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SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

MASTER'S THESIS

**THE EFFECT OF INSTAGRAM ACTIVIST ACCOUNTS ON  
PROMOTING GENDER AWARENESS AMONG USERS**

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## INTRODUCTION

The extensive use of social media in contemporary activism represents a new stage in the evolution of alternative forms of communication (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015). Many of the distinguishing aspects of social media as a space for contemporary activism originate from the way it lifts several of the physical limitations of the offline environment (Murthy, 2018). One of the advantages of social media activism over traditional social movement activism, which occurs in a physical space, is the capacity to rapidly and efficiently access a significantly larger number of potential supporters (Washington & Marcus, 2022). Furthermore, the new types of leadership emerging in the field of social media activism run in parallel with the continuing relevance of street community leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012). Within this context, online activism should be seen as a powerful mean that facilitates massive mobilisation in terms of social movement (Yilmaz, 2017). A wide diffusion of social media platforms such as those that predominate the contemporary web communication scenario (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) has played a crucial part in framing activists' agendas, empowering them to raise awareness, exchange information and organise petitions, protests, fundraising campaigns and other types of advocacies, as well as in the process of creating the collective identity of social movements (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Thus, in a matter of seconds, an online social media campaign can become viral and impact offline life in multiple ways. Hence, this can bring increased exposure and support for a cause, as well as greater pressure on institutions, businesses and other bodies to take act (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

The omnipresence of the visual social media platform Instagram, with 2 billion active users in 2023 (Statista, 2023c), has enabled the flourishing of a new type of social movement activity, namely online activism. Instagram is therefore a valuable platform for investigating the use of social media for activism (Cornet, Hall, Cafaro & Brady, 2017). According to Salis (2020), 93 percent of marketers worldwide support the effectiveness of Instagram's interactive and innovative content in educating users. Instagram social network can be a powerful tool to raise awareness and an opportunity to drive interest in more challenging topics, thanks to the immediacy as well as the "lightness" of their creative, evocative, and suggestive content, and Instagram's visually appealing carousel formats, which make even the most demanding arguments more accessible and effective (Restivo, 2020). In the present contemporary society, activists employ social media networks such as Instagram, to attract new followers, engage with their community members and advance their campaigns, fights and convictions (Zalm, 2021).

The relationship between feminism and marketing is intricate, but constantly evolving and developing (Maclaran, 2012). One of the main ongoing debates is on whether marketing activities exploit or empower women. Feminist scholars discuss this evolving relationship from historical and contemporary perspectives, while reflecting the heterogeneity inherent in feminism. Feminist marketing academics argue for the central role of the market structure in the success of the feminist movement, illustrating the fact that many suffragettes in the

First Wave Feminism period (1840-1920) were keen to use marketing tools and techniques to promote their campaign “Votes for Women” and the feminist movement more generally. This position is in stark contrast to the historically Second Wave feminists (1960-1988), who criticised marketers and marketing activities for disseminating against negative publicity images of women and their limited representation as decorative objects in domestic environments (Craig, 1997). The Third Wave Feminism (1988-2010), is characterised by a reduced focus on the manipulative and oppressive power of marketing and media practices and by the reconciliation of feminism and consumption, linking empowerment with sexual expressiveness and purchasing power (Maclaran, 2012). The latter Wave dealt with the micropolitics of gender identities and introduced a new principle of intersectionality, recognizing the interplay of various forms of oppression related to the female experience, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and so forth, that result in discrimination or marginalization (Maclaran & Stevens, 2019). From a wave of social media hashtag campaigns and feminist student societies to media stars speaking out against misogyny and encouraging women to support each other, we are arguably witnessing the emergence of the so-called Fourth Wave of feminism (2010 - today) (Cochrane 2013; Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). This wave is defined by the use of 21st century technology, more specifically the Internet and social media. These online platforms have cultivated a culture of “calling out” sexism and misogyny, and they have also enabled the growth of a global feminist community who utilize the internet and social media, both as a discussion forum and as a tool for activism, due to their easy accessibility and effectiveness (Munro, 2013). There has been a flurry of relevant arguments regarding the revival of debates on gender inequality in the workplace, on the streets and in the mass media, with an increasing number of celebrities today openly embracing the “feminist” label (Atkenhead 2014; Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). Feminist celebrities including Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Lady Gaga and Viola Davis are using their fame and notoriety in Hollywood and beyond to raise consciousness about the need for gender equality and contribute to redefine the meaning of being a feminist in the modern era (Team ELLE, 2023).

Social networking sites can be empowering platforms for feminist activism and a space that can catalyse transformative shifts in thoughts and patterns of behaviour (Washington & Marcus, 2022). The feminist potential of Instagram, as a revolutionary site for feminist activism, resilience and prominence is evident in the amount of outspokenly feminist accounts. These accounts somewhat harness the potential of the viewer’s perspective, directing the lens at themselves and challenging traditional interpretations of gender and aesthetics, while exhibiting for an audience other than the supposedly able-bodied, white, male, and straight spectator. The accessibility of feminist discourse and content on platforms such as Instagram, along with their general availability, provides an influential site for engagement with feminism (Mahoney, 2020). These sorts of accounts with a large number of followers have a high degree of visibility, credibility and influence over their audience. Moreover, feminist Instagram accounts play a crucial role in fostering feminist identities among young women, building and empowering online feminist communities, educating



and rising consciousness in their audiences on feminist issues, promoting feminist movements, enhancing action in support of feminist goals, and advancing social change. These accounts have also embraced ostensibly feminist discourses, effectively resonating with the popularity of fourth-wave feminism (Zalm, 2021). The online environment of the fourth wave has the capacity to combine multiple voices with a variety of targets and has an impressively rapid and comprehensive way of spreading information that makes feminism appealing to the contemporary and younger generations (Munro, 2013).

The main purpose of the present master's thesis is to fill the gap in the literature regarding the use of social media for the advancement of gender awareness by contributing to the body of literature on feminism and marketing. Relatively little or no literature research is available concerning issues on the affirmative contributions and impacts of feminist Instagram accounts posts towards positive and beneficial changes in attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of individuals in the online community. As marketing scholars have been mostly concerned with researching how social media accounts can affect consumer attitudes and behaviours, very little research exists on the potential effect of feminist Instagram accounts on the development of users' consciousness, sensitivity and education on feminist related topics such as gender inequality, body positivity, sexual harassment and assault, gender pay gap, women's empowerment, gender stereotypes and discrimination and so forth. Hence, in addition to its contribution to theoretical debates, the present dissertation also aims to further explore the extent to which Instagram feminism functions as activism and to help advance our understanding of whether feminist Instagram accounts are an effective mean and can make an impact on individuals that already follow feminist Instagram accounts, by countering gender stereotypes and violence, encouraging greater inclusivity and tolerance, and women's self-empowerment.

Therefore, the goals of the present thesis are the following: (1) To examine the relationship between marketing discipline and feminist movements ideology concepts through past, present and future time frames; (2) To review the content postings of several Instagram accounts promoting gender awareness by determining the recurring elements of the contemporary (Forth Wave) feminist agenda that are tracked in feminist Instagram posts content and analysing the format style adopted, the type of language employed, and the topics covered by feminist Instagram accounts to engage with their online audience; (3) To understand what are the drivers that lead social media users to engage with feminist Instagram accounts in the online community; (4) To analyse the impact on the online audience, resulting from the content posts of feminist Instagram accounts, by investigating the positive and negative aspects of users' opinions upon the interactive content postings by feminist Instagram accounts; (5) To assess whether feminist Instagram accounts, are an effective means of counteracting stereotypes, helping women achieve empowerment and/or encouraging inclusion in their audience.

The empirical part of this thesis is grounded on two primary data sources; the case studies examination of the four feminist Instagram accounts and the implementation of in-depth

interviews with Instagram users. The methodology for analysing the four Instagram feminist accounts posts involves the selection of accounts posts with purposive sampling, a sample of 100 total posts, 25 from each feminist Instagram account. Then, the thematic analysis, including codes is developed and employed to examine the sample of the posts by determining the recurring elements of contemporary feminist agenda that are traced in feminist Instagram content. A codebook is generated to identify, describe and report the themes found in the type of language employed, topics covered, and format style adopted by feminist Instagram accounts promoting gender awareness, to engage with their audiences. The methodology for analysing the reception of Instagram users involves the participation of 5 individuals in the in-depth interviews selected through convenience and purposive sampling. The in-depth interviews are employed with the aim of gaining a qualitative understanding of the reasons, opinions, feelings and motivations behind feminist Instagram users' engagement in feminist content posts on the four selected Instagram accounts.

The thesis structure opens by presenting the powerful and intricate relationship between marketing and feminism discipline and the introduction of various fundamental concepts derived from the combination, in the first part of the present study. The second chapter explore the modern era popularity of digital and social media marketing, as well as the potentials for activism on social media platforms, particularly on Instagram. The first two chapters are based on the obtainable academic secondary data sources and international research papers that contribute to build a comprehensive and holistic ground for the empirical part of the study. The third chapter, present the research framework and methodology of the thesis, employing two primary sources of data; the examination of the case studies of the four feminist Instagram accounts and the implementation of in-depth interviews with Instagram users. In the fourth and fifth chapter, the analysis and results are illustrated for each of the primary data sources. Therefore, the respective discussion of findings for Instagram accounts posts and for the opinion of Instagram users is displayed in the sixth chapter. Close to the end of the sixth chapter, a list of limitations and recommendations for future research is provided.

## **1      RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARKETING AND FEMINISM**

Feminist perspectives play a prominent role in critical marketing studies, highlighting several gender ideologies embedded in marketing and consumer behaviour phenomena, as well as the unequal power relations that underlie them (Maclaran, 2012). However, it was only in the 1990s, in the wake of the “cultural turn”, that academics in the marketing discipline started to draw on feminist perspectives, deconstructing the meanings of advertising and its masculinist research ideologies (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019).

The relationship between feminism and marketing is intricate, but constantly evolving and developing. One of the main ongoing debates is on whether marketing activities empower or exploit women (Maclaran, 2012). Indeed, according to marketing academics, on one side,

marketing was criticized by feminist scholars for reinforcing and perpetuating traditional gender roles and stereotypes concerning women. As in the former times, commercials frequently portrayed men as the breadwinners, while objectifying and sexualizing women and depicting them as homemakers and subordinate to the opposite sex. Marketing feminists have sharply criticised this kind of representation since it fosters biased and harmful perceptions and assumptions, based upon the idea that women's worth is determined by their physical appearance and their ability to perform household duties. However, on the other side, marketing can also be considered as a mean for furthering feminist principles and values. For instance, suffragettes employed marketing promotional techniques to advance their campaign battle for women's voting rights, in the early 1900s. Similarly, in contemporary days, a number of marketers have begun to incorporate more varied, authentic and realistic portrayals of women and female's experience in their advertisements and there has been a rise in gender-neutral products. This could be considered a step in the right direction, in terms of advancing equality and dismantling negative preconceptions and dominant gender norms (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2000). Furthermore, feminist theory may also be applied for investigating consumer behaviour and focusing on its intersections with gender, race, ethnicity, class and other social constructs, thus, influencing consumer attitudes and behavioural patterns. This could assist advertisers, in designing more inclusive and intersectional marketing initiatives and efforts, that connect with various communities and marginalized populations more effectively (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019).

Overall, the connection between marketing and feminism is complex, yet, as the industry and society continue to progress, the advancement of feminist principles and ideology in marketing framework is increasingly relevant and crucial for questioning the potential hidden gender assumptions and biases in the academic discipline (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). In order to provide a holistic overview of this powerful combination, this thesis will begin with the introduction of the relationship concepts such as gender and sex, continuing with the examination of the various definitions of feminism and the representation of women in advertising within historical and contemporary background. Next will follow the analysis of gendered readings in advertising campaigns and messages. Lastly, presenting the intersection between marketing and feminism in terms of the past, present and future, using the identified four waves of feminism to document the relationship.

## **1.1 Understanding relationship concepts**

The ability to embrace social change and continual transformation is valuable when analysing the evolution of the relationship between marketing and feminism. In the past, there was more discussion in the marketing discipline about gender than feminism. Despite its importance, gender was not well understood or conceptualised in marketing theory, research, or practice. Theoretical classifications such as gender, sex, sexuality, and sex role were frequently muddled. However, gender used to be (and remains to this day) among the

most widely used segmentation variables and most market studies, still today, employ it as a quota control or as a front variable in surveys (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2000).

For feminist thought and research, it is crucial to make a distinction between sex (the biology of a person assigned at birth, e.g. man/woman) and gender (created in culture and society, including gender roles and norms, e.g. male/female characteristics), because it means that gender differences, while pervasive in culture, are not immutable (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2000).

Both academic and practical marketing studies that have examined sex and gender, have tended to report that the differences existed (or did not exist) among males and females, simply leaving this data as a result, without attempting to investigate how, in what manner and, above all, why the differences were found (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 1997). According to Costa (1994), as the research field on gender and consumers has progressed far beyond these superficial and simplistic findings, we should no longer accept these results as important. Similarly, Artz and Venkatesh (1991) in their work “Gender representation in advertising”, noted that research of gender issue in advertising and marketing leads to “superficial and self-evident inferences”, is lacking in theory and is only concerned with the issue of gender stereotypy.

## **1.2 Feminism and marketing activities**

Feminism is a term that evokes strong emotions and associations, with a wide diversity of interpretations and meanings (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2000). Every branch of feminist thought in different areas of life holds its own set of principles and objectives, which are shaped by its own social, cultural, political, and religious perspectives (Maclaran & Stevens, 2019). Although each form of feminism has its own unique theoretical outlook, there are some key tenets that are endorsed by all feminist thoughts. The first fundamental principle that is central to feminist approaches and theories is that men and women should be equal, and feminists maintain that this is not the case in the majority of contemporary environments, either on a global or more local scale. Another key tenet is that, since it is a male-dominated system which encompasses all major social establishments such as the economy, politics, family and religion, this system, the so-called patriarchy, is responsible for this inequality (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). A third principle is that feminism recognises the distinction between sex and gender within the cultural and historical context, highlighting how gender standards are historically dependent. Furthermore, Maclaran & Stevens (2019) pointed out that not all cultures globally make such narrow binary gender distinctions.

Moreover, it is hard to define a bracket in feminism, since there is no single philosophy that can be classified as feminism. In accordance with Whelehan (1995), several academics hold that the term “feminisms” might actually constitute a more suitable label, as there are various feminist standpoints. These include liberal feminism, radical feminism, black feminism,

marxist feminism, socialist feminism, postfeminism, ecofeminism and so forth. The divergences between such feminisms may appear substantial and irreconcilable. Such a perception sorely undermines both the areas of shared commonality among feminists and feminism's capacity to foster and embrace diversity.

Feminist marketing scholars concur that, despite variations, women have experienced social injustice due to their sex and therefore aim to correct this gender imbalance. According to Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens (2000), feminism encompasses a mixture of social criticism (of the origins and effects of gender inequality) and social action (to draw attention to and enhance the status of women). Hence, politics is embedded in feminism. Therefore, feminist academic Weedon (1997) posits that feminism is a political movement aimed at altering the current power dynamics between men and women in mainstream society. These power dynamics shape every aspect of life, including the family, education and welfare, the workplace and politics, culture and leisure. They dictate who performs what tasks for whom, and influence who we are and who we can become. Similarly, Bordo (1990) maintains that feminism is not just about theoretical or radical intellectual critique; it is a political practice designed to advance the condition of women. It holds true that women all over the world, regardless of their race, class or sexuality, are in a less favourable position compared to their male counterparts.

A further explanation of feminism is given by the black feminist bell hooks (1984) in her book *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, which defines the movement succinctly and clearly as: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression". Stressing that the movement is not anti-male and that the issue at hand is sexism, hooks (2000) points out that sexism is the result of a social and cultural system that, from birth on, influences both women and men to accept sexist thoughts and actions.

Given its origins in social and political criticism and action, feminism has a complicated relationship with theory and philosophy; certain radical feminists even reject the theory. As feminists have become more committed to social criticism, they have recognised the shortcomings of traditional thinking and knowledge and have advanced new ways of reasoning in these domains. Feminist studies generally go further than simply describing, explaining, or understanding phenomena (Ozanne & Stern, 1993). Just as the feminist movement has as its goals both social criticism and social change, with the fundamental tenet of power and oppressive structures disruption, feminist theory and research also have both aims. As social critics, feminist scholars have pointed out how knowledge is shaped by gender. Just as supporters of social change, they aim to adjust the knowledge imbalance by presenting alternative methods and theories for knowledge creation. This requires a fundamental rethinking of the foundations of disciplinary knowledge, specifically the "male" perspective and the ignoring of gender (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2000).

Historically, feminist thought has played a significant role in shaping marketing practices, by challenging and changing the traditional gender roles and stereotypes that have been often perpetuated in advertising. Over the last half-century, numerous researches and commentaries have focused on the representation of women in advertisements. Historically, women in advertising have often been portrayed in a stereotypical and objectified manner, often serving as props intended to sell products targeting primarily men (Kerin, Lundstrom, & Sciglimpaglia, 1979). Studies such as Goffman's (1976) on gender representation in advertising revealed how men were more likely to be portrayed as confident and in control, while women were more likely to be represented as submissive and vulnerable. However, there has been a shift in recent years, with a tendency to portray women in commercials in a more diverse and empowering way, reflecting the change in cultural attitudes towards gender roles and female emancipation. Unlike the advertisements of the past, which exploited the female figure for the sole purpose of promoting products, today brands and products almost take on a secondary role and what is emphasised is the communicative message and a whole range of values that centre around the concept of inclusiveness (Rizzoli, 2022). For instance, Dove's marketing advertisement in 2004 "Global Campaign for Real Beauty", attempted to change, educate, and inspire women about the true definition of beauty in order to help them feel comfortable in their own skin (Murray, 2013). Since 2014, there has been talk of "femvertising", a newly coined neologism in marketing that refers to the use of the image of women in advertising, being represented as strong, resourceful, and independent role models. The aim of femvertising is to raise collective awareness and initiate change regarding the role and representation of women in society (Rizzoli, 2022). Although some advertisements nowadays still propagate gender stereotypes, a shift towards a more diverse, empowering and inclusive female presence in advertising is noticeable (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008).

Marketing scholar Stern (2000) suggests that non-sexist advertising campaigns should incorporate innovative ideas such as presenting authentic female experiences. This means avoiding denigrating sex-role stereotypes in advertising campaigns, such as the "sex kitten" or the "mindless housewife", and instead portraying multifaceted and realistic female characters. Feminist critics encourage advertising that accurately portrays the full range of women's experiences and feelings, depicting how it feels like to be a woman, rather than focusing on women as seen through men's eyes (also called the "gaze"). By prioritizing women's voices and experiences, advertising can serve as a platform for honest self-expression. Another important aspect of non-sexist advertising is the display of positive female role models for both adults and children. Currently, advertising aimed at children frequently emphasises incessant consumption messages and stereotypical caricatures of women. Only by showcasing women who are self-actualizing and have an identity that is not dependent on men can advertising messages help to promote a positive self-esteem and sense of feminine identity in young children. Non-sexist advertising should also reflect cooperation and community among women, rather than reinforcing competition and animosity. When women are portrayed as rivals for male attention, it erodes their sense of

self-worth and undermines their goals of self-fulfilment. By highlighting the ways in which women support and work collectively, advertising can help fight isolation and inferiority convictions, and foster a sense of solidarity among women. Lastly, non-sexist advertising can help promote a new vision of humanity, allowing advertising to humanise culture rather than perpetuate sexism, highlighting high self-esteem as a distinctive mark of feminine identity. This new perception of humanity is based on humanistic values such as nurturance, kindness, and cooperation. By representing both men and women as capable of embodying these values, advertising can help create a fairer and more equitable world and society.

### **1.3 The effect of gender on reading advertising texts**

In the past, academics studied advertising on the supposition that language neutrality enabled the communication of the “same” information to all individuals and that meaning had a universal and “correct” interpretation of a stable message by all consumers, despite the tendency of some audiences to misunderstand certain content (Stern, 1992). However, in recent years, postmodern criticism as well as feminist and multicultural theories (Stern, 1999) have challenged this notion, suggesting that readers are active participants in the reading process and that meaning is not universal and fixed (the term “reading” is derived from literary critics and utilised as a generic descriptor for consumer responses to advertising texts) (Stern, 1993). Feminist theory further underlined the relevance of taking into consideration the role of gender in the relationship between reader and text. This resulted in the concept of the “gendered nature of texts”, acknowledging that male and female readers may respond differently to texts, both in regard to subject matter and style as well as perceived significance (O’Donohoe, 2000). Gendered readings also take into account how various social, cultural and historical backgrounds can shape the interpretation of advertising messages. Furthermore, this insight can be used to examine variations in the response of different consumer segments to advertising messages (Stern, 2000).

In the 1990s, the notion of “gendered” text was extended from literature to advertising (Stern, 1992), with the argument that, in the same manner that products are assigned gender according to the product category, the endorser and/or the potential user’s sex, so too can advertising text be attributed gender as either female-centred or male-centred (Iyer & Debevec, 1986). In the view of Stern (2000), advertising content should be examined as sex-specific instead of sex-neutral, on the basis of interactions between the gender of the text and that of the reader, interactions similar to those assumed in literary criticism.

In the field of literary criticism, as in other areas of study, feminists initially drew attention to the perceived repressiveness of “women’s place” (Lakoff, 1973) in a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture in which male dominance was considered the standard. This norm assumed that both men and women embraced one viewpoint as dominant: the male perspective (Firestone, 1971). Indeed, male readers are likely to read male (androcentric) advertising texts “as men”, whereas female readers are more prone to read female

(gynocentric) advertising texts “as women”, but also to read male advertising texts “as men” (Culler, 1982). In advertising, the persuasive techniques employed prior to the 1970s commonly depicted women as viewed through the lens of male-defined “norms”. Feminist scholars have identified that the normalisation of androcentrism as a standard encourages women to adopt a masculine perspective, to identify with male viewpoints and to accept a masculine value system as normal and legitimate (Friedman & Fetterley, 1979; Stern, 2000).

Besides the gender of the advertising texts, another element that influences the process of reading are the differentiated reading styles depending on the reader’s gender. In this regard, academic Rosenblatt (1978) coined two contrasting ways of reading, namely, “aesthetic” (feminine) versus “efferent” (masculine), maintaining that aesthetic reading is a characteristic of female readers, as it is a style based on emotions and aimed at an experiential purpose. Conversely, efferent reading is a feature of male readers, as it is a cognitive style directed towards an informational objective.

The responses of male and female readers are reported to differ not only in terms of their reading style, but also in respect of the reader’s interactions with the text, which determine the nature of the reader’s engagement with the content (Stern, 2000). According to empirical research conducted by scholars Bleich (1988) and Flynn (1988), the reader’s engagement with the text may vary depending on the reader’s gender, which influences their level of participation or detachment from the material. Bleich describes the male response using the term “detachment” to indicate the notion that men read (evaluate, narrate) a story from an external viewpoint and with the intention of gathering knowledge from a story. On the other hand, Flynn called the female response “participation” to convey the opposite idea, that women tend to read (experience, sense, empathise with) a story from an internal perspective and with the purpose of experiencing the personal relationships of a story.

Critics adopting a feminist approach to reader response consider the reading process as a dynamic interaction between the gender embedded in the text and that of the reader (defined by sex), which determines their control (or the absence thereof) over the text (Stern, 2000). Therefore, four models of reader response have been offered. The first one is dominance, in which the reader holds power over the text, looking at the story from a distance and experiencing an apathetic sentiment towards the characters. The second is submission, where the text dominates the reader, creating in them an excessive emotional attachment to the events of the story, to the point of anxiety when confronted with new material. Next is that of interaction, wherein reader and text engage in a conversation, balancing empathic engagement with detachment to achieve understanding (Flynn, 1988). The last model is that of resistance (Friedman & Fetterley, 1979), whereby the reader resists reading a text as it was intended, reading it rather in opposition to itself in order to challenge male domination (Schweickart, 1988).



