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Young Women and Social Media Feminism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether feminism on social media, despite its empowering appearance, is truly inclusive and accessible to all sections of society, or primarily serves the interests of privileged users. Framed around the concept of 'epistemic injustice,' the study explores how digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok may unintentionally exclude marginalized voices through tools such as algorithmic sorting, aesthetic bias, and engagement-driven content filtering. Key concepts like testimonial injustice, shadowbanning, and report bombing are used to highlight the structural barriers faced by Dalit, queer, disabled, and muslim women online. By analyzing these platforms, the paper questions whether digital feminism truly reaches and democratizes voices or simply echoes dominant narratives.

Keywords: *Social Media Feminism, Digital Feminism, Epistemic Injustice, Testimonial Injustice, Marginalized Voices, Instagram Feminism, Tiktok Feminism, Algorithmic Bias, Echo Chambers, Chaos Chambers, Feminism and Algorithms, Shadowbanning, Dalit Feminists, Logic of Virality, Content Moderation.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, social media feminism has become a force in public discourse. Hashtag movements like #MeToo and other hashtag campaigns have dominated online communities, bringing issues of gender inequality, sexual assault, and institutional change into the spotlight. However, beneath this bold and empowering façade is an unasked question: Does this type of online feminism reach the individuals in marginalized communities? While social media has historically been praised for its inclusivity, this research paper will attempt to examine whether digital feminism is truly inclusive or if it only caters to the privileged.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter currently have an immense influence on ideologies and public narratives. But as Stewart, Cichocki, and McLeod (2022) discuss, algorithms on these sites tend to reinforce "the conditions that lead to some groups being systematically denied the full status of knowers" (Stewart et al. 1) . In other words, the same machinery that amplifies feminist communication may also be quietly censoring the voices of marginalized communities.

Among the most important issues that this paper is concerned with is the contribution of algorithmic injustice, i.e, particularly how digital platforms sort and target users online.

Algorithmic sorting, as this process is called, produces what academics refer to as "epistemic bubbles" (Stewart et al. 6–9), in which individuals are largely presented with material that is similar to their existing views. Consequently, powerful narratives of online feminism can replicate or echo within the same spaces, seldom reaching the women and communities that are most in need of being seen and heard.

Bouvier (2020) further complicates this discussion by pointing out the ways that movements such as #MeToo were frequently influenced by emotionally charged language, viral messaging, and what she terms "moral campaigning and commercial appropriation" (Bouvier 2). Although these movements undoubtedly created awareness, particularly in the mainstream media, they also threatened to oversimplify the various truths of oppressed groups. As Bouvier notes, "the power and clarity of the solidarity of #MeToo" (p. 3) was largely built around elite narratives.

The paper also talks about how digital feminism tends to play out in tightly controlled online environments. Scholars refer to these spaces as "nodes" or "echo chambers." These are online settings where individuals predominantly receive like-minded views, which can restrict genuine cross-community interaction. As Bouvier points out, "users can reside in nodes of opinion and information that are self-confirming and closed" (Bouvier 2), which complicates how diverse opinions emerge and are heard.

This leads us back to the notion of epistemic injustice, a term that has been brought forward by philosopher Miranda Fricker (Fricker 1). It is the harm that occurs when an individual is silenced or discredited as a source of reliable knowledge. In the online feminist world, this type of injustice becomes more apparent. As Stewart et al. (2022) quote from Astra Taylor, "The web reflects and even amplifies real-world inequities as often as it ameliorates them".

This work hopes to ask if enough has been done by online feminism to challenge such inequalities or if it can become simply another sly performance, without any relationship to those who have the most to lose.

Nodes and Echo Chambers

In the realm of social media feminism, there is a certain expectation that digital spaces act as amplifiers for the voices of the marginalized sections. However, this has been proven complicated at times due to the presence of nodes and echo chambers.

Nodes can be described as a point of concentrated activity where users engage with similar opinions and emotional content. These are often shaped by shared moral sentiments, influencers, and algorithmic nudging. According to KhosraviNik (2017b, Bouvier 2), nodes are ideological clusters that form when social media users engage primarily with those who affirm their views, reducing exposure to dissent. For instance, when someone only follows accounts that post urban, upper-class feminist content, they might never see posts from marginalized voices that challenge their views.

