

# The Digital Age of Feminism

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i  
književnosti i informatologije

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## **Feminizam i digitalno doba**

Završni rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

Osijek, 2023.

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Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, Ph.D. Associate Professor

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## **Abstract**

Since the inception of the feminist movement, literature has been an invaluable tool in spreading its messages of equality and liberation, as well as immortalizing the observations and conclusions made by the women who have spearheaded the movement. Over the centuries, the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks and so many more have shaped feminist thought and the course of the movement at large. In the recent years, feminists have begun to find their voices online, utilizing social media as a way to unite the movement globally. Social media as a form of activism has garnered mixed opinions, with some praising its global nature, wide range of voices, and role in destigmatizing, even popularizing the feminist label, while others have criticized it for the possible dilution of the message through overt consumerism, as well as the controversial “cancel culture.” Despite the numerous examples of real-life change enacted thanks to online media, Internet activism is not yet considered to be on a par with literature in terms of merit to the feminist movement. This thesis will present the work of activists who began their careers on social media, Laura Bates, Dolly Alderton, and Deborah Frances-White, but have gone on to publish literary works, which have granted them further recognition in feminist spaces as notable activists and authors.

Keywords: feminism, feminist literature, digital feminism, online feminism, Fourth Wave feminism.

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## Introduction

Undoubtedly, the Internet, and social media especially, has had a large impact on the feminist movement. It has allowed people to share their experiences with a wide audience, and find other like-minded individuals from all over the world. While most people mainly use it to simply consume feminist content, there is an admirable group of people who decide to utilize it as a tool for activism, and transform digital engagement into real-life change. However, social media activists are still hardly taken as seriously as authors, so the need for literary recognition persists. This is possibly one of the reasons why some feminist activists who rally an audience on social media also turn to publishing their own books to solidify their impact on the movement. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present three British twenty-first-century feminist activists, Laura Bates, Dolly Alderton, and Deborah Frances-White, who gained popularity on social media, such as blogs, podcasts, and magazine columns by speaking out about important social causes, and then continued to do the same through literary works, gaining widespread acclaim thanks to their literary prowess.

The first chapter offers a historical overview of the feminist movement, mainly in the United Kingdom, with a focus on the vital role literature had throughout it. Examples of notable writers and works that influenced both the theoretical and practical aspects of the movement will be provided. The second chapter aims to give an introduction into feminism on the Internet and social media. Its characteristics will be discussed in the context of whether they have built on the long-standing tenets of the feminist movement, thus helping it achieve its ultimate goals.

The third chapter will focus on the three internet activists and authors who have managed to make an impact with their online presence and literary merits alike. Firstly, Laura Bates, the *Everyday Sexism* project, as well as her works *Everyday Sexism*, *Girl Up*, *Misogynation*, *Men Who Hate Women*, and *Fix the System, Not the Women* will be discussed. Next, Dolly Alderton, her *Sunday Times* columns, the *High Low* podcast, and her works *Everything I Know about Love*, *Ghosts*, and *Dear Dolly* will be reviewed. Finally, Deborah Frances-White, her podcast and book, both titled *The Guilty Feminist* will be commented on. The paper ends with a Conclusion and complete list of sources cited throughout.

## 1. Feminism: The History and the Literature that Helped Write It

British journalist, critic, and novelist Rebecca West once famously remarked “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat, or a prostitute” (5). This statement has remained true for many people before and after her. Many definitions of the term, both broad and narrow ones, have emerged over the years, but none has been established as the universal, all-encompassing definition. In the most general sense, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* summarizes feminism as “the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes” (Burkett and Brunell). Depending on the area of focus or type of approach to the matter, some highlight intersectionality and inclusion, others activism and protest, while some lend their expertise to the sociological dismantling of gender. Over time, these additions to the main definition have changed alongside the development of the movement itself. For example, in the early stages of British feminism, the pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft writes in her seminal work *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman* (1792) that “the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex” (10). This, she believes, can be achieved through the proper education of girls and women, which was not customary at the time. Nowadays, the newly emerging multicultural feminism puts the intersection of gender, race, and class at the forefront of the discourse, claiming they are so intertwined they cannot be discussed separately (Andersen and Collins 2).

While the exact origins of the first feminist movement are unclear, its roots can be traced back to as far as the Middle Ages, with notable examples of women questioning their place in society including Hildegard of Bingen, Margery Kempe, and Jane Anger (Walters 6-9). The following period is marked by women taking up writing as a way of self-advocating to be seen as equal to men. The seventeenth century brought forth many influential voices, such as Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, and playwright Aphra Behn, reportedly the first English woman to “earn her living by writing” (Ferguson 144), as well as Mary Astell, to whom the famous question “If all Men are born free, how is it then that all Women are born slaves?” is attributed (147). The emergence of feminism as a philosophy is often linked to Enlightenment liberalism (Thirsk 274), which saw a focus on democracy and individual freedom, spurring a considerable amount of civil unrest, and eventually resulting in the French and American revolutions of the eighteenth century. This period saw a number of prominent female novelists and poets emerge, such as Jane Austen, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brönte, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and so many more. This period’s most notable feminist

author, however, was undoubtedly Mary Wollstonecraft. Her writing as a whole, and especially her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* continues to influence feminist thought to this day.

