

Hashtag Feminism: Examining Contemporary Feminist Concerns and Social Justice Activism in a Social Media Age

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Inception

This paper was written for Dr. Helene Vosters' class, "Feminisms: Current Perspectives," in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies.

Abstract

In Western society's image-saturated, media-driven culture, feminist activists have turned to social media to raise awareness for issues related to social justice and systemic oppression. At a time where social justice campaigns have erupted on social media, as evidenced by the recent #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, an inquiry into the influence of this activism, named as "hashtag feminism" is key to understanding contemporary feminist concerns. This article explores how trends in hashtag feminism correspond to broader political goals, and investigates not only the opportunities for activism provided by social media platforms, but also, the potential limitations.

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It is no surprise that in our image-saturated, media-driven culture, activists have turned to social media to raise awareness for their cause. Although social media is often erupting with political dialogue, the power this platform has for creating lasting change is not exactly known. Social media activist campaigns that are

circulated through the use of a hashtag, which allows users to easily see what is being posted with the corresponding phrase, such as the recent campaigns of #MeToo, or #TimesUp, have gained traction and popularity. Through a close examination of hashtag feminism activist campaigns, or simply “hashtag feminism,” I will examine how feminist social media activism represents specific goals in current feminist movements, and the benefits and drawbacks of this type of activism in our present media-saturated society.

Feminists are no strangers to using media as an avenue to respond to the sociocultural environment and according to relevant issues of the patriarchal structures of their time. As feminist values have grown, shifted, expanded, and otherwise been re-shaped, so has the use and relevance of specific feminist media outlets. Accordingly, as new avenues have emerged for activists to engage, a more diverse demographic of feminists have gained access to a platform in which to share their own personal contributions to feminist activism and the larger political environment. Huneault and Anderson note an increasing awareness and implementation of intersectional theory in today’s feminist movement (22). In their article, “A Past as Rich as Our Futures Allow: A Genealogy of Feminist Art in Canada,” they acknowledge the history of feminist art in Canada and the corresponding values as a way of imagining future possibilities for feminist art and activism. They demonstrate that intersectionality has been a focus since the 1970s, but still, we must be wary of perpetuating white feminism in our activism today, and avoid an “essentialism that limited women in the name of freeing them that naively celebrated their accomplishments in place of dismantling discursive constructs and destabilizing identity” (45). Their article remains relevant in feminist engagements with social media activism. As public use of social media as a way of advancing social change increases and becomes mainstream, a commitment to self-reflection and inclusivity is mandatory to ensure hashtag feminism avoids the exclusionary practices of past feminisms. Although the emphasis on intersectionality is evident in current

feminisms, the question is whether this is being reflected in hashtag feminism, or if this social media movement is simply reinforcing and perpetuating the power relationships we are trying to dismantle.

Upon an evaluation of the top posts in #feminism (see fig. 1), #feminist (see fig. 2), and #feministaccount (see fig. 3) on Instagram, it is clear that there are some specific commonalities in what is being posted in these hashtags. Previously, I have noticed an influx of craftivism, celebration of women's accomplishments, a show of solidarity to other women, validation of the right for people to make their own choices and be accepted for such choices, both conventionally feminine imagery and a subversion of such imagery, gender expression that challenges social norms, engagement with continued feminist education, and most of all, a focus on both personal autonomy and bodily autonomy. However, for the purposes of this article, I will be examining screenshots taken on April 6th, 2018, at approximately 4 PM in the afternoon, CST.

