# Illustrator as Feminist Activist

## The Role of Visual Communication

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### Introduction

This paper is a qualitative study placed within the context of fourth-wave feminism and illustration. Jennifer Baumgardner (2011) identifies fourth-wave feminism as "tech-savvy and gender-sophisticated". Kira Cochrane (2013) similarly identifies that the fourth wave is "defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online". Feminism has a rich academic history from which to draw. However, despite inspiring and facilitating tremendous change in terms of inequality of genders, feminism has not yet reached its goal of complete gender equality. Lynne Segal (1999:232) argues that feminism's absolute goal has not been reached, both on a personal level and as a collective movement aimed to change the world. She identifies this goal as being "a world which is a better place, not just for some women, but for all women". South Africa has one of the largest percentages of womxn in parliament[1] globally, but still features one of the highest levels of rape and violence against womxn (VAW) internationally (Frenkel, 2008:1). Ronit Frenkel (2008:1-2) adds that the fact that womxn's issues were subordinated out of necessity to the nationalist agenda during the struggle, alongside the patriarchal[2] nature of Apartheid, resulted in the ambiguous

1 Womxn currently account for 44.5% of the members of parliament, in both the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces (People's Assembly, 2020).

2 The patriarchy is an archaic social form in which the social, political, and economic power lies with men and they

gender positions and the polarity of statistics regarding representation and VAW. Frenkel (2008:2) states that womxn are clearly "both empowered and victimised, seen and unseen, included and excluded in different ways" in South Africa. Nonhlanhla Sibanda-Moyo, Eleanor Khonje, and Maame Kyerewaa Brobbey (2017:13) identify male-dominated power dynamics in South Africa as contributing to gender inequality, asserting that "non-progressive attitudes and beliefs among the people of South Africa, including women, remain a major challenge in fighting crime against women".

Conservative attitudes and beliefs surrounding womxn's position and issues in society are obscured by a lens of "culture" over womxn's own rights to their bodies and actions (Du Plessis 2019:52, Frenkel 2008:4). Gisela Geisler (2004:204) identifies the inherent patriarchal nature of political institutions as a major political limitation in regard to making a difference in terms of womxn's subordination. Issues such as "patriarchal power disparity, cultural norms, and gendered economic inequalities" are noted in an investigation by the Commission for Gender Equality as reasons for the persisting and high levels of VAW in South Africa (Du Plessis

control and dominate womxn by establishing a hierarchical family structure where womxn are subordinate to men (Cremer 2021:25 & Nash 2009:102). Womxn in a patriarchal structure "owe their social and class position to their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons" (Cremer 2021:26). Patriarchal beliefs dominate both public and private spaces, thus allowing men to dominate domestic and public life (Nash 2009:102). This has led men, especially mature white men, to maintain control over economic and political resources (Cremer 2021:25). Douglas J. Cremer (2021:25) writes that the patriarchy does not just rely on the power men gain when becoming fathers, but also the power that "dominant elite men" have over others, which include "women and men, enslaved and free, gender conforming or not, all included in a system of hegemonic values and rules crafted to perpetuate this patriarchal power." The patriarchy enforces ideologies, values, expectations, and institutions through sexism, misogyny, and paternalism, thus feminism aims to counter any patriarchal structure to achieve equality (Cremer 2021:25).

2019:53). Geisler (2004:205) states that this finding suggests that womxn cannot rely solely on government institutions to improve their lives, implying that changes to their social status must also come from within South African society. South African social scientist Sheila Meintjies (quoted by Geisler 2004:35) maintains that the main issue that binds South African womxn is the fact that "in comparison to men, they are politically powerless".

The understanding of the "triple oppression" of womxn, which refers to the intersecting oppression of race, class, and gender, helps navigate the complexities of womxn's oppression in South Africa (Geisler 2004:73). South Africa's achievement of gender equality is impeded by issues such as its complex relationship with cultural practices, patriarchal ideologies, and the prevalent issue of high crime. Additionally, contemporary South African womxn face a variety of other issues in addition to VAW, including overall crime, HIV/AIDS, poverty, workplace discrimination, and poor government delivery (History of Women's Struggle in South Africa, 2021). Thus, to navigate these issues and continue the fight for equality, gender equality activists need to understand all the aspects that hinder complete equality for womxn. Chamberlain (2017:3) argues that there has not been a sudden increase in intersectional thought, but rather that feminism "is becoming more intersectional as time passes". When looking at South Africa and its diversity in identities and the "triple oppression" womxn face, the inclusion of intersectionality within the feminist discourse is of vital importance to the movement's future in South Africa.

