Visible on Our Terms: Platformised Feminism and the Politics of Endurance

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Abstract: This article explores how feminist actors in Slovakia use Instagram to sustain politically engaged digital practices in a national context marked by institutional neglect and rising anti-gender discourse. While much scholarship on digital feminism has centred on Anglophone contexts and high-profile influencers, this study focuses on users operating outside mainstream visibility, who maintain a feminist presence not through spectacle but through careful negotiation with the platform's emotional, aesthetic, and algorithmic demands. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the analysis shows how these users adapt to Instagram's infrastructural pressures while striving to preserve critical integrity and ethical coherence. Their practices reveal a constant tension between the need for visibility and the risk of commodification, between the desire to communicate structural critique and the constraints of platform legibility. In attending to these dilemmas, the article foregrounds feminist labour as a form of ethical endurance, enacted not through viral reach but through slow, situated, and relational modes of engagement.
Keywords: Slovak feminist activism, platformised feminism, feminist visibility, emotional labour, algorithmic governance

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Feminist politics in Slovakia have long been marginalised, often dismissed as foreign, elitist, or out of touch with everyday life. Persistent gender stereotypes and right-wing populism have fostered a hostile climate in which feminist claims are ridiculed or cast as threats to national identity, family, and tradition. This has intensified with anti-gender discourse portraying feminism as a Western 'gender ideology' undermining Slo-

vak values (Grzebalska, Kováts, Pető 2017; Maďarová, Hardoš 2021). As mainstream institutions and media grow increasingly indifferent or hostile, many feminist actors are turning to alternative arenas, especially digital platforms, to express their politics, build community, and sustain critique in an otherwise unreceptive environment.

Instagram, in particular, has become crucial to this shift away from traditional public spheres towards more autonomous, digitally mediated spaces of feminist engagement. While empirical evidence from Slovakia remains limited, existing scholarship suggests that platforms like Instagram can serve as important arenas for feminist visibility, community-building, and informal political education (Mendes 2015; Jónsson 2014; Clark 2016; Keller 2019). Unlike mainstream media, which often exclude feminist perspectives or reduce them to simplistic stereotypes, Instagram offers a space where feminist discourse can be shaped by those who live it and shared through accessible formats that bypass institutional mediation. It also allows for the circulation of intersectional vocabularies and transnational feminist imaginaries that might otherwise be absent from local public discourse (Bhambra 2014).

However, this potential is constrained by the platform's own logics and infrastructures. Instagram is not a neutral tool but a commercial, algorithmically governed environment that structures participation through technical and affective parameters (Gillespie 2018; Bishop 2020). Content that is aesthetically pleasing, emotionally palatable, and personally framed tends to perform well, while more confrontational or complex posts, especially those challenging dominant ideologies, often struggle to gain traction in platform economies that favour positivity, clarity, and individualised expression. As a result, the platform incentivises a narrow repertoire of visibility aligned with neoliberal ideals of self-expression, empowerment, and resilience (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill, Orgad 2018; Rottenberg 2018). This creates a paradox, visibility is a valuable resource for feminist engagement, yet it is often shaped by platform logics that may conflict with core feminist values. Feminist users must therefore navigate the risk that their political commitments may be softened, distorted, or erased in the process of being seen. Visibility becomes a form of labour that is emotionally, aesthetically, and ethically demanding (Scharff 2023; Linabary et al. 2020).

Amid these tensions, this article examines how feminist users in Slovakia negotiate the pressures of visibility on a platform shaped by algorithmic and aesthetic constraints. Drawing on qualitative interviews, it focuses on self-identified feminists who engage in political expression and feminist discourse on Instagram, yet do not identify as influencers nor operate through institutional channels. These actors present themselves as everyday users who maintain a public feminist presence through ongoing, often informal, digital practices. The study explores how these users engage with Instagram's affordances, how they navigate or resist its emotional and aesthetic norms,

and how their practices reflect the structural constraints of a national environment in which feminism is persistently delegitimised. In doing so, the article addresses a key gap in the literature on digital feminism, which has largely centred on Anglophone contexts, high-profile campaigns, or influencer practices. It shifts the focus towards small-scale, slow, and ethically attentive forms of feminist engagement that unfold at the intersection of algorithmic pressure and structural precarity.

Feminism in the feed

Over the past decade, the growing role of social media in shaping feminist discourse has attracted sustained attention across feminist media studies, digital culture, and communication research. Scholars have increasingly examined how platforms are not simply spaces where feminist content circulates, but sites that actively shape the conditions under which feminism becomes visible, relatable, and politically resonant. This body of research suggests that digital platforms have transformed how feminist ideas are articulated and engaged with, particularly by enabling new forms of participation that extend beyond traditional organisational, spatial, or generational boundaries (Jónsson 2014; Clark 2016; Keller, Mendes, Ringrose 2016).

Rather than operating through established institutional channels, much of this engagement unfolds in informal, decentralised, and everyday instances. On platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, feminist users participate through practices such as storytelling, consciousness-raising, peer education, and solidarity work. These activities are often woven into the rhythms of daily life and shaped by personal experience, emotion, and community interaction (Papacharissi 2015). Scholars have argued that this reflects a broader transformation in the practice of feminism itself, one that is less dependent on formal movement structures and increasingly expressed through networked, affective, and individualised forms of political engagement (Mendes, Ringrose, Keller 2019; Tiidenberg 2020). Many thus link this development to the fourth wave of feminism, which is characterised by its digital embeddedness, its use of intersectional vocabularies, and its emphasis on affect, embodiment, and lived experience as key sites of feminist knowledge (Munro 2013; Chamberlain 2016; Marwick 2019).

At the same time, the embedding of feminist practices within commercial social media platforms raises important questions about the infrastructural and ideological constraints that shape digital participation. While platforms offer new affordances for visibility and community-building, they also impose specific norms, aesthetics, and logics that influence which voices are seen, amplified, or rewarded. As Barbala (2024) argues, feminist engagement on digital platforms must be understood not simply as content uploaded into a neutral space but as practice entangled with platform gov-

ernance, algorithmic filtering, and affective economies. The concept of *platformised feminism* captures this dynamic, foregrounding how digital feminist activity is materially and discursively shaped by sociotechnical systems and commercial imperatives (Magaudda, Solaroli 2020).

