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From Collective to Connective Identity: Digital Feminism and the Transformation of the Fourth Wave

Abstract: This study argues that digital-era feminism has reconfigured the foundations of political mobilization by transforming collective identity into a fluid, intersectional, and networked phenomenon. The fourth wave's most notable aspect is its ability to increase participation while also challenging the unity of feminist identity. This research engages a theory-driven, interpretive approach through a three-part analytical framework, examining theoretical mapping of social movement theories like Melucci's (1995) notion of collective identity and McCarthy and Zald's (1977) Resource Mobilization Theory, in addition to increasingly digital approaches like Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action. While examining the transformation of feminist collective identity, the paper also looks at some cases, such as #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos, FEMEN, SlutWalk, to show that emotional and personal connections exist in the digital feminist movement. By redefining collective identity through the perspectives of intersectionality, resource mobilization, and connective action, this study adds to the understanding of how feminist agency is transformed in the digital era, where visibility and solidarity exist in tension, and the ongoing challenge is to turn emotional connections into real political power.

Key words: digital feminism, fourth-wave, collective identity, intersectionality, connective mobilization

Introduction

The influence of the feminist movement on power structures and exclusionary institutions has redefined the political agendas and established a progressive landscape in the last century. It has originated from the fight against inequality, sexism, and systemic marginalization by challenging both cultural norms and "the structural sources of male privilege" (Swank, Fahs, 2017). As a social and political movement, feminism shows the dynamics of political mobilization, resource organization, and ideological framing central to social movement theory. Through feminist activism, scholars examine how groups come together over shared concerns and identities to impact power relations. Traditional political science approaches, such as Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy, Zald, 1977), Political Opportunity Structures (McAdam et al., 2012), and Framing Processes (Benford, Snow, 2000) explain how social movements turn collective identity into political influence.

The history of feminism illustrates this progression from campaigns for suffrage and legal equality to the establishment of women's rights and global gender policies. These stages show how feminist mobilization interacts with state structures and international political arenas to redefine citizenship, participation, and justice (Nash, 2002). However, with the arrival of digital activism, the fourth wave of feminism can challenge these established models of political engagement. Unlike earlier movements that relied on formal organizations and face-to-face mobilization, the digital feminist movement op-

erates through decentralized, networked participation. For example, online mobilization campaigns such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #EndRapeCulture show how digitalization can quickly create international solidarity and shape public discussion, without forming stable organizations or leadership hierarchies. Analyzing this shift in the activism mobilization raises the question about how collective identity and political agency are formed, sustained, or fragmented in digital spaces.

While feminist scholars have studied the social and cultural aspects of online activism (Khazraee, Novak, 2018; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2015), there are still gaps in analyzing the recent developments within political science frameworks of collective action and mobilization. The value of this article is to understand how digital feminism redefines political participation, while broadening the idea of the political sphere and interacting with institutional and international power structures. Looking at collective identity and intersectional feminism, the article analyzes digital feminism through the lens of political theory on social movements. Following Melucci (1995), collective identity is seen as an interactive process that shapes collective action within specific political opportunity structures (Johnston, 2013). Yet, digital feminism complicates this by creating diverse and fluid identities that challenge traditional forms of political organization (Polletta, Jasper, 2001). Bringing intersectionality and technology into political science frameworks helps explain how digital activism changes feminist mobilization into a dispersed but politically significant force and whether this is a new form of political participation or a temporary, individualized mode of engagement.

This study examines the evolution of collective identity in the fourth wave, not only through shared ideology but also through emotional connections and online participation, by exploring three main questions: How has the fourth wave of feminism emerged as a digital political movement? In what ways has digital activism reshaped collective identity and political participation within feminism? What do these changes mean for the sustainability and political effectiveness of feminist mobilization? Building on social movement theory and feminist political thought, this paper reviews secondary literature and examines digital feminist campaigns (e.g., #MeToo, #TimesUp, FEMEN, SlutWalk). The goal of the analysis is to show how collective identity and political agency function in networked environments. The article contributes to discussions on mobilization, participation, and digital change by illustrating how feminist movements navigate unity, diversity, and power in today’s political landscape.

Theoretical framework

The collective identity within social movement theory has always been thoroughly discussed. However, the concept still lacks a universally accepted definition and continues to change depending on mobilization dynamics (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). According to Melucci (1995), collective identity is a process where meaning is shared and negotiated through ongoing interaction among activists. This view shifted the focus from structural factors, like resources and political opportunities, to the personal and relational sides of collective action, which is the sense of “we-ness” that drives participation (Polletta, Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001).

