

Analyzing the Role of Social Media as a Catalyst in the Feminist Campaign in the Global South Using #WomenLifeFreedom as an Example

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Abstract. The death of Masha Amini in Iran gained significant attention and developed into the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign on social media. The current study explores the positive role of social media in the development of feminism. However, most of the current research focuses on the global perspective or feminist campaigns in the Global North, and there is a gap in the research on social media in the development of feminism in the Global South. Therefore, this paper analyses the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign on social media platforms through a case study method in qualitative research. This paper attempts to explore the catalytic role of social media in the feminist campaign in the Global South. The results show that social media, with its unique qualities of disintermediation, replicability, and diverse participation, has helped the Global South feminist campaign increase the visibility of women in the Global South, the influence of feminist ideas, and the engagement of the feminist campaign. In addition, to address the current problems of low diversity of visibility, insufficient de-Westernization, and inadequate activism in the Global South feminist campaign, this paper suggests that it needs to increase the visibility of other sexual minorities, combine social media and mainstream media to challenge the master narrative dominated by the Global North, and increase calls for practical action.

Keywords: Case study; social media; feminist campaign; global south.

1. Introduction

The defence of women's rights by feminism has never stopped since the Renaissance era. Today, relying on neoliberalism, feminism has evolved into a fourth wave and a post-feminist era. Alison Harvey claims that the active voices of the fourth wave of feminism have influenced ideologies around the world and that digital media and technology have bred a new wave of feminism [1]. This represents the root importance that digital media has shown in the development of feminism. Social media as a form of digital media has provided a field for producing and disseminating feminist campaigns that are more in line with the online environment of modern society. Therefore, it has become important to explore the role of social media as a catalyst for feminist campaigns. Previous studies have explored the role of social media in social issues campaigns. During the popularity of the #BlackLivesMatter social media campaign, scholars explored the intersectional feminism that developed on social media [2]. On the other hand, French scholar Jouët analyses the feminist campaign in France and the role of social media in mediating the ways in which participants in the feminist campaign on the Internet offer participation [3]. Even though the existing research on the role of social media in social issues has covered many aspects, most of the studies have focused on Western countries and rarely on the development of feminist campaigns in the Global South on social media platforms. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the role of social media in driving the feminist campaign in the Global South. This study will fill the gap in research on social media in the feminist process in the Global South. And this study attempts to provide potential guidance for the dissemination of feminist campaigns in the Global South on social media.

Based on existing research in the field of digital media communication on the positive role of social media in social issues and research in the field of gendered media on feminist social media campaigns, this paper attempts to explore the positive effects of social media on the development of feminist campaigns in the Global South in conjunction with the concepts of the Global South and

Global North in international media. This paper will use the case study method in qualitative research to analyse a case of Iran, the feminist campaign #WomenLifeFreedom. The case study of #WomenLifeFreedom is chosen because the related event of Mahsa Amini's death in Iran occurred on September 16, 2022, which means it is time sensitive. In addition, the fact that the event took place in the Global South and reached all women in Iran makes it representative of feminist campaigns in the Global South. This paper will discuss the role of social media in increasing the visibility, influence, and participation of feminist campaigns in the Global South. Furthermore, the paper will critically analyse and suggest the practices of feminist campaigns in the Global South in terms of visibility pluralism, ideological de-Westernization, and hashtag activism.

2. #WomenLifeFreedom Campaign Review

On September 16, 2022, Masha Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, was arrested by the Iranian morality police for not wearing the hijab according to strict rules and then died in prison for unclear reasons [4]. Afterward, Masha's death was suspected to be the result of abuse by the morality police [5]. This led to a massive protest campaign condemning the Islamic strictures on women's dress, including the unbinding of the hijab and the cutting of hair [6]. Notably, the hashtag #Women Life Freedom, a slogan derived from the Kurdish freedom campaign of the 20th century, was used in this protest campaign and was widely distributed on social media [7]. During the World Cup, banners with the hashtag #WomenLifeFreedom were often seen among fans of the Iranian soccer team [8]. This Iranian feminist campaign has attracted attention both in the real world with the women's marches and on the Internet with the popularity of the hashtag. Therefore, the social media's promotion of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign is well worth examining.