Rethinking feminist visibility on Instagram

Among contemporary digital platforms, Instagram has emerged as a key site for feminist engagement, offering a visually oriented space that privileges affective expression and personal narrative. Its popularity among feminists stems from its capacity to facilitate everyday activism, emotional storytelling, and aesthetic self-representation. Features like Stories, Reels, and grid posts provide accessible formats for communicating feminist messages in visually compelling ways. For many, Instagram enables new forms of intimate publicness (Tiidenberg 2020) and emotional connection (Papacharissi 2015), making it an appealing terrain for feminist participation. Yet while Instagram presents itself as an open, democratised space, it is neither ideologically neutral nor structurally equal.

To understand Instagram's impact on feminist expression, one must consider how its algorithmic infrastructures and commercial logics function. As part of the broader platform economy, Instagram is optimised to extract attention and monetise engagement (Srnicek 2017). Its algorithms elevate content that is emotionally resonant, visually coherent, and easily consumable, favouring smooth affective flows (Gillespie 2018). This infrastructure is far from passive, it encodes values aligned with neoliberal ideologies, such as self-optimisation, positivity, and individualism (Kanai 2020). Through opaque algorithmic curation and moderation systems, including shadowbanning, downranking, and keyword filtering, Instagram actively governs which feminist voices gain traction and which are silenced (Noble 2018; Are 2023). The result is a commercially curated public sphere where visibility is not earned purely through relevance or urgency but through compliance with the platform's preferred affective and aesthetic norms.

These infrastructures directly shape the kinds of feminist content that are most likely to circulate. Instagram privileges visually polished, emotionally uplifting, and easily digestible forms of feminism, often centred on self-love, confidence, and personal growth. What emerges is a popularised, postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007; Banet-Weiser 2018) in which feminism becomes a lifestyle brand, aspirational, individually framed, and emotionally palatable (Pruchniewska 2017; Baer 2016). Feminist expressions that align with this tone, such as body-positive images, motivational mantras, or self-care routines, are rewarded with visibility, while more radical or structurally oriented content is penalised by the algorithm. Posts addressing gender-based

violence, racism, or queer and trans rights, particularly by marginalised users, are often downranked, flagged, or shadowbanned, rendering them nearly invisible (Are 2023; Scharff 2023; Savolainen et al. 2020). This produces an affective economy of feminism (Kanai 2020), where only certain emotional registers, like hope, inspiration, and resilience, are amplified, and others, such as rage, grief, or critique, are filtered out.

Operating within this framework requires feminist users to engage in ongoing negotiations between political conviction and platform compatibility. Visibility demands more than presence; it requires performing in algorithmically legible ways. Feminist actors must adapt to the norms of Instagram's influencer culture, often embracing its tropes such as cohesive aesthetics, regular posting, emotional tone management, and strategic self-branding (Duffy 2017; Abidin 2021; Dean 2023). Even when they seek to subvert these norms, their content is still filtered through infrastructures that favour branding over disruption. Staying visible thus means staying within bounds, even when those bounds are antithetical to feminist values of structural critique, intersectionality, and collective resistance.

This leads to what Duffy and Hund (2015) call 'aspirational labour', an unpaid, affectively charged work to produce content that is both authentic and appealing. For feminist users, this labour is both practical and ethical. It involves careful calibration of tone, being critical but not 'too angry', political but not 'too radical'. Content must be visually harmonious, emotionally digestible, and strategically framed to avoid triggering moderation. This often leads to self-censorship or the aesthetic softening of political content (Ahmed 2017; Bishop 2020). The 'authenticity bind' (Duffy 2017) further complicates this dynamic, requiring users to appear sincere and politically committed while also curating their presence in ways that attract engagement and avoid penalisation. Moreover, users addressing trauma, violence, or sexuality must often rely on informal strategies – speculative and collectively shared tactics for navigating algorithmic systems – as they attempt to preserve reach without compromising message (Bishop 2020; Cotter 2023). Yet these tactics are precarious and labour-intensive, highlighting the fragility of feminist visibility under platform governance.

In this sense, Instagram represents both an opportunity and a constraint for digital feminism. It offers tools for connection, reach, and expression, but only within the ideological and infrastructural contours of platform capitalism. Feminist actors must constantly navigate tensions between branding and critique, aesthetic coherence and political clarity, emotional appeal and structural urgency. The result is a form of platformised feminism that is legible, clickable, and resonant, but also filtered, partial, and uneven. Recognising these dynamics is essential not only to understanding feminist participation on Instagram but to confronting the broader limits and possibilities of feminist politics in algorithmic publics.

Situating (digital) feminism in Slovakia

Slovakia offers a compelling case for understanding feminist activism shaped by post-socialist transformation, neoliberal restructuring, and rising illiberalism. After the collapse of state socialism in 1989, early feminist actors sought to articulate gender justice outside the confines of discredited state structures. ASPEKT, founded in the early 1990s, emerged as a key site of feminist discourse production (Cviková, Juráňová 2009). Rooted in civil society, education, and publishing rather than party politics or formal institutions, early feminist initiatives, such as ASPEKT, were often dismissed as elitist or culturally foreign, thereby complicating their legitimacy in the public sphere.

The country's accession to the European Union in 2004 reconfigured the terrain of feminist engagement. EU frameworks opened up space for gender equality discourse and provided much-needed funding, but they also introduced technocratic pressures and depoliticised rationalities. Feminist NGOs increasingly found themselves operating within donor logics that privileged compliance, quantifiable impact, and professionalisation over grassroots organising or structural critique (Černohorská 2019). Kobová (2016) describes this as a broader neoliberal turn in feminist praxis, where gender became framed through the lens of individual responsibility and economic productivity, while intersectional and redistributive politics were sidelined. As activists moved into bureaucratic and policy-making roles, the line between feminist critique and state-aligned gender expertise became increasingly blurred (Maďarová, Valkovičová 2021).

