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Confidence culture in neoliberal academia: the case of #Womeninacademia on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the intersection of gender dynamics, neoliberal higher education, and social media. Despite neoliberalism's claims of promoting meritocracy in higher education, its emphasis on competition exacerbated existing gendered, racial, and class-based inequalities in academia under the guise of productivity. A rising method to tackle gender disparities in (and beyond) academia is utilizing Twitter (rebranded as X). This study examines how gender dynamics in neoliberal higher education are portrayed on Twitter through the popular yet underexplored hashtag #womeninacademia. It is a content analysis of 4500 tweets (1175 tweets after excluding retweets and spams) with the hashtag from early 2021 to late 2022, highlighting the (post)pandemic period. Findings reveal #womeninacademia's prevalent use in addressing self-promotion for empowerment and inequalities in academia, both articulated through individualized narratives. This study argues that while this hashtag holds empowering potential, it also perpetuates the 'confidence culture' and competitiveness of formal neoliberal academic settings.

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Gendered academia; Twitter; women empowerment; confidence culture; gender equality

Introduction

This study examines how gendered dynamics of neoliberal academia are articulated and represented on social media. Although neoliberalism has promoted a narrative of meritocracy and equal access to higher education (Loher et al. 2019, 109), universities have increasingly evolved into consumer-oriented, profit-driven institutions that often undermine public interest (Ivancheva, Lynch, and Keating 2019; Shore and Wright 2000). This transformation has intensified pre-existing gendered, racialized, and class-based inequalities within academia (Kinikoglu and Can 2021; Ivancheva, Lynch, and Keating 2019; Oliver and Morris 2022). While universities and research institutions in the UK and the USA – where English remains the dominant academic language – have led these developments in the Global North (Kinikoglu and Can, 2024), similar processes are underway in the

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Global South, albeit with uneven impacts (Khandoker 2024). These inequalities surface through shared experiences, including gender pay gaps, unequal care burdens, limited academic access, and pervasive sexism, racism, and mansplaining (Oliver and Morris 2022; Gill 2016). As in other global social movements (Blevins et al. 2019), academics increasingly use social media platforms, especially Twitter (rebranded as X), to network and express solidarity. Hashtags such as #AcademicTwitter and #AcademicChatter have become tools for community-building, career support (Luo, Freeman, and Stefaniak 2020), and voicing concerns (Gomez-Vasquez and Romero-Hall 2020; Talbot and Pownall 2022). In this paper, we focus on the popular yet underexplored hashtag #WomenInAcademia to investigate how it is used to navigate, critique, and challenge the gendered and neoliberal dynamics shaping contemporary higher education.

Scholarly literature approaches Twitter, like other social media platforms, as a potentially democratic public sphere in the Habermasian sense – where actors engage in rational-critical debate to shape public opinion (Çela 2015); as a space for counter-publics, where individuals challenge hegemonic ideologies and articulate resistance to injustice (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015); and simultaneously as a platform marked by structural exclusions and uneven access, shaped by overt forms of control. Feminist social movements have utilized Twitter as a tool for advocating social justice both within and beyond the sphere of higher education (Ahmed 2021, 63; Blevins et al. 2019). However, Twitter is also entangled with the neoliberal logic of the higher education sector. In response to the demands of audit cultures and the expectations of government and funding bodies – particularly within the Anglo-American higher education context – academics and institutions increasingly rely on altmetrics (e.g. likes, downloads, shares) to demonstrate the societal reach and citation potential of their publications (Luc et al. 2021). These metrics are not only framed as indicators of academic influence but also as tools for evidencing impact and engagement with diverse audiences (Viney 2013, 176). Consequently, Twitter increasingly shapes academic careers, affects funding opportunities, and reinforces the competitive ethos of the neoliberal university (Prosser 2020). In this context, Twitter can be understood as both a site of resistance and a mechanism that reproduces neoliberal academic norms.

This aligns with post-feminist critiques of ‘confidence culture’ (Orgad and Gill 2022) and the ideal academic subject (Pereira 2019), where women are disproportionately encouraged to cultivate self-confidence and become ‘empowered’ as an individual solution to structural inequalities. This individualization of gendered experiences is further reinforced by academics’ use of social media – primarily for personal expression and, to a lesser extent, for academic discourse (Sugimoto et al. 2017, 2042). Twitter thus becomes a paradoxical space – exposing shared, structural gendered inequalities in academia while reducing them to individual struggles ultimately reproducing the contestation and competitiveness that characterize the neoliberal university. Building on this, our paper investigates how gendered academic experiences are represented on Twitter through the use of the hashtag #WomenInAcademia. We situate our analysis within a broader environment shaped by universities’ ‘empowerment narratives’ – which presume a meritocratic academic culture – and the pervasive neoliberal discourse of confidence culture (Loher et al. 2019; Orgad and Gill 2021). Specifically, we ask: Under what circumstances, when, and how is this hashtag utilized on Twitter? What kind of opportunities and setbacks does this hashtag on Twitter pose for women’s empowerment and solidarity in academia?

