

The 2025 Gen Z Protest in Nepal: Media Representation and Discourse of Democratic Deficit

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze 15 media texts to examine how the 2025 Gen Z protest in Nepal has been represented across media over 10 days, from September 8-18, 2025. To that end, we applied theoretical concepts of media discourse and representation to examine media-constructed discourses about the Gen Z protest, conducting a qualitative analysis of media texts in three phases: In Vivo coding, patterning, and thematizing. During our analysis and interpretation of media texts, we identified three dominant themes: the Gen Z movement as a youth awakening, leadership crisis, and the critical lessons it teaches. Our interpretation and discussion of these themes indicated that the 2025 Gen Z movement was primarily driven by decades of unfulfilled promises of democratic leadership and that it has offered a historic opportunity for post-Gen Z protest political leaders to fulfill those deferred democratic promises. Hence, this article not only offers a critical analysis of the achievements and setbacks of the Gen Z protest but also strongly calls for rebuilding and reforming Nepal by incorporating the true democratic aspirations of the 2025 Gen Z movement.

Keywords: Gen Z Movement, Gen Z Protest, Media Discourse, Democratic Deficit, Nepal

Introduction

Some photographs capture moments of crisis, going beyond simple documentation to serve as collective memories of suffering and resistance of a particular moment. A bloodied shoe image (Figure 1) taken by Dinesh Gautam, a news reporter from *Onlinekhabar*, can be considered the iconic photo that recognized not only the protesters in the demonstration but also thousands of other supporters worldwide who felt empathy for the irreparable loss of human lives and casualties of the 2025 Gen Z protest in Nepal. A closer examination of the image reveals how its symbolic details tell Gen Z protest as political awakening.

Figure 1

One of the Most Circulated Photos of the 2025 Gen Z Movement in Nepal.



First, the brand and design of the shoes are popular among Gen Z youths in Nepal, meaning they embody Gen Z aspirations and vigor. Second, the blood smeared on the shoe is Gen Z blood caused by police brutality against the Gen Z protestors who demonstrated against the then government. Third, the background road is a public space in Kathmandu Valley, where Gen Z youths protested but were shot at: “Amid the chaos, my eyes caught a blood-soaked shoe lying in the middle of the New

Baneshwor intersection” (Gautam, 2025). Fourth, the blood-soaked shoe left behind suggests that Gen Z Youths’ aspirations were as forsaken as the shoe. Fifth, Nepali people remember this image as a reminder of Gen Z youths who led the changes brought by the 2025 Gen Z movement in Nepal. The iconic shoe, which will likely remain a powerful reminder of the 2025 Gen Z protests in Nepal for generations, reminds us that the protests began when youths viewed the then-Nepali government’s ban on social media as an attempt to silence their voices, the voices that were amplified through the Nepo Kid or Nepo Baby campaign—a social media effort “exposing the luxurious lifestyle of the political elite” that sparked “widespread anger over socioeconomic inequality, corruption, lack of [good] governance” (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Therefore, for the Gen Z youths, the social media ban “represented a direct assault on freedom of expression, digital connectivity, and modern ways of living,” aiming to hide “years of perceived nepotism, elite capture, economic stagnation, and limited job prospects” (Adhikari, 2025).

Most Nepali youths, both at home and abroad, spoke out against the social media ban, and some Gen Z youths in Nepal invited all Gen Z members to gather for the protest at Maitighar, a government-approved site for peaceful protests in the capital, Kathmandu. On September 8, the first day of the Gen Z protest, tens of thousands of Gen Z youths and their supporters, many in school uniforms, gathered in Kathmandu. Initially, it was called for and expected to be peaceful mass protests, but no sooner had the police shot at the Gen Z protesters in school uniforms and injured hundreds of others than it turned out to be one of the most violent protests (Shrestha & Kharel, 2026). Thousands of Nepali people, both at home and abroad, shared pictures of the bloody attacks on school students on various social media platforms, showing solidarity and support for the Gen Z movement. As a result, the then-government was forced to lift the social media ban on the evening of September 8, 2025. However, the protests continued because people also expected Prime Minister KP Oli to take moral responsibility by addressing the public and resigning the premiership.

