

Social Media and Youth Feminism: The Intersection of Digital Activism, Mental Health, and Belonging

Xinyue Zhang

*Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
zzz10@student.unimelb.edu.au*

Abstract. The aim of this study is to investigate the mental effects of young female activism and how social media sites affect them. There are some opportunities for young feminists in digital spaces, but this piece identifies notable challenges by examining platform features, regional differences, differences between locations, and hashtag campaigns. The study uses examples from both East Asia and the West to show that social media sites can help people find their identity, get emotional support, but they can also put users at risk for algorithmic pressure, online abuse. In the past few years, internet activism has become an important part of young people's culture. The development is a reflection of larger changes in how people communicate and engage in political activities. The way these things work shows both the strengths and weaknesses of feminist speech online. The results show that female participation in digital media is emotionally complex, affected by cultural settings, and deeply shaped by the features of different platforms. Finally, it is suggested that more attention be paid to digital care, variety, and mental health, as well as the formation of long-lasting online feminist groups.

Keywords: Youth Feminism, Social Media, Digital Activism, Mental Health, Platform Affordances

1. Introduction

Social media has grown to be an essential component of young people's everyday life all around the globe in recent years ; instead, many young people increasingly use them to express themselves, build connections, and engage with social issues. These platforms are no longer just tools for conversing, viewing videos, or getting information. The most significant of these is the development of digital feminism, referred to as the "fourth wave of feminism," which is characterized by its emphasis on the varied experiences of gender and its online engagement [1].

Conventional understandings of social movements are being subtly altered by this new digital feminist movement [2]. Many young people, particularly women and sexual minorities, are utilizing social media to express their stories and fight against gender-based violence and discrimination, thanks to global hashtags like #MeToo and local hashtags like China's 'Mi To' (#米兔) and Japan's #WithYou [3,4]. These online forums serve as more than just informational resources; but also as communities that are often more inclusive and accessible, providing young people with support and empathy [5].

Naturally, such engagement comes with costs. Some participants have suffered emotional stress, online abuse, or even "social fatigue," while many others say that digital feminism empowered them and a feeling of belonging [6]. These platforms have the potential to improve relationships, but they may also make anxiety worse [7]. Online feminist groups may sometimes be safe havens, particularly for young people going through a self-discovery journey, but in other situations, people may feel uncomfortable due to internal exclusivity or significant language difficulties [8].

The purpose of this article is to look into how social media and youth feminism interact with each other, focusing on how young people's mental health and sense of community are affected by digital feminism. In order to answer the following issues, this research integrates existing literature actual situations, and cultural parallels between China and the West [9].

Building on the background above, this study is organised around four interrelated research questions that frame the scope of inquiry. This study looks at how young feminists use different platform features to connect with others and share their thoughts and experiences. It also looks at the mental effects of long-term digital engagement, such as positive effects (like self-assurance, support, and mobilization) and negative effects (like algorithmic visibility, harassment, and fatigue); it asks if online feminist spaces exclude some participants through language, aesthetics, or access, or if they instead create a safe place to feel like they belong; and finally, it compares how these dynamics change or stay the same in different political and cultural settings in East Asia and the West [10]. In short, it's about how people interact, what that interaction does for them, who feels included, and why context is important.

2. The rise of digital feminism in youth culture

2.1. Online expression and hashtag campaigns

The means that young people participate in feminist activism have changed significantly in the era of social media, especially with the advent of hashtag campaigns. In addition to giving more young people the chance to speak out about their experiences of gender-based violence, popular hashtags like #MeToo, #WithYou, #NiUnaMenos, and #MahsaAmini also allow them to seek justice, speak out collectively, and create international support networks and emotional connections [11]. These digital movements are widely adopted due to their low barriers to entry, rapid spread, and provision of a comparatively safe and powerful means of participation for marginalized groups (including women and the LGBTQ+ community), these digital movements are extensively used. Individual suffering eventually becomes apparent and becomes part of public debate when these hashtags are used often, increasing awareness of the severity and ubiquity of these concerns [12].

