From Memes to Mobilization: Mapping the Multi-Platform Protest Infrastructure of Nepal's 2025 Gen-Z Movement

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101100104

Received: 04 November 2026; Accepted: 09 November 2026; Published: 21 November 2026

ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media in political life has raised concerns that protest movements are being reduced to a single platform, obscuring how digital infrastructure shapes mobilization, narrative control and the risks faced by participants. This study investigates the relationship between platform-specific communicative functions and the phases of mobilization within the context of Nepal's September 2025 Gen-Z protests. A convergent mixed-methods research design was employed, combining content analysis of 210 public posts (Facebook, n = 110; Instagram, n = 50; TikTok, n = 50) with interviews with 20 person those are, volunteers, participants and bystanders. Data were analyzed using descriptive engagement statistics, nonparametric tests and reflexive thematic analysis. The results indicate that attention was highly concentrated: the ten most engaged posts accounted for 51.8% of all engagement, and core organizers produced 20.0% of posts but only 4.4% of engagement. TikTok carried grievance framing, Facebook organizational announcements and elite endorsement, and Instagram acted as a relay for regional and international accounts (39.5 shares per 100 likes). Furthermore, the study found that interviewees describe a private Discord-based backstage used for marshaling, security and political succession, and that the same infrastructure exposed participants to infiltration claims, misread symbols and the criminalization of decontextualized clips. These findings suggest that the movement's strength lay in a four-layer protest stack and in infrastructural brokerage rather than in any single platform. The study recommends that platforms, journalists and courts verify context before circulating or relying on clips and symbols, and that organizers plan for the security of private channels, to improve the protection of participants in future digitally mediated protests.

Keywords*:* digital activism; protest communication; platform ecology; Gen-Z mobilization; Nepal; communication infrastructure; online–offline integration; Discord

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first week of September 2025, Nepal experienced the most consequential youth-led political upheaval in its recent history. After the government moved against social media platforms in early September, young people who had already been circulating "Nepo Baby" videos about the lifestyles of politicians' children converged on Maitighar Mandala in Kathmandu on 8 September 2025 (23 Bhadra 2082). The march toward the restricted area around the Federal Parliament in New Baneshwor ended in lethal force against protesters; interviewees and posts in our corpus converge on a death toll of at least 19 on that day. On 9 September (24 Bhadra), enraged crowds burned the Parliament, Singha Durbar, the Supreme Court and numerous private and party properties, and Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned. Within days, an interim government headed by Sushila Karki, Nepal's first woman prime minister, had been installed after negotiations in which Gen-Z organizers took part.

Commentators quickly labeled the episode a "social media revolution" or a "Discord revolution." Such labels capture something real, but they flatten the communicative organization of the movement into a single technology. The evidence assembled for this study points to a more differentiated arrangement. Different platforms did different jobs, they were used by different kinds of actors, and they carried the movement through different phases. TikTok accounts built an emotional register of grievance weeks before any rally was announced. Facebook pages carried time-and-place calls, crisis statements and negotiation updates. Instagram, to a degree not anticipated in our initial framing, functioned as a relay through which regional and international

accounts re-circulated the events. And a private layer of Discord and other messaging spaces, which public data cannot observe, appears in the interviews as the place where marshaling, security and, ultimately, the improvisation of a post-government transition took place.

This paper asks: *How did Nepal's Gen-Z movement assemble and operate a differentiated platform ecology, and how did that infrastructure shape mobilization, narrative control and affective resonance, across the movement's phases and across the online–offline boundary?* Four sub-questions structure the analysis. RQ1: Which communicative functions (grievance framing, mobilization, documentation of violence, victory narration, and narrative defense) were concentrated on which platforms and in which phases? RQ2: Which kinds of actors captured attention, and how unequal was that distribution? RQ3: How do participants describe the digital coordination of the protest and its relationship to the offline events of 23–24 Bhadra? RQ4: How did the same infrastructure expose the movement to infiltration claims, misrecognition and criminalization?

The study draws on two bodies of evidence: a purposively assembled corpus of 210 public posts from Facebook, Instagram and TikTok (26 August 2025 to 29 March 2026), and twenty first-person interview accounts from organizers, volunteers, participants, injured protesters, people later targeted by online accusations, and bystanders who lived or worked near the Parliament. Combining the two lets us test what posts appear to show against what participants say they did. The central argument is that the movement's communicative strength was not located in any one platform but in a division of labor among platforms, and that this division also produced the movement's vulnerabilities: highly unequal attention, dependence on elite and foreign amplifiers, and exposure to fast-moving accusations that organizers could contest only by posting more.

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the data and methods. Section 4 presents findings, beginning with the attention economy of the corpus and moving through platform-specific functions, the backstage layer revealed by interviews, online–offline integration and contested narratives. Section 5 develops a four-layer "protest stack" model and discusses its implications. Section 6 concludes and notes limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Activism and the Question of Organisation

Scholarship on digital protest has moved from early celebration and skepticism (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011) toward analyses of how media interact with organizational capacity and political opportunity (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). Gerbaudo (2012) showed that social media help "choreograph" assemblies by giving crowds emotional and spatial direction, while Bennett and Segerberg (2013) described a logic of connective action in which personalized content sharing substitutes for formal collective identity. Tufekci (2017) cautioned that movements that scale quickly through digital means may lack the organizational muscle for later strategic decisions. These accounts frame an important puzzle for the Nepali case: a movement with no party backing and contested leadership nonetheless produced a rally, a medical and marshaling operation, and, within days, a negotiated political outcome.

2.2 Affordances and Platform Ecologies

The affordance concept (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001) directs attention to what technologies make possible without determining use. Applied to social media, it highlights how visibility, persistence, search ability and algorithmic recommendation differ across platforms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) and how users actively appropriate or subvert these properties (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011). Platform ecology approaches take the further step of treating platforms as interdependent: content, users and audiences move among them, and their commercial logics co-evolve (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018). In activism research this view appears as the study of hybrid media ecologies in which movements combine multiple media for distinct purposes (Treré, 2019; Treré & Mattoni, 2016), and of how affordances are mapped onto tasks such as private coordination, public persuasion and cultural expression (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020; Freelon et al., 2016).

TikTok's recommendation-driven discovery makes it especially suited to reaching people who do not follow activists (Zulli & Zulli, 2022; Kaye et al., 2021). Facebook remains, in many Global South settings, the default public sphere for news, organizations and celebrities. Instagram's visual and reel formats favor aesthetic and humorous forms of political communication and are easily reposted by accounts with no stake in the originate-

ng event. Closed chat and community platforms such as Discord offer channel-based, role-based and semi-private organization that is difficult for outside researchers to observe. We treat these properties as resources actors can use rather than as determinants of outcomes.