This institutionalisation left feminist politics vulnerable to backlash. From the early 2010s, conservative and far-right actors in Slovakia mobilised against 'gender ideology', depicting feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexual education as threats to national sovereignty, Christian values, and the traditional family (Grzebalska, Kováts, Pető 2017). This rhetoric became a symbolic glue uniting disparate grievances and fuelling a deeper illiberal shift in governance, which redefined democratic legitimacy through appeals to 'the conservative people' (Maďarová, Hardoš 2022). In practice, these developments led to tangible consequences: the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was blocked, over twenty anti-abortion bills were introduced between 2018 and 2021, and gender equality mechanisms were defunded or dismantled (Maďarová, Valkovičová 2021).

Amid this climate of institutional erosion and public hostility, digital platforms began to serve as alternative arenas for feminist visibility, dialogue, and mobilisation. ASPEKT's transition to online publishing through its blog ASPEKTin marked an early recognition of digital media's capacity to sustain feminist knowledge production and connect with new publics beyond the limits of mainstream print media (Černohorská 2019). By the late 2010s, other established organisations, including Možnosť voľby (Freedom of Choice), increasingly adopted social media strategies to counter disinfor-

mation, amplify advocacy, and engage younger audiences, especially as traditional channels grew less accessible.

Simultaneously, a new generation of feminist initiatives emerged that were digitally native in form and practice. Initiatives such as Dôstojná menštruácia (Dignified Menstruation) exemplify this shift, using Instagram and crowdfunding platforms to engage the public through advocacy, education, and the practical redistribution of material support. Yet these initiatives are not outliers, they are part of a broader diversification of feminist actors and tactics shaped by generational change and evolving media infrastructures. As Maďarová and Valkovičová (2021) observe, the field of feminist praxis in Slovakia has become increasingly differentiated, encompassing NGOs, informal collectives, cultural workers, and digitally networked individuals. Younger actors in particular encounter feminism not through institutional affiliations, but through social media environments shaped by global vocabularies and local resonance.

While these dynamics remain under-researched, Maďarová and Valkovičová (2021) further observe that digital media increasingly support emerging feminist voices and facilitate rapid organising across the country. In this context, digital platforms have begun to function, in effect, as alternative public spheres, enabling feminist discourse and action amid shrinking institutional support. Rather than definitive findings, current observations suggest the gradual emergence of a more fragmented, mediated feminist presence, one whose conditions and possibilities are still unfolding. Given this context, understanding how Slovak feminists navigate Instagram's infrastructural constraints and algorithmic demands becomes crucial, forming the empirical focus of this study.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by critical feminist methodology and interpretivist epistemology, drawing on feminist media studies (van Zoonen 1994) and the premise that knowledge is situated, relational, and shaped by structural power relations (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991). Rather than seeking generalisability, it aims to produce rich, context-sensitive insights into how feminist practices on Instagram emerge within and in response to the intersecting dynamics of algorithmic governance, political hostility, and transnational feminist vocabularies. Feminist engagement is approached not merely as communicative output, but as a sociopolitical practice embedded in platform infrastructures, affective economies, and local political conditions. Building on critical feminist media scholarship, the analysis attends to the performative, emotional, and relational dimensions of digital activism, foregrounding how the participants negotiate visibility, navigate constraints, and sustain feminist presence through everyday acts of care, curation, and critique (Gill 2007; Banet-Weiser 2018).

The participants were selected through purposive sampling using three core criteria; self-identification as a feminist, active public engagement with feminist themes on Instagram, and sustained participation in digital advocacy. This approach enabled the inclusion of individuals who are not only content creators but who contribute to broader feminist discourse and community-building through education, critique, and activist mobilisation. Rather than aiming for demographic representativeness, the goal was to engage with information-rich cases that reflect the diversity of feminist positions, trajectories, and digital practices in the Slovak context.

The final sample consisted of eight individuals between the ages of 23 and 35, all of them based in Slovakia and publicly engaged in feminist discourse on Instagram. The group is racially homogeneous and composed predominantly of white participants, most of whom come from relatively stable socioeconomic backgrounds, with access to higher education, cultural capital, and urban infrastructures. This composition is not a result of methodological oversight, but rather reflects the structural inequalities that shape who is able to participate visibly in digital feminist spaces in Slovakia. Women from structurally marginalised backgrounds, including, but not limited to, racialised women such as Roma women and women of colour, face multiple barriers to digital participation. These include systemic racism, economic precarity, rural isolation, limited access to quality education, and infrastructural inequality (ÚSVRK 2021). Acknowledging these intersecting absences is central to an intersectional feminist methodology, which must consider not only who is visible in digital feminist spaces, but also who is systematically rendered invisible by the entanglements of race, class, geography, and platform infrastructure (Crenshaw 1991).

At the same time, the sample reflects some variation in class background, educational trajectory, and employment situation, even though all the participants share a relatively high level of cultural and digital literacy. While most are university-educated and based in urban centres, a few have working-class or rural upbringings, and several navigate precarious forms of labour in the cultural, NGO, or creative sectors. These positionalities shape not only their access to digital tools and visibility but also the tone, sustainability, and framing of their feminist engagement online. This further echoes the classed dynamics of digital feminist activism noted by Scharff (2023), wherein the significant unpaid labour required by this activism can privilege those with greater resources and time.

Data collection unfolded in two phases. The first phase involved two months of online observation of the participants' public Instagram activity. This included analysis of posts, captions, Stories, comments, and other visible interactions. The aim was to gain insight into how feminist values are expressed, mediated, and negotiated through platform-specific formats and aesthetic strategies. Special attention was paid to engagement metrics, visual choices, caption tone, and follower interactions to under-

Table 1. Overview of selected Slovak feminist content creators on Instagram

Pseudonym	Main areas of focus	Gender identity	Racial/national identity
Zuzana	Feminist education, queer and trans inclusion, digital pedagogy	Woman	White (Slovak)
Vanda	Anti-capitalist feminism, environmental justice, and housing activism	Woman	White (Slovak)
Klára	Inclusive sex education, bodily autonomy, and sexual literacy	Woman	White (Slovak)
Ema	Sexual literacy, feminist workshops, and care work	Woman	White (Slovak)
Lucia	Sex work advocacy, queer, and trans-inclusive feminist activism,	Woman	White (Slovak)
Petra	Menstrual and reproductive justice, access to care, and structural inequality	Woman	White (Slovak)
Kristína	Transfeminism and queer feminist advocacy	Trans woman	White (Slovak)
Paula	Feminist discourse, digital engagement, and community-building	Woman	White (Slovak)

Source: Author.
Note: Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality. Data on gender identity and nationality are based on self-identification or publicly available information.

stand how Instagram's algorithmic and affective dynamics shape feminist presence and participation. This phase informed the design of the interview guide, ensuring alignment between the empirical context and the interview prompts.