Melucci (1995) highlights three key points for collective identity within social movements, which are shared emotional investment, ongoing interaction, and recognition by others (Johnston, 2013). These elements made his ideas influential in explaining second-wave feminism, which built lasting solidarity around the idea that “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 2006). A significant part of Melucci’s model is stable group boundaries and repeated face-to-face interaction, which are not provided in digital and global activism. As feminist mobilization began to include intersectionality and transnational issues, the idea of a unified “we” became more complex (Fineman, 2013; Tormos, 2017). Intersectionality revealed divisions within feminist identity and showed that solidarity could not be maintained only through shared experiences of oppression.

Unlike collective identity theories focusing on these shared stories, social movement theories, such as Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy, Zald, 1977), analyze the organization and strategic resources of feminist movements. It sees collective action as a rational, organized process that depends on available resources like leadership, networks, funding, and institutional access (McCarthy, Zald, 1977). This framework places activism within the strategic and structural dynamics that are key to political science. However, involving digital tools in the social movements expands the idea of “resources” beyond just material or organizational assets. For modern digital campaigns, the main political capitals are effect, visibility, and attention, which create a mobilization structure without a formal hierarchy or centralized leadership. When viewed alongside theories of connective action (Bennett, Segerberg, 2012) and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016), RMT shows how digital feminism combines strategic coordination with emotional and networked participation. This approach links traditional theories of mobilization with modern forms of digital collective action.

Based on the classic collective action theories, the modern theorists debate the reconfiguration of digital connectivity and mediated communication in producing collective identity. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) introduced the idea of connective action. They argue that digital communication tools allow individuals to participate without needing a strong collective identity or formal organization (Bennett, Segerberg, 2012). Instead of relying on shared beliefs, connective action is based on personalizing and sharing content, like hashtags, images, and stories, that briefly bring people together around shared issues. This idea effectively illustrates the decentralized nature of fourth-wave digital feminism, which organizes through platforms like Twitter and Instagram rather than through established groups.

The main difference between Melucci’s model and Bennett and Segerberg’s ideas is that Melucci’s theory explains how identity creates meaning and emotional connections, while the latter examines the flexibility and accessibility of digital platforms for active participation. However, connective action may simplify identity to a temporary alignment instead of lasting solidarity. While it describes how mobilization works, it misses the emotional and ideological depth that underpins collective political power. On the other hand, Melucci’s framework may downplay the political value of networked communication and its capacity to form new types of belonging beyond direct interaction. Together, these theories show a shift in feminist mobilization from organized, identity-focused movements to more fluid, networked groups.

Campaigns like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #NiUnaMenos illustrate how networked mobilization can create significant visibility and emotional impact. These “affective pub-

lics”[1] create emotional and situational collective identity rather than long-term ideological commitment seen in Melucci’s model (Papacharissi, 2016). Hence, this neoliberal individualism and algorithm-driven visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013) face the risks of becoming commercialized and fragmented, and raise the question of whether online feminism can have lasting political influence.

In this study, the two frameworks (collective identity and connective action) are viewed as complementary rather than oppositional, as they are combined to incorporate Melucci’s framework of emotional and relational depth of solidarity, along with Bennett and Segerberg’s model of technological changes in the digital age. Their combination allows for examining how digital feminism changes collective identity into a polycentric, intersectional, and networked form of political action. This retains emotional resonance while functioning through new ways of connecting.

Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual synthesis approach that explores the evolution of feminist collective identity in digital spaces and implications for movement sustainability. By merging concepts from feminist literature and social movement studies, this article seeks to create a cross-cutting perspective to alter thinking about collective identity and mobilization within digital feminism. It uses the campaigns #MeToo[2], #NiUnaMenos[3], #TimesUp[4], #PinjraTod[5], FEMEN,[6] SlutWalk,[7] EndRapeCulture,[8] as examples to illustrate the analyt-

[1] The term *affective publics* refers to digitally networked groups mobilized through shared emotions rather than formal organization or ideology, producing fluid and temporary forms of collective expression shaped by mediated affect (Papacharissi, 2016).

[2] The *#MeToo* movement, first introduced by Tarana Burke in 2006 and popularized in 2017, illustrates this point. It created a shared digital space for victims of sexual harassment to voice their experiences collectively (Burke, 2018).

[3] The *#NiUnaMenos* (Spanish for “Not One [Woman] Less”) movement originated in Argentina in 2016 as a protest against femicide and gender-based violence. It rapidly spread across Latin America, mobilizing millions of women to demand justice for victims and state accountability in combating gender violence (Chenou, Cepeda-Másmela, 2019).

[4] The *#TimesUp* movement was launched in 2018 by women in the entertainment industry in response to the widespread sexual harassment allegations that surfaced after the *#MeToo* campaign. It aimed to promote gender equality in the workplace and support survivors through legal and policy advocacy (Wexler et al., 2019).

