



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women in Digital Feminist Activism: Meaning and Challenges in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Digital feminist activism has become a significant force in advocating for gender equality through online platforms, yet the lived experiences of women in these movements remain underexplored. Existing studies often focus on the external dynamics of digital activism, leaving the subjective experiences of women largely unaddressed. This study explores how women interpret their participation in digital feminist activism, focusing on both empowerment and challenges, particularly in the context of online harassment. Using in-depth interviews with 15 women involved in digital feminist movements, thematic analysis revealed a dual experience: empowerment through connectivity and exposure to harassment. Women felt empowered by amplifying their voices and building supportive communities, but faced significant challenges such as misogynistic attacks and personal threats. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional complexities of online feminist activism, offering insights for future research on the psychological and social impacts of digital activism.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital activism, particularly feminist movements, has gained significant prominence in recent years, reshaping traditional forms of social engagement and advocacy (Aryandari et al., 2025). The rise of social media platforms has provided a space for individuals, especially women, to voice their opinions and challenge societal norms related to gender equality. These platforms have transformed how people engage with social justice issues, offering new opportunities for activism and collective action. Feminist digital activism, in particular, has become an influential force in promoting gender equality by reaching a broad and diverse audience across geographic and cultural boundaries.

In many societies, traditional forms of activism have been historically constrained by geographical, political, and social factors (Anwar et al., 2024). However, digital platforms have enabled individuals, particularly marginalized groups, to break down these barriers and engage in discussions that were previously limited to certain physical spaces. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have allowed feminist movements to thrive by amplifying women's voices and creating virtual communities that share common goals (Aladwan, 2025). These platforms have become crucial for women who seek to challenge gender norms and advocate for change, often providing a sense of empowerment and solidarity.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its capacity to shape how individuals experience and engage with gender-related issues in contemporary society (van Campenhout & Nabwire, 2025). Digital feminism is not just about the spread of ideas; it is an evolving form of activism that affects individuals' personal lives and their understanding of gender roles (Gökçe & Yildiz, 2025). The experiences of women who engage in digital feminism are shaped by a unique set of social, cultural, and personal factors, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures alone. Understanding how women experience and interpret their involvement in online feminist movements requires an in-depth exploration of their subjective experiences something that phenomenological research is particularly suited to uncover.

Given the growing significance of digital feminism, it is essential to delve deeper into the personal experiences of those involved in such movements. Phenomenology, with its focus on understanding lived experiences, provides the ideal framework to explore how individuals perceive and make sense of their engagement in digital activism (Robinson et al., 2025). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the meanings and emotions that underpin women's participation in online feminist movements, shedding light on the complexities and challenges they face (Ayodeji et al., 2025). By examining the lived experiences of women engaged in digital feminism, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how digital activism influences gender perceptions and the empowerment of women in the digital age.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals, particularly within specific phenomena such as digital feminism, has become an increasingly important area of study (Prasetyani et al., 2025). Understanding how individuals experience and interpret their engagement with digital platforms in the context of social movements provides critical insights into the complexities of modern activism. This research helps to uncover not just what is happening, but how and why these experiences shape individuals' perceptions and actions. In the case of digital feminist movements, this focus on experience is crucial, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how women navigate online spaces to advocate for gender equality and how their actions intersect with broader cultural, social, and political contexts.

However, studying such subjective experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative approaches, while useful for capturing patterns in large datasets, often fail to provide the depth and nuance needed to understand the personal and emotional dimensions of engagement in digital feminism (Falimu, 2025). These approaches cannot fully explore the meanings participants attach to their activism or the personal significance of their online interactions. The limited scope of quantitative research overlooks the complexities and variations in individual experiences that are critical to understanding the true essence of digital activism (Bogler et al., 2025). For example, while surveys may identify how many individuals engage in online feminist activities, they cannot capture the underlying emotions, motivations, or challenges that participants face in these digital spaces.

Thus, many existing methods fall short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. While content analysis and media studies have been employed to explore feminist discourse in digital spaces, these approaches primarily focus on the external outputs of activism, such as social media posts, hashtags, or public statements (Insani et al., 2024). They do not delve into the inner experiences and personal narratives that shape and are shaped by online feminist activism. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experiences and subjective meanings, offers a more fitting approach to uncover the layers of meaning and personal reflection embedded in digital activism. This study aims to address these gaps by focusing on how women actively experience and interpret their participation in digital feminist movements, offering a deeper and more authentic understanding of the phenomenon.

