

A Study on the Impact of Social Media on the Development of Feminism

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Abstract:

This essay explores the dual impact of social media on the development of feminism, focusing on both the empowering contributions and significant challenges these platforms present to feminist movements. Through an analysis of feminism's evolution across its various waves, with particular emphasis on the fourth wave's digital activism, the study illustrates how social media has revolutionized feminist discourse on a global scale. Social media has enabled the rapid mobilization of grassroots movements, amplified the voices of marginalized groups, and fostered a more inclusive feminist agenda. However, alongside these benefits, the essay also delves into the darker aspects of social media, such as the prevalence of online harassment, the commercialization of feminist ideals (often termed 'femvertising'), and the superficiality associated with performative activism. By underscoring the critical need for digital literacy, the essay advocates for more discerning consumption of online content and calls for the implementation of policies that protect feminist activism, ensuring it remains authentic and impactful in digital spaces.

Keywords: Feminism; social media; digital activism; online harassment; digital literacy

1. Introduction

Gender is a conceptualization that 'legitimizes a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction' [1]. Pierre Bourdieu's argument encapsulates the essence of how gender norms and expectations are socially constructed and reinforced. As a movement and an ideology, feminism fights against these patriarchal structures and promotes women's equality and rights. Over the years, feminism has evolved

through various waves, each addressing different societal issues and pushing for substantial changes in social, political, and economic arenas.

Social media has become a powerful platform in the current digital era, significantly influencing activism and public discourse. Social media encompasses platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, which facilitate real-time interaction, user-generated content, and widespread dissemination of information. Social media, as opposed to traditional media, offers a more democratic platform where a range of

opinions can be heard, and grassroots movements can gain momentum rapidly.

Studying the impact of social media on the development of feminism is crucial as these platforms have become vital in shaping public opinion and mobilizing social movements while understanding the dynamics between social media and feminism helps in devising strategies to harness social media's potential for positive change. For instance, movements like "MeToo" have made use of social media to gain international attention and support, highlighting issues of sexual harassment and gender inequality on a massive scale. However, social media also presents significant challenges, such as online harassment, and the spread of misinformation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the dual nature of social media, analyzing both its empowering contributions and the challenges it presents to the feminist movements. By focusing on the importance of digital literacy, this research aims to foster a more informed and equitable society. It encourages critical engagement with social media content and advocates for policies that support feminist activism while safeguarding users from online harm.

2. The Evolution and Impact of Feminism in the Digital Age

2.1 Evolution of Feminism

Conceptualizations of feminism are intricate and diverse. The initial concepts of feminism sprang from the systematic disparity in treatment between men and women. However, feminism has now evolved to encompass an ideology, viewpoint, and praxis that emphasizes social justice and equality. The feminist movement in the Western world has experienced four distinct waves. The initial surge of feminist social movements originated throughout the period spanning from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. Originating in Britain and subsequently extending to the United States, Australia, and other industrialized Western nations, the movement was primarily driven by white wealthy and intellectual women. Its primary aim was to advocate for women's suffrage, hence earning it the moniker of the 'women's suffrage movement'. With the start of World War I, industrialized nations in the Western world implemented laws to ensure women's suffrage, marking the effective culmination of the first phase of the women's movement. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the second wave of the feminist movement emerged, aiming to achieve equality in social spheres and particularly addressing disparities in the workplace, family, gender, and childbearing. A significant portion of the second wave

of conflicts took place in the Western world, with the United States serving as the primary battleground. During this period, the feminist movement exhibited a wealth of diversity in both its structure and substance and achieved expansive outcomes. Yet, as extensively condemned by academics and activists, these two waves of feminist movements mostly concentrated on the concerns of wealthy middle-class white women, disregarding the realities of marginalized and vulnerable women [2]. Emerging in the early 1990s, the third wave of activism promoted constructive conceptions of femininity, opposed domestic violence, rape culture, and sexual harassment, pushed for abortion rights, and sought to transform sexist culture. The third wave has been characterized by a strong dedication to micro-politics among many ethnicities and genders, mostly driven by the younger generation. Throughout the last two centuries, the three feminist movements have been ongoing, characterized by expanding concerns and consecutive results.

2.2 Transition to Digital Activism

Driving by the influence of social media, the feminist movement saw its fourth surge in 2012 and reached its zenith around 2018, employing digital media and technology to attain gender parity. Beginning in 2006, with the rise in popularity of social media, there were initiatives advocating for women's rights on social media known as Hashtag Feminism. In 2013, there was a notable surge of public feminist protests. The inaugural women's march in 2018 highlighted the November midterm elections as a momentous triumph for women in US politics. Concurrently, the involvement of women in politics has expanded to other industrialized nations as well. The second thread only addresses the issue of sexual harassment. The fourth wave of the feminist movement focuses on women's justice, namely addressing sexual harassment and domestic abuse, but has broadened its scope to encompass the principles of equality for all marginalized groups.

