Constructing Feminism: Media Bias And Its Impact On Youth Understanding

Junny Kumari

Assistant Professor

Amity University Patna

Abstract

Conflicting narratives presented by media sources—including social media, news platforms, and the entertainment industry—contribute to widespread public misunderstanding and division regarding feminism. While some portray it as extremist, others emphasize its role as a vital movement for equality. These contradictory portrayals significantly shape how young people understand and engage with feminist ideas.

This study evaluates how youth perceive and interact with feminist narratives and investigates how various forms of media either promote awareness or contribute to misconceptions. Using a survey-based approach, the research explores how different media types influence youth attitudes, whether portrayals encourage or discourage feminist participation, and how these perceptions vary across generations.

Additionally, it examines how generational exposure to feminism—from historical movements to modern digital platforms—shapes understanding. By analyzing these perspectives, the research contributes to a broader discussion on media accountability and its influence on youth engagement with feminism, ultimately aiming to foster critical media literacy around gender discourse. In order to determine whether the youth perceives feminism differently from older generations, this study also looks at how various generations perceive it. The youth now mostly encounters feminist discourse through internet channels, whereas earlier generations may have been exposed to feminism through historical movements and direct participation. This change in exposure may lead to changing viewpoints, either making the youngsters more progressive or encouraging skepticism because of media misrepresentations.

In order to contribute to the larger conversation on media responsibility in accurately portraying feminist values, this study attempts to comprehend how the media shapes the image of feminism and how it affects youth engagement. The results will promote critical thinking in the consumption of media narratives regarding gender equality and feminism.

Keywords: Media representation, feminism, misconceptions, youth perception, 21st century, social media influence, gender equality, feminist engagement, generational differences.

Introduction

Feminism, at its core, advocates for gender equality. In the 21st century, the movement has faced increasing scrutiny and misrepresentation, largely due to inconsistent media portrayals. While feminism is often positioned as a force for equality, certain narratives frame it as radical or divisive.

Media outlets—including social platforms, news agencies, and entertainment industries—play a central role in constructing and disseminating these images. While social media can amplify feminist voices, it also simplifies complex issues into viral content, fostering misinformation. Similarly, news and entertainment sources can either uphold feminist principles or reinforce outdated gender stereotypes, depending on ideological leanings.

This study aims to understand how these portrayals influence youth perceptions and engagement. It further investigates generational differences, contrasting how older generations, shaped by direct activism, interpret feminism compared to youth raised in the digital age. Through this lens, the research seeks to explore how the media molds contemporary understandings of feminism and how youth respond to these portrayals.

Media plays a vital role in shaping public awareness. Social media, news outlets, and entertainment platforms contribute to discussions around feminism, but not necessarily in an accurate or impartial manner. On one hand, social media amplifies feminist voices, raising awareness about gender issues. On the other hand, it also contributes in misinformation, where trending hashtags and viral posts often reduce feminism to simplified or misleading narratives. News media, based on its political or corporate stance, can either support or criticize feminist movements, affecting public understanding. Similarly, movies and television shows may misrepresent feminist themes, glorifying stereotypes rather than challenging them.

This study investigates the degree to which media perpetuates misunderstandings about feminism and how these representations impact young people's perceptions. Young people, who are particularly susceptible to media narratives due to their high levels of digital activity, will investigate how they understand feminism, whether they participate in feminist discourse, and how media-driven viewpoints influence their position on gender equality.

Furthermore, this study will examine how feminist perceptions vary by generation. While younger generations mostly learn about feminism through internet channels, older generations frequently base their knowledge of it on historical movements and direct activism. Their perspectives may be shaped differently by this disparity in exposure, either becoming more progressive or encouraging skepticism as a result of media falsehoods.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how the media shapes the perception of feminism and how these representations affect young people's involvement. The results will stimulate critical thinking while consuming media narratives about social movements and add to a larger discussion on the media's obligation to appropriately portray feminist ideas.

Review of Literature:

These articles supports limiting smartphone use for minors, emphasizing how unregulated digital exposure can lead to **anti-feminist messaging** and mental health challenges. It underscores the need for **policy intervention** to protect youth from harmful online content.

Together, these studies and commentaries emphasize the **dual-edged impact of media**: while it can educate and empower, it also risks distorting feminist values and reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. Addressing this requires both individual literacy and systemic responsibility.

Naseer, N. et al. (2022)

"Attitude of University Girls Towards Feminism: The Mediating Role of Media in Pakistan" The study, involving 115 female university students, demonstrates that media significantly shapes perceptions of gender roles. The research emphasizes the need for critical media literacy to dismantle stereotypes and promote progressive feminist values.

Gayathri & Bhuyan (2024)

"The Influence of Media on Gender Stereotypes Among Young Adults" Using established scales, the study reveals that Indian youth unknowingly absorb media-reinforced gender norms. It highlights the critical role of media literacy in challenging deep-rooted societal beliefs.

Lalukota, S. (2023)

"Adolescent Perception of Female Representation in Television and Its Impact on Gender Roles" This research explores how teens' exposure to media shapes their views on gender. Although results are not fully elaborated, it contributes valuable insight into media's long-term cognitive effects.

The Guardian Editorial (2025)

"The Guardian View on Modern Masculinity: Boys Need Mentors, Not Marketers" The piece critiques harmful online masculinities and emphasizes the need for nurturing, offline role models to develop healthy gender perceptions among boys.

The Guardian (2025)

"Ban Smartphones for UK Under-16s, Urges 'Adolescence' Writer" Jack Thorne's advocacy against smartphone use points to the dangers of online anti-feminist content. He highlights how digital spaces expose youth to sexism and mental health risks, calling for regulation.

