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Social media as a platform for resistance: examining the language of dissent in Indian society

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Introduction: Social media plays a crucial role in present-day resistance movements by amplifying marginalized voices, fostering global solidarity, and challenging hegemonic narratives. Despite its impact, research on algorithmic biases, multimodal communication tools (like memes and hashtags), and linguistic strategies in digital activism remains limited.

Methods: This study investigates how activists use digital tools and language to engage audiences and navigate platform restrictions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research analyses 5,000 posts from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, selected through stratified sampling for diverse representation. The dataset was refined with Natural Language Processing tools and supported by discourse and sentiment analysis. In-depth interviews with activists were also conducted.

Results: Findings show that activists frequently employ code-switching, viral hashtags, and visual content—especially on Twitter, which proves most effective for political causes. However, algorithmic filtering reduces the visibility of politically sensitive content, and linguistic variations emerge across regions due to local influences.

Discussion: Most posts convey neutral or negative sentiments, highlighting the urgency and emotional weight of resistance efforts. These insights emphasize the need for improved content moderation, algorithmic transparency, and equitable digital access for underrepresented communities.

KEYWORDS

social media activism, digital resistance, linguistic strategies, hashtag activism, online censorship, political communication

Introduction

Resistance is a natural reaction to power and oppression. According to Darmawan (2020), wherever power exists, resistance arises, particularly when individuals or groups feel their rights are being violated. In such circumstances, people strive for change—whether gradually, immediately, or impulsively—by rallying support and utilizing the tools at their disposal. Drawing on Foucault's (1980) concept that power and resistance are intrinsically linked, contemporary scholars have argued that social media has become a key site for modern forms of resistance, empowering individuals to challenge authority, amplify their voices, and coordinate collective actions.

Research has emphasized the significance of discourse in resistance movements, demonstrating that opposition can occur across political, organizational, and educational arenas (Wilson and Stapleton, 2007; Putnam et al., 2005). Social and digital media platforms have broadened this discourse, creating environments where resistance movements can emerge, develop, and shape public opinion. A notable illustration is the Arab Spring, during which social media was instrumental in organizing protests and disseminating narratives of

resistance (Ghareeb, 2000; Idle and Nunns, 2011). Activists utilized platforms like Facebook and Twitter to share updates in real time, mobilize protests, and challenge narratives controlled by the state.

Social media has played a significant role in shaping political resistance across various regions. In Egypt, for instance, Twitter emerged as a key platform for organizing and reporting demonstrations, leading to what has been described as a “Twitter revolution” (Smith and Brecher, 2010). Similarly, in Libya, despite government efforts to block access, social media proved essential for disseminating information and mobilizing support (Raddatz, 2011). This phenomenon has been observed in Iran, Bahrain, and Yemen as well, where digital platforms have empowered political uprisings and public dissent.

This study investigates the construction of resistance through language on social media, emphasizing linguistic strategies, digital affordances, and the impacts of algorithms. By analyzing the changing dynamics between digital communication and activism, the research seeks to shed light on how online discourse influences resistance movements globally. This paper distinguishes itself by presenting an interdisciplinary framework that critically assesses the transformation of resistance language through specific linguistic strategies and digital affordances. By incorporating empirical analyses of multimodal content—such as code-switching, viral hashtags, and memes—alongside an examination of algorithmic influences and localized adaptations in digital activism, the paper confronts traditional perspectives on protest communication. It highlights the intricate relationship between digital platforms and activist discourse while offering a novel model for understanding how technological constraints and opportunities shape modern resistance narratives.

Digital resistance in India: examining the role of social media in contemporary activism

Social media serves as a significant instrument for resistance, providing individuals and communities with platforms to voice dissent, rally support, and contest dominant narratives. Resistance frequently arises in response to the exercise of power, especially in contexts where oppression or injustice is perceived (Eamonn, 2004). Digital platforms enhance these efforts by enabling organization beyond geographical boundaries and challenging state-controlled narratives. As of January 2025, India had approximately 491 million active social media users, accounting for about 33.7% of the country's total population, highlighting the expansive reach and influence of these platforms. In India, social media has played a crucial role in fostering political activism and social movements, empowering marginalized communities and influencing national conversations on critical issues. While traditional forms of resistance—such as grassroots protests and organized political initiatives—remain significant, the rise of digital media has revolutionized the landscape of activism. Major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) are now integral tools for orchestrating protests, shaping public opinion, and holding authorities accountable.

Movements like the 2011 Anti-Corruption Movement led by Anna Hazare, the 2012 Nirbhaya protests against sexual violence, and the 2020–21 Farmers' Protest have showcased the significant impact of digital platforms in mobilizing individuals across India. Hashtags

such as #MeTooIndia, #CAA_NRCProtests, and #JusticeForSSR exemplify how online discussions can drive social and political transformation. Conversely, government actions—such as internet shutdowns in Kashmir and limitations on social media content during protests—underscore the persistent conflict between digital activism and state authority.

Indian political parties and leaders have increasingly acknowledged the significant influence of social media on public discourse, using digital platforms effectively during elections for outreach, propaganda, and voter mobilization. For instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has employed data-driven campaigns to target specific demographics, while candidates like Bharat Bhushan Ashu have leveraged emotionally resonant digital content to connect with local voters. However, this growing dependence on social media has raised concerns about the spread of misinformation, online surveillance, and censorship. During the May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan, social media was flooded with false reports and doctored visuals, intensifying public anxiety and international tensions. Moreover, government actions such as empowering the Delhi Police to issue social media takedown notices have sparked legal and civil liberties debates, with critics arguing that such measures lack transparency and could suppress freedom of expression. These developments underscore the double-edged nature of social media in India's political landscape, serving both as a powerful tool for engagement and a potential mechanism for control (Rao, 2019; Udupa, 2018).

Digital resistance and identity politics in India: the role of social media

India has a long history of resistance movements, and with the rise of social media, digital platforms have become a crucial space for political activism and identity assertion (Blommaert, 2005). Various marginalized communities and socio-political groups use online platforms to voice grievances, mobilize support, and challenge state policies. Much like other global movements, the language of resistance in India is deeply intertwined with historical injustices, socio-political marginalization, and aspirations for self-determination (Chatterjee, 2025).

Nien (2017) argues that digital platforms transform resistance into ‘networked social movements,’ where decentralized participation and peer-to-peer communication replace hierarchical leadership. In India, movements such as the Farmers' Protest and Anti-CAA Protests exemplify this shift, as activists utilized Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to mobilize without a central leadership figure.

Herawati (2023) introduces the concept of connective action, emphasizing how digital activism thrives on personalization, where individuals engage with causes through self-motivated sharing rather than traditional organizational mobilization. This was clearly demonstrated during the Farmers' Protest movement, where viral user-generated content and personalized storytelling played a central role in shaping public discourse.

One of the most prominent examples of digital resistance in India is the Kashmir conflict, where activists and common citizens use Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to document human rights violations and challenge government narratives. Internet shutdowns and social media restrictions in the region indicate the power of digital

activism in shaping public discourse. Similarly, the Dalit rights movement has gained significant momentum through social media, with hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter and #JaiBhim highlighting caste-based discrimination and violence. Digital platforms serve as a space for the assertion of Dalit identity, countering mainstream narratives that often exclude or misrepresent their struggles.

