

Association for Information Systems

AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

AISWN International Research Workshop on
Women, IS and Grand Challenges 2022

AIS Womens Network College

12-2022

From the Internet to Action: Women's Activism in a Digital World

Mary Macharia

Southern Illinois University - Edwardsville, mmachar@siue.edu

Cassie A. Collier

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, cassaco@siue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aisel.aisnet.org/aiswn2022>

Recommended Citation

Macharia, Mary and Collier, Cassie A., "From the Internet to Action: Women's Activism in a Digital World" (2022). *AISWN International Research Workshop on Women, IS and Grand Challenges 2022*. 4.
<https://aisel.aisnet.org/aiswn2022/4>

This material is brought to you by the AIS Womens Network College at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in AISWN International Research Workshop on Women, IS and Grand Challenges 2022 by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.

From the Internet to Action: Women's Activism in a Digital World

Short Paper

Mary Macharia

Southern Illinois University -
Edwardsville
1 Hairpin Dr, Edwardsville, IL 62026,
USA
mmachar@siue.edu

Cassandra Collier

Southern Illinois University –
Edwardsville
1 Hairpin Dr, Edwardsville, IL 62026,
USA
cassaco@siue.edu

Abstract

Social media often fosters a toxic, harmful online environment for individuals, particularly women. Paradoxically, features of social media also afford behaviors that further social causes such as women's advancement, as demonstrated by campaigns such as #MeToo. However, not all such campaigns translate from online popularity to real-world impact. Using a mixed-methods approach, we will draw from feminist theory and the concept of intersectionality and leverage the social media affordances lens to develop an integrated theoretical framework that explains women's digital movements that have tangible real-world outcomes. We will test the model by collecting and analyzing actual social media behavior and social movement media reports. This work answers calls in the literature to incorporate new methods in social media affordances and increase interdisciplinary research to address social justice research questions. For practice, our research seeks to contribute to the women's movements by providing an understanding of how social media use can impact social movement success

Keywords: Women's digital activism, social media affordances, intersectionality

Introduction

Online anonymity, disinhibition and other behaviors afforded by features of technology, social media and the Internet at large can foster a harmful, toxic online environment, especially for women. At the same time, however, the proliferation of social media and ubiquity of the Internet have also made it possible for the growth of grassroots movements (Samuels 2011) including those advocating for various causes, including women's advancement. In our study we focus on the role of the Internet and social media in advocating for women's rights or supporting women's causes, that is, women's digital activism.

The growth of women's digital activism has been fueled by the opportunities presented for women around the globe to find new spaces online to speak up and find solidarity in shared experiences (UN Women 2019). For example, the Women's March, a grassroots movement which started on Facebook and Twitter, was begun by ordinary, working women in the United States, who went online to mobilize millions of women to march against comments deemed misogynistic, anti-women and/or offensive to them. The number of women who turned out shocked even the political leaders who were not involved in its organization and who were then forced into the role of followers and participants. Similarly, the #MeToo movement gained momentum when actress Alyssa Milano, prompted by numerous allegations of sexual harassment of women by powerful men including Harvey Weinstein and Roy Price, took to social media to post "Me too"

as her status and call on other women to do the same (Alyssa_Milano 2017). The #MeToo movement is credited with several positive outcomes for women including more survivors requesting mental health support, increased access to legal services for survivors (Seales 2018), and the increased number of women in leadership roles within organizations (Sterbenk et al. 2022).

Although #MeToo is viewed as successful by some today (e.g., Seales 2018; Sterbenk et al. 2022), the hashtag was coined by a social activist and community organizer years before, but it failed to gain traction until a famous actress tweeted it out on her social media feed. The question therefore is: What attributes are required for a digital movement—and especially women's digital activism movements—to move from the Internet to into the “real world” so that it is impactful? For example, is public celebrity endorsement of the movement required, and/or are there specific affordances of social media that need to be in place? Do these requirements change as the movement develops over time? By addressing these questions, we can make recommendations for online social movements and, in turn, increase their effectiveness in moving toward more tangible real-world outcomes.

