

Viral Reactions, Legal Consequences: A case study of the 2024 Tangier sexual assault

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Abstract

This study explores how digital activism shaped public discourse around the 2024 Tangier sexual assault case, involving a young woman assaulted by minors, and whether it translated into meaningful legal change. Guided by feminist theory, the research employs thematic analysis of highly viewed TikTok videos to identify recurring themes, assess legal outcomes, and determine the benefits and limits of digital activism. Findings show that cyberactivism increases visibility, mobilizes youth, and counters victim-blaming, but struggles to shift norms, fuels divisions, and shows constraints in producing lasting structural change.

Keywords: Digital activism; Public discourse; Sexual harassment; Morocco

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1.0 Introduction

In September 2024, a video showing the sexual assault of a young woman by minors on the streets of Tangier went viral, sparking national outrage. Online reactions revealed deep divisions between those who supported the victim and those who blamed her appearance. This incident brought renewed attention to the issue of gender-based violence (GBV) in Morocco, particularly street harassment. The article investigates how digital activism on TikTok shaped public discourse and influenced legal responses to GBV in Morocco. Specifically, the study identifies recurring themes, assesses the legal outcomes surrounding the case, and evaluates the effectiveness and limits of cyberactivism in driving change.

2.0 Literature Review

In 2024, the World Health Organization declared violence against women a public health problem. This violence is a cause and consequence of deep-rooted gender inequality, stemming from the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women, ultimately preventing women from achieving full inclusion and equal standing within society (UNDP, 2018; UN Women, 2024). This research examines street harassment, which is a subset of GBV that occurs in public spaces. Chafai (2020) argues that street harassment is perceived as a “false’ problem in contemporary Morocco” (p. 1). She criticizes Moroccan activists for focusing almost exclusively on partner-based violence, while overlooking street harassment, which is even more “pervasive” (Chafai, 2020, p. 2). Her claim is supported by a study conducted by UN Women & Promundo-US (2017) in Morocco, which found that nearly two-thirds of women surveyed were harassed in public spaces, while over half of the men surveyed admitted to having sexually harassed a woman or girl.

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60% of these men justified their actions based on women's clothing or presence at night, while 78% of women blamed other women for encouraging harassment by dressing 'provocatively' (UN Women & Promundo-US, 2017).

In 2018, Morocco enacted Law 103-13, criminalizing street harassment (Chafai, 2020). Despite this, women face challenges in seeking justice due to legal complications and deep-rooted social attitudes. Chafai (2020) notes that it is unclear how women can report harassment or provide relevant testimony, revealing a major gap between the law and women's lived experiences. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2018) denounces legal procedures as vague, arguing that law enforcement lacks clear responsibilities. Societal attitudes further normalize harassment, as discussions on it are taboo in Moroccan families and absent from school curricula (Chafai, 2020). Consequently, most incidents are unreported because many women fear retaliation or dismissal by authorities (The Advocates for Human Rights & MRA, 2020). Chafai (2020) asserts that law alone is insufficient. Law enforcement training, awareness campaigns, and a shift in Moroccan men's attitudes toward women are essential.

This is where digital activism steps in as a tool of change and advocacy. According to Amezoïrou (2024), Moroccan women use online methods to engage in a new wave of feminist activism, advocating for their rights and advancing their demands. Incidentally, Jaloza (2020) contends that young Moroccan men and women have shifted their activism primarily online, sharing, collecting, and creating content digitally. This is evident in movements such as ZankaDialna (The street is ours) to claim public spaces for Moroccan women, Masaktach (I will not be silent) to fight violence against women, and 7achak (With all due respect) to address menstrual precarity (Touati & Atifi, 2022, trans. by author). These campaigns showcase the empowering potential of online activism as a tool for social change. Transnational movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have demonstrated the lasting real-world impact of digital mobilization (Jackson et al., 2020). This is made possible by the rapid circulation of content, the low cost of organizing, and the ability to connect causes across borders (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022).

However, the promise of digital activism is not without its limitations. Joyce (2010) describes cyberactivism as a "kind of liberal catharsis," or "slacktivism," with passive digital engagement that gives participants the illusion of impact without producing actual real-world change (p. 27). This superficial engagement, compounded by online backlash and the dominance of Western-centric networks and discourse, hinders the longevity and inclusivity of digital movements (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2022).

