



# Social Media Narrative On Youth Activism And Patterns Of Activist Fatigue

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**Abstract:** Youth activism has increasingly shifted to digital spaces, with social media playing a key role in mobilizing voices and sustaining movements. While this has expanded participation and reach, it has also exposed young activists to constant crisis-related content, public scrutiny, and emotional strain. Existing discussions largely focus on movement outcomes, giving limited attention to the emotional costs experienced by youth activists. This study addresses this gap by examining how activist fatigue is represented in online narratives on youth activism. The main objective of the study is to focus on social media narrative on youth activism and patterns of fatigue. A qualitative design was used, combining a systematic review of twelve peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2024 with an analysis of forty publicly available social media posts related to youth-led movements. A purposive sampling strategy guided the selection of peer-reviewed studies, while social media posts were included based on relevance to activism and fatigue. The combined dataset was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings revealed recurring patterns reflecting emotional strain, sustained pressure, and fluctuating engagement. Based on the discussion, the practical implications highlights the need for supportive structures within activist spaces, including peer support networks, clearer role boundaries, and mental health awareness.

**Index Terms** - Youth activism, Digital spaces, Youth activists, online environments, Emotional strain.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Youth activism has undergone a significant transformation in the digital age, with social media assuming a central role in mobilizing voices, shaping discourse, and facilitating participation across geographic and sociopolitical boundaries (Pandit et al., 2025). Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have enabled unprecedented connectivity, allowing young people to engage with movements instantaneously and to coordinate both online and offline activities (International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 2025; Subramanian, 2023). While this increased accessibility has expanded participation and amplified marginalized voices, it has also exposed youth activists to a relentless influx of crisis-related content, public scrutiny, and emotional strain. These conditions potentiate a state of activist fatigue, defined here as the emotional, cognitive, and motivational exhaustion resulting from sustained engagement with sociopolitical issues on digital platforms (Kim & Alavi, 2025; First Monday, 2025).

### 1.1 Youth Activism

Youth activism refers to the collective and individual efforts of young people to influence social, political, environmental, or cultural change. Over the past decade, youth have emerged as central actors in movements addressing climate change, racial justice, gender equality, and human rights, challenging traditional perceptions of young people as politically disengaged (O'Brien et al., 2018; Taft & Gordon, 2021). Scholars argue that youth activism is not only a form of civic participation but also a developmental and identity-shaping process, allowing young people to construct political agency and a sense of belonging (Wray-Lake et al., 2020). However, participation often occurs within contexts of structural inequality, limited institutional power, and high emotional investment, which can intensify the personal costs of activism for young people (Ginwright, 2016).

## 1.2 Digital Youth Activism

The rise of digital technologies has transformed the landscape of youth activism. Digital youth activism refers to the use of online platforms such as social media, blogs, and messaging apps to organize, communicate, and mobilise around social issues (Vromen et al., 2016). For young people in particular, digital spaces offer accessible entry points to activism by lowering barriers related to geography, resources, and formal organizational membership (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018). Studies show that digital activism enables rapid information sharing, network building, and visibility for youth-led movements, often amplifying voices that are marginalized in traditional political spaces (Banaji & Buckingham, 2019). At the same time, critics note that digital activism can blur boundaries between activism and everyday life, increasing expectations for constant engagement and visibility (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

## 1.3 Activist Fatigue

Activist fatigue, often discussed alongside concepts such as burnout and emotional exhaustion, refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological strain that results from prolonged engagement in activism (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gorski & Chen, 2023). For youth activists, fatigue may emerge from continuous exposure to injustice, pressure to remain active, internal movement conflicts, and feelings of limited impact despite sustained effort (Wahlström et al., 2021). Recent research highlights that while activism can foster empowerment and purpose, it can simultaneously produce stress, anxiety, and disengagement when adequate support systems are absent (Osberg Conner et al., 2023). Importantly, activist fatigue is not merely an individual issue but is shaped by structural and relational conditions within activist spaces.

