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Relational Mobilization under Constraint: Social Media, Peer Networks, and Youth Participation in Repressive Contexts

Md. Tahsinul Haque
University of Dhaka
Arifur Rahaman
arahaman@crimson.ua.edu
University of Alabama
Nahidul Islam
University of Dhaka
Eshrat Jahan
University of Dhaka

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Abstract

This article examines how social media and peer networks shape political participation under repressive constraint. Drawing on Resource Mobilization, the study conceptualizes digital engagement as both an informational infrastructure and a relational field through which collective action can be enabled in low trust environments. A convergent mixed methods design was employed by integrating survey data from 208 university students with fifteen in depth interviews with protest participants. Binary logistic regression analyses indicate that daily social media use is a strong predictor of protest participation after exposure to mobilizing content. Peer encouragement is also positively associated with participation, whereas generalized peer support is not. Qualitative accounts are consistent with these patterns, showing how reported direct encouragement, shared emotions, and moral outrage helped translate online engagement into on the ground mobilization. These findings conceptualize digital participation as relational resource mobilization, where credibility and affect operate as mobilizing capital. The study contributes to debates on the digital transformation of activism by situating connective action within a repressive political environment. It argues that in the absence of formal organization, moral and emotional ties transmitted through social media can sustain participation and reconstitute civic agency.

1. Introduction

Social media has played an instrumental role in collective action worldwide in recent years by transforming how grievances are articulated and coordinated (Klein, 2025; Zhao, 2025; Uwalaka, 2024; Sabline, 2023; Chen et al., 2021; Li et al. 2021; Brünker et al., 2020). Recent waves of Gen Z protests in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal, Peru, Madagascar, Indonesia, and Morocco showed how social media influenced popular mobilization (New York Times, 2025; Mbugua, 2025; CNN, 2025; Reuters, 2025; The Guardian, 2025; The Times, 2025). Social media allows youth to organize and amplify their demands in ways that political leaders cannot grasp, from livestreaming to protest selfies, ironic memes, and mass recordings.

Bangladesh represents a hybrid digital-authoritarian context where online dissent coexists with surveillance. Since 2015, the country witness four major youth uprising known as VAT movement (2015), Road Safety Movement (2018), Quota Movement (2018) and student uprising against government (2024). Among these, the student-led movement in Bangladesh in 2024 came as one of the most notable youth uprising. Social media became the primary instrument of coordination and enactment of the protest in this uprising (Daily Star, 2025; Rahman et al., 2025; BIPSS, 2024). The movement in 2024 started as a small-scale protest against the reservation system in government jobs. Students, already frustrated with massive unemployment and the government’s suppression of dissent, started protesting the discriminatory quota system (BBC, 2024). The movement is still contentious in some political circles; yet this study is not aimed at assessing its legitimacy. Instead, the study focuses on explaining how social media became the architecture for action. And, more critically, how did one's peer networks (e.g.,

friends, followers, classmates) propel individuals to transition from digital outrage to physical participation?

The movement showcased the ways in which decentralized, peer-driven activism operates in a digitally permeated context (The Daily Star, 2025). While the activism seen in the Arab Spring or the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong relied on digital means to some extent (Khondker, 2011; Howard and Hussain, 2011; Lee et al., 2018; Lee and Chan, 2018), Bangladesh presented a new dimension regarding the emotional and motivational peer influence in catalyzing action.

However, this dimension remains unexplored in literature. Only a handful of newspaper pieces have discussed the role of peer influence through social media in a fragmented way, missing its importance as a whole. To date, no systematic study has addressed such crucial factors in the movement. In this connection, the study is the first attempt to understand the role of social media and peer influence in physical participation of the protestors.

Classic theories of collective action, ranging from Resource Mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), Political Process (Tilly, 2004; Tarrow, 1998), Social Network (Snow et al. 1980) and Framing approaches (Snow & Benford, 1988; 2000), have explained protest participation for a long time through structural and cognitive dimensions. Recent scholarship has started to address the digital turn, particularly the role of social media in facilitating mass mobilization (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2015). Nevertheless, much of this literature is still focused on the West and has, for the most part, assumed democratic and robust internet accessibility and civic freedoms, which are certainly not the case in South Asia. This study extends these frameworks by incorporating digital tools and affective peer influence into classical mobilization model.