United Kingdom's Suffrage movement, which started in mid-nineteenth century and resulted in women over the age of thirty and of a certain social standing being given the right to vote in 1918 has been named as one of the most influential and successful campaigns of the feminist movement (Walters 56), as well as the so-called First Wave of feminism. The movement spread across Europe and further, so that by the end of the 1950s most European countries had enfranchised their female citizens as well. Suffragists and Suffragettes spread the word through essays, pamphlets, and journal articles (Egge 591), as well as held philosophical discussions in literary salons (Goodman 330). Many organizations focused on women's suffrage were founded, one of the first and most influential being *The National Society for Women's Suffrage*, and some began publishing their own journals and magazines focused on women's issues, such as *The Vote* and the *Woman's Suffrage Journal*. If they wanted to reach a wider audience, especially a male one, women were forced to publish their philosophical work either anonymously or under male pseudonyms – sometimes their husbands' – as critics would “focus on [the female writer's] femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles” (Showalter 35). The most notable women of this time are not necessarily remembered as authors, though they did write, but as activists and revolutionaries. While Suffragettes such as Emmeline Pankhurst, her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, Millicent Fawcett, and Emily Davison hold a place in British history due to their militant work in the streets, Barbara Leigh Smith, Harriet Martineau, Bessie Parkes, Josephine Butler, and many more used their literary merits to help achieve the goals of the movement. Men, though somewhat overlooked and underappreciated, played a crucial role in gaining suffrage for women. As Suffragettes relied heavily on the community due to the nature of their methods, which would often land them in jail, they needed the support of their male family members and partners who had influence in order to spread their word. Some men also lent their names to the shared work they published with their wives – John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* and William Thompson's *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race, Women, against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Restrain them in Political and thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* serve as prime examples (Walters 43).

Although a better part of the twentieth century was spent continuing the campaign for women's suffrage, as all British women over the age of twenty-one, regardless of property ownership, were only enfranchised in 1928, the two World Wars demanded a different kind of feminist action. While up to a third of British women, mostly of a lower income standing,

including women of color, had been working long before the 1910s (Pycroft 699), the lack of a male work force due to their being stationed on the battlefields resulted in women making up a majority of the factory and hospital workers (Walters 86). Despite their large numbers, women were still paid less than their male counterparts, their work was undervalued, they were relegated to menial, repetitive work, and were not even considered for leadership roles. Their discrimination was exacerbated by the unsafe and exploitative conditions in factories overall (Murphy 184), as well as wages that were rarely enough to cover the cost of living (Van Etten 313). If they chose to fight for their worker rights and join a trade union, they would often be turned away, or if they managed to join, unions rarely heeded their female members' demands (Pycroft 700). Besides the physically demanding full-time jobs, women also continued to fulfill their roles as mothers and homemakers. Alongside suffrage, in 1918 British women were officially given right to sit in Parliament, although it took a number of years for one to be elected (Walters 87). During this time, divorce laws were also made more lenient, making women less reliant on their husbands and men in general, and making it easier for them to escape abusive partners or family members. As modern feminism began to take shape, the issues at the forefront of the movement began to look more and more similar to the ones still being discussed today. Whereas Virginia Woolf controversially questioned feminism while at the same time condemning sexism and misogyny in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, Rebecca West bravely commented on political matters around the world from a feminist and socialist perspective.

After World War II, there was a return to traditionalism and strict gender roles as a result of heightened nationalism. However, many women did not want to go back to a time when they were completely dependent on their husbands to the point of being considered their property, so they met up with like-minded women, sharing their experiences, educating themselves and others in co-called consciousness-raising groups (Sarachild 144-150). Among issues at the forefront of these discussions were women's reproductive rights, the laws regarding which were severely restrictive at the time. This included free and easily accessible contraception, championed by Margaret Sanger, as well as the legalization of abortion, which ultimately resulted in the ratification of *Roe vs. Wade* in the United States in 1973, a revolutionary law that had persisted until 2022. In *The Second Sex* (1949), a groundbreaking piece of feminist theory, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273), differentiating between sex – biological, and gender – socially constructed, a distinction which has been the foundation of feminist thought ever since. In the United States, Betty Friedan published another seminal work of feminist theory, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), where she

analyzed the role of the housewife, concluding that it did not grant women any freedom or individuality, ultimately leaving them unfulfilled and unhappy.

