"Vamos destruir esse patriarcado, eu creio!"
Inter-American Networks and Articulations of Feminism on Social Media

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Introduction

The first two decades of the twenty-first century are marked, among other things, by the rise of social media, which ushered in new ways for people to connect, communicate, and share information, leading to the emergence of new media cultures. In the wake of these developments, social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok have become central sites of contemporary feminist media culture and helped boost a new wave of popularity of feminism, especially among young women. Given their size and reach, large feminist accounts have become a major influence in the mediation of feminism and can be considered an integral part of feminist media culture today, as hashtag movements like #MeToo or #NiUnaMenos in Latin America have most prominently shown. Based on these developments, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of feminist articulations on social media.

For this purpose, 89 Instagram accounts labelled as feminist were analyzed in a qualitative study in terms of their geographical location, popularity, influence within the network, thematic orientation, as well as who speaks and writes on these accounts. Additionally, similarities and differences across regions as well as power imbalances were traced and discussed. The premise of the study was to avoid an analytical framework that intermingles feminist articulations on social media with political activism or views them *a priori* as expressions of a neoliberal or postfeminist culture. Instead, the study was designed as a feminist media and cultural studies project that allowed for a more open-ended approach, viewing feminist articulations on social media as a di-

verse terrain encompassing a variety of feminist currents, orientations, and modes of engagement with feminism as part of everyday culture.

The overall research design was guided by the idea of mapping and analyzing influential feminist social media accounts from the Americas. In a first step, 89 feminist Instagram accounts from 12[1] countries in the Americas were selected using criterion sampling and snowball sampling. Selection criteria were a minimum of 10,000 followers and an explicit reference to feminism. To avoid violating privacy rights, accounts that were set as private were excluded. After the selection process, a social network analysis (SNA) was carried out, guided by the questions how the accounts are distributed across the Americas, how they are interconnected, and which accounts are most influential within the network. Following the SNA, a forum analysis heuristic, as employed by Jennifer M. Nish (2014) in her dissertation on transnational feminist publics, was adopted and slightly modified. After collecting general information about the accounts and their authors, a thematic analysis was conducted by examining the story highlights section of each account to learn more about the guiding themes and orientations of the accounts, and to discern thematic patterns across regions.

The Landscape of Feminist Instagram Accounts in the Americas

It turned out that the regional distribution of feminist Instagram accounts is highly uneven. Brazil, the USA, and Mexico are the countries with the largest share of feminist accounts within the Americas and with the largest followings. This distribution pattern shows that in certain countries, there already seems to be an extensive network of feminist social media accounts, while in other countries, such networks are either non-existent or much smaller. The SNA also showed that there is a dense network of links within and across national borders, featuring about 70 per cent national and about 30 per cent transnational connections, which means that most of the content circulates nationally. As regards transnational links, distribution turned out to be uneven, as well, as there are a few accounts with a high number of transnational links, while

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1   The accounts selected for analysis are from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, and the United States. Despite extensive research, it was not possible to locate large feminist accounts that met the selection criteria from other American countries.

the majority of accounts remain within the boundaries of national networks. This is especially true for accounts located in the US, where the distribution of transnational links to Latin American countries is highly centralized, with only 4 out of 19 accounts featuring transnational links. Sharing the same language, Spanish-language Latin American accounts are connected across national borders at a higher degree than Brazilian and US accounts.

For transnational in-degree links, the opposite was true. In comparison, most transnational links lead to US-based accounts, with about 40 percent leading to the overall largest and most influential feminist account within the network. Hence, on a transnational level, US-based accounts appear to have a disproportionately greater influence. However, despite such centralization tendencies, it is important to note that networks on social media are formed simply by one actor following another, with various actors being loosely linked in different orders, and although some accounts are more influential than others, there is no center around which all the actors coalesce, nor is there a common agenda. On the contrary, social media networks are rather characterized by their decentralized structure, with many autonomous actors loosely connected through their participation in online discourses and in the circulation of content.

Who Are the Women Running the Accounts?

