Feminism vs Pseudo-feminism: Analysing Women's Engagement with Pseudo-feminist Discourse on Social Media

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Abstract

The feminist ideology supports equality and advocates equal rights and opportunities for all genders. Contrary to feminist principles, social media platforms enable the creation and dissemination of pseudo-feminist content that exploits feminist ideals. The present study delves into examining the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourse on social media platforms and the role of social media in facilitating the spread of pseudo-feminist content. The major objectives of the study are to investigate how women engage with pseudo-feminist content on social media, to evaluate whether women are able to distinguish between genuine feminist discourse and pseudo-feminist content on social media, and to analyse whether pseudo-feminist contents dilute the core principles of genuine feminism. A qualitative study was conducted among ten women in the age group of 25 to 35 in the form of an in-depth interview. Purposive sampling was employed, and initial screening was done to include only women who use social media platforms in the study. The outcome of this study indicates that social media plays a crucial role in spreading pseudo-feminist notions. The study suggests that the rise of the pseudo-feminist movement on social media has made it difficult to distinguish between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism, and has also negatively impacted the core ideals and principles upon which the ideology of feminism has been built. The study indicates that the attitude of women towards pseudo-feminism is highly negative. The findings of this study are significant as they shed light on how the pseudo-feminist discourse on social media has affected actual feminist principles.

Keywords: *Feminism, Pseudo-feminism, Women, Social media*

Introduction

The growth of information and communication technology has made the internet and smartphones an indispensable part of our lives. Social media platforms on the internet, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, etc., have

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revolutionised the way we communicate and network, and have become an unavoidable aspect of our lives. Social media is defined as "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media enable people to showcase their identity, articulate their social networks, and create or maintain connections with others (Ellison, 2007). Social media often become venues for debates and discourses on various issues. The popularity of social media is used by people advocating for various causes to spread awareness and to create an impact. People advocating for 'feminism' also use social media for feminist activism.

The term "feminism" is commonly employed with vagueness, as its meaning and perception can vary depending on the context and situation in which it is used. For the purpose of this research, feminism is defined as an ideology that promotes equality and advocates equal rights and opportunities for all genders. Although feminism benefits both men and women, many people think of it as only about women, perhaps because of its name (Rudman et al., 2012). Along with the struggle of the feminist movement to address inequality and women's rights, the phenomenon of pseudo-feminism is gaining prominence. Pseudo-feminism, in the context of this study, is defined as a movement that exploits feminist principles by trying to project women as superior to men and giving women an upper hand.

The pseudo-feminist movement faces criticism as it goes against the idea of equality, and the rise of masculinity studies also came as a backlash to pseudo-feminism. Masculinity studies explore what it means to be a man in society, question stereotypes, and examine how gender roles affect men. As societal expectations for men are often more rigid, men may face greater consequences when deviating from traditional gender roles compared to women, even though both genders can experience challenges for not conforming to these norms (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

The present study is aimed at examining the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media and women's nature of engagement with them. The study also intends to examine whether women are able to distinguish between genuine feminist discourse and pseudo-feminist contents on social media and whether pseudo-feminist contents on social media dilute the core principles of genuine feminism.

Review of Literature

Majumadar et al. (2022) conducted a study in India that evaluated gender and identity performance on social media among young Indian users. By examining a compilation

of 442 comments from selected public Indian Facebook pages and doing a thematic discourse analysis, it revealed well known ((#mansplaining, pseudofeminism) and developing (choice feminism, MGTOW, #fuckboi etc.) discursive strategies within the main themes of feminism and antifeminism, men's rights, intersectional feminism, and sexual behaviour. The results of the study indicated that intergender communication on social media was reliant on conventional offline norms, yet it has the potential to create new discourses of gender by challenging those norms.

A study conducted in South Africa by Jagernath and Nupen (2022) that aimed to provide insights into the phenomenon of pseudo-feminism revealed that there is often a vagueness surrounding the purpose of the feminist movement. The study suggested that feminism may be perceived as a movement that has the intention to support the oppression of non-female genders, toppling decades of progress, if there is no clear distinction within society between feminism and pseudo-feminism. Another study was conducted to analyse the reflections of male-bashing in radical separatist feminist African literature (Acheampong, 2023). Using El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* as a primary text, the study disputes the reasoning behind male-bashing by bringing to the forefront several overlooked factors in this discussion. The factors include "faulty homogenization/essentialization of men and women and the constraints certain cultural expectations pose to men".