3. The Role of Social Media in Shaping Feminism

3.1 Social Media as a Platform for Feminism

As Polletta and Jasper mentioned, '(social) movements contain, symbolize, and ritualize all kinds of people and attributes' [3]. The advent of social media has made it easier for people with similar self-awareness to connect and share their ideas and perspectives, thus serving to strengthen collective consciousness and collective identity in social movements [4]. At the same time, social media's

ability to like, share, and retweet, as well as its precise categorization through hashtags, such as the “MeToo” hashtag, makes it even more conducive to the flow of information about social movements. Furthermore, as Vizcaino-Verdu and Aguaded stated, social media like TikTok provide opportunities for traditionally marginalized groups to express and represent themselves [5].

Social media has not only provided social movements with new ways of communicating and expanding their reach, but it has also fundamentally shaped social movements. In the meanwhile, social media practices do not necessarily trump traditional offline practices, rather, it is now more difficult to distinguish between online and offline activism [6]. This convergence of online and offline protests illustrates the evolutionary trend of social movements in the digital age, where the integration of digital tools has become a necessity to maintain movement momentum and achieve social change. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the interplay between social media and political activism may continue to reshape the tactics and impact of the global feminist movement.

3.2 Positive Influences of Social Media on Feminism

First and foremost, it has resulted in the migration of women to emerging nations. The women’s movement, which was previously mostly concentrated in the Western world, has now shifted its focus from the industrialized West to the developing world in its fourth wave. In a historic milestone, the feminist movement has reached its highest point outside of Western countries, establishing itself as a global phenomenon in emerging nations.

Furthermore, although the majority of participants are still female, their gender identities are increasingly varied, and the feminist movement has emerged as a platform for marginalized individuals. The fourth wave witnessed a substantial number of participants: the 2017 Women’s March garnered worldwide participation of about 3.5 million, while the 2018 March was held at around 250 event locations worldwide. The predominant demographic of participation consists of women, although there are also male participants, ethnic groups, and groups with disabilities. For instance, the “HimToo” movement aims to amplify the voices of male victims of sexual harassment, while intersectionality circles advocate for women belonging to racial minority groups.

Ultimately, social media has yielded unprecedented outcomes for the feminist movement and has garnered significant scrutiny from both society and the Government. In the United States midterm elections, a notable outcome was the achievement of a historic milestone in terms of

both the number of female candidates and the number of women elected. The second outcome of the “MeToo” movement was substantial legal consequences and extensive public censure, leading to the dismissal of senior officials, judicial proceedings against malefactors of sexual assault, and multiple resignations and public apologies from the accused. The third outcome is the increased prevalence of social education aimed at combating sexual harassment. Theories, terminologies, and organizational cultures about sexual harassment have been extensively deliberated, disseminating feminist understanding and strengthening a workplace culture that opposes sexual harassment. Moreover, other ideas such as challenging gender stereotypes, eradicating misogyny, and combatting pornography gained widespread popularity. The fourth result indicated the advancement of women’s rights in developing nations. Progress in granting women access to driver’s licenses, improving breastfeeding conditions, establishing anti-sexual harassment hotlines, and creating safe gender spaces in cities have significantly improved the social treatment of women in these countries.

3.3 Negative Influence of Social Media on Feminism

Social media has undoubtedly provided a powerful platform for feminist movements, but it also poses significant challenges that could undermine the progress and integrity of these movements. One of the most pressing issues is the prevalence of online harassment and misogyny. Social media platforms, with their openness and anonymity, have become a breeding ground for gender-based harassment. At the same time, feminist activists and supporters often face threats, name-calling, and mansplaining, which not only silences their voices but also prevents others from participating in the movement.

In addition, the commercialization of feminism on social media is another issue that has emerged. Brands and influencers often use feminist rhetoric and symbols to capitalize on the movement’s popularity, rather than genuinely supporting its values. This phenomenon, often referred to as ‘femvertising’, diminishes the impact of the movement and reduces it to a marketing strategy rather than a serious social cause. While such campaigns may raise awareness, they often do so in a superficial way, focusing more on profit than on driving meaningful change. This commodification of feminism may move a fad rather than a sustained effort to achieve gender equality.

Finally, the performative nature of social media activism poses a challenge to the feminist movement. While social media makes it easy to express support for feminist causes through likes, shares, or hashtags, these actions can

sometimes replace more substantive forms of activism. This can create a false sense of accomplishment, with individuals believing they are contributing to the movement without engaging in meaningful on-the-ground efforts. As a result, the focus on online visibility can distract from the hard work needed to achieve real change, such as policy advocacy, community organizing, and education.