The next day, on September 9, the Gen Z protesters continued their mass protest more aggressively from early in the morning. Protesters breached police lines, set fire to the Federal Parliament, the Supreme Court, and various political leaders' homes (Suwal, 2025; Adhikari, 2025; Adhikari, 2026). The then Prime Minister KP Oli resigned on September 9,

and his cabinet was dissolved, leaving the country in limbo for the next two days. Amid the political chaos, high-profile political leaders were airlifted by Nepal Army helicopters to the army headquarters and other secure locations (Adhikari, 2025; Asia Media Center, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Mulmi, 2025; Suwal, 2025; Adhikari, 2026). During this time, some Gen Z leaders, such as Sudan Gurung, Rakshya Bam, Miraj Dhungana, Ojaswi Raj Thapa, Prabesh Dahal, and Rehan Raj Dangal, among many others, were active on social media, coordinating to lead the Gen Z movement in a peaceful direction. The Nepal Army had already initiated coordination for peaceful transformation, inviting Gen Z protestors to come into dialogue. Similarly, to form the cabinet in their favor, Gen Z protesters used Discord, which had over 160,000 members, to vote for an interim leader. For that purpose, “an open Discord poll drew 7,713 votes, with Sushila Karki receiving the highest 3,833 (50 percent) votes”. On September 12, after political negotiations, former chief justice Sushila Karki was officially appointed Nepal’s forty-second and first female prime minister, beginning her tenure (Roy, 2025). The president dissolved the parliament with the prime minister’s approval, granting the new government a mandate to hold fresh elections scheduled for March 5, 2026. (Mulmi, 2026; Human Rights Watch, 2025). All this unprecedented political development was believed to have been initiated by the Oli-led government’s ban on 26 social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—on September 4, 2025, which resulted in the irreparable loss of 76 Nepali lives and injured a total of 2,638 people (*Full Details of Those Injured in Gen Z Movement Made Public*, n.d.; Shrestha & Kharel, 2026).

Nepal’s 2025 Gen Z movement attracted substantial attention from both national and international news media. Given the important role of media in shaping public understanding of political events, examining how the movement was represented in media discourse is a worthwhile research topic. In this article, therefore, we, the authors, seek to answer the following research question: In what ways do media represent the 2025 Gen Z movement in Nepal, and what narratives emerge from the media coverage? To answer this research question, we designed our study as a media discourse analysis of 15 media texts from six news outlets over 10 days, from September 8 to 18, 2025, to investigate the most immediate and up-to-date media discourse. Because media representation is considered a major source of information about the 2025 Gen Z movement, we aim to examine

the discourse produced by the selected media texts. We acknowledge that, although media representations are relative, they are part of public understanding and opinion because they disseminate information and opinions about the movement. Analyzing these representations, therefore, provides insight not only into what happened but also into how the 2025 Gen Z movement is perceived, interpreted, and documented across media. To situate this study within existing scholarship, the following section reviews relevant literature.

Literature Review

Nepal's 2025 Gen Z protest is a new topic of scholarly inquiry that has already drawn scholars' attention. Some researchers have explored its background causes. *Encyclopedia Britannica* has registered *Nepalese Gen Z Protests* (Teekah, 2025, December 10). It adds details about the protest and states that the Nepali Gen Z protest "echoed recent youth-led uprisings" in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Moreover, as presented in the entry, there are many causes, such as "about one-third of the country's gross domestic product comes from remittances," but "the country's limited productive sectors (such as banking, real estate, and large-scale import businesses) are controlled by a small, wealthy elite that dominates both government and economy." This lexical entry indicates that the Gen Z movement in Nepal arose from youth frustration stemming from decades of economic vulnerability, unemployment, and political and economic hierarchies between the ruling elites and the general public. According to Awale (2025), the Nepali Gen Z movement was shaped by the unfulfilled democratic values: "Nepal has had 14 prime ministers in the past 15 years. While development has faltered and unemployment has forced young people to migrate abroad for work" (p. 60). For Awale, the uprising was fuelled by mass youth frustration. Similarly, Gyawali (2025) compares the Nepali Gen Z movement with the Maoist insurgency in Nepal from 1996 to 2006 but distinguishes it by stressing that "Gen Z movement in Nepal represents the emergence of a new form of social resistance shaped by macro social forces like digital connectivity, global awareness, and moral-political frustration" (p. 28). It implies that the Gen Z movement in Nepal is a result of digital, global, social, and moral youth forces that resist systemic and structural inequities. Furthermore, Barma and Thapa (2025), analyzing the underlying causes of Gen Z movement from a structuralist perspective, conclude that the Gen Z movement, "initiated by a social media ban and rooted in systemic inequalities, elite dominance, and institutional