Research Objectives:

To analyze the role of media in shaping misconceptions about feminism in the 21st century.

Investigate how various media types contribute to misrepresentation and misinformation.

To examine how youth interpret and engage with feminism based on media narratives.

Assess whether media encourages support, fosters neutrality, or promotes opposition.

To assess the extent to which media-driven misconceptions impact youth attitudes and behaviors toward feminism.

Measure emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses among young individuals.

Research Methodology:

A **mixed-methods research design** was employed in this study to provide a comprehensive understanding of how media influences youth perceptions of feminism. This dual approach combines the strengths of both **quantitative** and **qualitative** methodologies to produce richer, more nuanced insights.

◈ Quantitative Component: Survey-Based Analysis

A structured questionnaire was designed and administered to **50 participants** aged **16 to 35**. This instrument included both **Likert-scale** and **multiple-choice** items, which aimed to systematically measure:

Individual attitudes toward feminism

Levels of engagement (active, passive, or oppositional)

Perceived accuracy of feminist portrayals in various media platforms

Primary sources of feminist knowledge (e.g., social media, academic texts, films, or news)

Generational perceptions and potential shifts in feminist understanding

The quantitative data enabled statistical analysis of general trends and frequencies, such as how many respondents identified as feminists, how they engaged with feminist content, and which media platforms they deemed most influential or misleading. This helped establish **measurable patterns** in attitudes and behaviors.

◈ Qualitative Component: Media Content Analysis

To complement the numerical data, a **qualitative content analysis** was carried out on both **social media** (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, YouTube influencers) and **mainstream media** (e.g., news articles, films, and television programs). This part of the study aimed to:

Identify **dominant narratives**, both supportive and oppositional, regarding feminism

Detect **repetitive themes**, such as feminism being equated with "man-hating" or "female superiority"

Analyze **framing techniques** used in headlines, scripts, and viral content

Highlight **stereotypical portrayals** of feminist individuals or gender roles

By examining recurring discourses, this component provided **contextual depth** to the survey responses, helping explain why certain perceptions or misconceptions were prevalent among participants.

Data Analysis & Interpretation:

