

Digital Disruption and Generational Power Shift: A Comparative Study of Gen Z Political Movements and Democratic Transformation in South Asia

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Abstract

South Asia region is facing a significant change in terms of political participation owing to technological advancement in the digital era, decline in institutional trust and rising digitally savvy Generation Z political activists. Digital spaces form the most frequent venues for political communication, collective actions and legitimation in the context of hybrid democracies. Current studies regarding digital activism, youth participation, and democratic transformation have been somewhat separate from one another. The existing research fails to give a comprehensive understanding of the ways through which youth mobilization and algorithmic activism transforms the political power relations and democratic legitimacy in South Asian hybrid regimes. The present studies form a comparative theoretical framework in order to examine the process of how digital disruption results in the change in generational power and institution in South Asia. The study seeks to provide an explanation for digitally mediated political change that goes beyond the traditional focus on protest activism. This paper offers Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGGDT) that integrates network society theory, digital contentious politics, generational political sociology and platform governance studies. Methodologically, the study employs abductive theory-building and comparative conceptual synthesis grounded in critical realist ontology and constructivist epistemology. Analytical interpretation is derived from peer-reviewed interdisciplinary literature and comparative South Asian political dynamics. The findings suggest that Gen Z movements function as continuous networked political systems operating through algorithmically mediated mobilization. These developments have created legitimacy volatility, institutional stress and hybrid, adaptive democratic forms across Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This book offers an innovative theoretical framework linking digital infrastructures to youth identity to processes of democratic change and policy prescriptions to adaptive governance, institutional reform and youth inclusion in a digital democratic framework in weak states.

Keywords: Gen Z Politics; Digital Activism; South Asia; Democratic Transformation; Algorithmic Governance; Hybrid Regimes; Youth Mobilization; Network Society

INTRODUCTION

Global Context of Digital Political Transformation

We are currently witnessing a deep restructuring of politics, spurred by the growth of digital environments, digitally mediated communication, and network forms of collective action. Digital spaces now exert influence on public participation, the flow of political information, public discussion, and legitimacy generation under democratic and hybrid political systems. The development of smartphones, social networks, and instant communication technologies have fundamentally reconfigured how political actors achieve legitimacy and mobilize popular support, construct political messages, and subvert institutional authority. This development can be characterized as a fundamental structural transformation of political engagement rather than a purely technological one.

Castells (2012) describes this change as a network society, where communication power exists in a decentralized network instead of in traditional institutions. This way of communicating lets politics depend less on formal institutions and more on digitally connected groups that can communicate quickly and share symbols. Tufekci (2017) notes that the speed and simplicity of digital communication have reduced the costs and time needed for protests to grow and escalate, resulting in large protests organized by flexible groups. The challenge presented by such movements remains the organizational instability and limited lasting institutional impact.

In conjunction with these digitally-fueled changes in politics and communication, representative democratic institutions have been losing public trust and legitimacy among various groups. Younger segments of the population in particular appear to hold significantly less confidence in established political institutions. Chadwick(2013) terms the current configuration of politics a "hybrid media system" that involves the awkward accommodation of existing, traditional institutions within digitally networked media environments. Here, algorithmic political communication drives not only visibility, but agenda-setting and affective mobilization as well. It is youth-centered networked politics that have become characteristic of this broader political restructuring, with "Gen Zers"-young people who were born into digital-connectedness-emerging as an exemplification of this new dynamic.

South Asian Political Context

These global changes are especially important in South Asia. Rapid digitalization is taking place alongside weak democratic institutions, a very young population, and current governance limitations. Many South Asian countries, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, have hybrid political systems. Here, formal democratic institutions exist with institutional weakness, centralized executive control, and inconsistent rule of law. In this context, digital media has become an effective political space. Citizens can express their concerns and organize actions to confront the power and authority of the state.

Increasing access to the internet and the number of mobile phones in South Asia has accelerated the use of digital media in everyday political life. Young people now use social media to

communicate, share political information, organize movements, and shape their political identities. A massive proportion of youth in South Asia makes them particularly potent actor, influencing the new political culture and protest dynamics in the region. Developments in countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan show common but differentiated digital political transition patterns: social media is used in Nepal to spread protest and decentralize citizen mobilisation; in Sri Lanka, digitally connected youth movement grew to national level in response to the economic crisis; recurrent student led digital activism challenges state power in Bangladesh and; political polarization has intensified as a result of algorithmic amplification in Pakistan's politics. Combined, the studies above reveal that digital infrastructures are not separate from the political field, but are emerging as primary political battlegrounds, where claims to legitimacy are made, and power is contested between generations.

