

Digital Activism and Crisis in Nepal: Examining Gen-Z Movements and the Decline of Tourism

¹Deepak Gautam, ²Sushila Sapkota, ³Keshab Baral*

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ABSTRACT

Youth activism has historically shaped social and political change worldwide, and Nepal is no exception. This review and case study analysis synthesizes historical literature (1950–2025), government reports, and real-time data to frame the September (8-10), 2025 “Gen-Z Protests” as a new form of digitally-driven activism and assess their comprehensive multisectoral impact, with particular attention to the tourism sector. The uprising was directly fueled by systemic corruption, nepotism, and elite privilege, with the immediate trigger being the government’s attempted suspension of major social media platforms perceived by youth as intolerable censorship. Underlying structural grievances, including weak governance and high youth unemployment, intensified public frustration. Protesters specifically targeted entrenched elites, commonly referred to as “Nepo Kids.” The movement produced substantial political outcomes, including the withdrawal of the social media ban (September 4) and the resignation of the Prime Minister. Simultaneously, the protests caused severe and immediate economic and human losses: initial government and economist estimate project approximately \$21 billion in total damages, 75 deaths, and over 2,316 injuries. The vital tourism sector experienced major disruptions, suffering losses estimated to exceed NPR 25 billion. This case study demonstrates the transformative potential of digitally driven youth activism in Nepal, highlighting its ability to generate tangible political pressure and demand public accountability. It underscores the urgent need for comprehensive governance reforms, enhanced transparency, and measures to address entrenched corruption and elite entitlement. The 2025 Gen-Z movement exemplifies

^{1,2,3}Tribhuvan University, Institute of Forestry, Pokhara Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

*Corresponding author: k.baral@iofpc.edu.np

how youth-led digital mobilization can challenge power structures and reshape the political and socio-economic trajectory of a nation. Establishing transparent online feedback systems and youth digital forums within ministries would channel social media activism into constructive dialogue, reducing the risk of uncontrolled digital mobilization and violent collective actions in the future.

Keywords: *Gen-Z protest, Hilton Nepal, political instability, transparency, youth activism*

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War, youth activism has played a pivotal role in shaping social, political, and cultural transformations across the world (Maksudyan, 2023; Shah & Khan, 2023). From the 1968 student uprisings in France (Gallagher, 2010) and anti-apartheid mobilizations in South Africa (Seidman, 2001), to more recent phenomena like the Arab Spring (Unver, 2017) and global climate strikes, young people have consistently emerged as catalysts for change. Globally, these efforts have highlighted the capacity of young generations to influence policy, redefine societal norms, and inspire broader participation in governance and civic life, establishing a historical continuum of activism that continues into the 21st century.

Youth activism has similarly defined Nepal's political transformations, from the overthrow of the Rana oligarchy in 1950 (Singh, 2004) to the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990 and the 2006 People's Movement (Hachhethu, 2025; Adhikari, 2024). However, the September 8–10, 2025 "Gen-Z Protests" stand out as a new kind of youth uprising, qualitatively different from earlier struggles. Unlike past movements that were organized largely through physical networks such as students' unions and political parties (Snellinger, 2007), the 2025 protests began in cyberspace, mobilized through digital platforms, and rapidly spilled into the streets with unprecedented speed and intensity (Koirala, 2025; Teekah, 2025).

The immediate trigger of this movement was the government's suspension of popular social media platforms on September 4, 2025 (Koirala, 2025; Rijal et al., 2025). Yet, to young Nepalis, this justification seemed less about regulation and more about censorship, a direct assault on their voice, identity, and freedom (Mafa & Chigwedere, 2025). This digital authoritarianism compounded decades of frustration rooted in systemic political corruption, weak governance, high youth unemployment, and the visible entitlement of political elites.

This article addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by providing the first integrated analysis of a digitally mobilized anti-corruption movement in Nepal and its immediate, quantifiable impact on critical economic sectors. This review argues that the 2025 Gen-Z movement, fueled by decades of elite corruption and catalyzed by digital censorship, represents a significant evolution in Nepali youth activism, demonstrating a transformative potential that, despite causing immediate economic devastation in the tourism sector, has laid the groundwork for long-term demands for institutional reform.