Second-Wave feminism, starting in the 1960s, brought a new focus on intersectionality, influenced by the various civil rights movements emerging, mainly the ones fighting for equality of people of color and members of the LGBT+ community. The inclusion of other marginalized identities into feminist spaces was in direct opposition to the so-called white feminism, which rarely took into account how other aspects of a woman's identity, such as her race, ethnicity, religion, age, physical and mental ability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity, can further marginalize her. This was the only type of feminist thought – and consequently woman – represented during the First Wave, leaving many women sidelined within a movement that promised equality for everybody. So, when she coined the term in a 1989 paper, Kimberlé Crenshaw referred specifically to the intersection of gender and race (Crenshaw 140) as being a crucial factor in discussing the position of (non-White) women, but since then its meaning has expanded to include all the aforementioned factors of marginalization. Literature reflected the plethora of issues discussed in feminist circles and beyond, resulting in this period being quite prolific in not only the number of works published, but also the wide array of topics covered.

The era also saw feminism become an academic field in the form of women's studies. In *Four Waves of Feminism*, Martha Rampton writes: “The second wave was increasingly theoretical, based on a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytical theory, and began to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother” (3-4). For instance, Andrea Dworkin condemned pornography due to the staggering amount of violence towards women depicted in it, which she believed perpetuated domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, and femicide in real life, similarly to Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will* (1975). Furthermore, Jill Johnston advocated for the inclusion of queer women into the movement. Women of color also published some of the most influential works of the feminist movement: Angela Davis's *Women, Race & Class* (1981), Audre Lorde's collection of essays *Sister Outsider* (1984), as well as many works by bell hooks serve as cornerstones of feminist teachings everywhere. In the United Kingdom, the Women's Liberation movement reflected all of the same ideas through Germaine Greer, Sheila Rowbotham, Juliet Mitchell, Susie Orbach, and so many more.

Around the end of the twentieth century there was a shift into Third-Wave feminism, named so by the journalist Rebecca Walker, though the boundaries between waves become blurry depending on how the differences between them are defined. Among other changes, this period saw a return to a more feminine aesthetic in an act of rebellion and an attempt to “subvert sexist culture and deprive it of verbal weapons” (Rampton 4). In contrast to this, the Riot Grrrl feminist punk movement became very popular in the early 1990s. Many believed that feminism was not needed anymore, that it had done the job it was intended to do when women were enfranchised, resulting in the period succeeding the Second Wave being called post-feminism (Rutherford 620). A number of feminists even argued that Second and Third Waves were more “dialed down” (Rampton 5) or had failed because their goals had not been as definitive and clear-cut as those of the First Wave. Some also believed it to now be a hateful, misandrist movement, the goal of which was to turn the tide of oppression onto men (Rampton 5). In general, the Third Wave was much less of an organized movement than its predecessors and more of a “state of mind” (6).

At the same time as this pushback against feminist labels was happening in both staunchly feminist and antifeminist circles; more and more people began identifying as feminists than ever before, partly especially because of this dilution of the movement’s message. Micropolitics, sexism, and misogyny present in everyday discourse, including advertising, literature, movies, TV, as well as representation on women in positions of power, such as politics and business, became relevant topics as casual feminism began to make its way into the mainstream (Munro 23). In terms of literature, despite abundant academic discourse on topics relevant to feminism, it is difficult to name authors and works that definitively shaped the era. Some, such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde brought their Second-Wave sensibilities into the new one, while others honed in on newly emerging issues for the movement to tackle, like Naomi Wolf, who spoke out about the effect the patriarchy had on women’s bodies and criticized diet culture and fatphobia in *The Beauty Myth* (1990). Similarly, Ariel Levy also commented on feminist popular culture in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, serving as a sort of capsule of the raunch culture that was prevalent at the time (*The Feminism Book* 282-283). On the academic front, there was the highly theoretical *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (1989), as well as a number of works by Sara Ahmed, starting with *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998). Also encapsulating a characteristic of the third wave was Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* (1991), in which she tried to explain why feminism was still very much necessary as a response to the growing disillusionment with the movement. Julia Serano provided a queer and transgender perspective with her works.

While the Third Wave took a step away from the initial message and organization of the feminist movement, the current Fourth Wave is on course to make “the personal political” again, repeating the motto of the Second Wave. The issues that were previously discussed only in feminist circles, such as access to abortion, sexual harassment and rape, violence against women, the gender pay gap, the pressure to conform to strict and unrealistic beauty standards, representation of women in business and politics, as well as intersectional issues like racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and others, are not seen as extreme or radical opinions anymore; rather, they often receive attention by mainstream media (Rampton 6-7). The main difference between the Second and Fourth Waves is in the medium through which feminists create and consume content: books and essays have slowly been turning into blogs, and consciousness-raising groups have been migrating to social media. This shift has granted anyone with an Internet connection the opportunity to chime in with their opinions and experiences, which has proven to have both positive and negative effects on the feminist movement. Authors sometimes have a hard time getting recognition without maintaining a social media presence and engaging with current news stories and pop culture moments in real time. Roxanne Gay, Jessica Valenti, Sonya Renee Taylor, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Caroline Criado-Perez, as well as the three authors discussed in this paper – Dolly Alderton, Laura Bates, and Deborah Frances-White – prove that social media truly is a vessel just as worthy of great ideas as literature. UK’s Caitlin Moran shows a funnier side of feminism as she explores everyday topics through the feminist lens in her memoirs *How to Be a Woman* (2011) and *More Than a Woman* (2020).