Problem Statement

Although we have seen an increase in research regarding digital activism, youth political participation, and democratic transformation, we lack a sufficient theory that adequately addresses these digital based, generational power changes in the hybrid regimes of South Asia. There is a lot of work being done on digital activism as simply communication, and work that focuses on the mobilization aspects of protests, without any consideration to their institutional consequences. Likewise, youth political participation discourse centers on the increase of civic attitudes and the decrease in institutional confidence, yet the impact of the structural mechanisms of algorithmic governance and the architecture of platforms is left unexplored when constructing new theory. As a result, youth politics and the digital governance debate occupy distinct fields of knowledge without considering the linkages between these topics in democratic transition.

Research Gap

The literature reveals three major analytical gaps requiring theoretical intervention. First, existing theories inadequately integrate generational identity with algorithmic political communication. How Gen Z political subjectivities are structurally constitutive of interaction with digitised info-scapes on a regular basis is rarely explored in the extant literature.

Second, a region specific, comparative theory that is able to explain why the South Asia-wide pattern of digitised mobilization and democratic instability exists has not been adequately explored. Most existing studies remain nationally isolated or globally generalized without sufficient regional

Thirdly, scholarship fails to adequately consider how legitimacy structures change in algorithmically mediated politics. Much of the existing democratic theory relies on a model of institutional authorities that possess fixed or steady power relations, yet the digital environment in which we currently live generates unprecedented speed in the generation of legitimacy fluctuation, fragmentation of publics, and velocity of dissent.

This paper addresses these issues through developing a novel, integrative framework that explains how digital infrastructures, generational political agency, and institutional change interact. The DGDGT provides such a framework, that the paper subsequently outlines.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Zen Z movements reshape political mobilization patterns in South Asia?
2. How does digital disruption redistribute political power within hybrid democratic systems?
3. What theoretical framework best explains democratic transformation under conditions of algorithmic activism and networked political communication?

These questions aim to go beyond simply describing the situation. They focus on creating a solid theoretical explanation for how digital tools are changing democracy.

Objectives

The research has three primary objectives. First, it is to construct a new theoretical paradigm on the interrelationship between digital infrastructure and generation as well as democracy. Second, it is to consider digital disruption as a form of political power rather than a means of communication technology. Third, it is to explain comparatively the effect of Zen Z political mobilization on institutional legitimacy and governance in the context of South Asian hybrid politics.

Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this article is organized into six sections. Section 2 critically reviews literature on digital activism, youth political participation, hybrid regimes, and algorithmic governance. Section 3 develops the Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGD). Section 4 outlines the methodological framework. Section 5 presents the analytical discussion and comparative South Asian analysis. Sections 6 and 7 discuss theoretical contributions, policy implications, limitations, future research directions, and concluding arguments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Activism and Network Society

Digital activism has therefore fundamentally altered our current understandings of political engagement, collective behavior and the ways in which social movements are organized. Early writings on networked communication identified the decentralized effect of digital technologies as they make it easier for citizens to get involved and allow them to depend less on established and hierarchically organized structures. Castells (2012) talks about the creation of a "network society" wherein power is shifting towards communication mediated through horizontally organized, digitally connected nodes which can effectively spread political messages and initiate collective action across distances.

In this way, digitally transmitted communication systems have given way to horizontally oriented communication networks, through which people can circumvent political mediators such as parties, unions and established media outlets. Networks public emerge as the key subjects for agenda setting and symbolic struggle, since they can rapidly scale the protest movement via their decentralized communicative structure. This impact of the new order has been particularly noticeable in movements of the young, since they tend to operate less through established institutions and more through social media systems.

Further research on this topic includes Bennett and Segerberg (2013), who explore the idea of "connective action". There was one crucial distinction between the digital form of collective action and its predecessors. The traditional social movement used the tools of organizational coordination and ideological identity, while connective action appeared via personal interaction and communication through digital means. It takes place through loose networks centered around personal expressions, hashtags, pictures and emotional appeal instead of leadership coordination.

More examples of the impact of digital protest infrastructure are provided by Tufekci (2017). She shows how digital activism reduces costs and accelerates the mobilization process. The speed of social media, the transnational awareness and capability to unite people on a massive scale without spending much effort make the organization easier. At the same time, the dilemma of digitally driven activism is revealed by Tufekci – even though it facilitates the fast mobilization of masses, the technology of protests may undermine long-term organizing efforts and institutionalization. Later studies have emphasized the impact of digital means on politics through other than mere communication functions. Therefore, activism is increasingly influenced by these technologically shaped realities.

