

Social Media and the Awakening of Women's Self-Awareness: A Four-Dimensional Analytical Framework

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Abstract

This paper explores the highly progressive awakening of self-awareness among contemporary women under the influence of social media and other digital developments. This includes recognizing their position within gender inequality, enhancing awareness of and elevating women's agency, the ability to defend women's rights and positions in contemporary society while recognizing that further advancement requires collective female agency, and the capacity to identify threatening behaviors like the male gaze that perpetuate female vulnerability. It also encompasses self-redemption in the face of online harassment, cyberbullying, and other misogynistic phenomena that endanger women's physical and mental well-being. Based on a systematic review of existing literature and theoretical analysis, this study examines how digital media environments shape the process of women's consciousness awakening. It proposes a four-dimensional analytical framework consisting of cognitive awakening, subjective awakening, collective awakening, and defensive awakening. The findings highlight the dual role of social media as both a catalyst for empowerment and a space where gender inequality and online misogyny may persist.

Keywords

social media, women's self-awareness, sexual objectification, gender inequality, online misogyny

1. Introduction

The deep development of digital technology and the spread of social media have reshaped contemporary women's areas of existence and discursive spaces. On one hand, as a new communication medium, social media provides women with vast opportunities to voice their perspectives in the public arena, consolidate collective strength, and further advance gender equality (Calogero et al., 2014). On the other hand, the widespread proliferation of sexual objectification by digital media is still keeping women in structural inequality. This correlation of chance and challenge has further triggered the consciousness of women to perpetuate and develop the spirit of "girls helping girls". According to social psychological objectification theory, a culturally objectifying setting leads women to acquire self-objectifying cognition, which causes adverse psychological outcomes such as body shame and appearance anxiety. This may even create passive social adaptation. Nonetheless, even though social media copies the gender disparities in the real world, it also presents women with a new level of empowerment. This two-sidedness of harm and empowerment co-existing is what makes the issue of how social media affects the consciousness-raising of women a

fundamental concern in the explanation of the modern change in gender relationships. It helps women to be self-aware and fight against online misogyny.

2. Literature Review

2.1 International Research Landscape

The research on social media and gender issues at the international level started rather early and included issues such as objectifying communication and gender discrimination. The literature on the objectification theory shows that experiences of sexual objectification cause self-objectification in women, which is reinforced by visuals on social media, and body shame and the urge to undergo cosmetic surgeries are the core consequences of objectification (Comunello et al., 2021). In the age of the Internet and digital media, researchers have also found that the perception of objectification among women is reinforced by visuals on social media, whereas the promotion of gender stereotypes is encouraged by the algorithmic recommendations. At the same time, online sexual harassment and misogynistic discourse are considered the digital manifestation of offline gender-based violence. Their secrecy and viral spread cause greater long-lasting damage to the physical and mental well-being of women. Other researchers pay attention to the so-called empowerment effect of social media that, to a certain degree, gives women a platform for discourse empowerment. To demonstrate this, the globalization of the #MeToo movement through social media has contributed to making sexual harassment and institutional change a mass concern, and thus, making women self-expressive in the cyber-world can lead to the re-formation of self-identity, as opposed to being the object of gaze. This massive identity reconstruction is considered a major marker of self-awareness awakening, which also reflects some level of ideological change and development among women.

2.2 Current State of Domestic Research

2.2.1 Research on the Dual Impact of Social Media on Women

The most common type of domestic research focuses on the double effects of social media on women. On the one hand, the culture of male gaze, the fear of body image, and cyberbullying on social media are observed to worsen self-objectification in women and gender inequality by scholars in the majority of studies. On the other hand, researchers note that social media has become a significant platform through which consciousness awakening in women can take place. Some female artists can resist their rights by discussing topics, advocating in the name of the public welfare, and taking collective actions. As an example, some female designers resist the traditional gender stereotypes. At the same time, the sexualization of labels such as baby food, which was originally aimed at mass female viewers with the help of big data advertising, demonstrates that even in cyberspace, women are still in danger of objectification.

2.2.2 Research Dimensions of Women's Self-Awareness Awakening

The current studies on the awakening of self-awareness by women are based mainly on macro-level constructs such as subject consciousness and equality consciousness. However, disaggregated into particular dimensions, the awakening of women's consciousness includes the capacity to perceive gender bias, to affirm one's subject position, to comprehend collective power, and to respond to gender-related violence. Nevertheless, no analytical framework has been developed systematically, and the paths to self-redemption have not been thoroughly examined.