Thus, when these concepts listed above are applied to advertising, the same four patterns of reader response are expected to describe consumer involvement with the advertising content, and these models may differ based on the gender of the text and/or the sex of the reader. Specifically, male readers tend to dominate both the androcentric and gynocentric advertising text (choosing not to engage), while female readers are more inclined to submit to the androcentric advertising text (feeling overcome by it), but to interact with the gynocentric advertising text (Rome, O'Donohoe, & Dunnett, 2020). Nevertheless, female readers, particularly those with a certain amount of exposure to feminist scholarship, are more prone to resist to the androcentric advertising text (reading against the intended meaning). The principles from feminist critique of reader response, concerning gendered texts, different reading styles, and gendered reactions to advertising texts, provide the foundations for specific topics of a research agenda to further advance the goals of feminists who attempt not only to comprehend the world, but to effectively change it (Stern, 2000).

#### **1.4 History of feminism and marketing**

The history of feminism and marketing is a relatively novel field of study, yet feminism has had a considerable influence on the way the discipline of marketing is researched and practiced. From the suffragettes of the early 1900s to the present days, the feminist movement for gender's equality has spanned over a century of activism. This history is often divided into distinct "Waves" to denote the various issues that were prominent during specific periods, commonly known as the "waves of feminism" (Maclaran, & Stevens, 2019).

The oppression of women has a deep-rooted history: the idea of female inferiority to men is deeply embedded in many ancient literatures, especially those relaying philosophical and religious beliefs. Considering this long-established misogyny, it is not surprising that there have been dissenting women's voices throughout the centuries, despite the fact that most of them have been silenced due to the imbalance of power and the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Yet, the beginning of the rise of women's status in Western society was marked by the suffragette movement, which started in the 1840s (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019).

Several marketing academics, including feminist scholars Scott (2000) and Peñaloza (1994), have examined the relationship between marketing and feminism from historical and contemporary perspectives, considering the heterogeneity inherent in feminism. Scott (2000) emphasizes for the central role of the market structure in the advancement of the feminist movement, also highlighting the fact that many suffragettes in the First Wave Feminism period (1840-1920) were keen to use marketing strategies and techniques to promote their campaign "Votes for Women", whilst also gaining publicity for the feminist movement more generally. For instance, during the 1850s, activist and founder of the first women's newspaper, *The Lily*, which advocated women's rights, Amelia Bloomer introduced a new

fashion trend, known as Bloomers, as part of her feminist dress reform agenda. Thereafter, in the late 1890s, American prominent abolitionist and president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Elizabeth Cady Stanton featured as a celebrity endorser in a national advertising campaign for Fairy Soap. These leading activists also generated significant income from their well-publicized lecture tours across the nation, and they were not hesitant to market themselves in order to attract large crowds for their speeches (Scott, 2005). Following Scott's (2005) provocative and innovative work, *Fresh Lipstick*, an examination and criticism of the extent to which much of the tensions of that period concerned the erosion of class distinctions and the affirmation of predominant class hierarchies within the suffragette movement.

During this First Wave Feminism, marketing as a field of study was in its initial stages and was just beginning to detach itself from economics and establish its own identity. Indeed, the earliest marketing courses began to be offered around the first years of the 1900s (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). The First Wave feminists held a distinct viewpoint compared to the historically Second Wave feminists (1960-1988), who criticised marketers and marketing practices for disseminating against negative publicity images of women and their limited representation as decorative objects in domestic environments (Craig, 1997). These thoughts were fuelled by works such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Maclaran, 2012). Similarly, to the First Wave of feminism, the Second Wave was mainly shaped and driven by upper middle-class, well-educated white women who concentrated movement fights around their own concerns. Indeed, black feminist hooks (2000) called attention to the class disparities within the feminist movement, as educated white women, as well as the group of women who received mass media exposure, rapidly claimed "ownership" of the movement, placing working-class white women, poor white women, and all women of colour in the position of followers. In her book *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*, hooks (2000) admonished the fact that the issue of female subordination and confinement in the home as housewives, as explored in the Friedan's work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was in fact only relevant to a small, elite group of well-educated white women. Whilst, at the time in the nation a large majority of lower-class women were employed in the workforce, for long hours and underpaid. The lack of well-paid employment opportunities for educated and privileged white women, that confined them inside homes (hooks, 2000).

Moreover, Second-Wave feminists treated women as a homogenous group, without paying attention to the numerous axes of differentiation that separate the singular category of "women". In her most well-known book, *Am I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks (1981) discussed the devaluation of black femininity, and the marginalization of women of colour, which she claimed perpetuated racism and classism within the movement. hooks' work played a crucial role in the emergence of the Third Wave of feminism as it emphasized the need for various feminisms (Munro, 2013).

According to the marketing scholar Maclaran (2012), at that time, many women working in the advertising industry advocated feminist thoughts and worked to bring about change from within their advertising agencies. In particular, during the 80s, advertisers started to frequently integrate themes of liberation and empowerment into their campaigns, reflecting feminist perspectives. Such views were applied to examine marketing and its related activities, including the deconstructing of advertising messages, the marketing rhetoric, and the underpinning ideology more comprehensively in consumer research. These studies revealed that the prevailing ideology in marketing and consumer research was masculinist and utilised the metaphor of the machine, embedded in the concept of homo economicus, which favoured the mind and knowledge (believed to be masculine) over the body and emotions (believed to be feminine). After this wave of feminist critique of marketing and consumer research in the early 1990s, later feminist analyses were scarce until Catterall et al.'s (2000) book *Marketing and Feminism: Current Issues and Research*, addressing this topic (Maclaran, 2012).

Marketing academic Peñaloza (1994) in her paper *Crossing boundaries*, provides a political examination of the relationship between feminism, race, and gender in the marketing academic context, offering a note of caution by highlighting the over-generalisation of women's experience in marketing, experiences depending widely across generations, classes, ethnicities and sexualities (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2000). Illustrating the reactions to the writings of the black feminist, bell hooks and of the gender theorist Judith Butler, who influences the Third Wave Feminism (1988-2010), placing greater emphasis on the experiences of queer and non-white woman and criticised second-wave feminists for assuming that all women faced the same types of oppression. hooks' foundational paper *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984) is an exploration of the intersection of race, gender and capitalism (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). She also opened the doors for masculinity studies, highlighted the limitations of Second-Wave feminism by criticising the way it treated men and ignoring how patriarchal culture prohibited men from being in contact with their own feelings and emotions. At that time also the seminal work of gender philosopher Judith Butler was also breaking new ground. In her paper *Gender Trouble* (1990) she attempted to address the relationship between discourse and the materiality of the body through her theory of gender performativity. Thereby emphasising the fluidity of gender and sexuality, she destabilised the categories of male and female. Butler's insights have inspired a new area of study, Queer Theory, which questions the validity of heteronormative discourse (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019).

Reflecting the broader cultural shift across the social sciences, the Third Wave dealt with the micropolitics of gender identities, embracing the idea of multiple feminisms as proposed by bell hooks. This new concept introduced a new principle of intersectionality, recognizing the interplay of various forms of oppression related to the female experience, such as race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, ethnicity and so forth, that result in discrimination or marginalization (Maclaran & Stevens, 2019).

In relation to marketing, the recognition of multiple feminisms during the Third Wave led to a point of reconciliation with consumption as pluralism turned into individualism. This marked the beginning of an era of identity politics and challenged the understandings of traditional binary views of men and women. It was not until the 1990s that feminist criticism entered the realm of consumer research as part of the emerging interpretive approach, using alternative modes of theory. This critique frequently aimed to deconstruct the masculine ideology present in both marketing and consumer research discourses. During this period, there was also a growing focus on the intersection of gender and consumption, which began with Janeen Costa's Gender, Marketing and Consumer Research Conference in 1991. While feminist perspectives have always been present, they became less pronounced during the 2000s, when the field of gender and identity projects, along with Consumer Culture Theoretics, gained prominence (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). Therefore, the Third Wave is characterised by a reduced focus on the manipulative and oppressive power of marketing and media practices (a critique linked to modernist perspectives) and by the reconciliation of feminism and consumption, linking empowerment with sexual expressiveness and purchasing power (Maclaran, 2012).

From a wave of social media hashtag campaigns and feminist student societies to media personalities pushing for gender equality, taking a stand against misogyny, and encouraging women to support each other, we are arguably witnessing the emergence of the so-called Fourth Wave of Feminism (2010 - present) (Cochrane 2013; Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). This Fourth Wave appears to incorporate elements of the Third Wave, particularly the concept of intersectionality and the acknowledgement of the predominant patriarchal systems of oppression from the Second Wave. Moreover, this wave is defined by the use of 21st century technology, more specifically the Internet and social media. These online platforms have cultivated a culture of "calling out" sexism and misogyny, and they have also enabled the growth of a global feminist community who utilize the internet and social media, both as a discussion forum and as a tool for activism, due to their easy accessibility and effectiveness. This culture reflects the ongoing influence of the Third Wave, with its emphasis on micropolitics and challenging sexism and misogyny in various forms of everyday discourse, such as advertising, movies, television and literature, media, and more (Munro, 2013).

According to Aikenhead (2014), there have been many relevant arguments regarding the revival of debates on gender inequality in various environments such as the workplace, the streets, the homes and the media, with an increasing number of celebrities today openly embracing the "feminist" label. Feminist celebrities including Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Lady Gaga and Viola Davis are using their fame and notoriety in Hollywood and beyond to raise consciousness about the need for gender equality and contribute to redefine the meaning of being a feminist in the modern era (Team ELLE, 2023). This latest resurgence of feminism in mainstream culture is in stark contrast to the prior decade, during which

gender equality was believed to have been largely accomplished, particularly in the West, due to women's emancipation and liberation through individual choices (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). Back then, the term "feminism" was derogatorily shortened to the "F-word" and avoided in polite conversations. Today, however, the "F-word" is once again popular as many young women self-identify as feminists, utilizing powerful marketing tools such as social media to raise awareness on a wide range of issues concerning women's inequality (Baumgardner, 2011).

Nevertheless, the incorporation of the recent cultural "trending" of feminism in marketing campaigns are said to be a merely form of "rebranding feminism" (Bainbridge, 2014), a manipulative marketing tactic in a world that is increasingly socially conscious and online connected (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019). This viewpoint may hold weight if the concept of cultural progression is seen as separate from economic logic, rather than being intertwined and inseparable from the revaluation of values and the materialization of these values (Groys, 2014). In other words, if culture and the market are not distinct entities, then the notion of separating the market to determine the authenticity and essence of the latest cultural wave is flawed, as is the rejection of feminist activism due to its perceived "overexposure" in the market (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019).

Parallel to the re-emergence of feminism in popular culture, there has been a resurgence of scholarship utilizing feminist theory in marketing and consumer research. This resurgence has brought new insights into the study of gendered relationships, experiences and issues, such as the person-object relations (Valtonen & Närvänen, 2015), the gendered experience of singleness (Lai, Lim & Higgins, 2015), and gender-based violence (Joy, Belk & Bhardway, 2015). In their paper, Hearn and Hein (2015) explore the missing feminisms in marketing and consumer research and suggest reframing gender and feminist knowledge construction to include a more diverse range of perspectives and theories. They maintain that a research agenda around "missing feminisms" should incorporate critical race theory, queer theory, intersectional and transnational feminisms, material-discursive feminism, and critical studies on men and masculinities. Stevens and Houston (2015) at the 13<sup>th</sup> Conference on Gender, Marketing, and Consumer Behaviour, presented their work arguing that the Fourth Wave of feminism focuses on using the body as a site for political activism, rather than individual empowerment.

Overall, the relationship between marketing and feminism has evolved over time and is still ongoing, and the recent emergence of the Fourth Wave of feminism has brought new perspectives and opportunities for research in this field. A number of academics believe that by concentrating on the relationship between feminism and technology, there is significant potential for new feminist theorising in the future. Ultimately, this could lead to a better understanding of the indicated interplay between marketing, feminism and technology disciplines and contribute to the development of deeper and more accurate academic insights and related conceptions (Maclaran & Kravets, 2019).

## **2 DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING**

In our contemporary high-tech driven world, digital and social media marketing has become an essential tool for corporations that seeks to effectively reach and connect with their target audience and achieve their marketing goals and therefore financial purposes, but also a meaningful mean for individuals utilizing digital technology in their daily life activities. The emergence of the Internet and social media networks have provided businesses with the access to an unprecedented amount of consumer data, and they can utilise this insight to create highly focused and targeted marketing campaigns. Similarly, individuals have the access to a wealth of information that they can employ at their convenience (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2017). The dynamic nature of the digital marketing landscape, ranging from search engine optimisation to social media advertising, requires companies to keep abreast of the latest trends and strategies to remain competitive, relevant, and drive corporate success as consumer tastes and preferences continue to evolve (Bala & Verma, 2018; Navarro, 2023a).

Within this chapter, the fundamental concepts and the modern era popularity of digital marketing and social media, including the diverse social media platforms available, the advantages associated with each of them, and the potential biases embedded within social media infrastructure are explored. Furthermore, a glimpse is provided into the innovative approaches of social media activism, through the analysis of activists' common fights, tools, and communication strategies. Lastly, a deeper look is taken at the relevant social activist accounts on the photo and video-sharing platform Instagram, and at the power of influence of feminist Instagram activism.

### **2.1 The surge of digital marketing**

Digital marketing is the practice of promoting products or services using digital communication technologies, mostly on the Internet, but also including mobile phones, through display adverts and other digital medium. Companies use a variety of digital channels like search engines, e-mail, social networks, and their own websites to reach and engage with existing and potential clients. This kind of marketing is also known as online marketing, web marketing or internet marketing. Digital marketing encompasses a wide range of digital strategies and platforms to engage with customers in the place where they spend most of their time: online. From websites to online company branding activities such as email marketing, digital ads, online brochures and more, there is a range of tactics that come within the “digital marketing” umbrella (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019). Hence, this has revolutionised how businesses apply communication technologies (Puthussery, 2020) and has resulted in the emergence of more connected, conscious, and empowered customer groups in both physical and virtual environments (Krishen, Dwivedi, Bindu & Kumar, 2021).

The advancement of technology is closely linked to the development of digital marketing (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019). The term “digital marketing” was first introduced in the 1990s, along with the surge in popularity of personal computers and the emergence of server/client architecture. This led to the integration of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems into marketing communication technology (Puthussery, 2020). During the 1990s and 2000s, digital marketing revolutionised the use of marketing technology by companies and brands. With the growing integration of digital platforms into marketing strategies and daily life, and as consumers shift from physical shopping to digital devices, digital marketing campaigns are becoming more widespread and effective (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019). In the 20th century, globalisation has brought intense competition in the marketing industry, resulting in improved quality standards and sophistication of goods and services. Therefore, to achieve widespread distribution and promotion of products and services, global advertising became a necessity (Krishen, Dwivedi, Bindu & Kumar, 2021). As a result, the shift in consumer behaviour preferences has prompted the diversification of marketing strategies and the adoption of new technologies and innovative business tactics such as content marketing, search engine optimisation (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), social media marketing, influencer marketing, campaign marketing, e-commerce marketing, data-driven marketing, display advertising, direct email marketing, and e-books, among others (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019).

The responsibility of digital marketers is to increase brand awareness and generate leads across the various digital channels (both paid and free) that the organisation has at its disposal. These channels can encompass the company’s personal website, search engine placement, social media, email, display ads and the firm’s blog. In order to accurately measure the business’s success across each individual channel, the digital marketer concentrates on a different set of key performance indicators (KPIs) for each channel. Nowadays, digital marketing is a crucial part of many marketing positions. In smaller companies, a single person is in charge of managing several digital marketing approaches, whereas larger organisations have various specialists (e.g. content marketer, social media marketer, email marketer, etc.) who are responsible for managing one or two digital channels of the business. The most performing digital marketers have a clear understanding of how each digital marketing campaign contributes to their overall objectives. According to the objectives of the marketing strategy, marketers can utilise the free and paid channels available to them to sustain broader campaigns (Desai & Vidyapeeth, 2019).

Digital advertising has emerged as one of the most essential and valuable marketing techniques worldwide. Due to the increase in Internet usage penetration rates (reaching 5.16 billion Internet users globally in January 2023, accounting for 64.4 percent of the global population, with an average individual time spent on the Internet of 6 hours 58 minutes per day by 2022) and the growing popularity of online content media (particularly throughout the pandemic period), worldwide digital advertisement spending was projected to hit a new record high of 681 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, (a record growth of 8.4 percent over the

previous year) with an increasing trend. This number is particularly remarkable, as it represents almost 70 percent of total investments in advertising worldwide (Statista Research Department, 2023a; Statista, 2023a). The increasing concentration of advertising dollars proves the effectiveness of digital marketing in targeting audiences and reaching growth objectives such as increased income, consumer fidelity, brand awareness, lead generation, and reduced customer acquisition and service charges (Faruk, Rahman, & Hasan, 2021). Despite the substantial growth of online advertising in many regions of the world, competition in the digital advertising landscape is intensifying and becoming more concentrated each passing year (Pellegrino, Stasi & Bhatiasevi, 2022).

### 2.1.1 Most effective digital marketing techniques

Based on an online survey by Statista (2020) on the most successful digital marketing tactics worldwide in 2020, content marketing and marketing automation, with 17.4%, were considered the most successful and having the greatest commercial impact on companies according to the feedback from global marketers. These were followed by big data (15.3%), artificial intelligence (AI) as well as machine learning (12.9%), social media marketing (7.8%), conversion rate optimisation (CRO) and website experience enhancement (4.8%), communities (4.8%), paid search marketing (3.9%), mobile marketing (3%), search engine optimisation (SEO; 3%) and so forth (Statista, 2020).

The application of artificial intelligence (AI) is widely employed in the analysis of marketing data in Europe, North America and Asia-Pacific countries. However, there are some regional variations in the implementation of AI. Asian marketers lean more towards testing with AI technology and using it in content creation, whereas European and North American market experts use AI to automate marketing tasks such as optimisation (calculation of conversion likelihood), personalisation (of the content), or programmatic advertising (timing of e-mails) (Statista, 2020). According to the newest reports, AI is firmly entrenched in the digital marketing space, with more than 80 percent of marketers incorporating some sort of AI technology into their online marketing operations. The widespread adoption of AI in marketing is not surprising, given its ability to make activities simpler and more efficient and to enhance marketing effectiveness by means of sophisticated advertising targeting (Dencheva, 2023a). Most of the marketers who have previously used artificial intelligence in their marketing activities, reported that AI was useful in various areas, including recognising improved content, customising campaigns, automating tasks, boosting sales, improving client relationships, and simplifying new product launches. Therefore, the proportion of marketers globally using AI for digital marketing has dramatically grown from 29 percent in 2018 to 84 percent in 2020 (Statista, 2020). In a survey carried out among global marketers at the end of 2020, revealed that 41 percent of interviewees reported higher revenues and better performance due to the employment of AI in marketing processes. Furthermore, another 38 percent credited the generation of customised consumer experiences to the use of AI for marketing purposes (Navarro, 2023b).



### 2.1.2 Digital marketing popularity among young people

Digital marketing is widely recognised as the most effective and influential way to connect with the younger generation of customers, since they are the age segment with the most active online presence, particularly on social media platforms, worldwide. As of 2021, more than half of the world's online users were aged between 18 and 34 (Petrosyan, 2023). In 2022, Europe had the highest proportion of internet users aged from 15 to 24 (also known as Generation Z), with 98 percent of this age group actively engaged online. The American regions ranked second with an internet penetration rate of 94 percent, while the member countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) recorded the third largest share of online access globally, at 91 percent. Conversely, young Africans had the lowest online presence, with only 55 percent Internet access. Overall, as of 2022, 75 percent of the world's population between the ages of 15 and 24 stated accessing the Internet (Statista, 2022a).

Young consumers are highly proficient in technology and spend a significant amount of time online, thereby making digital marketing one of the most powerful means to reach them. Figures show that 78 percent of Generation Z users and 67 percent of Millennial users, respectively, make extensive use of online platforms to explore and obtain further information about brands (Paun, 2022). Therefore, digital specialists are turning their attention and resources towards digital marketing tactics to harness the buying patterns of the younger generation of consumers and establishing a solid corporate presence online. Brands are investing in creative content creation techniques that target younger audiences, including influencer marketing, video content and interactive campaigns on various social media, blogs, and websites. Such strategies enable brands and corporations to build customised, immersive, and compelling user experiences for their target public, resulting in increased levels of traffic and the generation of a loyal customer base (Confos & Davis, 2016).

## 2.2 The role of social media

The world has witnessed a surge of information generated and shared across social media, over the past decade. Social media are commonly defined as an Internet-based third-party platforms (Pellegrino, Stasi & Bhatiasavi, 2022) that includes online social networking sites, video and photo sharing channels, instant mobile messaging applications and so forth. These applications use information and communication technologies to enable users generate content, express themselves and socially interact (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). People employ them to communicate with their friends, family members and other users in the online social community. Social media enables users to share relevant news updates, but also to posts, comments, publish photos and videos concerning their lifestyle and their everyday activities (Irshad & Ahmad, 2019). Social networking has also shaped and affected the way customers engage with companies and organisations as well as the other way around, and the way people consume and share news. It has impacted upon the normative standards and

cultural values of our society. Grounded in the wider landscape of “Web 2.0”, social media has enabled developers, entrepreneurs and common people to reinvent the role that technology can perform in information distribution, community building and communication (boyd, 2015). Moreover, social media networking facilities have contributed to removing geographical boundaries that formerly limited communication and have resulted in an explosion of online participation, e-communities and virtual presence (Dwivedi, Kelly, Janssen, Rana, Slade, & Clement, 2018) as well as the creation of business networks and the initiation of collaborative projects (Pellegrino, Stasi & Bhatiasevi, 2022).

Social media have empowered their users to actively generate their own online material (also known as user-generated content) without the need of particular knowledge or skills. The advancement of social media gave users the capability to design and share their own personal creations, to exhibit their creative talents or hobbies ranging from music, art, and other forms of inventive and original material (Fileborn, 2016). Social media has also provided consumers with a greater transparency and access to a wealth of meaningful information. Nowadays, consumers can explore and discover novel products and services, read reviews, and compare product features and prices of various brands, prior making a purchase, with only a few clicks. This has brought an increase in the awareness and power of consumers, who are now better informed on the products they purchase and the businesses they endorse (Irshad & Ahmad, 2019). Social media has also provided their user members with a room for social and political activism, to voice their thoughts, views, beliefs and experiences. Many individuals use this social space to raise awareness of relevant cultural and ecological issues, organise events and demonstrations, and advocate for social change (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

From the corporation perspective, social media has given companies a more personal and direct line of communication to reach their target audience. Businesses can employ social networks to design personalised and engaging content experiences, establish efficient customer relationship programmes, collect valuable feedback on their products or services, handle customer complaints, and foster a feeling of community around their brand (Wibowo, Chen, Wiangin, Ma & Ruangkanjanases, 2020). According to global marketers, this customer-centric strategy has been effective in developing brand loyalty and driving customer engagement (Gupta & Ramachandran, 2021).

Social media is an increasingly significant element of people’s daily lives around the world, as it keeps the global population interconnected, well-informed and entertained, allowing them to actively participate in sharing their thoughts (Washington & Marcus, 2022). In January 2023, it was estimated that active social media users were 4.76 billion worldwide, representing 59.4 per cent of the globe’s total population (Statista, 2023a), with a forecast to reach nearly 6 billion by 2027. Social media is an established component of everyday Internet use. Approximately on average, Internet users across the globe spend 144 minutes per day on social media and instant messaging apps, an increase of over half an hour in

comparison to 2015 (Dixon, 2023a). As of the beginning of January 2023, Northern Europe is the highest social media penetration region, with a reach of 83.6 per cent. Western Europe closely follows with 83.3 per cent and Southern Europe ranks third with a coverage rate of 76.7 per cent. Worldwide, about six out of ten people make use of social networking, with a global penetration rate of 59.4 per cent (Statista, 2023b).

Social networks have turned into one of the most successful digital marketing channels and most businesses have embraced the power of social like never before. As social media user numbers continue to rise and consumer buying patterns are increasingly affected by photo, video and content sharing platforms, marketers are strongly harnessing the pulling power of these networks for promotion. As of 2022, global advertising spending on social media amounted to approximately 230 billion U.S. dollars, with a forecast of exceeding 300 billion U.S. dollars by 2024 (Dencheva, 2023b). According to a worldwide estimation, the United States is the world's largest market for social media advertising spending, with an amount of 80.67 billion US dollars by the end of 2022, closely followed by China with USD 80.55 billion US dollars (Statista Research Department, 2023b). Across Europe, social media advertisement spending is estimated to amount to 37.47 billion U.S. dollars, growing by 18.1 percent throughout the year 2023 (Statista, 2022b). By far, the United Kingdom is the largest market for social ad expenditure in Europe, with 13.45 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2022c), followed by Germany with 5.05 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2022d) and France with 3.45 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2022e).