Youth Political Participation and Gen Z Politics

The research into youth political participation demonstrates substantial changes in their attitude towards politics and democracy. While the previous generations grew without access to constant internet connection, Generation Z grew in the digitalized world that shapes their political identity, political discourses and involvement into civic activities. A lot of scientific works suggest that reduced youth political activity is not a result of indifference but another form of political engagement.

Loader et al. (2014) state that the political engagement of youth in digitally connected societies has a distinctive character in comparison to other age categories. The form of political involvement of politically active youth is flexible, decentered and issue-oriented. Traditional measures of political participation, such as party membership and voting, do not work well in societies that use social networks as tools for political communication and mobilization. As in Loader et al. (2014), Bennett (2012) identifies a personalized process of politics among younger cohorts who tend to move away from stable forms of political identity based on party or institutional affiliation in favor of those based on lifestyle, issue politics, and narrative driven forms of activism. Personalization and individuality of participation is possible due to the enabling characteristics of digital communication technologies. Sloam and Henn (2019) point out that current youth generations show declining level of trust in representative institutions and high level of participation as issue-oriented activists. These contradictions reveal the democratic transformations of the current world where the role of institution in citizens' lives is losing its relevance while governance processes and practices are perceived as unfair and corrupted. Identity-based digital activism has taken root in Gen Z cultures. Social media platforms have become a new venue to articulate political identities with relation to identities such as gender, race, climate justice, democracy, social equality, etc. Political participation is largely about symbolic expression, network attachment and affective communication in the context of current democracies.

The literature on youth political participation may effectively describe and define changing patterns of youth civic engagement; however, it tends to downplay the role of structure and the influence of the digital infrastructures themselves. Only a few authors acknowledge the ways that algorithmic technologies affect the construction of youth political consciousness, the nature of youth engagement and the degree of their trust in political institutions. This aspect of youth political engagement has only recently become more widely recognized in youth political participation literature, particularly in regard to hybrid democracies, where the interconnection between digital politics, institutionalism, and governmentality is quite compelling.

Hybrid Regimes and Democratic Backsliding

The academic inquiry into hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding has come to the center of recent comparative politics literature, especially for cases with democratic formal institutions alongside authoritarian governance practices. In their framework of "competitive authoritarian regimes," Levitsky and Way (2010) observe that elections and formal procedures of democracy still persist but are manipulated through selective institutional control, restrictions on media coverage, and state resource control. Hybrid regimes distinguish themselves from consolidated democracies and autocracies in that "meaningful political contention remains possible, but the institutional accountability mechanisms...remain weak or selectively enforced." In hybrid regimes, "elites are willing to permit limited opposition participation, but not unlimited contestation, and they often employ a combination of legal, administrative, and coercive measures to restrain opposition activities."

Bermeo (2016) argues that democratic erosion increasingly takes place not through sudden and abrupt transitions to authoritarianism, but through "cumulative institutional decay," where features of a democracy are gradually whittled away. Characteristics of modern democratic backsliding includes executive aggrandizement, politicization of the judiciary, contraction of civic rights, manipulation of information infrastructure, and gradual deterioration of democratic norms, with a superficial maintenance of constitutionalism. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) illustrate how polarization, distrust of institutions and governance crisis often are coupled with democratic backsliding. In this context, poorly responsive institutions amplify public frustration, especially among the youth, which struggles with insecurity and lacks political inclusion.

In South Asia, hybrid regimes evolve through a mixture of democratic aspirations, fragility of institutions and state-centered politics; Digital communication technologies are becoming increasingly salient in this process, creating new possibilities for visibility, accelerating mobilization of protest. While governments are attempting to co-opt and harness digital technologies to legitimate themselves, at the same time they are seeking to extend their capacity for monitoring, manipulation and control through increased digital surveillance, state management of information and algorithms. However, the current academic frameworks of hybrid regime analysis largely regard digital technologies as external variables rather than an structural aspect of the democratic transition. Also, while the scholarship of democratic backsliding focuses on the erosion of institutions and the strategies of authoritarianism, it tends to ignore how the digitally-

embedded generation actor affects legitimacy structures and institution responsiveness. As a result, these current frameworks fail to capture the interplay between algorithmic communication and democratic vulnerability.

Algorithmic Governance and Platform Power

Rising attention to and alarm at the political effects of algorithm-based governance and platform power has occurred alongside a dramatic growth of digital platforms. Today, many of the modes of political communication exist within proprietary digital infrastructures that can also mediate attention, shape affective engagement and predict behavior.