The sample size for this research is 50. The data collected from the individuals were between the ages of 16 years and 35 years. 88% of the respondents belong between the age group of 16 to 24 while 12% belong to the age group of 25 to 35.
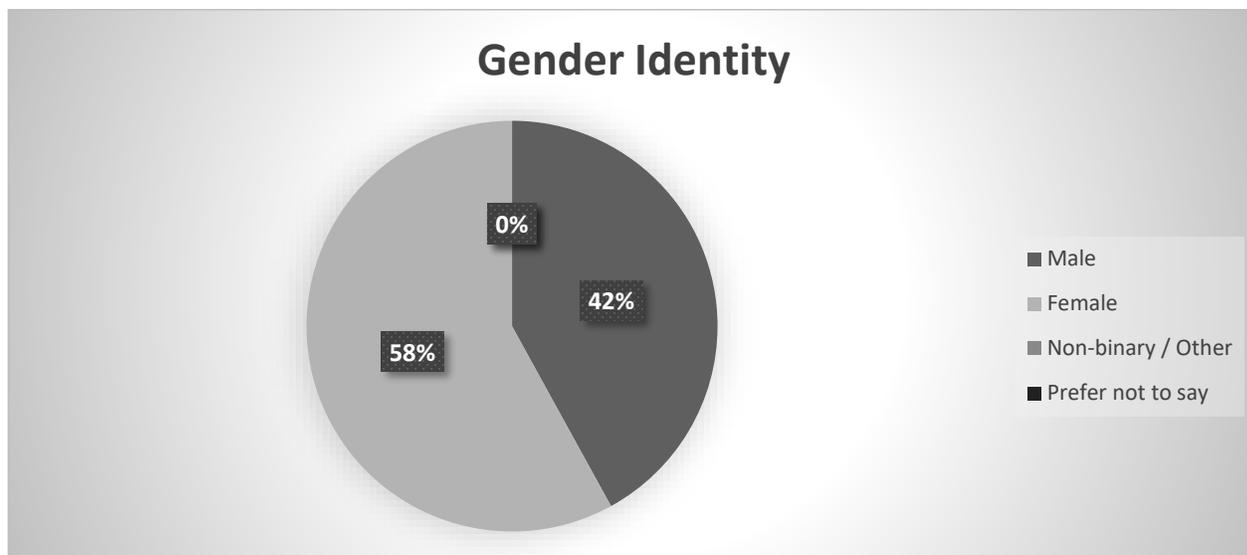
Gender: The majority of respondents identified as female (58%), while males made up 42%.
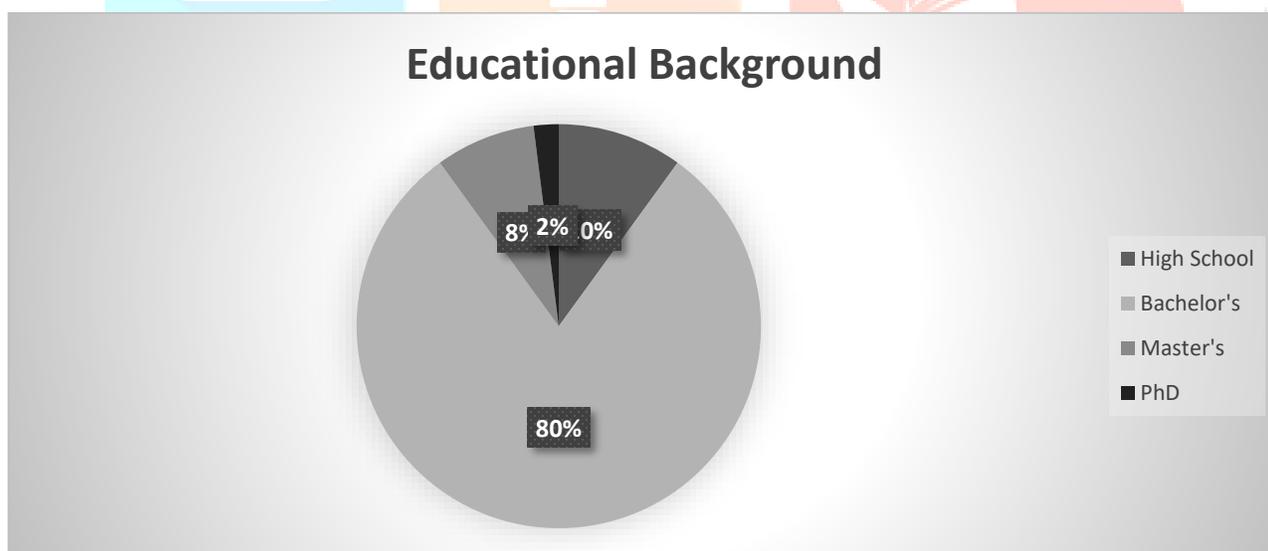
Educational Background: Most respondents were pursuing or had completed a bachelor's degree (78%), followed by Master's (8%), High School (10%), and PhD (2%).
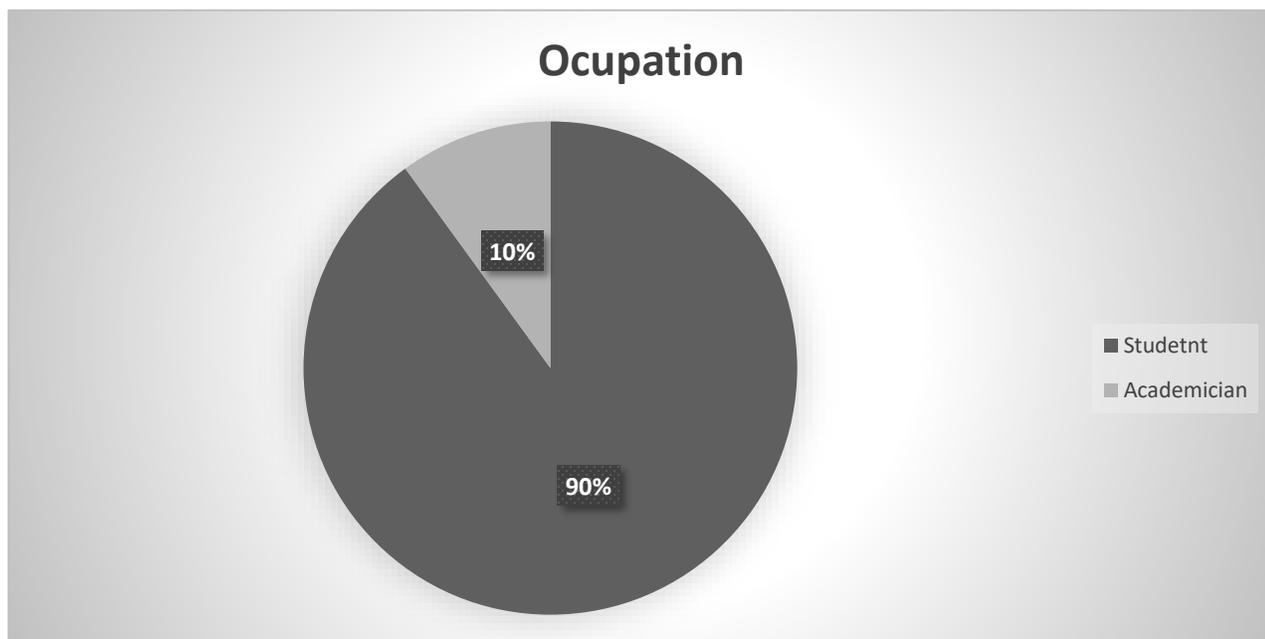
Ocupation

Occupation: An overwhelming 90% of participants were students, with the rest identifying as academicians.

