

INTERSECTIONALITY IN HASHTAG FEMINISM: DOMINANT VOICES AND MARGINALIZED NARRATIVES IN GLOBAL AND INDIAN DIGITAL SPACES

GOPIKA PV
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT
HARSHA INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Abstract

The hashtag #Feminism is a massive digital umbrella for global conversations which includes gender equality, women's rights, and the disconnecting of systemic patriarchy. It is a form of digital activism where people use social media tags (like #MeToo or #HeForShe) to raise awareness about gender inequality, share personal stories, and organize for social change. It also shows women to articulate experiences of gendered oppression and resistance in online spaces. Hashtag feminism raises critical questions regarding representation and visibility. This paper shows whose voices dominate hashtag feminist movements and whether Dalit, queer, Muslim, and disabled women are equally represented within these digital spaces. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory and qualitative discourse analysis, the study compares global and Indian hashtag feminism to highlight how social location and linguistic hierarchies shape feminist narratives. The findings reveal that hashtag feminism frequently reproduces existing power structures, which limits its intersectional. The study argues for a more inclusive understanding of digital feminism that foregrounds intersectionality and narrative diversity. Marginalized women do take part in hashtag feminist movements, but their voices are often less visible and receive limited recognition. This study also shows that hashtag feminism is not always an equal space and frequently reflects existing social inequalities, which reduces its potential to bring about inclusive feminist change.

Keywords: Hashtag feminism, intersectionality, digital feminism, Dalit feminism, narrative resistance

Introduction

Social media platforms have transformed feminist activism by allowing women to share personal experiences through hashtags that rapidly circulate across digital networks. Hashtag feminism has become a powerful mode of collective storytelling, converting individual statements into public feminist discourse. Movements such as global anti-sexual violence campaigns and Indian feminist hashtags addressing mobility, safety, and autonomy demonstrate the political potential of online feminist engagement. There are several grassroots groups like Gulabi Gang, also called Pink Gang for fight abuse, corruption and justice. They are using direct action like confronting abusers with sticks, street theatre, and community support, acting as a justice system when formal ones fail.

Digital spaces do not exist outside society, they reproduce offline hierarchies of caste, class, religion, sexuality, disability, and language. While some feminist narratives gain rapid circulation and media attention, others remain marginal, fragmented, or selectively amplified. Dominant voices, upper-caste, English-speaking, and digitally privileged which tend to shape the agenda of online feminist discourse, raising concerns about exclusion within movements that claim inclusivity. The visibility offered by hashtag feminism is not equally distributed. While some feminist narratives gain widespread attention, others remain silenced. This raises crucial questions: Whose voices dominate hashtag feminism? Are Dalit, queer, Muslim, and disabled women equally represented? How do global and Indian feminist hashtag movements differ?

Existing discussions frequently assume that digital platforms provide equal visibility to all women, overlooking the ways in which offline social hierarchies continue to shape online participation and recognition. By examining all these questions, this study seeks to show that hashtag feminism is not only a space that empowers women, but also a complex digital space shaped by power relations. When it enables resistance and visibility, it reflects the social hierarchies and exclusions, which shows the meaning that some voices are turned up while others continue to be marginalized. Understanding these tensions is essential for evaluating the actual political impact and inclusiveness of contemporary digital feminist movements. While existing scholarship on digital feminism and hashtag activism has structured the role of social media in loudening women's voices and fostering feminist solidarity, much of this research tends to treat hashtag feminism as an essentially inclusive and democratic space. Several studies focus on visibility, empowerment,

and storytelling in online feminist movements but there is limited critical engagement with the internal hierarchies that shape whose voices gain prominence within these digital spaces. There is insufficient attention to how intersecting social identities such as caste, religion, sexuality, disability, class, and language influence participation, recognition, and narrative circulation in hashtag feminism.

The comparative analyses between global hashtag feminist movements and Indian feminist hashtag activism remain exotic. The ways in which local socio-political contexts in India interact with dominant global feminist discourses to shape visibility and marginalization in digital spaces have not been suitably examined. This study addresses these gaps by applying an intersectional feminist framework to analyse representation, power, and voice within global and Indian hashtag feminism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in intersectional feminist theory, a framework first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw. He argues that gender-based oppression cannot be understood in isolation from other social categories such as caste, race, class, religion, sexuality, and disability. His concept of intersectionality shows how systems of power operate simultaneously, producing layered and unequal experiences of oppression for different groups of women. Feminist movements that foreground gender alone often risk centering the experiences of socially privileged women, while marginalizing those who experience multiple forms of structural disadvantage. Intersectional feminism provides a critical lens for examining whose voices are exotic and whose are silenced within feminist activism, including digital spaces.. Women do not experience inequality in the same way, instead their experiences are shaped by multiple and overlapping identities. Intersectional feminism points out how feminist movements often reflect the concerns of socially privileged women, while the voices of marginalized women remain underrepresented or ignored.