[5] The *#PinjraTod* (“Break the Cage”) campaign began in India in 2015 as a student-led digital and street movement against sexist curfew rules and patriarchal restrictions in women’s university hostels. It advocates for women’s autonomy and gender equality in educational institutions (Lochan, 2019).

[6] FEMEN is a feminist activist group founded in Ukraine in 2008, known for its topless protests as a form of “sextremism” against patriarchy, religious institutions, and political oppression. The group later expanded internationally, sparking debates about body politics, cultural context, and feminist representation (Channell, 2014).

[7] The *SlutWalk* movement began in Canada in 2011 in response to a police officer’s remark that women should “avoid dressing like sluts” to prevent sexual assault. The campaign reclaims the term “slut” as a symbol of resistance and calls for an end to victim-blaming and rape culture (Carr, 2013).

[8] Emerging in the early 2010s, *#EndRapeCulture* is a transnational online movement in South Africa that challenges the normalization of sexual violence and victim-blaming. It brings attention

ical potential of the framework, but does not produce particular findings derived from the cases. Therefore, future research may build upon them through comparative case studies or digital ethnography to substantiate the claims made herein.

This research engages a theory-driven, interpretive approach through a three-part analytical framework. The first part is theoretical mapping, which is an exploration of connections among basic and established social movement theories like Melucci’s (1995) notion of collective identity and McCarthy and Zald’s (1977) Resource Mobilization Theory, in addition to increasingly digital approaches like Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) connective action. It places feminist digital activism within political science theories of participation, mobilization, and organization. The second part involves conceptual integration, which synthesizes findings from different frameworks explored to understand how social media and digital spaces act as platforms for identity construction, engagement, and solidarity. It discusses how moving from organizationally driven collective action to personalized connective action impacts the resources, methods, and narratives of feminist mobilization. Finally, through the illustrative linkage, the integrated framework is applied to key examples of digital feminist activism like #MeToo, #TimesUp, #NiUnaMenos, and #EndRapeCulture.

However, the cases themselves are not empirical studies. They’re brought into conversation to clarify significant theoretical tensions, such as emotional solidarity vs. fragmentation, participatory networks vs. institutional organization, and intersectional inclusion vs. algorithmic exclusion. By considering how emotional communities (Papacharissi, 2016) operate alongside alternatively structured entities driven by algorithms, this study assesses how digital spaces redefine the emotional and organizational aspects of collective identity and new complications for cohesion and sustainability. This approach aligns with the analysis on established theories of collective action, resource mobilization, and identity framing, while also expanding them through feminist and digital media perspectives. The goal is not a measurement of identity formation but a theoretically grounded interpretation of how digital activism reshapes the political dynamics of participation and solidarity.

Intersectionality and the Fourth Wave of Feminism: From Collective to Connective Mobilization

The fourth wave of feminism has been generally regarded as the emergence of social media and digital platforms (Mohajan, 2022). Digital culture and feminist politics are increasingly combined through the functions of this period, such as intersectionality, body positivity, the inclusion of LGBTQI+ identities, and activism against gender-based violence. Some researchers maintain that this wave is not only a cultural movement but also changes the exclusively feminist techniques of activism (Chamberlain, 2017; Mendes, Ringrose, 2019). Thus, using these tools helps to challenge systemic inequality and cultural elements of patriarchy.

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to structural inequalities, calling for legal reform, consent education, and accountability (Gouws, 2020).

The concept of intersectionality[9] dates back to the 1976 DeGraffenreid v. General Motors case, where African-American women claimed they faced discrimination due to both race and gender (HoSang, 2020). The court dismissed their case, stating that the Civil Rights Act did not recognize compound discrimination. This decision highlighted how overlapping forms of oppression can be overlooked. Over the years, intersectionality has grown to include various forms of inequality related to race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and nationality (Crenshaw, 1991; Runyan, 2018). As both a political and analytical tool, intersectionality investigates how different power systems come together to shape people’s experiences and structural outcomes.

Intersectionality is also important for resource mobilization in feminist movements. McCarthy and Zald’s (1977) Resource Mobilization Theory suggests that social movements rely on gathering and using resources, like organizational, material, and symbolic, to keep activism going. In digital feminism, intersectionality influences how these resources are shared: who gets attention, who is listened to, and whose stories gain support. The symbolic value linked to certain identities or emotional narratives becomes a resource for mobilization. Thus, intersectionality is a way to analyze oppression and a factor in how resources like attention, legitimacy, and emotional engagement flow in digital activism.