weaknesses, illustrates the capacity of marginalised actors to challenge established power structures (p. 10). The authors suggest that the Gen Z movement was driven by “structural inequalities within the country's political, economic, and institutional framework” that have long existed in Nepal (p. 2). In the same vein, Gautam et al. (2025) connect this protest with the decline of tourism and present the Gen Z movement as a “digitalized uprising” which can be understood as a youth resistance to “Nepal’s systemic corruption, highlighted by its poor 34/100 CPI [Corruption Perception Index] score and a history of high-profile financial scams” (p. 124). It means that the protest was a youth-led resistance to the systemic corruption that caused poverty in the nation. For Timalina and Shrestha (2025), the movement was influenced by “a vibrant array of clandestine political forces,” including conflicts over control of digital systems, institutional weaknesses, Nepal's geopolitics, caste, class, gender, and geographic factors, and unequal patterns of participation (p. 70). This means that various intersectional factors shape the Gen Z movement.

Scholars not only foreground the causes but also map the future prospects of the Gen Z movement. Chenoweth and Cebul (2026), drawing connections between the anticorruption crusades in Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, write that Nepali “Gen Z activists have used the protests as an opportunity to push for political-party reforms that would retire old elites and improve youth representation in parliament” (p. 11). This argument stresses that the Gen Z movement was waged against ruling elites to achieve social and political reform. Measuring the tension between Gen Z youth aspirations and state repression, Koirala (2025) writes that the Gen Z protests in Nepal marked a political moment in Nepal's history, “revealing both the transformative potential and the inherent vulnerabilities of digitally native youth activism in the face of state repression” (p. 3). It reinforces the claim that the Gen Z protest is a historic moment that destabilized old political structures and aimed to reestablish new possibilities. Likewise, Magar (2025) assesses the potential of the Gen Z protest by asserting that it is “a significant historical turning point for both the transformation of political culture and the reconstruction of democratic transition” by transitioning Nepali politics from a leader-oriented and party-centered phenomenon to “issue-centered, transparency-oriented, and ethical leadership” (p. 113). It means the Gen Z movement aimed to bring about a major political shift in the Nepali political landscape. Shrestha and Paudel (2025) write that Nepal’s Gen Z uprising “is not

simply inheriting politics but actively reshaping it, transforming discontents into a call for systemic accountability and sustainable change, and ushering in a new era of civic engagement” (p. 3). The authors’ assessment of the Gen Z movement makes bold claims about its potential and significance in Nepal's history.

Our review of the existing literature shows that while scholars have examined the underlying causes of the protest and the potential and significance of the Gen Z movement, to the best of our knowledge, no research has been conducted on the media representation of the 2025 Gen Z movement in Nepal, even though we acknowledge that some scholars might have been working in parallel with us. In this article, therefore, we aim to explore a fresh perspective on how the movement has been represented in the media and to derive the discursive meaning of these representations. Seen in this light, our study offers a new perspective not only on the media representation of the movement but also on the meaning of the Nepali 2025 Gen Z protest itself, incorporating media discourse as the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical insights of this paper draw on representation and media discourse, as discussed in Jenny Kidd’s (2016) “Theories of Representation” and Mary Talbot’s (2007) *Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction*. Re-presentation, in simple terms, means presenting something again using different meaning symbols. Therefore, as Kidd (2026) writes, in media representations, researchers are interested in “establishing which systems are in operation” by explicating “words, images, news reports, films, and memes” to generate particular meanings (p. 21). It means that while studying media discourse, finding the representational aspect of media involves exploring patterns and systems of representation across media texts. As a result, when there is a similar pattern of representation across media texts, media representation becomes a discourse, a unit of representation that creates partial truths and meaning that has the potential to become information or knowledge. In this study, we applied media representation theory to examine how 15 media texts portrayed the Gen Z movement. Within the theoretical domain of media representation, the methodological insight we have incorporated in this article is media discourse. In simple terms, media discourse is a meaning created by a system of representation across various media texts. According

to Talbot (2007), media discourse plays a key role in constructing realities as “a vital function as a public forum” (p. 3). It means that media discourse plays an important role in the meaning-making process because media texts undergo an interactive process from production communities and audience committees “who interact with one another” (p. 4). Talbot states that media text “is part of the process of discourse and it is pointless to study it in isolation. It is the product of a meaning-producer (encoder) and a resource for a meaning-interpreter (decoder)” (p. 10). Hence, media discourse is a form of representation that produces meaning that can shape public opinions. Given that media discourse analysis requires a broader contextual perspective, we analyze 15 media texts to better investigate how the 2025 Gen Z movement in Nepal is represented.

