

The effectiveness of feminist hashtags such as #MeToo on empowering women, mobilising protests and enacting political and societal change

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the influence that digital feminist hashtags such as #MeToo have on individuals, and protest movements, both online and offline. It also looks at whether the hashtags have any influence on shifting long held societal beliefs, or policy change. This paper found that digital feminist hashtags have the ability to influence and affect individuals deeply. The hashtags allow for the creation of supportive networks and have the ability to make individuals, survivors, women and girls feel empowered and comforted as they tell their stories and connect with other like-minded people. Digital feminist hashtags are also extremely effective in mobilizing people incredibly quickly to protest, as evidenced by the recent #March4Justice carried out across Australia. The feminist hashtags also have the potential to mobilize vast networks of global populations online and allow the protest to continue perpetually, which may subsequently lead to policy change and even influence or change long held societal beliefs. However, this paper ultimately concludes that if a feminist hashtag is making sexual assault survivors, women and girls feel supported and comforted, they are valuable, regardless of if any societal change or action has occurred.

Introduction:

Feminist digital activism is growing in popularity. There is an increasing trend that is seeing women in particular embracing and engaging in hashtags on social media to fight resistance to patriarchy, sexism, oppression and misogyny (Mendes, et.al, 2018). It is becoming increasingly easier to engage in feminist activism through social media using hashtags and, in this way, social media is driving the latest wave of contemporary feminism, or “fourth wave” feminism (Matich et al, 2019). In just February and March of 2021 alone, we have seen the #March4Justice women’s rights march across Australia initiated and organised through social media; An uprising of young women calling for consent and sex education after Chanel Contos started an Instagram poll revealing thousands of allegations of sexual assault from former and current school girls; Rallies and vigils quickly organised and held across the UK after Sarah Everard was found raped and murdered by a policeman; Even Julia Gillard’s famous misogyny speech in Parliament in 2012 is enjoying a popular revival on Tik Tok that sees users lip sync to her speech while doing makeup, crafting or dancing. Feminist digital activism has been found to be extremely effective in mobilising people and engaging in a national or global movement by simply using a hashtag for their content (Matich et al, 2019) This paper will analyse the micro, meso and macro effects of feminist digital hashtag campaigns. It will look at how effective feminist hashtag campaigns are at mobilizing people both offline and online, and explore how individuals are impacted when participating in a feminist hashtag campaign. Finally, this paper will ask if ultimately feminist hashtag campaigns have any influence on shifting long held societal beliefs, or policy change, drawing on the movements driven by feminist digital activist hashtags such as #MeToo and #March4Justice as case studies through which to examine this.

Feminist digital activist hashtags and the individual

Feminist digital campaigns and hashtags can deeply impact individuals who engage in these campaigns. Matich et al (2019) describe the individual engagement and affect as “the micro level” of activism (pg .351). Sexual assault survivors have reported profound and lifechanging experiences from participating in a hashtag campaign (Keller, 2017). Some have been moved to report or talk about their abuse for the first time, while others find themselves supported and embraced by the online community the hashtag creates. This is evidenced by sexual assault survivor Isabella Murray’s experience who decided to join Twitter and share her story for the first time after Grace Tame became Australian of year (Blau, A. 2021). Describing her experience, Murray states:

"I have found my tribe.... Already, the support is wonderful. So many of my kind contacting me —I had no idea they were there waiting for me, or that there are so many of us out there." (Blau, A. 2021, para. 12)

Murray’s comments are also reflective of Mendes et al’s (2018) research which found that participants in digital feminist activist hashtags benefited from a considerable amount of support in the feminist hashtag networks. Seemingly small gestures such as a retweet, a short direct message or a click of the “heart” or “like” button meant a great deal to the women and girls who shared their stories and went a long way to them feeling supported (Mendes et al, 2018). Consequently, the effect of feminist hashtag campaigns is considerable on individuals and they “are doing meaningful and worthwhile work in building networks of solidarity” (Mendes et al, 2018, pg. 238).

Furthermore, the strong and supportive networks some feminist hashtags create could go some way to substantiating why some feminist hashtags such as #Metoo and #BelieveHer are still very popular and used daily, many years after they first started trending on social media (Li et al, 2020). The strong and supportive networks are formed from the persistent and pervasive contact that social media affords: That is the constant presence and contact and exchange of text or media (Hampton, 2016). Additionally, strong ties and relationships are formed when individuals disclose something personal or intimate about themselves, or what Hampton describes as the “bonding social capital” (Hampton, 2016, pg. 116) When individuals post something personal about themselves, others tend to feel closer to that person and in turn are more compelled to engage with their posts (Hampton, 2016). Due to the highly personal nature of most feminist hashtags, it is easy to see how strong networks are formed across the networks.