2.3 Communication Infrastructure

Communication infrastructure theory (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) conceives of communities as integrated through layered storytelling networks. Ling (2012) emphasizes how mobile communication becomes taken for granted as a background condition of coordination. Infrastructure studies add that such systems become visible mainly when they fail (Star & Bowker, 2002), and that platforms are themselves infrastructures whose governance and reliability shape those who depend on them (Plantin et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Juris (2012) and Earl and Kimport (2011) similarly stress how networked tools reduce coordination costs and reshape what protest requires. We use "protest infrastructure" to name the set of communicative systems, and the labor of maintaining them, through which a particular protest becomes organismal, visible and defensible.

2.4 Youth, Politics and Digital Vernaculars

Research on youth participation has shifted from an apathy narrative toward recognition of non-institutional repertoires (Dalton, 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In Nepal, a history of armed conflict and rapid, unstable democratization (Hutt, 2004) forms the background against which a younger, smartphone-connected generation relates to parties it perceives as entrenched. Studies of digital vernaculars and hashtag activism show how global platforms are localized into culturally specific idioms of grievance and humor (Poell & Borra, 2012; Sinpeng, 2021). The "Nepo Baby" frame, which in our corpus is explicitly linked to earlier uses in the Philippines and Indonesia, is such a localization: it travels as a template and is filled with Nepali names, prices and anecdotes.

3. METHOD

3.1 Design

The study uses a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A quantitative strand of descriptive content analysis and engagement analytics maps the visible, public layer of the platform ecology. A qualitative strand of twenty interview accounts reveals practices and perceptions that public data cannot show, especially in private coordination spaces. The two strands were analyzed separately and then integrated in the interpretive stage, where posts were read against interviewees' descriptions of the same days. The design is exploratory and descriptive; the corpus is purposive rather than random, so inferential statistics are used only as rough guides to patterns.

3.2 Social Media Corpus

The corpus comprises 210 public posts: 110 from Facebook, 50 from Instagram and 50 from TikTok, published by 121 distinct accounts between 26 August 2025 and 29 March 2026. Posts were located through the movement's hashtags and keywords (including #ZenZProtest, #StopCorruption, #NepoBaby and #GenZProtest) and through the accounts of organizers, public figures, media outlets and ordinary users who engaged with the events. For each post the dataset records the platform, date, account name, a content summary, likes, shares, comments, observed themes, a link and a screenshot file name. The link and screenshot fields serve only as references for verification and archiving; they were not used in any analysis.

Engagement counts were recorded as displayed at collection and converted from abbreviated values (for example, "10.1K") to numbers; values displayed in rounded form are therefore approximate. Total engagement is the sum of likes, shares and comments. Because platforms define and display these metrics differently,

cross-platform comparisons are treated as indicative. Only 14 posts (6.7 per cent) fall after 16 September, so the corpus is concentrated on the movement's acute phase and should not be read as a representative sample of later discourse.

We coded each post for (a) the platform, (b) the date, which was used to assign one of five phases (pre-mobilization, 26 August–7 September; protest day, 8 September; escalation and resignation, 9 September; transition, 10–16 September; retrospective, 17 September onward), (c) account type (core organizer, public figure, news media, Nepali page or creator, transnational or outsider account, ordinary user), and (d) nine non-exclusive themes. Account types were assigned from the account names and the dataset's descriptive notes. Themes were derived from the dataset's observed-theme notes and content summaries with a keyword-assisted codebook (Appendix B), so a post can carry several themes. This coding is transparent and reproducible but coarse; it captures whether a theme is present, not how it is argued.

3.3 Interviews

The qualitative corpus consists of twenty first-person interview accounts (I-01 to I-20), selected to represent different positions in and around the events of 23–24 Bhadra 2082: four organizers or group leaders (A), two Hami Nepal volunteers (B), six participants, several of them injured (C), two people later accused or investigated on the basis of online material (D), and six bystanders and residents near the Parliament and other sites (E). Appendix A lists the sample. The accounts were originally given in Nepali and are used here in English translation. Sections of the accounts that concern digital communication, coordination, rumour, visibility and accusation were coded using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with attention to platform selection, coordination practices, the online–offline interface and contested attribution of responsibility. Two volunteer accounts (I-04 and I-05) are almost textually identical; we treat them as a single narrative of the Hami Nepal medical team and do not count them as independent corroboration.

3.4 Ethics and Reflexivity

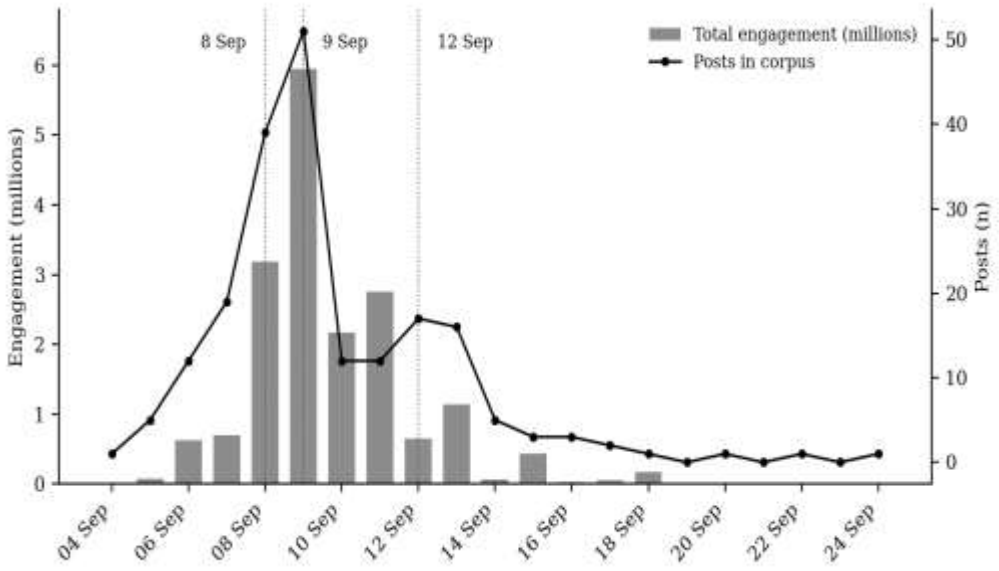
Interview accounts include allegations about violence, injuries and criminal investigations. We therefore refer to interviewees by code and role; names appear in Appendix A only for the four organizers whose public roles are central to the analysis. Information about people facing legal proceedings (I-08, I-09) is limited to what is needed to analyses the role of online material. Public social media posts are cited by identifier and, where an account belongs to a private individual, are described by type rather than by handle. Statements about responsibility for violence are reported as the claims of the interviewees, not as established facts. Where accounts conflict, the conflict is presented as a finding.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Attention Economy of the Corpus

The 210 posts generated 19.58 million recorded engagements (16.46 million likes, 2.36 million shares and 0.77 million comments). Attention was extremely concentrated. The median post attracted 6,588 engagements, the mean was 93,241, and the ten most engaged posts (5 per cent of the corpus) accounted for 51.8 per cent of all engagement; the top twenty accounted for 72.9 per cent (Gini = .84). Time was equally concentrated: the two days of 8–9 September produced 90 posts (42.9 per cent) and 46.7 per cent of engagement (Figure 1). A second surge on 10–11 September came from international and regional amplification, and a third on 13 September from Facebook posts celebrating the interim government.

