hashtag movements, and individual experiences with online mobilization were all examined in these interviews. In order to understand how these communication channels frame social issues and support collective identity, the qualitative data also included thematic analysis of user-generated content, including posts, comments, memes, and digital narratives.

In order to guarantee a representative distribution of age groups (15–40 years) and occupational backgrounds, including students, employees, and entrepreneurs, survey participants were chosen through the use of stratified random sampling. This sampling strategy made sure that the results would represent the demographics of participants in hashtag-driven movements, as students and young adults are the groups most active in digital activism. Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants with substantial hashtag activism engagement for the qualitative component, guaranteeing that the sample contained a variety of viewpoints from seasoned activists and content producers.

Descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions and measures of central tendency, were used to assess the quantitative data gathered from the survey in order to describe engagement patterns. The associations between demographic traits and hashtag usage frequency were evaluated using chi-square testing. Additionally, the structure of relationships within online activist networks was examined using network analysis. Key topics pertaining to motivations, obstacles, and perceptions of the impact of hashtag activism were identified using thematic analysis of the qualitative data from focus groups and interviews. The coding procedure was carried out in NVivo software. The sociological aspects of internet activism were better understood by the researchers thanks to this method, which went beyond the quantitative data's numerical trends.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the survey, content analysis, and qualitative interviews conducted as part of this study on digital activism, specifically focusing on how hashtags mobilize collective action in Indonesia. The results reveal significant patterns in engagement, the perceived impact of hashtag activism, and the barriers that hinder its long-term effectiveness. Through a combination of quantitative data, including survey responses, and qualitative insights from interviews and thematic content analysis, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how digital activism via hashtags functions and its limitations.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1. Demograp	hic Profile	of Respondents	(N = 400)
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Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender: Female	230	57.5
Gender: Male	170	42.5
Age 15–20	120	30.0
Age 21–30	190	47.5
Age 31–40	65	16.3
Age > 40	25	6.2
Student	160	40.0
Employee	145	36.3
Entrepreneur	55	13.7
Other/Unemployed	40	10.0

The demographic profile of the respondents provides important insights into the characteristics of individuals participating in hashtag activism. As shown in Table 1, the survey sample consisted of 400 respondents, with the majority being young adults aged 21–30 years (47.5%), followed by those aged 15–20 years (30%). A significant proportion of respondents were students (40%), reflecting the high level of digital engagement within younger, more technologically literate groups. Gender distribution slightly favored females (57.5%), aligning with global trends in digital activism where women tend to be more engaged in social justice movements (Zahra, 2024). This demographic breakdown suggests that digital activism, particularly via hashtags, is predominantly driven by a youthful, tech-savvy population, with women playing a central role in movements related to gender equality and human rights.

The sample also reflected a variety of occupations, with 36.3% of respondents being employees and 13.7% entrepreneurs. This occupational diversity underscores the broad appeal of hashtag activism across various sectors, particularly in urban environments where social media use is more pervasive. The skew towards younger, student populations suggests that digital activism resonates strongly within academic and socially conscious communities, a trend observed globally (Suk et al., 2024).

Frequency of Engagement with Hashtags

Table 2. Frequency of Hashtag Engagement

Frequency of Engagement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	95	23.8
2–3 times per week	140	35.0
Once per week	80	20.0
1–2 times per month	55	13.7
Rarely/Never	30	7.5

A key finding in this study is the frequency of engagement with hashtags. According to Table 2, over half of the respondents (58.8%) engage with hashtags at least once a week, indicating that hashtag activism is a regular activity for many individuals. A notable 23.8% of respondents report engaging with hashtags on a daily basis, suggesting that digital activism is not just a sporadic activity but an embedded practice in their daily routines. This frequent engagement highlights the normalization of activism within digital platforms, particularly among younger users, where social media has become a primary space for political participation (Anshori & Nadiyya, 2023).

Interestingly, a smaller percentage (7.5%) of respondents engage rarely or never with hashtag activism. This group cited factors such as lack of interest or distrust in the effectiveness of online activism as reasons for their limited participation. These findings suggest that while hashtag activism is widely adopted, the intensity of engagement varies across individuals, reflecting diverse motivations, resources, and levels of trust in the digital movement. The occasional participation observed here points to the varying degrees of commitment among the online activist community, where some individuals may participate symbolically without deeper involvement.

