



The Commercialization of Feminist Art Through Social Media Algorithms

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the modern digital landscape, social media has become one of the most prominent pathways for artists and activists to gain visibility and participate in public discourse. Across platforms such as Tiktok or Instagram, media algorithms have shifted beyond simply recommending content tailored to the viewer but towards a dangerous reality of imposed messaging where voices, aesthetics, and political statements are amplified online. This policy brief covers how the commercialization and algorithm curation of social media has challenged feminist creators and artists' visibility and creative freedom.

II. OVERVIEW

Since social media was first invented in 1997 with the launch of SixDegrees—the first platform to feature user profiles, friends lists, and real-name connections—online platforms have served as a way to connect people across the globe, facilitate communication, and share information globally. Over the past decade, however, social media has transformed beyond its initial mission of personal connection towards a growing space of activism, artistic expression, advertisement and political discourse. For young women and feminist artists, these platforms have provided them the opportunity to share their work and raise

awareness on pressing political issues; furthermore, social media recently began to commercialize their work into the latest marketable and viral trends, visually curated empowerment slogans, and performative activism that succeeds among algorithms. Due to social media algorithms only rewarding content on the metric of virality and profitability, many feminist movements online have become superficial and commercialised, created purely for the algorithm's trends rather than the implied message behind their work.

A. Relevance

As feminist art becomes more popular in online media, the term "commodity feminism" was created by researchers to define the commercialization of feminist political movements. Companies, corporations, and media transform complex political goals expressed through artwork into marketable, lifestyle products — in recent years, this marketing strategy has pivoted to specifically target the younger generation. Across platforms, large companies target the idealized and often romanticized version ¹ of political ideas to transform into products.

Empowerment through political art began with freedom of expression, but ended instead in consumerism. Rather than complex political messages, products for sale are branded as feminist

ideas and art. Feminist concepts, such as independence, strength, and empowerment—which were created to inspire true change and community—have been turned into generic products. Performative activism becomes glaringly obvious here, with shoppers purchasing a “feminist” t-shirt, tote bag, or other personal product as an act of activism.

II. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

The first feminist artwork began during the 1960s and 1970s, created to challenge the lack of female representation in the art profession. Numerous famous pieces by writers, artists, and activists have come together in the defining timeline of popularizing feminist art. In 1971, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* was published by art historian Linda Nochlin. The essay heavily criticized the social barriers and patriarchal social norms that have traditionally kept women out of the creative field—arguing that women did not lack talent, but were never given the same opportunities, access to art schools, drawing classes that men dominating the field had. It was one of the first novels portraying the need for female artists. Moving further down the timeline, works like Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* that celebrated women’s role in history, and historians like Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker who challenged the objectification of women, began to popularize.

In the 1970s, the movement, *the First Wave* emerged. Artists came together to reclaim feminine experiences, celebrate women’s history, and challenge a male-dominated art canon. Women celebrated the initial “vulgar” ideas of the female body through art, challenging the

taboo ideas of menstruation, vaginal imagery, and domesticity. Artists fought together for creative equality for women: representation of female art in museums and especially the acknowledgement of their contribution to art. This shifted the way women’s art was portrayed: from being ignored to prominently recognized as fine art.

Women’s art in this time period used traditionally “distasteful” methods of performance art, body politics, and media to fight against patriarchal art institutions. And they were largely successful, changing the tide to women communities of artwork for activism. However, the period did not last long, and in the 1980s, corporations began to appropriate feminist artwork into commercialized monetary gains.

Frida Kahlo was one of the first original feminist artists whose work was commodified into a recognized aesthetic. Kahlo’s revolutionary artwork, which was rooted in personal trauma, and her Mexican American identity and culture, was becoming mass produced onto everything. Her paintings, originally created as intimate expressions of pain, resistance, and identity, were increasingly detached from their political and historical context and repackaged into visually marketable symbols of “empowerment” and individuality. As she became more commercialized, the complexity and the meaning behind her art was soon forgotten at the hands of large scale media consumption.

III. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

One of the primary stakeholders impacted by the commercialization of feminist art through social

media algorithms are feminist artists and creators themselves. With media algorithms often boosting certain “viral” artworks based upon watch time and profitability, feminist artists often turn to algorithmically favorable content rather than authentic artistic or political expression.

Younger audiences are also significant stakeholders in the dilemma. For younger girls and teens, the depoliticalization of feminist art largely shapes how the younger generations perceive feminism, political participation, and self-expression within digital spaces. Since algorithms largely amplify aestheticized and simplified forms of feminism, younger audiences shift towards prioritizing artwork based on appearance or aesthetics, rather than the true political meaning behind it.

Technology and social media companies also are major stakeholders, as they play a significant role in determining which artistic and political forms of content can gain exposure online. A 2025 Study at the University of Illinois found that lower ranked social media feeds received 40% less engagement due to solely their position on algorithm feeds; Engagement drive algorithm directly influences visibility online.

B. Risks of Indifference

Beyond the commercialization of feminist art perpetuating digital media’s invisibility, the harms extend to algorithms reducing feminist activism towards “performative activism” and a dangerous “illusion of action.” When algorithms only boost marketable, performative artwork, they mask the ongoing crisis in reality with viral idealized artwork, which can often ignore the urgency of the crisis and detracts vital focus and resources away from real-world organizing. If left

unaddressed, social media algorithms will continue to boost popularized artwork, while the true urgency of issues behind artwork will be overshadowed online. In many cases, the visual appearance of activism can be even more harmful than inaction. Viral content and trend based political artwork can give the perception that important issues are receiving enough public attention, when in reality, little legislation change has been taking place in reality.

