

Scroll, Share, Speak: An Examination of Generational Differences in Women’s Engagement with and Perceptions of Feminist Content on Social Media

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Abstract

Whilst social media has been commended as a powerful frontier for feminist activism, raising awareness of women’s rights, and facilitating feminist community-building, little research has examined how this community is experienced by different generations of women. This research adopts a survey answered by self-identifying women belonging to three generation groups: Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Drawing on the survey responses, this study explores generational patterns of engagement with feminist-related content, motivations and barriers to participation, and perceptions of social media’s effectiveness for feminist activism. This research found that Generation Z engages most frequently with online feminist activism, particularly on Instagram and TikTok, whilst Millennials and Generation X participate less often and display a greater reliance on Facebook. From the results of this research, it was found that Instagram is currently the most effective digital platform to disperse feminist messages to the sampled generations of women. It was discovered that the general sentiment amongst women is that, though imperfect, social media is a beneficial tool for feminism; it raises awareness, is accessible to women who would otherwise not be exposed to feminist messages, and promotes a collective approach to achieving gender equality. Despite encountering significant levels of anti-feminist content on social media, respondents generally did not view this misogyny as a deterrent, but rather framed it as a motivation for collective feminist action. Overall, this study highlights the need for tailored approaches in online feminist activism, that address generational differences in platform use and interaction, in order to sustain the community-led ethos of feminism.

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1. Introduction

Social media has emerged as the “engine for contemporary feminism” (Martin and Valenti, 2013: 6), offering an online environment for raising awareness about women’s rights issues, and organising feminist events. However, despite its aiding of feminist activism and female empowerment, social media is a “double-edged sword” for the feminist movement, with the risk of gendered abuse, misinformation, and performative activism (Kamei, 2022).

Feminism encompasses many waves and definitions, but in the context of this research, feminism is taken to mean “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”, as defined by hooks (2000).

hooks (2000) notes that feminism is rooted in the principles of community and intergenerational collaboration, and, as activism shifts into digital spaces, it is crucial that the transition remains inclusive to all age groups. Martin and Valenti (2013: 6) note that online feminism can “mobilise people – young, old and everyone in between”, but in order to achieve this, it is key to understand how different generations of women engage with social media as a feminist tool. By understanding these engagement patterns, feminist activism can be more effectively tailored to each generation of women, maintaining solidarity within the feminist movement.

This study aims to investigate how three generations of women (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z) engage with feminist-related content on social media in the UK, using a survey to analyse their digital habits and overall perceptions of social media as a tool of feminism. Within the bounds of this study, feminist-related content includes posts, hashtags, blogs etc. that advocate for women’s rights and female empowerment.

To achieve this aim, this study will explore the following research questions:

- 1. How do women engage with social media as a tool of feminism?**
- 2. What motivates and discourages women from engaging and interaction with online feminist activism?**
- 3. Is social media perceived as a positive influence for the movement of feminism?**

Within this research, there is a sustained focus on the perceptions and experiences of women. The term ‘woman’ in this study is used to refer to anyone who identifies as a woman.

2. Literature Review

Many existing studies investigate the benefits of using social media to facilitate the feminist movement (Kamei, 2022; Crossley, 2015; Martin and Valenti, 2013; Thompson, 2023; Marwick, 2019). The existing literature on the topic highlights the value of social media for effective communication, acknowledging the intersectionality of oppression, and allowing a wider reach for feminist messages, beyond traditional geographical limitations (Kamei, 2022). Crossley (2015) applauds the ability of social media to disperse information about offline feminist events and recruit people for the movement. This benefit of social media in assisting offline events is supported by Martin and Valenti (2013), who discuss how online feminist platforms can

mobilise thousands of people within minutes, which transcends the limitations of traditional feminist organisation.

Crossley (2015) also identifies the importance of social media in continuing and enhancing the community-based foundation of feminism; online networks strengthen communities, solidarity and collective identity. Social media contributes to the sentiment of community in feminism, by offering a platform for women to share their stories and experiences, and connect with others (Thompson, 2023). The online feminist community is also outlined as an advantage by Martin and Valenti (2013), as the collective identity and friendship networks encourage decentralised leadership, allowing for collaboration between activists.

Although studies such as Crossley (2015) demonstrate the role of social media in facilitating feminist community-building, they overlook the intergenerational dynamics of this community. This research addresses the literature gap by examining how three generations of women engage with online feminist activism. In doing so, the study will evaluate the extent to which the online feminist community is inclusive across generations, or whether some women are marginalised.

To avoid neglecting certain generations of women from the online feminist community, it is key that this research investigates which social media platforms and content different generations of women engage with, providing insight into how to spread awareness to each age group. Many studies focus on blogs as the primary tool of online feminism (Crossley, 2015; Marwick, 2019; Winch, 2019). Marwick (2019) notes that the methods of online feminist activism are changing rapidly and, therefore, this research is important to update studies, exploring, for example, the emergence of TikTok as a feminist activist tool (Pomerantz and Field, 2022). In this research, other methods and platforms, such as fixed images and short videos on Instagram and TikTok, will be explored.

