Digital Activism and The Increased Role of Dalit Activism in Intersectional Feminism in India

Laura O'Connor, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the role of social media in feminist Dalit activism in India. Dalits, or Scheduled Castes, have been historically isolated from pop-culture and media spheres due to institutionalized casteism in India. Patriarchal norms have fused these two forms of oppression together in some cases, making Dalit women a particularly marginalized demographic. Mainstream media institutions within India are comprised of almost solely higher caste employees, particularly in directorship positions, which translates into higher caste-centric media coverage and leaves Dalit issues out of mainstream conversations. Using both feminist media theory and social movement theory this paper argues that social media has given rise to unprecedented levels of Dalit feminist activism. In particular, this paper uses the resurgence in support of the late Dr. Ambedkar, a famed Dalit activist and unifying force, the #WhyLoiter campaign, the support and media representation of Mayawati to give evidence for a rise in Dalit feminist and emancipatory activism.

Key Words: *Dalit activism, social media, feminism, feminist media theory, intersectional politics*

Introduction

In the past decade, social media has collided with social justice movements and grassroots activism. The lexicon surrounding the study of social movements has expanded into the realms of *hacktivism*, *hashtag activism*, *citizen journalism*, and other buzzwords describing the ways in which the everyday person is politically and socially empowered through social media. India, in particular, provides interesting insight into the ways in which subaltern politics are catalyzed by participatory media. The caste system has entrenched extreme socio-economic divides within Indian populations, preventing mobility within the class latter and entrapping many within the class they were assigned at birth. Moreover, institutional sexism and patriarchal social and political institutions have created vast gender inequality in India and normalized what many would deem rape-culture and victim-blaming within the context of sexual harassment and assault. *Par consequent*, social media has increased visibility for both Dalit and feminist activism. This article answers the question "In what ways has social media interwoven feminist and Dalit activism?" Referencing feminist media theory and social movement theory, I argue that the rise of social media has given Dalit activism unprecedented levels of visibility and brought Dalit emancipatory politics into the repertoire of intersectional feminism in India. This article will examine the ways in which social media has changed social movements and given voice to Dalit activism in India through analyzing anti-harassment feminist hashtag activism, representation of Dalit women in mainstream media and subsequent social media response, and, finally, the ways in which the former two intersect with *Dalit* emancipatory politics in India.

Firstly, this article will provide contextual evidence to the argument at hand. Kumbhojkar explains that a core creed of Dalit activism, as per the influence of B.R. Ambedkar, is creating a

collective identity for the Dalits that is outside the hierarchy dictated by the caste system (2018). This is the essential base for Dalit emancipation. The trouble, however, is distilling the countless interpretations of this collective identity into one generally agreed-upon unifying conception of *Dalit*. In the digital era, this means an uneven activist space in which many Dalit voices have disjointed and contradictory emancipatory theories. This being said, while it may lack uniformity, the democratization of knowledge and the endless platforms for expression *have* catalyzed Dalit activism and weaved all forms of Dalit social movements into one larger emancipatory space (Kumbhojkar, 2018).

Besides a lack of a uniform mission statement, a lack of access to internet is a major obstacle facing the quest for Dalit autonomy. The digital divide is a virtual wall separating those who have access to the environment versus those who do not, and, unfortunately, a large portion of the Dalit population is faced with economic barriers preventing access to internet and computers. Nevertheless, Dalit populations, particularly Dalit youth, have found voice through many social media platforms, and bring forth critical discourses to mainstream social justice activism.

Intersectional feminism, as a form of criticism and protest against oppressive social, political, and economic institutions, incorporates all form of oppression into its creed, including casteism. Dey explains that feminist criticism of patriarchal powers often bleeds into all social hierarchies and struggles for social change, going further than just women's movements (2018). For marginalized groups, identity-based politics are often crucial for unification and strength (Dey, 2018). In the same way that re-defining what Dalit means is an empowering emancipatory act for Dalit communities, women re-defining pre-conceived notions of womanhood is also an integral notion of feminist movements. As social media has exponentially expanded the platforms given to

both Dalit activists and feminist voices for expressing their protests against their oppressors, it has also brought together the two social movements and brought visibility to the overlaps between the two marginalized populations, and the intersections between socio-economic oppression and sexism. This article will analyze feminist social media movements and the ways in which Dalit activism has been increasingly interwoven into digital feminist activism.

