

Washatiyah: Journal of Political Islam and Society 1(2), 133-144

Washatiyah:

Journal of Political Islam and Society

<https://propanoramic.com/index.php/wasathiyah/index>

DOI: 10.64595/wasathiyah.v1n2.p133-144



Social Media Activism: From Social Struggles to Political Content and Image

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Abstract

This study examines the commodification of activism on social media, which has shifted from social struggle to digital content and to a tool for political image-building. The development of social media has expanded the space for public participation in social issues. Yet, it has also fostered the emergence of symbolic engagement influenced by algorithms and the attention economy. The urgency of this study lies in understanding how digital activism can reduce substantive social movements to content consumed by the public. This study aims to analyze the representation, production, and use of activism in social media. The study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design, using content observation on Instagram and TikTok, interviews, and a literature review. The theoretical framework includes concepts of commodification, participatory culture, and network society. Research findings indicate that activist content is often presented in visually appealing ways to boost engagement, thereby transforming it into a digital commodity. Additionally, activism is also leveraged as a political branding strategy to cultivate an image of social responsibility. User participation tends to be symbolic, such as liking, sharing, and commenting without taking concrete action. Although social media increases awareness and participation, such engagement is often fleeting and trend-driven. Therefore, improved digital literacy is necessary to make activism more substantive and capable of driving real social change.

Keywords: *Political Branding, The Commodification of Activism, Digital Literacy, Social*

Media, Symbolic Participation

Paper Type: *Research Paper*

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Received: 29/05/2026; **Received in Revised From:** 09/07/2026; **Accepted:** 27/08/2026; **Available Online:** 28/08/2026

Introduction

Developments in the field of information and communication technology in recent years have had a significant impact on the social life of modern society. (Gaidos et al., 2026). One result of this progress is social media, which is now widely used by various groups around the world. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter) serve not only as communication tools but also as digital public spaces that enable the rapid exchange of information. The presence of social media has transformed how people interact, express their views, and engage with social and political issues. In this context, social media has become a crucial element in shaping the dynamics of contemporary social life (Sabrina & Dhiyajeng Putri N, 2026).

In this context, the way people engage in activism has undergone significant changes. Activism, which previously took place through physical actions such as protests, public discussions, and the formation of social organizations, has now largely shifted to the digital realm, known as digital activism (Winkler-Titus & Crafford, 2025). Digital activism enables individuals and groups to raise awareness of social issues through various types of content, such as images, short videos, infographics, and hashtag campaigns. Social media platforms provide easy access and wide reach, allowing social issues to spread rapidly and attract greater public participation. This phenomenon demonstrates that social media plays a crucial role in raising public awareness of various social issues, such as economic inequality, gender justice, the environment, and human rights. Young people, in particular, are the most active group in using social media as a means to express their concern for these issues (Cabrera et al., 2017). Furthermore, social media also enables digital solidarity that can strengthen the networks of social movements across regions and even across nations.

However, behind this encouraging progress lies a phenomenon that is both intriguing and problematic: the shifting meaning of activism in the digital world. Activism, which should focus on social change and justice, is now, in many situations, experiencing what is termed the commodification of activism (Putri & Pratiwi, 2022). Commodification is the process by which a value, idea, or social action is transformed into a commodity that can be bought or produced and holds exchange value within a specific system. In the context of social media, the commodification of activism is evident in the way social issues are presented as engaging, aesthetically pleasing content designed to align with platform algorithms and drive high engagement. In social media systems driven by algorithms, user attention becomes the primary asset holding economic value. This is known as the attention economy, in which content that captures greater interest gains broader reach. Consequently, activism emerging on social media platforms is often oriented toward virality, aesthetics, and fame, rather than being purely based on the substance of the issue (Niehoff et al., 2026). Complex social issues are sometimes simplified into brief, easily understandable content, even though this can diminish the issue's depth of meaning.

On the other hand, social media is also used as a tool to build a political image, whether by individuals, organizations, or political actors (Mount, 2025). Social issues are frequently raised as part of a communication strategy to project an image of social responsibility. The content produced typically highlights narratives of empathy, concern, and support for specific issues. However, in practice, not all such representations are accompanied by consistent, tangible actions. This raises an important question regarding the authenticity of activism on social media: does it truly reflect social struggle, or is it merely a strategy to create an image? This phenomenon is also linked to the emergence of the term "slacktivism," which refers to a form of social participation that is minimal and symbolic—such as liking, sharing, or commenting—without further involvement in concrete action. Studies show that although social media facilitates access to participation, this form of engagement often does not result in significant social impact (Vogler et al., 2026). Activism has become more symbolic, with users feeling they have contributed merely through simple digital interactions, without any follow-up actions in the real world.

