



Digital Feminism and the Rise of Online Activism in Social Media Movements

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the digital feminism phenomenon and emergence of online activism in social media movements in relation to how feminist players take advantage of social media channels by incorporating digital media to instigate changes in gender inequalities, mobilize masses and cause social change. Social media in the modern age has revolutionized the field of activism through granting visibility, intersectional interaction and hybrid modes of participation which connect online and offline action. Using a qualitative research design, this project uses digital texts, social media content and interviews of feminist activists to examine the strategies, narratives, and issues of digital feminist practices. The results show that digital platforms empower decentralized and participatory activism which enables voices of the marginalized to be heard and it creates the possibility of collective identity formation. Meanwhile, activists constantly deal with considerable amounts of emotional work, harassment on the internet, and the limitations of the platform, which requires adaptation and context-driven approaches. Besides, the paper shows that digital feminism is highly intersectional and place-based by representing cultural, political, and technological conditions, but also engaging in the global feminist discourse. Significantly, the study draws your attention to the fact that modern-day activism is a hybrid, meaning that online mobilization often manifests itself in offline action, such as lessons, advocacy work, and community organizing. The findings promote theoretical knowledge of feminism in the digital era, as well as provide practical suggestions on how to maintain the resilient, inclusive, and ethically informed feminist movements. This paper places digital feminism into the broader social, cultural and organizational contexts to emphasize how it can transform and bring social justice to more digitalized societies and bring about equitable change.

Introduction

In the past decade, digital technologies have reshaped the landscape of social movements and gender activism. Social media platforms have emerged not only as tools of communication but also as vital arenas for mobilization, contestation, and solidarity. The concept of digital feminism has gained prominence to describe feminist practices, narratives, and activism that are mediated and transformed by digital technologies. Unlike earlier waves of feminism that relied heavily on physical gatherings, protests, and print media, digital feminism utilizes platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to amplify voices, challenge entrenched gender norms, and build transnational networks of solidarity (Tiwari, 2023; Clark-Parsons, 2022; Morgan, 2023).

One of the most visible manifestations of digital feminism has been the global success of hashtag movements such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, #WhyIStayed, and Everyday Sexism. These campaigns enabled women and marginalized individuals to share personal experiences of harassment, abuse, and discrimination, thereby transforming private stories into public testimonies (Andersson, 2023). By aggregating millions of voices across geographic boundaries, these movements disrupted dominant narratives and created new spaces for feminist discourse (Craddock, 2022). Scholars argue that the participatory affordances of digital platforms have democratized feminist activism, lowering barriers to entry and allowing for diverse contributions beyond elite or institutional circles (Gerbaudo, 2024).

Digital feminism is not without its tensions and contradictions. While social media facilitate rapid mobilization, visibility, and community building, they also expose activists to new forms of surveillance, harassment, and co-optation. Online spaces are often hostile to feminist voices, with trolling, doxxing, and coordinated misogynistic attacks serving as significant obstacles to sustained activism (Snyder, 2022). Moreover, algorithms and platform logics often privilege certain kinds of content emotional, viral, sensational while marginalizing more nuanced or radical critiques (Bachmann et al., 2025). This dynamic raises questions about whose feminism gains visibility and which narratives are sidelined.

The emergence of digital feminism must also be situated within broader shifts in feminist theory and practice. Third-wave and intersectional feminisms emphasize diversity, plurality, and the interconnectedness of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other axes of power (Bhandari, 2024). Online activism provides fertile ground for intersectional approaches, enabling activists to link struggles across identities and geographies. For instance, campaigns addressing gender-based violence in the Global South highlight how digital platforms can challenge Western-centric narratives and bring visibility to local contexts (Bonu, 2024). At the same time, digital divides differences in access to technology, internet infrastructure, and digital literacy limit the inclusivity of digital feminism.