The forum analysis showed that most of the accounts are run by individuals or collectives and only a few by organizations, such as NGOs or community organizations. To learn more about the background of the people who run the accounts, data on race, age, and education was collected. Of the accounts that provided such information, about 70 per cent were White women and roughly thirty per cent Women of Color and Black women as well as some Asian American and Chicana women and one trans woman. With few exceptions, nearly all of them have an academic background and are in their twenties.

Most of the women that run the accounts describe themselves as feminists in some way, some of them referring to their geographical location, nationality, cultural, or racial background. Further, there are women who indicate their affiliation to a particular strand of feminism like abolitionist, Marxist, radical, revolutionary, lesbian, or eco-feminism. Among these affiliations, intersectional feminism was one of the most frequently mentioned terms, including descriptions such as antiracist feminism, feminism for all, decolonial, trans-

inclusive, or Third World feminism. Perhaps surprisingly, only few women refer to themselves as activists. Instead, terms like blogger or digital creator seem to be used far more often as self-descriptors. What seems noteworthy about these is that these terms are closely linked to professional engagement with social media, such as creating, curating, and sharing content on the platform. However, there are also women who emphasize their struggle, describing themselves as women warriors or *luchadoras* (@luchadoras.mx, n.d.), or who make historical references by referring to themselves as witches, or identifying as descendants of the women who escaped enslavement through maroonage (@redmujeresafrodiasporicas 2020).

As regards the accounts that are run by organizations or collectives, many follow an educational or transformational approach, which is reflected in their self-descriptions such as feminist school, network, transnational articulation, or movement. Furthermore, accounts that are run by organizations are often linked to community projects outside of social media, however, the analysis also showed that with a few exceptions, the history of most accounts is linked to the emergence of social media platforms and does not relate to earlier projects.

Feminist Articulations on Social Media as an Expression of a Democratic Culture

The study is based on an understanding of feminist practices on social media as part of a democratic culture, which legal scholar Jack M. Balkin defines as a "network of people interacting with each other, agreeing and disagreeing, gossiping and shaming, criticizing and parodying, imitating and innovating, supporting and praising [in which] people exercise their freedom" through participation (Balkin 2004: 4). Central to his notion of a democratic culture is the process of meaning-making, which is based on interaction, and which leads to the emergence of new meanings and ideas from old ones. The concept appeared to be particularly useful in the context of the study because it allows for a perspective that does not distinguish between political and non-political expression and what is perceived to be low and high culture, or that asks whether social media feminist practices are aligned with feminist values or a feminist agenda that aims at transformation, but emphasizes the importance of non-political expression, popular culture, individual participation, and individual liberty as integral to the principle of free speech and hence of a democratic culture (ibid: 39).

Feminism in Practice: From Individual Growth to Collective Struggle

The results of the forum and the thematic analysis showed that feminist accounts cover a broad range of topics and approach feminism in diverse ways. Whereas some accounts are run in a rather professional way, using elaborately crafted images, texts, or videos, most accounts feature content that is reposted from other accounts or social media platforms. As the analysis showed, various accounts emphasize empowerment as a primary goal. In this context, the posts are often educational, providing information on feminism-related topics or concepts in an accessible and didactic way, making use of infographics and short sentences, written in an informal and accessible language, or using humor and irony to critically engage with and challenge antifeminist discourses. Some accounts with an educational focus offer workshops or live talks to their followers or provide resources such as e-books or online courses on a range of feminism-related topics.

Feminism as Personal Growth

Much of the analyzed content is aimed at raising awareness and giving advice by explaining, for example, how to recognize a toxic relationship or by providing mental health tips. Often, this type of content is aimed at the individual, with posts containing inspirational quotes or motivational phrases directed at personal growth and building confidence. Such accounts that focus on the individual are primarily concerned with women's bodies and their mental health, frequently using terms like body positivity, self-care, self-love, self-awareness, or healing. There are also a few accounts that intend to provide help for women in need, offering counselling services or providing specific information such as phone numbers and places where women can seek help or find shelter. However, such forms of engagement tend to be the exception.