While the benefits of social media usage are seemingly infinite, it is quite easy to neglect the drawbacks of social media, which are an increasingly significant consideration as social media sites keep multiplying. Social media has fostered a decline in content ownership and control, with the progressive overlapping of public, private and institutional domains. There is a need for a delicate balance between professionalism and freedom of expression to guarantee that published content does not outrage or damage reputations. The qualitative nature of social media content is varied and ranges from facts to "fake news". Inaccurate information can quickly spread all over the world and negatively impact people's opinions and perceptions (Dwivedi, Kelly, Janssen, Rana, Slade, & Clement, 2018). This leads to the polarisation of social groups and the exertion of improper influence on geopolitical events, like the 2016 US elections (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). Indeed, the term "fake news" acquired relevance in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election (Di Domenico, Sit, Ishizaka, & Nunan, 2021), where the most widely debated fake news tended to favour the candidature of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017). Further downsides of social media comprise plagiarism, time pressure, misrepresentation and privacy issues, as well as addictiveness and adverse mental health effects such as loneliness, suicidality and anxiousness, particularly among adolescents (Pellegrino, Stasi & Bhatiasavi, 2022). Whilst presenting a means of safeguarding public security, social media is also a vehicle for undermining it and enabling emerging forms of cyberbullying, as well as radicalising individuals sympathetic to terrorist causes. All of these are major issues, yet all

imply the usage of social media to pursue malicious intentions (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021).

### 2.2.1 Relevant social media platforms

Social media platforms, also known as social networking sites, are defined as web-based services that enable individuals to build a public or semi-public profile inside a bounded system, to structure a list of other online members with whom they share a connection, and to display and navigate their personal network of connections and those made by others inside the system. The nature of these connections may differ from site to site (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Arguably, it might be acknowledged that at present there is no other online community that interconnects members of real-world geographical, ideological or other communities as effectively as social networks do (Yilmaz, 2017).

These online channels bring a variety of technological features and functionalities; some of the most typical include accounts (these sites enable users to build a profile with personal information, such as name, age, upload a profile image, location, interests and an “about me” section), friends, connections, followers/following (users are encouraged to identify other people in the network with whom they have a connection, this does not necessarily imply friendship and the reasons why individuals connect are diverse) news feeds (networks commonly display a news feed on the home page site, with the latest news and information of relevant content to a member’s personal interests, depending on their following, list of friends and the kind of content they regularly engage in, the latter in form of sponsorship), groups (some social networks offer group feature within their platforms, so members of the online community can have a space where can find similar people and share common interest, information and discuss relevant topics; groups can be either private or public), posts (members of the online community are able to generate and post their own content, in forms of photos, videos and texts, on their personal profiles or in public places such as groups or pages; recently becoming popular the kind of content that includes up to 10 photos, texts and/or videos in a single post also known as carousel), stories (networking sites enable users that shares short full screen vertical, temporary content in forms of text, photos and videos, with optional filters, are visible up to 24 hours), sharing (these online platforms enable users to distribute their own or other users’ web content in form of posts, stories, texts, links, or articles, with their own friends/followers/connections both privately and/or publicly and can be shared across third party platforms), messaging (users can send direct, personal messages and comments to their audiences, either privately or in a group chat), hashtags (are words and numbers following the # symbol; this is a method of categorising and tracking content by making it easier and faster to find; users can add hashtags on their posts, stories and articles), live streaming (some platforms enable users to broadcast live unedited video content to their audiences, allowing real-time interaction, engagement and more personal conversation) advertisements (social network sites provide advertising opportunities for organisations and individuals, allowing them to target specific audiences with paid ads and

promote their products or services) and so on (Saxena, 2022; Konstant Infosolutions, 2020; Leiner, Kobilke, Rueß, & Brosius, 2018; Parungao, 2022; boyd & Ellison, 2007).

According to Washington & Marcus (2022), it is significant to note the growing recognition, that the business models and architecture employed by the majority of social media platforms contribute to the polarisation of discourse. The business templates of most online networks are based on selling users data in order to target them with promoted, sponsored or commercial content material. Platforms' algorithms sort and display related material to users from previous searches and positive associated interactions, as well as the users' demographic location and the language group preferences. In addition, the algorithm takes into account factors such as timeless trends and topics that trigger positive users' feedback. However, this may restrict the quantity of material from alternative perspectives that users see and reinforces certain viewpoints. Social media platforms' algorithmic outcomes have also revealed discrepancies in the content targeting whom. This includes a gender division of content, meaning that what is most visible to different (perceived) gender users is shaped by dominant perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, algorithm results can have a harmful influence on users by displaying different content according to their sex and gender identity (Diepeveen, 2022). A number of studies suggest that the degree to which algorithms generate an "echo chamber", that is a restricted ecosystem where members only encounter insights that strengthen their existing views, is exaggerated in popular speech (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

There are a variety of social media platforms that include social networking sites such as Facebook, photo-sharing sites such as Instagram and Pinterest, video-sharing sites such as YouTube or short videos such as TikTok, microblogging sites such as Twitter, business networking sites such as LinkedIn (Irshad & Ahmad, 2019), instant messaging applications including WhatsApp, Snapchat, Telegram and Facebook Messenger and other platforms (Altynpara & Diduh, 2022; Washington & Marcus, 2022). Among these different channels, Facebook occupies the first place in terms of the number of monthly active users worldwide, which, as of January 2023, are about 2.9 billion (Statista, 2023c). This platform allows users to freely interact with friends and other members of the online community through chats, events, discussion groups, marketplaces. It offers members the opportunity to comment, post, like and share their thoughts and catch up with the latest news or educate themselves on other subjects of interest on the newsfeed (Weller, 2016; Caers, De Feyter, De Couck, Stough, Vigna, & Du Bois, 2013). Youtube is one of the largest online video channels and the second most popular social network platform with 2.5 billion users (Statista, 2023c). It is an informative dissemination platform for individuals who are looking to learn and acquire expertise, with a wealth of "how-to-do" online video content (Javatpoint, n.d.). Music and comedy related entertainment content is particularly valued on this network (Mottola, 2020). Instagram is in third place with 2 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2023c). This image and video sharing platform enables users to edit and share their personal content in the form of pictures, videos, stories and reels. According to Instagram users, funny contents pieces

are the preferred form of content for more than half of the platform members, followed by creative and informative content material. Sixty percent of global Instagram users are aged between 18 and 34 (Dixon, 2023b). The short video sharing social platform TikTok reached approximately 1 billion monthly active users in January 2023 (Statista, 2023c). This social network enables users to generate, modify and share short length videos, enriched with filters and complemented by the latest music trends. It is a successful international phenomenon with an active young audience, a generation of strong smartphone users continuously in tune with trending content. The vast majority of content creators on TikTok are between 18 and 25 years old, a factor contributing to the platform's massive popularity among Millennial and Gen Z users (Ceci, 2022). Twitter had 556 million monthly active users at the beginning of 2023 (Statista, 2023c). This online social networking platform permits users to publish brief 280-character messages known as tweets. Registered users can easily read and post tweets as well as follow others through update feeds (Dixon, 2023c). Individuals use Twitter for numerous purposes, ranging from entertainment to updating news and voicing opinions. A study conducted in 2022 in the United States found that 53 percent of Twitter users regularly use the social platform for news (Watson, 2023c).

The opportunities, mainstream popularity and pervasive use of the previously cited social media platforms have made them appealing to organisations seeking to improve their competitiveness and generate business value (Dwivedi, Kelly, Janssen, Rana, Slade, & Clement, 2018). As of January 2022, market leader Facebook remains the most widely used social media network platform by global advertisers. According to a global survey, 90 percent of social media marketers interviewed reported to use the network to promote their business activities, while another 79 percent did so through Instagram. Thanks to the huge userbases of networks such as Facebook and Instagram, marketers can reach billions of potential consumers at the click of a mouse. Among the various advantages of using social media platforms for commercial gain, marketers especially value the greater visibility of their brands and products, as well as the enhanced traffic to their websites. Nevertheless, as the social media environment is rapidly evolving and new actors compete for the attention of the public and marketers alike, Facebook is facing increasing competition (Dencheva, 2023c). With Instagram and TikTok gaining momentum, 64 percent of marketers globally are planning to boost organic content posts on the Instagram platform and 37 percent are considering increasing the use of advertisements on TikTok, just as many advertisers are making plans to reduce their activity on Facebook in the future (Dencheva, 2023d).

## 2.2.2 Gender bias and content censorship in social media infrastructure

The business models and architecture of several social media platforms are increasingly acknowledged as contributing to polarising discussions, including on gender standards (Washington & Marcus, 2022). According to Mahoney (2020), the platforms' algorithms employ three ranking signals: relationship (users are more likely to view posts from an account they have earlier interacted with), interest (users appear more likely to watch posts

of the same kind as those previously engaged with, e.g. posts labelled “fitness” or “feminism”) and timeliness (the most up-to-date posts display at the top of users’ news feeds). Thereby, the volume of material from opposing perspectives that users receive may be restricted and thus can strengthen certain viewpoints. For instance, individuals that positively engage with content regarding feminism or a specific struggle or campaign are likely to receive other material of a similar nature. However, individuals who negatively react to this kind of material are likely to be displayed a greater amount of anti-feminist content. The extent to which this filtering occurs and contributes to the polarisation of opinions depends on the particular algorithm utilised by a respective platform, the variety of a user’s information sources and the power of their prevailing political attitudes (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

In *Hidden in plain sight* report, Diepeveen (2022) explores ways in which the (back-end) infrastructure of social media is shaped by, and shapes, gender norms (the informal societal rules that dictate how individuals are supposed to behave based on their perceived gender). Diepeveen first distinguishes the various hidden layers of the social media infrastructure: economic (social media platforms are business enterprises with commercial patterns that aim to obtain revenue through user information and service advertisers), technological (social media platforms are made up of software applications and programs, which greatly rely on the role of algorithms in automating decisions on what content to display to users and in which format) and organisational (social media platforms are organisations with their own cultures, politics, workforce and hierarchies). This economic, technological and organisational infrastructure of social media platforms interplay in a variety of ways to influence the user experience, including shaping gender norms, leading to consequences for gender equality and advocacy.

Algorithms play a fundamental part, and platforms depend upon them to continuously maintain a personalised online experience that presents, boosts and tracks content and connects users. Diverse online platforms demand different volumes of personal data from users. For instance, certain gender categories may be incorporated into the electronic identifications that users are required to select in order to participate on social media platforms. Algorithms may be employed to infer identity categories of users, like gender, according to their web usage. Investigations on social media algorithms demonstrate that they are gender biased and that users are exposed disproportionately to media content that mirrors predominant patriarchal and racial gender norms. The evidence suggests that profit motives guide algorithm performance, which amplifies content that supports a “traditional” or patriarchal vision of the woman’s bodies, as it is considered more profitable. Furthermore, digital data algorithms are restricted by the requirement to present information as a set of discrete values. This implies that gender is represented and tagged in discrete categories, divorced from social backgrounds and smooth self-definitions. In this sense, the back-end processes of social media platforms can operate as a form of “disciplining authority”, influencing the manner in which people self-identify. Algorithms misclassify users,

mistakenly estimating an individual's gender and constructing their online setting on this ground. The efforts to improve algorithms to help reduce misgendering to a minimum are probably insufficient since narrowing complex experiences to a restricted range of discrete categories would persist in marginalizing individuals whose sex/gender identities do not conform to dominant cultural standards. When unequal power relations are taken into account, irrespective of gender, race, or other characteristics, engineering approaches and solutions are insufficient since they fail to address the broader inequalities and biases that lie at the base of technical imprecisions (Diepeveen, 2022).

Algorithmic procedures are likewise employed to purposely regulate people's conduct through the practice of "shadowbanning", a method in which content moderators block or partially obstruct content in a way that is not evident to the author user or their connections. These decisions are frequently covert from the users. This suggests that social media organizations employ a certain degree of hidden censorship to determine the way individuals should appear and behave. In some instances, these practices have specifically targeted feminist activists (Diepeveen, 2022).

The majority of platforms have standards regarding permitted content, predominantly centred on areas that could be considered illegal, among which support for terrorism, criminality and hate speech groups, and sexual content involving minors. Moderation and removal of content entails both IT instruments and human monitoring. Internally, social media corporations commonly have content moderation teams working with frontline editors and freelance contributors. Externally, content takedown may engage crowd operatives that review content on an one-to-one basis, volunteer moderators, and users willingly "flagging" i.e. reporting, content as inappropriate. While content reporting can be employed by feminists to signal sexist stances, it has also been utilized against them. In 2021, for example, Hannah Paranta, a Somali women's human rights advocate, was limited by Facebook from publishing content when anti-gender advocates conducted a focused campaign that repetitively reported her content as inappropriate. Any decisions made based on user reporting are not visible to users to whom the flag is directed (Diepeveen, 2022).

Marginalized user communities have been disproportionately targeted by content removal. In 2019, LGBTQIA+ YouTube creators initiated a mass discrimination lawsuit against the corporation, claiming that the platform's moderation of content by both algorithm and individuals discriminated against LGBTQIA+ content material. As part of the lawsuit, some users explained that they started self-censoring content that might be tagged as queer by the algorithm of the platform to prevent its removal (Diepeveen, 2022).

Occasionally, content is taken down as the algorithms fail to take context into account. For example, Facebook's algorithm for deleting content relying on female nudity, did not differentiate between pictures of breastfeeding and indigenous elders with uncovered breasts and other forms of nudity. The resources available to users to challenge content takedown



processes are restricted. Users are frequently not provided with a clear reason for their content removal, and there is little opportunity to contest the limitations imposed on their accounts or posts. The most noticeable user efforts to challenge content removals have resulted in mass actions. Original and humorous viral campaigns, like the hashtag #FreeTheNipple, occurred, for example, in opposition to Facebook's nudity policy. Human rights activists also emphasize the necessity of transparent content moderation and regulation of social media firms to be disciplined by human rights. Such approaches imply that gender bias on social media sites should be tackled as part of a larger effort to achieve more transparency in general by reallocating authority power in platform moderation (Diepeveen, 2022).

### **2.3 Social media activism**

Activism is defined as a process through which individuals, groups and/or entities exercise pressure on governments, institutions, or other bodies in order to alter conditions, policies or practices by means of collaborative action (Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2018). Social media activism, also commonly known as digital activism or online activism (Gerbaudo, 2012), relates to the usage of social network technology to raise consciousness, coordinate and organise real-world movements surrounding specific political, societal or environmental issues (Brown, Ray, Summers & Fraistat, 2017). The actualities of the effectiveness of digital activism are complex. There are a number of studies that sustain the lazy generation theory of disingenuous slackers and other studies that demonstrate ways in which such practice results in a more informed, knowledgeable and more socially and politically committed population (Madison, & Klang, 2020).

The extensive use of social media in contemporary activism represents a new stage in the evolution of alternative forms of communication (Poell & Van Dijck, 2015). Many of the distinguishing aspects of social media as a space for contemporary activism originate from the way it lifts several of the physical limitations of the offline environment (Murthy, 2018). One of the advantages of social media activism over traditional social movement activism, which occurs in a physical space, is the capacity to rapidly and efficiently access a significantly larger number of potential supporters (Washington & Marcus, 2022). Furthermore, the new types of leadership emerging in the field of social media activism run in parallel with the continuing relevance of street community leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012). Within this context, online activism should be seen as a powerful mean that facilitates massive mobilisation in terms of social movement (Yilmaz, 2017). A wide diffusion of social media platforms such as those that predominate the contemporary web communication scenario (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter) has played a crucial part in framing activists' agendas, empowering them to raise awareness, exchange information and organise petitions, protests, fundraising campaigns and other types of advocacies, as well as in the process of creating the collective identity of social movements (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015). Consequently, in a matter of seconds, an online social media campaign can become viral and

impact offline life in multiple ways. Hence, this can bring increased exposure and support for a cause, as well as greater pressure on institutions, businesses and other bodies to take act. (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

Social media activism platforms have played a significant role by promoting a strong “sense of virtual community” (Murthy, 2018), connecting individuals to social movements and providing the means and opportunities for new social movements to rise online (Washington, & Marcus, 2022) and then, at times, shift offline (Murthy, 2018); movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (for racial justice), #MeToo and #TimesUp movements (for gender justice), #FridaysForFuture movement (for climate justice), movements for LGBTQIA+ rights and others. These social movements have used social media platforms to share post content, stories, reels, hashtags and live streams showcasing the agendas they stand for, as well as to organise fundraisers, petitions, protests and other forms of direct action (Washington, & Marcus, 2022). Furthermore, social media have modelled and frequently profoundly affected the landscape of organisational communication within social movements. The social media platform Twitter has emerged as a predominant “organisational mechanism” that crucially shapes the organisational framework of a social movement, far more than simply functioning as a mode of communication. For instance, recent social movements such as Black Lives Matter have moved from tweet discussions on the online social network Twitter into action in the streets, deeply shaping the national narrative on race (Murthy, 2018).

Nevertheless, social media activism also has its challenges. Although it may be an effective medium for increasing public consciousness and facilitating the mobilization and organization of grassroots action in the real world, it may lack the deepness and shades of traditional street (in-person) activism. The emerging digital activism may not replace traditional activism; rather, it needs to be conceived of as a hybridization of online and offline resistance practices (Stewart & Schultze, 2019) and as a mode of participation tailored to the more fragmented, flexible, and individualized nature of new social movements. According to cyber-sceptics’ scholars, online activism can emerge as an everyday activity that standardizes social movements and undermines their transformative power (Yilmaz, 2017). In addition, social media activism can occasionally be criticized for encouraging “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”, an internet-only form of activism (Gerbaudo, 2012), commonly linked to virtual activities such as signing e-petitions, joining groups on social networking sites, posting and sharing campaign material, engaging in short-term boycotts, and participating in online policy discussions (Yilmaz, 2017). Individuals may feel that they are committing to a political or social action and making a positive contribution simply by liking and sharing a social media post, without actually doing something concrete for a cause. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that even low-level action on social media can lead to greater commitment, such as volunteering, and is enhanced if other users in a social network are similarly involved (George & Leidner, 2019). Social media are frequently perceived to make activist movements more transparent, yet it can and often does favour

their own hierarchies and privilege certain voices (usually more centralized in the organizational network) resulting in elitism or information overload (Murthy, 2018). Social media activism can drive change in gender norms, but according to the Align report by Washington and Marcus (2022), online spaces and social media platforms have also become increasingly hostile environments, with hateful content targeting girls, women, and gender diverse groups, especially those with religious, ethnic, or racial minority identities or sexual preferences. Visible women in public life, such as journalists, activists, politicians, and others who publish material in advocacy of gender equality, are particularly subject to abuse. Such abuse, in the form of online gender-based violence, ranges from hate speech, trolling, sexual harassment, threats of violence, cyberstalking, and stalking. And alongside so many popular feminist activist projects on social media, lots of women-hating parties and movements are growing (Willem & Tortajada, 2021).

The emerging work in this field indicates that the use of online spaces, including social media and activism sites, can be a powerful opportunity and resource for obtaining (informal) justice for victims of street harassment and sexual violence. According to Fileborn (2016), such spaces allow survivors to challenge dominant narratives and bypass the channels of formal justice, providing them with a platform to share their experiences in their own voices and words (in a manner that the traditional formal justice system frequently is incapable of) and seeing their perpetrators sanctioned or condemned publicly. In particular, voicing one's experiences online has been greatly associated with a perceived sense of empowerment and validation. Virtual communities may provide collective support and recognition for survivors, and online outreach may serve as an avenue for meeting some elements of victims' justice needs. Some notable examples of grassroots activist groups in the recent decade that enjoy a strong online presence include Right to be (formerly Hollaback!) and the Everyday Sexism Project, which aims to address street harassment and other gender-based violence (Right to be, 2023). Moreover, online justice can contribute to more extensive social justice initiatives by identifying and contesting the power systems and oppressions that are behind these forms of violence. However, online spaces can also act as a trigger for re-victimization, silencing, re-traumatization, and exclusion. Reaching online justice demands users to navigate the online infrastructure of security and unsafety, and it is significant to recognize who can effectively employ online spaces for justice and work toward closing the justice gap. Despite its limitations, online justice should not be completely discarded. Street harassment requires a pragmatic response to obtain justice, and multiple solutions are needed to enable survivors to obtain some form of justice (Fileborn, 2016).

A study survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020 of U.S. social media users, investigated how individuals of differing ages, races, and political affiliations use social media for (internet-only form i.e. slacktivism) activism and political engagement. This included demonstrating support for causes by sharing photos (36 percent), seeking information about protests or rallies in specific areas (35 percent), encouraging others to act (32 percent), and employing hashtags associated with political or social issues (18 percent).

Findings from the survey revealed that younger people (18-29 years old) are more inclined to use social media for activism compared to older people, and that Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to use social media for activism than whites. The research also reported that Democrats are more willing than Republicans to use social media for activism experiences (Auxier, 2020).

### 2.3.1 Social media activists' common fights

Social media activists passionately support a range of causes, from environmental conservation to social justice issues (Soken-Huberty, n.d.a.). Online platforms are employed by social media activists to make their voices heard about their fights and to bring awareness to crucial issues of today's modern society. Each fight of social media activists is diverse, but they all share certain common values, such as the relevance for peace, justice, and equality which can contribute to a life of decency and possibility for individuals in contemporary world (Sadof, 2020). Social media activists hope to sensitize, educate, and inspire individuals, communities, and movements through peaceful mass mobilizations toward engaging in positive actions to make this world a better place by means of their activism (Witter, 2023; Washington & Marcus, 2022; Yilmaz, 2017).

Social media activists concentrate on a number of important concerns that affect individuals and communities around the globe. For instance, some of the most prevalent battles of social media activists are those for human rights (which include topics such as gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, racial justice, gender-based violence, freedom of expression and speech, the right to employment and education,...), environmental protection (matters such as deforestation and forest deterioration, water scarcity, ocean contamination and acidification, land erosion, biodiversity preservation,...), health and well-being (matters related to mental health care support, body positivity, child malnutrition, access to health services and medicines,...), economic equality (issues such as labour rights, universal minimum income for fair salaries, gender wage gap, wealth redistribution,...), political justice (topics related to corruption, voting rights, fair trial rights, government censorship,...) and so on. The issues identified above are generally intimately intertwined to one another (Soken-Huberty, n.d.b.; WWF, n.d.; University of Rochester Medical Center, n.d.; Hayes, 2022; United Nations, n.d.). However, this thesis research primarily address issues such as gender inequality, gender-based violence, body positivity, and the gender pay gap.

Social media has also raised expectations that online spaces can empower activists to hold government and business players responsible for their controversial and inconsistent operations. For instance, the adverse social and ecological consequences of high-profile catastrophes have turned the oil industry into a place of dispute and controversy. A broad range of activist groups and networks are bringing problematic corporate practices to the spotlight via social media channels, demanding action and reporting on protest events to a wider audience. The diverse array of activists can be viewed as a spectrum ranging from

traditional nongovernmental organizations (such as Oxfam and WWF) at one extreme and radical groups advocating for systemic reform at the other. In response to activists' criticism, corporations have sought to secure and repair their reputations by engaging in voluntary efforts and sponsorships or with advertising campaigns and messages, typically framed as sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Such initiatives have become crucial elements in businesses' fight for legitimacy in order to fulfil the expectations of many of their stakeholders. However, these initiatives are also challenged by activists as greenwashing, a practice that is meant to divert attention away from the societal and ecological effects of fossil fuel extraction and processing, thus assisting companies to garner reputation and image points (Uldam, 2017). According to De Freitas Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro & Soares (2020), the phenomenon of greenwashing is defined as the intersection of two corporate behaviours: poor environmental commitment and positive communication regarding environmental performance. A number of businesses make investments in green marketing communications campaigns in order to achieve enhanced buying intentions and attitudes toward the brand. However, the truth underlying business environmentalism can be disillusioning: TerraChoice, an environmental marketing company, reported that 95 percent of goods claiming to be eco-friendly and green in Canada and the United States commit at least one of the "sins of greenwashing", from the sin of covert compromise to the sin of false label worship (Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro & Soares, 2020).

