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Intersectionality in Action: Dalit Women's Digital Resistance via #DalitWomenFight

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Abstract

The hashtag #DalitWomenFight has emerged as a vital online space for the assertion, resistance and collective action of marginalised Dalit women in India. Dalit women have historically been silenced within both mainstream feminist and anti-caste movements. Much of the existing research on online feminist and anti-caste movements tends to privilege English-language, text-based activism, leaving underexplored the ways in which Dalit women mobilise through visual storytelling and multilingual digital practices on platforms like Instagram. This research aims to understand how social media, particularly Instagram, represents and amplifies the voices of marginalised Dalit women in the digital sphere. Theoretically grounded in the intersectionality framework and networked publics theory, the study examines how gender and caste intersect to shape marginalised communities in online platforms and enact positive social change by creating counter-publics where Dalit women's voices gain visibility and empowerment. The research adopts qualitative thematic content analysis of posts, primarily images and videos, using the hashtag. A purposive sample of approximately 200 posts is selected from July 2020 to July 2025 to understand the contemporary landscape of Dalit voices' portrayal and includes content in English, Bengali and Hindi. Both textual and multimedia posts will be considered to reflect the variety of expressive forms. Engagement metrics, such as shares, likes and comments, are analysed to understand visibility, digital reach and audience interaction. User anonymity is safeguarded throughout the research process. This approach aims to capture the linguistic diversity present within digital activism surrounding #DalitWomenFight and ensure representation of varied voices and narratives across different language communities. The research is expected to contribute to the broader discourse on intersectional digital activism and the role of social media in amplifying marginalised voices, while also offering actionable insights that can help to inform policy and digital activism strategies.

Keywords: #DalitWomen #MarginalisedVoices #Intersectionality #DigitalFeminism #OnlineActivism #SocialMedia #DigitalInclusion

Introduction

Dalit women in India occupy a unique and precarious social location, shaped by the dual and mutually reinforcing oppressions of caste and gender. The combination of caste-based discrimination with gendered

vulnerabilities creates additional marginalisation for Dalit women because patriarchal structures reinforce the existing social hierarchies (Chakravarti, 2003).

Dalit women have long been overlooked in both mainstream feminist movements and anti-caste struggles. Feminist campaigns tend to view women as a single group and overlook how caste dynamics create different challenges for women. The anti-caste movements, while focusing on challenging the caste hierarchies, usually highlight men's experiences and ignore the specific issues faced by Dalit women (Rege, 1998; Rao, 2009). This absence of Dalit women's voices from institutional, political and intellectual spheres results in the systemic erasure of their experiences, making the digital sphere a crucial site for rearticulation and resistance.

In recent years, digital platforms have provided new avenues for assertion, resistance and solidarity-building. In recent years, digital platforms, particularly visually driven and participatory spaces like Instagram, Facebook and X, have transformed how marginalised communities engage in public discourse. Social media enables Dalit women to reclaim narrative authority, articulate lived experiences of caste oppression and build translocal solidarities that were previously inaccessible due to structural and geographical constraints (O'Connor, 2020). At the same time, the digital sphere is not free from constraints. At the same time, the digital sphere is not free from constraints. Dalit women encounter algorithmic invisibility, cyber casteism, trolling and digital surveillance, revealing how technological systems themselves reproduce social hierarchies (Noble, 2018; Singh, 2022).

This study examines how Instagram serves as a platform for representing, amplifying and circulating the voices of Dalit women. By analysing visual, textual and multilingual content under the hashtag #DalitWomenFight from July 2020 to July 2025, the research aims to understand the dominant themes and issues that are most prominent in such posts and how public engagement (likes, comments, shares) influences their visibility and reach.

Objectives

- To analyse how social media, particularly Instagram, serves as a platform for amplifying Dalit women's voices in the digital sphere.
- To assess the audience engagement factor (likes, comments and shares) in terms of understanding visibility and reach related to posts on Dalit women's issues.

Research Questions

1. What themes and issues are most prominent in Instagram posts that seek to amplify Dalit women's voices?
2. How do audience engagement patterns (likes, comments and shares) shape the visibility and reach of Instagram posts on Dalit women's issues?