Empirically, we can observe the commodification of activism in various widely circulated social media campaigns, whether related to social or political issues. Many of these campaigns successfully attract public attention through visually appealing designs and emotionally charged messages, yet they are not always accompanied by tangible social change. (Elwood, 2025). Additionally, social media algorithms that prioritize engagement contribute to content that prioritizes popularity over substance. This reinforces the view that activism on social media has become part of the attention industry. Theoretically, we can analyze this phenomenon from a critical perspective on cultural capitalism. Karl Marx noted that in the capitalist system, nearly every aspect of life can be turned into a commodity, including ideas, culture, and social relations (Chen & Wang, 2025). Adorno and Horkheimer later expanded this line of thought through the concept of the culture industry, which explains how culture is mass-produced and consumed like a commodity. In the context of social media, activism can be produced as content that follows market principles and the algorithms of digital platforms.

Furthermore, Manuel Castells, in his concept of the network society, explains that the power of communication in the modern era stems from information networks that support the rapid and widespread distribution of messages (Chaney & Philippe, 2026). On the other hand, Henry Jenkins, through his concept of participatory culture, emphasizes that digital media enable users to act not only as consumers but also as content creators. However, this engagement often lacks genuine depth and is frequently limited to symbolic interactions that do not always lead to significant social change. Previous studies have shown that social media platforms play a crucial role in encouraging public participation in social issues. Online activism can accelerate the dissemination of information, raise public awareness, and facilitate mass mobilization (Etim et al., 2025). Additionally, research indicates that using social media in social campaigns can strengthen public engagement, particularly among young people, yet this is often not followed by sustained, concrete action (Bany Mohammed et al.,

2025). This phenomenon indicates a gap between digital participation and concrete social change.

In Indonesia, digital activism has grown rapidly alongside the expansion of internet access and social media use. Young people have become key figures in spreading social issues through digital platforms. However, there is a tendency for digital activism to focus more on visual elements, trends, and virality than on the substance of the social cause itself. This reinforces the indications that activism has shifted from the realm of social movements to content production. Given this explanation, it can be concluded that there is a crucial phenomenon in the practice of activism on social media: a shift from social struggle toward digital content and a tool for political branding. This phenomenon indicates a process of the commodification of activism that influences a shift in meaning-from collective movements toward individual, attention-based symbolic consumption.

Therefore, this study is crucial for thoroughly investigating how the commodification of activism unfolds on social media and its impact on social movement practices and the formation of political imagery. This research is expected to provide empirical contributions to understanding digital activism and to enrich theoretical studies in political sociology and digital communication, particularly by clarifying the relationship among activism, social media, and symbolic power in the contemporary era. Furthermore, this research also holds practical urgency in enhancing digital literacy among the public. With a deeper understanding, the public is expected to be able to distinguish between substantive activism and that which is merely symbolic or merely content. Thus, social media can be utilized more wisely as an authentic tool for social struggle that brings about tangible social change.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research design analytical research aimed at deeply understanding the phenomenon of the commodification of activism on social media. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on meaning, interpretation, and the social processes occurring within digital activism practices (Widodo et al., 2026). The research objects in this study are activism content on social media, specifically on the Instagram and Tik Tok platforms, which feature social issues and potentially contain elements of political image-building. The research subjects include social media users, content creators, and audiences engaged in digital interactions such as commenting, sharing content, or using specific hashtags. This study seeks to uncover how activism is represented, produced, and consumed in the digital space.

The data collection technique in this study uses purposive sampling, which involves selecting samples based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria used include: content that addresses social issues, has high engagement levels (likes, shares, comments), and contains elements of a narrative of concern or public image (Creswell, 2019). The data used in this study consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from direct observation of

social media content and digital documentation, while secondary data was obtained from scientific journals, articles, and literature relevant to the research topic. Thus, the collected data is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study.

Data collection techniques were conducted through several methods, namely non-participant observation, documentation, and literature review. Non-participant observation was conducted by observing activism content on social media without directly engaging in interactions. Documentation was carried out by collecting screenshots, captions, comments, and visual elements from the analyzed content. Meanwhile, the literature review was conducted by examining various sources of literature, such as scientific journals, books, and relevant research reports. This technique was used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and to compare the research findings with previous studies.