The second phase consisted of eight semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected participants. Interviews were held face-to-face, primarily in the participants' homes or mutually agreed private spaces, to foster comfort and openness. Each interview lasted around one hour and was conducted in Slovak. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subsequently translated into English. The interview guide blended theoretical and empirical insights and addressed the participants' motivations, digital strategies, challenges encountered, and reflections on their feminist practice in relation to platform cultures. Ethical protocols included confidentiality, pseudonymisation, and voluntary participation. All the participants were informed about the study's aims and the use of the data.

The interview data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences in particular social, political, and cultural contexts (Smith, Flowers, Larkin 2009). IPA is particularly well-suited to this study's aim of understanding the affective, reflexive, and embodied dimensions of feminist activism on Instagram, as it allows for a close reading of the participants' meaning-making concerning the pressures and possibil-

ities of platformed engagement. Transcripts were coded inductively using ATLAS.ti, following a bottom-up, iterative approach. Emerging codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters that captured recurring tensions in the participants' accounts, particularly the ambivalence of visibility, the ethical dilemmas of self-branding, and the labour involved in sustaining a feminist presence in a space structured by attention economies and neoliberal aesthetics.

Instagram as feminist infrastructure in an unreceptive landscape

For the feminist users in this study, Instagram has become a key medium for enacting, thinking through, and sharing feminist politics. While their profiles and practices varied, from curated feminist pages and activist profiles to hybrid profiles that blend personal content with political commentary, what unites them is a sustained, maintained, and intentional feminist presence on the platform. All the participants use Instagram regularly, many over several years, some for a shorter period, and they see it as integral to how they engage with feminism in their everyday lives.

For most, Instagram was not adopted with the explicit goal of doing feminist advocacy. Rather, it was a familiar social platform already embedded in their everyday digital routines, something that 'everyone uses'. Over time, however, it became an important interface through which feminist ideas were encountered, reflected upon, and articulated. Some of the participants even traced their own feminist consciousness to Instagram, discovering accounts, posts, or stories that helped them name experiences or rethink social norms. As Paula put it, 'It was through Instagram that I started to even understand what feminism could mean. It was like… suddenly I had words for things I always felt'. Others, already identifying as feminists, found Instagram to be a space in which to explore specific issues of interest, such as reproductive justice, queer identity, or sexual education, and connect with like-minded people in the process. The platform thus emerged not only as a tool for visibility or outreach but also as a resource for political and emotional literacy.

Across the interviews, the participants described Instagram as a dynamic source of feminist knowledge. Instagram offered a way to stay informed, both about global feminist discussions and about local developments. The participants described following accounts from across the world to gain language and insight into issues like gender-based violence, reproductive justice, or trans rights, issues that were often sidelined in the Slovak media or public discourse. Yet these were not passive processes of consumption. Many said that seeing global feminist content made them reflect on how (or if) those issues translated locally. Ema said: 'When something big happens abroad, like some abortion protests in the US or Poland, I don't just repost

it. I always try to ask, what does this mean for us here? How would this conversation even sound in Slovak?'

These forms of 'feminist translation', not linguistic but cultural and political, were central to how the participants navigated their engagement with transnational feminism. Through stories, captions, or informal commentary, they tried to localise global struggles, asking what feminist resistance might look like in Slovak conditions. This reflexive and situational translation recalls what Bhambra (2014) calls 'connected sociologies', ways of thinking through global structures from within specific historical and cultural contexts.

This also meant creating and circulating their own feminist knowledge. Some of the participants regularly created posts or carousels that explained concepts like victim-blaming, unpaid care work, or queer invisibility in Slovak language and context. Others reshared content from Slovak feminist peers, forming what they described as a small but tight-knit ecosystem. 'There are not that many of us who post (feminist content) regularly', said Kristína, 'so we kind of know each other through Instagram. It's like this small network, even if we've never met in person.' For those who were also involved in offline organising, Instagram also helped amplify campaigns or events.

Several participants emphasised that Instagram made them feel more politically vocal.

The visual, quick, and ephemeral nature of the platform made it easier to express opinions without the pressure of formality, making it a particularly attractive space for their engagement. 'I wouldn't go write an article or speak at a protest', said Petra, 'but I can share a story, or make a post or comment on something, and that's still political.' The participants valued the immediacy of the platform, and the ability to quickly react to events and process experiences in real time or to reach audiences without needing a 'big stage'.

Many also emphasised that Instagram enabled them to reach audiences beyond traditional activist circles, friends, co-workers, and classmates, who might not otherwise be familiar with such issues. Several even described deliberately blurring the boundaries between the 'private' and the 'political' (Hanisch 1970) to normalise feminist discourse within their everyday social networks. 'People follow me for all sorts of reasons', noted Lucia, 'so when I share a post about gender violence or something about queer rights, maybe they'll actually stop and read.' In this context, Instagram becomes a site of subtle intervention, where intimate aesthetics and critical reflection operate together.

The participants saw their engagement as both educational and emotional. Posting, resharing, or commenting became part of a broader feminist practice of questioning, unlearning, and staying accountable. Several noted that Instagram helped them shift

their views on key topics and challenged assumptions they had not previously noticed. Vanda said: 'There are posts I still remember from like two years ago that changed how I see some things.' They described their feed as a source of constant learning, an ongoing dialogue with others, but also with themselves. This made their feminist presence not only expressive but introspective. It allowed them to experiment, to speak out, and sometimes to make mistakes and learn publicly.

