

Making a Difference: Social Media, Photography, Activism and Women in Asian Contexts

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Abstract. Selfies by women and female photography has been used for digital activism. In the self-portraits, or selfies used in social media, women are active participants and through the dissemination and the sharing of images (and accompanying messages) there is an act of solidarity to raise awareness of particular issues. I will look at the impact of photography which has led to a rising female presence and empowerment through social media. Furthermore, I will examine feminist representational politics for social activism in the Asian region and how this has engaged with wider social movements such as #me too.

Keywords: Photography, Selfies, Female, Activism, Social Media, #me too.

1 Introduction

The photographic portrait and the selfie, which is a digital self portrait taken by a mobile phone, presents idealised versions of the self. There has been a significant amount of academic discussion relating to the selfie, in terms of narcissism, tourism social media, and its associated cultural significance [1]–[4]. I draw upon the notion that “selfies have become social artifacts that deliver social messages created and negotiated by the culture that produces them.” The portraits purpose contributes to a wider social discourse concerning authority and representation. I will look at the impact of photography which has led to female empowerment in social media. In particular, I am interested in portraits of women and how images of women, mainly taken by themselves have been used as feminist representational politics for social activism in the Asian region.

Of importance is the primacy of the gaze. John Berger [5] in his seminal work ways of seeing, suggest that women are rendered passive in the act of the gaze. He also suggests that whilst men are seen as active a woman’s identity is dependent on the gaze of others. With the use of social media this premise can be challenged. In the self-portraits, or selfies used in social media, women are active participants and though they may be dependent on the gaze of others for approval in the number of likes, through dissemination and the sharing of images (and accompanying messages), there is an act of solidarity. Furthermore, in cases of social activism there is a defiance, in displaying women’s visibility in many forms. They are able to engage like-minded supporters and promote feminist issues. It can be considered a personalisation of politics, a self-actualizing digitally-mediated DIY politics [6].

2 Result

2.1 Technology and Gender

The changes in technology has had a tremendous impact on the gendered practices of image making. Photography portraiture has traditionally been a male proclivity, with women its subjects. In terms of art and professional practice, photography was considered a male practice. For example, in the “1880s the heavy weight of the camera and its cumbersome nature, as well as the knowledge how to operate the technology required “diligence, dedication and study” which made in inaccessible for women at that time to engage in photography [7]. As camera technology became lighter and portable, from over thirty kilograms to something that can be held in one hand, an increasing number of women engaged with photography in the domestic sphere. Literally, the camera is on hand to document the everyday (and the politics of the everyday, such as women’s roles and experiences). Although there are women photographers working professionally in photojournalism and the arts, they are shadowed by their male counterparts. There is an inequality in the professional field due to sexism and the patriarchal nature of the workforce and art practice, in which men have dominated the field. In 1995, [8] wrote that:

While a large number of women photographers have gathered outdoor images, their failure to impress the art and journalism markets suggests that landscapes are still perceived as trophies from the battle of culture with nature.

This suggests that the photography of males venturing to the world is of significance whereas women’s domestic photography was not of importance.

Art historian Griselda Pollock also argues that in the histories of art there are different gendered visions. She asserts, “we cannot ignore the fact that the terrains of artistic practice and of history are structured in, and structuring of, gender power relations” [9]. Traditionally, it is the masculine gaze that has shaped aesthetic discourse, in what is determined of visual value. The lack of recognition and representation of women in the arts and journalism has been a longstanding discussion. The comments in regarding male dominance in photography from over twenty years still has resonance today. “In 2017, most photographs shown in the media are still produced by photographers from the developed world, who are most likely to be white men.” [10]. Nikon, a leading major Japanese producer of cameras in its 2017 PR campaign “chose 32 professional photographers across Asia and Africa to test drive and promote its new camera, the D850” [11]. No women photographers were selected. “The image Nikon used to promote its new camera shows that companies still don’t value women in photography, and that professional photography remains a boys’ club” [11].

Whilst professional photography has its masculine dominance, female photography in social media is prolific in our visual culture. And though, it may not be deemed commercially successful in the traditional areas of art and journalism, women have earned a lucrative income and presence from Instagram accounts, attracting thousands of followers and achieving micro celebrity status through their self-fashioning. “In the contemporary postfeminist sensibility, young women are hailed through notions of independence, agency and empowerment, interpellated as active subjects, imbued with the opportunity (indeed obligation) to ‘makeover’ their lives, through carefully designed and executed ‘choice biographies’ [12]. The use of the camera phone has enabled this agency. As Dong-Hoo Lee

[13] suggests that the digital camera phone has been adapted, utilised, and appropriated in young women's daily lives in both an experiential and microscopic dimension."