To address our main research questions, we conducted a content analysis of 4,500 tweets using the hashtag #WomenInAcademia between early 2021 and late 2022. This timeframe was selected to capture the gendered consequences of the (post)pandemic context – specifically, hiring freezes, rising domestic and care responsibilities, and inflation (Watermeyer, Raaper, and Batalla 2022) – and to explore how women academics turned to Twitter during this period. Thus, this content analysis examined both the content of the hashtag and the contexts in which it was employed. Our findings indicate that in a higher education landscape increasingly shaped by audit culture (Loher et al. 2019; Shore and Wright 2000), the hashtag #WomenInAcademia often centres on themes of self-promotion and mutual support among women scholars, eclipsing more critical and personal accounts of structural gendered inequalities in academia. In what follows, we first situate gendered inequalities in neoliberal academia within the broader ‘confidence culture’ (Orgad and Gill 2022), then outline our methodology, and finally present findings, under two themes: women empowerment and gendered inequalities in academia.

Cultivating confidence and elevating empowerment in gendered higher education

As surmised by Henderson and Taylor (2019), the feminism of the 1980s and 1990s has been reshaped through the rise of individualism and a growing emphasis on producing subjects who are ‘better adjusted to neoliberalism’. They argue that the once-politicized call to raise feminist consciousness has ‘mutated’ into a discourse that is less abrasive and overtly political. For example, notions such as *sisterhood* have been reframed as *friendship*, *rage* softened into *passion*, and *equality* rebranded as *empowerment*. This rearticulated sense of empowerment is situated within a broader ‘confidence culture’ (Orgad and Gill 2022), and marketed as part of a growing market for girls’ empowerment (Banet-Weiser 2015). Women are encouraged to ‘work on themselves’, become confident, and individually fix systemic issues from workplace dynamics to personal life (Orgad and Gill 2022, 29–56; 100–124). In the neoliberal Anglo-American higher education context, this empowerment narrative is coupled with an emphasis on diversity in student recruitment and employment strategies (Orupabo and Mangset 2021) and ‘the myth of meritocracy’ (Liu 2011). Hiring and contract renewals are increasingly governed by metrics of efficiency and fairness, underpinned by so-called ‘best practices’ (Loher et al. 2019; Shore and Wright 2000, 62), and assessed through standardized performance indicators in teaching and research. Despite long-standing gendered inequalities in higher education (Deem, Case, and Nokkala 2022), neoliberal governance and managerialism have deepened existing fractures under the guise of efficiency and fairness (Shore and Wright 2000, 60). This has coincided with rising academic precarity and casualized contracts (Cardozo 2017), where women face intensified competition amid uneven conditions informed by quantitative evaluations, disproportionate domestic responsibilities, and emotionally demanding administrative duties both at work and at home (Courtois and O’Keefe 2015; Lynch and Ivancheva 2015; Reay 2004). Moreover, women remained disadvantaged in student evaluations – a factor in teaching assignments – as students tend to favour male educators (Shipley 2018, 28). In precarious roles, they are also more susceptible to mobbing, marginalization, mansplaining, and

sexual harassment, much of which is normalized, silenced, or bureaucratized through institutional complaint procedures (Ahmed 2021). When women voice structural injustices, they are dismissed for being engaged in a 'victimhood' narrative, whereas similar disclosures by men are framed as emotional depth or 'sensitivity' (Jankowski 2019). This dynamic reinforces Orgad and Gill's (2022) argument that vulnerability is not only individualized but also differently valued depending on gender – positioned as a stepping-stone to success for some, and a liability for others.

In the early 2000s, Bagilhole and Goode (2001, 168) observed that while men academics in the UK often relied on self-promotion and patriarchal support networks to advance their careers, women were more hesitant to promote their work or assert their presence. However, the emergence and accessibility of social media have, to some extent, made traditional patriarchal support systems less central, offering women alternative spaces to develop 'feminist ways of working collaboratively and supportively' (ibid., 161). Today, within the higher education sector, women academics – like many women across the broader workforce – are continually surrounded by narratives of resilience, empowerment, and confidence. These stories often highlight women who have endured and overcome workplace harassment, sexism, and persistent gender inequality (Orgad and Gill 2022). While these narratives may appear celebratory, they are also implicated in the reproduction of neoliberal logics that frame systemic inequalities as personal challenges. The emphasis on resilience and empowerment suggests that issues such as underrepresentation, the gender pay gap, and workplace discrimination stem from a so-called 'confidence gap' that women must individually overcome (Orgad and Gill 2022). This framing shifts responsibility away from institutions and onto women themselves, reinforcing individualized responses to structural inequalities.

