Feminist Online Identity: Analyzing the Presence of Hashtag Feminism

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	In theory, the concept of hashtag feminism has created a virtual space where victims of inequality can coexist together in a space that acknowledges their pain, narrative, and isolation. As social scientists Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckles, & Sasha Barab (2002) state, these properties make online forums appeal favorable to vulnerable populations seeking support from 'disease or abuse, and to members of minority, social and political groups such as homosexuals, racial minorities, and feminists' (p. 371). However, in identifying online communities such as Twitter and Facebook as safe spaces for expressing feminism views and politics, its ramifications present dire consequences which lead to online harassment, hate speech, disagreements, and a miscommunication in rhetoric. It is with these consequences that the academic discourse becomes lost in transmitting the message of what feminism is and how feminists are identified. Using the ongoing debate that feminism does not acknowledge real life experience outside of the academic terrain, this paper explores how hashtag feminists identify in redefining feminism in their generation. Using the public platform of Twitter and Facebook (less specifically), this paper will explore the online following of women who identify as hashtag feminists and how their dialogue has set the tone for the era of internet activism.

Introduction

Online discussion forums present spaces for ongoing discussions in popular culture. These discussions create the foundation of establishing communities of like-minded people who identify according to the information shared, and collected, in the online discussions. Gatekeepers have invested millions of dollars to expand online discussion forums into more intimate settings that gives everyone the opportunity to control and maintain collective power through use of their narratives, hashtags, and identity. With the outpouring of public expression of beliefs on Twitter and Facebook, a new era of examining language has appeared.

Hashtag feminism is one of the most popular conduits of both Twitter and Facebook. Its presence has been felt globally and it has truly redefined the ways we view the active components of feminism in our present society. It is without question that we are facing the new wave of feminism, via hash tagging. However, as this online community is formed, questions of safe spaces, identity, and the redefining of feminism accommodate the mass popularity of feminist hash tagging. Just in writing this introduction alone, the following hashtags are gaining momentum with each minute of the hour: #bringbackourgirls, #YesAllWomen, #NotYourAsianSidekick, and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. Each of these hashtags has now been defined as #TwitterFeminism.

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Using the ongoing debate that feminism does not acknowledge real life experience outside of the academic terrain, this paper explores how hashtag feminists identify in redefining feminism in their generation. Using the public platform of Twitter and Facebook (less specifically), this paper will explore the online followings of women who identify as hashtag feminists, and how their dialogue has set the tone for the era of internet activism.

What Defines A Hashtag Feminist?

With a registered number of 645,750,000 active twitter accounts and an approximated 58 million tweets per day (Twitter, Huffington Post, eMarketer, 2014), its difficult establishing who is the identified hashtag feminist or what ideally constitutes a hashtag feminist. In attempting to search for a true definition of a hashtag feminist, the search falls upon a dozen arguments speaking against hashtag feminist as a staple in the true defining of what feminism is, both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012). Over the last year, hashtag feminism has achieved a certain ubiquity in pop culture, but it still hasn't set a solidified definition of what a hashtag feminist is.

For Mikki Kendall, creator of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, hashtag feminism provides a platform for feminist women of color:

> *You have feminists' writers of color who have platforms of their own via social media, that maybe you didn't see so much when it was just blogs. I saw my follower count jump this week – more than double actually. In terms of gate-keeping, it's much more difficult to keep people out. That's not to say people aren't still marginalized.* (Tobin, 2013)

Ramaa Mosley, a Los Angeles film director and mother of two, wanted to find a direct way to fight for the April 14, 2014 mass abduction of over two-hundred Nigerian school girls. On April 25, 2014, Mosley took to social media to share her heartfelt activism to bring these girls home by professing that America join her in virtually tweeting #bringbackourgirls. The phrase has now been used on Twitter more than 800,000 times, in America, and has garnered celebrity attention, and advocacy, from celebrities such as Kerry Washington and Chris Brown, as well as political figures Hillary Clinton, and First Lady, Michelle Obama. In addition, Mosely created a Facebook page to provide educational information about the situation of girls being sold into human trafficking and child marriages and she also provided ways to take virtual action; the page now has 43,000 likes (Litoff, 2014). For Mosely, hashtag feminism was defined as a way to be involved without directly being involved due to limitations:

> *I decided to transform my feeling of powerlessness into action. I thought of getting on a plane to Chibok, Nigeria, where the students were kidnapped, but my eleven year old daughter begged me not to go out of concern for my safety. She asked me to think of another way to help from home. I decided what I would do is that I would put out a call on social media. I started shouting it on social media hoping that people would listen and they would shout it back, and so first I started shouting to all of my friends. Then I started shouting it to President Barack Obama.* (Litoff, 2014)