The remainder of the article proceeds by first detailing the rigorous methodology used for literature synthesis and case study data collection. It then reviews the historical context of global activism and specific corruption trends in Nepal. Finally, it provides a detailed case study analysis of the multisectoral and tourism-specific impacts of the 2025 protests.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs two complementary theories to interpret the 2025 Gen-Z Protests. Digital Mobilization Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) posits that modern activism relies heavily on individualized online networks rather than traditional, centralized organizations, thereby enabling swift, mass participation. In the Nepali context, leaderless coordination was efficiently facilitated by social media algorithms and hashtags, closely resembling the organizational structures seen during Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (Chan, 2014) and the 2020 Black Lives Matter campaigns (Tufekci, 2017). Augmenting this, Collective Action Theory (McAdam & Tarrow 2021) stresses that structural factors, such as digital access or political instability, create "political opportunity windows" essential for triggering mobilization. The young people in Nepal astutely exploited the temporary period of connectivity preceding the full implementation of the social media ban, using this critical window to accelerate and intensify their dissent. Therefore, the Gen-Z Protests are best understood as a sophisticated, digitally networked, and opportunity-driven collective action strategically challenging the nation's entrenched power structures.

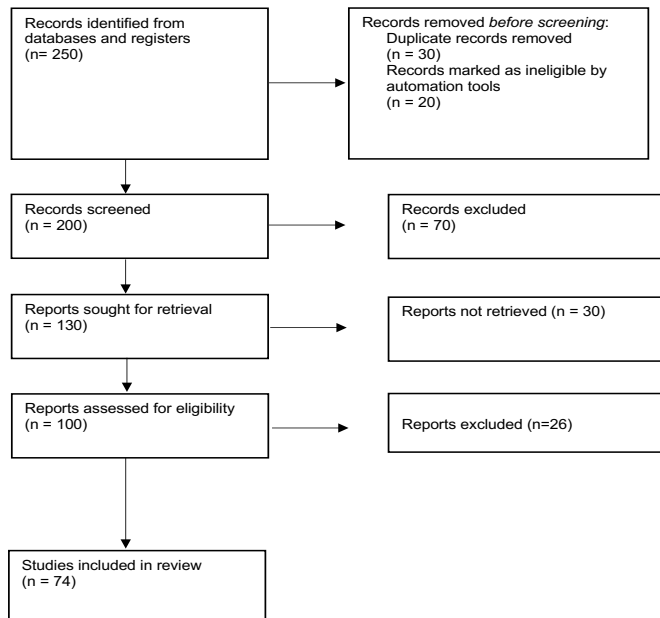
MATERIALS AND METHODS

The review employed a structured review methodology combined with a case study approach to systematically collect and analyze literature and data on youth activism, anti-corruption movements, and tourism. Data collection spanned the period 1950 to 2025 and utilized academic databases (Google Scholar) and grey literature such as reputable news outlets and

reports. The systematic search employed Boolean strings focusing on terms like (“Gen-Z movement or “Youth activism”, or digital mobilization”) and (Nepal or global) and (“anti-corruption”) and (Nepal and youth). Inclusion criteria focused on studies discussing youth participation in political, social, or digital activism, or anti-corruption initiatives, while excluding studies unrelated to youth engagement or lacking verifiable data. Analysis involved a dual approach: Narrative Synthesis was used for historical context (1950–2024), and Thematic Content Analysis was applied to the 2025 protest data, clustering impacts under themes like Political/Governance, Economic/Financial, and specifically, Tourism sector impacts, ensuring a comprehensive, descriptive understanding of movement effects over seven decades. In total, 250 articles and reports were initially identified, of which 74 met the inclusion criteria and were retained for the final review. The overall selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1). PRISMA stands for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses. It is a standardized framework used to improve transparency and completeness in reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The PRISMA flow chart visually represents the process of identifying, screening, and selecting studies included in a review.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flowchart of Study Selection and Inclusion Process



RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Global Historical Trajectory of Youth Activism

