



Resisting the Invisible: Lived Experiences of Human Rights Activists under Digital Repression in Authoritarian Regimes

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ABSTRACT

The expanding field of human rights law increasingly intersects with digital technologies, particularly in contexts where authoritarian regimes employ surveillance and censorship to suppress dissent. While legal and policy analyses have addressed these structural challenges, little is known about how human rights defenders experience digital repression at a personal and existential level. This study addresses the question how do human rights activists interpret and navigate digital repression in authoritarian environments? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study explores the subjective meanings that activists assign to their encounters with online surveillance, algorithmic censorship, and digital harassment. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve activists and analyzed using IPA to identify emergent themes of fear, adaptation, and redefined advocacy. Findings reveal that activists experience digital repression not only as an external constraint but as an internal struggle that reshapes their emotional landscapes, social relationships, and ethical responsibilities. The study highlights how participants resist repression through subtle, relational forms of activism while maintaining agency and commitment. These results deepen our understanding of digital repression by foregrounding the human experience behind abstract policy frameworks. They also underscore the need for future interdisciplinary research to explore long-term psychological impacts and context sensitive strategies of digital resistance.



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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, the defense of human rights has expanded beyond traditional platforms into the complex and often volatile terrain of cyberspace. Digital technologies, once celebrated for democratizing access to information and amplifying marginalized voices, have increasingly become instruments of control in authoritarian regimes (Barrenger dkk., 2019). State actors now employ sophisticated surveillance systems, algorithmic censorship, and targeted online harassment to silence dissent and suppress activism. These tactics constitute what scholars refer to as digital repression, a phenomenon that threatens not only freedom of expression but also the psychological and existential well-being of human rights defenders.

The lived experience of activists under digital repression extends far beyond legal or policy implications; it penetrates their private lives, emotional resilience, and sense of identity. Activists must navigate a pervasive climate of fear, marked by uncertainty, hyper-vigilance, and moral tension between personal safety and collective responsibility. In authoritarian contexts, where civic space is systematically constrained, these defenders often resort to adaptive strategies that are subtle, relational, and psychologically taxing (Barry, 2021). The impact of such repression cannot be fully understood through legalistic or structural analyses alone. It calls for a human-centered lens that foregrounds the meanings that individuals assign to their struggle, resistance, and survival.

Despite growing attention to the structural mechanisms of digital repression in human rights literature, there remains a limited understanding of how individuals interpret and experience such phenomena at the subjective level. The emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of digital activism—particularly as experienced by those directly targeted—have not been adequately explored. As such, there is a critical need for phenomenological inquiry that centers the voices of human rights defenders and captures the depth and complexity of their lived realities. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of repression—not merely as a legal violation but as a deeply human experience embedded in context, identity, and meaning.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals confronting systemic oppression—particularly within repressive digital environments—has emerged as a crucial subfield within human rights scholarship and qualitative inquiry. Scholars have increasingly recognized that understanding the emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions of activism requires moving beyond objective legal frameworks and quantitative data models (Boduszek dkk., 2021). Instead, there is a growing emphasis on the necessity to capture the meaning-making processes of individuals navigating oppressive systems, particularly in sociopolitical climates where repression is subtle, personalized, and pervasive.

Despite this recognition, significant methodological challenges persist. Conventional research approaches—especially those rooted in quantitative paradigms—often fail to access the richness and complexity of subjective experience. Standardized instruments and survey methods may quantify exposure to surveillance or repression, but they lack the depth needed to uncover how such experiences are felt, interpreted, and narrated by those who live them. Moreover, these methods tend to obscure the relational, contextual, and temporal aspects of experience, which are central to the phenomenological exploration of human rights struggles.

As a result, prior studies have frequently fallen short of capturing the full essence of what it means to resist digital authoritarianism from the inside. Without a deep exploration of personal narratives and embodied experiences, the literature risks presenting an incomplete, abstracted view of activism (Cihan & Sorensen, 2019). This limitation underscores the need for an interpretative phenomenological approach—one that prioritizes the voices of those affected and seeks to understand repression as an experienced phenomenon rather than merely a legal or technical condition. Through this lens, the study of digital repression becomes not only an investigation of rights violations, but also an inquiry into resilience, fear, identity, and the shifting boundaries of advocacy.

In the current landscape of digital repression studies, most scholarly and policy-oriented responses have relied on technical and legalistic frameworks, emphasizing cybersecurity measures, legislative safeguards, and digital literacy programs. While such practical approaches offer essential tools for protection and advocacy, they often operate on a surface level—addressing what happens but not fully interrogating how these experiences are perceived, embodied, and made meaningful by those affected. Consequently, much of the existing literature has not adequately engaged with the subjective realities of activists living under constant digital threat.