Movements like #MeToo may appear chaotic and decentralized on the surface, but their underlying structure often reveals a high degree of emotional and ideological clustering. The #MeToo discourse on Twitter was not as open or inclusive as it seemed; rather, it was "highly nodal in terms of affect and moral conviction" (Bouvier 1). Despite the vast number of participants and global reach, the conversation was largely shaped by dominant emotional narratives and moral standpoints, forming tightly bound digital communities, or **nodes**, around certain types of stories and identities. It is also important to highlight that such nodes also actively foster distrust toward those outside the group (Nguyen, 2020), (Stewart et al., 7). In other words, these are not just spaces where agreement is celebrated but also environments where **alternative perspectives are viewed with suspicion**, especially when they challenge the dominant narrative. This is particularly harmful in the context of social media feminism, where dominant narratives, which are often shaped by privileged identities, can discredit or outright dismiss contributions from more marginalized feminists.

Echo chambers, on the other hand, are media environments where users only consume information that supports their pre-existing beliefs. They isolate themselves from contradictory perspectives. H and Cappella (Bouvier 2) describe echo chambers as spaces where media users only consume ideologically reinforcing content, shielding themselves from alternative views. The emotional chaos of #MeToo is performative and networked, leading to chaos chambers that function similarly to echo chambers but with high emotional intensity (Bouvier 3). While appearing open and democratic, these environments often center voices that conform to dominant narratives of trauma and morality and usually have a clear scapegoat, out 'villain'. For instance, stories by celebrities or urban influencers gain virality, while testimonies from Dalit, queer, or disabled survivors are sidelined, as they do not evoke the same affective consensus and are quite complex realities faced by people daily. Traditional echo chambers are where people only engage with information that confirms their beliefs. Chaos chambers, on the other hand, *appear* open and messy, like everyone's talking to everyone, but in reality, they're emotionally structured around shared moral outrage, personal trauma, and intense feelings. A good example would be stories from Hollywood celebrities like Alyssa Milano or Rose McGowan got massive visibility. Meanwhile, equally powerful stories from Dalit feminists in India, queer survivors, or domestic workers didn't get the same reach. So even in a space that feels wild and democratic, the chaos chamber still subtly excludes certain voices.

While both filter bubbles and echo chambers lead to ideological isolation online, they're not the same thing. While filter bubbles involve passive exposure to content shaped by recommendation systems, echo chambers are deliberately formed through "active social sorting" (Stewart et al. 6). As a result, opposing or marginalized feminist perspectives are not only filtered out by platforms but also actively ignored or distrusted by users themselves. In 2017, Raya Sarkar created the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) as a way to shed light on harassment and empower individuals to speak out against powerful figures. However, it quickly faced criticism from many mainstream feminists, particularly those from upper-caste backgrounds, who thought it was problematic for not following official procedures. This situation highlights the difficulties and misunderstandings that can arise in feminist online communities (Chakraborty 197). Drawing on Fricker's (2007) theory of testimonial injustice, Stewart et al. 6) argue that echo chambers within digital platforms can exacerbate epistemic inequality by silencing or discrediting marginalized voices.

In the context of feminist discourse on social media, this means that not all testimonies are received equally. Marginalized feminists such as Dalit, queer, or disabled individuals may face increased testimonial injustice as their experiences do not align with the dominant feminist narrative shaped by the echo chamber. Their exclusion is not only social but epistemological as their credibility as knowers is denied.

Algorithmic sorting and targeting

Algorithmic sorting refers to the automated selection and prioritization of content based on platform algorithms, which are designed to maximize engagement, not fairness, truth, or representation. Different platforms also follow this algorithm-based news broadcasting, which impacts the credibility of these platforms. (Bouvier 3)

A good example would be of the #MeToo posts that are subject to algorithmic sorting based on what is getting more views, more interactions, etc. Platforms like Twitter or Instagram don't show every #MeToo post to everyone. This sorting of news and content shows only what's popular and relevant based on the user's past behavior. This highly suggests social platforms filtering out marginalised voices algorithmically (Bouvier 4). Even before human bias takes hold, this algorithmic design acts to sort content in a way that prefers dominant content narratives from users who are aesthetic and trending to gain more interactions. While social media is often hailed as a democratizing force, algorithms don't always prioritize justice. "Content from marginalized creators gets less traction, not because it's less important, but because it doesn't fit the algorithmic logic of virality." (Stewart et al. 6). What this means is that the value of a post isn't what determines its visibility; the algorithm does. The algorithm does not care if the news or event in the post is socially urgent or structurally significant.

It cares about whether the post can go viral, get more clicks, or react quickly.