## **2. Digital Feminism**

The Fourth Wave of feminism is primarily characterized by its utilization of the Internet and social media to get its messages across to a wider audience. In their report *#FemFuture: Online Revolution*, Martin and Valenti explain that online feminism “harness[es] the power of online media to discuss, uplift, and activate gender equality and social justice” and describe it as “a new engine for contemporary feminism” (6). This means that more people are able to share their experiences, learn about others’, receive news and information in real time, and get involved in the movement. Rebecca Traister calls blogs “a consciousness-raising session, of sorts, for the twenty-first century” (Preface), and Tracy L. M. Kennedy argues that “blogging is an important way for feminist thinkers to connect and build community and to advocate for social change” (“The Personal Is Political: Feminist Blogging and Virtual Consciousness-Raising.”). Madden and Zickuhr even claim that young adult women are “the power users of social networking” (“65% of Online Adults Use Social Networking Sites”).

The main novelty the Internet has brought to feminism that has helped it get closer to reaching its goals is its global nature. Thanks to social media, posts reach users around the world within seconds, the responses being imminent. Feminists create communities on social media where they feel safe among like-minded individuals, and are thus more willing to speak their minds. Social networks can also serve as the only alternative news source in areas of the world where media is run by oppressive political regimes who control the public opinion – not just their citizens', but global as well. A recent example of this is the current political state of Iran, whose so-called morality laws targeting women and LGBTQ+ individuals have sparked protests around the country and the world. As the government is controlling media and censoring certain outlets and individuals, citizen journalism has helped the protests' message of liberation reach a worldwide audience (Vega).

While some may claim so, the existence of digital feminism, or even the tendency for feminist discourse to take place online, does not mean that the movement has permanently settled onto social media. While Munro claims that whether the newfound popularity of feminism brought on by the Internet has resulted in any tangible political change is up for discussion (24), Martin and Valenti see it as quite the opposite: "No other form of activism in history has empowered one individual to prompt tens of thousands to take action on a singular issue – within minutes" (6). Worldwide protests after the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*, the US law that protected access to abortion on a federal level, in June 2022, as well as the currently ongoing protests as of August 2023 in Iran sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, prove that the newest generation of feminists is just as capable of showing their dissatisfaction with the current political climate and demanding change as they are discussing the intricacies of feminist thought. In fact, both sparked protests around the world, with abortion rights demonstrations occurring consistently throughout Summer 2022, those in Washington D. C. gathering crowds of approximately ten thousand people (Honderich). More and more frequently, the two forms of activism are used in tandem, with social media coverage and crowdfunding for rallies and protests contributing to their high turnout (Martin and Valenti 7-8).

Social media can also inspire change in the real world. One of the most notable examples of this happened in 2017, when the hashtag #MeToo, created by Tarana Burke, swept Twitter, its users recounting their own experiences of sexual harassment as a response to the groundbreaking *New York Times* article exposing the sexual harassment a large number of women endured at the hands of the greatly influential movie producer Harvey Weinstein (Kantor and Twohey). According to *TIME*, within days, the Twitter hashtag saw more than 1.7 million users sharing their



experiences of sexual harassment, especially in the workplace, and before the end of the year, at least 74 public figures had faced accusations, resulting in “The Silence Breakers,” a group of women and men, including Burke and actress Alyssa Milano, who first popularized the hashtag on Twitter, and whose speaking out about their experiences in different industries sparked change, being named the magazine’s 2017 Person of the Year (Chan). Time’s Up, a non-profit organization founded by a number of female celebrities, providing support to victims of sexual harassment was founded in 2018 as a response to the #MeToo movement, proving once again that online discourse can aid in bringing about meaningful change.

The Fourth Wave of feminism has also been lauded for being very inclusionary, even demanding of representation of different ethnicities, nationalities, religions, sexual and gender identities, body types, ages, and more. Many radical feminists claim that, because different aspects of a person’s identity cannot be separated, the movements and political discourse regarding them should also not be. Research has shown that younger people, namely Generation Z, born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, are more socially progressive than their predecessors (Parker), as well as more politically involved (“Europe’s Largest Gen Z-Focused Research”). Given that they are the main forces of the Fourth Wave, leading the charge in fighting for social issues, it stands to reason that they would look to diversify the movement as a whole. Predictably, there are always detractors, some of the most prominent in the recent years being those who seek to exclude transgender women from feminist discourse.

