

Knowledge Map of Digital Activism and Policy Change: A Bibliometric Analysis and Future Directions

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Abstract :

This study examines the intellectual structure and evolution of research on digital activism and policy change through a bibliometric analysis of 127 Scopus-indexed articles published between 2015 and 2025. Using R-Biblioshiny, the analysis integrates indicators of publication trends, citation patterns, geographical and institutional contributions, and thematic evolution to move beyond descriptive mapping toward deeper interpretive insights. The findings reveal a rapid growth in scholarly output, particularly after 2020, reflecting the increasing centrality of social media in shaping political discourse and policy processes in the digital era. The United States and the United Kingdom emerge as dominant contributors, while countries such as Indonesia, India, and Brazil highlight the growing involvement of the Global South, although regional disparities remain evident. Highly cited sources underscore the multidisciplinary nature of the field, linking communication, public policy, and social movement studies. Thematic mapping identifies social media and digital activism as foundational themes, while human-centered participation and social movements function as key drivers of current research. Thematic evolution further demonstrates a transition from technology-oriented perspectives toward more socially embedded and policy-relevant approaches, particularly those emphasizing public engagement and collective action. This study synthesizes how digital activism has increasingly been conceptualized as a dynamic mechanism influencing policy processes. It also identifies critical gaps, including the limited focus on direct policy outcomes and the lack of longitudinal and comparative analyses. These insights support the development of more integrated, context-sensitive, and evidence-based approaches to understanding digital activism and its policy implications.

Keywords: Digital Activism; Social Media; Policy Change; Public Policy; Bibliometric Analysis; Science Mapping

Abstrak :

Penelitian ini mengkaji struktur intelektual dan evolusi penelitian mengenai aktivisme digital dan perubahan kebijakan melalui analisis bibliometrik terhadap 127 artikel yang terindeks Scopus dan diterbitkan pada periode 2015–2025. Dengan menggunakan R-Biblioshiny, analisis ini mengintegrasikan indikator tren publikasi, pola sitasi, kontribusi geografis dan institusional, serta evolusi tematik untuk melampaui pemetaan deskriptif menuju wawasan interpretatif yang lebih mendalam. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan pertumbuhan pesat dalam jumlah publikasi, terutama setelah tahun 2020, yang mencerminkan semakin sentralnya media sosial dalam membentuk wacana politik dan proses kebijakan di era digital. Amerika Serikat dan Inggris muncul sebagai kontributor dominan, sementara negara-negara seperti Indonesia, India, dan Brasil menunjukkan semakin meningkatnya keterlibatan negara-negara Global Selatan, meskipun kesenjangan regional masih terlihat. Sumber yang memiliki sitasi tinggi menegaskan sifat multidisipliner bidang ini dengan menghubungkan studi komunikasi, kebijakan publik, dan gerakan sosial. Pemetaan tematik mengidentifikasi media sosial dan aktivisme digital sebagai tema dasar, sementara partisipasi yang berpusat pada manusia dan gerakan sosial berfungsi sebagai penggerak utama penelitian saat ini. Evolusi tematik selanjutnya menunjukkan adanya pergeseran dari perspektif yang berorientasi pada teknologi menuju pendekatan yang lebih berakar pada konteks sosial dan relevan dengan kebijakan, khususnya yang menekankan keterlibatan publik dan tindakan kolektif. Penelitian ini mensintesis temuan bahwa aktivisme digital semakin dikonseptualisasikan sebagai mekanisme dinamis yang memengaruhi proses kebijakan. Penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi kesenjangan penting, termasuk masih terbatasnya perhatian terhadap dampak kebijakan secara langsung serta kurangnya analisis longitudinal dan komparatif. Wawasan ini mendukung pengembangan pendekatan yang lebih terintegrasi, kontekstual, dan berbasis bukti dalam memahami aktivisme digital dan implikasinya terhadap kebijakan.

Kata Kunci: Aktivisme Digital; Media Sosial; Perubahan Kebijakan; Kebijakan Publik; Analisis Bibliometrik; Pemetaan Sains.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of civic engagement and political participation. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok enable new forms of activism characterized by speed, scalability, and networked connectivity (Popescu, 2025). This phenomenon, commonly referred to as social media activism or digital activism, has become a central area of scholarly inquiry across multiple disciplines.

Studies highlight how digital technologies reshape social structures, amplify voices, and challenge existing inequalities in online environments. In particular, social media has facilitated large-scale movements such as Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and global climate activism, demonstrating its capacity to mobilize individuals and shape public discourse (Chandler, 2017; Wahyuningroem et al., 2024). These developments have contributed to a significant increase in academic attention, especially since the mid-2010s.

Despite this growing body of literature, the field remains highly fragmented. Existing research tends to focus on specific dimensions of digital activism, including online mobilization, hashtag campaigns, and digital communications strategies. However, these studies often do not systematically address their relationship with policy change outcomes (Chari & Munoriyarwa, 2025; Willis, 2025). Furthermore, the literature presents an ongoing debate regarding the effectiveness of social media activism. While some scholars argue that digital activism can influence policy agendas and decision-making processes, others view it as a form of low-effort engagement with limited real-world impact (Rochford, 2021).

Rather than assuming that digital activism automatically produces policy change, this study approaches digital activism as a contingent and context-dependent process shaped by interactions between technology, public participation, and institutional structures.

The intersection between digital activism and policy processes is further complicated by structural inequalities embedded in digital environments. Issues such as unequal access, algorithmic bias, and online marginalization can shape both participation and influence in digital activism (Ferreira & Silva, 2025; Pyle et al., 2024). These dynamics suggest that the impact of social media activism on policy change cannot be understood without considering broader socio-technical contexts.

Although several review and bibliometric studies have examined trends in digital activism and related fields, there is still a lack of comprehensive analysis that explicitly integrates social media activism with policy change as a unified research domain (Sharma et al., 2022). In addition,

limited attention has been given to the longitudinal evolution of this field, particularly in understanding how research has shifted from a focus on awareness and mobilization toward governance and policy influence.