Wang and Chang (2023) conducted a study in China to understand why some women hate feminists and it examines social media and the structural limitations of Chinese digital feminism. The study discusses three themes of anti-feminist discourse held by respondents. The three themes are: "feminism as a concealed form of disciplinary normality for women; feminists as accountable for undermining women's solidarity; and digital feminism as merely a trendy business". The reasons for such misconceptions were identified as the technological affordance of Chinese social media platforms and a pro-fertility state discourse.

An Indonesian study conducted by Sokowati (2022) examined how women's issues and voices are represented by activism practices in social media and the problems in the movement. By observing the Instagram accounts of five feminist activists, the study found a representation problem when the activists published contents related to women's problems, as they only represented middle-class women's problems. The study also found an ethical problem owing to the activists' disregard for ethics when engaging in activism.

Objectives

- To examine the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media platforms and the role of social media in facilitating the spread of pseudo-feminist contents.
- To investigate how women engage with pseudo-feminist contents on social media and their attitude towards such contents
- To evaluate whether women are able to distinguish between genuine feminist discourse and pseudo-feminist contents on social media and to analyse whether pseudo-feminist contents on social media dilute the core principles of genuine feminism

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Data was collected using an in-depth interview conducted among ten women in the age group of 25 to 35. Purposive sampling was employed in the study. All the participants belonged to Kozhikode district in Kerala, but some are not presently living in Kozhikode as their job location is in other cities. Initial screening was done to include only women who use social media platforms, as the main intention of this study is to provide insights about the prevalence of pseudo-feminism on social media. The women were all educated, possessing a minimum educational qualification of graduation, and belonged to middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Of the ten women, eight were employed, and two were homemakers. Questions for the interview were designed in such a way as to explore in detail, women's nature of engagement with pseudo-feministic contents on social media platforms and their attitude towards it.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Demographic details of the participants

Sl. No	Name	Age	Educational Qualification
1	Ms. A. V	32	B.tech
2	Ms. N. S	32	M.tech
3	Ms. H. S	26	M.sc
4	Ms. K. P	33	MBA
5	Ms. S. J	30	MA

6	Ms. M. A	27	B.tech
7	Ms. N. A	28	MSW
8	Ms. A. A	27	B. arch
9	Ms. A. S	30	MBA
10	Ms. S. B	33	M.sc

Prevalence of pseudo-feminism on social media

If it wasn't for the proliferation of social media, I don't think fake feminism would have spread out the way it is now. There are a lot of influencers on Instagram and YouTube who spread toxic feminist content. They say things that are not related to feminism at all. Social media is actually giving these people an opportunity to spread the flawed notion that they have about feminism (Ms. A. A, 27 years).

I am a part of certain groups on WhatsApp where the members are only women. I see a lot of fake feminist content in it all the time. I believe the growth of social media platforms has facilitated the spread of pseudo-feminism to a large extent (Ms. K. P, 33 years).

I certainly believe that social media platforms contribute towards spreading fake feminist content. It is very difficult for people to stay away from social media, as it has become a part of everyone's lives. We are getting a lot of information from several sources whose authenticity and credibility are not known. So, as much as there is misinformation and lies spreading through social media in other areas, there is fake information being spread related to feminism as well. I have come across such contents many times (Ms N. A, 28 years).

All the participants agreed that they were exposed to pseudo-feminist content on social media platforms. All of them had the same opinion that social media platforms play a crucial role in spreading pseudo-feminist content.

Women's nature of engagement with pseudo-feminism on social media and their attitude towards it

The nature of engagement with pseudo-feminism on social media varied from woman to woman. The difference in their patterns of engagement with pseudo-feministic contents is mainly due to the difference in their attitudes, as some held the view that

not engaging with such contents was the best thing to do while others thought it was important to take a stand and express their opinion.