Key Concepts

Dalit communities and the ways in which Dalit communities have instrumentalized social media as a platform for activism and re-writing pop-culture narratives are the main focus subjects of this paper. The term *Dalit* refers to members of the caste system once referred to as "*untouchables*." Charsley writes that "'untouchability' stands directly for the humiliations imposed generation after generation on large sections of the Indian populations" (1996).

This being said, Still writes that while mostly regarded the term *Dalit* as the politically-correct term, it nervetheless carries problems, as "just because a person's ancestors suffered untouchability does not automatically mean that he/she identifies with those political groups that employ the term Dalit" (2014). The term Dalit is rooted in the caste system, and it is thereby rooted in deeply held, historically dictated social divisions. While these divisions have certainly manifested themselves in systemic socio-economic turmoil among Dalit communities, institutionalized discrimination and isolation, and, largely, ostracization from mainstream media spheres, many members of so-called Dalit communities do not wish to be referred by this label. Still goes on to address the use of the word "Untouchable," which is perhaps the most recognizable term by the international community, but reiterates that many activists, scholars and ordinary Dalits find the use of the term 'Untouchable' (and its vernacular equivalents) deeply reprehensible" (2014). However, Still further explains that her use of the term *Dalit* is simply because "at the time

of writing, it seems to be the least offensive and most widely-used name in the Indian media, literature and in academia" (2014). I am in agreeance with Still on her assessment of the use of the term *Dalit* and provide the same justification for my use of the term in this article.

This article will be using feminist media theory and social movement theory as theoretical lenses. Feminist media theory, evidently, is rooted in general feminist theory within the field of mass communication studies. Linda Steiner argues that feminist theory is inherently political (2014). Feminist media theory looks at power structures operating within media systems and, historically, it has focussed on the general marginalization of women within media structures. Steiner, however, explains that this view has historically *contributed* to the marginalization and invalidation of "women of color, sexual minorities, people marginalized by physical or cognitive (in)ability," and, consequently, the focus within feminist media theory has shifted to valorizing these identities and "international and multidisciplinary work seriously addressing media convergence and globalization" (2014). Feminist media theory has thus developed to not only look at the power structures operating within the institution that is the media and their focus on women, but also on other marginalized identities, many of which intersect with gender. This could and has taken the form of analyzing institutional sexism, transphobia, classism, and other intersectional feminist issues. The ways in which it will be employed in this essay will be examining the intersections of socio-economic marginalization, i.e. of Dalit communities through the caste system, and their impacts on women-identifying folks within Dalit communities.

Theory of social movements (supra) refers, as paraphrased by Bosi, focusses on four main points of observation, "(a) the relationship between structural change and transformations in patterns of social conflict; (b) the role of cultural representations in enabling collective action; (c) the mechanisms that render it rational to mobilize on collective goals; and (d) the effects of the

political and institutional context on social movements development and evolution" (2017). This article will be using these four questions as guiding points when analyzing feminist digital activism among Dalit communities. As the theory of social movements tends to be very broad in scope, the coupling of this theory and feminist media theory will narrow the scope of this article and allow for deeper analysis.

Historical Background

As with most marginalized communities, the socio-economic marginalization of Dalit communities, particularly women, translates to marginalization within media/pop-culture spheres (see *Figure 1*). Isolation and ostracization from mainstream media conversations contributes to oppressive power dynamics, in which media content is made by and for higher castes. Moreover, this leads to media narratives, particularly when addressing social issues and politics, catering to the wishes and viewpoints commonly held by higher castes.

