



## DİJİTAL SESSİZLİK VE SİMGESEL DİRENİŞ: #BLACKOUTTUESDAY KAMPANYASINDA İLETİŞİMSSEL EYLEM OLARAK SESSİZLİK

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, Black Lives Matter hareketiyle dayanışma amacıyla başlatılan küresel çaplı dijital bir protesto olan #BlackoutTuesday kampanyasında, dijital sessizlik ve simgesel direnişin iletişimsel eylem biçimleri olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü incelemektedir. Sessizlik çoğu zaman bir ifade eksikliği olarak değerlendirilse de bu araştırma dijital bağlamda sessizliğin bilinçli, anlam yüklü ve stratejik bir protesto biçimi olarak kullanılabileceğini öne sürmektedir. Araştırma şu iki soruya odaklanmaktadır: (1) Dijital sessizlik #BlackoutTuesday kampanyasında hangi biçimlerde ifade edilmiştir ve bu ifadeler ne tür simgesel, duygusal veya estetik anlamlar taşımaktadır? (2) Bu sessizlik biçimleri dijital kamusal alanda farklı aktörler tarafından nasıl yorumlanmış, desteklenmiş ya da eleştirilmiştir? Çalışma, nitel araştırma desenine dayanmaktadır ve veri toplama yöntemi olarak söylem çözümlemesi kullanılmıştır. Instagram ve Twitter’da siyah kare içeren kamuya açık gönderiler arasından amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen toplam 90 gönderi analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma, dijital sessizliğin sosyal medya aktivizmi bağlamında iletişimsel ve simgesel anlamlar taşıyan çok katmanlı bir eylem biçimi olduğunu göstermekte; dijital protesto kültürlerinde sessizliğin politik, duygulanımsal ve tartışmalı yönlerine dikkat çekmektedir. Sessizliği stratejik ve duygulanımsal bir pratik olarak ele alan bu çalışma, iletişim kuramına stratejik sessizlik kavramı üzerinden kuramsal bir katkı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dijital Sessizlik, İletişimsel Eylem, Blackouttuesday, Sosyal Medya Aktivizmi, Söylem Analizi

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## DIGITAL SILENCE AND SYMBOLIC RESISTANCE: SILENCE AS COMMUNICATIVE ACTION IN THE #BLACKOUTTUESDAY CAMPAIGN

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### Abstract

This study examines how digital silence and symbolic resistance functioned as forms of communicative action in the #BlackoutTuesday campaign; a global digital protest initiated in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. While silence is often perceived as a lack of expression, this research argues that, in digital contexts, silence can also serve as a deliberate, meaningful, and strategic form of protest. The study focuses on two main questions: (1) In what forms was digital silence expressed during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign, and what kinds of symbolic, emotional, or aesthetic meanings were attached to these expressions? (2) How were these forms of silence interpreted, supported, or contested by different actors within the digital public sphere? The study is based on a qualitative research design and employs discourse analysis as its method of data collection. A total of 90 public posts containing black square imagery were selected through purposive sampling from Instagram and Twitter. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of digital silence as a communicative and symbolic mode of action in the context of social media activism, drawing attention to its political, affective, and contested dimensions in digital protest cultures. By conceptualizing silence as a strategic and affective practice, the research aims to contribute theoretically to communication studies through the lens of strategic silence.

**Keywords:** Digital Silence, Communicative Action, BlackoutTuesday, Social Media Activism, Discourse Analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by hyperconnectivity, digital silence—the intentional absence of speech or content—has emerged as a paradoxical yet powerful mode of expression. Once envisioned as democratic arenas of participation, social media platforms have become spaces where non-expression can carry as much meaning as speech. In this context, silence is no longer simply the absence of communication but a deliberate and symbolic act with emotional, political, and aesthetic resonance.