## Fourth-Wave Feminism and Intersectionality

Although the wave metaphor when referring to feminist generations/iterations has been heavily critiqued within and outside feminist spaces (Chamberlain 2017; Rivers 2017), I believe that using this metaphor is helpful in positioning oneself within feminist discourse. As Prudence Chamberlain (2017:1) states:

> *[T]he wave can be a means by which to approach feminist temporality, considering how the past and future inform the affective immediacy of the present moment.*

Fourth-wave feminism is more complex than the previous waves and has undergone some changes, however the fight for equality remains. Finn Mackay (2015:122) writes "[p]erhaps the only thing that women share beyond doubt or question is the lived experience of being treated as women in a society where that means second class". Segal (1999:229) states that "feminism remains a powerful cultural presence" which is now as relevant as ever and its goals remain the same: to transform society (Segal, 1999: 20). Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune (2013:xxix) state that feminists still unite and advocate passionately and are continuing to change their tactics in order to address issues dealing with inequality. They also identify the methods employed by activist groups such as Pussy Riot[3], namely: performance, wearing balaclavas and the use of social media, as young, new forms of feminist activism.

Rivers (2017:16) adds that feminist academics have been interested in popular culture and media representations of womxn, as well as how current feminist discussions take place both inside and outside academic spaces, resulting in the inclusion of more diverse voices. Additionally, the fourth wave takes into consideration everything the previous waves have contributed, but adds the contemporary, online, diverse, and globalising society into the mix. Issues such as "rape culture, online feminism, humour, and intersectionality and inclusion" are at the centre of the fourth wave (Chamberlain 2017:2). Andi Schwartz (2021:21) states that the fourth wave includes exploring and expressing broader spectrums of sexuality and gender, breaking out of the binary systems patriarchy

3 Pussy Riot is a Russian feminist underground art group inspired by the "Riot grrrl" guerrilla activist movement formed in 2011 (Rutland 2014:575). Pussy Riot produces guerrilla activist campaigns, performance art, and punk rock music as ways to critique patriarchy and Russian politics. They are famous for their colourful balaclavas they wear to hide members' identities (Rutland 2014).

enforces. Gender is central to our society and fourth-wave feminists are fighting and working towards getting rid of the gender binary and, by doing so, allowing more potential for more inclusive theories and politics (Schwartz 2021:23).

Cochrane (2013) identifies that many feminists within the fourth wave state that they are intersectional feminists, highlighting the fourth wave's emphasis on intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989 as a means to discuss the levels of oppression Black womxn face in America (Gomez 2019:5 & Cooper 2016:385). It critiques "the erasure of multiple axes of identity that goes against the 'add and stir' narrative" and argues that systematic oppression overlaps with social identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (Gomez 2019:5). Stephanie Anne Shelton, Jill Erwing Flynn, and Tanetha Jamay Grosland (2018:5) define intersectionality as referring to "the interconnectedness of social and identity categories". Similarly, Redfern and Aune (2013:xxx) explain that intersectionality means that "oppressions and inequalities intersect", adding that gender cannot be understood without the context of the relationship between other identity markers, such as age, sexuality, class, religion, race, disability, or location. In other words, intersectionality brings to light the various aspects that comprise a person's identity and unique life experiences that influence their experience of oppression and discrimination.

Regarding South Africa and the fourth wave, Rosebell Kagumire (2021) notes that there has been an increase in access to and use of internet technologies and smartphones across the African content. Many African womxn have found "a common voice for community building, organizing, and mobilization". Kagumire (2021) states that access to information has always been vital to any social movement and "consciousness awakening." Rivers (2017:152) states that feminism is back and occupying more space in pop culture and has inspired mass political action and activism. Rivers (2017:8) highlights the renewed interest in feminism and how the emergence of a new wave has "(re)exposed fractures, inconsistencies, and deep inequalities within these debates".

The new wave of feminism highlights how far the fight against inequality has progressed and how far it still needs to go, and utilises the available tools to do so.

## Contemporary Activism

Leah Lievrouw (2011:6) identifies new media as the newest tool for contemporary activism and defines this phenomenon as a "cultural placeholder" for media that remixes various features and abilities from different types of media and technology. New media also blurs the line between consumers and creators/producers, as well as interweaving innovation with familiar media (Lievrouw, 2011: 6). Furthermore, Lievrouw (2011:8) states that new media evolved over time to become a hybrid between old media and new technologies, developing with continuously changing systems, for example, mixing traditional drawing and painting techniques on computer software creating digital art. The utilisation of the networking benefits, communication systems and interactive abilities that new technologies offer (such as the internet and related processes) makes new media inexpensive, yet powerful tools to counter the accepted narratives in society (Lievrouw 2011:8).

Lievrouw (2011:1) highlights that the activist space has changed thanks to the growth of the internet and related digital technologies, and, consequently, has brought traditionally underground, alternative, and independent mediums into the mainstream. Media culture in a contemporary world is more aligned with the digital age and is more "sceptical, ironic, perishable, idiosyncratic, collaborative, and almost inconceivably diversified" (Lievrouw, 2011:214). Desiree Lewis, Tigist Shewarega Hussen, and Monique van Vuuren (2013:51) write that these new media activist tools, unlike traditional media, can be driven by young people and marginalised groups themselves, offering more authentic ways of representation. Lievrouw (2011:2) adds that the changing landscape of activism has created more opportunities for expression and interaction from activists, artists, and other supporters of feminism who find value in these contemporary digital activist

tools. New media expanded traditional political actions by offering innovative ways of engagement with social issues through new media tools such as forums, social media, and online petitions, thus making political participation between social groups easier (Tugtekin 2019:15).