Additionally, failing to address feminist artwork across social media ultimately weakens the credibility and momentum of feminist movements. When political participation gradually gets associated with engagement metrics, the mobilization and urgency on political issues relating gender inequality, labor discrimination, and violence against women may gradually decline.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Although gender politics often takes place within a heavy partisan division, the broader implication of the commercialization of feminist art impacts millions digitally in how they consume information online, their essential media literacy skills, staying informed regarding political issues and sharing creatively online. Beyond personal political affiliation, the transparency of political issues can impact everyone.

- 1) Protecting the creative and diverse freedom of individual artists: Individual creators sharing their artwork online are forced to conform their work to favor engagement based algorithms that prioritize marketability, profitability, and audience retention rather than political complexity.

As a result, artists are increasingly adapting their artwork towards mainstream marketable content to remain visible, limiting more nuanced, unique, or unconventional political perspectives and art styles in a digital space. By demanding greater accountability and transparency regarding algorithm systems can support struggling artists gain creative freedom, individuality and visibility, and for artists to create askew from algorithmically successful trends.

- 2) Improving digital media among youth: The News Literacy Projects reports the lack of instruction, results in fewer than 2 in 10 teens (18%) accurately being able to distinguish between different types of information, such as news, advertisements, and opinion pieces. As more teens rely on digital media for political news and discourse, educating teens in recognizing bias, false reports, fact-checking and critical analysis is crucial. Thus, increasing awareness surrounding algorithm recommendation systems impacting performative activism, advertising strategies, may improve the younger generation's political illiteracy. With more users educated on how social media algorithm trends can impact the creative political content they see online, civic engagement and critical media consumption enhances.
- 3) Encouraging meaningful civic action and change among local governments beyond performative activism: Popularized by old folk tales, there is a common saying of

"monkey see, monkey do," that refers to action taken based on observation. As local news outlets and cultural engagement shift towards social media platforms, much of civic awareness is through videos and short content seen online. These algorithms have increasingly been rewarding trend based activism art content visibility. By quantifying the number of shares, likes, and viral hashtags online as demonstrated impact, users have a greater misinformed perception of widespread change while the issue continues to remain unresolved. To create true systemic change through civic participation, greater public awareness beyond "performative" and social media activism is needed. Social media is a useful method in increasing public awareness on issues, but by educating the public towards other forms of activism, such as community organizing, local advocacy, and public education initiatives—and especially the deeper message behind feminist art—can make a more direct impact in solvency. Additionally, by bringing visibility towards deeper political issues underlying feminist movements may encourage local government and policymakers to institute meaningful policy action.

IV. TRIED POLICY

In recent years, local governments and policymakers have recognized the need for regulation regarding social media platforms, with digital media often negatively impacting public discourse and limiting online creative expression.

Among young generators, misinformation and digital manipulation have increasingly impacted civic engagement; This has resulted in several regulatory and educational initiatives proposed to address the concerns of commercialization of political and artistic works online.

The European Union Digital Services Act (DSA) was one of these proposals adapted in October of 2022. The EU regulation established a legal framework for digital services among large technology companies. It significantly updated the Electronic Commerce Directive 2000 in EU law by mandating greater transparency in corporations' algorithm systems, the targeting of advertisement and content visibility. However, despite the new law created to increase transparency and oversight among digital platforms, many critics still argued that transparency in algorithmic systems did not fully address the commercialization and performative forms of political content. Although the policy represents one of the first steps in addressing the political influence of digital platforms, the effort may still be insufficient in the issues of transparency, media literacy and political expression.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Standardisation of hiring and promotion processes

Despite many social media platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok working to reduce harmful and manipulative content online, efforts have been focused on reducing misinformation, hate speech, and harmful content, rather than addressing the algorithmic systems shaping artistic and political activism. To address this

issue, new requirements and accountability must be implemented in social media platforms. A policy that specifically shares how platforms amplify, suppresses or prioritizes political and artistic content with algorithms is needed. By understanding how companies' algorithms directly shape content online can help researchers and policy makers shape educational systems teaching media literacy content as well as understand how public discourse and activism is shaped by recommendation systems.

Expansion of Digital Media Literacy Education

As younger generations increasingly rely on social media for political information and civic engagement, schools and local educational institutions should expand digital media literacy programs focused specifically on algorithms, performative activism, and online political manipulation. Existing media literacy curricula often focus primarily on misinformation and internet safety while overlooking how engagement-driven platforms shape public understanding of activism, feminism, and identity online.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Will social media continue to shape modern political discourse and artistic visibility? The answer is determined based on the action we take now.

While digital platforms have taken steps to address the targeting of women and marginalized artists visibility in sharing their work, the reality

is that their efforts have been diluted by the continuation of algorithm systems consistently prioritizing consumable, commercially profitable and "performative" activism over authentic, nuanced feminist artwork. Artists creating feminist art and starting movements for feminism continue to be aestheticized and commodified and reduced to "relatable," marketable trends rather than substantial political engagement. While individuals may be able to profit or participate in these "trends", real creators who created the movement to raise awareness on deeper structural inequalities within their artwork are overlooked. As a result, the artists sharing feminist artwork don't just lose their visibility, but public attention is drawn away from the urgency of the issue, and the meaningful social change the artwork intended to create is lost.

To address this issue, we need greater algorithmic transparency among large social media companies, expenditure of digital media literacy, stronger support for independent creators, and an increased effort to bridge together civic action and online awareness. It's up to the action we take now to determine whether feminist artwork will continue to be commercialized, or a tool for authentic political expression, civic engagement and social change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Taylor Beljon-Regen, Patrick Pickren, Tiffany Li, Asher Cohen, Paul Kramer, and other contributors for developing and maintaining the Fellowship Program within the Institute.

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