Another common deceptive marketing practice, highly contested by activists is pinkwashing. This term is employed when a business utilizes the recognizable pink ribbon symbol or signature colour scheme to merchandise a good or service without meaningfully endorsing breast cancer research (Schumer, 2022) or simultaneously manufactures, produces, and/or sells products containing chemicals related to the disease. In 2002, the grassroots and non-profit organization Breast Cancer Action for health justice, launched their Think Before You Pink® campaign with the goal of exposing pinkwashing and the culture of pink ribbon marketing (Breast Cancer Action, n.d.), demanding responsibility and transparency from corporations that claim to donate proceeds to breast cancer. The campaign calls on consumers to be aware of the small amount of money that is actually donated when buying supposedly pink products and to be resistant to businesses' attempts at pinkwashing (McHenry, 2015).

The growing economic power of the LGBTQIA+ community has attracted the attention of big brands and corporations. For example, organizations during Pride Month use performance activism to gain commercial advantage (Fisher, 2022). This has resulted in rainbow washing, defined as the act of employing or adding rainbow pride colours and/or visuals to advertisements, clothing, accessories, landmarks, and brand logos to denote progressive advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights and gain consumer credibility, but with minimal or no effort to demonstrate support (Czepanski, 2022). Nevertheless, some brands have successfully proven to be genuine advocates for LGBTQIA+ rights in their marketing strategies. Ikea, for instance, now features LGBTQIA+ people in its commercials and

donates proceeds to LGBTQIA+ organizations such as GLSEN, an American organization that fights to end harassment, discrimination, and bullying on grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender self-expression in K-12 schools (Fisher, 2022).

### 2.3.2 Social media activists' communication tools and strategies

Social media platforms allow issues to be displayed in an accessible, user-friendly, and easily shared format. Information or standpoints can be attractively packed and visually presented, with relatively little amount of body text or in audio-visual forms. Given a long track record of psychological studies, visual information content is frequently more effective than long texts in appealing audiences, especially those with lower degrees of literacy or shorter attention spans. Social media content posts engage users' emotions and influence their feelings, besides their awareness; the potential to involve "hearts" and "minds" is fundamental in changing norms. The emergence of Instagram, a photo and video-centred platform, has further stimulated the use of visual posts as a key to sharing messages (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

At present, young generations advocates of human rights and gender justice activists are reshaping activism by investigating the intersections between art and activism, i.e. artivism, also known as visual activism. Artivism combines the creative potential of the arts to arouse feelings and strategically drive social change. It comes in many forms, both online and offline, and addresses many themes (e.g. social justice, human rights, gender equality), but always triggers debate on matters that concern individuals every day and have become part of people's everyday lives. Visual storytelling, artistic illustrations, murals, paintings and videos have the potential to disrupt boundaries, represent the values of kindness, resilience and solidarity intrinsic to the shared feminist worldview, to contest sex-negative perceptions, unequal power structures and myopic visions of equality (Divedi, 2022). The employment of art to protest and make one's voice heard is a non-violent approach aimed at encouraging open dialogue. The anonymous street artist Banksy often addresses topics of migration, frontiers, capitalist avidity, extortion and others in his stencil artworks, examples of which have been discovered in various countries. Banksy is well-known for his extensive use of dark humour and his appropriation of famous imagery, such as logos or characters, ensuring that photographs of his pieces are able to reach a wide audience. Opposition to militarism and war are central themes explored in his artworks. One of his most famous works, *Love Is In The Air*, also known as *Flower Thrower*, portrays a masked militant about to throw a bunch of flowers, conveying a peaceful and non-violent message of protest. The best known version was created in 2003 as a large mural on a building in Beit Sahour, Palestine (Williams, 2022).

Social media can enable other activist awareness-raising strategies, such as performances, to be shared with a much broader audience. For instance, in 2019 the intersectional, interdisciplinary, and trans-inclusive Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis (Colectivo

Registro Callejero, 2019) employed social media to coordinate and perform the street dance protest, *Un violador en tu camino* ('A rapist in your path') streamed it to a massive global audience. Originating from an artistic collective of four women in Valparaíso, Chile, within days the performance went viral and was shared and retweeted thousands of times. *Un violador en tu camino* is an open, empowering, collaborative performance featuring lyrics chanted in unison over a catchy rhythm and simple choreography executed in synchrony by a group of women in a public space. The eyepatch is worn by the women in the performance as a signifier of the blind eye that influential institutions direct at sexual violence, and the display of their green headscarves symbolizes support for the legalisation of abortion (Divedi, 2022). This empowering and prefigurative performance mobilises the performers and addresses the public as an acute denunciation of violence, a demonstration of collective and prefigurative political action, and a composition that is visually stunning. Through the lyrics and movements, inspired by Argentine feminist anthropologist Rita Segato's writings on rape culture, the performers implement a range of values such as (transnational) sisterhood and solidarity, horizontality, collectivity and the accessibility of artistic and political engagement. Groups of women around the world initiated to replicate the collective performance and tailor it to their own context, experiences and language, transforming the Chilean song into a feminist anthem (Serafini, 2020; Washington & Marcus, 2022). In January 2020, women in the United States replicated *Un violador en tu camino*, in front of the New York County Courthouse during the criminal court case against Harvey Weinstein, later bringing the performance to Trump Tower. The protesters performed in both English and Spanish (Serafini, 2020).

An emerging stream of research centres on hashtag activism, defined as the act of fighting for or advocating a cause with the employment of hashtags (#) as the main channel for raising consciousness of a cause and stimulating debate through social media. A number of studies have demonstrated that hashtags work as a medium to generate awareness and discussion, gather insights and experiences, disseminate testimonials, better affiliate individuals to a community to gain social support, and mobilise others to participate in online and offline efforts (Xiong, Cho & Boatwright, 2018). Some hashtag campaigns are proactive and aim to raise awareness of an issue, while others react to a specific event, for instance a sexual aggression, a case of femicide or a proposed bill. Hashtags group together and, depending on a word or sentence, facilitate users to search for arguments on a particular subject. First emerging on Twitter, today individuals, brands, and politicians utilize hashtags throughout social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, to share storytelling and content online with target audiences (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

The hashtag movement has proven to be a successful approach to drive various beneficial socio-political changes across the globe (Goswami, 2018). For example, hashtags such as #MeToo (about sexual violence) and #BlackLivesMatter (about racial justice) have been crucial in gaining attention and consequently shifting societal norms (Madison & Klang, 2020). As in the case of the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter, the general public was encouraged

to participate to disseminate the magnitude of the issue and raise consciousness regarding sexual violence and victimization (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018). The #MeToo hashtag was tweeted almost one million times in the first 48 hours on social media Twitter alone (CBS, 2017). A research study on its impact concludes that the effect of reading so many similar narratives in such great abundance, diverse voices witnessing similar experiences from different locations, serves as powerful proof of the pervasiveness of violence against women, and this evidence cannot easily be silenced (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter first showed up on Twitter in July 2013 in response to the exoneration of George Zimmerman for the killing of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. From July 2013 to May 1, 2018, the hashtag was used almost 30 million times on Twitter, an average of 17,002 times per day, according to a Pew Research Center study of public tweets. Usage of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter has experienced periodic rises in daily utilization in response to factual incidents, particularly news stories related to race, violence, and criminal justice and debates about deadly confrontations between law enforcement and black Americans (Anderson, Toor, Olmstead, Rainie & Smith, 2018). The hashtag hit peak levels of 8.8 million tweets in a single day on May 28, 2020, during worldwide protests over the death of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis (Anderson, Barthel, Perrin & Vogels, 2020). Activist campaigns with proactive hashtags tend to demand specific acts, as the examples mentioned above. An additional example is the #NiUnaMenos movement, which originated as a hashtag in Argentina in 2015 in response to the murder of a 14-year-old pregnant girl, by her boyfriend. Individuals mobilized on Twitter and Facebook using the hashtags, demanding an immediate end to femicide and violence towards women and girls, sexual aggressions, and other forms of gender-based violence. Moreover, they protested for improved policies to ensure women's safety and an end to machista (sexist) culture more broadly (Washington & Marcus, 2022). Reactive campaigns tend to respond to a recent event (online or offline) or proposed legislation or policy shift. In India, student Nikita Azad launched the hashtag #HappytoBleed in 2015 on Facebook after the Sabarimala temple in Kerala prohibited all women from entering if they were menstruating and "polluting" its sanctity. The campaign helped lead to the Indian Supreme Court's decision to overturn the temple ban in September 2018. In Saudi Arabia, women used the campaign hashtag #Women2Drive to tweet images and videos of ourselves walking and cycling to challenge the country's driving prohibition. This protest is considered to have contributed to the lifting of the ban in 2018 (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

Social media enable online community members to provide support, organize activities, and engage with causes by signing online petitions and fundraising (Schwarz & Richey, 2019). These have emerged as one of the most prominent and popular forms of online activism and effective means for governmental and societal changes (Huang, Suh, Hill & Hsieh, 2015; Elnoshokaty, Deng & Kwak, 2016). At present, the most successful international online petition record is held by the nonprofit online petition platform Change.org concerning the



demand for justice for the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, which has collected more than 19 million signatures from individuals across the globe (Burke, 2020). The latter was initiated by a 15-year-old petitioner referred to as Kellen S. (n.d.) in response to a public protest for racial justice, which launched an appeal calling on Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey and Hennepin county prosecutor Mike Freeman to dismiss and prosecute the officers implicated. The petition reached a great campaign milestone in 2021, when the police Derek Chauvin was sentenced for the murder of George Floyd (Kellen S, 2021). The petition also stimulated a valuable partnership with the George Floyd Foundation, which debuted a three-dimensional hologram of George Floyd in Richmond, Virginia, to temporarily replace Confederate statues as a symbolic appeal to keep up the fight for racial justice (Aklilu, 2020).

Regarding online fundraising, social media platforms provide significant opportunities for nonprofits to create, sustain, and execute fundraising campaigns on social media (Bhati & McDonnell, 2020). In 2014, for instance, the “Ice Bucket Challenge” campaign aimed at raising awareness of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and spurring donations for scientific research engaged more than 17 million people, who uploaded videos that were viewed more than 10 billion times by an estimated 440 million people worldwide. Among the high-profile participants were philanthropist Bill Gates, talk show host Oprah Winfrey, animated cartoon figure Homer Simpson and many more. The challenge encourages nominated participants to be videotaped throwing ice water on their heads and challenge others to do the same, all the while forwarding donations to ALS organizations for scientific research. The majority of participants were not famous, but their donations piled up. By the end of the summer, over 28 million people had contributed an amount estimated at 220 million US dollars worldwide, exceeding past ALS research budgets by several times. (Sohn, 2017). Donations made through the 2014 ALS Ice Bucket Challenge helped the ALS Association increase annual research funding worldwide by 187 percent. During this period, the ALS Association’s team of researchers has grown and made scientific progress (including the discovery of five new genes linked to ALS), assistance to people with ALS has increased, and investment in research on the disease by the federal government has grown (ALS Association, 2019). Campaigns of this nature provide fertile examples of how social media can be used to involve stakeholders and their networks and boost a non-profit organization’s base of potential contributors and donations, as well as raise public awareness and stimulate rare disease research (Bhati & McDonnell, 2020).

Hashtags, performances, advocacy and storytelling content, social media fundraising campaigns, and e-petitions are critical to the success of online activism. Social media overall helps make the personal, political. Various social media features (live videos, reels, artistic pictures) can be employed to overturn racial injustices, gender stereotypes, or break taboos. This breaks the silence on continuing gender disparities, racial discrimination, and begins to debate certain topics that have been previously off limits or unknown. The communication tools and approaches of social media activists listed above are not mutually exclusive, using

combinations of these strategies can lead to social change with great impact (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

### 2.3.3 Relevant social activist accounts on Instagram

The omnipresence of the visual social media platform Instagram, with 2 billion active users in 2023 (Statista, 2023c), has enabled the flourishing of a new type of social movement activity, namely online activism. Instagram is therefore a valuable platform for investigating the use of social media for activism (Cornet, Hall, Cafaro & Brady, 2017). According to Salis (2020), 93 percent of marketers worldwide support the effectiveness of Instagram's interactive and innovative content in educating users. Instagram social network can be a powerful tool to raise awareness and an opportunity to drive interest in more challenging topics, thanks to the immediacy as well as the "lightness" of their creative, evocative, and suggestive content, and Instagram's visually appealing carousel formats, which make even the most demanding arguments more accessible and effective (Restivo, 2020). In the present contemporary society, activists employ social media networks such as Instagram, to attract new followers, engage with their community members and advance their campaigns, fights and convictions (Zalm, 2021). For this purpose, the present research primarily focus on the photo and video-sharing social media platform Instagram.

Many activists are present and active on the social networking site Instagram, spreading awareness of change among the users of the virtual community, fighting for gender equality, social and political justice and environmental protection. These activists (often involving celebrities from the entertainment industry) share insights and change perceptions, amplify messages, build and expand like-minded communities, mobilise campaigns, all in the format of inventive infographics based on short texts on Instagram, adapting to people's relatively low attention span (Washington & Marcus, 2022). For activists, infographics on Instagram have several benefits: they enable them to reach users who might otherwise not be interested in a particular matter and provide a forum for voices that are rarely addressed by traditional journalism. The expectation is to render activism more accessible, giving otherwise non-politicised people some more means to participate in movements whose message they endorse and by inspiring individuals to become active offline as well, either by taking to the streets or by organising (Stefanello, 2021).

New York (D-14) Congresswoman and political activist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@aoc on Instagram), also the youngest woman in history to be elected to the US House of Representatives in 2018 (Team ELLE, 2023), with her 8.6 million followers on her personal Instagram account, is using the latter to provide her followers with an inside look at a typically behind-the-scenes congressional experience. Her livestreams have become a popular format to connect with followers and supporters while eating a meal at home or petting her dog Deco (Lewinstein, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez's colloquial use of Instagram has humanised her experience as a modern politician in America, rendering politics accessible

to the average citizen. Employing the tools provided by Instagram, Ocasio-Cortez enables her online audience to participate in her political daily life, sharing the triumphs and downfalls she encounters alongside the journey. Cortez's agenda on Instagram ranges from fights for women and the LGBTQIA+ community, student indebtedness, climate policy, healthcare for all, access to housing as a human right, support for small businesses, integration and inclusion of immigrants, and so on. After the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion enshrined in *Roe vs. Wade* in the United States, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, on her personal Instagram account, started disseminating useful informational content (through posts, stories and highlights) regarding safe termination of a pregnancy, circumventing the abortion bans in the red states, advocating that freedom of choice is an inalienable right (Ocasio-Cortez, n.d.; Cheung, 2019).

Celebrity singer and body positivity advocate Lizzo, artistic name of Melissa Viviane Jefferson (@lizzobeeating on Instagram) has 13,4 million of followers on Instagram. Lizzo challenges fatphobia and recreates her identity as a fat person in a self-empowering manner via strategic employment of Instagram functions such as reels. On the social network, her statements assert blackness, fatness and femininity as non-negotiable features of the self, rather than as a temporary condition to be fixed. This rhetoric of self-definition has resulted in Lizzo receiving both positive and negative critiques in the Instagram comment session, either offline or in other media, concerning her personification. Conceivably, Lizzo's commodified objectification of his fat black body is a rhetorical component to survive public celebrity. Meanwhile, Lizzo drew positive attention to the diversity of black female bodies and embraced the public scrutiny of her figure. In this way, she has challenged negative perceptions of her bodily existence as a merely racial, fat, sexually evocative, and seductive being. Through Instagram, Lizzo's personification positions her body as powerful, indulgent and proactive, as black women themselves are really all of these things. Lizzo's commitment on Instagram is entertaining. Her personality shines through in the pictures, reels and captions of every post message. Furthermore, there is an absolute honesty that inspires followers to empathise with Lizzo. Self-love, political and social advocacy, resistance to fat stigma and rejection of respectability politics stood out as prevailing themes in Lizzo's Instagram content posts. Rhetorically, Lizzo manifests an emancipatory identity of fatness via the social networking site Instagram (Lizzo, n.d.; Pickett Miller & Platenburg, 2021).

Celebrity actress and singer Selena Gomez (@selenagomez on Instagram) is a mental health advocate, with 415 million followers on Instagram, earning her the most followed woman and the fourth most followed account on the Instagram platform (Gomez, n.d.). Since 2016, Selena Gomez has spoken openly about her battles with depression and anxiety due to lupus, an autoimmune illness that primarily afflicts the joints and kidneys, for which she subsequently received a renal transplant, and her diagnosis of bipolar disorder. The singer effectively incorporates them into her image, including in the Instagram marketing of her make-up line Rare Beauty, which she claims to support and donate to organisations that supply mental health services and has turned mental health consciousness into a keystone of

her brand (Thelandersson, 2022). The celebrity is co-founder of the startup Wondermind, a mental fitness ecosystem that strives to democratise and destigmatise mental health care. Last year marked the release of the intimate biographical documentary, *Selena Gomez: My Mind & Me*, which chronicles her battles with fame and her physical and mental well-being after her diagnosis (Gomez, n.d.). Her advocacy and vulnerability condemn the stigmas of mental illness and recognise the relevance of mental wellbeing with her huge audience of fans on Instagram. Not only does she actively encourage those battling with mental health to fully accept this part of themselves, but she also works as a positive representation of a much-loved celebrity with mental health issues by openly displaying it on the social network. By exposing the reality of mental health, Selena Gomez shifts the general public perception of mental disease and seeks to dispel the taboo surrounding it. As Gomez unmasks the negative connotations of mental health, especially in the entertainment industry, she contributes to a revolution. Gomez sets a model not only for the mental health community, but also for celebrity endorsement. She is cleverly using her assets as a high-profile figure to set up funding and speak at various events, such as McLean Hospital's annual dinner, where people listened to her address her journey with mental health and the significance of affordable resources, such as mental health education taught in schools and the hospital's instructional webinars (Kenney, 2022).

Climate justice activist Greta Thunberg (@gretathunberg on Instagram) has 14,7 million of followers on Instagram social network (Thunberg, n.d.). She is the public face of the social movement Fridays for Future. She started this phenomenon in 2018 by going on strike from school every Friday, instead sitting in front of the parliament building in Stockholm; she rapidly attracted local attention and appealing especially younger populations from various countries around the world to do the same, coming out of schools to call attention to and urge government action on climate change (Molder, Lakind, Clemmons & Chen, 2022). Greta Thunberg effectively employs social media sites, in particular Instagram, to plan new protest events, strikes and demonstrations, as well as to create, communicate and disseminate messages to demand action (Brünker, Deitelhoff & Mirbabaie, 2019). She utilises an emotional appeal of hope as a communication strategy and visually frames motivational collective action to mobilise her audiences (Molder, Lakind, Clemmons & Chen, 2022). Her memorable slogan *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (meaning, School Strike for Climate) has been successfully translated into dozens of languages. On March 15, 2019, an estimated of 1.4 million demonstrators around the world joined the youth climate change strike. The global climate strike originated from the Swedish teenager as a youth-led protest to challenge the past and present actions of older generations concerning the environment. The strikes were held on a number of Fridays, over the period of more than a year, running along the hashtags #FridaysForFuture and #SchoolStrike4Climate (Boulianne, Lalancette & Ilkiw, 2020). As of September 2019, Thunberg's strikes have inspired more than 6 million marchers in at least 185 nations. Polling data conducted among participants in global strikes indicate that Thunberg is an iconic and inspirational role model for young climate activists. During her rise, Thunberg has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, was voted "Person of the

Year” 2019 by Time Magazine, was the subject of the documentary *I Am Greta*, and has been invited to speak at high-profile climate summits (Molder, Lakind, Clemmons & Chen, 2022). The strike persisted into 2020 and over; more young protesters came to the streets to challenge governments and the mainstream media on the climate crisis. Such protest initiatives followed a common similar basic pattern employed by other prominent demonstration movements in recent years (Boulianne, Lalancette & Ilkiw, 2020).

## **2.4 The power of feminist activism on Instagram**

Feminist activism relates to activism efforts that advance and promote gender equality and justice. The label “feminist” is employed as shorthand for advocacy efforts to challenge sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression, although acknowledging that perhaps not all activists who strive for gender equality and justice, identify with the label “feminist.” It is essential to recognise that social networking sites can be empowering platforms for feminist activism and a space that can catalyse transformative shifts in thoughts and patterns of behaviour (Washington & Marcus, 2022). The feminist potential of Instagram as a revolutionary site for feminist activism, resilience and prominence is evident in the amount of outspokenly feminist accounts. These accounts somewhat harness the potential of the viewer’s perspective, directing the lens at themselves and challenging traditional interpretations of gender and aesthetics, while exhibiting for an audience other than the supposedly able-bodied, white, male, and straight spectator. The accessibility of feminist discourse and content on platforms such as Instagram, along with their general availability, provides an influential site for engagement with feminism (Mahoney, 2020). These sorts of accounts with a large number of followers have a high degree of visibility, credibility and influence over their audience. Moreover, feminist Instagram accounts play a crucial role in fostering feminist identities among young women, building and empowering online feminist communities, educating and rising consciousness in their audiences on feminist issues, promoting feminist movements, enhancing action in support of feminist goals, and advancing social change. These accounts have also embraced ostensibly feminist discourses, effectively resonating with the popularity of fourth-wave feminism (Zalm, 2021). The online environment of the fourth wave has the capacity to combine multiple voices with a variety of targets and has an impressively rapid and comprehensive way of spreading information that makes feminism appealing to the contemporary and younger generations (Munro, 2013).

Personal narratives can be an influential medium for feminist activism countering gender-based violence; personal storytelling can offer opportunities for individuals to form larger discourses concerning violence towards women and women’s right to share their experiences (Mwaba et al., 2021). Sharing personal stories and experiences creates empathy among individuals with shared experiences, thereby prompting others to acknowledge their own privileges, manifest solidarity and raise individual consciousness of injustice and oppression that they may not experience on a daily basis, but that others do. It deconstructs prevailing standards, making visible the hidden ways in which they function and thus challenging the

spectator to oppose them. Personal narratives also contribute to building and reinforcing a community that appreciates diversity and inclusion, thus empowering each individual to successfully challenge oppressive societal norms (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

According to feminist activist Divedi (2022), visual content activism (also referred to as artivism) is most effective as it conceptualises elaborate notions visually and comprehensively in a form that is understandable and affordable to a wider public. She continues by stating that a great number of artists, like herself, employ hope-based communications strategies in order to generate alternative solutions to present day issues. Instead of striving to endorse the way patriarchy objectifies, they craft visuals that embody shared belief of what a gender-egalitarian society will look like, a world vision with feminist core values of love, collective care, and equality. This also prevents reinforcing existing gender norms by empowering people to create their own values, by displacing power relations structures and questioning the gendered narratives that dominate people's lives (Divedi, 2022).

Thanks to its aestheticising potential, the topics on which Instagram feminism centres are usually of a visual nature. Different gendered representations of the body become a recurring theme. Much attention is given to body fat and hair, different skin tones and body shapes, along with the graphic impact of menstruation. Female sexuality is also generally an omnipresent background motif. The particularly appealing aspect of digital feminism's handling of these issues is embedded in the design features (candy and pastel colours, rhinestones, pretty blossoms, shades of pink, ...). The pervasive communication theme of today's mainstream feminism is the employment of so-called empowering slogans. That is, well-crafted motivational phrases and quotes to be shared through social media. In sense of the message conveyed, these types of catchphrases often encourage women to take ownership of their bodies and their sexuality, encourage them to love and believe in themselves. For example, with phrases such as "My body, my choice", "You don't owe anyone your body", "Know yourself, love yourself, be yourself", "My body. My shape. My rules", "You are stronger than you think", "Our uterus, our rules," "You don't need hair to be feminine," or even simply "Self-care." This type of feminist activist content visuals frequently drive a wider definition of femininity and promote bodies that do not necessarily conform to standard norms of female beauty, displaying desirable femininity as a feature of different bodies (Crepax, 2020). Artworks on Instagram by feminist activists also contribute to challenging sex-negative narratives surrounding pleasure. Challenging patriarchal dominance and heteronormative notions about sex which prioritise male pleasure, hypersexualise female bodies and pathologise queer sexual experiences into a rigid gender hierarchy in which even people of colour are fetishised or exoticised. Conversely, liberating, inclusive and diverse pleasure experiences should be celebrated (Divedi, 2022).

