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Emotions on Social Media as Catalysts for Change: Epistemic and Motivational Potentialities for Gender Equality

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Abstract

To this day, people still face gender discrimination and battle with gender injustices. To change this, we both need accurate knowledge about these injustices and we need to strive for active change. This article provides a theoretical reflection on how social media, by serving as an accessible platform for people to portray their emotions, can be a tool for both of these needs. In terms of the topics it discusses, the article operates at the intersection of the literature on digital activism on the one hand and emotions and social media on the other. However, I approach these topics using a combination of multidisciplinary lenses. I employ the epistemic injustice framework to emphasise the link between gender inequality and the production and distribution of knowledge. In line with the literature on affect theory, I argue both that emotions can generate epistemic novelties and that emotions have collectivising and motivational power. Finally, the article builds on existing research on how social media provide a space for people to portray, distribute, and adopt emotions. The theoretical reflection in this article then combines these insights to demonstrate how social media—by allowing the expression and distribution of emotions—can catalyse both the production of new knowledge and active change. With social media enabling emotions to be heard and seen, this online sphere can contribute to the epistemic empowerment of women and to the fight against gender discrimination and gender injustices.

Keywords

affect; emotions; epistemic injustice; gender; social media; societal change

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, possibilities to communicate have shifted significantly. Social media enable people to reach each other faster than ever before. Moreover, they allow people to be in contact with others

from all over the world. As such, people can now connect not only with acquaintances, but also with strangers. Among other things, this has impacted knowledge production and distribution. Many people turn to social media when seeking information on various topics, such as health care (Hamid et al., 2016; K. Kim et al., 2014; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Westerman et al., 2013). While social media's accessibility might result in a faster and broader dissemination of information, we can question whether this is always preferable when accurate information is desired. Indeed, several authors have pointed to the danger of filter bubbles and echo chambers on social media. Meaning, the content users see on social media becomes gradually less diverse over time (filter bubble; Leysen et al., 2022; Pariser, 2011) and people generally only see content that reflects or reinforces their own preconceived notions and ideas (echo chamber; Cinelli et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2018). These phenomena may lead to misinformation, confirmation bias, and polarisation, and are thus often perceived as problems when relying on and using social media (Barberá et al., 2015; Díaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2022; Nguyen, 2018). However, social media can also come with more positive transformative possibilities. Indeed, whereas for example the easy shareability of information can lead to misinformation, it can also result in allowing a wider variety of actors to participate in knowledge production (Jin et al., 2015; Safadi et al., 2021). As such, while social media should be treated with caution, the platforms still hold a more positive transformative potential as well. Social media can be a place where marginalised voices are given a platform and marginalised people form collectives. It is this potential of social media that plays a central role in this article. More precisely, the aim of this article is to provide a theoretical reflection on how social media, by serving as accessible platforms for people to portray their emotions, can contribute to combatting gendered injustices by both providing knowledge on these injustices and by facilitating and amplifying collective efforts for active change. It will do so by building on philosophical insights and frameworks—more precisely from the epistemic injustice literature and affect theory—and applying these to topical issues in media and communication studies.

Thematically speaking, this article mainly ties in with ongoing media and communication studies research on two topics: emotions and social media on the one hand, and digital activism on the other. Firstly, emotions have become an increasingly popular study object in social media studies (Hyvärinen & Beck, 2018). This is reflected in literature on topics such as flaming (Jane, 2015; Moor et al., 2010) and emotional contagion (Ferrara & Yang, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016; Kramer et al., 2014). One recurring theme in this field is social media's potential to amplify emotional experiences and to enable the social sharing of emotions (e.g., Micalizzi, 2014), while also reflecting and potentially perpetuating social inequalities (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 480). Secondly, social media have created novel opportunities and spaces for activism (Nikunen, 2019). This has sparked scholarly attention for the role of social media in the emergence of new social movements and events such as #MeToo (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Freedman, 2020; Gilmore, 2019; Page & Arcy, 2020) and the Arab Spring (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Gire, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2014). To explain social media's role in social change, recent empirical work in this field has mainly focussed on functional mechanisms, such as how social media can serve as platforms for expressing opinions and joining causes (Valenzuela, 2013), their ability to amplify counter-public spheres (Luna et al., 2022; Nikunen, 2019), and the possibilities they offer to raise awareness about the seriousness or the structural nature of issues such as sexual violence (Levy & Mattsson, 2023; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Moving on, while some authors have acknowledged that there is a link between digital activism and social media as platforms for emotions (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2016; Shaw, 2014), this link remains underexplored. Indeed, James Jasper argues, "emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest" (Jasper, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, approaching social change through the lens of emotions is necessary to reveal the "hidden mechanisms beneath many of the concepts we have taken for