Hashtags have even evolved into a powerful weapon for breaking past information blockades, particularly in areas with stringent news control, like portions of East Asia or the Middle East. They send protest voices straight to social media sites, avoiding the mainstream media [13]. More significantly, these online sentiments have sparked real reforms rather than just "venting frustrations." For instance, Latin America's #NiUnaMenos campaign has mobilized large-scale offline efforts to combat femicide, while the #MeToo movement in South Korea has resulted in legal reforms and public reflection on sexual harassment [14]. Since 2017, feminist hashtag movements have appeared in a variety of political and cultural contexts. Despite the differences in background, they are fundamentally strong reactions that the younger generation started online [15]. Additionally, this shows that hashtags are more than just "tags" on the internet; they have the power to elicit real emotional resonance and social change, which makes them a crucial tool for taking action in the digital era [16].

Hashtags have even become a strong way to get around information blocks, especially in places like East Asia and the Middle East where news is strictly controlled. People who want to protest go straight to social media sites instead of the mass media [17]. It's more important that these online feelings have led to real changes than just "venting frustrations." In Latin America, the #NiUnaMenos campaign has led to a lot of people working together to stop femicide. In South Korea, the #MeToo movement has led to changes in the law and public discussion about sexual abuse. Feminist hashtag groups have shown up in a range of political and cultural settings since 2017. Despite differences in background, they are fundamentally powerful, youth-led online responses. It demonstrates that hashtags are more than just "tags" on the internet; they can really make people feel something and lead to social change, which makes them an important tool for action in the digital age [18].

2.2. Platform affordances: Instagram, TikTok, Twitter

The distinctive features of various social media platforms have a direct impact on how young people interact with feminist concerns on the internet. Instagram, for instance, favors visual expression; infographics, body-positive images, and narratives with an aesthetic focus are typical genres. The popular "feminist short videos" and other expressions that combine self-care with aesthetic appeal are examples of how such material has influenced the style of "digital feminism" [19].

TikTok, by contrast, emphasizes interactivity. Funny films, parodies, or trend challenges are common ways for users to react to gender issues. Collage videos and current topic challenges are popular tools used by feminist TikTok makers to highlight gender inequality and encourage intersectional dialogue [20]. The platform's algorithm, however, occasionally introduces prejudice by favoring material with particular body types or races, which has caused a great deal of criticism [21].

Regarding Twitter (formerly known as X), it serves as more of a real-time comments tool. Through hashtag movements, threaded postings, or sharing comments, users may swiftly organize issues to openly criticize organizations [22]. Though many feminists, especially those who identify as queer or belong to a racial minority, are more susceptible to online attacks as a result of this highly public form of speech, which can cause psychological stress [23].

In conclusion, many platforms differ in their communication formats, sphere of impact, and emotional cost, all of which contribute to the variety of ways that young people now participate in digital feminist activities.

3. The influence of digital feminist engagement on mental well-being

Self-expression, visibility to others, and the attainment of popularity may all impact an individual's psychological well-being on social media. Online engagement may foster confidence and support; nevertheless, it may also result in tension and exhaustion. The platform's mechanisms, the online environment, and an individual's personal background all shape people's emotional experiences. This section examines two aspects: the psychological advantages derived from online feminist engagement and the potential risks associated with it.

3.1. Empowerment and confidence development

A multitude of young individuals report that engagement in digital feminist forums has enhanced their confidence and fostered a heightened sense of belonging. These platforms provide a venue for

previously marginalized voices, including young women, non-binary individuals, and LGBTQ+ youth, to articulate their perspectives. In the absence of conventional constraints on expression, individuals may disseminate their narratives, establish hashtags, and exchange information, progressively cultivating their own voices [24].

The #MeToo movement and body positivity discourse on Instagram exemplify this phenomenon. These initiatives have prompted increased participation from individuals sharing their experiences, contesting traditional gender norms and offering psychological help to numerous others [25]. The idea of "I am not alone" is extremely therapeutic, and many assert that it has helped them overcome and articulating experiences they had hitherto concealed.

Research suggests that engagement in such themes can improve one's ability to express oneself digitally", foster self-identity, and motivate many young individuals who were previously reluctant to partake in public discourse to voice their opinions. Numerous people have also stated that this is a component of their self-discovery and political education, particularly when they learn that their experiences are not only acknowledged but also supported [26]. This illustrates that digital feminism serves as both a social movement and a means for individuals to cultivate self-belief and resilience.

3.2. Risks: digital harassment and self-comparison

In addition to direct violence online, there is also less visible pressure: comparison. People who are physically attractive or post high-quality videos are more likely to get noticed on Instagram and TikTok. Some people feel like they need to make their posts more "photogenic" or "entertaining" to get more views because of this. As time goes on, some young people start to wonder: Am I sharing this to truly express myself, or just to please the algorithm [27]?