Figure 1 *Daily posts and total engagement in the corpus, 4–24 September 2025*



Note. Nine posts outside this window (26 August; 30 December 2025 to 29 March 2026) are omitted from the figure but included in all tables.

Table 1

Corpus Size, Engagement and Amplification Rates by Platform

Platform	Posts	Likes	Shares	Comments	Total engagement	Median per post	Shares per 100 likes	Comments per 100 likes
Facebook	110	6,180,302	397,095	580,435	7,157,832	3,258	6.4	9.4
Instagram	50	4,031,723	1,593,002	111,366	5,736,091	8,013	39.5	2.8
TikTok	50	6,247,314	365,369	74,019	6,686,702	17,165	5.8	1.2
Total	**210**	**16,459,339**	**2,355,466**	**765,820**	**19,580,625**	**6,588**	**14.3**	**4.7**

Note. Total engagement = likes + shares + comments. Median is of total engagement per post. Counts are as displayed at collection and, where shown in abbreviated form (e.g., 10.1K), approximate.

Platforms differed significantly in how much attention a typical post received (Table 1; Kruskal–Wallis test on likes, $H(2) = 11.87$, $p = .003$, interpreted cautiously given purposive sampling). The median TikTok post drew 17,165 engagements, the median Instagram post 8,013 and the median Facebook post 3,258. Facebook nevertheless supplied the most posts and the highest total engagement (7.16 million) because of a small number of extremely high-reach public-figure posts. The platforms also differ in the kind of response they elicit. Facebook posts attract the most comments relative to likes (9.4 per 100 likes), consistent with its use for argument, instruction and negotiation. TikTok posts are liked at scale but seldom discussed (1.2 comments per 100 likes). Instagram posts are shared at a strikingly high rate: 39.5 shares per 100 likes, compared with 6.4 on Facebook and 5.8 on TikTok. Instagram, in other words, was the platform on which content was passed along rather than debated.

Who held attention? Table 2 and Figure 2 show a sharp mismatch between volume of posting and reach. Core organizers (Hami Nepal, Sudan Gurung and a prominent young organizer) supplied 20.0 per cent of posts but 4.4 per cent of engagement. Public figures supplied 10.0 per cent of posts but 28.2 per cent of engagement, and a single account, the Kathmandu mayor's Facebook page, produced seven posts that account for 27.1 per cent of the entire corpus's engagement. Transnational and outsider accounts, mostly Indian, Bangladeshi and

Indonesian pages on Instagram, supplied 14.8 per cent of posts and 21.4 per cent of engagement, with 51.2 shares per 100 likes. News media were few (5.2 per cent of posts) but over-performed (12.4 per cent of engagement), driven by two international TikTok posts. Ordinary users, particularly those who happened to document the protest day or post a poignant video, produced 26.3 per cent of engagement, including three of the eleven most engaged posts. Engagement did not differ reliably across account types in a rank-based test ($H(5) = 10.17$, $p = .07$), which reflects how heavily each category depends on a few viral outliers.

Table 2

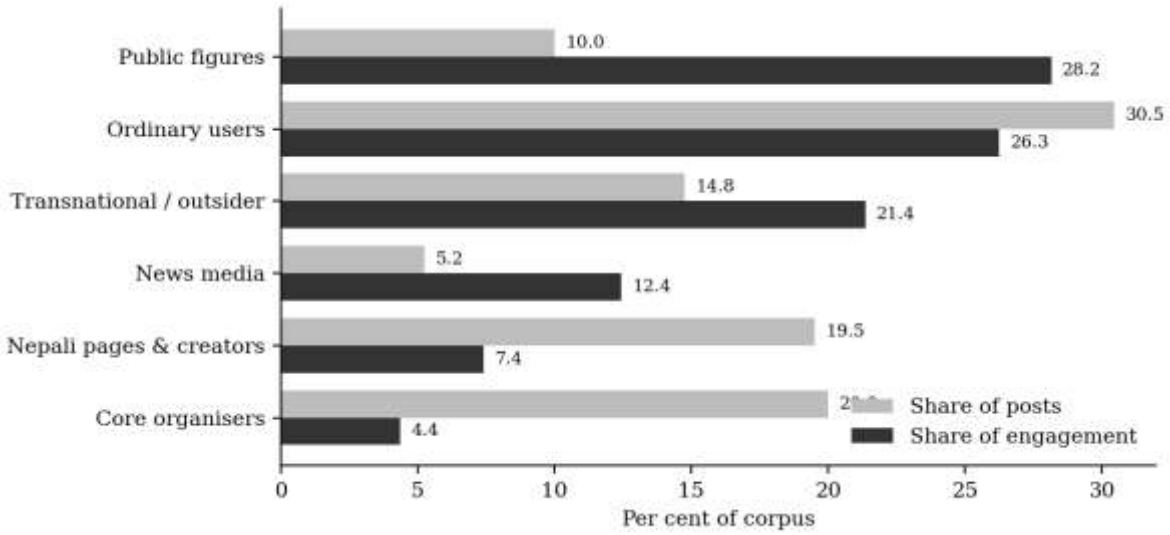
Posting Volume and Engagement by Account Type

Account type	Posts	% of posts	Total engagement	% of engagement	Median per post	Shares per 100 likes	Comments per 100 likes
Core organisers	42	20	852,333	4.4	8,292	5.5	5.5
Public figures	21	10	5,516,165	28.2	10,055	7.2	10.5
News media	11	5.2	2,434,919	12.4	30,317	8.1	1
Nepali pages and creators	41	19.5	1,450,870	7.4	2,890	7.3	4.2
Transnational / outsider	31	14.8	4,184,116	21.4	10,900	51.2	3.8
Ordinary users	64	30.5	5,142,222	26.3	6,847	6.7	1.1
Total	**210**	**100**	**19,580,625**	**100**	**6,588**	**14.3**	**4.7**

Note. Account types were assigned by the authors from account names and the dataset's descriptive notes; they are interpretive categories, not platform-supplied labels.