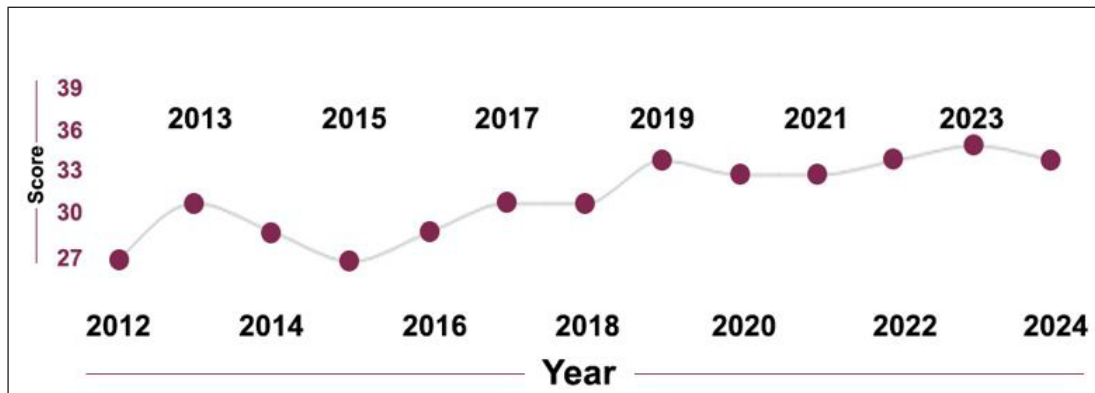
Across the globe, young people have consistently been at the forefront of social, political, and cultural transformation since the end of the Second World War. In the post-war era, American youth advocated for educational and employment benefits through the G.I. Bill (Kowalski, 2016) while Hungarian students led the 1956 uprising against Soviet control (Békés, 1997). The 1960s and 1970s saw landmark movements, including South Africa's Sharpeville protests (Coffey, 2022), France's May 1968 uprisings (Gallagher, 2010), U.S. anti-Vietnam War and civil rights demonstrations (Moore, 1999), Mexico's Tlatelolco protests (Carpenter, 2018; Young, 1985), the Kent State shootings (Broadhurst, 2010), the Soweto uprising (Ndlovu, 2017) and Iranian student involvement revolution (Vakili-Zad, 1990). During the 1980s, youth played a key role in the Philippines' People Power Revolution (Mendoza & Roberts, 2009) pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe (Blackington, 2024) and China's Tiananmen Square protests (1989) (Béja, 2010). South Asian youth led Nepal's Jana Andolan I (1990), Bangladesh's anti-Ershad movement (1991) (Hashmi, 2022) and Nepal's Jana Andolan II (2006). More recent activism includes Serbia's Otpor movement (Filin et al., 2022), the Arab Spring (Ansani & Daniele, 2012) Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement (Chan, 2014), global climate strikes (2018 onward), the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests (Shuman et al., 2022), Bangladesh's July 2024 uprising (Ahsan Ullah, 2025), Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement (2022) (Modin-Lundin, 2022). Pakistan-administered Kashmir protests (2024), Indonesia's anti-corruption demonstrations (2025) (Kadewandana, 2025) and Nepal's September 2025 Gen-Z protests. These events collectively demonstrate the enduring influence of youth activism, evolving from street protests to digital mobilization, and consistently challenging injustice, inequality, and authoritarianism worldwide.

Multisectoral Corruption in Nepal: The Structural Grievance

Nepal's low ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) over the last decade (Figure 2) underscores the deep-seated nature of public sector corruption, which serves as the fundamental structural grievance fueling youth unrest. In 2024, Nepal ranked 107th out of 180 countries with a score of 34/100, remaining well below the global average (Transparency International, 2024). The analysis of the CPI trend over the period 2012–2024 (Figure 2) reveals persistent stagnation, indicating that successive governments have failed to enact meaningful, sustained governance reform, thereby cementing public disillusionment.

Figure 2

Nepal's Corruption Perceptions Index 2012–2024 (Source: Transparency International, 2024)



A review of major corruption scandals demonstrates that corruption has evolved from generalized misuse of funds (e.g., Pajero and Prado Scandal) to sophisticated, high-value schemes involving the political elite (e.g., Lalita Niwas Land Grab Scam, Pokhara Airport Embezzlement) (Karki, 2025; Karki, 2023; Mulmi, 2023). The shift in protest focuses during the 2025 movement specifically targeting the visible privilege of “Nepo Kids” alongside systemic theft highlights the evolution of youth grievances from macro-level corruption toward the micro-level issue of elite entitlement and perceived injustice. This combination of endemic corruption and visible elite impunity created the volatile socio-political backdrop for the 2025 uprising.

