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# "Swipe up to smash the patriarchy": Instagram feminist activism and the necessity of branding the self

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## Abstract

This article provides an overview of the current status of digital feminism in Western societies after the pandemic. With particular attention to its expression in the Italian realm, and by merging auto ethnographical notes with existing theoretical contributions, I argue that the emerging figure of the activist-influencer is increasingly embodying the prominent form of digital feminism. Activist influencers become the expression of the entanglement between neoliberal feminism and platform affordances that encourage self-branding and consumer activities. In so doing, digital feminism reinforces a culture of competition, individual empowerment and depoliticisation, which could be detrimental to feminist solidarity and the urgency of creating shared political agendas to implement feminist policies and push for structural socio-political changes.

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## 1. Introduction

The use of hashtags, callouts and online flash mobs is an ever-growing and widespread practice among recent social movements, and feminism is no exception. In the past ten years, the use of digital tools by feminist activists has gained so much attention that some scholars argue that we are facing the fourth wave of feminism which, according to Knappe and Lang, "is defined by its focus on technology" (2014, 364). Social media are often seen as having the potential for disseminating feminist positions, establishing public discourses on gender and sexist oppression, and enabling the emergence of new creative tactics of resistance (Baer 2016). In more recent years, we have seen a massive growth of the so-called hashtag feminism (*Ibidem*) and the use of digital media to enable new modes of communication and activism around the globe, both online and offline. National, transnational and global academic literature is increasingly focused on the connections between feminism and social media, and literature on the topic is interdisciplinary (see Baer 2016; Hutton *et al.* 2016; Manago 2013). However, digital feminism is a complex and sometimes contradictory concept, thus should not be seen as a unique and compact body of movement as its relevance and effectivity for the feminist movement are still being debated among scholars. Criticisms of digital feminism primarily concern a shift towards post-feminist positions (McRobbie 2009) that digital platforms' affordances may facilitate. In particular, the increasing reliance on creating brands of the self is becoming an issue of concern among different scholars (Banet-Weiser 2018; Pruchniewska 2018; Gill 2010) as it may show an oscillation towards the latest capitalist subsumption of women and the feminist movement. In this context, the present article focuses on the recent emergence of a hybrid

and still overlooked figure inside digital feminism: the feminist *activist-influencer* that merges self-branding activities with political aspirations.

The analysis looks particularly at the Italian context, where more and more personal profiles have recently emerged on social media to disseminate feminist content online and to raise awareness on gender-based discrimination and violence. However, as online content creation needs to align with commercial platform requirements to personalise content and target individual users to achieve visibility, content creators are forced to deploy several self-branding strategies to "feed the algorithm" in the context of social media competition. However, which visions of the world are encoded in the digital feminism rooted in the logic of self-branding, and which are the consequences for feminism more broadly?

This paper initially takes a narrative approach to answer this research question, showcasing my experience as an online feminist activist in the form of an autoethnography on Instagram. Afterwards, it critically addresses public discourses of different activist-influencers manually gathered through screenshots and connects them to a theoretical framework on post-feminism limitations. Particularly, this research considers the contradictions in identifying oneself as an online feminist activist in relation to the constraints of platform affordances and the adherence to post-feminism by content creators. In the discussion, I contend that Italian digital feminists engage in three ways of confronting criticisms of their branded online activity as part of their activism: first, the right to digital feminist labour; second, the redefinition of intersectional feminism according to post-feminist positions; and third, the belief in the power of social media to create networks.

## 2. Digital feminism: an overview of the debate

The most known expression of digital feminism is hashtag feminism, which is the practice of using hashtags to address feminist issues by sharing personal experiences of sexual violence and discrimination or "shouting back" through collective callouts as a way of exposing the prejudice faced by women daily (Turley and Fisher 2018). This happens because hashtags can become visible and viral through algorithmic trending processes embedded in social media platforms (Latina and Docherty 2014) and make social networks new spaces for activist experimentation. Prominent examples of this phenomenon are global movements like #MeToo, #yesallwomen or #whyIstayed, which took the form of callouts and storytelling on social media in the US context but soon expanded worldwide.