Most of the studies that examine social media and peer influence in the context of protest do not go beyond a surface description (Born, 2016; Lim, 2008; Laer, 2007). For context like Bangladesh, where dissent was suppressed for long and the atmosphere is rife with fear and surveillance, dissent is peer-encouraged through shares, likes, and comments, or personal invitations could be a decisive mobilizing factor. However, the study fills the important gap in literature by addressing the nexus of social media, peer influence and movement participation. It adds to the body of knowledge of resource mobilization theory by bringing evidence from a low-trust scenarios where peer-led social media interactions become resources.

In doing so, the study combines social survey data with in-depth interview data to address the research objectives. A structured survey was conducted among 208 university students who participated in the movement from public, private, and national universities. Using stratified sampling, the survey population was diversified by gender, academic background, and area of living. Alongside, fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted from the movement participants to better understand the nature of their participation and factors influenced such participation. Motivations, emotional responses to digital content, the influence of friends and online networks, and the handling of misinformation were discussed. This

mixed-methods design enables triangulation, where one approach identifies predictors of participation and other accounts of motivation and trust.

2. Social Media and Student Protest

Social media provides a low-cost, high-reach platform for political communication and mobilization. Instead of viewing it as just a broad “public sphere,” scholars focus on how these platforms function as a collection of tools that help with information sharing, relationship building, emotional expression, and organizing collective actions (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Tufekci, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2012). In Bangladesh, the digital landscape is primarily mobile-first and heavily centered around Facebook. The platform's reach extends to about a third to half of the eligible population, capturing a significant portion of internet users. While there is a gender imbalance, with more men using Facebook, the platform’s overall penetration is broad and continues to grow (DataReportal, 2024).

From a resource-mobilization perspective, social media supply communication resources that reduce the costs of information discovery and coordination and enable low-threshold entry into collective action (McCarthy & Zald 1977; Earl & Kimport 2011). Field experiments show that exposure to cues on platforms can influence real-world political behavior on a large scale, especially when these cues are socially endorsed (Bond et al. 2012). Building on this, the concept of *connective action* highlights how personalized, networked messages spread through diverse yet personally relevant connections, making them more impactful (Bennett & Segerberg 2012).

Relational influence is not the same across different types of connections. Research shows that signals from close friends are especially powerful in influencing offline behavior, while signals from broader peer groups tend to have less impact (Bond et al. 2012). This aligns with studies on affective publics and moral shocks, where emotionally charged content, often in the form of videos, creates a shared sense of urgency and reduces the barriers to action (Papacharissi 2015; Jasper 1998). Additionally, experimental studies on emotional contagion suggest that emotional expressions spread through networks and influence how people engage and react (Kramer et al. 2014).

At the same time, framing and selective exposure influence what people see and how they act (Snow & Benford 1988; Benford & Snow 2000). On Facebook, user choices and homophilous networks of friends often limit exposure to diverse viewpoints more than the platform’s ranking algorithms do (Bakshy et al. 2015). This helps explain why frames endorsed by friends tend to spread more effectively within relevant networks, while general peer support may have less impact.

The relationship between misinformation and participation is complex. False news spreads more quickly and widely than true news, largely because people are drawn to novel and emotionally charged content (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). However, whether this leads to reduced or increased participation depends on factors like counter-frames, verification cues, and relational trust. In student networks, where cues from close friends dominate, exposure to misinformation may have little effect on behavior.

Finally, participation is influenced by institutional context and gendered risks. Political opportunity frameworks suggest that the organizational environment can shape the costs and benefits of activism (Tarrow, 2011). In Bangladesh, research shows that while many women support social and political movements, they often avoid visible online participation due to harassment, reputational risks, and legal or political deterrents (Nova et al. 2019; Ahmed et al. 2019).