Lewis *et al.* (2013:51-53) write that young South African womxn are drawn to online anonymous confessions pages and social media platforms to share their stories and express their issues of identity. These online spaces offer platforms to debate and respond to identity issues and make connections with similar issues both locally and internationally (Lewis *et al.* 2013:53). Tugtekin (2019:15) finds that new media tools such as social media have been "shown to support political and civic engagement by increasing socialization and information sharing among individuals". Lewis *et al.* (2013:53) adds that young South Africa womxn are actively engaging with online spaces where the complexities of social identities are discussed, and often visual images discussing dominant power relations are the entry points for them into these spaces. Lewis *et al.* (2013:53) state that social networking:

> *becomes more than a space allowing those who already share certain goals to consolidate their politics and pursue common goals. Rather, social networking – often despite unequal access and resources – is a virtual world in which young South African women can explore and redefine racial, gendered, and sexualised possibilities of "selfhood" and, through these virtual worlds, begin to formulate utopian ideas about the self and possible freedoms.*

This highlights the impact that visual media has online for womxn in South Africa. Lewis *et al.* (2013:55-56) argue that the creativity offered to young womxn to imagine future possibilities and expand the scope of imagining themselves, is offered to them by these platforms and tools which create political conversations and alliances. Paula Serafini, Alberto Cossu, and Jessica Holtaway (2019:1) argue that society today is at the "crest of a global wave of artists and creative workers increasingly engaged in the social and political space".

## Narratives

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) speaks of the dangers of a single story, highlighting that single stories perpetuate stereotypes and reduce people to being "just one thing". Adichie (2009) argues, however, that the telling of many diverse stories can empower, humanise, and offer dignity to people and not just enforce negative and problematic stereotypes. Roland Barthes (2018:259) writes that to understand narrative is to "not merely…follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognise its construction in 'stories'". Narratives in society can act as the construction of representation, reality, and the concept of the self (Bennet, Grossberg & Morris 2005:231). Often narratives in media perpetuate problematic ideals and stereotypes, and reduce people to single stories. Alan Young (2019:468) says that these narratives portrayed in the media do not necessarily contain truth but rather serve to naturalise social constructs and beliefs.

Furthermore, telling a feminist story is in itself vital for correcting and re-presenting problematic narratives. Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau (2008) identifies that a rise in the "girl power"[4] movement in pop culture coincided with the rise in "girl-run"[5] projects that became the catalyst of the third wave of feminism in the late 1990s to 2000s. These girl-run projects redesigned their narratives through workshops, zines, radio shows, and "girl-power" events, resulting in a surge of diverse feminist voices. Similarly, Sylvia Bawaa and Grace Adeniyi Ogunyankin (2018:455) credit the web series *An African City* as a means to counter narratives that "stoke hegemonic cultural and nationalist narratives of identities". Bawa and Ogunyankin (2018:449) identify *An African City* as offering a means to

4 Sheridan-Rabideau (2008:45) defines "girl-power" as seen in popular culture as typically meaning "girl solidarity and the idea that girls can be powerful actors in their own worlds".

5 "Girl-run" refers to projects that were started, run, and attended by mostly younger womxn and girls (Sheridan-Rabidea 2008).

examine complexities about identity, cognitive dissonance, and other issues that are associated with African womxn's identity. Bawa and Ogunyankin (2018:455) argue that through these more complex and postcolonial stories and art forms we can see how problematic narratives surrounding Africa are created and re-created, and thus can be deconstructed. Both the "girl-run" projects and *An African City* offer new ways of re-presenting narratives in ways that facilitate the notion that womxn are complex and diverse.

## Visual Communication and Illustration

Illustration is hard to define because its functionality, use, application, and popularity has fluctuated throughout history. Broadly speaking, illustration is a form of visual image making that contextualises a narrative problem (Male 2019:1). Alan Male (2019:1-2) identifies the narrative problem as the brief for an illustration project and how the research, conceptualisation, and critical thought necessary for the production of the solution through illustration, makes this practice different from fine art, even though the same methods and media are used in the production of these two art forms. Male (2019:2) adds that illustration is a visual communication medium that is "conceived and produced for specific audiences". Stuart Medley (2019:21) further states that illustration is "different to art in its intentionality" and is generally complemented with written textual information as a means to add more context to the message. Rachel Gannon and Mireille Fauchon (2021:19) add that illustrators possess a "heightened sensitivity to context", and that illustration is a visual communication medium that is applied and mediated, thus, context is the means through which it communicates meaning. Lawrence Zeegen (2009:6) states that illustration is one of the most direct modes of visual communication which helps people record stories, understand the world, and communicate the complexities of life.

