

## The Fourth Wave of Feminism and the Lack of Social Realism in Cyberspace

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(Received 20 July 2019; accepted 23 July 2019)

### Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a surge in research on the impact of the cyberspace on social movements. The feminist movement has built a vocal platform online which attempts to underscore sexual violence against women. Scholars have begun to suspect that the internet has ushered in a new wave, the fourth wave of feminism. The fourth wave's main feature is its reliance on social media. The accessibility, reach of a widespread audience, low costs and user-friendly environment have encouraged women to use social media to speak out against various forms of sexual violence directed against women. It is also assumed that going forward; the movement will also tackle issues such as the gender pay gap, neoliberal policies, maternity leave, and cultural sexism. Moreover, the internet-based movement is striving to bring to the fore the topic of intersectionality, that is, the intersection of oppressive institutions, and the attempt to rectify the failings of past waves by representing those oppressed by multiple institutions such as sexism, classism, and racism. This commentary provides an overview of the emerging academic literature on the fourth wave of feminism and critically reflects the lack of social realism in its existing form of knowledge production.

**Keywords:** feminism, fourth wave of feminism, internet, social media, social movements, social realism.

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### **The fourth wave of feminism: an introduction**

The dynamics of social movements changed forever in the year 1991, when the World Wide Web became available to the public. One of the outcomes of the transformation of social movements by the internet was the revamp of the feminist movement which some argue has brought an end to the era dubbed as 'post-feminism'. While postfeminists rendered the feminist movement irrelevant due to the fulfillment of some of its objectives, the fourth wavers utilized the internet and social media platforms to draw attention to what they believe is rampant sexism still experienced by women from all walks of life.

The interconnectedness granted by the cyberspace helped women share their stories online, enabling them to be heard or read instantly by the online community, who immediately saw a pattern of sexual misconduct and violence all around the world, inflicting emotional and physical pain on both men and women. This realization led to the establishment of various online campaigns to raise awareness and collect money for causes related to the issue.

The arrival of the fourth wave was anticipated as early as 2003. E. Ann Kaplan (2003) points,

The fourth wave will be distinguished by bringing second and third wave feminists together to confront a new and devastating reality that involves us all, if not equally, then at least at once. This new reality ideally cuts across racial, ethnic and national divides (p. 55).

Activist and writer Jennifer Baumgardner (2011) traces the formation of the fourth wave back to approximately the year 2008. While some refuse to accept the existence of a fourth wave, others are trying to elaborate on its features.

Shelby Knox considers the online activism of the fourth wave as a distinguishing feature, saying "blogs are our consciousness-raising groups". According to Knox, the fourth wave has equalized feminism as the virtual world allows the majority to participate in the movement without having to pay for education on matters related to women (Baumgardner, 2011).

Most scholars who have written on the subject of fourth-wave feminism have refused to define it, waiting for the wave to form and conclude before ascribing labels. The term "first wave" was applied to suffragists decades later in the 60s and 70s when journalist Martha Lear was writing an article about the feminist movement of the time for The New York Times Sunday Magazine (Baumgardner, 2011).

Prudence Chamberlain (2017) also sees the recent developments in technology a key factor in catalyzing the fourth wave of feminism. She says the fact that the term fourth-wave feminism has not been defined by scholars, but is being used by journalists and activists speak to the movement's penetration of "multiple disciplinary manifestations of feminism" (p. 3).

British journalist Kira Cochrane wrote a book titled *Meet All the Rebel Women* in 2013 to outline the fourth wave of feminism and its manifestations in the UK. According to her, "Everywhere you looked in the summer of 2013, the fourth wave of feminism was rising in the UK, and women were opening their eyes to misogyny and sexism, and shouting back against it" (p. 7). Cochrane's book gives examples of how women were opening their eyes to misogyny and violence in several countries around the globe, including Ireland, the United States, Russia, Germany, Australia, Egypt, etc.

While Jonathan Dean and Kristin Aune (2015) say they cannot picture the movement until after the event, in her book *The Feminist fourth wave: Affective Temporality*, Chamberlain (2017) says the refusal of academics to define the fourth wave is due to their reluctance to "hinder any natural growth or development" (p. 5).