Algorithmic targeting refers to how digital platforms use automated systems that specialise in deciding what content each user sees based on their engagement patterns, previous uses, emotional reactivity, popularity, and personal data. These algorithms are designed with the main purpose of maximizing screen time, prioritizing trending or commercially viable content. As a result, content that underperforms is suppressed and lost within the vast amount of posts. About the above, marginalised creators often post content that's serious, nuanced, or emotionally heavy, which does not do well in the algorithmic system of targeting users. The majority of users come to social media as a way to escape their daily life; it's supposed to be filled with short laughs and memes that are engaging. For example, a queer woman posting about homophobic violence may not trend because her post isn't "engaging" by Instagram standards. In comparison, a feminist reel with catchy and trending music might go viral. This algorithmic logic directly connects to epistemic injustice by suppressing feminist content that doesn't perform emotionally (Stewart et al. 6).

Instagram

Instagram uses a combination of algorithms and human moderators to manage content. The problem that arises is that both tools are shaped by the same biases that exist offline.

These algorithms are trained on a large dataset or multiple datasets that reflect social prejudices, which means that they can wrongly interpret or remove content made by marginalised users, simply because of real-life biases, even when no rules are broken.

This leads to testimonial injustice as creators from oppressed communities find that their experiences and credibility are treated as less or more offensive than others. For example, a woman or a trans man sharing their experience about sexual assault, consent, or body politics may be hidden simply because they come from a place valued less in the outside world." This discrimination is sometimes attributed to algorithmic oversights, human moderator bias, and how social media users take advantage of the reporting features on the platform." (Register et al. 5).

Instagram also allows users to report content for violating community guidelines. However, this system is often misused or weaponized. "Zeng and Kaye detail how 'report bombing' can be used to target creators with marginalized identities." (Register et al. 7). Report bombing is another phenomenon where coordinated users mass report marginalized or disliked creators to get their content removed. Since the Instagram algorithm acts automatically on mass reports, this creates a dangerous cycle of reporting where biased users' input results in biased outcomes. This situation goes on to reflect epistemic exclusion by denying some specific groups their right to share knowledge simply because others don't want to hear it. A good example would be how people may report images of fat creators as nudity or sexual content or posts of POC, whereas users wouldn't report a thinner white model for wearing the same kind of clothing or accessories.

Also, in attempts to remove sexual content from the platform, the moderation tool has been shown to disproportionately target sex workers, sex educators, queer models, women of color, body positive accounts, and even sexual assault survivor accounts (Register et al. 6). These vague rules around nudity and sexual content enforced, are far from neutral. This directly means that marginalized bodies that do not fit conventional beauty standards (fat, queer, or radicalized ones) are more likely to be flagged or deleted. This means that feminist creators discussing sexuality, consent, or body image are especially at risk of getting their content deleted or their vital education and activism from the platform being erased. Shadowbanning is another moderator tool that refers to the silent suppression of content. These posts still exist, but they don't show up on followers' feeds or hashtag searches. This affects creators' reach and their direct engagement, even when talking about important topics. Creators are being denied the tools to challenge the system that silences them. There's no explanation or accountability, and it causes creators to self-censor and avoid certain topics to protect their reach and incomes.

While Instagram often over-moderates feminist and anti racist content, it fails to moderate actual threats like hate speech, blackface videos, or even death threats. The structural bias is reflected here in how harm is defined and prioritized by the platform. Many users, for example, will confess to seeing violence or gore-related videos randomly on their For You page once in a while. These videos are hardly moderated to make the platform safe and end up on users' for you page without any notice, giving the algorithm a serious bane. Register et al. mention that "Interviewees were exasperated that reporting was effective at removing their own videos that did not violate guidelines but ineffective at removing content they reported for being harmful."

Through this understanding of Instagram's algorithmic structure, we see how the platform reinforces existing power structures. The platform reproduces the same gendered, racialized, and classed hierarchies that exist offline. The formation of digital epistemic violence is quite visible here, as it silences the very people who use social media to empower truth.

Tiktok

TikTok is one of the most influential social media platforms that plays a central role in shaping digital discourse, especially for younger audiences. While it has opened up spaces for self-expression and identity formation, TikTok's algorithm structure has also been seen to reinforce existing social hierarchies. This dual nature of TikTok's algorithm is another example of epistemic injustice. TikTok's algorithm pushes certain types of people to the top of the feed, people that "adhere to certain aesthetic norms—white, thin, able-bodied—and downranks those that deviate from it." (Amarikwa 4). This perfectly illustrates the algorithmic bias and testimonial injustice on the app's and the user's part, where marginalized creators are silently dismissed or overlooked. A real-life example to explain this situation is as follows. If two people post the same dance on a reel, where one is a thin white teen and the other is a plus-sized black woman, the first video is more likely to go viral, even if both are equally good at dancing. Another tool TikTok uses is called the Sensitive Content Flag.