Traditional methodologies—particularly those grounded in quantitative or policy-based analysis—struggle to capture the deeply personal and often invisible dimensions of digital repression. They fail to explore how surveillance, censorship, and online harassment are internalized, how they alter one's identity, relational networks, and sense of agency (Davies dkk., 2021). As a result, our current understanding remains fragmented and overly abstract, lacking the emotional depth and contextual nuance required to form a complete picture of what it means to be a human rights defender in authoritarian digital spaces.

To bridge this gap, a shift toward phenomenological inquiry is urgently needed. By prioritizing the lived experience of activists and seeking to uncover the essential structures of meaning within those experiences, phenomenology offers a more holistic and human-centered approach. It moves beyond documenting events or policies to explore how individuals interpret their realities—how they resist, cope, and reimagine advocacy amidst fear and control. This methodological pivot not only enriches theoretical insight but also informs more empathetic and context-sensitive responses to digital authoritarianism.

Previous studies on digital repression have primarily focused on structural analyses of surveillance technology, policy frameworks, and online censorship mechanisms. While these studies offer valuable insights into how authoritarian regimes limit civic space, they often neglect the subjective experiences of those who are directly affected. Some research has attempted to document activist responses, but rarely through methods that center lived experience as a primary source of meaning (Dunne dkk., 2020). Theoretical contributions from critical human rights discourse highlight the psychological and emotional toll of repression, yet fall short in describing how individuals interpret and navigate such realities. This research seeks to build upon and deepen those insights by using a phenomenological lens.

This study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand how human rights defenders make sense of their experiences in digitally repressive environments. IPA is well-suited for exploring subjective meaning, especially when the phenomenon involves psychological tension, ethical conflict, and identity negotiation. The method addresses the knowledge gap identified earlier by offering a way to access and analyze how individuals construct meaning under conditions of threat. It allows for a nuanced account of how activists redefine advocacy, resist fear, and preserve agency amid surveillance (Harris dkk., 2019). Through this approach, the study provides a more holistic understanding of the human dimension of digital repression.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the social and academic background of the study and articulates the research question. The methodology section explains the interpretative phenomenological design, participant selection, and data collection process. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the findings organized into thematic categories, each supported by direct participant quotes (Higley dkk., 2019). The final sections offer a critical discussion of the results and conclude with reflections on implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of human rights activists facing digital repression in authoritarian contexts. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for its capacity to capture how individuals make sense of their personal and professional realities under complex sociopolitical conditions. The method is grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, which emphasizes the interpretative nature of experience and the contextual embeddedness of human meaning-making (Jarldorn, 2020). This design is particularly suited to uncovering the nuanced, subjective interpretations that participants assign to their encounters with surveillance, censorship, and digital threats. By focusing on the depth of individual narratives, this approach facilitated the exploration of both emotional and strategic dimensions of advocacy within oppressive digital environments.

To enhance methodological transparency, this study also considered the potential for researcher subjectivity inherent in interpretative analysis. Reflexive journaling and regular peer debriefing were employed to critically examine preconceptions and maintain analytic rigor throughout the research process.

Participants

Participants included human rights defenders actively engaged in advocacy work within regions characterized by high levels of state surveillance and digital control. Selection was based on purposive sampling to ensure rich, relevant insight into the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least two years of documented experience in digital advocacy or rights-based activism in authoritarian settings, and to have personally encountered digital repression such as cyber-surveillance, doxing, or online harassment. Exclusion criteria included individuals who were not directly involved in digital advocacy or whose experiences did not align with the central phenomenon (Muller, 2020). A total of 12 participants were involved, comprising seven women and five men, with ages ranging from 26 to 48 years. Most held backgrounds in law,

journalism, or community organizing, contributing a diversity of perspectives relevant to the research context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in confidential settings, either via encrypted video conferencing platforms or in private, secure physical locations, depending on participant safety and accessibility. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a guiding protocol that encouraged open-ended exploration of experiences, emotional responses, and strategic adaptations. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim (O'Sullivan dkk., 2020). The environment was arranged to ensure participants' psychological comfort, with emphasis on trust-building and safeguarding their confidentiality. When necessary, pseudonyms and anonymization techniques were employed to further protect identities. The interview guide was developed based on prior literature and refined through pilot testing with human rights practitioners.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a detailed, iterative process of identifying, interpreting, and synthesizing themes that reflect the core meanings of participants' experiences. The analysis followed several systematic steps: initial reading and familiarization with the data, identification of meaning units, development of emergent themes, clustering of related themes, and abstraction into higher-order thematic structures (Peled-Laskov dkk., 2019). NVivo software was utilized to manage and organize data during coding, although interpretive decisions remained grounded in direct textual engagement. This method allowed for the emergence of essential insights while preserving the contextual richness of each participant's narrative.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, who were provided with detailed information regarding the study's objectives, risks, and data protection measures. Anonymity was maintained throughout the research process by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying details from transcripts. Confidentiality was ensured by securely storing all data in encrypted digital files accessible only to the research team. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical guidelines, including those outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local regulations governing research with human subjects.