Additionally, we examine the dichotomy of social media's ability to provide a toxic online environment for women while simultaneously supplying a platform for women's digital activism. For example, many instances of Zoombombing have been reported during virtual conferences (necessitated by the COVID pandemic's restrictions on travel and meetings), where women are meeting to discuss issues related to their advancement. Zoombombing is described the act of disrupting a Zoom meeting using lewd and offensive trolling behavior (Elmer et al. 2021). Although Zoombombing can happen to any group or gathering, research indicates that it disproportionately targets women, and racial and religious minorities (Elmer et al. 2021). By studying this contradictory effect, we hope to provide insights into ways to safeguard and protect safe online spaces for women's activism.

Brief Literature Review

Social movements are defined as a collective (of individuals, informal or formal groups) “coordinating voluntarily to pursue a range of values or interests that bring it into conflict with perceived systems of power” (Gillan 2019, p. 304). Social movements emerge for purposes of seeking policy change, new benefits (heretofore not available to them), changes in societal norms or in organizational culture among others. In general, social movements attempt to shape public opinion and put pressure on powerful others using dramatic, unorthodox means; and pursue change by organizing, mobilizing, and coordinating protests (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Gillan 2019). However, many would-be social movements are criticized for serving only as superficial recognition of social justice issues and not resulting in real-world change.

The use of Internet in social movements began in the 1990s where the earliest forms of digital protests or digital activism were conducted via e-bulletin boards or online newsgroups that allowed activists to post and cross-post narratives to pass their message to wider audiences (Yang 2016). In the recent years, technological advancement has enabled digital activism to gain traction among activists due to the afforded ability to reach great numbers of people in short amounts of time. For example, social media through hashtag activism, has changed the dynamics of digital protests and transformed traditional models of social mobilization and participation (Piatti-Crocker 2021). Hashtag activism is described as adding a hashtag (#) to a word posted on social media, for the purpose of increasing the number of participating voices and making it easier for others to search, link and interact with others to share stories related to the word (Yang 2016). Although mainly associated with Twitter, other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram also have hashtag capabilities (Dadas 2017).

Previous research reveals that the use of digital media as a platform for women's activism is a global phenomenon and not localized to just the West. Some prominent examples include the #NiUnaMenos (Not One (woman) Less) birthed in Argentina as a protest movement against misogynist violence (Piatti-Crocker 2011) and #Bringbackourgirls formed to bring attention to the abduction of 276 girls from a school in Nigeria (Dadas 2017).

Digital activism for women's causes has had some notable successes, for example, #NiUnaMenos inspired the creation of #AbortoLegalYa (#LegalAbortion) in 2018 which led to the enactment of the law in Argentina allowing abortion in 2021 (Piatti-Crocker 2021). Moreover, the importance of social media and hashtag activism to women's movements became evident from the mobilization of women for the 2017 Women's March and in the legal cases that have resulted from the #MeToo movement.

Our literature search reveals that prior studies on digital activism have focused on three major themes: first, the origins and development of such movements (e.g. Yang 2016); second, the roles and connectedness of different actors using these platforms (e.g., Mirbabaie et al. 2021); and finally, the role of social media in facilitating digital/hashtag activism (e.g., Brünker et al. 2020). Our research departs from these by considering the interplay between the online activity and offline action, especially with respect to women's digital movements. For instance, for all the popular and well-known digital women's movements that transition to fully-fledged offline movements, there are others that do not ever see the light of day. We also examine the contradictory effect of social media on women's causes, promoting activism while paradoxically aiding attacks on women's movements.

Social movements for groups beyond just women (e.g. Black Lives Matter, LGBT rights movements, etc.) are also supported by and potentially inhibited by social media. We elect to focus only on social movements related to women's rights for this exploratory research as it affords us the opportunity to utilize women-specific theories, including feminist theory-intersectionality perspective, discussed next.

Theoretical Framework

We aim to address our research questions using a combination of two theories. First, we draw on the feminist theory-intersectionality perspective. Feminist theory exposes social problems and issues that have been overlooked or misidentified because traditional social theories approached them from a male lens (Crossman, 2020). Thus, feminist theory has been responsible for a number of women's social justice movements (Ferguson 2017). The concept of intersectionality from feminist theory argues that women experience multiple, intersecting systems of oppression, for example simultaneously experiencing discrimination due to race, class and gender (Carastathis 2014). Research attributes the birth and/or advancement of many women's movements to responses to misogyny and other attacks on individual women or on women's groups. Therefore, the feminist-theory-intersectionality lens is appropriate for this study and it informs our analysis of past and present grassroots movements on social media.