Unlike previous bibliometric studies that often examine digital activism as an isolated phenomenon, this study integrates digital activism and policy change within a unified analytical framework. By combining performance analysis, thematic mapping, and thematic evolution analysis, the study not only maps the development of the literature but also interprets how digitally mediated activism has evolved within broader policy and governance contexts. Within this framework, digital activism is understood not merely as a communication phenomenon, but as a dynamic socio-political mechanism shaping public participation, collective action, and policy processes in the digital era. This approach further contributes to the growing discussion on the role of digitally mediated participation in contemporary governance and policy transformation. To address the existing research gaps, this study employs a bibliometric approach to analyze the development of research on social media activism and policy change over the 2015–2025 period. The analysis aims to identify publication trends, map the intellectual and thematic structure of the field, and trace the evolution of research themes over time.

This study makes three main contributions. First, it provides a structured overview of a rapidly expanding yet fragmented research area. Second, it bridges the conceptual divide between digital activism and policy studies by integrating both perspectives within a single analytical framework. Third, it offers insights into emerging research directions that can inform future studies on the role of social media in shaping policy processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media activism

Social media activism, also referred to as digital activism or online activism, has become a defining feature of contemporary civic engagement. It refers to the use of digital platforms to disseminate information, raise awareness, and organize collective action around social and political issues (Popescu, 2025). In contrast to traditional forms of activism that rely on formal organizational structures, social media activism operates through decentralized, flexible, and network-based forms of participation.

Within the academic literature, this phenomenon is often explained through the concept of connective action, where individual participation is driven by personalized expression enabled by digital technologies rather than strong collective identities (Cao et al., 2022). In this setting, social media platforms create networked publics, allowing individuals to interact, share information, and collectively shape public discourse. A prominent manifestation of this dynamic is hashtag activism, which facilitates the aggregation of individual voices and accelerates the diffusion of issues across global audiences (Willis, 2025).

A growing body of research highlights the capacity of social media activism to enhance issue visibility and mobilize large-scale participation. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and global climate activism illustrate how digital platforms can foster collective awareness, coordinate action, and influence public discourse. At the same time, social media expands opportunities for participation, particularly for marginalized groups that have historically faced barriers to engaging in conventional political arenas (Gause, 2022; Rochford, 2021).

The effectiveness of social media activism, however, remains contested. Some studies emphasize its potential to drive social and political change, whereas others question its tangible impact and associate it with slacktivism, characterized by symbolic engagement with limited real-world consequences (Idowu, 2022; Leonel et al., 2024). This divergence suggests that digital participation does not always translate into sustained collective action or structural transformation.

Equally important, the dynamics of social media activism are shaped by broader digital ecosystem conditions. Platform algorithms, misinformation, and unequal access to technology play a critical role in determining the visibility and reach of activist messages. These factors can reinforce existing biases while simultaneously constraining the effectiveness of digital movements (Rohid et al., 2025; Woldearegay, 2024). Taken together, although social media activism has evolved into a

dynamic field of study, its contribution to more substantive forms of change remains insufficiently understood, particularly in relation to public policy processes.

Digital influence and policy change

Digital influence on policy change has become an increasingly significant area of inquiry in public policy and political communication, particularly with the expansion of social media technologies. Traditional frameworks such as agenda-setting, the advocacy coalition framework, and the policy cycle emphasize institutional actors and political dynamics in shaping policy outcomes. The rise of social media introduces new dimensions by expanding the range of actors, participation spaces, and interaction mechanisms within the policy process (Cao & Zhang, 2025; Tang, 2023).

In this context, social media enables the rapid formation of public pressure through widespread and interactive information dissemination. Digital influence can therefore be understood as the capacity of individuals and collective actors to shape public opinion, increase issue visibility, and influence policy agendas (Li & Zhang, 2024; Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2018; Yeşilyurt et al., 2021). This process is often driven by mechanisms of virality, where certain issues gain widespread attention within a short period and prompt responses from policymakers.

Research increasingly suggests that social media plays a critical role in the early stages of the policy process, particularly in agenda-setting (Sunday et al., 2025). Issues that gain traction in digital spaces are more likely to enter public and political agendas. Social media also serves as a platform for mobilizing support, strengthening legitimacy, and exerting pressure on governmental institutions. Under certain conditions, digital campaigns have contributed to policy change, especially when accompanied by broad public engagement and extensive media coverage (Luk, 2024; Yeşilyurt et al., 2021).

The relationship between digital activism and policy change is, however, far from linear. The extent of social media influence depends on political context, institutional capacity, and the ability of actors to translate digital engagement into sustained collective action (Chami, 2025). Moreover, not all issues that achieve virality result in policy change, as policymaking involves complex negotiations among competing interests (von Bülow, 2023).

Additional challenges emerge from the digital ecosystem itself, including misinformation, polarization, and algorithmic manipulation, all of which can shape public perception and complicate the link between public opinion and policy decisions (Zhang et al., 2025). These conditions highlight the multidimensional nature of digital influence, involving interactions between technological systems, societal dynamics, and political institutions. Overall, while social media holds considerable potential to influence policy processes, the causal relationship between digital activism and policy change remains insufficiently understood. This limitation underscores the need for more systematic analyses to examine how digital influence evolves within long-term policy dynamics.

Taken together, the relationship between digital activism and policy change can be understood as a dynamic interaction between digitally mediated participation, public discourse formation, and institutional response. Social media platforms not only facilitate mobilization and collective action, but also shape agenda-setting processes by amplifying public visibility and political pressure. In this context, digital activism functions as a socio-political mechanism capable of influencing policy processes through the interaction of technological infrastructures, civic engagement, and governance systems. However, the extent and sustainability of such influence remain contingent upon broader socio-political and institutional conditions, highlighting the need for more integrative analyses within this research domain.