granted for so long" (Jasper, 2011, p. 18). This article responds to that need by focussing on social media's capacity to function as platforms for portraying emotions and how this fosters knowledge about and action against gender injustices. As such, in terms of the topics it discusses, this article operates at the intersection of the literature on digital activism on the one hand and emotions and social media on the other. However, I chose to approach these topics from the perspective of existing philosophical work on epistemic injustices and affect theory. These two bodies of literature can provide an added layer of analytical depth to discussions on social media, emotions, and active change. The main argument of this article is then that social media with their capacity to serve as platforms for emotions to be expressed, shared, and adopted, can be valuable in creating knowledge about inequalities and initiating active change against them.

What remains of this article consists of two parts. In the first part, I discuss the necessary existing literature that forms the basis of my discussion of emotions, social media, and (digital) activism. I start by briefly explaining gender in/equality as the background against which this article is situated (Section 2.1). This is followed by an analysis of the relevant state-of-the-art related to epistemic injustices (2.2), affect theory (2.3), and social media and emotions (2.4). In the second part of the article, the main argument of this article is developed. First, I argue that social media—as platforms for emotions—can provide valuable knowledge that can help overcome epistemic injustices (3.1). Then, in line with emotions' motivational power and current knowledge of online social movements, I also argue for social media's collectivising and transformative potentiality that can catalyse active change (3.2).

2. Discussion and Analysis of Gendered Epistemic Injustices, Affect Theory, and Social Media

2.1. Moving Towards Gender Equality

To this day, gender inequalities prevail in almost all aspects of our lives. Worldwide, women enjoy less education than men, are more prone to gender-based violence, have less access to quality healthcare, receive lower wages, face higher burdens of domestic work, have less social and political power, are more often in a subjugated position in the personal sphere, and so on (Bertocchi & Bozzano, 2020; Dahal et al., 2022; European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.; Gu et al., 2024; Kearns et al., 2020; Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019; Paxton et al., 2021; Perez, 2019; Treas & Tai, 2016; UNICEF, n.d.; World Economic Forum, 2023). While several strategies exist to combat gender inequality (e.g., gender quotas for political positions), scholars point out that true equality cannot be achieved as long as discriminatory beliefs and epistemic injustices prevail (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2013; Meeussen et al., 2022). To combat such discriminatory beliefs, injustices, and inequalities, two things are necessary: (a) accurate knowledge of what gender discrimination looks like, and (b) taking steps to actively combat this. This article addresses the role social media can play in both of these aspects by focussing on how they serve as platforms for emotions. In other words, I will discuss how social media—because of their link with emotions—can contribute to both knowledge about and action against gender injustices. This article thereby mostly refers to gender injustices faced by women because the vast majority of current research covers only men and women. However, much of what this article discusses may also apply to the situation of other non-cismen. Moreover, while the article mainly discusses gender injustices from the perspective of women in general, it is important to keep in mind that many women face complex forms of injustice due to intersectionally overlapping identities and inequalities.

So, in this article, I will point to social media's intimate link with emotions to explain how social media can contribute to both knowledge about and action against gender injustices. However, this reasoning implies three things: that there is a link between gender injustice and knowledge; that there is a link between knowledge, active change, and emotions; and that there is a link between emotions and social media. Therefore, in the following sections, I will discuss three bodies of literature corresponding to these three implications. First, we turn to the epistemic injustice literature as a framework for understanding the relationship between gender in/equality and knowledge. Next, I focus on current works from affect theory to explain the role emotions can play in creating knowledge about injustices and in active change. Indeed, while the link between emotions and activism has sporadically been touched upon within the communication science literature as well (Gerbaudo, 2016; Shaw, 2014), it is affect theory scholars who have most thoroughly discussed the intrinsic properties of emotions that cause them to have both epistemic and motivational value. Finally, I also discuss some relevant literature explaining social media's potential to be an accessible platform for expressing and sharing emotions.

2.2. Gender Inequality in Knowledge Production and Distribution

As explained, an important part of the fight against any kind of injustice is to have accurate knowledge about this injustice. With that in mind, I now turn to the existing literature on feminist epistemology, which addresses gender inequality in the production and distribution of knowledge. For the scope of this article, I focus on the work of Fricker (1999, 2007, 2013), Pohlhaus (2012), and Dotson (2012, 2014).