Second, we leverage the social media affordances lens to understand the role of social media in enabling women's digital activism or encouraging attacks on women's online activism. Social media affordances are the "action possibilities" permitted by the features of social media to fulfil psychological needs (Karahanna et al. 2019). For example, individuals create or update their social media profile pictures to portray themselves in a certain way and thus fulfil the psychological need for self-presentation (Karahanna et al. 2019). Women's movements leverage social media's "share content" affordance to upload stories, share and reshare them, and tweet and retweet comments and so on. Individuals wishing to attack women's online activism on social media also leverage the same share-content affordance to post negative comments about them. The tension between these positive and negative effects is reflected in social media affordance literature in organizations as well, in which affordances like social transparency can encourage knowledge sharing but may, paradoxically, lead to a decrease in overall organization transparency due to efforts to manage impressions or a feeling of being watched (Leonardi and Vaast 2017). Utilizing an affordance lens in our work will allow us to identify and untangle the mixed effects of different social media affordances on the actions required for grassroots movements to become effective.

Through integration of the feminist-theory-intersectionality lens and the theory of social media affordances, we will be able to address our research questions. The feminist-theory-intersectionality lens allows us to identify those attributes that have been related to successful women's movements in the past, as well as those theorized to support women's movements but not yet observed in real movements. By combining this with social media affordances, we can understand the role social media plays in affording or preventing those attributes that result in successful social movements.

Proposed Methods

We propose to conduct an exploratory mixed-methods study to address our research questions. Because hashtag activism mostly takes place on Twitter, we plan to scrape both qualitative and quantitative data on women's digital activism from the platform using appropriate tools such as Python and Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). We will also review media reports and other sources to collaborate and verify the data, especially with respect to the offline impact of online activism.

Karahanna et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of social media affordances from prior literature. Using this study as a starting point, we will review the identified affordances to determine those applicable to women's digital activism movements. We propose to conduct a literature review to determine if there are additional affordances besides those and especially those identified after 2019, that is, after the publication of the Karahanna (2019) study. We will then review our qualitative data to detect the emergence of new affordances.

LIWC is an appropriate tool for investigation of qualitative data because it analyzes written text using language variables, linguistic dimensions and psychological constructs. By using LIWC, we will be able to analyze our qualitative data to detect known and new affordances.

Specifically, first, we will capture actual social media use related to activism and code this use against known affordances of social media. By compiling the affordances used in various women's activism movements and identifying which movements had greater or lesser offline impact, we can begin to identify the affordances associated with more impactful movements.

Second, because we are interested in finding out whether public celebrity endorsement is required for impactful movements, we will also code celebrity endorsements of women's social movements on social media against the birth or growth of the movements. Third, we are interested in the real-world outcomes of digital movements. Therefore, we will also code for successful outcomes as determined by the women involved in the movement, as well as their allies and society at large. In this regard, we will use not just Twitter postings, but also other digital media to identify such outcomes. Finally, because we want to explore the contradictory effects of digital media on the one hand, as a platform for positive change, while on the other, as facilitating a negative, toxic environment for women, we will also code for negative online behavior.

The data collected will be analyzed using recommended software and results will be reported.

To ensure the validity of our qualitative data, we will employ inter-rater agreement to verify and refine our coding. For our quantitative data, we will assess validity using the appropriate methods for criterion-related validity and using reliability values recommended in prior literature. Since we will be using mixed methods, this approach lends itself to triangulation because it allows us the ability to expand insights from one method to another (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

Expected Contributions

Our research hopes to contribute to IS literature by extending the theory of affordances to women's online social justice movements. Given our knowledge that many aspects of life are different when conducted online (education, socialization, dating, etc.), it is reasonable to assume that examining women's digital activism from a social media affordances perspective will require development and extension of existing sociological theories and movements' best practices.