Research Methods

The research methods we employed in this article included collection, selection, coding, patterning, and thematizing. Drawing on the theory of representation and media discourse, first, we gathered 57 media representations from various online platforms. To diversify the analysis and make it more inclusive, we selected texts such as editorials, opinion pieces, blogs, and news reports. Then, we examined their titles and selected the 20 most representative pieces to retain the dominant discourses while avoiding repetition of identical forms of representation. Then, to investigate the most immediate media coverage, we selected 15 media texts published within 10 days, from September 8 to 18, 2025. The range of national and international news outlets includes *BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation)*, *The New York Times*, *The Kathmandu Post*, *The Himalayan Times*, *My Republica*, and *The Rising Nepal*. All the media texts we analyzed are reliable sources because they are available online, and readers can access them. The methods we employed to analyze the media texts were informed by the qualitative coding methods discussed by Saldaña (2025). We conducted three phases of analysis: In Vivo coding, patterning, and thematizing. We generated initial codes from the titles, subtitles, repeated words, and phrases from the selected media texts. After that, we actively searched for connections across the initial codes, the connections that helped us generate patterns. This approach helped us identify the dominant patterns in how the overall Gen Z movement is framed, focusing on its causes, characteristics, and consequences across media texts. Our analysis of patterns across media texts representing the 2025 Gen Z protest identified three themes: youth awakening, leadership crisis, and lessons learned. The three dominant

themes implied that the media narratives were not unilateral; they offered a dialectical perspective that not only represents the transformative potential of the Gen Z protest but also invites readers to explore the movement's dark side stemming from a leadership crisis. Thus, out of these two dialectical dimensions, a new meaning emerged: lessons learned. In the following section, we present the three major themes, further dividing them into sub-themes, which were the patterns we generated.

Findings

Gen Z Movement as Youth Awakening

Our qualitative analysis of the selected media texts suggests that the 2025 Gen Z protest in Nepal is a manifestation of the youth awakening, which, based on our qualitative analysis, can be discussed in four sub-themes: Youth Political Awareness, Anti-corruption Awareness, Youth Awakening through Digital and Physical Participation and Youth Awakening for Political Leadership.

Youth Political Awareness. One overarching theme that runs through media texts is Nepali youth's awareness of politics. The media presents Gen Z not as a passive recipient but as a politically conscious and activist generation in Nepal: “This generation is not simply asking for survival or opportunity; they want the ability to design their own futures and influence the social, political, and cultural structures around them (Shah, 2025). It indicates that the Nepali youth have a critical political awareness, which fueled the Gen Z protest. The reason for this reawakening is that Gen Z is informed about the global political landscape: “the young people of this generation are educated and quite aware of the national and international affairs. Being global citizens, they are studying the world closely” (Sharma, 2025). It suggests that the Gen Z movement is a claim to political participation for transformation, aligned with global political challenges. Therefore, as portrayed in the media, the movement's primary purpose was to “vanquish corruption, promote democracy and sweep away an entrenched leadership that kept power and wealth in the hands of a select few” (Beech & Sharma, 2025). It means that the Gen Z movement arose from a youth awakening for a radical reformation. The reawakening consciousness has also been expressed through the *Nepo Kid* or *Nepo Baby* campaign, which is “symbolic of a deeper frustration with inequality, as protesters compare the lives of the elite with those of everyday citizens” (Dahal et al., 2025). In the same vein, the movement was also sparked by

Nepali youth's "frustration and anger amongst the masses have been the top leaders' lifelong claim to leadership, who wouldn't retire until death" (Pariyar, 2025). Moreover, the media discourse highlights the movement's moral and non-ideological dimension (Pradhan, 2025). The media portray this movement as a spiritual revolution of consciousness aimed at "interact, learn, create, and grow collectively" (Shah, 2025). In that sense, social networking has been defined as a spiritual net in which knowledge and wisdom are not locked away in hierarchies. Instead, they get manifested through participation, dialogue, and shared experience. When the movement turned into painful havoc, the situation had spiritually awakened them, as they said, "all we wanted to do was fight against corrupt system...but we could not control the situation, and now this collective trauma will be embedded in our memories forever" (Beech & Sharma, 2025). This realization can be seen as a shift in ideology among young people, which has, to some extent, transformed them into moral beings. Hence, the media created a discourse framing the 2025 Gen Z movement in Nepal as a product of youth political awareness and presenting the protest as an anti-corruption movement.