Those who believe the mere addition of the internet to the mix is not adequate to claim the formation of another wave of feminism have questioned the existence of the fourth wave of feminism (Munro, 2013).

Debbie Stoller, Bust co-founder and editor-in-chief, believes that for a wave to exist, they must espouse new ideas, and she does not see that in younger feminists, she therefore dismisses the arrival of the fourth wave, saying that the new generation is merely using new technologies to discuss old ideas (Baumgardner, 2011).

Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune (2010) acknowledge the resurgence in feminist activity, but continue to see the movement as part of the third wave.

Chamberlain's (2017) counterargument is that policies are formed as a result of continuity, and despite the various waves, feminism's central objective has always been the creation of a society where men and women are treated equally.

Chamberlain (2017), therefore, rejects Baumgardner's idea that the fourth wave simply exists because it wants to, and Stoller's denial of its existence due to its repetitive themes, but instead argues that the fourth wave of feminism is "the acknowledgment of an affectively intense period of feminist activism" (p. 12).

While Chamberlain does not define the movement, she looks at the internet as the wave's facilitator of communication to examine its impact on the formation of collective feelings.

Nicola Rivers (2017) marks a heightened interest in feminism manifested in public consciousness, popular culture, and newspaper columns.

According to Rivers (2017),

Much like the third wave before it, fourth-wave feminism is fractured and complex, frequently reinforcing the advancement of the individual and centering the seductive notions of 'choice,' 'empowerment,' and 'agency.' These ideals are present even in feminist activism that seemingly undermines or challenges the idea of women—or perhaps more accurately some women—as able to make their own choices outside the constraints of an overtly patriarchal society (p. 24).

To prove her point, Rivers drops the names Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, and Miley Cyrus, who have in recent years chosen to call themselves feminists, which promotes the achievements of successful women. However, the type of success advocated by the said celebrities is the one also promoted by capitalism, success in the music industry depending on women presenting a sexualized image of themselves to the public. Therefore, Rivers cautions those who want to announce that the fourth wave of feminism has arrived, or to announce the end of post-feminism, to consider all facts. She nevertheless affirms the arrival of the fourth wave, saying, "the voices arguing for an openly pro-feminist identity and a 'revival' of feminist politics have begun to be heard, culminating in a swell of activity that could be conceptualized as the arrival of the fourth wave" (p. 25).

Nickie Charles and Khursheed Wadia (2018) have marked a sharp resurgence in feminist activism in recent years in the UK. Although they categorize the movement as the third wave, they have found the internet a central part of the ongoing feminist movement.

Solange Simões and Marlise Matos (2008) believe the fourth-wave feminism in Brazil is in large part influenced by a broader global movement, which in the South American country has translated into work towards three distinctive agendas, the move to increase political representation, rights to abortion and mitigating the widespread violence against women.

According to Parry, Johnson and Wagler (2018), the use of technologies such as the social media has allowed individuals to share

their experiences within a global discourse and to a larger audience; as a result finding similarities that can initiate global movements.

Hence, in recent years, we have seen a rise in the number of collective movements based on social, economic, and political agendas (e.g., sexual violence, equal pay, and reproductive rights) – a distinctly second wave organizing tactic. The result, then, is a new wave that is ushering in innovative conversations and actions around feminism that are a worthy consideration for leisure scholars (Parry et al., 2018).

Harriet Kimble Wrye (2009) believes the fourth wave addresses questions asked before, but to a new extent; questions concerning the limits of materialism, a shift from “me” to “we” and all that is on the planet and on how feminism can be of service to ecology and the world.

Ruth Phillips and Vivienne Cree (2014) are passed the question of if there is a fourth-wave feminism, and have in their work explored the consequences of the resurgence of interest in feminism on teaching social work.

The internet-driven wave has drawn international attention to topics of intersectionality, and the normalization of sex by the media. Pauline Maclaran (2015) believes that market and consumer research can benefit from the application of fourth wave feminist perspective in order to solve the problem of women’s economic exclusion and mark the ways in which the fashion and music industries and overall the contemporary culture is portraying a distorted image of women.