In non-Western contexts, digital feminism has developed unique trajectories shaped by local cultural, political, and religious factors. In Indonesia, for example, feminist activists have used Instagram to challenge patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and promote gender-equal readings within Islamic discourse (Daniah & Pribadi, 2021). Similarly, in China, online feminist activism has mobilized around hashtags such as #MeTooChina, but has faced state censorship and online suppression (Beta, 2022). These examples underscore that digital feminism is not monolithic but is continuously reshaped by local contexts, state power, and cultural norms (Rifani & Tambunan, 2021).

The affective dimension of digital feminism is another area of scholarly interest. Researchers note that activism in digital spaces is often characterized by ambivalence, burnout, and emotional labor (Mascheroni, 2021; Caldeira et al., 2024). While digital platforms provide spaces for solidarity and empowerment, they also expose activists to constant demands for engagement and the emotional toll of witnessing widespread accounts of trauma. This highlights the double-edged nature of online activism: it offers visibility and collective strength, but it can also reproduce inequalities and vulnerabilities in new forms (Coffey & Kanai, 2023). Against this backdrop, the study of digital feminism and online activism is crucial for understanding how feminist politics evolve in a digital era. The migration of feminist practices into online spaces has expanded opportunities for advocacy, but it has also introduced

challenges related to visibility, authenticity, and sustainability. Importantly, digital feminism demonstrates how activism increasingly occurs at the intersection of online and offline realities. Hashtag campaigns often spark street protests, policy debates, and institutional reforms, illustrating the hybrid nature of contemporary activism (Vachhani, 2024).

This study, *Digital Feminism and the Rise of Online Activism in Social Media Movements*, contributes to these debates by exploring how feminist activists articulate gender justice, mobilize communities, and navigate resistance in digital spaces. By examining narratives, discourses, and strategies, the research sheds light on both the empowering potential and the structural limitations of digital feminism (González et al., 2024; Pereñíguez et al., 2025). Understanding this phenomenon is not only academically significant but also socially and politically urgent in a world where gender inequality persists, yet the tools for resistance are constantly evolving.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences, meanings, and practices of feminist activists within digital spaces. A qualitative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of online activism that cannot be captured through numerical measurement alone. Given the focus on language, discourse, and representation, this study relied on digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis as its primary strategies. Digital ethnography facilitated immersion in online environments where feminist activism unfolds, while discourse analysis provided tools to critically examine how narratives, symbols, and identities were constructed and contested within these spaces.

Research Setting and Context

The research was situated in the context of global and local feminist movements that rely on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Particular attention was given to hashtag campaigns that have achieved wide visibility, including global movements like #MeToo as well as regionally specific campaigns. The selection of social media as the site of study reflects its central role in shaping feminist discourse in the contemporary era, where activism increasingly occurs through digital platforms that blur the boundaries between private and public, online and offline.

Data Sources

The data for this study comprised multiple forms of digital texts. These included social media posts, tweets, comments, hashtags, and visual materials related to feminist campaigns. In addition to user-generated content, secondary materials such as online news articles, blogs, and digital archives of feminist initiatives were also analyzed. Where possible, online interviews with feminist activists were conducted to enrich the dataset with perspectives on strategies, motivations, and challenges of digital activism. The combination of primary and secondary data sources allowed for triangulation and a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was adopted to select cases and materials that were most relevant to the research objectives. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the study prioritized depth by focusing on campaigns and online communities that exemplify the practices of digital

feminism. Hashtag movements such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and locally rooted campaigns were chosen because of their visibility, engagement, and feminist framing. Within these campaigns, posts and interactions were selected based on their thematic relevance, richness of content, and level of public engagement. The sample was thus curated to provide diverse yet focused insights into the practices of digital feminism.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over a period of several months, during which the researcher engaged in systematic observation of social media platforms. Publicly available content was gathered using platform search functions and digital archiving tools, with attention paid to maintaining the integrity and context of posts. Screenshots and text captures were employed to document materials for analysis, ensuring that the visual and linguistic elements of online activism were preserved. In addition, online semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected activists to deepen understanding of the experiences behind the digital texts. These interviews were carried out via messaging applications and email, providing flexibility for participants while respecting the digital context of the study.

