Digital Feminism in the Social Media Platform Economy: TIKTOK's Transnational Practice, Discourse Strategy and Algorithmic Dilemma

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Abstract: This article takes the theories of platform capitalism and digital feminism as a framework to analyze the cross-border practices, discourse strategies, and algorithmic predicaments of feminist expression on TikTok, a global short-video platform. The research indicates that feminism on TikTok presents a mixed form of "emotionalization" and "visualization". The creator has effectively achieved cross-cultural mobilization and issue dissemination by employing strategies such as irony, memes, body performances, and micro-narratives. However, under the logic of the platform economy, this expression also faces structural compression: The gender bias contained in the algorithmic recommendation mechanism often limits the visibility of serious issues. The review of "content security" shows different political controls in different regions, while the preference for entertainment and commercialization of traffic prompts feminist content to continuously adjust itself and undergo lightweight packaging. This article relies on the analysis of user interaction data and typical cases It reveals the contradictory state of digital feminism on TikTok, which is full of empowerment potential but deeply trapped in the dual predicament of platform governance and commercial incorporation, providing a critical perspective for understanding gender political practices in the era of social media.

1 Introduction

In the context of platform capitalism and the algorithm-dominated social media era, the practice of digital feminism has presented a complex situation and contradictory characteristics that have never been seen before. This article takes the global short-video platform TikTok as the research object to analyze the dynamic game situation between feminist discourse and technical architecture, economic models, and transnational cultural contexts. TikTok, relying on its powerful algorithmic recommendations and visual narrative logic, on the one hand provides a brand-new field for emotional mobilization and cross-border connection for feminism, while on the other hand, it has plunged it into a dual predicament of visibility politics and commercial incorporation. The pursuit of attention and data by the platform economy continuously reshapes the strategies and forms of feminist expression, leading to a difficult trade-off between empowering narratives and entertaining performances, critical issues and algorithmic compliance. This study integrates digital feminist theory, platform political economy, and a cross-national comparative perspective. An in-depth analysis of the diverse discourse strategies, user interaction patterns, and systematic algorithmic suppression faced by feminist practices on TikTok reveals the new operational mechanisms and internal tensions of gender politics mediated by technology.

2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Digital Feminism Theory

Digital feminism is feminist actions, collective identity construction and new mobilization models carried out in cyberspace. Scholars like Banet-Weiser have proposed "popular feminism", elaborating on how feminist discourse is collected by platforms and transformed into marketable content that can be disseminated. Gill's post-feminist theory criticizes the dissolution of structural criticism by individualization and consumerism under the guise of "empowerment", and McRobbie points out how gender equality discourse actually reaches a new compromise with patriarchy (Ratilainen et al., 2025). On short-video platforms like TikTok, feminist practices are mostly presented in a highly emotional and personal narrative form, forming "digital emotional politics", and emotional resonance has become a key mechanism for mobilization and connection.

2.2 Platform Capitalism and Algorithmic Governance

Platform capitalism relies on data accumulation, advertising drive and the attention economy to achieve its profit goals. In this model, algorithms, as a power mechanism, have a profound shaping effect on public discourse through visibility distribution and content recommendation logic. For female creators, The "creator economy" mostly requires them to engage in continuous emotional labor and perform with high physical visibility, transforming their personal experiences and bodies into data-driven and commercialized resources (Large & Mulvihill, 2025). Algorithms usually tend to promote content that aligns with mainstream expectations or is likely to trigger interaction. This situation may amplify certain feminist expressions while simultaneously suppressing marginal issues, causing female creators to fall into a predicament of self-censorship and performance.

2.3 Discourse Strategies on Social Media

Most of the feminist expressions on the TikTok platform often integrate visual and entertaining discourse strategies, such as dance,

beauty, and daily life displays. These visual discourses are combined with gender issues, forming an easy-to-spread hybrid form. Irony and memetic strategies are widely used, deconstructing gender biases through humor and parody (Lünenborg & Backes, 2025). In this way, critical expression is achieved. However, the platform also has a strong counter-discourse. Anti-feminist and misogynistic content often uses algorithmic recommendations to disrupt and counter feminist discourse, which makes the discourse field filled with competition and uncertainty.