In response to this tendency, several scholars have discussed the advantages of hashtag feminism as a new opportunity for feminists to make their voices heard and construct public counter-discourses against patriarchal institutions and cultures (Linabary *et al*. 2020). According to these positions, social media become spaces for disseminating information and alternative online discourses that challenge rape culture, misogyny and harassment (Baer 2016; Olson and LaPoe 2018). Research on hashtag feminism has also shown that during callouts, many participants could make sense of their experiences of sexual violence by reading others' tweets or sharing their own stories (see Linabary *et al*. 2020; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018). In this sense, hashtag feminism seems to work as an amplifier of solidarity which can even turn into a feminist consciousness of understanding sexual violence as a structural problem rather than a personal issue and validate others' experiences (Mendes *et al*. 2019). Therefore, the importance of hashtag feminism cannot be downplayed, especially regarding the possible rehabilitation of the experiences of survivors.

Feminist activities in the digital realm are also discussed in terms of helping women to come together, meeting like-minded people and getting closer to feminist positions. This happens not only in the form of hashtags and callouts but also as online dissemination of feminist information and content. Especially during the confinement in 2020, many social media profiles aiming at disseminating feminist content flourished on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. To date, more and more individuals regularly use the Internet informally for allegedly feminist reasons, such as blogging about their personal experiences as women and raising awareness of gender inequalities (Pruchniewska 2017). Information dissemination can be done seriously and in the form of irony. In this regard, Sundén and Paasonen argued that the evolution of digital feminism in absurd humour and the extensive use of memes could make "an essential contribution to a decades-long feminist project of making visible the male bias" (2021, 241). On the same line, Thrift (2014) broadly discussed the importance of memes inside feminist movements as new modes of engagement with feminism that encourage identification processes. However, despite the enthusiasm raised by different kinds of digital feminist initiatives, some scholars have questioned whether the "microrebellions of digital feminism" (Baer 2016, 18) can have the ability to create cultural/structural change.

Notably, the tangled relationship between the digital space and neoliberal practices and discourses generates a debate around the potential depoliticisation of feminist engagement (Linabary *et al*. 2020; McRobbie 2009; Baer 2016), which may remain limited to micro-actions instead of tackling systematic issues at large. In this regard, feminist scholars should pay more attention to all the constraints that digital platforms may pose to political participation in terms of inclusion, representation and visibility, as online platforms are not neutral mediators; instead, they are powerful actors whose affordances may influence the development of online feminism.

For example, it has been seen how social media prevents all women from being heard equally. In fact, it seems that those who are the most listened to and promoted through social media functionalities tend to be women who align to the platform and social norms, being primarily white, middle class, heterosexual and able-bodied (Megarry 2020). In this context, several scholars are calling for further attention to women who are being excluded from online discussions for their race, sexual orientation, gender identity and bodies that do not conform to the required standard of social media (see Megarry 2020; Noble 2018; Are 2021). Moreover, as noted by Megarry, there might also be an exclusion in representation due to lower levels of confidence that allows women to intervene and communicate online, as well as interferences with technical skills, emotional resilience and social status, thus "the encoding of male bias in platforms and practices should be of greater concern to feminist scholarship" (2018, 5).

Moreover, the growth of female voices in the digital realm has seen a worrying increase in violence and misogyny. The rise of digital technologies has allowed for the flourishing of gender-based hate, anti-feminist initiatives and the rise of the manosphere (Ging 2019; Powell and Henry 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Semenzin and Bainotti 2020). Feminist research has suggested that online platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are widely hostile and toxic spaces for women. For example, in a recent study on hashtag feminism conducted on Twitter, 72% of participants reported experiencing hostility and trolling in response to their feminist activities (Mendes *et al*. 2018), and these negative experiences have dramatically grown during the pandemic with women becoming the favoured target of online hate (Amnesty International 2021). Thus, the effectiveness of hashtag feminism and other initiatives can be inhibited through online harassment and trolling (Mantilla 2015) and the infiltration of hashtags by abusers/opposers (Linabary *et al*. 2020). In this regard, one may argue that social media are all but safe spaces for the flourishing of feminist discourses (Megarry 2020).

