
Analysing The Role Of Hashtags In Creating An Imagined Feminist Community

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Audiences & Identities

Submitted To:

Prof. Dr. Uwe Hasebrink & Ann-Mabel Sanyu

Submitted By: Sanika Diwanji

Matriculation Number: 7021058

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Introduction

The recent #MeToo movement has brought about much focus and discussion on the issue of sexual harassment and rape culture across the world (The Silence Breakers, 2017). A hashtag that emerged in the United States of America, travelled across the world and was used by social media users million times over. What propelled this collective expression? One reason that stands out is that women across the world identified with the hashtag and its deeper comment upon the rampant sexual harassment in everyday life situations. #MeToo became not only a movement, but a support system where victims of sexual harassment told their stories and in turn, associated with the larger call for action against sexual harassment.

The role of new media has been pivotal for feminism. So much so that new terminologies like cyber-feminism (Gajjala & Oh, 2012), DIY Feminism, networked feminism (Zobl & Druecke, 2012) and even claims of a new, fourth wave of feminism (Knappe & Lang, 2014) have cropped up in the last few years. No matter how one packages the words to define this new form of feminist activism, the idea it points to is that of a virtual space where feminism can be collectively articulated, propounded and deliberated upon under a common umbrella of thought.

In light of this, this paper sets out to examine whether and how hashtags contribute to a digital feminist identity and in turn also creates a sense of community for feminism. The first part of the paper delves into the conceptual framework of hashtags, digital feminism, and the use of hashtags in digital feminist activism. In so doing, I will touch upon literature related to identity, intersectionality and community building through networked feminism. The second part of the paper is my own independent deliberation upon whether hashtag feminism via social media can be constructed as an 'Imagined community' for today's digital feminists. This section draws a parallel between Anderson's concepts of the imagined community and the idea of hashtag feminism. In conclusion, I will summarise the overall discussion and outline further scope of research related to the field.

Research Question

Is hashtag feminism creating space for an imagined feminist community?

Literature Review

Understanding the 'Hashtag'

Over the past decade, social media has become deeply embedded into people's everyday lives. These media platforms have not only affected the formal and informal interactions of people, but they also imply a change in the institutional structures and professional routines of people (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). With over a million active users on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, the dynamics of communication and traditional mass media have been the subject of much scrutiny by researchers. Twitter is especially worthy of mention here since it has increasingly becoming a discursive space for public discussion and articulations of social movement (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013; Weller, 2013)

While there are various reasons for Twitter's popularity amongst academia, an important factor is its creation of 'Hashtags'- brief keywords or abbreviations, prefixed by the symbol '#', included in order to make tweets easily searchable amongst all Twitter message traffic (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013).

A hashtag is like a metadata tag that enables people to find content marked with that particular tag. Hashtags were popularized during the San Diego forest fires in 2007, when web developer Nate Ritter used his hashtag "#sandiegofire" on Twitter so that people could easily search for updates related to the disaster (Zak, 2013). Ever since, hashtags have emerged as crucial, not only to search information on Twitter (and now Facebook, Instagram and other social media as well) but also as a powerful mechanism to rally support and promote activism around diverse topics (Guha, 2014).

In recent years, hashtags have gone beyond their simple function of tagging and earmarking to a complex utility of political, cultural and identity oriented use. Right from #Sandiegofire, #Egypt, #OccupyWallStreet, #JeSuisCharlie to #Yesallwomen and #MeToo, hashtags have been put to use by millions of social media users for a variety of causes and events.