These new developments have caused a focus shift from digital participation to platform governance models and logics. Zuboff's (2019) concept of "surveillance capitalism" illustrates how digital platforms surveil behavioral data in order to predict and manipulate its readers toward profit and political ends. In political communication, the result is an asymmetric power relationship whereby algorithmic systems control the flow of public debate, affect its volume, and shape its visibility, without the accountability demanded of democratic governance.

Gillespie's work (2018) illustrates how rules and mechanisms of platform moderation, including recommenders and visibility rankings, position platforms as important arbiters of political discourse. They decide which political conversations are promoted and which ideas/texts are marginalized. And so, platform power is directly implicated in shaping political action and speech through controlling access to information and public attention. Couldry and Mejias (2019) take this concept further in their idea of "data colonialism." They argue that platforms create new forms of social exploitation by turning human interaction into a source of economic and political value. This means that political participation on digital platforms also comes to be seen as inextricably intertwined with data governance regimes and algorithmic control.

Algorithmic visibility also works to inflame political polarization and fragment communication. Recommenders' tendencies to highlight emotionally charged, high-intensity content can have effects of boosting affective polarization and fueling high-volume political communication; in precarious democracies with contested institutional legitimacy, this can also undermine democratic norms. In the literature on platform governance, few scholars discuss technology's deterministic quality and lack of intersection with a generational analysis. Although many authors detail Surveillance, data exploitation and algorithmic manipulation, they provide scant description of how such mechanisms intersect with youth political activity and democratic change in the context of hybrid political systems.

South Asian Protest Ecology

Digitally-fueled protest movements in South Asia have unfolded repeatedly in cycles since crises in governance, the weakness of developing economies, a lack of institutional credibility and youth grievances against authority structures. Worldwide and in South Asia, digital space has become an increasingly important site for mobilizing protests, narrating stories, and coordinating activism. In Nepal, social media has enabled the rapid diffusion of protest frames and distributed citizens' activism within youth communities in cities. An economic crisis in Sri Lanka last year revealed how digital-organized protest movements had, swiftly, consolidated into widely diffused, national

anti-government protest which brought the state institutions under intense pressure. In Bangladesh, there has been a recurrence of youth-driven digital activism focused on state accountability, educational reform and elections. Pakistan has experienced increasingly intense platform-driven political polarization.

Taken together, these examples illuminate a region-wide pattern of protest ecology, conditioned by the acceleration effects of digitally-mediated politics, on one hand, and generationally constituted politics of mobilization, on the other. The relative lacuna of South Asian scholarship remains scattered across numerous case studies, though without greater integration, theoretical generalization remains hampered.

Literature Gaps and Conceptual Tensions

These conceptual divides are evident in the review of the existing literature.

Firstly, there is low integration between theories of generational identity and the notion of algorithmic political communication. Research on youth politics often relies heavily on the assumption of behavioral change while neglecting the enabling or restricting role of the digital infrastructure on political consciousness and mobilization.

Secondly, there are very few South Asia-specific, comparative analyses that can account for contextually different manifestations of digitally mediated democratic change. Most existing theoretical paradigms are either globally universalized or regionally contained.

Thirdly, research is also under-developed regarding the connection between algorithmic systems and institutional authority. While there is a strong body of literature on the impact of platforms on political power and extensive studies of institutional decay from within democratic theory, there is minimal theoretical work exploring the ways in which algorithmic engagement with politics can undermine the legitimacy of governance institutions in hybrid democracies.

Addressing these conceptual paradoxes, it becomes necessary to develop a synthesized theory that addresses issues related to the nexus between digital infrastructure, generational political agency, and institutional change. It is the need to develop this synthesizing theory that the Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGDТ) addresses through combining fragmented literatures into a coherent, analytical framework on digitally mediated democratic change in South Asia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DIGITAL GENERATIONAL DISRUPTION THEORY (DGDТ)

Core Theoretical Proposition

DGDТ extends structural approaches to explaining democratic transformation within digitally-mediated hybrid regimes by providing an account of how digital infrastructure reshapes political agency. It assumes that platforms are not mere communication conduits but instead are governed by algorithms that organize public visibility, attention and the production of collective political meaning (Gillespie, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). It is through participation within such an algorithmically governed space that Gen Z or Zen Z agents can and do engage in the constitution of new political subjectivities that circumvents institutional mediation (i.e. Parties, legacy media and bureaucracies). This brings about a redistribution of political power from a hierarchy

of institutions toward networked publics that co-constitute meaning through algorithmically amplified communication (Castells, 2012; Tufekci, 2017), wherein a certain type of legitimacy will come to be determined by digital visibility and networked participation more than formal institutional power.

Core Constructs

DGDT is structured around four interdependent analytical constructs that explain the interaction between digital ecosystems, generational agency, and institutional change.

