

HASHTAGS, CENSORSHIP, AND BELONGING: THE NEW FACE OF TIBETAN DIGITAL ACTIVISM

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Abstract

The emergence of social media has significantly transformed contemporary forms of political activism, particularly among diaspora and stateless communities. The study examines Tibetan experiences within the broader context of internet activism and collective identity. It examines how technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have increased awareness of Tibetan issues, reshaped global discourse, and enabled new forms of resistance that break down traditional communication barriers. The study examines hashtag campaigns like #FreeTibet and youth-led TikTok projects as online social movements. These internet forums encourage the preservation of language, religion, culture, and political memory while also serving as platforms for activity and opposition. At the same time, Tibetan activism faces substantial problems, including state monitoring, censorship, platform moderation, and the constraints of hashtag activism. The paper explains how social media has increased the exposure of Tibetan issues in international public discourse while also introducing new risks for campaigners. The study adds to our knowledge of how stateless groups use digital technologies to preserve political involvement, cultural belonging, and collective resistance in the twenty-first century by putting Tibetan experiences within larger discussions on digital activism and diaspora politics.

Keywords: *Tibetan Diaspora, Digital Activism, Social Media, Collective Identity, Censorship, Digital Homeland*

Introduction

The rapid growth of digital communication technology has altered political activism around the world. Various networking apps such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp are becoming crucial tools for mobilization. Earlier activism, which relied primarily on physical meetings and community gatherings, has been replaced by modern digital activism, which allows individuals and communities to interact quickly across geographic borders. Social media has thus emerged as a crucial tool for marginalized and stateless people attempting to raise awareness, garner support, and to protect their identities.

Tibetans in exile are one of the communities that have increasingly embraced digital activism. Since the events of 1959 and the following spread of Tibetan communities across India, Nepal, Europe, North America, and other regions, Tibetans have struggled to maintain cultural continuity while pushing for political rights.

The activism of Tibetan refugees has been shaped by displacement, censorship, and limited access to global media (Shakya, 2012; Morcom, 2018). After China occupied Tibet in 1959, Tibetans living in exile mostly used newsletters, community events, and local advocacy to share information (Barnett, 2009). These methods kept Tibetan movements going for many years, but at present, digital technology has changed the protests of Tibetans living worldwide. Moving from traditional

communication to global digital platforms has changed how the Tibetan movement is organized and sustained.

This paper argues that social media has altered Tibetan activism's context, form, and impact by providing new avenues for political speech, cultural preservation, and global connectivity within the Tibetan community (Anderson, 2006; Choedon, 2021). Digital platforms are now especially important for younger Tibetans to overcome information barriers, share political concerns with a global audience, and stay connected within the diaspora (Tethong & Heller, 2020; Shakya, 2012). Social media enables Tibetans to bypass traditional gatekeepers, express their perspectives, and create a virtual community that extends beyond national boundaries (Morcom, 2018; Anderson, 2006).

The role of social media in Tibetan action goes beyond communication. Political protest, cultural preservation, and community development have all found common ground on digital platforms. Tibetans globally interact online to participate in rituals, discuss political happenings, learn the Tibetan language, and engage in Tibetan activities. These actions help to build a virtual or digital homeland.

The paper examines the challenges caused by censorship and surveillance, as well as how social media platforms foster a sense of community in order to mobilize different political campaigns and promote young involvement. The paper goes on to say that despite geographical dispersion and

political restrictions, social media has developed into a virtual homeland where Tibetans living in exile debate identity, maintain their culture, and continue political opposition.

The research is based on academic literature, reports issued by Tibetan organizations, digital activism scholarship, media coverage, and publicly available online materials. The goal is not to quantify social media usage, but to better understand in what way digital platforms influence activism, identity development, and community building in the Tibetan diaspora.

The Impact of Social Media in Constructing a Digital Homeland

A homeland is often seen as a physical place where people share culture, history, language, and a sense of belonging. For displaced communities, staying connected to their homeland becomes more difficult as new generations grow up in other countries. Since 1959, Tibetans have settled in places like India, Nepal, Bhutan, the United States, Canada, and several European countries. Despite being spread out, Tibetans have kept their shared identity alive through religious groups, cultural organizations, education, and political activities.

The emergence of social media has given community formation a new dimension. Tibetans who reside in different parts of the world are connected by modern means. Tibetans engage, share experiences, and participate in political and cultural events via Facebook groups, WhatsApp communities, Instagram pages, YouTube channels, and TikTok accounts. These virtual environments function as a "digital homeland," offering a place where a shared identity is preserved and reinforced. The Tibetan diaspora lived in more than 40 countries, with large communities in India, Nepal, the United States, and Europe (Central Tibetan Administration, 25 September 2020).¹ Using Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities," shared stories, photos, and live-streamed rituals on digital platforms help Tibetans maintain a sense of national identity across borders (Anderson, 2006). The digital activities help build and keep what this paper calls a "virtual homeland." Social media in the digital age enhances this process by enabling people who are thousands of kilometers apart to take part in the same discussions, watch the same events, and interact with shared symbols. Even though they have never seen most of their fellow members, Tibetans who live abroad can maintain a sense of belonging through digital connection.