Whilst much of the existing literature emphasises the benefits of social media for feminism, there is still acknowledgment of certain drawbacks, supporting the view of Marwick (2019: 310) that “social media can be simultaneously feminist and misogynist”. Megarry (2020) wholeheartedly disagrees that social media is beneficial for the feminist movement, and, instead, concludes that social media reinforces women’s oppression by male dominance; digital spaces provide misogynists with opportunities to intervene in feminist debates. Marwick (2019) discusses the importance of cyberfeminism, which challenges the male-dominated tech culture which establishes a white, male, straight normative. Megarry (2020) calls for women-only spaces offline to promote community and feminist networks, away from the monitoring of male structures.

Thompson (2023) identifies the promotion of intersectionality in feminism as a benefit of the use of social media, allowing for more women to have a voice in the feminist movement. However, whilst, in theory, social media can promote diversity, Marwick (2019) declares that social media often becomes a site for toxic feminism, as virtual spaces establish a white, middle-class, English-speaking normative. Therefore, an unequal representation of women of colour is common in digital feminist spaces, and certain women become marginalised.

Anti-feminist content and harassment is a common theme in the literature surrounding social media networks of feminism. Martin and Valenti (2013) note that the presence of misogynistic content on social media limits the effectiveness of platforms for feminist use. Marwick (2019) agrees that social media is not intrinsically feminist, and, instead, opens up space for anti-feminist content and hate.

However, Linjin (2022) believes that completely rejecting social media as a tool of feminism is partial and aggressive. Instead, a more nuanced approach must be adopted, with both the advantages and drawbacks of online activism being accounted for.

To achieve this balanced approach, it is key that the opinions of women are taken into account. Whilst existing literature battles between the theoretical advantages and disadvantages of social media for the feminist movement, few actually focus on how different women use social media to facilitate their feminist involvement, and how they view its impact. This research will explore the patterns and perceptions of women themselves, to offer a more concrete analysis of the impact of social media on the feminist movement.

3. Methodology

This study employs a survey to investigate how women in the United Kingdom engage with feminist-related content and perceive social media as a tool of feminism. The survey was distributed to women in the UK between the period of 6th to 25th July 2025, and prompted both qualitative and quantitative responses, to allow for a breadth and depth of investigation. The UK was selected for this research as it offered an accessible sample of a digitally-active population of women; Ofcom (2025) found that 92% of women in the UK report that they use social media apps or sites.

The survey was distributed through many channels, as to reach a wide variety of participants. Responses were gathered online, through social media platforms, such as Instagram, and also in-person, with public outreach.

The participants were asked to disclose their gender identity and generation only, remaining anonymous throughout the survey. The study focused only on three generations of women above the age of 18: Generation X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996) and Generation Z (1997-2012). This investigation focused on these three generations to encompass a range of experience: the familiarity of Generation X with feminism in a pre-digital age, Millennials as the witnesses of the initial shift to online activism, and the digitally-native Generation Z. The survey received 36 responses from women from Generation X, 32 Millennials, and 46 from Generation Z.

Whilst generation was the central focus of this study, it is important to note that gendered experience is shaped by interconnected markers such as class, race, and sexuality. As argued by Winch (2019), generation cannot be isolated from these other factors. However, due to the time and scope limitations of this project, this study focuses on generation. A more multi-faceted and complete analysis is recommended for future research.

The survey was answered by 111 self-identifying women in the UK, and it is key to acknowledge that this is a relatively small sample population, and cannot be extrapolated accurately to the wider UK population. Rather, it is an insight into broader themes and patterns.

Throughout this project, I remained mindful of my positionality as a white, British woman and feminist. My experience inevitably influenced the research design and interpretation, but I reflected throughout to remain critically aware of my own bias.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. How do women engage with social media as a tool of feminism?

To investigate how women use social media as a tool of feminism, the survey first explored the participants' patterns of engagement with feminist-related content.