Bibliometric studies in digital activism

In response to the rapid expansion of research on digital activism, bibliometric approaches have increasingly been employed to map the intellectual structure and developmental dynamics of the field (Ardha Putri, 2024; Asmiyono, E., & Rahmawati, 2025). Existing studies consistently report a substantial rise in publication output since the mid-2010s, reflecting growing scholarly interest in the role of social media in shaping social and political participation. Dominant themes identified

in the literature include political communication, social movements, and various forms of online engagement (Cao & Zhang, 2025; McDonald et al., 2017).

Bibliometric analyses have also explored a wide range of related domains, including digital political activism, social movements in the digital age, the intersection of social media and public communication, and issue-specific activism such as climate change and gender equality (Fernández-Zubieta et al., 2023; Makpor, 2025). These findings highlight the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the field, drawing contributions from communication studies, political science, sociology, and media studies.

More recent studies point to the emergence of increasingly complex themes, including misinformation, algorithmic influence, and platform governance (du Plessis, 2025). This shift reflects a broader transition in the literature, moving beyond the use of social media as a tool for mobilization toward a more critical examination of the structural and technological forces shaping digital activism.

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain evident in the existing bibliometric research. A considerable proportion of studies continues to treat digital activism as an isolated phenomenon, without explicitly examining its relationship with policy change outcomes. As a result, the connection between social media activism and public policy processes remains insufficiently conceptualized and empirically explored.

Equally important, limited attention has been given to the temporal dimension of the field. Many studies do not adequately capture how research themes have evolved over time, particularly the shift from early concerns with mobilization and awareness toward more complex issues related to governance and policy influence. This gap points to the need for a more integrative and longitudinal bibliometric analysis that can better account for the evolving nature of the field.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that digital activism has evolved into a multidisciplinary and rapidly expanding field of research. However, important gaps remain regarding the integration of digital activism and policy change within a unified analytical perspective, particularly in understanding the longitudinal evolution and thematic structure of the field. These limitations provide the basis for the present bibliometric investigation.

METHODS

Data source and collection

This study adopts a bibliometric approach to examine the development of research on social media activism and policy change over the past decade. The data were retrieved from the Scopus database, selected for its extensive coverage of high-quality scholarly publications and its provision of standardized and comprehensive bibliographic metadata.

A systematic search strategy was developed by combining keywords representing the two core concepts of the study, namely social media activism and policy change. The search query employed Boolean operators to integrate terms such as “social media activism”, “digital activism”, and “hashtag activism” with “policy change”, “public policy”, and “policy influence”. This approach ensured that the retrieved publications were closely aligned with the research objectives.

The search was limited to English-language journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, capturing a decade of scholarly development. The retrieved records were exported in RIS format to ensure compatibility with bibliometric analysis tools. The dataset includes complete bibliographic information, such as authors, titles, abstracts, keywords, affiliations, and citation data, forming the basis for subsequent analysis.

Screening and eligibility assessment

Following the PRISMA framework, the screening and eligibility assessment process was conducted in several stages to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. The initial search in the Scopus database identified 4,052 records. Prior to the screening stage, 577 records were removed based on predefined criteria, specifically publications outside the 2015-2025 time span and documents published in languages other than English.

After this initial filtering, the remaining records were screened based on titles, abstracts, and keywords to assess their relevance to social media activism and policy change. During this

stage, 3,925 records were excluded because they did not substantively address the intersection between digital activism and policy-related processes. As a result, 127 records were retained for further analysis.

All 127 reports were then sought for full-text retrieval through open-access availability, and no records were excluded due to retrieval issues. Consequently, 127 articles were assessed for eligibility through full-text review. At this stage, no additional studies were excluded, as all retrieved articles met the inclusion criteria.

Finally, a total of 127 studies were included in the final bibliometric analysis (Figure 1).

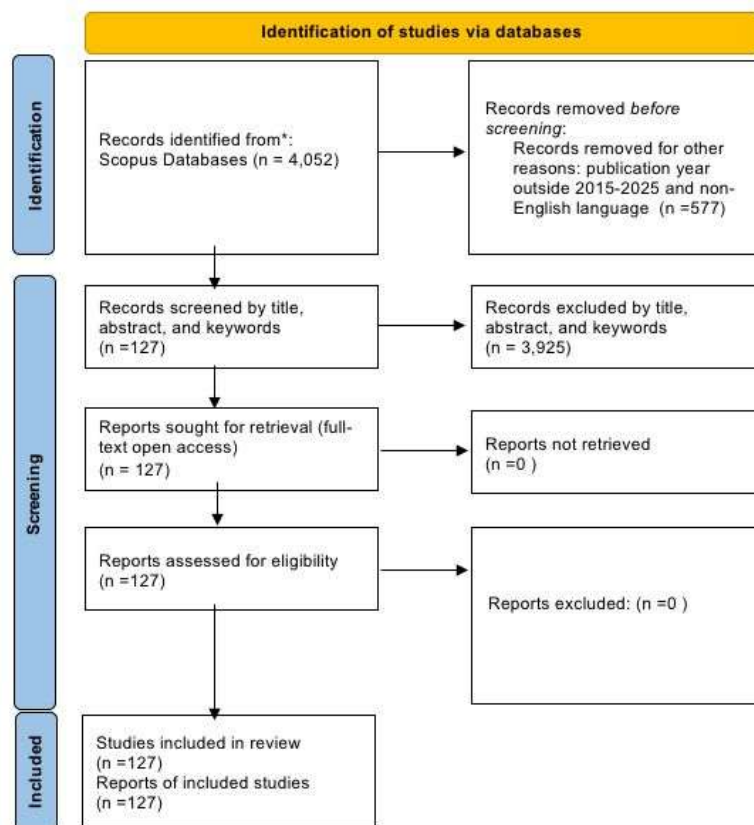


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process in social media activism and policy change research

Data analysis

The analysis consists of two main components, namely performance analysis and science mapping. Performance analysis was employed to evaluate the productivity and impact of scholarly publications in the field of social media activism and policy change (Tverdostup et al., 2022). This includes the examination of annual publication trends, the distribution of contributions across countries and institutions, the identification of the most productive authors, and the analysis of leading journals and highly cited documents. This approach provides a general overview of the growth and dissemination of research within the field.

