

The Influence of Information Cocoon Effect on the Spread of Feminism: Taking Douyin as an Example

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of social media platforms has provided new avenues for feminist discourse, enabling broader public engagement and visibility. However, algorithm-driven environments like Douyin (Chinese TikTok) introduce the information cocoon effect, which reinforces user biases by tailoring content to their preferences. This study investigates how these algorithmic constraints impact the dissemination of feminist content, shaping public perception and influencing the strategies of feminist creators. Using literature review and case study methods, the paper examines the effects of Douyin's recommendation algorithms on feminist narratives. It explores how feminist creators navigate the platform's algorithmic and audience-driven challenges, addressing the tension between generating visibility and delivering substantive, intersectional feminist discourse. The findings highlight the limitations imposed by the information cocoon effect, which prioritizes superficial, sensational content, thereby narrowing feminist perspectives and perpetuating misconceptions. The study underscores the importance of quality-driven, inclusive content strategies in breaking through these constraints to foster meaningful discussions and promote gender equality in digital spaces.

Keywords: Feminism, algorithm, new media, feminism content creator.

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has reshaped how information is consumed and disseminated, offering diverse voices a platform to amplify their messages. Feminism, a social movement advocating for gender equality, has leveraged these digital tools to foster solidarity and challenge societal norms. However, algorithm-driven platforms like Douyin (Chinese TikTok) introduce the information cocoon effect, where content is tailored to user preferences, reinforcing existing biases and limiting exposure to intersectional feminist perspectives [1-2]. This dynamic challenges feminist creators to navigate a system that favors entertainment and superficial engagement.

As Douyin increasingly becomes a popular platform for feminist influencers and activists in China, feminists, especially younger generations, have increasingly turned to social media to promote gender equality, challenge stereotypes, and foster solidarity. However, those influencers face unique barriers. Algorithmic personalization and the platform's traffic-driven nature restrict in-depth feminist content to niche audiences, mirroring global trends of echo chambers polarizing public discourse [3]. Moreover, the rise of "celebrity feminism" on platforms like Douyin often prioritizes oversimplified or highly controversial feminism themes to attract public and traffic, diluting feminist critiques of

systemic oppression such as patriarchal structures [4]. These challenges reflect a broader tension between digital accessibility and the depth of feminist discourse.

Previous studies highlight both opportunities and limitations for feminism in new media. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller emphasize social media's role in amplifying feminist activism, despite challenges like online harassment and algorithmic filtering [5]. Lamartine and Cerqueira demonstrate how digital platforms support feminist organizing but require adaptive strategies to overcome algorithmic constraints [6]. Munro discusses how the fourth wave of feminism leverages digital networks to promote intersectionality, emphasizing inclusivity across issues of race, gender, and class [7].

Using literature review and case study methods, this study investigates how Douyin's recommendation algorithms shape feminist discourse. It explores the impact of the information cocoon effect on feminist content dissemination and proposes strategies for fostering inclusive, intersectional feminist narratives on digital platforms.

2. Literature review

In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to the influence of algorithmic curation on the dissemination of social movements, particularly feminism, through digital platforms. The concept of the information cocoon effect, initially introduced by Cass Sunstein, posits that algorithms tailor information to users' existing preferences, which can trap individuals in self-reinforcing content loops. This phenomenon has far-reaching implications for the promotion of feminist discourse in the new media era.

According to Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, platforms outside China, are providing new avenues for feminist activism, but they also amplify digital harassment and reinforce existing power structures through selective exposure [5]. Feminist content that challenges mainstream views may be sidelined by algorithms that prioritize engagement, thereby limiting the reach of intersectional feminist ideas. Lamartine and Cerqueira's work on cyberfeminism further supports this, demonstrating how digital platforms can both aid and limit feminist movements' efforts, particularly in the context of organizing events like the International Feminist Strike [6]. They highlight the importance of communication strategies that adapt to algorithmic limitations while maintaining the movement's goals. However, they neglect the significance of how different depths of the content reflect exposure, which affects the public's opinions, acceptance, and reaction in the whole digital environment.