Figure 2

Share of posts and share of engagement by account type



Note. Account types were assigned by the authors from account names and the dataset's descriptive notes (n = 210).

Two consequences follow. First, the movement's organizers were not its loudest voices. They posted consistently (Hami Nepal alone posted 36 times, with a median of 6,676 engagements per post, and Gurung's two personal posts on 9 September drew nearly half of the core group's total), but their reach was dwarfed by celebrities, foreign pages and chance virility. Second, the single most engaged post in the corpus, an Instagram post from a regional meme account on 10 September, received 856,000 likes and 873,000 shares, meaning it

was shared more often than it was liked. It is an example of how content can detach from an originating movement and circulate as a generic "Nepal protest" spectacle.

4.2 Phases and Functions

Coding by phase shows that the communicative functions of the corpus shifted in the order one would expect of a protest that moved from grievance to confrontation to settlement (Table 3, Figure 3). In the pre-mobilization phase (38 posts), 84 per cent of posts articulated corruption or nepotism grievances and 61 per cent carried mobilization or call-to-action content; 21 per cent mentioned the social media ban. Reference to the ban declined thereafter and was absent after 16 September. Across the entire corpus the ban appears in only 18 posts (8.6 per cent) compared with 85 (40.5 per cent) for corruption and nepotism, which suggests that it functioned as an accelerant of a grievance that was already being narrated.

Table 3

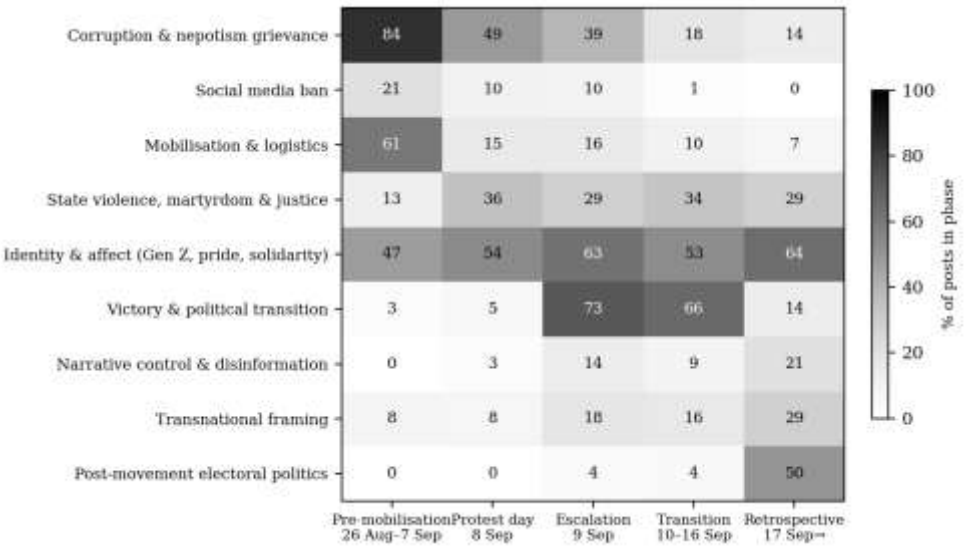
Posts and Engagement by Movement Phase

Phase	Posts	% of posts	Total engagement	% of engagement	Median per post	Shares per 100 likes
1. Pre-mobilization (26 Aug–7 Sep)	38	18.1	1,400,234	7.2	744	4.6
2. Protest day (8 Sep; 23 Bhadra)	39	18.6	3,190,408	16.3	5,617	9.1
3. Escalation and resignation (9 Sep; 24 Bhadra)	51	24.3	5,951,241	30.4	3,474	8.8
4. Transition (10–16 Sep)	68	32.4	7,233,304	36.9	9,964	27.4
5. Retrospective (17 Sep 2025 onward)	14	6.7	1,805,438	9.2	31,458	4.4
Total	**210**	**100**	**19,580,625**	**100**	**6,588**	**14.3**

Note. Phases were assigned by post date. Bikram Sambat dates: 23 Bhadra 2082 = 8 September 2025; 24 Bhadra 2082 = 9 September 2025.

Figure 3

Prevalence of themes by phase (percentage of posts in each phase)



Note. Themes are non-exclusive and keyword-assisted (Appendix B). Phase sizes: pre-mobilization n = 38; protest day n = 39; escalation n = 51; transition n = 68; retrospective n = 14.

On the protest day, the grievance frame persisted (49 per cent) while documentation of state violence rose from 13 to 36 per cent. On 9 September, victory and political transition themes jumped from 5 to 73 per cent and narrative-control posts (disavowals of arson, de-escalation appeals, rebuttals of rumors) appeared for the first time in meaningful numbers (14 per cent). In the transition phase (68 posts, 32.4 per cent of the corpus), engagement was driven by victory narratives and by transnational content: median engagement per post nearly tripled relative to 9 September (from 3,474 to 9,964) and the share rate rose to 27.4 per 100 likes as Instagram's share of posts climbed to 38 per cent. In the retrospective phase (14 posts), half of the posts framed the events in terms of electoral politics, and several contested the movement's legacy. Posts carrying a transnational frame had far higher median engagement (57,719) than posts framed around mobilization (2,890), which indicates that content aimed at organizing people was, in attention terms, the least visible part of the corpus.

4.3 TikTok: The Cultural Engine of Grievance

TikTok was the most grievance-laden platform (64 per cent of posts with corruption or nepotism themes, against 40 per cent on Facebook and 18 per cent on Instagram) and the one with the highest typical reach. It provided half (19 of 38) of all pre-mobilization posts. Its content was built around a repeatable genre. A cluster of posts from one anti-corruption account on 5 September paired itemized accusations of politicians' children's luxury consumption (branded clothes, foreign trips, hotels) with a personal testimony of family debt and an instruction to "expose" and share. Other early posts used the same contrast format: a 5 September post with 65,400 likes, a 6 September post with 224,900 likes, and a post on the same date with 147,900 likes that urged viewers to repost, like and comment. One widely shared post explicitly situated the Nepali call within a trend that "began in the Philippines and Indonesia" and announced a protest at Parliament House in New Baneshwor on 8 September (123,100 likes).