Anti-corruption Awareness. The analysis of the selected media text informs that the 2025 Gen Z protest in Nepal is an anti-corruption movement. Media reports present that the Gen Z movement was "propelled by long-standing frustrations: inequality, lack of opportunity, a sense of voicelessness, corruption, and deep distrust in the political establishment and leadership" (Pradhan, 2025). It suggests that the Gen Z movement was a youth-led war against the system rather than against any person or individual. As presented in the media, anti-corruption vigor is what Gen Z distinguishes from older generations: "Unlike the generations before them, who chose leaders and abided by instructions even when those leaders were corrupt or ineffective, the Nepali Gen Z refused to be bound by traditional hierarchies" (Sharma, 2025). As reported in the news, contemporary Nepali democratic political leadership and the political system were systematizing corruption, and the Gen Z movement opposed it. In this regard, Dahal, Atkinson, and Khan (2025) represent youths' voice: "We want to see an end to corruption in Nepal... Leaders promise one thing during elections but never deliver. They are the cause of so many problems." It implies that the decades-long discrepancy between democratic promises and post-election delivery was one of the causes of the Gen Z uprising. Similarly, Walker and Dahal (2025) report that protesters demonstrated by carrying placards with

slogans such as “‘enough is enough’ and ‘end to corruption’”. This news report reinforces the idea that Gen Z protesters opposed the corruption they perceived. The media further highlights other examples of rampant corruption, such as “collecting money from young people aspiring to find employment in the United States under the cover of refugee status that was intended for ethnic Nepalis who had been forcibly deported from neighboring Bhutan” (Sharma & Travelli, 2025). Therefore, as presented in media social media ban is not all about the cause of Gen Z movement, instead, “it’s about trust, corruption, and a generation that refuses to stay silent” (“Nepal’s Gen Z uprising explained,” 2025). Thus, our analysis of media representations suggests that the Gen Z movement was an anti-corruption campaign that took place in both physical and digital spaces.

Youth Awakening through Digital and Physical Participation. One important manifestation of this youth awakening was Gen Z’s active participation in both digital and physical spaces. Our analysis of the media text showed that the 2025 Gen Z movement in Nepal involved both actual and virtual protests. The actual and digital movements enabled Gen Z to surpass “the imagination of the generations before them” because Gen Z youth “mastered the digital tools at their fingertips,” thereby dramatizing an “extraordinary courage in marching ahead both virtually and physically” (Sharma, 2025). The online platforms for Gen Z, as represented in media coverage, are “lifelines for communication, organization, commerce, and self-expression,” and as a result, when “young people assert their right to be heard on the streets” they suggested a deeper human desire for reformed systems with knowledge, wisdom, and ethics (Shah, 2025). Since most Gen Z are digital natives, the Nepali government’s social media ban was a shock that prepared them against the authorities. BBC reporters write, “While the ban was a catalyst for the current unrest, protesters are also challenging a more deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the country’s authorities” (Dahal et al., 2025). The media texts show that Gen Z used social media more responsibly too, as they requested “tens of thousands of followers on social media not to act violently, even as at least 19 protesters were already killed [on the first day] when security forces opened fire” (Beech & Sharma, 2025). Instead, they pointed out how the state used online censorship to diminish people’s voices and how “young protesters were driven to overturn the government’s social media ban” (Beech & Sharma, 2025). Hence, as shown in media discourse, the Gen Z movement unfolded in two discursive spaces, the physical and the digital, with political potential.

Youth Awakening for Political Leadership. Beyond protesting the social media ban, the Gen Z movement reflected a youth awakening that could influence political leadership and challenge existing power structures. The dissolution of the parliament and formation of a new government, as presented in the media, brought new political hope that the movement-established government can “overcome the 2025 crisis by enforcing anti-corruption measures and promoting transparent governance, leveraging her judicial background to rebuild public trust” (Shrestha, 2025). In this context, media coverage highlights the potential of the movement to bring change: “having lived their entire lives under a system that has been in constant flux but has ultimately resulted in the same old and discredited men rotating back to power, they called for change and made it possible” (Thapa, 2025). Therefore, Pariyar (2025) presents the Gen Z movement as “good news for the younger politician” suggesting a new possibility for young people to enter politics and lead the country in a more democratic way, a task their predecessors failed to do. The media texts, however, make people aware that bringing about sustainable change requires “discipline, foresight, and constructive negotiation to ensure that opportunities and external factors do not hijack the movement’s spirit (Singh, 2025). Thus, media texts present that the Gen Z protest has opened an avenue for youth leadership, at least for now. The only caution they are projecting is whether this momentum can be translated into disciplined, inclusive, and sustainable democratic reform.