In essence, the literature suggests that time spent online, and the influence of close friends are key pathways from digital engagement to offline protest, while institutional context and gendered risks shape access to these pathways. The case of Bangladesh contributes to ongoing debates on resource mobilization versus connective action, affect versus accuracy, and opportunity structures in the Global South.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Conceptual Framework

This study is primarily grounded in Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), while drawing insights from Political Opportunity Theory (Tarrow, 2011), and the logic of Connective Action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) to explain how social media facilitates protest participation in authoritarian or low-trust contexts. Social media functions as an informational, emotional, and relational infrastructure of mobilization. Resource Mobilization Theory emphasizes how digital platforms reduce organizational costs and expand communication channels and allow individuals to access mobilizing information and coordinate collective action efficiently (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Tufekci, 2017). The logic of Connective Action extends this by showing that personalized and digitally mediated exchanges create flexible networks that can mobilize individuals without formal leadership (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Political Opportunity Theory complements these perspectives by asserting that participation is conditioned by institutional environments that shape perceived risks and benefits of activism (Tarrow, 2011).

The study conceptualizes online mobilization as a socially mediated process, in which digital exposure interacts with emotional triggers, peer encouragement, and institutional constraints to generate participation. Protest participation is thus viewed not as spontaneous reaction but as the culmination of digitally sustained relational processes and affective signaling.

3.2 Hypotheses

H1

Students who spend more time on social media are more likely to participate in protests after learning about them online.

H2

Students who receive direct encouragement from close friends are more likely to participate than those who receive only general peer support.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

To test these hypotheses, the study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) that combined quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interviews. The quantitative component assessed how demographic, institutional, and digital factors predicted protest participation, while the qualitative strand explored the subjective meanings, emotions, and peer influences underlying mobilization. Data from both strands were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated at the interpretation stage to enable triangulation and theoretical refinement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The next subsection details the sampling procedure, data collection instruments, analytic techniques, and ethical safeguards adopted in the study.

4.2 Data and Sampling

4.2.1 Quantitative Survey

The quantitative data were derived from a structured online survey of 208 university students who reported learning about the social Movement through social media since 2015. The target sample size was determined using the standard formula for estimating proportions in a large population (greater than 100,000), which assumes a 95% confidence level, a 50% response distribution to ensure maximum variability, and a 7% margin of error. According to the Cochran (1977) and Kish (1965) formula, this yields a minimum of approximately 196 cases. The final sample of 208 therefore exceeds the threshold necessary to achieve an SRS-equivalent margin of error of about ± 6.8%. Although the survey employed online recruitment and thus does not constitute a probability sample, these parameters provide a conventional benchmark of precision (Lohr, 2010; AAPOR, 2013; Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Given the repressive political environment and risks of surveillance after the youth uprising, probability sampling was neither feasible nor ethical. To protect participants' anonymity and ensure data integrity, the study adopted a strategic non-probability approach using stratified purposive sampling and snowball referrals to reach student protest participants. This method, common in repressive contexts, prioritizes internal validity over broad representativeness to yield credible associations within the digitally networked university population rather than generalizable estimates for all students.

The survey was distributed between June 2025 and August 2025 using a stratified purposive sampling strategy designed to ensure representation across public, private, and national universities in Dhaka city. Participants were recruited through student organizations, online academic groups, and snowball referrals from verified protest participants.

Eligibility criteria required respondents to (a) be between 18 and 30 years old, (b) be enrolled in or have recently completed a university degree, and (c) have been exposed to information about the protests via social media. Of the 208 respondents, 85.6% were aged 18–24, and 14.4% were aged 25–30; 53.9% identified as male, and 46.2% as female. The sample included students from public (17.3%), private (40.4%), and national (42.3%) universities.

4.2.2 Qualitative Interviews

To complement the survey, fifteen (15) semi-structured interviews were conducted with student participants who had engaged in the movement, either through physical protest or online coordination. Recruitment occurred through survey follow-ups and purposive selection to achieve variation by gender, university type, and degree level. Interviews lasted between 45 and 55 minutes and were conducted in Bangla and English, depending on participant preference. All interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and coded in Nvivo 13.

4.3 Measures

4.3.1 Dependent Variable: Protest Participation

The dependent variable was participation in protests after learning about them on social media, measured dichotomously (1 = participated; 0 = did not participate).