There are certain challenges that feminist activists face online. It is not only about sexist and misogynistic commentaries below Instagram content posts in the comment's session, but

also regarding the institutionalised patriarchy rooted in the social media infrastructure, enforced by arbitrary algorithms and guidelines. Online platforms are male-oriented and hypersexual environments, as well as spaces that are saturated with consumerism and propagate strongly embedded patriarchal systems and norms. Although Instagram pretends to be a democratic platform that promotes free speech, it is known for its suppression of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and women's bodies. Feminist accounts are frequently shadow banned for the material they publish on Instagram. When this occurs, their actions on Instagram's page are disrupted, engagement drops sharply and there is a clear discrepancy in the exposure of their content. Feminist activists' posts are removed by Instagram because they allegedly violate guidelines, especially posts that refer to sex, sexuality, genitalia, etc., or wherever they utilise such hashtags as #genderequality #feminism #sexuality, their online growth becomes restricted. Even so, this kind of censorship and monitoring does not prevent feminist activists from advancing their messages. Feminist activists have discovered innovative methods to challenge and trick the algorithms and their sensitivity to such words as sex, pleasure and bodily autonomy by employing coded terms or characters. Abortion activists on Instagram provide information on safe and legal services utilising terms like "legal camping" and coded characters like ab\*rtion, in which camping relates to assisting people seeking abortion outside their state (Divedi, 2022).

Digital feminist activism often employs pictures with a textual overlay and a comic message, usually based on a joke, also referred to as a meme, a form of contesting patriarchal gender norms. Memes utilise humour to reformulate prevailing perceptions, disrupt traditional views and build a shared sense of community among users who comprehend the joke, which may often relate to other popular memes. Meme humour works through relationality: "the power to trigger a sense of identification in the spectator". Feminist meme sites and accounts utilise memes to contest misogyny and advance equality. They accomplish so by challenging deeply rooted gender norms in fields such as male violence against women, educational equality, pay equity, women's experiences in the workplace and gender relations. Memes can merge local context and language alongside more globalised discussions, some of which draw on international memes and formats. Feminist memes can contribute to build a refreshed and wider awareness of gender equality concerns and involve new audiences to feminist views (Washington & Marcus, 2022). Feminist memes are a unique and novel form of creating public consciousness about feminist topics and encouraging a dynamic new commitment within feminism itself (Boling, 2019).

The best recognised manifestation of digital feminist activism is hashtag feminism, i.e. the practice of employing hashtags (# symbol) to tackle feminist questions by sharing personal testimonials of sexual violence and discrimination or "shouting back" by means of collective appeals as a mode of displaying the prejudices women face on a daily basis. This occurs since hashtags can turn visible and go viral thanks to the algorithmic trending sequences incorporated in social media platforms and transform social networks into new experimental

activist spaces (Semenzin, 2022). The Instagram site also provides users with the possibility to follow hashtags (similar to following single accounts) by doing so, users start to view and receive the top trending posts of the followed hashtag in their newsfeed, as well as the most recent news in the form of stories in the story bar (Instagram, 2017). Significant examples of this phenomenon are digital social movements, distilled into hashtag-friendly and symbolic words such as #MeToo (counting more than 3.1 million posts on Instagram), #yesallwomen (over 165.000 posts), #whyIstayed (over 19.000), #Timesup (over 793.000), #everydaysexism (over 58.000), which took the shape of callouts and storytelling on social media, quickly spreading across the globe and offline as well. At present, of the more than 50 billion posts on Instagram (Mahoney, 2020), there are 11 million posts containing the hashtag “feminism” and 8.3 million with the hashtag “feminist”. Further related hashtags such as #womenempowerment, #womensupportingwomen and #girlpower are even more popular and were employed in 23 million, 20 million and 34 million posts, respectively (Semenzin, 2022; Crepax, 2020; Mahoney, 2020; Instagram, n.d.). Hashtags on social media also provide opportunities to contest dominant gender stereotypes and gender norms and to voice different gender identities. For example, young women utilised the hashtags #BreakStereotypes (over 19,000 posts) and #ILookLikeAnEngineer (over 68,000 posts) on Instagram to emphasise women’s accomplishments, especially in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Washington & Marcus, 2022; Instagram, n.d.). Feminist discussions of this nature have outlined spaces for debate and feminist activism online (Mahoney, 2020). In this respect, hashtag feminism appears to function as an amplifier of solidarity that can also develop into a feminist awareness of comprehending gender-based discrimination and sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem and validating the experiences of others (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018).

A majority of young feminists were reported to experience fear and anxiety of being assaulted over their feminist opinions, despite the fact that digital feminism can simultaneously be experienced as highly positive in the generation of community, connection and support for feminist voices, and solidarity in reporting rape culture. Online platform sites were seen by many feminists as safer and facilitated spaces to commit in feminist activism than offline venues such as the street, school, workplace, friends and family. This was especially the case for female adolescents who have consistently found that practising (offline) feminism at school, was exceptionally problematic and challenging to navigate (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2018).

### **3 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology of this master’s dissertation is grounded on both primary and secondary data collection. In the empirical part of the thesis, two primary sources of data are employed; the description and examination of the case studies and the conducting and implementation of in-depth interviews. Below, the chapter opens by introducing the research



purpose and the goals of the present study. This is followed by the research design of the methodology for the first primary data sources; including the collection of data, the method of data analysis and the description of the sample of the four feminist Instagram accounts selected as case studies. Afterwards, the research design for the second primary data sources is provided; comprising the data collection, the data analysis method, and the sample description of the in-depth interviews with Instagram users.

### **3.1 Research purpose and goals**

The purpose of my master's thesis is to fill the gap in the literature regarding the use of social media for the advancement of gender awareness by contributing to the body of literature on feminism and marketing. Relatively little or no literature research is available concerning issues on the affirmative contribution and impact of feminist Instagram accounts posts towards positive and beneficial changes in attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of social media users. Furthermore, placing more prominence to the examination and the research of relevant outcomes regarding the development of consciousness and sensitivity as well as fostering people's education on gender related issues. Hence, I aim to further explore the extent to which Instagram feminism functions as activism and whether and how feminist Instagram accounts can make an impact on individuals that already follow feminist Instagram accounts, by countering gender stereotypes and violence, encouraging greater inclusivity and tolerance, and women's self-empowerment.

Therefore, the goals of the present thesis are:

- (1) To examine the relationship between marketing discipline and feminist movements ideology concepts through past, present and future time frames;
- (2) To review the content postings of several Instagram accounts promoting gender awareness by determining the recurring elements of the contemporary (Forth Wave) feminist agenda that are tracked in feminist Instagram posts content and analysing the format style adopted, the type of language employed, and the topics covered by feminist Instagram accounts to engage with their online audience;
- (3) To understand what are the drivers that lead social media users to engage with feminist Instagram accounts in the online community;
- (4) To analyse the impact on the online audience, resulting from the content posts of feminist Instagram accounts, by investigating the positive and negative aspects of users' opinions upon the interactive content postings by feminist Instagram accounts;
- (5) To assess whether feminist Instagram accounts, are an effective means of counteracting stereotypes, helping women achieve empowerment and/or encouraging inclusion in their audience.

The first goal of the present dissertation is answered in the theoretical part, in the literature review grounded on secondary data collection, that is, in the sub-chapter one: the history of

feminism and marketing. The response to the second goal is found in the empirical part of the study research within the collection of primary data regarding Instagram posts, in chapter four: analysis and results of accounts posts. Finally, the remaining goals are addressed by gathering primary data collection from in-depth interviews with Instagram users, in chapter five: analysis and results of users' opinion.

### **3.2 Methodology for analysing social media content**

The first section of the empirical research comprises the primary data collection of the four selected case studies, i.e., feminist Instagram accounts, and therefore the platform and account selection criteria are provided. Afterwards, the data analysis method of the Instagram accounts posts is examined in detail, as well as the description of the samples of the four selected accounts @unwomen, @the\_female\_lead, @farida.d.author and @girlsagainstoppression.

#### **3.2.1 Method of data collection**

The collection of data involves the process of selection of a single social media platform and therefore a list of selection criteria for accounts to focus on.

The social media platform Instagram is selected for this research for its relevance and valuable offering network opportunity for an examination of contemporary women's activism, which it has in the present moment. It can provide a powerful space for activism in general, as well as for social movements and feminist activism, feminist fights, and impactful messages of support and/or promotion of shared causes with a wider potential target audience to gain supporters and exposure. The Instagram platform has a culture of aesthetic and visual communication, and activists' advocacy messages are shared and convey significance through photos, videos, and captions with accompanying text, hashtags, and/or links used to deliver needed context. Content on the platform characteristically emphasizes beauty and "selfies," and thus has a feminized reputation. Instagram enables gendered performances that do not challenge other identities or features such as femininity, rendering it an approachable means for women's political engagement, irrespective of their degree of political background or level of progressive gender policy. Thereby, it is ready to emerge as an essential organizing venue for all women to record novel forms of feminist activism online. From an organizational point of view, posts on Instagram can be utilized to sustain mobilization by information sharing and employing techniques of framing to maintain activists motivated and interconnected, thus effectively sharing a collective culture and identity and preparing them for the upcoming action, either a huge march or a smaller event, online or offline (Einwohner, & Rochford, 2019).

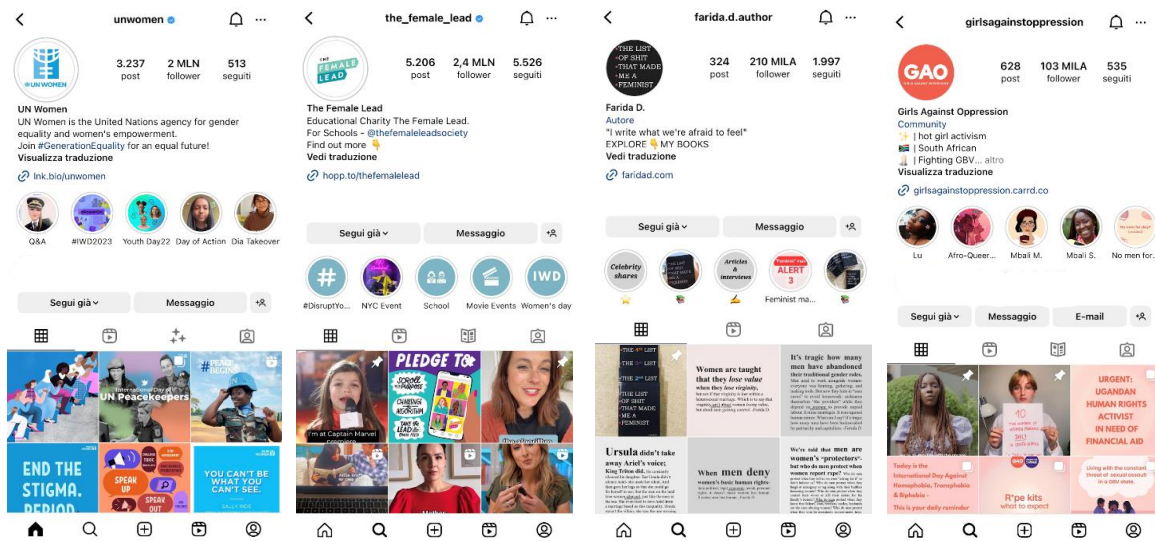
Further support of the claim that Instagram is emerging as an influential political space for women, is the proof that two of the most popular advocacy hashtags, namely #me too and

#time's up, concerned violence against women. Instagram is an optimal platform for the research for additional points as well. In contrast to Twitter, which restricts members to 280 characters, Instagram users are able to type expository paragraphs up to a limit of 2,200 characters. This opportunity for additional free space for text, combined with the usage of pictures, filters, and videos, turns Instagram into a curated and stylized window into people's lives. Another factor to consider is that protest acts are frequently visual, or at the very least they lack the ability to be fully comprehended via text message solely. Moreover, demonstrators employ physical appearance, signs, imagery and visuals, and stylistic design to convey their messages, and which Instagram empowers them to accomplish so online. Particularly in a feminized platform such as Instagram, where political performance and gender performance are likely to interplay. This provides insight into gendered political performance that might be lost in other forms of data. Instagram captures such communication and activities simply by enabling users to craft a digital scrapbook, a filtered and modified visual storytelling (Einwohner, & Rochford, 2019). An additional driver for the decision to choose this visual platform over other popular social networks (such as Twitter or Facebook) was the absence of research on the political potential of Instagram's feminism in the literature review.

To determine which accounts are considered for examination, four set of criteria are employed. First, a rapid eye scanning of the content material of the accounts is performed to assure that these accounts actually addressed feminist topics (e.g. gender equality, body positivity, rape culture, equal pay, gender discrimination,...). The second criteria consider English-language accounts to guarantee a complete and accurate understanding and interpretation throughout the process of analysis. The third criterion looks at popular accounts, meaning accounts with a large number of followers, to ensure that each account's posts have high exposure and reach, circulating widely on Instagram and being the subject of interaction by hundreds, thousands, or even millions, of viewers on a daily basis. Hence, it is determined that each account is required to have at a minimum of 100,000 followers to be included in the study research analysis. The fourth and final criteria involves a background screening to ensure that such accounts are not sponsoring marketing products or services that do not address feminist topics, but rather focus purely on advocating and endorsing feminist voices and messages (e.g., gender awareness), without a profit purpose behind it. Accounts that endorse feminist books and literature, are included in the selection process since they directly cover topics related to feminism and they assist indirectly in raising gender awareness.

Therefore, four feminist Instagram accounts are selected for the analysis, according to the four criteria listed above: @unwomen, @the\_female\_lead, @farida.d.author, and @girlsagainstoppression (see Figure 1). From each account, 25 posts are selected for examination, making a total of 100 postings, consisting of 79 images and 21 videos.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the four accounts selected for analysis illustrating their profile page



Source: UN Women (n.d.); The Female Lead (n.d.); Farida D. (n.d.); Girls Against Oppression (n.d.);

### 3.2.2 Method of data analysis of accounts posts

Once the accounts are selected with purposive sampling, data collection on the accounts' posts follows, which occurred on May 23, 2023. The sample is taken from the posts that are publicly accessible on Instagram, which implies that the selected account has a public social account, thus everyone could potentially visit and engage with the page profile by liking, commenting on, and/or sharing the account's posts. No private content or material from closed online communities is used. The sample of accounts posts is chosen by simple random sampling. The 25 posts from each feminist Instagram account are captured utilizing the snipping tool to select a piece of the computer screen and generate a saveable picture as well as employing screen recordings for video-based posts (also known as reels on Instagram), for a total of 100 posts. The caption (textual writing with accompanying hashtags frequently) below each post is also included in the collection, as it provides a normative insight into how images or reels are supposed to be understood. Bearing in mind that many Instagram posts employ a carousel style format, that is, they consist of more than one image or video, up to a maximum of ten. Thus, the total 100 posts from the four accounts results in 205 individual images/videos, consisting of 184 images and 21 videos.

Then, thematic analysis is employed as an inductive method, to examine the sample of posted accounts by determining the recurring elements of the popularization of contemporary (also known as Fourth Wave) feminist agenda that are traced in this content posts from the four selected official feminist Instagram accounts and analysing, describing, and reporting on the themes found in the type of language employed, topics covered, and format style adopted by these feminist Instagram accounts that promote gender awareness,

to engage with their audiences. Thematic analysis is described as a method of analysing qualitative data (Caulfield, 2019). It requires a high degree of involvement and interpretation on the part of the researcher, who closely examines and focuses on identifying and describing implicit and explicit ideas, topics, or patterns of meaning that repeatedly emerge within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to the raw data as summary indicators for subsequent analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011).

Since there is no previous codebook of general feminist content on the social media platform Instagram, a codebook is generated for the present research based on theoretical concepts, previous social media content analysis, and a scoping review of feminist content. The coding procedures was inspired by Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John & Slater (2019) content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram and Einwohner & Rochford (2019) analysis of social media activity related to the Women's March on the Instagram platform, adapting the necessary codes to fit the patterns traced in the sample data.

Therefore, Instagram posts are coded on two levels: (1) Imagery (without any caption) and (2) Post themes (with imagery and caption). Imagery as a visual component of posts is coded as (a) visual picture only (such as human figure, non-human picture, other); (b) text only (such as motivational statement, humorous text, educational message text, opinion, other); (c) visual picture and text combination (such as quote overlaid on a picture, picture with the message below, other); or (d) video. Imagery codes are mutually exclusive, so a post can have only one code. However, for the post themes, each picture and caption, are coded in conjunction to determine the overarching theme of the post. Codes for the post themes are not mutually exclusive, so to a post multiple theme codes could be applicable. The posts in a carousel style format are rated taking into account each code theme present in the images that make up the post; if a code theme is present in more than one image in that carousel post, the code theme is counted only once. Therefore, for post themes, the posts are coded into four main themes for the type of language employed: (1) inspirational or empowering, (2) inclusive or intersectional, (3) callouts or critical, and (4) humorous; and the posts are coded into twelve main themes for the topics covered: (1) body positivity or self-acceptance, (2) sexual or reproductive rights, (3) period stigma, (4) pay equity or equal career opportunities, (5) educational opportunities, (6) women's representation or achievements, (7) health or mental health, (8) sexual harassment and assault or feminicide, (9) victim blaming, (10) breaking gender stereotypes or norms, (11) challenging patriarchy, and (12) gender identity. Further details on each thematic code are given with definition and example in Table 1 for the type of language employed and in Table 2 for the topics covered.

*Table 1: Post themes codes for the type of language employed*

Code	Definition	Example
inspirational or empowering	Posts displaying uplifting quotes, messages of strength, encouraging words and statements, personal experiences stories of resilience, and motivational content material designed to empowering women and foster self-confidence.	Image of the supreme court judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg in combination with a quote: “The decision whether or not to bear a child is central to a women’s life, to her wellbeing and dignity. It’s a decision she must make for herself.” (from @the_female_lead)
inclusive or intersectional	Posts emphasising the relevance of inclusiveness, embracing diversity, acknowledging and representing the intertwining experiences and identities of individuals from diverse and socially marginalised backgrounds.	Image of a screenshot tweet with a subject and a text: “As a black woman on a national science show, I intentionally wear braids and my curly Afro to normalize black hair in stem. In this pic, I am wearing cornrows to study plants being sent to space at NASA.” (from @the_female_lead)
callouts or critical	Posts denouncing and calling out instances of misogyny, sexism, racism and other discriminatory practices, reporting problematic and harmful conducts, behaviours, positions or attitudes.	Image of a subject with a paper sheet in hands with text: “Rape culture will continue to thrive as long as survivors face more scrutiny than rapists. #believe survivors” With a caption: “What were you wearing? Did you say no? Did you fight back? How drunk were you? Are you sure you don’t just simply regret it? Addressing rape culture means completely redesigning our approach to victim support and how we address who. It’s time we start asking the predators hard questions instead.” (from @girlsagainstoppression)
humorous	Posts characterised by humour, satire, irony or wit messages and statements to engage with feminist arguments, challenge gender stereotypes, and draw awareness to gender inequalities in a light-hearted approach style.	Image with a non-human figure, with a text: “RIP Patriarchy”. And with a caption: “Spooky fact for #Halloween: patriarchy is still alive and well. Time to bury it.” (from @unwomen)

*Source: own work.*

*Table 2: Post themes codes for the topics covered*

Code	Definition	Example
body positivity or self-acceptance	Posts encouraging self-love, embracing body diversity, accepting imperfections, questioning strict beauty standards, and promoting a positive body image.	Image with a subject and a quote: “You don’t need hair to be feminine”. With caption: “You don’t need anything to be feminine – long hair or short hair, breasts, to wear dress, makeup or anything else. Besides, you don’t even have to be feminine. You do what you want. What you need is to be in tune with yourself. That’s all.” (from @the_female_lead)
sexual or reproductive rights	Posts advocating for reproductive rights, mandatory and inclusive sex education in schools, access to contraception, safe and legal abortion, advocacy for individual rights to decision-making autonomy, about their bodies and sexuality, and discussions featuring consent.	Image of a subject with a paper sheet in hands with text: “Asking for consent only ‘ruins the mood’ if someone didn’t want sex in the first place.” With caption: “Often when talking about consent in sexual situations and how important confirmation of consent is a counter argument is thrown into the discussion: But asking for consent ruins the mood.” (from @girlsagainstoppression)
period stigma	Posts tackling menstrual taboos, encouraging period positivity and education, breaking the silence on menstruation poverty, advocating for affordable and accessible menstrual health products.	Image of a screenshot tweet with a text: “I bleed, You bleed, She bleeds, We bleed, They bleed, You bleed. When something is this common, we need to be able to talk about it! It is time to break the stigma around periods.” (from @unwomen)
pay equity or equal career opportunities	Posts emphasising gender pay gaps, promoting wage equality, challenging wage discrimination, advocating for transparency in salary contract negotiations, supporting equal career access opportunities independently of gender, and exposing gender discrimination in recruitment practices and promotional decisions.	Image of three working subjects, with incorporated text: “Can we have families without losing our jobs?” And with caption: “This is a question many women are confronted with. Let us speak up against discriminatory hiring practices and promotion decisions.” (from @unwomen)

(table continues)

*Table 2: Post themes codes for the topics covered (cont.)*

educational opportunities	Posts endorsing policies, efforts and actions that advance for equal access to education for all genders, advocating for inclusive learning possibilities for marginalized communities, and addressing the difficulties and barriers faced by women and girls in obtaining access to education.	Image with a non-human figure, with a text: “Nearly 130 million girls are out of school globally. More than half live in crisis-affected countries.” With caption: “Education is not a privilege. It is a fundamental RIGHT. Yet nearly 130 million girls are out globally. This puts them at risk of violence, exploitation & early marriage.” (from @unwomen)
women’s representation or achievements	Posts praising women’s accomplishments, advocating women in leadership positions, promoting women’s equal participation in political and public life, supporting gender equilibrium in decision-making roles, and contesting stereotypical assumptions about women’s abilities.	Image of the supreme court judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg in combination with a quote: “Women belong in all places where decisions are being made.” With a caption: “Today we remember Ruth Bader Ginsburg, U.S. Supreme Court Justice #BornOnThisDay. She was a champion for justice and she cleared the way for gender equality so other women can have a seat at the table.” (from @unwomen)
health or mental health	Posts dealing with the topics of women’s health, mental health consciousness, trauma processing and healing, healthcare access and de-stigmatisation of help-seeking for mental health challenges.	Image of a mobile phone with a reminder text: “Healing from trauma is not linear and our different responses are each valid. Allow yourself to feel it out. Practice gentleness always.” (from @girlsagainstoppression)

(table continues)



*Table 2: Post themes codes for the topics covered (cont.)*

sexual harassment and assault or feminicide	Posts raising awareness about harassment and sexual assault, addressing rape and feminicide culture, providing resources to denounce incidents, fostering support for survivors, encouraging legal prosecution of perpetrators, and dealing with gender-based violence that is entrenched in gender disparities and imbalances of power.	Image with a text: “We are taught that it’s okay to laugh at rxpe jokes, but not to call out rxpe. It’s okay for us to sexualize women, but not for women to be sexual. It’s okey to say ‘she was asking for it’, but not to question ‘did he ask her first?’ Women are taught how to get used to misogyny, but not how men get to use misogyny.” With caption: Not okey. (from @farida.d.author)
victim blaming	Posts questioning victim blaming approaches, challenging society’s propensity to victimize survivors of violence, advocating compassion and empathy, sympathy and support for victims.	Image with a text: “Rape is the only crime I can think of that’s 100% inexcusable. There’s absolutely no reason for it ever. In any circumstance. You can murder in self-defence, you can steal to help your starving family. Even doing illegal drugs can really help calm people down. But rape doesn’t help anyone except the rapist. And it just baffles me to this day the way people will excuse rape with, ‘Well he/she was drunk’ or ‘What was she wearing?’ or ‘He’s a guy though, he probably enjoyed it.’ It’s the one crime that everyone should find inexcusable and yet it’s the one that people try to justify the most often.” With caption: “Blame the perpetrator, not the victim.” (from @girlsagainstoppression)
breaking gender stereotypes or norms	Posts questioning conventional gender roles, shattering of stereotypes, emphasising individuals defying gender norms and standards as well as contesting societal assumptions associated with gender.	Image with two screenshots from a news journal, addressing same topic but using different narrative due to subject gender, in combination with a text: “So when a woman shows signs of aging she’s ‘given up,’ but when a man does, he’s a ‘silver fox’? One criticized, one praised.” (from @the_female_lead)

(table continues)

*Table 2: Post themes codes for the topics covered (cont.)*

challenging patriarchy	Posts confronting systemic sexism and misogyny, critiquing harmful patriarchal standards, disrupting toxic masculinity, contesting systems of oppression and structures of patriarchy, resisting patriarchal capitalism and advocating for a more equitable society.	Image with a text: “Abortion isn’t a problem; it’s a solution. Divorce isn’t a problem; it’s a solution. #MeToo isn’t a problem; it’s a solution. Feminism isn’t a problem; it’s a solution. The problem is that patriarchy doesn’t want us to have solutions.” #smashthepatriarchy (from @farida.d.author)
gender identity	Posts addressing different gender identifications, advocating transgender rights, supporting the right of everyone to define their own gender identity, countering discrimination on the basis of gender identity, raising consciousness regarding non-binary and gender non-conforming experiences.	Image with a text: “If we fear the men in dresses because the men in suits taught us to do so - then who we fear are not the men in dresses; but the men in suits. If we fear lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and non-binary folks because cishet men taught us to do so – then who we fear are cishet men.” With caption: “ALL trans women are women, period – your approval is not a pre-requisite to anyone’s identity.” (from @farida.d.author)

*Source: own work.*

The coding approach utilized in this research study is illustrated by one of the posts in our sample (see Figure 2) from the account @the\_female\_lead. The post was designed to celebrate women on this year’s International Women’s Day by representing some inspiring women who have set the tone for making change. The post contains both the visual image of women supporting and assisting each other in climbing and reaching the summit all together, and the accompanying text stating: We rise by lifting others. A clear and powerful reference to sisterhood. The approach is to conceptualize both image and text, therefore the code of the post for the type of language employed is inspirational or empowering due to the uplifting and empowering messages. There are so many extraordinary women from different backgrounds and communities doing incredible and meaningful work in advocating for a more inclusive world. For this artwork, six inspirational women coming from diverse backgrounds were chosen to be portrayed: singer and body-positivity activist Lizzo, actress and mental health activist Jameela Jamil, tennis champion Serena Williams, climate activist Greta Thunberg, civil rights and education activist Malala Yousafzai, and US Supreme Court Justice and women’s rights activist Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The intended mission of this artwork is to honour the women who came before us, who stand by our side and who will come after us. Thus, we can track two more codes: women’s representation or achievements

for the subject matter and another code for the language used, that is, inclusive or intersectional.