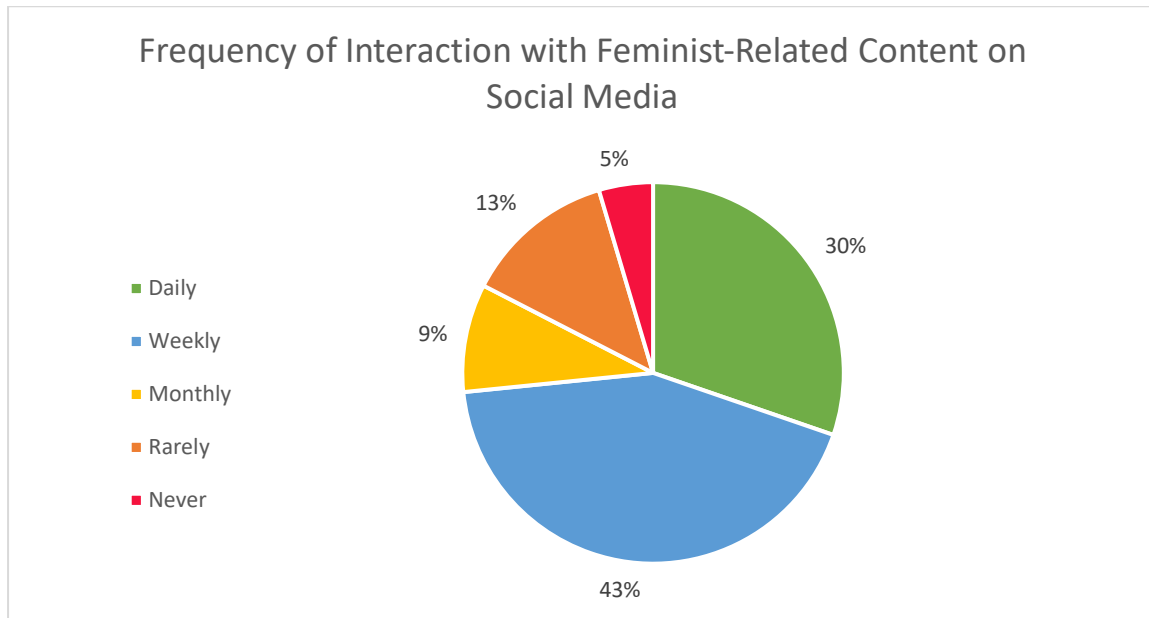


Figure 1: Pie chart showing the frequency at which women interact with feminist-related content on social media.

Figure 1 represents the frequency of women's interaction with feminist-related content on social media. Figure 1 displays that 43% of participants stated that they engage with feminist content through social media on a weekly basis, followed by 30% of women engaging daily. The frequent nature of interaction with feminist content highlights the importance of social media as a channel of the feminist movement, as it reaches women on a common basis. However, it is key to acknowledge that not all generations of women interact with feminist content as frequently, and generalising women does not allow for a valid or accurate analysis of more specific patterns.

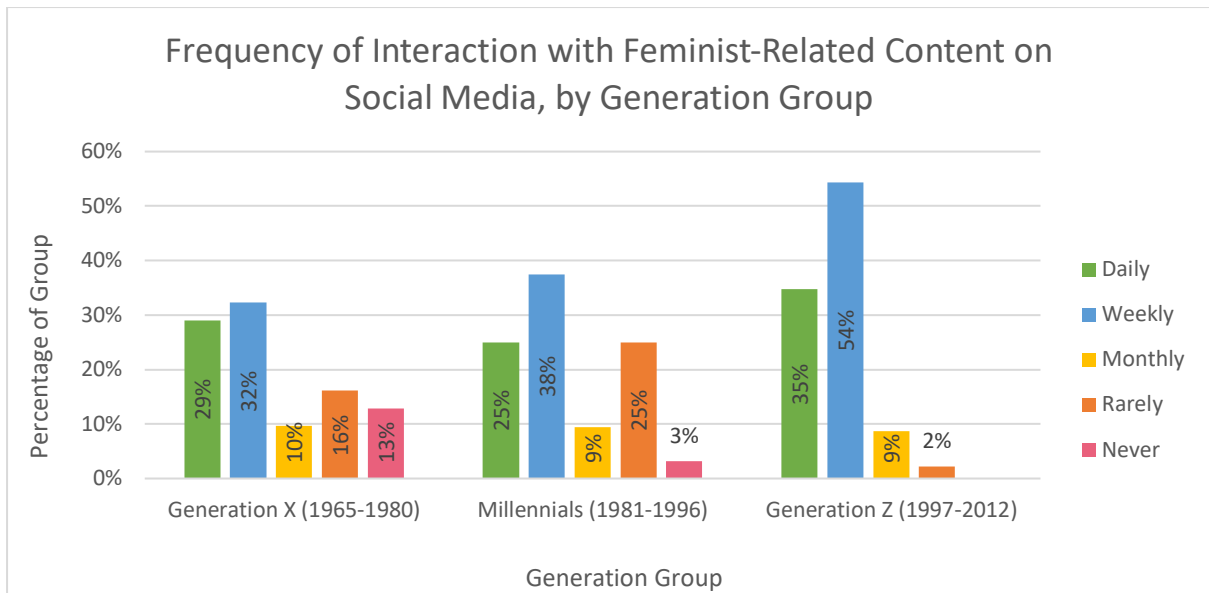


Figure 2: Clustered column chart showing the frequency at which women interact with feminist content on social media, divided by generation group.

Figure 2 offers a more in-depth visual analysis of how frequently women interact with feminist-related content on social media, divided by generation group. Figure 2 shows that, in all generation groups (Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z), the highest percentage of women engage with feminist content on a weekly basis, supported by Figure 1. However, Figure 2 offers evidence that, on average, Generation Z interact more frequently than the other sampled generations: 35% of Generation Z respondents interact daily, and 54% weekly, compared to 29% and 32% of Generation X women in the same categories. In this vein, 16% of Generation X and 25% of Millennials rarely interact with feminist content on social media, and 13% of Generation X respondents never interact. Therefore, Figure 2 suggests that, whilst literature discusses the benefits of using social media for the feminist movement, it is mobilising generations of women differently, reaching Generation Z most frequently. Figure 2 supports that, to obtain a more effective use of social media for feminist activism, digital activists and feminist organisations need to focus on targeting Generation X and Millennials, as to not neglect women by age.

In order to target specific generations, it is important to analyse which platforms are most commonly used to access feminist content.