Tibetan culture is also preserved in large part through digital channels. Tibetan language instruction, cultural symbols, religious instruction

from monks, and historical documentaries are all available on YouTube channels. Tibetan art, music, fashion, and traditional festivals are displayed on Instagram profiles. Social media allows Tibetans to share an identity beyond physical borders. It gives them a digital space for political expression, cultural preservation, and staying connected globally.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media's role as a digital homeland became clear. Communities were forced to rely largely on digital communication due to travel and public gathering restrictions. Over 1,000 Tibetan adolescents attended workshops on advocacy, online safety, and history during the COVID-19 lockdown. The high level of youth involvement in these digital initiatives demonstrates that online engagement not only makes it simpler and more inventive for young people to get involved, but it also contributes to the development of a new generation of Tibetans who are politically engaged. These exercises showed that even when in-person communication was not feasible, digital platforms could still maintain community involvement.

Social media thus serves as a virtual homeland where cultural identity, collective memory, and political aspirations come together, in addition to being a communication medium. A major aspect of modern Tibetan life is the digital homeland, which offers a place for scattered communities to stay in touch and reinforce their feeling of identity.

Hashtag Activism and Political Mobilization

Tibetan digital activism is exemplified by hashtag campaigns. Hashtags increase user visibility and inspire group action by connecting individual posts to larger discussions. Hashtags have developed into effective instruments for political mobilization in recent years, assisting activists in planning campaigns, increasing awareness, and garnering international attention.

The hashtag #FreeTibet is one of the most popular internet representations of Tibetan protest. The hashtag, used on several social media platforms, serves as a focal point for groups, activists, and supporters who want to draw attention to concerns about religious freedom, human rights, and cultural preservation in Tibet. By linking thousands of separate messages, the hashtag creates a unified digital narrative that transcends national boundaries.

The significance of hashtag activism became particularly evident during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. For example, the widespread use of #FreeTibet during and after the 2008 Beijing Olympics led to several Western parliamentary debates about Tibet and calls for diplomatic

pressure on China (International Campaign for Tibet, 19 September 2008).² These digital campaigns put pressure on international organizations and the media by keeping Tibetan issues in the spotlight and shaping global stories, especially during major events like the Olympics. These hashtags demonstrate how digital tools can swiftly disseminate information and unite people all around the world.

A comparable instance surfaced during the Beijing Winter Olympics preparations in 2022. Activists began the #NoBeijing 2022 movement to raise awareness of human rights and political persecution. Social media increased protests in cities including Sydney, New York, and London, enabling photos and messages to quickly travel across global networks. The campaign showed how offline and online activism can support one another, with digital platforms increasing the visibility and reach of in-person demonstrations. These efforts demonstrate how social media may increase the influence and visibility of Tibetan activism while assisting Tibetan voices in reaching international headlines (Times Now, 10 August 2021).³

The case of Tashi Wangchuk, a Tibetan language rights advocate, is one of the most successful examples of hashtag-based human rights mobilization. After appearing in a New York Times documentary calling for Tibetan language education, he was arrested in 2016 and charged with “separatism.” The hashtag #ReleaseTashiWangchuk helped bring global attention to his case (Radio Free Asia, 2024).⁴

Despite these successes, hashtag activism has also attracted criticism. Online participation, according to academics like Malcolm Gladwell and Evgeny Morozov, may occasionally promote shallow engagement rather than substantive political action. Without requiring a significant commitment, the simplicity of liking, sharing, or reposting content can foster a sense of connection. This behavior, which is frequently referred to as “slacktivism,” begs the question of whether online campaigns result in long-lasting political change.

Raising awareness, as defined by proponents of digital advocacy, is an important kind of participation. Participating online frequently inspires people to take a more active role in advocacy initiatives. Hashtag campaigns can raise public awareness, build networks of solidarity, and keep attention on topics that might otherwise go unnoticed, even if they don't result in quick policy changes.

In the Tibetan context, hashtag activism has grown to be a crucial part of political mobilization. By bringing together activists from all over the world and elevating marginalized perspectives, digital

initiatives have increased the worldwide exposure of Tibetan issues and contributed to larger movements for human rights and cultural recognition.

Youth-Led Digital Activism

Young Tibetans are prominent in contemporary digital activism. Raised in a digital environment, they possess the skills and familiarity required for effective social media use. Their involvement has significantly transformed the methods and culture of Tibetan activism.