> *I choose to ignore contents related to fake feminism whenever I come across them. I don't post a comment to disagree and express my take on it. I feel it is better to ignore than engage with such contents (Ms. A. V, 32 years).*

> *Once I saw a video on Instagram that was supposed to be about women empowerment. But I felt that the video was extremely toxic. So, I expressed my disagreement with it. Then the comment section became a battleground, with a lot of people supporting me and many others opposing me. I don't mind getting involved in a healthy debate. But you know how social media comment sections are, right? Some people were humiliating me and using abusive words. I think that a lot of women are so carried away by fake feminism. Most of the hate replies that I got were from women. It is an irony that these self-proclaimed feminists, who are actually pseudo-feminists, do not hesitate to bring another woman down or abuse her on social media just because she expressed her opinion (Ms. A. S, 30 years).*

> *I used to share videos and other contents on social media, which I think are related to empowering women. But usually, a lot of content is related to fake feminism. So, I choose not to forward it or share it with anyone else. Most of the time, I don't express my opinion because I really don't want to get into any sort of verbal spat with others (Ms. N. S, 32 years).*

While some women thought it was necessary to fight pseudo-feminist contents, others felt that ignoring those contents was the best thing to do. The fear of facing cyberbullying from pseudo-feminists online also kept some of the women away from expressing their genuine opinions. All the women had the same opinion about facing cyberbullying when they expressed their disagreement with contents on social media that promote fake feminist ideologies.

> *Once I posted a comment on Facebook under a post that described gender roles and women empowerment. But more than empowering women or ensuring equal rights for both genders, I found the write-up extremely misleading by giving women an upper hand over men. My comment triggered a lot of women, and then they started accusing me of supporting patriarchy (Ms. M. A, 27 years).*

All the participants opined that rather than ensuring gender equality, certain so-called feminist influencers on social media platforms spread toxicity about gender roles and women empowerment.

> *I believe feminism is about giving equal rights to women, especially underprivileged women. But we often see privileged women using feminism as a tool to defend their highly flawed notion of feminism and to spread hatred against men. There was a video on Instagram that I happened to scroll down to, in which a woman was asked if she thinks that men are important. Her reply to that was, 'like for what'? and then she compared a man with a dessert. That video was given a king of swag appeal by the creators and edited in such a way as to promote women's views on men. I wondered how the video, in any way, was related to empowering women. If it were a man in her position making such a remark about women, then things wouldn't have been the same. So, such kinds of double standards undermine gender equality (Ms. S. B, 33 years).*

All the women expressed their growing concern over social media's role in creating a highly deceptive picture about gender equality. All the women have come across contents on social media platforms that misrepresent gender equality by giving more privilege to women. According to the women, such contents bring down the core ideologies and principles of feminism. They felt that making fun of men and disrespecting men were all promoted under the banner of 'women empowerment'. They all agreed that the repercussions of such videos are different for a man and a woman because if women are disrespected or made fun of in any videos, it will invite a lot of criticism contrary to the other way around. All the women had an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards the spread of pseudo-feminism using social media platforms.

> *Pseudo-feminism on social media platforms needs to be condemned. But everything has pros and cons, and so does social media. While there are a lot of pseudo-feminist influencers, there are a lot of other content creators that emphasise the ideal values of feminism and have played a crucial role in contributing towards the creation of women empowerment-oriented contents (Ms. H. S, 26 years).*

> *If we neglect the fake feminist ideologies being circulated through social media, social media has also facilitated the empowerment of women by giving women more exposure to real feminist contents and making them aware of their rights and the need to fight against society's unfair ways of treating women (Ms. S. J, 30 years).*

Even though the women find pseudo-feminist contents highly misleading, they all have the same opinion when it comes to social media's positive role in creating more awareness about women's rights and equality in society through genuine feminist discourses.

The impact of pseudo-feminism on genuine feminism

I think feminism has become more like a style statement for some women, which is especially used by urban privileged women. They use 'feminism' for their own advantage. All that they promote in the name of feminism actually doesn't have anything to do with the core ideology of feminism. Because of the way they have toppled the whole concept of 'feminism', it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between feminism and pseudo-feminism (Ms. M. A, 27 years).

I feel that it is important for people to understand what real feminism is about and not get caught in the deceptive portrayal of feminism by pseudo-feminists. Often, people are mistaking pseudo-feminism for real feminism (Ms. N. A, 28 years).

Some of the women felt that feminism was being used by privileged women for their own advantage, neglecting the foundation on which real feminism is built. All of them felt that it was important to make people understand what real feminism stands for and what it intends to achieve. According to the women, distinguishing between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism has become very hard because of the prevalence of fake feministic contents on the internet.

