
From Hashtags to Health: Evolving Themes in Women's Digital Activism Across Global Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an overview of how the field of women's digital activism has been evolving, through a mixed-method approach combining a systematic literature review (SLR) and bibliometric analysis. While digital platforms have emerged as important venues for women to advocate for their particular concerns, engage in collective mobilization, and contest various social injustices, analyses on the governance response to these phenomena are scarce in the literature. Following the PRISMA guidelines, we have analysed 30 indexed articles in Scopus published from 2011 to 2025. The VOSviewer software was applied for mapping the publishing trend, institution, countries/regions, academic fields, and intellectual clusters in the body of literature. Our findings demonstrate a significant acceleration in publications between 2023 and 2024, representing an expanding and more diversified research landscape in such topics as health activism, feminist perspectives to gender-based violence, and transnational networks in the Middle East and North Africa region. Yet, we also find a concentration of the literature within Western academia and Social Sciences scholarship, with insufficient research on the governance of digital platforms, state regulation, and the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Keywords: digital activism; women; digital governance; gender equality (SDG 5); bibliometric analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Women's role in the new landscape of digital activism in the twenty-first century have received increasing attention, particularly as a tool for voice amplification, collective action and challenging oppressive regimes (Alam, 2024). In these new digital spaces, women can combat systematic inequality, formulate feminist ideals and cross national divides to unify and address common concerns (Mendes et al., 2019). This significance is further heightened in contexts where offline civic action is inhibited by patriarchal constraints, political suppression, or the risks associated with security (Mano, 2023).

Indeed, women's digital activism has resonated far beyond physical spaces as evidenced by trending global hashtags like #MeToo and #BringBackOurGirls, which can set international agendas and influence policies (Clark, 2016; Xiong et al., 2019).

This is a particularly important research topic as the global media scape becomes more saturated with digitally driven civic activism, resistance, and the repositioning of social power (Milan, 2015). A systematic review on women's digital activism, thus, appears warranted, if not critical, to provide a comprehensive overview of a field that is experiencing significant growth and maturity in terms of both its theoretical and empirical scope. Recent research on women's digital activism, for example, indicates a shift from general analyses of social media and feminism towards a greater focus on specific issues including health-based digital activism, the gender-based responses of online mothers in Iran, COVID-19 and gendered digital resistance in India, or cross-cultural feminist solidarity in the Middle East and North Africa regions (Pea-Fernndez et al., 2023; Zhao & Abidin, 2023). While a comprehensive literature review on women's digital activism is arguably long overdue, given its rising prominence, a significant lack of internationality characterizes the available scholarly works, with an overrepresentation from Anglophone countries, in particular, and the social sciences discipline (Milan, 2015).

Drawing on this knowledge gap, this study proposes to use an innovative hybrid methodological framework comprising a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and bibliometric analysis in an effort to map and analyse women's digital activism research in terms of their evolving nature, content, geography, and disciplinary breadth.

Beyond just a systematic mapping, this research seeks to address limitations in current scholarship on women's digital activism: a dearth of attention to the Global South countries that may generate women's activism within distinct socio-political context and a focus on a narrow scope of disciplines (mainly Social Sciences) to the neglect of others such as computer science (to identify algorithm bias), psychology (to investigate emotions and psychological processes in activism) and law (for the regulatory aspects). By doing so, this research aims to provide an encompassing multidimensional, and geolocally diverse understanding of women's digital activism.

METHOD

In this research, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines will be followed, which provide a clear, systematic, and replicable protocol for literature retrieval, screening, and syntheses. PRISMA is an evidence-based minimum set of items for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses, intended to promote transparency and ensure the quality of systematic reviews through clearly defined methodology, which is designed to improve the accuracy, trace ability and credibility of reviews (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). Inclusion criteria for studies: (1) All articles published before or on September 3, 2025; (2) All articles written in English language; (3) All articles focused on digital activism and women or female topic. This research uses the bibliometric method through VOSviewer to determine trends in research related to digital activism and women or female topics. Moreover, the research focuses on identifying research trends by determining which topics are most frequent or related. The initial step in this research was the identification of keywords, which was initiated through the use of the macro top-down top-down top-down top-down

macro top-down top-down approach whereby broadly stated searching trails are narrowing to more focused studies and topics.