These posts did three things. They supplied a shared moral vocabulary ("Nepo Baby," "enough is enough") in a vernacular, humorous and affectively intense form; they recruited audiences who did not follow activist organizations; and they normalized the idea of a Gen-Z protest as an event to attend. The interviews show the effect at the individual level. One bystander-participant (I-11) reports that he decided to go to Maitighar after seeing a live TikTok video of the gathering, and another interviewee (I-07) describes the protest as growing out of Reddit and TikTok trends that continued after the government's ban. On the day itself TikTok became a documentation platform: crowd videos from ordinary accounts reached 580,600 and 305,800 likes (the latter from a media account), and on 9 September a post from an international broadcaster gained 1.3 million likes and 125,000 shares, reporting the 19 deaths and carrying the events to an international audience. TikTok also carried the movement's earliest leadership voice: on 26 August a post by Gurung's account warned that if the government would not take youth seriously, "we will force them to think again," a post that drew 10,100 likes, small relative to what followed but notable as the earliest item in the corpus.

4.4 Facebook: Command, Legitimation and Elite Amplification

Facebook is where the corpus is most institutional. Forty of the 42 core-organizer posts are on Facebook (36 from the Hami Nepal page, three from its chairman's personal page and one from a student organizer), and all twenty-one public-figure posts are on Facebook, and the platform has the highest comment-to-like ratio. Its functions can be traced through Hami Nepal's 36 posts. On 7 September the page published the call to assemble at Maitighar Mandala at 9 a.m. (9,900 likes). On 9 September it posted nine times in a day: announcing that the Prime Minister had resigned, requesting that medical teams stand ready, and, repeatedly, disavowing arson and looting as "not Gen Z" and calling for volunteers to guard buildings (FB010–FB012). On 11 September it issued an "official notice" denying that the movement had met with a royal figure and telling followers to trust only information released by the movement (FB017). On 12 September it posted twelve times, including a "final warning" to the President that the decision was taking too long (30,200 likes, 10,000 shares), a notice that its chairman had entered the Presidential Palace, and, on 13 September, the announcement that Karki had been chosen to lead an interim government. Later posts rebutted claims of political co-optation and addressed visual misinformation, including the reputational risk of symbolic clothing worn by individuals at the protest (20 and 22 September).

This is infrastructural labor of an unglamorous kind: scheduling, announcing, correcting, and naming who speaks for whom. Its audience was local and its engagement moderate, but it gave a leaderless movement a recognizable "official" voice at the point when the state needed someone to negotiate with. Interviews support this reading. I-06 identified two main leadership groups (Hami Nepal's and a student group led by a second organizer) and described others as groups that joined later. Others, however, stressed that there was no organization (I-07) and no prior consultation among those said to be leaders (I-03, I-07). Facebook, then, was the site where an authoritative organizational identity was performed and consolidated, even though participants experienced the protest as decentralized.

Facebook was also where elite amplification took place. The mayor's seven posts between 7 September and 30 December 2025 formed a narrative arc: a pre-protest endorsement presenting the rally as an autonomous movement of the under-28 generation and warning parties not to exploit it (509,600 engagements); two posts on 9 September, one an angry condemnation of the Prime Minister (1.09 million engagements) and another claiming the movement as purely Gen-Z and advising on negotiation with the Army only after dissolution of Parliament; a post telling young people to go home; a post on 11 September supporting Karki as interim prime minister as "a proposal from Gen Z"; a tribute to the dead; and in December a note praising Gurung's role. These posts both reflected and shaped the movement's direction. They supplied a vocabulary for the transition, and the 11 September post publicly aligned with a candidate whom, according to one organizer (I-03), the Gen-Z group had settled on after the mayor himself showed no interest. Celebrity posts from actors and singers in the corpus (21 public-figure posts in total) supplied additional legitimacy and, by their 10.5 comments per 100 likes, also generated the most discussion.

4.5 Instagram: Relay, Meme and Transnational Spectacle

Our initial expectation was that Instagram would function chiefly as the movement's aesthetic frontstage. The data point elsewhere. No core-organizer account in the corpus posted on Instagram. Instead, 28 of the 31 transnational or outsider posts are on Instagram, as are 17 of the 30 posts with a transnational frame. Its content is relatively light on grievance (18 per cent of posts) and heavy on victory and transition (70 per cent). It also dominated the transition phase, contributing 26 of the 68 posts between 10 and 16 September. The platform's role is therefore that of a relay: events and images were extracted from their original context, re-edited with music, captions and hashtags, and passed along by accounts in India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and elsewhere that had no connection to the organizers. The share rates described earlier (39.5 per 100 likes overall; 51.2 for transnational accounts) reflect this logic, and the top-performing Instagram posts include a regional meme page post (856,000 likes, 873,000 shares), an audio-driven template post (321,000 likes, 219,000 shares) and a video documenting a protest in a provincial city (1 million likes, 122,000 shares).

Nepali meme pages also posted on Instagram, translating events into humor and grief; one such post of 8 September, coded in the dataset as confirming 14 deaths, drew 317,000 likes. Casualty counts in the corpus vary across posts, from 14 on the protest day to 16 in a human-rights appeal on TikTok and 19 in broadcaster posts on 9–10 September, a reminder that the numerical record of the day was assembled in real time and from different sources. Instagram's most analytically interesting function, however, is that it is the platform where outsiders told the story of the backstage. A repost of a newspaper piece on 14 September described Gurung as a "former DJ" who "used Discord to drive protests" and became an unlikely power broker, and a post on 15 September told an Indian audience that Nepal had formed a government "through Discord polls." The private layer of the movement thus became publicly legible mainly through external retelling.

4.6 The Backstage: Discord and Private Messaging in the Interviews

Public data cannot show what happened inside closed spaces, but the interviews describe them. Three features stand out. First, Discord was used both as a gathering device and as a space needing policing. I-03 joined a Discord group on the night of 20 Bhadra (5 September), and reports that about 400–500 members of the group attended the protest although he knew almost none of them personally. On 8 September, Gurung posted a public Discord link as the "central communication channel for the protest" (FB002; 40,700 likes). The channel therefore functioned as a legible public entry point to a nominally private space, and two organizers' accounts converge on the point that there was no central command: I-03 describes no hierarchical direction and "no

discussion" on Discord on the night of 23 Bhadra, while I-01 appears to describe forming small leader groups of about twenty protesters so that participants could be identified if violence occurred.