Microcelebrity, as defined by Teresa Senft, is "a new style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites" [4]. In Indonesia there are Selebrgrams, individuals who have achieved fame for their persona and style trends. They have thousands of followers on Instagram. In Singapore, the microcelebrities are known as 'Influencers'. They are "internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in "digital" and "physical" spaces, and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events" [1]. Crystal Abidin suggests that the Influencers involve tacit labour collective practice of work that is understated and under-visibility from being so thoroughly rehearsed that it appears as effortless and subconscious [1]. Moreover, as Abidin asserts "Influencers' (semi-)professional selfie products and practices offer new ways of framing the selfie as a tool which has the potential to insidiously undermine prevalent discourses" as marginal or unproductive.

2.2 Female Activism and Selfies

"Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge." [14]. Derek Murray has highlighted "the rise of a newly politicised and empowered female presence" in social media [4]". It is about sharing and building a community of supporters. Significantly, whereas they are "less visible in the public eye, girls' activism plays out in social media where they can speak out about gender-based injustices experienced and witnessed" [10]. Girls and women are documenting their lives and images of their experiences are circulated on social media. As Lee suggests, there is a gendered relation to the camera phone. "Women develop a more intimate relationship with technology, challenge the conventions of gaze, give meaning to what is taken, and circulate their own expressions".

In a transnational study of selfies across five cities around the world it was found that women produced more selfies than men (Selfiecity). The camera phone has transformed the art of picture taking. The selfie has become part of everyday life. It is an opportunity to present one-self as one would like to be seen, but also in a way that is considered appealing. The self-fashioning is an integral part of the selfie. In a study of Chinese women's social media profile images, [15] assert that "profoundly aware of the unfair treatment women are subject to in contemporary China, the interviewees intentionally resorted to the profile picture as a virtual means to tackle oppression" (p.331). This has been viewed as a new type of digital feminism, in which the technology "has greatly empowered female users of social media to express themselves in a way that transcends the passivity and objectification associated with traditional media allowing them to exercise the pure joy of self-loving..." (p.330). In India in 2017, there was a trend of women taking selfies at mid night to mock the ruling party who stated that women should not go out late at night. Using the [16], "women began sharing photographs of themselves living their lives regardless of the time of night, reiterating the fact that staying out late is not in any way encouraging or welcoming inappropriate behaviour"[16]. By posting their selfies online they are empowered in making a visual stance to challenge patriarchy. Digital activism through selfies is a way women can share, protest and draw attention to gendered inequities in society.

Of significance Asia has the highest producers of selfies. A Time magazine 2014 report indicated that the top ten cities for 'selfies' are in Asia. The self (re)presentation has a political significance as a form of empowerment. Riquelme et al "suggests the use of Instagram allows women to gain confidence and develop the capability to organize and execute the courses of actions required to produce attainments they value, whether it be posting on fashion, promoting products or services, offering advice, supporting ideas or another use of the platform. This feeling of confidence in one's own ability has been mentioned as critical for any behavior to take place [17]. By posting their portraits on public platforms, they are open to trolling, which is targeted offensive comments. Nevertheless, the act of posting the images presents a defiance to negativity, and is an empowering act.

In the twenty-first century female representational politics is linked with the use of camera phone technology and social media. For example, in Hong Kong Indonesian domestic workers are heavy users of social media. It is used as a form of communication amongst fellow domestic workers and family back home. "Facebook is used to inform the Indonesian migrant workers about Indonesian news and local community events as well as updates about social issues and workers' rights." [18]. Facebook, particularly in Asia, is used to engage in social issues and used as a call for social activism [19]. A significant example of social activism that reached worldwide attention was the case of twenty- three year old Indonesian migrant work Erwiana Sulistyaningsih, who was brutally abused by her Hong Kong Employer. The photos of Erwiana's bruised and battered body (that were taken by a fellow domestic migrant worker who met Erwiana at Hong Kong airport) were uploaded on Facebook and evoked widespread outrage.