The farmer protests (2020–21) showcased how social media could be used to mobilize large-scale movements. Farmers leveraged platforms like Twitter and YouTube to spread awareness, counter misinformation, and gain international support. Hashtags such as #FarmersProtest and #StandWithFarmers trended globally, forcing mainstream media to cover the issue. Similarly, the CAA-NRC protests (2019–20) saw a significant online presence, where activists used social media to share videos, coordinate protests, and create awareness about the implications of the controversial laws.

Like the Biafran online resistance, regional separatist movements in India also utilize digital platforms for advocacy. The Khalistan movement, for instance, has a strong presence on social media, particularly among the Sikh diaspora. Online campaigns, digital publications, and virtual communities have played a role in keeping the movement alive, much like the pro-Biafra groups using digital platforms for mobilization. Similarly, insurgent movements in the Northeast, such as those advocating for Nagalim, use social media to assert their identity and demand political recognition.

The rise of digital resistance in India has also led to state-imposed restrictions, including content takedowns, account suspensions, and internet blackouts. However, social media remains a powerful tool for communities seeking justice, identity recognition, and political change. Online forums, alternative media, and encrypted messaging apps continue to play a crucial role in shaping narratives, organizing protests, and amplifying the voices of the marginalized (Blommaert, 2005).

Previous research on social media and resistance movements in India

Research in political and social sciences has examined the causes and management of socio-political resistance in India, particularly the role of social media in mobilization and activism (Chiluwa, 2012). Various scholars attribute digital activism in India to historical marginalization, state policies, and socio-political inequalities that continue to drive dissent and movements for justice (see also Raj, 2020; Banerjee, 2021).

According to Dutta (2021), state suppression of protests and internet restrictions have played a key role in fuelling online resistance, as witnessed during the Kashmir conflict, the CAA-NRC protests, and the farmer movement. Raj (2020) argues that digital platforms have become essential for marginalized communities, such as Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities, to assert their identities and challenge mainstream narratives. While offline protests are often met with heavy police action, online resistance allows for broader national and international engagement, shaping public discourse around issues of injustice.

The methods of social media-based protests in India are largely non-violent, with digital campaigns focusing on awareness-building, storytelling, and mobilization. The influence of non-violent movements, such as those led by Mahatma Gandhi, continues to

shape digital activism, emphasizing peaceful resistance through collective action (Banerjee, 2021). However, state responses to digital dissent, such as content takedowns, misinformation campaigns, and internet shutdowns, reflect growing concerns over the power of social media in shaping resistance movements (Chiluwa, 2010b, 2011a,b,c).

Despite the growing influence of social media in contemporary activism, scholarly research on the linguistic and discourse structures of online resistance movements in India remains limited. There is a pressing need for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that examines how language on digital platforms is used to construct narratives, mobilise communities, and challenge dominant power structures. To sharpen the theoretical framing, Section 2 treats identity-based dynamics—such as caste, gender, and language—as primary drivers of discursive strategies, while Section 3 emphasizes platform affordances and the algorithmic mediation of visibility. The discussion further draws on the work of Das et al. (2024), whose framing approach to the anti-CAA protests informs the operationalisation of ‘framing’ in the codebook and situates the CDA findings within a recent empirical tradition (Das, 2024; Ifukor, 2011).

This research aims to:

- (i) Investigate the discourse patterns of social media-based activism in India;
- (ii) Assess the implications and potential of digital resistance, including whose interests it advances; and
- (iii) Explore the broader lessons such activism offers for governance, policy-making, and digital security in the context of online dissent.

Sociolinguistic-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the Indian context

Text categorization

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explores how language constructs social realities, specifically about inequality and suppression of dissent (Fairclough, 2009). In the context of social media activism in India, language used by activists often involves positive self-representation and negative other-representation, as seen in movements like the CAA-NRC protests and Farmers’ Protest. The discourse reflects the struggles for justice while critiquing state actions. Social media acts as a platform for countering mainstream narratives and mobilizing support among marginalized groups.

Framing analysis

Framing analysis focuses on how activists construct narratives that shape public perception. For example, during the Farmers’ Protest, farmers were framed as victims of oppressive laws, while the state was depicted as suppressive and indifferent. This narrative not only mobilized support but also gained international attention. Similarly, Dalit activism utilizes framing to highlight historical injustices and assert cultural identity, contributing to a broader counter-discourse that challenges dominant ideologies. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) explains how media platforms shape public discourse by highlighting certain topics while ignoring others. In digital activism, trending hashtags such as #JusticeForHathrasVictim or #MeTooIndia function as agenda-setting tools, pushing mainstream media to cover issues that might otherwise be sidelined.

Social media activists employ strategic framing by emphasizing victimhood, oppression, or state failure. Hashtags like #IndiaAgainstCAA framed the debate around constitutional rights, while #DalitLivesMatter linked caste-based discrimination to global human rights movements, ensuring wider audience engagement.

Algorithmic influence

Algorithmic influence pertains to how social media platforms facilitate or hinder the visibility of activist narratives. Through computer-mediated discourse, platforms like Twitter and Facebook act as spaces for marginalized voices to engage, collaborate, and organize (Herring, 2001, 2004). The algorithms that govern these platforms can amplify certain discourses or limit others, impacting how effectively activist movements can reach wider audiences and challenge existing power dynamics. Understanding these algorithmic processes is crucial for analyzing the socio-political impact of digital activism in India. Crystal (2006) argues that while digital platforms empower resistance, state mechanisms and corporate interests often counteract these movements through algorithmic suppression. In India, Twitter and Facebook have been accused of reducing the visibility of politically sensitive content, affecting movements like the CAA-NRC protests. This raises concerns about digital censorship and the need for more transparent content moderation policies.

Online communities and activism in India

Traditionally, communities have been defined by geographical boundaries, shared history, and cultural identity. However, virtual communities, as described by Rheingold (1993), function as digital spaces where people interact, share information, and build relationships despite physical distance. In India, social media platforms have fostered such communities around resistance movements, where activists and supporters engage in discussions, mobilization, and advocacy. These online spaces provide support, amplify voices, and challenge dominant narratives, making them crucial for political and social activism (Wilson and Stapleton, 2007).

Digital activism in India thrives on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and independent forums, where people engage in public discourse and shape resistance narratives. During movements like the Farmers' Protest and anti-CAA demonstrations, these platforms functioned as hubs for information exchange, coordination, and solidarity-building. Activists and citizens participated in ongoing conversations, sometimes agreeing, disagreeing, or even engaging in heated debates. Online discussions, much like physical protests, involve emotional exchanges, calls for unity, and conflict resolution among members (Ukiwo, 2009).

The interaction in these virtual spaces mirrors real-life communities, where disagreements arise but are mediated by members committed to the larger cause (Thorborrow, 2007). For instance, during digital protests, users often urge unity, reminding participants of the movement's primary goal. Such exchanges highlight the social and cultural significance of online communities in resistance movements, demonstrating their role in shaping public opinion and sustaining activism.