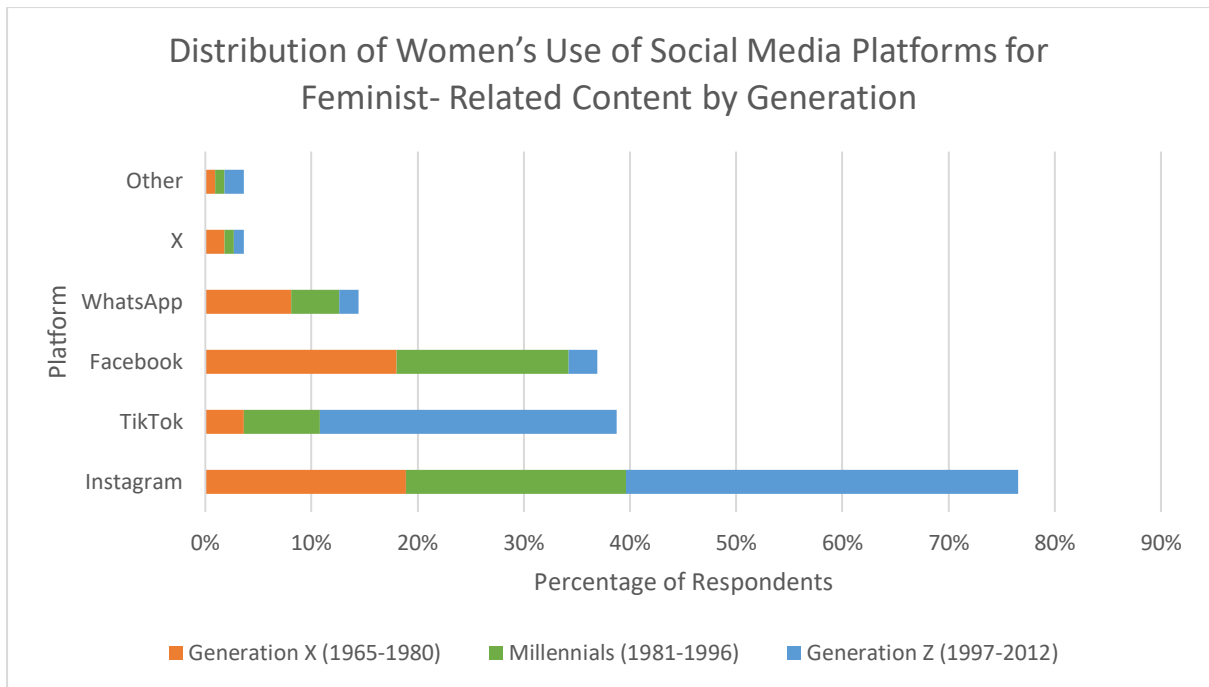


Figure 3: Stacked bar chart displaying the overall proportion of women who use each social media platform to access feminist-related content, as well as the proportion of each generation who use each platform.

Figure 3 shows that Instagram is the most popular social media platform amongst women for accessing feminist content, with 77% of all respondents stating that they use Instagram to engage with posts about feminism. Figure 3 also shows that the use of Instagram is divided somewhat equally between generations, as 19% of Generation X respondents, 21% of Millennials, and 37% of Generation Z use the platform to access feminist content. Therefore, Instagram is the most popular platform at spreading awareness to all generations, maintaining the inter-generational community of feminism.

Dividing engagement by generation is important as to not generalise and obscure certain patterns. For example, overall, a similar proportion of women use Facebook and TikTok to engage with feminist-related content (37% of all women selected Facebook and 39% selected TikTok). However, when divided by generation, Figure 3 shows that, whilst 37% of respondents use Facebook for feminism, only 3% of this is made up by Generation Z. A similar pattern is true of TikTok, which was selected by 39% of women overall, but only 4% was Generation X. Generational analysis is useful as it shows the most effective platforms to target specific generations.

Whilst Instagram is currently the most popular platform for accessing feminist-related content, as highlighted by Figure 3, it is important to acknowledge the constantly changing platforms used for digital feminism. As identified by Marwick (2019: 319), Instagram could be “tomorrow’s obsolete MySpace”. Therefore, it is important to examine the rising importance of other platforms, such as TikTok.

Figure 3 shows that TikTok is a useful platform for targeting feminist messages to Generation Z, which agrees with Pomerantz and Field (2022:62) who state the importance of “TikTok as a facilitator of feminism”. The use of TikTok as a space for political activism (Jalli, 2021), and as a popular platform amongst young feminists exemplifies a digital move away from Facebook, which has been a previous focus of literature. The altering pattern towards platforms such as

TikTok is exemplified by the fact 68% of respondents stated that they engage with short videos as a form of feminist content on social media.

4.2. What motivates and discourages women from engaging and interacting with online feminist activism?

In order to analyse patterns of women’s interaction with feminist-related content on social media, it is key to explore the motivations for their engagement.