2.4 Transnational Research Perspective

The perspective of transnational feminism highlights the local characteristics and cross-cultural differences of feminist practices. As a global platform, TikTok's female-related content shows significant variations in different countries and cultures: In the Western context, the focus is mostly on identity politics and individual empowerment ("The making of China's first skiing princess," 2025). In non-Western regions, it may be more closely related to local social issues and cultural traditions. The varying political sensitivities and censorship systems in different regions have defined the boundaries of discourse. Platform algorithms will also adjust the logic of content distribution according to the situation, resulting in the same action pattern potentially leading to completely different communication effects and political implications.

3 Cross-border Practices of Digital Feminism on TikTok

3.1 Main Types of Transnational Feminist Issues

The feminist issues on the platform mainly revolve around several core areas. The body autonomy and body positivity movement directly confronts a single aesthetic standard by showcasing various body types, posing challenges without makeup, or discussing menstrual health. Videos of the "Daily Life" category present gender inequality in daily life from a micro perspective. Situations such as unbalanced division of household chores or micro-discrimination encountered on the street (Biana, 2025). Gender issues in the workplace are mostly explored through forms such as data visualization, situational short plays, or personal experience sharing, to address problems like salary gaps, promotion obstacles, and workplace harassment. Global anti-domestic violence and anti-harassment movements such as #MeToo on TikTok have transformed into concrete narrative sharing, supportive gesture challenges, and popular science warning messages, forming an emotional resonance network. In addition, gender education content produced by creators from the Netherlands, the United States and other places systematically explains gender theories, the concept of consent or LGBTQ+ knowledge, and conducts public enlightenment in the form of "knowledge for all".

3.2 The Combination of TikTok's Visual Templates and feminist Communication

All the unique features of the platform have become catalysts for the cross-border connection of feminism. Among them, the "Stitch" and "Duet" functions allow users to directly participate, refute or supplement others' videos, creating cross-language dialogues and relays. This enables a criticism initiated in one region to trigger global multilingual responses and re-creations. The choice of popular music plays a crucial role in setting the emotional tone. Specific melodies or lyrics fragments have become universal symbols for expressing anger, unity or joy. Dance and performance videos are often endowed with metaphorical meanings, such as symbolizing women's liberation through movements of breaking free from constraints, or presenting the power of unity through collective synchronized dances, encoding political information into entertainment forms to achieve efficient dissemination.

3.3 Differences among different Countries/cultural Circles

The practice of feminism has shown a localization strategy in the process of cross-border flow. The content of users in Europe and America is often more direct, focusing on the sharing of personal experiences and the criticism of institutional issues. Physical political issues are public and intense. Chinese users have adopted different strategies on Douyin and TikTok: The domestic version of the content tends to be more life-like narratives and metaphorical expressions to avoid censorship, while on the international version of TikTok, some creators may adopt more straightforward expressions. Most female creators in the Middle East focus on educational rights, artistic expression or family narratives, striving for discourse space in a relatively "gentle" and culturally context-appropriate way. Southeast Asian creators are adept at ingeniously integrating feminist messages into entertainment short plays, beauty tutorials or comedy performances, forming an "educational entertainment" style and lowering the threshold for acceptance.

