



Digital Capital Divide and Political Communication: Bourdieusian-Ragneddaian Views on Nepal's Online Political Sphere

Sunil Paudel

Coordinator, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Madan Bhandari Memorial College

Article Info.

Email

sunilpaudel.np@gmail.com

Article History

Received: March 12, 2026

First Revised: April 11, 2026

Second Revised: May 25, 2026

Accepted: July 10, 2026

Cite

Paudel, S. (2026). Digital capital divide and political communication: Bourdieusian-Ragneddaian views on Nepal's online political sphere. *SAIM Journal of Social Science and Technology*, 3(1), 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.70320/sacm.2026.v03i01.006>

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital extended in Massimo Ragnedda's concept of digital capital shapes political influence within Nepal's online political sphere.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach by reviewing scholarly publications, official reports, documents, and recent political developments, including the social media ban, political powershifts, and the 2025 Nepal's Gen Z Protests.

Findings: The review reveals that digital capital has emerged as an important source of political influence by enabling political actors, youth groups, and citizens to mobilize support, shape public discourse, and democratic participation and influence. However, access to digital capital remains uneven across urban and rural populations, generations, educational backgrounds, and political actors, reinforcing existing socioeconomic inequalities and digital capital divide in Nepal.

Originality/Value: The study proposes the combined Bourdieusian-Ragnedda model to analyse Nepal's digital political landscape positioning digital capital as a form of political participation and power. The paper also combines the ideas of digital divide. It contributes to the digital political communication and highlights the need for empirical research to examine the relationship between digital capital, democratic participation, and influence.

Keywords: digital capital divide, Bourdieusian-Ragneddaian model, political communication, online political sphere

Introduction

Nepal has gone through a fast change in how people talk about politics. Twenty years ago, political discussion in Nepal happened mostly in newspapers, radio, party offices, tea shops and leader-cadre-voter interaction. Today, a large

part of that discussion happens on social media platforms, basically Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and X (Twitter). This change is not only about technology. It is also about power (Barma & Thapa, 2025). The people and groups who know how to use these digital spaces well are often the ones who are heard the most.

This power shift became very visible in September 2025. The government of Nepal announced a ban on twenty-six social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X, saying that these platforms had not registered with the government (Harvey & Pokharel, 2025). Within days, mass protests broke out, led largely by young citizens who called themselves “Gen Z.” The protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli and to the appointment of an interim government led by former Chief Justice, Sushila Karki. This event alone shows how central digital space has become to political power in Nepal (Barma & Thapa, 2025; Teekah, 2025). The digital communication in online sphere had made such a big powershift in the country with a vast digital divide within a short period. The rise of the Rastriya Swatantra Party and Balendra Shah’s electoral victory illustrate the growing influence of social media in Nepalese politics, enabling emerging leaders to connect directly with citizens and shape public opinion.

This paper turns to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to understand this political power shift. Bourdieu argued that society is made up of different fields, such as the political field, the education field, and the cultural field, and that people compete for power within each field using different kinds of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). He described three main forms of capital: (i) economic capital relating to money and property, (ii) cultural capital including education, knowledge and taste, and (iii) social capital which means networks and connections (Bourdieu, 1986). When these capitals are legitimated, they turn into symbolic capital and power (Benzer & Reed, 2019). Scholars such as Massimo Ragnedda have proposed that in today’s world, there is a further form of capital that Bourdieu did not name directly: digital capital. Ragnedda (2020) defines digital capital as the combination of digital skills and digital access that a person or group holds. He argues that this digital capital interacts with the older forms of capital to create new patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

Who holds digital capital in Nepal’s online political sphere? How does that digital capital turn into political power and influence? There are several such questions raised worldwide after the digital media sphere became one of the powerful tools of democracy and digital inequalities rose as a serious problem for social inequality (2005; Noris, 2001). While studying political communication in Nepal (Dahal, 2025; Paudel, 2026a,b). The paper does not treat the internet as a neutral space where everyone has an equal voice. Instead, it treats Nepal’s online political sphere as a field, in Bourdieu’s sense, where actors bring unequal resources and compete for position and legitimacy.

Research Objective

This study is guided by two main objectives. It aims to examine how different political actors in Nepal, including political parties, individual leaders, youth movements, and ordinary citizens, use digital capital to gain political influence. It also studies how digital inequality in Nepal, particularly between urban and rural areas and between different age groups, affects who can convert digital capital into political influence. For this purpose, the paper analyses the context through the theoretical frameworks of capital, digital capital and digital divide as a combined connected theoretical lens: digital capital divide.