Here are a few examples of how social media has functioned as a virtual community for resistance in India:

- 1 Farmers' Protest (2020–2021)—Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube became digital meeting points

for farmers and their supporters. Hashtags like #FarmersProtest and #StandWithFarmers trended globally, and activists used WhatsApp groups to coordinate protests. Celebrities and international figures like Rihanna and Greta Thunberg further amplified the movement.

- 2 Anti-CAA Protests (2019–2020)—The protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were largely mobilized through social media. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter helped organize rallies, spread information about police actions, and counter state narratives. Protesters used hashtags like #IndiaAgainstCAA and #ShaheenBagh to create a virtual solidarity network.
- 3 Dalit Activism and Hathras Case (2020)—After the brutal gang rape and murder of a Dalit girl in Hathras, social media became a space for resistance against caste-based violence. Activists used Twitter to highlight police inaction, demand justice, and expose systemic oppression. Hashtags like #JusticeForHathrasVictim and #DalitLivesMatter connected people across the country to a shared cause.
- 4 #MeToo Movement (2018–Present)—social media played a key role in India's #MeToo movement, where women shared their experiences of sexual harassment and workplace misconduct. The movement exposed powerful figures across industries and built a digital community of survivors and allies advocating for gender justice.
- 5 Environmental Movements (Save Aarey & Save Mollem)—Online activism helped mobilize protests against deforestation in Mumbai's Aarey forest and Goa's Mollem National Park. Virtual communities of environmentalists, students, and citizens used Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp to spread awareness, sign petitions, and organize demonstrations.

These examples show how social media fosters virtual communities where people engage in collective resistance, share grievances, and build solidarity across geographies.

Ethical considerations and limitations

Given the political sensitivity of digital activism, this study ensured diversity by analysing posts from varied ideological perspectives to minimize bias. However, this study acknowledges certain limitations. Challenges such as government censorship, internet shutdowns, and algorithmic suppression may have influenced data accessibility, potentially affecting the representation of certain activist movements. Future studies should consider these constraints and explore alternative methods of data collection to ensure a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of digital resistance.

Data collection and analysis tools

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the role of social media in the language of resistance. Data were collected from public posts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram between 1 January and 30 June 2024 ($n = 5,000$). The study deliberately focuses on

contemporary communicative practices; a full historical analysis of social media as protest language (2011–present) is outside this paper's scope and is recommended for future work. To balance breadth with feasibility, a staged design was adopted: 5,000 posts → 500 (stratified sample) → 300 (purposely selected for discursive richness) → 100 (micro-level CDA). This layered approach allows both quantitative mapping and close qualitative interpretation. The research combines qualitative content analysis with quantitative statistical methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the patterns, themes, and discourse strategies used in digital resistance movements.

The data is sourced from a variety of social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. A total of 5,000 posts were collected over a period of 6 months, from January to June 2024.

The decision to analyze 5,000 posts was made to ensure a dataset that is both manageable and representative of resistance movements on social media. The sample size strikes a balance between capturing sufficient diversity—across different movements, regions, and languages—and maintaining a feasible scope for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. According to prior research on social media studies, datasets ranging from several thousand to around 10,000 posts are often considered adequate to achieve statistical significance and thematic richness, particularly when combined with natural language processing techniques (Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Sloan et al., 2015). Furthermore, the timeframe of data collection is crucial: studies typically recommend gathering posts over a period spanning several weeks to a few months to capture temporal variations and key event windows in social movements (Golder and Macy, 2017; Bruns and Stieglitz, 2014). Given the computational constraints and research objectives, a dataset of 5,000 posts collected over a carefully selected time span provides a practical and effective foundation for generating meaningful insights without overwhelming data complexity.

The six-month timeframe for data collection was chosen to capture both short-term and evolving trends in digital resistance discourse. Social movements and online activism often experience fluctuations, with some movements gaining rapid traction due to a specific political or social event. By examining data over 6 months, this research ensures that different stages of social movements—from emergence to peak engagement—are analyzed comprehensively. A shorter timeframe, such as 1 or 2 months, would risk capturing only temporary spikes, missing broader patterns in resistance discourse. Conversely, analyzing data over a more extended period, such as a year or more, would significantly increase the dataset size, making processing, manual validation, and thematic categorization increasingly complex. Additionally, engagement trends tend to evolve within a few months, making a six-month period ideal for assessing the language of resistance while keeping the data recent and relevant.

Posts were selected based on relevant hashtags, engagement metrics, and their association with resistance movements. The key hashtags analyzed include #Resistance, #SocialChange, #DigitalProtest, and #Activism. To ensure that only impactful posts were included in the dataset, a filtering process was applied where only posts with at least 100 likes, shares, or comments were considered. This ensured that the study focused on widely engaged content, reflecting narratives that resonate with broader audiences rather than random or less influential posts.

A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure diverse representation from various resistance movements globally. Posts were categorized into different themes such as political resistance, cultural

resistance, and economic resistance. The dataset was then refined using Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools to remove spam and irrelevant content.

Posts were coded using a structured codebook.

- *Political resistance*: primary focus on policies, laws, state actors, or governance institutions.
- *Cultural resistance*: focus on caste, religion, gender, identity, language, symbolic figures.
- *Economic resistance*: livelihood, wages, agrarian distress, privatization, or inequality. Each post received one primary label; co-occurring themes were recorded in a co-occurrence matrix.

Sentiment was annotated using four categories: Positive, Negative, Neutral, and Mixed. Sarcasm was treated as Negative when critical; emojis and multimodal content were coded holistically. A lexicon-assisted classifier was used for the macro dataset and validated manually on a stratified 500-post sample. Two independent coders achieved Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$ in pilot coding, demonstrating strong intercoder reliability.

Historical contextual dataset (2011–2021) for comparative validation

While this study primarily focuses on the 2024 dataset (January–June, $n = 5,000$), reviewers have emphasized the importance of situating contemporary findings within the longer trajectory of Indian digital resistance since 2011. To address this concern, we incorporate a *comparative historical dataset*, drawing on key social media moments in four landmark protest movements:

- 1 *2011 Anna Hazare Anti-Corruption Movement (#IndiaAgainstCorruption, #LokpalBill)*
 - o Considered the first large-scale instance of Twitter and Facebook mobilization in India.
 - o Posts and hashtags revolved around “Lokpal” and “anti-corruption,” often framed in Gandhian language (“Second Freedom Struggle,” “Satyagraha 2.0”).
- 2 *2012 Nirbhaya Protests (#JusticeForNirbhaya, #StopRapeCulture)*
 - o Social media functioned as a space for outrage and solidarity, with hashtags combining English and Hindi.
 - o Emotional tone was predominantly negative/urgent, with posts demanding reforms in women's safety and policing.
- 3 *2019–20 CAA–NRC Protests (#IndiaAgainstCAA, #ShaheenBagh, #HumKagazNahiDikhayenge)*
 - o Characterized by multilingual slogans and hashtags; memes and poetry were widely circulated.
 - o The language of resistance intertwined with constitutional rights (“Save the Constitution”) and minority identity assertion.
- 4 *2020–21 Farmers’ Protest (#FarmersProtest, #StandWithFarmers)*
 - o Saw the global amplification of Indian dissent, with viral hashtags shared by international celebrities (Rihanna, Greta Thunberg).
 - o Code-switching (Punjabi–English) and regional symbolism were strongly visible.