What is your primary source of information about feminism? (Select all that apply)
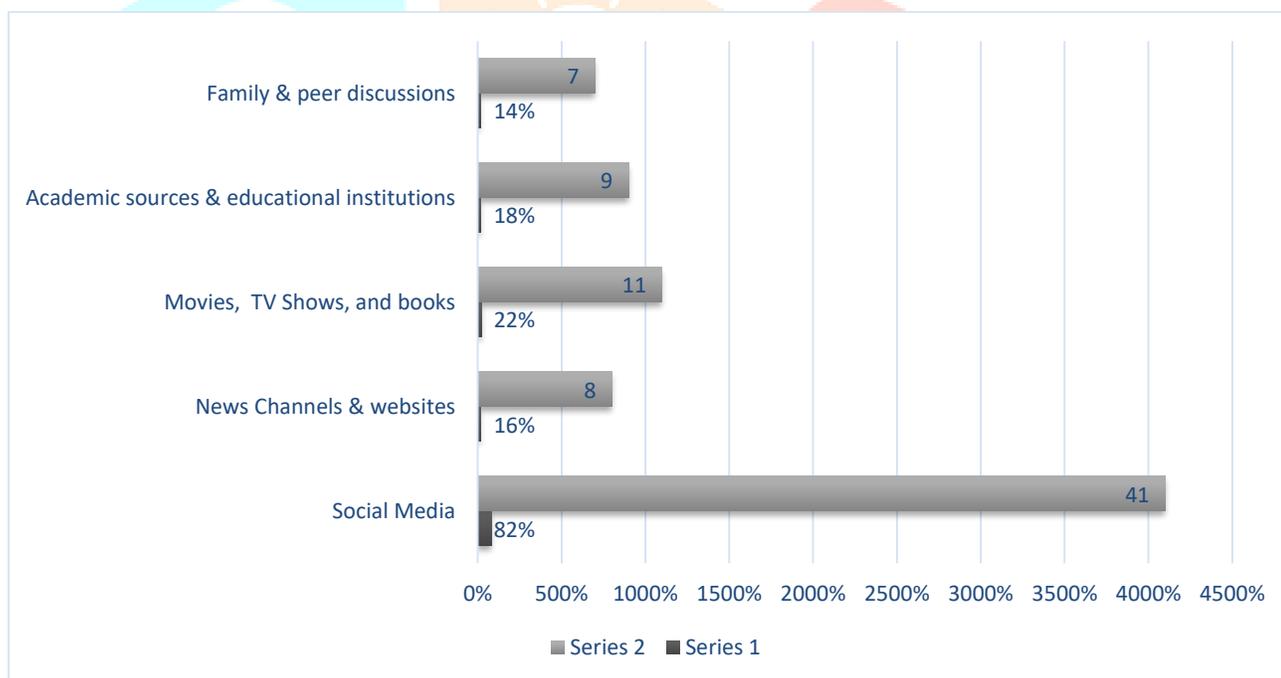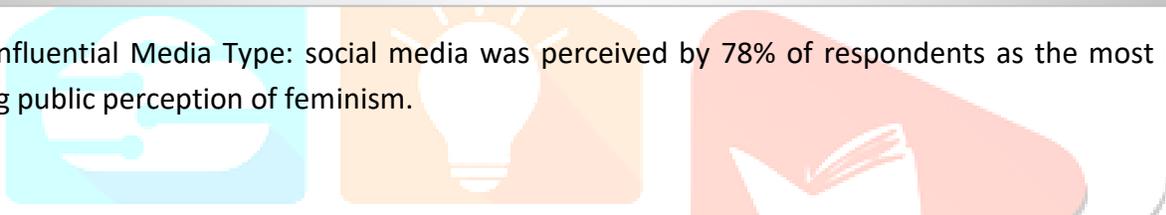

Primary Sources of Feminism Information: Most respondents (over 75%) cited social media as their main source. Other sources like academic materials, news channels, and movies were far less common.
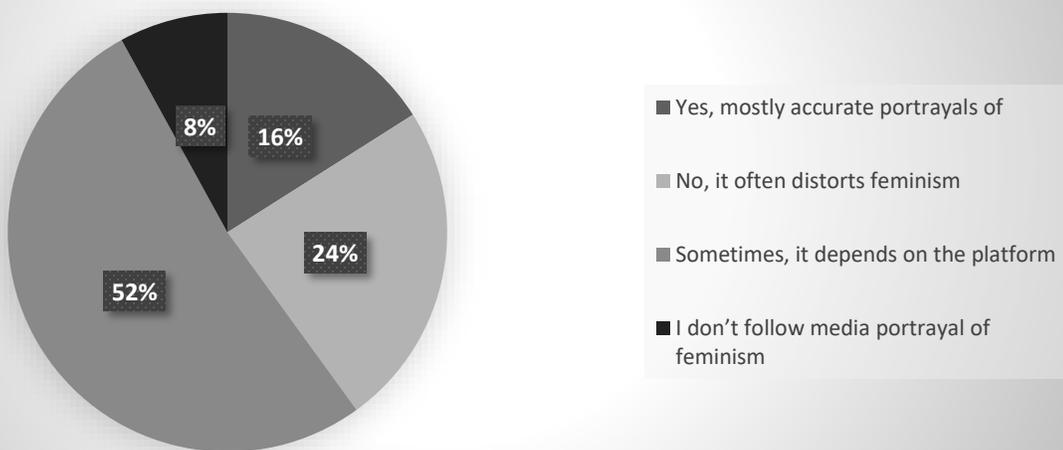
What type of the media do you think has the most influence on the public perception?

Pie chart values: 8%, 14%, 78%

Legend:
- ■ News Media
- ■ Social Media
- ■ Entertainment Industry
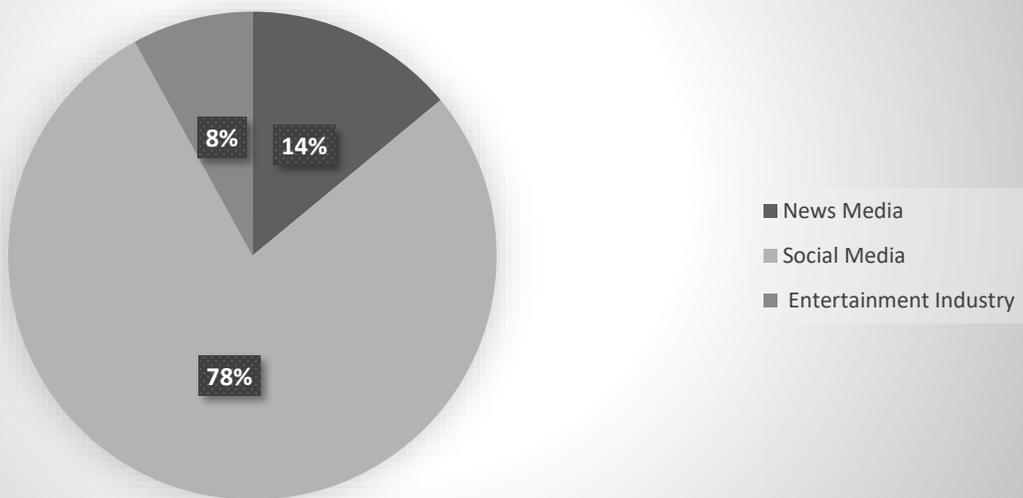
Most Influential Media Type: social media was perceived by 78% of respondents as the most influential in shaping public perception of feminism.