Second, the same space was understood as dangerous. I-01 reports that on 22 Bhadra he learned that a group on the Discord server was preparing arson and improvised incendiary devices, that he informed the police chief at the nearest station and visited the Cyber Bureau in person, and that he and Hami Nepal posted publicly that violence, arson or vandalism on Discord would lead to permanent bans and referral to the police. On 24 Bhadra, after the Prime Minister's resignation, he says the Inspector General of Police and the Chief of the Army Staff called him and asked him to help protect the Prime Minister's Office. He then used Discord to gather volunteers, who formed human chains outside the building, placed volunteer phone numbers on a citizen helpline and worked through the night with the army. These are claims by one participant, which we cannot independently verify, but they depict a movement infrastructure that simultaneously mobilized crowds, policed its own boundaries and was drawn into the state's security operations.

Third, the backstage was where political succession was improvised. On the night of 24 Bhadra, I-03 recounts that Gen-Z friends discussed who should lead the country, that the Kathmandu mayor was first mentioned but declined interest, that Sushila Karki was approached because of her legal background, and that after she agreed a consensus recommendation was passed to the Army chief. The mayor's Facebook post of 11 September (FB046) and Hami Nepal's posts of 12–13 September (FB023, FB030) corroborate the outline, while an external Instagram post attributes the outcome to Discord polls. The interviews do not mention polling; we therefore treat that detail as an outsider's gloss that interviewees neither confirm nor refute. Beyond Discord, interviewees mention Viber (I-06 sent slogan texts to a friend on the night of 22 Bhadra) and Reddit (I-07). The private layer was thus plural, personal and often improvised rather than a single tool.

4.7 Online–Offline Integration

Interviews reveal a two-way relationship between the stack and the street. In the digital-to-physical direction, social media produced attendance and form. I-11 went because of a live video; I-02, I-04 and I-06 describe weeks of social media promotion; I-06 circulated drafted slogans on the night before the protest and found them in physical form on placards and banners the next day. I-18 reports joining the protests on 9 September after hearing that the state had shot children. Hami Nepal's volunteers arrived at Maitighar with doctors, nurses, supplies and an ambulance (I-04, I-05), and I-01 describes pre-assigned marshals and a banner carried at the head of the march.

In the physical-to-digital direction, the events produced a flood of content, but participants' own access to information on the ground was limited and rumor-prone. I-01 reports that he and most people at the protest did not know about the shooting immediately, since tear gas, batons and water cannon were already in use, microphone announcements could not be heard over the crowd, and he learned of the deaths from his medical-camp team. I-11 describes hearing rumors in the crowd that front-line protesters had been shot. I-03 tried to call the Chief District Officer during the escalation and could not connect. One neighboring shopkeeper (I-14), living close to the Parliament, says he learned the scale of casualties from social media that night. In other words, local witnesses experienced events through proximity, noise and rumor, while national and global audiences saw them as a documented sequence of posts. Digital tools were used to exit as well as enter: I-07 reports issuing a press release and social media appeal after hearing gunfire, stating that the peaceful protest had been infiltrated and asking participants to go home, while I-03 appealed on social media against arson on 24 Bhadra, and I-01 and I-02 report in-person appeals, none of which stopped the crowds by their own accounts.

The interviews also show that the stack's influence on the physical protest stopped short of control. Crowds moved beyond the agreed route and barricade despite repeated requests from organizers through microphones and banners (I-01, I-03, I-07). I-02 describes how different groups had agreed to gather at 9 a.m. and march to a point near Hotel Everest and return, while another group planned a second protest in Baluwatar for 6 p.m. Accounts conflict on whether permission was sought for the event: I-02 says the plan was agreed with the Kathmandu District Administration Office, I-07 says he applied for permission with a colleague, and I-03 says his group did not seek it. This is consistent with a distributed mobilization in which several nodes called the

same protest without a shared plan.

4.8 Contested Narratives: Infiltration, Misrecognition and Criminalization

The same infrastructure that mobilized the protest produced the evidence and the rumors through which it was later judged. Two competing explanations of the violence on 24 Bhadra run through the interviews. Ten of the twenty interviewees (I-01, I-02, I-03, I-08, I-10, I-11, I-12, I-17, I-18, I-20) link the arson and vandalism to public anger over the killings on 23 Bhadra. Eleven (I-01 to I-07, I-10, I-11, I-17, I-20) attribute some or all of the destruction to infiltrators, intoxicated individuals or organized anarchic groups, and seven interviewees (I-01, I-02, I-03, I-10, I-11, I-17, I-20) hold both views. In the posts, Hami Nepal's disavowals on 9 September ("not Gen Z") and its later rebuttals of misinformation performed the same function in public, and posts carrying narrative-control themes were rare (8.1 per cent of the corpus) but clustered among core organizers (24 per cent of their posts, against 2 to 14 per cent for other account types).

Because infiltration was an inference drawn from appearances, visual signs became contested evidence. Several participants and residents (I-06, I-15, I-16) describe riders on motorcycles, jackets bearing a "TOB" insignia and black flags as adding to the excitement of the crowd or as signs of outside provocation. I-09, the person who designed and wore that jacket, tells a different story. He says he is a tattoo artist who created the symbol to represent his lineage, that he attended for about an hour, that he was struck by stones and left, that others seen on bikes near the Parliament were not his group, and that after images of the jacket circulated online he has been forced to leave his home and close his business. This is a case of digital misrecognition: a symbol detached from its wearer becomes an indicator of a group. Whether or not the allegations about the motorcycle riders have merit, the interview shows how rapid, context-free circulation can convert appearance into attribution.

A second case concerns a former student union president (I-08) who says he was arrested in Mangsir 2082 (November–December 2025) and held for 18 days on rioting-related allegations on the basis of a clip of about five to seven seconds in which he criticized corruption in the judiciary on 24 Bhadra. He says the clip was circulated without its context and presented as an incitement to burn the Supreme Court, and those investigators had no other evidence. We cannot adjudicate the case, but it demonstrates a structural property of the protest ecology: short clips travel faster than their contexts and later serve as evidence. A third concerns money. I-20 reports that individuals and groups were collecting funds from domestic and international sources in the names of the injured, and asks for it to be controlled. Fundraising in the aftermath of a social media–mediated protest is itself a communicative practice that depends on photographs, names and stories whose provenance is hard to check.

Retrospective posts show the afterlife of these contests. A March 2026 TikTok accuses the movement's early leadership of having "hijacked" the protest and become king-makers; another, on 29 March, reports the arrest of the former Prime Minister and Home Minister and celebrates an "unseen force" behind the transition. Contrasting accounts are visible in the same ecology, and each draws on selected images and events. The stack, in sum, did not settle the meaning of 8–9 September; it kept the question open.