Robyn Phillips-Pendleton (2019:70) argues that illustration offers a unique voice through its visual communication, noting that illustration has challenged

perspectives and understandings of identity markers, such as race and culture, around the world throughout history and continues to do so. Phillips-Pendleton (2019:570) states that:

> *Each illustrator maintains their stylistic integrity and infuses their visual forms with their point of view, complete with their own biases and perspectives of life as they see it.*

Illustrators have impacted society via the images they create, which are influenced by their perceptions, point of view, and their constructed understanding of people, places, and the world (Phillips-Pendleton 2019:571). Gannon and Fauchon (2021:19) add that illustration is "fundamentally engaged in the social world because it is produced to perform within it", hence audiences' interaction with illustration is not limited to traditional art spaces but happens within real-world contexts. Furthermore, illustration does not function in isolation but is created within specific cultural, social, and economic conditions that influence the context of the narratives that illustration portrays (Gannon & Fauchon 2021:139). Illustrators have the ability to share ideas, start discussions, and spread awareness about social issues, but can also do the opposite and enforce negative views (Phillips-Pendleton 2019:596). Gannon and Fauchon (2021:143) similarly argue that illustration can be used to advocate for identity politics because it can "create new representations of cultures, social groups, and people that allow for alternative narratives and viewpoints to be understood". Illustration offers new visualisations that "challenge dominant portrayals, confront stereotypes, or reveal insights into seemingly exclusive or enigmatic communities" (Gannon & Fauchon 2021:143). Likewise, Deborah Brandt (2006) postulates that creative visual practices, such as illustration, are vehicles for knowledge- and meaning-making in society and, thus, can offer new points of view and be a means of activism. Illustration can thus be seen as a very important activist tool to re-represent and re-design narratives for fourth-wave feminist goals.

Liz McQuiston (1997) states that womxn have been using their "graphic voice" to express their concerns and beliefs from the inception of feminism and continue to do so.


**Figure 4.1:** Howard Miller J, '*We Can Do It!*', 1942 (McQuiston 1997:71).

McQuiston (1997) highlights that visual media have long been a useful and impactful way to campaign for womxn's rights and liberation, and refers to several examples of how visual communication was used in different contexts and periods, such as the "We Can Do It" poster (Figure 4.1). The now iconic symbol of "Rosie the Riveter", is an illustration of Naomi Parker Fraley as the focal point of a very successful campaign to persuade womxn to join the industrial labour industry during the Second World War (WWII), when most men had enlisted as soldiers (Fox 2018). To this day, this image of Rosie is still seen as a feminist icon, representing the empowered working-class womxn.


**Figure 4.2:** Watts C, *The Bugler Girl*, 1908 (McQuiston 1997:8).


**Figure 4.3:** Savage K, *Boobs Bite Back*, 1993 (McQuiston, 1997: 16).

More examples of feminist visual communication can be seen in Figures 4.2 and 4.3. Figure 4.2 features an early example of feminist propaganda posters, illustrated by Caroline Watts and published by the British Artists' Suffrage League. This poster was originally designed to announce the procession of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)[6] on 13 June 1908 (McQuiston 1997:9). Figure 4.3 shows a T-shirt that is an example of the work of feminist designer Karen Savage, and was created to be part of the "Stereotypes with Attitude" collection (McQuiston 1997:17). The above two images showcase that visuals in various formats have been used to advocate for womxn's liberation.

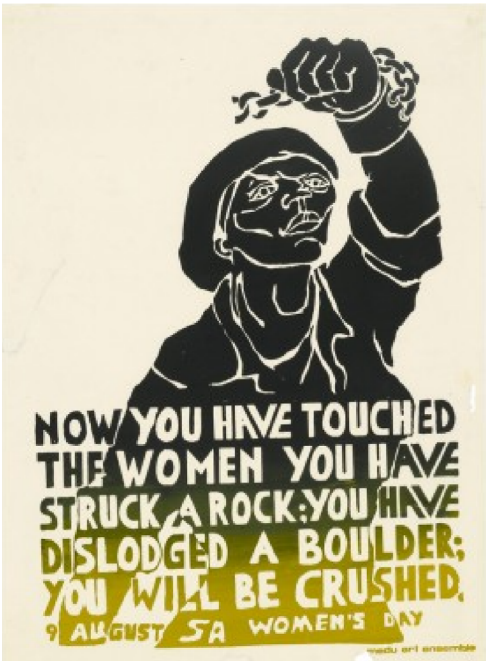


**Figure 4.4:** Seidman J, *South African Women's Day Poster*, 1981 (McQuiston 1997:214).

6 NUWSS was created 1897 by many of the suffragette groups across Britain combining and thus forming the largest organisation fighting for womxn's rights/suffrage (Hume 1982:iii).