Literature Review

Bourdieu’s Theory of Capital

Pierre Bourdieu argued that the social world cannot be understood using only economic ideas of money and wealth. In his well-known essay, “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu (1986) explained that capital can appear in three basic forms. Economic capital is the most familiar form. It is money and property, and it can be turned into other resources quite directly. Cultural capital is different form. It includes education, qualifications, knowledge, taste, and even the way a person speaks or carries themselves. Bourdieu explained that cultural capital exists in three states: (i) the embodied state, which is part of a person’s habits and manners built over years, (ii) the objectified state which includes

cultural objects such as books, art, and instruments, and (iii) the institutionalised state which includes formal qualifications such as university degrees. The third form is social capital. Bourdieu described social capital as the resources a person can access through networks, group membership, and connections. A person with strong social capital can call on friends, family, or associates for help or support, and this can later convert into other advantages (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu also introduced the idea of symbolic capital which is a kind of prestige or honour that is recognised by others. This often works to hide the underlying economic and social advantages that produced it (Bourdieu, 1986). A person seen as respectable, wise, or trustworthy holds symbolic capital that can be extremely useful in politics, even without direct wealth or formal networks.

Besides capital, Bourdieu built two other central ideas: habitus and field. Habitus refers to the deep habits, tastes, and ways of thinking that a person develops through their upbringing and experience. Habitus shape how they act without always being a conscious choice (Bourdieu, 1990). Field refers to a structured space of activity, such as the political field, the education field, or the media field, where actors compete for position using the capital they hold. Each field has its own internal rules of what counts as valuable (Bourdieu, 1990). Different fields value different types of capital. In the academic field, cultural capital in the form of degrees matters greatly. In the political field, symbolic capital, social capital, and increasingly, digital capital matter greatly.

Bourdieu's framework is useful for this study because it does not treat power as only about money. It allows this paper to ask what kinds of resources make a person or group influential in Nepal's online political space, beyond simple wealth.

Ragnedda's View: From Cultural Capital to Digital Capital

As internet use spread around the world, researchers began to notice that access to the internet and the

skill to use it well was becoming its own kind of resource, tied to but not identical with older forms of capital. Massimo Ragnedda, building directly on Bourdieu's framework, proposed the concept of digital capital in a series of studies. In his 2018 article "Conceptualizing Digital Capital," Ragnedda argued that digital capital should be understood as a distinct, Bourdieusian form of capital that interacts with the five other capitals he identified: economic, cultural, social, personal, and political capital (Ragnedda, 2018). He explained that digital capital shapes inequalities not only in who can access the internet, known as the first level of the digital divide, but also in who has the skills to use the internet well, known as the second level, and in who actually benefits from internet use in real life, known as the third level (Ragnedda, 2020).

In later work with Maria Laura Ruiui, Ragnedda defined digital capital more precisely. They defined digital capital as the accumulation of digital competences, meaning internalised skills, knowledge, and attitudes, together with digital technologies, meaning the external devices and connections a person has access to (Ragnedda & Ruiui, 2020). Ragnedda and Ruiui (2020) describe their book, "Digital Capital: A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Digital Divide," as an attempt to give researchers tools to measure digital capital directly, rather than only guessing at it. An empirical work by Ragnedda et al. (2020) built and tested a Digital Capital Index using survey data, confirming that digital capital could be measured much like Bourdieu's other forms of capital. An important insight from this literature is that digital capital acts as what Ragnedda calls a bridge or mediating resource (Ragnedda, 2020). It helps people move their existing offline resources into the online space, and it also allows people to turn online engagement into real offline benefits, such as job opportunities, wider networks, or public recognition. This bridging idea is central to the present paper because it suggests that political actors in Nepal who already hold economic,

cultural or social capital are likely to be the ones best placed to also build strong digital capital.

Concepts of Digital Divide

The digital divide is no longer adequately understood as a simple gap between those who have and do not have access to the Internet (Norris, 2001). van Dijk's (2005) resource and appropriation approach conceptualizes digital inequality as a cumulative process involving motivational access, material access, digital skills, and actual usage. In this perspective, having an Internet connection does not automatically translate into meaningful digital participation; rather, inequalities in resources, competencies and patterns of use can reproduce broader social inequalities. Pippa Norris extends this understanding into the political domain by distinguishing the global divide, social divide, and democratic divide, emphasizing that unequal access to and use of digital technologies can produce unequal opportunities for civic engagement, political information, mobilization and participation. Taken together, Norris (2001) provide a useful integrated Digital Divide–Political Participation perspective: digital inequality is not simply an infrastructural problem but a social and political inequality in who can access information, develop the capacity to use it, participate in online public life, and derive political benefits from digital communication.

Political Participation Via Digital Social Network

There is now a large body of research on social media and political participation across the world. Much of this literature agrees that social media lowers the cost of political participation, allowing citizens to share opinions, organise events, and reach large audiences without needing traditional media access (Abdullah et.al, 2024). At the same time, researchers such as Pippa Norris (2001) have long argued that a digital divide limits how equally these opportunities are shared, since civic engagement online depends on existing patterns of access and information poverty.

Studies globally show that despite the different levels of digital gap and distinct level of media literacy the social media have become the prime source for political communication and influence almost worldwide. Comparative research in South Asia shows similar patterns. A study comparing Indonesia and Pakistan found that social media use shaped political learning, political participation, and a sense of political effectiveness among youth in both countries, though the strength of these effects differed by context (Ida et al., 2020). A comparative study of Nepal and Indonesia examined how Generation Z used online platforms to coordinate protest actions and build a shared political identity. The study concluded that digital activism can accelerate the shift from online talk to offline mobilization. This pattern was visible in Nepal's 2025 protest wave (Arafat et al., 2025; Win, 2025).