In addition, science mapping techniques were applied to explore the intellectual structure and conceptual relationships within the literature (Ardha Putri, 2024). Co-word analysis was conducted to identify relationships among keywords and to reveal the dominant research themes. Furthermore, thematic mapping was used to classify themes based on their centrality and density into motor themes, basic themes, niche themes, and emerging or declining themes. This analysis enables the identification of the relative importance and development of each thematic area.

To capture the dynamic evolution of research topics, a thematic evolution analysis was performed by dividing the study period into several time intervals. This analysis aims to examine

how research focus has shifted over time, particularly from issues of digital mobilization toward policy influence and governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Performance analysis

Annual publication trends

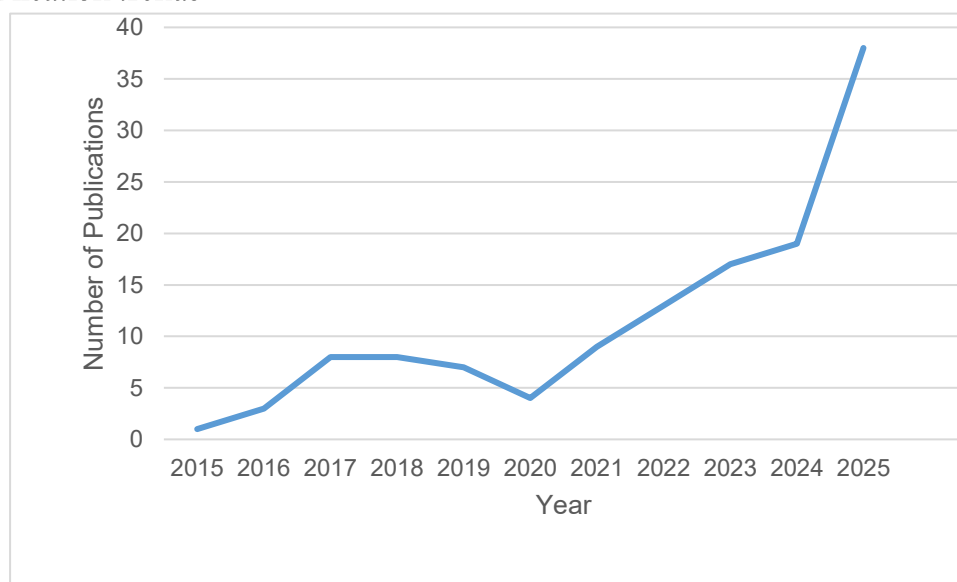


Figure 2. *Annual publication trends in digital activism and policy change research*

The temporal distribution of publications on digital activism and policy change. Figure 2 demonstrates a clear evolution from a nascent research niche into a rapidly expanding field. In the early stage (2015–2017), scholarly output remained limited, beginning with only 1 article in 2015 and increasing modestly to 3 in 2016 and 8 in 2017. This phase reflects the initial emergence of academic interest, likely influenced by the growing prominence of digital platforms in shaping political participation and advocacy.

From 2018 to 2020, the number of publications entered a relatively stable phase, with 8 articles in 2018, 7 in 2019, and a decline to 4 in 2020. This period can be interpreted as a consolidation stage, where foundational theories and empirical approaches were being refined. The temporary decrease in 2020 may also be associated with broader disruptions to research activities during that time, although the overall trajectory of the field remained intact.

A turning point becomes evident in 2021, where publication output increased to 9 articles, marking the beginning of a sustained upward trend. This growth continued steadily, reaching 13 articles in 2022 and 17 in 2023. This period corresponds to an expansion phase, driven by intensified global attention to digital activism, including its role in influencing governance, public discourse, and policy outcomes.

The most striking feature is the sharp publications in recent years, with 19 publications in 2024 and a dramatic increase to 38 in 2025. This surge indicates that the field has entered a phase of rapid development and heightened scholarly engagement. It reflects both the proliferation of digital activism practices and the increasing recognition of their significance in shaping policy change across diverse contexts.

Country contributions

The distribution of publications by country reveals a clear concentration of research output among a limited number of countries, as shown in Table 1. The United States dominates the field with 56 publications (38.1%), significantly surpassing all other countries in contributing to

research on digital activism and policy change (Shaheen, 2022; Stokes & Atkins-Sayre, 2018; Woldearegay, 2024). This dominance reflects its central role in shaping the intellectual development of the field, supported by strong research capacity, a well-established academic ecosystem, and close alignment with the evolution of global digital platforms and technologies.

The United Kingdom ranks second with 21 publications (14.2%), followed by Australia (14 publications; 9.5%) and Spain (11 publications; 7.4%). This pattern highlights the continued prominence of Global North countries as key drivers of research in digital communication and public policy. Such concentration points to the uneven distribution of academic resources and research infrastructure across regions.

At the same time, contributions from countries such as Canada, China, and Indonesia each account for 8 publications (5.4%), while Brazil, India, and South Africa each contribute 7 publications (4.7%). Although comparatively smaller, the presence of these countries indicates an expanding geographical scope of research, particularly involving Global South contexts (Ardha Putri, 2024; Kakungulu-Mayambala & Rukundo, 2019). This reflects the growing relevance of digital activism across diverse socio-political environments, including developing countries with distinct policy dynamics.

Table 1. Top 10 Countries by Number of Publications.