A striking example of such silence is the #BlackoutTuesday campaign, which unfolded on June 2, 2020, in response to the murder of George Floyd and in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. As part of the campaign, users across Instagram and Twitter refrained from posting regular content and instead shared a uniform black square—an act of intentional inaction that symbolized mourning, solidarity, and disruption. The campaign was widely adopted by individuals, celebrities, corporations, and institutions, transforming social media feeds into monochrome spaces of silence. Yet, its widespread participation also sparked critique: some argued that the campaign overshadowed vital activist messaging or represented a form of performative allyship devoid of actionable support (Jackson et al., 2020; Mallory, 2020).

These tensions underscore a central paradox of digital activism: the strategic use of silence can function both as a powerful statement and as a site of contestation. While scholars have examined hashtag activism, networked publics, and affective participation (Papacharissi, 2015; Freelon et al., 2020), the role of silence remains underexplored. What does it mean to go silent in a space designed for constant visibility and engagement? How do audiences interpret and assign value to acts of digital non-expression?

This study takes the #BlackoutTuesday campaign as a case to explore the communicative dimensions of digital silence in online protest cultures. Rather than treating silence as a passive or ambiguous phenomenon, the study frames it as a symbolic, emotional, and rhetorical resource that users mobilize strategically within platformed spaces. Drawing on a qualitative discourse analysis of 90 publicly available social media posts and critical responses, the research seeks to contribute to emerging conversations on symbolic resistance, performative activism, and digital minimalism.

To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions:

**RQ1:** In what forms was digital silence expressed during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign, and what symbolic, emotional, or aesthetic meanings did users associate with these acts?

**RQ2:** How did different audiences interpret, support, or critique these expressions of silence, and what tensions emerged around the communicative value of silence in digital activism?

By centring silence not as absence but as action, this study aims to expand the conceptual vocabulary of digital communication and to offer new insights into how meaning is created—not only through speech, but through deliberate restraint.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the communicative dimensions of digital silence necessitates engaging with theories that conceptualize both communication beyond words and activism beyond physical presence. This section draws on scholarship in communication theory, digital activism, and critical media studies to situate digital silence as a strategic, symbolic, and performative act within the broader paradigm of networked resistance.

### 2.1. Communication as Symbolic Action

Traditional models of communication have largely emphasized transmission—messages encoded and decoded between sender and receiver. However, symbolic interactionism and performative theories reframe communication as constitutive action. Austin's (1962) concept of the speech act and Butler's (1997) theory of performativity underscore that utterances do not merely describe reality but can act upon it. This framework is particularly relevant when examining how silence, which is often considered a lack of speech, can be performative.

Silence, then, is not necessarily the absence of communication. As Jaworski (1993) and Bruneau (1973) argued, silence may convey dissent, solidarity, power, or vulnerability depending on its context. In the case of #BlackoutTuesday, digital silence was not accidental but intentional—a form of symbolic withdrawal designed to momentarily suspend regular social media behaviour and create a space of reflection and visibility for Black lives. This aligns with Couldry's (2010) notion of “voice” as a

moral and political act, whereby even silence can be positioned as a speech act within a digitally mediated public sphere. This conceptualization is directly relevant to RQ1, as it helps explain how silence, though seemingly passive, was enacted as a meaningful and affective communicative resource during the campaign.

## **2.2. Networked Publics and Digital Activism**

Social media has redefined the landscape of activism, enabling the formation of what Boyd (2010) calls networked publics, that is, digitally connected spaces that allow for the circulation of political discourse. Papacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of affective publics, emphasizing the emotional intensities that fuel online movements. In these spaces, users do not solely share information; they perform belonging, resistance, and affect.

#BlackoutTuesday is a prime example of how silence operated within affective publics. The act of posting a black square-without text, hashtags, or personal branding-functioned as a visual cue of participation. As Jackson et al. (2020) suggest, such gestures are part of what they term “hashtag publics,” where communication is less about sustained dialogue and more about visibility and symbolic alignment. This discussion informs both RQ1 and RQ2 by illustrating how symbolic gestures like silence circulate within affective and hashtag publics, and how their visibility can be both empowering and problematic.