4. Navigating the Challenges of Feminist Activism Online

4.1 The Future of Feminism in the Digital Era

In the era of information technology and artificial intelligence, epitomized by social media, the progress of the women's movement will be more resilient overall, notwithstanding the obstacles, it encounters. The social and economic ramifications of information technology present novel prospects and requirements for the feminist movement. Although technology often enhances women's material well-being, offers new job prospects, and generates a potential need for women's expertise, it can also exacerbate gender inequality by reshaping the job market. Furthermore, artificial intelligence algorithms do not exclude the potential for gender bias. Therefore, to address these emerging concerns, feminism must confront the task of presenting fresh demands and exerting a more constructive impact on public policy. Both of these factors will help to the progressive evolution of feminism in both advantageous and disadvantageous manners.

The facilitation of women's mobility by social networks will significantly contribute to the swift expansion of feminism in developing nations. Social networks are particularly relevant to women as they offer convenient access to worldwide concerns, resources, and the organization of grassroots movements. Multiple Fourth Wave mobilizations have shown that social networks may effectively mobilize millions of individuals and several nations within a brief timeframe for women's movements. The involvement of women in underdeveloped nations through social networks will facilitate the organization of their battles.

Moreover, social media will augment the peaceful, progressive, and developing nature of feminism, therefore facilitating its gradual recognition by governments. Feminism has a track record of nonviolent and forward-thinking opposition, and in the era of social media, virtual public forums, and online organizational strategies can effectively eradicate animosity and bitterness, foster logical thinking, and enhance the coherence and maturity of the movement. Moreover, the achievements of the women's movement and its advantages, such as the promotion of

women's rights, the safeguarding of marginalized communities, and the dissemination of political correctness, can be extensively propagated through social media, thereby fostering fresh inspiration for the expansion of feminism.

4.2 Digital Literacy and Critical Consumption

Today, for those who advocate for feminist issues, having the ability to navigate media effectively is crucial. Digital literacy involves the skills to locate, comprehend, and assess content. This proficiency is vital because not everything shared on platforms can be trusted or verified. There is an abundance of misinformation circulating online that can easily spread. For supporters of feminism possessing literacy enables them to discern credible sources and prevent falling victim to deception.

To enhance digital literacy, feminists should actively seek educational resources and training that focus on critical media consumption. Participating in workshops, webinars, or online courses that cover fact-checking methods, source evaluation, and the recognition of biases can significantly bolster one's ability to engage with media critically. Social media often presents people with content that aligns with the existing beliefs making it challenging to expose ourselves to diverse viewpoints. This phenomenon creates an 'echo chamber', where familiar ideas are echoed continuously. For feminists, it is essential to recognize this tendency and actively engage with a range of perspectives. Embracing this approach fosters a grasp of relevant issues and encourages more meaningful dialogues.

Moreover, feminists should adopt the practice of cross-referencing information with multiple reputable sources before forming opinions or sharing content. This approach not only aids in avoiding misinformation but also strengthens the feminist discourse by ensuring that only well-supported arguments are amplified. Understanding how social media content is generated and disseminated is equally important. The companies behind these platforms frequently prioritize content based on popularity rather than accuracy. Feminists should be mindful of this dynamic and approach what they engage with--such as liking, sharing, and following--with a mindset. By considering their actions, on the internet individuals can contribute to the dissemination of information and bolster the feminist cause more efficiently. At the same time, policy and regulation play a crucial role in shaping the way social media platforms operate, which in turn affects how feminist movements thrive or struggle in these digital spaces. Governments and regulators have the power to enforce rules and ensure that social media companies act responsibly, particularly in areas such as content auditing, privacy protection, and prevention of online harassment. Effective

policies can help create a safer online environment, where feminist voices can be heard without fear of harassment or misinformation being silenced.

5. Conclusion

The intersection of feminism and social media represents a powerful and complex dynamic that has reshaped activism in the digital age. While social media platforms amplify feminist voices, allowing for rapid mobilization and widespread awareness of gender-related issues, they also present significant challenges, including the spread of misinformation, cyber harassment, and the commodification of feminist ideals. The fourth wave of feminism, characterized by digital activism, shows the potential for the global movement to flourish, even in traditionally marginalized communities. However, the sustainability of this progress depends on the development of digital literacy among feminists and the implementation of strong policies to protect users and ensure the integrity of feminist discourse online.

To continue advancing the feminist cause in the digital age, supporters must not only harness the power of social

media but also critically engage with the content they consume and share. By fostering a more informed and vigilant community, feminists can mitigate the risks associated with online radicalization and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive digital environment.

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