Before the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, many feminist campaigns had emerged on social media, such as the #Metoo campaign and the #TimesUp campaign, which represented the fourth wave of feminism [1]. These feminist campaigns were characterized by the fact that they were all based on real news events and tried to use social media's replicability to spread their hashtags. This indicates that social media has a diffusionist role in feminist campaigns. Also, third-wave feminism has focused on and challenged the oppression of women in Islam, but its focus was on improving the treatment of women [1]. The Islamic mandate for women to wear the hijab continued to shackle women's right to free choice until the events of Masha's death. Thus, even though the global feminist campaign on social media has been helpful in addressing the plight of women, women in the Global South are often marginalized. The #WomenLifeFreedom campaign is an important attempt to apply social media to feminism in the Global South. It is worth exploring the positive impact social media can have on women in the Global South.

3. The Contribution of Social Media to the Feminist Campaign in the Global South

Feminism offers a philosophical and methodological contribution to the study of the voices of marginalized groups, and it emphasizes inclusiveness as opposed to the patriarchal paradigm [9]. This difference also hinders the feminist campaign because women are systematically marginalized because of gender factors in a context where the Global North media dominates the global media with its patriarchal values [9]. However, social media, with its characteristic disintermediation, replicability, and diverse participation, has had a positive effect on feminism, especially for feminist campaigns in the Global South that have been systematically marginalized. This is because it gives them an alternative to mainstream traditional media. Using the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign in Iran as an example, this paper will explore the role of social media in promoting visibility, influence, and participation in feminist campaigns in the Global South, based on the characteristics of social media.

3.1. Social Media Disintermediation Increases the Visibility of Feminist Campaigns in the Global South

One of the features of social media is disintermediation, which can help increase the visibility of marginalized Southern feminism. This refers to the fact that on social media, initiators of women's campaigns in the Global South can directly reach larger audiences without the hindrance of media gatekeepers. While social media brings a larger number of users, its disintermediation allows users to take over the rights of these platforms in social media or traditional media, as shown by the ability of users to influence the content of traditional news media, while they are also an important source for the production and distribution of news content [10]. Ideological hegemonic theories assert that the bourgeois ruling elite controls the media in the context of conventional media [9], which impedes the dissemination of views and values that are contrary to those of the powers that be. This impediment is even more difficult in the case of feminism in the systematically marginalized Global South. This is because marginalised persons frequently lack privileges, resources, and rights and are frequently portrayed via commercial, stereotypical lenses [9]. For example, in the coverage related to the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, mainstream media coverage focused on allegations of moral policing and the Iranian government's response and expressed the Iranian government's insistence on the Islamic dress code for women and concerns about the protesting crowd [4]. The Global North media, which dominates the global media, presents Islam's dress code for women as a religious feature that needs to be respected while ignoring that women's rights are being violated. This gives the feminist advancement of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign low visibility in the mainstream media. However, in social media communication, there is not as much reliance on media intermediaries, which would provide greater visibility to the feminist campaign in the Global South. This refers to the fact that the disintermediation of social media allows everyone to be unrestricted and unfiltered about the sending and receiving of information. Due to social media's accessibility, users have become a significant source of news, and their power to influence traditional media is growing [10]. The advancement of feminism in the Global South, ignored by mainstream media, has gained high visibility on social media. For example, Toronto artist Partou has published a tribute to the quest for female freedom as expressed in the Iranian women's campaign via Instagram [11]. To show their support for Iranian women fighting for their rights, forty German actresses posted videos of haircutting on Twitter [12]. As a result, the kernel idea of the feminist campaign in the Global South is more visible on social media. Even though social media platforms are adept at algorithmically pushing customized messages to users, narrowing the possibility of audiences reaching the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, and activists can still be active with trending hashtags, hiring influencers, etc. to reach a larger audience.

3.2. The Reproducibility of Social Media Reinforces the Influence of the Feminist Campaign in the Global South

The technological development of social media has made its content easily replicable, which allows the advanced ideas of the Global South feminist campaign to influence people's ideologies by cultivating theoretical pathways. Social media has provided the Global South feminist campaign with technologies, such as platforms, algorithms, and emerging agents. These technologies make messages on social media more easily replicated compared to traditional media [13]. For example, on social media platforms, the retweet function allows original content to appear on the retweeter's user page, thus completing a content replication. The hashtag function, which is commonly used in social media platforms, is another indication of replicability in social media platforms. The #WomenLifeFreedom campaign used the hashtag feature to symbolize the event of Masha's death as a hashtag on social media and encouraged everyone to use the hashtag when participating, which allowed the protest campaign to spread the protest of Islam's bondage of women with each repetition of the hashtag by the audience. Related to this act of reproduction is the cultivation theory. The cultivation theory contends that ideological statements and images utilised in mass media have an influence on how people perceive their surroundings, particularly when these messages and images are repeated [14].