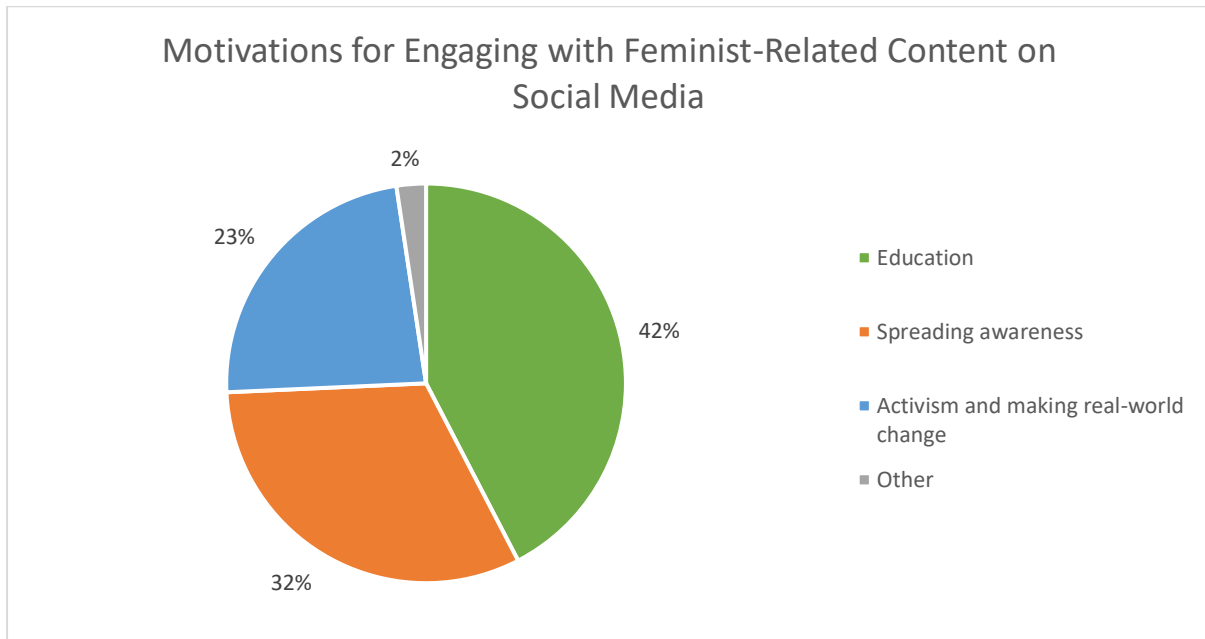


Figure 4: Pie chart illustrating the proportion of women who were motivated by each factor to engage with feminist content on social media.

Figure 4 displays the factors that motivate women to interact with feminist-related content on social media, with 42% of participants identifying education, and 32% selecting spreading awareness, as their motivation. In comparison, a lesser 23% answered that making real-world change motivated them to engage with feminist content. The lack of activist motivation behind using social media as a tool of feminism, poses the question of whether social media is ineffective in leading to real-world change in the feminist movement. This question will be addressed in more detail in Section 4.3, where the opinions and perceptions of women surrounding this topic will be discussed.

It is also key to examine the factors that discourage women’s engagement with feminist-content on social media, in order to identify barriers faced by women, which can then be addressed in order to optimise feminist engagement on social media.

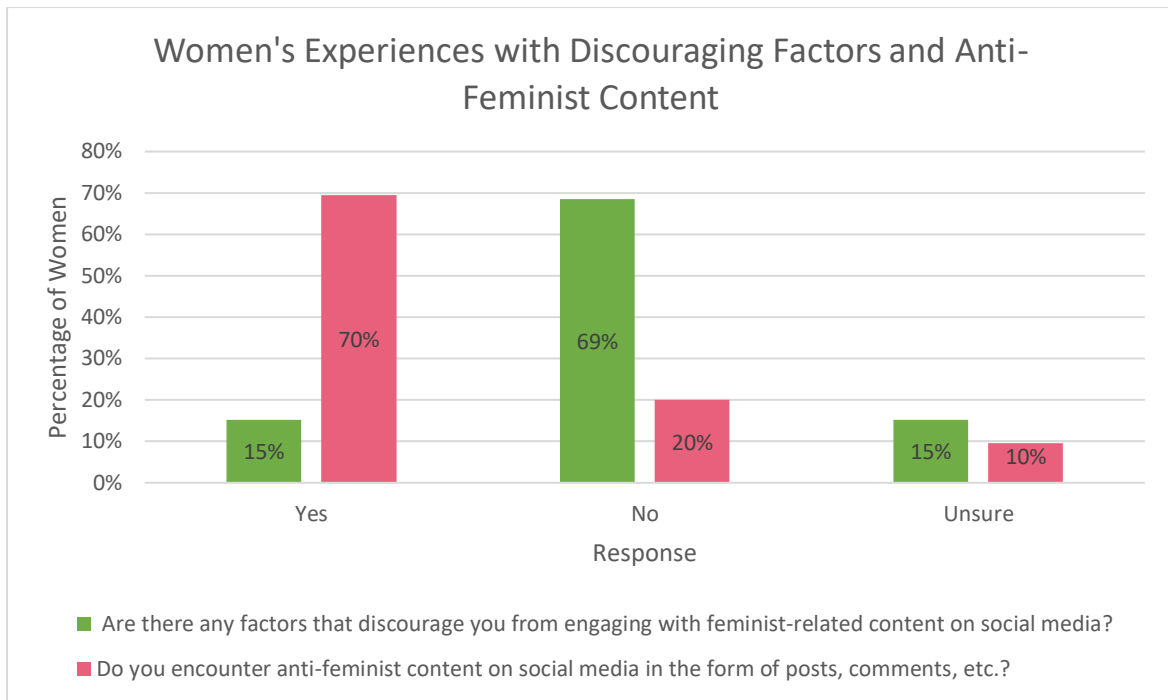


Figure 5: Clustered column illustrating whether women are discouraged from engaging with feminist-related content on social media, and whether respondents encounter anti-feminist content on social media.