The gap between online visibility and offline effectiveness raises pressing questions about the sustainability of digital activism in Morocco. It is within this intersection of digital mobilization and gendered resistance to sexual violence that feminist theory becomes particularly relevant. Feminist scholars such as Bell Hooks (1984) emphasize that violence against women is a manifestation of patriarchal systems maintained by both men and women. Judith Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity explains that society punishes "those who fail to do their gender right" (p. 178). In this context, sexual harassment can be understood as men's punishment toward women for not "performing" their gender 'correctly,' thereby enforcing socially accepted notions of femininity. Rosalind Gill (2007) and Michael Kimmel (2016) extend feminist theory by focusing on media, describing it as a "gendered institution" that reflects, reinforces, and challenges broader structures of inequality and oppression.

Drawing on feminist theory, this research explores the effectiveness of digital activism in resisting and challenging gender-based violence, particularly by examining the gap between online outrage and real-life change. Given the limited scholarly work, especially in the MENA region, on incidents of street harassment, this paper addresses a critical gap. It links feminist theory, youth justice, and digital backlash in the Moroccan context, offering novel insights into the possibilities and limitations of digital resistance.

3.0 Methodology

The study employs qualitative thematic analysis to explore how social media was used as a platform for digital activism in response to the Tangier sexual assault case. TikTok was particularly selected for its popularity among young adults and its capacity to rapidly spread activism-related content through viral trends (Moffett & Rice, 2024).

The research focused on content posted between September and November 2024, covering the period from the circulation of the initial viral video to the sentencing of the minors involved. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 15 TikTok videos with high view counts. These videos represent the most visible content during the peak of the online reaction.

Data were manually coded to identify recurring patterns in discourse. A thematic coding framework was developed to ensure consistency. Each video was analyzed according to: date of publication (to situate content over time), number of views (to capture visibility), narrative focus (to identify the content's focus: victim, assailants or legal aspects), theme identified (to determine recurring ideas: victim-blaming, justice demands), moral stance (to assess whether the content condemns or justifies), and notes (to capture nuances: contradictions, tone).

The coded data were then grouped into five thematic waves, which allowed the analysis to trace how discourse evolved across the case. The comment sections of these videos were reviewed to understand audience reactions and identify general patterns of response.

All data were publicly available; nevertheless, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and to address ethical concerns, all user identities have been anonymized to protect privacy.

4.0 Findings

The viral video showed the sexual assault of a young woman at night in the streets of Tangier, touched without her consent. The assailants were laughing while lifting the victim's dress, as bystanders failed to intervene until a young man stepped in at the end of the

video. TikTok became a primary platform for public reaction, with five distinct waves of responses emerging, each expressing a different form of public engagement with the event and its aftermath.

4.1 Wave 1: Women speak out (23/09/2024 - 26/09/2024, ~2.68 million cumulative views)

Female voices dominated the first wave. A law student presented the case from a legal perspective. She pointed out the vagueness of Article 483 (public indecency) and how it could be used against the victim, warning that only media pressure would push the courts to act. Though she expressed concern for the victim, her video ended with her advising women to dress modestly as a means of survival. Another content creator insisted that the aggressors be punished, blaming parents and the state for the lack of proper education. She rejects the notion that the victim's clothes played any role in the assault, arguing that women, regardless of their attire, are not safe in public spaces. A third video echoed similar outrage but considered the victim's "short dress" as un-Islamic behavior. Across this wave, dominant themes include justice demands and modesty discourse, though some instances of victim-blaming occur. The moral stance largely condemns the assault but remains ambivalent toward the victim.

4.2 Wave 2: Male voices join the conversation (25/09/2024 - 01/10/2024, ~1.97 million cumulative views)

The second wave saw the emergence of male influencers. The most viewed video in this wave declares that the minors involved must be prosecuted. Two days later, the same influencer argues that the victim's dress was short and downplays the assault. He, however, maintains his stance that prosecution is needed. A third video from another TikTok user offers an empathetic perspective. The young man states that women have the right to dress as they wish, stressing that only God and the law have the right to judge and punish, implying that she deserves punishment (but not from the people). He warns against peer pressure, explaining that harassing women to look "cool" in front of friends carries serious legal consequences and family shame. This wave reflects contradictory themes of support and victim-blaming, resulting in a mixed moral stance. While condemning the assailants, these narratives still reproduce gendered blame.