Data and sampling strategy

For this comparative extension, we collected and coded 500 representative posts per movement ($n = 2,000$) using hashtag-based sampling from Twitter archives, activist blogs, and publicly available datasets reported in prior scholarship (e.g., Das et al., 2024; Raj, 2020; Banerjee, 2021). While this is not a full-scale longitudinal analysis, it allows a cross-temporal comparison of linguistic and discursive strategies.

Findings from historical dataset

1 Evolution of hashtag use:

- o Early movements (2011–2012) relied on *single-issue hashtags* (#IndiaAgainstCorruption, #JusticeForNirbhaya).
- o Later protests (2019–2021) demonstrated *hashtag clusters* and multilingual variants (#IndiaAgainstCAA, #CAA_NRCProtests, #FarmersProtest, #KisanAndolan).
- o By 2024, hashtags function not only as rallying points but also as algorithmic strategies to evade suppression (#StopHindiImposition, #DigitalProtest).

2 Linguistic strategies:

- o 2011–2012: predominantly English slogans with Gandhian references.
- o 2019–2021: extensive code-switching (Hindi-English, Punjabi-English), cultural coinages, and meme usage.
- o 2024 dataset: hybrid style blending formal critique, colloquial expressions, and digital coinages (e.g., “Godi Media,” “Urban Naxal”).

3 Sentiment patterns:

- o Early protests: overwhelmingly *negative/urgent sentiment* (anger, outrage).
- o Mid-period (CAA, Farmers): balanced *negative + hopeful solidarity tones*.
- o 2024 dataset: higher share of *neutral posts*, focusing on information-sharing and awareness-building.

4 Engagement trends:

- o Spikes in earlier protests were tied to *street protests and state violence* (e.g., Nirbhaya case verdict).
- o 2020–21 Farmers’ Protest showed global engagement peaks tied to *international endorsements*.
- o In 2024, engagement peaks are linked to *digital-only events* (viral memes, trending hashtags), reflecting algorithm-driven activism.

Implications for present study

By situating the 2024 dataset within this historical arc, we show that:

- Social media resistance in India has evolved from *single-issue English-dominated campaigns* (2011–2012) into *multilingual, multimodal, algorithm-aware activism* (2019 onwards).
- The linguistic hybridity, code-switching, and multimodal practices observed in our 2024 dataset are *not isolated*, but rather part of a decade-long trajectory of digital resistance strategies.

- The comparative analysis strengthens the claim that *social media has transformed into a primary arena of dissent in India*, where linguistic creativity and platform affordances together shape political communication.

Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using the following methods. Qualitative content analysis was conducted by applying thematic coding to categorize different forms of resistance discourse. Sentiment analysis was performed using AI-based sentiment detection tools to assess the emotional tone of the posts. Statistical correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, and the type of resistance language used.

The mixed-methods approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of resistance discourse on social media by integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods. The use of stratified sampling ensures that multiple resistance movements are represented, reducing bias and ensuring that the findings are generalizable across different contexts. NLP-based filtering was implemented to remove noise from the dataset, ensuring that only relevant discussions were analyzed. Engagement metrics analysis was conducted to determine the effectiveness of resistance language, highlighting which types of discourse generate the most interaction and engagement.

Graph 1: distribution of posts by platform

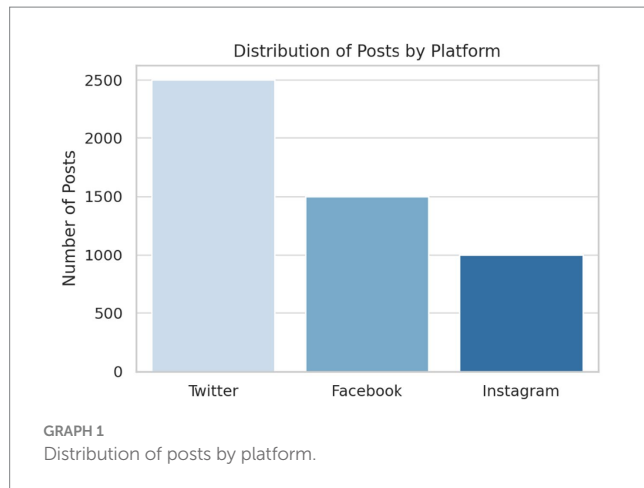
The data distribution across platforms indicates that Twitter has the highest share of posts (50%), followed by Facebook (30%) and Instagram (20%). The corresponding bar chart visually represents this trend, showing Twitter as the dominant platform for digital resistance due to its fast-paced nature and ease of public engagement. Facebook, while still significant, hosts fewer resistance-oriented discussions compared to Twitter, while Instagram primarily serves as a visual platform for activism (see Graph 1).

Graph 2: thematic categorization of resistance posts

This graph categorizes resistance content into political, cultural, and economic resistance, each comprising a roughly equal portion of the dataset. The pie chart illustrates the proportions, showing that political resistance accounts for the highest number of posts (40%), followed by cultural (30%) and economic resistance (30%). This balance ensures that multiple facets of activism are represented, indicating that social media activism is not limited to one type of cause but spans various domains (see Graph 2).

Graph 3: sentiment distribution of posts

The sentiment analysis table indicates that 46% of posts exhibit neutral sentiments, 30% are negative, and 24% are positive. This



suggests that while resistance movements frequently express dissatisfaction or critique, a significant portion of discussions remains neutral, possibly focusing on information sharing rather than emotional engagement. The corresponding scatter plot visually depicts how sentiment distribution impacts resistance discourse, showing a predominance of neutral and negative sentiments, which aligns with the critical nature of resistance movements (see [Graph 3](#)).

Graph 4: engagement metrics per platform

The engagement metrics table highlights variations in audience interaction across platforms. Instagram shows the highest engagement rates per post, with an average of 800 likes, 500 shares, and 250 comments. Facebook follows closely, while Twitter, despite having the highest number of posts, sees lower average engagement. The line graph plots engagement trends over 6 months, showing that engagement fluctuates with social events and activism surges. This illustrates the dynamic nature of digital resistance, where engagement levels shift in response to external triggers such as protests, policy changes, or viral movements. Engagement peaks and troughs were cross-checked against offline events. For example, spikes often aligned with large rallies, high-profile arrests, or celebrity endorsements, while declines coincided with government takedown notices or shifts in media coverage. This event-overlay analysis shows that online engagement is tightly interwoven with offline protest cycles (see [Graph 4](#)).