In the context of Douyin, the platform's recommendation algorithms function similarly to those of Western counterparts, curating content based on user behavior. Research shows that Douyin's algorithm assigns content to users based on their viewing history and engagement patterns, effectively narrowing their exposure to unfamiliar ideas, including diverse feminist perspectives [2]. This raises important questions about the impact of the information cocoon on feminist content visibility, particularly in a Chinese context where feminist discourse is already subject to cultural and political constraints.

Through the related literature review, this paper arrives at the research questions below:

1. *How is feminist contentspread on the Douyin platform?*
2. *How does the information cocoon effect influence the spread of feminist discourse on Douyin?*
3. *How do feminist creators adapt their content strategies to overcome algorithmic filtering and reach broader audiences? What are the characteristics of feminist discourse in Douyin?*

Therefore, the research hypothesizes that the information cocoon effect on Douyin significantly limits users' exposure to diverse feminist perspectives by reinforcing their pre-existing preferences and biases. It is further expected that Douyin's recommendation algorithms tend to prioritize superficial, controversial or entertain-based feminist content, thereby restricting the visibility of more intersectional or radical feminist ideas. To navigate these constraints, feminist creators on the

platform may need to strategically modify their content to align with the platform's algorithmic preferences in order to achieve a broader reach and engagement. These hypotheses aim to explore the interplay between algorithmic curation and the dissemination of feminist discourse on Douyin.

3. The Representation and Engagement of Feminist Discourse on Douyin

In examining the current state of feminist content on Douyin, it becomes apparent that the platform's algorithm-driven environment significantly influences the type of feminist discourse that gains traction. Douyin, like many other social media platforms, is structured to maximize user engagement, which often leads to the promotion of content that aligns with trending topics or that sparks controversy. This dynamic poses challenges for feminist content creators, particularly those who engage with more nuanced and theoretically complex feminist perspectives, such as radical feminism or postmodern feminism. These creators typically receive less attention compared to those who focus on reactionary content, critiquing or commenting on hot topics or viral gender-related events.

In the initial formation of new media feminism, because women's rights issues are often ignored by traditional media, the dissemination of feminism is basically attached to public opinion events, and then enters the public agenda through new media platforms [8]. However, with the spread of feminism in recent years, it has gradually mastered the new media mode and entered the public's vision. The case study shows that bloggers who delve into detailed feminist theories—such as those offering in-depth analyses of radical feminist critiques or postmodern feminist interpretations of societal phenomena—often struggle to generate the same level of engagement as those who address popular or controversial events. Metrics such as likes, comments, and shares reveal a disparity in public interaction, with creators of theoretical content receiving significantly lower levels of engagement. For example, the number of likes on a detailed feminist post is much lower than that of a post offering a critique of a viral gender-related controversy. Additionally, the gender composition of high-engagement comments on controversial posts reveals a more balanced representation of both men and women, suggesting that divisive content triggers broader public discourse.

4. Strategies for Overcoming Algorithmic Filtering: Feminist Bloggers and the Information Cocoon Effect

In the face of algorithmic curation and the information cocoon effect, some feminist bloggers on Douyin have developed strategies to gain more visibility, transcending the platform's inherent biases. The information cocoon effect refers to the phenomenon where users are fed content that aligns with their existing preferences, limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives. However, feminist bloggers seeking broader reach are increasingly adopting content strategies that appeal to wider audiences, effectively breaking out of these cocooned environments. By leveraging user engagement mechanisms, such as commenting on trending topics or creating content that is visually and thematically aligned with the platform's most popular formats, these creators can disrupt the algorithmic constraints that would otherwise confine them to smaller, more niche communities.

Despite the potential for broadening exposure, creators face a dilemma: the public tends to favor superficial and eye-catching short videos that may sacrifice depth for visibility. This is particularly true on Douyin, where the algorithm rewards high levels of engagement, often directing traffic to content that appeals to mass tastes. As a result, feminist bloggers who focus on highly visual, attention-grabbing content tend to fare better in terms of likes, shares, and visibility, even if the substance of their feminist arguments is diluted. This trend points to a broader issue in the propagation mode on Douyin: creators who comment on hot or controversial events are more likely to attract lucrative traffic. By tapping into the public's appetite for sensationalism, these creators boost their visibility and profit, but this approach risks overshadowing more substantive feminist discussions.