One of the most noticeable developments has been the growing popularity of TikTok among Tibetan youth, who create popular short videos that promote their culture, music, and day-to-day experiences. The videos attracted millions of views and inspired global interest in Tibetan attire and identity. (Xinhua, 2022; Heritage, 2019). These videos frequently blend entertainment and cultural education, introducing worldwide audiences to aspects of Tibetan tradition that may otherwise be unfamiliar. Such content demonstrates how digital platforms can transform cultural performance into a form of activism by increasing visibility and challenging stereotypes.

Youth-led activism also extends beyond cultural expression. Organizations such as Students for a Free Tibet have incorporated many digital initiatives as a part of their struggle. For example, #Momo Challenge encouraged participants to share photographs of Tibetan food while simultaneously learning about political issues affecting Tibet. By linking cultural practices with political awareness, these campaigns made activism more accessible and engaging for younger audiences.

Similarly, the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) and the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA) largely communicate political information via digital platforms. These organizations post information through Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube and stay connected with global audiences. They raise international awareness, coordinate global campaigns, and rally support for policy advocacy and protest actions (Choedon, 2021). Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama's presence on Facebook and Twitter, with over a million followers, helps in reaching out to netizens all over the world.

Digital activism has also allowed young Tibetans to explore new kinds of creative expression. Graphic artists digitally recreate images from Lhasa, portraits of the Dalai Lama, and cartoons emphasizing China's restrictions on the Tibetan language. These artworks are regularly shared on Instagram and frequently used as protest posters. Tibetan artist Tenzin Phuntsok's 2020 illustration

“Nomad Dreams,” depicting a child holding a prayer flag against a surveillance camera, went viral and appeared on banners during London protests (The Guardian, 13 June 2020).⁵

At the same time, youth-led activism faces significant challenges. Online platforms are characterized by rapidly changing trends and short attention spans. Maintaining long-term engagement can therefore be difficult. Furthermore, digital participation does not automatically translate into offline activism or sustained political involvement. Critics argue that social media may encourage symbolic forms of participation that lack lasting impact.

Despite these concerns, youth engagement remains a vital component of Tibetan digital activism. By embracing new technologies and creative forms of communication, younger generations are helping to ensure the continuity of Tibetan identity and political advocacy in the digital age.

Censorship, Surveillance, and Platform Governance

While social media opens up new avenues for activism, it also exposes activists to serious risks. Censorship, surveillance, and platform administration have become top priorities for Tibetan digital activists working in an increasingly complex online environment.

The Chinese government operates one of the world's largest surveillance programs to control the internet. They are using systems like the Great Firewall to block information and also monitor the discussions that take place on the internet. Because of this, Tibetans in Tibet frequently face significant problems whenever they participate in political debates online.

The removal of Tibetan and Uyghur language options from several digital sites demonstrates how technology decisions can impact minority communities (Central Tibetan Administration, 24 March 2022).⁶ Similarly, regulations governing online religious content have restricted digital spaces that previously facilitated the sharing of Tibetan Buddhist teachings (Freedom House 2024).⁷ These developments demonstrate that control over digital communication extends beyond direct censorship to include broader forms of platform governance.

The removal of Tibetan writer and blogger Woesser's post about Kalsang Yeshe's self-immolation protest exemplifies the dichotomy between social media platform moderation and the exposure of underrepresented voices. Woesser's post, which linked to video footage of Yeshe's execution, was removed by Facebook, sparking claims of censorship and concerns about the suppression of

Tibetan voices on international platforms (Bell, 2014).

Over 20,000 people responded by signing a petition on January 27, 2015, calling for Tibetan perspectives to be expressed uncensored (International Campaign for Tibet 28 January 2015).⁸ Although the content was eventually restored following public pressure, the incident raised important questions regarding transparency and accountability in content moderation. Online WeChat groups promoting Tibetan Buddhist culture were ordered to shut down after a new regulation was adopted on 20 Dec 2021 (Tibet Watch, 2 February 2022).⁹

Surveillance is another important concern. Some major threats to activists include monitoring, collection, and hacking. Fear of identification may discourage participation and limit people's online political voice.

Cybersecurity challenges digital activism also. These attacks aim not merely to collect information but also to challenge the organisation's activities. As a result, digital security has become a more significant feature of modern activism.

Conclusion

The growth of Tibetan activism in the modern technological age demonstrates the power of social media to establish community, preserve culture, and strengthen political voices. Tibetans used digital platforms in exile to cross geographical borders and to broaden the global support for their cause of Tibet. Despite various hurdles, Tibetan activists, particularly young people, have used online resources to sustain their resistance and cultural expression. As digital activism evolves, the Tibetan experience provides vital insights into how stateless and marginalised communities can maintain collective identity, brotherhood, and campaign for political change in a globalised world.

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