*Figure 2: Example of @the\_female\_lead post content*



*Source: The Female Lead (n.d.).*

### 3.2.3 Sample description

The selection process results in the following accounts: @unwomen, @the\_female\_lead, @farida.d.author, and @girlsagainstoppression. Each account is surely quite unique. The feminist Instagram account @unwomen is the official account of the United Nations agency for gender equality and women's empowerment, which works to encourage the process of growth and advancement of women's condition and their public participation. The account that promotes gender awareness has 2 million of followers and its target audience is very diverse. They cover women's issues and experiences from across the world, including Asia, Africa, Europe and so on (UN Women, n.d.). The account @the\_female\_lead is the most popular among those selected, with 2.4 million followers at the time of writing. It is the official account of The Female Lead, a well-known education charity that focuses on social gender issues and is committed to raising the visibility of women's stories. On their Instagram page, they offer women and girls a broad range of inspiring positive role models, by sharing women's success stories and wisdom, in their work careers and in life (The Female Lead, n.d.). The Instagram account @farida.d.author is run by Arab gender researcher and poet Farida D., who has been studying the daily oppressions of Arab women for decades. She has 210,000 of followers on her Instagram page. Farida D. is her username, as she cannot safely share her identity. She is an intersectional feminist author of a range of books and her poetic style is best characterized as honestly brutal and thrilling, and her words are portrayed as raw, true, and completely unfiltered. She claims to write "what most of us are afraid to feel," and the aim of her poetry is to dismantle the various oppressions of gender, class, race, sexuality and more. Her target audience includes all women for she believes that

the similarities are far more than the differences between Eastern and Western societies, arguing that the oppression of women in the aforementioned societies is one, but manifests itself in different ways (Gupta, 2020; Farida D., n.d.). The @girlsagainstoppression account is run by four South African women and has 103,000 followers on the Instagram platform. In their intersectional community profile they mainly engage in discourse around gender-based violence, but also rape culture, gender identity, and more. The account shows its support for the struggle for African gender equality by assisting with signing petitions, raising funds and resources for projects for girls who are survivors of gender-based violence and rape inside vulnerable communities in South Africa. Particularly for the South African region, they additionally provide accurate information on police stations, shelters, and support centres dedicated to survivors. The Girls Against Oppression page also aims to give a space to explain concepts, share topics, and provide insights on racism, gender-based violence, and queer issues (Girls Against Oppression, n.d.).

Instagram provides limited number of metrics to measure the popularity of accounts and posts. The popularity of social media accounts posts, as measured by the number of likes and comments, increases by preferential affiliation. This is somewhat comparable to how, for instance, scientific articles acquire citations: resources with a large amount of citations (in our case, the likes a post has) have a higher likelihood of gaining even more citations (in this instance, likes). In addition, the only account-related performance metrics promptly made available on Instagram are the number of followers for individual accounts and the number of people individual accounts follow. The latter insight is less significant for the measurement of account popularity. Both data figures are readily visible on the upper part of each individual account on Instagram. These constraints on post and account metrics restrict the type of analysis that can be performed on post and user data (Cornet, Hall, Cafaro & Brady, 2017).

Therefore, the Instagram engagement rate calculator from the Collabstr platform is employed to provide the engagement rate, average likes and average comments for each of the feminist Instagram accounts selected for this research. The engagement rate is a measure of the degree to which users and/or followers engage (through likes and comments) with the account's content. Instagram engagement rate by Collabstr (n.d.a.) is calculated by considering the total number of likes and comments of the 12-24 most recent posts. These numbers are first summed and then divided by an account's number of followers. Finally, the outcome is multiplied by 100 to obtain the engagement rate percentage. The results are presented below (see Table 3). Collabstr's insights on the engagement rate compared to similar accounts (which refers to similar in number of followers), reveal that the engagement of @unwomen and @the\_female\_lead accounts on Instagram is lower than the average compared to similar accounts (Collabstr, n.d.b.; Collabstr, n.d.c.). Whereas the engagement of @farida.d.author and @girlsagainstoppression on Instagram is above the average when compared to similar accounts (Collabstr, n.d.d.; Collabstr, n.d.e.). An engagement rate ranging between 1% and 3% is considered to be average on Instagram. Generally, the higher

the engagement rate, the more committed and high-quality followers an account has. The number of followers is also another factor to take into consideration, as the more followers an account has, the harder it is to have a great engagement rate due to Instagram’s algorithm (Collabstr, n.d.a.).

*Table 3: Users engagement with selected accounts*

Instagram account name	Followers	Engagement Rate	Average Likes	Average Comments
@unwomen	2MLN	0.36%	7.2k	88
@the_female_lead	2.4MLN	2.30%	31.6k	377
@farida.d.author	210.7k	6.38%	13.3k	192
@girlsagainstoppression	103.8k	3.06%	3.1k	38

*Adapted from Collabstr (n.d.b.), Collabstr (n.d.c.), Collabstr (n.d.d.), Collabstr (n.d.e.).*

### **3.3 Methodology for analysing reception of social media content**

The second body of empirical research examines the reception of the social media accounts selected above by Instagram users, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which these users engage with the content material of the selected feminist accounts. Initially, the study involves the primary data collection of in-depth interviews, selecting individuals according to specific set of criteria. This is then followed by the method of analysing reception data through in-depth interviews with Instagram users on the content of the selected social media accounts, and lastly the description of the sample of interviewees.

#### **3.3.1 Method of data collection of in-depth interviews**

The data gathering includes the list of criteria for individuals’ selection for the in-depth interviews, therefore the list of potential questions raised in the interviews, and finally the number of people involved in the interview research.

To determine which individuals are considered for examination, five set of criteria are employed. First, the potential interviewees should endorse feminist concepts and ideologies. Identification with the word feminist is not mandatory, since many people choose not to identify as such, yet still share the aim and purpose of disrupting the systems of power and oppression addressed by feminist theory. Second, participants are expected to have a solid knowledge of the Instagram platform, which is evidenced by their usage of the social network. A daily use of Instagram is required. Third, participants need to exhibit interest and enthusiasm for feminist issues and should always be willing to further deepen their

knowledge and awareness concerning these subjects. Fourth, individuals should engage on a daily basis with feminist Instagram accounts and with at least one of the accounts selected for this research. It is preferred that they also engage with other similar accounts that share feminist themes and thoughts. Fifth and last criterion, potential interviewee should be between the ages of 20 and 30, since, as we discovered within the theoretical framework, the leading activists in contemporary Fourth Wave feminism are the youngest generation, who are most present in feminist activities both online and offline combined.

Therefore, five participants are chosen for analysis, following the five criteria outlined earlier. The names of the participants will remain anonymous.

In order to address the research questions, a list of prospective interview questions is constructed. The interview questions help explore users' feminist perspectives and the reasons for their engagement with Instagram accounts. The questions posed in in-depth interviews address four themes: the notion of feminism, drivers of engagement with the accounts in general, direct engagement with the content posts and their impacts on the community, and the general insight of users' opinion and perception on the effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts. First, I ask participants for their definition of feminism, without imposing a normative understanding of feminisms. Instead, I let the interviewees elaborate on what kind of ideas or practices they regard as feminist. Before starting with the second thematic question about the drivers of engagement with the accounts, I show respondents the Instagram page of the four feminist accounts selected for this research. Secondly, I ask the interviewees: What are the drivers that lead you to engage with feminist Instagram accounts in the online community? The third set of questions concerning direct engagement with the accounts' posts and their impacts on the online audience involves questions such as: Do you find these types of posts to be effective for their purpose? What feeling do you get when you see these kinds of posts? Do you believe this sort of content shares positive and empowering messages? Do you think that this kind of content can have a positive or negative impact on you? And the ultimate question regarding the users' general opinion and perception of feminist Instagram accounts' effectiveness is the following: Are feminist Instagram accounts an effective means to counter stereotypes, help women achieve empowerment, and/or encourage inclusion in their audience?

### 3.3.2 Method of data analysis of in-depth interviews

Participants are selected by convenience and purposive sampling according to transparent and logical criteria. Therefore, the reception of the social media accounts by Instagram users are examined relying on in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are employed with the aim of gaining a qualitative understanding of the reasons, opinions, feelings and motivations behind feminist Instagram users' engagement in feminist content posts on the selected Instagram accounts. This allows me to analyse the impact of content posts material on users' awareness and education concerning feminist issues, as well as to understand participants'

reasoning and beliefs. The in-depth interview attempts to capture the “lived experiences” of the individual. In-depth interviews are frequently employed by academics, who are primarily interested in gaining the “subjective” insights that an individual brings to a specific situation or set of circumstances. This approach is often issue-oriented. Meaning, a researcher might utilize this approach to explore a particular topic and obtain targeted information about the issue from the interviewees. The interview technique still remains among the most popular instruments used by feminist researchers to reach subjugated knowledge. Feminists are especially interested in reaching experiences that are frequently hidden. In-depth interviewing enables feminist researchers to reach out to these hidden voices and knowledge. The interview gives researchers access to individuals’ thoughts, ideas, and memories in their own words rather than in the researcher’s words (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

The interview is carried out in person and is semi-structured, with a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions. A semi-structured interview is conducted with a specific guide, which is a list of thematic areas and written questions for the researcher to address in a specific interview. Having a particular agenda that I want to explore during the interview, a specific interview guide is prepared for this study research. I do not concern myself too deeply with the order of these questions, although it is essential that they are addressed in the course of the interview. Therefore, I have a certain degree of control over how the interview is structured, such as in terms of the precise content of each interview question. Nevertheless, I remain open to raising further questions, on the fly, during the progress of the interview. While I have an agenda, it is not strictly fixed, and there is space for spontaneity on the side of the researcher and the interviewee (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

From the in-depth interviews I produced myself the interview scripts due to the likelihood of a negative impact of the voice recorder, since I want to create an environment in which participants feel comfortable to express whatever they want on a specific subject and to prevent participants from self-consciously altering their narrative or providing very limited information to bias their explanation of their experience. I believe that in this study research, the absence of the audio recorder can be advantageous and may provide a more evident validity and credibility of the data (Rutakumwa, Mugisha, Bernays, Kabunga, Tumwekwase, Mbonye & Seeley, 2020).

### 3.3.3 Sample description

The selection procedure resulted in five participants, three female and two male interviewees. All participants will remain anonymous. Their age ranges between 22 and 26 years old. They all consume Instagram content material on a daily basis, and even multiple times a day. All of the potential interviewees have feminist perspectives and believe in gender equality. Further information concerning the participants’ occupation and the accounts followed is given below (see Table 4).

Table 4: Interviewee details

Participants Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Occupation	Accounts followed
Participant V	23	Female	Student	@unwomen @the_female_lead
Participant K	25	Female	Social worker	@the_female_lead
Participant O	22	Male	Digital marketer	@the_female_lead
Participant M	26	Female	Student	@farida.d.author @girlsagainstoppression
Participant D	26	Male	Trainee solicitor	@unwomen

Source: own work.

## 4 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS OF ACCOUNTS POSTS

In this chapter the results of the content posts analysis are reviewed and presented for each of the four feminist Instagram accounts that were selected for the study research as case studies: @unwomen, @the\_female\_lead, @farida.d.author, and @girlsagainstoppression. The results cover the identification of the most used format style and the kind of language employed, as well as the most prominent and addressed topics by feminist Instagram accounts to engage with their audience. The results for each individual feminist account are presented separately.

### 4.1 Case1: @unwomen

The first case study reviewed is the Instagram account of the United Nation organization for gender equality: @unwomen. The results show that, overall, 52% (13/25) of posts are of visual and textual combined nature, 28% text only, 12% visual picture only and 8% video (see Table 5). Only two times the carousel format is employed. The page often uses the light blue colour as a theme colour of the post's material, since it is also the colour of the United Nation logo (UN Women, n.d.).



*Table 5: Imagery results of @unwomen*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
visual picture only	3	12
text only	7	28
visual picture and text combination	13	52
video	2	8

*Source: own work.*

Regarding the post themes, in terms of the type of language employed, the most widely utilized thematic code is inspirational or empowering with 60% of the frequency (15/25), closely followed by inclusive or intersectional with 56% and callouts or critical theme with 44%. Less popular is humorous with only 4% (see Table 6). The @unwomen page makes extensive use of empowering messages and uplifting quotes from influential women and activists for change, such as Rosa Parks, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Audre Lorde, Miriam Makeba, Oprah Winfrey, Kamala Harris, Michelle Obama, bell hooks and many others (UN Women, n.d.).

*Table 6: Post themes results for the type of language employed of @unwomen*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
inspirational or empowering	15	60
inclusive or intersectional	14	56
callouts or critical	11	44
humorous	1	4

*Source: own work.*

Concerning the post themes, in relation to the topics covered, the most commonly utilized theme codes with 24% frequency (6/25) are the following codes: pay equity or equal career opportunities, sexual harassment and assault or femicide and breaking gender stereotypes or norms (see Table 7). However, we can notice that there is little variation in the frequencies between the codes mentioned above and the other codes. Yet, this is not merely a coincidence, since the UN Women entity has a broad political agenda, and it is evident and common that it addresses almost all the topics thematic selected for this research study. The organisation, whose vision calls for a gender-equitable world, addresses matters including ending violence against women, ensuring peace and security for all women and girls worldwide, eradicating all forms of discrimination against women, that upholds the right of women to participate in public life and the political sphere, investing in the economic empowerment of women, and so forth. On their official Instagram page, they often portray women in STEM disciplines in combination with their own citations, for raising

consciousness around gender stereotypes, particularly surrounding the male-dominated environments, as well as challenging traditional gender norms and fighting for equal career opportunities for women. Thus, a common quote in @unwomen content posts is “Any job is a woman’s job”. Furthermore, when addressing certain topics, they frequently provide statistical numbers, like in this example of a visual and text combined post that states: “More than 5 women/girls are killed every hour by someone in their own family”, addressing the thematic code of sexual harassment and assault or feminicide in this case (UN Women, n.d.).

*Table 7: Post themes results for the topics covered of @unwomen*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
body positivity or self-acceptance	1	4
sexual or reproductive rights	2	8
period stigma	1	4
pay equity or equal career opportunities	6	24
educational opportunities	2	8
women’s representation or achievements	2	8
health or mental health	2	8
sexual harassment and assault or feminicide	6	24
victim blaming	2	8
breaking gender stereotypes or norms	6	24
challenging patriarchy	3	12
gender identity	3	12

*Source: own work.*

## **4.2 Case2: @the\_female\_lead**

The second case study examined is the Instagram account of the educational charity: @the\_female\_lead. The findings show that overall, 64% (16/25) of posts are in the video format and 36% are visual and text combined posts (see Table 8). Visual picture only and text only posts are not encountered. The carousel format is likewise not utilised, yet we can observe that the account widely employs videos to engage its online community. The extensive use of the video format is recognised as an effective tool for reaching a wider online audience and increasing engagement due to the architecture of the Instagram platform. The @the\_female\_lead account also makes use of colourful themes for the background of its profile page (The Female Lead, n.d.).

*Table 8: Imagery results of @the\_female\_lead*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
visual picture only	0	0
text only	0	0
visual picture and text combination	9	36
video	16	64

*Source: own work.*

In terms of the themes of the posts, regarding the type of language used, the most commonly utilised thematic code is inspirational or empowering with 56% of frequency (14/25), narrowly followed by inclusive or intersectional with 52% and callouts or critical theme code with 44%, less frequently adopted is humorous with 16% (see Table 9). Their approach is somewhat similar to the type of language strategy applied by the @unwomen account. The @the\_female\_lead account regularly praises quotes from inspiring and powerful women, also in relation to daily events news. Women such as the singer known as the queen of rock and roll Tina Turner, actress and LGBTQ+ rights activist Jamie Lee Curtis, US Supreme Court Justice and activist Ruth Bader Ginsburg, America's first woman in space Sally Ride, former Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern, activist and founder of the Me too movement Tarana Burke and so on. Emphasising also the importance of inclusivity and diversity, recognising and representing the individual experiences of various marginalised groups and their accomplishments (The Female Lead, n.d.).

*Table 9: Post themes results for the type of language employed of @the\_female\_lead*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
inspirational or empowering	14	56
inclusive or intersectional	13	52
callouts or critical	11	44
humorous	4	16

*Source: own work.*

As far as the topics of the posts are concerned, the most frequently occurring topic codes with 32% of frequency (8/25) are the following: body positivity or self-acceptance, and women's representation or achievements (see Table 10). This is closely followed by the thematic code breaking gender stereotypes or norms with 28% frequency. It can be noticed that there is a greater variation in frequencies between the codes just mentioned and the other codes listed in the table below. Therefore, the focus will mainly remain on the most frequent codes. The content material published by the @the\_female\_lead account is quite often taken and reposted from content of other, less popular feminist accounts. This account appears to

serve as a platform (with a large base of followers) for sharing and helping to discover other works by feminist artists. The @the\_female\_lead page frequently shares inspiring stories of women with a positive view of the body, highlighting experiences of self-love, body confidence and the normalisation of all bodies and body hair. Also providing positive role models for other women or girls who are struggling with self-acceptance while at the same time challenging rigid and unrealistic beauty industry standards. In a post by @the\_female\_lead concerning the shape of the “ideal body” over the decades, ranging from Marilyn Monroe to Kate Moss and Kim Kardashian, we find a humorous caption stating: “Not only are we supposed to live up to a standard of beauty, which is hugely unfair in the first place, but we are expected to live up to changing standard of beauty?”. Pointing out the absurdity surrounding women’s changing beauty standards throughout the decades (The Female Lead, n.d.).

*Table 10: Post themes results for the topics covered of @the\_female\_lead*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
body positivity or self-acceptance	8	32
sexual or reproductive rights	2	8
period stigma	2	8
pay equity or equal career opportunities	1	4
educational opportunities	0	0
women’s representation or achievements	8	32
health or mental health	2	8
sexual harassment and assault or feminicide	0	0
victim blaming	0	0
breaking gender stereotypes or norms	7	28
challenging patriarchy	1	4
gender identity	0	0

*Source: own work.*

### **4.3 Case3: @farida.d.author**

The third case study explored is the Instagram account managed by the Arabic PhD gender researcher and poet Farida D.: @farida.d.author. The outcomes reveal that the online format style utilised by the account is text-only post content with 100% (25/25) frequency (see Table 11). In addition, the carousel format is not employed. The @farida.d.author account also employs a standard visual colour theme throughout all posts, that is grey, light grey and occasionally light pink with black writing text (Farida D., n.d.).

*Table 11: Imagery results of @farida.d.author*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
visual picture only	0	0
text only	25	100
visual picture and text combination	0	0
video	0	0

*Source: own work.*

As far as the themes of the posts are considered, with regard to the type of language used, the most popular thematic code applied is callout or criticism with 96% (24/25), as almost all the posts in the sample condemn instances of sexism, misogyny, racism, domination and oppression of patriarchal structures and other discriminatory practices. This is succeeded by the inspirational or empowering thematic code with 48% and with 20% frequency for both codes: inclusive or intersectional and humorous (see Table 12). The @farida.d.athor account uses direct language and honest communication, highlighting realistic oppression and resistance to repressive patriarchal systems (Farida D., n.d.).

*Table 12: Post themes results for the type of language employed of @farida.d.author*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
inspirational or empowering	12	48
inclusive or intersectional	5	20
callouts or critical	24	96
humorous	5	20

*Source: own work.*

Regarding the post themes, for the topics covered, the most commonly employed thematic code with 48% of frequency (12/25) is challenging patriarchy. At 32%, the second most popular topic code is harassment and sexual assault or feminicide (see Table 13). This is narrowly followed by the thematic codes: sexual or reproductive rights and breaking stereotypes or gender norms with 28% frequency. It may be seen that there is a higher variance in frequencies between the codes just mentioned and the other codes listed in the table below, since some codes are not even discussed. Hence, the main emphasis here will be on the four most frequent codes previously mentioned. The contents post of @farida.d.author often challenge patriarchy either directly or indirectly, referring to patriarchy as the rooted source of the problem, that should be dismantled in order to make this word more equitable and inclusive for all genders, free from dominance and oppression. For instance, we can observe this direct challenge of the approach to patriarchy in the subsequent text post, which states: “It’s not bad for women to have casual sex, it’s bad for

patriarchy. It's not bad for women to have safe abortions, it's bad for patriarchy. It's not bad for women to be single and independent, it's bad for patriarchy. It's bad for women, that everything bad for patriarchy, is framed as bad for women." The account also often covers topics directly related to rape culture matters and employs the word "rxpe", such as in the following example: "A man doesn't rxpe a woman because he cannot control his drive; he rxpes her because he has been taught he can derive control.", to deflect Instagram's algorithm and prevent account's content material from being removed. Similarly, @farida.d.author use the word "h@te" with the same purpose, like in the present example: "Women h@te men because of misogyny. Men h@te women because of misogyny. The same words: but worlds of difference." In the latter post, patriarchy is indirectly challenged as systemic misogyny due to the harmful system of heteropatriarchal oppression is discussed and exposed. Also, the notion of consent is frequently addressed throughout the postings as it relates to sexual harassment and rape culture. This concept is clearly and directly evidenced in the next post, which states: "The difference between flirting and harassment isn't about whether he's attractive; it's about whether she consents." (Farida D., n.d.).