3.4 User Interaction and Cross-border Communication Paths

During TikTok's cross-border dissemination, user interaction has become a key mechanism for the spread of digital feminist content. The comment sections often feature cross-language interweaving, such as English, Spanish, and Arabic, demonstrating the immediate participation of global users. This multilingual dialogue has promoted cultural exchange. It also helps women's rights issues overcome language barriers by means of translation tools and users' voluntary explanations. Forming cross-border unity, for instance, a video centered on bodily autonomy might trigger resonant comments from users in different regions, jointly creating a cross-cultural critical space. Feminist content effectively reduces cultural barriers through the "memetic" strategy. Memes are characterized by humor, conciseness, and high adaptability, capable of transforming complex ideas into easily communicable visual symbols. On TikTok. Feminist memes are often combined with dance, tag challenges or ironic audio, and re-created with localized elements such as clothing, dialects or popular music to adapt to different cultural contexts. For example, the "#WomenSupportingWomen" challenge has given rise to multiple versions worldwide, conveying a message of unity in a relaxed way. It has accelerated the speed of cross-border diffusion. Data indicators, such as views, likes, and shares, show differences across different cultural circles, reflecting the regional characteristics of content reception. The following Table 1 presents the
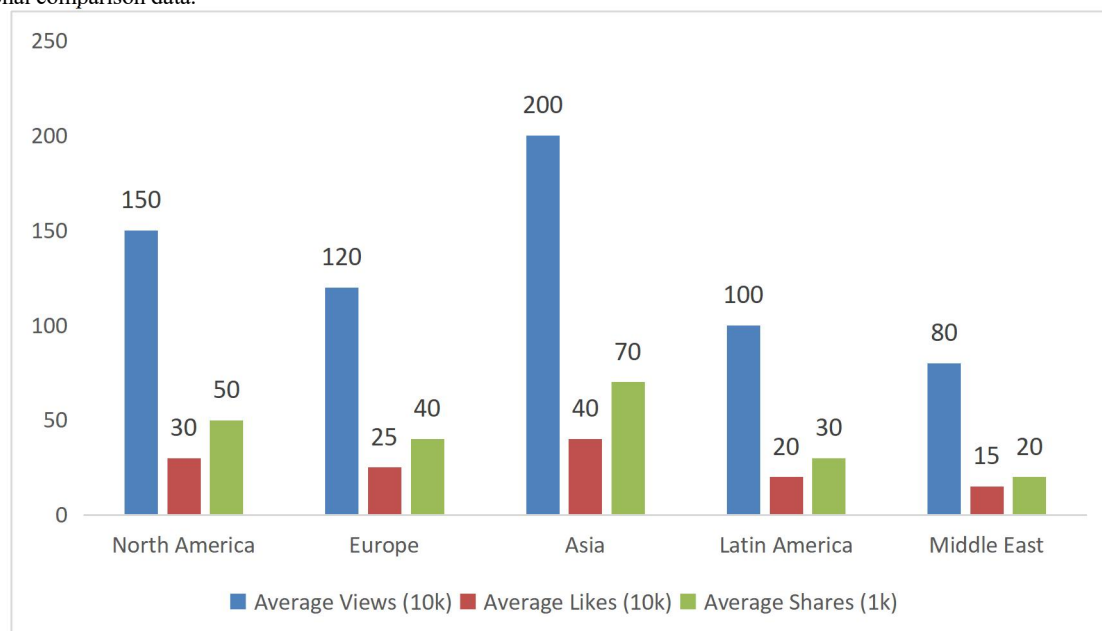
cross-national comparison data.

Table 1. presents cross-national comparison data

By observing the data, it can be found that the interaction indicators in the Asian region show a relatively high level. This might be due to the large population base in this region, the high popularity of platforms, and the close integration of feminist content with local social movements. In contrast, the interaction indicators in the Middle East are relatively low. Perhaps it is influenced by factors such as cultural sensitivity and differences in platform regulation. These differences clearly present the unbalanced distribution of algorithms in cross-border communication. The platform needs to combine localization strategies to optimize visibility, thereby enhancing the influence of feminist discourse on a global scale.

4 Strategies and Expression Methods of Feminist Discourse on TikTok

4.1 Irony and Meme Strategies

On the TikTok platform, satire and memes are key rhetorical strategies of digital feminism. Users ingeniously deconstruct the deeply rooted misogyistic structure through humor and parody. Just like videos like "Male Gaze Reversal", they visually present the inequality in gender power relations by allowing male characters to experience the materialized perspective. This strategy integrates critical thinking into entertainment forms, reducing the difficulty of dissemination and enhancing persuasiveness. "Memetic feminism" has emerged. It refers to the rapid cross-context circulation of feminist ideas through highly templated and replicable audio-visual symbols such as specific audio, gestures or labels (Athira & Jiang, 2024). A successful meme, such as the "#ManExplaining" challenge, can overcome language barriers in a short time and trigger global users to create and interpret it again. This viral spread pattern demonstrates the participatory nature of online culture and also reflects the risk that when feminist discourse ADAPTS to the logic of platforms, its sharp political connotations may be simplified into a symbol of popular culture.