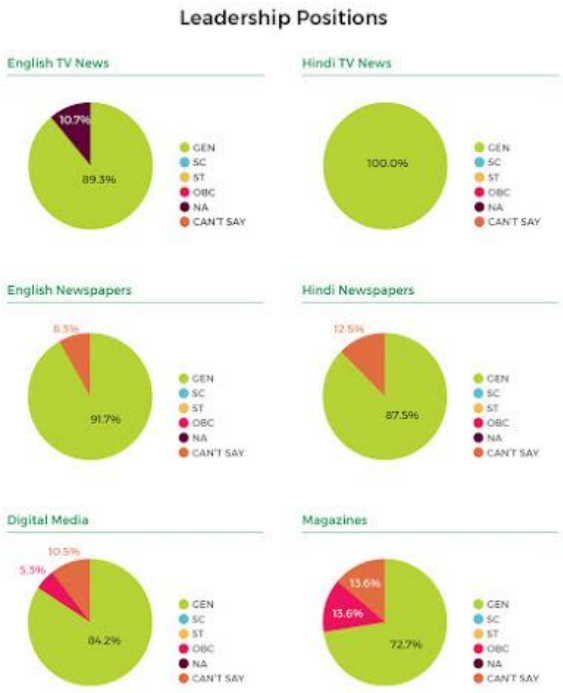

Figure 1, Courtesy of OXFAM India Report

As demonstrated by the figure above, Dalit communities (labelled above as SC, *"Scheduled Castes"*), hold marginal amounts of leadership positions within Indian media. The above figure is particularly compelling as it addresses not only just the general need for space to be held by Dalit community members, but the particular need for *leadership roles* to be held by Dalit community members in India media.

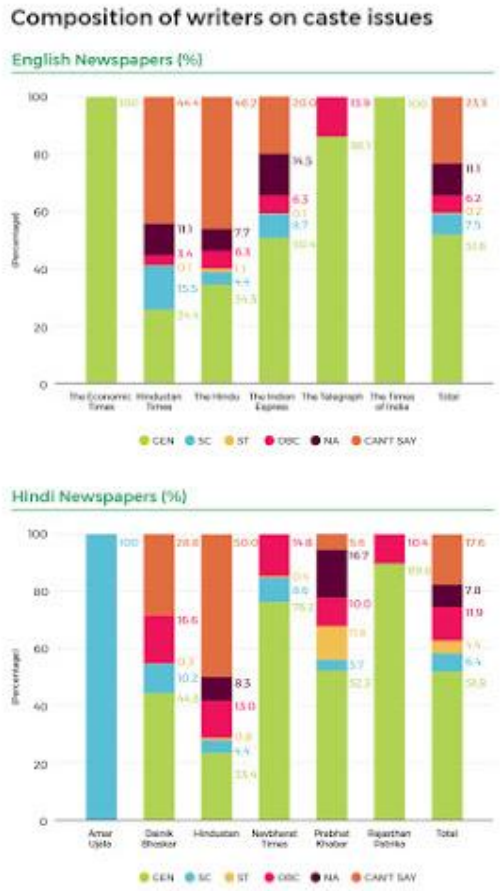

Figure 2, Courtest of OXFAM India Report

When looking at the discussions of caste issues in particular in Indian media, the statistics show further lack of representation. The vast majority of major media corporations, particularly in English media, hold single-digit levels of caste issues that are discussed by Dalit analysts. If one analyzes figures on Dalit women in Indian media, the figures become much sparser and seemingly

under-researched. This does not indicate favourable levels of media representation of Dalit women.

Tying back to Bosi's text, social movement theory asks about the role of cultural representations in enabling action (2017). This article will be looking at the historical and current marginalization of Dalit individuals from media spheres as a springboard for collective action being taken on self-directed platforms, i.e. social media.

Current Literature on the Subject

Kumbojkar's text begins by explaining the role of Dr. Ambedkar in mobilizing Dalit communities (2018). Dr. Ambedkar's ideas were in favour of breaking down caste barriers and named himself and his community as "Dalit" to highlight the marginalization they face. His ultimate goal was to reconstruct the Dalit identity and brake away from its caste associations. The author explains that Dr. Ambedkar served as a pivotal figure for Dalit activists, particularly because he served as a uniting force and single representative of the Dalit cause. This is a feat considering Dalit communities are comprised of such diversity, and often, lack of consensus.

Kumbhojkar further provides analysis of the use of YouTube and Facebook among Dalit activism. The dawn of YouTube allowed for a resurgence of attention on Dr. Ambedkar's writings, as videos of his speeches, his funeral procession, and his follower' speeches allowed for democratized access to his political thought (Kumbhojkar, 2018). Moreover, Ambedkarite music has become increasingly popular on YouTube, garnering millions of views. In addition to allowing many Dalit communities in India access to Ambedkar's speeches calling for Dalit emancipation, this has also allowed his speeches to reach members of the Dalit diaspora and communities in Pakistan and Nepal. This has served as unifying force for Dalit communities, aligned with the call for unity of Dr. Ambedkar himself (Kumbhojkar, 2018). Kumbhojkar also highlights the YouTube

chancel Dalit Camera, which has over six million views and is dedicated solely to providing content relevant to Dalit communities.