*Table 13: Post themes results for the topics covered of @farida.d.author*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
body positivity or self-acceptance	1	4
sexual or reproductive rights	7	28
period stigma	0	0
pay equity or equal career opportunities	0	0
educational opportunities	0	0
women's representation or achievements	0	0
health or mental health	0	0
sexual harassment and assault or femicide	8	32
victim blaming	1	4
breaking gender stereotypes or norms	7	28
challenging patriarchy	12	48
gender identity	1	4

*Source: own work.*

#### **4.4 Case4: @girlsagainstoppression**

The fourth and final case study investigated is the Instagram account run by four South African women: @girlsagainstoppression. The results reveal that the most frequently used format, with 44% (11/25), are posts employing either text-only or a combination of text and images (see Table 14). The video format is only utilised with a frequency of 12%. However, it can be observed that the carousel format is employed 14 times, which indicates that almost half of the posts in the sample are in carousel mode. Thus, the total of 25 individual content

posts, resulted in 122 individual images/video posts. The extensive use of the carousel style format is known to be beneficial for the engagement with Instagrams' online community and for the explanation of various complex and challenging concepts. The @girlsagainstoppression page also makes use of shades of pink and orange as the background colour of posts, in combination with orange or white coloured writing texts (Girls Against Oppression, n.d.).

*Table 14: Imagery results of @girlsagainstoppression*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
visual picture only	0	0
text only	11	44
visual picture and text combination	11	44
video	3	12

*Source: own work.*

In terms of the type of language employed in the postings, the most common thematic code used is callout or critical with 88% frequency (22/25), similar to @farida.d.author's type of language strategy. The @girlsagainstoppression account likewise has nearly all the posts in the sample referring to harmful discriminatory practices. It is followed by the inclusive or intersectional thematic code with 52% and the inspirational or empowering code with 44% frequency (see Table 15). The humour code is not employed at all (Girls Against Oppression, n.d.).

*Table 15: Post themes results for the type of language employed of @girlsagainstoppression*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
inspirational or empowering	11	44
inclusive or intersectional	13	52
callouts or critical	22	88
humorous	0	0

*Source: own work.*

Concerning the topics of the posts, the most commonly used thematic code with 48% (12/25) is sexual harassment and assault or feminicide. In @girlsagainstoppression account this code is frequently addressed through personal stories of abuse, feminicide and daily news of rape in South Africa. With 32% frequency, the second most popular topic code is victim blaming (see Table 16). This is not a coincidence, since posts dealing with rape culture are often accompanied by victim blaming practices particularly on the part of police officers that make use of the following queries: How drunk were you? What were you wearing? Did you react? Did you say no? Furthermore, the police minister of South Africa, Bheki Cele used the

adjective “lucky” in an interview to refer to a girl who was raped by “only” one man. In South Africa, rape culture is widespread and sexual education, and the notion of consent are little discussed or non-existent. In response, a post was released portraying one of the women who run the @girlsagainstoppression account with a piece of paper in hands that reads: “0 is the number of women’s lives saved by the phrase #NotAllMen.” The third most utilised thematic code is: breaking stereotypes or gender norms with 24% frequency. In a post with the earlier-mentioned code, @girlsagainstoppression made a remark on psychologist Jordan Peterson’s assertion: Men are comparatively more interested in things and women in people.”, conceptualizing that, “Yes, it is true, but this isn’t solely because of biological differences. It’s also because of the difference in the way that children are socialized based on their gender. Although it’s true now, it’s already beginning to change. And thus, shouldn’t be used as an excuse for job inequality and the wage gap.” Additionally, the account often tackles the conceptualisation of consensus and the importance of confirmation as necessary, a topic which goes hand in hand with issues of rape culture. Similarly to @farida.d.author account strategy, also @girlsagainstoppression account frequently employs words such as “rxpe” or “r\*apist”, when addressing the topic of rape culture, to bypass the Instagram’s algorithm and prevent the content from being taken down. In this case, some variations in frequencies can be observed among the three thematic topics already discussed and the other thematic codes in the table (Girls Against Oppression, n.d.).

*Table 16: Post themes results for the topics covered of @girlsagainstoppression*

Codes	Frequency of codes	
	Number of posts that contain each code (N=25)	%
body positivity or self-acceptance	1	4
sexual or reproductive rights	4	16
period stigma	0	0
pay equity or equal career opportunities	1	4
educational opportunities	0	0
women’s representation or achievements	2	8
health or mental health	4	16
sexual harassment and assault or femicide	12	48
victim blaming	8	32
breaking gender stereotypes or norms	6	24
challenging patriarchy	5	20
gender identity	0	0

*Source: own work.*

## 5 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS OF USERS’ OPINION

In order to answer the last three research questions, in the following subchapters, the analysis and exploration of feminist Instagram users’ opinions that emerged from the in-depth



interview, are provided. The outcomes concern the identification of users' notions of feminism, the factors that determine followers' account engagement, the impact of content posting material upon users, and the degree of effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts among their audience.

## **5.1 The notion of feminism**

All participants involved in the in-depth interview process embrace the feminist ideas and core values and believe in gender equality. Nevertheless, the self-identification with the feminist label is still frequently misinterpreted, due to several reasons such as misconceptions, possible associated negative stereotypes or radical viewpoints, adverse experiences, lack of consciousness or knowledge, concerns related to terminology and so on. Indeed, the participant O displays signs of uncertainty in self-identifying as a feminist, in order to avoid potential misconceptions or conflicts. However, participant V, participant K and participant D self-define themselves as feminists and participant M define herself as a proud feminist. Furthermore, the perceived meaning of feminism may vary according to individual perspectives and contexts, although it has certain key principles and goals that are often associated with the feminist movement, namely the advocacy for gender equality, the fight to end gender discrimination, the defence of intersectionality and the challenge against patriarchy. The principle of gender equality is touched upon in the participant V's definition of feminism, affirming:

“Feminism is the idea and belief that women's rights must be respected as human beings, embracing topics and issues that are of great relevance to women and their social and working life, with the obvious problems that arise due to the lack of (fairness and) equality between women and men.”

In the given definitions of the concept of feminism, certain spheres are frequently mentioned where the right should be respected and equal for both sexes in relation to all aspects of life, including fields such as the social, economic, political, institutional, health, personal and cultural spheres. In the participant K, participant D, and participant M's definition of feminism, these spheres are named more specifically. According to the theoretical framework, different kinds of feminisms exist, which are united by the dismantling of systems and structures of discrimination and oppression that are the fundamental root cause of gender inequality. In respondent M's definition, the concept of multiple feminisms is raised and highlighted. Furthermore, the participant M expresses strong and positive feelings for the feminist movement and defines her identification clearly as:

“My feminism is intersectional, queer and anti-capitalist. And by the term intersectional I mean the inequality and discrimination that are the product of different factors: sexism, racism, classism, capitalism, colonialism, queerphobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism...”

## 5.2 Drivers of engagement with the accounts

Based on the four feminist Instagram accounts previously included in the research, the in-depth interviews suggest that the drivers of engagement with those accounts can be diverse. Drivers can vary from the reasons of loneliness to feelings of being part of a community and having accounts sharing similar beliefs and values as the users one. These latter factors are intricate and interrelated. Feminist accounts can build a sense of community for individuals, provide opportunities of connection with like-minded people and foster help to end users' loneliness, by providing them support, engagements in discussion, experiences of validation and the possibilities to share their own experiences, in the online community. Moreover, followers need to resonate with these feminist accounts' values, their content and messages promotion ideas, that leads to potential engagement. The three factor drivers listed above are the reasons for all female participants: V, K, and M, engagement with feminist Instagram accounts. Participant M summarizes all those reasons for her personal engagement by stating:

"I need something/someone that supports my ideas in moments when I think that I am surrounded only by antifeminists & co."

From the in-depth interviews an additional factor that drives engagement with feminist Instagram accounts arose. This factor is the empowering and inspirational content posts features of Instagram feminist accounts. Accounts that promote empowering and inspirational content, display uplifting quotes, messages of strength, encouraging words and statements, personal experiences stories of resilience, and motivational content material designed to empower users. These kinds of accounts are an effective instrument in fostering their followers' self-acceptance and self-love. Empowering and inspirational content factor was present in the reasons of participant K engagement with feminist Instagram accounts. Interviewee K explains her experience in following the content material of @the\_female\_lead account as:

"These pages give me the strength and motivation to challenge social norms, but also more confidence in myself and my abilities, thanks to the many stories of experiences shared of inspirational women. I believe that these social pages help women feel more united and stronger together."

Another driver of engagement with feminist contents emerges from the interviews. The reason derives from the need of education and raising awareness on feminist ideologies, issues, and movement to get a deeper understanding and insights. Feminists accounts provide informative resources of personal experiences, updated daily news, reliable statistics, well designed infographics, articles related feminist topics and historical background insights, that contribute to the followers learning process. This driver was traced in the participant D's and participant O's reasons of engagement with feminist accounts. Respondent O admits:

“The reason I interact with feminist accounts is to be on the lookout for information to learn more about feminism and the movement, and at the same time find inspiration and motivation to be able to apply feminist ideology in everyday life.”

### **5.3 Engagement impacts with the content posts**

The content posts of those four feminist Instagram accounts, can have both a positive and a negative impact on our five interviewees. Overall, the respondents showed a positive opinion of the impact of those feminist accounts due to the great messages the accounts convey. Feminist Instagram accounts' main purpose is to advocate for gender equality, while also raising awareness of existing inequalities, and challenging existing patriarchal system of oppression and discrimination. However, the topics and the strategies of the four selected feminist Instagram accounts may vary depending on the issues they advocate for, and the topics covered focus. These insights were already obtained and showed in the previous chapter, in the analysis of results of the four feminist Instagram accounts chosen for this research study. The respondents also explain in-depth their opinion on the content posts of specific accounts, either of the account they follow either of other accounts that they wanted to analyse and express their point of view, and here also same negative aspects arise.

The inspirational and inclusive language employed in the posts of the @the\_female\_lead account, helped the account to have a positive impact on the interviewees V and K. The reasons of this optimistic effect are due to the positive body images and self-confidence posts messages that the account endorse, as well as for the account's posts constant challenge of strict and narrow standards of beauty. Those kinds of stories messages enable women and other individuals to value their bodies and put their qualities and capabilities above their external appearance. Indeed, participant V and K tell:

“For me, it's positive to see content like that of the @the\_female\_lead account, which shows the reality that is often hidden because of society's absurd and strict beauty ideals, such as posts about normalising, accepting and promoting the diversity of bodies.”

“Seeing this kind of content on a daily basis convinces me that it is so right to accept yourself for who you are, with all the imperfections and to practise self-love every day, which consequently also has benefits for your mental health.”

The account @the\_female\_lead also had a positive impact on the participant O, due to the account post representation and portray of plenty of diverse people's lives, both girls/women, but also boys/men, so he could identify himself. Participant O also finds very effective the innovative format style of the content post of @the\_female\_lead account, that are mainly reels, claiming that those videos are very well designed, creatively promoting positive messages and small life lessons.

The empowering and inspirational language posts content of the @unwomen profile, have a positive impact on the participants V and D. The main reason is the topic covered in the account content of @unwomen that often addresses the defying of gender stereotypes or norms and the refuting of the imposed society restriction and ingrained prejudice that can prevent women from achieving their full potential. Moreover, the postings' content questions traditional gender roles and societal expectation related to gender through motivating statements, personal stories of perseverance, images of women in stereotypically male-dominated occupations or sectors. Therefore, respondents V and D argue:

“It makes me happy to see empowerment content, on issues where society still undervalues women. Content like @unwomen's which often portrays the different roles of women working in 'typically male' fields, i.e. so decided by society.”

“I believe the @unwomen profile due to its authority (as a United Nations profile) can be very influential by sharing inspirational posts and stories that break down gender stereotypes, the messages it conveys, such as the intention to inform about problems and possibilities for change for the better, are very positive to me.”

On the other hand, participant M criticizes the content of the @unwomen account for oversimplifying intricate matters, and of being unable to discuss and explore in-depth certain issues that need more explanation, as well as of being incapable of correctly or precisely addressing the root issues concerning gender pay disparity theme. Interviewee M argues:

“For me it's like oversimplification of complex feminist issues. From what I have seen, patriarchy, which is also the very reason for inequality, is rarely mentioned. Most of the time, there is only talk of ending the pay gap, without even saying why this gap exists.”

The direct and honest language of the content posts of @farida.d.author account, made a positive impact on respondent M and a partially positive impact on participant D, who also voiced some criticism on her behalf. The post of @farida.d.author are renowned for heavily utilizing condemnation techniques and directly opposing patriarchal structures of discrimination and oppression. Participant D expressed @farida.d.author content as powerful and able of generating and making arise inquiries from individuals while consuming her content, of issues that had not previously considered. Whereas participant M also praises the account by stating:

“I value the sincere and straightforward language that @farida.d.author uses in her content and the constant employment of callouts over the patriarchal system of oppression, and the encouragement for its dismantling and condemnation. Placing more focus on the patriarchy itself as the root problem of gender inequality, which is often not emphasised.”

From the other side participant D criticize @farida.d.author due to the post persistent negative focus on remarks and callouts, which have an overwhelming effect, and also for the monotonous consistent format style that the account employs throughout all the posts.

Participant O also pointed out @farida.d.author content for the possible divisive and alienate attitude that may arise from regularly consuming her content. Respondent O remarks:

“I think these accounts content such as @farida.d.author can be very divisive and alienate people by creating a ‘men versus women’ confrontation mentality, especially if followed on a daily basis.”

The account @girlsagainstoppression content, made a positive and favourable impact on respondent M and a partially beneficial effect on participant D, who also raised some complaints on the account content behalf. The @girlsagainstoppression page extensively utilize the approach of in-depth explanation of concepts and themes, avoiding the oversimplification of intricate topics. This is not by coincidence. Sexual harassment, assault and femicide are the most often addressed subjects in the @girlsagainstoppression content postings, in relation with the frequent daily news reports of these violent and horrific occurrences particularly from South Africa. Thus, the detailed comprehensive explanation strategy of complex topics is applied through the efficient and coherent format structure of the content post, known as carousel, and contains more than one image and/or video, up to a maximum of ten. Interviewees M and D asserts:

“@girlsagainstoppression page has an excellent post structure (mainly carousel format): first picture has a few key concepts, and in subsequent pictures there is explanation for those who want to go deeper.”

“Their format style is very coherent with the addressed topics in the content posts; extensive use of carousel, which is perfect for explaining complex concepts that need more space and length, avoiding so the oversimplification of notions and topics.”

Participant D on the other hand, highlights the potential adverse impact that the account may have in applying polemic communication strategy as well as the intimidating approach that can result in a potential distancing of those users who do not completely support and appreciate the accounts’ missions and struggle, explaining:

“The negative effect is that the page content has a polemical tone and sometimes risks sounding like an intimidating communication. It also risks not engaging those who do not 100% embrace the cause/battle of the page. On the contrary, such an approach may scare away those who are not convinced feminists.”

#### **5.4 The effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts**

Overall, the efficacy of feminist Instagram account in general as a successful mean to counter stereotypes, help women achieve empowerment, and encourage inclusion in their audience is believed by all the five participants V, K, O, M and D. Feminist Instagram accounts challenge rigid stereotypes by using the counter narrative approach, deconstructing, and

offering alternative strategies to the dominant and still powerful and influential patriarchal discourse, helping dismantle discriminatory and reshape strict social perceptions. These strategies are employed in accounts content posts by sharing inspirational individuals' experiences, providing positive role models, amplifying individuals experiences and voices, celebrating different forms of femininity, challenging taboo topics, criticising harmful and stereotyped media representation, and so on. Therefore, feminist Instagram accounts helps women achieve empowerment, providing them with a wealth of knowledge regarding feminist theories and their rights and with the potential widespread diverse kinds of discriminations and oppressions, but also by refuting self-imposed restrictions and internalized prejudice that may prevent individuals from reaching their full potential. It is also significant to emphasize the importance of feminist Instagram accounts as safe and supportive spaces that allow users to open up with their stories and experiences and get a sense of solidarity, belonging and empathy from the feminist online community. Moreover, feminist Instagram accounts encouraged inclusion by amplifying marginalised communities' voices and stories, and also by promoting their representation and visibility. The language employed in those accounts content is used with awareness and is of great relevance by acknowledging and respecting the diverse identities and experiences of individuals from all backgrounds, avoiding using terminology that could potentially exclude or erase particular communities. Therefore, respondents V, O and D argument deeper their thoughts on the effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts, as:

“I think feminist Instagram accounts are an effective means of counteracting stereotypes among its followers, as the pages are easily accessible to a wider, that kind of material interested audience, to whom they can teach different realities, highlight stereotypes and make it clear that they are wrong. It helps to achieve the emancipation of women, yes, because women are the directly affected and concerned, with messages of encouragement they can empower themselves, understand each other, and find their own space. As far as inclusion is concerned, in my opinion, all these types of feminist narratives, through the accounts content, contribute to reducing discrimination, exposing and embracing diversity and disability, thus fostering the values of inclusiveness.”

“In my opinion stereotypes are broken down by sharing images, inspirational and positive stories of women fighting for cultural and societal change. They help women in their empowerment by providing resources, information and support, creating spaces to share their stories, experiences and connect with each other creating strong communities. Inclusion is encouraged by promoting the idea that every individual, regardless of gender, should be treated equally and have the same opportunities.”

“I believe that they break down many prejudices, make things that are considered taboo (e.g. menstruation, sexuality) normal. There are many positive messages for women: the pages are an invitation to take charge of one's life, valuing one's femininity. The pages raise many questions. This is important: ask yourself the problem and then try to solve it, or at least try to cultivate solidarity and empathy if the problem is bigger than you.”

Moreover, participant M furthered her reasoning on the effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts, first and foremost by understanding and framing the beliefs of followers or potential users who engage with this type of accounts narratives. Users or followers that engage with feminist Instagram accounts already adhere to feminist ideology and thoughts or they believe in feminist values and ideas but struggle to put them into words. Thus, Instagram feminist accounts fundamentally aid and assist users approaching feminist thoughts or other individuals and accounts' followers helps to "remain" feminist. Participant M advice:

"@girlsagainstoppression and @farida.d.author can be useful for people who believe in these messages and values but don't know how to put them into words, as those accounts provide potential users the language and the correct terms explanation to effectively illustrate feminist theory. For example, some people say, 'oh I'm not a feminist', but I believe that people should be treated equally. Maybe following these accounts, they learn that actually that means being feminist."

Therefore, feminist Instagram accounts are an effective mean in counteracting stereotypes, helping achieve women's empowerment, and encouraging inclusion almost exclusively among individuals that already follow feminist Instagram accounts, as they are the only ones to have the opportunity to be exposed, updated, and educated on feminist thoughts on a daily basis, benefit from the content learning material and apply acquired knowledge in the daily life. Participant M also identifies the Instagram's algorithm as a result aspect of polarising thoughts and the creation of the divisive, so-called echo chambers, clarifies:

"Hardly people who are against the feminist movement will see this kind of feminist content or accounts, also because of Instagram's algorithm. So, it will result in the creation of these echo chambers, which will only reinforce ideas and beliefs that people already have, resulting in very polarising beliefs between them. Only people who show the slightest interest in these feminist topics might receive content from feminist accounts on their feed in the form of 'you might like it' personalized posts, even without previously following them."

Similarly, Participant V shows scepticism towards the community's acceptance ability of diverse individuals and/or groups, particularly the non-feminist community, but she also introduces the concept of chance of the community members' thoughts transformation, claiming:

"Most of the community that does not embrace these ideas and issues and therefore will not be interested in following feminist accounts and consequently will hardly change their thinking. Although it can always start with a small act, because people can also start to ask themselves some questions, perhaps by seeing a feminist content of these accounts by chance. Everything always possibly starts with a small action and then expands."

## **6 DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Within the present section, an overview of the summary of findings of the posts' themes of feminist Instagram accounts and the summary of outcomes from the opinion of feminist Instagram users are separately briefly displayed. Furthermore, the thesis's limitations and recommendations for future research are illustrated towards the conclusion of this chapter.

### **6.1 Summary of findings of accounts posts**

Throughout the fourth chapter the results of the empirical analysis of Instagram accounts post are presented with the aim of providing the answers to the second research question, which concerns the identification of the recurring elements of the contemporary (Forth Wave) feminist agenda that are detected in the content of feminist posts on Instagram. These recurring elements are analysed through the style of format adopted, the type of language employed, and the topics addressed by the four selected feminist accounts on Instagram. The outcomes are presented separately for each account. Therefore, in the present subchapter those results are summarized in a comprehensive manner altogether.

Each account is uniquely its own, in terms of the format utilized, the type of language employed, and the topics addressed, which are coherently distributed amongst themselves. However, certain similarities between the accounts content posts emerged. According to the format style adopted in the posts content, each account have a diverse layout; @unwomen mostly uses a combination of visual picture and text, @the\_female\_lead extensively utilizes the video format, @farida.d.author adopts text-only style layout and @girlsagainstoppression uses a mixture of visual picture and text as well as the text-only format in the content posts. Furthermore, in terms of the type of language the accounts employed throughout their postings, some similarities can be observed among the accounts; @unwomen and @the\_female\_lead have a really common language strategy, both accounts mostly utilize inspirational or empowering and inclusive or intersectional language. On the other side, accounts such as @farida.d.author and @girlsagainstoppression have quite similar language approach, as both of them employs the callouts or critical language. Finally, with regard to the topics addressed in the content posts of the accounts, both similarities and variations can be detected across the accounts; @unwomen most commonly utilized topics are pay equity or equal career opportunities, breaking gender stereotypes or norms, sexual harassment and assault or feminicide. @the\_female\_lead most frequently employed themes are body positivity or self-acceptance, women's representation or achievements, breaking gender stereotypes or norms. For @farida.d.author, the most used arguments are challenging patriarchy, sexual harassment and assault or feminicide, sexual or reproductive rights, breaking gender stereotypes or norms. And lastly for the @girlsagainstoppression account, the most adopted matters are sexual harassment and assault or feminicide, victim blaming, breaking gender stereotypes or norms. Overall, the most addressed topics throughout all the accounts' post content are, breaking gender stereotypes or norms, which is most adopted by



all the four feminist Instagram account and the topics, and sexual harassment and assault or femicide, most used by the three out of the four feminist accounts, that are, @unwomen, @farida.d.author and @girlsagainstoppression.

## **6.2 Summary of findings of users' opinion**

Within the fifth chapter, the outcomes of the empirical investigation of the opinion of Instagram users are presented with the purpose of providing answers to the last three research questions, which covers the identification of the drivers that lead users to engage with the feminist Instagram accounts, the analysis of the impacts of the accounts' content posts upon users and finally the assessments of the effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts. Thus, in the present subchapter those findings are briefly outlined.

The opinions of the interviewees regarding the content of the posts, but also in general concerning the accounts, both shared similarities and differences. Concerning the factors that determine followers' feminist account engagement, we observe five drivers of engagement among the respondents: reasons of loneliness, being part of the community, shared beliefs and values with the account, empowering and inspirational content features, and lastly, the need for education and raising awareness. Here we note that all female participant V, K and M similarly share the first three drivers, while participant K additionally expresses her reason of engagement also for the empowering and inspirational content features that the feminist Instagram account frequently utilize. On the other side, respondents O and D as a factor of engagements they voice the need for education and raising awareness on feminist issues. Moreover, in terms of the accounts' content posts impact over their online audience, we remark that overall, all the participants express an affirmative attitude about the positive impact that the content of the four feminist Instagram accounts chosen in our research case study have upon their respective followers. This is mainly due to the positive messages that the feminist account conveys throughout their content posts regarding the advocacy for gender equality as their primary goal. Some critics arise from the participants when reviewing the content of the posts of each individual feminist Instagram account included in the research, due to at times, intimidating and negative-focus communication strategy adoption. Lastly, we note that in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of feminist Instagram accounts, all the respondents believe in the feminist Instagram accounts as a successful mean of counteracting stereotypes, helping achieve women's empowerment and encouraging inclusion in their followers. This is due to a number of combined factors such as, for instance, the efficiency of delivering sincere and impactful personal stories and voices that evokes emotions, amplifying positive role models, celebrating differences and the refuting of harmful gender stereotypes, the creation of supportive, safe and healthy environments, the employment of empowering, empathetic and inclusive language that is respectful of the diverse identities and experiences of all individuals, including people from marginalised communities, which collectively, make the accounts' feminist narratives a powerful and successful strategic approach.