Figure 5 presents the proportion of women who answered “Yes”, “No” and “Unsure” to whether there are factors that discourage their engagement with feminist content on social media, and if they encounter anti-feminist content.

Only 15% of respondents agree that there are factors that discourage them from engaging with feminist content on social media, suggesting that motivation for online feminism overrides the barriers women face. Of the women who answered “Yes” to being discouraged, 25% name ‘judgement’ as the dominant factor, stating that negative comments they receive, along with becoming a target for hate, makes them less likely to interact with online feminism. This experience agrees with Amnesty International (2018), that many women have to self-censor what they post to avoid hate online.

The prevalence of anti-feminist content on social media is proven by the fact 70% of respondents encounter anti-feminist sentiments in the form of posts, comments etc. Many respondents of the survey mention the damaging influence of some content creators, such as Andrew Tate, who promotes and normalises misogyny in the online sphere (Haslop et al., 2024). Andrew Tate is a key example of the growing ‘manosphere’, which is a term for online communities that have “narrow and aggressive definitions of what it means to be a man – and a false narrative that feminism and gender equality have come at the cost of men’s rights” (UN Women, 2025). Many respondents raise concerns about the negative influence of online misogyny and creators such as Andrew Tate, especially on younger individuals. One respondent called attention to the fact that social media is run by male voices, which discourages their personal engagement with online feminism. Cyberfeminism is a method to combat male-dominated tech culture, resisting the white, male, able-bodied, straight, English-speaking subject as the normative, and instead placing focus on personal and diverse experiences (Marwick, 2019).

It is important to note that individual women have different experiences of anti-feminist hate. For example, misogynoir is a certain abuse that targets Black women, where racism and misogyny intersect to create a unique form of digital harassment (Madden et al., 2018). The certain ways in which different women are targeted by anti-feminist content impacts on women’s engagement with online feminism.

Figure 5 displays the stark difference in the answers of the two questions shown. The survey found that 69% of participants answered that there are not any factors that discourage them from interacting with feminist-related content on social media. However, in contrast, 70% of women responded that they encounter anti-feminist content on social media. The disparity between responses shows that, whilst 70% of women come across anti-feminist content, most women do not view this as a barrier to their feminist engagement on social media. Instead, it is likely that anti-feminist content creates collective anger among women and motivates more online feminist engagement. Hemmings (2012) notes that the co-experience of rage and shared anger among women online allows for feminist activism, supporting the theory that anti-feminist content does not always discourage feminist engagement, but rather drives participation.

4.3. Is social media perceived as a positive influence for the movement of feminism?

This section will focus on the perceptions of women on social media as a tool of feminism.

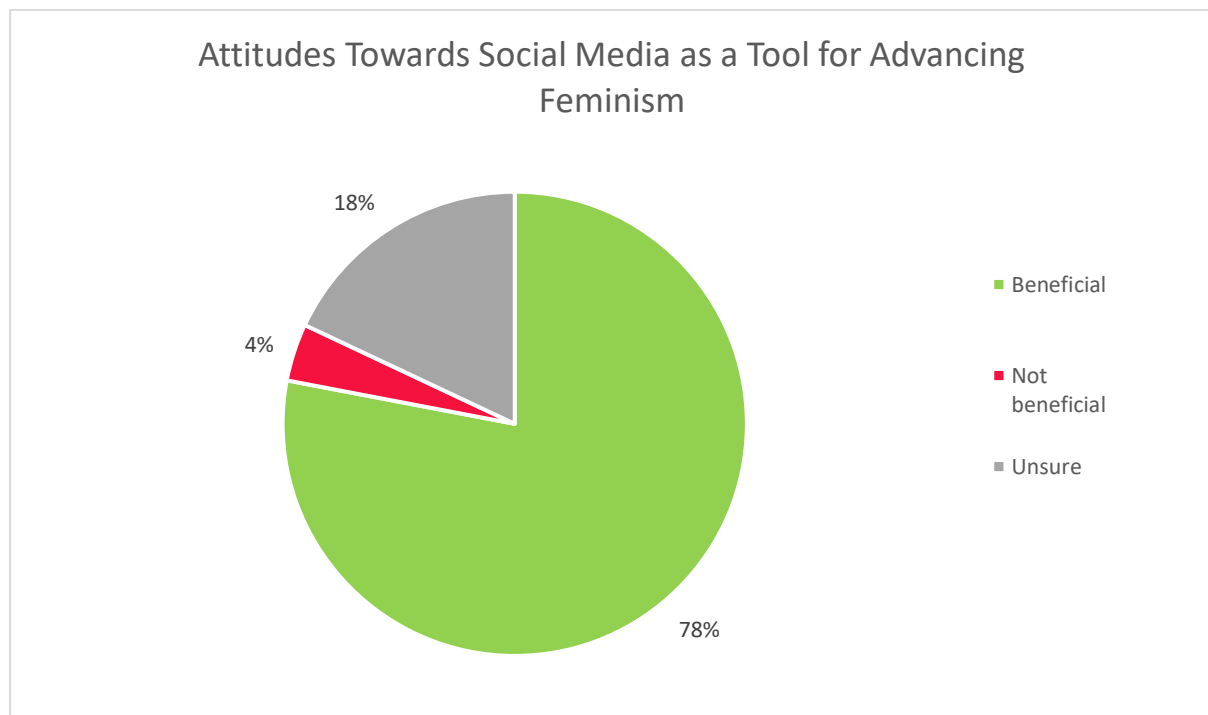


Figure 6: Pie chart showing how women responded to the question “Do you think social media is beneficial for feminism?”.