Digital Disruption Intensity (DDI) refers to the degree to which digital infrastructures penetrate political communication and mobilization processes. High DDI environments are characterized by pervasive platform dependency, algorithmic content curation, and real-time political communication flows. In these hybrid contexts political debate tends to be framed not by institutional gatekeepers but by visibility algorithms (Chadwick, 2013).

GPA refers to the capacity for Gen Z actors to affect political results through networked participation, symbolic speech and digitally networked collective action. Instead of the traditional measures of political participation, such as voter turnout and political party activity, GPA represents networked influence generated by connect action networks which occur on digitally networked platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

IAC measures the ability for political institutions to assimilate, translate and react to digitally mediated inputs. Low IAC indicates rigidity, slowness, and limited ability to accommodate digital feedback, while high IAC indicates responsive elasticity to network pressure (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

LVI refers to the susceptibility of political trust to digital intermediation and algorithmically generated media. In high LVI contexts political legitimacy and public trust are highly volatile due to rapid cycling through viral content, emotion dynamics, and visibility algorithms (Zuboff, 2019).

These ideas show how the network system influences political authority, participation of different generations, and the integrity of institutions in hybrid democracies.

Causal Pathway Development

DGDT suggests a step-by-step process showing how digital infrastructures lead to democratic change: digital disruption, networked mobilization, generational power shift, institutional strain, democratic reconfiguration.

In the first stage, a rise in Digital Disruption Intensity (DDI) increases the importance of platforms in political communication. This decreases dependence on traditional intermediaries. As a result, networked mobilization occurs, with collective action forming through decentralized and algorithmically boosted communication structures (Tufekci, 2017).

Sustained networked mobilization improves Generational Political Agency (GPA). This gives Generation Z a greater voice in political discourse and the construction of symbolic legitimacy. Thus, traditional institutions lose their ability to set the agenda.

These institutions find it difficult to deal with digital input at the speed of digital demands. This bottleneck in Institutional Absorption Capacity (IAC) results in the crisis of legitimacy and gaps in governance. Ultimately, these changes are turning democracy into a blend of adaptive authoritarianism, hybrid governance or institutional reconstruction.

Moderating Variables

However, how digital disruption leads to democratic change depends on several factors. The state's ability to monitor influences how digital protests are watched, controlled, or suppressed. This affects both the visibility of the protest and the risks involved in protesting (Fuchs, 2021). Media freedom shapes the presence and strength of alternative viewpoints. Socioeconomic inequality impacts access to digital technology and heightens frustrations among disadvantaged youth, making it easier to mobilize and potentially more disruptive. Digital literacy influences how well citizens can understand algorithm-driven content, reducing their vulnerability to misinformation.

Conceptual Model Explanation

The DGDT conceptual model shows the structural relationship between digital infrastructures and democratic transformation: Zen Z digital networks, algorithmic mobilization, collective action density, institutional pressure, governance adaptation or breakdown.

Zen Z digital networks form the basic layer of political communication. They enable mobilization processes that are influenced by algorithms. These networks create algorithmic mobilization, in which platform logic highlights certain narratives and accelerates patterns of political engagement. This results in increased collective action density, demonstrating a higher frequency and scale of coordinated political activity.

As collective action density increases, institutional systems face mounting pressure to react to rapidly changing demands. Based on Institutional Absorption Capacity (IAC), governance systems either adapt through reform and responsiveness or face breakdowns due to legitimacy crises and institutional fragmentation. Thus, the model shows that digital infrastructures act as key mediators of democratic transformation.

Table 1: Theory Comparison Matrix

Theory	Core Focus	Limitation
Network Society (Castells, 2012)	Communication structures and digital networks	Weak generational integration
Digital Activism Theory (Tufekci, 2017)	Protest mobilization and connective action	Limited institutional analysis
Generational Theory (Bennett, 2012)	Cohort-based political behavior	Weak digital structural analysis
DGDT (This Study)	Integrated digital–generational–institutional transformation	Requires empirical validation

METHODS

Philosophical Orientation

This research is based on the critical realist view that social structures like institutions, digital platforms, and political systems have real effects and influence actions, regardless of whether people recognize them. Social impacts often occur through social processes (Bhaskar, 1978). This viewpoint combines with a constructivist approach, suggesting that political meaning, legitimacy, and collective identity are shaped by communication and interactions in digital spaces. These theoretical choices are particularly useful for examining political changes that happen through digital means. They take into account the interaction between physical infrastructures (like platforms and algorithms) and interpretive processes (like the development of youth political identity) to explain the political outcomes of digital political change (Zuboff, 2019).