Parry et al. (2018) identifies four major tenets for the emerging fourth wave of feminism, “(1) blurred boundaries across waves; (2) technological mobilization; (3) interconnectedness through globalization; and (4) a rapid, multivocal response to sexual violence.”

In general, there seems to be a consensus among those who have acknowledged the fourth wave, that the movement is online (Andersen, 2018; Parry et al., 2018; Roberts, 2014; Salime, 2014), with its primary goal being combating sexual violence (Andersen, 2018; Baer, 2016; Munro, 2013; Parry et al., 2018; Roberts, 2014). The movement also focuses on intersectionality as one of its main objectives (Andersen, 2018; Cochrane, 2013; Munro, 2013), attempts to call attention to pregnancy leave and the gender pay gap (Benn, 2013; Cochrane 2013), and neoliberal economic policies (Baer, 2016; Cochrane, 2013; Salime, 2014).



### **Internet and the fourth wave of feminism**

In an interview with American feminist writer and journalist Jessica Valenti, Deborah Solomon (2009) casually mentions to Valenti that maybe they are onto the fourth wave now, in return Valenti replies that maybe the fourth wave is online.

Social networking services, grassroots movements, and feminist discussions have marked a fourth wave of feminism, which has found meaning via digital spaces (Guillard, 2016). In her article, '*Feminism: A Fourth Wave?*' Ealasaid Munro's primary claim for the fourth wave is that it has been enabled by the internet, particularly social media, facilitating a call-out culture.

Women are using technology to empower themselves by establishing networks that can facilitate organization (Sutton & Pollock, 2000).

Based on the experience of Bates and her Everyday Sexism Project, Cochrane (2013) writes,

The immediacy of the internet lends itself to the sharing of everyday sexism, as Bates has found – the incidents women might otherwise of necessity brush off, but which form an essential part of a larger conversation when shared, the evidence that what we face isn't individual, but collective, that there are power structures in place which might be tackled politically (p. 37).

With the new generation enabled by the speed of communication in the social media, the majority of protests against the status quo have been online (Benn, 2013). The internet has fostered a 'call-out' culture that allows sexual predators to be 'called out' and exposed (Munro, 2013).

One of the manifestations of this surge in activism is witnessed in hashtag feminism. The concept has created a space for victims of inequality to gather and share their experiences (Dixon, 2014).

Kitsy Dixon (2014) in her article indicates, "It is without question that we are facing the new wave of feminism, via hash tagging" (p. 34).

Young women have chosen social media as a platform for feminist activism due to its low cost, easy use, flexibility, accessibility and its wider reach of the audience (Schuster, 2013).

In 2013, certain scholars were pondering the effectiveness of online tools (see: Cochrane, 2013; Munro, 2013). Julia Schuster (2013), while acknowledging the yawning generational gap between the older and younger feminists in New Zealand, was expecting an improvement in issues related to social media use by the younger feminists. She hopes

passage of time will gradually result in a rise in digital literacy and take care of the problems related to the use of social media.

Besides the solidarity that online hashtag movements such as #MeToo or #BeenRapedNeverReported have created, the ubiquity of sexual violence against women makes the public see the issue not as something personal, but rather as something structural (Mendes et al., 2018).

Liz Lane (2015) sees hashtags as a method for women to subvert patriarchal structures in a space where the body is not immediately seen and one's voice can be heard. Lane (2015) continues, "hashtags contribute to a larger ethos of the language at play, building new conversations around central rhetorical tactics with which users across the globe can identify" (p. 18).

Social media platforms such as Twitter remain a fundamental part of the fourth wave's distinct identity by enabling speedy commentary (Zimmerman, 2017).

Tegan Zimmerman (2017) also sees technology as the distinctive feature of fourth-wave feminism, and names social media platform Twitter as the enabler of the movement, especially its main objective, that is, intersectionality. Moreover, Zimmerman refuses to distinguish between online and offline activism and encourages scholars to defer from a binary approach when researching online and offline social protests.

She further elaborates,

Twitter is the most important platform for fourth wave feminist activism chiefly because of its deployment of intersectionality. Identifying privilege, difference, representation, and racism from an intersectional approach is a necessary prerequisite for fourth wavers, demonstrated time after time with hashtags like #solidarityisforwhitewomen, which resonated, angered, and divided many feminists (Zimmerman, 2017: 64).