Figure 6 shows that the majority of respondents (78%) stated that they think social media is beneficial for feminism. Conversely, 18% of respondents answered “Unsure”, showing the mixed opinions of women and the co-existence of benefits and drawbacks of social media as a feminist tool.

The respondents discussed many advantages of online feminism, but one of the most prominent was the ability of social media to spread awareness about the feminist movement, which was mentioned in 34% of answers. Thompson (2023) supports this perspective, discussing the use of social media in increasing awareness about women's rights issues. In this vein, many respondents outlined the benefit of social media in reaching a wider audience, mobilising thousands of people within minutes. Martin and Valenti (2013) note that this encourages decentralised leadership; online feminism moves away from traditional top-down information, and instead allows for collective approaches with collaboration between activists. As part of the decentralised leadership encouraged by social media, more women can access information and contribute to the feminist movement, compared to in traditional feminism. Social media is mobilising more people in the feminist movement, and some respondents note its ability to reach people who may otherwise have not had access to feminist activism. For example, Pomerantz and Field (2022) discuss that TikTok allows young people to learn about feminism before they would have otherwise encountered the topic in depth.

Social media opens up feminism, so it is no longer exclusive to an 'in' crowd, as had occurred with the academisation of feminist theory (hooks, 2000). hooks (2000: 23) encourages reaching beyond the academic and calls for the use of "books on tape, songs, radio and television" to share feminist knowledge. Social media is the modern form of these channels outlined by hooks (2000) and has facilitated the shift so that "feminist knowledge is for everybody" (hooks, 2000: 24).

Many women also identify that social media can assist feminist organisation, connecting women from around the world, and planning offline events. Earl et al (2010: 429) discusses the online facilitation of offline activism, which allows for "providing information on, logistical support for and/or recruitment for offline protest events". However, whilst many women acknowledge this logistical benefit of social media, the survey found that a limited number of women use social media in this way: only 5% of respondents answered that they use social media to organise and find offline feminist events to attend. Therefore, whilst women perceive social media as an organisational tool, not many actually use platforms in this manner.

Whilst the respondents outlined the many advantages of using social media as a tool of feminism, this must be balanced with the negative aspects. For example, many women noted that social media is a breeding ground for anti-feminism and misinformation, which could disrupt the progress of the feminist movement.

Toxic feminism was also identified as a negative impact of online feminism, which involves the marginalisation of women who do not fit the homogenous view of the normatively white and middle-class woman in social media spaces (Marwick, 2019).

One woman called attention to the high burnout rate of feminist activists on social media, due to a lack of funding, which often results in movements losing steam. Marwick (2019) discusses this 'blogger burnout' which occurs due to the unfunded and unsupported nature of feminist work, existing as a 'third shift' after a paid job. Not only does this burnout make it difficult for women to lead feminist movements, but it means that those that can are those who are able to donate unpaid labour. Therefore, this further privileges the already privileged, and overlooks many minority groups, contributing to toxic feminism (Martin and Valenti, 2013).

There is a risk with social media, as highlighted by many respondents, that feminist activism is becoming performative, and people passively absorb content, without leading to real-world change. In this vein, only 53% of respondents believe that engaging with feminist-related

content on social media leads to real-world change for feminism. Kamei (2022) proposes that social media can lead to a loss of critical thinking in feminism, due to the speed at which people are receiving information. However, Hosie (2020) concludes that, whilst many have posed the question of whether political content on platforms such as TikTok is performative, it is a useful tool for activism, even if it only spreads awareness about social justice.

To further understand women’s perceptions of social media as a tool of feminism, it is important to stage the opinions in comparison to more traditional feminist methods, such as protests and events spread by word of mouth.