September 2025 Gen-Z Anti-Corruption Movement

The September 2025 Gen-Z anti-corruption movement in Nepal was ignited by the government’s digital censorship via a social media ban. This act was not seen as regulation but as an attempt to silence dissent, triggering a rapid, digitally-led mobilization across the nation. The protests quickly escalated beyond Kathmandu to major cities like Pokhara, Birjung, Biratnagar, Chitwan, Hetauda etc . The core grievances driving the movement were the failure of governance, high youth unemployment, and the culture of nepotism and corruption (Mafa & Chigwedere, 2025). The government’s subsequent violent suppression led to fatalities and injuries, ultimately proving unsustainable. The immense pressure forced the immediate withdrawal of the social media ban and, critically, the resignation of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, demonstrating the political power of this digitally-mobilized generation. Digital mobilization theory and collection action theory explain how and why the movement

spread so fast and gained massive participation despite limited formal organization so that the movement was successful within few days.

Multisectoral and Economic Impact of the Gen Z Protests

The September 2025 protests inflicted immediate and severe economic and social consequences, with preliminary government and economist reports placing the total collateral damage at approximately Rs3 trillion (around \$21 billion), which amounts to nearly half of Nepal's GDP, stemming from widespread damage to public and private sector infrastructure. Socially, the upheaval was tragic, resulting in 72 deaths and over 2,100 injuries, alongside the sudden unemployment of nearly 10,000 citizens. The comprehensive multisectoral impact was significant: Politically, the protests forced the Prime Minister's resignation and the withdrawal of the social media ban, signaling a major victory for digital freedom; Economically, major businesses (e.g., Bhat-Bhateni Supermarket, Chaudhary Group) reported heavy losses, leading to low morale and short-term investor uncertainty; Digitally, the successful reversal of the ban cemented social media as critical infrastructure for political discourse; and Socially/Culturally, the movement enhanced youth civic engagement and utilized cultural elements to promote progressive values. It is important to note, however, that the financial figures cited (Rs 3 trillion) are preliminary estimates from industry bodies and government sources and should be treated as indicative, pending long-term government reconciliation and insurance assessments (Prasain & Prasain, 2025 September 14).

Detailed Impact on the Tourism Sector

As a key pillar contributing 8–9% of Nepal's GDP (Whitmore & Archer, 2025), Nepal's violent protests severely impact tourism as visitor numbers drop by 30% (Ahmed & Katari, 2025 September 16). The tourism sector absorbed the most immediate and significant economic shock, with systematic disruptions evident across every segment, leading to an estimated cumulative loss exceeding NPR 25 billion (New Business Age, 2025, September 13). Specifically, the hotel and lodging sector in hubs like Kathmandu and Pokhara suffered extensive property damage, looting, and closures, with the Hotel Association Nepal confirming major damage to nearly two dozen hotels. Air India and IndiGo cancelled Delhi to Kathmandu flight (AVSN, 2023 September, 9). Aviation was crippled by 500–700 domestic flight cancellations on major routes like Kathmandu–Pokhara and a 20–30% reduction in international arrivals. The crucial Trekking and Adventure sector saw dramatic declines, with Everest Base Camp and Annapurna Circuit reporting 40–60% booking cancellations, causing losses of NPR 500 million–1 billion

in rural villages alone. Furthermore, key Heritage Sites, including Pashupatinath Temple and the Durbar Squares, were temporarily closed, losing hundreds of millions in entrance fees, while major Tourist Hubs like Thamel and Pokhara's Lakeside reported collective losses of up to NPR 7 billion from closures of businesses and agencies. This profound vulnerability of Nepal's international revenue streams to internal political instability was symbolically underscored by the significant damage sustained by the Hilton Kathmandu, which signaled high risk to international tourists and investors

CONCLUSION

The September 2025 Gen-Z movement in Nepal is a pivotal case study confirming the enduring influence of global youth activism. This digitalized uprising was fundamentally a response to Nepal's systemic corruption, highlighted by its poor 34/100 CPI score and a history of high-profile financial scams. The immediate catalyst was the government's attempted digital censorship, which sparked nationwide mobilization driven by anger over elite privilege and lack of opportunity. While the protests yielded severe short-term consequences, including devastating losses exceeding NPR 25 billion to the vital tourism sector, the political outcomes were substantial: the movement successfully forced the Prime Minister's resignation and reversed the social media ban. This demonstrates a new paradigm for civic action in Nepal, showing the power of digitally-mobilized youth to generate tangible political pressure and demand public accountability. The Gen-Z movement underscores Nepal's urgent need for radical governance reforms and enhanced transparency. Future research should focus on longitudinal analysis to track whether these political shifts translate into measurable, long-term transparency improvements in key sectors like public procurement and tourism. Lastly, youth-led digital mobilization and collective action show how online platforms can turn mass protests into coordinated political action.

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