# FEMINISM DISCOURSE ON TWITTERSPHERE: THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN THE SOCIAL SYSTEMS OF NIGERIAN WOMEN

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**Abstract**
Feminists aim to create a more equitable society by addressing systemic gender-based inequalities, advocating for gender rights and opportunities, and ultimately eliminating gender-based discrimination. A crucial aspect of achieving this goal involves narrowing the information and knowledge gap and bridging the digital divide in societies. Creating a more just and equitable society for women will reduce the socio-economic and social system disparities between men and women and also create a more egalitarian society. While social media plays a significant role in advancing these efforts, it remains unclear how many issues raised and discussed on Twitter (now X) are categorised as feminist discourse, and which are perceived as casual banter by users. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to comprehend and address the information and knowledge gap and the associated digital divide, as evidenced by feminism discourse on Twitter. This paper, grounded in both Feminist Theory and the Knowledge Gap theory, delves into Twitter discourse related to feminism. Data for this research is collated using simple random sampling and constructed week sampling, involving the content analysis of tweets. In conclusion, this paper explores how the digital divide impacts Nigerian women's participation in feminist discourse on Twitter. Additionally, it shows the effect of socio-economic disparities also shapes their online involvements, viewpoints and the general value of feminist engagement. Therefore, reducing these societal divides, especially through the utilisation of Artificial Intelligence, can significantly improve feminist activities and enhance women's socio-economic status in Nigeria.

**Keywords**: Feminism, digital divide, knowledge gap, artificial intelligence, socio-economic status, social systems.

## Introduction

The continuous advancement of media and communication technology has significantly enhanced humanity's overall understanding of international situations and processes. Kaul (2012) asserts that the media plays a central role in cultural, social, political, and economic events globally. Furthermore, developments in communication have impacted every aspect of human life, thanks to the capabilities offered by the media. Nevertheless, Udeze and Oko (2014) contend that there is a significant discrepancy in ownership, access, and utilisation of modern information devices among global populations. This discrepancy in ownership is particularly pronounced among women, particularly those who are socially disadvantaged. The feminist movement has been motivated by the hardships and challenges that women face and endure in their cultures. In his work, Freedman (2001) elucidates that feminists are leading the charge in advocating for social, economic, political, and cultural transformations aimed at diminishing and ultimately eradicating gender-based discrimination against women.

The feminist movement has been driven by advocates and activists who have long championed gender equality and the freedom of women. This paper aims to examine the inequalities in the socio-economic status of women and social systems in Nigeria, and their influence on the ongoing issue of the digital divide and knowledge gap between genders and between affluent and poorer women in our society. It will specifically analyse the discourse on Twittersphere, drawing comparisons with Twitter as a public sphere, and explore how the implementation of Artificial Intelligence can mitigate these disparities.

## Statement of the Problem

The feminist movement is a global movement that aims to establish a society where both genders have equal social, economic, and political opportunities, and to promote the rights and interests of women in all spheres of life and across all societies. The differences in socio-economic status between women and the social structures in Nigeria are particularly evident in this aspect. These inequities are partially driven by the information and knowledge gap exacerbated by the digital divide in our culture. This study investigates the feminist discourse on Twitter and aims to comprehend the manner in which these inequities are addressed and challenged. The study also looks at Artificial Intelligence's roles in eliminating these disparities and advancing the cause of women in Nigeria.

## Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:
1) Ascertain the responses/contributions to feminism and feminist discourse on Nigerian Twitter;
2) Sample the different perceptions of feminists and feminism on Nigerian Twitter;
3) Ascertain the level of disparities that exist concerning information and knowledge gap and about feminism issues fuelled by the existence of a digital divide.

## Conceptual Review
## Feminism and Feminists

The topic of "Who is a Feminist?" is commonly posed in contemporary times, as individuals seek to understand the identity and significance of feminists. A feminist is an individual who fundamentally advocates for the political, economic, and social equality of both men and women (www.amazoncastle.com). According to Delmar (2001), a feminist is an individual who holds the belief that women experience discrimination based on their gender, that their unique needs are disregarded and unfulfilled, and that addressing these needs would necessitate a fundamental transformation in the social, economic, and political structure. Freedman (2001) elaborates that the discussions surrounding equality, its definition, the methods of attaining it, and its importance to the emancipation of women are fundamental to feminist examination and discourse.