Because of this, the culture of each site brings with it a different set of risks and opportunities. For example, TikTok and Instagram let people express themselves creatively, but their algorithms often favor certain aesthetics [28]. Twitter is good for real-time debates, but it often leads to heated arguments. And Weibo is heavily censored, so users have to use acronyms, emojis, or coded language to communicate [29]. These different outcomes show that the features of a platform have a direct effect on both the safety and the longevity of feminist speech [30].

3.3. Action fatigue and emotional labor

Engaging in digital feminism is notably taxing, particularly for the youth. The exigencies of 'visibility' on social media compel several young feminists to remain perpetually online, promptly address diverse social concerns, disseminate educational information, and offer emotional support to others, sometimes devoid of institutional protections or psychiatric assistance. This ongoing responsibility to "care" for both issues and communities may result in considerable emotional fatigue [31]. Occasionally, this may evoke emotions of guilt, such as questioning one's own efforts, which can eventually lead to disengaging from online environments [32].

Studies reveal that several young activists frequently struggle with self-expression and sustaining political engagement, particularly throughout social crises or instances of public injustice. Moreover, continuous exposure to extensive information regarding violence, gender discrimination, and traumatic situations might result in secondary trauma, also known as 'compassion fatigue'. Individual emotional turmoil is interwoven with communal adversity, inadvertently inflicting a significant psychological strain [33].

Some people manage their emotions by taking 'temporary vacations from the internet' or concentrating exclusively on trustworthy groups. Nonetheless, several individuals quietly withstand

these influences, which may ultimately result in aversion to social media and adversely affect their lifestyle and mental well-being.

4. Digital feminist communities and affiliation

4.1. Secure environments and collective identity

Digital feminist networks function as significant 'safe havens' for several young individuals. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Discord provide emotional support and channels for expression to individuals marginalized in real life due to gender, sexual orientation, or political beliefs. These online platforms promote reciprocal support, the sharing of personal narratives, and the affirmation of identities, progressively transforming into informal "mutual aid networks" [34].

Compared to schools, families, or local social circles, these communities frequently offer a more genuine feeling of belonging and emotional connection, particularly for young people with more complicated identities, such as LGBTQ+ persons or those from minority races [35]. Members can collaboratively formulate regulations, exchange experiences, and cultivate an environment that contests conventional frameworks. In these contexts, many individuals first experience a shared sense of belonging, perceiving that 'we are one sort of people'.

4.2. Obstacles to entry and constraints of affiliation

While these societies prioritize inclusion, they are not completely devoid of 'hierarchies of disdain.' One frequently requires meeting certain "implicit conditions" in order to have influence within a community. For instance, one may need to have a specific number of followers, be skilled at using popular phrases, or have an appearance and style that complies with the platform's aesthetic standards in order to be more visible [36].

Individuals from linguistically or culturally marginalized backgrounds may have their voices silenced or overlooked. Concerns such as 'tone policing,' disputes on the criteria for a 'real feminist,' and shallow 'performance activism' can render new members or those on the periphery feeling excluded [37]. Numerous studies indicate that these ostensibly 'progressive' forums frequently perpetuate Western-centric, white middle-class, liberal feminist narratives, with the authority to define who qualifies as a 'real feminist' concentrated in a tiny minority [38].

These examples demonstrate that, even in ostensibly open digital environments, a sense of belonging is not equally accessible to everyone.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that digital feminism is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomena rather than a mere dichotomy. Hashtag movements like #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos exemplify the potency of unified voices to shatter silence and instigate social transformation. The disparities among platforms significantly influence the way these expressions unfold: Instagram and TikTok promote creativity and visibility while simultaneously reinforcing particular aesthetics via algorithms; Twitter enables swift discourse but frequently subjects users to hostility; and Weibo constrains expression through censorship. On an individual level, digital involvement offers several young feminists empowerment, confidence, and a sense of solidarity; nevertheless, it also presents hazards of harassment, comparison, and emotional fatigue. Online community spaces can serve as helpful refuges, although they are susceptible to exclusionary tendencies and internal hierarchies. Collectively, these findings indicate that the advantages and disadvantages of digital activism are

intertwined. Consequently, any research, platform development, and educational or psychological programs should closely examine the concealed emotional tolls of activism in conjunction with its apparent successes. A truly sustainable digital feminist ecosystem necessitates visibility and influence, as well as inclusivity, empathy, and a continuous commitment to the mental well-being of participants.

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