Within 24 hours the photos on Facebook went viral and attracted worldwide attention to the plight of this young woman. A new Facebook page appeared in 14 January 2014, four days after the revelation of Erwiana's case, titled "Justice for Erwiana and All Migrant Domestic Workers Committee"...The variety of support from migrant workers on Erwiana's case is proof of how important solidarity is among migrant workers and the significant impact digital media has for diasporic communities. Notably, Erwiana Sulistyaningsih was named in Time magazine's 2014 top 100 most influential people in the world. Somaly Mam (2014) describes in Time how Erwiana's survival story and her courage in speaking "up for the voiceless will create lasting change" [18].

The photographs of Erwiana were vital, in this case, to attract international and activists' attention.

Young, bruised, and helpless, Erwiana became the poster girl for the many victims of abuse through transnational domestic worker migration. Her story and image displayed a strong symbolic representation of the abuse and exploitation of the female domestic migrant worker [18].

The campaign for Erwiana, and female domestic workers human rights was triggered by images and her story of abuse. Other foreign domestic workers from across the world also displayed images of themselves as a sign of solidarity with Erwiana.

A recent activist social media campaign that has a significant global impact is the #me too movement, in which photographs play an important role in drawing attention the sexual abuse and intimidation of women. The me too movement started in 2006 when African American activist, Turana Burke launched the campaign to raise awareness about sexual harassment. On October 15 2017, the hashtag me too became prolific on social media, after US actress Alyssa Milano encouraged victims of sexual harassment to come forward, in the wake of accusations of abuse of power and sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The movement has exposed the widespread abuse of power and the broke the silence of

victims, with many women coming forward to recount horrific experiences from years past. Arguably, it has the potential to empower women in sharing their experiences and the understanding that they are not alone. “The hashtag was widely used on Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and other platforms; on Facebook, it was shared in more than 12 million posts and reactions in the first 24 hours”. The use of social media and its global impact was profound. Worldwide it has been shared by at least 85 countries. “By the end of the day, there were similar movements in multiple languages, including Arabic, Farsi, French, Hindi, and Spanish.”

The #me too was often accompanied by women holding hand-made signs with the word #me too. In contrast to the face flattering angles of the selfie, the photographs that appeared in this activist campaign reveal a determined and direct message, in regards to female representational activism and drawing attention to the harassment towards women. An example of this is the photograph of Hong Kong hurdle athlete who claimed she was sexually assaulted at 13, by her sports coach. In her image that was posted on her facebook book she holds a sign stating “#me too”. She stands with her body directly to the camera. Her face is not the feature of the photograph, rather it’s her upright bodily stance.

Female photographers have been engaged in presenting images of strength. Women are not rendered as the passive subject. They are presented as active, demonstrating pride and defiance. “The common aesthetic of most Me Too photojournalism likely arises, in part, from this idea, as photographers turn to similar visual cues for presenting a woman as a person with gravitas rather than appeal. Positioning a woman as honest and dignified, in this context, is particularly vital. Before the Me Too movement took hold, women risked being discredited or disbelieved when they came forward with sexual assault allegations” [20]. It is in the sheer number of images and voices disseminated that the movement has gained momentum.

It is claimed that in Asia, the #me too movement has taken a life of its own [21]. “As high profile perpetrators in the West publicly apologized for their behaviour and some lost positions of power, many in Asia saw a chance to reignite long-simmering movements pushing for gender equality and shape their own national conversations about gender inequality.” [21]. The #me too movement has reinvigorated attention to the exploitation and abuse of women and widened the conversation in relation to gendered behaviours and patriarchal practices. For example, the practice of Hmong men travelling to impoverished villages in Laos to find wives whom are decades younger.

The #MeToo movement "has to come down to the level of a village woman who is working in somebody's farms in the field. [It] has to come down to a labour woman who is trying to work in the construction industry or building the road, and being exploited by the contractor," said Ranjana Kumari, women's rights activist and director of the Centre for Social Research in New Delhi[21].

Across Asia the #metoo movement has received critique as being too white or considered a western privileged movement. In Hong Kong, Chip Tso a well-known satirical columnist announced “he is a worshipper of Western culture and so must now follow its latest fashion trend, which is to declare himself a victim of sexual assault.” [22] He posted a photo of “himself holding up a “Me Too” sign, he claims he was sexually harassed by a female teacher in kindergarten because she once touched his face without his consent. Predictably, his series of posts have triggered an internet storm.” [22]. He wrote: “Thanks to the new age of Facebook, all that’s needed is to hold up a selfie with a sign and instantly turn many people into [the alleged Hollywood sexual abusers] Harvey Weinstein or Kevin Spacey” [22]. His proclamations draw attention to the possibility of false accusations which has been sparked by the #me too movement. The high profile case of Indonesian playwright and activist Ratna

Sarumpaet lying about being physically assaulted by unknown persons raised doubts on the truth of other victims stories are draws attention to notions of truth [23].