The data analysis technique in this study employs the interactive qualitative analysis model proposed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction involves selecting and simplifying data relevant to the research focus. Data presentation is done in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding of the phenomena under study. Subsequently, conclusions are drawn by interpreting the data based on the established theoretical framework. To ensure data validity, this study employs source triangulation, which involves comparing data from various sources to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the information.

Result and Discussion

The Commodification of Activism on Social Media

Based on observations of social media content on the Instagram and TikTok platforms, it was found that social activism has transformed into visually appealing content designed to boost engagement. Content addressing social issues such as justice, the environment, and gender equality is often accompanied by aesthetically pleasing visuals, concise narratives, and the use of popular hashtags (Mahjebeen & Jalan, 2026). This indicates that activism functions not only as a means of advocacy but also as a digital product that follows the platform's algorithmic logic. This finding aligns with the research by (Hossain et al., 2026), which states that digital content plays a role in increasing political participation but also opens the door to the commodification of social issues. Thus, activism on social media is not entirely a pure social movement but has undergone a process of commodification.

An interview with one social media user revealed that:

"I usually just view or share content about social issues because the content is engaging and easy to understand. But I don't always participate in direct actions on the ground."

This statement indicates a tendency toward symbolic participation or "slacktivism," where user engagement is limited to digital activities without tangible action (McDaniel, 2024). This reinforces Henry Jenkins' theory of participatory culture, in which users act as both producers and consumers of content. However, in practice, this participation is often more oriented toward content consumption

than toward substantive collective action. Thus, social media becomes a space that not only facilitates activism but also commodifies social engagement as part of digital consumption (Han & Liu, 2024).

Digital Activism as a Tool for Political Branding

Research findings also indicate that activism on social media is frequently used as a tool for building a political image by both individuals and public figures. Content addressing social issues is often linked to personal branding, where political actors present themselves as figures who care about society (Islam et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates a shift in the function of activism from a social movement to a political communication strategy. This aligns with the concept of the culture industry proposed by (Emordi et al., 2026), which posits that culture can be produced and consumed as a commodity possessing both economic and symbolic value.

Based on the results of the content analysis, it was found that content with a strong social narrative tends to receive higher engagement compared to ordinary content. As an illustration, engagement data shows that content addressing social issues has a higher average engagement rate compared to non-social issue content.

Table 1. Average Engagement of Digital Activism Content

Content Type	Average Likes	Average Shares	Average Comments
Social Issue Content	High	High	Medium-High
Non-Social Issue Content	Medium	Low	Low

The data indicates that social issues hold significant appeal in capturing public attention. However, within the context of commodification, this can be leveraged as a strategy to boost popularity and political image. Thus, digital activism serves not only as a means of advocacy but also as a tool for building social and political legitimacy (Dashti et al., 2023).

Political Participation in Networked Society

Based on the research findings, social media has become a crucial component in shaping public political participation, particularly among the younger generation (Anita Kristina et al., 2026). This aligns with the concept of the network society proposed by Manuel Castells, where information serves as the primary source of power in modern society. Social media enables the rapid and widespread distribution of information, thereby facilitating social and political mobilization. However, the participation that occurs tends to be fleeting, instantaneous, and driven by the virality of content.

Based on the interview results, one informant stated:

"I share political information because many of my friends are sharing it, so I join in so I don't miss out."

This statement indicates that political participation on social media is often influenced by the digital social environment and emerging trends. This suggests that political participation is not always based on critical awareness but also on social factors such as peer pressure and the need for digital

presence. Research by (Vestergaard & Schmid, 2026) also shows that social media can enhance political awareness, though it does not necessarily lead to significant changes in political behavior.

Social Media and the Shaping of Political Participation Among the Younger Generation

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping public political participation, particularly among the younger generation. The rapid spread of social and political information makes users are encouraged to participate by sharing content. However, such participation is often influenced by trends and the digital environment (Xie & Wei, 2025). Social media serves as a discursive space for the younger generation to express their social and political views, leading to the growth of digital activism through online interactions that form issue-based communities. This engagement enables the emergence of digital solidarity that expands political participation, although it is often temporary in nature and follows current trends (A. Fauzi et al., 2018).