Thus, audience repetition of the #WomenLifeFreedom hashtag deepens the impact of protesting ideas that bind women's dress code and thus may influence perceptions of the Islamic requirement for women to wear the hijab. This demonstrates the replicability of social media, which is easier than that of traditional media, can deepen the influence of perceptions of feminist campaigns in the Global South.

3.3. Diverse Engagement of Social Media Increase Participation in the Global South Feminist Campaign

Social media has provided more ways for audiences to participate in the feminist campaign in the Global South. This refers to the shift from passive ways of participation, such as spectating street marches and watching the news, to active ways of participation, such as creating content on social media platforms, retweeting content, and commenting on content, especially user-generated content (UGC). With the increase of user-generated content platforms, the role of the user is no longer just a passive recipient of information, but often an active and motivated contributor to the engagement and creation of content [15]. The diverse participation of audiences on social media is reflected in both the diversity of participation methods and the diversity of participation content. At the level of participation methods, the feminist campaign in the Global South is manifested in social media as a participatory media. Participatory media is divided into creative participation, and discursive participation [16]. Creative engagement is when users can participate by posting UGC or distributing content. For example, in the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, audiences were encouraged to post content in support of the Iranian women's protest campaign using the hashtag. From the data of Google search (Figure 1), Google searches for #WomenLifeFreedom have fluctuated in a lower range of values since June 2022 [17]. It was only after the events of Martha's death on September 16, that social platforms began to use the hashtag #WomenLifeFreedom with high frequency, and the related Google search volume increased significantly in October. Discursive engagement is when users engage by commenting on related posts or retweeting related posts.

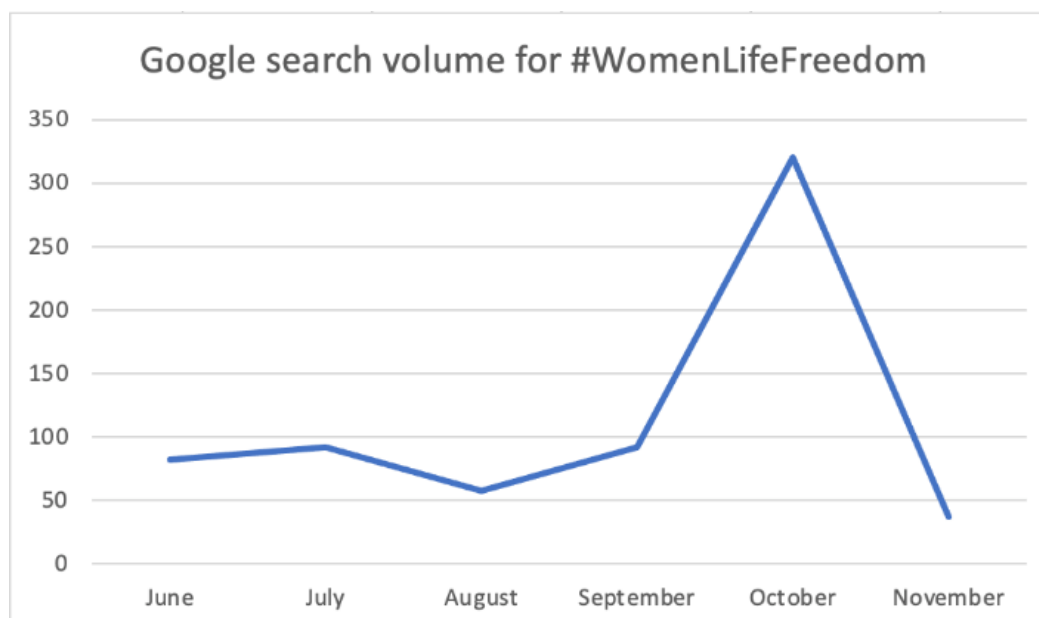


Fig 1. Google search volume for #WomenLifeFreedom [17].

