

# Research on the Development of Feminism from the Perspective of the Internet

*Jingyi He*

Institute of Social and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Park Ln, Leeds, United Kingdom

hejingyi411@outlook.com

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**Abstract.** The internet's influence on feminism is of society. Through textual and discourse analysis, it explores how the internet enables women to have a greater voice in media platforms, allowing for the dissemination of feminist ideas and the empowerment of marginalized groups. However, it also highlights the negative repercussions, such as the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, the stigmatization of feminism, and the objectification of women. The paper examines how family upbringing and workplace environments contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal norms, hindering feminist development. Despite these challenges, it emphasizes the growing awareness among women regarding their rights and the increasing participation in feminist movements. The paper concludes by calling for further research to address the systemic barriers to feminist development online and the need to break free from information echo chambers to foster broader understanding and acceptance of feminist ideologies.

**Keywords:** internet, feminism, social media, network

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## 1. Introduction

The development of the internet provides more ways for the development of feminism, and at the same time, the characteristics of the internet also allow women to have more voice in the media, promote the rise of more women's consciousness, and provide strength for the development of feminism. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the development of feminism related to new media from the perspective of the internet and to explore the influence of the internet on the development of feminism and the current development dilemma of feminism. This paper adopts the textual analysis and discourse analysis to explore further the current situation and problems encountered in the development of feminism in the Internet era and to put forward ideas through the study of literature, books, and the analysis of advertisements and other media content.

## 2. Feminism and Its Current Development

Feminism is a set of beliefs and ideas that originated from the feminist movement in the West. Feminism provides the shape and direction of the women's movement [1], and at its core, it aims to achieve equality between men and women and pursue women's rights in law and politics. In China, feminism as a concept first appeared in an article in 1900 [2]. Although the time of emergence varies, on the whole, feminism has produced a period of developmental stagnation due to changes in the social environment.

In recent years, as the internet has become more connected to people's lives, feminism has taken on a new dimension on the internet. This is especially true for young feminists who use the media, pop culture and the internet as a tool for feminist action [3]. The internet has gradually become an essential site for young feminists' practice [4]. Whether in China or the West, it is undisputed that the internet has provided a space for the development of feminism, helping young feminists to come together and facilitating the exchange of information between feminists, bringing political issues into their everyday experiences. It is worth noting, however, that just because the internet has strengthened connections between feminists does not mean that it has helped feminism to develop more rapidly. At the same time, the internet also provides a tool for the development of patriarchy. As demonstrated in the film 'Barbie', if the internet is seen as the real world in the film, the internet has contributed to the development of patriarchy in much the same way Ken has changed Barbie's world after meeting the real world patriarchy. Patriarchy ubiquity in life has allowed it to take advantage of the internet for its quick development. Moreover, because patriarchy has been and often is dominant at different times in the history of different countries and regions, this can have a severe impact on the spread and development of feminism, especially for those women who have long been marginalised and affected by patriarchy.

### 3. How the Internet Has Influenced Feminist Development

In order to answer this question, firstly, it is essential to understand feminist media theory, which is a feminist theory that applies the logic of articulating feminist concepts to the media field. Feminist media theory views gender as an essential factor that constitutes identity and experience without assuming it to be static and constant [5]. Secondly, due to the media's extraordinary priority of information dissemination and the right of speech in this era as an essential vehicle for communicating ideas, the media's expression of gender and other topics in communication will significantly impact the development of feminism.

#### 3.1. Positive Impacts

##### *3.1.1. The Internet Enables Women to Have More Voice on New Media Platforms*

Anyone can post information and express their views on the internet for more people to see. Before (and even now in some countries), women were not allowed to have a voice in the public sphere. This is also exemplified in a piece of Western literature, the *Odyssey*. When Penelope is walking from her private quarters to the palace halls, and she does not think the poem the bard is singing is funny, she tells him to pick a happier one in front of everyone. Young Telemachus (the son of Odysseus and Penelope) interjects, 'Mother, go back to your room; the speeches will be men's business...' [6]. However, after the emergence of the internet, women are no longer restricted from posting information on media platforms, where they have a greater degree of freedom of speech and more possibilities to present themselves, which allows them to spread feminist views and communicate with more feminists from all over the world in a more accessible and more straightforward way, thus enriching the concept of feminism even more.