It's a label placed on posts that the platform deems inappropriate, controversial, or risky. The post or content is limited to "its visibility regardless of its educational or community-driven intent." (Amarikwa 6). For example, makeup and prank videos go viral easily, whereas important issues like caste based violence or LGBTQ+ rights may get flagged or not shown on users' fyp. This is only because the latter is a rather "sensitive" or "political" issue, which automatically restricts its reach.

El Sayed and Hotait discuss the role of TikTok for Muslim women and talk about how it functions as a "third space" where muslim women challenge mainstream stereotypes and offer alternative interpretations of their identity (Frank 2).

TikTok acts as a "third space" where Muslim women can express their different identities freely and challenge their usually stereotypical perceptions on social media. By sharing different aspects of their life revolving around beauty, skincare tips, and humour, they reclaim their narratives and also make space for alternative forms of knowledge. This directly pushes back against epistemic injustice by creating a space where voices can be heard. Being visible on a platform like TikTok helps Muslim women challenge stereotypes, but it also makes them targets of trolls, Islamophobia, and gendered hate (Frank 2). This dual nature of TikTok again creates constant tension and problems for muslim women. A regular example is of a Muslim woman's video about hijab trends going viral, but the comments are full of Islamophobic hate. This constant exposure to hate speech is a form of epistemic violence, limiting their freedom of expression and discouraging them from participating fully. It is also important to note that the rules or patterns that decide what content spreads quickly online usually favor content that's funny, light-hearted, catchy, or short. This "logic of virality" (Frank 3) helps reach more people, but it also flattens complex issues into something digestible, which may leave out key context. Users may have seen many videos about a serious topic like domestic violence or the ice bucket challenge, which uses a popular dance trend or an action to explain or raise awareness about a serious issue, just to make sure it appears on the For You page. This logic of virality forces creators to simplify serious feminist issues, in turn, reducing their depth. It means that important knowledge must be made into "entertainment" to be seen, which deeply impacts how feminism is shared online and limits the full complexity of marginalized experiences.

CONCLUSION

Through a detailed examination of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, it becomes clear that while these spaces appear democratic and empowering, they are deeply shaped by algorithmic structures.

Under Nodes and Echo Chambers, it was discussed that feminism online often exists within tightly restricted idea nodes. These 'nodes' celebrate agreement and moral sentiment but also foster suspicion or dismissal of complex stories from different nodes. Echo chambers on Instagram and TikTok filter out opposing or underrepresented views entirely. Movements such as # MeToo, amplify urban life stories while sidelining experiences from Dalit, Queer, or disabled feminists. These chambers create a digital space where credibility is based not on real life experiences but on conformity to dominant stories, which results in testimonial injustice.

Algorithmic sorting and targeting research exposed how social media algorithms prioritize emotionally engaging, good-looking content over real life or heavy feminist discussions.

Content by marginalized creators is often shadowbanned or even deleted. Mechanisms like report bombing and freestyle moderation contribute to epistemic exclusion on a larger scale digitally, where valid feminist voices are silenced not because of violation of guidelines but because of user and platform bias.

On Instagram, this bias manifests through a tool called shadowbanning and over policing of content created by users while allowing hate speech and violent posts to spread freely on the platform. The use of reporting features as a weapon further exacerbates the problem for content creation and freedom of speech.

In contrast, TikTok functions as both a site of expression and exclusion. While it offers Muslim women and other marginalized sections a potential "third space" to reclaim their identity, the Sensitive content flag and the platform's "logic of virality" concept often dilutes serious topics. Important feminist issues, therefore, are forced into entertainment to gain views. Additionally, marginalized creators face lower visibility, therefore overshadowing same quality content, which reflects a pattern of algorithmic injustice.

Across both these platforms, the research concludes that social media feminism does not adequately reach or represent marginalized sections. Instead, it often rewards simplified, viral content that aligns with the dominant aesthetic and feel of the majority of users. This leads to Epistemic injustice, where epistemic knowledge and testimonies of less privileged communities are ignored systematically.

While social media has made access to information easier in many ways, it has also replicated the very structures of exclusion and injustice that exist outside the digital space. Hence, Feminism online cannot be assumed to be inclusive simply because it is visible and trendy. True digital empowerment must question not only patriarchal ideas but also algorithmic bias, class privilege, and the uneven attention economy that governs what is seen and believed online.

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