## 1.4 Role of Social Media in Activist Fatigue

Social media plays a dual role in contemporary youth activism. On one hand, platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok facilitate mobilization, storytelling, and solidarity by enabling young activists to share experiences and connect with global audiences (Jackson et al., 2020). On the other hand, social media intensifies activist fatigue by exposing users to constant streams of crisis-related content, online harassment, algorithmic pressure, and expectations of continuous responsiveness (Buchanan et al., 2021). Research indicates that the emotional labour of repeatedly witnessing violence, injustice, and trauma online can contribute to compassion fatigue and withdrawal from activism over time (Neumann & Fawcett, 2022). Moreover, the performative nature of social media activism can create pressure to display commitment publicly, further blurring the boundaries between personal wellbeing and political engagement (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020).

## 1.5 Need of the study

- Youth activism is increasingly digital: Social media platforms have become central to youth activism, enabling broader participation, community-building, and mobilization across geographic and institutional boundaries (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2016; Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020; Banaji & Buckingham, 2019).
- Crisis exposure causes emotional strain: Constant exposure to crisis-related content, such as videos, news, and social injustices, creates emotional stress, anxiety, and compassion fatigue among young activists (Buchanan, Keats, & Kelley, 2021; Neumann & Fawcett, 2022; Chen & Gorski, 2015; O'Brien, Selboe, & Hayward, 2018).
- Emotional costs are often overlooked: Most existing research focuses on movement outcomes, policy impact, and mobilization success, while the psychological and emotional toll on youth activists is underexplored, particularly in digital contexts (Kligler-Vilenchik, Literat, & Banaji, 2020; Osberg Conner et al., 2023; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Objectives

- To examine activist fatigue in youth activism.
- To identify patterns of emotional strain and pressure.
- To analyse recent peer-reviewed studies and youth social media posts.
- To understand digital overload and coping responses.

### 2.2 Design

A qualitative research design was employed, combining:

- A systematic review of twelve peer-reviewed studies (2020 - 2025) relevant to youth activism and digital engagement.

• Thematic analysis of 40 publicly accessible social media posts (September - November) associated with youth-led movements (selected purposively for relevance to activism and expressions of emotional exhaustion).

### 2.3 Analysis

Both datasets were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predefined categories. (Thematic Analysis - Braun & Clarke, 2006)

• Familiarisation with the data: All peer-reviewed studies and social media posts were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of youth activism narratives and expressions of fatigue.

• Generating initial codes: Relevant data segments were coded inductively, focusing on emotional strain, pressure to remain active, exposure to crisis-related content, and disengagement.

• searching for themes: Similar codes were grouped to identify broader patterns related to activist fatigue across the dataset.

• Reviewing themes: Emerging themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, relevance, and consistency with the entire dataset.

• Defining and naming themes: Clear definitions and concise labels were assigned to each theme, such as emotional strain, sustained pressure, and fluctuating engagement.

• producing the report:

The final themes were organized into a coherent narrative linking social media representations of youth activism with existing literature on activist fatigue.

## III. RESULTS

### 3.1 Results

Table 3.1: Thematic analysis of papers

S.no	Codes	Reference	Sub- themes	Final themes	Description
1	Overload	1	Emotional Overload	Activist Fatigue	Youth feel mentally exhausted due to constant exposure to crisis content and activism demands.
	Burnout	3			
	Emotional drain	5			
	Outrage-cycle	2	Outrage Cycle		Emotional spikes during online crises followed by withdrawal and numbness.
	Numbness	4			
2	Silence-fear	3	Fear of Judgement	Performance Pressure	Youth worry about being judged or criticised for not posting about social issues.
	Judgment-pressure	6			
	Identity-display	1	Activism as Identity Display		Activism becomes linked to self-presentation, causing pressure to post even when emotionally tired.
	Comparison	7			
Duty-to-post	1				

3	Unclear-role	2	Role Uncertainty	Identity Confusion	Youth struggle to define what meaningful activism looks like online.		
	Activism-meaning	6					
	Mixed-identity	4	Belonging Conflicts		Tension between individual beliefs and expectations from online activist communities.		
	Belonging-need	4					
4	Constant-crisis	1	Crisis Saturation	Algorithmic Overexposure	Algorithms push nonstop updates on social issues, resulting in information fatigue.		
	Repeat-content	5					
	Negativity-feed	3	Negativity Overload		Heavy exposure to negative posts increases emotional and cognitive strain among youth.		
	Algorithm-push	3					
5	Detox	2	Digital Detox	Coping Strategies	Youth take deliberate breaks to manage fatigue.		
	Avoidance	5					
	Humour-use	4	Positive Feed Curation		Youth curate lighter content to reduce emotional load.		
	Positive-feed	4					
	Filter-use	6					
6	Disengage	5	Digital Retreat	Withdrawal Patterns	Youth temporarily leave social media to reduce stress		
	Break-from-platform	5					
	Muting	2	Selective Avoidance		Youth mute hashtags or accounts related to activism as a coping mechanism		
	Escape-behaviour	4					