In its most general form, epistemic injustices are injustices that hamper someone's capacity to gather knowledge or to be seen as generating valid knowledge. Fricker (2007, 2013) distinguishes two kinds of such epistemic injustices: distributive and discriminatory injustices. Distributive injustice refers to an unjust distribution of epistemic goods, i.e., when people have less access than others to information and knowledge. For example, academic articles are less accessible to a broader public than popular media (e.g., social media platforms). The second form, discriminatory injustice, is again subdivided into testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person or a group is perceived as less credible due to stereotypes. The experiences they report, e.g., testimonies on sexual violence in official hearings, can then be perceived as not credible. We speak of hermeneutical injustice when someone has an unfair disadvantage in their social situation being understood, either by themselves or by others. This might occur when there is a lack of understanding or of fitting concepts and language for people to interpret or describe certain experiences (Fricker, 2007, 2013). For example, when there is a lack of collective insight into the structural features of societies that contribute to the prevalence of sexual violence, victims of sexual violence can blame themselves, and their experiences might be misunderstood by others. To this list, Dotson (2012) and Pohlhaus (2012) add a fourth type of epistemic injustice: contributory injustice. This occurs if alternative hermeneutical resources are wilfully ignored by epistemic agents. Current prejudiced epistemic resources are then maintained as the norm. For example, when victims of sexual violence attempt to explain their experience in a shifty or emotional way, those listening to them might not believe these testimonies due to them upholding structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that victims are "people who fight back" and—importantly—that true testimonies must be "logical, rational and clear." The epistemic agent listening thwarts a knower's ability (here the victim) to contribute to knowledge by not having done the necessary work to understand that victims of sexual violence may not be able to sound clear and rational after being assaulted (Dotson, 2012).

As such, we can distinguish four forms of epistemic injustice: distributive (when there is an unjust distribution of epistemic goods), testimonial (when people are seen as less credible due to stereotypes), hermeneutical (when someone has an unfair disadvantage in their social situation being understood), and contributory (when certain sources of knowledge are wilfully ignored). Moreover, if one or more people suffer from any of these kinds of epistemic injustices in a systematic way, we can speak of epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 1999). While all these concepts surrounding epistemic injustice are ever-evolving and can each be analysed even further, the distinctions explained here suffice for the purpose of this article. Readers interested in further discussions on epistemic injustices can refer to Kidd et al. (2017).

2.3. The Cognitive and Motivational Power of Emotions

As discussed earlier, this article builds on affect theory to explain the relationship between emotions, knowledge, and active change. This will then later be applied to the case of social media as places where emotions are expressed and distributed. In affect theory, different terms are used to address emotions—"emotions," "affects," etc. The terms' usages and meanings vary across the literature. This article consistently uses the term "emotion" because it is more common in everyday language than terms like "affect" and it thus resonates more with laypeople (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014). To understand how emotions can be valuable for societal change, this research builds on the work of three authors who played key roles in the development of affect theory: Nussbaum (2001), Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), and Cvetkovich (2012). I will mainly use the work of the first two authors to argue for the role emotions can play in epistemic in/justices. The latter two will mainly be used to emphasise emotions' role regarding the motivation of active change.

First, Nussbaum's (2001) work reveals how emotions contain cognitive value. She defines emotions as a way of perceiving objects or situations. They can be seen as a lens between the subject and the object, concerned with both the receiving and the processing of information. Therefore, emotions are bearers of knowledge. They contain information on the object that causes the emotions as well as on the subject that experiences them. Moreover, they teach us something about how subjects and objects relate (Nussbaum, 2001). Next, Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) explains phenomenological aspects of emotions by showing how emotions can form people and groups. Her work can be seen as a "sociality" of emotions (Ahmed, 2004b). She explains the relationships between bodies (people, objects, etc.) as defined by emotions sticking to these bodies in two ways. First, emotions can stick more to some bodies than to others. Meaning, different bodies are associated with different emotions, due to e.g., stereotypes. Secondly, emotions can stick bodies together. Meaning that they can form relations between bodies—through e.g., shared histories and experiences—and create collectives. As stereotypes can stick certain emotions to minority groups and as these groups' shared histories can bring them together, emotions have consequences for minority groups (Ahmed, 2004b). This makes emotions a worthwhile study object. Even more so since emotions can also have a motivational power within these formed collectives. Cvetkovich (2012), building on Berlant (2011) and Sedgwick (2003), addresses emotions' motivational power. She counters the idea that emotions are merely individual and argues that experiencing emotions can be something collective and thus part of public life and group identities. Because of this collectivity, emotions carry the potential for us to use our agency in various ways, such as motivating each other to participate in political action. Due to this motivational power, Cvetkovich (2012) considers emotions necessary for political action.

