

# The Failure of Feminist TikTok's Attempt to Combat Toxic Masculinity

## **Abstract**

*TikTok is a significant social media platform which allows users to advocate for causes which they believe in. This paper will explore how feminism has created an online community on TikTok, and how effective it is in providing a solution to feminist issues. This paper will use popular hashtags and TikTok accounts to gather an unbiased impression and explore the popularity of different forms of content, in order to prove that feminist TikTok fails to reduce notions of toxic masculinity on the app.*

The platforms which advocacy takes place on is changing and is continuously evolving. In the past, the negative impact harmful masculine identities had on society was explored in the public sphere and over a longer period of time. However, social media has transformed the landscape of advocacy. Online platforms like TikTok have opened up a third place for networked publics to engage in hashtag activism and discussions about misogyny and feminism. These discussions are effective in raising awareness about women's rights however they fall short in terms of forming solutions to result in a decrease in the expression of toxic masculinity online.

Because social media is widely available, easy to understand and easy to engage with, it is now a key driver in the continued push towards gender parity. The current focus on such social media is on changing the behaviour of men who cause negative impacts on society, through violence and aggression against women, and the villainization of feminine traits among men. By allowing conversations to occur in an environment most people have access to, these issues can be protested for in a manner which is largely noticed by the majority of the population.

## **TikTok as an Advocation Tool**

There is a reason why social media is now at the forefront of assisting modern advocacy, including for women's rights. Posts on social media networks are very easy-to-digest, easy to create and share, and easy to access. This means that the necessary conversations advocates wish to create easily take place over the Internet.

While the Internet has been around since the 1990s, social media has only really been relevant in the past decade, since the prominence of the smartphone. Now, networks can be created on social media website for those who take a specific interest in something or someone. These “influencers” open up avenues for conversations to take place as their advocacy can be seen on a mass-level almost immediately (Church, Zhao, & Iyer, 2020). Because these posts can be seen almost immediately on such a wide-spread scale, advocacy movements utilise this to communicate their message.

An example of one of these influencers can be seen through Tenley Yearles, who posted a video in October 2019 of herself dancing to a recording of her abusive ex-boyfriend yelling at her (Yearles [@tenleyearles], 2019). This video allowed for avenues to be opened up which resulted in conversations about violence against women. Yearles therefore used her TikTok account to spread her message widely across the app. The video has over 870,000 likes.

It is therefore evident that many TikTok users are using the app as an advocacy tool and can communicate to wide network of feminists on the app due to the app’s design.

### ***Feminism before the Social Media Age***

When understanding modern history, major movements in feminism have been described as “waves of feminism” (Bennet, 1989), and have occurred on the tail-end of a massive shift in globalised institutional and industrial advances.

The first “wave” arrived on the tail-end of the industrial revolution and involved creating a landscape where women were provided with more opportunities and eventually resulted with women being allowed to vote in America (Rampton, 2015). The second “wave” started in the 1960s, after World War II, in the wake of mass civil rights movements and anti-war protests, many minority groups (women, people of colour, LGBTQ people) were being advocated for (Rampton, 2015). The third “wave” of feminism began on the tail of the postmodern era, in the mid 1990s.

All of these different eras of feminist activism have set up the advocacy landscape to result in its current incarnation through digital communities. This new, online, form of feminism can be seen to follow the mass digitisation of the current world, and hence follows this consistent trend of “waves” of feminism.

### ***The current digital movement working to combat “toxic masculinity”***

Social media is objectively at the forefront of the movement which aims to combat toxic masculinity. Although toxic masculinity is a nuanced term, this paper will explore toxic masculinity as a notion of “violence and aggression” in masculine identities which is primarily derivative from misogyny (Salter, 2019). This movement aims to expose unjust and unfair displays of misogyny and sexism from men, through methods such as calling out sexual assault, and through the breaking down of traditional masculine/feminine stereotypes.

This movement has created multiple communities throughout different platforms, such as the feminist movement found on TikTok. TikTok allows for the posting and promotion of short videos limited to a maximum of one minute long. It hosts a large range of different vibrant communities, considering its roughly 1.5 billion users (Weimann and Masri 2020). TikTok acts as a third place for such communities to exist through the use of its algorithm. This algorithm is set up in a way where different users can discover others with similar interests to easily discover once another, as videos are suggested to users based on their reactions to previously shown videos.