Nepal's Digital Political Participation

Nepal-specific research on this topic, while still growing, gives a strong base for this study. Ujjwal Acharya's (2017) report for the Center for Media Research-Nepal was among the earlier detailed studies of social media, youth, and political participation in Nepal. Acharya (2017) documented how movements such as "Nepal Unites," which pushed for the completion of Nepal's first Constituent Assembly's work, and "Occupy Baluwatar," a protest against political corruption, relied heavily on Facebook and other online platforms to organise supporters, especially urban, educated youth.

A study published in the *Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences* examined Facebook's role in Nepali politics in greater depth, describing how the platform has been used to raise political awareness, though it also spreads misinformation and divisive content (Chand & Awasthi, 2025). Other Nepal-focused research has traced how youth-led movements have grown in influence over Nepal's political direction, arguing that digital platforms have become central tools for youth mobilisation even though there remains a

research gap in fully understanding their long-term political effect.

Most directly relevant to this paper is the growing body of writing on the September 2025 Gen Z protests. Journalistic sources describe how the government's short-lived ban on major social media platforms, layered on top of long-standing anger about corruption and nepotism, triggered protests (Rest of World, 2025) that led to the resignation of the sitting prime minister within days (Paudel, 2026c; Teekah, 2025; Harvey & Pokharel, 2025; Barma & Thapa, 2025). Sharma (2025) described the event as a "political watershed" for Nepal, noting that the protests were organised by an independent, loosely structured group of young citizens without a single visible leader. This literature gives the present paper a recent, real-world case through which to examine digital capital and political influence in Nepal.

Theoretical Framework

This study develops its theoretical framework by integrating Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, habitus, and field with Massimo Ragnedda's concept of digital capital to explain how political influence is constructed within Nepal's evolving digital political sphere. The framework recognizes that political participation in contemporary societies increasingly depends not only on traditional forms of capital but also on individuals' capacity to access, utilize, and strategically employ digital technologies.

According to Bourdieu (1986), society consists of multiple social fields in which individuals and organizations compete for resources, legitimacy, and power. Each field is characterized by its own rules and forms of competition, while actors occupy different positions according to the volume and composition of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital they possess. Habitus, representing individuals' internalized dispositions, shapes how actors mobilize these forms of capital to pursue advantages within a particular field. Consequently, political influence is not determined

solely by institutional authority but by the interaction between actors' accumulated capital and the structure of the field in which they operate.

Within this perspective, Nepal's online political sphere is conceptualized as a distinct political field where political parties, elected representatives, journalists, civil society organizations, social media influencers, youth movements, and ordinary citizens compete for visibility, legitimacy, and political influence. Similar to traditional political institutions, this digital field is characterized by unequal distribution of resources. Established political parties often enter the digital space with substantial economic resources, organizational capacity, educational advantages, extensive social networks, and symbolic legitimacy accumulated through offline political engagement. These pre-existing advantages significantly shape their ability to dominate digital political communication.

While Bourdieu did not explicitly theorize digital environments, Ragnedda (2020) extended his framework by introducing digital capital as an independent yet interconnected form of capital. Digital capital consists of two complementary dimensions: (i) digital access, referring to the availability of digital devices, internet connectivity, and the financial resources necessary to maintain digital participation; and (ii) digital competence, representing the knowledge, technical skills, digital literacy, and strategic ability required to effectively utilize digital platforms. Rather than functioning independently, digital capital interacts dynamically with economic, cultural, and social capital, enabling individuals to convert existing resources into digital influence (Ragnedda & Rui, 2020).

This interaction is particularly relevant in Nepal's political environment. Political leaders possessing higher cultural capital through education and communication skills are generally better positioned to produce persuasive digital content and frame political narratives. Likewise, youth organizations with extensive

social networks can mobilize collective action rapidly through hashtags, online campaigns, and digital communities, transforming social capital into political mobilization. Conversely, unequal digital infrastructure, limited digital literacy, and socioeconomic disparities restrict the accumulation of digital capital among marginalized populations, thereby reproducing existing inequalities within the digital political field.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital further explains how legitimacy and recognition are produced within digital environments. Symbolic capital represents the prestige, credibility, and public recognition accumulated by actors whose opinions become socially valued and politically influential. In contemporary digital politics, symbolic capital increasingly emerges from online visibility, audience engagement, credibility, and perceived authenticity rather than formal institutional authority alone. Consequently, content creators, citizen journalists, independent commentators, and meme creators may exercise considerable political influence despite possessing limited traditional political or economic power. Their accumulated online reputation can subsequently be converted into broader political legitimacy and public influence. The widespread circulation of anti-corruption narratives and "Nepo Kids" content preceding Nepal's 2025 Gen Z protests illustrates how symbolic capital generated through digital platforms contributed to political mobilization and public discourse (Harvey & Pokharel, 2025).