Moreover, Facebook has also become a tool for Dalit communities to mobilize. Kumbojkar explains that Facebook has become a platform for Dalit communities to connect with one another. Whatsapp, in tandem with Facebook have both been used as safety measures during Dalit protests. The author gives the example of a demonstration in honour of Dr. Ambedkar being held in Mumbai, where a cyclone warning was put out, and demonstrators organized protection, food, and shelter for all participants, using Facebook and Whatsapp for means of communication. Moreover, Facebook gives platforms for planning these protests, while Whatsapp allows for more private discussion.

Kumbojkar's argument is both compelling and in accordance with that of mine. The third question asked by social movement theory, i.e. the mechanism(s) that enable collective action towards collective goals (Bosi, 2017). Looking at these forms of social media, in which there is no monopoly on who may create content, we see both Facebook and YouTube being utilized as tools to both uplift and unite Dalit communities, and particularly, Dalit women who have been left in the dark by top-down controlled media systems. The author's explanation of specific platforms in particular, i.e. Facebook, Whatsapp, and YouTube, being unifying forces reminiscent of the rallying power of Dr. Ambedkar himself is thoughtful and compelling. The article further proves the shifting face of Dalit activism in the wake of social media. Using a feminist lens, this unifying force serves as a powerful link between Dalit women, who are finally being able to; a) create and distribute media content, b) be represented in media sphere, and c) organize collectively and efficiently. This article furthers the argument of this article, that is, that social media activism has

given a new era to Dalit feminist activism, with those who have historically been isolated from mainstream political discourse, to reclaim media narratives.

Kumar and Subramani' s article (2014) provides a valuable contextual analysis of Dalit media platforms. Kumar and Subramani begin by briefing the reader on the criticisms of mainstream Indian media being casteist by influential Dalit figures, many of whom have called for separate Dalit media outlets to be made. However, historically, Dalit media platforms (newspapers, magazines, etc.), have not been able to sustain themselves and have been outlives by more prominent non-Dalit media corporations. The authors note that the problem runs deep into the corporate structure of Indian media, with ownership of media outlets being virtually monopolized by higher castes.

The writers then acknowledge the existence of a digital divide – that is to say, disproportionate level of Dalits who do not have access to internet compared to those who do. Moreover, it is acknowledged that many Dalit user do not speak English – a barrier for internet usage (Kumar & Subramani, 2014).

The article argues that while historical and systemic marginalization has normalized the ostracization of Dalits from media circles, there is a growing presence of Dalits within Indian media, particularly since the rise of the internet. While Dalits currently occupy small numbers of places within media corporations, and often times fill only low-level positions, the Internet shows potential for Dalit activism, particularly by being used as a community-building tool, and a tool to "offer a counter–hegemonic representation of Dalits" (Kumar & Subramini, 2014). This article will argue the same viewpoint. The framework offered by Kumar and Subramini can very well be transferred to a feminist theoretical perspective, as we see similar communities built within Dalit *women*, as a sub-group of Dalit activists. In the same way that larger Dalit communities are

building community using the internet, this essay will argue that women within this larger community are finding solace in internet platforms, both in using them as platforms to connect and build community, and as creating a larger presence in the media, changing the norms of caste representation in Indian media.

De Kruijf (2015) discusses the use of internet by Dalit organizations as a way to re-write historical narratives and correct misinformation about Dalit communities and caste oppression. Moreover, the author discusses the role of internet as a powerful discursive tool for Dalit communities to hash out political disputes – essentially, a tool to aid in participatory democracy. The author discusses the reactive nature of Dalit online presence, causing it to be quite spotty in frequency and intensity. Moreover, most Dalit users do not focus on one platform, but make use of a handful of social media platforms. De Kruijf furthers this point by noting that Dalit online presence "materializes as a creative combination of original content and recycled contemplations and images of fellow Dalits and global icons of political struggle" (De Kruijf, 2015, p. 21).

Finally, he analyzes the individual nature of Dalit collective action, remarking that online activism for Dalit users seems to be as much of a discovery of oneself as it is a larger political movement. This is particularly interesting as De Kruijf notes that "activist stance of Dalits is influenced by the experience of double/multiple marginality and by the experience of being an insider outside because of migration, education or whatever kind of untypical socio-economic mobility" (De Kruijf, 2015, p. 21). This essay will grow upon this point, as the "double marginality" nature of Dalit women makes the participatory nature of Internet activism that much more valuable. The reactionary nature of Dalit internet use will be examined further as this paper analyzes the #WhyLoiter campaign, a reactionary online measure taken against sexual harassment and rape culture in India.