Rank	Country	Documents	Percentage(%)
1	USA	56	38.1%
2	UK	21	14.2%
3	Australia	14	9.5%
4	Spain	11	7.4%
5	Canada	8	5.4%
6	China	8	5.4%
7	Indonesia	8	5.4%
8	Brazil	7	4.7%
9	India	7	4.7%
10	SouthAfrica	7	4.7%

This distribution underscores a persistent imbalance in global knowledge production, with dominance concentrated in developed countries. However, the increasing participation of developing nations suggests a gradual shift toward a more inclusive research landscape. This trend aligns with the evolving nature of the field, which is becoming more context-sensitive and interdisciplinary, highlighting the importance of cross-country perspectives in understanding the relationship between digital activism and policy change.

Author and institutions

The contributions of authors and institutions in research on digital activism and policy change reveal a relatively distributed pattern, with several academic actors emerging as key contributors.

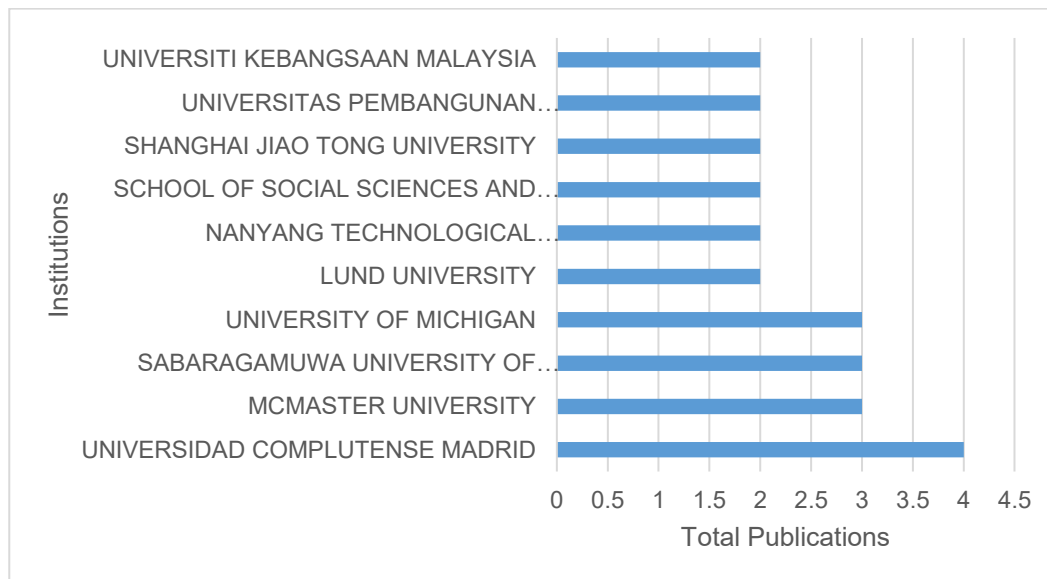


Figure 3. Most relevant affiliations in digital activism and policy change research

At the institutional level, Universidad Complutense Madrid ranks first with 4 publications, reflecting its active engagement in advancing research on digital activism, particularly within the fields of communication and media studies in (Fernández-Zubieta et al., 2023; Werner, 2023; Whyte et al., 2024). Other institutions, including McMaster University, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, and the University of Michigan, each contributed 3 publications. This pattern highlights cross-regional participation spanning North America, Europe, and Asia. The inclusion of institutions from developing regions, such as Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, indicates that knowledge production in this field is not exclusively concentrated in developed countries but is increasingly expanding within Global South contexts (Nanayakkara et al., 2024).

As further shown in Figure 3, additional institutions such as Lund University, Nanyang Technological University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta each contributed 2 publications. This distribution suggests the absence of a single dominant institution, instead reflecting a dispersed pattern of scholarly contributions. Such a pattern indicates that the field remains in a developmental stage, characterized by broad participation from diverse academic institutions.

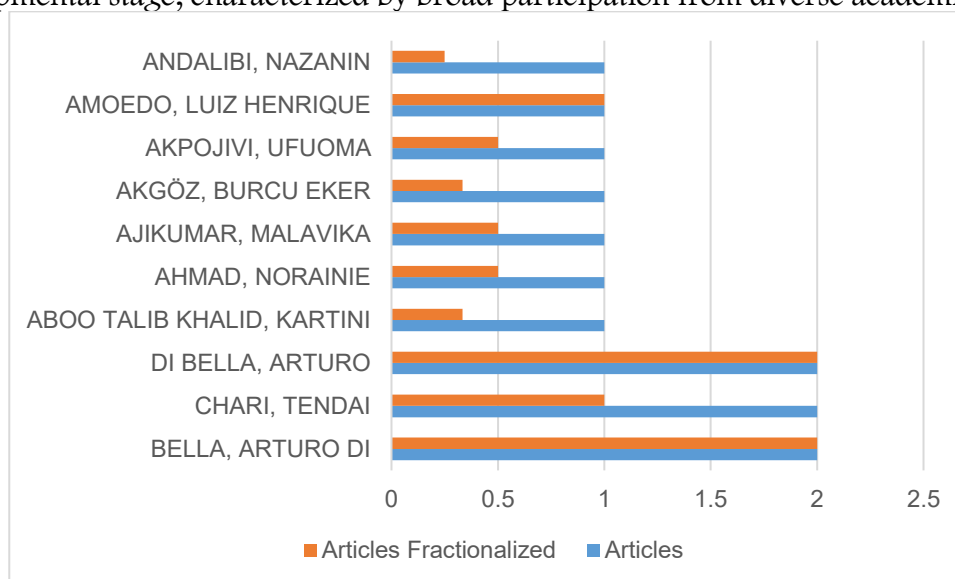


Figure 4. Most relevant authors

From the authorship perspective, demonstrates that no single author dominates the field. Authors such as Arturo Di Bella and Tendai Chari each produced 2 publications, while others contributed at a more modest level. The distinction between total articles and fractionalized contributions further indicates collaborative authorship patterns, which are typical in multidisciplinary research domains.

