

Instagram Celebrities Leading a New Wave of Feminism

Abstract

Social media has transformed political advocacy by offering new ways for activists to promote and express their identities. In the past, political movements depended upon face-to-face interactions and in-person rallies to promote change. These methods were highly inflexible and limited the effectiveness of advocate efforts. In modern society, advocates employ social media platforms like Instagram to engage new supporters, interact with community members, and promote their beliefs. The technical features of these platforms enhance advocacy by eliminating geographical and temporal barriers between users and supporting virtual conversations between mass groups of Internet users. However, for these affordances to be put to use, Internet users must become engaged in the activist cause and motivated to participate. This paper will explore how celebrities utilise the affordances of Instagram to achieve these goals. I argue that these high-profile users play a crucial role in promoting feminist identities in young women, building virtual feminist communities, educating people on feminist issues, and advancing feminist movements. To support my ideas, I will analyse the Instagram accounts of several celebrities including Clementine Ford, Abbie Chatfield, Brooke Ashley Hall and Beyonce Knowles-Carter. This paper belongs to the Identity and Online Advocacy stream because it explores how celebrities curate their identities to advocate for Feminism.

Introduction

Social media platforms such as Instagram have increased the potential efficacy of advocate movements. The online nature of these platforms has eliminated geographical and temporal barriers between users (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1884). This has allowed people in remote and marginalised communities to engage in online advocacy more easily (Turley & Fisher, 2018, p. 3). Further, the technical affordances of Instagram such as hashtags, messaging, tagging, content sharing, and commenting support interconnected advocate communities by enabling virtual conversations between mass groups of Internet users (Riquelme & Al-Thufery, 2018, pp. 1115-1116). However, for these affordances to be put to use, Internet users must become engaged in activist causes and motivated to participate (Christiano & Neimand, 2017). Due to their visibility and influence, one of the ways that young audiences can be engaged is through celebrities. This paper will explore the ways in which several feminist celebrities on Instagram use fame to publicize feminist identities and encourage audiences to engage in feminist advocacy. I argue that celebrities on Instagram play a crucial role in promoting feminism and empowering feminist communities to act on their values. Firstly, I will explore how celebrities expand feminist networks by engaging new users in feminist issues. Next, I will cover how celebrities strengthen feminist communities by creating a sense of solidarity and support between users. Then, I will discuss how celebrities educate their audience on feminist issues by curating feminist content in ways that are more digestible and relevant to

everyday users. Finally, I will explore how celebrities influence societal change by using their platform to both broadcast concerns about current issues and empower people to speak out.

Building Online Communities

Firstly, let's explore how celebrities leverage the affordances of Instagram to engage new audiences in feminist ideas and encourage them to adopt feminist identities. The visual and interactive nature of Instagram makes complex feminist ideas more appealing for younger users who may otherwise be deterred by them (Caldeira, 2020). Celebrities play an important role in promoting such content by improving its visibility on the platform and encouraging user engagement (Kim & Ringrose, 2018, p. 52). Brooke Ashley Hall is an American model and social media celebrity who leverages Instagram's graphic affordances by sharing feminist ideas in the form of reels (see figure 1). These short 15-second videos engage young audiences in feminist content. While any user can share reels to Instagram, Hall's 350,000 followers improve the discoverability of her content and the overall effectiveness of her feminist messages (Casey & Watson, 2017). Hence, the affordances of Instagram combined with the visibility of celebrity accounts improves engagement with feminist ideas and promotes the adoption of feminist identities.

According to Fondevila-Gascón et al. (2020), the interactive nature of Instagram stories has also helped to engage and make audiences more interested in new ideas. Although Instagram enables this affordance, celebrities play a key role in its effectiveness due to their great influence over younger audiences (Franklyn, 2016, p. 11). For example, Abbie Chatfield, a past contestant on the Australian Television show *The Bachelor*, utilises this affordance by using Instagram stories to ask feminism-related questions to her followers, such as "Is wolf whistling a compliment?". These interactions encourage her fans to engage with feminist ideas and consider the ways in which feminist issues may be relevant to their everyday lives.