5. Structural and Content-Related Challenges in Promoting Feminism on Douyin

One of the key problems feminism faces in Douyin is the narrowing of feminist perspectives. For a variety of reasons, the discussion of women's rights rarely enters the public agenda, so many feminists are reluctant to miss any opportunity to express themselves, resulting in often overheated or out-of-control situations [9]. This is one of the reasons why popular feminist content focuses on easily digestible critiques of gender dynamics, while more profound discussions about gender theory or the systemic underpinnings of patriarchy are often sidelined. Bloggers who produce detailed, comprehensive, and theoretically grounded feminist content tend to struggle to gain traction, as their posts do not align with the dominant trends or user preferences on the platform. This creates a vicious cycle where algorithmic filtering further marginalizes this content, making it difficult to break through the information cocoon and reach broader audiences. Furthermore, the agitating voices (not to say they are unuseful) will make netizens who do not often come into contact with feminism misunderstand it, resulting in negative feedback like extreme, insecure and a large number of ununderstood voices

Another significant issue is the rise of erroneous and harmful views that distort the message of feminism and contribute to a toxic online environment. On platforms like Douyin, some bloggers and users promote provocative, extreme, and antagonistic views under the guise of feminism, which not only aggravates gender tensions but also distorts public understanding of what feminism truly represents. Examples include views commented down the video about a feminist creator discussing warm spots:

User A: Do not stand on the side of men; do not scold women

User B replies: Good point!

User C: I didn't look too closely at what happened to these girls, but I know I'm definitely not on this guy's side

User D: I always stand on the side of the girls with no doubts; it's always right to not participate in the encircling and suppression of the females.

Supplement with meme:

That sounds a little crazy

But it's a man

It is normal

User E: In fact, once I saw a guy join, I slid away immediately.

Many women's opinions are influenced, showing in statements like: "When somethings happens, do not stand on the side of men, and do not scold women. "This is actually a misunderstanding of radical feminism, and it will only lead to further stereotyping of men and women, and increased fear.

The extreme opinions claimed by alleged feminist creators—whether they involve aggressive denunciations of men or radical critiques of societal structures—contribute to a polarization of online discourse, creating gender antagonism rather than fostering constructive dialogue about gender equality. Additionally, it's a pity that, as a result, many women are immersed in the illusion of the rise of female consciousness, falling into a state of alertness and contradiction rather than true consciousness liberation.

Moreover, Douyin has seen the emergence of “fake” feminists, individuals who capitalize on the growing popularity of feminist discourse on social media to gain attention and traffic. These creators often promote false or oversimplified feminist ideologies that deviate from the core values of the movement. Their content tends to focus on superficial gender conflicts or exaggerated claims, which can mislead the public and divert attention from genuine feminist issues. By occupying public resources and diverting traffic away from meaningful feminist content, these creators undermine the

movement's goals and contribute to the commodification of feminism as just another trendy topic for engagement.

6. The sense of insignificance and gender polarization

The short video format inherent to platforms like Douyin is designed to cater to the limited attention spans of users, as attention diminishes significantly with time [10]. Videos are typically restricted to durations under one minute, leading to the prevalence of concise, simplified, and often polarizing content. While these characteristics allow for greater reach and engagement, they also foster misunderstandings and open the door to attacks by individuals with ill intentions. Simplistic portrayals of feminism, stripped of nuance, often result in misrepresentation and criticism from the broader audience.

One prominent case exemplifies this issue: an anti-feminist male blogger illustrated the supposed "stages" of female feminist bloggers' development—women's growth, women's plight, criticism of patriarchy, and radical feminism. His narrative framed these stages as corresponding to a decline in perceived physical attractiveness, equating radical feminist critiques with a lack of aesthetic appeal. Such depictions reflect a narrow understanding of feminism and utilize inflammatory rhetoric to undermine feminist creators who have managed to gain visibility despite the information cocoon effect. By caricaturing feminist efforts and associating them with negativity, these individuals incite public fear and polarization in gender relations.

As users engage with and agree with such reductive portrayals, platform algorithms amplify their exposure to similar content, reinforcing distorted feminist concepts and perpetuating a cycle of misinformation. This process highlights how algorithmic recommendations shape user perceptions, often to the detriment of nuanced feminist discourse. The repetition of content not only entrenches skewed views but also creates a hostile environment for feminist creators.