RESULTS

Living Under Constant Digital Surveillance

Participants consistently described the feeling of being constantly watched, with state surveillance extending beyond physical spaces into their private digital communications. This persistent observation fostered psychological distress and self-censorship.

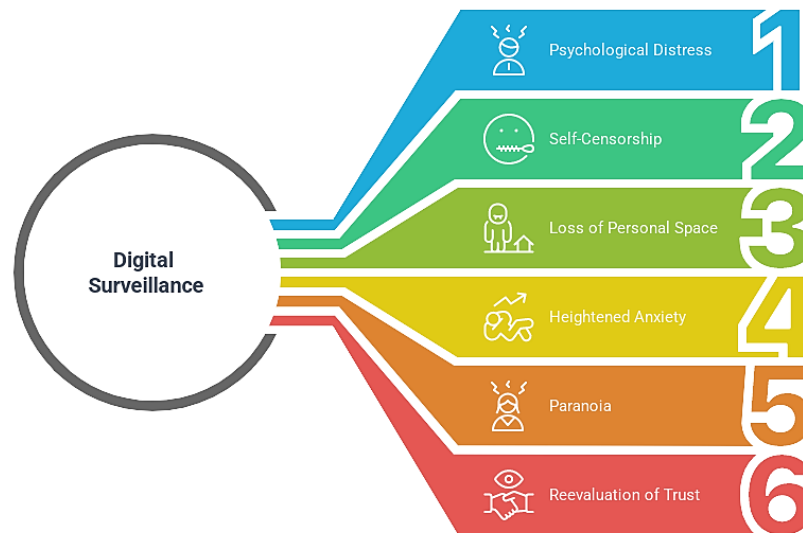
"Even when I'm not posting anything controversial, I feel like my messages are being read, my video calls monitored. It's like I'm never alone, even in my own home." (P1)

This omnipresent surveillance reshaped their sense of personal space, leading to heightened anxiety, paranoia, and a reevaluation of trust—even among close colleagues.

"I deleted my old activist group chats. I couldn't tell anymore if it was safe to speak openly, even with friends." (P3)

The intrusion blurred the line between public activism and private life, with participants noting that surveillance tactics targeted not only their work but their identities as individuals.

The Multifaceted Impact of Digital Surveillance



Strategies of Digital Adaptation and Resistance

In response to state surveillance, participants developed adaptive strategies to continue their advocacy while mitigating risk. These included the use of encrypted communication platforms, pseudonymous social media accounts, and digital hygiene routines.

"I started using signal and VPNs, but I also began coding my messages—even basic things like 'meet' would become 'walk' or something innocuous." (P2)

Despite the sophistication of surveillance, participants found ways to reclaim a degree of agency. Resistance, they emphasized, was not merely oppositional but strategic and thoughtful.

"I no longer confront the state directly online. I raise awareness subtly—through stories, art, or satire." (P4)

These acts of digital resistance became symbolic gestures of reclaiming voice and visibility within shrinking civic spaces.

The Emotional and Ethical Toll of Repression

Digital repression not only disrupted activism logistically but imposed a profound emotional and ethical toll. Participants spoke of trauma, burnout, and the moral dilemmas they faced in balancing safety and solidarity.

"I live in fear, not just for myself but for the people around me. One wrong post and someone else might suffer." (P5)

There was also a recurring sense of moral responsibility, particularly among seasoned activists who felt accountable for mentoring younger defenders in increasingly hostile terrains.

"Sometimes I wonder if it's fair to encourage young people to speak out when I know how dangerous it has become." (P6)

This theme underscored the internal conflict between commitment to the cause and the human need for safety, rest, and emotional sustainability.

Reconstructing the Meaning of Advocacy

In the face of surveillance and suppression, many participants reported a shift in how they conceptualized advocacy itself. Rather than viewing resistance solely in public or oppositional terms, they embraced subtler, relational, and culturally rooted forms of activism.