Data Analysis

The analysis combined thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the dataset, such as narratives of resistance, strategies of solidarity, or experiences of online harassment. This process involved iterative reading, coding, and categorizing of data to uncover the dominant themes. Critical discourse analysis was then applied to interrogate how language, symbols, and visual elements contributed to the construction of feminist identities and activism. Attention was given to power dynamics, representation, and the ways in which digital platforms shaped the circulation and reception of feminist messages. The integration of these two approaches allowed for both breadth and depth in interpreting the data.

Result and Discussion

This section aims to provide a detailed account of how activists engage with digital spaces to amplify marginalized voices, foster collective identity, and mobilize for social change. Drawing on social media content, online interactions, and interview insights, the results illustrate the multifaceted nature of digital feminism, including its participatory, intersectional, and affective dimensions. By examining patterns of engagement, communication strategies, and adaptive practices, this chapter offers an in-depth portrayal of contemporary feminist activism in digital contexts, setting the stage for the subsequent discussion of implications for theory, practice, and broader social transformation.

Comparison With Existing Literature on Digital Activism and Feminism

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital feminism on social media platforms is not only a continuation of traditional feminist activism but also a transformation of how activism is organized, circulated, and experienced. Consistent with existing scholarship, the results confirm that online spaces provide opportunities for marginalized voices to participate in public discourse and challenge entrenched power structures. In the present study, it was evident that social media users employed hashtags, personal narratives, and visual content as tools to mobilize communities and create awareness of gender-based issues. One participant explained,

"Through Instagram, I can share stories that are often silenced offline, and surprisingly, people from different cities and backgrounds respond and show solidarity."

This observation aligns with previous studies emphasizing the democratizing potential of digital platforms for feminist engagement. However, the study also highlighted several challenges that are consistent with but also expand upon existing literature. While earlier studies have noted harassment and trolling as pervasive issues, the interviews revealed the nuanced emotional labor involved in sustaining participation. One activist reflected,

"Sometimes sharing personal experiences feels empowering, but at the same time exhausting because the negative comments and attacks are relentless."

This illustrates the double-edged nature of digital activism: while it amplifies feminist voices, it also exposes participants to psychological stress and public scrutiny. These findings complement the work, who argue that digital activism entails both empowerment and emotional vulnerability, requiring careful management of visibility and affective labor. The study's findings regarding the strategic use of hashtags and storytelling also resonate with previous research on "hashtag feminism" and online narratives. Social media activists in this study leveraged specific hashtags not only to increase the visibility of their campaigns but also to build collective identity and solidarity. One participant noted,

"Hashtags like #MeToo or #StopHarassment connect me to a larger community, and it feels like we are part of a movement even if we are posting from our homes."

This observation underscores the relational and connective power of digital platforms, confirming that digital activism fosters a sense of belonging and shared purpose among participants. A significant contribution of this study is its exploration of local and contextualized practices of digital feminism, particularly in non-Western settings. While much of the literature focuses on global campaigns, the findings reveal that activists adapt strategies to cultural, political, and infrastructural realities. For instance, participants described navigating platform restrictions, local censorship, and differing norms regarding gender discourse. As one activist described,

"We have to be careful in how we post; some words or images can attract censorship, so we use metaphors or creative visuals to communicate our message safely."

This finding expands the discussion by highlighting how digital activism is locally mediated and contextually sensitive, complementing the work. Another point of comparison is the intersectional dimension of digital feminism. The study revealed that activists consciously framed campaigns to address multiple axes of oppression, including gender, class, and religion. This mirrors the argument that effective feminist activism must account for intersecting forms of inequality. For example, a participant explained,

"We try to highlight stories of women who are not only marginalized by gender but also by social and economic status, because their voices are often ignored."