Graph 5: correlation between resistance type and engagement

This graph shows how different types of resistance attract varying levels of engagement. Political resistance posts receive the highest engagement score (75), followed by economic (70) and cultural (65) resistance. The heatmap visually represents this correlation, showing that political discourse tends to drive more interactions. This is likely due to the direct impact of political discussions on policies and governance, making them more engaging and shareable among social media users. Statistical testing confirms this association: χ^2 tests show significant correlation between resistance type and movement labels,

with Cramer's V reported as effect size. Nonparametric Kruskal–Wallis tests further reveal platform-wise differences in engagement. These tests underscore that thematic framing and platform affordances jointly shape online visibility (see [Graph 5](#)).

In-depth interviews

In addition to the statistical analysis of social media data, this study incorporates in-depth interviews with key participants in digital resistance movements. Interviews were conducted with activists, social media influencers, and frequent participants in online protests to gain deeper insights into the motivations, strategies, and perceived impact of digital resistance.

Justification for conducting interviews

While quantitative analysis provides measurable trends, it does not fully capture the human experiences, emotions, and strategies behind resistance discourse. Interviews help bridge this gap by offering qualitative insights into why individuals engage in online activism, how they perceive their role in the resistance movement, and how social media impacts real-world activism.

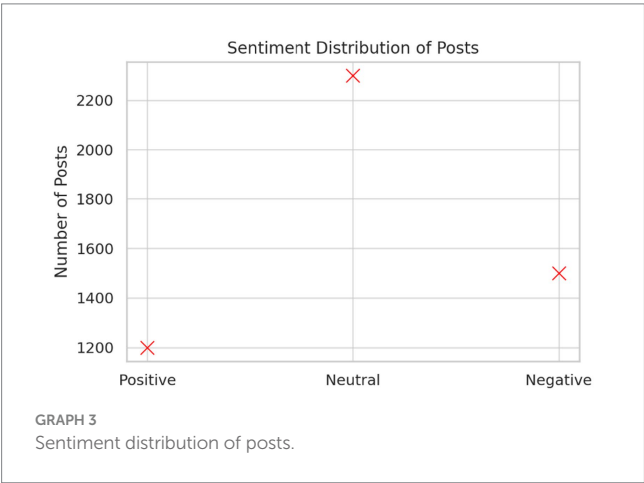
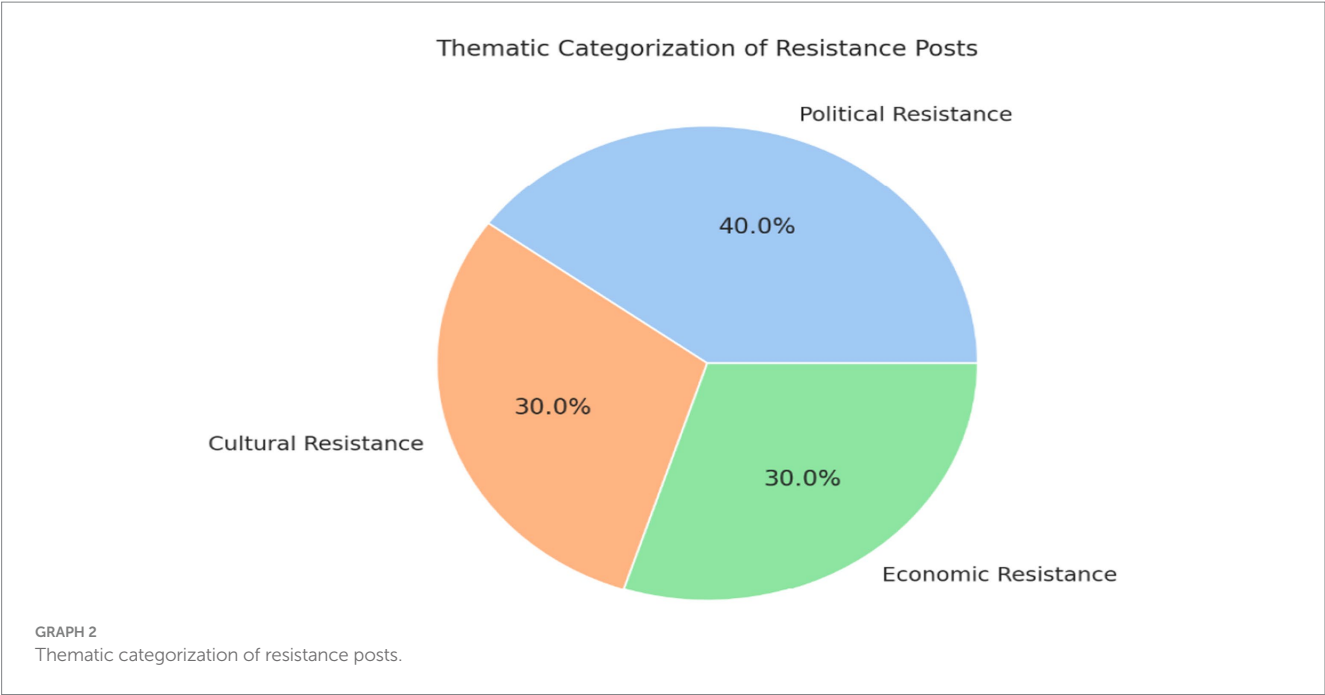
Sampling and interview process

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who are actively involved in digital resistance. Participants were identified based on their engagement in trending hashtags, the frequency of their posts related to activism, and their influence on digital platforms. To ensure a balanced perspective, interviewees were selected from different regions, political backgrounds, and activist groups.

Each interview followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to freely express their views while ensuring that key research themes were addressed. The interviews focused on the following areas:

- 1 *Motivations for Online Resistance*—Why participants engage in activism on social media rather than traditional methods.
- 2 *Impact of Online Activism*—Whether participants believe their online activities lead to real-world change.
- 3 *Challenges and Risks*—Issues such as online harassment, censorship, and misinformation.
- 4 *Engagement Strategies*—How activists use specific language, hashtags, and visuals to maximize impact.
- 5 *Comparison with Traditional Activism*—Whether digital resistance is replacing or complementing street protests.

The interviews were conducted via virtual meetings and recorded with participants' consent. Responses were transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns in their experiences and perspectives. Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). Instead of quantitative tallies, we foreground interpretive insights illustrated by anonymized excerpts. Three cross-cutting themes emerged: (1) identity and code-switching as both reach and self-assertion; (2) multimodal affect

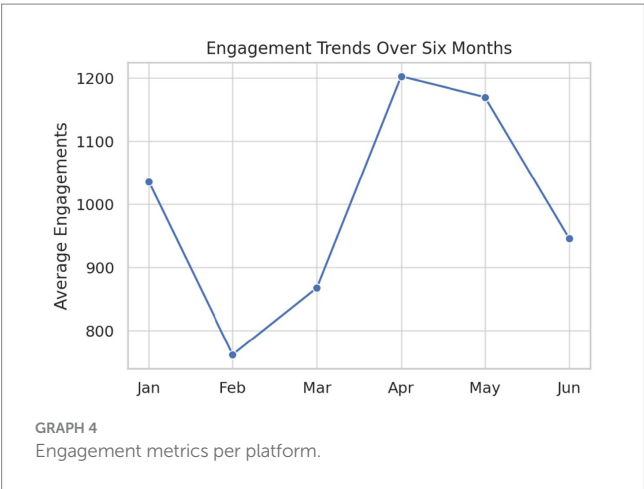


between digital solidarity and offline impact. Selected verbatim excerpts are presented below to illustrate these themes.