Types of Digital Activism Participation

Type of Participation	High (%)	Moderate (%)	Low (%)
Sharing/Reposting Hashtags	70.0	20.0	10.0
Creating Original Content	40.0	35.0	25.0
Signing Online Petitions	55.0	30.0	15.0
Donating/Fundraising Online	35.0	40.0	25.0
Joining Offline Protests/Events	30.0	25.0	45.0

Table 3. Types of Digital Activism Participation

The study also examined the types of digital activism participants engaged in. As indicated in Table 3, the most common form of participation was the sharing or reposting of hashtags, with 70% of respondents reporting high engagement in this activity. This form of activism is often considered low-effort but highly visible, contributing to the spread of awareness and the amplification of messages. Reposting hashtags plays a critical role in viral activism, where the mere visibility of a cause can lead to significant public discourse and raise awareness on a large scale (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

On the other hand, more involved forms of participation, such as creating original content (40%) or joining offline protests (30%), were less common. This supports the ongoing debate about "slacktivism," where symbolic actions like reposting do not always translate into real-world outcomes such as protests or volunteering. Despite this, the creation of original content (such as blog posts or videos) suggests a deeper level of engagement for some participants, particularly those who are content creators or influencers. The relatively low percentage of respondents engaging in offline protests may indicate a gap between digital visibility and tangible, offline activism, a limitation often discussed in critiques of digital activism (Jalloh et al., 2020).

Perceived Impact of Hashtags on Social Movements

Table 4. Perceived Impact of Hashtags on Social Movements

Indicator	Strong Impact (%)	Moderate Impact (%)	Low Impact (%)
Raising Awareness	75.0	20.0	5.0
Influencing Public Debate	65.0	25.0	10.0

Policy Change Influence	40.0	35.0	25.0
Mobilizing Donations	50.0	30.0	20.0
Building Solidarity	70.0	20.0	10.0

Respondents rated the impact of hashtags on different dimensions of activism. Awareness (75%) and solidarity-building (70%) stand out as the strongest perceived impacts, showing hashtags' effectiveness in shaping public consciousness.

Policy influence is weaker (40% strong impact), indicating the gap between digital discourse and institutional change. Nonetheless, mobilizing donations and sparking debates (65%) show that hashtags can generate real-world consequences beyond visibility.

Platform-Specific Dynamics

Table 5. Platforms Most Used for Hashtag Activism

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Twitter/X	190	47.5
Instagram	120	30.0
TikTok	60	15.0
Facebook	20	5.0
Others	10	2.5

The results also shed light on the preferred platforms for hashtag activism. **Table 5** shows that Twitter (47.5%) is the dominant platform for hashtag activism, followed by Instagram (30%) and TikTok (15%). This reflects Twitter's strength in facilitating rapid mobilization through trending hashtags, where issues can gain immediate attention in real-time. Instagram, known for its visual appeal, serves as an ideal platform for campaigns that rely on emotional resonance and compelling images to capture public attention. TikTok's rising importance, particularly among younger demographics, indicates a shift towards more interactive and creative forms of activism, which may further enhance the viral spread of hashtag movements (Zahra, 2024).

The declining role of Facebook (5%) in hashtag activism aligns with global trends, where younger users have migrated to newer platforms like Instagram and TikTok for more dynamic and visually engaging content. These platform preferences highlight the importance of adapting activism strategies to suit the specific features and user behaviors associated with each social media platform.

Barriers to Effective Hashtag Activism

Table 6. Barriers to Effective Hashtag Activism

Barrier Reported	Percentage (%)
Online Harassment/Trolling	52.0
Government Censorship/Regulation	40.0
Misinformation/Hoaxes	55.0
Short-lived Public Attention	60.0
Lack of Offline Follow-through	48.0

Despite the successes of hashtag activism, several barriers to its effectiveness were identified in the study. **Table 6** reveals that the most significant challenge faced by activists was short-lived public attention, with 60% of respondents citing this as a barrier. This issue of "issue fatigue" is common in digital spaces, where the fast-paced nature of social media cycles means that attention quickly shifts to new trends, leaving previous campaigns behind. Misinformation (55%) and online harassment (52%) were also major obstacles, undermining the credibility and safety of digital

spaces for activism. These findings highlight the vulnerabilities that activists face online, where digital campaigns can be easily distorted or discredited through coordinated trolling or the spread of false information (Purnamasari et al., 2025).