### **6.3 Limitations and future research**

Throughout the dissertation, the potentials and opportunities of the feminist Instagram accounts promoting gender awareness, were explored, and illustrated, however it is also significant to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in the present research study and subsequently offer some recommendations for further studies in this field.

The limitations identified concerns the bias of the sample of Instagram users, both in terms of sample size and demographic characteristics of the sample. A small respondent pool, as of five participants, can represent a challenge for the further generalization of the findings for a broader population. The outcomes can risk of representing only the sample group interviewed. Moreover, in terms of the sample demographics characteristics bias, the interviewees were all coming from the same country, that is, the Italian peninsula. Therefore, the other states are underrepresented in the current dissertation analysis, thus the outcomes of the research may differ from the present study findings if the sample will be more equally and fairly distributed. Further research should concentrate on including a wider and a more heterogeneous sample group of users, taking into account elements such as age, geographic area, gender and socio-economic backgrounds.

Little research has been conducted on the extent to which Instagram feminism functions as activism. Therefore, there are some relevant insights and recommendations to be highlighted for further deepening and supplementing the present novel research literature in this regard. The focus should be directed to the exploration of the possible negative attitudes towards feminism on Instagram, in order to gain a complete picture of the potential motives that restrain individuals, from engaging with feminist content material on Instagram; Individuals that use Instagram social network and are aware of the existence of feminist Instagram accounts but choose not to get involved, should be invited to participate in in-depth interviews. Moreover, to obtain reliable and comprehensive outcomes over users' engagement with feminist Instagram accounts, longitudinal studies should be conducted in order to capture long-term users' behaviours, attitudes and perceptions, towards these feminist accounts, which may change progressively over time and require more patience to be consolidated. Furthermore, with regard to the content analysis of feminist Instagram account, future studies could concentrate on examining and determining the most successful methods for advancing gender consciousness, by considering the kind of post material that has the highest users' engagements through evident instantaneous Instagram statistics such as the number of likes and comments below each post. Hence, further analysing the most popular posts, by identifying which are the most effective approaches used in those posts, to achieve a high number of users' interactions. Finally, another focus could be directed to a deeper examination of the intersectional characteristics of feminist Instagram accounts and their impact on diverse communities that could be discovered through the in-depth interviews with the latter communities. Recognizing the intricate nature of gender awareness and its relationship with other gender identities across feminist Instagram accounts, could be

potentially improved by examining these narratives related to race, class, sexuality, and disability.

## CONCLUSION

With the fast-changing online environment, the advancement of digital marketing technologies, and the meaningful popularization of social media, we are witnessing the shaped landscape of contemporary activism in the digital age. The dynamic nature of the present digital culture is highlighting the transformative power of social media platforms in advancing global social movements for gender equality and justice. We are currently living in the “Fourth Wave” of feminism, where more and more young feminists have access to the Internet and social media and have a deeper knowledge and awareness concerning their fundamental rights. Therefore, more women have the power to raise their voice and share their personal experiences, gaining more strength to stand up and fight for their rights, appealing to other people to do likewise. This is evident in the increasing women’s empowerment and the changing position of women within the society, a result of the influence of the new communication technologies that have opened up spaces for individual expression, education and activism online. Social media platforms appear to be favourable venues for enacting activism. Furthermore, the recurring elements of the fourth wave feminist agenda can be observed in the numerous feminist accounts on Instagram, which address themes such as sexual harassment, body positivity, self-acceptance, reproductive rights, gender pay gap, gender stereotypes, and so forth. Thus, the aim of the present dissertation was to investigate this novel form of feminist activism that emerges on the social networking site Instagram.

The thesis was successful in revealing the effective capacity of Instagram’s platform and their respective feminist accounts in promoting gender awareness among their users, through evocative storytelling, honest and empathetic content, visually appealing and user-friendly format, and inclusive language features. The outcomes of the present empirical research proved that feminist Instagram accounts are successful in adapting to the rapidly evolving digital environment and online discourse, applying innovative and suggestive communication techniques to appeal to a wider audience and draw them closer to feminist issues, besides enabling direct user engagement with global social movements. In analysing interviews with frequent users of feminist Instagram accounts, we observe a common perspective on issues related to gender inequality. Those individuals exposed to feminist material on a daily basis, have a more progressive vision, are more capable of challenging traditional gender stereotypes and norms, are more inclined to cultivate solidarity, empathy and advocacy, are able to embrace and value diversity and inclusion, and cultivate consciousness of injustice and oppression, which they may not face in the first instance, but which others do. Feminist Instagram accounts have an affirmative impact on their online audience due to their positive and impactful messages of equality and justice. The popularity of feminist Instagram accounts is apparent in the growing number of these accounts on the

Instagram platform and the increasing number of followers these accounts obtain as time progresses. This leads us to consider that feminist Instagram accounts are a valuable medium for catalysing social change and have an efficient implementation of the communication strategy that counteracts the predominant hegemonic narrative while at the same time inspiring people to engage with the gender-awareness topics addressed by such accounts.

In conclusion, we should all be aware that the path toward gender equality is still long way ahead us. And we, as a society, have the power to influence the length of this path. Working together, learning from each other, and creating a future of love and possibility. In order to live our lives free from discrimination and oppression, living the universal truth that we are all created equal. Feminist politics can help us take a step towards a gender equal world, but this will only depend on us, if we are brave enough to undertake and actively pursue that way. Bearing in mind, that what we all want is living a life of freedom, a life of justice, a life of love and a life of peace. All we want is to be accepted for who we really are. So, dear society, remember that, feminism is for everybody (hooks, 2000).

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## **APPENDIX**



## **Appendix: Summary in Slovenian**

Obsežna uporaba socialnih medijev v sodobnem aktivizmu predstavlja novo fazo v evoluciji alternativnih oblik komuniciranja (Poell in Van Dijck, 2015). Številne značilnosti družbenih medijev kot prostora sodobnega aktivizma izhajajo iz načina, kako se znebijo številnih fizičnih omejitev zunanjega okolja (Murthy, 2018). Med prednostmi aktivizma v socialnih medijih v primerjavi s tradicionalnim aktivizmom družbenih gibanj, ki poteka v fizičnem prostoru, je zmožnost hitrega in učinkovitega dostopa do bistveno večjega števila potencialnih podpornikov (Washington & Marcus, 2022). Poleg tega nove vrste vodenja, ki se pojavljajo na področju aktivizma v družbenih medijih, delujejo vzporedno z nenehnim relevantnim vodenjem uličnih lokalnih skupnosti (Gerbaudo, 2012). V tem kontekstu je treba spletni aktivizem obravnavati kot vplivno sredstvo, ki omogoča množično mobilizacijo družbenih gibanj (Yilmaz, 2017). Velika razširjenost socialnih medijskih platform, kot so tiste, ki prevladujejo v sodobnem spletnem komunikacijskem scenariju (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter), ima ključno vlogo pri oblikovanju programov aktivistov, saj jim omogoča krepitev ozaveščenosti, izmenjavo informacij in organizacijo peticij, protestov, kampanj zbiranja sredstev in drugih vrst zagovorništva, pa tudi v procesu oblikovanja kolektivne identitete družbenih gibanj (Gerbaudo in Treré, 2015). Zato lahko to prinese večjo izpostavljenost in podporo določenemu cilju ter večji pritisk na institucije, podjetja in druge organe, da ukrepajo (Washington & Marcus, 2022).

Vseprisotnost vizualne platforme socialnih medijev Instagram, ki leta 2023 šteje 2 milijardi aktivnih uporabnikov (Statista, 2023c), je omogočila razvoj nove vrste dejavnosti družbenih gibanj, in sicer spletnega aktivizma. Instagram je zato pomembna platforma za raziskovanje uporabe družbenih medijev v aktivizmu (Cornet, Hall, Cafaro in Brady, 2017). Po podatkih Salisa (2020) 93 odstotkov marketinških strokovnjakov po vsem svetu podpira učinkovitost interaktivnih in inovativnih vsebin Instagrama pri izobraževanju uporabnikov. Družbeno omrežje Instagram je lahko izjemno uspešno orodje za ozaveščanje in priložnost za spodbujanje zanimanja za zahtevnejše teme, in sicer zaradi neposrednosti ter "lahkotnosti" njegovih ustvarjalnih, evokativnih in sugestivnih vsebin ter Instagramovih vizualno privlačnih "carousel" formatov, zaradi katerih so tudi najbolj zapleteni argumenti dostopnejši in učinkovitejši (Restivo, 2020). V sodobni družbi aktivisti uporabljajo omrežja socialnih medijev, kot je Instagram, da bi pritegnili nove sledilce, se povezali s člani svoje skupnosti ter širili svoje kampanje, pobude in prepričanja (Zalm, 2021).

Odnos med feminizmom in marketingom je zapleten, vendar se neprestano odvija in razvija (Maclaran, 2012). Ena od glavnih razprav, ki potekajo, je o tem, ali marketinške dejavnosti izkoriščajo ženske ali jih krepijo. Feministične raziskovalke razpravljajo o tem razvijajočem se odnosu z zgodovinskega in sodobnega vidika, pri čemer se upošteva heterogenost, ki je značilna za feminizem. Feministični akademiki s področja trženja zagovarjajo osrednjo vlogo marketinške strukture pri uspehu feminističnega gibanja, kar ponazarjajo z dejstvom, da so številne sufražetke v obdobju prvega vala feminizma (1840-1920) z navdušenjem uporabljale marketinška orodja in tehnike za promocijo svoje kampanje "Glasovi za ženske"

in feminističnega gibanja na splošno. To stališče je v popolnem nasprotju s feministkami zgodovinskega drugega vala (1960-1988), ki so kritizirale tržnike in marketinške dejavnosti, ker so širili negativne oglaševalske predstavitve žensk ter njihovo omejeno reprezentacijo kot dekorativne predmete v gospodinjstvih prostorih (Craig, 1997). Za feminizem tretjega vala (1988-2010) je značilno manjše osredotočanje na manipulativno in zatiralsko moč marketinških in medijskih dejavnosti ter usklajevanje feminizma in potrošnje, ki emancipacijo povezuje s spolno izraznostjo in kupno močjo (Maclaran, 2012). Slednji val je obravnaval mikropolitiko spolnih identitet in uvedel novo načelo interseksionalnosti, ki priznava prepletanje različnih oblik zatiranja, povezanih z žensko izkušnjo, kot so rasa, spol, družbeni razred, spolnost, etničnost itd. in ki privede do diskriminacije ali marginalizacije (Maclaran in Stevens, 2019). Od vala kampanj s hashtagi na socialnih omrežjih in feminističnih študentskih društev do medijskih zvezd, ki so se javno opredelile proti mizoginiji in spodbujale ženske k medsebojni podpori, smo verjetno priča pojavu tako imenovanega četrtega vala feminizma (2010 - danes) (Cochrane 2013; Maclaran in Kravets, 2019). Te spletne platforme so gojile kulturo "klicanja" seksizma in mizoginije, hkrati pa so omogočile rast globalne feministične skupnosti, ki internet in socialne medije zaradi njihove lahke dostopnosti in učinkovitosti uporablja kot forum za razpravo in orodje za aktivizem (Munro, 2013). V zadnjem času se je pojavilo veliko relevantnih argumentov v zvezi z oživitvijo razprav o neenakosti spolov na delovnem mestu, na ulici in v množičnih medijih, pri čemer vse več slavnih osebnosti danes odkrito prevzema naziv "feministka" (Atkenhead, 2014; Maclaran in Kravets, 2019). Feministične znane osebnosti, kot so Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Lady Gaga in Viola Davis, svojo slavo in ugled v Hollywoodu in drugod izkoriščajo za ozaveščanje o potrebi po enakosti spolov in prispevajo k ponovni opredelitvi pomena biti feministka v sodobnem času (Team ELLE, 2023).

Družabna omrežja so lahko platforme, ki poskrbijo za opolnomočenje feminističnega aktivizma in okolje, ki lahko spodbudi transformativne spremembe v mišljenju in vzorcih vedenja (Washington & Marcus, 2022). Feministični potencial Instagrama, kot revolucionarnega mesta za feministični aktivizem, odpornost in prepoznavnost, se kaže v številu odkrito feminističnih uporabniških profilov. Ti uporabniški profili nekoliko izkoriščajo potencial gledalčeve perspektive, usmerjajo pozornost nase in izzivajo tradicionalne interpretacije spola in estetike, hkrati pa delujejo za publiko, ki ni domnevno telesno sposobna, bela, moška in heteroseksualna javnost. Dostopnost feminističnega razpravljanja in vsebin na platformah, kot je Instagram, skupaj z njihovo splošno dosegljivostjo zagotavlja vplivno območje sodelovanja s feminizmom (Mahoney, 2020). Tovrstni profili z velikim številom sledilcev imajo visoko stopnjo prepoznavnosti, kredibilnosti in vpliva na svoje uporabnike. Poleg tega imajo feministični računi na Instagramu ključno vlogo pri spodbujanju feminističnih identitet med mladimi ženskami, vzpostavljanju in krepitvi spletnih feminističnih skupnosti, izobraževanju in ozaveščanju svojega občinstva o feminističnih temah, spodbujanju feminističnih gibanj, pospeševanju delovanja v podporo feminističnim ciljem in napredku družbenih sprememb. Ti profili so sprejeli tudi navidezno feministične razprave, kar učinkovito vpliva na priljubljenost

feminizma četrtega vala (Zalm, 2021). Spletno okolje četrtega vala je sposobno združevati več glasov z različnimi cilji ter ima impresivno hiter in celovit način širjenja informacij, zaradi česar je feminizem privlačen za sodobne in mlajše generacije (Munro, 2013).

Glavni namen predloženega magistrskega dela je zapolniti pomanjkljivost v literaturi o uporabi družbenih medijev za spodbujanje ozaveščenosti o spolu s prispevkom k literaturi o feminizmu in marketingu. Trenutno je na voljo relativno malo ali nič strokovnih raziskav v zvezi z vprašanji o pozitivnih prispevkih in vplivih sporočil feminističnih profilov na Instagramu na pozitivne in koristne spremembe v stališčih, vedenju in dojemanju posameznikov v spletni skupnosti. Ker se strokovnjaki s področja marketinga večinoma ukvarjajo z raziskovanjem, kako lahko uporabniški računi na družbenih omrežjih vplivajo na stališča in vedenje potrošnikov, je zelo skromno raziskan potencialni vpliv feminističnih računov na Instagramu za razvoj zavesti, občutljivosti in izobraževanja uporabnikov o feminističnih temah, kot so neenakost spolov, pozitivna naravnost telesa, spolno nadlegovanje in nasilje, razlike v plačah med spoloma, krepitev vloge žensk, stereotipi o spolu in diskriminacija ter podobno. Zato je namen tega magistrskega dela poleg prispevka k teoretični razpravi tudi dodatno raziskati, v kolikšni meri feminizem na Instagramu deluje kot aktivizem, in prispevati k nadaljnjemu razumevanju, ali so feministični računi na Instagramu učinkovito sredstvo in/ali lahko vplivajo na posameznike, ki že sledijo feminističnim računom na Instagramu, saj se zoperstavljajo spolnim stereotipom in nasilju, spodbujajo večjo inkluzivnost in toleranco ter krepitev samostojnosti žensk.

Cilji magistrskega dela so naslednji: (1) preučiti odnos med marketinško disciplino in ideološkimi koncepti feminističnih gibanj v preteklih, sedanjih in prihodnjih časovnih okvirih; (2) pregledati vsebinske objave več Instagram računov, ki spodbujajo ozaveščanje o enakosti spolov, z določitvijo ponavljajočih se elementov sodobne (četrti val) feministične agende, ki jih zasledimo pri vsebini feminističnih Instagram objav, ter analizirati prevzeti oblikovni stil, vrsto uporabljenega jezika in obravnavane teme feminističnih Instagram računov za vzpostavljanje stikov s svojim spletnim občinstvom; (3) ugotoviti, kateri so tisti dejavniki, ki uporabnike družbenih medijev spodbujajo k vzpostavljanju stikov s feminističnimi Instagram računi v spletni skupnosti; (4) analizirati vpliv na spletno javnost, ki je posledica vsebinskih objav feminističnih Instagram računov, s preučevanjem pozitivnih in negativnih vidikov mnenj uporabnikov o interaktivnih vsebinskih objavah feminističnih Instagram računov; (5) oceniti, ali so feministični Instagram računi učinkovito sredstvo za preprečevanje stereotipov, podporo ženskam pri pridobivanju samostojnosti in/ali spodbujanje inkluzivnosti pri svoji publiki.

Struktura magistrske naloge se začne s predstavitvijo močnega in zapletenega odnosa med marketingom in feminizmom ter uvedbo različnih temeljnih konceptov, ki izhajajo iz te kombinacije. Drugo poglavje raziskuje popularnost digitalnega in socialnega medijskega marketinga v sodobnem času ter potencial za aktivizem na platformah družbenih medijev, predvsem na Instagramu. Prvi dve poglavji temeljita na pridobljenih akademskih sekundarnih virih podatkov in mednarodnih raziskovalnih člankih, ki prispevajo k

oblikovanju obsežne in holistične podlage za empirični del študije. Tretje poglavje sestavlja raziskovalni okvir in metodologija magistrskega dela, ki uporablja dva primarna vira podatkov: preučitev študij primerov štirih feminističnih Instagram računov in izvedbo poglobljenih intervjujev z uporabniki Instagrama. V četrtem in petem poglavju so prikazani analiza in rezultati za vsakega od primarnih virov podatkov. V šestem poglavju je prikazana razprava o ugotovitvah glede objav na Instagramovih računih in glede mnenj uporabnikov Instagrama ter ob koncu poglavja, je podan seznam omejitev in priporočil za nadaljnje raziskave.

Raziskovalna metodologija magistrskega dela vključuje tako primarne kot sekundarne vire podatkov. Teoretični okvir in opredelitve pojmov temeljijo na dostopnih znanstvenih sekundarnih virih podatkov in mednarodnih raziskovalnih prispevkih. Empirični del tega magistrskega dela temelji na dveh primarnih virih podatkov; na študiji primera preučevanja štirih feminističnih računov na Instagramu in izvajanju poglobljenih intervjujev z uporabniki Instagrama. Metodologija za analizo objav štirih feminističnih Instagram računov zajema izbor objav računov z namenskim vzorčenjem, in sicer vzorčenjem 100 skupnih objav, 25 z vsakega feminističnega Instagram računa. Nato se razvije tematska analiza, ki vključuje kode, in se uporabi za pregled izbranih objav z ugotavljanjem ponavljajočih se elementov sodobne feministične agende, ki jih je mogoče zaslediti v feminističnih vsebinah na Instagramu. Ustvarila sem kodni priročnik za opredelitev, opis in poročanje o temah, ki sem jih zasledila v vrsti uporabljenega jezika, obravnavanih temah in stilu oblikovanja, ki jih prevzemajo feministični računi na Instagramu, namenjeni spodbujanju ozaveščenosti o spolu, da bi vzpostavili stik s svojim občinstvom. Metodologija za analizo recepcije uporabnikov Instagrama vključuje sodelovanje petih posameznikov v poglobljenih intervjujih, izbranih s priročnim in namenskim vzorčenjem. Poglobljeni intervjuji so uporabljeni z namenom, da se pridobi kvalitativno razumevanje razlogov, mnenj, čustev in motivov za vključevanje feminističnih uporabnikov Instagrama v objave feminističnih vsebin na štirih izbranih Instagramovih računih.

Ugotovitve raziskave objav feminističnih računov na Instagramu kažejo na edinstvenost vsakega računa, čeprav so se med vsebinskimi objavami računov pojavile določene podobnosti. Glede na stil oblikovanja vsebinskih objav imajo vsi računi različno postavitev; @unwomen večinoma uporablja kombinacijo vizualne slike in besedila, @the\_female\_lead v veliki meri uporablja video format, @farida.d.author uporablja le tekstovni stil postavitve, @girlsagainstoppression pa uporablja kombinacijo vizualne slike in besedila ter samo tekstovni format vsebinskih objav. Kar zadeva vrsto jezika, ki so ga računi uporabljali v svojih objavah, lahko med njimi zasledimo nekaj podobnosti; @unwomen in @the\_female\_lead imata resnično skupno jezikovno strategijo, oba računa večinoma uporabljata navdihujoč ali opolnomočujoč in vključujoč ali intersekcionalen jezik. Po drugi strani imata računa, kot sta @farida.d.author in @girlsagainstoppression, precej podoben jezikovni pristop, saj oba uporabljata pozivni ali kritični jezik. Glede tem, ki jih obravnavajo vsebinske objave računov, je mogoče med računi zaznati tako podobnosti kot razlike;



@unwomen najpogosteje prikazuje teme, kot so enakost plač ali enakost poklicnih možnosti, rušenje spolnih stereotipov ali norm, spolno nadlegovanje in nasilje ali feminicid. @the\_female\_lead najpogosteje uporablja teme, kot so pozitivnost telesa ali samosprejemanje, zastopanost ali dosežki žensk, rušenje spolnih stereotipov ali norm. Pri @farida.d.author so najpogosteje uporabljeni argumenti izzivanje patriarhata, spolno nadlegovanje in nasilje ali feminicid, spolne ali reproduktivne pravice, rušenje spolnih stereotipov ali norm. In nazadnje pri računu @girlsagainstoppression so najbolj uporabljene teme, spolno nadlegovanje in nasilje ali feminicid, krivda žrtve, rušenje spolnih stereotipov ali norm. Na splošno so najbolj obravnavane teme pri vseh računih, rušenje spolnih stereotipov ali norm, ki so jih posvojili vsi štirje feministični računi na Instagramu, in teme, kot so spolno nadlegovanje in nasilje ali feminicid, ki so jih uporabili trije od štirih feminističnih računov: @unwomen, @farida.d.author in @girlsagainstoppression.

Rezultati empirične raziskave mnenja uporabnikov Instagrama kažejo tako na podobnosti kot razlike. Glede dejavnikov, ki določajo angažiranost sledilcev feminističnih računov, med anketiranci opazamo pet dejavnikov angažiranosti: razlogi za osamljenost, pripadnost skupnosti, deljenje skupnih prepričanj in vrednot, ki jih prikazuje račun, opolnomočenje in navdihujoče funkcije vsebine ter nazadnje potreba po izobraževanju in ozaveščanju. Poleg tega glede vpliva vsebinskih objav računov na njihovo spletno javnost opazamo, da na splošno vsi udeleženci izražajo afirmativno stališče glede pozitivnega vpliva, ki ga imajo vsebine štirih feminističnih Instagram računov, izbranih v naši raziskavi primera, na njihove sledilce. To je predvsem zasluga pozitivnih sporočil, ki jih feministični uporabniški računi posredujejo v svojih vsebinskih objavah in ki se nanašajo na zagovarjanje enakosti spolov kot njihovega glavnega cilja. Pri pregledu vsebin objav posameznih feminističnih Instagram računov, vključenih v raziskavo, se je s strani udeležencev pojavilo nekaj kritik zaradi včasih zastrašujoče in negativno usmerjene komunikacijske strategije. Nazadnje ugotavljamo, da glede ocenjevanja učinkovitosti feminističnih Instagram računov vsi udeleženci menijo, da so feministični Instagram računi uspešno sredstvo za preprečevanje stereotipov, prispevanje k doseganju emancipacije žensk in spodbujanje integracije pri njihovih sledilcih. To je posledica številnih skupnih dejstev, kot so, na primer, učinkovitost podajanja iskrenih in prepričljivih osebnih zgodb in glasov, ki vzbujajo čustva, krepitev pozitivnih vzornikov, obeleževanje razlik in zavračanje škodljivih spolnih stereotipov, ustvarjanje podpornega, varnega in zdravega okolja, uporaba krepitvenega, empatičnega in inkluzivnega jezika, ki spoštuje in upošteva različne identitete in izkušnje vseh posameznikov, tudi ljudi iz marginaliziranih skupnosti, kar vse skupaj omogoča, da so feministične naracije v računih močan in uspešen strateški pristop.