This study also draws on scholarship in digital feminism and feminist digital activism, which shows how online platforms such as social media enable new forms of feminist expression, mobilization, and resistance. Scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser, Zizi Papacharissi, and S. J. Vachhani have shown that digital feminist movements rely heavily on affect, visibility, and networked participation. Hashtags function as political tools that transform individual experiences into collective feminist discourse, allowing women to articulate personal narratives of oppression, harassment, and resistance in public digital spaces. The feminist digital activism scholars also caution that visibility in online spaces is uneven and shaped by platform algorithms, linguistic dominance, and existing social hierarchies.. Digital feminism explains the role of hashtags as tools that transform personal experiences into collective political statements. Hashtags enable women to share stories which challenge the dominant narratives, and create visibility for gender-based injustices in digital spaces. The paper is informed by feminist narrative theory, which views storytelling as a form of resistance. These narratives not only express individual pain but also contribute to shared feminist consciousness.

Together, intersectional feminism and digital feminism guide this analysis by helping to examine whose stories gain visibility, whose remain marginal, and how power operates within online feminist spaces. These frameworks enable a critical comparison of global and Indian hashtag feminism, revealing how social location and digital structures shape feminist narratives and determine whose voices are stressed.

Intersectionality and Digital Feminism

Intersectionality is very important to the study of digital feminism because online spaces do not exist outside social power structures but they reproduce and reorganize offline hierarchies of caste, class, religion, sexuality, disability, and language. The digital platforms are often celebrated for their democratizing potential, intersectional feminist theory reveals that access, visibility, and recognition in online feminist movements are unevenly distributed. Upper-caste, urban, English-speaking, and digitally privileged women are more likely to gain algorithmic visibility and media attention, and the narratives of Dalit, queer, Muslim, disabled, and rural women remain fragmented. Applying an intersectional lens, it allows this study to move beyond celebratory accounts of hashtag feminism and to examine how digital feminist spaces enable resistance and reproduce inequality at the same time.

Review of Literature

Digital feminism and hashtag activism have examined how online platforms enable feminist participation, storytelling, and collective mobilization. S. J. Vachhani's (2024) study on *Networked Feminism in a Digital Age* explores how vulnerability operates as a political resource within online feminist movements. Vachhani describes about the role of affect, emotion, and relationality in building feminist solidarities, which argues that digital spaces allow women to transform personal experiences of pain, fear, and exclusion into collective political expression. While this work is important for understanding the affective dimensions of digital feminism, it has a limited engagement with how structural inequalities such as caste, class, religion, and digital privilege shape which vulnerable voices gain visibility and validation within hashtag activism.

Similarly, P. Pain's (2021) analysis of the Indian #MeToo movement highlights how digital platforms enabled Indian women to articulate experiences of sexual harassment that were previously silenced. Pain's study is particularly valuable in pointing out the risks of online feminist activism, including backlash, harassment, and legal consequences. The analysis primarily centres on gender-based oppression and does not sufficiently explore intersectional differences related to caste, religion, sexuality, or disability. The

study leaves unanswered questions about whose voices within the Indian #MeToo movement received sustained attention and whose remained fragmented.

Intersectional have to do with more explicitly addressed in More's (2024) work *Storying Ableism*, which applies a feminist intersectional framework to examine disability within digital feminist activism. This study shows in demonstrating how ableist assumptions shape feminist narratives and activist practices online, often side-lining the experiences of disabled women even within feminist spaces. While More's work foregrounds disability as a critical axis of marginalization, it does not extend its analysis to other intersecting identities or offer a comparative perspective across national or global feminist movements.

Anani (2019) provides a broader overview of digital activism within feminist movements, describing the role of online platforms in bridging activism and academic discourse. Also, the study prioritize diversity within feminist movements, but it does not critically examine how power relations related to caste, religion, sexuality, or disability influence visibility and authority within hashtag feminism. As with much of the existing literature, the focus remains on participation and engagement rather than on internal hierarchies and exclusions.

Taken together, these studies make important contributions to understanding digital feminist activism, networked movements, and hashtag-based storytelling. Existing scholarship has effectively highlighted themes such as vulnerability, empowerment, affect, and narrative sharing within online feminist spaces. However, much of this literature tends to treat hashtag feminism as a broadly inclusive and democratic arena, offering limited critical attention to the internal hierarchies that shape whose voices gain prominence and whose remain marginal.