4.3.2 Key Independent Variables

1. **Social Media Use**: Measured by average daily time spent on social media with four ordered categories (< 1 hr, 1–2 hrs, 3–4 hrs, > 4 hrs). This variable served as the primary predictor in H1.
2. **Peer Influence and Peer Support**: Two binary indicators captured relational dynamics: *friend influence* ("Were you influenced by close friends to join the protest?") and *peer support* ("Did you feel general support from your peers for participation?"). These were tested under H2 (Resource Mobilization).
3. **Institutional Context**: Dummy variables represented private and national universities, with public universities as the reference category.
4. **Information Verification and Misinformation Exposure**: Respondents indicated whether they verified information before sharing and whether they encountered false or misleading news. These were included as controls in the political-opportunity model.
5. **Demographic Controls**: Age (18–24 vs. 25–30), gender (male/female), and education level (undergraduate enrolled, postgraduate enrolled, completed undergraduate, postgraduate/above) were included as covariates.

4.4 Analytical Strategy

4.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Binary logistic regression was employed to estimate the likelihood of protest participation as a function of demographic, institutional, and digital variables. Three hierarchical models were tested:

1. **Baseline Model**: Demographic and institutional factors.
2. **Resource Mobilization Model (H1–H2)**: Adds social media time and peer variables.

Model fit was evaluated using chi-square statistics, Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2, and Wald tests for individual predictors. Odds ratios (ORs) were calculated with 95% confidence intervals. Marginal effects were estimated to illustrate predicted probabilities across levels of social media use and university type. Statistical analyses were performed in *Stata 19*.

4.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis following grounded-theory coding procedures (Charmaz, 2014). After open coding, axial codes were generated to capture recurrent patterns related to digital exposure, peer influence, emotional triggers, verification practices, institutional context, and gendered experiences. Coding reliability was ensured through iterative comparison and memo-writing. Emerging themes were then mapped onto the quantitative hypotheses to identify convergence and divergence.

4.4.3 Integration Procedure

Following Creswell and Clark's (2018) *convergent parallel design*, both strands were analyzed independently and merged during interpretation. Integration occurred through (a) a joint display matrix aligning statistical findings with corresponding qualitative themes, and (b) a narrative integration linking each hypothesis (H1–H2) to its interpretive mechanisms. For instance, quantitative support for social media use as a predictor of participation (H1) was qualitatively illuminated by accounts of emotional video exposure and platform coordination.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval

for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of North South University, Bangladesh (Protocol No. 2025/OR-NSU/IRB/0506). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. All survey respondents provided digital informed consent prior to participation, and interviewees signed consent forms explaining confidentiality, data handling, and the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were assigned to all non-public individuals, and sensitive details were paraphrased to ensure anonymity.

5. Findings

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 (Appendix) presents the socio-demographic profile of respondents (N = 208). The sample was predominantly young (85.6% aged 18–24), with a nearly balanced gender distribution (53.9% male, 46.2% female). The majority were enrolled in undergraduate programs (83.7%), and most attended either national (42.3%) or private (40.4%) universities. A large share (63.5%) reported using social media for more than four hours per day, indicating strong digital immersion across the cohort.

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 208)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age group	18–24	178	85.6
	25–30	30	14.4
Gender	Male	112	53.9
	Female	96	46.2
Education level	Undergraduate (enrolled)	174	83.7
	Postgraduate (enrolled)	17	8.2
	Completed Undergraduate	11	5.3
	Postgraduate/above	6	2.9
University type	Public	36	17.3
	Private	84	40.4
	National	88	42.3
Average daily social media use	< 1 hour	28	13.5
	1–2 hours	45	21.6
	3–4 hours	3	1.4
	> 4 hours	132	63.5

5.1.1 Bivariate Associations

Chi-square tests were used to assess whether socio-demographic characteristics were associated with protest participation after learning about protests on social media. As shown in Table 2, gender emerged as the only significant factor, χ^2 (1, N = 208) = 14.998, p < .001. Men were more likely to report participation (73.2%) than women (39.5%). No significant differences were found for age or education, suggesting that basic demographic factors, aside from gender, were not decisive predictors of participation.