The rise of digital platforms has changed feminist organizing from collective action to connective action (Bennett, Segerberg, 2012). Earlier feminist movements focused on organizational leadership, shared beliefs, and group identity. In contrast, digital feminism emphasizes decentralized participation and personal storytelling. Online campaigns like #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, #PinjraTod, and #EndRapeCulture illustrate this new approach where individuals share their personal stories, which, when combined, create large groups of empathy and outrage. These campaigns show how “affective publics” connected through shared emotions instead of formal organization have replaced traditional collective structures (Papacharissi, 2016). Affective expression acts as a mobilizing resource, creating visibility and engagement. However, this emotional immediacy often leads to a fleeting nature, causing activism spurred by feelings and viral moments, rather than lasting organizational efforts. This results in a new type of feminist mobilization that is fluid, networked, and emotionally driven but can also be fragmented and unstable.

The digitalization of feminist activism has also altered the political economy of mobilization. In contrast to previous movements that relied on the collective work and physical presence of individuals, contemporary feminism functions through the commercial digital platforms that are owned by corporations. These spaces operate according to algorithms that favor viral content and emotional intensity over structural critique. When feminist stories traverse through these channels, they intertwine with the pecuniary aims of platform capitalism. The new forms of political currency are engagement metrics like likes, shares, and clicks. Visibility, rather than ongoing organization, is now the main resource. As RMT explains, the movements adjust themselves to available structures of opportunity. However, when those structures are corporate and algorithm-driven, they push feminist activism toward marketable visibility. Consequently, the very marginalized voices that intersectionality is trying to bring up can be left in the shadows by the

[9] The term intersectionality was introduced to the social sciences and identity politics in 1989 by civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw as the intersection of race and gender, which was developed later as “a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytical tool” in 2013 (Crenshaw, 1991; Runyan, 2018).

narratives that hit the emotional trends of the majority or serve the interests of the corporations. Besides, this commercialization results in a shift in the concept of agency. The very activists have to deal with the visibility economies that are created where attention functions more or less like a currency. This makes feminist expression both a means of empowerment and a place of exploitation.

On the other hand, some critics argue that intersectionality is divisive and hierarchical, claiming it gives preference to certain identity groups while silencing others (Christoffersen, Emejulu, 2023; Christoffersen, Siow, 2025; McGrath, 2020; Mounk, 2025). Some have even called it a form of “dangerous faith” that demands ideological conformity (French, 2018; Sullivan, 2017). These critiques show not only the political backlash against intersectional ideas, but also foster coalition politics, when poorly applied intersectionality can split movements and lead to competition within groups about who is “most oppressed.” This conflict highlights a broader definitional challenge where intersectionality’s flexibility with various social categories both enriches and complicates feminist mobilization (Collins, 2015). The variety of identities weakens the unified ideological frames that earlier feminism had. Hence, the new wave functions through interconnected individual engagements linked by emotional bonds and online engagement.

Transitioning from collective to networked identity impacts feminist unity considerably. Intersectionality exposes intricate systems of oppression but simultaneously splinters feminist perspectives into overlapping, occasionally contradictory viewpoints. Digital platforms encourage customized participation and rapidly spreading narratives instead of organized group activism. As a result, solidarity forms through emotional connections rather than shared beliefs. This alteration introduces a dual dynamic of difficulty and potential in feminist political discourse. From one perspective, the interplay of identities presents options for extensive involvement and cross-border collaborations. On the other hand, its fragmentation and the influence of commercialization on digital platforms may weaken political cohesion. The future of feminist activism in the digital age will depend on whether affective publics can turn emotional energy into lasting organizational and political strength.

The fourth wave of feminism represents a significant shift in how political mobilization happens, moving from organized, collective efforts toward personalized, connective participation. Intersectionality remains central to this shift, influencing how power, identity, and resources flow within digital spaces. Through affective publics, feminist activism gains emotional depth and global reach, but its reliance on algorithms creates new issues with visibility and voice. Understanding these changes through resource mobilization, connective action, and affective publics reveals both the freeing potential and the structural weaknesses of feminism today. The future of feminist politics requires rethinking solidarity beyond shared ideology, focusing on lasting, connective actions that turn feelings into real political power.

Digital Feminism and the Transformation of Collective Identity

Digital platforms have changed feminist activism by providing greater access, visibility, and immediacy for political expression. These tools not only facilitate communi-

cation but also influence the way contemporary feminist engagement is structured and understood (Pruchniewska, 2019). Unlike earlier waves that relied on print media, local organizations, and in-person efforts, the digital age allows anyone with internet access to participate in global feminist discussions (Keller, 2012). Feminism has evolved from scholarly and advocacy discussions into an interactive, interconnected, and emotionally intense online phenomenon.