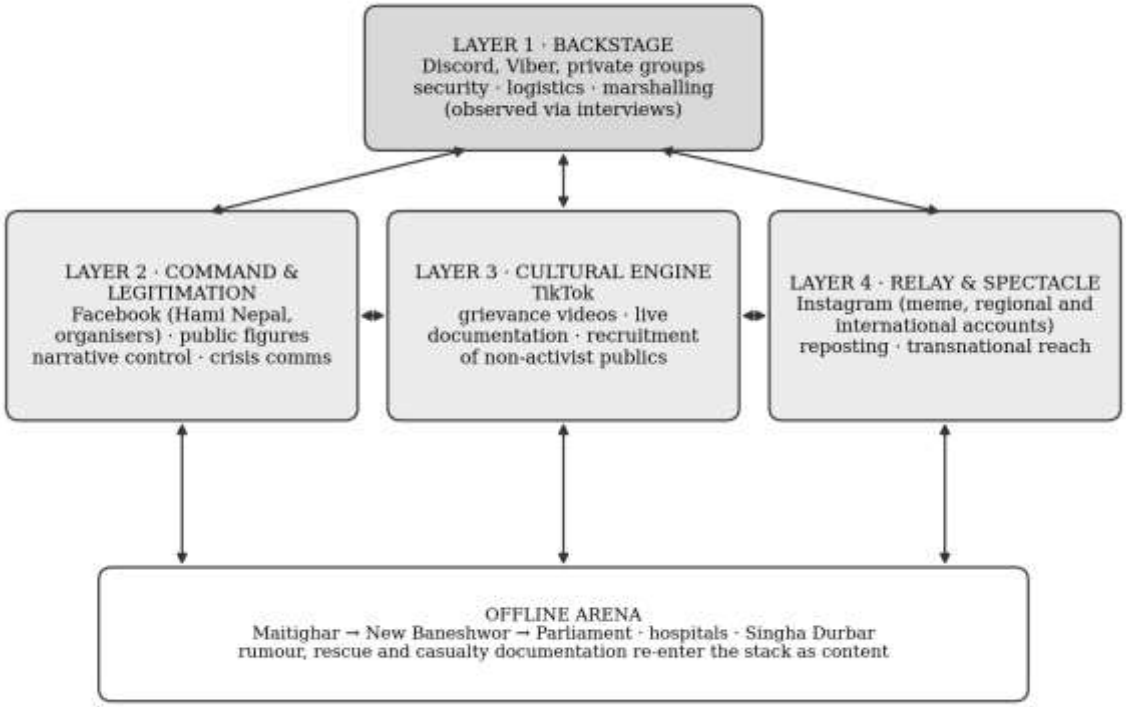
5. DISCUSSION

5.1 A Four-Layer Protest Stack

The findings support a revised and more specific version of the "protest stack" idea. We propose four interdependent layers (Figure 4). The backstage layer (Discord, Viber and other private channels) handled marshaling, internal security and, at the end, improvised political succession; it is observable mainly through participants' testimony. The command and legitimation layer (Facebook) housed organizational identity, official announcements, negotiation updates and elite endorsements. The cultural engine (TikTok) generated grievance narratives, recruited non-activist publics and documented events with high reach. The relay layer (Instagram) re-circulated and aestheticized the events for regional and transnational audiences and, in doing so, determined much of the movement's global image. An offline arena of assembly, hospitals, barricades and burning buildings feeds back into each layer as content.

Figure 4

The four-layer protest stack and its offline feedback loop



Note. Synthesis of corpus findings (n = 210 posts) and interview accounts (n = 20). Layer 1 is inferred from interviews; public data cannot observe it directly.

Relative to tripartite models that separate encrypted backstage, visual front stage and cultural engine, two differences stand out. Instagram's role was relay rather than front stage: the organizers were absent from it, and its reach was produced by outsiders. And Facebook did the work of "legitimation" that a front stage metaphor tends to attribute to Instagram. The change underlines the importance of studying use rather than assuming the function a platform's design implies (Faraj & Azad, 2012; Treré & Mattoni, 2016).

5.2 Infrastructural Brokerage and the Attention Gap

The most striking quantitative finding is that organizers produced a fifth of the posts but captured under 5 per cent of engagement. A reading consistent with the interviews is that the organizers' power lay less in reach than in position. They were the people who could be addressed: the movement's "official" page, a public Discord link, and a chairman who could be called by the Inspector General of Police and the Army chief and could walk into the Presidential Palace. We call this infrastructural brokerage. It is distinct from charismatic leadership (the mayor's posts reached far more people) and from technical mastery. It consisted of making the movement addressable by institutions while leaving the crowd diffuses. This extends the literature on leaderless digital movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci, 2017): the lack of formal leaders did not preclude brokers, but brokerage was situational, took place in private channels and relied on endorsements from people with larger audiences.

5.3 Visibility, Security and the Dual Use of the Backstage

Interviews describe a backstage that was simultaneously organizational, protective and exposed. Publicly announcing a Discord link gave the movement scale at the price of openness, and I-01's account stresses that doing so required monitoring and banning those who planned violence and notifying police. Strengthening a movement's security by informing the state is a common but ethically complex act: it can protect participants and property, and it can also incorporate organizers into policing. For movements whose legitimacy depends

on being seen as independent of government, this is a delicate balance. The later request by state security leaders that organizers help defend official buildings illustrates how quickly the relationship can invert. Platform design interacts with this politics. Discord's channel-based moderation tools made it possible to expel and report members, while its openness to invitation links made it hard to establish who was inside.

5.4 Speed, Context Collapse and the Criminalization of Clips

The interviews of I-08 and I-09 place a risk at the heart of the stack that its organizers could not control: the ability of images and clips to travel without context and to be treated as proof. Concerns about misinformation in social movements usually focus on false claims; here the harmful items are real fragments, a jacket and a few seconds of speech, that circulated in a political environment primed to seek culprits. The same speed that allowed a call to assemble to reach thousands overnight made it possible for accusations to precede and shape later legal processes. Movement infrastructures must therefore be understood together with the evidentiary infrastructures that surround them (Star & Bowker, 2002; Gillespie, 2018): what is posted for mobilization or witness may later serve as evidence against the participants.

