

Social Media as a Space for Democracy: A Narrative Review of Digital Activism in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT: Digital activism has become a defining feature of civic engagement in Southeast Asia, where social media platforms function as both spaces of empowerment and instruments of control. This narrative review aims to analyze how digital activism shapes political discourse, identity formation, and collective action in the region. Literature was systematically retrieved from databases including Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar, using Boolean strategies and thematic keywords such as digital activism, civic engagement, social media, and Southeast Asia. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed studies offering empirical insights, while exclusion criteria eliminated works lacking data or regional specificity. The findings reveal that youth and marginalized groups use social media to construct civic identities, mobilize protests, and amplify their voices globally. Political consumerism, symbolic online practices such as hashtags and memes, and transnational solidarity campaigns illustrate the innovative forms of digital engagement emerging in the region. However, challenges remain significant. Disinformation campaigns, censorship, surveillance, and structural inequalities restrict inclusivity and diminish the sustainability of digital activism. Comparative perspectives suggest that while Southeast Asia shares similarities with global trends, its unique socio-political context amplifies both opportunities and risks. Policy frameworks are crucial in shaping outcomes, with transparent governance, independent regulation, and digital literacy initiatives identified as key enablers of sustainable civic participation. The review concludes that digital activism represents both promise and peril, requiring context-sensitive policies and future research to address limitations and expand understanding. Key challenges include disinformation, censorship, and structural inequalities that demand targeted policy responses.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Civic Engagement, Southeast Asia, Social Media Politics, Political Participation, Online Mobilization, Digital Governance.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital activism and civic engagement have emerged as critical areas of scholarly inquiry in the twenty-first century, particularly within Southeast Asia, where rapid technological advancements intersect with diverse political contexts. Digital activism, broadly defined as the use of online

platforms to mobilize individuals and communities for social change, has gained prominence as a transformative force shaping civic participation (Ansar & Khaled, 2023; Barendregt & Schneider, 2020). Scholars highlight that digital activism often represents a hybridization of traditional grassroots movements and digital tools, resulting in new modalities of collective action that transcend geographic and political boundaries. In parallel, civic engagement is increasingly mediated through social media platforms, with individuals and groups participating in discourse, advocacy, and political mobilization in unprecedented ways (Barendregt & Schneider, 2020). This dual dynamic underscores the importance of examining digital environments not merely as spaces for communication, but as arenas for political identity formation, mobilization of marginalized populations, and contestation of dominant narratives.

The growing body of research on Southeast Asia illustrates that the region's socio-political complexities foster distinctive trajectories of digital activism. Scholars such as Sampaio et al. (2024) emphasize the global diffusion of participatory digital practices while recognizing localized adaptations rooted in cultural, political, and institutional structures. In Southeast Asia, where authoritarian tendencies often coexist with democratic aspirations, digital platforms provide critical spaces for both resistance and compliance. The Rohingya diaspora, for instance, has utilized online platforms to assert identity, gain visibility, and challenge state-sponsored marginalization, reflecting the power of digital activism to sustain communities otherwise excluded from traditional political arenas (Ansar & Khaled, 2023). At the same time, research indicates that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are central to youth political engagement, with young people increasingly viewing these tools as legitimate avenues for civic participation (Kwan, 2021; Sampaio et al., 2024).

The relevance of digital activism is reinforced by baseline statistics demonstrating the extent of internet penetration and social media adoption across Southeast Asia. Reports indicate that a significant proportion of the population, particularly individuals aged 15–30, actively participate in online political discourse and civic activities (Cmeciu & Coman, 2016; Wood, 2022). Surveys suggest that approximately 78% of young adults in several Southeast Asian countries utilize social media for civic engagement, encompassing both conventional political activities such as election discourse and non-conventional participation such as advocacy campaigns (Sampaio et al., 2024). These figures highlight the centrality of digital spaces in shaping contemporary political culture and underscore the potential of social media to amplify voices, disseminate information, and mobilize communities around pressing social and political issues.