One of the most interesting functions of hashtag is its role in assembling ad hoc publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2015) with a shared interest in specific events, issues and topics. The use of hashtags in a variety of situations like natural disasters, politics, pop culture, activism, advertising, promotions and much more can be pre-calculated and planned or as many viral hashtags show us, can be spontaneous and incidental. Bruns & Burgess (2015) show in their

study that social media users can take different approaches in engaging with hashtags. Of these, two approaches stand out- a communal “audiencing” (Fiske, 1992) of media events, where users prefer to participate in posting content with specific hashtags but don’t share additional material; and the other is that of dedicated “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2005) of acute events where users prefer to share topical information in the form of urls and retweets but less of their own content. Studies like these pose new and important questions for researchers about the role of hashtags in creating publics and counterpublics- where feminist publics have always viewed themselves as the latter (Zobl & Druecke, 2012).

Digital feminism: The medium is the message

Tanja Carstensen (2014) states that “from its beginning, gender researchers have investigated the question of whether or not the internet could strengthen worldwide solidarity among women, create critical counter-publics, improve participation, and increase the opportunities for feminist politics.”

There has been much research already done on the role and impact of Internet and social media on feminism, women empowerment and women’s activism (James P. Curran, 2005; Mclean & Maalsen, 2013; Rivers, 2017). Social networking sites in particular have been a critical platform for researchers since they facilitate exchanges of information, discussions and comments for women like no other platform before them has been able to. They provide space for users to empower each other, to establish events and protests and even mobilize others far and wide for political action. “The design of social media enables a dense interdependence of feminist discussions” (Carstensen, 2014).

Social media has become a discursive space for broad and often times, controversial issues. Carstensen elaborates on this by explaining that feminists “*comment on and criticize current political issues that relate to gender, family, or equality politics; they publish thoughts about their lives as queers; as parents; mobilize for “slutwalks” challenging sexual objectifications and restrictions; demonstrate against the criminal convictions of the Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot; and uncover situations of commonplace sexism and male privilege...*” (Carstensen, 2014 p. 489)

The digital public sphere has created such a feminist counterpublic that are fighting for their rights and voices to be heard. The internet is by no means a safe space for women, as online hate speech, gender trolling and harassment persists on social media just like in the offline world. Cyberspace cannot escape the social construction of gender because it was constructed by gendered individuals, and because gendered individuals access it, in ways that reinforce the subjugation of women” (Luckman, 1999).

Along with gender equality in the online and offline sphere, a number of feminist discussions in social media also deal with users’ own privileges while they tackle questions of inclusion, exclusion, self-understanding, positioning, and so on. The users participating in hashtag feminist campaigns employ the public nature of social media platforms like Twitter to their advantage. As such, pressing issues can be made public and more people can be involved in the discussion. Feminists who use social media become more visible and this in turn also helps mobilize a broader audience for their aims (Carstensen, 2014).

In many cases, like the #YesAllWomen, #BringBackOurGirls, #Aufschrei or even the recent #MeToo campaign, women collectively published their experiences of and with sexism, which have in turn provoked expansive public and political debates far beyond Twitter. The volume and frequency of gender debates in social media have increased with more and more women speaking up against injustice. And as such the range of forums that the web offers for people- especially the counterpublics to meet and connect is burgeoning.

Feminist Identities Online: A tale of construction, co-creation and multiplicity

The conservative philosopher Roger Scruton states that: “The condition of man [sic] requires that the individual, while he exists and acts as an autonomous being, does so only because he can first identify himself as something greater - as a member: society, group, class, state or nation, of some arrangement to which he may not attach a name, but which he recognizes instinctively as home” (Scruton, 1986, p. 156).

Social media is a unique platform to observe identity and self-presentation. Most social media sites today require users to self-consciously create virtual identities of themselves. As such, what information users choose to share and show others on social media, or the conversations and posts they engage in are markers of a person’s identity in today’s seamless online-offline

assemblages. It is no wonder then, that most research about online identities has focused on self-presentation (See Wynn & Katz 1997; Papacharissi 2002; boyd 2010; Marwick 2013).

Identity can refer to a personal identity as an individual or our social identity as a member of a group (Marwick, 2013), and people tend to present themselves differently based on context (where they are) and audience (who they are with) (Goffman, 1959).