Finally, scholars are asking how and in what ways feminist activity might be erased or silenced in digital space, not only for the high level of harassment but also because of the mass surveillance operated by companies and governments for political and commercial purposes (Megarry 2017; Linabary *et al*. 2020). As they rise in popularity, hashtags and contents can easily be co-opted for commercial or political purposes, thus their attempts to provide visibility to structural factors causing gender-based violence and victim-blaming discourse can be limited (Linabary *et al*. 2020). Activists may find that their messages are, intentionally or unintentionally, diluted, monetised, and/or erased (Rodino-Colocino 2014), with detrimental consequences for their voices. In this sense, the platform affordances may jeopardise hashtag feminism's potential; thus, their role as mediators of activism should be scrutinised more seriously.

## 3. Self-branded activism in the digital feminist sphere

The algorithms of digital platforms are built on the imperative to track and predict the productive activity of viewers through algorithmic infrastructures that organise and distribute content (Zuboff 2019). In this sense, online architectures represent the most efficient form of organisation and circulation of content to maximise the platform logic (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Duffy *et al*. 2019). Digital capitalism thrives through the platform economy (Kenney and Zysman 2016), where the imperatives of self-branding, creativity, and passionate labour play a pivotal role in orienting people's behaviours (Arvidsson *et al*. 2010; Hearn 2008; McRobbie 2018). For the sake of clarity, in this article, I will focus on the use of strategies of self-branding by feminist activists on Instagram. This is because, as already noted by Bainotti (2021), Instagram has risen to prominence in the influencer marketing sector in recent years, as it allows marketers and advertisers to reach a big potential audience in various ways, many of which rely on the presence of influencers.

Most concerns regarding digital feminism have focused mainly on embracing personal branding, promotion and audience interaction in disseminating feminist content online (Banet-Weiser 2015; Pruchniewska 2017; Gill 2011). In fact, those who engage in producing feminist content are increasingly forced to adhere to the neoliberal logics of individualism and self-governance encoded in platform affordances. As it has already been noted, self-branding activities lead to the flourishing of post-feminist approaches rooted in self-empowerment, personal responsibility and individual choice, limiting the conversation around broader structural influences in gender inequality (Banet-Weiser 2015; Baer 2016; McRobbie 2009; Gill 2016). Post-feminism is a contradictory sensibility characterised by components such as the emphasis on femininity as a bodily property, the imperative to (hetero)sexual self-objectification, a disciplinary consumption of fashion and beauty, and an insistence on portraying women's actions as freely chosen, knowing, and self-pleasing (Gill 2007; 2008). Accordingly, post-feminist positions can be detrimental to feminist social and political transformations, as they reproduce inequalities related to gender, race, class, sexuality, and other forms of difference (McRobbie 2009; Gill 2011). As argued by Mohanty, neoliberal ideologies of privatisation and individualisation turn "systemic projects of resistance into commodified private acts of rebellion" (Mohanty 2013, 968), threatening counter-hegemonic feminist politics and discourses and leading to a process of depoliticisation.

Moreover, since self-branding is successful as it relies on self-disclosure to express "who I am" to the intended audience in a way that evokes an intended emotional reaction (Banet-Weiser 2012, 81), digital feminism displays itself increasingly through the use of personalised narratives. However, as Baer (2016) noted, although the mantra "the personal is political" remains crucial for feminist activism, neoliberalism seems to have reversed its sense by redefining the political solely as personal, obfuscating the need for creating shared knowledge and collective activities. This interactivity enables "post-feminist authorship," or women's

writing (mainly autobiographical writing) that is "inextricably linked to the present economy of recognition and visibility," as defined by Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova (2013).

In conclusion, because of the intersection between platform affordances and neoliberalism (see also Barbrook and Cameron 1996), social media activism is increasingly becoming a ground for performing individualist and productive activities within a framework of social aspirations. Starting from these theoretical considerations, I will look at the emerging role of Italian feminist content creators on Instagram, who recently started labelling their work online as "activism". The discussion will help trace a line on the current aspect of digital feminism in Italy, reflecting on the consequences of disseminating post-feminist approaches in the digital realm.