##### *3.1.2. The Emergence of the Internet Enhances Women's Influence*

On the media platform built on the internet, women can rely on their knowledge, dress, writing, life records, make-up techniques, etc., to gain audiences and influence; women who are despised in the actual workplace can also post their ideas about certain things on the internet platform to help others and influence more people. Li Ziqi, named Person of the Year by China Newsweek, has been seen across the country and even around the world for spreading the pure culture of subsistence farming in the Chinese countryside, spreading Chinese culture through her influence. Additionally, before the advent of the internet and even in the early days of the internet, many societies, including the West, prohibited public talk about rape. However, as more and more women began to speak out and break the boundaries of the topic's restriction by secular prejudice, more and more people who had experienced the same thing could see it, gradually prompting survivors of sexual violence to have a voice all over the world and, through the discussion, to gain attention globally [7]. Women can also share the dangers they encounter living alone in videos or comments about sharing to alert other women to their safety and bring attention to what would otherwise go unnoticed or undiscussed so that it can be addressed. This is referred to by many young Chinese feminists as 'girls help girls', meaning that although feminists are not yet powerful enough to influence society as a whole, they can first help and influence the women around them. It is also mentioned in the study of the role of feminism in the web in Spain that the goal of these feminists who use the web to post information is to raise awareness of feminism. Internet feminists include a variety of female voices, such as queer women, transgender people, working-class women, and others [8]. The internet has made women less of a marginal figure in politics and society, allowing more people to see the impact women have on society and the power of women, making more and more people realise the importance of women and join in promoting feminism.

#### 3.2. Negative Impacts

##### *3.2.1. Feminism Is Misunderstood*

In China, with the development of the internet in recent years, feminism has become familiar to many internet users, especially young users. However, most people do not understand what "feminism" is in a society where information is rapidly updated. On the internet, when female influencers raise questions about "the different situations faced by men and women in society" and end with the conclusion that "women are more unprotected", their videos are often commented on by men in a very mean tone. The comments on their videos often contain very mean and even abusive comments from men. This is often worse when a full-time mum posts the video. From the men's point of view, although some acknowledge their vested interest in the patriarchal system, they also believe it exploits them by driving them to strive for male ideals such as high income, social status, and power [9]. Therefore, they do not accept and attribute to feminism the idea that "women are less protected" by "full-time mums" or women who, in their opinion, "do not need to be subjected to too much social pressure". In this context, when feminists who do not understand the true meaning of feminism attack all men who disagree with them in the name of feminism, some men will generalise this as the view of all feminists, thus generating critical and denigrating behaviours and replacing the word 'power' with 'fight' in the word 'feminism' (in Chinese, right and fight have the same pronunciation), meaning "a fist that swings wildly". The rapid flow

of information on the internet and the butterfly effect caused by small acts between any group of people are leading to deeper and deeper misunderstandings and more extreme gender antagonistic behaviour between men and women.

### 3.2.2. *Stigmatisation of Feminism*

The rapid development of the internet and the high-speed transmission of information may expose users to information that is hard to distinguish from the truth and give more powerful influence to some media and corporate accounts that have more speech power on the internet than ordinary users. When these accounts, regarded as authoritative organisations by ordinary users, publish inaccurate content, the majority of the audience is likelier to believe it and spread the information. When analysing the text of the content published by the media, it is easy to find that some media accounts that have been authenticated by online platforms and have a wide range of audiences also find it difficult to follow the truthfulness and objectivity of the news when publishing information about feminism. In China, for example, the term "female driver" has been seen by feminist resisters and much of the patriarchal media as demeaning to women's ability to drive and has had the widespread effect of making many women doubt their ability to drive, gradually creating a stereotype of women drivers as inferior to male drivers. The term "female driver" is also seen as critical and demeaning to women by all groups of people, including women. Defenders of the patriarchy attempt to justify the critique of individual women's competence by labelling the group as less competent, thereby exaggerating the scope for spreading misogyny and discrimination against feminists and maintaining patriarchal equality (the real-world power inequality) through the stigmatisation of women and feminism.