Yet this symbolic alignment is not without its tensions. Critics argued that the campaign, while emotionally resonant, lacked actionable clarity and risked displacing more substantive content related to the Black Lives Matter movement. This concern reflects what Dean (2010) calls communicative capitalism, a condition where expressions of solidarity can be commodified and diluted in the fast-paced circulation of digital content.

## **2.3. Silence, Visibility, and Power**

The politics of silence in digital spaces is also entwined with questions of visibility and erasure. As Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) note, race and inequality are often embedded in digital infrastructures, influencing whose voices are heard and whose are silenced. In this sense, choosing to be silent, especially as a form of solidarity is a privileged position not available to all. Black activists, for example, have long had to navigate the tension between speaking out and protecting their own emotional labour and safety online (Tufekci, 2017).

Moreover, silence as resistance echoes Foucault's (1978) insight that power does not only repress speech but also produces it; it dictates when silence is permissible and when it is subversive. In the case of #BlackoutTuesday, the act of posting "nothing" became a means of reclaiming narrative space, disrupting the algorithmic flow of consumption-driven content with a symbolically charged void. This dimension of digital silence addresses RQ2 by shedding light on how such gestures were interpreted, questioned, or resisted by different users based on their positionalities and the platform dynamics.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how digital silence was enacted, interpreted, and contested during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign. The two research questions guiding this investigation are:

- **RQ1:** In what forms was digital silence expressed during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign, and what symbolic, emotional, or aesthetic meanings did users associate with these acts?
- **RQ2:** How did different audiences interpret, support, or critique these expressions of silence, and what tensions emerged around the communicative value of silence in digital activism?

To answer these questions, the study employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework supported by purposive sampling and multimodal data collection from public social media content.

#### 3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

The #BlackoutTuesday campaign, launched on June 2, 2020, was selected as a paradigmatic case of digitally enacted silence. It featured a unique form of symbolic action—users voluntarily abstained from regular content sharing and instead posted uniform black squares, often without captions. As the campaign centred on inaction rather than verbal protest, it offered a fertile ground for examining how silence functions as communicative performance in digital protest cultures (RQ1).

The campaign's global reach and widespread use across multiple platforms, particularly Instagram and Twitter, made it a suitable case for capturing a variety of expressions and interpretations of silence (RQ2). The study focused on posts that were

made during the peak of the campaign (June 2–4, 2020), ensuring temporal relevance and contextual consistency.

### **3.2. Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling method was used to select information-rich posts that reflected the campaign's core visual and discursive patterns. The sample was drawn from publicly available posts on Instagram and Twitter that met the following criteria:

- Included a black square image (with or without caption),
- Contained campaign-relevant hashtags (e.g., #BlackoutTuesday, #TheShowMustBePaused, #BLM),
- Had high visibility (verified users, influencers, or high engagement metrics),
- Represented both support for and criticism of the campaign.

The final dataset consisted of 90 entries:

- 50 Instagram posts,
- 30 tweets,
- 10 critical public responses from activists, journalists, or academics.

This composition was designed to address both RQ1 (expression and symbolic meaning) and RQ2 (public interpretation and contestation).

### **3.3. Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected in June 2020 using a combination of platform-based search tools (Instagram public feeds, Twitter Advanced Search) and third-party archiving interfaces. Posts were stored in anonymized form, using screenshots and metadata logs. All data were public and non-identifiable; usernames and personal details were excluded in line with ethical guidelines (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

The inclusion of both campaign participants and critics allowed the study to capture the performative and contested dimensions of digital silence. For instance, user-generated posts were analysed for how silence was framed, while activist commentaries were examined for their critiques and meta-discursive reflections.

### 3.4. Analytical Approach

This study employs Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is particularly suited for examining the interplay between text, discourse, and social structures in mediated activism. The three dimensions of CDA—textual analysis, discursive practice analysis, and social practice analysis—provided a layered framework for interpreting how digital silence was enacted, symbolized, and debated during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign.