The growing popularity of feminism has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the progress made towards the goal of achieving complete equality of genders. A higher amount of people demanding change has resulted in many of those appeals being met. Despite this, one of the main issues with digital feminism that traces back to the Third Wave, but is being mentioned more and more often as the popularity of casual feminism grows, is the possible dilution of the message. When discussing mainstream, casual feminism, the terms “lean-in feminism,” “girl power,” and the more philosophical “neoliberalism” come to mind. These catch-all terms are supposedly used to uplift women, but have garnered criticism for a few reasons: firstly, they promote the hyper-individualistic choice feminism, which states that any choice a woman makes independently is a feminist choice, and that the ultimate goal of feminism should be to allow women the freedom to choose whatever path in life they want, even if it upholds traditional patriarchal structures (McRobbie 1; Budgeon 308); secondly, they operate under the same pretense as the patriarchy, presenting power as the ultimate goal of feminism, be it monetary, legal, or physical (Rottenberg 422); and finally, they alleviate women who uphold the patriarchy

in pursuit of this kind of power in the name of feminism of any responsibility or consequences. This kind of message has also been adopted by brands with the goal of selling products to women, or to market themselves as socially progressive. However, radical feminists criticize it because it complies with oppressive socio-economic structures currently in place, which they believe need to be dismantled in order for marginalized groups – all, not just women – to be truly equal (Rottenberg 421-422).

Moreover, the amount of different directions feminism has taken, resulting in a wide range of opinions, has been a point of contention within feminist circles, with some lauding the diversity of stances, and others lamenting the lack of unity between the groups. It is important, however, to note the difference between being on a different point on the path to the same end goal, and being on a different path entirely. While some are at the beginning of their feminist journey, still learning and evolving, others are using their title as feminists to spread hateful messages. Despite the Fourth Wave's definition of feminism being broader than any previous wave's, many still claim only biological women should be included in feminist discourse, thus alienating transgender women, who also face many of the same forms of oppression biological women do – alongside transphobia – as well as men whose involvement is crucial to the feminist movement. Similarly, Munro points out a possible divide between the older and younger, newer feminists, with older ones dominating academia, while the younger are leading the charge on social media (5).

Another criticism that has been levelled against twenty-first-century feminism is that it is overly focused on polishing its message to perfection, rather than direct action. Deborah Frances-White points out that different groups of feminists have the same end goal in mind, but contrasting methods of reaching it, and while they are arguing over which method is best, the patriarchy continues to oppress them all (7). This harkens back to the issue of division within the movement, which some believe could lead to its downfall.

Similarly, the harshness of the so-called “call-out culture” and its more drastic version “cancel culture,” appears as a criticism of online discourse in general, but seems to target feminist discourse quite frequently. The terms refer to the act of pointing out actions or opinions – often alleged or taken out of context – of individuals, mainly celebrities, which do not align with the stances on cultural issues of the person calling them out, with the intention of lowering public opinion of the celebrity, or in extreme cases, causing them to lose their platform or even career. Though it may have come from a place of internet activism, its users having “a productive intention of teaching members of society when something could be considered offensive or

misinformed” (Tucker 4), it has since evolved into “an unhelpful and counter-productive approach, in which celebrities are victimised and ostracised instead of educated” (Shackelford). Of course, holding people accountable for their actions and demanding change from them is admirable, and indubitably made easier thanks to social media, but the practice has evolved into quite a hateful one, with users celebrating the downfall of a person and rarely taking into account if they had expressed remorse or shown growth since. Also, it does not allow for nuance or distinction of severity of the transgression made, with minor mistakes resulting from lack of education or behaviors that there is no evidence of having occurred more than once – often deliberately dug up from the depths of celebrities’ pasts – being lumped together with genuinely problematic or even criminal behavior. Decisions are made in the moment, thus “inherently limit[ing] interactive discourse as it brands the accused before there is the opportunity for an explorative discussion” (Tucker 4). The latter effect is a direct consequence of the nature of digital media which allows for and even encourages such “knee-jerk” reactions, as there is no form of “preemptive” control over an individual’s posting. In literature, or other forms of hard-copy-media, however, any text goes through multiple levels of control and is more thought-through.

In the same way social media has popularized and destigmatized feminism, it has given voice to detractors as well. In her book *Men Who Hate Women* (2020), Laura Bates exposes certain anti-feminist groups that initially appeared online and mainly exist on social media, but have influenced the men involved in them to mistreat the women in their life, and in extreme cases target other women in heinous acts of violence. Moreover, it has let hatred spread through disinformation and propaganda created and shared by anti-feminists, many of whom have collected quite a large following of like-minded individuals. Cyberbullying, hate speech and tangible threats directed towards women have become a large problem, one rarely addressed and moderated by social media platforms, though strides have been taken in recent years to ensure the safety and well-being of their users, thanks to fervent demands by users (Gillespie 34).