In the age of ubiquitous social media for a range of social communication practices, identity can be seen more so in the way cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall (1987) or Angela McRobbie (1994) define it. Identity is pluralist, socially constructed, flexible and changeable over time (Marwick, 2013). When I use social media, I can be interested in multiple issues like race, gender, profession, my political views and more- that I identify with.

Pluralist identities in the online world are also affected by the *affordances*, or the differing interfaces of social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr (Herrera, 2017). Scholars have theorised the ways in which these social networking sites in themselves become an influence on the ways user identities and social interactions occur on them (See Boyd, 2014; Crossley, 2015; Shwartz & Halegoua, 2015; Wargo, 2015). Or in other words, it is as Marshall McLuhan said, ‘the medium is the message’.

Feminism- online or offline, has never been without the nuances of intersectionality. In the recent years, feminist scholars have described digital feminism as a ‘new moment or a turning point in feminism in a number of ways’ (Baer, 2016). Digital platforms have brought together diverse voices under the common umbrella of feminism, which in turn, has enabled new kinds of intersectional conversations.

“The Internet provides a space where feminists can learn from each other about why things some feminists see as harmless can be hurtful and offensive to others. Most feminists know about intersectionality, but far from all of us know every way in which intersectional oppression works” (Fredrika Thelandersson 2014, p. 529)

Recent feminist hashtags like #Solidarityisforwhitewomen, #Girlslikeus, #NotyourAsiansidekick and more are examples of how the increased use of digital media has altered, influenced and shaped feminism in the twenty-first century where multiple identities even within feminism are slowly being asserted and accepted (Clark 2016; Druecke & Zobl 2015; Scharf et al 2016). In summary, digital feminism can be said to be an interplay of multiple identities that can be flexible, intersectional, medium-specific and put to use for various roles- right from activism to passive self-identification.

In the next section of this paper, I would like to build upon this idea of hashtag feminism as an identity construction and lead an argument that this sense of identity through hashtags enables the formation of an imagined community of feminists.

Hashtag Feminism- An ‘Imagined Community’?

The notion of identity goes hand in hand with that of community and society. “People seem to need to imagine that they—or others—belong to a community: a set of people who share sociability, support, and a sense of identity” (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011, p. 1295).

The aim in this section of the paper is to argue that hashtag feminism is increasingly becoming the glue that binds together a common feminist identity and is giving digital feminists a sense of community that extends beyond a classical Andersonian view of ‘nation’. To do so, the author would like to draw upon examples from various feminist hashtag campaigns and movements that went viral on the internet and as such were also picked up by the traditional media, adding to their political and discursive power.

To help stimulate and guide our argument, we turn to Benedict Anderson’s concepts of identity and nation. He defined ‘the nation’ as an “imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson, 1985). He says the nation is ‘imagined’ because members will never know most of their fellow members, and yet there will be an image of their communion in each of their minds. Secondly, according to Anderson, even the largest of the nations has finite, if elastic boundaries and thus it is constructed as ‘limited’. And lastly, it is a community because the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship regardless of the dissent and inequalities within its borders. Taking this as a starting point I would firstly like to **define and argue that hashtag feminism is ‘a political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign and is advocating women’s rights on the grounds of equality of the sexes.’** Many scholars have contested the way in which feminism is a political act or a standpoint (Millet, 1970; Beasley, 2011; Ferguson, 2017) and based on the literature overview in the first part of the paper, I draw my definition of hashtag feminism as this political community that is independent in its thought and yet limited in its reach and access.

Users could never know everyone on the different social media sites like Twitter for example. But they are certainly aware of other users' presence through their friends and follower networks. Hashtags enable an assembly of ad hoc publics who gather through the common messages that are encoded in the hashtag. So when users write a message with a particular hashtag, they are writing for their intended audience- who may or may not follow them on social media. As a result people who identify as feminists probably will never know each of the other members face to face; however, they know of other members who have similar interests and identity as feminists.