Feminism as a Collective Struggle

There are also accounts that rather reflect a notion of feminism as a collective struggle and that, for example, locate themselves in a socialist or Marxist tradition, taking an anti-capitalist stance and emphasizing collective action and social justice, drawing attention to the various forms of violence and oppression that women have experienced. The most frequently mentioned terms in this context are patriarchy, *machismo*, masculinity, beauty norms,

White supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. The account @sororamx is such an example, focusing on posting protest images or messages written on protest banners such as "Nuestra primera soberania territorial son nuestros cuerpos" [Our first territorial sovereignty is our bodies] (@sororamx 2021). In contrast to individualized responses to feminism, such messages can be seen more in the tradition of second wave collective feminist struggles and debates, echoing feminist values like autonomy and social justice. Even more, such messages can also be located in the decolonial discourse of Latin American feminisms through references to sovereignty, territory, and women's bodies. In addition, some accounts particularly focus on or are dedicated to specific communities and their struggles and experiences such as African American or Asian American communities.

From Politics to Trivia

Other accounts rather focus on sharing news items and political content, not always related to feminism. Less frequent were accounts with a commercial focus that promote products or advertise other accounts in exchange for a fee, or accounts with an entertainment focus, which post content on a variety of issues not directly related to feminism but rather concerned with lifestyle, personal tastes, and other random topics.

Guiding Themes and Issues

As regards content and thematic orientation, the analysis showed that protest, feminism, abortion as well as gendered violence and LGBTQ+related topics are particularly prominent. A further group of themes is related to women's bodies, comprising a range of topics related to physical and mental health, sex education, menstruation, and maternity.

Deconstruction as a Feminist Practice

A central term that appears on many accounts is deconstruction, which is presented as a feminist practice aimed at recognizing oppressive social structures, beliefs, and traditions and is linked to an idea of personal growth. It is based on the belief that being or becoming a feminist can be best achieved through (de)constructing oneself and internalized social norms by engaging in a con-

stant process of reflecting, inquiring, and becoming as a feminist, something that Kanai (2020: 31) has described as a "student-like approach" which according to her, has become "entangled in feminist identities" where constant learning is enacted with some kind of rigor and where girls locate themselves within a "trajectory as 'growing' in their feminism" fitting into a neoliberal framework of self-actualization. However, there were also posts in which women critically interrogate and explore the ways in which feminism can or has affected personal development and consciousness-raising, reflecting on how individual and collective processes are intertwined. Further, there were posts that criticized certain types of engagement with feminism or articulations of feminism, echoing postfeminist or neoliberal feminist scholarly debates and differentiating between true and false types of feminism.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality turned out to be another central theme, with various accounts stating that they are rooted in or supportive of intersectional feminism. It does, however, not always become apparent from their content what makes their approach to feminism intersectional. Furthermore, none of the accounts engages critically with the concept itself. One account where an intersectional focus is easily discernible is the overall largest and most influential Instagram account called @feminist, which is described as an "intersectional feminist community made up of a diverse network of change makers from around the [world]", and which almost exclusively shares content from other accounts that fits its notion of intersectionality. The way intersectionality is operationalized on this account suggests that it is something that can be easily achieved by posting a certain type of content. However, the fact that it focuses particularly on a US-context and posts exclusively English-language content raises the question to what extent the content represents or addresses a global community.

In comparison, the account @aafc.nyc, which is linked to a Black and Asian American Feminist Solidarities Project, might actually provide an example of a transversal, dialogic, and intersectional practice, as envisioned in transnational feminist theory (cf. Marshall 2021). As stated on their website, the women who run the project feel "indebted to ways Black feminist thought and Third World feminist movements enable us to think and act critically through our own positionalities to address systems of anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, and xenophobia" (Asian American Feminist Collective 2022).