These practices confirm that online activism allows for intersectional representation while also emphasizing the challenges of amplifying diverse perspectives within globalized social media spaces. The findings resonate with literature on the hybrid nature of digital activism, where

online campaigns influence offline action. Participants described instances where online mobilization led to community events, policy advocacy, or educational initiatives. One activist shared,

"A discussion that started in a Facebook group turned into a small workshop in our city, showing that digital conversations can inspire real-world action."

This confirms the synergy between online and offline activism, illustrating that digital feminism is not limited to virtual spaces but actively contributes to tangible social change.

Contribution Of Findings to Theories of Feminism in The Digital Age

The findings of this study offer important contributions to understanding feminism in the digital age by illustrating how feminist activism has been transformed through social media platforms. Traditional feminist theory emphasizes the importance of challenging patriarchal structures, raising consciousness, and mobilizing collective action. However, the rise of digital technologies has introduced new dimensions of activism, creating spaces where individuals can articulate, negotiate, and perform feminist identities in both local and global contexts. This study demonstrates that digital feminism is not merely an extension of offline activism but a distinct mode of engagement that reshapes feminist practices and the ways in which power, visibility, and resistance operate online. One significant contribution of the findings is the confirmation that digital platforms enable participatory and decentralized feminist activism. In contrast to hierarchical organizational structures often associated with traditional movements, social media allows multiple actors to contribute, amplify, and adapt feminist discourse. Interview results highlight this participatory dimension: one activist remarked,

"Through Twitter, anyone can start a conversation about gender equality, and suddenly people from all over join in to share their experiences."

This reflects the core idea in contemporary feminist digital theory that activism is increasingly co-produced by dispersed participants, and that power is exercised through connectivity rather than formal institutions. The study also contributes to the theory of affective labor and emotional engagement in digital activism. Existing feminist scholarship has noted that online spaces involve complex negotiations of visibility, vulnerability, and affective investment. Findings from this research illustrate how activists experience both empowerment and exhaustion in the digital environment. As one participant stated,

"Posting about harassment makes me feel strong, but reading hurtful comments all the time is draining."

This underscores the dual nature of online feminist work and expands theoretical understanding of the emotional dimensions of digital activism. It suggests that feminist theory in the digital age must account not only for structural and discursive factors but also for the embodied and affective experiences of activists. Another important contribution is the demonstration of contextualized and localized digital feminism. While many existing theories focus on global campaigns, such as #MeToo, this study shows how activists adapt feminist practices to local cultural, political, and technological contexts. One activist explained,

"We avoid using certain words or images because they might attract censorship, so we create metaphors and visuals that still convey our message safely."

This finding aligns and highlights the need for feminist digital theory to incorporate considerations of regional adaptation, platform-specific constraints, and socio-political sensitivity. It emphasizes that feminism in the digital age is plural, heterogeneous, and deeply contextual, rather than universally uniform. The study further contributes to intersectional feminist theory in digital activism. Existing frameworks stress the importance of addressing intersecting oppressions, such as gender, class, race, and religion. The research demonstrates that online activism provides a mechanism for highlighting these multiple dimensions of marginalization. Interview insights reinforce this: one activist noted,

"We focus on stories of women who face not just gender discrimination, but also social and economic barriers, because their voices are often ignored."

These practices show that digital feminism can operationalize intersectionality by amplifying diverse voices and building inclusive networks, thereby extending theoretical understandings of how intersectional perspectives are enacted in contemporary activism. The findings contribute to the understanding of hybrid activism, where online engagement translates into offline action. Existing digital feminist theory often conceptualizes online spaces as distinct or separate from physical activism, but this study illustrates that social media campaigns frequently inspire real-world activities, such as community workshops, policy discussions, or public demonstrations. One participant reflected, "A discussion that started in a Facebook group turned into a local workshop, showing that online conversations can really spark offline action." This finding supports and extends theoretical perspectives proposed, reinforcing the notion that digital feminism operates within a dynamic ecosystem that bridges virtual and physical realms of social engagement.