4.2 Visualizing Body Politics

TikTok's visual centrism has turned the body into a key arena for feminist expression and competition. Female creators use physical performances such as dance, fitness, and makeup shows to declare their autonomy, break the sense of body shame, and achieve a kind of "visible empowerment". However, in the context of platform capitalism and algorithmic governance, This high level of physical visibility also faces the dual challenge of being commercialized. Algorithms often tend to recommend body content that aligns with mainstream aesthetics and can attract the greatest attention, thereby reinforcing specific beauty standards in an intangible way. Even seemingly neutral "makeup tutorials" may contain implicit feminist expressions, such as deconstructing the myth of "perfect women" by showcasing imperfect skin or challenging traditional aesthetics However, this process is also quite complex: when these rebellious performances gain traffic, they are extremely easy to be absorbed by the platform's attention economy and transformed into consumable "rebellious wonders", causing creators to be trapped in the contradiction between self-materialization and empowerment claims.

4.3 Narratives & Micro-storytelling

Micro-narratives and first-person self-narratives form the foundation for TikTok's feminist content to evoke widespread emotional resonance. The platform's short, flat and fast format has given rise to a "fragmented epic" narrative style, where creators use 15 to 60-second fragments of daily life. Such as gender discrimination encountered in the workplace, unequal division of labor within families, and insecurity existing in public Spaces, to reveal macro structural inequality. This "seeing the big picture through the small details" strategy transforms abstract social theories into perceptible personal experiences, significantly enhancing the appeal and credibility of the content (Cui, 2022). The first-person perspective creates a direct sense of dialogue and intimacy, making it easier for the audience to empathize and identify with

their identities, and turning personal troubles into public issues The power of this kind of emotional politics lies in its ability to quickly assemble scattered individual experiences, forming collective cognition and voices. However, it may also weaken the systematic criticism of the broader political and economic structure due to its excessive reliance on personal stories.

4.4 Discourse Conflict: The Double Attack of anti-feminist and gender-opposing content

The feminist discourse space on TikTok is not a place for reaching consensus but is filled with intense confrontations. In recent years, anti-feminist content on the platform, such as the "male rights" circle and the "red pill" philosophy, has seen a significant increase. They have gained visibility similar to that of feminist content through algorithmic recommendations, creating a phenomenon of "confrontational onlookers". Most of the time, these contents strategically use popular hashtags such as #Feminism to attract traffic and disrupt the discourse, making the interactive environment under these hashtags more complicated. Female creators have encountered frequent malicious comments, reports and cyber violence. To deal with this situation of being attacked from both sides, many creators have developed flexible verbal counterattack strategies: Some adopt a retaliating approach, responding to attacks with more creative humor and irony, while others proactively change the topic or set up comment filters to protect the community space. The following table presents the distribution of interaction data for related videos under the #Feminism tag during the sampling period. It reveals that negative interactions account for a relatively large proportion

Table 1. Negative interaction ratio of related video interaction Data under the #Feminism tag

Interaction Type	Proportion	Main Manifestations
Positive / Supportive Interaction	45 %	Empathetic comments, encouragement, experience sharing
Neutral / Inquisitive Interaction	25 %	Knowledge questions, concept discussions
Negative / Confrontational Interaction	30 %	Malicious mockery, personal attacks, deliberate flame-baiti

5 Algorithmic Dilemma: Visibility Issues in Platform Governance and Feminist Expression

5.1 Algorithmic Recommendation Mechanism and Gender Bias

TikTok's algorithmic recommendation mechanism takes "content safety" and "user experience" as its core principles. However, its automated review system is often embedded with gender biases in the real world. Once the content involves key feminist issues such as sexual harassment, body autonomy, and abortion rights, Most of the time, the content will be wrongly judged as "sensitive" or "non-compliant" by the algorithm because it contains so-called "high-risk words", resulting in restricted traffic, reduced weight or even deletion of the content. Many female creators have reported that their accounts have experienced a "catastrophic" drop in traffic. Even if the content does not violate explicit rules, this biased filtering is actually a "technical silencing" of structural violence issues targeting women, forcing creators to conduct self-censorship and replace precise concepts with vague language. This weakened the intensity and clarity of the criticism.