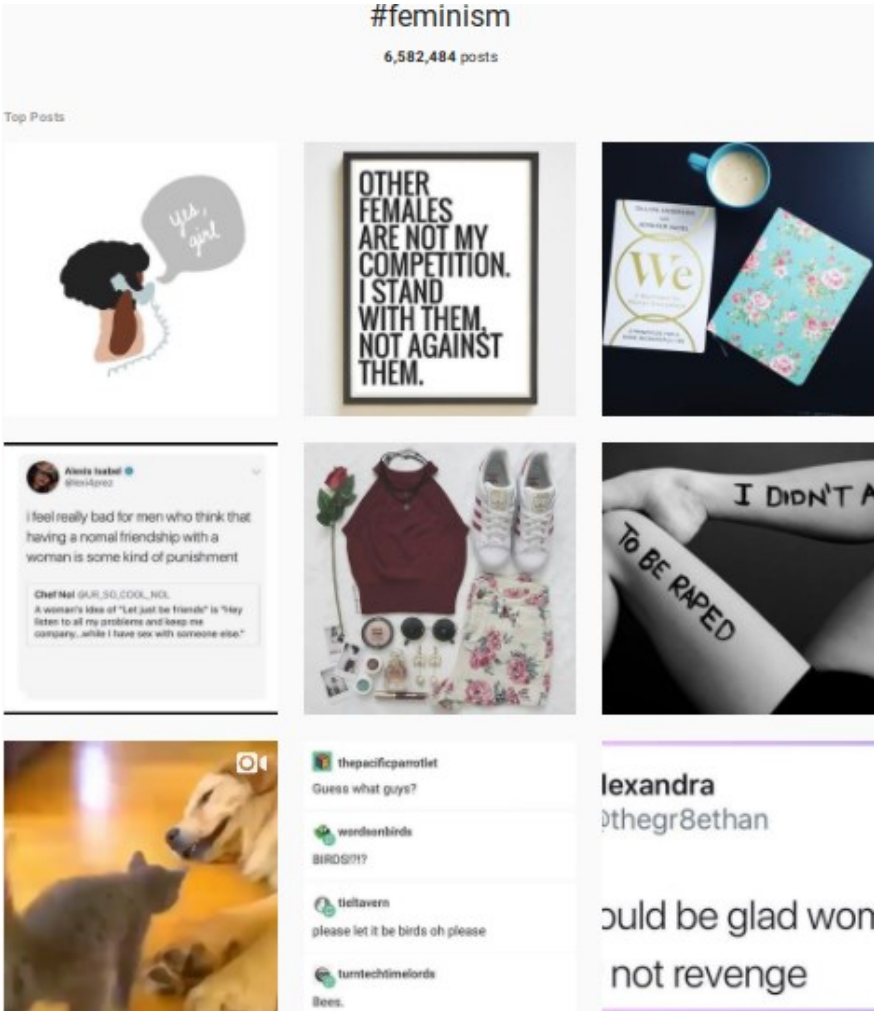


FIG 1. Screenshot of top posts in #Feminism tag on Instagram. Taken at 3:56 pm on April 6, 2018. #Feminism • Instagram Photos and Videos, www.instagram.com/explore/tags/feminism/.