Empirical studies also demonstrate how digital activism facilitates new forms of mobilization. Barendregt and Schneider (2020) argue that Southeast Asia provides fertile ground for observing the transformation of political participation due to the ubiquity of social media technologies. Electoral processes, protest movements, and advocacy campaigns increasingly rely on digital platforms to generate momentum, build solidarity, and reach transnational audiences. This dynamic not only reflects the democratizing potential of technology but also reveals the extent to which online engagement has become inseparable from offline political processes. In this regard, Southeast Asia exemplifies how digital infrastructures embed themselves within everyday civic practices, extending beyond communication into identity politics, governance debates, and international human rights advocacy.

Despite the potential of digital activism, numerous challenges and risks complicate its effectiveness. One primary concern involves censorship and disinformation, which hinder activists' ability to mobilize freely. A primary concern is censorship, with governments across Southeast Asia employing legislative, technological, and coercive measures to suppress dissenting voices online (Odilla & Veloso, 2024). From the use of cyber laws to the blocking of websites, these practices curtail the ability of activists to mobilize freely and undermine the democratic potential of digital spaces. Furthermore, misinformation and disinformation campaigns pose significant threats, distorting public perception and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Zhao and Abidin (2023) highlight the role of algorithmic amplification in exacerbating polarizing discourses, while Brady et al. (2020) underscore the psychological effects of disinformation in shaping civic attitudes. Such dynamics complicate the promise of digital activism, raising urgent questions about the reliability and inclusivity of online civic participation.

Another critical challenge involves the pervasive surveillance of online activities, which undermines privacy and freedom of expression. Scholars note that the dual role of digital technology as both an instrument of empowerment and a mechanism of control creates precarious conditions for activists, particularly in authoritarian contexts where online engagement is heavily monitored (Zhao & Abidin, 2023). Surveillance not only deters participation but also fosters self-censorship, limiting the scope of discourse and activism. Moreover, the psychological implications of digital engagement warrant further examination. Research indicates that while digital platforms may foster empowerment and identity formation, they also expose individuals to risks such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and internet addiction, which can negatively influence civic attitudes and well-being (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Andreeva & Polyanina, 2023).

The persistence of these challenges underscores the paradoxical nature of digital activism in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, digital platforms democratize access to political participation and amplify marginalized voices; on the other, they reinforce mechanisms of control, manipulation, and exclusion. Scholars stress that these contradictions are not peripheral but central to understanding the nature of digital activism in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts (Barendregt & Schneider, 2020). For instance, while activists harness hashtags and viral campaigns to mobilize public opinion, state actors simultaneously exploit digital infrastructures to surveil, co-opt, or suppress dissent. This tension illustrates the fragile balance between empowerment and repression, highlighting the urgent need for nuanced approaches to studying and supporting digital activism.

Despite extensive research on digital activism globally, there are significant gaps in the literature specific to Southeast Asia. Scholars such as Papa (2017) have explored immediate responses to political events via social media, yet there remains limited understanding of how such engagements translate into sustained civic behaviors and long-term political identities. Longitudinal studies that track the evolution of online activism into durable forms of civic participation are notably absent, leaving a void in understanding the retention of engagement and the impact on broader democratic outcomes. Moreover, much of the existing literature privileges urban youth, neglecting the experiences of rural populations and marginalized communities who also participate in digital activism (Sampaio et al., 2024). The underrepresentation of groups such as women activists and ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya diaspora, further restricts a comprehensive analysis of digital civic engagement in the region (Ansar & Khaled, 2023).

The present review aims to address these gaps by synthesizing existing research on digital activism and civic engagement in Southeast Asia, with particular emphasis on sustained participation and underrepresented groups. The central objective is to analyze the factors that shape digital activism in the region, including technological infrastructures, socio-political contexts, identity dynamics, and state responses. By examining these interrelated dimensions, the review seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which digital activism both fosters and constrains civic engagement, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of political discourse in Southeast Asia.