Waldrop (2004) reconceptualizes casteism in India and explains that the caste system has too often been considered a "static phenomenon of 'traditional' India, and hence that these are insufficient for an understanding of caste in India today," meaning that many believed that in post-colonial India, the caste system would soon enough become obsolete and lose its institutional pull (Waldrop, 2004, p. 276). The author takes a different approach, further writing that "although in many places caste has lost its institutionalised basis in the village, due to urbanisation and industrialisation, its importance has not decreased" (Waldrop, 2004, p. 276). This re-positioning of casteism in India is crucial to understanding Dalit activism. As explained by Kumbhojkar, in post-colonial India, Dalit communities have long attempted to draw themselves away from their caste systems, following the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar and re-defining themselves as Dalits rather than other casteist terms (Kumbhojkar, 2018). Waldrop summarizes the work of Dr. Ambedkar as arguing that in order to destroy the caste system, Dalits had to unite against the Brahmins, which to him meant an opposition against the whole Varna system and all castes within it" (Waldrop, 2004, p. 287). This article will draw heavily on this concept, as Internet space have proven themselves as effective community-building communities. She further explains that this reconstruction of Dalit identity is necessary to change casteist institutions and break down barriers to equality.

The author argues that "a historical and structural perspective is capable of capturing the many manifestations of caste practices and ideologies over time" (Waldrop, 2004, pp. 276). A historic viewpoint is argued to be useless and ineffective when analyzing caste dynamics in India. Moreover, the necessity in understanding the institutional manifestations of casteism in India (ex. in media structures), is emphasized. This will be taken into account when understanding the

contextual significance of Dalit representation in mainstream media, and in analyzing Dalit emancipatory action using social media.

#WhyLoiter Campaign

Activism on social media platforms is, most often, reactionary. Particularly "Hashtag Activism," is typically always in response to specific event. These instances become nodes in the memory of social media users, and snowball until a hashtag is formed to thread through the needles of the interrelated social injustices, giving a slogan to a particular social movement. #MeToo is a cornerstone example of this. The hashtag began as reactionary pushback to the sexual harassment endured by one woman and has spiralled into the larger social movement against systemic sexual assault and harassment in the workforce.

In India, the #WhyLoiter campaign trended as a way to protest rape culture and the lack of judicial deterrence for sexual assault in the country. The causative incident? The brutal sexual assault and murder of Jyoti Singh. Sonora Jha analyzes this hashtag through the framework of feminist media theory and theory of social movements, explaining that the #WhyLoiter campaign "extended and expanded on the resistance to rape culture in India by focusing on women's claim to public space, thereby adding another facet to the growing anti-rape movement in India" (Jha, 2019). Women posted pictures of themselves in public spaces and used the hashtag #WhyLoiter to reaffirm a women's right to occupy public space without threat of violence. The hashtag essentially backed countless women in their protests against their inability to feel safe in public spaces, and the growing trend of victim-blaming in sexual assault cases in India.