Based on previous limitations, and due to the relative scarcity of articles about these subjects, this research used "digital activism" and "woman OR female" as keywords to retrieve the title, abstract, and keywords sections in the Scopus database. Scopus was chosen because it is one of the commonly utilized databases by researchers to perform literature reviews and identify subject matter experts in specific areas and monitor current research trends. Four research questions guiding this research were generated: (1) How have the trends in the academic literature concerning digital activism and women's participation evolved from 2011 to 2025, and what does the sharp increase in articles published during 2023-2024 suggest? (2) What are the academic affiliations of researchers producing literature on this subject, and what does the prominent presence of certain institutions suggest about the field? (3) In what academic disciplines is research on digital activism and women's participation primarily found, and what implications does the dominant presence of Social Sciences have for our understanding of the phenomenon? (4) Which countries lead in publications on this subject, and how does this geographic distribution align with the current dominant themes of the field?

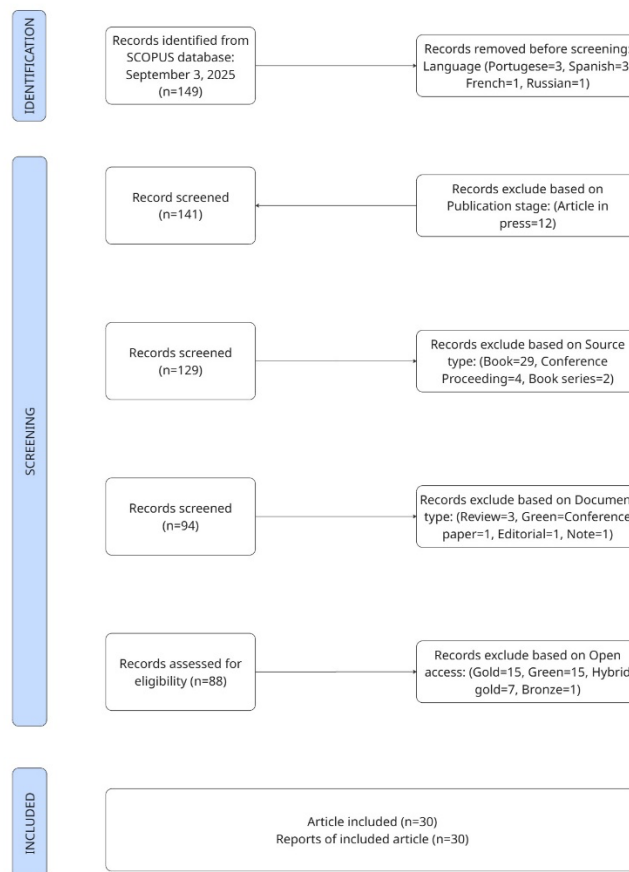


Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Process (PRISMA Method)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The study of publication data in Scopus on "digital activism" AND "woman OR female" in the period of 2011-2025 demonstrated that between 2011-2018, the number of articles in the research field was relatively low and inconsistent, averaging to less than one per year which characterized it as an early or niche field. A dramatic increase started from 2019 and consistently raised afterwards. In 2023, research in the field was intensified and publications peaked up to seven articles.

The main areas investigated are health activism (Turrini, 2023), activism for women with disabilities (Acevedo, 2023), the polarisation of Feminism and GenderIdentity on Social Media (Pea-Fernandez, M. D., et al., 2023), Women led transnationalism (Gajjala, R., et al., 2023), gestural activism on racism (Zhao & Abidin, 2023), women workers' anti discrimination struggle in China (Liu, H., 2023), subjectivity, power and political women's activists in Belarus (Sarakavik, 2023).

In 2024, eight articles have been published covering a broader scope, including Digital interventions to respond to the COVID-19 induced domestic violence in India, Feminist activists, hashtags and selfies in South Korea, mothers for justice in Iran, Feminist infrastructure and zines as organizing strategy, women leaders in digital movements in the Global South, Solidarity in and across borders in MENA, Feminist digital activism for gender and consent in Australia. In general, publications in 2024 reflected a tendency toward more complex discussion of gender based violence and solidarity compared to platform focused engagement.