The culture of confidence aligns closely with meritocratic ideals of individual success, reinforcing the neoliberalization of academia and other professional fields. As Pereira (2019) demonstrates in the context of Portuguese higher education, the construction of the 'ideal academic' is grounded in neoliberal values such as productivity, self-motivation, and constant visibility. In what Pereira describes as 'play[ing] the game of productivity for emancipatory reasons' (2019, 181), feminist scholars are often caught in a paradox – striving to challenge structural inequalities while simultaneously contending with the pressures of high-performance expectations. This dynamic frequently results in exhaustion and stress as scholars attempt to meet the intensifying demands of academic labour. By framing success and failure as matters of individual responsibility, the confidence culture obscures systemic inequalities and the growing precarisation within neoliberal academia. Within this context, the dominant empowerment narrative becomes a tool that can be mobilized to silence the lived experiences of marginalized women academics – particularly those who face intersecting oppressions based on race, sexuality, or other axes of identity. Rather than addressing institutional barriers, this narrative often shifts attention away from structural critique and towards personal adaptation, thereby perpetuating the very inequalities it claims to overcome.

The empowerment narrative is widely disseminated through conferences, podcasts, blogs, and special journal issues – but perhaps most pervasively via social media. Recent scholarship has extended the conceptual boundaries of the Habermasian public sphere to include social media platforms, which are seen as digital spaces where diverse users and perspectives can converge around specific issues (Çela 2015; Habermas

1991; Shirky 2011). However, post-structuralist and feminist scholars have long critiqued Habermas's model for its tendency to exclude marginalized voices and social groups, particularly women (Dahlberg 2014). These critiques rest on two primary concerns. First, the Habermasian framework presumes that exclusions in discourse can be virtually eliminated, underestimating the pervasive influence of power dynamics and systemic exclusion in everyday communication (Flyvbjerg 2000). Second, critics argue that the rational norms underpinning the public sphere – although intended to foster democratic participation – are themselves exclusionary. Feminist theorists have demonstrated how the criteria for what constitutes legitimate democratic communication often reinforce existing hierarchies of dominance and silence non-conforming voices (Coole 1996; Dean 1996; Fraser 1997; Young 2000). As Dahlberg (2014) notes, participation in such a sphere often requires individuals to adopt a specific communicative mode deemed universally valid. Those who fail to conform risk marginalization or exclusion, despite the purported inclusivity of the space. These critiques are especially salient in the context of social media, where empowerment narratives may appear participatory while still reproducing structural exclusions.

Despite persistent inequalities, the opportunity to express one's views and connect with others online has catalyzed significant social campaigns and political debates. One prominent example is the #MeToo movement, which exposed widespread instances of sexual harassment and mobbing across various professional sectors. However, the movement has also faced critique for inadvertently normalizing trauma, reducing it to 'just another me-too story' (Ahmed 2021, 22). We argue that the digital is inseparable from the material, shaped by the interplay of objects, ideas, practices, and cultural norms (McLean et al. 2019). Digital spaces thus mirror societal structures, reproducing inequalities and normative constraints much like physical environments and other technologies. Yet they also create openings for resistance and identity reconstruction, allowing challenges to dominant power structures (McLean et al. 2019; Black et al. 2020). This duality – simultaneously exclusionary and empowering – highlights the need to engage digital spaces as critically as physical ones, especially in relation to gendered experiences and academic activism.

Twitter has become a key platform for fostering social movements and intersectional activism (Talbot and Pownall 2022; Wilkins, Livingstone, and Levine 2019), offering marginalized groups a space to connect, advocate for social justice and gender equity (Locke et al. 2018; Turley and Fisher 2018), build collective identities, and co-create content (Bayfield et al. 2020; Schuster 2013; Talbot et al. 2020). Research shows that academics use Twitter for various purposes, including networking, organizing academic events, enhancing professional visibility, engaging in debates on current issues (Sugimoto et al. 2017, 6), and publicly voicing their concerns (Bayfield et al. 2020; Talbot and Pownall 2022). However, other studies have documented cases in which academic institutions monitor staff social media activity (Sathish 2023, 93), with some faculty facing disciplinary action or termination over the content of their tweets (Sugimoto et al. 2017, 2042). This surveillance necessitates careful boundary work and emotional labour as academics navigate personal and professional identities online. In doing so, they extend academic labour into digital spaces and often feel compelled to engage in continuous self-promotion (Pereira 2019; Sathish 2023, 68). Drawing on feminist critiques, we conceive Twitter as a site of both potential feminist solidarity and the reproduction of neoliberal and patriarchal academic norms.