As to date, no one person has taken the claim for the hashtag #YesAllWomen, but its transformative tweets appear only days after Elliot Rodger went on a horrific shooting spree in Isla Vista, near the University of California Santa Barbara, killing six people before committing suicide. In weeks, even years, leading up to the killings, Rodger's publicly shared his disgust for women through hate sites, YouTube videos, and a 137 page manifesto. #YesAllWomen offers a counter testimony to the disturbing evidence left behind the tragedy Rodger's produced. #YesAllWomen demonstrates that Rodger's hate grew out of elements that are still surrounding society such as sexism, oppression, and patriarchy. The tweets produce personal one sentence narratives demanding for a more just society for women (Weiss, 2014). Some of these tweets personally define hashtag feminism as an acknowledgement of their pain and a platform to share their experiences of living in a male dominated society (Weiss, 2014, p. 3):

> *Because I've rehearsed "Take whatever you want, just don't hurt me." #YesAllWomen*
> *#YesAllWomen because every time I try to say that I want gender equality I have to explain that I don't hate men.*

> *#YesAllWomen because apparently the clothes I wear is a more valid form of consent than the words I say.*
>
> *I repeat: the fact that there are male victims isn't proof it's not misogyny. It's evidence that misogyny hurts men too. #YesAllWomen*

Suey Park is the freelance writer and organizer behind the hashtag #NotYourAsianSidekick which encourages Asian American women to express their feminism by joining the 140 character conversation on Asian American feminism. For Park, hashtag feminism is a way to both come out as a feminist and to come into that conversation safely. For Park, hashtag feminism is putting the pressures Asian American women face on the forefront of feminist discourse (Capachi, 2013, p. 2):

> *It is so confusing having these white ideals of what beauty looks like and realizing that most of the women in my family are around 5 feet 2 inches and then trying to live up to those expectations. As an Asian American woman you're told that you have to be smart and pretty to be heard. I also think there is a lot of silence around mental health issues and eating disorders in Asian American families whether it be because of a cultural barrier or a communication barrier. I think a lot of white people have a visceral reaction to the fact that they belong to a structural whiteness. But I think it shows us something really important, which is that fraction of discomfort is nothing compared to a lifetime of being racialized and put into a subordinate class of people in the U.S.*

The term 'feminism' has many different uses and its meanings are often debated. While feminism has traditionally been defined in relation to its many movements, some feminist scholars object to this identification and instead seek to examine the resistance and isolation these movements have had in the equal rights of all women in society. Many scholars view feminism as a normative set of beliefs and ideals upon which equality is defined. For many other scholars, the debate of how oppression, intersectionality, labor and work, relationships, community, and reproductive rights are all defined differently based on injustices in regards to sexuality, race, class, and gender. Given the controversies over the historical, and present, meaning of the term 'feminism' it's only fair to question 'is there any point to asking what feminism is?'

One clear component of feminism is that it involves at least two groups of claims: normative and descriptive. According to Professors of Philosophy Sally Hanslanger (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Nancy Tuana (Penn State), the normative claims concern how women should be viewed and treated and these claims draw on the premise of justice and moral position. Descriptive claims concern how women are viewed and treated, alleging that they are not being treated in accordance with the standards of justice or morality invoked in the normative claims (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003).

The personal narrative as a method of qualitative research cannot go unmentioned in the dynamic movement of identifying the hashtag feminist. The humanist approach of creating alternative meaning systems associated with women sharing their real life experiences helps them to, as Professor of Women's Studies at Oregon State University Janet Lee proclaims, 're-author their lives.' Women's stories are gendered and telling their stories in a male cultured society has silenced their voices. The use of narrative therapy, feminist narratology, and gender narratology have provided not only an alternative voice, but also a stronger recognition for women's intersectionality in terms of research methodology.

Traditional representations of knowledge have been constructed from the societal perspective of the male, and this process of reconstruction with hashtag feminism is only an extension of re-authoring the lives of women by sharing their narrative. The Personal Narratives Group (1989) states that the woman's narrative has been a central component in the pioneering of women's movements. 'Listening to women's voices, studying women's writings, and learning from women's experiences have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world…women's personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research' (p. 1).

Although a tweet consists of only 140 characters, it is a platform to start the narrative whereas the extended use of notes and status updates, via Facebook, creates the descriptive conversation piece through personal narrative, educational resources, and current testimonials with updates. What activates the term of 'feminism' in the social media world has a lot to do with micro theories. Tweets and Facebook likes are similar to the micro theories of: psychological ownership theory and perceived control, social exchange theory, and social penetration theory.