In sum, according to existing research, emotions have cognitive value, define both bodies and social relations, and are political potentialities. They shape individuals, form collectives of them, and can fuel these collectives with motivation for change.

2.4. Social Media as Platforms for Communicating Emotions

In the previous two sections, I have addressed both the relationship between gender injustices and knowledge, and the relationships between knowledge, social change, and emotions. The final topic that needs to be discussed before moving on to the second part of this article is the link between social media and emotions. Therefore, I now briefly explore existing research on five essential characteristics of social media related to emotions.

First, Panahi et al. (2012) have discussed the potential of social media for sharing tacit knowledge, i.e., personal knowledge that exists in the mind of the knower in the form of personal experience, beliefs, know-how…and emotions. However, only existing in the mind of individuals, tacit knowledge is not easily spread. Nonetheless, Panahi et al. (2012) argue that social media have some interesting characteristics that can facilitate this, for example by enabling practices of observation, imitation, and informal networking. Hence, social media can provide valuable opportunities for spreading the knowledge contained in emotions. Moreover, secondly, social media posts allow people to have additional types of control over how they express their emotions in comparison with real-life contexts (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Panger, 2017). Third, social media provide platforms where people can express their emotions, and this on a larger scale than ever before (Duncombe, 2019; Jalonen, 2014; Lykousas et al., 2019; Tettegah, 2016). As such, emotional messages often reach a wider audience when presented on social media. Therefore, they can draw attention to and emphasise the emotions people experience towards certain events, systems, objects, etc. Fourth, messages on social media are more widely shared when they contain emotions (Chen et al., 2022; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). This further illustrates the potential of social media to serve as platforms for emotional messages to reach and impact many people. Fifth and finally, social media often serve as platforms for emotional contagion (Ferrara & Yang, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016; Kramer et al., 2014). Meaning, emotions expressed on social media by one person may be taken over by others, even unconsciously. As such, social media facilitate the spreading of emotions.

In sum, social media form spaces where various emotions can be expressed, distributed, and perceived that otherwise would go unexpressed or unheard. Moreover, we saw earlier how emotions have both an epistemic and a motivational value and how knowledge about inequalities is an important precondition for change. Taken together, these insights suggest that social media may be highly suitable places for activism to emerge. The rest of this article will argue that this is indeed the case, and that social media's link with emotions plays an important role in explaining why this is so. More specifically, I will first discuss how emotions and social media can contribute to knowledge about gender inequality, and then how they can help in actively combatting it.

It is important to note that I do not aim to portray social media as utopian means of communication where injustices can be combatted without drawback. Indeed, social media come with their own dangers and imperfections, for example regarding polarisation, misinformation, etc. (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2020; Aïmeur et al., 2023; Morahan-Martin, 2000). This should not surprise, given that social media are generally

profit-driven and tend to prioritise content based on commercial rather than social justice considerations. Moreover, media platforms often reflect and reproduce (gendered) injustices, among other things due to them usually being designed by the more dominant and privileged groups of society (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). At the same time, however, people at the margins of society regularly reinvent the use and significance of technologies such as social media to suit their own needs and cultures—often in ways that involve a form of resistance. This phenomenon is referred to as "the appropriation of technology" (Eglash, 2004). In line with such practices, this article points to how social media platforms can play a role in social change and how they might be used as tools by ordinary people and activists who—by doing so—in turn shape these digital realms and their significance. In other words, I believe that social media can be employed to capitalise on the epistemic and motivational value of emotions, which can in turn help combat gender injustices. As such, social media can form a useful complement to other means of communication, such as traditional media, face-to-face communication, traditional knowledge distribution, etc.

3. Theoretical Reflection on Emotions' Potentiality for Epistemic Justice and Active Change Through Social Media

3.1. Social Media and Emotions as Tools to Reduce Gendered Epistemic Injustices

As discussed previously, knowledge about gender inequality and oppression is an essential precondition for change (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2013). In this section, I will explain how social media—as platforms where emotions are widely and easily shared—can contribute to this knowledge. I mainly build on the feminist epistemology literature about epistemic injustices and on affect theory to develop this argument. Furthermore, I refer to examples of digital activism—mainly #MeToo—to further illustrate the role social media can play.