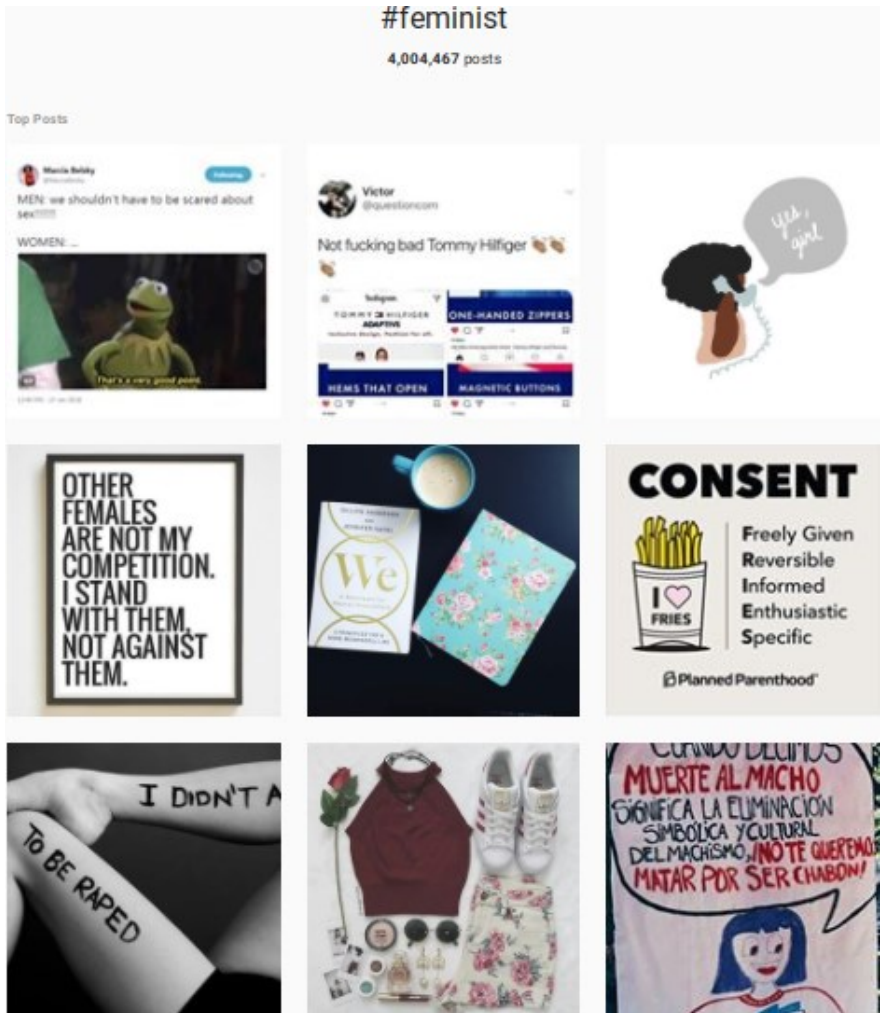


FIG 2. Screenshot of top posts in #Feminist tag on Instagram. Taken at 3:57 pm on April 6, 2018. #Feminist • Instagram Photos and Videos, www.instagram.com/explore/tags/feminist/.

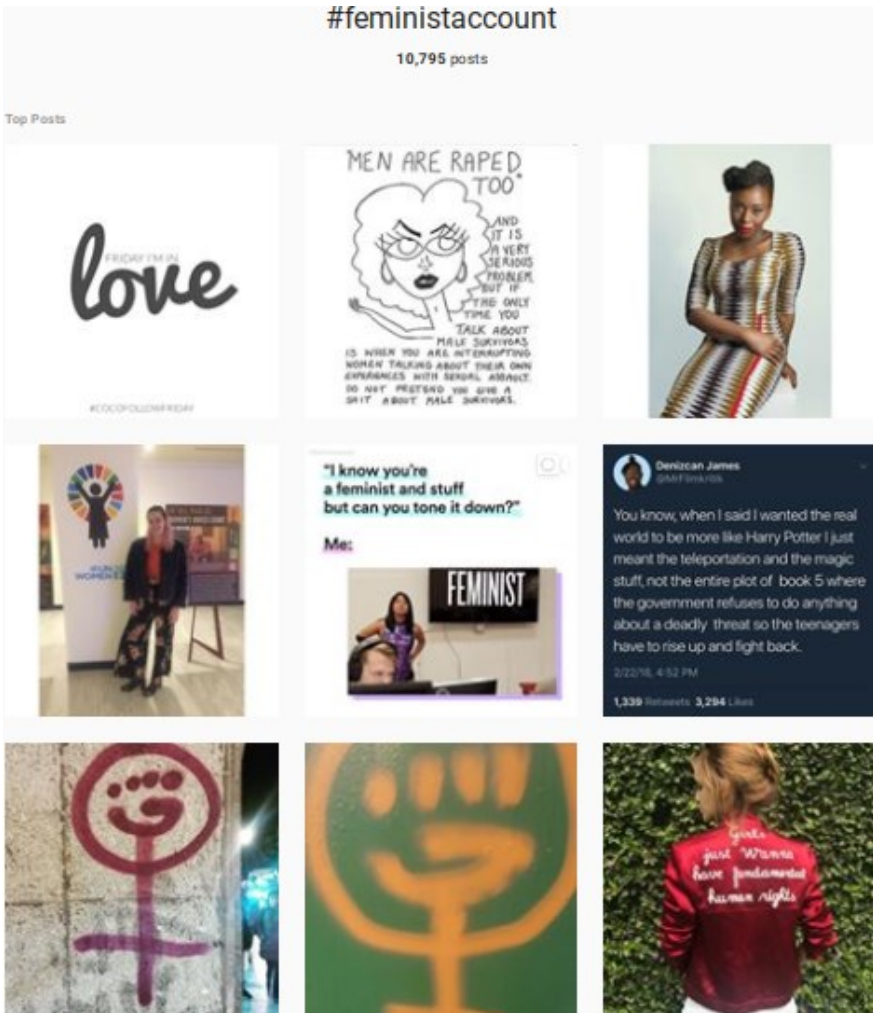


FIG 3. Screenshot of top posts in #Feministaccount tag on Instagram. Taken at 3:58 pm on April 6, 2018. #Feministaccount • Instagram Photos and Videos, www.instagram.com/explore/tags/feministaccount/.