This section examines how digital feminism reshapes shared feminist identity via intersectionality, connective action, and platform capitalism. It argues that while digital spaces make participation more inclusive and amplify marginalized voices, they also divide solidarity, reproduce power structures, and risk turning activism into a form of commodified visibility. Digital feminism utilizes online media and virtual spaces to advance gender equity, organize campaigns, and oppose systemic sexism (Martin, Valenti, 2013). Its rise coincides with what Chamberlain (2017) and Mendes and Ringrose (2019) portray as merging feminist ideology with networked online activities. Online activism enables people to express their perspectives and identities openly, circumventing institutional obstacles. This casual engagement transforms the cause from a unified ideological position to a network of individualized exchanges.

This evolution mirrors Bennett and Segerberg’s connective action (2012), differing from the disciplined and methodical mobilization seen in prior feminist generations. Connective action emphasizes decentralized involvement and personal narratives, where hashtags, updates, and digital accounts replace declarations and formal organizations. As a result, feminist identity becomes fluid and performative, shaped by personal expression instead of institutional ties. The focus on personal stories, self-representation, and emotional communication has led to what Papacharissi (2016) calls “affective publics,” where emotional connections become the main method of political engagement. This change has beneficial and negative implications. On one hand, online feminism enables the involvement of people previously marginalized in traditional activism because of geography, economic circumstances, or cultural background. On the other hand, it risks reducing feminist politics to personal expressions of emotion without a lasting collective structure or long-term strategy.

One of the most notable examples of digital feminism is hashtag activism, which serves as a tool for connecting people based on shared experiences. Movements like #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, #PinjraTod, and #EndRapeCulture show how personal stories can grow into global campaigns.

The #MeToo hashtag bridged social and cultural gaps, uniting women from various fields, ranging from Hollywood stars to factory workers, and facilitating transnational solidarity (Redden, 2017; Zacharek et al., 2017). Similarly, #NiUnaMenos in Latin America mobilized against femicide and gender-based violence through social media, linking local protests in Argentina to global feminist challenges (Kurian, 2019).

The rise of digital feminism must also be viewed in the context of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2021). Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) are not neutral spaces; they are profit-driven platforms that monetize user attention, data, and emotional responses. Algorithms favor content that stirs intense feelings such as anger, compassion, or surprise because these boost interaction and thus ad income. In this climate of competition for attention, feminist efforts get caught in

a framework valuing popularity above substance and spectacle over planning. Being seen emerges as the key resource for political engagement. According to McCarthy and Zald’s Resource Mobilization Theory from 1977, it is possible to claim digital feminism alters mobilization tools while emotionally charged storytelling and visibility dictated by algorithms replace money, followers, and organizational hierarchies.

This led to the commercialization of feminist rhetoric, with brands and influencers appropriating feminist language for brand marketing (“femvertising”) (Gill, Orgad, 2018; Windels et al., 2020; Zeisler, 2017). Slogans like “The Future is Female” or “Nevertheless, She Persisted” are now products, stripped of political meaning. Gill and Orgad (2018) argue that such a process privileges individual empowerment and encourages women to “fix themselves” rather than contesting systemic inequality. Thus, feminism risks being of being portrayed as a lifestyle rather than a collective political effort. This commercialization causes inequality in the movement. While some influencers and activists with larger audiences gain more attention, grassroots and marginalized voices, especially from the Global South, are overlooked and go unheard due to algorithmic bias and language dominance (Jackson et al., 2020). Consequently, the same platforms that generate global visibility also reproduce existing hierarchies of attention and privilege.

Another impact of digital feminism is on intersectionality, which begins functioning not so much as a political notion but also as a “resource of mobilization” that starts weighing in on the question regarding who gets visibility, legitimacy, and support. However, some critics argue that digital intersectionality sometimes devolves into a competition for attention and moral authority (Christoffersen, Emejulu, 2023; McGrath, 2020). In such cases, the primary intention of intersectionality to foster broad-based coalitions is compromised by identity-centered competitions. Algorithmic amplification heightens these divisions by rewarding emotionally charged content often at the cost of nuance or alliance-building. Movements focused on specific identities may gain visibility but may struggle to maintain connections with others, resulting in fragmented audiences rather than unified groups. This situation illustrates a structural tension in digital feminism, even though it aims for inclusivity, and the visibility mechanisms that govern digital involvement by reinforcing inequality.