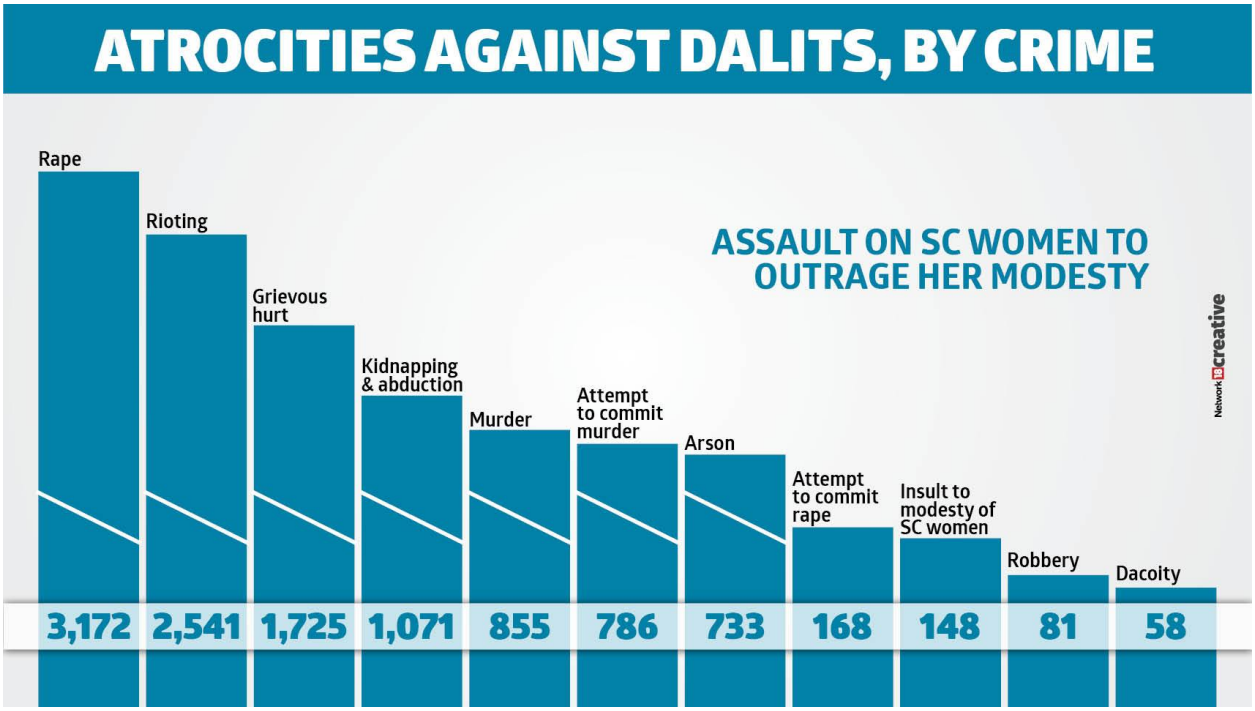

Figure 3: Courtesy of the National Crime Records Bureau

It is important to note the historical context behind this movement. Dalit women face particular vulnerability to sexual assault, as demonstrated by figure 3 (above). Moreover, among women who report their sexual assault, rates of conviction are estimated to be as low as 2% (International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2018). Even when looking at date on motives behind these attacks, Minority Rights Group International found that 70% of crimes committed against Dalit women were committed as Dalit women attempted to assert their rights or challenge patriarchal norms and gender roles (ex. modesty, career roles, etc.). Thus, when analyzing the #WhyLoiter campaign, it is necessary to understand firstly the background norms and perhaps spring-boarded this rebellion, but also the level of risk that many women were putting themselves in by performing such a public rebellion.

While the hashtag gained momentum, casteism came into the picture shortly thereafter. Critics questioned whether or not the movement could go beyond the socio-economic factors

working against Dalit women that made them more vulnerable to sexual attacks. The root of the criticism was in the symbolic nature of hashtag activism – if a hashtag is just a symbol for a greater social movement, does it really have the ability to transcend pre-existing social institutions, or does it merely work *within* these predominant oppressive institutions? (Jha, 2017).

Moreover, questions arose over who was truly being targeted by the social justice campaign. Many of the photos depicted unemployed men in the background whilst middle or upper-class women posed for their #WhyLoiter pictures. What is the ultimate goal of this campaign? Increased police presence ensuring the security of these loitering women? If so, does this not disproportionately target Dalit unemployed men, who will then face increased rates of mass incarceration? Does the #WhyLoiter encourage security for all members of the Indian population in public spaces, or just middle to upper-class women at the expense of Dalit men? (Jha, 2018).

Dey offers further insight into this issue of class representation in feminist digital activism, noting that middle class participation, in particular, accounts for the largest portion of social media activism, despite the increased vulnerability of Dalit women to sexual harassment and assault (2018). These critical viewpoints within the #WhyLoiter movement lead to a push for an intersectional approach to the feminist social media campaign. The founders of the campaign themselves accepted criticism and admitted the need for a more intersectional approach (Jha, 2018). This mainstream acknowledgement of the need to incorporate other marginalized voices into feminist campaigns came as a product of digital activism and the sheer magnitude of visibility given to feminist activism by social media.

Kumbhojkar draws further parallels between feminist and Dalit activism, quoting a journalist who states that “the mere presence of women in online spaces does not constitute

emancipation unless they can exercise agency and use those spaces to assert themselves" (Kumbhojkar, 2018). In the same way that the #WhyLoiter campaign pushed women to occupy physical public space and assert their right to this space, Dalit activism has had increasingly practical applications, rallying together Dalit youth in particular to re-define their socio-economic standing and social label. Moreover, the acknowledgement of the need for intersectional feminist campaigns hints at further mainstream digital movements incorporating anti-classism and anti-sexism sentiments.