There are multitudes of different factors which the TikTok algorithm uses to determine what makes a video similar to another. Videos which use the same sound are more likely to be shown to the same user, along with videos by creators who have formed communities with similar creators. A major contributor to what makes a video similar to another is the hashtags which it uses (Anderson 2020). Common keywords are used by creators in the feminist community on TikTok to reach one another and engage in discussion.

### ***Hashtag Activism on Feminist TikTok***

Hashtags are used on TikTok in order to engage in certain discussions within a digitised community. One example can be seen in TikTok’s feminist community, through the breaking down of traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes. This is done in order to support the notion that no person should feel they have to adhere to an expectation that does not co-align with their identity. An example of a hashtag in this instance is #toxicmasculinity, with users and influencers who are not women wearing clothes which are stereotypically designated for women to wear (skirts, dresses, high heels, blouses, corsets, etc.). An example of one of these influencers

is Griffin Maxwell Brooks, who regularly wears women's clothes in their videos in order to emphasise that they are not only for women (Brooks [@griffinmaxwellbrooks], 2021). The emergence of people such as Brooks has grown rapidly on social media in the past few years, due to the ease of use and accessibility. These feminine stereotypes aren't limited to clothing, but also includes emotions, behaviours, hobbies, and much more.

Another popular hashtag that is used by TikTok's feminist network is #97%, which was created after a study was released from UN Women UK in 2021. This study of over 1000 women revealed that only 3% of women had never experienced any behaviours relating to sexual harassment against them (UN Women UK, 2021). The revelation that 97% of women had been subjected to some level of sexual harassment sparked conversation among online communities, especially those who stand up for feminism and equality. Numerous posts have been contributed to the #97% hashtag, calling out behaviour which fosters toxic masculinity such as "unsolicited dick pic senders," "catcallers," and other men who act inappropriately to women (Ashley [@morgannashley], 2021) among numerous others. The #97% hashtag is just one of multiple viral hashtags which are used in order to advocate for this cause. Others include #rapeculture, #metoo and #femicide. All these hashtags have over 15 million views on TikTok, with #97% having over 329 million views.

The massive viewership of these hashtags reveals that a large, digitised network are watching these videos and interacting with them. These interactions occur completely online, where TikTok has been used as the third place to engage in feminist discussion. This community has therefore been effective in raising awareness about feminist rights and issues with some aspects of masculine identity.

### ***Toxic Masculinity on TikTok***

While TikTok's feminist community are effective in reaching others interested in their cause and sparking discussions regarding toxic masculinity, there is no evidence that this work has resulted in the decrease in the presence of such harmful behaviour online.

Because TikTok's algorithm connects users with similar interests, it would not suggest feminism-related content to users who are not interested in it (Rentschler 2017). Hence, similar to the feminist community that was created on TikTok, a network of "toxic" men could just as easily be created.

However, the powerful advocacy by feminists on TikTok would be noticed by a certain percentage of these men due to casual algorithmic suggestion. Seeing these discussions would invoke these men to create a response such as #notallmen, which suggests that the toxic behaviour exhibited by the men which is being called out is only descriptive of a certain percentage of men and not all of them. The fact that this response was created by men in order to defend themselves shows that some men aren't willing to change their behaviour and are defensive of the fact that they would be "called out," instead of being willing to listen to the feminists on the app trying to discuss the issue and work towards a solution.

A quick search through TikTok can show how this behaviour is still large and present. In October 2020, @theswayla posted a video of Jaden Hossler, who's face is being gripped by Anthony Reeves as if they are about to kiss (@theswayla, 2020). With the context that both these men are straight, it is evident that video is poking fun at homosexuality and men who don't typically fit in to the traditional roles of straight men. Evidently, toxic masculine behaviour is still exhibited and celebrated largely on the app.

Feminism is a large and present advocacy cause in modern society. In modern history, a large portion of the advocacy for this cause has been online, due to recent technological advancements resulting in the digitisation of modern society. TikTok allows for conversations about women's rights to occur, and a large network of feminists do engage in these discussions and participate in hashtag activism. However, due to the algorithmic traits of TikTok, the videos do not make much of a presence of users who are not feminists. The response to feminism and the exhibition of misogynistic behaviour found on TikTok reveals how the feminist movement is failing to diminish the amount of toxic masculinity in society, no matter how large the digitised feminist network is.

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