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Momentary Empathy: The Hidden Drivers of Temporary Social Media Activism

Abstract

The rise of social media has empowered young adults to engage with global crises by sharing content and participating in discussions. Research indicates that social media activism often intensifies during periods of heightened media coverage and may wane as media interest fades, a pattern seemingly influenced by momentary empathy, a transient emotional response to emotionally evocative content. This study investigates the motivations, emotional dynamics, and authenticity of social media activism during traumatic news events. Using a qualitative approach, 13 semi-structured interviews with individuals aged 18-25 revealed five progressive stages of engagement, encapsulated in the “Momentary Empathy Cycle”: Trigger, Action, Sustained Engagement, Saturation and Fatigue, and Disengagement. Emotional triggers, such as vivid imagery and poignant narratives, drove initial engagement, while emotional fatigue, desensitisation, and competing priorities emerged as barriers to sustained activism. Findings highlight that while digital activism offers a platform for immediate mobilisation, its sustainability is hindered by emotional exhaustion and the ephemeral nature of online engagement. The study provides practical insights for fostering sustained and authentic social media activism, with implications for platform design, educational interventions, and advocacy strategies.

Keywords: Momentary empathy, Social media activism, Motivations, Authenticity, Emotional Dynamics, Traumatic News Events

Introduction

Social Media Activism:

Social media has reshaped how individuals engage with societal issues, creating opportunities for activism that were previously inaccessible. Platforms such as X, Instagram, and Facebook, have skyrocketed in popularity in the past few years providing a platform for voices to be heard. Unlike traditional activism, which relied on grassroots organisations and mainstream media, social media has democratised participation, amplifying marginalised voices and fostering global connectivity (Boulianne, 2015). Traumatic news events lead to social media campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter which exemplify social media's ability to mobilise collective action, spark dialogue, and raise awareness about pressing social issues. However, the sustainability and real-world impact of such activism remain subjects of debate.

Traumatic News Events:

Traumatic news events often serve as catalysts for social media activism, prompting users to express solidarity and share information rapidly. The immediate emotional responses elicited by such events can lead to widespread online engagement. The emotional resonance of these events fosters a transient emotional response where individuals briefly experience and empathise with the feelings or distress of others, often prompted by exposure to emotionally evocative content such as images, videos, or narratives on social media. (Batson, C. D, 1991). Although this empathy can lead to prosocial actions, such as donating or amplifying awareness, its effects are often short-lived, with attention shifting rapidly to the next crisis (Zaki, 2019). This pattern raises

critical questions about the drivers and sustainability of social media activism and its capacity to drive lasting change.

Social Psychology Factors:

The motivations behind social media activism are deeply rooted in social psychology. Individuals often engage in online activism due to a desire for social validation, seeking approval and recognition from their peers. This behaviour can sometimes lead to performative activism, where actions are driven more by the pursuit of social capital than by genuine commitment to a cause. Additionally, the concept of "slacktivism" or the tendency to engage in minimal online actions reflects the tendency for individuals to participate in low-effort online activities that provide a sense of contribution without necessitating significant personal investment. (Christensen, 2011). Understanding these psychological factors is crucial for assessing the authenticity and effectiveness of digital activism

Review of Literature:

Existing research has explored the role of social media activism in raising awareness, mobilizing support, and fostering dialogue. Boulianne (2015) and Kavada (2015) highlight how campaigns like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have amplified marginalized voices, yet their long-term impact remains debated. Christensen (2011) introduced the concept of "slacktivism," describing low-effort online actions that provide a sense of contribution without significant commitment. Zaki (2019) emphasized the role of emotional triggers, such as vivid imagery, in fostering transient empathy, echoing Batson's (1991) findings on the link between emotional resonance and prosocial behaviour. However, Zaki also noted the ephemeral nature of this empathy, raising concerns about sustaining activism. Vogel et al. (2014) examined the influence of peer validation

and social comparison, linking these factors to performative activism, where actions are driven by social capital rather than genuine commitment. While these studies provide insights into the dynamics of social media activism, gaps remain in understanding the interplay between transient emotional responses, social validation, and the authenticity of activism, particularly among college students during traumatic news events. This study addresses these gaps by offering a psychological perspective on the motivations, emotional dynamics, and sustainability of social media activism.

