Digital Activisms and Intersectionality in Context

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In the past two decades, there has been a great deal of visibility for marginalised populations from many parts of the world via social media platforms, whether through Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Tumblr, YouTube and other platforms. Digital visibility, as we know by now, does not always translate into changes in lived realities or liberation for most people. However, digital visibility creates global awareness and highlights the specific conditions of particular groups of people and their struggles within local hierarchies as they intersect with, are complicit with, or are in tension with universalised understandings of hierarchies and power imbalances. Thus, while broader categories such as class, gender, race and sexuality definitely play out in various scenarios of governmentality and technologies of power, each national, local, regional and communal context of struggle and protests reveals the particularities of how these play out. The three co-editors came together to propose this special issue because our own research negotiates these spaces. We realised that flat terms such as 'global south' and 'global north' do not adequately address the simultaneous historicity and contemporary sociopolitical nuances of caste, indigeneity, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so much more. In fact, the three of us met through our research struggles and have collaborated on research projects that have revealed these problematics to us in various contexts.

Specifically, for this special issue, our call asked that contributors not only ponder and examine protest movements focused on gender, race and caste issues but also that they take into account the contradictions around, for instance, utilising these privately-owned communication technology infrastructures to build networks, reach global audiences, and demonstrate the influence of digital 'publics,' 'contrapublics,' 'alternetworks,' 'counterpublics' and so on (see Squires, 2002; Sobande et al., 2023). At the same time, these platforms are equally accessible to trolls, or individuals and groups that use them to spread hate speech, fake news, propaganda, misinformation and divisive rhetoric in the name of freedom of speech. Misogyny and co-optation of feminist languages of choice happen side-by-side with brand-feminisms and feminist activist callouts. Oppressive governments also use social media surveillance to silence dissent, enforce bans and suppress opposition voices.

In this seemingly chaotic digital space, activists, influencers and advocates attempt to simultaneously speak to their local, regional and national audiences while broadcasting outwards transnationally to garner solidarity and support. These outcries, callouts and protests in digital publics create nuanced awareness around the particularities of social inequalities in the regions from which they originate. With platforms taking on bolder ideological stances through strategically marginalising moderation techniques, or a lack thereof, that step away from what Gillespie (2018) had framed as a reluctant task of content moderation, one of the particularities of operating within digital spaces is to contend with phrases such as 'freedom of speech but not freedom of reach' (Twitter/X) or 'too many mistakes, too much content being censored' (Meta). With platform owners themselves redefining their roles as custodians of the internet, where boundaries of proper speech are reshaped in favour of racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic expressions, a core affect about activists is that the internet today is a more reinforced anti-activist

internet. It is within these tensions that we seek to interrogate how intersectionality in digital spaces plays out despite, within and because of the multiple binds of oppressions triggered by state-user-platform encounters. Therefore, we invited submissions that examine the cultural and political contexts of digital activism and how they shape practices, strategies, and considerations of activism and online engagement.

Our call asked contributors to 'nuance intersectionality as theory or method' and deploy situated, contextual, intersectionalities to flesh out how activisms and solidarities can be forged based on shifting temporal, social, and geopolitical dynamics. We encouraged contributors to dive deep into how digital activisms conceptualise intersectionality within and beyond activists' contexts and the nuances made visible in activists' use of intersectionality as critical praxis or analytical strategy.

The articles in this special issue cover a range of digital protest contexts. Adrija Dey and Gavaza Maluleke critically examine the case of the South African context based #RUReferenceList while also making comparative references to #LoSHA (coming from an Indian context) and a more global #MeToo by centring questions around sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). A key question they highlight is the question of why survivors turned to social media outlets in their call outs for justice. They argue that both #LoSHA and #RUReferenceList operated at a systemic rather than individual level, focusing not on specific perpetrators or survivors but on transforming institutional frameworks. They expose how institutional structures enable sexual and gender-based violence through systematic silencing, victim-blaming practices and the suppression of survivor voices – processes that render existing due process mechanisms both inaccessible and insufficient. Rather than centring individual cases, these initiatives emphasised broader survivor needs and the pervasive structural violence embedded within higher education institutions. They envisioned comprehensive institutional transformation and promoted nuanced, intersectional frameworks for understanding rape culture that account for complex, intersecting power dynamics across multiple identity categories and institutional hierarchies.

Brianna Wiens and colleagues, on the other hand, examine the viral uptake of media events around 'Bear vs Man' memes, noting that these memes speak to the current status of #MeToo and reveal depths of misogyny. Connecting this with other trends through a 'digital dwelling' as methodology, this article highlights how digital activism within the digital itself as social space is an important reality of our everyday life.

Laura Haddad focuses on postcolonial fashion drawing on case studies around hijab fashions. She discusses three creators who use social media in a deeply personal mode. Since hijab-wearing makes their appearance inherently political, reclaiming this politicisation aligns with feminist traditions of making the personal political yet the designers themselves do not claim to be feminists. They practice contemporary digital activism by sharing their personal struggles in relation to gender expectations, family relationships and beauty standards, thus also providing visibility for marginalised perspectives. Intersectional feminist practices shape how they navigate conflicting beauty standards (religious and secular) while developing individual coping strategies.

Taking forward the problematic of how to research the subjective experiences of religious women navigating technocolonial regimes of visuality and beauty standards on Instagram, Rachel Abreu's article contributes to our understanding of layered methodological approaches, or intersectionality-as-method, to understand digital lives of women without flattening these to either platform-centric analyses or to a singular subject position. The strength of this article is its exploration of networked identities-in-difference (Muñoz, 1999) and the role of the researcher as not only a participant observer within digitally mediated spaces and conversations, but also as one constituted by a critical-interventionist position.