Table 2
Chi-Square Tests of Socio-Demographic Predictors (N = 208)

Predictor	Categories (row %)	χ^2 (df)	*p*
Gender	Female: 39.5% Yes, 60.5% No Male: 73.2% Yes, 26.8% No	14.998 (1)	< .001
Age group	18–24: 81% Yes, 19% No 25–30: 73% Yes, 27% No	1.07 (1)	.301
Education	Undergrad: 82.6% Yes, 17.4% No Postgrad: 88% Yes, 12% No Completed: 82% Yes, 18% No Postgrad/above: 83% Yes, 17% No	0.84 (3)	.841

The findings indicate that gender differentiation remains salient even within digital mobilization pathways which point toward potential differences in online political efficacy or social risk perceptions.

5.2 Predictors of Protest Participation

A binary logistic regression tested the hypothesis outlined.

Table 3
Logistic regression predicting protest participation

Variables	Model 1 Baseline	Model 2 Peer resources	Model 3 Gender × peer
Social media 3–4 hours	0.68 (0.59)	0.54 (0.61)	0.68 (0.59)
Social media > 4 hours	1.76*** (0.56)	1.62*** (0.57)	1.76*** (0.56)
Peer support		0.79 (0.55)	0.66 (0.54)
Friend influence		1.26† (0.71)	1.26 (0.86)
Female	−1.82*** (0.44)	−1.75*** (0.44)	−1.58* (0.81)
Age 25–30	−1.88* (0.73)	−2.08* (0.89)	−2.07* (0.92)
Enrolled in Masters	1.80† (1.05)	1.65 (1.17)	1.80 (1.21)
Graduated	1.26 (1.02)	1.12 (1.10)	1.09 (1.12)
Postgraduate or above	2.11* (1.06)	2.44* (1.11)	2.31* (1.14)
National University	1.36* (0.65)	1.35 (0.83)	1.16† (0.67)
Private University	−0.16 (0.43)	0.39 (0.82)	−0.00 (0.45)
Female × Friend influence			−0.28 (0.98)
Constant	−0.87 (1.09)	−0.21 (0.80)	−0.21 (0.84)
Wald chi square	38.78***	45.79***	45.04***
Pseudo R squared	0.22	0.26	0.26

Standard errors in parentheses.

† p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 3 reports a series of binary logistic regression models estimating the likelihood of protest participation after exposure to mobilizing information on social media. All models are statistically significant at conventional levels, with Wald χ^2 statistics ranging from 38.78 to 45.79 ($p < .001$). Pseudo R^2 values range between .22 and .26, indicating moderate explanatory power for individual level participation in a repressive political context.

Across all specifications, social media use emerges as the most robust predictor of protest participation. When treated as a categorical variable, only the highest level of engagement shows a statistically significant effect. Students who reported using social media for more than four hours per day were substantially more likely to participate than low use students, with coefficients ranging from 1.62 to 1.76 (SE ≈ 0.56–0.57, $p \leq .004$ across models). This corresponds to an increase in the odds of participation by approximately 5.0 to 5.8 times. In contrast, moderate levels of use, including three to four hours per day, are not statistically distinguishable from the reference category. This nonlinear

pattern indicates that participation is associated with sustained digital immersion rather than incremental increases in exposure, suggesting a threshold effect consistent with intensive monitoring, emotional engagement, and coordination.

Relational variables display more conditional effects. Direct encouragement from close friends is positively associated with participation, with coefficients around 1.26 (SE ≈ 0.71–0.86), reaching marginal significance in some specifications ($p \approx .07–.14$). Generalized peer support, by contrast, is not statistically significant in any model (coefficients ≈ 0.65–0.79, $p > .15$), indicating that diffuse approval does not independently motivate participation once other factors are held constant. An interaction model between friend encouragement and university type reveals quasi complete separation in one institutional category, where participation without friend encouragement was effectively absent. While this leads to the omission of one interaction term due to perfect prediction, the pattern itself is substantively meaningful and consistent with a risk reduction mechanism, whereby close interpersonal ties function as necessary mobilizing resources under conditions of constraint.

Institutional context exhibits a nuanced relationship with participation. Using public universities as the reference category, students from national universities show higher odds of participation, with coefficients ranging from 1.16 to 1.36 ($p \approx .035–.105$ across models). In contrast, students from private universities do not differ significantly from their public university counterparts (coefficients near zero, $p > .60$). These results indicate that institutional opportunity structures operate in context specific ways that cannot be reduced to a simple public versus private divide.