Study Populations

College students aged 18-25, as a demographic highly immersed in social media, represent a key group for understanding digital activism. Their frequent engagement with platforms like Instagram, Facebook and X makes them particularly susceptible to the dynamics of social validation and peer influence. Research suggests that students' online behaviour is shaped by both personal motivations and the opinions of their social networks (Vogel et al., 2014). This dual influence makes their engagement with social and political issues uniquely complex, blending genuine concern with the pressure to conform to prevailing digital norms.

Research Problem: Exploring Momentary Empathy in Social Media Activism

The phenomenon of temporary social media activism during traumatic news events highlights significant questions about the motivations, emotional dynamics, and authenticity of such behaviour. This research seeks to understand why college students, in particular, participate in transient online acts of empathy and whether these engagements contribute to genuine awareness or meaningful, long-term social change. Further, it seeks to understand the authenticity behind social media activism and its sustainability.

The Momentary Empathy Theory (MET)

The **Momentary Empathy Theory (MET)** addresses the gap between emotional triggers, social validation, and patterns of digital behaviour. Unlike previous theories that prioritize sustained empathy and long-term prosocial actions, MET focuses on transient emotional reactions and their fleeting expressions within digital activism. This study builds upon these concepts, providing a novel perspective on the motivations and authenticity of online engagement. It is pivotal in understanding the psychological factors influencing temporary social media activism during traumatic news events, particularly among university students. The introduction of MET offers a fresh analytical framework for examining how transient emotional responses shape online behaviour. By exploring the motivations, authenticity, and sustainability of such activism, this research seeks to determine whether these behaviours originate from genuine emotional engagement or external social pressures.

Differentiating MET from Existing Empathy Models

While previous theories, such as Batson's (1991) empathy-altruism hypothesis, suggest that empathy can drive sustained prosocial behaviour, MET emphasises the transient and digitally mediated nature of empathy in online activism. Unlike Zaki's (2019) transient empathy framework, which focuses on the short-lived nature of emotional resonance, MET integrates the role of digital environments in amplifying and subsequently dissipating emotional engagement. This distinction is crucial in understanding why activism often fades once social validation decreases or media attention shifts. Additionally, MET highlights the role of content saturation and emotional fatigue, which are less emphasised in traditional empathy models.

Need for study

This study is crucial for understanding the psychological factors that influence temporary social media activism during traumatic news events, particularly among college students. By exploring the role of momentary empathy, performative behaviour, and peer influence, this research aims to uncover the motivations driving online engagement and the factors affecting its authenticity and sustainability. The results will provide valuable insights into whether such activism stems from genuine emotional investment or external social pressures. These findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of digital activism, offering practical implications for fostering sustained, meaningful engagement and enhancing the impact of online advocacy campaigns.

Methodology

Aim

To examine the psychological mechanisms underlying temporary social media activism, focusing on momentary empathy, emotional triggers, and authenticity in engagement during traumatic news events among college students

Research Questions

1. What motivates college students to engage in temporary social media activism during traumatic news events?
2. How do college students perceive the authenticity and sustainability of their social media activism?
3. What role does momentary empathy play in influencing social media activism behaviours?
4. What patterns of engagement and disengagement emerge in temporary social media activism?

Objectives

1. To understand how momentary empathy plays a role in temporary social media activism.
2. To understand the motivations driving individuals to post and engage with traumatic news events on social media.
3. To evaluate participants' perceptions of authenticity and sustainability in their activism.
4. To identify recurring patterns in how college students engage and disengage from social media activism.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, using a phenomenological approach to explore participants' lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions of social media activism.

Tools Description:

- **Screening Questionnaire:** A short questionnaire was designed to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria, ensuring relevance and focus during the research.
- **Interview Guide:** A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore participants' emotional responses, motivations, and perceptions of authenticity related to temporary social media activism. To enhance the reliability of the interview process, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of peers. This helped refine the questions, clarify ambiguities, and ensure that the guide effectively captured the intended data. Feedback from the pilot study informed revisions to improve the flow and depth of the interviews.

Participants

The study examined 13 college students (ages 18-25) who were active on social media and had recently engaged in temporary activism related to traumatic news events. Participants were purposively sampled from different Indian states, including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Karnataka. They were selected based on their active social media presence and engagement with digital activism to ensure rich experiential insights. Their sociodemographic profiles are documented in **Table 1**.