Additionally, 40% of respondents reported that government censorship or regulation posed a significant barrier, particularly in Indonesia, where online speech is often scrutinized and regulated. This underscores the importance of safeguarding digital freedoms and the role of government policies in shaping the landscape of online activism. The combined effect of these barriers suggests that while hashtags are effective in generating awareness and engagement, their ability to sustain momentum and achieve tangible outcomes is often hindered by external challenges that require innovative strategies to overcome.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm that digital activism in Indonesia has become an important vehicle for collective expression, particularly among younger and more digitally fluent populations. However, rather than merely restating the descriptive results, the discussion must interrogate how these patterns reflect broader transformations in civic engagement and social movement practices. The prominence of young adults and students in hashtag activism suggests not only generational familiarity with technology but also a shift in the modes of political participation from formal institutions to networked, decentralized, and affect-driven spaces. These digital publics embody what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) described as *connective action*, where personal narratives and self-expression substitute for traditional organizational structures. In this sense, the youthful demographic dominance is not incidental but central to understanding how activism evolves within a media-saturated environment.

What emerges from these dynamics is a new form of citizenship that prioritizes visibility, immediacy, and symbolic solidarity. The daily or weekly engagement with hashtags shows how activism has become embedded within routine online behavior. This normalization of participation indicates that social media has blurred the line between private communication and public advocacy. Yet, the frequency of engagement must not be mistaken for depth of commitment. High activity levels may represent a diffusion of engagement rather than its intensification (Araki, 2023). The challenge for digital activism, therefore, is not attracting attention but sustaining it long enough to produce structural outcomes. This problem is magnified by the platform architectures that reward novelty and speed over continuity. The fleeting cycles of online trends tend to favor emotional peaks followed by rapid decline, which explains the difficulty of maintaining collective momentum once media visibility wanes.

A more critical reflection reveals that the predominance of low-effort participation such as sharing or reposting hashtags reflects the dual character of digital activism. On one hand, it democratizes participation by lowering barriers to entry, allowing anyone with internet access to contribute. On the other, it risks reducing activism to symbolic gestures with minimal transformative power. The "slacktivism" critique is relevant here, yet it requires nuance. While reposting alone may appear superficial, at scale it performs important communicative functions. It constructs collective narratives, amplifies marginalized issues, and exerts pressure on mainstream media to recognize overlooked topics. However, the study's findings also suggest that the translation from online awareness to offline mobilization remains incomplete. Without mechanisms that link digital visibility to organizational strategy, hashtag movements struggle to move beyond expressive solidarity.

The weak influence of hashtags on policy change highlights a fundamental asymmetry between cultural and institutional power. Hashtags are effective in

shaping discourse but far less so in influencing bureaucratic or legislative outcomes (Rho & Mazmanian, 2019). This disconnect underscores the structural limits of digital activism in political systems where decision-making remains insulated from public opinion. In Indonesia's context, where institutional responsiveness is often mediated by patronage and political negotiation, online mobilization faces barriers in transforming visibility into authority. The implication is that digital activism must develop hybrid strategies that combine online mobilization with offline advocacy, coalition-building, and policy engagement. Without such integration, movements risk confinement within the symbolic realm, generating awareness without agency.

Platform-specific differences deepen this insight. Twitter's predominance reflects its algorithmic design that favors virality and rapid information diffusion, but this same speed can produce volatility (Romero et al., 2011). Campaigns that trend quickly may fade equally fast, eroding sustained engagement. Instagram and TikTok, while less dominant, introduce visual and creative dimensions that foster emotional connection and identity performance. This diversity of platforms suggests that digital activism is not a monolith but an ecosystem of overlapping media logics. Effective activism requires multi-platform literacy, where messages are adapted to the communicative affordances and audience behaviors unique to each space. The strategic use of different platforms can extend a campaign's lifespan and diversify its forms of engagement, moving from textual persuasion on Twitter to visual storytelling on Instagram and participatory content creation on TikTok.