To start, let us consider how women are confronted with all four forms of epistemic injustice described earlier. Indeed, many women have no or less access to knowledge resources and are consequently less able to understand the systemics of the discrimination they face (distributive injustice; Fricker, 2007, 2013). Women are also perceived as less credible and irrational (Bankey, 2001), stereotypes resulting in them being less likely believed or taken as accurate sources of knowledge (testimonial injustice; Fricker, 2007, 2013). The lack of knowledge on various gender issues also results in women's positions being less understood, often leading to hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Moreover, I assert that when women express their knowledge about gender injustices in an emotional manner (rage about the gender pay gap, confusion about whether they consented to the sexual violence they experienced, etc.), this is often misperceived as irrational and unreliable because of entrenched views of knowledge as rational and emotions as unfit for knowledge production (Jaggar, 1989). This is in line with contributory injustice (Dotson, 2012; Pohlhaus, 2012). While women are thus confronted with all four kinds of epistemic injustice, social media can play a role in overcoming these. An important reason for this is the fact that they can function as platforms where emotions can be communicated. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the rest of this section, considering emotions as knowledgeable and cognitive (in line with affect theory and scholars such as Nussbaum, 2001) can open up potentialities to combat cases of all aforementioned epistemic injustices. These potentialities can then be harnessed using social media.

To explain why that is so, we first establish emotions' epistemic potentiality for gender equality. As Nussbaum (2001) describes, emotions link an emotional subject to an object and mediate how the subject receives and processes information. Therefore, studying emotions can teach us a lot about how something is perceived by a subject, how the subject and object relate, and how the subject processes information. Moreover, as Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) explains, shared emotions have the potential to instigate the formation of collectives. People who experience similar emotions can then find a mutual ground that binds them together. Hence, studying emotions can also be useful for understanding how collectives are formed and what unites them. Ahmed also argues that emotions can stick to certain people due to stereotypes (2004a, 2004b). For example, there can be an intertwined genealogy identified with regards to women being perceived as hysterical and mad (i.e., various emotions), and unknowledgeable and irrational (i.e., various stereotypes). This gives them a shared understanding of how existing patriarchal power relations are maintained in discourses of rationality (Bankey, 2001). As such, emotional stereotypes can also contain valuable knowledge, and bearers of these stereotypes can teach us something we otherwise wouldn't have access to. In sum, emotions can be regarded as a rich epistemic resource that can reveal important insights into gender inequalities.

Moving on, social media are spaces where people portray, distribute, perceive, and adopt emotions (see above). I argue that this attribute of social media results in social media bearing the potential to combat epistemic injustices. I will now illustrate this by discussing all four kinds of epistemic injustices described above. First, we can consider distributive injustice. Distributive epistemic injustices occur when there is an unjust distribution of epistemic goods (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Whereas many forms of knowledge are not always equally accessible to everyone, the accessibility of social media provides a wide reach in terms of knowledge distribution. We can think for example of the #MeToo movement. Although statistics, articles, etc. were already discussing the prevalence and diversity of sexual violence before the start of the #MeToo movement in October 2017, this was not able to reach and impact as many people as the online #MeToo movement did (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020). Moreover, emotions around sexual violence also found their way into public knowledge more through this social media movement than through earlier theoretical works (Gilmore, 2019). As such, social media enabled a wide spreading of information, testimonies, and emotions regarding—in this case—sexual violence. This illustrates how social media—in addition to combatting distributive injustice by disseminating information widely—are especially helpful in reducing distributive injustice with regard to the knowledge contained in emotional messages. Evidently, social media are not accessible to everyone (think for example of older people, people without internet connection, people who live in places where social media are forbidden or content is censored, etc.). Nonetheless, social media and their potential for the distribution and expression of emotions can help us to reach people with knowledge (such as tacit knowledge about gender-related topics) that otherwise would not be reached.