Table 1
Represents the demographics of the participants in this study:

S. No.	Name	Age	Sex	Education	Occupation	Residence
1	RQ	24	Female	MSc Psychology	Student	Chennai
2	SR	19	Male	B.E Mechanical Engineering	Student	Chennai
3	SD	20	Male	BSc Psychology	Student	Chennai
4	AB	18	Female	BA Psychology	Student	Chennai
5	AH	19	Female	BSc Psychology	Student	Kochi
6	CAX	19	Male	BSc Psychology	Student	Chennai
7	JB	20	Female	BSc Visual Communication	Student	Chennai
8	SK	20	Female	BSc Psychology	Student	Chennai
9	TJ	18	Male	BA Psychology	Student	Chennai
10	SA	23	Female	MSc Psychology	Student	Chennai
11	VMK	20	Female	BSc Psychology	Student	Pune
12	YAH	25	Female	B.E Computer Engineering	Student	Bangalore
13	VK	21	Male	M.A Media Management	Student	Mumbai

Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria. A screening questionnaire was circulated to identify suitable candidates for semi-structured interviews.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Participants aged between 18-25 years.
2. Active users of social media who have recently posted or engaged with content about traumatic news events.
3. Willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Individuals without recent engagement in social media activism.

Data Collection:

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted online or in person, lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Method Used for Data Analysis:

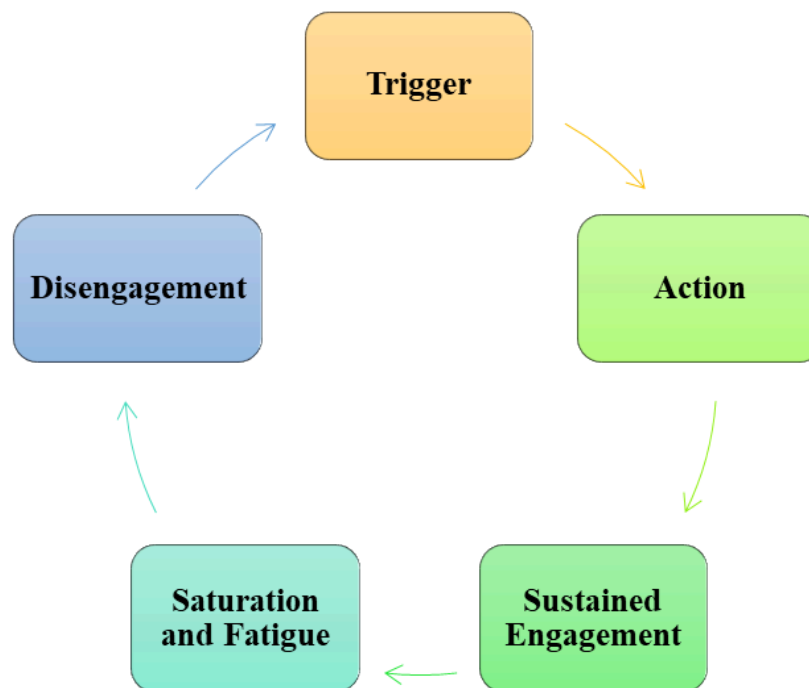
The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which identifies and interprets patterns within qualitative data. MAXQDA 2024 was used for efficient coding and organization of themes. Data saturation was reached when no new insights emerged, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. The analysis explored how momentary empathy influenced motivations, perceptions of authenticity, and disengagement in social media activism.

Results and Discussion

Introduction

The findings of this study, based on thematic analysis of 13 in-depth qualitative interviews with participants aged 18-25 from diverse academic backgrounds across India, illuminate the intricate emotional and behavioural dynamics of social media activism during traumatic news events. There were 5 male and 8 female participants. The narratives of participants unravel the complexity of engagement, emphasizing emotional triggers, peer influence, and the challenges of sustaining digital activism. The findings are encapsulated within the "Momentary Empathy Cycle," which delineates five progressive stages: Trigger, Action, Sustained Engagement, Saturation and Fatigue, and Disengagement.

The Momentary Empathy Cycle:



The Momentary Empathy Cycle describes the lifecycle of emotional engagement in social media activism, where exposure to emotionally evocative content triggers an immediate but transient empathetic response. This response drives initial activism, which often declines as emotional fatigue, desensitization, or competing priorities emerge. conceptualizes the lifecycle of social media activism through five progressive stages:

1. **Trigger:** Exposure to emotionally evocative content activates empathy and prompts action.
2. **Action:** Heightened emotional intensity drives immediate responses, such as sharing posts or commenting.
3. **Sustained Engagement:** Continued activism, influenced by ongoing updates and social validation.
4. **Saturation and Fatigue:** Emotional exhaustion and desensitisation reduce engagement.
5. **Disengagement:** Competing demands and diminishing emotional intensity lead to withdrawal.