In fact, during the heyday of second-wave feminism, almost half of the articles tried to delegitimise feminism by defining the feminist agenda as radical [10], and even the textual presentation gradually became networked, using eye-catching headlines or topics in pursuit of news hits. The reason for this is that the news media usually operates within a patriarchal system [11], and attention is only given to women when they display attitudes that are not taken into account in traditional definitions or when they break the public perception. Whilst women have more power to express themselves and promote feminism on the internet, the media's use of words such as 'radical' and 'emotional' to define feminists will hinder the development of feminism.

### 3.2.3. *The Internet Contributes to the Objectification and Commodification of Women*

In previous research, an example of an American clothing company was mentioned: in 2012, the company released an advert featuring young women in tight clothing with their legs spread wide, sending an erotic message to the camera, with the headline 'new open'. In the advert, women are depicted as inanimate objects (Keller, 2021), and women are used in the advert itself to attract customers. Indeed, the objectification of women as consumer products is exacerbated on the internet due to patriarchal influences and the internet's precise data analysis of men's tendency to consume pornographic products. However, for women, once they are objectified, it means that they are not seen as equals, which is the same problem feminists want to solve and change the status quo. Undeniably, the internet has broadened the channels of women's expression, and women are no longer only "owned" by their spouses.

Moreover, due to the influx of information on the internet, women who were previously unaware of the problem of "objectification of women" may be able to recognise it and act against it. To some extent, the ability of patriarchal men to objectify women is weakened. Nevertheless, at the same time, due to the long-lasting influence of the patriarchal system, women's struggle for freedom on the internet (e.g., the freedom to post photos of their bodies and to choose their styles of dress) is more easily ignored for its own sake, i.e., to call on more women to abandon their traditional influences. Even many men instead see it as ingratiating and believe that women influencers are gaining fame and benefits because of male attention and that women should be grateful for this. This is a great misunderstanding of the behaviour of feminists in their quest to break the deadlock and ignores the efforts of feminists towards the development of feminism.

### 3.2.4. *The Phenomenon of the Information Cocoon Room Hinders the Development of Feminism*

In the context of existing media platforms, algorithmic technology is widely used in various websites to capture user preferences and make corresponding placements accurately. The concept of the "information cocoon room" was first proposed by American scholar Sunstein in the book 'Information Utopia' in 2008, when the internet was in the era of Web 2.0. With the birth of social media, more and more individual users can access the internet and express their opinions [12]. However, influenced by existing perceptions, people tend to be more willing to accept some information that supports their attitudes and show disinterest in other information in their social media browsing habits, and over time, lose the opportunity to receive different types of information, which is known as the information cocoon effect [13].

For the people who spread feminism on the internet and those who single-handedly reject all content that has a feminist message to spread, the information cocoon effect only serves to show them what they want to see, thus exacerbating the separation of these two groups. When further societal-wide discussions on the issue are held, the inconsistency of group opinions can easily lead to difficulties in reaching a societal consensus [12]. For feminists, this is not a desired outcome. In this context, it is difficult for them to convey the message of feminist development outside of the group of people who are concerned about feminists, let alone correct the views of the group of people who are overly resistant to the concept of feminism. Furthermore, within the social platforms of those who resist feminism, they usually only learn about some extreme feminist behaviours and concepts and, from there, equate

feminism with extreme feminism. Therefore, when searching for information about feminism online, it is also not difficult to find satirical videos produced by people who oppose the spread of feminism.

Similarly, in a Korean study, the point was made that in feminist media research, spoofing behaviours are often present and contribute to creating emotional communities [14]. People in such affective communities are usually opposed and resistant to feminism. This sentiment is similarly recognised as righteous as they interact with each other and attempt to use the power of the group to spread the already biased message to a broader range of people who have a negative impression of feminism [15]. Feminism is hindered by reinforcing the stereotypes of such people.

## 4. Feminist Development Dilemmas

Influenced by traditional social attitudes, women's and men's understanding of women before they come into contact with the internet is mainly based on stereotypes from their family and social environments. The phrase "women are from Venus, men are from Mars" is often seen as describing the differences in how men and women think, feel and behave. It is undeniable that men and women differ in many areas of life; however, even though they exhibit similar characteristics, preferences and ambitions, stereotypes make the general public view and expect different things from them [16]. This paragraph aims to analyse the impact of external pressures on the development of feminism in terms of social environment and family education.