Do you believe media portrays feminism accurately?

Pie chart values: 8%, 16%, 24%, 52%

Legend:
- ■ Yes, mostly accurate portrayals of
- ■ No, it often distorts feminism
- ■ Sometimes, it depends on the platform
- ■ I don't follow media portrayal of feminism

Accuracy of Media Portrayal: Only 16% felt the media mostly portrayed feminism accurately. A significant number (52%) believed media distort feminism, or it depends on the platform.

How do you personally view feminism?
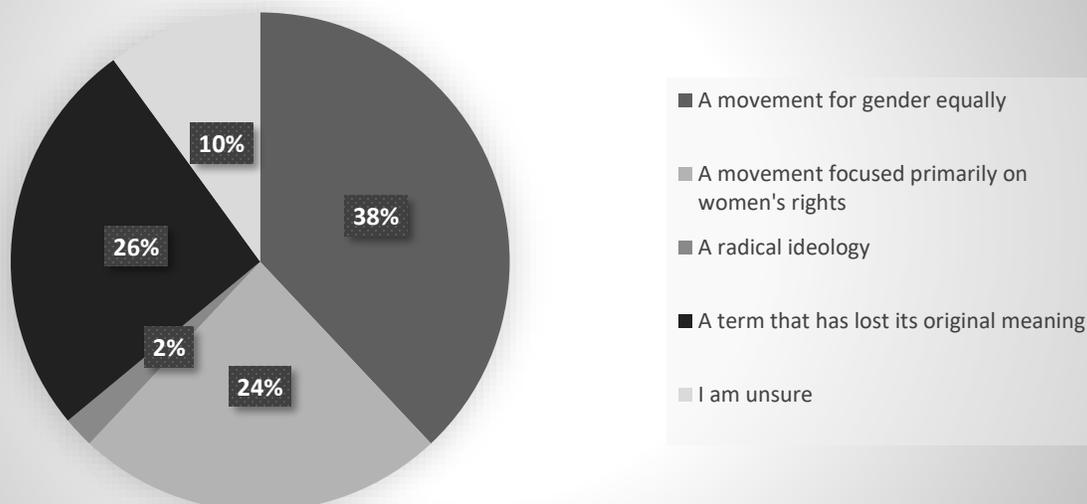
View of Feminism: 38% viewed feminism as a movement for gender equality, while 24% believed it had lost its original meaning and another 24% saw it as primarily focused on women.

Do you think younger generation views feminism differently than older generations?
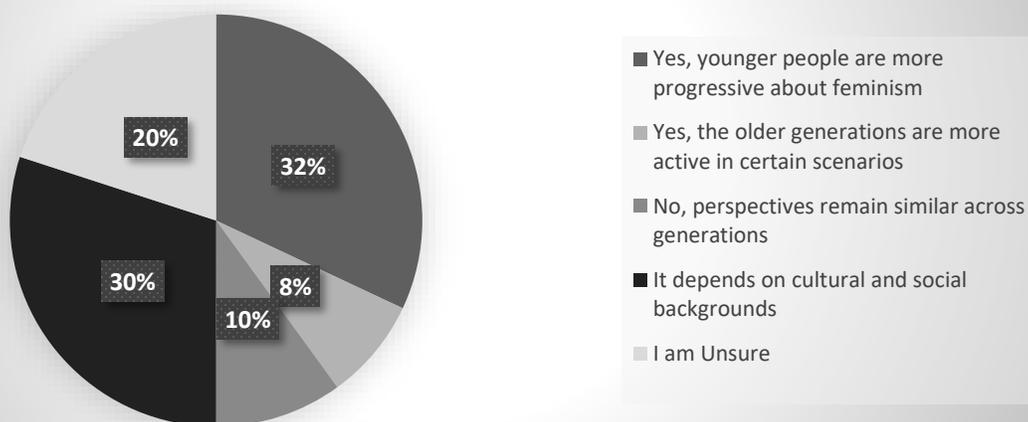
Generational Differences: 32% of respondents believed younger generations were more progressive. However, 30% said this depended on social/cultural backgrounds.

## How has your perception of feminism changed over time?
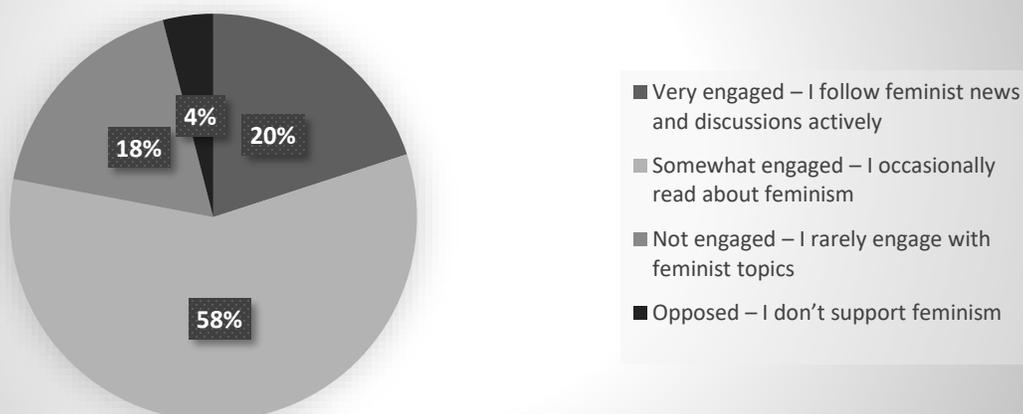
Engagement Level: The majority (58%) were somewhat engaged, while 20% were very engaged. Only 4% openly opposed feminism.