Stage 1: Trigger – Theme Initial Emotional Engagement

- **Sub-theme 1.1: Emotional Triggers:** Vivid imagery and poignant narratives act as catalysts for engagement.
- **Sub-theme 1.2: Relatability and Identity:** Issues aligned with personal or community identity enhance emotional responses.

Stage 2: Action – Theme Transient Emotional Reactions

- **Sub-theme 2.1: Expressive Sharing:** Sharing content provides an emotional outlet and reinforces values.
- **Sub-theme 2.2: Urgency of Action:** A strong sense of immediacy drives participants to share or react quickly.

Stage 3: Theme Sustained Engagement

- **Sub-theme 3.1: Ongoing Involvement:** Continuous updates and validation motivate long-term engagement.
- **Sub-theme 3.2: Challenges to Momentum:** Perceived stagnation or lack of progress leads to reduced enthusiasm.

Stage 4: Theme Saturation and Fatigue

- **Sub-theme 4.1: Overexposure:** Repeated exposure to distressing narratives leads to desensitization.
- **Sub-theme 4.2: Theme Emotional Fatigue:** Prolonged emotional investment causes mental exhaustion and disengagement.

Stage 5: Theme Disengagement

- **Sub-theme 5.1: Loss of Motivation:** Feelings of helplessness and futility prompt withdrawal from activism.
- **Sub-theme 5.2: Competing Demands:** Personal and professional responsibilities overshadow activism efforts.

Discussion

Stage 1: Trigger – Initial Emotional Engagement The Trigger stage marks the onset of engagement, driven by exposure to emotionally provocative content that activates empathy and prompts action.

Sub-theme 1.1: Emotional Triggers Participants consistently identified vivid imagery and poignant narratives as key catalysts for their involvement. Participant VMK reflected on this, stating:

“When I see videos of people in Gaza showing their daily struggles, it makes me feel heartbroken. These visuals push me to engage.”

Similarly, Participant YAH noted:

“Emotions play a vital role; they trigger something inside me and prompt me to act”

Sub-theme 1.2: Relatability and Identity Issues that resonated with personal identities or community affiliations heightened emotional responses. Participant AH shared:

“As a member of the queer community, I feel it’s my responsibility to amplify issues that directly affect us”

Stage 2: Action – Transient Emotional Reactions This stage reflects the zenith of emotional engagement, where participants convert empathy into immediate actions such as sharing posts, commenting, or adding personal viewpoints.

Sub-theme 2.1: Expressive Sharing For many, sharing content served as an emotional outlet. As participant YAH observed:

“Posting feels like an emotional release, even if it’s just my personal feelings being expressed”.

Sub-theme 2.2: Urgency of Action A strong sense of immediacy characterized this stage. Participant AB emphasized:

“It feels urgent to share posts about relief helplines during disasters. Someone might need it”.

Stage 3: Sustained Engagement This stage encompasses ongoing activism beyond the initial response, influenced by continuous external cues and personal motivations.

Sub-theme 3.1: Ongoing Involvement Participants who maintained engagement highlighted the role of consistent updates and social validation. Participant CAX explained:

“When I see consistent posts and updates, it keeps me involved”

Sub-theme 3.2: Challenges to Momentum Despite initial enthusiasm, participants often experienced a decline in motivation when perceiving stagnation. Participant SA remarked:

“When you realize nothing meaningful is changing, it’s hard to stay motivated”.

Stage 4: Saturation and Fatigue This stage is marked by emotional exhaustion stemming from prolonged exposure to distressing content and the absence of tangible outcomes.

Sub-theme 4.1: Overexposure Repeated exposure to similar narratives often leads to desensitization. Participant VK shared:

“Seeing the same heartbreaking stories repeatedly desensitised me”.

Sub-theme 4.2: Emotional Fatigue Emotional exhaustion was a key reason for disengagement. Participant SK noted:

“It gets emotionally exhausting to keep revisiting the same painful issues”.

Stage 5: Disengagement The final stage describes a gradual withdrawal from activism as emotional intensity diminishes and competing priorities take precedence.

Sub-theme 5.1: Loss of Motivation Participants often cited feelings of helplessness as a reason for disengagement. Participant SD expressed:

“When you see no real change happening, it feels futile”.

Sub-theme 5.2: Competing Demands Personal and professional responsibilities frequently diverted attention. Participant RQ shared:

“Life gets busy, and activism takes a backseat”.