Research Design

The research is based on the abductive approach of theory building. This enables oscillating between existing theories and new propositions (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Unlike hypothesis-testing research design, the study will attempt to formulate a new model of explanation, namely Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGDТ), by reinterpreting interdisciplinary literature. This is achieved through a comparative conceptual synthesis research design that synthesizes lessons from network society theory, digital activism literature, and generational politics and hybrid regimes literature. This approach is suitable for exploring complex and changing topics like Gen Z political movements, where established theories offer only partial and inadequate explanations of digitally influenced democratic change.

Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy is based on the integration of three parts. Firstly, a thematic meta-synthesis of published and peer-reviewed works in the fields of political science, sociology, communication studies and digital governance research is carried out in order to identify "repeated patterns of conceptual elements of the issues under investigation concerning digital mobilization, algorithmic governance, generational politics and institution legitimacy". Secondly, political comparative analysis is performed on South Asian countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan in order to determine the structural similarities and context differences of digitally mediated political changes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Finally, theory abstraction and synthesis of disparate theorizations are executed to consolidate disparate theorization in an integrative framework. By this step, description and disciplinary research could be transmuted to a level higher-order conceptual framework, thus the establishment of DGDТ.

Scope Conditions

The applicability of the framework is limited to **hybrid political regimes** characterized by partial democratic institutions and uneven governance effectiveness. It further requires **high internet penetration**, ensuring widespread access to digital platforms that structure political communication. Finally, the model assumes active youth mobilization, especially among Gen Z

groups involved in networked political participation. These scope conditions set the contextual limits where Digital Generational Disruption Theory works well.

Validity and Theoretical Coherence

Triangulation of literatures achieves theoretical validity. Triangulation uses empirical observations from different literature to improve the stability of the concepts and lessen the risk of the bias coming from one author. Conceptual consistency tests were used to test the internal consistency of the key concepts of DGD model like DDI, GPA, IAC and LVI. The purpose was to determine if the hypothesized causal relationships were consistent with the theoretical constructs.

ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

Digital Mobilization as Structural Political Force

Digital mobilization in contemporary South Asia has begun to function as a structural political force, rather than merely as a temporary mode of protest. Zen Z politics is increasingly operating as a permanent mode of political activism embedded in perpetually active digital space, where political communication is maintained through the combination of platform-specific interaction, algorithmic circulation and networked visibility. It continues to produce continuously networked political systems wherein political mobilization is perpetually activated and reproduced, not temporally organized by protest events (Castells, 2012; Tufekci, 2017).

This type of system distributes dissent beyond conventional protest spaces, into the enduring structures of social networking platforms, instant messaging applications and algorithmically filtered content streams. Here, dissent is sustained through the mechanisms of symbolic statement, fast communication, and decentralized political organizing. Individualized digital interactions create and facilitate the outcomes of broad collective action through the mechanisms of connective action without organization (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013).

As such, political contention becomes structurally inscribed into daily practices of digital communication, leading to a persistent architecture of digital dissent that continually undermines institutional accounts and enlarges the temporal scope of political mobilization beyond conventional protest time.

Institutional Stress and Legitimacy Breakdown

Increasing digitally mediated mobilization intensifies institutional stress in South Asian hybrid polities. Hybrid institutions, built for incremental hierarchical processes, struggle with the speed of digital mobilization, the rapid rise and fall of public opinion and collective action, and the rapid re-evaluation of legitimacy it encourages. These asymmetries produce a permanent state of "governance lag"-when institutions fail to keep up with digitally induced political amplification. This erodes trust, so that legitimacy hinges not on institutional performance, but the speed of circulating digital narratives.

Zuboff (2019) argues that algorithmic logics in digital platforms specifically boost emotional content, feeding the perception of institutional failure and shortening the time span required for legitimacy deficits to deepen. This happens rapidly and dramatically in hybrid states where institutional credibility is not consistent to begin with. Rapidly unfolding dissent pressures add

to these weaknesses. Compressed digital time scales hasten political dynamics from isolated grievances to mass action. The carefully constructed balance that hybrid institutions depend upon-which requires a carefully controlled and absorptive institutional responsiveness (Levitsky & Way 2010)is shattered.

Comparative South Asian Dynamics

Despite structural commonality in South Asia, digitally mediate political transformation processes take acontextual flavor.

High levels of platform diffusion and youth engagement lead to rapid political protests in **Nepal** with significant digital transmission. Social media provides dominant infrastructural basis for civic mobilization in Nepal, facilitating bottom-up mobilization structure and quick propagation of public discourses. This contributes to enhancing citizen collective action capacity while marginalizing established political organizations.