Methods

This study explores how the hashtag #WomenInAcademia represents gendered experiences in academia by examining its usage patterns, the themes it generates, and its potential to foster or constrain feminist solidarity within neoliberal academic spaces. We carried out a content analysis of tweets containing the #womeninacademia hashtag during the years 2021 and 2022 – a period marked by the (post)pandemic transformation of neoliberal higher education and a concurrent economic crisis that exacerbated gendered inequalities in academia (Hordósy and McLean 2022, 388–389). Mainstream hashtags such as #womeninacademia can enhance the visibility and accessibility of discussions within the public sphere, as they engage a broader, more diverse user base and are adaptable across various academic contexts. To capture the diversity of gendered experiences in academia, we focused on #womeninacademia, a widely used mainstream hashtag, rather than more specific or niche alternatives (e.g. #momaedia, #womeninstem, #blackwomeninstem) highlighting intersectional inequalities (see the LeveragedPhD 2022).

Data sources and sample

We retrieved 4,500 tweets via the Twitter API and focused on tweet content and context, rather than engagement metrics, to identify key trends and representations. To ensure analytical coherence, we excluded retweets with unrelated hashtags and spams, and concentrated on a corpus of 1,175 tweets, exploring the contexts, meanings, trends, representations, and uses of #womeninacademia on Twitter. We collected data only from public accounts, open to the gaze of the wider audience (Demirsu 2024, 49), with the hashtag [#womeninacademia] signalling users' willingness to contribute to a public debate (Townsend and Wallace 2016, 12). Nevertheless, we acknowledge the dynamic nature of Twitter data and privacy and anonymity debates in social media studies (Buck and Ralston 2021; Townsend and Wallace 2016). Focusing on content and context rather than particular subjects, we removed identifying details (e.g. university or department names, Twitter handles, names, places or websites), paraphrased some tweets, and we did not quote any tweets that could be potentially harmful. We ensured that the tweets we quoted in our study were not 'reverse searchable' (Ball and Traxler 2024, 371).

Data analysis

We first employed open coding of tweet content, including texts, website links, and hashtags. Rather than applying pre-defined concepts, we adopted an inductive approach to allow themes emerge organically from data. Two primary code sets emerged: (1) expressions of exclusion, failure, naming, and care-related burdens and overwork experienced by women academics; and (2) instances of showcasing events, success stories, lectures, research activities, and written contributions by women in academia. Subsequently, we applied theoretically informed coding (Saldana 2009, 42). We categorized the first set of codes under the theme of gendered inequalities (see Table 1), encompassing structural issues such as pay disparities, restricted career advancement, job insecurity resulting from care-related career interruptions, gendered divisions of academic labour, and exclusion

Table 1. Distribution of themes identified in the coding process.

	Themes	Number of tweets	Frequency
Gendered inequalities	Access to and participating in gendered academia	322	% 27.4
	Care-related inequalities	76	% 6.4
Empowerment	(Self)promotion and support systems	599	% 50.1
	Women celebrating women	178	% 15.1
Total		1175	%100

from patriarchal institutional structures (Reay 2004; Vohlídalová 2020). O’Keefe and Courtois (2019, 466) argue that the emphasis on success stories of women academics can obscure the systemic gendered inequalities experienced by those in less privileged academic positions. This critique resonates with a post-feminist analysis of women’s empowerment discourses in the context of the prevailing ‘confidence culture’ (Orgad and Gill 2022), particularly as seen in practices such as promoting women colleagues or supporting women-centered academic initiatives (Pereira 2019). Building on this critique, we categorized the second set of codes under the theme of women’s empowerment, recognizing both the symbolic and material dimensions of support for gender equity in academia. In addition to open coding, we employed closed coding to analyze metadata such as Twitter handles, tweet timing, and the academic disciplines referenced. This enabled us to map the contexts in which #womeninacademia was used.