The platform was also described as an emotional and relational space. The participants emphasised the sense of connection Instagram enables, such as the ability to follow and be followed by others who share similar values, to comment, to vent, and to process collective feelings in moments of crisis. Whether responding to a political scandal, a feminist campaign, or a moment of collective grief, Instagram provided what one participant called 'a kind of solidarity infrastructure'. These micro-publics were not always harmonious, but they were perceived as supportive, dialogic, and essential for sustaining energy. Through posts, stories, DMs, and comment threads, the participants cultivated a shared feminist vocabulary, inflected by local struggles but also resonating across borders.

Instagram in this sense, was also described as safer and more manageable than other social media platforms, especially Facebook. While all the participants had public accounts, they felt that the platform's design enabled more control over interactions. 'On Facebook, anyone can comment, and it's full of trolls', said Petra. 'On Instagram, it feels more filtered. Like, if someone sends you hate, it's not like this burst of random comments, it's usually some DMs, and you can just block them.' This allowed them to maintain what many described as 'a kind of bubble', not in the sense of isolation, but as a space of affective protection and mutual recognition. They formed what felt like micro-communities, visible, porous, and public, but still intimate. One participant called it 'a feminist neighbourhood', where people share, rant, support each other, and sometimes just vent. This affective mode of collectivity aligns with the idea of 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2015), wherein emotional expression and digital circulation co-constitute political participation.

While the participants were aware of the platform's limitations, which are explored in more detail in the sections below, they emphasised its usefulness. Instagram enabled them to engage in low-threshold political action, connect with others, and feel less alone. It allowed them to stay close to feminist conversations even when burnout or daily life kept them from doing more. And for many, it offered a flexible, emotionally meaningful way to participate in collective life. 'It's not perfect', said Klára, 'but it's what we have now, this is also our space. And in a country where feminism still feels like a bad word, that really matters.'

Visibility and the aesthetic constraints of platform feminism

A central tension that emerged in this study revolves around the contradictory demands placed on feminist Instagram users: the imperative to remain faithful to feminist values, while also adapting to a platform logic that rewards precisely the kinds of content and behaviours that risk betraying those values. Visibility on Instagram is not neutral, it is governed by algorithmic systems and cultural norms that privilege emotional coherence, aesthetic legibility, and strategic vulnerability. Remaining visible, then, often requires navigating a narrow corridor of acceptable feminist expression, one that flattens critique, softens anger, and incentivises content that is personally resonant yet politically unthreatening.

The participants were acutely aware of these tensions. Instagram, as they saw it, is a double-edged infrastructure. On the one hand, it offers access, reach, and community. On the other hand, it operates through mechanisms of commodification and emotional capitalism that can distort and dilute feminist messages. Several interviewees spoke of the platform's tendency to amplify content that is visually polished and emotionally easy to consume while marginalising posts that contain complex, confrontational, or politicised content. As Kristína noted, the platform comes with 'built-in hierarchies': 'Well, it's mostly white, urban, cis, attractive women sharing something cute like some motivational quote on empowerment rather than some angry feminist with something complicated.' This reflects Kanai's (2020) analysis of aesthetic legibility, in which content is rewarded not for its critical depth but for its ability to conform to dominant visual and affective norms, typically those that are polished, emotionally coherent, and personally resonant. In this sense, algorithmic legibility operates not only as a technical filter but as a cultural disciplining force, one that teaches users which forms of expression are rewardable and which are silently pushed into obscurity. Scholars such as Noble (2018) further emphasise how these norms are not neutral but deeply racialised, classed, and gendered, producing what we might call 'platformed privilege', where visibility accrues more easily to those who embody white, cis, conventionally attractive, and emotionally palatable forms of subjectivity. Visibility, then, is not simply algorithmic; it is structured through intersecting systems of power that shape who gets seen, heard, and valued.

Faced with these structurally unequal and culturally coded conditions of visibility, the participants felt compelled to package their feminist critique in ways that made it algorithmically and socially legible. Petra provided an example of this: 'When I post something personal with a photo, or some simple visual, it gets tonnes of likes. When I post something less appealing and something that is more critical, like about reproductive rights or menstruation poverty, the reach drops so fast. It's like the platform just doesn't want to show it.' They also recognized that Instagram's design and cor-

porate, metrics-driven nature, built to maximise user engagement, represents platform capitalism in action, privileging content that is profitable: 'Every third post is an influencer selling me some product that is supposed to be some easy solution to gender inequality', Vanda complained, adding 'activism shouldn't have to compete with products and promotions', whereby she highlighted how the commodification of Instagram crowds the space with marketing. Petra commented, 'When feminism becomes a personal brand, it loses its teeth. It becomes something people consume, not something that changes anything.' Many similarly described feeling pressure from Instagram to show content that makes a profit rather than content that educates or challenges.

This was particularly evident in how they voiced frustration with influencer feminism, described by some as a depoliticised, aestheticised version of activism that draws attention away from systemic critique. In the Slovak context, the participants pointed to the overwhelming dominance of content centred on idealised motherhood, pastel-toned domesticity, wellness entrepreneurship, or 'girl-boss' feminism. Such imagery circulates widely not only because of its aesthetic appeal but also because it aligns with both algorithmic preferences and culturally conservative norms. Feminist content that challenges these tropes, especially posts addressing reproductive rights, anti-racism, or LGBTQ+ issues, is often rendered less visible or even met with hostility, making structural critique a high-risk, low-reward endeavour on the platform. When it comes to the activists in this study, they deliberately distance themselves from this depoliticised 'empowerment-lite' discourse (Rottenberg 2018) tied to the paradox of popular feminism, as well as from the archetype of aspirational self-branding, exemplified by certain Instagram influencers, even if that stance means slower growth, fewer likes, and less visibility.