Literature Review

Intersectionality and Caste-Patriarchy

Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality highlights how identity categories such as race and gender are not merely neutral descriptors but sites where social power operates to exclude and marginalise. Crenshaw (1991) stated that justice debates often treat race, gender and other identity categories within mainstream liberal discourse primarily as residual "biases" or forms of domination. In such framings, these categories are constructed as inherently negative markers through which social power operates to

exclude, marginalise and disadvantage those deemed different. This framework is useful in the Indian context, where caste and gender intersect to produce forms of exclusion unique to Dalit women. Chakravarti (2003) explained how caste is not just a social hierarchy but a gendered system in which women's roles in reproduction, labour and sexuality are central to its maintenance.

Feminist Engagement and Networked Publics

The paper by Siemon et. al (2024) theorises the Twitter network discourse on sexualised violence, around the Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation, from the perspective of feminist counterpublics, which helps in understanding the power relations in public debate. The findings indicate that the discourse network was highly polarised, but feminist voices were well integrated within the (progressive) centre of networked public spheres and influenced the general public discourse. Although feminists acted as challengers seeking the attention of established political actors and news media, they did not remain isolated. As a consequence of social media communication, the position and power constellations of established actors and counterpublics have become more fluid.

Dalit Women's Voices and Digital Resistance

This paper examines the role of social media in feminist Dalit activism in India. Social media has given unprecedented visibility and voice to Dalit feminist activism, allowing Dalit women to challenge their historical marginalisation from mainstream media and pop-culture spheres. The rise of social media has interwoven feminist and Dalit activism, bringing Dalit emancipatory politics into the realm of intersectional feminism in India. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook have become tools for Dalit communities to mobilise, connect and reconstruct their identity outside of the caste system. Hashtag campaigns like #WhyLoiter have highlighted the need for intersectional approaches in feminist digital activism, bringing attention to the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. Social media has allowed Dalit women to reclaim media narratives and challenge casteist and sexist norms, as seen in the case of political figure Mayawati. Digital activism has unified various social justice causes, bringing together Dalit activism, feminism and anti-oppression narratives. While social media shows promise for Dalit feminist activism, there are still challenges, such as the digital divide and the need for more representation and research on Dalit women in media spheres. The paper argues that social media has fundamentally changed the landscape of Dalit feminist activism, providing new platforms for voice, representation and community-building that were previously inaccessible due to institutional casteism and sexism in traditional media (O'Connor, 2020).

Intersectionality in Action

The paper examines the convergence of activism and intersectionality to understand how communicators create messages about social justice issues using social media. It focuses on the 2017 Women's March on Washington (WMW) as the object of study and argues that social media advocacy and intersectionality are inextricably linked. The paper discusses several key principles of intersectionality, including how individuals and groups understand themselves and others based on power differentials between groups, which are rooted in social constructions of multiple identities. Identities include race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, age, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, geographic location and dis-/ability, among others. Identities pivot such that a single identity may become salient momentarily, as the social constructions of these identities rely on time- and space-based contexts that give the identities meaning. The paper argues

that social media complicates and problematises an activist organisation's ability to assemble across disparate publics. It also argues that producers' reflexivity of their identities within their organisation is related to achieving social justice goals, particularly within socially mediated spaces. The analysis suggests that while the WMW was not wholly intersectional, particularly in determining its political agenda, the efforts toward intersectionality are notable for theory-building and reflective practice, especially for socially mediated campaigns (Vardeman & Sebesta, 2020).

Research Gap

The existing literature addressing online feminist and anti-caste movements focuses highly on English-language, text-based activism, thereby overlooking the unique ways Dalit women mobilise and narrate their identities through multilingual and visual storytelling, especially on visually oriented platforms like Instagram. While much is known about textual advocacy within dominant digital spaces, limited attention has been paid to the intersectional dynamics of gender and caste as enacted in visual posts created by Dalit women in regional languages.