Additionally, the study draws on van Leeuwen's (2008) and Fairclough's broader frameworks to identify how semiotic resources—such as the absence of text or imagery—construct meaning through symbolic minimalism and intertextuality. Specifically, van Leeuwen's approach was applied to examine how visual absences—such as the lack of captions or the uniform use of black square imagery—function as semiotic resources that generate meaning through omission.

Themes were generated through a hybrid inductive–deductive coding process, initially guided by the three CDA dimensions and refined through iterative close reading of the dataset. Analytical decisions were continuously reviewed to ensure alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework.

Each analytical layer contributed to addressing the study's research questions:

- **Textual analysis (RQ1):** Focused on how black square imagery, minimalist captions, and visual silence were symbolically or emotionally constructed.
- **Discursive practice analysis (RQ1 & RQ2):** Explored how posts were shared and interpreted across platforms, and how users engaged with shared norms and aesthetics.
- **Social practice analysis (RQ2):** Examined the ideological implications of digital silence, including tensions related to race, platform governance, and performative activism.

Through this combined lens, the study explores how meaning is produced not only through what is said or shown, but also through what is deliberately left unsaid or unseen. This analytical framework directly informed the thematic structure of the findings section, where digital silence was examined across dimensions of presence, solidarity, aesthetic disruption, and controversy.



### **3.5. Reflexivity and Limitations**

As with all qualitative research, the analysis is shaped by interpretive judgment. The researcher acknowledges her positionality as an observer of digital activism and remains attentive to the broader power dynamics at play in digital discourse. Limitations include platform-specific algorithmic constraints (e.g., visibility bias in Instagram feeds), the ephemeral nature of some content (e.g., deleted or archived posts), and the challenge of interpreting intent from minimalist posts. Nonetheless, these constraints also highlight the richness of digital silence as a subject of study, where meaning is often conveyed through deliberate absence.

### **3.6. Ethical Considerations**

All data analysed were publicly accessible and did not require participant consent under current ethical guidelines for digital content research (AoIR Ethics Guidelines 2.0). However, to protect the integrity and dignity of online participants, all posts were anonymized and paraphrased when used as examples.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings thematically, organized according to the two research questions. Each theme reflects a specific communicative or ideological function of digital silence as enacted or interpreted during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign. All examples are paraphrased and anonymized in line with ethical research standards.

To provide a clearer and more representative overview of the dataset, the following table summarizes the main themes identified through the analysis of 90 social media posts and tweets related to the #BlackoutTuesday campaign. For each theme, multiple illustrative examples are presented alongside brief interpretive notes. These examples, paraphrased and anonymised for ethical considerations, reflect the diverse ways in which digital silence was enacted, interpreted, and debated by users. The table aims to visually reinforce the thematic patterns and communicative functions identified in the qualitative discourse analysis.

Research Question	Theme	Representative Example (Paraphrased)	Analytical Commentary
RQ1	Digital Silence as Presence	“Not speaking today. Just holding space.”	Silence is framed as presence and emotional availability, showing support without overt expression.
RQ1	Digital Silence as Solidarity	“Muted for the movement. #BlackoutTuesday”	Silence operates as a ritual of collective withdrawal to create space for marginalized voices.
RQ1	Digital Silence as Aesthetic Disruption	“My feed looks like a funeral. Maybe that’s the point.”	Visual uniformity disrupts the aesthetic rhythm of social media, transforming feeds into symbolic mourning.
RQ1	Digital Silence as Strategic Minimalism	“.” (a black square post with a single period)	Extreme minimalism underscores intentionality and uses absence as rhetorical power.
RQ2	Digital Silence as Controversy	“You posted a square. But did you donate or protest?”	Critiques target the superficial nature of symbolic gestures, questioning their political effectiveness.
RQ2	Interpretations by Activists	“We asked for justice, not empty squares.”	Activists express frustration with the campaign’s performativity and lack of substantive impact.
RQ2	Algorithmic Disruption	“Blackout Tuesday is silencing more than it’s helping.”	Silence unintentionally disrupted information flow, especially under hashtags meant for mobilization.