## 4. Methodological note: Digital autoethnography in the Italian context

The following discussion proceeds from a long process of autoethnography (Ellis *et al*. 2011) on social media during my personal experience as an online feminist activist. Autoethnography is a research method that uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences (Adams *et al*. 2011), thus it becomes an "interpretation and creation of knowledge anchored in the native context" that employs autobiography and ethnographic ideas (Mitra 2010, 15). In the context of digital societies, contemporary processes of autoethnography are increasingly becoming digital autoethnography, which is distinguishable from traditional autoethnography as it mainly focuses on digital cultures, not physical (Dunn and Myers 2020). The choice of narrating my reflections on digital feminism in the form of digital autoethnography builds on Jasmine Linabary's call to feminist activists and scholars to address more in-depth the ongoing tensions between the possibilities offered by platforms affordances with "the

material and discursive context of neoliberalism and post-feminism that emphasises individualism, empowerment, and personal choice" (Linabary *et al*. 2020, 16). Towards this purpose, I started to systematically note down my personal experiences and observations within the space of digital feminism on Instagram from the end of 2018.

The autoethnography is also informed by the collection of online content that I manually gathered throughout one year of participation in this Italian "feminist bubble" of Instagram (from March 2021 to March 2022). To enrich the analysis, I selected 13 relevant Instagram profiles of young white women who self-presented as feminist activists, used self-branding strategies (e.g., did at least one sponsored collaboration) and whose social engagement ranged from a minimum of 10k followers to a maximum of 300k. During the observation period, I collected different data types through screenshots, such as Instagram stories public and private - through the Instagram stories function for "Only Friends", posts, directs and reels. All this material has been categorised with the help of the N-Vivo software to operate a critical content analysis (Krippendorff 2018) of their discourses around digital feminist activism.

### *4.1. Ethical issues*

Most of the analysed material was made public on users' social media profiles for the contextual nature of the privacy settings provided by Instagram (Zimmer 2010). Most importantly, it has to be noted that content creators' profiles are made public also to seek external validation and visibility for the nature of their practices, hence the content posted on their social media profiles is aimed at being publicly shared and commented on (Bainotti 2021; Landers *et al*. 2016). Given the difficulties associated with seeking consent in this context (Salmons 2015), the collected data shall be assimilated into data gathered from observation methods such as the

"walkthrough method" (Light *et al*. 2018). Moreover, the analysis should be considered ethically implemented as it seeks to preserve users' privacy by following the ethical principles of social research. In fact, the collected data has been analysed and published in a way that protects the privacy of the researched users with the aim of not harming them. Not only the names and personal details of the content creators have been anonymised, but online discourses are resumed in the form of "ethical fabrication", as suggested by (Markham 2012), and displayed in an aggregated format so that individual users cannot be identified.

## 5. Research timeline

The story starts when, at the end of 2018, I had to turn my personal Instagram profile (@silviasemenzin_) public on social networks (currently 20,7k followers) as I was running a political campaign that asked for criminalising the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images. The campaign started through a petition on Change.org and later became spread through the hashtag #intimitàviolata during the first half of 2019 (until April 2019, when the Italian Parliament approved an amendment against "revenge porn" inside the so-called "Red Code"). During my political experience, I became interested in the potential of self-branding activities to promote the message of the campaign, and I experimented with Instagram affordances to reach out to more visible profiles of feminist activists, combine my hashtagging activities with mainstream news media and constantly provide information on the campaign process. At that time, combining digital strategies with offline political activities to promote a successful feminist campaign seemed logical to me. However, during confinement in 2020, I developed several concerns regarding how my political engagement should take place in the digital realm.

In November 2020, after months of engaging in online conversations with other activists and news media, my Instagram profile suddenly reached a peak of engagement (passing from 5k to 20k followers in less than a week). On that occasion, several new platform functions were unblocked to me (e.g. the swipe-up button and the possibility to use advertisement stickers), and, for the first time in my life, I became labelled as "an influencer" of the Italian feminist Instagram's bubble by feminism supporters (and also by detractors). However, precisely after receiving that increase in attention, I decided to stop my online activities for a while.