Recent scholarship on digital transformation further supports the expanding importance of digital resources in organizational, financial, and societal decision-making. Mishra (2026) demonstrates that digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped organizational operations and institutional effectiveness in South Asia, emphasizing that digital capabilities increasingly determine institutional competitiveness. Similarly, Celestion et al. (2026) argue that digital technologies and

artificial intelligence enhance managerial decision quality by improving information accessibility and analytical capability, highlighting how digital competencies constitute valuable strategic resources. Although situated within corporate management, these findings reinforce the broader proposition that digital capability functions as an important form of capital influencing decision-making and competitive advantage.

Likewise, Celestion et al. (2026) show that digital adoption in Africa is influenced by technological accessibility, regulatory environments, and users' digital competencies, suggesting that unequal access to digital resources directly shapes participation in digitally mediated systems. Complementing this perspective, Celestion, Mishra, and Mishra (2025) demonstrate that organizations increasingly depend on digital platforms for real-time information dissemination, transparency, and stakeholder engagement. These studies collectively illustrate that digital competence and access have become strategic assets across multiple sectors, reinforcing Ragnedda's argument that digital capital represents a distinctive yet interconnected form of capital within contemporary society.

Drawing upon these theoretical perspectives, this paper argues that political power in Nepal's online political sphere cannot be explained merely by internet access or social media usage. Rather, political influence emerges through the interaction between digital capital and traditional forms of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Different political actors convert these interconnected resources into varying degrees of visibility, legitimacy, and influence within Nepal's digital political field. Accordingly, the study investigates how digital capital reinforces, transforms, or challenges existing political hierarchies while simultaneously reproducing broader social inequalities related to education, geography, class, and technological access.

The Digital Capital Divide: Bourdieusian-Ragneddaian Theory Mix

However, this framework can be developed further through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and Massimo Ragnedda's concept of digital capital. A Bourdieusian approach shifts attention from access alone to the unequal distribution of resources, competencies, dispositions, networks and forms of recognition that determine people's positions within social fields. Ragnedda conceptualizes digital capital as a form of capital that interacts with existing economic, social, cultural, personal and political capital, shaping both the quality of individuals' online experiences and the benefits they are able to derive from digital participation (Ragnedda, 2020). Thus, digital inequality can be understood not merely as a divide in access but as a divide in the capacity to convert digital resources into social and political advantages.

Bringing these perspectives together produces a more comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding Nepal's emerging online political sphere. Van Dijk explains how inequalities emerge across the stages of digital access and use. Norris explains why these inequalities matter for democratic and political participation. To propose a combined Bourdieusian-Ragneddaian Model of Digital Capital Divide, the views of both of theorists, Bourdieu and Ragnedda is adapted. Their explanation of how digital resources become capital and how their value is unequally converted into political visibility, voice, influence and participation has given an insight to explain the Nepali relevance of digital political sphere. The integrated framework therefore moves analytically from access, skills, and use to digital capital, political participation, and political influence for better understanding of digital political divide and political communication in Nepal.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, literature-based research design. Because the paper covers a very recent and still developing situation, and because

Bourdieu's framework is fundamentally about interpreting social structures rather than only counting numbers, a qualitative approach is the most suitable choice.

The paper follows an interpretive, document-based approach. It draws on purposively selected peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, statistical reports, and related news and policy analysis sources describing recent events in Nepal. This combination allows the paper to connect long-standing sociological theory with real-world political developments including the September 2025 protests in Nepal.

Three broad categories of sources were used for writing this paper; (i) academic research papers, book chapters and books written for the theoretical base related to capital, digital capital, digital divide, political communication and political power for conceptual and theoretical framework, (ii) empirical and contextual sources on Nepal such as academic articles and reports on social media, youth, and political participation in Nepal, along with statistical data from the digital reports such as DataReportal for contextual relevance; and (ii) event-based sources like journalistic and policy-analysis papers of the September 2025 social media ban and Gen Z protests are used to illustrate the theoretical framework with a concrete, recent case (Sun et. al., 2025). The paper uses thematic, conceptual analysis. Material gathered from the sources above was organised around the study's objectives and research questions. The analysis proceeds by first mapping Bourdieu's and Ragnedda's concepts onto the Nepali context, and then examining how the available evidence about Nepal's online political actors fits, extends or challenges this framework.

Results and Discussion

Nepal's Digital and Political Context

To understand digital capital in Nepal, it is necessary to first understand the basic shape of Nepal's digital landscape. As the paper connects

the theoretical perspectives to Nepal's practice of new media technology, political communication, participation and power, there are several thematic areas to be observed and discussed. This study's major goal also is to understand the theory and practice of digital capital, digital divide and political power in Nepal's political power. Some thematic matters are presented as follows:

Internet and Social Media Use in Nepal

Nepal's digital ecosystem has expanded considerably over the past decade, transforming the way citizens access information, communicate, and participate in political and social discourse. According to DataReportal's Digital 2026 report based on Kepios analysis, Nepal had approximately 16.6 million internet users by the end of 2025, representing an internet penetration rate of approximately 56% of the country's estimated population of 29.6 million (DataReportal, 2026). Furthermore, the Digital 2026 report indicates that Nepal recorded approximately 14.8 million social media user identities in October 2025, equivalent to nearly 50% of the national population (DataReportal, 2026). These statistics demonstrate the growing importance of digital technologies and social networking platforms in shaping public communication and civic engagement.