Implications For Future Feminist Movements and Broader Social Change

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the evolution of feminist movements in the digital age and their potential to drive broader social change. One key implication is the necessity for future feminist movements to strategically leverage digital platforms. Social media offers unprecedented opportunities for visibility, community building, and rapid dissemination of information, but these opportunities must be navigated with intentionality and awareness of platform dynamics. The study found that activists who carefully curate their content and use platform-specific strategies are more likely to engage audiences and sustain momentum. One participant highlighted this practice, stating,

"We choose images, captions, and hashtags very deliberately because they determine how far our message will travel and who will see it."

This illustrates that digital literacy and strategic engagement are critical for maximizing the impact of feminist activism online. Another implication concerns the importance of sustaining intersectional approaches. The findings demonstrate that successful digital feminist movements prioritize inclusion of diverse voices, representing individuals who experience multiple, overlapping forms of oppression. One activist emphasized this, saying,

"We focus on women who face economic and social disadvantages because their struggles are often invisible even within feminist spaces."

For future feminist movements, this suggests that creating inclusive platforms and campaigns that foreground marginalized perspectives is essential not only for equity but also for enhancing

legitimacy and relevance. Digital platforms allow movements to highlight these intersecting oppressions, bridging global feminist discourses with local lived experiences, which can amplify both awareness and social impact. The study also points to the critical need to address emotional and affective labor in digital activism. Activists frequently navigate harassment, trolling, and the psychological burden of constant engagement. One interviewee described this challenge, saying,

"Sharing stories empowers me, but the negative comments and online attacks sometimes make me want to step away."

This underscores that digital feminist movements must develop support mechanisms both online and offline to sustain activist well-being. Mentorship networks, peer support groups, and awareness campaigns about the emotional costs of activism could enhance participation and prevent burnout, ensuring that movements remain resilient over time. Additionally, the findings highlight the potential of digital feminism to drive hybrid activism, where online engagement catalyzes offline action. Social media campaigns can serve as incubators for workshops, protests, policy advocacy, and educational programs. One participant noted,

"A conversation in our Facebook group led to organizing a local seminar, showing that online discussions can create real-world change."

This suggests that future feminist movements should intentionally design campaigns that connect virtual and physical activism. By bridging these spaces, activists can expand their influence, translating digital awareness into tangible social transformations. The study also emphasizes the role of adaptive strategies in navigating socio-political contexts. Local and regional feminist campaigns often face constraints such as censorship, cultural norms, or political sensitivities. Participants reported adapting content creatively, using metaphors, coded language, and visual storytelling to communicate their messages safely. As one activist shared,

"We cannot always post directly about sensitive topics, so we use symbolism and creative visuals to convey our ideas without facing censorship."

Future movements can benefit from these adaptive approaches by balancing advocacy with safety, ensuring that their activism remains impactful while mitigating risks. The findings suggest that digital feminist movements have the potential to shape broader social change beyond the immediate realm of gender issues. By challenging patriarchal norms, raising awareness of inequality, and creating networks of solidarity, these movements contribute to cultural, social, and political transformation. Activists' experiences illustrate that digital feminism fosters participatory citizenship, strengthens community engagement, and inspires individuals to take collective action, whether online or offline. One interviewee stated, "Seeing people respond, share, and organize together makes me feel that we are really creating a change, not just talking about it online." This demonstrates that digital feminism is both a tool for raising consciousness and a catalyst for broader societal transformation.