Not only was I scared by the growth of gender-based hate I received by exposing myself online, but I also felt overwhelmed by the performance anxiety that both Instagram affordances and my audience were encouraging. On the one hand, followers on my profile were constantly asking me to comment on on-trend topics and media articles, which highly stressed me as, at that moment, I was about to submit my PhD dissertation. On the other hand, Instagram algorithms penalised me when I posted less while seeming to reward branded content instead (this was my perception since Instagram's algorithms are still "black boxes" - see Bucher 2018; Pasquale 2015).

As a scholar in digital sociology and a convinced leftist feminist, I have always been attentive to avoiding any branded activity on my profile that could potentially harm the discussion I was trying to build around gender-based violence online. As Broke Duffy and Emily Hund contend, in fact, "the infectious rhetoric of personal branding has been linked to the contemporary logic of post-feminism" (2015, 3), which is part of the neoliberal ideology that makes feminism "undone" (McRobbie 2009). In this regard, the principles of self-branding "serve to shatter any sense of cohesive community and commitment", which instead is crucial to feminist collective aspirations (Banet-Weiser and Juhasz 2011, 1769).

A few months later, in March 2021, several multinational brands such as Asos, Vodafone and Coca-Cola offered a set of sponsored collaborations to the most followed feminist influencer-activists on Instagram using hashtags such as #activistsofoptimism or #mybodymychoice. While this phenomenon is not new and forms part of strategies of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez 2019), the explicit collaboration between activists and brands raised a wave of criticism inside the Italian digital feminist realm and saw the emergence of several public discussions on the topic, often operated in the form of callouts and "shouting back". In line with previous research on social media polarisation (Tucker *et al.* 2018) and echo chambers (Quattrociocchi *et al.* 2016), these discussions often took the form of antagonist and conflictual discourses.

In that context, I started to develop my reflections on digital feminism and its strong link to the performance of self-branding in line with microcelebrity practices on social media (Senft 2013). While my profile was irremediably losing public engagement, I became interested in observing how successful Instagram influencers' profiles started to label themselves as "activists" to become more recognisable to brands and/or other potential collaborators. In the following paragraphs, I will present and discuss the critical elements of the debates mentioned above that I had the chance to witness "from the inside", in which feminist influencers-activists attempt to combine the individualistic efforts required to prosper in the digital economy with their collective feminist beliefs. Following previous research on self-branding practices inside the digital feminism realm (Pruchniewska 2017; Banet-Weiser 2012; 2015), I contend that Italian feminist activist-influencers engage in three ways of justifying their branded online activity as part of doing activism: the right to digital feminist labour, the redefinition of intersectional feminism according to post-feminist positions, and the belief in the power of social media to create networks.

## 6. The right to digital feminist labour

In May 2021, an Italian writer, Irene Graziosi, published a long piece on the "performative activism of digital activism" (Graziosi 2021). In her article, Graziosi referred to digital activists' online engagement as mainly based on the market of the self, powered by algorithmic logic and confined to the boundaries of slacktivism (Morozov 2013). In line with research on social movements that appeared during the pandemic, such as Black Lives Matter (Wellman 2022), Graziosi attacked Instagram activists to maintain a performative allyship to build self-brand credibility and obtain rewards. It has to be noted that the idea of "performative activism" here is not attached to the use of artistic/disruptive performances in the context of collective actions; instead, it is referred to the performance of personal values required to build a successful brand of the self, inside social media platforms. Part of the criticism reflected the profitable activities that many of these activists-influencers undertake, with arguably unethical brands (e.g. Nike or Coca-Cola).

The first element that emerged in the online debates among Italian activists-influencers following the criticisms was understanding their activism as labour. In fact, in response to the criticism raised by some users regarding their commercial activities, the observed activist-influencers started to disclose their online activity as part of their job publicly. During this public debate, most reported to "have to pay the rent somehow" and narrated their struggle to make precarity fit with their social aspirations seeking support from their public and activism colleagues.