These codes and themes are not mutually exclusive, as individual tweets often convey overlapping or even contradictory functions and messages. To identify the dominant trends in the use of #womeninacademia, we determined the primary message communicated in each tweet by integrating the initial codes into broader, theoretically informed themes (Sillars and Overall 2016, 206). To ensure consistency and reliability in our coding, we divided the total 4,500 tweets equally between researchers. Each researcher coded both their assigned subset and a portion of their colleague’s data (Saldana 2009, 27), and we maintained analytic memos to critically reflect on our interpretive processes throughout (ibid., 36). This collaborative and iterative approach enabled us to move beyond binary classifications to explore the nuanced thematic intersections and implicit meanings embedded within tweets. Aligning with content analysis we integrated both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, attending to manifest meanings as well as latent content – including what is omitted or strategically avoided (Mayring 2019). Accordingly, under each theme, we drew attention to less frequently occurring codes to deepen and diversify our interpretive insights.

Results and discussion

Our findings highlight the complex ways in which academics use Twitter as a social space through the #womeninacademia hashtag. Ten specific Twitter accounts used the #womeninacademia hashtag the most, and they tweeted on women academics’ empowerment and gendered inequalities in academia across different academic disciplines, ranging from STEM and social sciences to literature, archaeology, and law. In our following discussion, we highlight that precarity and personal stories of women academics were under-represented in our data. Studies on academics’ Twitter use show that women fear losing their jobs or feel that their job prospects could be endangered for speaking out

their stories (Sugimoto et al. 2017, 6). This was visible in one of the tweets we retrieved: 'Looking back, I wish I had stood behind that podium and told him he was completely out of line. I didn't. Because I was petrified, not of him, but of the entire institution that supported and continues to support people who behave that way'. Whatever the intentions behind holding back such stories, we acknowledge the complexity of such statements. We show that (1) an empowerment narrative pervades a social space (Twitter) that is considered more democratic, open, and even a space for 'feminist praxis' (Talbot and Pownall 2022), while obscuring (2) gendered inequalities in academia.

An ambivalent women's empowerment narrative

We have specifically traced the hashtag of #womeninacademia to analyze and observe the collective reflections of gendered academia on Twitter, a space to give testimony to academics and create a more democratic, honest and safe space for holding difficult conversations that in return is helpful in feminist advocacy and unionizing academics (Bayfield et al. 2020; Talbot and Pownall 2022). Studies also note that academics consider Twitter as a space for sharing personal matters (Sugimoto et al. 2017, 6). In the 1175 tweets we analyzed, we found that 65.1% used the hashtag to promote a narrative of 'women's empowerment' by sharing individual academic achievements of women. Gill and Orgad's (2022, 20-21) observe that women's empowerment is seen to rely on individual choice, competition and productivity, i.e. 'ideals of corporate success'. Likewise, here, the majority of tweets revolve around announcing and celebrating other women academics' achievements, self-promotion of publications, job hires or conference speeches, promotion of women speakers at conferences, supporting other women academics, and circulating job advertisements. This theme has been the most prominent one in all of our data with around 777 references.

In line with the abovementioned scholarly literature on neoliberal ideals of productivity (Pereira 2019), the hashtag has been used to promote and celebrate women's empowerment and diversity in an increasingly neoliberalized academia. This point is further evidenced by the 272 tweets using the hashtag for job advertisement. In addition, higher education and research institutions and various organizations often use the hashtag to promote their work, blogs, podcasts, writing retreats, and conferences. They also use it to highlight that they employ successful women academics and aim to recruit more. This tendency is also visible in the frequency of commonly used terms. Words like 'apply' (used 299 times) and 'congratulations' (used 308 times) appeared far more frequently than terms such as 'adjuncts' (used 4 times), 'quitting' (used 8 times), 'precarity' (used 20 times) and 'early career' (used 9 times). Even when these latter terms, which signal the structural problems in neoliberal academia, are mentioned, they often appear in celebratory tweets such as 'Great to hear @ ... chatting with @ ... about academic precarity'. This, in return, creates a sea of tweets and engagement that sound something like this:

Join us in congratulating

A new research publication from one of our

A huge congratulations to

We are proud to

Glad to announce that

What an amazing achievement ...

Such tweets may create solidarity, making women's achievements more visible, while simultaneously disguising structural gendered inequalities in academia. They create a language that perpetuates a confidence culture and is centred on the premises of neoliberal academia obsessed with filling performance and diversity requirements (Pereira 2019; Rogler 2019; Shore and Wright 2000). Thus, celebration of individual success also reproduces an empowerment sentiment. This appears not only in women celebrating other women or highlighting collaborations among women, but also in tweets that express this sentiment as a way of combating feelings of inadequacy as a woman in academia. One tweet, among the 777 tweets in this category, illustrates this support system:

There is always impostor syndrome. But tell yourself, 'you're enough!' [...].