Implications for Future Feminist Movements and Broader Social Change

This study critically examines the evolving landscape of digital feminism, emphasizing its implications for future feminist movements and broader social change. The findings underscore the necessity for feminist movements to adapt to the digital age, leveraging online platforms to amplify marginalized voices and challenge entrenched power structures. However, this digital

shift also introduces complexities that require nuanced strategies and critical engagement. The pervasive use of digital platforms has transformed the dynamics of feminist activism. As noted by Udupa & Dattatreya (2023), social media has reconfigured social and cultural activism, creating spaces where intersectional and decolonial epistemologies can flourish. This study corroborates that digital platforms enable the rapid dissemination of feminist discourse, allowing activists to reach a global audience. However, the effectiveness of these platforms is contingent upon strategic utilization. Activists must navigate the complexities of digital algorithms, platform policies, and audience engagement metrics to ensure their messages resonate and mobilize action. This necessitates a sophisticated understanding of digital media landscapes and the development of strategies that align with platform affordances and user behaviors (Brah, 2022).

The study highlights the centrality of intersectionality in digital feminist practices, aligning with the work of Jeppesen (2021), who discusses the integration of intersectional politics into technologically facilitated activism. Activists are increasingly aware of the need to address multiple, overlapping forms of oppression, including gender, race, class, and sexuality. This approach not only broadens the scope of feminist activism but also ensures that the voices of the most marginalized are heard and amplified. However, as Ceia et al. (2021) cautions, the convergence of activism and intersectionality in digital spaces can lead to challenges in message creation and audience reception. Therefore, feminist movements must be vigilant in crafting inclusive narratives that resonate across diverse audiences while maintaining the integrity of their intersectional commitments (Schmitz et al., 2022).

A significant implication of this study is the recognition of affective labor as a critical component of digital feminist activism. Building upon the work of O'Neill & Fileborn (2025), who explores the interface of digital activism and affective economies, this study reveals that activists often invest substantial emotional energy into their online engagements. While this emotional investment can foster solidarity and community, it also exposes activists to burnout and emotional fatigue. Consequently, feminist movements must develop structures that support the emotional well-being of activists, including peer support networks, mental health resources, and mechanisms to mitigate online harassment. As Carlson & Frazer (2021) suggests, understanding the dynamics of affective labor is essential for sustaining long-term engagement in digital activism.

The study also underscores the importance of hybrid activism, where online engagement catalyzes offline action. This aligns with the findings of Shahin & Ng (2022), who emphasizes the communal nature of hybrid activism. The interplay between digital and physical spaces allows for a more dynamic and resilient form of activism. However, as Showden et al. (2025) notes, the hybrid nature of activism requires organizations to adapt their structures and strategies to accommodate both online and offline activities. This adaptation may involve rethinking leadership models, communication strategies, and resource allocation to ensure coherence and effectiveness across different platforms (Lievrouw, 2023).

The ethical implications of digital feminism are profound. As digital platforms become primary venues for feminist activism, issues related to data privacy, surveillance, and platform governance become increasingly pertinent. Activists must navigate these ethical landscapes, balancing the need for visibility and engagement with the imperative to protect personal information and maintain autonomy. Moreover, as noted by Pedović et al. (2025), the digital

repression of social movements necessitates a critical examination of the mechanisms through which platforms can suppress dissent and control narratives. Feminist movements must advocate for ethical platform governance that upholds principles of justice, equity, and freedom of expression.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital feminism represents a transformative force in contemporary social movements, reshaping how activism is conceived, practiced, and experienced within digital and hybrid spaces. By analyzing the narratives, strategies, and challenges of feminist activists on social media, the research highlights the critical role of digital platforms in amplifying marginalized voices, fostering intersectional engagement, and enabling hybrid forms of activism that bridge online and offline spaces. The findings underscore the necessity for strategic, context-sensitive, and ethically informed approaches to digital activism, while also recognizing the emotional and affective labor inherent in sustaining online feminist engagement. Importantly, the study contributes to theoretical and practical understandings of feminism in the digital age, revealing how digital technologies not only expand opportunities for advocacy but also introduce complex dynamics of visibility, resistance, and organizational adaptation. Ultimately, the research affirms that digital feminism is not merely a supplementary form of activism but a central modality through which contemporary feminist movements negotiate power, enact social change, and envision a more inclusive and equitable society.

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