According to the social platform analytics site Keyhole (Figure 2), 51% of the total 973 tweets about #WomenLifeFreedom on Twitter on a single day, January 27, 2023, were discursive engagements [18]. And, according to Keyhole, the total number of retweets, replies, likes, and comments on #WomenLifeFreedom on January 27, reached 43,510 [18]. Thus, diverse engagement can help increase participation in feminist campaigns in the Global South. At the level of content diversification, users can post not only textual content, but also images or videos. Previously, the

German social media campaign #Aufschrei collected over 55,000 posts accusing a male politician of gender discrimination content in his actions and statements in a short period of time [3]. The French social media campaign #I am a Feminist also encouraged audiences to participate by posting selfies [3]. Based on existing social media campaigns and the development of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign on Twitter, diversifying participation and engaging content on social media platforms could provide more and richer engagement with feminist campaigns in the Global South.

Post Types on Twitter about #WomenLifeFreedom on 27th January

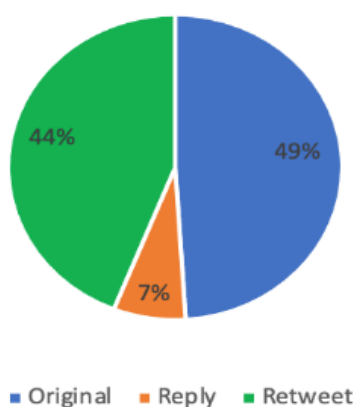


Fig 2. Post types on Twitter about #WomenLifeFreedom on 27th January [18].

4. Limitations and Suggestions for the Global South Feminist Campaign

Social media can help the Global South feminist campaign grow with greater visibility, deeper influence, and wider audience participation. At the same time, the social context that feminism has reached its fourth wave cannot be ignored. The feminist campaign in the Global South is still lagging behind the development of feminism. In addition, the Global South feminist campaign has certain limitations in social media. This is demonstrated by the fact that as a systematically marginalized group of women in the Global South, the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign has not been sufficient for them to fully challenge the master narratives dominated by the Global North media. Moreover, the effectiveness of campaigns that use the hashtag function of social media platforms is often questioned. This paper will use the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign as an example to critically reflect on and make suggestions for feminist campaigns in the Global South on social media platforms.

4.1. Visibility Diversity

The visibility of the feminist campaign in the Global South shows the claim of free choice for women, but this does not increase the visibility of other sexual minorities. Feminism's quest for inclusion is demonstrated in its requirement that all individuals be equally represented in relevant research [9]. This shows that the core of the feminist methodology is the equality of all individuals. The #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, on the other hand, seems to tend to focus on the conflict between individual groups of women and the teachings of Islam. The invisibility of other sexual minorities in this debate is high. Even though this is in line with second-wave feminism's focus on women's equality and empowerment, it does not fit the core claims of the third-wave of feminism because it does not challenge the traditional notion that gender and heterosexual norms are taken for granted [1]. Thus, the high visibility of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign does not include other sexual minorities. It shows that the visibility of Global South feminist campaigns is not enough for diversity.

Despite the slow growth of feminism in the Global South, there is also a need for increased visibility of diversity. This is because the third wave of feminism that developed in the context of diversity inspired by critical communication and the queer theory emphasizes challenging gender binaries, especially challenging stereotypes of masculinity and femininity by creating new narratives or symbols of masculinity and femininity in the media [1]. In addition to this, as gender equality gains attention on social media and the intersectionality of oppression of sexual minorities, including transgender and genderqueer, the fourth wave of feminism has contributed to the development of intersectional feminism in media studies [1]. This illustrates that feminism has always expanded its inclusiveness in its progress and this inclusiveness has reached other sexual minorities. The feminist campaign in the Global South needs to include the voices of other sexual minorities. For example, inviting opinion leaders of transgender, genderqueer, lesbian, gay, and other sexual minority groups to participate as representatives in the dissemination of feminist ideas on social media. Feminism in the Global South should respond to feminist developments by being bolder in challenging gender binaries and gender stereotypes, as well as focusing on the rights of other sexual minorities.

4.2. Ideological De-Westernization

In the context of the master narrative being dominated by the Global North media, the spread of feminist campaigns in the Global South is more difficult, which needs to show de-Westernization ideologically. According to Carili, the Global North media, which is based on patriarchal ideals, dominates the worldwide media narrative while women in the Global South are systematically marginalised within the patriarchal system [9]. This makes it more difficult for feminism in the Global South to attempt to challenge male hegemony or religious teachings based on male hegemony as a value. This is because such core claims challenge the root values of the dominant media, which takes a long time to achieve an ideological shift and requires a more inclusive social environment. Thus, even though social media has helped deepen the influence of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, the impact of the narrative dominated by the Global North media on the ideology of citizens is unlikely to change radically in the near future.