When these users use certain feminist hashtags to express themselves or show solidarity, they are well aware of other users using the same hashtags too, essentially creating a sense of an imagined community. The #MeToo movement or #WhyIStayed movement are solid examples of such imagined solidarity and network creation.

The Internet also creates limited borders of the online sphere. Only those who can access, understand and use the internet and its social media platforms can be active members of this imagined feminist community. Although there is a high contention to this point since online feminist protests or movements also translate into offline impact but that is a broader argument which needs to be addressed through a different lens than that of this paper.

Anderson posits that there are three important factors that lead to the sense of an imagined community for members of a nation- common language(s), temporality and high centres. In the following part of the paper, I will argue that these concepts hold true for digital feminism as well.

1. Common Language

According to Anderson, a key element of community formation is the development of a common language that leads to a common discourse (Anderson, 1985). He stated that media assists in this and helps create a common public discourse. Digital media has created such a space for people to use and understand certain medium-specific linguistic codes that enable a shared meaning making process.

As previously discussed, hashtags have played a big role in the creation of a common language for feminist internet users. When the hashtag #MeToo began trending on October 15th 2017, it carried with it the emotion of millions of women who had experienced sexual harassment but may not have openly disclosed or confronted it. #YesAllWomen was one of the first feminist hashtags that went viral in early 2014 (Weiss, 2014) and ever since many

more hashtags have come up to give a united voice to women beyond the boundaries of nation-states.

Recognising the fast growing significance of hashtag feminism, *Feminist Media Studies* even featured three special sections of essays around the very same issue (*Feminist Media Studies*, 2014) where authors like Rosemary Clark (2014), Michaela D.E. Meyer (2014) and Tanya Horeck (2014) highlight hashtag feminists' ability to stand up against and intervene on despotic discourses produced by different media. Hashtag feminism's discursive power to advance ideas, coalitions and express emotions has been studied vigorously over the last few years (Clark, 2014; Thrift, 2014; Williams, 2015; Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Clark, 2016). Hashtag campaigns such as #YesAllWomen, #SafetyTipsForLadies, and #StopStreetHarassment, #MeToo, #WhyIStayed have created common key words to shed light on women's everyday encounters with rape culture and the victim-blaming discourse that sustains it.

Another important aspect of trending feminist hashtags is that they travel beyond the scope of digital media and into mass media (Bennett, 2014; Khomami, 2017; Freidman, 2014; Clark, 2016). Journalists and news organisations cover issues that get a lot of traction on social media. Many feminist hashtags have gone viral on social media and have become a catalyst for women to openly discuss sensitive issues like sexual harassment, rape culture, domestic violence and more- which in turn let the media to pick up the conversations and highlight them in the news. All these factors lead to a common language related to feminist issues get wider attention and use, which is essential for the growth of a sustained community and movement.

2. Temporality

Another aspect that Anderson associated with the creation of imagined communities is that of a "homogeneous" time, in which a community is "moving through history together by sharing a consciousness of a shared temporal dimension in which they co-exist" (Anderson, 1989). Does hashtag feminism lead to such a shared consciousness of time amongst the users?

According to data about hashtag usage patterns and networks, it seems they do. For example, the #MeToo spread to more than 85 countries within 24 hours (Lekach, 2017). Women from multiple countries poured their stories using the hashtag only because they felt a sense of

solidarity to the issue of sexual violence. Similarly, another hashtag #Bringbackourgirls was used in April 2014 to compel the Nigerian government and International organisations to take action and bring back the 219 school girls kidnapped by the terrorist organisation Boko Haram (Olson, 2016). Through this hashtag, people pressured the government into taking real time action and understood the shared temporal dimension in which they were trying to help save the kidnapped girls.

A similar sense of acknowledgement to a collective present time is seen in the way hashtags are used by people on different social media- with many users live tweeting or sharing events, protests and more. However, when people from different parts of the world contribute to the same hashtags, the sense of time is constructed differently in the digital sphere.