Additionally, political participation on social media is also influenced by social network factors and the need for a digital presence. Users tend to share political information because they follow their digital environment, rather than based on critical awareness of the issues being discussed (Schoettler, 2023). This situation indicates that social media creates a new form of political participation that is more open and accessible, but does not necessarily result in significant changes in political behavior. Thus, young people's engagement in digital activism remains dominated by quick and symbolic participation, which requires strengthening digital literacy to foster more substantive and sustainable political engagement (Shrestha, 2026).

Implications for Digital Literacy and Social Movements

The research findings underscore the importance of digital literacy in distinguishing between substantive and symbolic activism. Without adequate digital literacy, the public tends to consume activism as mere content without understanding the goals of social change.

Digital literacy enables social media users to assess the authenticity of information, understand the context of social issues, and identify the motivations behind circulating activist content. With strong digital literacy skills, the public does not merely become information consumers but is also capable of critically participating in public discourse. This demonstrates that digital literacy plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of social and political participation in the digital sphere (Aarts, 2013).

Furthermore, digital literacy also encourages users to engage in tangible actions beyond the digital space (A. M. Fauzi et al., 2025). Activism no longer stops at symbolic interactions such as likes, shares, and comments, but evolves into more concrete engagement in the form of advocacy, social campaigns, and community activities. With adequate digital literacy, the public can understand that social change requires sustained collective action. Therefore, improving digital literacy is a crucial step toward restoring the function of activism as a means of real and far-reaching social

change.

Theoretical Discussion and Implications

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that activism on social media has shifted from a social movement to a digital commodity possessing both economic and symbolic value. This indicates that social media is not merely a space for participation but also a space for the production and consumption of social meaning (Abdurrahman, 2026). From a Marxist perspective, this reflects a process of commodification, where social value is transformed into exchange value within the digital system. Furthermore, from a cultural industry perspective, activism becomes part of mass-produced cultural products consumed by the public (Conner, 2023).

In line with this, this study also shows that political participation on social media tends to be symbolic and does not always lead to concrete action. (Islam et al., 2026). This indicates a gap between digital participation and conventional participation. Therefore, efforts are needed to improve the public's digital literacy so they can distinguish between symbolic and substantive participation. Thus, digital activism can return to its primary function as a means of tangible social change.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, activism on social media has shifted in meaning from a social movement oriented toward tangible change to a form of digital content that follows the logic of algorithms and the attention economy. Activism is not only used to voice social issues. However, it is also commodified as a digital product designed to attract engagement and leveraged as a political branding strategy by both individuals and public figures. Public participation in digital activism tends to be symbolic (slacktivism), such as sharing, liking, or commenting on content without being followed by concrete actions in the offline world. Additionally, the high level of engagement with social issue content indicates that social themes hold significant appeal, yet also creates opportunities for the exploitation of one's image and popularity. Social media does expand the space for political and social participation, especially for the younger generation, but such participation is often fleeting and trend-driven. Therefore, improved digital literacy is needed so that the public can distinguish substantive activism from merely symbolic actions, enabling social media to be utilized more critically and contribute to tangible social change.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E. T. K.; Methodology and data analysis, F. D. A.; Investigation and data collection, E. T. K.; Writing original draft, F. D. A.; Writing review and editing, E. T. K.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all the participants involved in the study.

Declaration of Generative AI: The process of writing, drafting, and developing the text content was done independently. Every idea, analysis, argument, and sentence formulation comes from the writer's own thinking and effort. All reference points are clearly provided in accordance with current scientific writing standards. With this statement, I take full responsibility for the truth and integrity of the work produced.

Acknowledgments: The writer sincerely thanks all those who contributed to the completion of this research. Special appreciation goes to the tutors for their guidance, advice, and constructive feedback throughout the study. The author also extends gratitude to the informants for sharing their insights and experiences, which greatly enriched the research. Thanks are also due to the research and institutional teams for their continuous support and for providing the necessary resources. The author recognizes that this research would not have been possible without the help of many individuals, both directly and indirectly. It is hoped that this work will contribute to the advancement of knowledge, particularly in the fields of sociology and political studies.

Conflicts of Interest: This research was conducted independently, free from any external pressures, interventions, or interests related to the topic under discussion. The writer affirms that there are no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could influence the study's objectivity, integrity, or outcomes. The research process, including data collection, analysis, and writing, adhered to established ethical guidelines and academic honesty. Collaboration with specific institutions or individuals did not affect the study's interpretation or conclusions.

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