Moreover, most studies do not sufficiently explore how these expressive forms promote counter-publics and generate digital visibility for Dalit women. This research aims to fill this gap by foregrounding the roles of visual and multilingual practices in digital feminist and anti-caste activism, examining their impact on representation and agency for Dalit women on social media.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a theoretical framework integrating the intersectionality framework and networked publics theory to critically examine the representation and amplification of Dalit women's voices on Instagram.

a. Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, explains how overlapping systems of power, including caste, gender and language, shape marginalised identities and experiences in society. This framework highlights how marginalised identities are constituted at the intersection of social categories and power relations, providing a nuanced understanding of how Dalit women experience, negotiate and challenge multiple forms of oppression in digital contexts. Intersectionality helps to study how their multilingual and visual narratives shape their representation online and create spaces for visibility within online publics.

b. Networked Publics Theory

Networked publics theory provides a conceptual framework to interrogate how Dalit women's mobilisation generates counter-publics that challenge traditional structures of exclusion. In digitally mediated environments, networked publics emerge as dynamic, participatory spaces where marginalised voices gain visibility, agency and collective power. The study applies this framework to examine how Instagram, as a networked public, enables the circulation, amplification and legitimisation of Dalit women's narratives, thereby contributing to social change and the creation of alternative publics.

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis to get a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary portrayal of Dalit women's voices on social media.

Sampling Strategy

Post Selection

Purposive sampling is applied to select posts directly relevant to Dalit identity and advocacy, focusing on those using the targeted hashtag #DalitWomenFight. Not all the selected posts are necessarily shared by the Dalit women themselves, but all of them are connected to issues affecting Dalit women. Posts are selected from Instagram to ensure the inclusion of varied expressive forms such as visual, audiovisual and textual content, including different languages (English, Bengali, Hindi) and storytelling approaches. This strategy allows for the systematic analysis of posts that actively contribute to the representation and discussion of Dalit voices.

Sample Size

Content Analysis: 200 Instagram posts using the specified hashtag #DalitWomenFight are selected for analysis from July 2020 to July 2025. The posts are chosen to maximise diversity in format, language and thematic focus.

Inclusion Criteria

- Posts must use the specified hashtag and be published between July 2020 and July 2025.
- Posts should be in English, Bengali or Hindi.
- Both textual and multimedia posts (images and videos) are eligible.
- Posts must contribute directly to the portrayal or discussion of Dalit women's voices and may be shared by anyone, not necessarily the Dalit women themselves.

Data Collection Procedures

Relevant Instagram posts are identified and gathered based on their use of the specified hashtag. Post formats include images, videos and text, ensuring representation of various modes of narration. Engagement metrics (likes, comments and shares) are systematically recorded for each post to support the analysis of visibility and digital reach.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative Data (Content Analysis): Posts are subjected to thematic analysis using MaxQDA software, where each post is coded and analysed to understand the recurring themes.

Quantitative Data (Engagement Metrics): Engagement data (likes, comments and shares) are tabulated and analysed using Excel, helping to measure digital reach and audience interaction. Patterns in

engagement are assessed to complement the qualitative findings, providing insight into the visibility and resonance of various themes.

Mixed-Method Data Integration: The combination of qualitative and quantitative findings enables a comprehensive understanding of the diverse forms of Dalit women's expression and their impact on digital visibility and audience engagement. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of both social media's role in representing and amplifying Dalit women's voices in the digital sphere and the reach of such content.

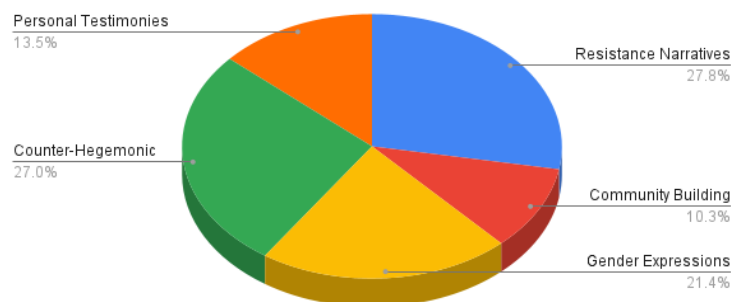
Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and Anonymity: The identities of social media users are anonymised and no direct identifiers are included in the research outputs, in compliance with ethical standards. User privacy is rigorously maintained throughout the study.

Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of 200 Instagram posts under the hashtag #DalitWomenFight revealed five distinct themes that capture the ways in which Dalit community-related posts are published on the social media platform. These themes are *Resistance Narratives*, *Community Building*, *Gender Expressions*, *Counter-Hegemonic Discourse* and *Personal Testimonies*.