Unlike influencers who invest in aspirational labour in hopes of future sponsorships or fame (Duffy 2017), activists in this study engage in what we might call 'aspirational labour for social change', an extensive, unremunerated effort driven by the hope of a more just society. Activists invest time, emotion, and creativity into content, not for economic gain but for the hope of generating awareness, resonance, and collective consciousness. Zuzana expressed this by saying, 'I would rather address fewer people by saying what matters than reach more people by staying only on the surface and not address what needs to be'. Their 'aspiration' is thus not entrepreneurial, but ethical and relational, a feminist future that is more just, more inclusive, and more critical. Their 'payoff', if any, is not financial but is represented by the impact made on followers' consciousness and the creation of a feminist community. They measure success not in follower counts or brand deals but in meaningful interactions. 'I know I'm not a big account', said Lucia, 'but sometimes someone writes to say thank you, or that something I shared helped them. That's when I feel it's worth it.' By focusing

on this sort of feedback, direct messages, and thoughtful comments over quantitative metrics, they resist the platform's reduction of impact to numbers. This reflects an alternative vision of visibility, grounded in resonance and community rather than mass appeal.

Considering this, the pressure to gain visibility and traction and to spread messages educate or connect was still felt and articulated by all of them. 'To be seen is to be heard' Klára noted, adding, *'if my posts or stories are not visible to anyone, then what is the point'.* This is what has led to careful negotiations. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, feminist creators walk a tightrope where visibility is necessary for connection, yet the modes of visibility offered by corporate platforms risk co-opting feminist discourse. Activists were acutely aware of this tightrope. They step out onto it because being unseen is not an ideal option, but they do so warily, always watchful that their message does not get lost in the performance. Such tactics illustrate what Gill (2016) might describe as feminist media savvy under neoliberal conditions, leveraging media techniques for progressive ends without fully capitulating to the neoliberal logic of constant positivity and self-optimising branding.

To navigate these competing demands, the participants turned to developing and applying some creative strategies. Many described a trial-and-error learning process of what Bishop (2020) calls 'algorithmic lore', tacit knowledge of how to work with and around Instagram's algorithms. One of the most significant negotiations captured happens at the level of aesthetics and affect and involves how feminist activists package their messages on a visually-driven platform governed by certain emotional norms. Ema provided an example of this: 'Sometimes I put a serious message under a personal photo just so people see it. Otherwise, it disappears. It feels manipulative, even though I'm doing it for a reason.' In the same way, they learned that posting an eye-catching image or personal photo could 'boost' a serious post's reach; they also discovered alternative tactics to increase the reach, such as posting at certain times, using popular hashtags, or encouraging engagement through questions or polls.

By operating in this hybrid manner, many attempts to 'hack' the attention economy remain visible but are aimed at retaining a critical edge. This is a delicate dance; aesthetic compromises are made to hook the audience, but the substantive core, calling out patriarchy, racism, and inequality, is carefully preserved in captions and comments. This way, the participants negotiate Instagram's aesthetic logic by meeting the platform halfway visually but not fully surrendering their values. Each post thus becomes a site of negotiation on how to deliver feminist critique in a visually appealing, emotionally engaging way without stripping it of its critical edge. This was not, however, experienced only as a simple strategic adaptation but as a source of affective and ethical dissonance, a site of moral struggle. Kristína noted: 'I know what works – the face, the body, something soft. But I don't want to turn feminism

into a lifestyle brand.' Some deliberately refused to follow every growth hack. Vanda admitted: 'I could play the game more, but I do not want to be part of this game.' Some were a bit more open, as Paula noted: 'If we want to be seen, we have to accommodate a little. But too much, and we lose what we're about.' This stance encapsulates a common strategy, a willingness to engage with platform logics, but only up to the point where core feminist values remain intact.

One strategy that most of the participants embraced with greater ease was the differentiated use of Instagram's features, particularly the strategic deployment of Stories versus the main feed. Several noted that they relied heavily on Instagram Stories to share content that might be too contentious, emotionally raw, or complex for the polished grid. Kristína explained: 'Stories feel freer. I can say something messy or emotional without worrying it'll stay on my profile forever.' Others echoed that Stories alleviated the pressure for perfection and aesthetic cohesion, allowing more candid, spontaneous, or experimental forms of engagement. These ephemeral posts provided space for venting, sharing in-progress thoughts, or addressing urgent political events, without the lingering burden of visibility metrics or the fear of algorithmic suppression. Because Stories are less amplified and more easily targeted in terms of audience, they offered a softer space for testing tone, expressing frustration, or broaching sensitive issues.

This informal channel stood in contrast to the carefully curated main feed, which the participants described as a site of higher-stakes performance, more permanent, more visible, and more scrutinised. Maintaining a cohesive and legible grid often meant prioritising clarity, aesthetics, and emotional readability, whereas Stories allowed a parallel, lower-pressure mode of communication. This division of labour across platform features enabled the participants to selectively accommodate Instagram's logics without fully capitulating to them. By reserving the grid for enduring content and using Stories for more ambivalent or disruptive expressions, they created space for complexity within the limits of platform governance, navigating visibility on their own terms, even if always partially and provisionally.

Authenticity as feminist practice

While visibility emerged as a central terrain of negotiation, it was closely entangled with the demand for authenticity. For many of the feminist Instagram users in this study, being authentic was inextricably linked to the pressures of platform legibility and public perception. Authenticity was not simply about emotional openness or aesthetic rawness, but a space of tension, an ongoing effort to remain grounded in feminist values while navigating the affective, aesthetic, and social expectations shaped by the platform. As Petra put it: 'For me, being authentic doesn't mean be-

ing raw all the time. It means staying grounded in what I believe, even when it's hard to express that.' What emerged was not a branded performance of sincerity, but a form of feminist fidelity, marked by a refusal to perform curated clarity, confidence, or positivity just to appease the algorithm.

This tension was often articulated through what Duffy and Hund (2019) describe as the 'authenticity bind', the expectation to appear sincere, morally consistent, and emotionally open, yet never 'too much'. The participants described feeling caught between conflicting demands: to be strong but relatable, vulnerable but composed, politically outspoken but still palatable. Klára further articulated this tension as a form of performative discipline: 'You're supposed to be real, but only the kind of real that's cute or inspiring. Not the kind that makes people uncomfortable. It's like performing realness on cue.' This bind reflects the affective norms of Instagram's feminist zeitgeist, where personal disclosures and emotional resonance are encouraged, but certain affects, especially anger, exhaustion, or grief, must be carefully managed. Expressions of justified frustration risk being recast as negativity or as embodying the figure of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed 2010), whose refusal to smooth over discomfort is often met with dismissal or resistance. 'If I say something too angry, I'm "aggressive"', Vanda noted. 'If I'm too soft, then I'm not serious. There's no perfect tone.' This contradiction was echoed by Paula: 'I dressed up my anger, and suddenly it was allowed in the room.' Across these reflections, authenticity was not simply about self-expression but was a carefully calibrated performance, constrained by what the platform deems emotionally legible, affectively palatable, and algorithmically safe.