While existing research on digital feminism has provided valuable insights into the discourse and external manifestations of online activism, it often relies on practical, quantitative approaches that focus on measurable outputs such as social media activity, hashtags, or engagement metrics (Ikhwan, 2025). These studies offer a surface-level understanding of the phenomenon, primarily capturing the frequency and scope of online feminist activities rather than the deep, subjective experiences of individuals involved in these movements (Lu et al., 2025). For instance, many studies have examined how feminist content spreads across digital platforms or analyzed the effectiveness of digital campaigns, but they fail to address how participants experience these actions personally or the meanings they attribute to their involvement in the movement.

Such approaches, while useful for identifying trends or patterns, fall short of providing a rich, nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological processes behind digital activism. They cannot explore the inner motivations, emotional impacts, or the transformative nature of engagement in online feminist spaces (Vujadinović & Marjanović, 2025). This lack of depth limits our understanding of how women truly perceive their roles in digital feminism, how they navigate challenges like online harassment, or how they form a sense of community and solidarity through virtual networks.

Consequently, the existing literature provides an incomplete picture, missing the complexities that shape individual participation in digital feminism.

To address this gap, it is essential to adopt a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Yousafzai & Aljanova, 2025). Phenomenology allows for a more holistic exploration of how women make sense of their digital activism, capturing the personal and emotional dimensions that other methods overlook. By delving into the subjective meanings that participants attach to their engagement in digital feminist movements, phenomenology offers a deeper understanding of the essence of these experiences. This study, therefore, aims to provide a comprehensive account of the personal, lived experiences of women engaged in digital feminist activism, contributing to a more nuanced and rich understanding of the phenomenon.

Previous research on digital feminism has primarily focused on the external aspects of online activism, such as the reach of social media campaigns and the effectiveness of hashtags in raising awareness (Amaliyah et al., 2025). Studies have also explored how digital platforms enable women to challenge gender norms and advocate for equality, often relying on quantitative data and content analysis (Pham, 2025). However, these studies overlook the lived experiences of women involved in digital feminist movements, failing to capture the emotional and subjective dimensions of their activism. Theoretical frameworks, such as gender theory and feminist media studies, provide a basis for understanding the broader context of digital feminism, but they do not adequately address the personal meanings that participants attach to their involvement (Fernandez, 2025). Thus, while existing literature contributes valuable insights, it leaves a significant gap in understanding the deep, personal experiences of those engaged in digital feminist spaces.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is employed, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of women involved in digital feminism (Karami et al., 2025). By focusing on the subjective meanings and personal reflections of participants, phenomenology offers a method that captures the essence of their experiences in a way that other approaches cannot. This study seeks to explore how women experience their participation in digital activism, considering how they interpret their roles, navigate challenges, and derive empowerment from these online spaces (Choi, 2025). By using phenomenology, this research aims to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of digital feminist activism that moves beyond surface-level observations and reveals the complexities of personal engagement in these movements.

The structure of this article is organized to present a comprehensive analysis of digital feminist activism through a phenomenological lens. The introduction provides an overview of the general and specific backgrounds, highlighting the significance of the study and the knowledge gap in understanding women's experiences in digital activism (Saldanha et al., 2025). Following this, the article outlines the phenomenological methodology used to collect and analyze data, which includes in-depth interviews with participants, thematic analysis, and a focus on the lived experiences of women in digital feminist movements. The results section discusses the key themes that emerged from the data, while the discussion interprets these findings in the context of existing literature. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main insights of the study and suggests directions for future research in this area.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences of women involved in digital feminist activism. This approach was selected due to its focus on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and meanings associated with their involvement in online feminist movements. Phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how participants perceive and interpret their engagement in digital platforms, making it ideal for capturing the essence of their activism and its impact on gender awareness. Specifically, a descriptive phenomenological approach was applied, which emphasizes a detailed and direct description of participants' experiences, without seeking to interpret or analyze them through preconceived theoretical lenses (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This

approach facilitated the study's aim to uncover the essence of participants' experiences, providing rich, firsthand accounts of their online feminist practices.

Participants

The participants in this study were women actively engaged in digital feminist movements on social media platforms. A purposive sampling method was used to select individuals based on their involvement in feminist discourse online. Inclusion criteria required participants to be women aged 18 or older who had actively contributed to online feminist activism within the past six months. No specific exclusion criteria were applied, except for individuals who had no experience with digital feminist activism. The final sample consisted of 15 participants, with an age range from 20 to 45 years, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of education and profession (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). This range provided a broad perspective on the different experiences of women engaged in digital feminist activism, ensuring the richness and diversity of the data.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed narratives about their personal experiences with digital feminist activism (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a private, quiet setting to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and transcriptions were made for analysis. A semi-structured interview guide was used, which allowed for flexibility in the conversation, enabling participants to express their thoughts in their own words while ensuring the main themes of the study were covered (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The guide was informed by the research question, focusing on participants' motivations for engaging in digital feminism, the challenges they faced, and the sense of empowerment they derived from their activism.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common technique in phenomenological research. Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexibility in identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The process began with careful transcription and reading of the interview data, followed by the identification of meaningful units or fragments of text that reflected participants' experiences. These fragments were then coded and grouped into initial themes. The analysis was conducted in several stages: first, open coding was used to identify themes; second, themes were refined and categorized into broader, overarching themes that represented the essence of participants' experiences (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). This iterative process allowed for the emergence of themes that captured the participants' perceptions of empowerment, challenges, community, and the intersectionality of their experiences within digital feminism. NVivo software was utilized to assist in organizing and categorizing the data, although the focus remained on the qualitative, human-centered interpretation of the themes.