The second fundamental inquiry that individuals consistently pose is, "What is the necessity for feminism?" Brunell and Burkett (2019) assert that feminist endeavours have contributed to the advancement of women's conditions, resulting in a more favourable global environment for them. Modern women play a significant role in society. They are no longer marginalised but rather visible, empowered, and have the right to vote and own property in most countries. These advancements were made possible by the emergence of feminism and the women's rights movement (Brunell & Burkett, 2019). Women in certain regions of the globe have achieved liberation, along with the acquisition of rights and constitutional safeguards that were previously absent. Nevertheless, several countries continue to harbour bigotry and impose limitations, and Nigeria is an exemplar of a society where conspicuous discrimination and restrictions against women persist. Segal (1999, cited in Freedman, 2001) raised the inquiry, "Why feminism?" They elucidate that the reason lies in its most revolutionary objective, which encompasses both individual and collective aspects: the attainment of a world that is improved, not only for certain women, but for all women, and not only for women, but also for men.

## The Digital Divide

According to McQuail (2005, referenced in Udeze & Oko, 2014), the digital gap refers to the different inequities that arise due to the advancement of computer-based digital communication. The digital gap is perpetuated by factors such as the exorbitant costs of technology, reliance on sophisticated infrastructure, and the requirement for advanced communication skills. Gaziano (2016) argues that the digital gap is caused by disparities in internet usage, and just increasing internet access may not always address other barriers to knowledge. According to Wei and Handman (2011, quoted in Gaziano, 2016), the digital divide refers to disparities in the effective utilisation of information and communication technologies. Panel data shows that digital inequality has a greater impact than its analogue equivalent, resulting in a more substantial difference in knowledge.

Bonfadelli (2002) argues that opponents of the emerging information society and new media express concerns about a growing digital divide, which refers to a societal disparity between those who have access to computers and the internet (the information rich) and those who do not (the information poor), or between those who benefit from technology use and those who do not. According to detractors, there is a prediction that the Internet would create a division in society, with one group being the information elite and the other group being those who are not connected to the Internet (Rosenthal, 1999, cited in Bonfadelli, 2002). According to Keniston and Kumar (2003, cited in Udeze & Oko, 2014), the significant factors that separate people are income disparities,

linguistic and cultural distinctions, the widening digital divide between affluent and low-income countries, and the rise of privileged social groupings.

According to Jeffres et al. (2011), variations in age and education significantly influence the comprehension of technological knowledge gaps. They assert that technology is often perceived as the pragmatic implementation of scientific knowledge, although it may equally be regarded as the human capacity to manipulate our surroundings. Scientific knowledge, like technology information, can often be intricate and inaccessible to the general public (Jeffres et al., 2011). Kaul (2012) also challenges the disparity between the developed countries and the developing countries. This gap, shown as an inequality between the affluent and the impoverished, continues to persist as a result of discrepancies in the availability of resources, knowledge, and technology, particularly in rural regions. However, this division is replicated in almost every country and frequently mirrors other gaps in socio-economic and social systems, such as disparities across income brackets, genders, and ethnicities.

## Socio-economic and Social System Disparities
Imbalances in socio-economic status, which characterise all modern society, are induced by the uneven distribution of economic power between individuals; such disparities are among the fundamental forces behind the emergence of social inequalities. These inequalities, in turn, lead to social stratification and spatial segregation in social structures characterised by the correlation between the social network, living environment and socio-economic status of people (Leo et al., 2016). According to The World Bank Social Development Department (2006), the distribution of public goods and resources in most countries is unequal; therefore, some social groups experience inequality by their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, family/clan affiliation, political views and so on. This distribution is unequal and inequitable when it deprives excluded groups of the opportunity to access civil, political and economic mechanisms to improve their status (World Bank 2005a, cited in The World Bank Social Development Department, 2006). Social structures, norms and values, which groups internalise to sustain existing arrangements, provide a framework in which inequitable systems persist and inequality traps perpetuate (Keizer, 2005; Govender, 2005, cited in The World Bank Social Development Department, 2006).

## Twitter as a Microcosm of Society
According to Weller et al. (2014), since the launch of Twitter in 2006 (now rebranded as X but for this paper will still be referred to as Twitter), it has transformed from a niche service to a mass phenomenon, combined with the interpersonal nature of its communication, Twitter is increasingly used as a source of real-time information and a place for debate in news, politics, business and entertainment. Twitter provides a communicative space affording the emergence of a new type of publicness: the "personal public". This personal public is seen as an ideal type of communicative space, defined and placed in contrast to the traditional publics afforded by journalistic mass media and framed by the three structural dimensions of technological affordance, social and textual relationships, and shared rules and expectations (Weller et al., 2014, pp. 3-7). The success of Twitter has made it a rich research site for scholars interested in online interactions, information dissemination, activism and a plethora of other subjects. The sheer volume of its users, tweets and hashtags has made the site a favourite for quantitative data analysis (Weller et al., 2014).