Gender is a strong and consistent predictor across all specifications. Female students are significantly less likely to participate than male students, with coefficients ranging from − 1.58 to − 1.82 (SE ≈ 0.44–0.81, $p \leq .049$). This translates into a reduction in the odds of participation by roughly 80 percent. An interaction between gender and friend encouragement yields a small and statistically insignificant coefficient ($b = − 0.28$, $SE = 0.98$, $p = .77$), indicating that peer encouragement does not eliminate the gender gap in participation. Age also shows a stable negative association, with students aged 25–30 significantly less likely to participate than those aged 18–24 ($b \approx − 2.07$ to $− 2.08$, $p \leq .025$).

Several robustness checks were conducted to assess the stability of these findings. First, social media use was estimated both as a linear ordinal predictor and as a set of categorical indicators. The substantive conclusions remain unchanged, with only the highest exposure category consistently significant, confirming that the main effect is not an artifact of linear specification. Second, models were re estimated after dropping small education categories that could inflate coefficients due to sparse cells. The direction and significance of key predictors, particularly social media use, gender, and age, remained stable. Finally, interaction models were inspected for separation and collinearity. Where quasi complete separation occurred, it was transparently reported and interpreted as substantively meaningful rather than treated as a statistical failure.

The findings provide consistent support for a relational resource mobilization account of protest participation under constraint. High intensity digital engagement and close interpersonal encouragement

facilitate participation, but their effects are bounded by persistent demographic and institutional inequalities. Social media expands mobilizing capacity, yet it does not neutralize gendered risk or uniformly overcome institutional constraints.

5.3 Mechanisms of Digital and Relational Mobilization

The qualitative interviews helped to uncover the mechanisms through which social media shaped protest participation. Participants consistently described a layered platform ecology in which Facebook served as the primary arena for exposure, information sharing, and emotional amplification, while Messenger, WhatsApp, and Telegram were used for coordination and safety planning. As one participant explained, “Facebook was where we saw everything; Telegram was where we planned” (P7, female, public university). Another added, “Movement pages replaced the news; we watched Facebook for updates, but Telegram was safer to organize” (P2, male, public). This division of digital labor illustrates the strong association between time spent online and protest participation observed in the logistic models. Online time thus appeared less as passive consumption and more as an activity of continuous monitoring, coordination, and collective interpretation.

Participants also emphasized the affective power of visual content. Short videos depicting violence or repression were described as the most mobilizing stimuli. Several respondents recalled moments when footage of police attacks or deaths circulated widely, producing what they described as an “impossible to ignore” moral urgency. “When the videos of students being beaten spread, you couldn’t just stay home” (P2, male, public). Similarly, “After the attack on female students, my timeline flooded; that made it urgent” (P3, male, public). Such accounts illustrate how emotionally charged content transformed outrage into intention, offering a plausible mechanism consistent with the quantitative relationship between digital engagement and participation (H1). Affective resonance thus operated as a low cost mobilizing resource through which digital awareness could be translated into physical presence.

Relational dynamics emerged as an equally decisive factor. Students distinguished between diffuse peer approval and direct encouragement from close friends or classmates. Even those initially hesitant to attend reported that nudges from peers shaped their decision making. “Sometimes I didn’t feel like going, but a friend called and then we all went together” (P2, male, public). “We had hall and local groups; seeing others go made me go” (P7, female, public). These narratives closely align with the regression results under the resource mobilization model (H2), in which friend influence was substantively meaningful ($p \approx .050$), whereas general peer support was not. Interpersonal trust and shared risk thus constituted a “last mile” mechanism through which individuals moved from online endorsement to participation.

The interviews also highlighted the nonsignificant relationship between misinformation exposure and participation. Although rumors circulated frequently, students described a culture of networked verification that mitigated potential misinformation effects. Respondents reported cross checking trusted pages, movement organizers, and friends present at protest sites, often deleting inaccurate content afterward. “I verify before sharing; if fake, I delete it” (P1, male, public). “We relied on movement

pages and people at the scene" (P8, female, public). This pattern of peer validation helps contextualize why misinformation did not significantly predict participation in the political opportunity model, as reported direct encouragement appeared to buffer informational disorder.