Figure 1: Celebrating international women's day

Celebrities also use Instagram to enhance feminist objectives by establishing an intimate and supportive community environment. The technological affordances of social media platforms such as Instagram have democratised participation on the web (Hardesty et al., 2019, p. 254). This has given everyday users more opportunities to connect with online networks and participate in discussions. Celebrities have encouraged users to make use of these affordances by promoting personal interactions on their Instagram accounts (Boyd, 2006). For example, ex-bachelor contestant Abbie Chatfield uses Instagram's Stories to ask her followers to anonymously share their experiences with issues such as workplace harassment. These interactions foster a sense of intimacy between celebrities and their fans and improve community sentiment (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1872). Instagram's interactive media environment also enriches a sense of community by helping users interact with other members of feminist networks (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1972). The comments section on celebrity accounts is a particularly rich area for feminists to participate in conversations and demonstrate support for feminist perspectives (Prøitz et al., 2019). This space promotes a sense of solidarity and strengthens relationships between members of feminist networks (Bailey, 2015). Further, celebrities establish a sense of togetherness and support by sharing content produced by other members of feminist counterpublics (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1874). For example, on International Women's Day, author Clementine Ford shared Instagram posts from other feminist accounts to demonstrate her support for their ideas (see figure 2). This strengthens community ties between networked individuals and heightens awareness of imagined communities on the platform. Hashtags are also important tools to connect with and

express support for users with similar beliefs (Turley & Fisher, 2018, p. 4). For example, Australian author Clementine Ford shared the hashtag #toomanymen in an Instagram post to demonstrate her support for feminist community members who use the hashtag (see figure 3). Thus, by using their Instagram accounts as a platform to host discussions and nurture supportive relationships between feminists, celebrities play a crucial role in developing feminist communities.

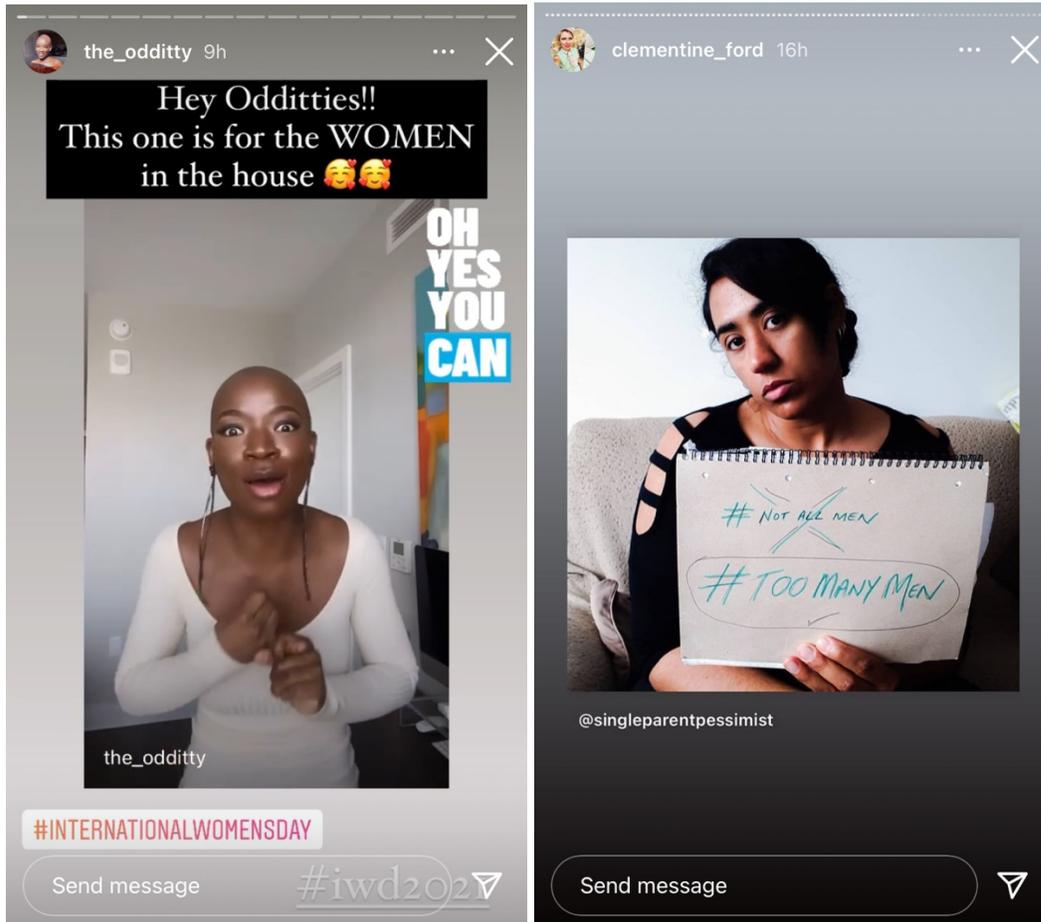


Figure 2: Sharing content that celebrates international women's day
Figure 3: Promoting #toomanymen