Digital feminism’s reliance on visibility as power creates a paradox. While online campaigns raise awareness and foster emotional connections, they often fail to bring about institutional or legislative change. For instance, although #MeToo ignited global discussions about sexual harassment, many prominent cases, like those of Jian Ghomeshi and Bill Cosby, showed the limitations of digital mobilization in achieving real justice (Matheson, 2017). This limitation highlights what Poell and van Dijck (2015) call the infrastructural limits of digital activism (Poell, Van Dijck, 2015). Activists rely on corporate-owned platforms that dictate what is seen, shared, and remembered. The result is a kind of “algorithmic activism,” one in which an issue’s visibility hinges less on its political significance than on whether it falls within platform guidelines. Moreover, the attention economy leads to “hashtag fatigue,” too much and too fast promotion of the topics makes it lose its novelty (Gill, Orgad, 2018). As feminist activists work so hard to stay “relevant,” the issues often get simplified into something that works on these platforms, resulting in more reactive than thoughtful mobilization.

While providing less restricted participation by eliminating the physical space and relevant challenges, the digital activism causes the risk of online harassment, trolling, and surveillance (Dickel, Evolvi, 2023). Feminist activists, especially women of color, LGBTQI+ individuals, and those advocating for sexual or reproductive rights, face serious backlash and online abuse without any filter. Unfortunately, these tactics cause activists for self-censorship and unwillingness to participate in future campaigns. Over time, this leads to what Baer (2017) calls “selective digital feminism,” where only those who have more resilience, anonymity, or protection on these platforms remain active (Baer, 2017). The ongoing exposure to misogynistic and homophobic attacks undermines the formation of an inclusive collective identity and maintains visibility hierarchies.

Moreover, there is a risk of surveillance by social media companies and governments using the shared information of the activists and other users. Especially in authoritarian regimes or hostile groups, this capability can be used to target feminist campaigns, considering these movements challenge the state power (Poell, Van Dijck, 2015). This also highlights the geopolitical aspect of online feminism, where the physical mobilization of the movement can be restricted due to the political agendas of local governments. Even though this makes digital feminism an advantageous tool in activism, accessibility to this tool is still not globally provided. The barriers are not only the lack of access to technological devices and online platforms, but also the limited knowledge of English in low-income communities. (Jackson et al., 2020). Major popular feminist campaigns are initiated in Western countries, where the content is usually produced in English. Even with the translation tools, non-English information does not pass through either algorithms to be viral, or the misinterpretation happens due to the poor quality- translation in social media platforms. These restrictions usually affect the participation of rural and/or older women, people in the Global South. Due to these challenges, organically or inorganically, privileged users are formed in social platforms who lead the feminist discussion based on their worldview and perspective, creating a hierarchy within the feminist movement. Hence, the online connective identity is often considered as Western-focused, echoing earlier criticisms of universalism in feminist theory (Mohanty, 1988).

One of the important changes in digital feminism is the redefinition of the phrase “the personal is political.”[10] While the earlier usage of this phrase was intended to bring people into one common political goal, to raise consciousness in society. After widespread usage of online platforms, politics often becomes personal (Baer, 2017), instead of personal becoming political. The main characteristics of hashtag campaigns are the individualistic approach, where personal stories and experiences become the forefront of feminist politics. Movements like FEMEN highlight this tension by claiming women’s empowerment through the refusal of patriarchal standards for women’s clothing and behavior. However, this approach does not consider those whose cultural or religious beliefs oppose such methods, again creating a division between women within the movement. This leads to forming a fragmented feminist identity, where empowerment is defined by narrow visual and cultural standards. This personalization of politics mirrors

[10] “The personal is political” is popularized by Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of the same title, to illustrate the women’s struggles are beyond personal affairs, but shaped by the social and political conditions. The concept developed to stand in the core of second-wave feminism and later in the further development of feminist theory (Hanisch, 2006).

neoliberal ideas of self-empowerment and consumer choice, potentially replacing structural change with individual performance. The digital space amplifies this change, as self-expression becomes intertwined with activism, where each post, image, or hashtag acts as a display of feminist identity.

Collective Identity in the New Wave of Feminism

Questioning identity within feminist activism is both a cultural inquiry and a political necessity, since it plays a significant role in the movement’s political effectiveness. During each wave of feminism, feminist identity embraced both its social and political characteristics as well as its mobilizing structure. The first wave was significant with a unified and visible collective identity focused on one main goal to achieve legal and political reform, particularly the right to vote. This process evolved into an effective social movement in the second wave when the activists adopted formal leadership and clear political demands with a focus on equality in the workplace and bodily autonomy. However, with the rise of intersectionality and digitalization, collective identity shifted from a politically cohesive structure to a networked, fluid mix of individual engagements. Finally, contemporary feminism has changed not only its mobilization formats, such as hashtags, online campaigns, and viral stories, but also developed a dependency more on emotional connections than organizational unity. In this chapter, the transformation of the feminist movement in the fourth wave is examined to understand how political mobilization methods, such as leadership, resource sharing, and strategic messaging, have been influenced by digital infrastructures, resulting in both empowerment and fragmentation.