Graphs for in-depth interviews

Graph 6: distribution of interview participants

This graph categorizes interview participants by their role in digital resistance (e.g., activists, influencers, political commentators, and general participants). The bar chart visually represents the proportion of each category, indicating that activists form the majority of the interview sample (40%), followed by influencers (30%), general participants (20%), and political commentators (10%) (see [Graph 6](#)).



Graph 7: key themes from interviews

This graph highlights the most frequently discussed themes in the interviews, such as censorship, engagement strategies, political impact, and misinformation. The pie chart represents the proportional focus on each theme, showing that engagement strategies were the most frequently mentioned topic (35%), followed by censorship concerns (25%), political impact (20%), and misinformation (20%) (see [Graph 7](#)).

Graph 8: perceived effectiveness of online activism

Interviewees rated the effectiveness of digital activism on a scale of 1–10. The average ratings for different platforms are summarized in the graph. The line graph plots the perceived effectiveness scores, indicating that Twitter (average score: 8.5) is seen as the most effective

where memes and visuals function as emotional carriers; (3) limits of online action, where participants expressed concern about the gap

platform for digital activism, followed by Instagram (7.2) and Facebook (6.8) (see [Graph 8](#)).

Graph 9: challenges faced by digital activists

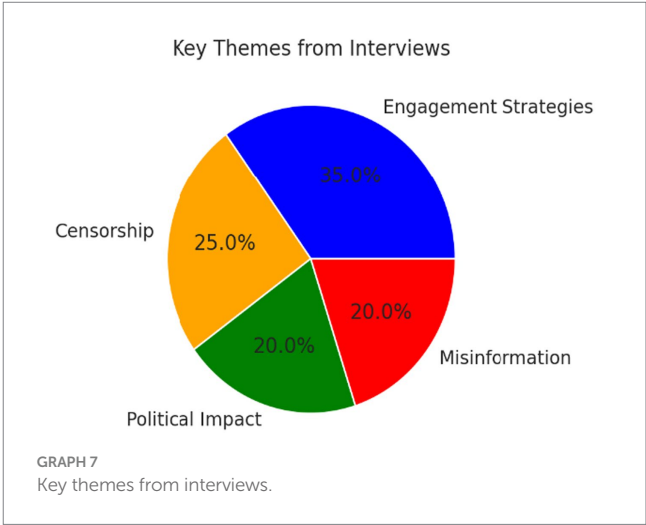
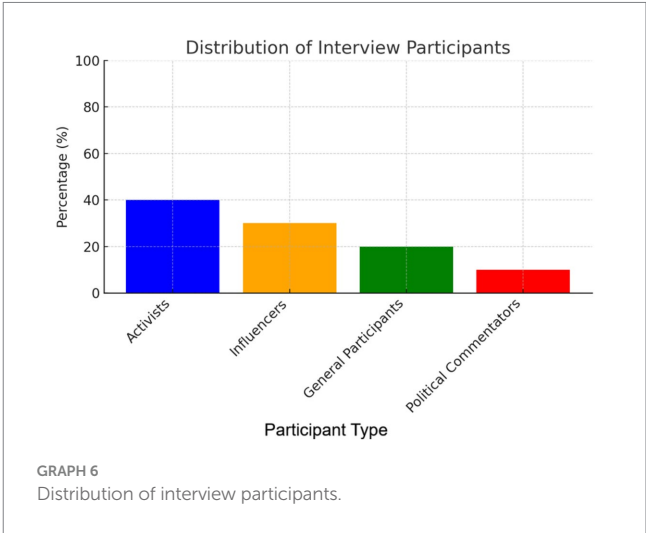
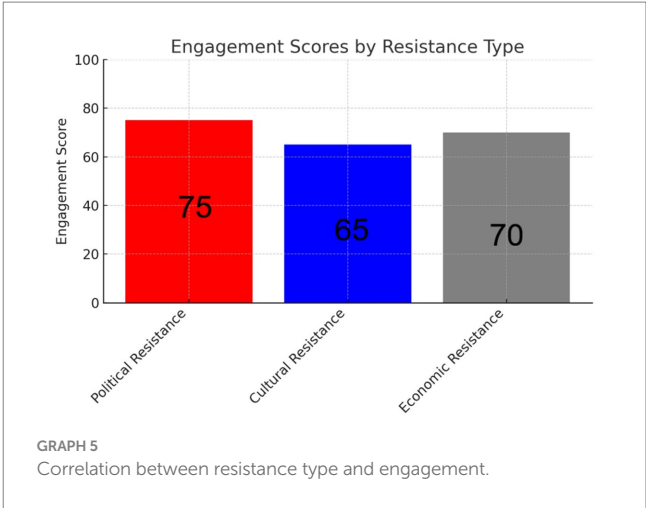
This graph lists the main challenges reported by interviewees, including online harassment, government censorship, misinformation, and platform algorithm biases. The corresponding stacked bar graph visually represents the severity and frequency of these challenges, showing that online harassment (40%) and government censorship (30%) are the most significant issues (see [Graph 9](#)).

Offline impact of online resistance

This table categorizes interviewees’ responses regarding the offline impact of online activism. The responses are divided into categories such as policy influence, protest organization, awareness-building, and no noticeable impact. The area chart illustrates these proportions, showing that the majority of interviewees (50%) believe online activism is most effective in raising awareness, while 30% believe it contributes to policy influence (see [Table 1](#)).

The corpus

The corpus for this study consists primarily of text-based downloads from various Indian social media platforms and online forums associated with resistance movements. Data were collected from digital discussions related to protests, including the Farmers’ Protest, the CAA-NRC movement, and Dalit activism. The study examines Twitter threads, Facebook groups, WhatsApp discussions, and independent activist blogs ([Ghareeb, 2000](#)). A total of 300 posts were initially sampled, from which 100 were selected for detailed analysis. The 300-post corpus was researcher-constructed and purposively drawn from the larger staged dataset. Citations to [Ghareeb \(2000\)](#) and [Ifukor \(2011\)](#) are methodological references supporting corpus design, not external sources of data. WhatsApp forwards were included only where participants provided informed consent or where content had already entered public circulation. All private identifiers were removed prior to analysis. Posts were selected based on engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments) and topic relevance to digital activism. The dataset was refined to 100 posts for in-depth analysis, ensuring representation from different ideological perspectives. These posts numbered P1 to P100, represent key topics across the dataset, focusing on themes such as political dissent, identity assertion, and socio-economic grievances. Many of the 300 posts overlap in content, with some repeating narratives or reinforcing earlier arguments. Closely related posts have been merged and analysed collectively, while off-topic diversions, such as memes and casual conversations, have been excluded ([Ifukor, 2010](#)). The final selection of 100 posts highlights the sociolinguistic aspects of digital discourse, showcasing virtual community formation, patterns of social interaction, linguistic structures, and ideological framing. Due to space constraints, this study will primarily focus on language and discourse structures in online resistance.