Baer (2016) also sees Twitter as a vital part of feminist protests since it can collect the experiences of women from various localities, and reveal the pervasive structural inequalities faced by women especially when it comes to violence.

Twitter is not the only manifestation of digital activism. Keller (2012) studied girl bloggers to find out how girls are using blogging as a way to engage in public life despite being excluded from formal politics and citizenship rights, and challenges the mainstream assumption that girls are shallow customers of the internet.

Mendes et al. (2018) explored the emotional toll and the unpaid labor of online campaigns in their article on digital feminism, finding that 72% of their respondents have experienced trolling, online abuse or hostility after sharing their experiences online. The participants, however still viewed Twitter as a safer and easier space for engaging in feminist activities.

Henrike Knappe and Sabine Lang (2014) conducted a comparative study of women's movements networking in different organizations in the UK and Germany to highlight the transition of social movements from offline to online and distinguish its differences in feminist organizations in two European countries.

The fourth wave of feminism has triggered numerous online campaigns, as well as campaigns that have gone further from online and turned into marches in the offline world.

Feminist activists contend that campaigns such as the Everyday Sexism Project, No More Page 3 and the Daughters of Eve have set the fourth wave's path and have manifested the wave's objectives (Roberts, 2014).

The absolute agreement of scholars on the fact that the fourth wave of feminism is online, stems from the manifestations of this feature in multiple vocal and global campaigns. The following campaigns were either purely online or were organized online:

The International Slutwalk: In January 2011, a Canadian policeman speaking to students at York University on community safety tips said, "I've been told I'm not supposed to say this, however women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized" (Johnson, 2011).

The Toronto SlutWalk was organized in response to the police officer's comments to challenge rape culture and victim blaming. The protest in Canada triggered similar protests all around the world (Borah & Nandi, 2012).

Cofounded by Heather Jarvis and Sonya Barnett, the local movement drew the attention of news and social media and in the later months Slutwalk protests were held in more than 200 cities and 40 countries including Australia, Germany, Mexico, South Korea, Brazil, India, and the United States. The objective of the movement is to eradicate a culture that blames victims of sexual assault for what happens to them (Hill, 2016).

Many have criticized the movement. Those who are against SlutWalk believe such protests trivializes the issue of rape culture. Others however see the SlutWalk as a movement that "mobilizes against a specific instance of sexist oppression and its politicized use of clothes challenges the pervasive ideology of sexual violence" (Hill, 2016: 31).



The MeToo Movement: The hashtag #MeToo started trending on Twitter on October 24, 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano, inspired by actors Ashley Judd and Rose McGowan who had openly discussed their encounters with American film producer Harvey Weinstein, used it to encourage the public to disclose their experiences of sexual violence. Later, it was revealed that African American women's rights activist Tarana Burke had coined the hashtag in 2006. The hashtag was used 12 million times in the first 24 hours (Mendes et al., 2018).

As reported by Soucie, Parry, and Cousineau (2018), within four months after Milano used the hashtag, at least 100 men in positions of power in numerous industries were accused of sexual violence. Many were stripped of their positions.

Women's March: Following the inauguration ceremony of US President Donald Trump and on his first day in office, around one million protestors marched on Washington D.C. to advocate legislation regarding women's rights, immigration reform, abortion, environment, LGBTQ rights, racial equality, freedom of religion, healthcare and worker's rights (Women's March, 2017, Mission section).

The march was the largest one-day protest in the US history. Similar protests occurred in many cities across the United States and around the world in Sydney, Berlin, London, Paris, Nairobi and Cape Town to show solidarity (Smith-Park, 2017).

Project Unbreakable: After a friend told her she was sexually assaulted, New York photography student Grace Brown founded Project Unbreakable in 2011 to give voice to hundreds of rape victims who have shared their stories on the blog's Tumblr page. Survivors can hide their identity if they want, and they hold cards that are either a message of hope, or quote a sentence the attacker said to the victim during the assault (Meyjes, 2017).