This is important for the 'Is it just me' moments Bayfield et al. (2020, 423) describe, as it helps to create sentiments of solidarity and support among women academics. Tweets using #womeninacademia can even be considered feminist, as they bring visibility to marginalized groups and highlight the significance of gender and being a woman in this social space (Talbot and Pownall 2022). However, the self-belief (Orgad and Gill, 2022, 21) required to avoid being 'knocked off' by imposter syndrome feeds into an empowerment narrative that normalizes the precarity and over-competitiveness that pervade neoliberal higher education. It also shifts the burden of neoliberalization on women academics by encouraging them to work on themselves and become more 'confident' in their abilities. This is evident in tweets such as 'focus on yourself' and 'do the right thing' as well as self-promoting tweets that celebrate one's own achievements. While this may increase the visibility of women's accomplishments and agency it can also function as a tool for comparison, sparking negative feelings among the 'less successful'. This effect is reinforced by the hashtag's rare use for sharing failures, challenges or sexism faced.

Thus, our findings for this theme suggest that this hashtag is more used as a gendered space for promotion and competitiveness, under the guise of support and solidarity. As Pereira (2019, 171) observes, the internalization and promotion of neoliberal productivity values in academia create a dilemma for women academics: while this visibility and support from fellow women colleagues may increase, they also risk perpetuating and concealing the deleterious conditions of the academic environment. The social position of women is used to boost competitiveness and success, as measured by neoliberal higher education institutions through altmetrics (Viney 2013). At the same time, the systemic burden and injustice are reframed as individual responsibility – women academics simply need to be confident and persistent (Loher et al. 2019). As mentioned above, rather than addressing the structural issues in academia, most initiatives concentrate on having successful women academics share career guidance, host conferences, podcasts, and panels on how to succeed in the higher education industry as a woman. This promotion creates a form of support and solidarity among women academics on Twitter – not around stories of gendered academia, but around achievements meeting the demands

of neoliberal academia. This reflects feminist critiques of the Habermasian public sphere, where conforming to an achievement-oriented communicative model may potentially exclude others.

Gendered inequalities within and beyond the social space of academia

Scholarly literature shows that Twitter also works as a forum whereby women academics can create ‘feminist praxis on #AcademicTwitter’ (Talbot and Pownall 2022). They do so by sharing their ‘authentic tales’ (Williams and Greenhalgh 2022), and discussing experiences of imposter syndrome (Taylor and Breeze 2020), precarity and ‘pandemic burnout’ (Gewin 2021; also see Kinikoglu and Can, 2021). They also build empowering support communities (Gomez-Vasquez and Romero-Hall 2020). Contrary to these studies, our findings indicate that women less frequently share gendered inequalities in academia when using #womeninacademia (%33.8). Tweets about care-related and other gendered inequalities in academia appear less than half of the tweets that emphasize women’s empowerment in academia (Table 1). Concepts such as precarity (63 tweets), sexism (51 tweets), racism (69 tweets), and assault (6 tweets) feature only in %16 of the analyzed #womeninacademia tweets. Interestingly, these tweets rarely include personal accounts. As the examples below show, when these issues are discussed on Twitter, being a woman is mainly mobilized as symbolic capital, i.e. a source of prestige or reputation in a social field (Bourdieu 1993: 7). Here, gender as a form of disposition (See Miller 2014) is highlighted to promote achievements, announce new hires or job adverts, and signal to the wider world how ‘sensitive’ higher education institutions appear regarding gender equality. As one user aptly tweeted – and we concur – ‘It is not about free speech. It is about free advertising’.

Of the 401 tweets on gendered inequalities, only 46 (11.4%) contained women’s first-person testimonials about their experiences in academia. Within these accounts, women either described how they were addressed by male colleagues or students (25 tweets) or shared the challenges of balancing motherhood with academic work (21 tweets). Two cases about how women academics are named particularly stand out. In one tweet, a woman academic arrives for a meeting: security calls her ‘sweetie’, directs her to the ‘little girls’ room’ while waiting, and a technician ‘reassures’ her that ‘small girls’ were cute. A second tweet showcases a woman academic addressed by her first name, while male colleagues were treated as ‘Dr. Manhood’. While the first tweet emphasizes the reduction of a woman academics’ professional identity to physical appearances as a ‘cute’ ‘short’ girl, the latter pinpoints the invisibility of women’s academic titles in comparison with those of their male colleagues. Together, these examples reveal that women’s scholarly identities and achievements are often rendered invisible within the university. This invisibility extends beyond higher education, encompassing the informal labour women perform as caregivers and domestic workers at home (Raddon 2002). Among tweets that used the #womeninacademia hashtag, 21 contained accounts of women juggling between caregiving responsibilities with their professional roles in academia.