As a narrative struggle, the Global South is on the way to de-westernization, and it is already at the forefront of the development of technologies of new media [19]. This represents a desire for feminism in the Global South to ideologically challenge the master narrative of the Global North media, and they need to use social media platforms to actively provide a counter-narrative. For example, posting surveys and opinions on social media with the #WomenLifeFreedom hashtag from other perspectives that are different from the master narrative. It is worth noting that in addition to social media, Global South feminism is not without the support of mainstream media. Al Jazeera is the sole television station covering the Global South in terms of geography, but more significantly in terms of cultural, social, and political terms, and it also leads the global media discourse on the Iranian demonstrations [20]. In the news coverage of Masha's death, Al Jazeera is also attempting to challenge the dominant master narrative of the Global North. This is reflected in the way Al Jazeera's coverage focuses on the bravery and fearlessness displayed by Iranian women protesting [5]. By attaching to and disseminating Global South media coverage on social media, the Global South feminist campaign can get stronger support in the narrative struggle for de-Westernization. Thus, feminist campaigns in the Global South on social media need to combine autonomous posting by users of platforms, and support and dissemination to mainstream media in the Global South, to challenge the master narrative of the Global North media.

4.3. Hashtag Activism

Feminist campaigns in the Global South on social media are often associated with hashtags, which can increase participation in the campaign, but the effectiveness of hashtag activism has also been criticized as slacktivism. Critics argue that hashtag activism is actually a form of slacktivism because audiences engage with political issues or social events on social media platforms with posts, likes, and shares without actual effort and often without commitment [21]. Even though social media

provides diverse ways for audiences to engage and recognizes diverse engagement content, the majority of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign's audience engagement on social media is similarly done in the form of liking, sharing, and posting because of the limitations of the technologies of social media. As a result, the feminist campaign in the Global South is deficient in terms of activism.

The feminist campaign in the Global South needs to combine high levels of engagement on social media with some practical calls to action. One example that can provide a lesson for feminist campaigns in the Global South is the #icebucketchallenge campaign, which became popular in 2014. The #icebucketchallenge campaign encouraged audiences to pour buckets of ice water on themselves and upload videos to challenge others, which is a way to raise awareness of motor neuron disease (MND) or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) [22]. In the campaign, activists encouraged the audience to take action and engage in the campaign from just tapping on their phone screens to more action-oriented participation such as pouring ice water and making donations. As the result, the #icebucketchallenge campaign actively contributed to the funding of ALS illness research and activism [22]. For feminist campaigns in the Global South, a call to action can make the core ideas more effective in reaching the target audience.

5. Conclusion

Using the case study approach in qualitative research, this paper analyses the positive impact of social media on feminist campaigns in the Global South, using the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign in Iran as an example. The positive impact of the characteristics of social media is manifested in three ways: the de-mediated of social media helps increase the visibility of the Global South feminist campaign, the replicability of social media deepens the influence of the Global South feminist campaign and the diverse methods of participation in social media increase the audience engagement of the Global South feminist campaign. Considering the current state of the #WomenLifeFreedom campaign, the Global South feminist campaign has some limitations. These include its failure to increase the visibility of other sexual minorities, its lack of ideological de-Westernization, and its challenge by slacktivism. This paper, therefore, makes three suggestions for the Global South feminist campaign, which are to focus on other sexual minorities, to use social media and mainstream traditional media to challenge the master narrative of the Global North and to increase calls for practical action. This study fills a gap in social media research, and gender media research, on feminism in the Global South. It will inform the study of feminist campaigns in the Global South. Women's groups in the Global South are among those who have been systematically marginalized for a long time. Therefore, the communication of their voices is important. The study of the feminist campaign in the Global South will contribute to the voices of marginalized women's groups and to the development of feminism in the Global South. This study has some limitations in the classification of social media platforms. This paper does not provide a categorical analysis of the current role of different modes of social media in promoting the feminist campaign in the Global South. Therefore, the role of social media in the feminist campaign in the Global South needs further research.

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