Brown told the Guardian newspaper that the people who share their stories on posters are sometimes talking about the incident for the very first time, and talking about trauma can be a way of healing and letting go (Adewunmi, 2012).

Most of the posters are the words the attacker has said to the victim before, during or after the attack. Some examples are: "Just suck it up and get over it", "You're a guy, you can't say no to a girl like me", "Stop playing hard to get", "you're beautiful", "I love trans boys", "You must have really bad karma from a past life", "If you tell anyone you will be kicked out of the school", "I know you want it", "If you tell anyone you will be in just as much trouble as I am" (Patel, 2013).

The victims include both men and women from all ages and walks of life who have used Project Unbreakable to talk about their experiences sometimes for the first time.

**No More Page 3:** The tradition of printing topless women on page 3 in the UK-based Sun newspaper began in 1970 when Sun editor Larry Lamb published the photos of a topless German model at a time when the owner of the newspaper Rupert Murdoch was out of the country. 30 years later Lamb said he regretted the choice, but at the time, the move resulted in a 1.5 million to 2.1 million rise in circulation (Moyer, 2015).

The campaign No More Page 3 was organized to protest UK's prominent newspaper the Sun from printing pictures of topless models on its page 3. The campaign was founded in 2012 when Lucy-Anne Holmes wrote a letter to the then-editor of the Sun to reconsider his approach to page 3. When Holmes received no answer, she started a petition. Two years later in January 2015 and after the campaign had gathered 217,000 signatures from teachers to politicians and actors, the Sun withdrew its 44-year-old feature (Aston, 2015).

The campaign has inspired similar movements in other countries. In Germany, Sophia Becker and Kristina Lunz launched a campaign dubbed Stop Bild Sexism to challenge the daily paper Bild, which publishes sexualized images of women and asks readers to rate women based on their cleavages (Greenslade, 2015).

**The Facebook Rape Campaign:** In 2013, several feminist activists realized that Facebook has a number of groups online that are encouraging violence against women. The groups contained pages of battered women, but they were labeled humorous and according to Facebook, not considered hate speech. Activists Laura Bates, Soraya Chemaly and Jacklyn Friedman along with the organization Women, Action and Media (WAM), first started reporting the pages to Facebook only to find out the company does not see the pages constitute hate speech. The women started a Facebook Rape Campaign, which sent over 60,000 tweets and 5,000 emails within a week. Facebook felt threatened when brands started to withdraw their advertisements from the website. The pressure from brands which either withdrew completely or contacted Facebook to support the campaign resulted in the company removing some of the offending pages, as well as changing their standards policy and training employees who are in charge of checking reports to better evaluate what constitutes hate speech (Chamberlain, 2017).

**Everyday Sexism Project:** UK feminist Laura Bates developed the website Everyday Sexism Project in 2012 to draw the public's attention to sexist attitudes women and girls face every single day of their lives

(Phipps et al., 2018). The overwhelming number of similar stories shared by women from all around the world pointed to the pervasiveness of violence against women (Bowles Eagle, 2015).

Thousands of women have shared their stories in the website to challenge the normalization of sexism and verbal and physical abuse in streets, schools, universities, at the workplace and home.

All-Male Panels: Saara Särämä, a researcher in International Relations, who witnessed that a lot of the conferences and meetings that she attends have all male panels, created the Tumblr page All Male Panels (Locker, 2015).

According to a research conducted by event software company Bizzabo, out of the 60,000 speakers surveyed in mostly private sector events across 23 countries, 69% were male (Fadel, 2018).

On her Tumblr page, Särämä posts pictures of all-male panel event all around the globe, and attaches to them a photo of Knight Rider star David Hasselhoff giving thumbs up to the event organizer who managed to gather an all-male panel. To Särämä, Haselhoff embodies the concept of white masculinity and therefore she finds it funny that Haselhoff would congratulate the panel (Locker, 2015). Särämä has approached the subject with humor to underscore a lack of trust for female experts in various fields and promote equality.

Hollaback!: The Hollaback campaign was established in 2010. The website and its application “allows users from across the world to map their local experiences with street harassment on a global platform” (Parry et al., 2018: 8).