Closely linked to this is the methodological approach that Nathasha Fernando introduces as postcolonial autoethnography in her article charting the course of racialised Italians' media making in response to and following the networked #BLM movement. Drawing from her work in the award-nominated podcast Sulla Razza, the findings in this article throw light on the strategies racialised Italian activists developed to insist that mainstream coverage on #BLM did not skirt over local issues, finding interconnections between experiences of Black people in the US and their own in the Italian context. Kumru Berfin Emre focuses her analyses on the politics of media witnessing of the persecution and massacre of the Alevi community based in Turkey. Shattering the outdated dichotomy of online versus offline activisms, this article forwards a theoretical framework for understanding the centrality of media-making towards the collective memory and communal identity of Alevi people. These modes of media, mainly tele-visual, witnessing thus not only resist violent attempts to erase the challenges that this particular minoritarian identity poses to the fantasy of the Turkish national identity. Moreover, utilising a feminist critical lens, this article further explores how 'the persecution of Alevis stand at the nexus of complex interplay between religion, gender and sexuality.' This article highlights the affordances of the tele-visual and screen-based media forms to facilitate emotional viewing and provides a feminist conceptual framework that stretches our understanding of digital protests as extending beyond hashtag mediated events.

O. M. Olaniyan explores how feminist-queer intimacies were constructed and fractured in #EndSARS discourse. Framing their work as a complementary reading to research that explores the behind-the-scenes and inner workings of feminist and queer networks in this movement (Faniyi, 2025), they focus their analysis on the

Black diasporic queer witnessing embodiment in the discourse of #QueerNigerianLivesMatter, a sister hashtag that emerged out of #EndSARS silence on queer experiences of police violence. Reading this countermovement as a strategic engagement with Blackness produced in and through digital spaces, they explore the alternative frameworks of solidarity and visibility brought on by the discourses within digital magazines such as The Rustin Times, Minority Africa, and The Kito Diaries, Olaniyan argues that 'QueerNigerianLivesMatter maps a transformation of African LGBT solidarities through diasporic longing.' Through the affordances of the diasporic networks these media create and curate, they argue that queer diasporic identities and histories of the present and past are reinvented through feelings of friction and longing triggered by and beyond the movement. While this movement was peculiar to the tensions and politics of alterity in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, Olaniyan argues that the tense terrain of the movement was nonetheless diasporic, produced in and through digitised narratives of national politics encountering an equally digital and attentive global audience.

Finally, the last piece in this special issue is a 'roundtable' of essays around issues of queer lifeworlds, transnational solidarity and activism, and organising within the intersections of the digital and the political. As noted by co-editors Basu and Gajjala in the preface to the essays, they reveal tensions between digitally mediated 'transnational' and local struggles (which might themselves emerge and be re-shaped within forms of digital mediation), queer critical imaginaries and organisational work, asking what it means to hold space for queer presence and activism within different public spaces that utilise or respond to contemporary issues pertaining to digital mediation in a variety of ways drawing from situated yet interconnected struggles.

Also, please note that this issue also includes some "general articles" that were not part of our editorial team's selection. Therefore, it is to be noted that Radhika Gajjala, Maitrayee Basu and Ololade Faniyi are not responsible for the selection, review process and publication of those articles.

Finally…

A last word from Chief/Founding Editor Sally R Munt, and Managing Editor Rose Richards, who are stepping down from their roles at *Feminist Encounters* at the end of 2025, and so this issue will actually be the last one that will be produced by us. It has been a privilege to work on this journal jointly with activist scholars and feminists from all over the world, and to see the journal developing into a strong research publication that has now over 100,000 readers in dozens of countries globally. We wish to thank all of our authors and contributors, guest editors, production team and the esteemed Editorial Board for all of their hard work and support over the past 10 years, making the journal such a collective effort. Like all great projects it has been a joy (and of course occasionally a pain!), to see each issue come together, and to experience the shared commitment to equality and diversity that has made the journal such an ethical portal for feminist research. In many ways, feminist research is becoming more important than ever, so we wish the journal well in its future and want to thank you once again, dear readers, for supporting us and for disseminating feminist knowledge, we hope you will continue to do so and may the conversations endure.

Acknowledgement

Biographical sketch

Dr. Radhika Gajjala is a Professor of Media and Communication and of American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University, USA. She was Fulbright Professor in Digital Culture at University of Bergen, Norway for the year 2015-2016. In 2012, she was Senior Fulbright scholar at Soegijapranata Catholic University. She has researched non-profit organizations and engaged in community partnerships with biracial communities in the U.S. Her published work engages themes related to globalization, digital labour, feminism and social justice.

Dr. Maitrayee Basu is an Assistant Professor in Race and Media in School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds and Deputy Director of Digital Technologies, Communication and AI pathway at White Rose Doctoral Training Programme. Her work is situated at the intersection of postcolonial migration and diasporas, cyberfeminisms and queer affect studies. Articles by her have been previously published in journals like *Feminist Media Studies, Communication, Culture and Society, Women's Studies in Communication* and *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. She is currently working on her first monograph titled *Brown non-sovereignties: Feminist re-mediation of digital diasporas*.

Ololade Faniyi is an African feminist activist-scholar and Ph.D. student in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Emory University. Her research employs a feminist data lens and participatory digital ethnography to the study of Nigerian feminist/queer social-political activism, African feminist digital cultures, alternative political communication, digital/data technologies, and digital humanities. She serves as an African advisor for FRIDA and is a graduate fellow for the Atlanta Interdisciplinary Artificial Intelligence network.

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