Summary Table

#### **4.1. RQ1 – How was digital silence expressed, and what symbolic, emotional, or aesthetic meanings did users associate with these acts?**

##### **4.1.1. Digital Silence as Presence**

Many participants used silence to convey attentive presence and acknowledgment. This theme reflects a nonverbal form of support rooted in moral alignment with the Black Lives Matter movement. Rather than an absence of participation, silence here was constructed as intentional presence.

For example, one post read: *“I’m here. I’m listening. Black lives matter.”* This statement reframed silence as an active listening position, emotionally aligned with the movement. Another user wrote: *“Not speaking today. Just holding space,”* emphasizing the emotional labour of silent presence. A third post stated simply: *“No words. Just here, witnessing,”* indicating that being digitally present without commentary was itself a gesture of solidarity.

These minimal yet assertive expressions suggest that silence was not interpreted as disengagement, but as an embodied and morally anchored form of participation. Users employed silence as a deliberate rhetorical act—refraining from speech to foreground the voices and lives of others.

##### **4.1.2. Digital Silence as Solidarity**

Another dominant theme was silence as a symbolic expression of collective unity. Users framed their inaction as part of a coordinated withdrawal to make space for marginalized voices. Silence, in this sense, functioned not as avoidance but as allegiance.

One post read: *“Muted for the movement. #BlackoutTuesday.”* This statement redefined silence as action—choosing to be quiet in order to amplify others. Another user wrote: *“No selfies. No noise. Just space for Black voices,”* which emphasized silence as spatial and discursive clearing. A third post proclaimed: *“One square, one cause. We stand together.”* Through such minimalist expressions, users performed digital alignment with the values of the Black Lives Matter movement.

These examples illustrate how silence can act as a ritualized form of solidarity. By abstaining from personal expression, users transformed their profiles into symbolic zones of support. The repetition of black square imagery, paired with minimal captions,

created a shared visual language of protest that substituted sound with presence. This theme directly addresses RQ1 by demonstrating how silence was expressed not individually but as a collective act of identification.

#### **4.1.3. Digital Silence as Aesthetic Disruption**

Silence was also used to disrupt the visual norms of social media. In a digital ecosystem characterized by colour, branding, and rapid consumption, the repetition of black squares stood out as an intentional rupture.

One Instagram user posted: *“My feed looks like a funeral. Maybe that’s the point.”* This post illustrates how silence was not only communicative but visual and affective. Another user shared only a period—“.”—alongside a black square, using extreme minimalism to shift attention toward absence. Both posts exemplify how digital silence challenged the attention economy of social media by foregrounding visual emptiness.

These aesthetic choices acted as a counter-performance to the usual self-promotion and entertainment-oriented content of platforms like Instagram. In doing so, participants leveraged silence as a form of protest not just through what they said, but through how they visually abstained. This theme contributes to RQ1 by showing that users associated silence with aesthetic resistance—refusing visibility to create reflective space.

#### **4.1.4. Digital Silence as Strategic Minimalism**

Some users employed even more stripped-down forms of expression, using near-total absence to signal intentionality. Posts with no caption, a single word, or a punctuation mark were common during the campaign.

A post that included only a black square and the caption “.” captured this logic of strategic minimalism. Another read: *“This is enough. Today is not about me.”* These expressions convey an ethic of self-erasure and silence-as-message. Their effectiveness relied not on elaboration but on deliberate reduction—emphasizing what was *not* being said.

This theme aligns with Austin’s notion of the performative, where even the most minimal linguistic or visual act can carry illocutionary force. Here, silence operated rhetorically—communicating alignment, grief, or resistance through intentional non-

expression. These findings reinforce RQ1's emphasis on the symbolic and affective dimensions of how silence was enacted.

#### **4.2. RQ2: How did different audiences interpret, support, or critique these expressions of silence, and what tensions emerged around the communicative value of silence in digital activism?**

##### **4.2.1. Digital Silence as Controversy**

While many participants viewed silence as a moral gesture, others questioned its sufficiency and sincerity. Posts that appeared symbolic or superficial drew critique for lacking tangible impact.