McQuiston (1997) also looks at the relationship between the South African anti-Apartheid movement's use of protest posters in relation to the international womxn's movement. She (McQuiston 1997:212) states that "consciousness-raising projects and solidarity posters further acknowledged the role women were playing in the struggle". McQuiston (1997:214-219) discusses how these visuals not only aided the liberation of South Africa, but also communicated the struggles and the aspirations of Black womxn, as a marginalised group, to a larger audience. Figure 4.4 shows a screen-printed poster featuring an illustration of a womxn with broken shackles raising her fist in the air and a slogan reading, "Now you have touched the women you have struck a rock; you have dislodged a boulder; you will be crushed", with the National Women's Day date – 9 August. This slogan became a rallying cry heard during the 1956 women's march, after the Apartheid government issued a law stating that Black womxn, not only the men, were required to carry passes[7] (You strike the women, you strike the rock!, 2020). This poster has since become symbolic of the gender and race struggle in South Africa, especially as an icon representing the courage of Black womxn (Kellner 2021). Clive Kellner compares the Women's Day poster to the Rosie the Riveter poster as having the same significance in the fight for womxn's rights (Kellner 2021). Kellner (2021) states that there is "a productive tension between the propaganda message of the poster medium linked to a collective social idea and the notion of the individual artistic identity behind the image." Even though the mediums differ between the two posters, both evoke the message of the individual womxn fighting in the middle of historical events reshaping society (Kellner 2021).

7 The Pass Law was a law enforced by the South African Apartheid government stating that all Black citizens must carry a passbook as a form of identification (You strike the women, you strike the rock!, 2020).


**Figure 4.5:** Blase C, *Vaginal Teeth zine cover*, 1998 (Triggs 2010:142).

Another medium of visual communication that aided the feminist movement is zine culture. Alison Piepmeier (2009:2) defines a zine as "quirky, individualized booklets filled with diatribes, reworkings of pop culture iconography, and all variety of personal and political narratives". Zines can be seen as a "low-fi", hand-made art form synonymous with underground and counter cultures. An example can be seen in Figure 4.5, featuring the cover with handwritten type and illustrations of a feminist zine called *Vaginal Teeth* from the "riot grrrl"[8] era. Piepmeier (2009) analyses various feminist or

8 The term "riot grrrl" originated in the early 1990s "almost as a joke, an offhand comment that was written into mimeographed fanzines that circulated among punk rock and feminist communities". Riot "grrrls" organised protest and punk performances and made art and zines, all in

"grrrl" zines addressing concerns from various womxn with differing opinions and understandings of feminism, adding that the inclusion of these diverse voices emphasised the notion of intersectionality within feminist thought. Piepmeier (2009:45) asserts that "grrrl" zines "were carrying on a feminist legacy", helping mobilise the third wave of feminism, as well as establishing a particular type of youth vernacular, through the way they were addressing and challenging the sexism young feminists encountered in their personal lives.

Another example of the intersection of activism via visual communication and feminist narratives is shown in feminist comics and graphic novels, which communicate womxn's unique voices. Hillary Chute (2010:3) defines the role of comics or graphic novels as a medium to reimagine, challenge, and confront conventions, stating that comics bring "to the forefront conversations about the political, aesthetic, and ethical work of narrative". Furthermore, Chute (2011:116) states that comics "accommodate the interaction between the see-able and the sayable without attempting to smooth over the gap of reality". Chute (2011:119) further credits comics as a medium which allows creators to express and document life stories, offering them an opportunity for authentic representation of diverse life experiences, thereby countering problematic single narratives present in society.

Anja Venter (2018), a South African self-identified feminist illustrator, creates various illustrations with feminist themes that she shares on her social media pages and websites. Venter does exhibit in person and sells physical items but most of her personal marketing takes place online. Venter designed and illustrated a T-shirt for the Mr Price PROJECT line, a limited range of T-shirts featuring designs illustrated by local illustrators, launched in October 2017 (Meiring 2017). She was one of six illustrators who took part in the 2017 series of PROJECT X T-shirts. The T-shirt (Figure 4.6) features a round emblem or logo design with a female figure in the centre

attempt to oppose the oppressive patriarchy (McDonnell & Vincentelli 2019).

flexing her arm with type at the bottom reading, "do it for yourself". Venter references the iconic visual of 'Rosie the Riveter' (see Figure 4.1), thereby transferring this feminist icon's connotative meaning to her design. Merchandise such as badges and posters have formed part of the feminist movement since the first wave (McQuiston 1997). The application of a feminist iconic sign on merchandise that was sold by a large South African fashion retailer carries significant feminist activist meaning, making such a message accessible to a larger audience and, potentially, making it more digestible for the mainstream audience. This illustration aims to create a sense of self-empowerment for womxn by communicating a feminist message through stylisation, iconography, and application.


**Figure 4.6:** Venter A, *Mr Price x Tee*, 2017 (Venter 2018b).

Another example of Venter's feminist work is her series of embroidered patches titled *Jurassic Patriarchy* (2018a) which she sold on her website and marketed through her social media accounts. One of these designs, as seen in Figure 4.7, features an illustrated dinosaur in a business suit with typography at the top and bottom reading "Jurassic Patriarchy". The humanised dinosaur wearing a suit and the typography referencing Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Jurassic*


*Park* creates an interesting visual full of social commentary and pop culture references. This illustrated patch design aims to raise awareness of the archaic and predatory nature of patriarchy by using pop culture references, as well as the embroidery production method, which carries its own significance. As A. Durham (1990:342) notes, womxn's aesthetic creative practices, such as embroidery, have been associated with the feminine ideal of submissiveness, yet these mediums offer womxn the ability to create their own meanings, which counters the assumption of feminine crafts as a sign of selflessness. The dinosaur reference alludes to the outdated ways of thinking associated with the patriarchy, and by offering this image though the medium of embroidery, adds a traditional feminine element (historical feminine crafts) as an innovative form of protest.