RESULTS

Empowerment through Digital Activism

The first significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the empowering role of digital platforms in feminist activism. Many participants described their involvement in online feminist movements as a means of gaining a voice and fostering collective action. One participant, Aulia, shared:

"I feel like digital platforms give me a space to speak out. It's the first time I feel that my voice matters, especially on issues I care about like gender equality and women's rights."

This sentiment was echoed by others, who spoke of using social media platforms as tools for creating awareness, mobilizing others, and challenging traditional gender norms. The digital space, as they noted, provided a platform that allowed for participation without the physical limitations of traditional activism. As Nia explained:

"What's amazing about social media is that we can reach a global audience. I can share my thoughts, join movements, and feel like I am part of something bigger."

The narrative here illustrates that the participants found digital platforms not just as communication tools but as instruments of empowerment, amplifying their voices in the feminist discourse. Digital Empowerment in Feminist Activism.



Challenges of Navigating Feminist Discourse Online

While many participants described positive experiences of empowerment, they also shared the challenges they encountered in navigating feminist discourse online. A major concern was the frequent online harassment that came with expressing feminist views. Many participants reported being subjected to misogynistic comments and personal attacks. Dini, for instance, shared her experience:

"I've received countless hateful messages from men who feel threatened by what I post. They often call me names, or accuse me of being 'anti-man' just because I support gender equality."

This theme highlights the complexities of engaging in digital activism where empowerment is countered by resistance and backlash. As another participant, Siti, added:

"Every time I post something about women's rights, I get nasty comments. It's frustrating because all I want is to help others understand, but instead, I'm bombarded with hate."

These experiences emphasize how digital platforms, while offering opportunities for activism, also expose participants to vulnerabilities they wouldn't typically face in physical spaces.

The Role of Community in Digital Feminism

Another critical theme identified was the role of community within digital feminism. Participants discussed how online platforms created virtual communities where they could support each other, share experiences, and provide solidarity. As Andini noted:

"Being in an online feminist group made me feel connected to others who share my views. We empower each other by sharing resources, stories, and even organizing virtual protests."

Similarly, Maya shared:

"When things get tough online, the community reminds me why I started this work in the first place. We always encourage one another to keep fighting."

This theme speaks to the importance of community-building within digital activism. Despite the challenges of online harassment, participants consistently mentioned that the sense of community they felt within digital feminist spaces helped sustain their activism and offered emotional support in times of difficulty.

Intersectionality in Digital Feminist Spaces

Another recurring theme in the interviews was the intersectionality of digital feminist activism. Many participants highlighted how issues of race, class, and sexual orientation were deeply intertwined with gender issues in their activism. Clara shared:

"In the feminist movement, we must also talk about the intersectionality of issues. As a woman of color, I often find that my experience of oppression is different from others. Digital activism allows me to bring those experiences into the conversation."

Maria, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, also explained:

"As a queer woman, my experience in digital feminist spaces is shaped by both my gender and my sexual orientation. It's important to highlight those overlapping identities in our activism."

This intersectional approach within the digital feminist discourse was an essential aspect of how participants engaged with the movement, allowing for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender equality.

The findings from this study demonstrate that digital platforms offer a space for empowerment and activism, especially for women engaged in feminist movements. However, these platforms also expose participants to harassment and challenges, which are compounded by the intersectional nature of their identities. The support from online communities provides emotional reinforcement, helping activists to navigate these challenges. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the dual role of digital platforms in both empowering and challenging individuals involved in feminist discourse, highlighting the complexities of online activism in a digital age.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of women engaged in digital feminist activism, revealing that digital platforms play a significant role in empowering women while simultaneously presenting challenges. Participants described how these platforms allowed them to amplify their voices and connect with others who share similar goals, but also highlighted the emotional toll of online harassment and resistance. The findings emphasize the dual nature of digital feminist activism, providing insights into both the empowerment it offers and the struggles it entails. These findings address the primary research question: how do women experience and interpret their involvement in digital feminism?