According to the campaign’s website, the objective of the campaign is to end harassment and introduce the locations of harassments to local authorities via Hollaback!’s publicly available map. They are currently active in 26 countries, 79 cities and operate in 14 languages.

Founder of the campaign Julie Lalonde says the majority of the street harassments they receive were related to public transportation. When she first approached OC Transpo (the urban transit service of Ottawa, Ontario located in Canada), they refused to work with her but after she encouraged the public to speak out about the instances of harassment that occur on the bus, the transit service has set up a mechanism for people to report such instances. Since the mechanism was established in 2013 until 2015, 800 incidents were reported to OC Transpo (McGenere, 2018).

Time’s Up: In the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the MeToo hashtag, Hollywood celebrities initiated the Time’s Up organization and raised more than \$22 million to fight discrimination. The money has

allowed the organization to establish a Time's Up Legal Fund for women who lack the resources to bring their cases of sexual harassment against employees to the court (Linderman, 2018).

Regarding the goals of Time's Up, the movement's president Lisa Borders says the objective is to alter how women are treated at workplaces, to making a systematic change to society and make workplaces a safer and more fair environment for women (Desta, 2018).

Moreover, Time's Up Entertainment, an affiliate of Time's Up, has recently established an initiative labeled 'Who's in the Room' which aims to diversify the producers and executives by giving people of color entry-level and assistant positions where they can be mentored by those more experienced in the business (Kilkenny, 2018).

One Billion Rising Campaign: Largely in response to former House Representative Todd Akin's use of the term 'legitimate rape', Eve Ensler founded the One Billion Rising global movement to end rape and sexual violence against women.

The name of the campaign, One Billion Rising, refers to a report published by the United Nations and the World Health Organization that says one in every three women will be sexually and/or physically assaulted at some time during their lives (Smith, 2015).

Since 1998, every year on February 14 rallies are held by the campaign to raise awareness about violence against women, which takes many forms such as rape, battery, female genital mutilation, incest, and human trafficking.

### **Social realism needed: Who constructs women's lives**

Feminists with the fourth wave orientation have been espousing their ideas in recent years via the internet and social media platforms. They are optimistically following to give voice to those who remained historically silenced on the bitter experiences of gender-based violence and discrimination. Online campaigns and blogging are the most fashionable tools that have made this speaking out possible. The fourth wave of feminism is still expected to expand its list of oppressions and disadvantages beyond sexual harassment, rape culture, and body shaming. The fourth wave's main claim is to give agency to victimized women and like its precedents, it stands on an empiricist constructivist point of view.

Today, there is no doubt that the introduction of harsher punishments for rapists and the perpetrators of any forms of violence, including the physical, psychological or sexual abuse is an essential requirement for the health of our social life. The movement's extremist approach to

suspects of sexual harassment, though, can effectively alienate many members of the public from the movement and reinforce the idea that emotions run wild in the feminist movement. One of the ways to avoid this consequence is to wait for a judge's ruling on rape cases before pressuring corporations to strip the accused of their positions of power. One could say that the current behavior of many associated with the fourth wave resembles an angry mob online, destroying anyone's reputation who is merely accused and not yet proven guilty.

The fourth wave of feminism in theory and practice stands on a significant moment. The fact is that no practical prescription, no calling for a deeper reflection on the concept of violence and mobilization to safeguard women's lives against various forms of violence has been put forward by the fourth wave. The records indicate the movement is much concentrated on accusations, defamation and at best, lawsuits against those whom they claim to deserve punishment. Fourth wave advocates have yet to base their approach on social realism, and the consequences of their strategies until now can be witnessed in the public backlash against feminism in recent years.

The fourth wave is yet to start a discourse on the extent of women's control on defining strategies and practical techniques for making their domestic and work environments safe, on what constitutes consent and what constitutes sexual misconduct (the case of stand-up comedian Aziz Ansari), on the controversial topic of participatory engagement in promiscuous behavior and finally joining professions with conventional focus on the body performance and the female beauty such as the porn industry, along with many other necessary practical provisions. It seems, similar to previous generations, the fourth-wave feminists are grappling with acknowledging the biological differences between men and women and the limitations that come with it. This denial has disarmed women for the past decades and has stopped them from creatively shaping their minds and social acts for a better future.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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