Nevertheless, estimates of digital penetration vary considerably across data sources due to differences in measurement approaches. While DataReportal estimates active internet and social media users, the Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) reports substantially higher subscription-based penetration rates because individuals often maintain multiple mobile subscriptions. In contrast, the Nepal Living Standards Survey (NLSS) measures household-level digital access and therefore reports relatively lower levels of internet utilization as mentioned in K.C.'s (2026) analytical infographics. These methodological differences highlight the complexity of Nepal's digital environment and

reveal persistent inequalities in digital access across geographical locations, socioeconomic groups, and demographic characteristics.

Social media has become an integral component of Nepal's communication landscape. Facebook remains the country's most widely used social networking platform, followed by Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other emerging digital platforms. Although TikTok experienced a temporary government ban during 2023 and 2024, its subsequent restoration demonstrated both the platform's widespread public acceptance and the growing significance of social media in public discourse. Data from the Nepal Telecommunications Authority further indicate that internet access in Nepal is predominantly mobile-based rather than dependent on fixed broadband infrastructure, reflecting the country's mobile-first pattern of digital adoption (K.C., 2026). Young adults aged 18 years and above constitute the largest proportion of active users across Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and related digital platforms (DataReportal, 2026).

The rapid diffusion of social media has substantially reshaped patterns of information dissemination, public engagement, and digital influence in Nepal. Mishra et al. (2026) demonstrate that social media influencers have become increasingly influential in shaping consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions in India and Nepal, indicating that digital platforms have evolved into powerful channels for influencing public opinion beyond commercial contexts. Their findings suggest that digital visibility, audience engagement, and online credibility have become valuable strategic resources capable of influencing attitudes and decision-making, reinforcing the broader concept of digital capital.

Similarly, Mishra and Mishra (2024) argue that effective management in the digital era increasingly depends upon organizations' and individuals' ability to strategically reach, engage,

and influence target audiences through digital communication channels. Their work emphasizes that digital communication has become a critical managerial capability for creating awareness, establishing trust, and sustaining stakeholder relationships. Although developed within a management perspective, these insights support the argument that digital communication competencies constitute an important dimension of digital capital that enables political actors, institutions, and citizens to acquire visibility, legitimacy, and influence within Nepal's online political sphere.

Collectively, these developments indicate that Nepal is undergoing a significant process of digital transformation in which social media platforms increasingly function as arenas for political communication, civic participation, information exchange, and public opinion formation. However, unequal access to digital technologies, disparities in digital literacy, and socioeconomic differences continue to constrain the equitable distribution of digital capital. Consequently, while digital platforms have expanded opportunities for democratic participation, they have also reproduced existing inequalities, making digital capital an increasingly significant determinant of political influence within Nepal's evolving digital political landscape.

Political Instability and Rising Digital Politics

Nepal's political history since the new democratic era in 1951 has been marked by frequent changes. Even after the restoration of its multiparty democracy, between 1990 and 2026, Nepal saw more than a dozen different governments formed under different parties and prime ministers, with no government completing a full five-year term (Teekah, 2025). Since the new constitution of 2015, the office of prime minister rotated mainly between three senior leaders. Almost all of the party heads, prime ministers, ministers, party leaders and even cadres have been facing repeated accusations of corruption. This background of instability and weak public trust in political institutions created

fertile ground for citizens, especially younger citizens, to look outside traditional party structures for political voice, and social media offered exactly this kind of alternative space (Acharya, 2024). Those with traditional political power are also becoming increasingly dependent on digital media to maintain their influence and popularity.

Social Media Ban and Gen Z Protests

The clearest and most dramatic recent example of digital capital converting into political power in Nepal is the sequence of events in September 2025. In November 2023, the Nepali government had already introduced directives requiring social media companies to register locally, appoint a resident compliance officer, and remove flagged content within twenty-four hours (Rest of World, 2025). In early September 2025, citing non-compliance with these registration rules, the government ordered a shutdown of 26 platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and X (Harvey & Pokharel, 2025). This ban arrived at a moment when online anger about corruption and about the lavish lifestyles of politicians' children, commonly labelled "Nepo Kids" in viral content, was already building (Harvey & Pokharel, 2025; Sharma, 2025). Protests broke out on 8 September 2025, and within a day, security forces had killed at least nineteen protesters, according to widely reported figures, with the death toll continuing to rise over the following days (Harvey & Pokharel, 2025; Teekah, 2025). Government buildings, including the parliament building, were set on fire, and by 9 September, Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli had resigned (Teekah, 2025). The social media ban was withdrawn during this period, but the protests continued until a curfew was imposed. Sushila Karki was later appointed as interim prime minister.

This episode is important for this paper for two reasons: (i) it shows that the Nepali state itself recognised social media as an important field of political power, serious enough to attempt to shut it down, and (ii) it shows how quickly digital capital,

built up over years through online networks, shared grievances, and viral content, could convert into real offline political consequences once it was directly threatened.