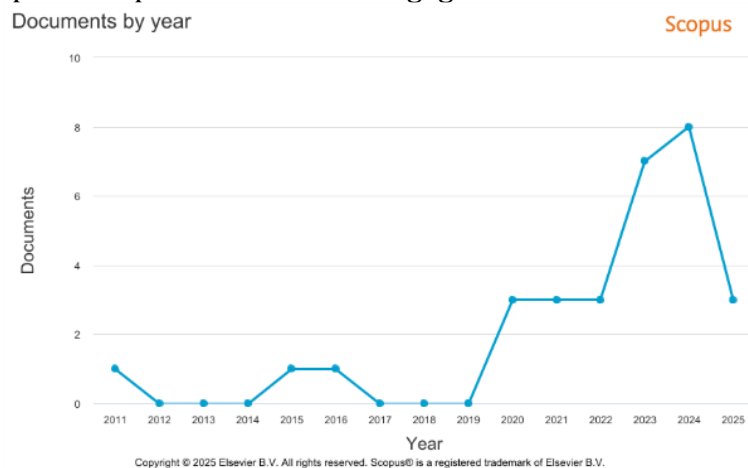


Figure 2. Document by Year

Looking at the affiliation data, most digital activism on women's issues is produced by a handful of institutions, with the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the forefront with three articles, followed by the University of Goteborg and the University of Warwick, both with two. These patterns also reveal concentration in dominant hubs of research in Europe, notably the United Kingdom and Sweden – probably as a result of existing specialisation in gender and technology, and the strong links that many researchers maintain among themselves in those institutions.

Yet this is not limited to these locations; affiliates of the West African Transitional Justice Centre and of the University of America in Spain and US-based institutions signal the international scope of this research area and promise of cross-border future research collaboration.

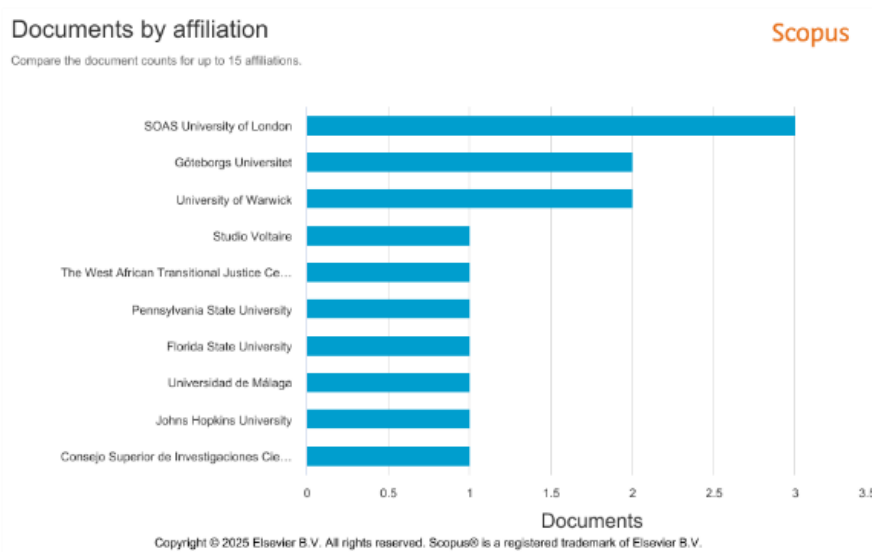


Figure 3. Document by Affiliation

Disciplinary Perspectives in Digital Activism Research

Based on the subject area breakdown, the Social Sciences have the largest stake in research about digital activism and women, accounting for 66.7 percent of publications, with 52% looking at the phenomenon through a sociological, communication, or political lens. Other disciplines are involved, though at much lower levels, confirming that the Social Sciences represent the predominant theoretical lens for thinking about women and the digital landscape.¹⁰⁵

While these numbers suggest the topic has been built on a Social Sciences foundation, they open a space to think about it more broadly – by bringing together psychological consequences of online engagement and sociological analyses, for example, or the economic mechanisms driving digital social movements.

The top producing country was the UK, followed by the United States and Spain (Figure 4), signaling that the most significant output on women and digital activism comes from a more Western orientation that possibly is due to increased research funding, academic interest, and a more extended research tradition in gender and media studies in these areas.

That countries like Nigeria, Australia and India are also producing output suggests the work on this area is global in scope, but the same Social Sciences pattern in Western countries seems to dominate much research in the West, indicating an opportunity to expand the range of theoretical approaches used.