Restating the Research Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Uncover the emotional and behavioural dynamics of social media activism.
2. Examine the role of empathy and emotional fatigue in sustaining engagement.
3. Investigate perceptions of authenticity and barriers to the sustainability of activism.

Interpretation Through the Momentary Empathy Cycle

Trigger and Action: The initial stages underscore the power of emotionally charged content in mobilizing individuals. This aligns with the emotional contagion theory, which suggests that emotions can spread among individuals like a virus, and the self-affirmation theory, which posits that actions such as posting online help individuals maintain their sense of personal integrity. These theories highlight the psychological mechanisms that make emotionally evocative content particularly compelling for initiating activism. The urgency described by participants illustrates the amplification effect of digital platforms.

Sustained Engagement: Sustained involvement is often contingent on external cues like media visibility and social validation. However, the fragility of this stage underscores the necessity for mechanisms that encourage long-term commitment.

Saturation and Disengagement: Prolonged exposure to distressing content leads to emotional fatigue and desensitization, echoing findings in compassion fatigue literature. To mitigate these

effects, strategies such as limiting screen time, curating diverse content to prevent overexposure to distressing narratives, and engaging in offline activism can help sustain emotional well-being while maintaining advocacy efforts. These insights highlight the critical need for balancing emotional investment with self-care strategies.

Summary of Findings

The Momentary Empathy Cycle provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the lifecycle of social media activism, offering practical insights for designing targeted strategies that enhance engagement. By mapping these stages, activists and digital platform designers can create content that maintains empathy-driven participation, incorporates mechanisms to reduce emotional fatigue, and fosters sustained interaction with causes. Emotional triggers and urgency propel initial engagement, as evidenced by participants who shared that witnessing distressing images or compelling stories moved them to immediate action. For example, several participants described posting about relief efforts during natural disasters, while others felt compelled to comment on systemic injustices like the Gaza conflict or gender-based violence. However, as emotional fatigue set in due to the repetitive nature of distressing content and perceived lack of progress, many participants noted a gradual disengagement. These observations highlight the dual role of emotional resonance as both an initiator of activism and a potential barrier to sustained involvement when overexposure leads to desensitization. These findings underscore the transient nature of digital activism and its inherent challenges.

Conclusion

This research highlights the intricate interplay between emotional triggers, peer dynamics, and transient activism within the context of traumatic news events. The "Momentary Empathy Cycle" framework effectively encapsulates the lifecycle of social media activism, from initial engagement driven by momentary empathy to eventual disengagement influenced by emotional fatigue and competing priorities. The study underscores that while social media platforms offer unparalleled opportunities for rapid mobilization and awareness, the sustainability and authenticity of digital activism remain significant challenges. Emotional resonance serves as both a powerful motivator and a potential barrier, with many participants citing feelings of helplessness or desensitization over time. Additionally, the role of social validation and peer influence often amplifies performative activism, raising critical questions about the genuine impact of online advocacy. By examining these dynamics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social factors shaping temporary social media activism. It emphasizes the need for fostering meaningful, sustained engagement by addressing emotional fatigue and reinforcing mechanisms that promote genuine connections to causes. The insights gained from this study have practical implications for designing digital platforms, advocacy campaigns, and educational interventions aimed at enhancing the impact and authenticity of online activism.

Implications:

1. **For Platforms:** Implement features to reduce content saturation and support users' mental health.
2. **For Educators:** Teach media literacy to help individuals critically assess digital content and manage emotional responses.
3. **For Activists:** Encourage a blend of online and offline activism to sustain momentum and achieve tangible outcomes.

Limitations:

While this study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the reliance on a qualitative sample of college students aged 18-30 may limit the generalizability of findings to other demographics or age groups. Additionally, the study focuses on self-reported data, which may introduce biases such as social desirability. Finally, the analysis is specific to the context of social media activism during traumatic news events, which may not fully capture broader trends in digital advocacy.

Scope for Further Research

- 1. Expanding Demographics:** Investigate other age groups, professional sectors, or geographical regions to explore variations in motivations and engagement patterns.
- 2. Cross-Platform Analysis:** Compare user behaviour across various social media platforms to identify platform-specific drivers and barriers to activism.
- 4. Intersectional Analysis:** Explore how intersecting identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background) influence motivations and perceptions of authenticity in activism.
- 5. Quantitative Insights:** Use quantitative methodologies to validate and measure the generalizability of the Momentary Empathy Cycle across larger populations.
- 6. Offline Impact:** Study the connection between online activism and its translation to sustained offline actions and policy changes.

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