Figure 1: Engagement Patterns Across Key Themes in Instagram posts on #DalitWomenFight



Thematic Distribution:

Among the five themes, *Resistance Narratives* (Theme 1) emerged as the most prominent, accounting for 27.8% of the total posts. This indicates that direct challenges to the caste hierarchy remain the central mode of digital articulation within the movement. The second-largest category was *Gender Expressions* (Theme 3), at 21.4%, followed closely by *Counter-Hegemonic Discourse* (27%). *Personal Testimonies* accounted for 13.5% of the posts, while *Community Building* (10.3%) represented the least frequent theme.

Likes:

In terms of user engagement measured through likes, posts categorised under *Resistance Narratives* received the highest number of likes. At the opposite end, *Community Building* posts attracted the least number of likes, suggesting that while collective solidarity is critical, it may not command the same level

of immediate digital attention. Between these two poles, *Counter-Hegemonic Discourse* ranked second in terms of likes, followed by *Personal Testimonies* and with *Gender Expressions* ranking fourth.

Comments:

When examining comments, a similar pattern emerges. *Resistance Narratives* again generated the highest volume of comments, reflecting not only visibility but also active audience engagement and discussion. *Community Building* posts, once again, received the fewest comments. *Counter-Hegemonic Discourse* ranked second in terms of comment volume, followed by *Gender Expressions* and then *Personal Testimonies*.

Shares:

The pattern shifts when considering the number of shares. *Personal Testimonies* emerged as the most frequently shared content, underscoring the power of lived experiences to circulate across networks as tools of awareness and empathy. *Community Building* posts remained the least shared, reinforcing their limited reach compared to other categories. *Resistance Narratives* ranked second in shares, followed by *Counter-Hegemonic Discourse* and then *Gender Expressions*.

Theme 1. Resistance Narratives: Direct Challenges to Caste Hierarchy

A significant proportion of posts discussed the caste hierarchy by exposing systemic violence, everyday discrimination and structural inequalities. The posts highlighted a wide range of issues, from child labour and poverty to the brutalities inflicted upon Dalit men and the exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi disabled children from education. For instance, the case of a Dalit man thrashed by a mob for addressing a shopkeeper's son as *beta* (a term of kinship) illustrates how ordinary acts of speech are policed by caste arrogance, often escalating into fatal violence. Similarly, reports of inhuman treatment like forcing Dalit men to eat grass, drink dirty water and shave their heads demonstrate how caste-based humiliation continues to be normalised even in contemporary India.

Another set of posts questioned representational politics in terms of India's continued neglect of Dalit visibility in its own cultural and media spheres. By foregrounding this absence, such posts resist tokenistic celebrations of diversity that ignore the realities of caste oppression in India. Importantly, these resistance narratives extend beyond documenting atrocities. Dalit women expose the deliberate blindness of dominant caste groups who benefit from a discourse of caste denial. Dalit and Adivasi children face layered discrimination, not only exposing institutional neglect but also challenging notions of meritocracy. The posts under this theme reveal how, rather than abstract discussions, narratives ground themselves in lived violence, institutional exclusion and cultural humiliation, presenting a layered account of how caste oppression is both normalised and resisted.

A recurring strand of posts documented caste-based violence in its most brutal forms, including rape, death and denial of dignity in death. Instances such as families barred from viewing the bodies of rape victims, police actively shielding perpetrators or the removal of the Hathras rape case files from the CBI website highlight how institutional actors are complicit in silencing Dalit women's suffering.

Equally prominent were accounts of systemic discrimination in everyday life, ranging from being denied access to ration shops, water sources, polling booths and non-Dalit households, to being underpaid for labour and barred from acquiring equal portions of land ownership. These narratives reinforced the argument that caste hierarchy is not confined to spectacular acts of violence but is embedded in the

microstructures of everyday existence, sustaining cycles of economic and social marginalisation. Urban casteism was also highlighted, challenging the common narrative that caste is only a “rural problem.” Posts pointed to how caste-based biases persist in urban spaces under the guise of “merit,” “surname,” or “culture fit,” thus revealing the covert forms of exclusion hidden behind professional and social respectability.