Bourdieuian-Ragenddaian Perspective of Digital Capital and Political Influence in Nepal

This paper adapts the theories of Bourdieu and Ragnedda proposing the combined Bourdieuian-Ragenddaian framework, it is necessary to apply the proposed digital-capital-divide theoretical framework to Nepal's online political sphere directly. The findings mentioned below reflect the same scenario of digital capital divide, political communication and influence in Nepal's online socio-political sphere.

Parties and Leaders Converting Old Capital into Digital Capital

Nepal's established political parties and senior leaders generally entered the online political field already holding significant economic, social, and symbolic capital built over decades of offline politics. In Bourdieuian terms, this offline capital gives them an advantage in the digital field as well. They can hire staff to manage social media pages, pay for promoted content, and rely on existing party networks to share their messages. However, the case of the 2025 protests suggests that this advantage is not unlimited. Despite holding strong traditional capital, senior leaders such as Prime Minister Oli could not prevent, and arguably worsened, a crisis that was driven largely by actors outside the traditional party structure. This suggests that in Nepal's current online political field, symbolic capital built through visible closeness to ordinary citizens' daily struggles can outweigh the traditional capital held by senior party figures, at least during moments of acute public anger.

Youth Movements and the New Digital-Political Actors

The clearest example of new actors converting digital capital into political influence is Nepal's Gen Z protest movement. Unlike

traditional political parties, this movement did not have a single formal leader, a party office, or, in most cases, large personal wealth. According to Puspa Sharma's (2025) analysis, the protests were organised by an independent, loosely structured group of young people. What they held instead was digital capital in Ragnedda's sense: (i) widespread digital access through smartphones, (ii) strong digital competence built from growing up online, and (iii) dense peer-to-peer networks on platforms such as Discord, TikTok, and Instagram. This digital capital is combined with shared grievances about corruption and inequality. It allowed a decentralised movement to organise fast enough to force a prime minister's resignation within days. This is an outcome that decades of traditional opposition politics in Nepal had not achieved as quickly. This is a strong illustration of Ragnedda's idea that digital capital acts as a "bridge resource" as it allowed young Nepalis to convert online grievance and organisation directly into offline political change.

At the same time, this movement also shows the limits of digital capital alone. The protest achieved a change in government. However, converting this into stable, lasting political influence, such as representation in formal institutions, still depends on other forms of capital, such as political experience, organisational capacity, and alliances. These forms of capital are not the same as digital skill. This matches Bourdieu's broader point that capital in one form does not automatically or fully convert into capital in another field. Conversion of capital from one to other is always partial and requires effort.

Ordinary Citizens, Content Creators and Symbolic Capital

Beyond parties and organised movements, individual citizens and content creators also gain political influence in Nepal's online sphere by building symbolic capital. Citizen journalism, where ordinary people share videos or reports of local problems that later gain attention from mainstream media is one clear example. Content

that exposed the lifestyle gap between ordinary citizens and the children of powerful politicians, described using the term “Nepo Kids,” is a striking case of symbolic capital. This capital is built entirely within the digital field and then converted quickly into real political consequences.

This shows an important feature of Nepal’s online political sphere. It allows some conversion of digital capital into symbolic and political capital even for actors who begin with little economic or institutional capital. However, this should not be read as evidence that the online field is equal for everyone.

Nepal’s Digital Inequality and Limits of Digital Capital

Following Ragnedda’s framework, it is important to separate access to the internet from the ability to convert that access into real benefits, described as the second and third levels of the digital divide (Ragnedda, 2020). Nepal shows clear evidence of both levels of inequality.

Urban-Rural Digital Access Gap

Even though overall internet penetration in Nepal has grown quickly, access remains uneven. Reporting on Nepal Telecommunications Authority data shows that fixed broadband access, which usually provides more stable and higher quality connectivity, is concentrated in urban regions. Rural Nepal continues to depend more heavily on mobile data and, in some remote areas, still relies on older two-generation mobile networks (Dhakal, 2026; Joshi, 2024). Around three-quarters of Nepal’s population still lives in rural areas (DataReportal, 2026), meaning that any political message or organising effort that depends on fast, reliable connectivity will reach urban citizens more easily and more often than rural ones.

Skills Gap Between Active and Passive Internet Users

A more subtle form of inequality concerns digital competence, the second component of Ragnedda’s definition of digital capital. Reporting based on Nepal Telecommunications Authority

figures has noted that even where internet subscriptions are high, the share of citizens who are genuinely active, regular internet users is much lower. That costs and limited digital skills remain barriers for many households (DataReportal, 2026). This matters for political influence because building an online following or organising a digital campaign requires more than occasional access. It requires the confidence and skill to create and share content regularly.

Users’ Age and The Generational Gap

Nepal’s online political sphere is also shaped by a generational divide in digital capital. As noted above, the 18 and above age group dominates active social media use in Nepal (DataReportal, 2026). This generational concentration of digital capital partly explains why the 2025 protest movement was so strongly associated with youths. Young Nepalis, on average, hold far more digital capital, in both access and skill, than older generations. It gives them a structural advantage in the online political field even when they hold comparatively little economic or institutional capital.