Take advantage of the 8hours I have to: write, do interviews, try to read, anticipate future research projects, and take ‘breaks’ to express breast milk. At the same time organize a move to [another country] for this summer. #WomenInAcademia

Most of my female colleagues will not consider, or simply will not want, to apply for a mobility scholarship because of the social pressure on mothers and lack of support.
#WomenInAcademia

[...] being rather lucky to have places in public day care although I do not have an 'official job'. But having to pick them up at 4:30 PM because I am certainly doing nothing.
#WomenInAcademia

[...] We can't all publish much when our time is chopped up by children needing attention + everything else.

As these examples show, women highlighted their unaccounted labour in childcare, which is considered a 'break' or 'leave' rather than an 'official job'. This break interrupts their academic career and burdens them with overwork that includes not only conducting research and publishing but also pumping breast milk and commuting their children to and from day-care. Some of the tweets (11 tweets) under this theme of care-related inequalities in academia highlighted the need for, and lack of, public and informal child-care support for mothers in academia. Lacking the necessary social capital for care support, women academics' time is 'chopped up' by their children, endangering their participation in, and equitable access to the social space of academia. Tweets using the #womeninacademia hashtag also indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic (28 tweets) forced women to juggle home schooling, childcare and domestic work, while trying to deliver synchronous online lectures and increasing administrative work (Kinikoglu and Can, 2021). Here, we captured only five tweets that specifically referred to the heavy burden of unpaid domestic work, clearly indicating the pervasive invisibility and normalization of assigning routine domestic work to women (Raddon 2002). The silence around such pressing issues reveals the care burden women academics carry alongside their academic career in the neoliberal higher education system fed by a merit-based and publish-or-perish academic paradigm. This further perpetuates the aforementioned confidence culture in academia, where inequalities and systemic structural problems are later reframed as challenges women academics must overcome by 'believing in themselves' and telling themselves that 'they are enough', instead of exposing the gendered injustice in higher education.

According to our findings, the remaining majority of tweets under this theme addressed gendered inequalities in access, participation, and representation within academia (272 tweets). Contrary to the aforementioned finding that academics use Twitter to share personal matters, we observed that users posted statistics, articles, and scholarly observations on the gender pay-gap, the under-representation of women at universities and conferences, and gendered discrepancies in research and publication arising from the additional work women must shoulder at universities and at their homes. As below examples illustrate, most of these tweets employed a language designed to raise awareness of such issues by restating factual information, supported by website links to reports, blog posts, research, or newspaper articles.

Did you know that women publish less when compared to men, not because of less productivity, but rather to a shorter career life: they leave science earlier due to family responsibilities and work environment [website link].

#WomenInScience #WomenInSTEM #womeninacademia

Although the gap is narrowing, prestigious prizes are still more likely to go to men, finds an analysis of gender bias in the world's top science awards. Read more at:[website link] @ ...
#WomenInAcademia #Research

Great blog post by my @ ... colleague @ ... on what it's like to be a mother and a PhD student in the midst of a pandemic! Thank you for sharing your experience!

#AcademicChatter #WomenInScience #WomenInAcademia

[website link]

Considering that such factual restatements constitute the majority of the examined tweets, the #womeninacademia hashtag works as a tool for aggregating empirical evidence on gendered inequalities across English-speaking Twitter. Similar to the aforementioned encouraging yet distant accounts of women's empowerment, tweets about gendered disparities in academia often employ depersonalized language grounded in evidence. These matter-of-fact depictions of women's empowerment and gendered inequalities may serve as testaments to the support and solidarity networks women build to amplify both their achievements and problems. At the same time, this formal tone may be a strategic manoeuvre to avoid emotional language, as Ahmed (2021) and Orgad and Gill (2022) note, thereby sidestepping perceptions of victimhood, the exposure of vulnerability, and the risk of jeopardising future career opportunities through complaints. Notably, our data revealed that senior women academics, already established in their careers, are more likely to openly discuss past gendered experiences. Regardless of the reasons women academics have for avoiding personal disclosures on Twitter, these contributions are products of complex emotional labour processes (Sathish 2023), as they carefully negotiate professional and personal identities to raise their voices and visibility within higher education.