Although many individuals report feelings of solidarity and support, they face extensive complexities when it comes to the use of feminist hashtags such as #MeToo and #BeenRapedNeverReported in particular. (Mendes et al, 2018). On the one hand, survivors feel supported, heard and part of a tribe such as Murray described. At the same time, survivors report being extremely traumatised by the hashtags, or what Keller (2017) describes as “the double bind of hashtags: triggering and comforting” (pg. 2). #BeenRapedNeverReported was tweeted millions of times when it was trending in 2014 (Mendes et, al, 2018). Despite the immense number of tweets, women and sexual assault survivors reported agonising over whether to post their stories: they worried about what other people might think, or whether they would be ignored and reported countless sleepless nights (Mendes et, al, 2018). However, once the survivors and

women overcame these emotional and mental barriers, they ultimately found comfort in the supportive networks they found in these hashtags. In this way, if feminist hashtags are ultimately making survivors feel supported and comforted, they are valuable, regardless if any societal change or action has occurred (Keller, 2017).

It is this “double bind” of hashtags - the supportive and the traumatising that elicits an immense mental toll and emotional barriers that hold women back from participating in a feminist hashtag campaign. (Mendes, et.al, 2018). Furthermore, it is well documented that social media can often be a hostile environment and participants in feminist digital activist hashtags can be exposed and encounter further abuse or trolling in an often vulnerable moment. (Blau, 2021) Yet, Mendes et al’s (2018) research found that although women and girls may encounter trolling, threats and abuse, ultimately the benefits of participating in the feminist hashtag campaigns outweighed the disadvantages and the participants “largely persisted in their digital feminist activities” (pg. 243). Like many people experiencing trolling or abuse online, the women in Mendes et al (2018) research developed a range of strategies to help them cope with the abuse. Such strategies included blocking and muting the users, avoiding in engaging with abusive users and engaging in digital vigilante tactics (Mendes, et.al, 2018).

Feminist digital activism and the power of crowds

Following the micro level of digital feminist activism and the influence on individuals is the meso level of digital activism. The meso level aids a participatory atmosphere across diverse activists

and communities to converge in the same online space to address a shared concern Matich et al (2019). Digital feminist activism and the corresponding hashtags campaigns are extremely effective at mobilising people to protest in the digital space. The digital protest also has the added advantage of reaching global audiences. Posts, photos, videos, and content online can be shared and viewed millions of times which will significantly eclipse any protest that would take place exclusively in a physical space. (Matich et al, 2019) The hashtag campaigns are particularly effective in this area where anyone can pick up and propagate a hashtag and fill it with their own stories and content. As Matich et al state: the “Digital space allows the protest to continue to make an impact long after protestors go home.” (Matich et al, 2019, pg 341)

Although feminist digital activism is extremely effective in mobilising people to protest online, it is also highly effective in mobilising people to gather offline. By utilising feminist digital activist hashtags, it is now easier than ever to mobilise, organise and inspire people to feminist movements and spark a feminist activist revival. (Baer, 2016) Many scholars (Baier, 2016; Matich et al, 2019; Mendes et al, 2018; Li et al, 2020; Keller 2017) express a sense of optimism in the role that feminist digital activism plays:

Indeed, no other form of activism has had the capability to mobilise thousands within minutes, enabling those invested in social justice to play their part through crowdfunding activity, consciousness-raising efforts and a call-out culture, by providing a platform for radical forms of education, by providing space and visibility for

marginalised bodies and identities, and through the formation of online communities and knowledge sharing platforms. (Matich et al, 2019, pg 345)

Exemplifying this sentiment is Australian feminist Janine Hendry who sparked the recent women's rights protests and the #March4Justice. When angered and frustrated by recent sexual assault allegations within the Federal Australian Government, Hendry tweeted out the following on February 25:

Ok here's my thought - is it possible to form a ring of people around the perimeter of Parl Hse? Then all of us extremely disgruntled women could travel to Canberra on March 8 and form a ring linking arms and with our backs turned toward the parliament and stand in silent protest. (Hendry, 2021)

Although the date for protest subsequently changed to March 15, what then ensued was the hashtag #March4Justice and Australia's largest women's rights march in recent years coming together in cities and towns across the country. In just over 2 weeks since Hendry's initial tweet, by using the hashtag #March4Justice, Hendry and fellow organisers were able to mobilise thousands of women across the country, command discussion on mainstream media and spark debate in federal parliament. However, although it is still early days, what remains to be seen is any action from parliament or change in societal sentiment.