Next, we turn to testimonial injustice, i.e., when people's testimonies are not believed due to e.g., stereotypes (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Looking at gender equality and epistemology, we see that throughout history, women have been seen as less rational and more emotional than men (Bankey, 2001; Jaggar, 1989). This has marginalised women with regard to knowledge production. Their testimonies and opinions are regarded as less credible due to the intertwined genealogy between stereotypes of irrationality and being perceived as emotional (Bankey, 2001; Jaggar, 1989). However, if we follow affect theory scholars in recognising that emotions also contain valuable knowledge, women's testimonies cannot be that easily dismissed anymore for being "irrational." After all, emotional testimonies can then be seen as an epistemically very rich resource instead of being brushed aside as unhelpful or worthless. Importantly, social

media can help distribute this epistemically rich resource (see above). Social media's accessibility and wide reach can result in a far-reaching impact of epistemologically valuable emotional testimonies. This can normalise emotions as knowledgeable in testimonies of people that are usually disregarded as "emotional and thus irrational." This impact of social media is again also visible by looking at the example of the #MeToo movement. The power of this movement (partly) lay in the fact that it was not about a few individual cases, but about large numbers of women sharing their stories and revealing structural injustices prevalent in our societies (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020). This revelation of structural injustices makes subsequent individual depositions, tacit knowledge, and emotional statements harder to dismiss as made up or exaggerated. As such, social media expand the power and potentiality emotions already contain regarding current testimonial injustices.

Moving on, hermeneutical epistemic injustices entail that someone has an unfair disadvantage in their (social) situation being understood (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Gender inequalities can propagate such injustices. After all, dominant groups of people have more power in both producing and distributing knowledge. As such, they influence what people know about diverse social situations. This can then result in a lack of knowledge about diverse (intersectional) experiences and circumstances (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2007, 2013). Think for example about sexual violence by romantic partners. Today we know that when victims do not fight back, reach for help, or leave the relationship, this might be due to love, fear, or other binding emotions towards their partners. However, when one does not understand the social situation of these victims, one might interpret the fact that the victim didn't fight back or leave their partner as a sign of consent (instead of one of fear/love/etc.). As such, acknowledging emotions as knowledge diminishes hermeneutical injustices by shedding light on aspects necessary to understand people's social experiences. Here as well, social media can elevate this potentiality of emotions because of its large scale, wide impact, users' control, and potential for sharing tacit knowledge (see above). To illustrate this, the #MeToo movement is again telling. The movement provides us with a large database of personal testimonies. When more and more women share their stories of sexual violence, or gender inequality in general, it helps both women to better understand their own situation and other people to understand the systemic oppression women face (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Freedman, 2020; Page & Arcy, 2020). People are thus given a new hermeneutical knowledge resource to understand the social situation of women, namely women's lived experiences (tacit knowledge) presented to them through social media. This then results in a reduction of hermeneutical injustice.

Finally, the main epistemic injustice that acknowledging emotions as knowledge would evidently reduce is contributory injustice. This injustice occurs when alternative hermeneutical resources are not recognised by epistemic agents (Dotson, 2012; Pohlhaus, 2012). By listening to emotions as possible sources of knowledge, we are acknowledging them as an alternative hermeneutical resource. Therefore, valuing emotions as knowledgeable is a way of going against the maintenance of only structurally accepted hermeneutical resources and a way of acknowledging an alternative hermeneutical resource. This is also highly relevant for gender injustices since minority people (women, people of colour, etc.) are so often disregarded as irrational due to their attachment to emotions (confused, angry, etc.; Bankey, 2001; Gilman, 1985; Jaggar, 1989; J. Y. Kim, 2016). Together with dominant epistemological paradigms favouring "rational" knowledge, these stereotypes lead to situations where minority people have fewer opportunities to contribute to knowledge production (Jaggar, 1989). Valuing emotions as knowledge gives these people a greater say and influence in knowledge production, thus resolving some aspects of the contributory injustice they currently still face. Social media can also play a role in this by providing platforms for people to share their emotions and thus

contribute to knowledge production. For example, again looking at the #MeToo movement, many people have contributed to the revelation of the mechanisms and scope of structural sexual violence and abuse of power by testifying about it and discussing it on social media (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Page & Arcy, 2020).

In sum, valuing the epistemic potential of emotions can have positive effects on various forms of gendered epistemic injustice. Moreover, social media can serve as accessible platforms for people to portray their emotions and for others to get in contact with and learn about other peoples' emotions. As such, social media can be harnessed to spread the positive effects of acknowledging the epistemic potential of emotions. All in all, while certainly not utopian platforms, social media can thus still be useful tools in overcoming epistemic injustices.

