Digital Challenges to Rape Culture and Sexual Violence: Hashtag Feminism

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Feminists, by which I mean individuals who seek equity among all genders, frequently evolve and diversify the tools they use in order to combat sexual violence and rape culture. This is necessary in order to continue paving the road for equality in the 21st century, where heteronormative gender roles for men and women (and for all genders more broadly) are no less harmful and toxic for being, perhaps, less explicitly stated and enforced.

The past decade has accelerated the growth of the online self and of the online community. Feminists are taking advantage of the opportunity for visibility and engagement with those who would normally not involve themselves in conversations around rape culture through hashtag feminism. Hashtag feminism, defined as "using hashtags (the # symbol followed by a thematic word or phrase) to produce communities of conversation among disparate Twitter users" (Mendes et al., 2018: 237), is a relatively new form of online activism. Its rise to prominence parallels Twitter's own rise in popularity and widespread use, perhaps signaling that feminists *needed* an online space where they could explore and pursue feminism in new ways. Researchers who have studied this phenomenon either extoll the possibilities of hashtag feminism with high praise or refer to it derisively as "'slacktivism'" (Linder et al., 2016), but the reality is much more complex than that. Some of the possibilities—both positive and negative— of hashtag feminism are easy to grasp and corroborated by the literature, while others require more critical analysis and thought. A key finding of this literature review is that there is still relatively little in-depth analysis of hashtag feminists' activities. While there is a wealth of knowledge, much of it is still surface-level. For example, most studies of hashtag feminism have not had the capability to track participants' demographic information and rely mostly, if not

solely, on publicly available data (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2016; Kaufman et al., 2019; McCauley et al., 2018; Maas et al., 2018; PettyJohn et al., 2018; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018).

Drawing on these and other studies and articles produced in the last decade, I argue that hashtag feminism provides a new avenue to speak out and speak up against sexual violence that is especially valuable to marginalized individuals who may not have had their voices heard in the past. At the same time, however, there can be unanticipated consequences for those who participate in hashtag feminism that range from relatively harmless to seriously damaging to feminists and survivors of sexual violence.

Two early and powerful exemplars of hashtag feminism are #SafetyTipsForLadies and #BeenRapedNeverReported, which were created in March 2013 and October 2014, respectively. #SafetyTipsForLadies is one of the first major pieces of hashtag feminism and uses ironic tweets offering safety tips for women living in a rape culture; for example "@femarmchairregime joked that women should don chain mail or three sweat suits, a ski mask, and sleeping bag to avoid rape" (Rentschler, 2015: 353). #BeenRapedNeverReported has been used more than 8 million times today (Keller et al, 2016). The hashtag was a response to supporters of Jian Ghomeshi (CBC radio host accused of sexual violence) who posited that if the women accusing Ghomeshi were really raped, they would have come forward sooner. This movement energized feminists and allowed and motivated them to create a space that served both as a place to speak and as a place to listen. Keller et al. (2016: 31) explore both aspects in their study, most notably with Susan, who expressed surprise at the number of tweets she saw in the feed and was moved by them to reflect and re-imagine herself, saying: "'I've been a feminist for three weeks!!'" These two early hashtag feminisms, along with #YesAllWomen and #NotOkay (discussed in further

detail below), attracted large amounts of participation and set the stage for and contextualized the #MeToo Movement.

#MeToo was first created by activist-of-color Tarana Burke ten years before its mainstream explosion. However, the hashtag really took hold in October 2017 due to its use by actor Alyssa Milano in response to accusations of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein (Kaufman et al., 2019). The hashtag was used more than 2 million times in the subsequent 24 hours (Mendes et al., 2018). #MeToo was everywhere and allowed individual feminists and activists all over the world to connect through shared experience. A critical example is the college campus activism sparked by #MeToo. Traditional feminist movements and marches can be difficult to access for college feminists. The #MeToo Movement provided a space for college feminists to ally themselves with other college feminists to collectively challenge rape culture and sexual violence on college campuses. Some campuses even had their own "'#MeToo Moment'", such as McGill University in 2018, when three professors were suspended for having sexual relations with their students (Rentschler, 2018). Kaufman et al. (2019) also found that #MeToo's ubiquitous presence sustained information-seeking for months afterwards, with Google searches for *metoo, sexual assault* and *sexual harassment* remaining higher than baseline 6 months after the Matt Lauer accusation (the last major event in the #MeToo movement) (Kaufman et al., 2019). These are clear, tangible outcomes of the #MeToo Movement and evidence that online activism can impact people's daily lives and inform their interests and opinions.

It is clear that a critical aspect of hashtag feminism is the ability to make yourself heard—and potentially heard by thousands—with a single tweet (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). This can be especially useful for feminists who have traditionally been marginalized. As Linder et al.