Old to New Inequalities: Reinforcement or Disruption?

A central theoretical question, following Ragnedda and Ruiu (2020), is whether digital capital simply reinforces older inequalities of class, geography, and education, or whether it can disrupt them. The evidence from Nepal suggests both processes are happening at once. On one hand, urban, educated, and economically better-off citizens generally find it easier to build strong digital capital, reinforcing old patterns of advantage. On the other hand, the 2025 protests show that digital capital can, at least temporarily, allow young and otherwise less powerful citizens to challenge and even remove entrenched political elites. Bourdieu’s (1990) own theory allows for this kind of tension. He argues such fields are not perfectly fixed. Struggles over the value and distribution of capital are a normal part of how fields change over time.

Bringing the findings together, this paper argues that digital capital has become a genuine and independent source of political influence in Nepal. But that is still closely tied to older forms of capital and to structural inequalities within Nepali society. Political parties and senior leaders continue to hold real advantages in the online field because of their existing economic, social, and symbolic capital. Yet, the political movements, change and powershifts after the growth of digital media in Nepal and particularly, the 2025-2026 case, shows that these advantages are no longer sufficient to guarantee political survival on their own. Younger and less institutionally powerful actors have shown that concentrated digital capital, especially digital competence and dense peer networks can be converted rapidly into offline political consequences during moments of acute public grievance.

Bourdieuian-Ragenddaian framework in this paper also cautions against overly optimistic readings of digital politics in Nepal. The same unevenness that Bourdieu described in other fields, where a small group holds most of the valuable capital, appears again in Nepal's online political sphere. Unevenness or divides, significantly in the digital political communication and influence, in Nepal still appears along the lines of urban versus rural residence, age, and digital skill rather than only traditional class lines. Digital capital, in other words, is not a fully separate or equalising force. It is best understood as a new layer added onto Nepal's existing structure of social and political inequality and divides that reflects in dramatic moments such as September 2025 can temporarily unsettle that structure.

Conclusion

This paper sets out to examine digital capital and political influence in Nepal's online political sphere through the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu, extended by Massimo Ragnedda's concept of digital capital proposing and applying the combined Bourdieuian-Ragneddaian model,

digital capital divide theory. Using a qualitative, literature-based approach, the paper has shown that Nepal's online political field is shaped by uneven distribution of economic, cultural, social, symbolic, and now digital capital divide has become more significantly serious issue. Established political actors generally hold strong traditional capital that gives them real, though not unlimited, advantages online. Newer actors, particularly Nepal's youth have shown that concentrated digital capital in the form of digital access and digital skills combined with dense social networks can be converted into significant political influence. It was dramatically illustrated by the September 2025 Gen Z protests that led to the resignation of a sitting prime minister. This digital capital gave the youths of less cultural and symbolic capital, more power. At the same time, ongoing gaps in internet access, digital skill and generational participation mean that this new form of capital remains unevenly distributed creating and reinforcing a vast digital divide. This is often reinforcing Nepal's existing social divides even as it occasionally disrupts them. Understanding Nepal's political future increasingly requires understanding who holds digital capital and how that capital interacts with the older forms of capital as Bourdieu as well as Ragnedda have described.

Recommendations

This is a desk based qualitative review article and it is not triangulated by quantitative study or any other field-based approach. This is a document-based theoretical study rather than a survey or interview-based study. It cannot measure digital capital directly among individual Nepali citizens or politicians. It relies instead on secondary evidence and on the logical application of an established theoretical framework. The study focuses heavily on the September 2025 protests as an illustrative case. While this event is highly informative, a single case cannot represent the full range of ways digital capital operates in Nepal's ordinary, non-crisis politics, such as routine election campaigning or local government communication. Because events

connected to Nepal's political situation continue to unfold, some details discussed in this paper may be updated or reinterpreted as more research and data become available. Also, statistical figures on internet and social media use in Nepal vary between sources depending on their methodology. This paper has tried to note these differences honestly rather than presenting a single figure as absolutely certain.

The future research on this topic could usefully include direct survey or interview-based studies that measure digital capital among specific groups of Nepali citizens, such as party workers, independent activists or rural residents to test the patterns suggested in this paper with primary data. Comparative research examining Nepal alongside other South Asian countries that have experienced similar youth-led, social-media-linked protest movements would also help clarify which patterns are specific to Nepal and which reflect broader regional trends. Finally, longer-term research tracking Nepal's political situation would help show whether the digital capital mobilized as described in this study translates into lasting institutional influence or whether it fades once the immediate crisis passes.