### **3. Screen to Book: Three Examples of Online Activists Turned Authors**

Today’s era of the Internet is marked by the domination of user-created content and social media, with a focus on interactivity and active participation (Kenton). This has allowed content such as blogs, microblogs, podcasts, and social media profiles to flourish as not only active communities and discussion hubs, but also vessels for activism. It bears repeating that blogs, and by extension, other similar slices of the Internet, are often called consciousness-raising groups of the twenty-first century (Traister).

As social media began to be seen as a viable career path, as well as a good platform for activism, many feminists found their voice online. Besides the three discussed later on in more detail, there are many other examples: blogs such as *Scarleteen*, *Feminist Killjoys*, *F-Bomb*, *Feministing*, *QueerBlackFeminist*, and so many more, as well as various podcasts and numerous social media profiles on sites such as X or Instagram by individuals and organizations alike continue to provide news, entertainment, and social commentary, thereby educating and engaging their followers.

Although online activism has time and time again proven itself to be as effective of a tool in spreading the feminist message as literary works, it is still not taken as seriously, and online activists are frequently looked over in conversation about the influential figures of the movement. Feminist writers and activists discussed in this thesis – Laura Bates, Dolly Alderton, and Deborah Frances-White – have managed to bridge the gap by following their achievements in the online sphere with success in the literary field.

### **3. 1. Laura Bates**

The most prolific, and possibly the most prominent of the three authors, Laura Bates found initial success in 2012 with her blog *The Everyday Sexism Project*, where users recounted their experiences with instances of sexism and misogyny, with the goal of showing just how ubiquitous they are. The practice eventually spread onto X and Facebook, and later other social media platforms. By the website's third anniversary in 2015, it had amassed more than one hundred thousand entries (Bates, *Everyday Sexism* 19), the number rising to almost quarter of a million since, and it currently boasts translations into twenty-five languages from all around the world, as well as numerous international versions on various social media platforms.

Entries to the blog are submitted from women and girls of different ages, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, sexualities, socio-economic classes, and body types, proving that sexism and misogyny affect absolutely all women. They detail instances of street harassment, sexual assault, rape, workplace discrimination, double standards in parenting, and sexist comments just to name a few, ranging from the “niggling and normalized to the outrageously offensive” (16). Some of the most disturbing come from young girls, showing just how early it all begins. Men also chime in, whether to express surprise at the stories they read on the website, recall their own experiences of sexism, or write hateful messages, sometimes even threats, thus proving the point of the website. Of course, the site is heavily moderated, so none of those entries make it to the front page, but Bates often speaks out about the large amount of hate mail she has gotten since

starting the website (Sanghani; Bates, *Everyday Sexism* 325-326; Bates, *Men Who Hate Women* 6-7, 143, 173).

In 2014, Bates published her debut work, *Everyday Sexism*, in which she built a theoretical framework of the modern feminist movement using entries from the website, as well as historical and current political and popular culture events from all around the world. Similarly to the blog which inspired it, the book contains commentary on a wide range of topics and how they affect the daily lives of girls and women around the world: from street harassment and catcalls to rape and domestic violence, from jabs on the playground to exclusion in the workplace, from gendered toys in kindergartens to the encouragement of sexual assault on college campuses, from the docility that is instilled into daughters to the physical, psychological, and emotional labor mothers take on, from the belittlement of famous women in tabloids to the depiction of sex on pornography websites. It is to this day her most popular work and the one most closely associated with her name.

Following the success of her debut, Bates published *Girl Up* in 2016. Similar to *Everyday Sexism* in its goal of educating the public about the issues women face on a daily basis, the author's second venture is primarily targeted at preteen and teen girls, though it can be a good way for mothers and daughters to learn together about what the world is like for young girls (Bates, *Girl Up* 1). Through light-hearted anecdotes, allegories, quips, and illustrations, Bates tackles social media, body issues and eating disorders, dress codes, genitalia and sex, as well as sexual harassment in schools, finishing with encouragement for girls to get involved in the feminist movement, whether on social media, or by joining or creating a feminist society in their school or community. On her website, Bates describes *Girl Up* as "a survival guide for teenage girls" ("Author").

Laura Bates' third title is a curated collection of articles she penned for *The Guardian* newspaper between 2013 and 2017. The title for the collection, *Misogynation*, comes from claims that the United Kingdom has a concerning problem with sexism (*Misogynation* 311). The author's signature talking points are present, such as the trivialization of street harassment and rape, the sexism and misogyny experienced by young girls, the disappointing portrayal of women in tabloids and other mainstream media, the various forms of discrimination women face in the workplace, as well as the demoralizing messages sent to women about their bodies. Even more so than in her other works, Bates reflects on the current events of the time of writing, as the articles

are exclusively opinion pieces. She frequently comments on headlines mainly from the UK, but also around the world pertaining to politics, law, culture, media, and more.