(2016: 234) articulate, "because mainstream media outlets and feminist organizations have ignored Black women's experiences with sexual violence, Black feminists have used online spaces to raise awareness about violence against Black women." The hashtag #YesAllWomen, for example, was created by a woman of color in response to #notallmen, which was created by men after the shooting in Isla Vista, California to convey the idea that not all men are murderous self-proclaimed incels (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2016). The meaning of #YesAllWomen is that while not all men may be like the Isla Vista shooter, all women exist in a rape culture in which sexual violence is normalized and in which they are taught that they are responsible if they become victims of sexual assault. Since its creation in May 2014, the hashtag has been tweeted and retweeted more than 2 million times, a significant amplification that shows the reach and power movements like this can give to traditionally marginalized voices (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2016).

Student activists have also historically been marginalized, especially by school administrations. Linder et al.'s (2016: 236) study of 23 student activists found that hashtag activism and social media more broadly were especially useful for "consciousness-raising and calls to action, an opportunity to connect with other activists, and as a counter-space to reduce power dynamics present in other spaces." The power dynamics mentioned include those between students and administrators who, as the research team shrewdly points out, praise activists who are trying to make a difference outside of the college campus but vilify college campus sexual assault activists. Student activists have created connective networks, such as the Know Your IX Facebook group, to share ideas and strategies to prevent sexual violence and to seek justice for those who experience it (Linder et al., 2016). This network of student activists affords ever-younger activists—now even high school students—the opportunity to connect and collectively

fight against rape and rape culture (Keller et al., 2016). The significance of this cannot be overstated—it is crucial to educate young boys and girls on these issues, as fathers who have embraced the #HowIWillChange movement (discussed further below) have expressed (PettyJohn et al., 2018).

The head-on confrontation of rape culture represented by hashtag feminism often leads to what some call "viral justice" (Thompson et al., 2016). Viral justice can be formal or informal, and frequently is a combination of the two. For example, in Steubenville, Ohio in 2013, two high school football players sexually assaulted an unconscious fellow classmate. They recorded the event and disseminated the recording which eventually ended up in the hands of Twitter activists and Twitter trolls alike. The activists "outed" the students who committed and shared this act, which in turn led to formal sanctioning through the school and legal systems as well as informal "calling out" (Powell 2015; Mendes et al., 2018) by the Twitter activist community. Another prominent form of viral justice is the #SurvivorSelfie (Thompson et al., 2016). #SurvivorSelfies are a form of self-portrait that documents the effects of intimate partner violence. Photography like Nan Goldin's (Goldin, 1984) showcased and popularized this type of in-your-face documentation early on, but the concept of the Survivor Selfie has continued to reify itself in new ways throughout the decades. A powerful contemporary #SurvivorSelfie is Jada's #IAmJada pose, shared on Twitter by Ronan Farrow (Farrow, 2014; Powell 2015). When Jada's sexual assault by two high school classmates in the Houston, Texas area in 2014 was documented in pictures and disseminated, she was harassed by Twitter trolls using the hashtag #JadaPose. These individuals mimicked the pose of Jada's unconscious, 16-year-old body during the sexual assault. In response, Jada came forward and started #IAmJada to take back her story. It is especially important to note that Jada was a high school student at the time of this event—as well

as a woman of color—to contextualize the importance of Twitter in helping her reclaim her narrative in the face of ridicule and disbelief from her peers.

In addition to providing a clear link to informal justice processes such as publicly calling people out on their behavior, the documentation of sexual and physical violence in Survivor Selfies may help lead to formal justice, evidencing the increasingly-complex relationship between social and criminal sanctions. The need to speak out and right wrongs has additionally led activists to create robust forums to explore formal and informal justice for victims of sexual violence, such as Hollaback! (Keller et al., 2016), notokay.ca (Maas et al., 2018), and the Know Your IX Facebook group mentioned above. The diversity and range of these mechanisms of viral justice highlight the idea that more traditional forms of justice do not adequately meet the needs of victims of sexual assault. This statement is easily validated anecdotally, but the great surge of hashtag activism lends even more weight to the idea that true justice for victims of sexual violence may or may not be found in courtrooms. Again, this is something we can see reflected in low conviction rates for sexual assault offenses (Powell, 2015), but the data showing such high amounts of participation in these informal mechanisms of viral justice further proves this idea. As Powell convincingly argues, "Perhaps it is the widely documented and routine failure of traditional criminal justice to secure convictions in relation to rape that has driven some victim-survivors to document the crimes for themselves" (Powell, 2015: 576).

However, this is not to say that there are not real risks associated with undertaking hashtag feminism. It is a reality of Twitter that for every empowering tweet or hashtag there is one that is degrading, aggressive, or minimizing. Several of the positive hashtags discussed previously, such as #IAmJada and #YesAllWomen, are direct responses to viral violence and online rape culture. Stubbs-Richardson et al. (2018) found that victim-blaming tweets are more

likely to have more retweets (and thus more visibility) than victim-supporting tweets. Further, Twitter users who tweet victim-blaming messages also have significantly higher numbers of followers (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). This shows that there is an online community of toxic behavior (and especially toxic masculinity) that is at least equal in magnitude to hashtag feminism. Further, online toxic masculinity provides social "rewards" in the form of retweets, likes, followers, and consensus-building in ways very similar to hashtag feminism. The relationship between these diametrically-opposed communities can be seen in every-day Twitter wars and becomes especially salient when one tries to consider one without the other. Which came first *to Twitter*: online toxic masculinity or hashtag feminism? And could either exist as we now know it without the other?