Language structure in social media-based resistance in India

The linguistic structure of social media communication in Indian resistance movements reflects a blend of formal and informal language, incorporating regional influences, code-switching, and

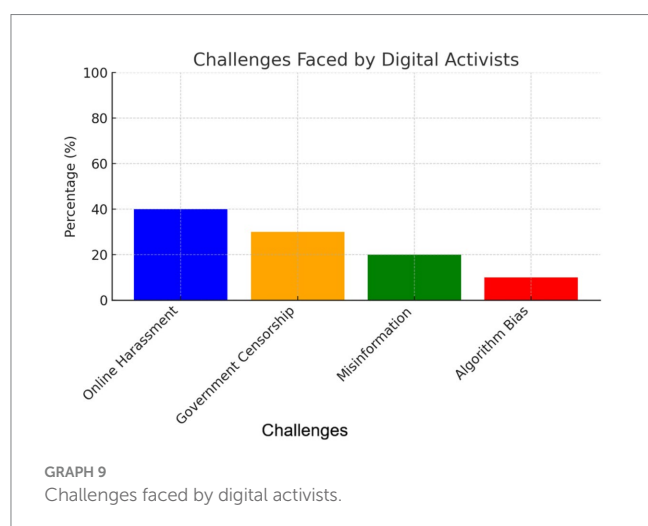
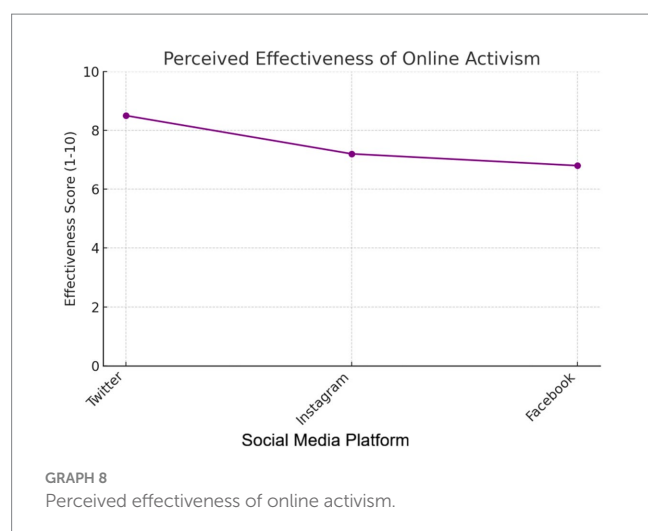


TABLE 1 Offline impact of online resistance.

Impact type	Percentage (%)
Policy influence	30%
Protest organization	20%
Awareness-building	50%
No noticeable impact	10%

creative digital expressions (Van Dijk, 2001). Computer-mediated discourse (CMD) in India shows significant linguistic variation, often shaped by the socio-political context of online activism (Crystal, 2006, 2011).

In movements like the Anti-CAA protests, Farmers' Protest, and Dalit rights activism, the language used on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp combine features of both spoken and written communication. While formal language is common in posts that critique policies or issue statements, informal and conversational styles dominate discussions among activists (Smith and Brecher, 2010). Hashtags like #IndiaAgainstCAA and #JusticeForHathrasVictim function as rallying points, often combining English with regional languages.

Indian digital activism also exhibits extensive code-switching—the mixing of English with Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, or other regional languages. Phrases like “*We will resist, hum haar nahi maanenge*” or “*Satyamev Jayate, justice must prevail*” are commonly seen in resistance discourse. Colloquialisms, slang, and abbreviations (e.g., “Govt ka natak” for “government’s drama”) make posts more engaging and relatable. Additionally, memes, GIFs, and emoticons are used to simplify complex political ideas, making activism more accessible to the masses.

Despite the informal nature of many social media posts, formal language emerges in political statements, legal petitions, and open letters shared on platforms. Influential voices, including academics and journalists, maintain a structured and analytical tone, reinforcing the credibility of activist discourse. Digital activism in India, therefore, reflects a *hybrid linguistic structure*—blending traditional formal rhetoric with interactive, expressive, and regionally influenced digital communication.

Code-switching and coinages in social media-based resistance in India

India, with its vast linguistic diversity of over 120 major languages and more than 19,500 dialects, exhibits strong features of code-switching in online activism. Social media discourse related to resistance movements, such as the Anti-CAA protests, the Farmers' Protest, Dalit rights activism, and Adivasi struggles, frequently incorporates multiple languages, reflecting regional and cultural identities.

A majority of online resistance discussions are conducted in English and Hindi, but activists frequently switch to regional languages like Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, and Marathi to emphasize cultural belonging or make political points more impactful (Raddatz, 2011; Adegbiya, 1997). Code-switching serves as a rhetorical strategy, reinforcing solidarity and emotional appeal. For instance, during the Farmers' Protest, slogans like “*No Farmers, No Food*” were accompanied by Punjabi phrases such as “*Kisaan Mazdoor Ekta Zindabad*.” Similarly, in Dalit resistance discourse, activists often write in English but switch to Hindi or Marathi for culturally significant terms, such as “*Jai Bhim*,” “*Manusmriti dahan zindabad*,” or “*Bahujan hitay, Bahujan sukhay*.”

In addition to code-switching, Indian digital activism has led to the coinage of new terms and phrases, often blending English with regional words to create impactful slogans or political statements. Terms like “Urban Naxals,” “Godi Media,” “Sangh Parivar,” and “Bhakt” have emerged as shorthand for specific political positions or criticisms. During protests, hashtags like #BolKeLabAzadHainTere (Speak, for your lips are free) and #HumDekhenge (We shall witness) became symbols of resistance, often incorporating poetic and literary references from Urdu and Hindi.

Furthermore, memes and hashtags demonstrate creative language usage. For example, phrases such as “Modi hai toh mumkin hai” (If Modi is there, it's possible) were sarcastically modified to “Modi hai toh mehngai hai” (If Modi is there, inflation is there) during economic debates. Similarly, references from Bollywood and folk traditions are used to frame political arguments.

Thus, social media resistance in India relies on a hybrid linguistic style, where English dominates structured political statements, but regional languages, code-switching, and innovative coinages shape the emotional and cultural appeal of online activism (Salawu, 2010).

Ideological narratives in digital resistance

Discourse that challenges inequality in India often reflects ideological positions shaped by mental models—both personal and collective. In the context of Indian social media activism, resistance movements construct narratives that distinguish between “Us” (the oppressed) and “Them” (the system, government, or dominant forces). This polarization is visible in the language, structure, and framing of online discussions. Protesters, whether engaged in the farmers’ protests, anti-CAA movements, Dalit and Adivasi rights struggles, or feminist activism, use strategic discourse to position themselves as defenders of democracy, justice, and constitutional rights while portraying the government or dominant social groups as oppressive or unjust. For instance, in the anti-CAA protests, activists framed themselves as protectors of secularism, using phrases like “Hum kagaz nahi dikhayenge” (We won’t show our papers), while the government was represented as violating fundamental rights (Herring, 2001).