5.5 Youth Political Agency in a Mobile, Entertainment-Based Ecology

The organizers and participants in our interviews include a businessman and adventure coach who chairs a volunteer organization, students, a recent graduate without work, small shop and club owners, and law students. None describes professional training in political communication, and several describe platforms they used for entertainment before they used them for politics. Their platform literacy, which includes knowing which space to use for a public call, which for a closed group and which for a viral clip, appears to have been developed through everyday use rather than formal civic education, as research on youth participation anticipates (Dalton, 2008). This is a hypothesis consistent with our evidence rather than a tested claim, but it suggests that in contexts with high mobile connectivity and a vernacular entertainment culture, the entry costs of building a multi-platform repertoire may be lower than assumed (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

5.6 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The corpus is purposive and concentrated on 8–16 September; it cannot support claims about the prevalence of content on any platform. Account types and themes were assigned with a keyword-assisted codebook and have not been checked by independent coders. Engagement counts are snapshots, displayed in rounded form, and differ in meaning across platforms. No network or reply data were collected, so we do not map who amplified whom. The backstage is observed only through the accounts of those who used it; we did not have access to server logs, and the Discord events described here rest on the testimony of individual participants. The interviewees were chosen to represent positions, not to be statistically representative, and some accounts (for example I-04 and I-05) overlap heavily. Their testimony may be shaped by the circumstances in which it was given and by translation. Finally, many claims about responsibility for violence are contested and remain so; we report them as claims. Future work should add network analyses of reposting, interviews with platform moderators and fact-checkers, and longitudinal study of whether the organizing capacity built during the protest persisted or dissolved.

6. CONCLUSION

Nepal's 2025 Gen-Z movement was not a single-platform event. In the evidence examined here, grievance was built on TikTok, command and legitimacy were performed on Facebook, spectacle and international reach were produced by relay on Instagram, and security, marshaling and succession were handled through private channels such as Discord. This division of labor allowed a movement without parties to call a very large protest, document its repression, claim the political outcome and negotiate a transition. It also created particular vulnerabilities: attention was extraordinarily concentrated, organizers' reach was small relative to that of celebrities and foreign pages, and the movement's symbols and statements could be extracted from context and used against its participants.

The study contributes in three ways. Empirically, it offers a documented account of multi-platform protest

practice in a South Asian setting, combining a 210-post corpus with twenty participant accounts. Conceptually, it proposes a four-layer protest stack and the notion of infrastructural brokerage to explain how a diffuse movement became politically addressable. Practically, it points to areas where platforms, journalists and courts can contribute to reducing harm: verifying context before circulating clips and symbols, protecting organizers and participants from retaliatory misattribution, and recognizing that closed communication spaces are used simultaneously for organization, moderation and cooperation with the state.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Sample

Table A1

Interviewees by Group, Role and Digital-Communication Content

Code	Group	Role / position	Digital-communication content in account
I-01	A	Chair of Hami Nepal (volunteer NGO); business owner and adventure coach (Sudan Gurung)	Discord marshaling and warning; public announcements; Instagram policy on bans; army/police request on 24 Bhadra
I-02	A	Master's student and foundation worker; leader of a Gen-Z group (Raksha Bom)	Social media promotion; group discussions; planned route and timing
I-03	A	Founder-chair of a youth NGO; undergraduate student; Discord group participant (Hemraj Saud)	Discord group of 400–500; social media appeals; succession discussion
I-04	B	Hami Nepal volunteer; business owner	Medical team deployment; social media promotion
I-05	B	Hami Nepal volunteer; travel-business owner	Near-identical to I-04; adds hospital transport
I-06	C	Participant; slogan writer; rescuer	Viber slogans; social media calls; leadership map
I-07	A	Unemployed graduate; permit applicant (Purushottam Yadav)	Reddit/TikTok origins; press release; permit conflict

I-08	D	Former law-campus student union president; investigated	Viral 5–7 second clip; arrest and bail
I-09	D	Tattoo artist; motorcycle-club founder; wore "TOB" jacket	Online circulation of jacket images; displacement
I-10	E	Student and snooker-hall owner; friend of a person killed on 24 Bhadra	No digital content; infiltration claim
I-11	C	Student; participant-observer	TikTok live video; rumours in crowd
I-12	E	Education-consultancy owner near Parliament	Phone contact with police officer; no social media content
I-13	E	Hotel owner, Koteshwor	Sheltered police on 24 Bhadra
I-14	E	Mobile-shop owner near Parliament	Learned of casualties via social media
I-15	E	Mobile-shop owner, west gate of Parliament	Observed motorcycles agitating crowd
I-16	E	Resident near Parliament	Observed TOB jackets; army inactivity on 24 Bhadra
I-17	C	Participant; shot and wounded 23 Bhadra	Requests investigation; infiltration claim
I-18	C	Participant on 24 Bhadra; shot and wounded (Jawalakhel)	Joined after hearing of killings
I-19	C	Participant; hit by rubber bullet 23 Bhadra	No digital content
I-20	C	Participant; hit by rubber bullets 23 Bhadra	Concern about fundraising in injured people's names

Note. Groups: A = organizers or group leaders; B = Hami Nepal volunteers; C = participants (several injured); D = people investigated or accused on the basis of online material; E = bystanders and residents. Names are given only for organizers whose public roles are central to the analysis (I-01, I-02, I-03, I-07). I-04 and I-05 are near-identical statements.

APPENDIX B

Keyword-Assisted Codebook

Table B1

Theme Codes, Keyword Stems and Prevalence (N = 210 Posts)

Theme	**Keyword stems applied to observed-theme notes and content summaries**	**Posts**	**% of posts**
Corruption and nepotism grievance	corrupt*, nepo*, luxury, privilege, inequal*, impunity, tax money, poverty, inflation, unemploy*	85	40.5
Social media ban	ban, shutdown, unban, VPN	18	8.6
Mobilization and logistics	mobili*, call for protest, call to, logistic*, assembl*, rally, repost, wake up, time and place, gather	45	21.4
State violence, martyrdom and justice	shot, killed, casualt*, death, martyr, violence, bullet, massacre, murder, oppress*, accountab*, justice, tribute	61	29

Identity and affect	gen z, generation, solidarity, pride, patriot*, affect, emotion, hope, identity, emoji, unity	116	55.2
Victory and political transition	victory, resign*, karki, interim, celebrat*, first woman, government formation, Discord polls	87	41.4
Narrative control and disinformation	not gen z, fake, infiltr*, hijack*, misinfo*, media manipulation, denies, false news, disavow, de-escalat*, restraint	17	8.1
Transnational framing	transnational, international, Indian, Indonesia, Philippines, Bangladesh, cross-border, foreign, UN, geopolit*	30	14.3
Post-movement electoral politics	elect*, vote, ballot, king-maker, arrest	12	5.7

Note. Themes are non-exclusive. An asterisk marks a stem (e.g., corrupt* matches corrupt, corruption, corrupted). Keyword matching establishes the presence of a theme, not the stance of the post.