Table 3.2 Thematic analysis of social media posts

S.no	Codes	Sub- themes	Final themes	Description
1	youth-voice	Speaking against injustice	Rising Youth Voice	Young people speak up when they see injustice. They take leadership and push for change instead of waiting for adults or leaders to act.
	demand-change	Demanding accountability		
	lead-action	Leading movements		
2	online-mobilise	Mobilising through social media	Digital-First Activism	Most youth movements start online. Social media helps them gather people fast, share updates, and turn simple posts into large actions
	digital-network	Hashtag movements		
	hashtag-power	Online community building		
3	protest-spread	Cross-country influence	Rapid Spread of Protests	Youth protests spread quickly across cities and countries. One event inspires another, creating a strong wave of collective action.
	global-wave	Youth movements toppling leaders		
		Fast coordination		
4	emotional-bond	Feeling personally affected	Emotional Attachment to Issues	Youth activism is personal. They feel deeply connected to issues like climate, gender, corruption, and identity.
	identity-activist	Sense of responsibility		
	duty-feeling	Identity tied to activism		
5	game-protest	In-game protests	New Forms of Activism	Young people use creative spaces like games, virtual worlds, and online platforms to express their political views when real-world spaces are limited.
	creative-digital	Creative online expressions		
	virtual-solidarity	Virtual gatherings		
6	low-energy	Feeling drained	Emotional Exhaustion	Long exposure to painful issues drains their emotional energy. They

	emotional-drain	Constant sadness or heaviness		feel tired even when they want to continue helping.
	mental-tiredness	No energy for causes		
7	news-overload	Too much crisis information	Overload of Bad News	Constant updates about crisis, violence, or injustice can overwhelm them. Too much information becomes mentally heavy.
	crisis-fatigue	No time to process		
	emotional-cloud	News fatigue		
8	no-boundary	Activism mixing with daily life	Blurred Boundaries	Activism mixes with their everyday life. They find it hard to rest because their mind stays active even when they try to log off.
	life-activism-mix	No clear break		
	hard-to-switch-off	Difficulty switching off		
9	life-imbalance	Neglecting hobbies	Activism vs Personal Life Conflict	Activists struggle to balance work, study, hobbies, and activism. Other parts of life get pushed aside.
	self-loss	Loss of balance		
	priority-conflict	No time for self		
10	doubt-rise	Feeling impact is too small	Doubt & Hopelessness	Slow progress makes them question whether their actions matter. They sometimes lose confidence in change.
	hope-drop	Fear that change is slow		
	meaning-question	Questioning the purpose		

### 3.2 Combined interpretation

- **Theme 1: Emotional Overload & Fatigue**  
Youth activists experience sustained emotional strain due to constant exposure to crisis-related content, online harassment, and high expectations within activist communities, resulting in psychological fatigue and burnout.
- **Theme 2: Pressure, Identity & Role Confusion**  
Activists navigate multiple responsibilities and expectations from peers, mentors, and movements, creating tension between personal identity and activist roles, which contributes to stress and uncertainty.
- **Theme 3: Algorithmic Saturation & Digital Fatigue**  
Social media platforms intensify pressures through endless information streams, visibility demands, and algorithmic prioritisation, leading to cognitive overload and digital fatigue.
- **Theme 4: Coping & Digital Withdrawal**  
To manage emotional and digital stress, youth adopt strategies such as setting boundaries, limiting online engagement, or temporarily disengaging from platforms to protect mental health.
- **Theme 5: Resilience, Voice & Creative Activism**

Despite challenges, youth demonstrate resilience by using creative forms of digital activism, expressing their voices through innovative approaches, fostering community, and sustaining long-term engagement.

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