References

- Abdullah, N. H., Zaki, T. S. A. T., & Ahmad, M. F. (2024). Shaping the future: Social media's role in youth political information and engagement: A review of Literature. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 14(12), 319–325. <https://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i12/23955>
- Acharya, U. (2017). *Social media, youth and political participation*. Center for Media Research-Nepal.
- Arafat, M. Y., Mia, M. S. Md., Imraan, I. H. & Islam, M.R. (2025). Reflections from uprising: The role of youth and social media in political movements in Nepal and Indonesia. *International Journal of Education and Social Science Studies*, 1(3), 191–199.
- Barma, P., & Thapa, S. (2025). The 2025 Nepalese Gen-Z protests: A structuralist analysis of youth mobilization, political transformation, and governance reform. *SUPRA: Global Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Innovations*, 1, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.71183/supra.2025020301>
- Benzer, M., & Reed, K. (2019). Pierre bourdieu: capital and forms of social suffering. In *Pierre Bourdieu: Capital and Forms of Social Suffering* (pp. 18-35). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714517.n2>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). The logic of practice (Trans. Richard Nice). Polity Press.
- Celestin, M., Mishra, A. K., Vasuki, M., Dinesh Kumar, A., Asamoah, P. J., & Banoaga, I. (2026). Neobank adoption dynamics in Africa shaped by benefits barriers and fintech regulation. *Intellectual Journal of Academic Research*, 4(1), 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ijar.v4i1.98337>
- Celestin, M., Mishra, A. K., Vasuki, M., Kumar, A. D., Banoaga, I., Boakye, M. M., Mishra, S. & Aithal, P. S. (2026). AI-driven capital budgeting and managerial decision quality in global firms. *Poornaprajna International Journal of Teaching & Research Case Studies (PIJTRCS)*, 3(2), 14–59. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21700705>
- Chand, P. B., & Awasthi, K. R. (2025). Facebook's influence on Nepali political dynamics: Survey of Tribhuvan University political science students in Nepal. *Quest Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 7(1), 155-166. <https://doi.org/10.3126/qjmss.v7i1.82023>
- Dahal, D.R. (26 April 2025). *Political communication vital for governance*. The Rising Nepal.
- DataReportal. (2025). *Digital 2025: Nepal*. Kepios DataReportal Global Digital Insights.

- Dhakal, B. (2026, June 17). Connected but not equal: Nepal's internet boom still leaves millions behind. *NepalNews*.
- Harvey, L. & Pokharel, S. (2025, September 10). A social media ban, corruption and 'Nepo Kids': What we know about the deadly protests that ousted Nepal's leader. *CNN*.
- Ida, R., Saud, M., & Mashud, M. (2020). An empirical analysis of social media usage, political learning and participation among youth: A comparative study of Indonesia and Pakistan. *Quality & Quantity*, 54(4), 1285–1297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-00985-9>
- Joshi, A. (2024, September 10). Nepal's persistent digital divide: From high penetration to inclusion. *The Himalayan Times*.
- K.C., A. (2026, June 30). The digital landscape of Nepal: An extensive analysis of internet and social media user trends (2024–2025) with infographics. *Gurkha Technology*.
- Mishra, A. K. (2026). Analysis of digital transformation in logistics and supply chain management in India and Nepal an innovation at Madhesh University. *Madhesh Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 1(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.3126/mjir.v1i1.97089>
- Mishra, A. K. Mishra, S., Gautam, T. P., & Chalise, M. (2026). Patent publication: Impact of social media influencers on beauty and cosmetic brands in India and Nepal. *Apex Journal of Business and Management (AJBM)*, 5(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.61274/apxc.2026.v05i01.001>
- Mishra, A. K. & Mishra, S. (2024). *Management of reaching prospect: A call for action*. Intellectuals' Book Palace, Kirtipur, Kathmandu. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14561081>
- Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Paudel, S. (2026a). Political communication and public trust in government institutions in Nepal. *Sahita* 69(4), 249–262. Press Council Nepal.
- Paudel, S. (2026b). Political communication in Nepal: Artificial intelligence, deepfakes and democratic governance. *GS WOW: Wisdom of Worthy Research Journal*, 5(1) 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.62078/grks.2026.v05i01.007>
- Paudel, S. (2026c). Media coverage and framing analysis of the recent Gen Z protests in Nepal. *Samhita*, 67 (3), 144–154. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18801000>
- Ragnedda, M. (2018). Conceptualizing digital capital. *Telematics and Informatics*, 35(8), 2366–2375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.10.006>
- Ragnedda, M., & Ruiiu, M. L. (2020). *Digital capital: A Bourdieusian perspective on the digital divide*. Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781839095504>
- Ragnedda, M., Ruiiu, M. L., & Addeo, F. (2020). Measuring digital capital: An empirical investigation. *New Media & Society*, 22(5), 793–816. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819869604>
- Rest of World. (2025, September 9). Nepal's Gen Z protests lead to the prime minister's resignation.
- Sharma, P. (2025). *Unrest and reckoning: Nepal's political watershed*. Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, (ISAS Insights No. 768).
- Sun, Y., Hsieh, J., & Gao, X. (Andy). (2025). Integrating qualitative comparative analysis with reflexive thematic analysis in theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24, 1–14.
- Teekah, E. (2026, April 2). *2025 Nepalese Gen Z Protests*. Encyclopedia Britannica.
- van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2005). *The deepening divide: Inequality in the information society*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229812>
- Win, H. (2025). *Comparative study of protest (2025) in Indonesia and Nepal: A cross-national analysis of youth-led democratic movements*.