3.2. Social Media and Emotions' Ability to Collectivise and Motivate Active Change

I started this article by positing that two things are needed in the fight against gender inequality: knowledge about this inequality, and active change. In the previous section, the focus was on knowledge and the barriers to spreading this knowledge. Now, we turn to active change and what role social media and online emotions can play in this, bringing us to the domain of digital activism. Most straightforwardly, social media can be a place to call people to action or a space where concrete plans to take action are spread. This was for example the case in the Arab Spring revolutions, where—as several authors have argued—social media played a key role in mobilising, organising, and broadcasting protests and other actions (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Gire, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2014). However, as explained in the introduction, such direct mechanics are not the focus here. Instead, following Jasper (2011) and existing research on emotions in digital activism (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2016; Shaw, 2014), I focus on social media's additional capacity to showcase and distribute emotions, and how this can instigate societal change in/directly.

An interesting starting point is the work of Gerbaudo (2016), who characterises the Egyptian revolution and the Spanish Indignados movement as "moments of digital enthusiasm" that were facilitated by emotional communication on social media. In his analysis of these movements' Facebook pages, he identifies two important driving factors behind this digital enthusiasm: the emotional work of page admins to construct a hopeful narrative, and emotional contagion between Facebook users that resulted in collective solidarity. However, we can ask ourselves what the deeper emotional mechanics behind this are: How do emotions expressed on social media lead to feelings of collectivity, and how can that result in active change? To answer these questions, let us return to the affect theory literature on the collectivising and motivational potential of emotions.

As explained, Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) researched how emotions "stick" people together. People can live through similar emotions by going through similar experiences. We can think for example about the fear women may have of walking alone at night due to their position as women in a world that is often still unsafe for them. When people experience similar emotions, this can glue them together, turning individuals into collectives (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b). Moreover, these emotions can spark feelings of active togetherness. Meaning, the comparable fear, anger, or joy people feel due to shared histories can encourage them to pursue change for the good of their collective. Indeed, as Cvetkovich (2012) argued, collective emotions can encourage people to take action. As such, emotions can be seen as a necessary ingredient for political and societal change.

Because of their intricate link with emotions, social media can then extend these characteristics of emotions. Indeed, social media allow for the collectivising potential of emotions to impact a large audience. As established in the literature on social media and emotions, social media can serve as accessible platforms for the expression, distribution, contagion, and uptake of emotions and emotional messages (see above). As such, it can be a locus where feelings of togetherness blossom and where communities are formed. Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that knowledge about gender injustices can be spread and taken up through social media, which can result in the emergence of online collectivities (boyd, 2011; Morahan-Martin, 2000). We can observe this in the case of the #MeToo movement. This started with one person using the hashtag, but it evolved into a movement where many people felt connected through their shared experiences and emotions. Indeed, a powerful aspect of the #MeToo movement is that it consolidates feelings of solidarity and collectivity (Page & Arcy, 2020; Suk et al., 2019).

Thus, social media induce the formation of collectives, and emotional messages leave a residue on viewers of social media posts. It is precisely this that can catalyse active change. After all, most large-scale social change does not come from individuals, but from many people who share certain emotions or a sense of urgency and necessity for change. Therefore, the formation of collectives is often a necessary step in achieving social change. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, collective emotions can motivate active change (Cvetkovich, 2012). This can be fuelled by the mechanisms and characteristics of social media. Social media can enable people to share their anger, pain, feelings of injustice, and determination. This can then be converted into calls for change or concrete plans of action. Social media's capability for emotions to be shared widely can then not only create collectives, but also help to motivate active change. Here again, we can look at the #MeToo movement. This movement goes beyond people sharing their tacit knowledge, experiences, and emotions. It also inspired calls for action in relation to gender injustices such as gendered violence. Social media played a key role in this (Mendes et al., 2019). Another example of the collective potentiality of emotions arising from media (content) is the case of the Arab Spring. Here, collective outrage was often spread, voiced, and fuelled through social media. This then created a feeling of collectivity, sparking calls to take action (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Gire, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2014).

To sum up, in accordance with authors such as Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) and Cvetkovich (2012), I argue for emotions' collectivising and motivational power. In line with that, I argue that social media can play a valuable role in forming social movements and collectives, and in creating active change. A key reason for this is that social media act as platforms where emotions can be expressed, shared, and understood, and ultimately lead to the formation of collectives. Subsequently, social media can then—through those collectives and collective emotions—inspire, motivate, and incite activism and social change.

4. Conclusion: Social Media and Emotions Enabling Epistemic Justice and Active Change

With gender injustices persisting to this day, it is important to both have accurate knowledge on what gender discrimination looks like, and to take steps to actively combat this. This article has argued that social media, by serving as accessible platforms for people to portray their emotions, can be tools for both of these needs. It did that by building on philosophical insights and frameworks—more precisely from the epistemic injustice literature and affect theory—and applying these to topical issues in media and communication studies.