3. High Centres

Finally, Anderson suggested that the decline of the idea that “society is naturally organized around and under high centers” aided in the formation of a sense of community (Anderson, 1989). Are there high centers in hashtag feminist activities? Or is it also a horizontal, decentralised structure of publics?

On first look, it can be said that digital feminism represents a horizontal structure where anyone is free to join and start conversations around issues, follow each other via groups or personal profiles, and is free to block those that they do not wish to communicate with. So from a purely techno-centric perspective, all users of social media have similar privileges and access to features as each other. Many feminist hashtags which later went viral, first came from common people who were not part of any popular groups, activist organisations or political parties.

However, if we closely inspect the networks that govern the spread of the viral messages on digital platforms, we can begin to identify a pattern- one Twitter for example, less than 1% of all Twitter users (0.9%) follow more than 1,000 tweeps (twitter users) (Cheng & Evans, 2009). When we see this in light of Anderson’s concept of high centers, we find that high centers on social media are popular individuals or organization, celebrities or media companies who have a large network of followers.

The following visualization maps the #MeToo user network from October 16th over a period of 31 hours. The graph of 24,722 #MeToo tweets is a network visualization where each big circular dot are the tens of thousands of people who connected to the hashtag through the

highlighted user profiles. Looking closely, we can see that a few names including actress Alyssa Milano (Alyssa_Milano), journalist and public figure, Alexis Benveniste (apbenven) are the central networks. From these users, the hashtag travels to further smaller networks of local influencers and so on. Thus the hashtag was used mostly by retweeting, following or mentioning these user profiles- which created a large network of people.

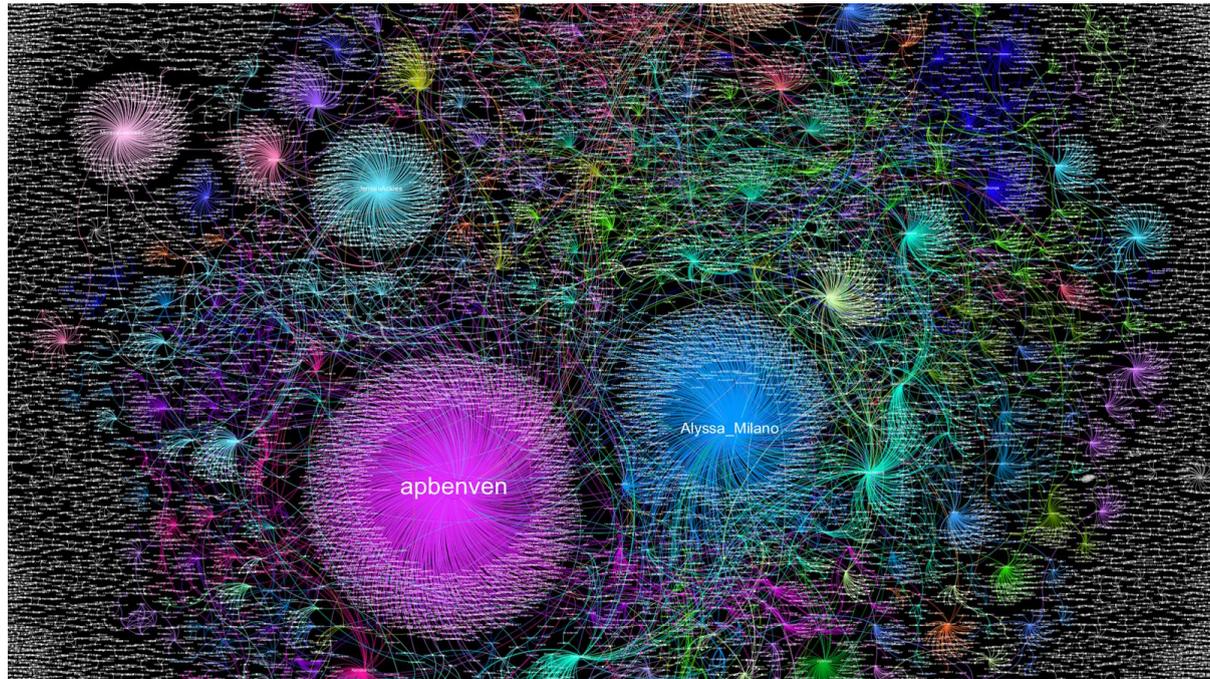


Figure 1 Network visualisation of 24,722 #MeToo tweets from 16th to 18th October 2017 (Taken from Gallagher, 2017)