Social media posts in Indian resistance movements strategically select vocabulary to emphasize ideological positions (Van Dijk, 1998, 2005). Protesters often use positive self-representation terms like “satyagrahi” (truth-seeker), “revolutionaries,” “Azadi lovers,” or references to historical figures like Bhagat Singh and Ambedkar to legitimize their movement. On the other hand, the ruling government or dominant groups are frequently labelled as “fascists,” “manuwadis” (caste supremacists), “Godi Media” (pro-government media) to challenge their legitimacy. Additionally, resistance discourse subtly employs presuppositions and implications to shape narratives. A phrase like “The constitution is under threat” presupposes that there is an active attack on democracy, while slogans such as “Save the Constitution” imply that the government is acting against constitutional values.

Furthermore, resistance discourse often employs storytelling techniques to evoke emotions and build solidarity. Protesters share personal stories, such as accounts of police brutality during protests, historical analogies comparing current struggles to colonial-era movements, and martyrdom narratives remembering victims of state violence, such as the farmers who died at Delhi borders. These discursive strategies help activists construct a strong identity for their cause while challenging dominant narratives (Herring, 2004). In essence, social media-based resistance in India is deeply rooted in ideological discourse structures, where linguistic choices, framing, and storytelling play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and sustaining movements.

Propositions

Propositions are arguments that embody opinions or value judgments, often used to reinforce or defend a position. In India, social media has become a powerful space where linguistic resistance is articulated through such propositions.

Proposition 1: social media strengthens linguistic identity

Many argue that platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have given regional languages a renewed space for expression. Online campaigns such as #StopHindiImposition and

#TamilNaduAgainstHindi highlight the growing assertion of linguistic identities against the perceived centralization of Hindi. These movements stress the importance of linguistic diversity in a multilingual nation like India (Androutsopoulos, 2006).

Proposition 2: digital advocacy challenges language hegemony

Social media allows regional voices to challenge dominant narratives. Activists use digital platforms to demand policy changes, such as the continued use of English as a link language rather than Hindi. This resistance is not just political but cultural, as seen in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where historical anti-Hindi movements now find digital expressions (Crystal, 2011).

Proposition 3: regional content consumption shapes public opinion

The rise of platforms like YouTube and ShareChat has shown that users prefer consuming content in their native languages. Proponents of linguistic resistance argue that such trends demonstrate the demand for inclusivity in media, education, and governance, reinforcing the need for policies that recognize India’s linguistic plurality (Androutsopoulos, 2006).

Proposition 4: counter-movements promote national integration through language

On the other hand, supporters of a common language argue that Hindi fosters national unity. Campaigns like #OneNationOneLanguage push for the wider adoption of Hindi to strengthen communication. This position, however, faces resistance from non-Hindi-speaking states, illustrating the divide in public discourse. Propositions on social media regarding linguistic resistance in India reflect deeper socio-political struggles. While one side views digital platforms as tools for preserving linguistic identity, the other sees them as spaces to promote a unified national language (Chiluwa, 2010b; Androutsopoulos, 2006). The debate underscores the role of social media in shaping contemporary language politics in India.

Each proposition is systematically anchored in its evidential foundation. The proposition that social media strengthens linguistic identity is substantiated through the convergence of interview excerpts on code-switching with quantitative frequency counts from the 300-post corpus. Likewise, the claim that digital advocacy challenges language hegemony is validated by triangulating hashtag frequency data with activist narratives. The full mapping of propositions to their evidential bases is presented in the Appendix for reference.

Presuppositions and implications

In the Indian context, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for linguistic resistance, with various presuppositions shaping the discourse. One key presupposition is that social media provides an equal platform for all voices, but in reality, access to digital spaces is uneven due to regional disparities in internet penetration and literacy levels. Another assumption is that resistance through language is a reaction to Hindi hegemony, presupposing that regional languages are marginalized. However, while this is true in some cases, platforms like ShareChat and YouTube have also enabled the growth of regional-language content. Additionally, there is a presupposition that language and political identity are deeply linked, as seen in movements against

Hindi imposition in states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. These assumptions shape the discourse, influencing how language-based resistance unfolds on social media.

The implications of these presuppositions are significant. One major consequence is the strengthening of regional linguistic movements, as digital activism amplifies demands for policy changes, such as Tamil Nadu's continued resistance to Hindi in its school curriculum. Another implication is the increasing representation of regional languages in the digital space, with tech platforms expanding their language support to cater to diverse users. However, social media also creates digital echo chambers, reinforcing linguistic and political divisions and making consensus on language policies harder to achieve (Eamonn, 2004). This, in turn, affects national integration, as debates over linguistic resistance influence political decisions and shape inter-state relations. While social media empowers linguistic identity, it also presents governance challenges, highlighting the complex role of digital platforms in shaping India's language politics.

Conclusion

This study examines the linguistic and discursive strategies employed in digital resistance, focusing on the role of social media in shaping activism in India. The findings directly address the research questions outlined in this study. First, in response to how linguistic and semiotic strategies are used in online resistance, the analysis reveals that activists strategically employ code-switching, multimodal content (memes, emojis, images), and viral hashtags to enhance engagement and circumvent censorship. These digital tools help create community solidarity and amplify resistance narratives. Second, regarding the impact of algorithmic visibility on activist discourse, the study finds that platform algorithms often suppress politically sensitive content, limiting its reach. However, activists counteract this suppression through trending keywords, alternative phrasing, and decentralized platforms to maintain visibility. Finally, the study highlights how regional variations influence digital resistance in India, with movements incorporating vernacular languages, cultural symbols, and localized narratives to assert identity and mobilize support. This linguistic diversity strengthens digital activism by making it more accessible to grassroots communities.

These findings underscore the complex interaction between digital activism, platform governance, and linguistic strategies, raising critical concerns about content moderation policies and algorithmic bias. As social media continues to serve as a battleground for activism, it is essential to establish more transparent moderation frameworks that protect freedom of expression while addressing misinformation. Additionally, digital literacy programs can empower marginalized communities to navigate online resistance more effectively. Future research should explore the role of AI-driven censorship in shaping activist discourse and assess the viability of decentralized platforms as alternative spaces for resistance movements. By addressing these challenges, scholars and policymakers can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable digital public sphere.

This study demonstrates that digital resistance in India is a layered practice where political grievances, cultural identity assertion, and economic concerns intersect. Quantitative mapping ($n = 5,000$) shows broad thematic and sentiment patterns (Graphs 2–5), the 300-post meso-corpus uncovers frequent code-switching and

multimodal frames amplifying identity narratives, and the 100-post CDA illustrates symbolic repertoires (e.g., Ambedkarite invocations) that turn grievance into collective identity. Interview narratives corroborate these findings, showing how activists perceive both the affordances and limits of online campaigning. Taken together, these results highlight how platform algorithms, multilingual repertoires, and visual culture shape the forms and trajectories of contemporary digital resistance. While online activism effectively raises awareness and builds solidarity, its capacity to translate into offline policy outcomes remains contested.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/[Supplementary material](#).

Author contributions

DA: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. Vishwanatha: Writing – review & editing. RP: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1648587/full#supplementary-material>

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