Leadership Crisis

Another important aspect of media representations of the Gen Z movement that we found important is balanced perspectives, highlighting both the successes and challenges of the movement. In our study, one of the main themes in media texts is the leadership crisis, which we examine through three sub-themes: a transformative but leaderless movement, a build-or-break dilemma, and a pyrrhic or constructive victory.

Leaderless Movement. A common discourse in the news is the focus on the lack of leadership to lead the Gen Z protest. As presented across media, when the Gen Z movement took place on September 8, people were unsure who the actual leaders were, how it would move forward, or who would take accountability for it. The actual crisis of leadership was felt when the country was in arson and protesters attacked political leaders and demolished their houses. Thapa (2025) observes that the Gen Z movement

in Nepal represents a new form of youth mobilization: decentralized, digitally connected, and focused more on collective action than on following a single leader. Observing the leadership crisis on the aftermath of the arson and destruction, Pradhan (2025) asserts that “without leadership and organizational capacity, even powerful uprisings risk being co-opted before meaningful change can take root.” Even though there was no leader to point out, the collective effort unified Gen Z will all generations. Therefore, Thapa (2025) writes that “To limit what they have achieved to being the voice of just one generational cohort is to do injustice to their movement. In that sense, we are all Gen Z.” It was not only the Gen Z movement that lacked a leader even the country experienced it from September 9 to September 12. Therefore, Beech, Travelli, and Sharma (2025) rightly reported that “Nepal is now a country without a functioning government.” Therefore, as presented in the media texts. Gen Z protest created a kind of leadership vacuum both in Gen Z as well as in the country. Thus, media discourse constructs a narrative of the leaderless movement that posed a build-or-break dilemma.

Build-or-Break Dilemma. Our analysis suggested that one of the themes that resonated across media representations was the build or break dilemma. The media texts foregrounded that the Gen Z movement has brought new hope as an opportunity for “Rebuilding from Revolt” (Shrestha, 2025). As the Gen Z movement intensified, narratives such as “Then the Vibe Changed” (Beech & Sharma, 2025) reflect a loss of control, in which initially peaceful demonstrations gave way to violence and uncertainty (Gautam, 2025). In succession, the media reports also highlight the damage Gen Z movement caused: “property damage in the billions of rupees, with the tourism industry—just beginning to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic — hit especially hard” (Sharma, 2025). The reports of deaths and injuries, indicative of violence, risk, and human cost, appeared in headlines as “At least 19 Dead in Nepal after Gen Z Protests” (Walker & Dahal, 2025), emphasizing how political disagreement escalated into life-threatening confrontations. The media headline “Nepal’s Capital Is Choked with Smoke and Gripped by Fear” (Beech et al., 2025) created a strong sense of fear and chaos. For many Nepalis—including us, the authors living abroad—and for concerned people around the world, the media-disseminated image of smoke-filled streets was deeply unsettling. It showed not only the physical violence of the protests but also the emotional and psychological stress experienced by both protesters and ordinary citizens.

Thus, the media texts collectively highlight themes of violence, risk, and human cost, depicting the cost of the Gen Z uprising, which appears as the dialectic of the political potential theme that we discussed above.