Institutional context further shaped these processes. Students from public universities, particularly Dhaka University, identified their campuses as legitimate and symbolically central sites of contention. In contrast, participants from private or national universities cited surveillance and administrative restrictions as major deterrents. "At DU protest is normal; in private universities even gathering looks suspicious" (P3, male, public). "Our university discouraged activism, so we relied on Facebook to support from afar" (P9, male, private). These observations help contextualize the quantitative finding that institutional context shaped participation in uneven ways across university types. The difference reflected perceived institutional cost structures rather than political apathy.

Gendered experiences added further nuance. Female students described familial monitoring, dormitory curfews, and fear of harassment, yet also reported strong moral motivation following attacks on women demonstrators. Many mitigated risk through collective strategies such as travelling together, leaving early, and coordinating online. "As a girl, family kept calling; we went together and left before the gate closed" (P4, female, public). "After I saw girls being dragged, it felt like a duty to be there" (P7, female, public). These accounts help illuminate the apparent tension between bivariate male predominance and the complex ways gendered participation was experienced on the ground. Even as women remained less likely to participate overall, heightened moral urgency and collective safety strategies shaped how participation was negotiated in practice.

The qualitative findings reveal that digital mobilization in student movements in Bangladesh was not simply a matter of online exposure. Social media operated as an architecture of relational opportunity, a networked space in which affective communication, interpersonal trust, and institutional constraints interacted to shape who transformed online outrage into offline activism.

6. Discussion

This study set out to understand how social media and peer networks influenced student participation in youth based social movements in Bangladesh. By combining survey and interview data, it uncovered how digital platforms acted as both a communication infrastructure and a social environment through which motivation, trust, and collective identity were produced. The findings suggest that social media was not merely a tool for coordination but a field of meaning making that enabled emotional and relational engagement with political action.

Classic resource mobilization theory conceptualized participation as dependent on tangible and organizational resources that lower the costs of collective action (McCarthy and Zald 1977). In the context of digital activism, however, resources take a different form. The study found that time spent on social media, interpreted as a form of digital capital, was a strong predictor of participation, particularly at higher levels of use. Students who spent longer periods online were more likely to join street protests.

This aligns with prior research showing that digital media reduce information and coordination costs while increasing perceived efficacy (Earl and Kimport 2011; Tufekci 2017). What this study adds is the observation that these digital resources were embedded within relational networks. Peer engagement did not merely accompany online activity but shaped how digital exposure translated into moral and emotional commitments.

The findings also resonate with the framework of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), though in a qualified manner. Students personalized collective action through individualized expressions, including sharing posts, reels, and videos aligned with their moral or emotional positions. These acts, while personal, contributed to a shared connective logic by amplifying visibility and emotional resonance without reliance on hierarchical organization. In Bangladesh, where formal student unions were constrained and civic space tightly monitored, this connective architecture provided a flexible infrastructure for mobilization. At the same time, the results indicate that connective processes did not replace interpersonal resources, as online engagement was most consequential when reinforced through trusted peer ties.

The spread of emotions through protest videos played an important role in shaping participation. Many participants reported feeling compelled to act after watching violent clips or highly emotional posts circulating on social media. This affective mechanism mirrors what Papacharissi (2015) describes as affective publics, in which emotions circulate through networks to generate shared urgency. Social media thus functioned not only as a channel for mobilization but also as a site where emotional meanings were collectively produced and interpreted.

The findings further show that digital activism was closely intertwined with campus environments. Participation varied across university types, reflecting differences in perceived surveillance, administrative control, and political norms. While students from some campuses were more visible in street protests, the results do not suggest a simple public versus private divide. Instead, they support Tarrow's (2011) argument that political opportunities are relationally perceived, as students evaluated the risks and possibilities of participation within their specific institutional settings.

The qualitative findings add depth to these patterns. Many students from private and national universities described preferring to support the movement online rather than through street protests, indicating a strategic form of engagement that allowed continued involvement while minimizing exposure to repression. Symbolic participation through hashtags, profile frames, and content sharing illustrates that participation was not binary but distributed across digital and physical spaces. This pattern is consistent with research on hybrid activism in constrained political contexts (Gerbaudo 2012; Lee and Chan 2018).