2.3 Research Review

Together, both domestic and international studies have partially revealed the effects of social media on modern women, but three gaps remain: First, the perspectives of research are characterized by a bias towards a dichotomous approach, and cannot see the issue in the duality of issues, where women are at the same time harmed and empowered by social media space; Second, research studies do not thoroughly break down the dimensions into specific areas within the modern context, in particular, failing to explore the core aspects of the issue, such as male gaze, online misogyny, and the process of overcoming the gender norms. In addition, the systematic and logical distillation of the current practices of women is lacking.

3. Discussion

This study, based on the literature analysis and case induction, determines the key dimensions of modern women's self-awareness awakening in the social media environment.

3.1 Key Dimensions of Women's Self-Awareness Awakening

Awareness awakening of contemporary women profiling in the social media context can be characterized on four levels, namely cognitive, subjective awakening, collective, and defensive awakening. The level identified encompasses self-awareness and activism as leading to the broad awareness network (Ma et al., 2022; Zhao, 2023). Awakening to gender equality (cognitive awakening): At this point, females tend to speak out more regarding gender discrimination and inequality, which can be found both inside the workplace and within family institutions (Johnson, 2005). There are many issues raised, like the gender pay gap or how women are treated in their workplaces. Such cognitive recognition is the starting point for women raising their consciousness. Awakening to Subjecthood (Subjective Awakening): Women are defying the objectifying gaze of the "male gaze" and creating their own forms of subjectivity (Calogero et al., 2014). They shun more traditional measures of subjectivity such as their age, money and marital status as measures of who they really are. Instead, they showcase themselves on social media as everything from a successful professional to an advocate for women against marriage, showing that they will not be morally coerced and that they do not need men to make them valuable (Comunello et al., 2021). Awakening to collective power (Collective Awakening): Women know the importance of collective power to achieve sustainable gender equality. The example of actor Tang Wei is a case in point. In 2008, after her performance in *Lust, Caution*, she was criticized while her male co-star was praised, a reaction that, due to a lack of online platforms, did not mobilize collective action at that time. Then, in 2021, with the emergence of new forms of social media Tang's winning awards prompted women on the internet to collectively repost the earlier treatment (Kaufman et al., 2021). This sparked a collective backlash against how female embodiments are critiqued while similar performances in male actors are tolerated. This example corresponds to our argument of how social media empowered women to recognize their experience of injustice: to come together from disparate locations and classes online about this shared injustice, and then speak with one voice (Ma et al., 2022). Realizing the Danger (Defensive Awakening): Since the Sanzari et al.'s (2023) and Calogero et al.'s (2014) studies, women are now more alert to recognize and respond to online-type sexism, including sexual objectification, sexual harassment, misogynistic cyberstalking, and commodifying marketing. While facing criticism regarding their appearance and behavior, from which they are not protected, women are able to discern educational assessment as compared to malicious disciplining. This defensive awakening enables women to actively respond to and fight against online sexism, rather than passively accepting it.

3.2 The Two-Sided Nature of the Mechanism of Social Media

Social media has a two-sided influence on the development of women's consciousness, functioning simultaneously as a catalyst for empowerment and a source of potential obstacles but on one side, social media can be an empowering tool for women in so many ways. First, in terms of discourse empowerment, it breaks down the boundaries that limit women from accessing theories of gender equity and the sharing of their lived experiences, both of which are crucial for their knowledge acquisition. Female creators can rely on short videos to not only undermine gender stereotypes but also introduce wider views on this topic to virtually all women. Talking about joint empowerment, the social media creation of distinct common links, along with the interactive and viral nature of social media, transforms individual cognitive awakening into a collective action and a spirit of girls helping girls. Regarding cultural empowerment, the advertisement of body positivity and various portrayals of gender undermine conventional standards of beauty and gender stereotypes, and thus contribute to the development of a cultural environment that augments women's self-awareness. At the same time, social media is disturbed by harmful elements, and these factors do not allow women to be conscious.