**Figure 4.7:** Venter A, *Jurassic Patriarchy*, 2016 (Venter 2018a).


**Figure 4.8:** Van Zyl A, *Respect Everyone Period*, 2020 (Van Zyl 2020).

Figure 4.8 features an illustration Alicia van Zyl posted to her personal Instagram page as well as on her free Protest Art page, which links to a website[9] through which people can access and download the posters free of charge and use them to advocate for the causes they believe in, whether through printing and presenting them at a protest event or re-sharing them on their social media pages. This poster contains the words "Respect Everyone Period", printed within a sanitary pad-shaped frame on a red drop-patterned background. By using the word "period" and placing it within the sanitary-pad-shaped frame on the red drop pattern, which simulates blood, she alludes to the message of gender equality and, in particular, to the normalisation of the female menstrual cycle. One can also interpret the word "period" in the command "Respect Everyone Period", as referring to the full stop that indicates the end of a sentence, thus, implying the end of this discussion on equality in terms of gender, race, and sexuality and that no alternative to this imperative will be tolerated.

Her use of strong, bold, almost masculine, hand-drawn type and strong, striking colours enforces the power of the message of equality in the piece. Often in advertising and marketing aimed at womxn, soft, feminine colours, such as various shades of pink, are used to enforce gendering and denote femininity (Koller 2008:410). In contrast, Van Zyl uses white, black, and a bright red, thus making the image (and by implication the message) appear bold and striking. In this illustration her colour choices subvert the association of softness usually associated with feminine products such as menstrual pads, consequently making a powerful statement about the gravity of issues girls and young womxn from impoverished backgrounds experience during their menstrual cycle. Through her use of simple lines and bold artwork she utilises visual communication to effectively communicate a feminist message which is freely accessible for feminist activists to use during their marches or other protest events through Van Zyl's protest art website.

9 Available at www.freeprotest.art.

## Illustration as activism, online

Aristea Fotopoulou (2016:2) maintains that being feminist in contemporary society means that feminists are users and participants of media technology, social media, and other internet resources. Fourth-wave activists have the ability to use tools such as online activism and social media to challenge sexism and misogyny, thus allowing for further understanding and emphasis of intersectionality (Chamberlain, 2017:3; Rivers, 2017:5).


**Figure 4.9:** Video Music Awards, *Beyoncé performance*, 2014 (Arnold 2019).


**Figure 4.10:** Dior, *We Should All Be Feminist T-shirt on the Runway*, 2017 (Rodulfo 2017).

Mendes *et al.* (2019) write that fourth-wave feminism utilises new technologies to advocate, create awareness, and fight against feminist issues such as rape culture.[10] According to Mendes *et al.* (2019:1), the various new feminist critiques, initiatives, and ideologies have gained higher levels of visibility as a result of the use of these new activist tools, including the influence of celebrities identifying as feminists and pop culture embracing feminist ideologies. Mendes *et al.* (2019:1) credit feminist declarations such as Beyoncé's "feminist" banner at the 2014 Video Music Awards (Figure 4.9), various popular magazines' special feminist issues, and Dior's 2017 "We should all be feminists" T-shirt (Figure 4.10) as evidence that feminism is visible in mainstream culture. Mendes *et al.* (2019:2) further argue that the increased visibility of feminist activist initiatives is largely because of the creative and innovative ways in which digital technologies are being used to mobilise feminism.

Hashtag activism refers to social media activism whereby participants use a hashtag to respond to, share, or participate in a movement, for example the #metoo and #timesup movements (Mendes *et al.* 2019). Jamillah Bowman Williams, Lisa Singh, and Naomi Mezey (2019:372) state that #metoo "converted an online phenomenon into tangible change, sparking legal, political, and social changes in the short run". Williams *et al.* (2019:375) further write that hashtag activism helps activists "organize and share information, push for freer expression, and propel political change". Social media activists have argued that the smallest online action, such as liking, sharing, or commenting, is seen as a form of participating in a particular movement (Williams *et al.* 2019:378). For example, the high engagement with the #metoo movement is evident of how online activity can be a catalyst for change and action; it offers legitimacy and visibility for the movement that

10 Mendes *et al.* (2019:6–8) describe rape culture as the cultural and societal discourse that condones and perpetuates problematic ideologies around sexual violence against womxn. Rape culture includes rape jokes, victim blaming, cat-calling, and other sexist acts that belittle womxn.

translates to offline spaces (Williams *et al.* 2019:383). The two important factors Mendes *et al.* (2019:140) highlight about hashtag activism is the potential for hashtags and social media campaigns to transfer to mainstream media, and how society must consider the outcomes of hashtag activism.