Even though this is just a visualization of one hashtag, a similar pattern can be observed with most viral hashtags (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). What this shows is that digital communities have multiple high centers that coalesce around individual users and personal networks that grow on to become larger networks.

Summing up, hashtags that bring up women's issues form a bond amongst the victims of gendered discrimination, violence, sexism and more. These issues are personal to women and that itself makes the 'personal as political'. A sense of solidarity and feeling of being heard by others who can empathise creates a community that does not need national boundaries on many occasions. And even though some of these hashtags are localised by translating them into different languages, it actually creates a wider sense of an imagined feminist community in the same spatio-temporal digital sphere.

Conclusion

This paper looked at digital feminism and tried to analyse whether the use of hashtags in online feministic activities can lead to the formation of an imagined community. After a brief overview of Benedict Anderson's concepts of imagined communities from a digital feminist sphere, we can summarise to say that indeed, hashtags play an important role in the creation and assemblage of an imagined feminist community.

This imagined feminist community on social media is dual faceted- it is collective as well as personal. I call it collective because it has common norms of feminist ideas, need for awareness and expression of women's issues and a call for gender equality. It is also based on a fundamental assumption that only the people who have access to internet are part of this collective identity, although in some cases, a hashtag may become very popular and also travel beyond the borders of the internet and onto the mass media to create offline impact. The other factors that make this a collective community is the common language and a collective discourse that the hashtag triggers.

On the other hand, the imagined community is personal because each user of the feminist hashtag imagines himself or herself to be contributing to the cause. Each user has a personal network of users to whom they are talking with and expressing their opinions to. Feminist hashtags lead to a personalisation of politics where users share their own stories through a common hashtag, leading to a broader public discourse.

This imagined community thus has a common language and members are also aware of the analogous time in which they are using the hashtag. As such each member of the ad hoc public sphere is aware of the temporal dimension in which they co-exist.

Lastly, the collective feminist community forms around high centers through celebrities, popular individuals, public figures and more. However, even less popular individuals can play the role of local high centers and create virality through hashtags. This is the part where Anderson's key reason of the formation of imagined communities in his time differs from today's digital communities. For him, the breakdown of high centers was linked to community formation whereas today, high centers play an important role in forming digital communities. However, these digital high centers are instrumental rather than detrimental to

the dissemination of information and in generating a sense of common identity and solidarity amongst other members of the community.

Limitations and Further Scope

Even though this paper argues for an imagined feminist community created through common hashtags, it is a myopic view and should be noted as such. The same idea can be posited upon any other hashtag community and may not be exclusive to feminism. That social media has brought upon a big change in the way feminism is played out today is a noteworthy fact, but it does not mean that it hasn't affected other political activism arenas. For example, a similar study can be done to understand the growing use of hashtags that speak to and for African-American community like #BlackLivesMatter, #Fergusson or #BlackTwitter.

This paper was a small attempt to understand the role of hashtags in the formation and strengthening of an identity. But since identities are known to be layered and complex, a feminist hashtag can simultaneously also be linked with one or more other identities- like it is seen in the case of black feminist hashtags, LGBTQ hashtags or even women in STEM sciences.

There is a wide scope to research the role of hashtags, social media and identity construction, as it is a new and evolving field of study. The role of audience in giving meaning and political power to different hashtags is also a large research area that has still not been tapped into by researchers.

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