Another strand of posts aimed at savarna feminist discourses, critiquing their silence on caste violence and their failure to engage with intersectional feminism, which often prioritise gender at the cost of ignoring caste. Posts also addressed cultural humiliation and hostility, particularly in relation to symbolic practices such as weddings. Narratives from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh illustrated how Dalit assertion, like riding a horse, performing rituals or participating in public celebrations, was met with upper-caste violence, road blockades, boycotts and even physical attacks.

Historical oppressions were also revisited through references to the Devadasi system, which, though legally abolished, continues to entrap young Dalit girls as a survival strategy for impoverished families. Posts highlighted both the persistence of this exploitative practice and the role of NGOs and welfare associations in creating pathways out of it, thus juxtaposing structural oppression with narratives of resilience and resistance.

Finally, posts expanded the conversation by encouraging self-reflection on everyday casteism, from casteist slurs in casual conversations to humour and stereotypes embedded in urban culture. By framing caste oppression as both overt violence and subtle prejudice, these narratives challenged audiences to interrogate their complicity and rethink their understanding of “modern” India.

By making visible the brutality of everyday life, from physical violence to structural exclusion, these narratives reveal that resistance is not limited to protest marches on the ground but extends into digital archives that document, amplify and politicise Dalit struggles.

Theme 2. Community Building: Solidarity and Collective Action

Although Community Building accounted for the smallest proportion of posts, the content within this theme reveals important insights into how solidarity and collective action operate within the digital sphere of #DalitWomenFight. Posts in this category foregrounded acts of “mutual aid”, such as fundraising efforts for victims’ families, emphasising that collective support is not merely symbolic but materially consequential. These posts highlighted how digital spaces are mobilised to coordinate assistance, share resources and sustain affected families in moments of crisis.

Another prominent pattern was the emphasis on “selective action against cis-het patriarchal power structures.” A recurrent discourse within this theme was the assertion that “neutrality is not an option”. By rejecting the notion of neutrality, posts repeatedly stressed that individuals who do not engage in efforts to support oppressed communities are complicit in maintaining structures of inequality. Overall, while community-building posts were fewer in number and received comparatively lower engagement across likes, comments and shares, their content reveals how rhetorical framing works to push followers toward active participation, whether through raising awareness, amplifying voices, donating or advocating.

Theme 3. Gender Expressions: Gendered Violence Narratives and Feminist Terminology

The posts classified under Gender Expressions reveal issues such as child labour, caste-based discrimination and poverty, showing how structural factors compound each other and ultimately produce

forms of problematic empowerment, where Dalit women are forced into survival-based choices rather than genuine upliftment. A dominant cluster of posts highlighted extreme forms of gender-based violence, including gang rape, rape and murder and custodial brutality, where police were reported to have burned a victim's body without family permission and justified this by claiming the victim's "character is not good." These posts also documented cases where the police dismissed rape or molestation complaints as "false" and referred to them as a "business," revealing systemic dismissal of Dalit women's victimhood. The posts further emphasised the high mortality rate of Dalit women and their shorter life span, attributing these outcomes to economic exploitation and health-based discrimination. Many narratives detailed how Dalit women are forced into prostitution, receive less education than Dalit men and face continuous social, religious and economic oppression rooted in patriarchal structures dominated by Brahmins and upper-caste men.

Several posts invoked historical and contemporary examples of oppression, such as punishment for raising voices against practices like the breast tax and the persistent untouchability practices, which coexist with the sexual violence perpetrated against Dalit women. One striking example showed a menstruating Dalit woman student forced to sit outside the classroom, illustrating how gendered caste practices continue in everyday life. These posts also stressed that the caste system thrives on the oppression of women, reflecting the idea of "gendering caste." The theme also included calls for self-driven action, framed through messages such as "no one is coming to save you, so save yourself," signalling both urgency and autonomy in resisting oppression.

Theme 4. Counter-Hegemonic Discourse: Challenging Mainstream Narratives and Producing Alternative Knowledge

Posts under the theme of Counter-Hegemonic Discourse reveal an active attempt to challenge dominant narratives surrounding caste, gender and social justice, especially those propagated by mainstream media, urban liberal discourse and institutional structures. A significant cluster of posts criticised the mainstream feminist movement for failing to acknowledge or address violence against Dalit women, highlighting how Dalit women's experiences are often marginalised even within feminist spaces. This was accompanied by posts that pointed out the lack of recognition accorded to Dalit activists, writers and cultural contributors, whose achievements remain unheard or unsensationalised in the media. The posts emphasised that while caste-based violence frequently makes headlines, it is selectively published.