As can be seen on its Instagram account, @aafc.nyc hosts various joint events with @blackwomenradicals and other community organizations. As stated on their website, they approach feminism as an "ever-evolving practice that seeks to address the multi-dimensional ways Asian/American people confront systems of power at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, disability, migration history and citizenship and immigration status" (ibid.), combining feminist scholarship with political activism. Perhaps unlike most of the other accounts that described themselves as intersectional, the people behind @aafc.nyc and @blackwomenradicals base their thought and action on their own experiences much in the sense as argued by Julia Roth (2019: 333) who has emphasized that "an intersectional perspective always needs to be context-specific and aware of the concrete historical situation in which it is applied and which defines the relevance of the varying social divisions for each context".

Feminist projects like @feminist, on the other hand, are closely tied to and depend on the existence of social media platforms, and despite what might be best intentions, can evoke the impression that their intersectional practice might rather serve as a marker of authenticity, as suggested by Akane Kanai (2020: 25), using it to signal correct behavior and being a 'good' feminist, an approach to feminism that is undergirded by a neoliberal governmentality of self-actualization, leading to an environment in which "the self is re-conceptualized as a 'platform' through which marginalized others are included".

Regional Similarities and Differences

As regards commonalities and differences between regions, it appeared users across the Americas utilize the affordances of social media in largely similar ways. Themes and topics that appear transnationally are empowerment, deconstruction, intersectionality, and LGBTQ+related topics with content related to oppressive social structures as well as content that is directed towards the individual.

Regarding differences, sorority turned out to be a concept that is particularly confined to a Latin-American context, which might be an indicator that is has a distinct cultural meaning, perhaps similar to *comadrismo*, which according to Scholz (2016: 82) can be used to explain a "transnational subjectivity of feminism", which she calls *comadre*, a "politicized subject" that "enacts counterhegemonic agency in transnational communication systems through a rela-

tional framework" and that is embedded in a "web of kinship and friendship relations, as well as oppressive asymmetrical global structures" (ibid). Similarly, sorority might be an example for how affect circulates in global cultural flows, providing a conceptual framework for affective relations between women.

Furthermore, protest appears as an overarching theme on Spanish-language accounts. This might be explained by the #NiUnaMenos movement, which sparked an ongoing series of protest marches throughout the region, sometimes referred to as *marea verde* (green tide) due to the widespread use of the *pañuelo verde*, a green bandana scarf which emerged as a symbol for protest against the anti-abortion legislation and which has, according to Larrondo/ Ponce (2019: 30), become an identity marker of feminism. Content related to gendered violence and femicides also appeared almost exclusively on Latin American accounts, particularly on Spanish-language accounts. Similarly, one of the topics that turned out to be particularly relevant in a US-American context was #BlackLivesMatter. Immigration and social justice turned out to be further prominent topics on US-American accounts, however, these were not always related to feminism.

Another distinctive feature of Latin American accounts are references to decoloniality as a term that hints at Latin America's colonial past as well as the asymmetrical oppressive global structures, mentioned by Scholz, which it has engendered. As a strand of feminism that emanates from women whose bodies have been racialized and exploited, Nora Garita (2019: 14) has highlighted the centrality of decolonial feminism to Latin American feminism. As she points out, there has been a permanent tension with hegemonial, Eurocentric, or North American feminisms that subscribe to an essentialist version of womanhood, which has led her to distinguish between urban middle-class feminisms and indigenous, communitarian feminisms with their strong links to nature, ancestral practices, as well as *sentipensante* [thinking-feeling] and Cosmovision-related knowledges. In direct comparison, the latter strand seems to be largely absent from the feminist landscape on social media.

Visibility and Representation

The findings of the study showed that although social media applications enable their users to connect across geographical, economic, and cultural borders, existing hegemonic structures and power asymmetries are also (re)produced in these spaces in various ways. Considering that feminist Instagram

accounts tend to be run by middle-class women with academic backgrounds and that certain regions and people are only sparsely or not at all represented, the question arises to what extent marginalized standpoints get to circulate in these spaces. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the high number of accounts might not translate into a proportionate wealth of diversity. Thus, when discussing intersectionality in the context of social media, it needs to be considered that many women are left out of the picture, namely the most disadvantaged.