Considering these screenshots are of the “top posts” on Instagram, they reveal that hashtag activism, at least on this social media platform, is often concerned with addressing male privilege, claiming an unapologetic feminist identity, representing women across races, engaging humour to address everyday sexism and racism, attention to sexual assault awareness and activism, and solidarity among women. However, I also noted misappropriation of the hashtags presented to draw viewers to posts completely unrelated to feminist activism. This phenomenon perhaps hints at the growing popularity and engagement with feminism in mainstream society and on social media platforms. If everyday users are utilizing the hashtag to draw more attention to irrelevant posts—that is, posts that are not related to feminist politics—it suggests that feminism now has considerable social traction. Hashtag feminism has gained enough circulation within social media that others are capitalizing on this draw to direct attention to their own content and increase their population and reach. Although feminisms have often been relegated to activism and the academy, it is clear they are becoming more accessible to a larger, mainstream demographic. Even so, the utilization of social media for activism has been an interesting development and academics have taken up the phenomenon of hashtag feminism and explored its implications in our world.

The accessibility and widespread use of social media has also allowed those of marginalized communities to have a platform of which to share their experiences and struggles regarding social justice. In particular, hashtag activism and hashtag feminism have given rise to theories of intersectionality outside of the academy. For example, movements such as Black Lives Matter, and their use of social media in their political efforts, “have finally succeeded in making intersectional issues of racial oppression visible to mainstream America” (Jackson, 377). Other scholars have noted that while hashtag feminism allows for widespread collectivity, which is helpful in calling attention to issues, it also easily allows for issues to be oversimplified, or even for capitalist or colonialist ideas to be

reinforced (Khoja-Moolji, 349). This critique echoes a critique of the intersectional feminist movement put forward by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a foundational feminist activist and theorist who coined the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw celebrates the implementation of intersectionality for building coalitions across identity groups, but warns that attention needs to be given to the nuances of intersectionality and group identity politics overall (Crenshaw, 492). Moving forward, it is clear that simply engaging in hashtag feminism is not enough. One must also consider other feminist values in their practices of social media activism and question whose voices are being marginalized, and be reflective of the messages they are circulating. This introduction of feminism to mainstream audiences through simplified hashtags leaves plenty of room for messages to be spread or misinterpreted without consideration or knowledge of feminism's history or foundational theories.

Longstanding feminist theories of gender as performative, utilization of embodied activism, fighting for women's access to the public sphere, and their right to their own bodily autonomy are gaining traction on social media platforms. Although perhaps the issues have been quite altered by years of changing political climates, many of the same issues of earlier feminist movements are echoed in hashtag feminist activism. Following similar sentiments of Kate Bornstein in *My Gender Workbook*, much of hashtag feminist activism offers those questioning their gender and identity reassurance and affirmation while underscoring the importance of being attentive to self-care strategies (Bornstein, 1-24). Hester Baer notes that hashtag feminism tends to "employ the female body in ways that call attention to gender norms as open to transformation...engage...with the objectification of female bodies in media culture; with injunctions about women's roles in public spaces; and above all with the subjection of women to sexual violence" (23). It seems that, in accordance with the empowerment women achieved during the second wave, issues of sexual violence

are being powerfully addressed, worldwide, and hashtag feminism is playing a role in offering awareness and building coalitions internationally to fight this issue (Enloe, 501). Power does seem to lie in the broad reach of hashtag feminism, but we must question who is benefitting from this power, and who is still silenced. Perhaps it is not a question of how much power hashtag activism affords feminism, but of how conducive this platform actually is for enacting political change that benefits minority communities.

Hashtag feminism has both been praised and dismissed, but despite the critiques that exist, its prevalence and influence on politics cannot be ignored. Due to its prevalence and increasingly popular use by the general public, mobilizing hashtag activism as a way of pushing for social change presents some benefits for activist movements. Hashtag feminism allows for transnational communities to be built and gain collective power, for sharing personal experiences of intersectional oppression, and it offers new or “creative modes” of activism (Baer, 18). New media, including social media, offers more opportunities for people of marginalized communities to engage in politics, to have their voices heard, their messages circulated, and to create dialogue, as there are fewer “gate-keepers” than traditional media. This is not to say that social media allows for complete freedom and autonomy for its users—the influence of big tech companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, is undeniable (see Gillespie). Social media platforms and a user’s experience of such are shaped by the political and economic interests of these companies, therefore the effectiveness of campaigns such as hashtag feminism is at risk of being limited. Still, through social media, marginalized groups can reach larger media corporations, such as Twitter and Facebook, and make their issues visible to mainstream audiences (Mann, 295). With its “expansive” reach, the use of hashtags makes it easy for ideas to circulate and re-circulate, and movements to gain momentum (Stache, 162).