5.2 Structural compression of feminist content by the platform economy

The fundamental logic of the platform economy lies in monetizing attention and generating revenue through advertising. Structurally, this logic tends to focus on content that is light, entertaining, and highly engaging. Serious and critical feminist issues often trigger complex discussions or even confrontations. In terms of algorithms, Its indicators that are beneficial to the content, such as "completion rate" and "interaction density", are inferior to those of entertainment content, putting it at a disadvantage in the competition for traffic. Most of the time, this kind of content is regarded by brand owners as "controversial", which leads to relatively narrow channels for its commercial monetization. As a result, the expression of feminism is facing a situation of "structural compression" : Either the issue is packaged in a "lightweight" way to cater to the algorithm, such as transforming systematic criticism into personal life skills, or one persists in being critical but accepts being marginalized and obtaining low-reward results, falling into a difficult situation of "generating electricity with love".

5.3 Algorithm Review and Transnational Differences

TikTok's algorithmic review mechanism shows a very prominent cross-national difference, which has a profound impact on the visibility boundaries of feminist content. In markets such as the United States and Europe, the review mainly focuses on commonly applicable red lines such as violence and explicit content, and feminist content has a relatively loose expression space. However, in many regions such as Asia and the Middle East, The platform has set up a stricter and broader "political sensitivity" filter to comply with local laws and cultural norms. Content related to gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and body politics is often subject to more stringent scrutiny and restrictions, and its recommendation weight is also actively reduced. This differentiated governance strategy has led to the global feminist movement being unable to have the same mobilization capacity on the platform, and at the same time highlights the compromise and self-censorship of multinational platforms in response to local regulations.

5.4 Data Evidence: Limitations on the Dissemination of feminist labels

The data clearly shows that feminist content on the platform has encountered systematic dissemination restrictions. Content with tags such as #feminism and #womenrights that clearly identify feminism is often systematically marked by the platform as "potentially containing

sensitive content", which has an impact on the size of its initial recommendation pool. Compared with mainstream entertainment content, the average visibility and interaction data of this type of content are significantly lower. The comparison data shown in Chart 3 visually presents this gap:

Content Category	Avg. Views (×100k)	Avg. Like Rate (% of views)	Avg. Completion Rate
Viral Entertainment / Dance	250	12 %	85 %
Beauty / Lifestyle	180	9 %	75 %
Feminist Topics (tagged #feminism)	65	6 %	60 %

As shown in the table, all key communication indicators for feminist issue-related content are significantly lagging behind. A lower completion rate may stem from the speculative nature of the content rather than pure sensory stimulation, but this, in turn, is interpreted by the algorithm as "insufficient appeal", creating a vicious cycle that suppresses serious discussions.

6 Conclusion

This study conducts a cross-border investigation into the digital feminist practice on the TikTok platform, revealing its core contradiction: behind the surface of technological empowerment and enhanced visibility, there lies the systematic regulation of algorithmic power and the platform economy. Feminist creators rely on their astonishing cultural creativity. It has developed memified, emotional and visual discourse strategies to break through barriers and connect the world. However, its critical core is mostly diluted by traffic logic and even besieged by reverse discourse. The so-called "neutral" technical mechanism claimed by the platform actually continuously shapes the boundaries and forms of feminist expression through implicit content filtering, differentiated cross-border censorship, and the obstacles faced in commercial monetization. Future research needs to track how algorithm iterations and policy changes dynamically affect gender discourse, while also paying attention to the ongoing negotiations and struggles among creators, users, and the platform. Digital feminism on TikTok is not a simple story of empowerment, but a complex political practice that constantly shifts between the visible and the invisible, criticism and inclusion, the global and the local.

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