The Case of Mayawati

The centre of this Venn diagram of feminist and Dalit activism, however, is Dalit women on social media. The sexual exploitation of Dalit women has been prevalent for ages. Kumar acknowledges the longstanding relegation of Dalit women to being sexual servants to higher-caste men (2009). This is inarguably linked to both their gender and their non-existence within the caste system. The sexual assault of Dalit women is not only a violation of her status as a woman, but it is also a form of political violence about the Dalit population and their socio-economic status in Indian society. Moreover, the uncomfortable reality is that often times, sexual violence against Dalit women often take the form of gang-rape, often committed by members of a higher caste. The disturbing metaphorical quality of continuous violations of Dalit women committed *en masse* by members of higher quality is representative the larger social norms in Indian society, in which exploitation of Dalit women on the basis of both class and gender is normalized.

In the realm of social media, however, many Dalit women are reclaiming their voices. Mayawati, the prevalent Dalit female politician, for example, has become a trailblazing icon for Dalit women. While mainstream Indian media has made countless casteist remarks against her and been silent while her political components make similar casteist remarks, social media has been a

platform for her followers to show their admiration for the Indian politician. With the rise of participatory media and social network, media narratives are no longer monopolized by large news corporations and politically biased journalists, but also by everyday people expressing their viewpoints and insight. Supporters of Mayawati now have platforms to express their admiration for the political actor and are given a platform to build community support and empowerment for Dalit women (Kumar, 2009). The waves of social media admiration and rallying of Dalit women in support of Mayawati serves as a foundational example of digital Dalit feminist activists. Mayawati has become an icon for the general Dalit movement, Dalit feminism, and general feminist movements, unifying the social justice causes and furthering Dalit activism's place in intersectional Indian feminism.

Interestingly enough, Dr. Ambedkar has been enshrined as a Dalit icon on social media similar to Mayawati. In the dawn of the Facebook era, with online versions of his speeches and writings being produced, shared, and widely commented on among Dalit activists and supporters of Ambedkar (Kumbhojkar, 2018). The Dalit power figures have become unifying forces for Dalit activism and have helped define what Dalit activism is searching for. Both Mayawati and Ambedkar serve as unifying forces for the Dalit emancipatory movement.

Moreover, the intersections of Mayawati's gender and caste identity as a source of the institutional oppression she has faced and increased visibility of Dalit activism and intersectional feminism in the same way that the #WhyLoiter movement begged social media users to consider the role the classism in India has to play in gender inequality and feminist movements.

Discussion

The #WhyLoiter campaign has put feminist social media activism into mainstream media conversations and mobilized social media as a tool for social reform and undermining gender

norms. While the campaign has of course faced scrutiny, it also faced exponential levels of engagement and support. This normalization of collective feminist action has marked a shift in power dynamics within Indian media. Not only can feminist campaigns now take over social media spheres, if users choose to use a certain hashtag, they also infiltrate mainstream media discussions as news corporations are unable to ignore the sweeping collective force that is a widespread feminist social media campaign. This gives powers to users who may hold counter-cultural beliefs, or who may inherently be of a marginalized community – such as Dalit women – as their voice is no longer able to be stifled through a monopolized media narrative.

Mayawati, while being a political figure, has contributed to this shift in power dynamic. Supporters of Mayawati, particularly Dalit women, have shown gratitude and support for the political figure, and have allowed her to garner momentum as a challenge to casteist and sexist norms. This unprecedented attention also infiltrates mainstream media conversations, as newsrooms have to respond to the talking points of the public. As Dalit women are becoming increasingly capable of putting their voices through the megaphone that is Twitter or other popular social media platform, they are constantly rewriting the mainstream media narrative and are no longer able to be ignored as a result of selective hearing on the part of higher castes and/or media institutions.

In the same way that general feminism searches for equality between the sexes, Dalit emancipation searches for a reclamation of what it means to be a member of the *Dalit* community, rejecting oppressive casteist social limitations in the same way that feminists reject the restrictive patriarchal socio-economic and political barriers placed on women. Social media, in essence, gives users an opportunity to claim the media narrative for their own, and broadcast their own insights. This is a key tool in the social justice activist's arsenal, allowing for one to increase visibility on