It has also been noted that hashtag feminism is good for awareness and joining those who understand the concepts behind the hashtag, but otherwise, has some concerning aspects. For instance, the mainstreaming of feminism may allow for simplification of complex issues in favour of circulating catchy slogans or easily digested ideas, much as Crenshaw warned. However, social media, and art, and the connections made through these platforms do allow us a way of imagining, and of hoping for, potential futures—transformed futures. The images and messages we spread may perhaps be images that represent the world we would like to see, and social media allows us to envision this world alongside many others. However, we must remain concerned and attentive to ensure we are not limiting marginalized groups through ignorance or lack of consideration for the nuances of our politics and how they intersect with the varying lived experiences of those with whom we seek solidarity.

Despite the collectivity of social media and its other benefits, just as with any other type of activism, it can have its downfalls. For example, as noted in my analysis of the Instagram posts, the downfall is often that hashtags are re-appropriated in ways that are unhelpful to the original intentions of the social justice movement (Stache, 163). It is also not clear whether social justice campaigns and their related hashtag activism are creating real political action or simply spreading a superficial understanding of feminism, often simplified to messages simply promoting “girl power” (Stache 163). In this vein, we must be wary and resist commodification of the very groups we seek to give visibility to (Kingston, 294). Anique Jordan addresses aspects of this type of commodification in her recent installation at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Although she is speaking to the event of Canada 150, her sentiment remains the same when applied to hashtag feminism. Essentially, she asks, is our way of fighting back, offering alternatives, and seeking a different future simply becoming a commodity utilised by the very systems and corporations that have marginalized us (Jordan, “Tangential

Tableus...")? We must continue to consider and engage, and perhaps, rectify, when possible, the disadvantages of using this relatively accessible platform in our feminist activism. Although influential in many ways, this very power to reach audiences worldwide, can be an issue. The transnational aspect of social media, for example, offers a way to provide awareness to issues in other areas of the world, but simultaneously makes it quite easy for Western voices to speak over or speak for those of marginalized communities who have continually been silenced.

In keeping with Western ideologies, of course, is the potential for social media and its hashtag activism to be commodified in our capitalist society and for-profit enterprises. Anyone who has used social media knows that advertisements and capitalist sentiments are becoming a "necessary evil" to navigate while scrolling through newsfeeds, watching videos, or even streaming music. As social media use continues to grow, so does the implementation of it as an avenue for advertising, capitalist ventures, and the negative influence and control of capitalist structures may spill over into what seems like a relatively "free" and accessible media outlet for users (Rey, 401). Similarly, with the influence of capitalist and right-wing political values, combined with an opportunity for anonymity that encourages severe harassment among users, the freedom offered by social media platforms may become limited. Users' privacy and access to social media, especially for radical activism, may be constrained as both the government and corporate organizations increase their surveillance, expand the reach of their control and implement policing strategies regarding user-access to online avenues such as social media (Uldam, 42). This poses many questions, including how long social media will remain influential and be utilized as a driving force for activism, before government and corporate organizations exert power over users and limit their online activity. For many, concerns about government control and policing of the internet and related media channels have been raised, with the threat of repealing policies such as Net Neutrality, and other

violations to one's rights and personal freedoms. It seems that the government and media corporations may not be able to introduce increased surveillance strategies, upon facing public backlash. However, it is also worth considering how much influence social media does have in the current resistance, and in community and activist organizing. How are we to feel secure in our ability to organize if so much of it depends on our access to tools like social media? The implementation of hashtag activism and capitalist practices demand we consider such questions, and imagine a way forward, if our abilities to organize in such large numbers does become inhibited.

Although hashtag feminism may seem like an attractive way to promote our social justice activism in an age where we are so connected to social media, we must approach it with the same care and consideration of any other social justice campaign. It is empowering to be able to reach thousands, across the globe, with our messages, by simply using the hashtag. However, this international reach must not simply reinforce the current power systems in place by replicating them. We must actively remain engaged in the practice of questioning our feminisms: Who is benefitting? Who is being silenced? How does hashtag activism translate into enacting political change? Is it commodifying important concepts and theories, such as feminism, or is it promoting understanding, and awareness of complicated issues? Hashtag feminism has its place and its value, but just as we are aware of its benefits, we must also remain acutely aware of its potential consequences.

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