Many of the participants spoke of striving to redefine authenticity not as a performance of confessional sincerity, but as an ongoing feminist practice, a form of presence anchored in integrity, relational accountability, and critical self-awareness. For them, authenticity was not about exposure or emotional rawness per se, but about aligning one's digital voice with deeply held commitments, even when those commitments were difficult to articulate or sustain. 'For me, authenticity means not pretending I have all the answers', said Petra. 'It means posting when I can, how I can, and being honest about my limits.' Others similarly emphasised that being authentic was not the same as being constantly visible, nor did it mean presenting a coherent, neatly packaged identity. 'Sometimes I don't post for weeks, and it's not because I've stopped caring', said Lucia. 'It's because I need space to think, to feel, to not turn everything into content.'

The rejection of algorithmically palatable forms of feminist expression, the confident, curated, always-in-control activist, marked a shared refusal to conform to what some described as the pressure to be 'the perfect feminist'. As Klára reflected, 'I don't want to be another girl-boss with a perfect grid. That's not what feminism means to me.' Instead, they described authenticity as showing up with contradiction,

exhaustion, or uncertainty, making space for imperfection without commodifying it. 'It's about staying grounded in what I believe, even when I'm tired or unsure or scared', Petra noted.

This mode of authenticity was not rooted in the promise of reach or recognition but in a feminist ethic of care, care for the self, for followers, and for the integrity of the message. Ema explained: 'When I share something, it's because I believe in it, not because it will get likes. That's my version of being real.' For many, this also meant being attuned to the relational dimensions of digital engagement and thinking carefully about how their posts might affect others, how their tone might be read, and how they could maintain a sense of responsibility without compromising their voice. In this way, authenticity was not about visibility or personal branding, but about preserving the capacity to be emotionally honest, including when that honesty meant expressing anger, sadness, or doubt. By refusing aspirational perfection, the participants attempted to stretch the affective norms of the platform, making space for feminist voices that were messy, ambivalent, and critical. They remained committed to showing up, not as polished personas, but as people navigating structural injustice, and in doing so, they redefined authenticity as the courage to stay emotionally and politically present, even when that presence risked discomfort or disapproval.

Affective costs and feminist self-surveillance

The commitment to authenticity and visibility often came at a cost. The participants frequently spoke of burnout, anxiety, and exhaustion, not only from the effort of producing content, but from the effort of bearing the emotional weight of their messages. Klára described Instagram as 'performative by default', reflecting on how even attempts at honesty were filtered through concerns about legibility: 'Even when I try not to be, I end up thinking about how it will look, how it will be read. I want to speak honestly, but it's exhausting.' The labour of appearing, of making feminism visible without diluting its substance, was not experienced as empowering, but as a constant drain, a site of ethical friction and emotional depletion. This affective toll is often manifested in the minutiae of platform practices. Lucia, for instance, described spending hours crafting a carousel post on gender-based violence: designing illustrations, fact-checking statistics, and rewriting captions for clarity and care. Yet the post garnered only a fraction of the attention received by a selfie she had casually uploaded a week earlier. 'It felt unfair', she reflected, 'because one was important and took everything from me, and the other got likes just because it looked nice'. The disparity between labour invested and algorithmic reward underlines how platform dynamics not only distort visibility but erode the sustainability of feminist expression itself.

What might appear as a simple Instagram post is, in reality, the product of intense emotional calibration and anticipatory self-censorship. 'Sometimes I rewrite a caption like even ten times', Zuzana admitted. 'Not because I don't know what I think and want to write, but because I'm afraid it will be read the wrong way. Or that someone will call me out.' Her painstaking revisions reflect the pressures of both the platform and the community, where the risk of being misunderstood or misread materialises as large. This anticipatory labour reveals how feminist Instagram users internalise the demand for communicative perfection, constantly weighing each word and image against possible backlash. 'Will this offend someone unintentionally? Will sarcasm be misinterpreted? Will an expression of frustration be taken as too negative or alienate potential allies?' Such questions illustrate how platform visibility is bound not only to algorithmic logic but also to social legibility, where even minor missteps can carry disproportionate consequences. In this context, self-expression becomes less about spontaneity and more about strategic affective management.

What emerged was a form of feminist self-surveillance, a careful and repetitive checking of whether the participants' politics could survive the platform's affective filters and aesthetic expectations without being blunted or misunderstood. But this vigilance, while strategic, was also profoundly affective. Kristína said: 'It's not just what you say, it's how it lands.' Despite operating on a platform framed as 'social', many of the participants described the experience as isolating: a solitary loop of composing, hesitating, revising, and doubting. Klára noted: 'You feel like you're talking into the void, but also like everyone is watching at the same time.'

The weight of this emotional solitude was amplified by the specific dynamics of the Slovak feminist field, which is small, politically sensitive, and socially entangled. Several participants pointed out that their audiences were not anonymous publics, but also included family, colleagues, journalists, and, crucially, fellow activists. 'It's hard because everyone kind of knows everyone', said Zuzana. 'You want to say what you think, but also not offend someone you'll be on a panel with next month.' The stakes of misinterpretation were heightened not only by algorithmic reach but by reputational risk within a dense and interpersonally proximate community. Lucia remarked: 'You worry about being seen as too academic, or not academic enough. Too radical, or too soft. It's like there's no right [amount of] feminism.' Others shared similar anxieties about being perceived as insufficiently intersectional, too urban, or detached from everyday struggles. These concerns were not only about public backlash but about preserving solidarity and credibility in a field where recognition, and misrecognition, circulates quickly and lingers long.