I am a feminist, and I think all the women are feminists, because none of them would like to consider themselves inferior to men. And if there are women who hold on to patriarchal values, then they need to be educated. I have come across a video on YouTube that is hosted by an ex-Malayalam actress. In the show, she invites celebrities to her show and serves them the dish that she made. I found her to be extremely supportive of patriarchy. She also blatantly made a comment in her show that "women are a bit inferior to men, and that is good for a healthy family". Even though all the comments were against her, I'm sure there are a lot of women out there who think exactly the way the host of the TV show did and they support her (Ms. A. S, 30 years).

I believe in equality, and I know that feminism is about equality. Still, I don't want to identify as a feminist because it has a negative connotation. I

> *suppose that could be due to the rise of pseudo-feminism. The term 'feminist' has now become polluted, and people relate it to 'men hating', 'victim card playing', etc. So, the word feminist carries a wrong perception in the minds of people (Ms. A. V, 32 years).*

All the women strongly believed in gender equality. Yet, not everyone wanted to identify themselves as feminists. While some women proudly identified themselves as feminists, others did not want to call themselves feminists because they felt feminism does not carry the positive reflection of equality with it anymore and has rather become a term associated with women who promote misandry and try to project women's interests above men's interests. Those who do not want to be identified as feminists cited pseudo-feminism as a reason because they felt that pseudo-feminism makes people skeptical of the genuine intentions of real feminism. Women expressed their concern over some women in society who support patriarchy and consider themselves inferior to men without realising the need for equality. All the women emphasised the importance of educating women who still cling to patriarchal values.

> *The root cause of the backlash against feminism these days is not solely due to pseudo-feminism. The concept of feminism as a whole doesn't go well within a society, as the majority of men consider them superior to women, and a lot of women also support the inherent patriarchy embedded within the society. I think, in the name of pseudo-feminism, some people are targeting feminism and trying to project feminists in a negative way (Ms. S. B, 33 years).*

> *There are a lot of trolls and memes about pseudo-feminists on social media. At times, I feel like attempts are made to degrade even genuine feminism in the name of pseudo-feminism, which is not the right thing to do. Unfortunately, pseudo-feminism is being used as a tool to bring down the values of real feminism (Ms. A. A, 27 years).*

> *While there is a prevalence of pseudo-feminism on social media, there are also attempts made to tarnish the values of genuine feminism in the name of pseudo-feminism. People who do not support gender equality try to project feminist values as fake and toxic (Ms. S. J, 30 years).*

Some women felt that pseudo-feminism was being used as a weapon by some people to undermine the work of real feminists. According to them, most of the men, and unfortunately some women in our society cannot support feminism, and they try to bring down the ideals of the feminist movement.

The spread of fake feminism through social media platforms has painted 'feminism' in a bad light. I can relate it to an incident that happened in my life. One day, me and my husband were having an argument over who would do the dishes. My 12-year-old son made a comment that "mom is a feminist", and he smiled. So, I asked him, what does being a feminist mean to him? His reply shocked me. He said feminists are women who do not listen to men and are always arrogant. I had to literally educate my son on what 'feminism' is about and teach him that men and women are equal and that their gender does not define their individuality. He watches YouTube videos and shorts most of the time. I am sure his source of such unchecked information about feminism must have been YouTube. I realised it is important to monitor what your children are consuming on social media and teach them from a very young age about gender equality (Ms. K. P, 33 years).

It is also important to note that what I believe to be feminism may be pseudo-feminism for someone else. The concept has become very subjective. Inherently, the ideology of feminism has its roots in gender equality. But people nowadays are having their own interpretations of what feminism is and what is not (Ms. N. S, 32 years).

All the women had the same opinion on the role of pseudo-feminist discourse on social media in negatively affecting the ideals of feminism. In their view, on top of making it really difficult to differentiate between genuine feminism and fake feminist propaganda, pseudo-feminism has greatly contributed to diluting the core values and principles upon which the movement of feminism has been built. All the women opined that pseudo-feminism has largely affected the way in which people perceive feminism. Also, subjective interpretations of what is feminism and what is pseudo-feminism are on the rise. In the opinion of women, the challenges created by pseudo-feminist discourses through social media platforms can only be countered by using social media more aggressively to spread genuine information related to feminism, which can educate as well as create awareness among people about the real intentions of the movement of feminism.

