

Chapter 15

Feminist Hashtags in Pandemic Times

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ABSTRACT

Hashtags are commonly used in social media communication not only to categorize conversations but particularly to raise attention and generate debate of certain topics. Hashtag activism is one of the areas that is gaining particular attention from academics and the overall society. The focus of this chapter is hashtag attributes. Particularly, it analyses and compares four hashtags related to violence against women that circulated on social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic: #16Days, #IsolatedNotAlone, #womensupportingwomen, and #NiUnaMenos. The chapter highlights important aspects to increase the effectiveness of communication with the use of hashtags.

INTRODUCTION

Digital environments and social networking sites have been increasingly used by feminists to broaden debates on behalf of women (Wang & Driscoll, 2019). Through various social platforms, feminists have generated discussion about female empowerment (Riquelme et al., 2018), sexism (Baer, 2016), misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018), and sexual harassment (Thompson, 2018) against women. The use of online spaces has become essential (Rivers, 2017) and has enabled feminist movements to amplify their voices.

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Arguably, activist movements escalate in times of crisis, with the various themes adapting to the current trends. For example, during Covid-19 lockdown, feminist hashtags were used to warn about the rise of violence, as it will be demonstrated throughout this chapter. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020), as lockdown progressed, about 15 million additional cases were reported every three months. Newspapers from around the world evidenced an increase in the number of cases of violence against women during the pandemic's social isolation (Harrison et al., 2020) and, as stated by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2020a), in some countries this 'hidden pandemic' caused a five-fold increase of calls to helplines, specifically reporting domestic violence inflicted by intimate partners as a consequence of Covid-19.

In response to the growing number of incidents, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) and feminist collectives worldwide started a series of campaigns using feminist hashtags to combat violence during the pandemic. #EuMetoAColherSim, from Brazil (Carvalho, 2020), #ThereIsHelp, from Thailand (UN Women, 2021), #NousToutes, from France (Forgar, 2021), #UnaSuTre, from Italy (Redazione, 2020), #womensupportingwomen, from Turkey (McKernan, 2020), #IsolatedNotAlone (Webwire, 2020), and #SafeHome (FIFA, 2020), from the USA, are some of the hashtags that spread on social media during 2020 to alert about the number victims of domestic violence during the pandemic. Furthermore, well-known campaigns such as United Nations' #16Days (UN Women, 2020b) aiming to combat the increasing number of victims and ensure financial support to offer basic services to girls and women survivors of domestic violence, gained strength during the Covid-19 crisis.

Although interesting contributions from several studies addressed the use of hashtags in online communication (e.g., Petersen & Gerken, 2021; Rauschnabel et al., 2019), more research is needed to understand their performance in terms of reach and generated engagement, namely through shares and comments. One of the understudied aspects is the hashtag's attributes. In fact, the literature on marketing and communication points out the importance of message attributes to communication effectiveness. However, studies on this topic are still scarce concerning some online communication, particularly hashtags.

Thus, considering the gap in the literature regarding hashtag attributes, this chapter presents an empirical study that seeks to answer the following research question: how do hashtag attributes contribute to their performance on social networking sites? In particular, the study presented in this chapter considered hashtags related to violence against women that circulated on social networking sites during the Covid-19 pandemic, and provides a detailed analysis of 200 tweets from the following four hashtags: #16Days, #IsolatedNotAlone, #womensupportingwomen, and #NiUnaMenos. Guided by the literature review, the content of the tweets was interpreted taking into account the following attributes: source, credibility, relevance, appeal, involvement with the audience and emotion.

This chapter makes several contributions. It summarizes the main attributes for hashtag engagement and viralization and proposes a framework for analyzing hashtag performance. It applies that framework to feminist hashtags, and demonstrates how feminist hashtags' attributes are essential for the communication process. Empirically, the study compares four hashtags, three of them created in the context of a social crisis, and analyses their performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the chapter provides a comparison of hashtags, based on their attributes, in order to further understand their performance in terms of engagement and virality.

As such, this chapter provides interesting insights for feminist organizations and for other social causes that intend to use hashtag activism tools, as well as for corporate entities and brand managers that aim to associate themselves with social causes through hashtags, and, in general, to professionals and academics interested in better understanding the effectiveness of hashtags in social media strategies.

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