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Bridging the Gap
The significant expansion of human knowledge in recent times may largely be attributed to the advancements in media and communication technology. Kaul (2012) states that there has been a rapid transition in the world due to developments in communication technologies. People are increasingly mobile and urban; physical, political and social environments are shifting. These factors influence our communication; nonetheless, a disparity in the dissemination and retrieval of information continues to exist. When it comes to the Internet, which combines visuals with text, these visuals have the potential to be more easily understood and interpreted by individuals. However, the process of deciphering and understanding the printed material may pose challenges stemming from educational, psychological, physiological, or sociological factors (Gaziano, 2016).

Scholars like Barker and Dun (1972, quoted in Udeze and Oko 2014) believe that until access to information services is generally available, individuals already rich in information will continue to be at an advantage over the information poor. They argue, however, that universal access to information services is unattainable, implying that these disparities will continue to exist indefinitely. Gaziano (2016) posits that the advent of the internet and the widespread teaching of computer skills and information retrieval in educational institutions may potentially lead to a reduction in knowledge inequality. Here is where the utilisation of Artificial Intelligence

(AI) becomes relevant. Horton (2023) asserts that utilising AI can enhance technology accessibility and narrow the divide between individuals with and without access to technology. This is achieved by rendering technology more attainable for those lacking the requisite abilities or resources to utilise it proficiently.

Horton (2023) provides various instances of how artificial intelligence might be employed to bridge the gap between those who have access to digital technology and those who do not. AI-driven translation tools facilitate communication across different languages by overcoming language barriers. AI-powered chatbots offer personalised assistance and guidance, enabling users to navigate digital platforms and accomplish tasks that they may have struggled with independently. AI technology streamlines and automates various processes, enhancing accessibility and efficiency for users of all skill levels. Additionally, AI can contribute to the development of cost-effective and efficient technologies that can be utilised in resource-limited environments. Lastly, AI-based analytics can identify deficiencies in digital infrastructure and facilitate targeted interventions in those areas (Horton, 2023).

## Theoretical Framework
### Feminism and Feminist Theory
Ropers-Huilman (2000, cited in Pasque & Wimmer, 2001) posits that feminist theory is primarily based on three fundamental principles. Firstly, it recognises the valuable contributions that women can make to all areas of society. Secondly, it acknowledges that women, as an oppressed group, have been hindered from realising their full potential, receiving recognition, and participating fully in society. Lastly, feminist research should not only critique existing structures, but also strive for social transformation. According to Lober (1997), feminist ideas have evolved over the last thirty-five years. This evolution occurred as the shortcomings of one set of ideas were analysed and resolved by a more superior set of concepts that aimed to explain the significant inequality between women and men. The progression has been ambiguous due to the simultaneous occurrence and ongoing nature of numerous discussions. Thus, the various strands of feminism exhibit both continuities and convergence, alongside significant discrepancies. According to Delmar (2001), the varied interpretations of feminism among feminists have resulted in a form of sclerosis inside the movement, causing certain parts to become isolated and resistant to one other.

According to Delmar (2001), the division and disunity within contemporary feminism demonstrate the difficulty of creating a cohesive and universally accepted definition of feminism in the present. Due to the diverse explanations and changing emphases in practical campaigns, there are now multiple interpretations of feminism, leading to the recognition of a diversity of feminist perspectives rather than a singular one. According to Delmar (2001), the pursuit of equal rights for women's independence and self-sufficiency, presented as a self-contained ideal without considering its societal purpose or impact on others, caused significant debate and disagreement among certain groups. Detractors of individualist feminists levied accusations of egoism on women whom they said had embraced a masculine paradigm as the embodiment of humanity (Delmar, 2001). The branch of feminism focused on individualism, which faces substantial criticism, is a prominent topic of discussion on Nigerian Twitter. Users engage in constant debates regarding the role of women in traditional households and our conservative society. These discussions often revolve around societal rules dictating what women should and should not do. However, it is important to remember that an egalitarian society, which does not impose gender roles, benefits both women and men equally. This study utilises this theoretical framework to elucidate how Nigerian women utilise the Twittersphere to establish support networks and demonstrate unity in their feminist endeavours. Gaining insight into these relationships helps cultivate more robust ties within the feminist endeavour, fostering a collective feeling of purpose and solidarity among women from all backgrounds.