Micro Theories Use in Explaining Hashtag Feminism

Assistant Professors of Hospitality Bing Pan & John Crotts (2012) applied psychological ownership theory to explain why former hotel guests are motivated to offer word of mouth feedback in consumerism. Their results discovered the crucial need to implement theories to help interpret and understand the behavioral data of why people resort to social media to express their concerns and opinions. Using theoretical models to substantiate their findings, Pan & Crotts found: 1) relevant theories do apply to behavioral data; 2) theoretical frameworks can help the discovery of new opportunities, and 3) theoretical frameworks could help understand user implications through a global and abstract view (p. 1-4).

In applying the psychological ownership theory to hashtag feminism, followers on Twitter and Facebook sites develop feelings of connections with the lead hashtag feminist and feel as though the language used is a language they identify with in a social group setting. This emotion forms the community which also forms the concept of identity. As social psychology professors Jan Strets and Peter Burke (2000) state, 'in role based identities, some form of interaction and negotiation is usually involved as one performs a role. [Within these social media settings] relations are reciprocal rather than parallel. Different perspectives and narratives are involved among the persons in the group as they negotiate their respective roles, creating micro social structures within the group' (p. 227).

The loyalty in the social structure of Twitter and Facebook is generated by retweeting a statement of justice and political demand regarding race, class, and gender and/or liking a status that provides a detailed position taken on an issue of injustice. This ownership emphasizes follower loyalty and enhances the perception of psychological ownership and control among the virtual social structure (Pan & Crotts, 2012).

The social exchange theory states that individuals engage in behaviors they find rewarding and avoid behaviors that market too high of a cost. This theory uses a cost-benefit framework to explain how human beings communicate with each other, how they form relationships and bonds, and how communities are formed through communication exchanges (Pan & Crotts, 2012). The benefit of hashtag feminism is both the reputation and the display of the issue through controversial conversation. Being that the participation in social media is not compensated, the posited results, according to Bing Pan and John Crotts (2012) are as follows: a) an expected gain in reputation and influence on others; b) an anticipated reciprocity on the part of others; c) altruism; and d) direct reward (p. 8).

There are more people consuming information via social media sites, than there are generating information. Therefore, identity of the followers and reputation of the hashtag feminist and the primary issue becomes the reward – the transmission of awareness.

Altman and Taylor developed the social penetration theory to describe self-disclosure as the sharing of information about oneself. Understanding that disclosure entails sharing both 'high risk' and 'low risk' information differentiates who you choose to share information with and in what capacity (Altman & Taylor, 1973). What motivates a person to self-disclose?

Altman, Vinsel, and Brown (1981) use the analogy of the peeling of an onion to describe what motivates a person to self-disclose.

> Peeling off the layers of an onion, one must disclose him or herself through the continuing process of exposing one's inner self and identity. It starts with public, visible, and superficial information, such as gender, clothing preferences, and ethnicity; slowly, as the relationship progresses, one starts to share feelings; at the deepest level, one will expose his or her goals, ambitions, and beliefs. (Pan & Crotts, 2012, p.15)

What's important to understand in the online discussion community of Twitter and other social media formats is the grounding of community being formed through identity as a 'feminist' and emotions shared with a collective group. Using social media as a point of advocating verifies role identities where participants in the online community develop trust in others, commitments to the situation, and positive emotions toward those who have verified their identity (Zhang, Jiang, Carroll, 2010, p. 345).

However, despite the illusion of comfort, community, and similar orientation these online communities

promote through social media, there are consequences associated with using social media as a primary base of identifying as a feminist.

Consequences of Hashtag Feminism and its Community

There is no overlooking the tension and negative criticism that naturally clinches itself to feminism in general. We cannot ignore the deep division in feminist politics and the many movements of activism that emphasized fragmentation and decline. The formation of feminist coalitions in the first and second wave of feminism did not include hash tagging or liking statuses, but it mobilized feminists in very similar ways. Women's studies programs brought knowledge to misconceptions about feminism and organization on establishing social movements to be effective, politically. Publications allowed women the opportunity to express their experiences and share their stories both locally and globally. Music festivals, feminist bookstores, churches, and classrooms provided spaces where women could speak and be heard (Gilmore, 2008).

In very much the same way, the structures of social media has provided opportunities for women to define their 'actions' of feminism through a virtual community. In these communities, women have been able to identify as feminists and share their real life experiences as just that, feminists. Community identity helps individuals define who they are and give them guidelines for proper social intercourse in community life (Zhang, Jiang, Carroll, 2010, p. 69). The only difference in developing community, virtually, is that identity is constituted through the social or symbolic change of those we may never meet to produce direct action. This is the unfortunate consequence of hashtag feminism, the fear that not everyone in the 'community' is really real or passionate about the issues at hand.

Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab (2002) uses their research to define the 'troller' as a deceptive member of the feminist space whose primary goal is to disrupt the community by aggravating the conversation into an argument by writing deceptive responses in order to attract the maximum number of responses (p. 372-373). Using research from Erin Andrews (1996), the 'troller' is identified based on three definitional criteria (Herring, et. al., 2002, p. 375):

1) messages from a sender who appears outwardly sincere,
2) messages designed to attract predictable responses
3) messages that waste a group's time by provoking futile arguments.

An Example of Troller Disruption

In May, Visiting Scholar of the New School in NYC, Bell Hooks, took part in a panel discussion in which she called Beyoncé a terrorist. American author, feminist, and social activist, Bell Hooks', exact words during this discussion were: 'I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact anti-feminist – that is a terrorist, especially in terms of the impact on young girls" (King, 2014, p. 1). In response, Hooks comments sparked both a Twitter and Facebook war where trollers manipulated the conversation to display Hooks in a light that made her appear to attack Beyoncé.

It didn't take long for virtual feminist spaces to disrupt. Many online feminists took to their Facebook and blog pages to allow enough time to state their opinions. The response was clearly one where black feminists separated themselves from Bell Hooks and created a message that directed attention away from uniting in intellectual discussion to arguing about race; many of the online discussions concentrated on Beyoncé being attacked, by Hooks, because she was 'light skinned.' Other feminists who went against Hooks compared her comments about Beyoncé to the use of drones on people by President Obama. And then there were other comments that lashed out in stating that Beyoncé was power, money, and control and those that don't agree are destructive to society.

The point of analyzing such comments is showing how easy it is to disrupt the intentions of an online community rendering its goal of activism, worthless. The Bell Hooks comments about Beyoncé sent messages as demonstrated in the three criteria defining of trolling in that the reactions of other online feminists were designed to attract predictable responses – a strong support for Beyoncé and the bashing of another's opinions or even the opportunity to further expand on what 'terrorist' meant in context. Secondly, the arguments became so incongruent to finding a solution, or a main hypothesis, to where intellectual time was

wasted instead of preserved.

Later in the week, Bell Hooks took to her twitter account to attempt to refocus the mission of her visit to the New School which was, continuing intellectual conversation about the current condition of young girls and women. Therefore, Hooks had to re-create a safe space for her virtual followers and virtual feminists to reconnect in the online community she established. What Hooks did was create a hashtag #strong #beautiful #mothers to celebrate the sacrifices of mothers around the world. Hooks even invited her followers to submit pictures and real life stories of their mothers to be posted in her community. Covering her page with the stories of appreciation and love for mothers finally eased the curdling arguments from her panel discussion at the New School and its defensive online appearance.

Sometimes in the online community, disruptive incidents force group members to articulate explicit norms and rules, but it also may have the unexpected effect of strengthening an online group's self-definition as a community. According to Herring, et. al., (2002) the reactions of online feminist groups to harassment and disruption can be situated into two categories: the libertarian view on individual freedom of expression, and communitarian values on the good of the group (p. 377-378).

In the libertarian view, the use of online communities who identify as hashtag or online feminists is a new frontier that has a lackadaisical system of structure, organization, or definition. In contrast, a communitarian view of freedom of speech recognizes that less empowered women may require a community where they feel safe creating their own identities, sharing their own stories, and learning about their causes through virtual means.

Author and Professor of Sociology, Patricia Hill Collins analyzes the importance of self-definition for women in her text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, and although Collins analyzes Black womanhood and the importance of self-identity, I would like to use her premise to include all women. As Collins states, 'the journey toward self-definition has political significance' (p. 113). Women create virtual communities to self-identify and to forge identities that are 'larger than the one society has forced upon them' (Collins, p. 113).

Women are using hashtag feminism to rise above the limitations of not only women's mobility, but the limitations of being a feminist. The question of what is, or is not, a feminist continues to raise its head in complexity for many, but our society is continuously redefining what feminism is, who are feminists, and women are creating communities that help them identify to those self-defining's. Whether or not hashtag feminism is a point of action or the foundation for social movement is another discussion, but in analyzing if hashtag feminism is personal empowerment, one would have to argue that hashtag feminism demonstrates an ability to redefine social realities by combining new ways, and ideas, in forming communities for women who are seeking a place to express their beliefs, globally, with other women who share in their social identity. The ways in which we create community, life, and identify in online communities is merging into the arena of research and academia, and it's revealing a power in language and everyday experiences that cannot be ignored.

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