Much as offline labour does, digital labour has largely been accused of exploiting the unpaid labour of those who employ digital platforms and social media as venues of creativity, entertainment, and activism (see Duffy 2015). To perform a branded self, it is necessary to engage in labour, discipline, and capital research, especially in freelance creatives (Duffy and Hund 2015; Gandini 2016). People creating online cultural content operate in an increasingly neoliberal and precarious context (Gill

2010; McRobbie 2002; Neff 2012), further worsening with the pandemic crisis. In 2020, women, particularly women of colour, have suffered terrible job losses and poverty (UNWomen 2021). However, the observed activists-influencers of the Italian realm are composed mainly of white, cisgender and young women, who do not necessarily relate with the most affected victims of precarity. Instead, their representation of precarity seems to be more related to what Baer (2016, 21) described as the "unprecedented instrumentalisation and endemic sensation of insecurity in neoliberalism, but an insecurity that might give rise to the potential for change". In line with the self-branding strategies of "traditional" influencers do, also activists-influencers tend to include practices of displaying their social status as micro-celebrities (see Bainotti 2021) through the engagement in social events, the constant receiving of gifts and the description of their daily activities, such as make-up and hair routines. According to Baer (2016), citing Gill and Pratt (2008), there is a double meaning in the understanding of precarity by the observed online feminists: while they recognise it as a social problem, they also present it as an opportunity for new subjectivities, new politics, and even new careers to emerge. This new understanding of precarity stems from the apparent neutrality of neoliberal contradictions that intends to "open up a space of social critique and political activism that takes advantage of neoliberal paradoxes" (Baer 2016, 21). Interestingly, as Harrington (2019) already noted, survivors of gender-based violence can use this framework to construct neoliberal subjectivities, for example, by positioning violence trauma as something survivors must work on to achieve self-efficacy.

By accepting a certain grade of capitalism in the development of their activities, which oscillated between labour and activism, these Italian activists-influencers also showed a certain grade of competition among them. Once again, this relates to a crowded digital ecosystem in which feminist individuals and projects need to

compete for publicity, recognition and resources (Fotopoulou 2016). When confronted with the fact that competition is very much opposed to feminist values, for instance, one publicly mentioned the existence of a "healthy female competition that could push them to do better" and was reposted by other observed profiles. This perception aligns with post-feminist approaches that explain women's liberation through their choices as entrepreneurial individuals, always being at their best self (Repo 2020). In this manner, "the small firm or individual feminist entrepreneur begins to replace the feminist group or organisation as the agent of feminist advocacy. In this scenario, the enterprise is assumed to be an unproblematic way of enabling feminist activism for its awareness-raising power alone" (Repo 2020, 11).

## 7. The negotiation of intersectional feminism

Another strategy deployed by the observed activists-influencers for confronting criticisms of their self-promoting activities regarded the negotiation of their feminist authenticity, which is established by the values embedded in their brand (Pruchniewska 2018). This debate echos Banet-Weiser's (2012) assertion that "to craft a successful self-brand, one not only has to brand oneself as authentic but literally has to *be* authentic" (Ivi, 80). In this regard, Italian activists-influencers engaged in discussions regarding how political participation should look like and what role digital technologies play in the debate. Especially in response to the accusations of slacktivism, Italian activists-influencers confronted their different interpretations of the possibilities and pitfalls of using social media. Notably, a recurrent thematic emerged in this debate as a ground of confrontation, which is the definition of intersectional feminism in relation to algorithmic structures.

Before delving into the analysis of this debate, a brief clarification on the concept of intersectionality is needed. According to Sasha-Costanza Chock (Costanza-Chock

2018), we should understand intersectional feminism as a fundamental reconceptualisation of race, class and gender as interlocking systems which do not operate separately but are often experienced together. As the concept was born in the realm of black feminism (the first proposing the term was Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist scholar, in 1989), intersectional feminism is aimed at looking at experienced discriminations as intersected, e.g. how black women often experience male violence as a product of intersecting racism and sexism but are then marginalised from both feminist and antiracist discourse and practice (Costanza Chock 2018). Nevertheless, the understanding of intersectionality has gone further in transforming radical worldviews of the feminist movement into individualist expressions of the same. This idea is what Nancy Fraser called "identity politics" (Fraser 1998), referring to a growing individualisation of political identities that are less and less conceived as collective issues and more and more as part of the individual recognition of oneself. For Fraser, identity politics are causing a shift from the feminist critique of capitalist exploitation to the constituency of its essence in this latest neoliberal phase (Fraser 2019).