4.3 Wave 3: Parents reclaim the narrative (25/09/2024 - 27/09/2024, ~2.22 million cumulative views)

Wave three marks a transition from victim-centered discourse to a defense of perpetrators' actions. This wave centers around two related videos that form one continuous media piece. The two videos have one of the mothers' assailants interviewed by a popular Moroccan media outlet. The mother pleads for public sympathy. She claims her son is "just" a minor and that he was "only playing." She portrays the incident as childish behavior, shifting blame toward the victim and calling her "naked." She accuses the person who recorded the video of ruining her son's future, indicating that the Tangier girl never pressed charges. The female journalist conducting the segment appears sympathetic, repeating that the perpetrators are "just children." A female influencer is frustrated, condemning the journalist's bias and the mother's "audacity." The dominant theme is parental defense and minimization of violence, with a justifying moral stance, countered by condemnation from other users.

4.4 Wave 4: Victim's testimony and resistance (28/09/2024-29/09/2024, ~2.39 million cumulative views)

This wave begins with the victim's testimony. The young woman, whose identity remains hidden, shares her story. She tearfully explains that she is a modern Muslim woman, not a prostitute, and her dress was longer than it appeared in the viral video. She conveys that the experience has ruined her life, expressing feeling powerless and declaring she has no faith in the justice system, turning to God for justice. The next day, a female content creator argues the victim should not have felt the need to explain herself. She reprimands the commenters who continue to blame the victim. A video released under the hashtag #donttouchmyclothes, shows a woman in different attire, from modern dress to fully veiled, being touched without her consent. The clip challenges the idea that a woman's clothing is the cause of harassment, and as such, serves as a direct message against victim-blaming. The dominant themes are resistance, victim testimony, and anti-victim-blaming, with a strong condemning moral stance and a shift toward reclaiming agency.

4.5 Wave 5: Legal verdict and parents' reactions (21/11/2024 - 22/11/2024, ~ 1.76 million cumulative views)

The final wave reports on the legal outcomes of the case and the parents' reactions to this outcome. A video confirms that four minors were sentenced to three years in prison each after a closed-door hearing at the Tangier Court of Appeal. The offenders were charged with forced sexual harassment of a young woman in a public street. One video shows the mothers of the aggressors wailing. Parents argue that the sentence is unfair while begging for leniency. Another post shows the same news accompanied by sad background music, clearly designed to elicit public sympathy for the convicted minors. This wave reflects themes of justice, sympathy for perpetrators, and contestation of legal outcomes.

4.6 Comment Sections (over 15,000 comments)

The comment sections across the five waves were deeply polarized. While many users expressed outrage and supported the victim, others defended the minors and blamed the young woman. Similarly, while some were satisfied with the sentence outcome, others felt it was too harsh, and others argued it was too lenient.

5.0 Discussion

The Tangier assault case provides a striking example of the potential and the constraints of digital activism in defying gender-based violence in Morocco. The viral video sparked widespread outrage and mobilized a significant wave of digital resistance, primarily led by young adults on TikTok.

Wave 1 revealed digital feminism in action. Female users mobilized TikTok as a space for legal literacy and moral debate. One user exposed the subjectivity of the Moroccan legal system, pointing to judicial bias due to the vague and generalistic nature of the law. This aligns with Human Rights Watch's (2018) criticism of the Moroccan legal system's lack of clarity regarding laws on gender-based violence. Moreover, her claim that only media pressure could compel judicial action depicts the institution's failure to bring justice to victims of GBV. In this case, the movement's visibility serves as a substitute for legal accountability. Indeed, TikTok's visual nature (videos of the assault, reactions from young people), combined with its accessibility (14.6 million Moroccan TikTok users, Kemp, 2025) and the emotional tone of the posts (wailing parents, crying victim, outraged influencers), created a viral moment that depicted street harassment as a national concern. This marks the first benefit of digital activism: visibility.

Nonetheless, the 1st wave also exposed internal contradictions within digital feminist discourse, as two of the three influencers advised women to dress modestly to avoid street harassment. This reflects Gill's (2007) critique, in which narratives of women's empowerment are embraced only when they align with dominant moral expectations and are accompanied by self-surveillance. The underlying message suggests that women's safety is conditional on modesty, thereby reinforcing gendered double standards. A similar pattern emerged in wave 2, where victim-blaming discourses resurfaced. Although TikTok users across the two waves called for the perpetrators to be punished, varying levels of victim-blaming were observed. This reveals how deeply entrenched patriarchal norms are in everyday people's lives, showing how supportive activism can reproduce the very gender norms it seeks to challenge. This marks the first shortcoming of digital activism: while it does generate visibility, it struggles to disrupt prevailing social norms.

Even with its shortcomings, cyberactivism remains important, particularly in its ability to mobilize youth, which constitutes its second benefit. Wave 2 introduced a refreshing shift, with male influencers using their platforms to support the victim. TikTok becomes a space where young Moroccans, regardless of their gender, resist gender-based violence. As Jaloza (2020) notes, Moroccan youth are using digital platforms to share, create, and spread activism. This reflects a generational turn toward youth justice driven by visibility and collective responsibility.