Another prominent strand involved responses to urban casteism denial, where users addressed comments claiming that caste discrimination exists only in rural areas. Counter-posts provided examples such as students in universities being forced to fill in the reservation column, experiences of not sharing utensils and continued workplace and social discrimination disguised under terms like "merit," "surname," "culture fit," and "neighbourhood vibes." Several posts also pointed to the problematic media representation of caste violence, including instances where police engaged in personal attacks on victims' families or delegitimised their complaints. In this context, posts stressed the importance of acknowledging Dalit mental health, which is affected by continuous systemic violence and gaslighting.

The theme also included posts aimed at unlearning caste privilege, emphasising that such unlearning is not a one-time act but a continuous practice that requires listening, reflecting and recognising discomfort. Media clips and educational videos highlighted how casteist slurs and everyday language, often used casually, carry oppressive histories, reinforcing discriminatory attitudes. Another set of posts focused on alternative knowledge production by exposing practices such as the Devadasi system, which, though

legally banned, continues to be imposed on young Dalit girls as a source of income for families. These posts highlighted the role of NGOs, welfare associations and access to education in enabling escape from such systemic exploitation, thereby offering counter-narratives of resistance and change. Several posts also challenged the invisibility of caste in social circles, arguing that if one does not know a Dalit person, it reflects the structural segregation built into caste society. The posts collectively urged users to interrogate their own privilege and positionality.

Overall, the Counter-Hegemonic Discourse theme illustrates how Instagram, as a platform, is utilised to critique dominant assumptions, reveal hidden structures of oppression and assert alternative frameworks for understanding caste and gender.

Theme 5. Personal Testimonies: Lived Experiences of Discrimination, Survival and Resistance

Personal Testimonies offer intimate, first-person accounts of caste-based discrimination, everyday struggles and acts of resistance. These posts highlight the lived realities centred on experiences of caste denial of basic resources, such as access to water. One notable testimony described a 70-year-old Dalit woman who faced insults and stone-throwing from dominant caste groups while trying to collect water, prompting her to take the issue to court, where she ultimately secured justice. Some testimonies focused on discrimination faced by Dalit figures such as Baby Kamble, the Ambedkarite activist and author of 'The Prisons We Broke,' whose experiences represent both the generational trauma and intellectual resistance of Dalit women. These posts used individual stories to shed light on broader patterns of social, cultural and institutional marginalisation.

A substantial segment of testimonies came from students describing caste-based discrimination within educational institutions, including experiences of social isolation, being denied friendships outside their community and constant scrutiny of their lifestyle or identity. Several posts highlighted protest testimonials, especially from individuals who raised their voices against caste oppression, referencing historical struggles such as the resistance to the breast tax. Another thread in this theme focused on how the quota system enabled educational mobility for many Dalit women, providing opportunities historically denied to them. These posts simultaneously acknowledged the benefits of reservation while highlighting the discrimination that persists despite structural support, thus presenting a nuanced account of empowerment and oppression.

Finally, testimonies showcased the work of Dalit social activists, particularly women who advocate for equality and rights at national and international forums. Their posts emphasised that Dalit women's activism is ongoing, multidimensional and rooted in lived experience rather than abstract theory. Overall, the Personal Testimonies highlight how individual narratives function as critical tools of counter-memory.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Instagram, through the hashtag #DalitWomenFight, serves as a critical digital platform for amplifying awareness about the realities of the Dalit community, particularly regarding Dalit women, making visible the layered realities of caste and gender oppression. The predominance of *Resistance Narratives* indicates that social media is being strategically deployed to confront caste hierarchies, document violence and reclaim spaces of dignity that have historically been denied. Personal testimonies possess a unique viral quality, enabling them to circulate widely through shares. Community building, despite its importance in sustaining movements, appears less visible and less engaged with in

the digital sphere. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of digital platforms in advancing intersectional feminist discourse, challenging caste denial and ensuring that Dalit women's struggles and stories are not silenced but amplified in the contemporary public sphere.

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