One widely circulated tweet read: *"You posted a black square. Great. But did you sign petitions, donate, or call your representatives?"* This critique highlights the tension between symbolic solidarity and material activism. Another user wrote: *"Justice, not aesthetics. This isn't activism."*—a direct challenge to the notion that posting a square was meaningful political engagement.

These reactions exemplify what Schumann and Klein (2021) describe as the double-edged nature of performative activism. While emotionally resonant, such gestures risk being interpreted as self-serving or hollow. This theme directly addresses RQ2 by showing how silence, when detached from action, becomes vulnerable to scepticism and moral policing in networked publics.

##### **4.2.2. Interpretations by Activists**

Black activists and commentators offered some of the most pointed critiques of the campaign. For many, the widespread participation of individuals and corporations raised concerns about dilution and co-optation of the movement's core goals.

In an online op-ed, activist Tamika Mallory wrote: *"We asked for justice, not empty squares. The movement doesn't need silence; it needs support."* This response reclaims the communicative space from symbolic acts perceived as insufficient. Another activist wrote: *"We were mourning. You turned it into a trend."* Such reactions reflect fatigue with performativity and an insistence on structural, not symbolic, change.

These voices underscore an unequal burden in digital protest: marginalized groups are often left to correct misinterpretations, reassert the message, and demand accountability. As Tufekci (2017) and Freelon et al. (2020) argue, the symbolic

circulation of protest can obscure the voices it seeks to centre. This theme speaks directly to RQ2 by illustrating how interpretations of silence are shaped by positionality, power, and proximity to the cause.

#### 4.2.3. Algorithmic Disruption and Platform Logics

An unintended consequence of the campaign was its interaction with platform algorithms. As millions of users posted black squares under the hashtag #BLM, it overwhelmed the feed, making it difficult to find critical information, such as protest logistics or legal support.

One tweet summarized the issue: *“Blackout Tuesday is silencing more than it’s helping.”* Another user wrote: *“You mean well, but you’re burying vital resources. Use other hashtags.”* These posts reveal how algorithmic systems—designed to reward repetition and popularity—can distort activist communication even when intentions are aligned.

This theme highlights how digital silence can unintentionally reproduce communicative inequalities, particularly when aesthetic actions override informational content. It supports RQ2 by showing that the value of silence in digital activism is not only a matter of meaning, but of distribution and platform governance.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This study explored how digital silence functioned as a communicative strategy during the #BlackoutTuesday campaign—an online protest defined not by speech, but by intentional inaction. Through the analysis of 90 publicly available posts on Instagram and Twitter, the study sought to answer two research questions concerning how digital silence was enacted (RQ1), and how it was interpreted or contested by different audiences (RQ2).

Findings revealed that participants used silence in diverse and deliberate ways: as a presence, as solidarity, as aesthetic disruption, and as strategic minimalism. These acts were not passive but performative, conveying moral alignment, collective identity, and affective resonance. At the same time, silence emerged as a site of tension. Critics questioned its effectiveness, activists expressed concern over performative co-optation, and algorithmic disruptions revealed the unintended consequences of symbolic participation.

By reframing silence as symbolic, emotional, and rhetorical action, the study contributes to communication theory by extending the vocabulary of digital activism beyond speech-based models. Methodologically, the research highlights the value of qualitative discourse analysis for examining meaning in absence, and for tracing how seemingly minimal acts circulate within networked publics.

However, the study has limitations. It focuses on a single campaign and a purposively selected dataset, which restricts generalizability. Moreover, it does not capture longitudinal dynamics or platform-specific algorithmic effects beyond the immediate campaign window. Future research could address these gaps by examining how digital silence evolves across platforms and contexts, or by integrating computational methods to track its diffusion and transformation over time.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that silence in digital protest is neither empty nor neutral. It can unite, disrupt, or divide—depending on who uses it, how, and under what conditions. As networked activism continues to evolve, so too must our understanding of how both presence and absence function as communicative tools in digital publics.

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