Through this work, we will answer calls in the extant literature to 1) understand how communities intersect with organizations online and 2) incorporate new methods, specifically observations of social media use, into understanding how social media affordances affect users' organizing (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017). Additionally, we respond to calls for more interdisciplinary research in our field by leveraging feminist theory and intersectionality and incorporating literature from women's studies. By thus doing, we enrich IS research.

Our work will also have practical implications. Organizations interested in promoting women's activism will be able to identify those social media affordances that are associated with higher (lower) levels of impact and encourage (discourage) use of them by grassroots members. The work will also be important for social media companies and developers interested in improving the accessibility and use of their platforms for digital activism.

References

- Alyssa_Milano. 2017. "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet," [Twitter post]. (2017, October 15). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976?
- Armstrong, E. A., and Bernstein, M. 2008. "Culture, Power, and Institutions: A multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements," *Sociological Theory* (26:1), pp. 74-99.
- Brünker, F., Wischnewski, M., Mirbabaie, M., and Meinert, J. 2020. "The Role Of Social Media During Social Movements—Observations from The# MeToo Debate on Twitter," In Proceedings of the 53rd *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*.
- Carastathis, A. 2014. "The Concept of Intersectionality In Feminist Theory," *Philosophy Compass* (9:5), pp. 304-314.
- Crossman, A. 2020. "Feminist Theory in Sociology. An Overview of Key Ideas and Issue," *ThoughtCo*. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/feminist-theory-3026624>.
- Dadas, C. 2017. "Hashtag Activism: The Promise and Risk Of 'Attention,'" In *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, Pedagogies*, pp. 17-36.
- Elmer, G., Neville, S. J., Burton, A., and Ward-Kimola, S. 2021. "Zoombombing During a Global Pandemic." *Social Media+ Society*, (7:3), pp. 1-12.
- Ferguson, K. E. 2017. "Feminist Theory Today," *Annual Review of Political Science* (20), pp. 269-286.
- Gillan, K. 2019. "Social Movements, Protest, and Practices of Social Change," In Snow, D. A., Soule, S. A., Kriesi, H., and McCammon, H. J. (Eds.). 2018. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. John Wiley & Sons the Wiley Blackwell Companion to Sociology, pp. 301-318.
- Karahanna, E., Xu, S. X., Xu, Y., and Zhang, N. A. 2018. "The Needs—Affordances—Features Perspective for the Use of Social Media," *MIS Quarterly* (42:3), pp. 737-756.
- Leonardi, P. M., and Vaast, E. 2017. "Social Media and Their Affordances for Organizing: A Review and Agenda for Research," *Academy of Management Annals* 11(1), pp. 150–188.
- Mirbabaie, M., Brünker, F., Wischnewski, M., and Meinert, J. 2021. "The Development of Connective Action during Social Movements on Social Media," *ACM Transactions on Social Computing* (4:1), pp. 1-21.
- Montiel, A. V. 2014. "Media and Gender: A Scholarly Agenda for the Global Alliance on Media and Gender," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO. Paris, France: UNESCO. Retrieved from http://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/media_and_gender_scholarly_agenda_for_gamag.pdf.
- Piatti-Crocker, A. 2021. "Diffusion of# NiUnaMenos in Latin America: Social Protests Amid a Pandemic", *Journal of International Women's Studies* (22: 12), pp. 7-24.
- Samuels, B. 2011 "Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—and Democracy," *Academe* (97:4), pp. 32-34.
- Seales, R. 2018. "What has #MeToo actually changed?," *BBC News*. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44045291>.
- Sterbenk, Y., Champlin, S., Windels, K., and Shelton, S. 2022. "Is Femvertising The New Greenwashing? Examining Corporate Commitment to Gender Equality," *Journal of Business Ethics* (177:3), pp. 491-505.
- Teddlie, C., and Tashakkori, A. (Eds.). 2009. *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- UN Women. 2019. "Hashtag women's rights: 12 Social Media Movements You Should Follow," Medium. Retrieved from https://medium.com/@UN_Women/hashtag-womens-rights-12-social-media-movements-you-should-follow-6e31127a673b.

Yang, G. 2016. "Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism: The Case of# BlackLivesMatter," *Media and Communication* (4:4), pp. 13.