This analysis addresses the main research question: How has digital feminism, through intersectionality and connecting practices, changed the collective identity and political capacity of the feminist movement? In political sociology, collective identity acts as the emotional and cognitive bond that connects individuals to the movement’s goals (Polletta, Jasper, 2001). It is not just cultural but also serves as a crucial resource for ongoing political action. Resource Mobilization Theory helps explain why a coherent identity is important, since it turns personal grievances into collective claims that can generate political power (McCarthy, Zald, 1977).

In online feminism, however, collective identity becomes decentralized and performative. For instance, analyzing hashtags like #MeToo and #SlutWalk, a fast mobilization with little organizational structure is easy to notice. In a very short time, they establish a sense of belonging by connecting people through emotions, shared feelings, instead of a shared ideology. Even though the emotional identification is helpful for campaigns on more sensitive issues and can encourage more participation through sympathy, it undermines the movement’s ability to form long-term political goals, negotiate with institutions, or develop a clear agenda. Thus, the collective identity in the fourth wave has passed from a sociological issue into a crisis of political strategy and legitimacy. This leads the movement to turn into a symbolic protest, lacking institutional pathways or accountable leadership, risking achieving real changes in the social and political framework.

The introduction of intersectionality brought much-needed recognition of differences in feminist theory and practice, but also made the idea of a unified subject, “woman,” less stable, which was a concept earlier feminist waves had used as a political category. From a mobilization perspective, intersectionality changes how symbolic and representational resources are distributed. Visibility and recognition in digital spaces often go to those whose stories fit algorithmic patterns or resonate emotionally. This visibility usually brings out specific people with higher education backgrounds, more tech-knowledge, and from Western countries, challenging the main aspects of intersectionality, which aims to bring marginalized groups forward. This hierarchical structure in the digital space damages the solidarity of the movement, creating more clusters.

As a result, the tools aimed to unify the movement became a site for ideological contestation. Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) theory of connective action offers a key framework to examine people showcasing solidarity via personal narratives, hashtags, and updates. This model helps to broaden the scope of the movement but also makes coordination less political. The key features of campaigns like #MeToo are reach and speed, yet their decentralized spread weakens the tactical unity. The absence of structure or unified direction prevents the sustainability of the movement and participation engagement in the long term. Connective action establishes larger alliances but also fragile communities by emphasizing acknowledgment rather than substantive progress, often resulting in “clicktivism” instead of structural transformation. While these networks increase participation, they do not necessarily enhance political capacity, which prevents them from pressing institutions, proposing laws, or monitoring accountability.

However, the move from collective to connective action does not indicate the end of feminist advocacy but its reshaping within digital capitalism, where identity, exposure, and feeling are considered as new forms of political currency. These new values limit the political nature of the movement since they are decided by the corporations that own the digital platforms, making feminist activism a product for consumers. This leads political debates to become trends rather than following a long-term strategy. On the other hand, marginalized voices are pushed aside by the algorithms and leaving the movement in the hands of the commercial companies to use feminist rhetoric for gain. #MeToo and SlutWalk campaigns are good examples to identify the potential and the fragility of digital collective identity. They quickly spread across the regions and cultures, bringing significant visibility to gender-based violence. Yet, institutional responses were partial and inconsistent once digital solidarity began to weaken. It showed how emotional bonds can swiftly foster intense sentiments, yet how the absence of systematic organization hinders long-term political influence. Without mechanisms for negotiation, representation, and policy engagement, emotional energy can be lost in the spectacle of visibility. Digital activism offers quick results but lacks endurance. The lack of in-person interactions, shared rituals, or sustained coordination restricts the development of movement memory. While digital tools allow for rapid mobilization, they also create emotional ups and downs, leading participants to swing between excitement and exhaustion.

Moreover, digital platforms lack formal accountability structures. While encouraging involvement in the movement, digital activism limits prioritization or conflict resolution. Consequently, the collective identity of the fourth wave frequently turns performative, fueled by self-promotion and virtue signaling instead of deliberate political engagement,

promoting concerns about accountability and legitimacy. We are left with questions such as who speaks for the movement? Who defines its goals and future trajectories? Addressing challenges like a lack of formal leadership and algorithmic visibility, feminist movements progressively encourage hybrid strategies by merging online advocacy with offline structures. For instance, the 2017 Women’s March demonstrated how virtual planning can promote real demonstrations, reconnecting emotional networks with physical presence. Similarly, the continued #MeToo movement shows how online narratives can achieve structural influence when tied to legal and policy systems (Fisher et al., 2017; Mendes, Ringrose, 2019). The difficulty lies in the preservation of intersectional clarity without compromising the clear goals of the movement. Hence, future feminist activism must cultivate a collective identity with both emotionally compelling and strategically viable. The evolution of feminist collective identity in the fourth wave mirrors larger changes in political mobilization under digital capitalism. This influenced the redefinition of intersectionality, deepening diversity while challenging cohesion. The result is a feminism more visible, emotive, and personalized, yet less rooted in institutions.