The day after the (re)creation of #MeToo, Australian journalist Benjamin Law tweeted: "Guys, it's our turn. After yesterday's endless #MeToo stories of women being abused, assaulted and harassed, today we say #HowIWillChange." (Law, 2017). So began the well-intentioned #HowIWillChange hashtag, which quickly became dominated by tweets by men either A) indignantly protesting that not all men are the same ("I didn't do anything to y'all. Most, yes *most*, men respect women. #HowIWillChange"), or B) aggressively promoting sexual violence ("#HowIWillChange grab her pussy harder") (PettyJohn et al., 2018: 6). The latter example is notable because it weaves together the toxic masculinity pervading the hashtag with the politics of the day. Almost exactly a year earlier, activists started #NotOkay in response to news about then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's self-described "locker-room talk" in which he described "grabbing them [women] by the pussy" (Maas et al., 2018). This again demonstrates the tangled intersections and parallels between hashtag feminist and toxic masculinist communities.

Besides the problem of the equal salience of victim-blaming and victim-supporting content, Twitter (or any online platform, for that matter) is also not the pinnacle of inclusion for intersectional feminists. It is telling that Tarana Burke began #MeToo in 2007, but it wasn't picked up and made viral until a white actor used the hashtag 10 years later in reference to sexual assault allegations against a powerful white man. However, #MeToo is not the only piece of hashtag feminism that has been white-and-hetero-washed as the conversation went on. #YesAllWomen was also created by an activist of color, but has subsequently been criticized for mostly focusing on white women's experience with feminism and rape culture. In fact, the woman who created the hashtag removed herself from the conversation for an extended period of time because the hashtag became much narrower than she had originally intended and lost "its potential for feminist specificity" (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2016: 16). As a counter, Twitter activists of color started #YesAllWhiteWomen. Similarly, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, which emerged in 2013, highlights the fact that the experiences of feminists of color are still "othered," even in what are perceived to be more inclusive spaces (Linder et al., 2016). Members of the LGBTQ community also experience this disconnect and otherness in online feminist spaces. #MaybeHeDoesn'tHitYou, a hashtag created in 2016 to shed light on non-physical intimate partner violence, has been criticized for its implied heteronormativity. McCauley et al. (2018) provide several examples of this criticism, such as one tweet stating: "'#MaybeHeDoesntHitYou is great convo, also important to remember tht [sic] women, trans, nonbinary, ALL people abuse, & anyone can be a victim. <3'" It is also important to reiterate here, considering the definition of "feminist" advanced at the outset of this review, that men are systematically othered from these conversations by the toxic masculinity aimed at them by other men (PettyJohn et al., 2018).

Finally, as Mendes et al. (2018) make clear in referring to the "labour of digital feminist activism," participating in hashtag feminism involves *work* and can be extremely taxing for the feminists who choose to engage in it. Their study follows women who describe feeling panic attacks and an "emotional tax" because of their involvement with hashtag feminism. In many cases, just the sheer *amount* of content to sift through could trigger an emotional response for survivors of sexual violence. Returning to Susan, newly-minted feminist (see page 2), she expressed to Keller et al. (2016: 31): "I didn't expect…the overwhelming number of people saying that they had been raped as well." While she was able to channel her overwhelm into enthusiasm for feminism, in the same study we hear from Chantelle, who said, "…one resonated, right, and it was really ... it was really a tough couple of weeks. Even though it was positive, it was very, very difficult for me. There were some nights where I didn't sleep" (Keller et al., 2016: 30). Clearly, hashtag feminism feels different from feminist to feminist, and it's not any easier because it is done virtually (Mendes et al., 2018). The triggers and stressors may be different, but they are just as real and must be considered just as carefully when one is deciding whether to engage in online activism.

As mentioned earlier, a major finding of this review is that while there has been an explosion of studies of hashtag feminism in the past decade, most of them have relied on publicly available data—in most cases, on tweets and retweets captured through NCapture or another similar software (notable exceptions are the Keller et al. (2016) and Mendes et al. (2018) studies). This has led to innovative studies in quantitative content analysis, but we do not have anywhere near as much information on *who* the individuals engaging in hashtag feminism actually are (including key demographic information) or *how* their online activism affects their daily lives. Researchers who have especially positive outlooks regarding hashtag feminism

(Powell, 2015; Linder et al. 2016), tend to theorize that there is no great leap between online and physical activism in the sense that an activist lives her truth regardless of the space she is in. However, the next step in hashtag feminism research is clear: studies that collect more in-depth data must be created to complement the studies that have emerged in the past decade and to continue broadening our knowledge on this emerging form of feminism.

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