### Knowledge Gap Hypothesis
Gaziano (2016) explains that the knowledge gap hypothesis proposes that as more and more information is disseminated into a social system, such as a community or a nation, the wealthy gain more knowledge faster than those who aren't rich. This leads to a relative differential in the knowledge increase between both groups, both at one point in time and over time. Gaziano (2016) gives the reasons for developing knowledge gaps, including characteristics of more advantaged socio-economic groups and mass media information-delivery systems. Tichenor et al. (1970, cited in Gaziano, 2016) opine that the less advantaged would gain more knowledge, but the more advantaged would gain more knowledge faster. Gaziano (1997, cited in Gaziano, 2016) defined this knowledge as information gained and remembered through a learning process, whereas information gaps are disparities in data available to be learned. This knowledge can be measured as a simple awareness of an issue (a dichotomous measure) and in-depth information (a continuous variable).

According to Bonfadelli (2002), the knowledge gap hypothesis is often mentioned in the public debate on the social consequences of the information society. Udeze and Oko (2014) believe that these social consequences imply that the information gap and knowledge gap between the information rich and the information poor is getting wider daily. However, to some scholars, the knowledge gap proposition is deterministic, biased and overlooked abilities of the less advantaged (Gaziano, 2016). Rogers (2003, cited in Gaziano, 2016) alleged that it is due to communication activities and renamed it the communication effect gap hypothesis, citing the cause in information sources rather than receivers. According to Tichenor et al. (1970, cited in Gaziano, 2016), there exist some conditions under which knowledge gaps on the level of the community do not always occur; how active organised groups are on issues with the community is significant to here, this is because of their ability to control information flow and stimulate conflict.

Jeffres et al. (2011) opine that the knowledge gap hypothesis is a perspective that even though it is rooted in studies of traditional new media during the postmodern era, as media convergence continues to grow, these gaps in audience information now apply to new media. Kaul (2012) explains that the advent of new media with different practical and ideological changes from traditional media has impacted social change and transformed our world's communication landscape. Most technology described as new media are digital, often characterised by being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, impartial and interactive. Gaziano (2016) opines that introducing new media has held promise and discouragement for closing knowledge gaps. When access to internet use depends on socio-economic status, knowledge differentials may increase. This is why feminists have strived to improve the status of women, especially the economic status of women in society because they are most affected by these gaps and bear the brunt of poverty and discrimination in their societies. Women's ability to bridge the digital divide and improve their socio-economic status will benefit them and their societies.

## Methods

Kim et al. (2018) adjudged simple random sampling to be more efficient in obtaining a more efficient and representative sample of Twitter data because it assumes that each item in a specific population is given an equal chance to be selected in the sample. Using a keyword search as demonstrated by Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016, cited in Kim et al., 2018), this researcher's content analysed tweets on the subject of study. About 2,000 tweets were randomly selected between the 3rd and 30th of April, 2023. They were collected from 20,000 tweets from a pool of identified feminism-related tweets, checking their geotags and geolocation to ensure users are in Nigeria.

This research coded tweets into five categories: personal opinion on feminism, identification as a feminist, opposition to feminism, support for feminism, and issues about feminism. On personal opinion on feminism, tweets were examined and coded on whether a tweet was tweeted/retweeted, if the tweet was in response to another tweet or response to a published article (3 variables). On identification as a feminist, tweets were examined and coded based on users identifying as feminists, refusing to identify as feminists, or wanting to identify as feminists but having certain constraints (3 variables). In opposition to feminism, tweets were coded that showed negativity towards feminism (1 variable). In support for feminism, we coded tweets that were favourable towards feminism (1 variable). On issues about feminism, tweets were examined and coded based on issues relating to feminism that were discussed, the knowledge and information gap fuelling a disparity in realities of women, real world and online feminism realities, and the problem they have with feminism (3 variables). The inter-coder reliability calculated using Holst's formula was (r = 88%), and data was presented using simple percentages.

**Data Presentation**

**Research Question 1:** What are the responses/contributions to feminism and feminists discourse on Nigerian Twitter

| Variables for coded tweets | Simple Percentage (%) |
| --- | --- |
| Users who contributed to tweets on feminism from other users | 72 |
| Users who responded to tweets on articles about feminism | 58 |
| Users who have issues with the concept but aren't against or for feminism | 51 |

**Research Question 2:** What are the different perceptions of feminists and feminism on Nigerian Twitter?

| Variables for coded tweets | Simple Percentage (%) |
| --- | --- |
| Users favourably disposed to feminism | 21 |
| Users who are against feminism | 38 |
| Users who identify as feminists | 17 |
| Users who don't identify as feminists | 50 |