In discussing power asymmetries, it is further necessary to critically examine the role of large and influential accounts that operate by reposting content from other accounts run by individuals whose voices they think should be amplified. Although such accounts afford visibility to certain individuals for a short span of time, they also create dependencies and power structures that may not empower those whose voices the account seeks to amplify, but rather the account itself as well as the people that run it, by affording them the prestige of doing important activist work. Such dynamics, in which large accounts represent those who are perceived in need of representation, likely lead to new regimes of (in)visibility. If the largest and most influential feminist account is a US-American account that purports to cater to a global community, but predominantly features English-speaking individuals from the US, many individuals are left out of the picture. Sarah Jackson and Sonia Banaszczyk came to a similar conclusion in their study on digital feminist counterpublics on Twitter, pointing out that even if it

> works as a space where the historically marginalized standpoints of women can be elevated through virality and collective advocacy, the technological architecture of the platform's trending, retweeting, and mentioning functions, along with the ways mainstream and elite individuals and outlets legitimate the "popular", reproduce the marginalization of intersectional experiences (Jackson/Banaszczyk 2016: 403–404).

It is therefore important to ask whose standpoints tend to be most influential and whose are neglected or even obscured. As the example of @aafc.nyc and @blackwomenradicals has shown that, in the relation to intersectionality, there is a difference between people or groups who use their accounts to draw attention to their projects and those whose intersectionality is solely based on curating content and showcasing individuals that meet their criteria of intersectionality, emphasizing certain people or experiences and neglecting others.

In the former case, the groups' effort to build intersectional and transversal solidarities takes place outside of social media and does not depend on visibility provided by third parties.

Feminist Practices on Social Media as an Ongoing Conversation

Despite such criticisms, it may still be argued that feminist practices on social media offer potential for change. As Caldeira et al. (2020) have argued, it is particularly in the "realm of the everyday and the ordinary that individuals enter into 'conversations' with hegemonic power structures, engaging with them or opposing them, although not always consciously, through their own personal everyday practices", (3) a notion similar to Balkin's concept of a democratic culture. The extent to which this becomes possible, however, is shaped by the platform vernaculars, which according to Caldeira (2021) can be described as a "combination of communicative styles, grammars, and logics that emerge from the relationship between the platform's technological affordances and the practices continuously enacted and negotiated by its users" (7).

Moreover, following Balkin (2004), such potential may also lie in the diversity of feminist articulations on social media that can all be considered integral to maintaining a democratic culture, regardless whether they are accounts that may be interpreted as expressions of neoliberal entanglements with feminism, or accounts that do not fit such framings because their content rather reflects their work on the ground and is aimed at spreading information, announcing events, addressing critical issues like abortion, gendered violence, teen pregnancy, or racism that affect women in their communities. As Tisha Dejmanee (2016: 744) has argued, it might be concluded that

> [u]ser-generated feminism – like popular feminism – is not a perfect expression of feminist politics. The tendency of this movement is to emphasise individual interpretations of feminism, leading to pluralistic and ambivalent outcomes. However, feminist media scholars are also challenged to seek out new ways to analyse the politics of these spaces, given the fact that denouncing individual women for their social media productions has a markedly different valence from campaigning against a media conglomerate's representation of women.

Such a perspective allows for a view of feminist practices on social media as forms of participation in and engagement with the cultural industries and conventions that surround them with all its ambivalences, acknowledging that these practices are not always counterhegemonic, but can sometimes also be complicit with hegemonic structures.

As an outlook, many questions and aspects remain to be discussed in feminist research and theorizing that can provide further insights into (re)articulations of feminism in digital or social media cultural contexts, since a sole recourse to established analytical concepts from feminist media studies or the feminist wave narrative seem to offer little new insight here. Studies that focus on the entanglements in contemporary feminist media cultures, on the role of affect, and the relational frameworks that are at play in feminist social media networks, or that examine the relationship between intersectionality and content creation on social media have already provided new ways of theorizing feminist practices in digital cultures, without falling into the binary of either criticizing contemporary feminism as lacking commitment to a socially transformative feminist agenda, or exaggerating expectations about its capacity to initiate fundamental changes.

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