Journals and citations

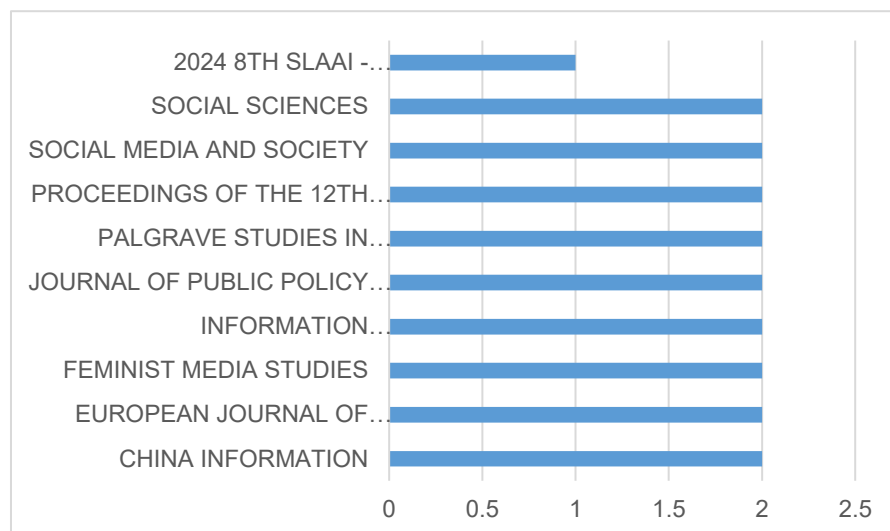


Figure 5. *Articles by journal*

The distribution of publications by journal sources reveals that research on digital activism and policy change is dispersed across a wide range of outlets, with no single journal demonstrating strong dominance. Several journals, including China Information, European Journal of Women's Studies, Feminist Media Studies, Information, Communication and Society, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology, Social Media and Society, and Social Sciences, each contributed 2 publications. In addition, conference proceedings such as ECSM 2025 and SLAAI-ICAI 2024 also appear, albeit with a smaller number of contributions (Nanayakkara et al., 2024; Popescu, 2025)

This pattern highlights the multidisciplinary nature of the field, as research is distributed across journals in communication, gender studies, public policy, and information technology. As shown in Figure 5, the absence of a highly dominant source suggests that the field is still evolving and embedded within multiple academic communities rather than consolidated within a single disciplinary domain.

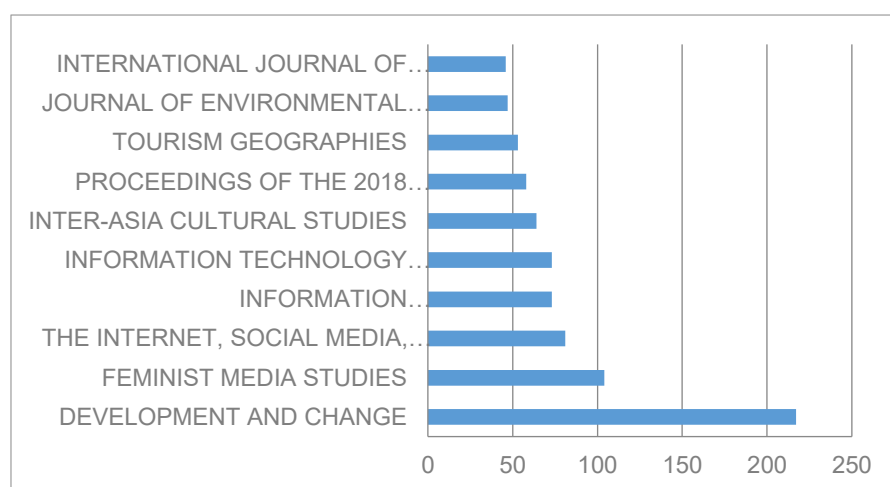


Figure 6. *Most total citations*

In contrast, citation analysis provides insight into the scientific influence of the sources, as presented in Figure 6. Development and Change ranks highest with 217 total citations, followed by Feminist Media Studies (104 citations) and The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China (81 citations). Other influential sources include Information, Communication and Society and Information Technology for Development, each with 73 citations, indicating their significant role in shaping scholarly discourse in this area.

A notable distinction emerges between publication volume and citation impact. Some sources with relatively few articles demonstrate high citation counts, suggesting that research influence is driven more by relevance and scholarly impact than by publication frequency alone. Furthermore, the prominence of journals such as Development and Change indicates that digital activism is increasingly being examined within broader discussions of development and social transformation (Pailey, 2020).

Science mapping analysis

Keyword co-occurrence



Figure 7. Keyword co-occurrence network map in digital activism and policy change research

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to identify the conceptual structure and thematic relationships within research on digital activism and policy change. As illustrated in Figure 7, the keyword network is organized into three main clusters, each representing distinct yet interconnected research themes.

The largest cluster (red) represents the core of the field and is dominated by keywords such as social media and digital activism. These concepts function as central nodes that connect multiple research themes. The presence of keywords such as public policy, social networking (online), and social movement indicates that this cluster primarily focuses on the relationship between digital engagement, social mobilization, and policy (Deseriis, 2020; Makpor, 2025; Shahin, 2019). This suggests that social media acts not only as a communication tool but also as a strategic space influencing policy dynamics.

A second prominent cluster (blue) reflects a more contextual and empirically oriented perspective. Keywords such as case-studies, social movements, and smart city indicate a focus on the application of digital activism in specific contexts, particularly in urban governance and regional planning (Gudalov et al., 2025; Schiavi et al., 2025). This cluster expands the understanding of how digital activism operates in practice and how it interacts with policy at local and regional levels.

Finally, the green cluster is associated with public health and the use of digital technologies in the context of global crises. Keywords such as human, internet, public health, and COVID-19 suggest that digital activism also plays a role in health-related issues, particularly in information dissemination and public mobilization during the pandemic (Cao et al., 2022; Seow et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2025). Although thematically distinct, this cluster remains connected to the broader network through the central role of digital technologies.