social injustice, even in the face of social marginalization. As social media access increases, input and involvement of marginalized communities in social justice movements has increased. While in past decades, feminist and social justice crusades may have excluded Dalit communities from participating, we now see Dalit communities themselves rejecting this traditional norm. Feminist social media campaigns that leave out this key marginalized voice are now no longer being accepted by their audiences but are instead being criticized publicly by Dalit voices themselves. Moreover, media representation and mainstream narratives are no longer dictated by large news corporations but are heavily influenced by social media users. Figures such as Dr. Ambedkar and Mayawati have become social media icons for Dalit activism and feminist activism, merging two realms of social media into one larger anti-oppression narrative. They also serve as unifying forces for intersectional feminists searching to re-define oppressive social institutions. Social media has interwoven feminism and Dalit emancipation by giving visibility to the parallels between their two creeds and searches for autonomy and empowerment. The #WhyLoiter campaign, user critiques, and mainstream admission of the need for an intersectional approach shows the newfound voice of Dalit communities in feminist digital activism. Moreover, the places held by feminist and Dalit audiences draw overlapping crowds, unifying social justice communities and solidifying Dalit activism within intersectional feminism. I argue that Mayawati may very well be comparable to the role served by Dr. Ambedkar. While in the past, Dr. Ambedkar garnered support as a unifying force among Dalit communities, Mayawati is now garnering staggering levels of support by playing a similar role. In his time, Dr. Ambedkar was awed as a leader among Dalit communities, being one of the only mainstream Dalit voices. Mayawati now fills the same shoes. I further argue that campaigns such as #WhyLoiter are a result of this increase in representation of Dalit women. While in the past, a lack of representation served as a stifling force for Dalit women, who are

giving no encouragement to unify or challenge any pre-existing gender/caste norm, an increase of Dalit women in political spheres (i.e. Mayawati), and her subsequent supporters on social media, encourage women and assure them that support is given to those who assert their rights and challenge what the feel is unjust.

In short, social media has given way to subaltern views of social justice, in which the needs of women and Dalit communities (and Dalit women!), are voiced and mirrored and acknowledged as being necessary to build anti-oppressive social institutions in place of the current oppressive norms. Moreover, social media may very well lead to steep increases in Dalit feminist action, causing rapid changes to gender norms, power dynamics within media, and notions of the role of Dalit women in Indian pop-culture.

Concluding Remarks

As briefly discussed in the literature review, the current research on Dalit feminist digital activism seems relatively limited as of now,however, it appears to be growing as a field of research. This being said, there was inevitable limitation to this research. As all writings were based on pre-existing publications, as opposed to field research, the lack of specific literature on the topic was an impediment to this paper. Moreover, there was an even further lack of writing by Dalit community members themselves, which was another key impediment.

As explained in the analysis of Figure 2, there is a severe lack of quantitative research and date on media representation of Dalit women, to the point where no reliable and/or relatively recent quantitative data was found on the subject. This leaves a major gap in research on Dalit communities, particularly through the lens of feminist media theory. A major conclusion drawn is the need for statistical analysis on the role of Dalit women in mainstream media spheres. Not only are figures arguably easier to distribute and digest to a wider public than qualitative research and

analysis, they also lay a firm foundation for qualitative research to begin. This gap in the research field thus served as an impediment to this article and will also most likely impede future qualitative research on the subject.

General reflection on the research, however, shows a positive outlook on the situation of social justice movements in India, particularly among caste women. As highlighted earlier, the rates of violent crimes, particularly of a sexual nature, committed against Dalit women is staggering. The historical isolation, socio-economic disadvantages, and seemingly condoned abuse faced by Dalit women cannot be understated. These norms were so engrained that many may argue that it was unreasonable to think that mainstream media narratives and institutions could ever serve as a force for changing these oppressive conditions. Social media, however, has shown an optimistic future for Dalit feminist activism. While it may be unreasonable to expect a media institution controlled by higher castes to shift power towards lower caste women, this is quickly becoming less and less of a concern, as Dalit women are increasingly being able to re-write their own narratives through user-controlled media.

This being said, the places for future quantitative research lie in analyzing the digital divide, i.e. the lack of access to internet in those facing lower socio-economic statuses. Dalit women have become a larger voice in social media sphere, but there seems to be limited data on Dalit women who remain silence due to lack of access to internet or devices with internet-capability. This is a crucial area of research if the cause of Dalit feminist digital activism is to be furthered.

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About the author:
Laura O'Connor is an undergraduate student at the University of Ottawa, pursuing a Joint Honours Degree in Political Science and Communication. Her particular areas of interest are Track Two Diplomacy, conflict resolution, particularly in South Asia, grassroots feminist activism, and reproductive healthcare in humanitarian and conflict zones.