The work that follows is Bates' groundbreaking research on several male-dominated online anti-feminist groups. In *Men Who Hate Women* (2020), she details the results of her year-long research undercover at various forums, blogs, and social media platforms dedicated to different subgroups of the manosphere, an interconnected spectrum of communities of men, who, under the guise of supporting their fellow men, spread hateful messages about women, and in extreme cases encourage rape and violence against them. The author differentiates between a few groups, which, though varied in their degree of extremism, share similar thought processes and ultimate ideals for relationships between men and women. Throughout, her goal is to shed light on these communities that have largely flown under the radar of law enforcement, as well as the social media platforms on which they choose to spread their hateful messages and educate the general public about the roots of some infamous violent crimes from recent years.

Bates' latest book, *Fix the System, Not the Women*, published in 2022, explores five institutions – education, politics, media, policing, and criminal justice – the connections between them, and how their failures continue to perpetuate the systematic oppression of women. Pulling focus onto the shortcomings of various systems of power and demanding change from them, rather than blaming all sexism and misogyny on corrupt individuals has been a thread in Bates' writing since the very beginning, as well as a definitive goal of radical feminism. As with all her writing, the author gives solid examples of how these institutions fail women on a daily basis, in extreme cases even playing a factor in their deaths.

Laura Bates is a prime example of a feminist activist who made an initial impression with an online endeavor, even earning some recognition as a contributor for *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Huffington Post*, and more, but truly cemented herself as an important figure in feminist history with her insightful and original literary works. She has worked closely with the British police force to help stop sexual harassment on public transport, as well as with Women Under Siege, an organization combatting the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The author continually speaks at feminist events, as well as at schools and universities across the UK (“Activist”), reporting her findings in her books, thus giving them additional credibility. As an author, she does not speak in hypotheticals, but strengthens her theoretical research with patterns of behavior and belief she witnesses everywhere: in her own personal experiences, entries to the *Everyday Sexism* website, experiences she is regaled with at events, examples in media, such as

tabloids and women's magazines, and more. Bates has received the British Empire Medal and was named a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature for her work.

### 3. 2. Dolly Alderton

Dolly Alderton began her career as a columnist for *The Times*, mainly focused on dating, and in 2020 got her own weekly advice column for the paper titled *Dear Dolly*, which is still active as of August 2023. She co-created and co-hosted the *High Low* podcast with Pandora Sykes until 2020, producing over 150 episodes. The podcast focused on conversation around pop culture and current affairs, exploring highbrow and lowbrow culture alike. In her second podcast, *Love Stories*, Alderton interviewed famous guests, such as Stanley Tucci, Sharon Horgan, Lily Allen, Matt Haig, and Marian Keyes about their most defining relationships. Both podcasts garnered considerable audiences, as well as positive reviews. Alderton's work explores the themes of love, female friendship, and her experiences living as a millennial woman, which is evident in her column, podcasts, non-fiction, and fiction alike. All her works are very personal and intimate, giving readers a sense of companionship with the author.

Alderton's debut work is also her most popular one to date. *Everything I Know About Love* (2018) is a memoir following the author through her secondary school and university years, and into her twenties. While she regales the reader with stories of wild nights out and questionable sexual exploits, cleverly satirizes life in one's twenties, and shares lists of things she learned yearly, the love she has for her close female friends and personal growth remain the heart of the story. By stating "Nearly everything I know about love, I've learnt in my long-term friendships with women" (314), she subverts the expectations the reader has for the content of the memoir – that the "love" she finds after years of one-night-stands, bad dates, and short-lived relationships is a romantic one, when it is in fact love for herself, her friends, family, career, hobbies, and life overall. In this, she subverts the ingrained idea that romantic love is what a woman's life revolves or should revolve around. Alderton's chapters on alcoholism, substance abuse, eating disorders, therapy, as well as grief are particularly striking, but still remain hopeful and optimistic. In 2019, the memoir was shortlisted for the British Book Awards in the category for narrative non-fiction, as well as for the Waterstones Book of the Year.

The author's follow up work was her 2020 novel *Ghosts*, which follows similar themes, evidently drawing from Alderton's personal life once again. She explores life and especially dating in one's thirties, unhealthy romantic relationships, aging parents, and in general learning

to cope with and find peace in aging. The author herself called her second rendition “cynical” compared to her optimistic and hopeful debut (Sweeney).