Feminist digital activism: Cause for optimism, but still a long way to go

Feminist digital activist hashtags have many beneficial impacts as aforementioned on the micro and meso levels: benefiting sexual abuse survivors, women and girls alike with feelings of solidarity and mobilising thousands of people to the streets and millions of people to online protests. However, how much change can a hashtag actually affect when it comes to concepts on the macro level such as influencing political change, conviction for abusers or changing deeply and long held societal stereotypes and beliefs? Some scholars believe that “unfortunately, no matter how well intended, a hashtag can’t really erase decades of stereotyping” (Gamble, I. 2016 as cited by Matich et al, 2019, pg 354). However, there is a more optimistic view that although exceedingly difficult to identify or recognise, there are some signs that change is possible on the macro level because great change occurs at the micro and meso levels (Matich et al, 2019) From this prospective, “particularly through the powerful partnering of activism and technology”, (Matich et al, 2019, pg 354) substantial changes such as altering long held societal beliefs may happen over time through the subtle changes that occur from individuals participating in a hashtag campaign or attending a protest on the streets.

High profile feminist hashtags such as #Metoo can have an effect of raising feminist consciousness over time which is essential to shifting long held societal beliefs (Keller, 2017). Keller’s (2017) research found that many women or girls did not start identifying as a feminist, until after they had shared their story online and connected with a multitude of supportive women with similar story. The sheer number of women across the network experiencing and going through the same emotions and challenges helped the women and girls “recognise that

sexual violence was a structural problem, rather than an individual experience” (Keller, 2017, pg. 2)

In the opposite situation, long held societal beliefs on the macro level are being disrupted from the male perspective. Li et al (2020) believe that feminist digital activist campaigns could help to prevent a potential perpetrator from committing an abuse in the first place. For instance, some people may come to the realization that survivors are now more empowered to share their story and potentially ‘out’ their abuser (Li, et al, 2020) The potential fear of being held to account on social media could perhaps deter someone from committing an assault (Li et al, 2020). Others are educated on what sexual assault is and the impact it can have on victims (Li et al, 2020). Australia began its own #Metoo reckoning in February of this year, and after weeks of relentless terrible revelations from female politicians, schoolgirls and women everywhere across the country, some men felt “a sickening moment of truth” (Salmin and Bali, 2021, para. 1) after realising they had committed sexual assault. At the time of assault, they did not realise their behaviour was problematic, however after weeks of mainstream and social media saturation, they were able to come to that realisation (Salmin and Bali, 2021).

Public opinion and societal sentiment can be changed little by little over a long period of time (Matich et al, 2019,) This change can be helped along by a strong online network of passionate people that are highly dedicated to the feminist movement. These people are likely to frequently post online and consistently engage with people over the feminist hashtag networks. Over time

from prolonged exposure, more people are recruited to the feminist cause. Furthermore, “from this energy grows people power and with this more influence to dictate what is popular, successful and acceptable” (Matich et al, 2019, pg. 358) Thus, after continued relentless publicity, exposure, debate and engagement, societal shifts could be possible. Indeed, since #MeToo trended in 2017 in the US Harvey Weinstein was eventually convicted and here in Australia feminist issues are becoming regular public discussions.

However, although the arguments outlined in this paper have been quite optimistic so far, it must be recognised that the social media platforms these feminist digital activist hashtags are hosted on are monopolistic companies that profit immensely from successful hashtags that trend overtime (Keller, 2017). The social media platforms can amass large amounts of personal data and sell to advertisers (Keller, 2017). Furthermore, Keller implores us to ask the difficult question of:

“what it means for digital feminist consciousness raising and solidarity to be intimately connected to the digital capitalism promoted by the tech sector – one of the most sexist industries today,” (Keller, 2018, pg. 3)

Undoubtedly, the question raised is difficult and one that is not easy to answer, however it must be considered along with all arguments when contemplating the capabilities and limitations of feminist digital activism and hashtags.

Despite this, digital feminist hashtags do have the ability to influence and affect individuals deeply. The hashtags allow for the creation of supportive networks and have the ability to make individuals, survivors, women and girls feel empowered and comforted when they tell their stories and connect with other like-minded people. Digital feminist hashtags are also extremely effective in mobilising people incredibly quickly to protest in the streets as evidenced by the recent #March4Justice carried out across Australia. The feminist hashtags also have the ability to mobilise vast networks of global populations online and allow the protest to continue perpetually. It is the perpetual ongoing nature of the feminist hashtag campaigns that could eventually lead to policy change and even influence or change long held societal beliefs. However, ultimately, as Keller (2017) suggests, if a feminist hashtag is making sexual assault survivors, women and girls feel supported and comforted, they are valuable, regardless of if any societal change or action has occurred.

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