Gender emerged as a particularly important dimension of participation. Female students described heightened familial monitoring, curfews, and fears of harassment, yet many also reported strong moral motivation following attacks on women demonstrators. Their narratives reveal how moral outrage and solidarity intensified commitment even under conditions of elevated risk. At the same time, quantitative

results indicate that women remained less likely to participate overall once other factors were controlled. Taken together, these findings suggest that emotions such as anger and moral shock facilitated engagement without fully overcoming gendered constraints, consistent with Jasper's (1998) argument that emotions are central but not sufficient drivers of political action.

Contrary to expectations, misinformation exposure did not significantly affect participation. Rather than undermining mobilization, participants described engaging in peer based verification through trusted networks and movement pages, often deleting content once identified as false. This pattern aligns with Bond et al. (2012), who show that social endorsement from friends exerts stronger behavioral influence than anonymous messages, and with research suggesting that misinformation effects are mediated by relational trust and local verification norms (Aral and Eckles 2019).

By situating the youth movement within broader debates, this study contributes to the comparative understanding of digital contention in the Global South. Similar to cases such as the Arab Spring or student protests in Latin America, the Bangladeshi movement demonstrates how social media can compensate for constrained civic institutions by creating temporary spaces of coordination and expression (Howard and Hussain 2011; Castells 2015). At the same time, the findings point to a distinct pattern in which mobilization was propelled less by centralized leadership and more by micro level peer influence and affective communication. Digital platforms expanded the capacity for collective action, but participation remained shaped by relational ties, institutional constraints, and persistent inequalities.

7. Conclusion

The student movements in Bangladesh marked an important moment in the country's recent political history and contribute to broader debates on digital contention in the Global South. The findings indicate that mobilization in Bangladesh was not a spontaneous reaction to political grievance alone but unfolded through sustained digital interactions and peer based encouragement. Using a mixed methods approach, the study identified convergent patterns across quantitative and qualitative evidence. Time spent on social media emerged as a significant predictor of participation, particularly at high levels of engagement, but its effects were shaped by relational ties and emotional dynamics. Online presence did not operate independently. Instead, it was translated into action through interpersonal encouragement and moral validation among friends and classmates. These findings underscore that participation in contentious politics, even under authoritarian constraints, remains fundamentally social and affective.

In this sense, the movement illustrates how resource mobilization has been reconfigured in digitally mediated environments. Traditional organizational resources such as formal leadership, funding, and stable structures were less visible, while relational and emotional resources circulated through online networks. Social media functioned as a form of movement infrastructure, enabling coordination, interpretation, and affective alignment. This pattern resonates with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) logic of connective action, while also suggesting an important modification. Digital connectivity did not substitute collective solidarity but interacted with existing peer relationships to sustain engagement.

Comparatively, similar dynamics have been observed in recent youth mobilizations in different political contexts. Protests in Kenya, Nepal, and Peru demonstrate how digital platforms have facilitated rapid mobilization in environments where formal organizational channels were weakened or constrained. Across these cases, emotionally resonant content and decentralized online coordination supported physical participation without reliance on centralized leadership. Taken together, these examples point to a broader generational shift in which protest politics is increasingly articulated through moral communication and peer based networks rather than through hierarchical organization alone.

At the same time, the findings highlight the ambivalent consequences of these forms of mobilization. Horizontal networks of peers and affective publics can lower barriers to participation and broaden engagement, yet they may also diffuse responsibility for sustained organizational development and long term political outcomes. Digital infrastructures enable rapid mobilization, but they do not automatically resolve questions of leadership, durability, or institutional change.

Declarations

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of North South University, Bangladesh. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation in the survey and interviews. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Consent to publish anonymized data and quotations was obtained from all interview participants. No personally identifiable information is included in the manuscript.

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Author Contribution

Author A conceptualized the study and developed the theoretical framework. Author B designed the methodology, conducted analysis, and led manuscript preparation. Author C assisted with literature review and discussion refinement, while Author D contributed to data organization and proofreading. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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