Alderton’s latest piece is a collection of responses from her titular *Sunday Times Style* advice column. In *Dear Dolly: On Love, Life and Friendship* (2022), she offers candid answers based on personal experience on questions regarding dating, friendships, relationships, family, sex, break-ups, and more. The author states that her goal for the column was to be an “agony aunt,” who tells advice-seekers exactly what to do (Alderton, *Dear Dolly* 12). She decided she would always choose unique questions for which she could not give a “binary ruling,” and she would never pass judgement on any advice-seeker (19). Although the questions are often highly specific, Alderton widens the scope of the problem, relating it to other areas of life, and thus manages to make the answer more widely applicable.

Dolly Alderton differs from the other two subjects of this paper in that her works are not necessarily those of feminist activism, but the feminist overtones are present nonetheless. Besides proudly calling herself a feminist and speaking on certain feminist issues, such as female sexuality and slut shaming, body dysmorphia and eating disorders, as well as double standards for men and women in appearance, responsibility, and maturity alike, Alderton’s emphasis on the impact her close friendships with women have had on her undoubtedly makes her a feminist author, as the notion of *sisterhood*, that is, women supporting each other, is one of central feminist ideas (hooks 127).

### **3. 3. Deborah Frances-White**

Deborah Frances-White is an Australian-born British comedian, author, and screenwriter. She began her career as a stand-up comedienne, but she quickly realized the stand-up world was quite sexist and dismissive of female talent (Tuxworth-Holden). Following her success in that field, she created and co-created comedy shows in a variety of different formats. In 2015 she started *The Guilty Feminist* podcast alongside fellow comedienne Sofie Hagen, where they discuss issues relating to feminism with guests in front of a live studio audience. Each podcast episode begins with the statement “I’m a feminist, but...”, where the hosts share instances of behaviors, choices, or thoughts that left them feeling guilty for doing something an ideal feminist would or should not. They also challenge themselves and each other every week to do something they usually would not, such as not saying sorry for a week, sky-diving or posing nude for a drawing class. Frances-White mixes brazen humor with genuine discussions about a wide variety of feminist topics, and claims jokes can be utilized as either a weapon used to isolate those deemed inferior



or as a means of inclusion, the latter being what she aspires to achieve with *The Guilty Feminist* (Haridasani Gupta).

*The Guilty Feminist* book (2018), a spin-off of the podcast, seamlessly blends comedy with activism in a similar fashion. It also somewhat serves as a memoir, as Frances-White recounts her teenage and young adult years as a Jehovah's Witness and the hardships she endured during her beginning years in comedy. She heavily criticizes the field for its misogyny and sexism, exposing her own experiences with discrimination, as well as its disturbing history with sexual harassment. The author also explores the impact the podcast has had on her as a comedienne and feminist, and utilizes many of the same formats in the book, including an "I'm a feminist, but..." statement at the beginning of every chapter, alongside interviews with various activists and creatives, notably fellow comediennes Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Hannah Gadsby. Frances-White also makes a point of including a wide variety of experiences both in her writing and when choosing interviewees, lending voice to women of color, transgender women, gender non-conforming individuals, and more.

While still better known for *The Guilty Feminist* podcast than the eponymous book, Deborah Frances-White has managed to show that her writing brings merit to her message without losing her voice, which is relatable in its humor and occasional self-deprecation. While proving women can be talented comedians, she also proves feminists can have a sense of humor, and even use it to get their message across.

## **Conclusion**

As feminism has evolved in the course of the past few centuries, and more intensely in the last several decades, so have its characteristics and goals. However, throughout the four waves, as the movement achieved socio-economic freedom and equality for women, some things remained constant, such as its members' reliance on literature to spread its message. Whether it is the Suffragettes demanding enfranchisement through pamphlets or modern sociologists theorizing about the difference between sex and gender, literary works have been the cornerstone of the fight for gender equality. Nevertheless, as the world changes, new media compete intensely with print.

The Internet and social media have recently shown to have a great impact on not only how the message of the movement is spread, but also its overall reception. As it is more and more normalized and popularized, feminism has left its mark on law, politics, business, art, advertising, popular culture, and more. The number of people self-identifying as feminists has also risen, the label slowly becoming less stigmatized. While some claim the Internet is beneficial to the

movement, the reasons including the two aforementioned ones, as well as its inclusionary policy and global nature, others are criticizing it for the dilution of the message, excessive harshness, and its, at times, black-and-white view on social issues. Some also predict it could in the future take over as the main medium for activism; however, that is not likely to happen, as more feminist literature is being published than ever. Despite the popularity of digital media, books and literature still seem to function as confirmation of merit as they affirm the quality and relevance of someone's argument.

Proving that literary works are still necessary for recognition as a prominent name in feminist circles, despite notable projects online, are three Internet activists and authors discussed in this paper: Laura Bates, Dolly Alderton, and Deborah Frances-White. While the impact on the feminist movement they achieved online is admirable, their literary merits are what cemented their names as well-known feminists of the twenty-first century.

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