The influence of caste, religion, sexuality, disability, class, and language on the circulation and reception of feminist narratives in digital spaces remains to a limited extend analysed. Existing studies focus either on global digital feminism or on isolated national contexts, resulting in a lack of comparative analysis between global and Indian hashtag feminism. The ways in which local social hierarchies, historical inequalities, and cultural contexts in India interact with dominant global feminist narratives remain under-theorized. Pointing out of these gaps, the present study critically examines hashtag feminism as a contested digital space shaped by power relations, with particular attention to representation, voice, and visibility across global and Indian contexts.

Research Methodology

This study carries a qualitative research to examine representation, visibility, and power relations within hashtag feminist movements. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on sense-making narrative construction, and discourse rather than on quantifiable trends. This study combines textual analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to interpret feminist narratives circulating in digital spaces and to understand how social identities and power structures shape online feminist participation.

The primary data for this study were collected from major social media platforms commonly used for feminist activism, specifically Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. These platforms were selected because of their widespread use in hashtag-based activism especially Instagram and their central role in shaping public feminist discourse globally and in India. Hashtags on these platforms performs very important part in feminist storytelling, mobilization, and debate, making them suitable for analysing digital feminist narratives. Social media platforms function as networked public spaces where personal experiences are transformed into collective political narratives through hashtags. Hashtags operate as organizing tools that link individual posts to broader feminist conversations, which allows the users to participate in movements regardless of geographical location. These platforms also enable marginalized women to persuasive the experiences of oppression, resistance, and identity that are frequently excluded from mainstream media. At the same time, the visibility of feminist narratives on social media is shaped by platform-specific features such as algorithms, follower networks, language dominance, and digital literacy. Social media offers opportunities for feminist expression and participation, it also reproduces existing social hierarchies that influence whose voices gain prominence within hashtag feminism.

The data were collected over a period spanning 2020 to 2024, it is marked that digital feminist activity globally and in India. This period includes significant feminist hashtag movements which is related to sexual harassment, bodily autonomy, gender-based violence, and intersectional justice. Selecting this time frame allows the study to capture both global feminist discourses and India-specific feminist conversations shaped by evolving socio-political contexts.

The study includes purposive sampling to select relevant feminist hashtags and posts for analysis. Hashtags were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. The hashtag explicitly addressed feminist issues such as gender justice, sexual violence, bodily autonomy, or women's rights.
2. The hashtag demonstrated significant user engagement, including high visibility, interaction, or circulation.
3. The hashtag showed relevance to either global feminist movements or Indian feminist digital activism.
4. The hashtag enabled the participation of diverse users, including marginalized groups.

The selected data were examined by using thematic analysis and qualitative discourse analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to vulnerability, empowerment, marginalization, resistance, and identity. Qualitative discourse analysis is used to examine how language, narrative framing, and storytelling practices construct feminist meaning and authority within hashtag activism, with particular attention to whose voices are marginalized.

Ethical considerations is a median to this study. Only publicly accessible content was analysed, and all identifying information was pseudonymised to protect user privacy. This study focuses on discourse rather than individual users to avoid direct quotation where there was a risk of findability.

Findings

The analysis of selected global and Indian hashtag feminist movements reveals that digital feminist spaces are not equally accessible or representative for all women. Although social media allows marginalized women to speak and participate, visibility within hashtag feminism is shaped by existing social and cultural power structures. Dalit, queer, Muslim, and disabled women do participate in hashtag feminist movements, but their voices are less visible and less sustained. Their narratives focus on structural oppression, including caste violence, religious discrimination, heteronormativity, and ableism. However, these experiences are questioned, or ignored within mainstream feminist hashtags.

Global hashtags such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #WomenAtWork mainly foreground issues of sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, bodily autonomy, and individual empowerment. These narratives align closely with liberal feminist frameworks that recognize personal agency, legal reform, and professional success.

Similarly, Indian feminist hashtags like #Women Safety, #GirlsAtWork, and #SheThePeople shows the urban concerns such as workplace harassment, public safety, and gender representation in professional spaces. These narratives often gain rapid circulation, are picked up by mainstream media, and receive institutional endorsement. For example, highly circulated posts which continuously frame empowerment in aspirational terms: *“Speaking up at work changed my life. No woman should stay silent. #Women Empowerment”*. Such posts dynamite confidence, access to platforms, and cultural legitimacy, reinforcing their dominance within hashtag feminist discourse.