Concerning Fraser's reflections, it must be noted that Instagram's activist-influencers often used their instances to justify their online engagement, once again contributing to the redefinition of feminism as more aligned to post-feminism (Pruchniewska 2017). In this sense, identity politics offered individuals a diversity of feminist causes and identities (trans-inclusive, radical, liberal etc.) from which to choose to develop one's unique self-representation (Repo 2020). For example, in response to slacktivism criticism, a feminist disabled activist (echoed by abled activists) lamented the suffering of ableism because they "could not access demonstrations or square concentrations". However, the definitions of non-conventional forms of political participation do not concern only the occupation of physical spaces but, first and foremost, the ability to create collective conversations around discrimination. In the case of Instagram feminism, where the political

is personal, traditional forms of doing politics disappear from the debate, and digital spaces become the only way to be included in the conversation. According to this view, it is not relevant how profoundly classed, racialised, and heteronormative digital platforms are: feminist activists-influencers still appear to see it as a space for recognition. In this context, social class becomes less important than other types of identity in defining intersectionality, in line with a neoliberal approach to identity politics. This shall be observed in line with the effort mentioned above of justifying and framing activism as a job, in which neoliberal digital contexts are not challenged but instead seen as an opportunity to emerge. However, as argued by Nancy Fraser (2019), the dichotomy between recognition (who deserves rights) and redistribution (who deserves income) is false, and both should exist to structure the feminist agenda. Thus, the erosion of social class from the public debate of Instagram feminist activists is counterproductive to feminist goals. Additionally, as bell hooks (1984) argues in her discussion on consciousness-raising, the articulation of personal experience is not always synonymous with forming political consciousness. Self-discourses have no way of progressing toward meaningful collective action and, eventually, revolution unless one uses one's experience to relate to women's reality as a collective group (Repo 2020).

## 8. The myth of the network

Since its arrival, the Internet has been embedded with imaginaries around its potential to create more democratisation and horizontality. The power of this "network imaginary" (Bory 2020) relies on the idea that networks are inherently empowering, equal and positive; thus, the possibility of creating new and more extensive networks is seen as an essential opportunity for social progress. Regarding digital activism, in the beginning, sociology focused on the potential of networks as opportunities for mobilisation (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; González-Bailón *et*

*al*. 2011). However, as Bory (2020) points out, the network myth obscures the potential criticism of the actual shape of the Internet as a profoundly hierarchic, centralised and discriminatory space.

The observed Italian activist-influencers of Instagram tend to adhere to the network myth. For example, one of them received a lot of attention and support when she published a carousel post explaining the importance of digital activism, arguing that "we can still do things here, for example, helping other women make sense of their experience as discriminated subjects". As already mentioned, it is quite accepted that hashtag feminism can provide the space for some women to rehabilitate their experiences as survivors of violence, but what is interesting to note is that Italian activists-influencers show a certain rate of trust in the horizontal potential of social network that provided them from critically engaging with the actual shape of the digital ecosystem. Although most of them are aware of social media filter bubbles, they also trusted that, in gaining visibility, they could "burst the bubble" and therefore disseminate "subversive" discourse. More interestingly, the same activists-influencers also lamented being part of a "feminist bubble" that would limit their visibility and recognition, thus showing controversial understandings of social media affordances. During a public debate on Instagram algorithms and echo chambers that took place at the end of 2021, Instagram feminists with minor social engagement started to denounce a "hierarchy of visibility" inside the feminist Instagram realm, in which bigger activists-influencers decided whom to make visible or invisible based on their personal preferences and commercial agenda. In response to these criticisms, particularly one macro activist-influencer declared that she decided to "leave the bubble" as it was becoming too toxic and "sisters are becoming haters". This assertion is particularly interesting as it restates the individualist perception of doing activism online as rooted in labour performance, downplaying the importance of engaging with feminist criticisms. Indeed, the existence of criticism inside the same feminist movement is ignored and

downplayed as part of the toxic Internet instead of being an essential task for constructing collective subjectivities. Moreover, this position also shows a shared belief in the individual agency for resisting algorithmic bias instead of addressing the problem encoded in the technology.