How engaged are you with feminist topics and discussions?


Change in Perception: 52% had developed a more positive view over time, while 16% had a negative shift, mostly due to media.

## What do you believe is the biggest barrier to feminism today?
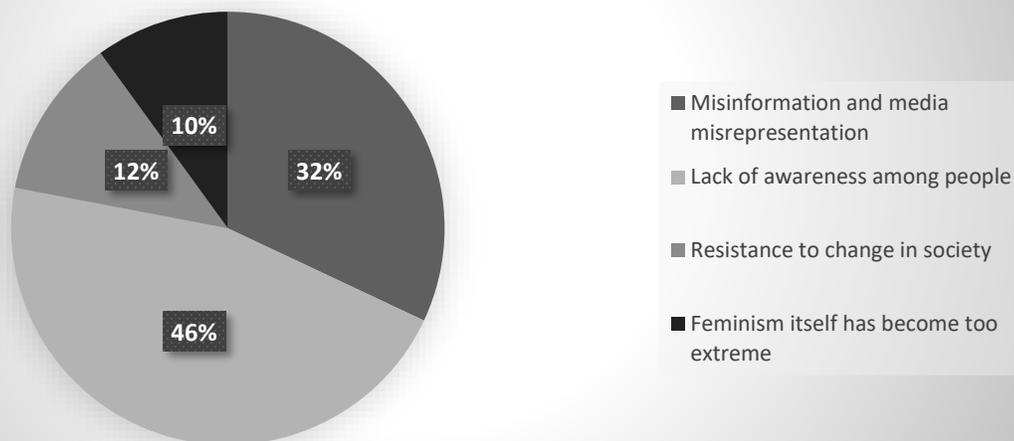
Barriers to Feminism: The top challenge was lack of awareness (46%) followed by media misinformation (32%).

What is the biggest challenge in achieving gender equality in media representation?
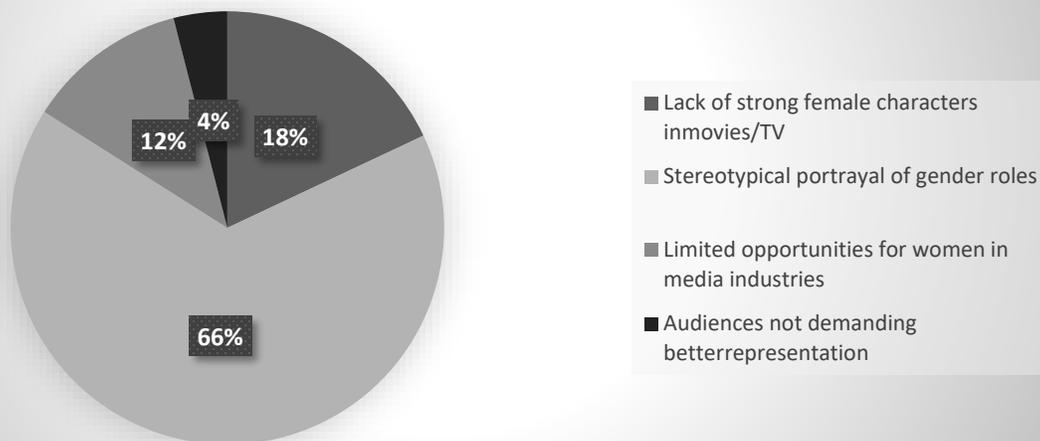
Gender Equality Challenges in Media: 66% believed the issue lies in stereotypical portrayals of gender roles.