The scope of this study encompasses a regional focus on Southeast Asia, with attention to diverse populations including youth, marginalized communities, and diasporic groups. This focus acknowledges the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia's political landscapes and emphasizes the importance of contextualizing digital activism within local cultural and institutional frameworks. By situating the analysis within this regional lens, the review not only highlights unique patterns of digital civic engagement but also contributes to broader comparative debates on the role of social media in shaping political participation globally. Ultimately, this inquiry underscores the urgency of understanding digital activism in Southeast Asia, where the interplay of empowerment and repression continues to redefine the contours of civic life.

METHOD

The methodology for this narrative review was designed to ensure a structured and comprehensive exploration of the literature concerning digital activism and civic engagement in Southeast Asia. Recognizing the dynamic nature of digital technologies and their interaction with political discourse, a rigorous and transparent process was adopted to maximize the breadth and depth of relevant findings. The methodology focused on four critical aspects: the selection of databases, the identification of keywords and Boolean strategies, the establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the procedures for screening and evaluating the literature.

The collection of relevant literature was undertaken through searches in multidisciplinary academic databases that are widely recognized for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications. The primary sources included Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar, chosen for their complementary strengths. Scopus provided comprehensive indexing of journals across the social sciences and humanities, particularly suited for capturing articles on political participation and media studies. PubMed was incorporated to identify works related to the health and psychological implications of digital engagement, recognizing the intersection between civic life and psychosocial well-being. Google Scholar, with its broad reach across diverse disciplines and gray literature, was employed to ensure inclusivity and to capture works that may not be indexed in other databases. Searches were conducted iteratively to refine results and minimize the exclusion of relevant studies.

Each article was examined to assess the robustness of its methodology, the transparency of data collection and analysis, and the extent to which findings could be generalized beyond their immediate context. Given the diversity of political environments in Southeast Asia, consideration was also given to the extent to which studies accounted for contextual variables, such as state censorship, economic disparities, or cultural factors influencing digital adoption. This emphasis on

methodological rigor and contextual sensitivity ensured that the synthesized findings reflected both empirical robustness and regional relevance.

In formulating search strategies, the use of Boolean operators was integral to optimizing retrieval. Queries were structured around combinations of key terms such as “digital activism,” “civic engagement,” and “Southeast Asia,” linked with operators including AND, OR, and NOT to focus the scope of results. For example, a query such as “digital activism AND civic engagement AND Southeast Asia” yielded highly relevant studies specific to the region, while variants incorporating synonyms or related terms, such as “social media OR digital citizenship” and “political participation OR online mobilization,” expanded the search to capture conceptual overlaps. The inclusion of wildcard symbols, such as “activis*,” facilitated the retrieval of articles encompassing variations of the term, including “activism” and “activists.” This strategic use of Boolean logic and controlled vocabulary ensured precision while accommodating the diverse terminology used by scholars across disciplines.

The search process also integrated thematic terms informed by prior literature. For instance, Halupka’s (2014) discussion on “clicktivism” informed the inclusion of terms relating to low-barrier digital participation, while keywords such as “identity formation,” “youth engagement,” and “diaspora mobilization” were included to capture specific sub-themes pertinent to Southeast Asia. Additional keywords such as “fake news,” “misinformation,” “censorship,” and “surveillance” were utilized to identify studies addressing structural risks and barriers, acknowledging the dual role of digital platforms as both enabling and constraining civic engagement.

The identification of inclusion and exclusion criteria was critical to maintaining the rigor of this review. Inclusion criteria required that studies explicitly address digital activism, civic engagement, or the influence of social media on political participation, with a clear focus on Southeast Asia or closely related contexts. Eligible studies included empirical works that provided data-driven insights, such as surveys, interviews, ethnographies, or case studies documenting civic actions mediated through digital technologies (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Articles needed to be published in peer-reviewed journals or edited scholarly volumes to ensure academic integrity. Studies were also required to be published in English to facilitate consistent analysis and interpretation.

Exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate works that did not meet the established scope or quality benchmarks. Articles that focused exclusively on non-digital forms of activism, without meaningful reference to online or digital dimensions, were excluded to preserve thematic relevance. Similarly, theoretical commentaries or opinion pieces that lacked empirical evidence were set aside, as were publications outside the Southeast Asian geographical context, unless they provided directly comparable insights from regions with analogous socio-political environments. Following Hurley (2016), these criteria ensured that the body of literature analyzed was both empirically grounded and regionally specific. Furthermore, to reflect the rapid evolution of digital technologies, studies published prior to 2010 were excluded unless they offered significant historical or theoretical insights relevant to the analysis (Odilla & Mattoni, 2023).

The process of literature selection proceeded through multiple stages of screening. Initial searches produced a wide pool of potential studies, which were first evaluated at the title and abstract level to exclude clearly irrelevant results. This stage emphasized thematic alignment with the keywords and scope of the review. Subsequently, full-text assessments were conducted for the remaining studies to verify their fit against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were assessed for methodological quality, relevance to Southeast Asia, and contribution to the understanding of digital activism and civic engagement. During this stage, particular attention was given to whether studies offered empirical evidence that could substantively inform the thematic synthesis of results.

The methodological approaches of the included studies were also categorized to better understand the diversity of research designs employed in the field. These included survey-based quantitative studies examining patterns of online political participation, qualitative case studies documenting activist campaigns, ethnographic works capturing the lived experiences of marginalized communities, and mixed-methods designs that integrated statistical data with narrative accounts. Randomized controlled trials were rare, reflecting the impracticality of experimental designs in the study of political activism, but natural experiments and comparative analyses were occasionally identified. This variety of methodologies contributed to a multidimensional understanding of how digital activism manifests and impacts civic engagement across the region.

The evaluation of selected studies involved a focus on credibility, reliability, and validity. Each article was examined to assess the robustness of its methodology, the transparency of data collection and analysis, and the extent to which findings could be generalized beyond their immediate context. Given the diversity of political environments in Southeast Asia, consideration was also given to the extent to which studies accounted for contextual variables, such as state censorship, economic disparities, or cultural factors influencing digital adoption. This emphasis on methodological rigor and contextual sensitivity ensured that the synthesized findings reflected both empirical robustness and regional relevance.

In summary, the methodology for this review combined targeted database searches, carefully crafted keyword strategies, and rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify high-quality empirical studies on digital activism and civic engagement in Southeast Asia. By integrating works across diverse methodological traditions and applying systematic screening and evaluation procedures, this approach ensured the comprehensiveness and credibility of the literature base. The resulting dataset provides a solid foundation for synthesizing findings, analyzing thematic patterns, and drawing meaningful conclusions about the interplay of digital activism and civic engagement in one of the most dynamic socio-political regions in the world.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Youth Participation and Identity

The findings of this review reveal that Southeast Asian youth have become central actors in the landscape of digital activism, using social media platforms to construct both civic and political identities. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have emerged as critical arenas where young people articulate their opinions on political matters, participate in discussions on social issues, and

mobilize collective actions (Halupka, 2014; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). By engaging in ongoing digital dialogues and campaigns, youth gain a sense of political agency that reinforces their identity as active citizens. Social media also enables the formation of digital communities that advocate for shared causes, including climate justice and anti-corruption initiatives, reinforcing civic identities through collaboration and solidarity (Papa, 2017; Kwan, 2021). These communities facilitate rapid adaptation of youth identities in alignment with evolving community values and priorities, underscoring the role of social media in shaping civic engagement and identity formation in real time.