### 4.1. Influence of Family Education on the Development of Feminism

In the analysis of the literature of different countries, I found that many countries and regions have varying degrees of women being influenced by family education and subconsciously developing gender stereotypes. Some scholars have also suggested that family education, especially preschool education, is vital for developing gender stereotypes [17]. Firstly, when a woman becomes a mother, she is usually taught that caring for her children is her main task. Women's parents more often give the expectation of putting in work to women's male partners [16], which to some extent is stereotypical for both women and men and also causes women to be still influenced by friends and family around them due to emotions and other factors after learning about feminism, thus ignoring some of the subtle shackles that women place on themselves, such as the belief that it is normal for women to earn less than their male counterparts, that it is easier for women to make irrational judgements, and that women should take care of their children compared to men, are the result of long-term family influences. It is usually difficult for such feminists to break away from the shackles of patriarchy.

Moreover, on the internet, media reports reinforce different standards for men and women. In their coverage, the media focuses on reporting on men's achievements. In contrast, for women with high achievements, there is more focus on appearance and personal relationships [16], and high-achieving, high-status women are often even speculated to have inappropriate relationships with men. Research suggests that over time, gender stereotypes conveyed in this implicit way can influence women's beliefs about gender, roles, etc. [18], which would have a reverse effect on the development of feminist drives.

### 4.2. Workplace Environment Affects the Development Of Feminism

In the workplace, although women's perception of their value has gradually become more apparent and many of the rights that women are entitled to have been fought for, women are still more likely to be rejected and discriminated against because of the biological reason of childbearing. For example, when candidates with the same background apply for the same company, men are more likely to be accepted than women. Moreover, during the interview process, most interviewers will consider women's maternity reasons, and even if the applicant has no immediate plans to have children or clearly states that she does not intend to have children, the interviewer will still reject the female applicant for this reason. However, men are not affected by the issue of marriage and parenthood. The reason for this is that people think men's working hours are more stable than women's, who need maternity leave and are perceived to spend long hours caring for their children after giving birth. In some fields, such as engineering and construction, jobs that require much time away from home and a variable work environment are also reject women because of stereotypes that women cannot handle the intensity of the work. In addition, women are considered by some men to be 'non-workers', meaning that they are not suitable to be the breadwinners because they are only responsible for ancillary tasks such as taking care of the family. This is partly a sign of male discrimination against women and a sign of men's desire to maintain patriarchy by placing women in a subordinate position.

Inevitably, there is also the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace. A study in the early twenty-first century showed that 58 per cent of 86,578 working women had experienced sexual harassment at work [19]. Especially in recent years, with the convenience of the internet and the development of feminism, more and more women are joining the fight to protect their rights and no longer tolerate sexual harassment, which also makes some male managers in the workplace feel frustrated. Due to men's 'empathy' with people of the same gender, some men may even think that women's actions affect the company's image, so they try to attribute the problem to female applicants, who are more likely to be 'solved', and spread rumours to affect the image of harassed women, to guide public opinion to solve the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace, which is undoubtedly disrespectful to and belittling of women. This act of disenfranchisement of women also implicitly affects other women who are sexually harassed in the workplace by making them feel afraid to speak out [20]. This is also a male display of power and

suppression of the development of feminism and sexual harassment in the workplace due to the difficulty of obtaining evidence and other objective factors and the lack of a proper solution to the plight of women who can not get justice, how to protect women's rights in the workplace is still a problem.

## 5. Conclusion

In the analysis of the article, we found that the impact of the internet on the development of feminism is two-sided. Although the internet provides a broader space for the development of feminism, at the same time, due to the influence of patriarchy in all areas of society, especially in the media industry related to the internet, men's urgent intention to defend patriarchy conflicts with the development of feminism, and the development of feminism is still facing many difficulties. Fortunately, more and more women have become aware of the denial of women's rights and have taken the initiative to participate in the fight for women's rights. In addition, it is worth noting that the discrimination faced by women in the workplace has become an urgent problem, and women's desire to be treated equally in society is becoming a problem that must be addressed in the development of contemporary feminism. At the same time, we also need to conduct more in-depth research on whether the development of feminism through the internet requires a complete system and how to break the information cocoon room so that more people can learn about feminism and change the radical image of feminists.

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