Recent economic crisis has initiated large-scale youth mobilization in **Sri Lanka** with the engagement of digital communication tool as a key factor that transformed economic demands to organized political actions and showed how material crises and algorithmic communication interacts to generate rapidly mobilized protests.

Student-centered network activism in **Bangladesh** presents student-led political mobilization and sustained youthful political actions through digital communication tool. The movements in Bangladesh are increasingly taking network-based forms where offline student networks are being integrated with online communication platform in the framework of connective action to fight for institutional reform.

Algorithmic polarization and digital fragmentation characterize the nature of political processes in Pakistan. Algorithmic platform mediation leads to reinforce existing ideological division and enhance affective polarization which weakened the ability to formulate shared public narratives. This has resulted in divided digital public sphere and contentious environment in digital politics.

In contrast to the contextual differences of these four countries, there are still shared features in which digital infrastructures provide avenues of increased youth political agency while simultaneously undermining existing institutional forms of political legitimacy and political mediation processes.

Emergence of Hybrid Democratic Forms

Digital mobilization and institutional strain result in hybrid democratic configurations which are more precisely defined by adaptive instability. These structures are not simply democratic or authoritarian but instead represent shifting arrangements of institutional responsiveness, selective repression and tactical co-optation.

States simultaneously expand digital repression techniques such as surveillance and content monitoring and content suppression of online dissent, while simultaneously instituting co-optative means that attempts to bring or co-opt digital dissent through symbolic appeasement or policy adjustments. However these adaptive mechanisms frequently fail, producing unintended results, such as increasing levels of distrust and renewed patterns of mobilization.

As Chadwick (2013) notes hybrid media systems erase many of the distinctions between institutional communications and networked public debate resulting in instability in terms of conditions of legitimacy. State adaptation is thus an ongoing process of adjustment rather than stasis as digital infrastructure continually reconfigures what is acceptable political legitimacy between state control and state responsiveness. In the end, hybrid democratic forms in South Asia are an outcome of an emerging balance of algorithmic governance, generational conflict, and pressures toward institutional adjustment.

Theoretical Contributions

Primary Contribution

A theoretical model that unifies the explanation is a novel contribution from the research, namely Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGDT). The impact of digital generations on the transformation of democracy in the hybrid regime is proved by DGDT. First, it is not only the means for people to communicate with each other through the digital infrastructure. At the same time it is seen as an important milieu through which agency is possible (Castells, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). Gen Z political actors are seen as networked individuals, and their ability to mobilize and act politically is conditioned by their presence on the internet and the rules of the platforms (Zuboff, 2019). The power of the generation to make politics, in turn, upsets traditional middlemen and throws doubt on the legitimacy of the political process.

Secondary Contributions

Besides the main theoretical contribution of DGDT, it is worth noting that the concept has two more contributions. First, it connects the theories of digital governance and generations by showing how algorithmically mediated contexts organize generation-based political actions and civic engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Second, and of secondary importance, the framework broadens the scope of network society theory to institutional settings through the IAC and LVI (Chadwick, 2013). Thus, DGDT incorporates institutional feedback into digital systems, going beyond Castells' (2012) focus on networks.

Third, the DGDT framework uses a regionally defined South Asia framework that highlights how the digital mediated political transitions under the hybrid regimes in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan show differentiated yet structurally converging patterns. Regional contextualisation enhances the explanatory value of universalistic digital democratic theories by contextualizing it with respect to the empirically-politically varied nature of the Global South.

Interdisciplinary Contributions

DGDT has potential to be interdisciplinary, as it spans four main areas of academic knowledge; political science, sociology, digital studies and governance theory. It will push arguments forward about democratic transformation, within the area of political science by including the role of digital infrastructures in structural explanations. In sociology, it reinterprets generational identity as a digitally constructed and continuously mediated phenomenon. In digital studies, it shifts focus from platform functionality to political system-level consequences of algorithmic governance. In governance theory, it introduces new analytical constructs DDI, GPA, IAC, and

LVI to assess institutional responsiveness under digital pressure. Together, the above suggest DGD as a cross-disciplinary framework for understanding digitally induced democratic change in contemporary hybrid regimes.

Policy Implications

Youth Inclusive Governance

Need to institutionalize youth inclusive governance in light of burgeoning influence of digitally-native Gen Z populations in the political arena. The traditional representatives' governance systems in South Asia are increasingly inconsistent with networked governance wherein politics is carried out on digital networks rather than party politics. Structured youth advisory boards, digital consulting platforms, and participatory policy-making forums need to be built into the institutional structure of governance that integrate digital civic inputs in formal policy-making (Loader et al. 2014). These systems would lower the legitimacy volatility by increasing institution responsiveness to the digitally-mediated demands of the public.