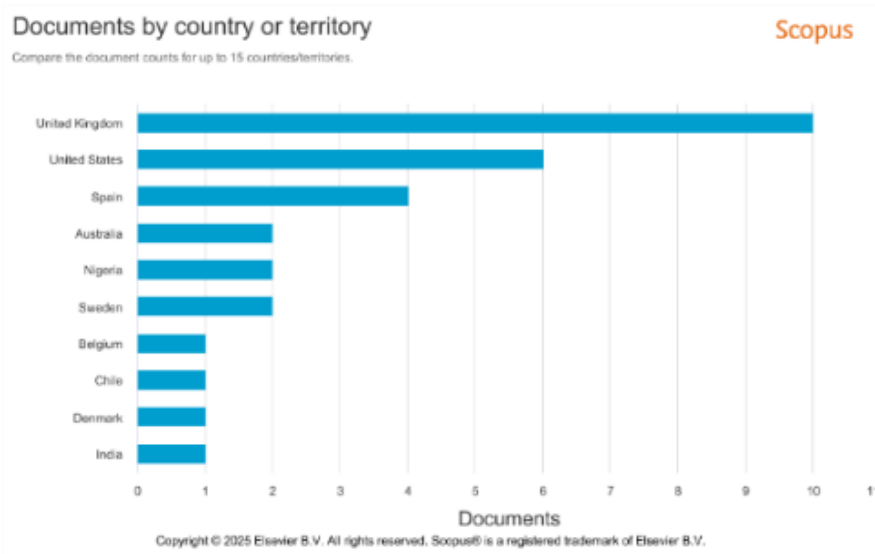


Figure 4. Document by Country or Territory

The VOSviewer network visualization provides an overview of the main thematic clusters and their interactions. The core cluster, centered on “digital activism,” shows significant linkages to other clusters. The red cluster—encompassing “social media,” “feminism,” and “fourth-wave feminism”—reflects a broad research focus on social media as a tool for feminist mobilization, while the purple cluster (“women’s status” and “Islamism”) reflects interest in more specific social and religious contexts, demonstrating that digital activism is studied across a variety of global settings rather than solely through a Western feminist lens.

Other clusters illustrate the field’s diversity: the green and blue clusters focus on “health education,” “digital center,” “COVID-19,” and “digital feminism,” while clusters such as “affective-mediated justice,” “algorithm bias,” and “femicides” suggest that research increasingly extends beyond acts of activism into questions of algorithmic bias, emotion, and gender-based violence.

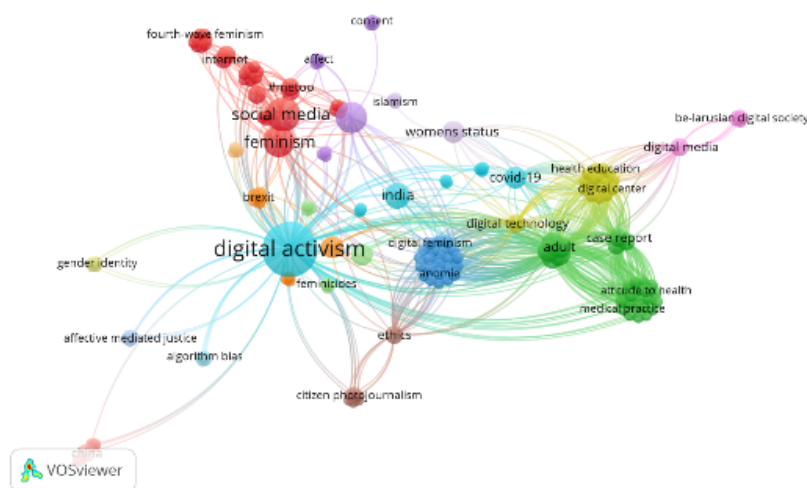


Figure 5. Network Visualization

The overlay visualization shows the chronological progression of research themes, from dark purple (2020) to bright yellow (2025). Older clusters such as “social media,” “internet,” and “feminism” served as the foundation for early

Discussion

The study findings shed light on the changing and expanding landscape of research on women's digital activism. Beyond the descriptive publication trends it captures, the systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis identify underlying structures of the field. The dramatic increase in the number of articles from 2023 to 2024, paralleled by growing public attention on issues of gender-based violence, feminist mobilization, and societal upheaval like COVID-19, mirrors the theoretically captured "fourth wave" of feminism that emphasizes the centrality of digital technologies for grassroots mobilization and global solidarity (Mendes et al., 2019).