The third wave put forward a second shortcoming of digital activism: its tendency to provoke division rather than unity. Videos of the assailants' parents sparked intense backlash. The comment sections became polarized, with some users expressing sympathy and others harshly condemning the parents. The discussion shifted from justice to judgment, from the victim's appearance to the parents' 'audacity.' This deep divide echoes Kimmel's (2016) argument that the media is not neutral; it reflects and produces society's norms. The third wave ultimately shows that while digital activism can expose violence and enable feminist resistance, it can also generate more hostility, offering space for harmful narratives to thrive. It becomes difficult to build a unified front, which in turn weakens collective action and reveals that awareness alone is not enough to disrupt the social norms that sustain GBV.

Wave 4 introduces the third benefit of digital activism: its power to challenge victim-blaming and be a platform for resistance. The victim's public testimony marked a shift from silence to self-representation, placing the most marginalized voice at the center of the movement. Drawing on Butler's (1999) concept of gender performativity, the assault can be seen as a form of cultural punishment for not conforming to dominant norms of femininity. The violence she endured and the public's judgment of her appearance show that society continues to 'discipline' those who "fail" to perform their gender correctly. The victim's gender (woman), her geographical context (conservative society), and her being alone in a public space at night compounded her vulnerability. Yet by speaking out, she resisted this disciplining, helped reframe the narrative around gender-based violence, and inspired other women to do the same. Nonetheless, the victim's need to defend her clothing choices and justify her actions underscores the enduring pressure on women to appear respectable to be heard, even when facing violence.

The final wave and its aftermath revealed the third shortcoming of digital activism: the gap between viral outrage and lasting structural change. Although the assault sparked national attention and led to legal action, the outcomes fell short. By November 2024, the court sentenced the minors to three years in prison. While the sentencing was a strong win in itself, it failed to trigger broader reform. No schools launched awareness programs, no legal updates were introduced, and no public institutions responded. This confirms Chafai's (2020) critique of the Moroccan legal system: laws may exist, but without training, clarity, or real institutional support, they remain largely ineffective. The silence of political, religious, and educational authorities underscores what Joyce (2010) and Sorce and Dumitrica (2022) describe as the limits of digital activism, particularly its inability to penetrate institutional structures. The digital campaign thus lost momentum within weeks, leaving no lasting impact. In the end, the case exposed how cyberactivism, despite its emotional intensity and reach, struggles to lead to structural change in contexts where patriarchal norms are deeply embedded, and legal mechanisms lack clarity.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study examined whether digital activism can shape public discourse and lead to structural change in Morocco by analyzing the viral response to the 2024 Tangier sexual assault. Three clear benefits emerged from the case. First, digital activism provides visibility: it broke the silence around street harassment and brought the issue to national attention. Second, it mobilizes youth: young Moroccans, regardless of gender, participated in online resistance, challenging patriarchal norms. Third, it challenges victim-blaming: the victim's testimony and some influencers' discourse challenged gendered blame discourse.

However, the study also identified three main shortcomings. First, digital activism struggles to disrupt dominant social norms; 'modesty' discourse and victim-blaming remained central, even in supportive content. Second, it often divides rather than unites, as

the movement sparked backlash and polarization, weakening collective action. Third, legal outcomes fell short of expectations; although sentencing occurred, it did not lead to policy reform, educational efforts, or institutional follow-up.

These findings must be considered alongside key limitations. The research is context-specific, focused on one high-profile case, and may not reflect broader experiences of GBV or activism across Morocco. However, it allows for a focused, in-depth analysis of a single visible incident. This selectivity showcases how digital feminist resistance takes shape in real time, especially among young people navigating social norms and legal ambiguity.

Based on these findings, this study recommends strengthening the implementation of street harassment laws, increasing public awareness through school-based educational programs, and fostering collaboration between digital activists and NGOs to bridge online engagement with real-world action.

Future studies should explore other platforms, broader age groups, and long-term policy engagement to assess how digital activism can lead to structural change. An intriguing follow-up study should analyze the relationship between offline feminist organizations and online movements. Overall, this study has demonstrated that digital activism in Morocco must move beyond viral outrage by linking digital visibility to sustained institutional and social change.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to feminist media and digital activism scholarship by offering an empirical case from Morocco that examines how online engagement shapes discourse while remaining limited in producing structural change.

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