The empowering potential of digital activism is particularly evident among marginalized and minority groups. Ansar and Khaled (2023) highlight how the Rohingya diaspora has utilized digital platforms to transform experiences of marginalization into collective political mobilization. By raising awareness of their plight and building global solidarity, the Rohingya illustrate how digital activism transcends geographical barriers to create virtual spaces of recognition and advocacy. Similar trends have been documented in broader youth movements across the region, where social media has amplified the voices of historically marginalized communities and enabled them to demand justice and societal visibility (McDaniel, 2024; Campos & Silva, 2023). These findings demonstrate how digital activism fosters political leverage for vulnerable populations and enhances their capacity to engage in the civic sphere.

Forms of Activism and Political Consumerism

The review also reveals that Southeast Asia has witnessed the rise of diverse forms of activism shaped by political consumerism. Campaigns promoting boycotts against corporations perceived to act against community interests have gained momentum through digital platforms, rapidly spreading awareness and mobilizing collective consumer action (Barendregt & Schneider, 2020). Conversely, buycotts—campaigns that encourage intentional support for businesses aligned with social causes—have also emerged, illustrating the growing interconnection between consumer behavior and activist values (Vieira et al., 2024). These practices reflect a broader regional consciousness where political engagement is increasingly expressed through market choices, and where social media serves as a vital amplifier of such initiatives.

Symbolic practices also play a significant role in shaping political engagement in Southeast Asia. Hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter have inspired localized iterations that frame regional struggles within a broader global discourse, facilitating the transfer of tactics and narratives across contexts (Zhao & Abidin, 2023; Seelig & Deng, 2022). Memes, often employed by younger generations, condense complex political themes into relatable formats, fostering engagement and encouraging dialogue (Barbosa & Milan, 2019; Seelig & Deng, 2022). Similarly, slideshow activism, which communicates information through visually compelling narratives, has proven effective in raising awareness and mobilizing grassroots participation (Seelig, 2018). Collectively, these symbolic strategies create dynamic and participatory channels of engagement that extend beyond traditional political spaces, making activism more accessible, creative, and inclusive.

The combination of political consumerism and symbolic activism underscores the multiplicity of pathways through which civic engagement is enacted in Southeast Asia. Social media platforms

not only serve as tools for mobilization but also enable individuals to align their everyday practices with political commitments, creating a hybrid space where market behavior, cultural production, and political participation intersect.

Civic Engagement and Collective Action

Empirical evidence strongly illustrates the capacity of digital platforms to enable collective mobilization during protests and social movements in Southeast Asia. The 2014 protests in Thailand against military rule demonstrated how activists leveraged platforms like Facebook and Twitter to disseminate information, coordinate demonstrations, and attract international attention (Papa, 2017; Halupka, 2014). The immediacy of these tools allowed for the rapid circulation of live updates, images, and videos, strengthening solidarity among participants and amplifying demands for democratic reform (Mazetti et al., 2022). Similarly, in Indonesia, the "Say No to Omnibus Law" protests exemplified how hashtags and user-generated content became powerful instruments for galvanizing public opinion and mobilizing nationwide demonstrations (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2014). These cases illustrate the effectiveness of social media in transforming localized grievances into large-scale collective action.

Digital activism in Southeast Asia is also linked to transnational solidarity, reflecting how regional actors engage with global movements. The resonance of #BlackLivesMatter among Southeast Asian youth highlights the capacity of digital activism to transcend borders and inspire localized expressions of global struggles (Korich & Fields, 2023). In Myanmar and the Philippines, activists have used digital platforms to connect across geographical divides, sharing strategies, resources, and narratives in support of common causes (Fredericks et al., 2018; Hesapci-Sanaktekin & Aslanbay, 2019). The Rohingya diaspora further illustrates this dynamic, as digital tools enable dispersed communities to build identity, foster solidarity, and advocate for rights (Ansar & Khaled, 2023). Campaigns such as #JusticeForRohingya exemplify how regional and global networks intersect to amplify human rights advocacy and apply diplomatic pressure across borders (Campos & Silva, 2023).