Due to the algorithmic matching which happens to be based on specific interests and preferences, and the mainstream gendered discourses which are more or less dominated by popular opinions, social media platforms are prone to stereotyping women into certain roles. It either strengthens or hinders gender equality. For example, a major reason for language model bias in the domain of machine learning is the way these models tend to associate women predominately in domestic settings, furthering their propensity to stereotype women in these roles. On the one hand, social media glorifies thin

and flawless appearance ideals, which girls who are not that thin and have imperfections mostly feel as lacking, causing body shame and appearance anxiety that interfere with women's self-discovery. Alongside that, gender-based violence in online spaces including sexual harassment, doxxing, and misogynistic discourse, creates a hostile environment that keeps women from joining group actions and acquiring group consciousness. Along with these platform-level risks, there exist more extensive environmental factors that prevent the awakening of women. Being shaken off by the culture of patriarchy, traditional mindsets, weak regulation of social media platforms, and flaws in legal systems, the awakening is still not very advanced.

3.3 The Dialectical Logic of Awakening and Its Theoretical Extension

The four-dimensional awakening structure (cognitive, subjective, collective, and defensive) proposed in this study indicates that contemporary women's consciousness-raising is a dialectical developmental process shaped by the interplay of social media's dual attributes. The use of social media is paradoxical: the same social media feature can be both empowering and oppressive. For example, visuality can capture body diversity (cultural empowerment) and can further the scope of the norm of 'ideal beauty' to exert increased bodily discipline (body anxiety) (Sanzari et al., 2023). Algorithmic recommendations can unclutter (discursive empowerment) and further perpetuate gender stereotypes (cognitive impasses) (Kaufman et al., 2024). This "unity of opposites" constitutes the dialectical starting point of women's awakening and harm and empowerment transform into one another. When women begin to recognize the harm of objectifying gazes on social media, this awareness itself triggers consciousness-raising and collective actions taken after awakening (such as publicly condemning gender-based violence) subsequently pressure platforms to adjust their content ecology, thereby reshaping the gendered discourse space of social media (Kaufman et al., 2021). Theoretically, this implies an extension of the traditional objectification theory into the new application field. In traditional objectification theory, the focus is on how the sociocultural environment makes women self-objectify (e.g., body shame, appearance anxiety), and the theory is usually described as a vicious circle of "gaze, internalization, passive acceptance" (Calogero et al., 2014). However, the current research indicates that the four-dimensional awakening structure intervenes and disrupts the vicious cycle. Cognitive awakening identifies the mechanism, subjective awakening regains self-worth, collective awakening unites counteracting force, and defensive awakening guards against digital sexual violence. Women are active subjects who turn "being stared at" into "staring back" through consciousness-raising. What we should add about this awakening process is that it is not the simple and easy to observe story of the process going smoothly, but, definitely, very significantly interspersed with conflicts and solution spirals. Each conflict in the strategy to get rid of gender disparity may encounter even harsher opposition and each solidarity campaign on the web may endanger the very real peril of cyberbullying. It shows that the dialectic of these two notions in terms of intersectionality, logically, and necessarily implies that the emancipation of consciousness of women is a fluid infinity of the process that should constantly be refreshed and rekindled with experience.

3.4 Practical Value and Real-World Limitations

The modern consciousness of women is a significant individual and social value. On a personal level, it assists women in overcoming gender stereotypes and attaining various manifestations of self-esteem. To society, it promotes gender equality in cyberspace, enhances the collective power of women, and produces a social agreement on gender equality. That is, female awakening and activities over the internet are transforming the future of gender relations. Although this has been a great improvement, there are various limitations to the consciousness-raising of women. Its uneven distribution: the awareness is more widespread among younger, better-educated urban women, more exposed to gender equality ideas, whereas middle-aged/older, less-educated rural women are in a state of cognitive disadvantage.

4. Conclusion

This article builds a four-dimensional (cognitive, subjective, collective, defensive) framework in order to understand the awakening of women's consciousness in social media. It is argued that social media provides a two-way influence to awakening, i.e., it is both a propeller and a possible hindrance for women concerned. Cognitive awakening as a phenomenon is important for individuals, families, the community, as well as the

wider society, although its development is hampered by structural, as well as other limiting factors. Their efforts, both on and off the social media platform, will be crucial for achieving further awakening.

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Conflicts of Interest

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