In this context, we can see how post-feminist values are also merged with the hegemony of the Californian Ideology of the Silicon Valley (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), which builds on discourses on the power of technology to solve social issues from an entrepreneurial perspective. Italian digital feminists avoid engaging in a radical critique of the current unbalances of social networks because they see potentialities in them; thus, they accept to play within the reality of platform affordances in the hope of powering their network to becoming successful digital entrepreneurs. In this regard, digital feminism shows a turn towards depoliticisation that erases social class problems from the debate and creates an illusion of participation. The focus on the self, facilitated by platform affordances, creates the illusion of engaging in feminist praxis without addressing structural problems (Repo 2020).

## 9. Conclusion

This article has analysed the figure of the activist-influencer that prominently emerged in recent years within the Italian digital sphere, particularly on Instagram. By providing an overview of the current academic debate regarding the possibilities and constraints of digital feminism and by merging theoretical contributions with elements of autoethnography, I engaged in a discussion on the emergence of self-branding as a critical component to becoming a successful online activist that, first and foremost, need to follow social media platforms' logics. The digital transformation of feminist activism, in this sense, requires the use of self-branding strategies to gain public visibility and public influence. However, when

gaining public visibility becomes the ultimate goal of online feminist activism, there are broader consequences for the feminist movement that becomes increasingly commodified to digital economy logics.

What the discussion has ultimately shown is that, through a constant negotiation of what feminism means according to personal values and perspectives, digital feminism is marking a shift towards post-feminist approaches. First, the figure of the activist-influencer becomes justified by the necessity of entering the market and fighting precarity in the form of women entrepreneurs. This position often downplays the contradictions of neoliberalism for feminism, seeing it more as an opportunity than a constraint. Second, by providing personalised views of feminist authenticity, activists-influencers of the Italian feminist "bubble" restate the centrality of identity politics in structuring the feminist agenda in a way that hides economic inequalities. Accordingly, social class disappears from the debate on intersectionality, leaving room only for the articulation/judgment of political consciousness according to personal experience. Finally, in justifying their online activity, activist-influencers also showed a certain acceptance rate of some technological myths, such as the network myth. This view aligns with the hegemonic discourses of Silicon Valley, which are interested in maintaining the power of digital capitalism through the myth of technosolutionism (Morozov 2013). In so doing, digital feminism prevents capitalism from becoming an object of critique and a target of intervention (Repo 2020).

In conclusion, by increasingly relying on self-branding strategies, Italian digital feminism mostly reinforces a culture of competition, individual empowerment and depoliticisation, which has previously been debated as potentially detrimental to feminist solidarity and the urgency to push structural socio-political changes (McRobbie 2009; Gill 2016).

As with any research, this contribution presents limitations that could be explored for deploying future studies on digital feminism. First, the research is limited to the Italian context and cannot make any generalisation of digital feminist actions at large. Moreover, for this article, I only focused on individual profiles that self-present as activists on social media, excluding the feminist entities that may use social networks to share their activities (e.g. NGOs, associations, women's aid centres etc.). In this sense, all the "good practices" of using social media foregrounded in collective activism were not considered in this research. What was ultimately at stake here was highlighting how the feminist activism rooted in self-branding practices performed within platform affordances will always result in post-feminist approaches.

Finally, I consider that, although autoethnography is widely accepted inside social sciences as a valid research method, the reflections still stem from personal observation of the phenomenon that could be limited by social media filter bubbles and my privileged positions as a white, heterosexual, cisgender women. Further research may take into account a more structured data collection of feminist debates to operate a qualitative analysis of the discourse, as well as I encourage feminist scholars to continue to critically explore the experiences of those who are participating in such initiatives so that we can have a better understanding of the bigger picture, as well as the long-term ramifications and consequences of this kind of feminist activism.

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