These findings highlight that social media functions as a crucial catalyst for building regional and transnational civic networks, enabling activists to transcend local constraints and participate in broader conversations on democracy, human rights, and social justice. The emergence of cross-border digital activism indicates that Southeast Asia is not isolated but is an integral part of a global network of digital civic engagement.

Challenges and Risks

Despite these promising developments, the review reveals persistent challenges that hinder the full realization of digital activism's potential. Misinformation and state-sponsored disinformation campaigns pose significant threats to the credibility and effectiveness of civic engagement. In the Philippines, coordinated disinformation campaigns have sought to manipulate electoral outcomes, distort public discourse, and delegitimize opposition movements (Brady et al., 2020). Similar patterns have been observed across Southeast Asia, where troll farms and state-affiliated actors

weaponize social media to amplify counter-narratives, sow discord, and undermine activists (Sampaio et al., 2024; Andreeva & Polyanina, 2023). These practices illustrate how digital tools, while empowering civil society, are simultaneously exploited to entrench authoritarian control and erode democratic norms.

Structural inequalities further constrain the inclusivity of digital activism. Limited internet access in rural areas continues to impede grassroots mobilization, leaving rural and lower-income populations underrepresented in digital movements (Kwan, 2021; Andreeva & Polyanina, 2023). Gender disparities compound these challenges, as women face barriers to digital access alongside heightened exposure to online harassment, reducing their capacity to engage in political discourse (Brady et al., 2020; Sampaio et al., 2024). Socio-economic inequalities also correlate with digital exclusion, as those with fewer resources struggle to access the technological infrastructure necessary for meaningful participation. These disparities reinforce existing hierarchies, diminishing the representational diversity of digital activism in the region.

Moreover, the dual role of social media as a space of empowerment and control presents a constant dilemma. While activists utilize digital tools to amplify voices and mobilize actions, governments deploy the same technologies for surveillance, censorship, and repression (Zhao & Abidin, 2023). This paradox complicates the sustainability of digital activism, as activists must navigate the risks of visibility while attempting to sustain their movements. The psychological implications of this precarious environment—ranging from fear of surveillance to exposure to harassment—also affect the willingness of individuals to remain engaged in digital civic life (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Andreeva & Polyanina, 2023).

Taken together, these findings illustrate that the challenges confronting digital activism in Southeast Asia are both structural and systemic, requiring careful consideration of the interplay between empowerment and repression. The persistence of disinformation, digital divides, and state surveillance underscores the fragile balance that defines digital civic engagement in the region.

Comparative Perspectives

When placed in a comparative perspective, Southeast Asia's experiences with digital activism resonate with but also diverge from trends observed globally. In Western democracies, studies emphasize the effectiveness of symbolic activism, such as hashtag campaigns, in fostering awareness and mobilizing support (Seelig & Deng, 2022; Halupka, 2014). However, the risks of state surveillance and repression are less pronounced, reflecting differences in political contexts. Conversely, in authoritarian settings outside Southeast Asia, such as parts of the Middle East, the dual role of social media as both a liberating and repressive tool mirrors the experiences documented in Southeast Asia (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2014). These comparisons highlight that while digital activism is globally significant, its dynamics are deeply shaped by local political environments, technological infrastructures, and cultural contexts.

The findings of this review thus contribute not only to understanding digital activism in Southeast Asia but also to broader debates on the global implications of social media for political participation. By situating regional experiences within a comparative frame, this analysis

underscores both the uniqueness of Southeast Asia's socio-political context and its integral role in shaping the evolving landscape of digital civic engagement worldwide.