Which of the following do you think is the biggest misconception about feminism today?(Select all that apply)
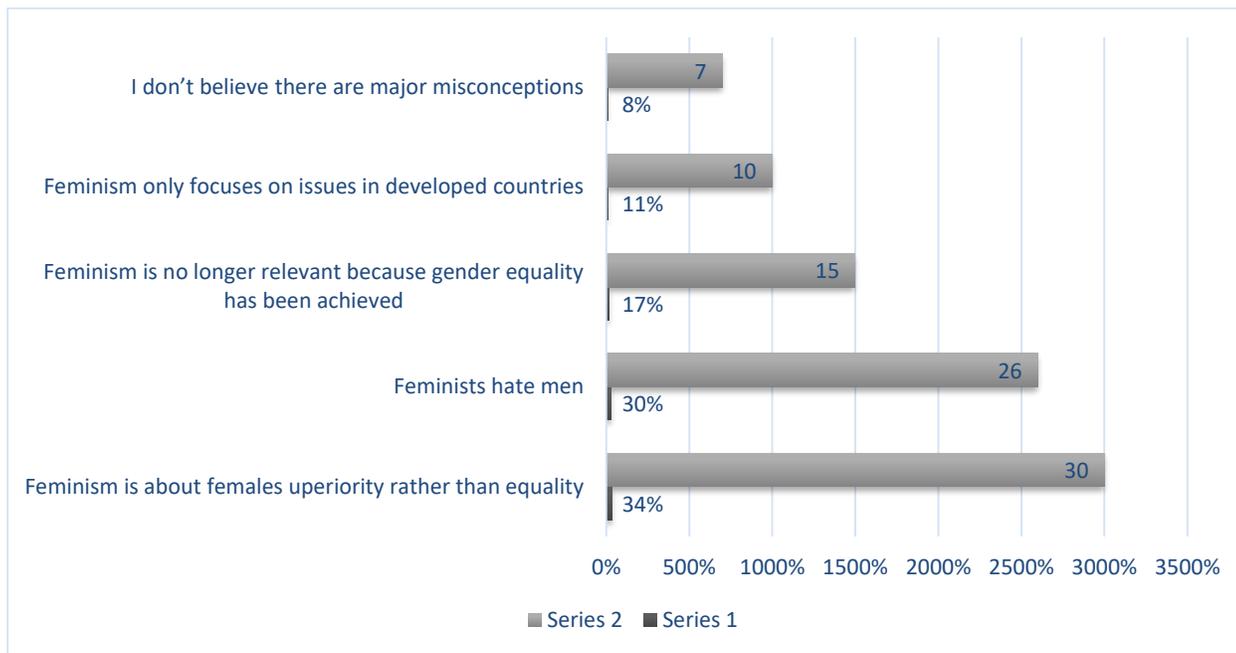
Misconceptions: The most cited was that feminism is about female superiority and that feminists hate men. Some even believed that feminism is irrelevant today.
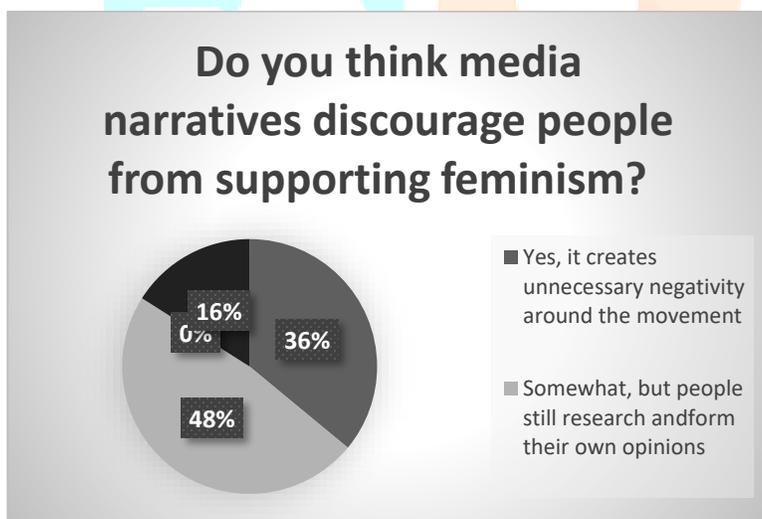
Narrative Impact: 48% agreed media discourages support for feminism by creating negative buzz.

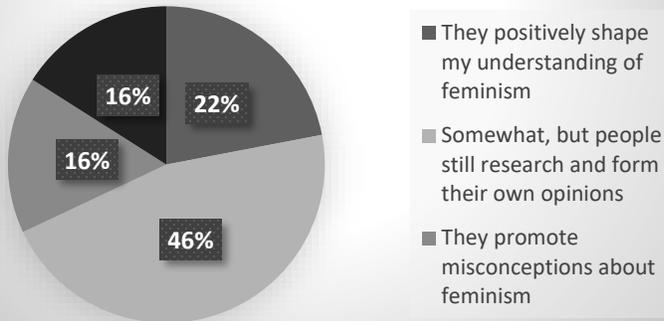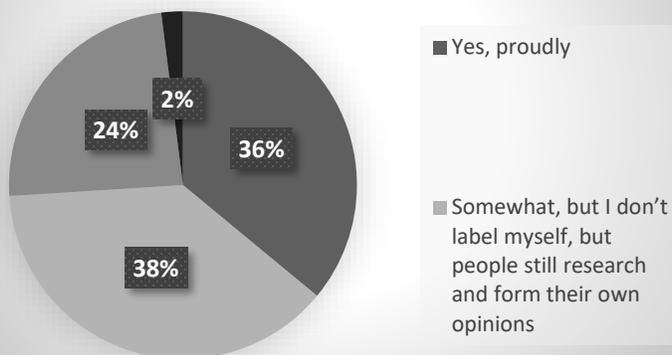**Influencer Impact:** A significant 46% felt influencers confuse people with conflicting content; only 22% found them helpful.

Self-Identification with Feminism: 38% identified as feminists without reservation. 40% supported feminist ideals but avoided the label. 24% did not identify as feminists but believed in gender equality. Only 2% rejected feminism altogether.

Open Ended findings Analysis

The responses to the open-ended question on feminism have revealed a wide range of perspectives, with nearly 65% of participants clearly articulating that feminism stands for gender equality across all genders. These individuals have emphasized fairness, equal rights, and equal opportunities—not the superiority of one gender over another. Around 20% of respondents have used metaphors or detailed reflections to describe feminism as a fundamental human right or basic decency, often associating it with societal progress and empowerment.

However, about 30% of participants have mentioned confusion or misunderstanding regarding feminism, attributing this largely to the role of social media and online content. These individuals have pointed out that

media has distorted feminism into something radical, divisive, or anti-male. Some have specifically cited the influence of "red pill" content or exaggerated portrayals on social platforms that have contributed to this misunderstanding.

Approximately 15% of the respondents have expressed little to no engagement with feminism, with responses like "no comments," "I don't think about it," or "I haven't engaged in feminism." This indicates a notable apathy or lack of awareness, even within a relatively educated demographic.

A smaller group—around 10%—have critiqued the media's portrayal of feminism and have advocated for deeper education, especially in rural areas where patriarchy and gender roles still dominate. These respondents have highlighted how cultural and regional factors continue to restrict women's freedom and how feminism has remained necessary in such contexts.

Overall, while the majority have demonstrated support for feminism and its core values, misconceptions fueled by media representations have affected youth perception, either through distortion or disengagement.

Findings

⬜ Age: 88% were aged 16–24; 12% aged 25–35.

