"I Guess my Abuser is Right:"
A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Gender-Based Violence Activism on TikTok

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Introduction

The shadow pandemic of gender-based violence (GBV) continues to pose a substantial threat to girls and women around the world, while impacting their health and well-being.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 736 million women- one in three- have experienced physical and sexual violence at least once in a lifetime, which caused irreversible long-term effects for the victims (World Health Organization, 2021).

Literature Review

Social media platforms, including TikTok, dissolved the physical borders among victims and paved the way for digital feminist activism around the globe (e.g. #Metoo, #WhyIStayed, #Timesup).

Previous scholars have studied these feminist movements through various methods, such as content analysis, ethnography, qualitative thematic analysis, and in-depth interviews.

Little scholarly attention was dedicated to the critical study of the digital discourse present on GBV activism, especially within the parameters of power dynamics and gendered relations.

Earlier studies that have explored this phenomenon in a virtual context have fallen short of investigating TikTok as a novel platform in the context of GBV.

The different gender roles present across cultures lead to various manifestations of violence and oppression towards women

Research exploring how the content on the platform gives rise to discourses that promote or challenge unbalanced power relations and gender stereotypes is scarce.

Research Questions

RQ. 1 How is GBV addressed in TikTok activism videos within different cultural contexts (English vs. Arabic hashtag)?

RQ. 2 What are the themes present in the discourse surrounding GBV activism on TikTok in different cultural contexts (English vs. Arabic hashtag)?

RQ. 3 How are power dynamics and gender roles depicted in TikTok violence activism videos in different cultural contexts (English vs. Arabic hashtag)?

Method

The Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) framework developed by Lazar (2007) was employed because it provides a gender lens for the analysis of how different power relations are negotiated within a discourse.

We selected the most viral English hashtag: #stopviolenceagainstwomen (190.2M views), and the most viral Arabic hashtag: #لا للعنف ضد المرأة (126.0M views) on TikTok.

We followed a purposive, non-probability sample consisted of a total of 80 videos.

We examined the captions, song lyrics, visual titles, posters displayed within the visuals, inserted text captions, and protest banners depicted in the videos, if any, to comprehensively analyze the content.

We examined semiotic elements such as *video transitions*, *video colors*, *symbols*, *emojis*, *attire of characters*, and *the use of music/songs*. Next, through the lens of FCDA, we explored *the use of language and verbal elements*, *powerful adjectives*, *depicted gender roles*, *power dynamics*, *status of women*, *status of power*, *emotional tone*, *narratives*, *activism strategies*, and *frames*.

Results and Discussion

The # لا للعنف ضد المرأة focused on acid attacks, murder, harassment, and psychological abuse, reflecting the violence that is typically common in Eastern cultures, while the #stopviolenceagainstwomen, focused on other forms of violence mostly discussed in Western societies, such as marital rape, emotional manipulation, discriminatory laws, lack of political participation for women, unpaid healthcare, sexual violence against lesbians, financial abuse, and revenge porn.
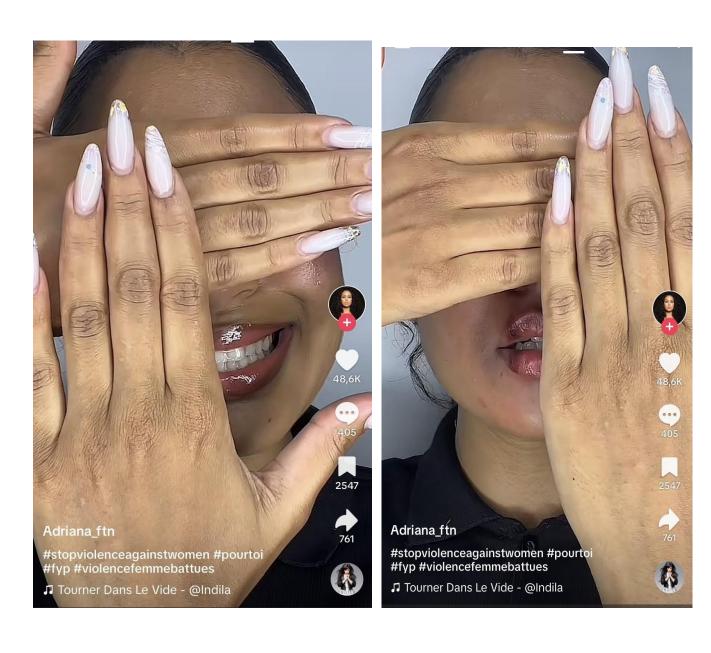
Two counter-discourses emerged, aiming at promoting an alternative understanding of GBV:

1) Counter-Discourse one: Breaking the Silence

-The role of victims in breaking the silence
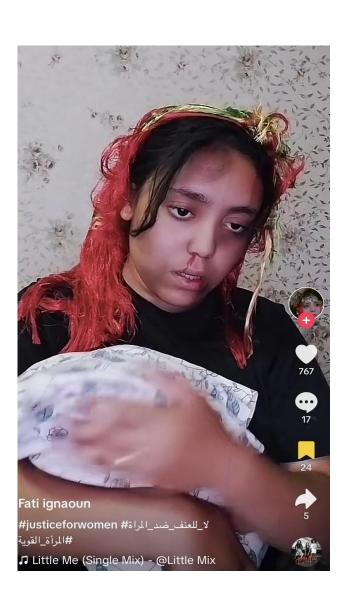

-The role of bystanders in breaking the silence

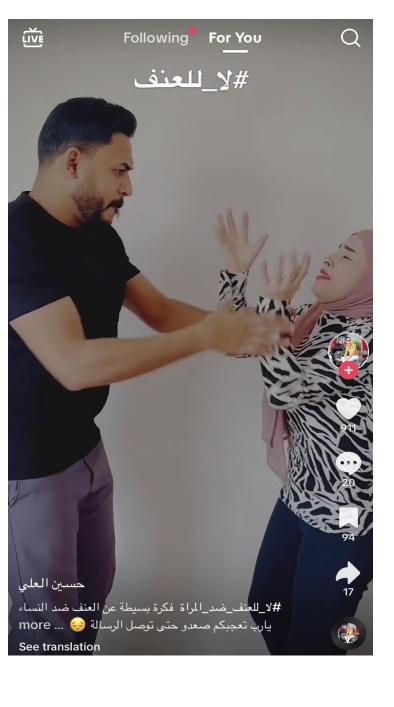-The importance of change in laws that can empower women to break their silence

Results and Discussion

2) Counter-Discourse two: Redefining Cultural and Social Norms

لا للعنف ضد المرأة#	#Stopviolenceagainstwomen
-Videos took a more collectivistic approach	- Videos took a more individualistic approach
"*do not hit a girl of my country*"	"*always leave at the first sight of any physical abuse, even if a man grabs your arm too hard*"
-Emphasized that hitting women is disobedience to God's rules and contrary to the teachings of Islam	-Discouraged tolerating abuse in the name of love or the hope of changing a partner
-Challenged the notion of manhood in Eastern cultures, shattering the myth that hitting women represented masculinity	-Challenged prevailing notions about gender roles, encouraging parents to educate both their daughters about safety, and their sons about consent
-Discouraged parental pressure, which forced young girls into marriage, curbing their aspirations	

While TikTok videos attempted to challenge traditional gender norms and empower women, they inadvertently reinforced existing power imbalances and often portrayed women as passive victims. In spite of these challenges, some narratives emerged, showcasing women's resilience and challenging societal norms, albeit within the constraints of traditional roles.

Conclusion and Future Directions

1) This work extends the literature on FCDA by taking the lead in unveiling the relationship between language and power dynamics within the context of GBV activism on TikTok

2) This comparative study is among the earliest to explore how the online discourse on activism is shaped by cultural differences present in both languages (English and Arabic). The study also addresses the scarce scholarly work on the analysis of Arabic hashtags.

3) By uncovering the embedded gender power relations present within the GBV activism discourse on TikTok (Lazar, 2007), the work here represents a form of analytical activism and feminist advocacy aiming at promoting social change and gender equality.

4) Forthcoming research also should critically analyze the content of humanitarian organizations, such as the United Nations, that advocate for the cause and provide a comparative analysis between the conversations of users and these organizations