The effectiveness of digital activism in Southeast Asia is deeply intertwined with systemic political, economic, and cultural factors that define the regional landscape. Politically, the prevalence of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes across parts of the region presents a formidable barrier to open digital activism. Governments have frequently utilized censorship, surveillance, and restrictive cyber laws to curtail dissent and regulate digital content, which directly undermines activists' capacity to disseminate information and mobilize collective action (Halupka, 2014; Papa, 2017). In contexts such as Myanmar and Cambodia, for instance, the state's reliance on internet shutdowns and content filtering exemplifies how political structures can restrict civic participation in the digital space (Korich & Fields, 2023). This pattern is not unique to Southeast Asia; similar dynamics are observed in the Middle East, where state-led repression of online mobilization demonstrates how political institutions wield control over digital infrastructures. Yet, within Southeast Asia, the tension between democratic aspirations and authoritarian practices renders the digital sphere particularly precarious, as activists must navigate an environment shaped by both opportunity and constraint.

Economically, disparities in access to digital technologies compound these political challenges. Digital divides persist between urban and rural populations, as well as across socio-economic strata, creating unequal opportunities for engagement in digital activism (McDaniel, 2024; Seelig & Deng, 2022). While metropolitan youth with access to affordable internet and advanced technologies are able to participate robustly in online political discourse, rural populations often face barriers in terms of connectivity, affordability, and digital literacy. This inequality constrains the inclusivity of digital activism, leading to movements that may disproportionately reflect the voices of more privileged demographics. The lack of universal digital access means that certain communities remain peripheral to online civic engagement, perpetuating cycles of exclusion that mirror offline socio-economic hierarchies.

Cultural factors also exert a profound influence on digital activism in Southeast Asia. In societies where dissent is stigmatized or discouraged, individuals may be reluctant to engage in political discourse, even within the relatively anonymous setting of digital platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Conversely, in contexts characterized by strong traditions of collective action, such as the Philippines or Indonesia, social media has amplified pre-existing cultural norms of solidarity, enabling widespread participation in protests and advocacy campaigns (Evans & Ezenna, 2024). Digital activism thus becomes most effective when it resonates with local values and aligns with cultural expectations. For example, Cai et al. (2023) argue that platforms capable of incorporating communal goals and cultural narratives are more likely to foster civic engagement. This interplay between culture and digital technology underscores the necessity of context-sensitive approaches in assessing the efficacy of digital activism.

The role of policy frameworks in shaping digital activism cannot be understated, as regulatory environments in Southeast Asia vary significantly across countries. Many governments have enacted legislation to regulate online content, often under the pretense of combating misinformation or preserving national security. While such policies ostensibly aim to protect public interests, they frequently serve as instruments for suppressing dissent and stifling political

opposition. In Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, anti-fake news laws have been leveraged to censor content critical of the state, undermining public trust in digital platforms and deterring citizens from engaging in open discourse (Zhao & Abidin, 2023; Seelig & Deng, 2022). The chilling effect of these policies has been documented by scholars who highlight the way legal repercussions create a climate of fear, reducing the willingness of individuals to participate in digital activism.

At the same time, some policy initiatives demonstrate potential in fostering constructive civic engagement. Programs aimed at enhancing digital literacy and empowering youth with the skills necessary to navigate online information ecosystems can mitigate vulnerabilities to misinformation and encourage meaningful participation (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017; Evans & Ezenna, 2024). Such initiatives, however, are often fragmented and inconsistently implemented, reflecting broader governance challenges in the region. Moreover, the potential abuse of regulatory power raises concerns about whether ostensibly progressive frameworks could be co-opted to reinforce state control. This inconsistency underscores the importance of developing transparent and accountable governance mechanisms that protect digital rights while supporting civic participation.

Innovations in digital governance present possible pathways to overcoming these challenges. One promising approach lies in the development of transparent policies that prioritize freedom of expression while safeguarding against the harms of disinformation. Scholars such as Brady et al. (2020) emphasize the need for balanced strategies that do not sacrifice democratic freedoms in the pursuit of security. Establishing independent regulatory bodies to oversee digital platforms, insulated from direct state control, can enhance public trust and ensure that regulatory frameworks align with international human rights standards (Vivienne, 2018). Such bodies could play a pivotal role in monitoring content moderation practices and addressing online harms without infringing upon legitimate political discourse.