⬜ Gender: 58% female, 42% male.

⬜ Education: 78% Bachelor's, 10% High School, 8% Master's, 2% PhD.

⬜ Occupation: 90% students, 10% academicians.

Primary Source of Feminist Information:
Social media dominated (75%), followed by news, academic sources, and films.

Perceived Influence:
78% identified social media as the most influential platform.

Accuracy of Media Portrayal:
Only 16% found media accurate. 52% felt it distorted feminism or that accuracy "depends on the platform."

Views on Feminism:
38% aligned feminism with gender equality. 24% believed it had lost meaning or was too woman-focused.

Generational Differences:
32% believed younger people are more progressive; 30% felt it depended on culture or background.

Engagement:
20% highly engaged, 58% moderately, 4% opposed feminism.

Shifts in Perception:
52% shifted positively over time; 16% had a negative shift due to media influence.

Main Barriers:
Lack of awareness (46%) and media misinformation (32%).

Stereotypes in Media:

66% said media promotes outdated gender portrayals.

Common Misconceptions:

Feminism as anti-men or pro-female superiority were most cited.

Influencer Impact:

46% felt influencers confuse people; only 22% saw them as helpful.

Self-Identification:

38% identified as feminists, 40% supported values but avoided the label, 24% believed in equality without claiming the title, and 2% rejected feminism.

To analyze the role of media in shaping misconceptions about feminism in the 21st century-

Youth interpret feminism diversely, influenced by media narratives, with social media driving both positive education and confusion. Engagement varies widely: some actively follow feminist discussions (14 "very engaged"), while others remain detached (12 "not engaged"), suggesting media exposure doesn't uniformly translate to support or opposition but shapes a spectrum of perceptions from progressive to skeptical.

To examine how youth interpret and engage with feminism based on media narratives-

Media, especially social media, plays a significant role in shaping misconceptions about feminism by amplifying conflicting narratives and polarizing views. Respondents frequently cite distortions like "feminism is about female superiority" or "feminists hate men," with social media—seen as the most influential medium—often blamed for confusion due to its diverse, unfiltered content.

To assess the extent to which media-driven misconceptions impact youth attitudes and behaviors toward feminism-

Media-driven misconceptions significantly impact youth attitudes, with many noting negativities discourage support (27 agree fully or partially), yet resilience exists—40 either identify as feminists or support equality despite distortions. This suggests media sows doubt but doesn't fully deter, as some youth actively resist or reinterpret narratives through personal reflection.

Open-Ended Responses Summary

Positive Views: 65% equated feminism with universal gender equality.

Misunderstanding: 30% pointed to media as a major source of confusion (e.g., "red pill" rhetoric).

Apathy: 15% showed indifference or disengagement.

Critique and Call for Education: 10% advocated for rural education and accurate media representation.

Conclusion

Media plays a double-edged role in shaping youth understanding of feminism. While it amplifies awareness, it also circulates conflicting messages that lead to confusion and disengagement. Social media, in particular, emerges as both an educator and misinformer.

Despite misconceptions, many young people still uphold feminist ideals. Yet, they are hesitant to embrace the term due to media portrayals. Generational shifts also show how digital exposure redefines engagement, often requiring critical interpretation.

Promoting critical media literacy and responsible journalism is essential for accurate portrayals of feminism. Only then can the movement progress and maintain clarity in its message of equality and social justice.

The role of media in shaping public perceptions of feminism in the 21st century is both significant and complex. This study reveals that while the core objective of feminism remains the pursuit of gender equality, media narratives often distort or oversimplify this mission, leading to widespread misconceptions, particularly among the youth. Social media, though powerful in amplifying feminist voices, simultaneously fosters misinformation and conflicting interpretations, creating confusion about the true essence of feminism.

The data shows that while a considerable number of young individuals support feminist ideals, many are hesitant to identify openly with the feminist label due to negative portrayals and prevalent stereotypes perpetuated by media. Furthermore, the generational analysis suggests that while younger audiences tend to be more progressive, their perspectives are deeply influenced by the type and quality of media they consume.

This research highlights the urgent need for critical media literacy among the youth to enable them to discern between authentic feminist values and distorted media representations. It also calls for greater responsibility on the part of media platforms to portray feminist movements accurately and constructively. By fostering a more informed and nuanced understanding of feminism, media can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality and empowering the next generation to engage thoughtfully and actively with social justice movements.

In conclusion, addressing media-driven misconceptions is essential not only for restoring the true narrative of feminism but also for building a more equitable and inclusive society. Encouraging critical engagement with media content and supporting responsible journalism will be crucial steps toward achieving this goal.

References:

- Naseer, N., et al. (2022). Attitude of University Girls towards Feminism: The Mediating Role of Media in Pakistan. Pakistan Journal of Social Science, 42(3), 679–690. https://pjss.bzu.edu.pk/index.php/pjss/article/view/1167
- Gayathri & Bhuyan, B. (2024). The Influence of Media on Gender Stereotype Among Young Adults. International Journal of Indian Psychology, 12(4), 202–213. https://ijip.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/18.01.202.20241204.pdf
- Lalukota, S. (2023). Adolescent Perception of Female Representation in Television and Its Impact on Adolescent Views on Female Gender Roles. Journal of Student Research, 10(3). https://www.jsr.org/hs/index.php/path/article/view/4773

- The Guardian Editorial. (2025). The Guardian View on Modern Masculinity: Boys Need Mentors, Not Marketers. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/01/guardian-view-masculinity-boys-need-mentors

- The Guardian. (2025). Ban Smartphones for UK Under-16s, Urges 'Adolescence' Writer. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/feb/12/ban-smartphones-uk-children-jack-thorne