The keyword network reveals an integrated structure with social media positioned at the core, connecting multiple research themes. At the same time, the presence of distinct clusters reflects thematic diversification, highlighting the multidisciplinary nature of the field. This pattern indicates that research on digital activism and policy change continues to expand across multiple domains, including digital communication, public policy, and global health.

Thematic map

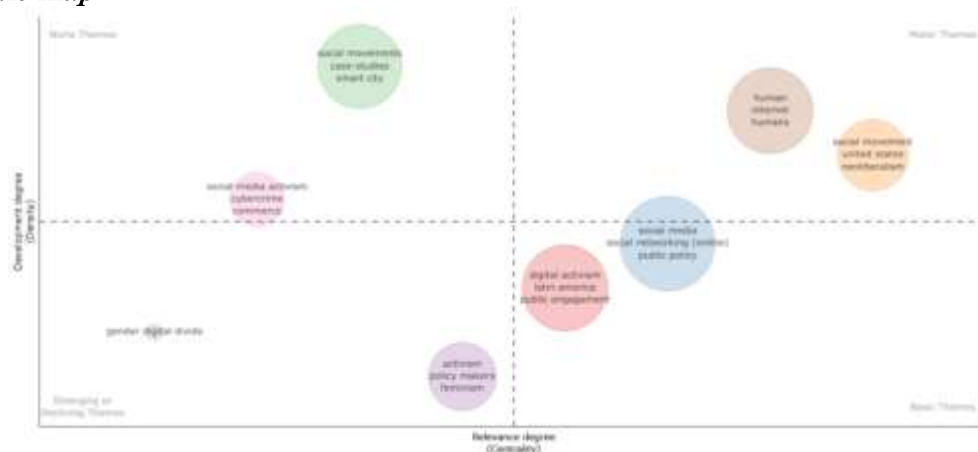


Figure 8. *Thematic map of digital activism and policy change research*

Figure 8 presents an overview of the strategic positioning of key research themes in digital activism and policy change based on their centrality (relevance) and density (development). The thematic map categorizes these themes into four quadrants, reflecting their roles and levels of maturity within the knowledge structure.

In the Basic Themes quadrant, which represents topics with high relevance but moderate development, the dominant cluster includes social media, public policy, and social networking (online). These themes form the foundational core of the field, emphasizing that social media and its interaction with public policy remain central to the discourse on digital activism (Popescu, 2025). The cluster of digital activism also appears in this quadrant, suggesting that while it is highly central, it continues to evolve in terms of conceptual depth and empirical exploration.

In the Motor Themes quadrant, which includes themes with both high centrality and strong development, clusters such as human, internet, and social movement emerge. These themes indicate a growing research focus on human-centered perspectives, digital participation, and the dynamics of social movements within digital environments. As such, they function as key drivers of the field's advancement, particularly in understanding how individuals and groups engage within increasingly complex digital ecosystems (Chami, 2025).

The Niche Themes quadrant includes clusters such as social movements, case-studies, and smart city. Although these themes are well developed, they are less central to the overall field. This suggests that they represent specialized areas of inquiry, often focused on specific contexts or methodological approaches, such as case-based analysis or urban governance applications.

Finally, the Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant features topics such as activism, policy makers, feminism, and gender digital divide. Their position indicates that these themes are either in early stages of development or experiencing a decline in attention. However, they retain significant potential for future research, particularly in relation to social issues such as gender equality, political participation, and digital inclusion (Makpor, 2025; Ndlovu & Mandiyanike, 2025).

Overall, the thematic map demonstrates that the field is anchored in the core relationship between social media and public policy, while simultaneously expanding toward human-centered perspectives, social movement dynamics, and context-specific applications. This pattern highlights the multidisciplinary nature of the field, integrating insights from digital communication, public policy, social studies, and emerging societal issues. The findings of this study further indicate a conceptual shift in digital activism research from approaches primarily centered on

communication and online mobilization toward perspectives increasingly oriented to governance, public participation, and policy influence. The growing prominence of themes such as public engagement, collective action, and policy processes suggests that digital activism is progressively understood as a form of digitally mediated socio-political participation. In this regard, the study extends the theoretical understanding of digital activism beyond networked communication practices by positioning it as a governance-related mechanism that shapes policy agendas, public legitimacy, and the dynamics of contemporary digital democracy.

Thematic evolution

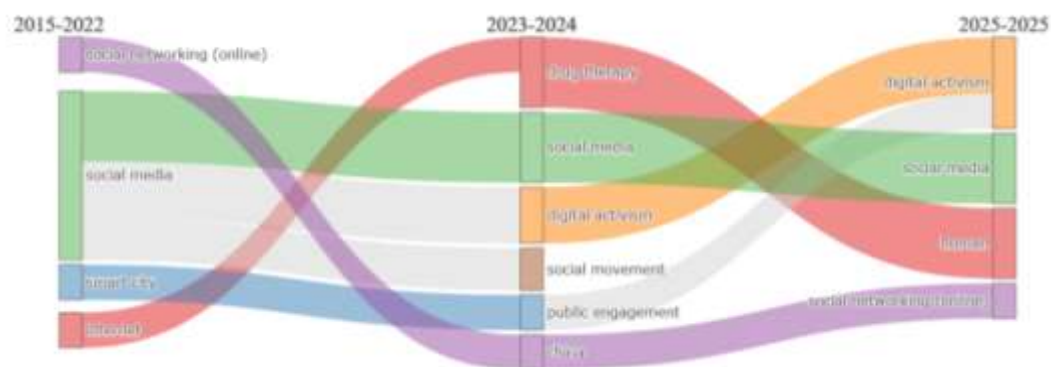


Figure 9. *Thematic evolution of digital activism and policy change research (2015–2022, 2023–2024, 2025)*

Figure 9 illustrates the dynamic evolution of research themes in digital activism and policy change across three main periods. This evolution highlights how the research focus has shifted from broad foundational themes to more specialized and context-driven approaches.