Second, the concentration of publications in UK, US and Swedish institutions shows persistent structural biases in whose perspectives define this academic field. It is reflective of Western academia's role in shaping global discourse on feminist movements, prompting concerns about the Eurocentrism of research on women and digital activism (Milan, 2015). Although the inclusion of publications from Nigeria, India and Australia shows that the practice of women's digital activism is a truly global phenomenon, the scant representation of the Global South is demonstrative of the necessity for an inclusive and context-specific agenda that interrogates how socio-political limitations, autocratic governing systems, and cultural conventions shape diverse activism forms outside of Western settings.

Third, the overwhelming dominance of the Social Sciences (66.7%) underscores both the potential and limitations of the field's current disciplinary direction. While social and political science frameworks are particularly robust in helping us to understand identity formation and mobilization, they underplay key aspects. Computer scientists can address algorithmic bias and platform architecture; psychologist can shed light on emotional and cognitive aspects of online interaction; legal scholars can inform us on regulatory aspects and human-rights implications of women's digital actions. The study is therefore in alignment with discussions pointing to an interdisciplinary turn in digital activism studies (Clark, 2016).

Finally, network, overlay and density visualizations suggest a field moving from general concepts toward specific issues. From the network map illustrating thematic connections between feminism, social media and digital activism, the overlay analysis traces temporal shifts toward issues such as health activism and consent, while density analysis points to both intensively explored areas and budding themes, such as algorithmic justice and activism in non-Western settings. Overall, this points towards a movement from simply describing the field to exploring power relations, intersectionality and solidarity in cross-cultural contexts.

Such findings are, as I have hinted already, directly relevant to public administration and governance scholarship, which appears to be significantly underrepresented in the reviewed literature. Women's digital activism takes place within systems of governance – and is directly shaped by these systems – that include platform policies, state regulations and human rights frameworks. As Suzor et al. (2019) argues social media platforms have, as states, a duty to design rights-based governance schemes targeting online gender-based violence which is becoming even more important in areas that are fraught with risks such as anti domestic violence activities in India or justice-seeking activists in Iran. Interpreted from a governance perspective, the previously addressed disparities between

institutions/ countries are not only academic gaps but are also symptomatic of disparity in the state's institutional capacity – that is, the dominant producing states, the US, UK and Spain, have more sophisticated public and digital right's frameworks, whilst those countries where much activism happens - mainly in the Global South - have limited capacity to protect human rights in online spaces (UN Women, 2025).

The relevance of these findings for policy-makers is clearer when discussed in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. The activism of women online contributed to SDGs 5 and 16 as an extension of ways of ensuring freedom, voice, leadership and security from gender-based violence (SDG 5) as well as ensuring protection and justice-based governance frameworks, and democratic political space (SDG 16) (Esquivel and Sweetman, 2016). Yet the discussed imbalance between a largely western academic institutions and a limited analysis of non-western context, coupled with a discipline-focused-in-the-Social-Sciences methodology does not enable exploration of governance and public administration focused- questions related to policy making, enforcement and state responsibility and impact across varying political systems which can assist public officials, regulators, institutions and civil society organization working toward SDGs 5 and 16 to take action based on empirical findings regarding the landscape of women's digital activism.

CONCLUSION

This analysis reveals that research on women's digital activism has expanded and diversified significantly, particularly since the rise of publications in 2023–2024. The findings show a clear progression from early explorations of feminism and social media to more nuanced studies of health advocacy, gender-based violence, and international feminist solidarity. Bibliometric evidence indicates that, while the discipline is expanding thematically, it remains limited by institutional, disciplinary, and regional imbalances. Two gaps stand out: first, the dominance of Western institutions and perspectives underscores the need for greater geographic diversity, particularly through the amplification of Global South voices; second, the current emphasis on the Social Sciences calls for multidisciplinary collaboration with computer science, psychology, and law to address concerns such as algorithmic bias, emotional dynamics, and regulatory frameworks.

Beyond these disciplinary gaps, this study argues that women's digital activism should also be read as a governance issue. Future research agendas that more explicitly engage public administration, platform accountability, and the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDG 5 and SDG 16—would help move the field from descriptive mapping of trends toward actionable, policy-relevant knowledge that supports regulators and institutions in protecting gender-inclusive digital civic space.

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