Educating People on Feminist Issues

Furthermore, advocate movements play an important role in educating people about feminist issues and concerns. In order to foster informed feminist communities, activist content must be presented in a way that enhances interest and engagement (Christiano & Neimand, 2017). Due to the sheer volume of content available online, advocates often struggle to engage the attention of new users, especially young audiences who privilege entertaining and stimulating content (Bouse, 2016, p. 42). However, Instagram caters to these needs of young people by offering a highly visual and interactive platform (Caldeira, 2020). Abbie Chatfield uses Instagram stories to share personal viewpoints on

feminist issues in a conversational manner. This method of presenting information makes information more digestible and appeals to younger audiences by allowing them to process this information more easily (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020). Similarly, the visual microblogging nature of Instagram encourages celebrities to convey feminist ideas using graphic material and concise captions. For example, in 2014, American singer Beyonce posted an Instagram photo of herself recreating the popular American World War II feminist wartime poster, “We Can Do It” (see figure 4). This photo used visual codes to communicate feminist themes such as female empowerment. By presenting feminist ideas in this way, celebrities improve engagement with younger audiences and the educational potential of their material.



Figure 4: Beyonce recreating the We Can Do It poster

Another way that Instagram facilitates education of feminist issues is by allowing celebrities to share and comment on existing media content (Krueger, 2019). For example, freelance food writer and MasterChef Australia host Melissa Leong used Instagram to share an article about workplace harassment written by MasterChef contestant Poh Ling Yeow. This enhanced the educational potential of her platform by exposing her followers to additional feminist content. Also, by tagging the author of the article, Leong strengthened network connections between feminist accounts and improved the discoverability of new feminist material (Baker et al., 2020, p. 33). Furthermore, Instagram provides an opportunity for celebrities to comment on existing media, such as TV programs, and showcase their ideas and opinions in an informal forum. For example, feminist author Clementine Ford uses Instagram Stories to provide a weekly recap of the popular television program *Married at First Sight* and express her feminist opinions on the show’s events (see figure 5 and 6). This helps raise awareness

and educate her audience on relevant feminist issues in modern society. Also, sharing this topical media content creates a sense of relevance and immediacy which enhances audience engagement (Savolainen et al., 2020). Whilst some people say that information online is deemed unreliable, the personal nature of social media platforms fosters a sense of authenticity and creates a highly receptive environment for educating audiences on feminist issues (Casey & Watson, 2017; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016). Thus, by allowing celebrities to share and critique existing media content in a personal setting, Instagram enhances educational opportunities.



Figure 5: Photo of Married at First Sight episode with recap captions.

Figure 6: Recapping episode of Married at First Sight

Promoting Change

While community building and education are important aspects of advocacy, the core goal of advocate movements is to promote societal change (Christiano & Neimand, 2017). Celebrities have a high level of visibility and credibility which makes their social media accounts ideal sites to achieve this (Franklyn, 2016, p. 11). Instagram has helped stimulate change by providing a platform for celebrities to highlight examples of sexism and anti-feminism. For example, Bachelor contestant Abbie Chatfield uses Instagram

stories to highlight issues of sexist representation in mainstream media articles written by The Daily Mail (see figure 7 and 8). Chatfield’s Instagram account has high visibility due to its high following, which allows her ideas to gain traction and go ‘viral’. This promotes change by encouraging mainstream media organisations to remove anti-feminist content to avoid negative public relations (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1876). Similarly, social media allows users to draw attention towards anti-feminist conduct on the app which helps promote behavioural change (Rentschler, 2014). For example, Chatfield uses Instagram reels to expose anti-feminist messages from an Instagram user. By making the user’s profile visible on her platform, she invites her followers to plague the user with feminist messages of disapproval. This promotes change by discouraging users from posting similar anti-feminist content on her platform. Thus, Instagram promotes action against content that challenges feminist beliefs.