Pyrrhic or Constructive Victory. The media present both optimistic and pessimistic narratives about the Gen Z movement. The pessimistic tone is evident in the reporting of the loss of 76 lives and property, whereas the optimistic tone echoes in mapping the future possibilities. Our analysis of media texts shows that the theme of a leaderless, build-or-break dilemma gives rise to the theme of gaining from great loss, known as a Pyrrhic victory. As reported in the media, the movement toppled the Oli-led government, but the cost was high. The statistic narratives like “Almost 200 people are believed to have been injured in clashes with police,” “Total death toll to at least 22” create a gloomy rather than a glorious image of the Gen Z protest (Dahal, Atkinson, & Khan, 2025). Likewise, narratives of oppression like “Tear gas also entered the hospital, making it difficult for doctors to work” represent the brutality of the authorities (Walker & Dahal, 2025). In a column, “Nepal’s Gen Z uprising explained,” the brutal picture of authorities has been reinforced: “police responded with water cannons, tear gas, plastic bullets—and eventually live fire,” and “police used live ammunition in multiple locations.” Such reporting shows that the Gen Z protesters were violently suppressed, triggering rage and revenge against the authorities. Nevertheless, the oppressive acts of governments have been balanced by other narratives in the media, such as “The protests, once peaceful, gave way to widespread vandalism ... cities witnessed arson, looting, and destruction” (Sharma, 2025). Such media coverage raises doubts about the intentions of the Gen Z protesters. However, a news article “Gen Z movement: the path forward” reports that “the opportunists hijacked the protests, key administrative buildings were set on fire, including offices containing vital state records. Over 10,000 prisoners escaped after jails were stormed, spreading fear among citizens as dangerous criminals roamed free.” This media coverage raises the issue of who the opportunists were and who benefited from the protest. As a result, the responsibility for the destruction remains unanswered: “No group has taken responsibility for the destruction in Kathmandu” (Beech & Sharma, 2025). As presented in the media, however, the authorities have the lower hand: “all the people who were shot dead had been shot either on head or chest, not below the knee, which was against the law of Nepal” (Shrestha, 2025). Therefore, such a brutal act of government has been presented as a

“stupid and unforgivable act” (Sharma, 2025). Contrary to the notion of a Pyrrhic victory, some news channels frequently highlighted the new possibility of reconstruction, a notion of a constructive victory. According to Shrestha (2025), the Gen Z movement represents a constructive victory, and “With the unwavering support of the youth and her efforts to introduce actionable reforms in the nation, Nepal can be ‘Rebuilt from Revolt.’” Similarly, Singh (2025) expresses optimism about reform, noting that “dialogue between Gen Z representatives and legitimate state authorities is essential” during periods of instability. Hence, media representations of the Gen Z movement construct discourses that present a duality of victory, suggesting that, even though victory came at great cost, there is always a possibility of regeneration from loss.

Lessons Learned

Our analysis of the media discourse about the Gen Z movement shows that media representations offer critical insights for everyone, including politicians, protesters, leaders, and future protesters. Largely, the media coverage reports that the Gen Z movement carries a transformative spirit: “The Gen Z protests were about a complete transformation in how the state functions. Their demands were not only theirs but of the entire country, even of Generation Beta, just being born” (Thapa, 2025). It indicates that a generation, like Gen Z can represent the transformative spirit to rebuild the nation. The Gen Z movement has brought both challenges and opportunities, paving the way for future pathways while drawing on lessons from the past. Pradhan (2025) translates a popular revolutionary Nepali song, “Once in an age, a single day arrives. It brings upheaval, turmoil, transformation,” recalling earlier historical movements and indicating that if a movement cannot achieve sustainable progress, those revolutions cannot bring substantial change. Therefore, as the media represent it, the 2025 Gen Z movement teaches that “sustaining momentum requires foresight and organization” (Pradhan, 2025). Regarding the sustainability of development, there is a need to learn from countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and from their setbacks in economic independence, “enforcing anti-corruption measures and promoting transparent governance, leveraging their judicial background to rebuild public trust.” (Shrestha, 2025). Furthermore, economic reform is not only the issue the Gen Z movement is calling for. Instead, it is a call for “a new political culture” (Sharma, N., 2025), which the past leadership could not foster. Had the past leadership listened to the voices of youth and addressed

their aspirations, this situation would never have happened. This revolt reminds us that even in a democracy, if people's voices are suppressed and not heard properly, especially those genuinely aimed at the existing undemocratic political culture, such as the “#Nepo baby” accusation (Dahal et al., 2025), new times demand new leadership that values people's opinions, concerns, and problems. Hence, one of the key lessons the media disseminates is that the Gen Z movement is a decade-long reaction, recollected in people's minds, against the systemic corruption, nepotism, and unfulfilled promises of democracy. Therefore, drawing on the lessons learned, we titled this article “The 2025 Gen Z Protest in Nepal: Media Representation and Discourse of Democratic Deficit.” Whoever comes to the government, owing to the loss of lives and property damage, the future leadership has no excuses if they fail to successfully transform the democratic deficit into a full-fledged democracy in Nepal.