Additionally, the radical and homogeneous nature of widely publicized feminist content has inadvertently sparked mockery and trivialization. Terms like "women's power," used to deride aggressive feminist statements, and scoff like "women safe," which originated from the hashtags added to content about women's safety concerns, have become tools for some users to ridicule feminist achievements. Such behaviors trivialize the struggles and risks faced by women, turning genuine concerns into internet jokes that nullify the long strive of feminism. To elaborate, research by Lee, Jang and Chung and studies found that when users see comments that align with their views, it bolsters their own convictions, leading to opinion reinforcement. Conversely, users exposed to contrasting views are more likely to hesitate or adjust their opinions, often influenced by a perceived shift in the broader opinion climate—a phenomenon rooted in Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" theory [11]. Thus, the playful and disrespectful words will be emulated by more people, not only drowning out the voices of feminists, but also making those confused people unknowingly fall into perpetuating misogynistic actions, further worsening the environment of feminist digital communication. Consequently, under the influence of the information cocoon effect, these trends deepen public misunderstandings of feminism and hinder its broader acceptance.

This climate of trivialization and hostility poses significant challenges to the dissemination of feminism through new media. Misogynistic narratives, fueled by misinformation and entertainment-driven content, erode the credibility of feminist efforts. Consequently, the path to leveraging new media for feminist advocacy grows increasingly fraught, requiring creators to navigate a delicate balance between gaining visibility and preserving the integrity of their message.

7. Sustainable and Effective Feminist Advocacy in new media

In response to these challenges, it is crucial that feminist bloggers adopt a more measured and thoughtful approach to content creation on Douyin. Rather than chasing quick exposure through sensational or controversial topics, creators should focus on high-quality, theory-driven content that can gradually break through the information cocoon effect. While this process may take longer and may initially reach fewer people, it fosters meaningful engagement with users who are genuinely interested in feminist discourse. By starting with smaller, targeted audiences who are open to in-depth discussions, bloggers can build a sustainable community of followers who value thoughtful content over quick, provocative commentary. Shifting individual perspectives is inherently challenging; however, feminist initiatives could focus on exerting a subtle yet transformative influence on public cognition and societal norms. By gradually shaping collective attitudes and fostering a more inclusive public discourse, such efforts create an environment where dissenting individuals are incrementally influenced to align with evolving social paradigms [12].

It is essential that feminist content creators reduce their reliance on extreme or inflammatory rhetoric, as this not only distorts the core values of feminism but also contributes to an unhealthy public discourse. Instead, creators should aim to foster discussions that emphasize freedom, equality, and mutual respect, and promote a vision of gender liberation that is inclusive and free from sensationalism. Over time, these strategies can contribute to a more diverse and inclusive feminist movement on Douyin, one that moves beyond superficial engagement to achieve true social transformation.

Consequently, while Douyin presents unique opportunities for the promotion of feminism, the platform's algorithmic structure and user behavior create significant challenges. Feminist content must adapt to these conditions by balancing visibility with substance, avoiding the pitfalls of sensationalism, and fostering a thoughtful, inclusive dialogue that truly advances the cause of gender equality and the true liberation of ideology from oppressive social norms.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explored the influence of the information cocoon effect on the dissemination of feminist discourse, using Douyin as a case study. It highlighted how algorithmic personalization shapes public perception by reinforcing biases and favoring superficial, sensational content. Feminist creators face significant challenges in breaking through algorithmic barriers, and balancing visibility with the delivery of meaningful, intersectional narratives. The findings emphasize the critical need for strategic, theory-driven approaches to counteract these constraints and foster meaningful public engagement in the online dissemination of feminism.

However, this paper has limitations that warrant further exploration. It lacks interviews with content creators and users, as well as quantitative data to support its observations. Future research could employ mixed methods, combining qualitative insights from interviews with statistical analysis of user engagement metrics to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Expanding the literature base to include comparative studies across platforms may also deepen insights into how algorithmic dynamics vary by context.

Looking ahead, research should focus on developing frameworks for creating sustainable feminist content strategies in algorithm-driven environments. Topics such as the intersection of feminism and digital ethics, effective strategies to combat misinformation, and measuring the long-term impact of feminist narratives in digital spaces hold promise for advancing the discourse. By addressing these areas, future studies can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable digital environment for feminist advocacy.

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