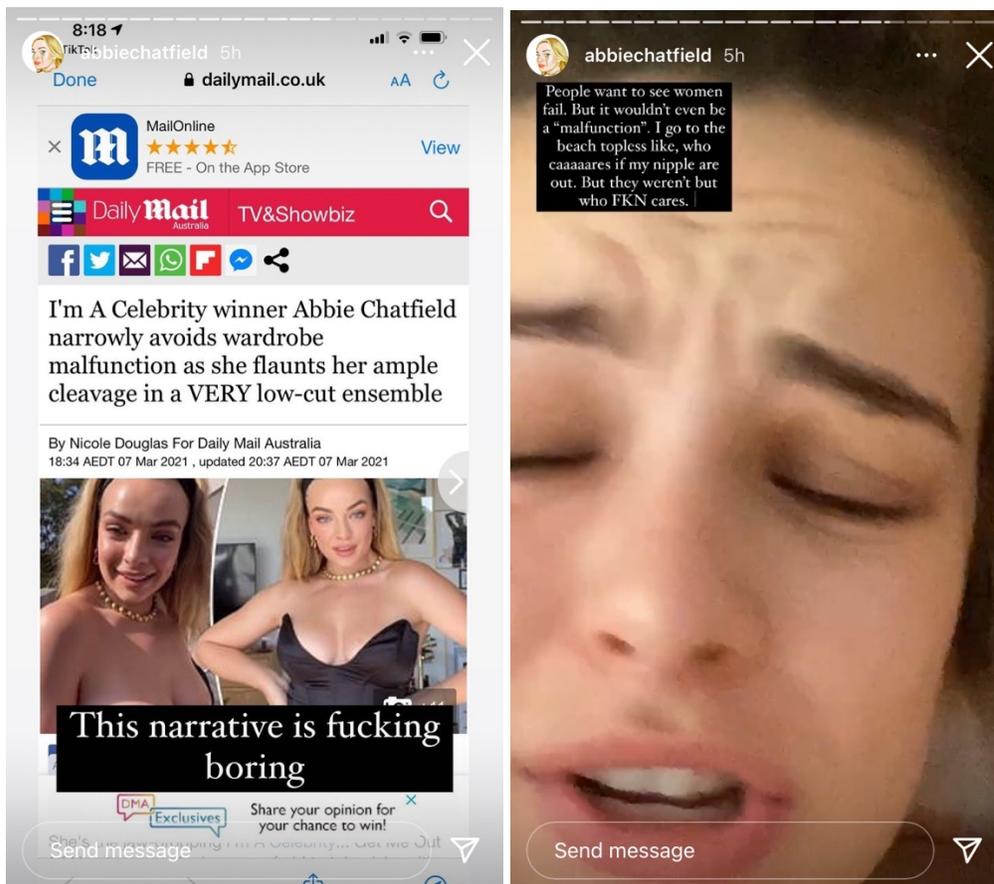


Figure 7: Screenshot of mainstream media article with captions

Figure 8: Critiquing representations of women on mainstream media

In addition to raising awareness for feminist issues, digital spaces have helped celebrities empower people to act upon their beliefs (Al-Emadi & Imene, 2020). Due to their social prestige and status, celebrities possess great power to influence the actions of their followers (Franklyn, 2016, pp. 16-18). Hence, while some people argue that online activism is not effective because online users are not easily mobilised (Kim & Ringrose, 2018, p. 49), celebrities are driving social change by motivating networked feminist

communities. The ability for users to share their reactions and opinions on social media allows feminist celebrities to demonstrate how to respond to criticism (Rentschler, 2015). For example, Chatfield not only shares anti-feminist messages that she receives, but also adds humorous commentary and upbeat music (see figure 9). This inspires her audience to demobilise anti-feminism and improves confidence to publicly perform their identities (Rentschler, 2015). Furthermore, the comments section on Instagram provides a space for celebrities to have discussions with other users about their content, and potentially shut down anti-feminist remarks that occur on the app. The visibility of these responses once again informs people on how to respond to anti-feminist messages and empowers them to do the same.



Figure 9: Responding to feminist hate comments from an Instagram user

Conclusion

Social media has significantly changed political advocacy by offering new ways for activists to interact with networked communities and promote change. However, due to the millions of users on social network sites, everyday advocates can struggle to engage and motivate new audiences to act on social issues. The visibility and credibility of celebrity figures on social media allows them to reach mass audiences and convince them to act. Therefore, I argue that celebrities on Instagram have played a crucial role in

advancing advocate movements by encouraging users to utilise platform affordances. Specifically, this paper has explored how celebrities utilise the affordances of Instagram to promote feminist identities in young women, build virtual feminist communities, educate people on feminist issues, and promote action to support feminist objectives.

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