Digital feminist campaigns are a means of collective consciousness-raising, and this practice creates connections, solidarity, and a sense of community (Mendes *et al.* 2019:186). Mendes *et al.* (2019: 128-130) report that victims with a history of assault and harassment engaged with social media, through hashtags and online activist tools, more freely and comfortably than reporting such assaults to authorities. This fact highlights the ability of individual stories to achieve justice and empowerment and, in turn, reveals the overall feelings about the pervasiveness of abuse and harassment in society and the desire of the general public to change this situation (Williams *et al.* 2019:372). This response can also be seen in action taken locally after President Cyril Ramaphosa promised new courts, reviewing of cold cases, and harsher penalties for gender-based violence perpetrators after the outcry in response to Uyinene Mrwetyana's murder in 2019 and the similar deaths of many other womxn.

The amount of womxn who regularly use the internet, and related technologies and infrastructure, has doubled over the last five years in 34 African countries, increasing from 11% to 26% (Kagumire 2021). In South Africa, access to internet technologies, such as smartphones, was 51% in 2018, which is higher than the global computer ownership (Venter, Blignaut, Renaud & Venter, 2019:2). Despite this increase, womxn are still less likely than men to have access to mobile phones, daily internet access, computers, and social media platforms. The gender gap still is 8% to 11% (Kagumire 2021). Womxn who do have access and are using internet technologies still face enormous challenges and get pigeonholed as only "womxn's issues" (Kagumire 2021). Rivers (2017) and Chamberlain (2017:134) highlight some challenges feminists face online, such as cyberbullying, trolling, commodification, and a lack of protection against harmful content. Kagumire (2021)

states that the "marginalization within public discourse extends into the online world, where hierarchies of who is heard are recreated and extended from offline". Often, online harassment can leak into the external world and many feminists are forced to leave their homes and take legal action to protect themselves and their loved ones (Chamberlain, 2017:141). Chamberlain (2017:129-136) states that for every feminist campaign there are forums that encourage rape culture and GBV as forms of jokes, and the anonymous nature of the internet makes hate easier to spread. Not only do feminists have to deal with the general harassment one faces online, but sexism still *thrives* online.

Consumerism is another challenge fourth-wave feminists face, as social media platforms and internet technologies are overrun with advertising and marketing which have not been kind to womxn (Chamberlain, 2017:127). Chamberlain (2017:127-131) states that "[w]omen themselves have become commodities", highlighting how brand awareness has evolved to maintain some forward-facing support for womxn. Sheridan-Rabideau (2008:111) notes the decision by many feminists that "since there was no way out of consumer culture, people should work within available structures and adapt them for feminist ends". Rivers (2017:57) adds that the popularity of feminism and commodification of feminism is the evident in the way high-profile celebrities declare their alliance with feminist values and ideals. A high-profile example was Beyoncé's use of a "feminist" banner at the 2014 Video Music Awards, referenced previously. But even this type of feminist activism can be critiqued as a means of celebrities furthering their own brands (Rivers 2017:58). Rivers (2017:59) additionally identifies so-called "marketplace-feminism" as the practice by brands and companies of using their allegiance to feminism as a way to promote the "neoliberal vision of the empowered individual". Schwartz (2021:21) adds that feminist issues on social media platforms can become oversimplified and distorted due to social media platforms becoming increasingly capitalist and consumerist.