Understanding the cultural contexts in the global #me too movement is vital, especially in societies where talking publicly about sexual misconduct is taboo. In Japan women have been shamed for coming forward to share their stories of abuse. In Japanese society, there is a prejudice against women speaking about what is considered 'unspeakable acts' of patriarchy. Shiori Ito, a journalist who became the 'face' of the #metoo movement in Japan after coming forward with her personal story of rape became a target of attack for speaking out. "To say 'me too' is quite dangerous in Japan," Ito told France 24. "So, we came up to say 'we too' so no one can target me or [any other] individual." [24]. The #Wetoo movement is not only meant for victims but also supporters against harassment. Luisa Tam, writer for South China Post asserts that women should not post #metoo on social media. "these women are going about their campaign the wrong way, as the emphasis should be shifted to exposing those guilty of abuse over identifying victims." If this is the case, photography of women or self-representation in regards to them proclaiming their identification and solidarity with other women is eradicated.

In Indonesia sexual violence against women, "is sparking public outrage and raising the profile of the western #MeToo movement in public spaces, along with demands that the government and law enforcement develop pro-victim rules and follow them"[25]. "The group Sisters in Danger stated that '3 women become victims of sexual violence EVERY 2 hours in Indonesia' – citing figures from the National Commission on Women's Rights (Komnas Perempuan) and promoted campaigns such as #Song of Resistance" (GlobeAsia). In reported cases, the credibility of the victim plays an important factor. Camera phone technology has enabled victims to document their experiences. A case in point, is of a twenty-two year old woman who was groped by a passing motor cyclist whilst walking from a train station in Depok, West Java. The woman managed to take a photograph of the licence plate of the vehicle. She posted this on Instagram the image and her ordeal became viral and has drawn attention to the safety of women and the offences committed to them on transport services such as Go-Jek and Grab [26].

Whereas, self-representation and images of strong defiant women are prevalent in the #me too movement. The campaign has also drawn attention to the pervasive use of cameras by men for illicit purposes. In a news article titled "My life is not your porn': South Korean women fight back against hidden-camera sex crimes" [27]. In Korea there is the word 'molka' combining the words secret and camera. It refers to the act of being secretly recorded, which is prevalent across South Korea with a over 6500 cases reported in 2017 and hidden camera photographs circulated on the internet [27]. There have been anti-molka protests and images on social media of graffiti targeted at men to stop secretly photographing women.

2.3 Political Engagement and Photography

"Digital feminist activism is a new iteration of feminist activism, offering new tools and tactics for feminists to utilize to spread awareness, disseminate information, and mobilize constituents". Photography of women, by women is challenging entitlement. "The participation in feminist activism and criticism has grown manifold due to the invention and popularization of digital media technologies". As discussed earlier Asia has the highest rate of selfie takers. Women's photography has dominated social media. It may not have the commercial or journalism success of its male counterparts, but it's social influence is far greater in terms of its cultural impact. The gendered focus on the self, of issues relating to

women by women has brought attention to shared experiences, such as in the #me too campaign, to notions of self-empowerment through the fashioning of the self.

Abidin argues that selfies may be seen as subversive frivolity commenting that women “have been renarrativising the moral panic surrounding selfies to such a successful extent that good selfies and selfie-taking skills are a prized asset in the Influencer industry” [1]. The selfie is not a marginal, unproductive practice. It has real world effects in terms of generating interest that has social sway. In terms of fashioning the self, selfies used for activism provides a rich area for analysis in which the camera is used as a digital response to unacceptable behaviour and the gendered politics of lived experience. In the photographs and selfies, women are declaring the right to be seen (and heard) by disseminating their images. As Derek Conrad Murray asserts “Taken en masse, it feels like a revolutionary political movement – like a radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body.” As such, the use of the selfie can be seen for social good and more nuanced approaches to representation, collective action and social activism is evidenced. In this case the female selfie is seen as a political act.

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