In this context, even minor acts of expression could become emotionally fraught. Posts were not just crafted for visibility, but for recognisability within a web of feminist norms, expectations, and mutual obligations. The labour of speaking on Instagram

was thus entangled with the politics of being seen *by the right people* in *the right way*, a pressure that extended well beyond the screen. Authenticity, here, was not only about self-expression but about maintaining feminist accountability in a digital landscape saturated with both exposure and precarity.

Post-publication, the emotional labour often continued. Several participants described the affective aftershocks that followed: clarifying misunderstandings in the comments, responding to hostile DMs, moderating disagreements between followers, or watching nervously to see how a post would land. For some, the emotional labour of *post-publication clean-up* was as demanding as the act of creation itself. In a few cases, the participants admitted to deleting posts that in retrospect felt 'too much' or 'too angry', not because they regretted the politics, but because the tone, timing, or reception made them fear backlash or, worse, indifference. 'It wasn't that I changed my mind', said Lucia, 'but I started panicking that it would spiral, or just fall flat.'

This form of ongoing emotional management speaks to what Ahmed (2017) describes as a feminist ethics of care, being attentive not only to what one says, but to what that saying *does* in the world. For these feminist Instagram users, such care translated into constant affective monitoring: Did this post harm someone unintentionally? Did it exclude someone? Was I clear enough, nuanced enough, kind enough? 'I feel responsible for my followers', Paula explained. 'I think about who's reading, what they might take away. I don't want to cause harm or spread misinformation.'

Such reflections underscore that authenticity, for these activists, is not reducible to personal sincerity or spontaneous disclosure. It is a relational and political practice, one that involves anticipating consequences, shouldering responsibility, and sometimes withholding or carefully shaping one's voice to stay true to feminist values of inclusivity, accuracy, and compassion. Their presence on the platform was aspirational, not in the entrepreneurial sense of future success, but in the feminist sense of striving towards a politics that can be visible without being flattened, affectively powerful without being commodified.

What emerges from these accounts is not a resolution but an ongoing negotiation, an attempt to sustain feminist commitment within a platform environment that both enables and undermines it. The participants did not present clear solutions; instead, they described a constant process of adjustment, ambivalence, and small acts of resistance. Their political work unfolded in the gaps between critique and compromise, care and exhaustion, visibility and distortion. Rather than rejecting Instagram or conforming entirely to its logic, they navigated its constraints with selective engagement, refusing certain aesthetic norms, prioritising depth over reach, embracing vulnerability over polish, and sometimes choosing silence over performance. These practices were not grand gestures of resistance but everyday labours of feminist integrity, caption rewrites, private reflections, and content shared with care rather than for attention.

Conclusion: enduring feminism in the platformed periphery

This article examined how individual Slovak feminists navigate Instagram as a site of feminist articulation, care, and critique within a digital environment that is simultaneously enabling and constraining. Situated within a national context characterised by political hostility, anti-feminist backlash, and institutional marginalisation (Maďarová, Valkovičová 2021; Grzebalska, Kováts, Pető 2017), the study demonstrates that these actors sustain public feminist engagement not by aligning with influencer-oriented models of self-promotion but through the cultivation of small-scale, ethically situated feminist presence embedded in everyday digital practice. Their engagement foregrounds not spectacle or virality but persistence, a slow, situated form of activism that maintains space for critique amid conditions that frequently work to suppress it.

By attending to the emotional, aesthetic, and algorithmic constraints of Instagram, the study foregrounds the ambivalent position these actors occupy. Visibility emerges as both a resource and a liability, a vehicle for reaching beyond hostile publics, but one that simultaneously demands affective calibration, aesthetic legibility, and continuous negotiation with opaque systems of platform governance (Kanai 2020; Bishop 2020; Cotter 2023). The participants described how they tactically adapted to platform logics, utilising ephemeral formats such as Stories for more explicit commentary, blending personal and political content, or softening the tone to mitigate potential backlash, while simultaneously resisting pressures to brand, depoliticise, or simplify their feminist expression. These negotiations were not merely strategic but also affective and ethical. Remaining visible and authentic entailed a considerable degree of emotional labour, curating voice, modulating tone, and anticipating audience and algorithmic responses. For many, these adjustments engendered discomfort, a sense of being caught between remaining faithful to feminist convictions and remaining legible within a platform that privileges emotional coherence and aesthetic polish (Scharff 2023; Barbala 2024).

This article contributes to current scholarship on digital feminism in two key ways. First, it offers a situated account of feminist digital labour in a national and regional context that remains underrepresented in platform studies, where feminist expression is shaped not only by platform norms but also by longstanding geopolitical, cultural, and material exclusions. Second, it expands existing critiques of platformised feminism by shifting the analytical lens beyond tactical adaptation to explore the ethical frictions and emotional tolls of sustained visibility. The participants did not merely conform to platform expectations; rather, they negotiated them with ambivalence, frustration, and fatigue. They described moments when political expression felt compromised, when critique was softened, or when anger had to be rendered emotionally digestible in order to be heard. These were not simply pragmatic choices but ethically and

politically charged decisions, often perceived as minor betrayals of feminist intention, even when undertaken in the name of safety, reach, or endurance.

In this regard, the article extends a growing, though still limited, body of scholarship interrogating the ethical contradictions of visibility under platform capitalism (Keller 2019; Caldeira 2024). It refocuses attention from affordances alone to the emotional labour, moral dissonance, and ethical ambiguity that structure feminist participation on commercial platforms. The tensions the participants articulated, between critique and compromise, between care and commodification, are not peripheral but fundamental to the infrastructures that render visibility possible. The feminist labour described here is not one of empowerment per se, but of endurance: the ongoing practice of maintaining a presence within systems that neither support nor affirm feminist critique.

This, ultimately, is the contribution of the article. It demonstrates that even within extractive, algorithmically governed digital infrastructures, feminist politics persist, not through virality or strategic branding, but through the ongoing relational labour of staying present. These actors do not seek to master the platform's terms; rather, they seek to inhabit it critically, refusing its logics without surrendering their voice. In doing so, they offer a powerful reminder that digital feminist politics are not only about expression but about negotiation, friction, and the enduring labour of ensuring that critique, care, and community continue to matter even in digital environments.

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