Social media allow for people to inform many others on emotional experiences with additional types of control over their messages. Furthermore, social media can enable emotional contagion and allow for tacit knowledge to be shared widely and with a large impact. Because of these characteristics, they are valuable media where emotions on topics and experiences related to gender injustices can be shared and distributed. In this article, I uncovered how this ability of social media to serve as platforms where emotions can be expressed and shared can contribute to knowledge about and action against gender injustices.

I first looked at how social media can help provide knowledge about gender inequality and counter epistemic injustices. This is the case because of their link with emotions. Indeed, valuing emotions as knowledge enables us to understand different aspects of gender injustices that would otherwise remain underexposed. I discussed how epistemic injustices cause certain groups of people to have less access to knowledge production and distribution than others. Moreover, these injustices result in the testimonies of some being valued more than those of others due to stereotypes and insufficient knowledge about different social contexts. They also lead to various knowledge resources being disregarded. However, valuing emotions as knowledge can—at least partly—combat these injustices. Valuing emotions as an alternative hermeneutical resource allows people's emotional testimonies to be believed, others' social contexts to be understood, and it enables people viewed as "emotional and not rational" to take part in knowledge production. Gender plays a prominent role in this as women are often viewed as emotional. Due to this connection to emotions, their testimonies are often not believed. Moreover, their social contexts are repeatedly underrepresented and underexposed. The potential of social media to share emotions and to do so with additional types of control, a wide reach, and substantial impact ensures that social media can be platforms where the effects of valuing emotions as knowledge can come to fruition. In this way, social media can play a valuable role in gaining a better understanding of the variety and diversity of injustices related to gender inequality.

Broadening our knowledge of gender inequality may be the first step to combat it, but it is not the last. Fortunately, as this article demonstrated, social media also allow us to move from knowledge to action. This they do by enabling the formation of collectives, and by empowering people to motivate others for active change. Here as well, emotions can play a crucial role since they define the relationships between bodies (people, objects, etc.). Emotions can both stick more to certain people than to others due to stereotypes, and they can form relations between bodies through e.g., shared histories and experiences. When people learn via online platforms how others face similar experiences and emotions to theirs, this can evoke feelings of togetherness and induce the formation of collectives—we can for example think about the collectivity of the #MeToo movement. Even more so, emotions have a motivational power. Emotions can motivate us to participate in political action, and—in line with their collectivising potential—encourage others to do so as well. Together with social media's broad reach, this can catalyse social movements promoting gender equality and justice.

In conclusion, by enhancing the cognitive, collectivising, and motivational power of emotions, social media can be useful tools in the fight against gender injustices. First, when we open up to the idea of emotions as knowledgeable and valuable, we can better understand gender in/equality and counter epistemic injustices. Valuing emotions as knowledge and understanding the extending role social media can play in their cognitive potential allows for women to participate (more) in knowledge production and distribution. Moreover, emotions' collectivising and motivational power allows people to come together and instigate active change for more gender equality. In sum, social media and online emotions' potential for enabling marginalised

people to participate in knowledge production and distribution, and to bring these people together in collectives that can take action, cannot be underestimated.

Of course, this research is not without limitations. Firstly, I have focussed only on discrimination and injustices faced by women. The ideas developed here may benefit from future research expanding the scope of analysis to the situations of other oppressed groups and to intersectional experiences. Moreover, this study primarily offers a theoretical reflection on the themes discussed. Further empirical work may help validate and deepen the arguments developed here. Thirdly, while I acknowledge that social media also posit potential challenges from a social justice perspective, I have chosen to focus mainly on their more positive transformational potential. In future research, it would be beneficial to analyse if and how these positive potentials of social media can be preserved while minimising their downsides. Withal, this article can be valuable both from an academic and a social justice perspective. The academic contributions of this article lie primarily in how it examines the all too often overlooked intersection of digital activism on the one hand and social media and emotions on the other, and in how it does this from an innovative perspective. Indeed, I approached these topics through the lenses of the epistemic injustice framework and affect theory, which provided this article with additional layers of analytical depth. Importantly, the relevance of this article also goes beyond its academic value. After all, a deeper understanding of the emotional mechanics behind active change on social media can contribute to the epistemic empowerment of women and future fights against gender discrimination and gender injustices.

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