Conclusion

The fourth wave of feminism arises from the convergence of digital technology, intersectional politics, and emotional mobilization, and has transformed collective identity in modern feminist activism. This new model, both as a sociocultural and political force, reshapes collective action and feminist mobilization. By providing easier access to the movement, the fourth wave brings a new understanding of feminist identity. The shift from collective to connective action has led to decentralized and networked mobilization, where political participation relies on algorithms, visibility metrics, and emotional engagement instead of traditional organizational structures. While intersectionality offers a foundation for inclusivity, it also creates multiple identities and priorities, often leading to conflicting narratives that make it hard to reach consensus.

The accessibility feature of online feminism also ties the movement to commercialization. Resource Mobilization Theory explains this development as reducing the barriers to entry and increasing symbolic capital, while also turning participation into a commodity and favoring viral content over a deeper critique of structures. This leads to “platform-dependent politics,” where feminist visibility is influenced by corporate algorithms that determine what is seen as politically relevant. Even though this helps to increase awareness for feminist discourse, the political effectiveness of the demands now depends on market dynamics and the unpredictability of online attention.

Furthermore, including emotional aspects in the campaigns helps to bond the participants while only temporarily building alliances instead of lasting organizations. Movements like #MeToo and SlutWalk illustrate emotional mobilization that can cross national and cultural borders. However, the limited effect on institutions to achieve significant political results questions the value of the time and energy spent on the movement. These outcomes point to the importance of having hybrid movements by combining online and offline activism, such as the Women’s March, to have an effective and sustainable movement.

The paper concludes that the fourth wave of feminism encompasses both a democratization and a depoliticization of feminist mobilization. On one hand, the movement has broadened its horizon, reaching global awareness. However, the limitations of digital activism, such as language barriers, algorithmic visibility, and dependence on emotional connection for engagement, prevent the movement from reaching a strong structural and organizational entity. The future of feminist politics will rely on creating hybrid frameworks that blend digital engagement with collective organization, allowing emotional publics to develop into sustainable coalitions. By redefining collective identity through the perspectives of intersectionality, resource mobilization, and connective action, this study adds to the understanding of how feminist agency is transformed in the digital era, where visibility and solidarity exist in tension, and the ongoing challenge is to turn emotional connections into real political power.

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Od tożsamości zbiorowej do sieciowej: feminizm cyfrowy i transformacja czwartej fali

Streszczenie

Badanie dowodzi, że feminizm ery cyfrowej wpłynął na podstawy mobilizacji politycznej, przekształcając tożsamość zbiorową w zjawisko płynne, intersekcjonalne i sieciowe. Najbardziej charakterystycznym aspektem czwartej fali jest jej zdolność do zwiększania uczestnictwa, a jednocześnie kwestionowania jedności tożsamości feministycznej. Przeprowadzone badanie opiera się na podejściu teoretyczno-interpretacyjnym, wykorzystując trójdzielne ramy analityczne, obejmujące mapowanie teorii ruchów społecznych, takich jak koncepcja tożsamości zbiorowej Melucciego (1995) oraz teoria mobilizacji zasobów McCarthy’ego i Zalda (1977), a także coraz bardziej cyfrowe podejścia, jak teoria działań łączących Bennetta i Segerberga (2012). Analizując transformację feministycznej tożsamości zbiorowej, artykuł przygląda się również przypadkom takim jak #MeToo, #NiUnaMenos, FEMEN czy SlutWalk, aby ukazać, że w cyfrowym ruchu feministycznym istnieją emocjonalne i osobiste więzi. Redefiniując tożsamość zbiorową poprzez perspektywy intersekcjonalności, mobilizacji zasobów i działań łączących, badanie przyczynia się do zrozumienia sposobu transformacji feminizmu w erze cyfrowej, w której widoczność i solidarność współistnieją w napięciu, a nieustannym wyzwaniem pozostaje przekształcenie więzi emocjonalnych w realną siłę polityczną.

Słowa kluczowe: feminizm cyfrowy, czwarta fala, tożsamość zbiorowa, intersekcjonalność, mobilizacja sieciowa

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