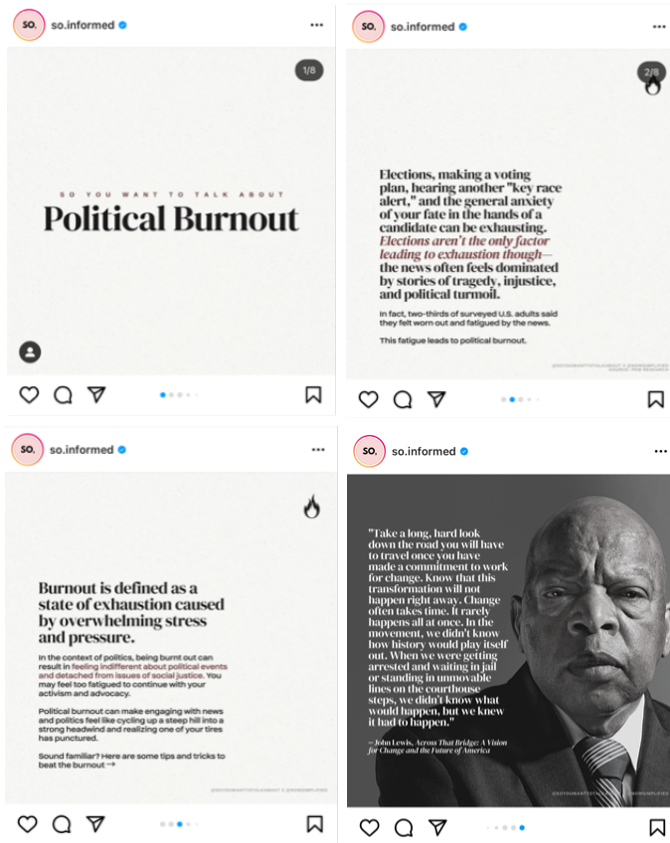


**Figure 4.11** So Informed *Political Burnout carousel slides 1, 2, 3 and 8*, 2021 (Screenshots So Informed 2021).

Another challenge which faces social media platforms specifically is the issue of "slactivism". One of the ways activist campaigns communicate and share information online is in the form of simple graphic carousel[11] posts, often featuring illustrated elements. The example shown in Figure 4.11 shows the typical structure that these posts follow, which includes a cover slide with a title of the content discussed in

11 A carousel post is the term used to describe one social media posting with various slides/images following one after another.


**Figure 4.12:** Impact, *Stop Asking Women When They are Having Babies*, 2021 (Screenshot Impact 2021).


**Figure 4.13:** Feminist, *Real Men Don't Rape*, 2021 (Screenshot Feminist 2021).


**Figure 4.14:** The Female Lead, *Consent slide 2*, 2021 (Screenshot The Female Lead 2021).

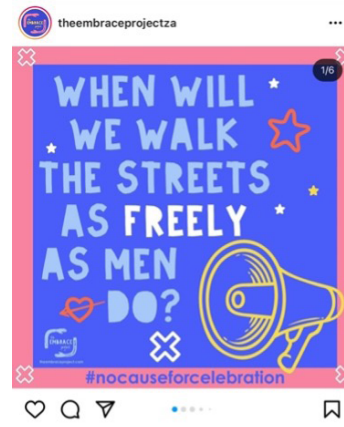


**Figure 4.15:** The Embrace Project, *When Will We Walk the Streets as Freely as Men Do?*, 2021 (Screenshot The Embrace Project 2021).

the carousel, a few slides with content which includes text and icons and, sometimes, illustrations (as seen in Figures 4.12 and 4.15) and a last slide with either a call to action, links to more resources, or links to fundraising pages. Other examples of the variety of aesthetics of these posts can be seen in Figures 4.12 to 4.15, ranging from minimally designed posts to those including illustrated type and illustrations. Erin Corbett (2021) and Liz Kraisinger (2021) note that the death of George Floyd in 2020 seemed to be the point after which these activist posts on social media platforms increased. Corbett (2021) writes that some organisations believe that sharing information on social media via the digestible carousel posts helps involve more people, often for the first time, making it a useful tool for reaching out to and educating larger audiences. Kraisinger (2021) identifies these infographic posts' greatest strength as their ability to make issues mainstream and normalise them amongst people who are then more willing to engage with social change movements. However, traditional means of activism are still needed because relying solely on these infographic posts on social media becomes "slacktivism[12]", and not "real" activism (Kraisinger, 2021).

Even though feminists online face these challenges, African feminist voices are still making an impact online and offline (Kagumire 2021). Despite economic and digital disparities on the continent, information is now even more accessible to the current generation than their parents' generation (Kagumire 2021). Rivers (2017:149) adds that, despite these issues, intersectionality and the fourth wave are connecting feminists across many waves and offer powerful tools for organising collective action and giving space to marginalised voices.

12 Slacktivism, or clicktivism, is the act of engaging with a social movement but with minimal effort and commitment (Fisher, 2020). This term is used to describe the way people often just reshare and "like" activist content and believe that that is all that is needed to make a change.

## Conclusion

This paper dealt with the intersection of feminism, contemporary activism, and illustration, with a focus on South African issues. Feminism is currently in its fourth wave, which emphasises intersectionality and contemporary methods of protest, such as online activism. Contemporary activism utilises new media tools that are more creative, collaborative, and combine traditional and contemporary methods alongside online activist methods to mobilise support for social movements. Fourth-wave feminism brings such subjugation into the spotlight to show that the various gender-related issues are connected and that to achieve gender equality, each of the intersecting identity markers must be considered. The state of gender equality in South Africa draws attention to the very complex nature of the local fight for equality, which includes institutional issues and an inherently patriarchal culture. Even though South Africa has progressive laws and policies in place for equal representation in politics, it still has one of the highest levels of gender-based violence in the world. This crisis highlights the need for continued activism to address the persistence of gender inequality in South Africa.

Contemporary activism, which includes the use of creative media and evolving digital technologies and relies on the internet's influence on society, has had a significant impact on social movements. Illustration can communicate feminist messages, as demonstrated through the discussion of feminist illustrations and visual communication created by Miller, Watts, Seidman, Blase, Venter, and Van Zyl. Looking at contemporary South African examples of feminist illustrations accessible online, one still needs to keep in mind the limitations of online spaces. Womxn still face harassment and hate online, brands and corporations actively use social movements as marketing tools, and the digital divide still persists on the African continent. Noting this, I would like to still emphasise the positive influence and changes activism online and through visual communication tools like illustration has already done, and continues to do.

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