Algorithmic Transparency

With the role of platforms at the heart of political communication, transparency in algorithms managing political discourse systems should be ensured. Visibility of the political content in the network of public discourse which plays a crucial role in shaping opinions and triggering actions is dictated by the content ranking logic of the algorithms (Gillespie 2018). Regulations on digital communication systems ought to make transparent the criteria that influence how information is ranked, how political ads are targeted, how the usage data are collected etc. Increased transparency in the algorithmic logic of the digital governance systems would enable greater accountability.

Rapid Response Governance Reform

Increased velocity of politically mobilizing digital activities demands prompt and responsive systems of governance. Traditional governmental institutions in South Asia appear too static to respond quickly to the high-speed dissent on digital networks, leading to delays in governance, deepening the legitimacy deficit. Institutional reform is expected to prioritize real-time surveillance of digital sentiments, coordinating units on emergency responses and institutional feedback mechanisms. Enhancement of institutional responsiveness and absorptive capacity (IAC) is essential for stabilization.

Digital Civic Education

Sustained democratic resilience, therefore, demands systematic investment in the area of digital civic education. More importantly, it means reinforcing media literacy programs, critically analyzing information sources, and promoting algorithm literacy in citizenry (specifically in youth). In the increasingly algorithmically driven politics and cognitively processed democracy, citizens must possess a sophisticated understanding of the internal logic of platforms, information cascades, and data governance systems to make informed democratic choices. Strengthening civic education programs could improve citizen resistance to misinformation and more resilient democratic engagement in the digital age.

Limitations

Primarily a theoretical and conceptual work, this study is not directly applicable for empirically testing purposes. While it draws from synthesizing literature across comparisons, it lacks empirical primary field data or quantitative large-scale data to test explanatory claims with sufficient accuracy. The analysis is limited to hybrid regimes and specifically South Asia to claim a wide degree of generality with consolidated democracies and fully authoritarian systems. Lack of micro-level behavioral data concerning the actual political actors in the Gen Z population makes causal testing difficult in practice. There is a need for empirical examination and operationalization of these conceptual components to ultimately test the DGDТ framework in varying contexts.

Future Research Agenda

Large-scale social media data and advanced computational social science methods should be utilized in future work to empirically test the Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGDТ). In particular, methods like network analysis and machine learning should be used to formalize constructs such as DDI and LVI and to identify how these phenomena spread through digital networks, and the amplifying role of algorithmic responses.

More research should be conducted on comparative cases outside of South Asia such as Africa or Latin America to determine the transregional nature and boundary conditions of DGDТ. In so doing, research should determine what components of the theory remain useful when transplanted to other contexts and in what ways the theory may need to be modified.

Additional work that utilizes AI assisted modeling should be applied to protest diffusion dynamics and sentiment analysis. These models may identify the particular nature and magnitude of the ways in which algorithmic responses shape protest dynamics. Lastly, simulation based research should be employed to analyze the effect of variations in IAC on the stability of governance under conditions of rapid digital protest.

CONCLUSION

In this study, a theoretical framework to explain the reconfiguration of democratic change in South Asian hybrid regimes via digital generational movements namely Digital Generational Disruption Theory (DGDТ) was formulated. The findings explain how digitally-based infrastructures act as structural political spaces that reallocate political agency and speed up the rate of collective action and undermine intermediary institutions. Within such structural political spaces, Gen Z movements are presented as ongoing network actors whose agency gains political power through algorithm-mediated visibility rather than institutional frameworks (Castells, 2012; Tufekci, 2017).

The findings suggest that democratic transformation is likely to experience a higher degree of legitimacy volatility, institutional stress and responsive government mechanisms in South Asia. A perpetual inability to accommodate fast-paced digital dissent will challenge institutional structures with lags and fluctuation political trust. Furthermore, digital platforms will hasten the process of generational political shifts as participation decentralized from the top to the ground and established frameworks of representation lost its power (Castells, 2012). Combinedly, all such processes mark a structural shift of the political systems.

DGDT presents a framework that combines institutional analysis, theory of generations and the digital governance literature in a single explanation of democratic change, adding to the studies of democracy by presenting digital infrastructures as determining factors of it.

From governance perspective, the necessity of the responsive structural reforms is needed to respond to network political pressures that will be needed to increase responsiveness, institutional capacity for digital governance and managing of legitimacy volatility on time.

Further research should endeavor to test and improve the application of DGDT in different contexts to gauge its external validity further and for development of models of democracy under platform governance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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