Discussion

The findings of the study shed light on women's engagement with pseudo-feministic contents on social media platforms and their attitude towards them. All the participants agreed that pseudo-feministic contents are prevalent on social media

platforms, and social media platforms play a significant role in spreading fake feminist discourses.

The nature of engagement with pseudo-feminist discourses on social media was not the same for every woman. Some women opined that it is better to ignore such contents. But others were of the opinion that it is important to take a stand and express their views, as it could help fight the misconception about feminism created by pseudo-feminism discourses through social media posts. The women also noted that facing cyberbullying for reacting against pseudo-feminism was a major issue that they had to deal with. All the women believed that social media was being used by certain influencers to create toxic content under the disguise of gender equality.

According to the participants, pseudo-feminism paints a highly deceptive picture of gender equality and sends out a misleading message about women empowerment and gender roles. The participants felt that under the tagline of feminism, women are given more privilege and an upper hand over men, and men are often mocked, disrespected, and made fun of. This, according to the women, goes against the founding principles of the feminist movement. The responses of the participants clearly indicated that they held a highly negative attitude towards the spread of pseudo-feminism using social media platforms.

As much as the participants expressed their growing concern over the spread of pseudo-feminism on social media and how it impacts the fundamental values of genuine feminism, they also opined that the positive role played by social media in creating awareness about women's rights and gender equality through real feminist discourses cannot be overlooked.

All the women agreed that distinguishing between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism on social media has become a strenuous task owing to the prevalence of pseudo-feminism. Hence, according to them, it is important to create awareness among people about what real feminism stands for, as in most of the cases, the ideology of feminism is being misused by some women for their own advantage.

Even though every woman endorsed the idea of gender equality, some hesitated to label themselves as feminists, while others clearly desired to be recognised as such. Similar to the findings of the present study, a study conducted by Aronson (2003) among young women to know their attitudes towards feminism and gender relations indicated that while some of the women fell within a spectrum of feminist identification, others were either undecided or struggled to express a clear position.

The women projected pseudo-feminism as the major reason for tarnishing the genuine intentions of feminism. The participants also highlighted the importance of educating those women in society who do not recognise the importance of gender equality and support patriarchy. Some of the participants also expressed their opinion that pseudo-feminism is being used as a weapon to undermine the core values of feminism by those people in our society who strongly disapprove of the idea of gender equality and consider women inferior to men.

In the opinion of the participants, pseudo-feminism has not only made it difficult to differentiate between genuine feminism and fake feminist propaganda but has also negatively affected the founding principles of the feminist movement. The women also opined that subjective interpretations of what is feminism and what is pseudo-feminism are on the rise. According to the participants, social media should be used more aggressively to counter the false narrative of pseudo-feminism, as it can help in alleviating to an extent the distorted picture of gender equality portrayed by pseudo-feminism and in retaining the inherent values and principles embedded in the very idea of feminism.

The findings of the study align with the standpoint theory, as the women's engagement with pseudo-feminism on social media and their take on feminism and pseudo-feminism diverge. Standpoint theory posits that an individual's perspectives are shaped by their personal experiences, forming a unique point of view through which they interpret the world.

Conclusion

This study was intended to examine the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media platforms and how women engage with them. The findings of the study clearly indicate that social media platforms enable the widespread circulation of pseudo-feminist content. The outcome of the study suggests that the rise of the pseudo-feminist movement on social media has made it difficult to distinguish between genuine feminism and pseudo-feminism and has also negatively impacted the core ideals and principles upon which the ideology of feminism has been built. The study also highlights the negative attitude held by women against those who spread pseudo-feminist discourses in the name of gender equality. The findings of this study are significant as they shed light on the prevalence of pseudo-feminist discourses on social media, how women engage with them, and how they affect the foundation of genuine feminism. The major limitations of the study are the sample size and the demographic characteristics of the participants. A large sample size with

participants belonging to all different socioeconomic statuses is required to provide a rich, contextualised understanding.

Feminism is at the centre stage in society today, as women empowerment is certainly a need of the hour. Social media is a powerful tool in this endeavour. Yet some tendencies prevalent seem to put feminism on the back foot. Such as pseudo feminism, a harsh reality in the digital world, although the term itself defies a clear cut definition. This perhaps could be considered a limitation of the study. The standpoint theory would help to substantiate why often there is a lack of agreement and difference of opinion about what constitutes feminism and pseudo feminism.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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