In the early phase (2015–2022), represented on the left-hand side of the map, research was dominated by foundational themes such as social media, internet, and social networking (online). These themes reflect the initial stage of the field, where the primary focus was on digital technologies as tools for communication and social interaction. Additionally, the presence of themes such as smart city indicates early attempts to connect digital technologies with broader societal contexts, including urban governance and civic participation.

During the intermediate phase (2023–2024), shown in the central portion of the map, the thematic focus shifted toward more specific and context-oriented topics. Themes such as digital activism, public engagement, and social movement became more prominent, signaling a transition from technology-centered discussions to a stronger emphasis on social mobilization and policy-related engagement. The emergence of region-specific themes such as China further reflects an increasing interest in geographical and contextual variations within digital activism research.

In the most recent phase (2025), represented on the right-hand side of the map, the thematic structure becomes more specialized and consolidated. Core themes such as digital activism and social media persist, indicating their stability and continued importance within the field. At the same time, stronger connections with themes such as human and social movements suggest a growing emphasis on human-centered perspectives and the societal impact of digital activism. This stage reflects a more integrated approach that combines conceptual and empirical insights in understanding the relationship between digital technologies and policy change.

Overall, the thematic evolution presented reveals a clear trajectory: from broad foundational themes in the early period, to diversification and contextualization in the intermediate phase, and finally to a more specialized and integrated research landscape in recent years. This progression reflects the maturation of the field, highlighting its increasingly multidisciplinary nature and its growing relevance to contemporary social and policy dynamics.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the knowledge structure and research development in the field of digital activism and policy change. Overall, the results indicate that the field has experienced significant growth over the past decade, marked by

a steady increase in publications and an expansion of research themes across multiple domains. However, despite this growth, several structural patterns suggest that the field is still evolving toward conceptual maturity.

From a performance analysis perspective, the dominance of Global North countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, highlights an imbalance in knowledge production. Nevertheless, the increasing contributions from Global South countries such as Indonesia, India, and Brazil indicate a gradual shift toward a more inclusive research landscape. This trend suggests that local contexts are gaining greater attention in digital activism studies, enriching the understanding of how digital dynamics interact with diverse policy systems.

Furthermore, the analysis of authors, institutions, and journals reveals a relatively fragmented structure, with no single dominant actor shaping the field. This reflects the inherently multidisciplinary nature of digital activism research, which integrates perspectives from communication, political science, media studies, and public policy. At the same time, such fragmentation points to a lack of strong theoretical consolidation, as research remains dispersed across different approaches without a fully integrated conceptual framework.

Insights from the science mapping analysis further reinforce this interpretation. The keyword co-occurrence network identifies social media and digital activism as the core concepts linking various research themes. Meanwhile, the presence of distinct clusters, including smart city and public health, indicates the expansion of the field into broader contexts. The thematic map highlights that the relationship between social media and public policy serves as the foundational core, while human-centered participation and social movements function as key drivers of current research development.

The thematic evolution analysis reveals a clear shift from technology-centered approaches to more impact-oriented perspectives focusing on social and policy implications. In its early stage, research primarily emphasized digital technologies as communication tools. Over time, however, the focus has shifted toward understanding how digital activism influences public participation, social mobilization, and policy processes. This transition reflects the increasing maturity of the field in integrating technological dimensions with broader social and political implications.

Despite these advancements, several research gaps remain evident. Much of the existing literature continues to focus on mobilization and participation, with relatively limited attention given to the direct linkage between digital activism and concrete policy change. In addition, the lack of longitudinal and cross-country comparative studies limits the ability to fully understand how the impact of digital activism evolves over time and across different contexts.

Based on these findings, future research should aim to develop more integrated conceptual frameworks that systematically explain the relationship between digital engagement, social dynamics, and policy change. There is also a need to expand cross-contextual studies, particularly in developing countries, to provide a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the field. Moreover, multidisciplinary approaches combining quantitative and qualitative methods are essential to capture the complexity of digital activism more effectively.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present bibliometric analysis systematically maps the intellectual structure and evolution of research on digital activism and policy change. The findings reveal a substantial increase in scholarly attention over the past decade, with social media and digital activism emerging as the central themes connecting diverse research areas. The thematic and scientific mapping analyses further indicate a gradual shift from technology-centered perspectives toward broader governance-oriented understandings of digitally mediated participation, collective action, and policy processes. In addition, the field demonstrates an increasingly multidisciplinary character, spanning governance, public health, civic participation, and social movement studies.

The analysis contributes to the literature by providing a structured and interpretive overview of the development of research on digital activism and policy change. Beyond mapping publication trends and thematic structures, the findings position digital activism as a socio-political mechanism that increasingly shapes public participation and policy interaction in digital societies.

From a practical perspective, the growing prominence of themes such as public engagement and public policy highlights the importance of social media platforms in facilitating participatory governance and civic interaction. The results also emphasize the need for more inclusive and transparent digital policies, particularly in addressing challenges related to digital inequality, algorithmic bias, and online marginalization.

Despite these contributions, several gaps remain within the existing literature. Research directly examining the relationship between digital activism and concrete policy outcomes remains limited, while comparative and longitudinal studies are still underdeveloped. Future research should therefore prioritize interdisciplinary and cross-national perspectives to better understand how digitally mediated activism influences governance, policymaking, and democratic participation across different socio-political contexts. Such efforts are essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and evidence-based policy development in the digital era.

Data Availability Statement

The bibliometric dataset supporting the findings of this study is openly available in Zenodo: Ramadhani, I. S. (2026). Scopus bibliographic dataset on digital activism and policy change between 2015 and 2025 [Dataset]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20267601>

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