Discussion

Analysis of 15 media texts on the Gen Z movement shows that the protest is not merely a response to the government's immediate political move to ban social media. The media discourse suggests that the Gen Z protest should be understood in a broader context, including the political awakening of younger generations, protests against corruption, digital activism, and Gen Z's future aspirations. The Gen Z movement was a response to decades of anti-democratic experiences by the Nepali people, especially among youth. Seen from this discursive lens, the seed of the 2025 Gen Z movement was sown decades ago, when democratic promises were not delivered as promised by different political leaders who formed governments. The discourse of leaderlessness suggests that the political parties that had long existed in Nepal were unable to transfer their leadership to new generations, or that the new generations were not interested in traditional political games. Therefore, the roots and routes of the Gen Z movement trace back to promised but unfulfilled democratic ideals, implanted in different historical moments, including the successful revolt against the Rana Regime to establish democracy in 1951, the toppling of the Panchayat system in 1990, the end of the monarchy, and the establishment of a federal democratic republic in 2005. As inferred in the media texts, despite those historic transitions, the Nepali people's dream of equal participation, transparency, and state accountability remained deferred and unfulfilled. As a result, it raised serious questions about how the political system became inefficient in strengthening governmental

institutions, leading to poor governance, systemic corruption, impunity, and a crisis of democratic leadership. Similarly, when the chief of the army staff, Ashok Raj Sigdel, called the emerging Gen Z leaders for a peaceful talk, the absence of the movement's actual leader(s) for a few days indicates a growing need to promote youth leadership skills and literacy. The leadership crisis in Gen Z teaches that leaderless protest can turn innocent individuals into victims of collective fury, sometimes leading to the irreversible loss of human life and national assets. Overall, the media discourse suggests that the 2025 Gen Z movement operates at the intersection of historical memory, contemporary political dissatisfaction, and emerging forms of digital activism. A critically reflective reading, however, also requires caution: media narratives cannot be neutral mirrors of public opinion but are constructed interpretations shaped by institutional, ideological, and commercial factors. Thus, while they provide valuable insights into how the movement is being framed and understood, they also necessitate careful scrutiny in assessing whose voices are amplified, whose perspectives are marginalized, and how the meaning of the movement is being negotiated.

Conclusion

The analysis of selected media discourse represents the 2025 Gen Z movement as a result of decades of democratic deficit in Nepal. Referring to different political movements in the name of true democracy, be they against the Rana Regime, the Panchayat System, or King Gyanendra's dismissal of democratic government, the findings indicate that lasting impact depends on the capacity of democratic institutions to translate civic energy into meaningful reform. There is still a possibility that, in the near future, a new generation will come along and continue to hold Gen Z and Post-Gen Z protest leaders accountable for failing to deliver on their advocacy. The aftermath of the Gen Z protest demands the attention of all political parties and leaders, whether they won or lost the March 5 election. After all, leaders and parties may perish, but the Gen Z aspiration for democratic transformation will not.

However, as we write this article, many changes have already taken place in Nepal, prompting us to examine developments in post-Gen Z protests. Gagan Thapa was elected as the president of the Nepali Congress party at the party's special general convention, and the Election Commission recognized the Gagan Thapa-led Nepali Congress as official.

Likewise, popular leaders like Balendra Shah and Rabi Lamichhane united on the eve of the election to campaign for, which ensured the Rastriya Swatantra Party's (RSP) landslide victory, securing 182 seats in the 275-member parliament in the March 5, 2026, parliamentary election. The election relegated the oldest party, the Nepali Congress, to a distant second with 38 seats, while the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) of former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli won 25, and the Nepali Communist Party won 15 (Sharma, 2026). Just three months old, Harka Sampang's Shram Sanskriti Party won 7 seats while Mahabir Pun, a scientist and researcher, announced his candidacy and won a seat in the House of Representatives, aiming to bring systemic changes to education.

For now, the responsibility and accountability of turning democratic deficit into full-fledged achievements are largely assigned to the RSP's leaders. The public has high expectations of RSP, and those expectations entail responsibilities that go beyond fulfilling their *Bacha Patra* (Rastriya Swatantra Party, n.d.), the commitment made during the election. These responsibilities include managing deep-rooted political rivalries, implementing inclusive reforms, and ensuring transparency in governance. Hence, even though the media discourse foregrounds democratic deficit as the cause of the Gen Z movement, it is now time to expect democratic achievements.

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