Conclusion

This paper examines how women's gendered experiences are shaped by an 'audit culture' and framed through 'women's empowerment' narratives. Based on a content analysis of 4,500 tweets (1,175 after excluding retweets and spam) using the #womeninacademia hashtag, it traces contexts, outcomes, and representations of gendered higher education across 2021–2022 – a period marked by post-pandemic transformations, hiring freezes, and intensified workloads that deepened gender inequalities (Kinikoglu and Can 2021; Vohlídalová 2020). Prior research, including our own (Kinikoglu and Can 2021; Bayfield et al. 2020; Loveday 2018; Talbot and Pownall 2022), shows how audit-driven environments demand sacrifices from academics while privileging financial metrics and student satisfaction over scholarly rigour. These studies also underline the risks of contesting neoliberal norms, which often generate gendered and racialized consequences amid escalating precarity and unpaid labour. Guided by our first research question, 'Under what circumstances, when, and how is this hashtag utilized on Twitter?' our analysis reveals that #womeninacademia is invoked primarily to showcase competitiveness and academic 'successes', sidelining narratives of gendered inequalities. When such inequalities are addressed, they are predominantly presented through empirical evidence rather than personal stories. This finding echoes feminist critiques of the Habermasian idea of the

public sphere. Although tweets using #womeninacademia adopt a communication style to showcase women academics' achievements or gendered inequalities, they still circulate within neoliberal logics that inadvertently and potentially sideline alternative narratives.

This brings us to our second research question: 'What kind of opportunities and setbacks does this hashtag on Twitter pose for women's empowerment and solidarity in academia?' Our findings echo Talbot and Pownall's (2022, 113) view that Twitter can provide a space for women academics to share experiences, express solidarity and collaborate. Yet, it also reinforces the competitiveness and overwork in neoliberal academia through an empowerment narrative. 'Being a woman' carries symbolic capital, paradoxically, intensifying competition within a 'confidence culture' (Orgad and Gill 2022).

Our findings suggest that Twitter provides a platform for critique, but only within the constraints of neoliberal academia. As Orgad and Gill (2022, 145) note, today's confidence culture embraces feminism and promotes 'feminist issues' in art, music, celebrity discourse and mainstream media. Likewise, although Twitter can, as Talbot and Pownall (2022, 113) argue, fulfil 'feminist functions', how academics actually use the platform tells a different story. More often than not, personal testimonies of gendered inequality, sexism, mansplaining, the disproportionate domestic and care burdens placed on women academics are underrepresented on Twitter. When such stories surface, they usually come from senior academics rather than early career researchers, and they often recount events that happened years earlier. Thus, our data show that this is a highly individualized feminism that conveniently sidesteps the long-standing systemic issues in higher education.

Here, we should emphasize that our intention is not to hold women academics individually responsible for self-promotion, nor to imply that they should expose themselves to risk or engage in 'more authentic' disclosures. Rather, our analysis foregrounds the structural limits within which women in academia articulate their experiences online. Drawing on critiques of the Habermasian public sphere (Dahlberg 2014; Fraser 1997; Young 2000), we demonstrate that 'legitimate' communication in a seemingly open communicative space such as Twitter is often bounded by institutional hierarchies, which silence or marginalize non-conforming voices. Twitter's openness allows users to voice gender inequality in academia, express solidarity with other women academics, and expose meritocratic myths of neoliberal higher education. Yet, this same openness can backfire, as employers and occasionally internet trolls can trace academics' online accounts. Thus, the current trend of 'women's empowerment' rhetoric reflects how neoliberal academia (among many other neoliberalized work fields) accommodates women without challenging the foundations of neoliberal academia. In this sense, our argument is not one of 'blaming the victim' but of showing how the neoliberal and patriarchal university narrows the range of permissible discussion, constraining women's ability to resist without personal or professional cost. Thus, we emphasize the need to analyze not only the performances of confidence or disclosure themselves, but also the structural inequalities that shape why, how, and to what extent women can engage in such performances at all.

Finally, we acknowledge that focusing only on English-language tweets confines our analysis to Anglo-American narratives, centring largely on cis-gendered white feminism rather than broader feminist solidarity (Phipps and McDonnell 2022). Future research should examine how self-promotion and university branding reproduce hierarchies while imposing emotional labour, extended workloads, and pressures to publicize

achievements. Our findings suggest women's visibility on Twitter depends on depersonalized accounts of inequality, framed within empowerment rhetoric that aligns with higher education's preferred communication models. In this sense, gender remains both a barrier to advancement and a form of symbolic capital in the 'confidence culture' (Orgad and Gill 2022) of neoliberal academia. As academics, we must recognize our complicity in sustaining these institutional injustices by participating in – and benefitting from – such regimes of symbolic and social capital.

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