Indian hashtags such as #DalitWomenFight, #CasteAndGender, #MuslimWomenSpeak, and #QueerFeminism explodes the testimonies that challenge dominant feminist framings. These posts frequently articulate lived experiences of layered marginalization that are absent from mainstream feminist conversations. Dalit feminist posts mainly link gender violence to caste hierarchies.

“When violence happens to us, it is not just because we are women, but because we are Dalit women. Feminism must speak about caste.”

Similarly, Muslim women’s narratives question selective feminist solidarity:

“My hijab is constantly debated in feminist spaces, but my safety and dignity are ignored. Whose feminism is this?”

Such posts receive fewer likes, shares, and algorithmic recommendations. In many cases, they are questioned, dismissed as “divisive,” or excluded from trending feminist conversations.

Hashtag feminist movements are largely dominated by socially privileged voices, mainly for those of upper-caste, urban, English-speaking, digitally literate women who have greater access to social media platforms, larger follower networks, and algorithmic visibility. These voices will align with liberal feminist concerns such as individual empowerment, workplace equality, and personal freedom. Due to this, their narratives receive greater circulation, media attention, and institutional validation, which shapes the dominant agenda of hashtag feminism.

Global hashtag feminist movements put forwarded the issues like sexual harassment, workplace equality, and bodily autonomy within predominantly Western, liberal feminist frameworks. Indian hashtag feminism is deeply shaped by local social hierarchies, particularly caste, religion, patriarchy, and linguistic privilege. Also, Indian feminist hashtags address similar kind of concerns, they are strongly intended in distinct socio-political contexts where caste oppression, communal tensions, and digital exclusion which influence whose voices gain visibility. This comparison reveals that feminist narratives are not universal but are shaped by specific cultural and historical conditions.

Hashtag feminism does not provide equal visibility to all women. Digital platforms reproduce offline inequalities through algorithmic bias, language dominance, and networked privilege. So social media offers tools for visibility within hashtag feminism which is structured by power relations related to caste, class, language, and digital access. Posts written in regional languages, or those addressing caste violence, communal discrimination, or disability rights, fails to gain sustained visibility. Limited follower networks and reduced engagement mean that marginalized feminist voices struggle to remain part of ongoing hashtag conversations.

For example, while a post under #MeToo by a celebrity or influencer may trend for days, testimonies under #DalitMeToo or #MeTooCaste suddenly disappear from feeds within hours, despite their political significance. This unequal circulation demonstrates that participation alone does not guarantee visibility. Rather than, hashtag feminism connects within a hierarchy of attention, where dominant voices are continuously amplified while marginalized narratives remain peripheral.

Conclusion

This study scrutinized the voices which dominate hashtag feminist movements and it represents that Dalit, queer, Muslim, and disabled women are equitably represented within digital feminist spaces. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory and qualitative discourse analysis, the research compared global and Indian hashtag feminism to examine how social location, power relations, and platform structures shape feminist narratives online. This finding is a showcase where the collections of hashtag feminism which is expanded for opportunities like feminist expression and resistance, it does not function as a fully inclusive or egalitarian space.

This probe shows that dominant feminist narratives are largely shaped by socially privileged groups especially upper-caste, urban, English-speaking, and digitally visible women whose voices receive greater algorithmic amplification, media attention, and institutional validation. The marginalized women actively participate in hashtag feminist movements and articulate powerful counter-narratives, their voices remain less visible, fragmented. This uneven visibility reflects the persistence of offline hierarchies of caste, religion, sexuality, disability, class, and language within digital feminist spaces.

By foregrounding intersectionality, this study contributes to digital feminist scholarship by stretching celebratory assumptions that equate online participation with equal representation. It demonstrates that hashtag feminism operates as a contested digital terrain where empowerment and exclusion coexist, shaped by algorithmic bias, linguistic dominance, and networked privilege. In fact, the research showed how digital platforms both enable feminist resistance and reproduce structural inequalities.

This study has certain limitations. It focuses primarily on publicly accessible posts and hashtags and does not capture private discussions, closed online groups, or offline feminist organizing, which may offer alternative forms of resistance and solidarity, while the analysis addresses multiple intersecting identities, it does not exhaustively represent all marginalized groups, particularly rural women, digitally excluded populations, and users of non-mainstream platforms.

Despite these limitations, this study shows the need for a more inclusive and reflexive understanding of digital feminism. Future feminist activism and scholarship must move beyond visibility as a measure of success and engage critically with questions of representation, power, and narrative justice. Only by actively foregrounding marginalized voices and addressing internal hierarchies can hashtag feminism realize its emancipatory potential and contribute to more equitable feminist futures.

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