**Research Question 3:** What are the levels of disparities that exist concerning information and knowledge gaps about feminism issues fuelled by the existence of a digital divide?

| Variables for coded tweets | Simple Percentage (%) |
| --- | --- |
| Users' tweets on the knowledge and information gap fuelling a disparity in the realities of women | 22 |
| Users tweet on real-world and online feminist realities | 67 |
| Users tweet about the problem they have with feminism | 75 |

**Discussion of findings**

**Research Question 1:** What are the responses/contributions to feminism and feminist discourse on Nigerian Twitter? Conversations on feminism and feminist issues are usually very heated on Twitter and garner a lot of engagement; Twitter users frequently contribute to these discussions and generally have opinions on these issues. This shows that educated Nigerians who can use social media technologies to communicate are very up-to-date with issues relating to feminist activities in Nigeria and the problems Nigerian women face.

**Research Question 2:** What are the different perceptions of feminists and feminism on Nigerian Twitter? The data shows that generally, there are more negative tweets, views and perceptions about feminism and feminists on Twitter than there are positive views. This means that a good number of Nigerians on Twitter are not favourably disposed to the concept of feminism, despite their seemingly high level of education and also considering the issues that women face in Nigerian society. According to Offen (1988), to many people, the word feminism continues to inspire controversy, arouse a visceral response, and even evoke fear among a sizeable portion of the general public. Understanding what feminism stands for and a proper education of who feminists are will be a crucial step in changing these negative perceptions about people who take it upon themselves to fight for the equality of the sexes and the advancement of women.

**Research Question 3:** What are the levels of disparities that exist concerning information and knowledge gaps about feminism issues fuelled by the existence of a digital divide? The data shows that Twitter users do not trust the conversations had on feminism on the site; a good number of the users do not feel that the conversations on Twitter are representative of the realities on the ground; they feel that there is a gap in how online feminists deal with women issues that is quite different from the significant issues affecting women in Nigeria. They also feel that feminism is a Western world concept and most of the conversations are not the reality of what Nigerian women face offline. The women (poor rural women who do not have access to social media and the technologies that power them or have the means to afford them) who need feminism most are not a part of these

conversations and do not even understand the importance of their rights or know the rights they have; therein lies the knowledge and information gap fuelled by their socioeconomic status and social system disparities.

The socio-economic and the social system realities of women in Nigeria are reflected in these conversations. Obijiofor (2012, cited in Udeze & Oko, 2014) emphasised that the use of new media in poor continents, such as Africa, is limited to the middle and upper classes that are technologically savvy. This divide is very prominent when looking at advocacy for women's rights and the equality of the sexes discussions on social media, especially on Twitter. Proponents and opponents of feminism continue to have arguments on the elements of feminism; a lot of the women who suffer the most from this inequality are not a party to these discussions because they do not have access to the technologies that will enable them to be part of these discussions. To further bridge the gap between these classes of women in our societies, the use and improvement of AIs, focused on the advancement of women and the activities that help improve their equality in society, should be advocated. Kumar and Choudhury (2022) explain that, however, in the world of AI, gender imbalance is a critical issue. Because women make up such a small Percentage of the technological workforce, technology may become the tangible incarnation of male power in the coming years if the gender imbalance is left unchecked. This would, in turn, deny women the opportunities to access technologies that would make their lives easier, give women access to critical infrastructure that will help eliminate the information and knowledge gap, reduce the digital divide and improve the socio-economic status of women in their societies.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has discussed the subject of feminism and its importance to not just women but society as a whole. This paper also discussed the socio-economic and social system disparities that lead to persistent gaps in information and knowledge and an increase in the digital divide between different groups of women in our societies: the haves and the have-nots. The concepts and research reviewed in this paper can lead to a more comprehensive representation of feminist efforts that reflects the connections of gender and digital access. The awareness gained from this investigation can aid advocacy efforts that support digital inclusion to improve the socio-economic status of women in Nigeria, as well as contribute immensely to scholarship on women issues in Nigeria. If the persistent inequalities that plague different women in our societies are not properly addressed, these socio-economic problems that cause the knowledge gap and digital divide will continue to persist. Also, advances in technology, like Artificial Intelligence, will make an impact, but only for women who are already exposed to such technologies; therefore it is imperative that our society improves on women access and exposure to digital technologies. Until we live in a world where socio-economic and social system disparities do not exist, irrespective of the advances achieved in technology, media and communication, the problem of the knowledge and information gap and the digital divide will continue to persist. Issues relating to women's rights, which are mostly fuelled by poverty and a lack of information, will also continue to persist.

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