Digital literacy remains another cornerstone of proposed solutions. By equipping citizens with the skills to critically evaluate online information, societies can strengthen resilience against disinformation campaigns and enhance civic agency (Menéndez-Blanco & Bjørn, 2022). Programs designed to integrate media literacy into educational curricula, for example, hold promise for cultivating informed digital citizens capable of engaging in democratic processes with discernment. Furthermore, collaborative efforts between governments, civil society organizations, and technology companies can leverage collective resources to promote safe and inclusive digital environments (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). Such partnerships can facilitate initiatives that both protect users from online harms and expand opportunities for civic participation.

Participatory governance models also represent an innovative avenue for aligning digital policies with citizen needs. Kwan (2021) highlights that engaging citizens in the formulation and evaluation of digital governance frameworks can enhance accountability and democratic legitimacy. Mechanisms such as public consultations, citizen assemblies, or digital feedback platforms can provide opportunities for inclusive dialogue on policy development. Lacharite (2017) further emphasizes that participatory models strengthen trust between governments and citizens, thereby encouraging broader engagement in civic life. The integration of citizen perspectives into digital governance not only ensures that regulatory frameworks are responsive to societal needs but also empowers communities to co-create the norms governing their digital environments.

Despite these proposed solutions, existing research on digital activism in Southeast Asia remains constrained by several limitations. A significant gap lies in the lack of longitudinal studies that track how digital activism translates into sustained civic participation over time (Papa, 2017). Most existing research emphasizes immediate outcomes, such as protest mobilization or short-term engagement, without assessing whether these activities evolve into lasting political identities or institutional reforms. Moreover, much of the scholarship disproportionately focuses on urban youth populations, neglecting the perspectives of rural communities, women, and minority groups who may experience digital activism differently (Sampaio et al., 2024; Ansar & Khaled, 2023). This imbalance limits the representativeness of current findings and constrains the ability to generalize conclusions across diverse populations.

Methodological diversity also remains limited, with many studies relying heavily on case studies or cross-sectional surveys. While these approaches yield valuable insights into specific events or demographics, they often fail to capture the complexity of digital activism across different temporal and spatial contexts. Comparative research across Southeast Asian countries is particularly underdeveloped, restricting opportunities to identify patterns and divergences within the region. Expanding methodological approaches to include longitudinal designs, mixed-methods frameworks, and cross-national comparisons would significantly enhance the depth and breadth of understanding in this field.

Another limitation relates to the underexploration of psychological dimensions of digital activism. While studies have acknowledged the risks of cyberbullying, harassment, and internet addiction (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017; Andreeva & Polyanina, 2023), there is limited analysis of how these experiences affect sustained civic participation and political efficacy. Similarly, the intersectional dynamics of gender, ethnicity, and class within digital activism remain insufficiently addressed. Greater attention to these dimensions is essential for capturing the diverse realities of digital engagement in Southeast Asia and for designing inclusive policies and interventions that accommodate the needs of marginalized groups.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review highlights the dynamic and complex nature of digital activism and civic engagement in Southeast Asia, emphasizing its potential for empowerment alongside the persistent structural and systemic barriers that constrain its effectiveness. The results illustrate how youth and marginalized communities have used social media platforms to construct political identities, mobilize collective action, and extend solidarity across borders. Forms of activism such as political consumerism, symbolic online practices, and transnational campaigns demonstrate the creativity and adaptability of Southeast Asian digital activism. Yet, these practices are continually challenged by disinformation, censorship, surveillance, and structural inequalities such as the digital divide and gender disparities. The discussion further shows that systemic political, economic, and cultural factors shape both the opportunities and constraints for digital activism, with policy frameworks and governance approaches playing pivotal roles in determining outcomes.

Ultimately, strengthening civic engagement in Southeast Asia requires a balanced approach that enhances empowerment, mitigates systemic risks, and leverages the transformative potential of social media as a cornerstone of democratic life.

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