The barriers identified in this study further reveal the fragility of digital spaces as arenas of civic expression. Short-lived attention, misinformation, and harassment represent not only technical or behavioral challenges but also structural limitations of the digital public sphere. The constant flow of information creates competition for visibility, leading to what scholars describe as *attention scarcity*. Movements that fail to innovate or emotionally engage users are quickly replaced by newer causes. Misinformation and trolling, on the other hand, expose the vulnerability of open platforms to manipulation. When digital discourse becomes saturated with falsehoods and hostility, trust declines, and activism risks fragmentation. Addressing these issues requires digital literacy education, moderation policies that protect free expression while preventing abuse, and alternative spaces that prioritize deliberation over virality.

Government censorship compounds these difficulties. In contexts where digital surveillance and regulatory constraints limit dissent, online activism must navigate a delicate balance between expression and risk. The finding that 40 percent of respondents identify government regulation as a barrier illustrates the enduring tension between the democratizing potential of digital media and the state's impulse to control public discourse. While social media can circumvent traditional censorship, it also leaves digital traces that expose activists to monitoring. Sustainable digital activism thus depends on legal protections for online speech and transparent governance of digital platforms. Civil society organizations can play a mediating role by providing advocacy training, digital security resources, and institutional support to activists who operate under these constraints.

A key theoretical implication of these findings concerns the relationship between collective identity and sustainability of movements. Hashtags not only coordinate action but also construct symbolic communities around shared grievances and aspirations. This identity-building function explains why participants feel part of a movement even when their contributions are minimal. However, the durability of these identities depends on their institutional anchoring. Movements that remain purely discursive risk disintegration once public attention shifts. The challenge, therefore, lies in transforming digital solidarity into organized capacity. Partnerships

with NGOs, grassroots organizations, and advocacy networks can provide continuity and translate online mobilization into policy initiatives or community programs.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that digital activism in Indonesia must be contextualized within broader socio-political realities. The country's large youth population, expanding internet penetration, and vibrant social media culture create fertile ground for online movements. Yet, persistent inequalities in access and digital literacy mean that activism remains concentrated among urban, educated users. This urban bias raises concerns about representation. Marginalized groups without reliable connectivity or technical competence risk exclusion from digital spaces where public debates increasingly occur. Future activism must therefore consider inclusive strategies that bridge digital divides, ensuring that online movements do not replicate existing social hierarchies.

From a methodological perspective, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data strengthens the credibility of the study but also highlights areas for refinement. While surveys capture participation patterns, they may not fully account for the affective and performative dimensions of digital engagement. Qualitative interviews offer valuable insights into motivations and experiences but require deeper longitudinal tracking to assess how engagement evolves over time. Future research should employ mixed methods that integrate network analysis, ethnographic observation, and discourse analysis to explore not only who participates but also how narratives circulate and transform across platforms. Ultimately, this discussion demonstrates that hashtag activism operates at the intersection of expression, organization, and transformation. It succeeds in making voices visible, in forging a sense of belonging, and in shaping cultural awareness. Yet, it falters in institutionalizing its gains and sustaining momentum beyond the immediacy of digital attention. The solution lies in recognizing that digital activism is neither purely symbolic nor fully transformative. It represents an evolving stage of civic engagement that complements rather than replaces traditional forms of collective action. By linking online networks with offline institutions, activists can leverage digital visibility into social power capable of influencing policy and fostering durable change.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that hashtag activism serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness, building solidarity, and shaping public discourse, particularly among younger and digitally literate communities in Indonesia. While the majority of participation is characterized by low-effort activities such as reposting and content sharing, these actions collectively contribute to amplifying social issues and increasing their visibility on digital platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. However, the study also shows that the influence of hashtags on concrete policy change remains limited, as challenges such as short-lived public attention, misinformation, online harassment, and government censorship hinder their long-term impact. Thus, while hashtags are effective in mobilizing collective identity and fostering digital engagement, their sustainability and effectiveness in driving structural transformation depend on integrating online activism with offline organizing and institutional support.

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