"Advocacy now means surviving with dignity, not just shouting louder. It's in the quiet support, the behind-the-scenes help, the everyday courage." (P7)

This redefinition allowed participants to maintain purpose and momentum, even when conventional forms of protest were no longer viable.

"What used to be marches and speeches has become community care, underground education, and solidarity circles." (P1)

The transformation reflected a deep resilience and a reorientation of activism from confrontation to endurance, from public spectacle to intimate solidarity.

Across these four themes, the data reveals that activists do not merely endure digital repression—they actively interpret, resist, and reimagine their roles in response to it. Their lived experiences reflect a complex interplay of fear and resistance, vulnerability and strength, isolation and solidarity. Rather than being silenced, they reconstruct the meaning of advocacy within the constraints of a digitally authoritarian environment, making visible the invisible burden carried by human rights defenders in the digital age.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that digital repression is not only a structural or political condition but a deeply personal experience shaped by fear, adaptation, and evolving definitions of advocacy. Participants described living under constant surveillance, developing subtle forms of resistance, and reinterpreting their roles as defenders of human rights in digitally authoritarian environments. These insights directly respond to the research question by shedding light on how activists experience, interpret, and navigate repression—not just as victims, but as resilient agents of change.

This study contributes a nuanced understanding of how digital repression is internalized and responded to by those it targets (Sievert, 2021). The data illustrates that surveillance and censorship are not only legal or technological constraints, but also existential pressures that affect activists' identities, relationships, and emotional lives. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research reveals that human rights defenders reconstruct their advocacy in quiet, symbolic, and relational forms. These findings provide a powerful answer to the guiding question of how activists assign meaning to their experiences in digitally repressive settings. The study moves beyond surface-level observations and offers a layered narrative of resilience, moral conflict, and reimagined resistance.

The results align with and expand upon existing literature, including (Smith & Smith, 2019) analysis of digital repression as a legal (ten Benschel *et al.*, 2019) work on the psychological impact of surveillance on online advocacy. However, unlike previous studies that often remain at the structural level, this study enters the subjective realm to expose the personal costs and meaning-making processes that define activists' lives. It supports (Smith & Smith, 2019) observations about gendered resistance but extends the scope by capturing a broader spectrum of emotional and ethical tensions across diverse activist identities. In doing so, it adds depth to existing human rights discourse by emphasizing the experiential essence of repression—an area often overlooked by traditional frameworks.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both academic inquiry and human rights practice. At the scholarly level, the research enriches phenomenological literature by highlighting how subjective meaning-making unfolds within contexts of technological and political oppression. Socially and culturally, the study underscores the importance of recognizing activism not solely in visible, confrontational acts but also in quiet, everyday forms of resistance rooted in dignity and care. These insights invite practitioners, policymakers, and advocacy networks to adopt a more empathetic and context-sensitive approach—one that acknowledges the psychological and existential dimensions of repression. For broader populations living under surveillance, the study offers a language and framework to articulate their often-silenced struggles, potentially contributing to new models of digital resilience and solidarity.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for phenomenological depth, restricts the diversity and representativeness of the sample (Zhao dkk., 2019). Participants were primarily drawn from urban-based activist communities, potentially limiting insights from rural or less-connected regions. Additionally, while IPA is effective in capturing depth, it does not aim for generalization. The narratives reflect deeply individual perspectives that may not capture all facets of the phenomenon in other sociopolitical or cultural settings. These limitations are not weaknesses but rather guideposts for interpreting the findings within their appropriate scope.

Future research may build upon this study by exploring how digital repression is experienced across different generational or gender-based activist groups, especially in underrepresented regions. Longitudinal phenomenological studies could also investigate how meaning-making evolves over time in response to changing repression tactics or political climates. Furthermore, interdisciplinary integration with media studies, psychology, and digital ethics may offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding the layered experiences of activists. In this way, the present study opens up pathways for continued inquiry into the emotional, ethical, and philosophical contours of digital resistance in authoritarian settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of human rights activists facing digital repression in authoritarian environments, focusing on how they interpret and respond to constant surveillance and online threats. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed that activists experience digital repression not only as a legal or technological issue but as a deeply personal and existential challenge. The findings showed that activists develop subtle forms of resistance, reframe the meaning of advocacy, and navigate fear while maintaining their commitment to justice. These insights fill a critical gap in the literature by providing a nuanced, experiential understanding of repression that quantitative or structural methods have often overlooked. The study offers valuable implications for designing more empathetic and context-aware human rights interventions. Future research could expand on these insights by examining diverse activist populations and exploring long-term transformations in meaning-making under prolonged digital threat.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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