Contribution to the Research Question

The study provides a deeper understanding of the personal meanings that women attach to their participation in digital feminist movements. It shows that digital activism is not just a political or social act, but a deeply emotional and personal journey for many women (Cihangir et al., 2025). The empowerment derived from connecting with others and advocating for gender equality is tempered by the challenges of harassment and backlash (Okoro et al., 2024). This nuanced understanding of digital activism moves beyond surface-level observations and offers a more holistic view of how women experience their activism. By exploring the lived experiences of participants, this study contributes to the understanding of the intersection of digital technology, gender, and activism in a way that previous research, which often focused on external outcomes or quantitative measures, could not.

Relationship with Existing Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings align with existing literature on digital activism, particularly studies that highlight the empowering potential of digital platforms in feminist movements (Duggan, 2015; Fuchs, 2017). Similar to the work of Baym (2015), this study confirms that digital platforms provide women with opportunities to engage in social change, particularly by facilitating access to global networks and increasing visibility (Sweida-Metwally, 2025). However, this research also extends the work of scholars like Banet-Weiser (2018), who noted the complexities and contradictions inherent in digital feminism. While previous studies have pointed out the potential for digital activism to create solidarity and

community (Grewal, 2013), this study deepens the understanding of how these communities both empower and expose participants to vulnerabilities (Adhariani, 2022). Additionally, the theme of online harassment discussed here supports earlier research on the toxic aspects of digital spaces, including the harassment women face when they assert feminist positions online (Jane, 2014). These findings contribute to a growing body of work that acknowledges both the promise and peril of digital platforms for feminist activism, offering new insights into the personal and collective dimensions of online feminist movements.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant social, cultural, and practical implications. From a social perspective, they highlight the dual role of digital platforms in shaping feminist movements (Zhou, 2025). On one hand, these platforms provide a powerful tool for empowerment, enabling women to connect, advocate, and share their experiences globally. On the other hand, the experience of harassment and online resistance underscores the challenges faced by women in digital spaces, which can undermine their sense of safety and solidarity (Abdul Mumin et al., 2025). Culturally, this research emphasizes the need for further dialogue on the complexities of digital feminism, particularly as it intersects with broader societal attitudes toward gender equality. Practically, the findings suggest that online feminist communities can play a critical role in shaping gender discourse but also necessitate strategies for protecting participants from online abuse. The study calls for a deeper understanding of the balance between empowerment and vulnerability in digital activism, especially in contexts where gender-based violence and harassment are prevalent.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of women engaged in digital feminist activism, it is not without limitations (Farida et al., 2022). One key limitation is the sample size and demographic diversity, as the study focused on a relatively small group of participants from specific geographical and cultural contexts (Popoola, 2025). This may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or regions. Additionally, the use of qualitative interviews, while rich in detail, is subjective and may not fully capture the broad spectrum of experiences within digital feminism. The study also relies on self-reported data, which is inherently influenced by participants' perceptions and memories. Future research with larger, more diverse samples and a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods could offer a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One important direction would be to explore the experiences of other marginalized groups within digital feminist movements, such as women of color or LGBTQ+ individuals, to understand how intersectionality shapes their engagement and experiences (Chen et al., 2025). Another area for further investigation could be the role of different digital platforms in fostering or hindering feminist activism, particularly as newer technologies emerge. Furthermore, longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of digital activism on participants' personal and professional lives could offer valuable insights into how online engagement shapes identity and societal change over time. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing field of digital feminism and offers a foundation for future studies that aim to understand the complexities of online activism in a rapidly changing digital landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of women engaged in digital feminist activism, aiming to understand the personal meanings and challenges associated with their involvement in online movements. The findings reveal that digital platforms empower women by amplifying their voices and fostering community, but also expose them to significant challenges such as online harassment. While this research contributes to the understanding of digital feminism by addressing the gap in existing literature, which often overlooks the subjective experiences of participants, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. The study relied on a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused on participants from specific

demographic backgrounds, and expanding the scope to include a more diverse range of voices could provide a broader perspective.

In terms of practical recommendations, digital feminist activists could benefit from greater awareness and preparation for the online harassment they might face. Support systems, such as online safety resources and digital self-defense tools, should be incorporated into digital feminist spaces to help mitigate these challenges. Furthermore, advocacy for stronger policies against misogynistic online behavior could be instrumental in fostering safer online environments. Lastly, activists and organizations should continue to prioritize intersectionality within their work, ensuring that all women, regardless of race, class, or sexual orientation, have a voice in the digital feminist movement.

Future research could further explore the intersectionality of digital feminism and investigate the long-term impacts of digital activism on participants' identity and societal perceptions. Expanding the study to include a larger and more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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