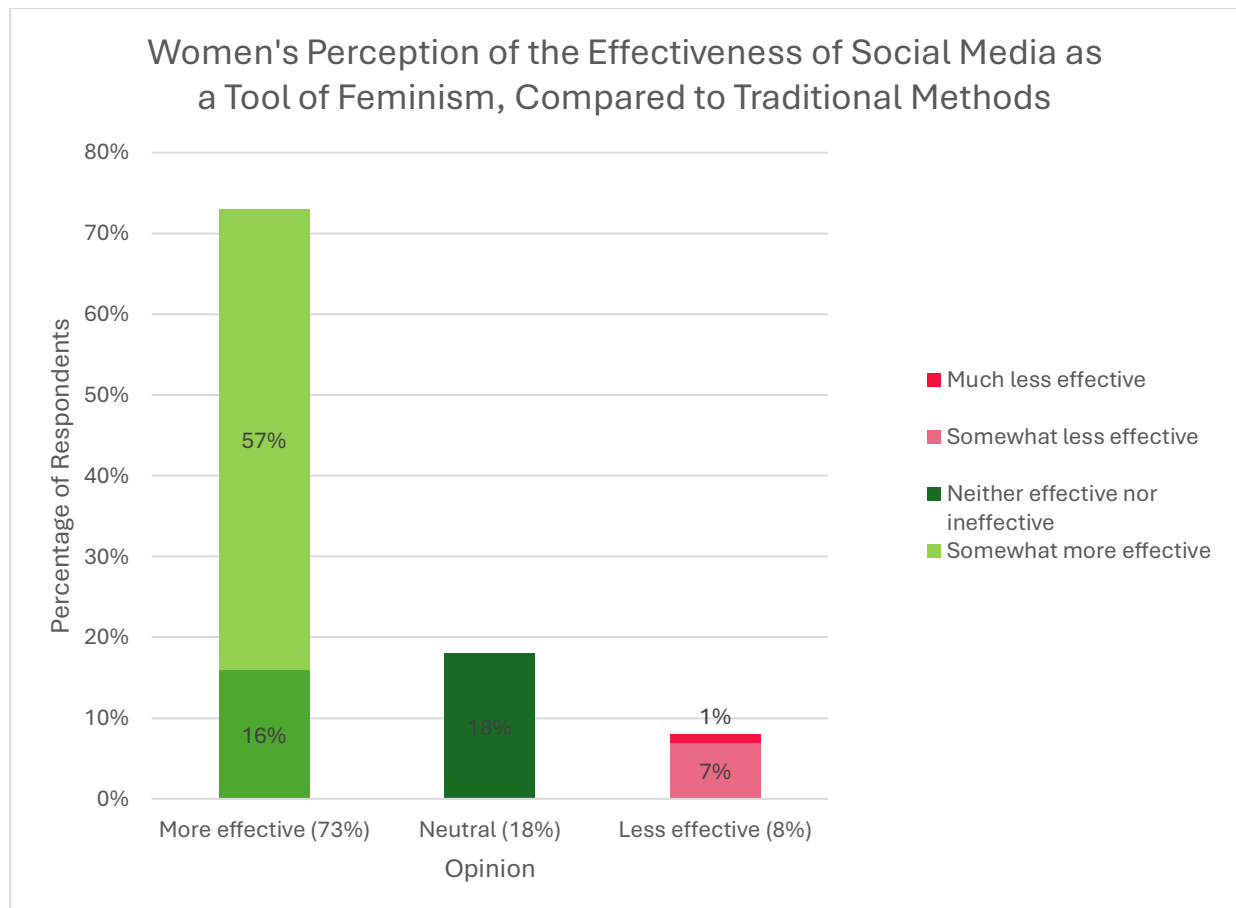


Figure 7: Stacked column chart displaying the perceptions of women about whether online feminism is more or less effective than traditional methods, such as word of mouth and in-person events.

Figure 7 displays respondents’ perceptions of whether social media is more or less effective than traditional feminist methods. It is clear from Figure 7 that the majority of women (73%) believe that using social media as a tool of feminism is more effective than traditional methods. Many women mentioned the more accessible nature of social media, allowing for women of different races, sexuality and geographical locations to collaborate on activism. For example, one respondent mentioned the use of more diverse movements, such as #BlackGirlMagic, which is a collective stand against stereotyping, colourism, misogynoir, and racism, whilst also building on the community of Black women (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2016).

However, not all women agreed that social media is more effective in feminist activism than traditional methods. There was repeated mention of traditional feminist activism being more

memorable and powerful, whilst also being more immediate in demanding change for women. One respondent stated that “you can't beat on-the-ground action”, which is supported by Kamei (2022) who declared “if everyone were to remain solely within the virtual world, who would stand to make a change in the real world?”. To reap the benefits of both online and in person feminist activism, a dual approach should be adopted, with both online and offline aspects of the feminist movement.

5. Conclusion

This study has found that all sampled generations of women use social media to engage with feminist-related content. However, Generation Z is the most digitally-active generation within the feminist movement, using Instagram and TikTok most commonly as a feminist tool. The less frequent interaction of Generation X and Millennials highlights the importance of targeting online feminism to these generations, in order to maintain a community-led feminist movement. Instagram is used somewhat equally among all sampled generations and, therefore, is the most effective medium to promote feminist content, whilst also including the broadest range of women.

Overall, most women perceive social media as a useful tool for supporting feminism, spreading awareness and empowering women in the movement. The mobilisation of women from around the world and from different backgrounds, who can collaborate to promote a decentralised movement, is considered among women as a positive influence of social media.

The study has shown that women acknowledge social media as not being completely feminist; the prominence of anti-feminist content and misogynistic hate is experienced by many respondents. Whilst social media can be used to discriminate against women (Amnesty International, 2018), the research has shown that women do not view anti-feminist content as a barrier to their own engagement. Rather women use this anger to fuel feminist movements, sharing personal experiences and reinforcing the community aspect of feminism, bridging experiences between generations.

Therefore, whilst social media has some drawbacks for feminism, this study has found that women nonetheless view online feminism as a positive influence. For example, women from around the world and from different backgrounds are mobilised. Whilst it is acknowledged that social media can lead to a loss of critical thinking with the speed at which women receive feminist messages, social media is fundamentally viewed as a useful tool for advancing the feminist movement. As one respondent stated, “any action is better than none”.

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