How Women of Color Are Discussed
in Hashtag Feminist Movements

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Abstract

Social media platforms such as Twitter have the power to promote and engage the public in social issues. Often referred to as hashtag activism, movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp on Twitter often lead to a number of voices sharing their opinion in the public sphere. Moreover, these voices tend to lead to an exclusion of people of color in discussions that concern broad social issues. With an increasing amount of media attention being given to sexual harassment, abuse, and violence against women in the United States, this study examines how women of color are being talked about in the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. Through a thematic content analysis from tweets collected on both International Women's Day and Equal Pay Day, this study found that women of color were often overlooked on days where all women's rights should be discussed and not just those of white women in the United States. This suggests that in order for the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement to claim that they are inclusive, they need to be more intersectional in their methods and more intentional about recognizing women of color.

I. Introduction

In 2007, Tarana Burke created #MeToo with the intention of bringing awareness to the plight of women who have faced sexual assault and abuse. The popularity of the hashtag dwindled but gained traction for a second time in October 2017 with the help of actress Alyssa Milano (Garcia, 2017). Milano's tweet helped launch the #MeToo movement back into the public sphere, where it gained popularity among the thousands of women who shared their stories online. They vocalized their stories of abuse in an effort to bring awareness to women's experiences with sexual assault and harassment around the world. Later on – with the emergence of other actresses and prominent figures in Hollywood speaking out about their experiences with sexual assault in the entertainment industry – Hollywood actresses and other women spoke out against prominent entertainment figures such as Harvey Weinstein and Matt Lauer, which helped the #MeToo movement stay relevant on a variety of media platforms (Khomami, 2017).

Although the #MeToo movement garnered support, it has been critiqued by many for leaving out the experiences of women of color (Prois and Moreno, 2018). This critique was further highlighted with op-ed articles published in *The New York Times* by prominent actresses of color such as Lupita Nyong'o and Salma Hayek (Nyong'o, 2017; Hayek, 2017). As a result, other hashtags – such as #WOCAffirmation x– were

created to address and give voice to these experiences as well. Other branches of the movement, such as #TimesUp, were also created to address these disparities by providing legal recourses. These other branches supported by specific hashtags have actively worked to provide a more inclusive platform for women of color who have experienced sexual harassment and/or assault (Garber, 2018).

With recent media coverage of issues such as sexual harassment, misconduct and assault, the #MeToo movement and others like it have become more than social media campaigns. They have emerged as social movements with the power to further efforts that works toward creating real social change. This paper will examine the hashtags #MeToo and #TimesUp and analyze themes that emerge from these movements to see how they address the experiences of women of color.

II. Literature Review

Twitter in Social Activism

Since its conception in 2006, Twitter has served as a platform for people to express their thoughts and perspectives as a way to contribute to the sphere of public opinion. With 68 million monthly active users, people have used this microblogging platform as a way to not only disseminate information, but also as a way to promote and engage in social activism within the confines of its 280-character limit (Larson, 2017).

Social movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp, among others, emerged from Twitter. It was this specific platform, in addition to other forms of social media, that pushed social movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp into the spotlight. Twitter is one example of how "social media [has] been chiefly responsible for the construction of choreography of assembly as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling [of] a highly dispersed and individualized constituency" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5). In other words, Twitter "give[s] a shape to the way in which people come together and act together" and serves as a platform that goes beyond advocacy for social issues where people can organize beyond the digital sphere (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 4).

Another reason Twitter has allowed for the emergence of social movements is because it "prompts users to answer the question 'What are you doing?'" and it allows users to answer this question in relation to different types of audiences (Marwick, 2010, p. 116). Additionally, what makes Twitter and other social media platforms a viable option for these movements is that these media "eliminate walls between separate social situations, [which contributes] to rapid social change" (Marwick, 2010, p. 115). One reason for the prevalence of the use of social media as a form of activism has to do with the tendency that "this current generation's activism often takes place online and, at times, exclusively through social media platforms, leading to a heavier reliance on text-based interactions via social media" (Clark, 2016, p. 790).

Hashtag Feminism

Hashtag feminism is a category that scholars nest under the umbrella of hashtag activism. It is a term used to describe those "cases concerning gender equity… within the burgeoning sphere of online feminism" and "can be understood as a particular form of feminist linguistic activism that, due to the immediacy of Twitter, is event-oriented and focused on the discourse surrounding a highly visible social phenomenon unfolding in the moment" (Clark, 2016, p. 793). Movements that fall under the umbrella of hashtag feminism are movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp, which gain traction and popularity because they "become highly visible to wider audiences by being appropriated by the established news media as news stories in themselves" (Latina and Docherty, 2014, p. 1104).

According to a survey published by the Pew Research Center (2018), 78% of women are on a variety of social media platforms, and 24% of these women use Twitter. This statistic highlights the prevalence of women on social media– many of whom take part in some way with the content that is being produced and disseminated on these platforms. For people who are part of the feminist movement, hashtag feminism has "provided feminists of color and feminists working outside of formal organizations with a new, effective means of exposing their work and connecting with others" (Clark, 2016, p. 790). Supporters of hashtag feminism say that "when white feminists miss opportunities to stand with their black sisters and mainstream media overlooks the plight of nonwhite women, women of color use social media as a tool to unite and inform" (Williams, 2015, p. 342).

Although hashtag feminism is said to have provided all women with a platform to advocate for gender equity, critiques of this form of activism say that although it is theoretically more inclusive, it still leaves out the voices of some segments of the population, particularly without access to the Internet and, therefore, no access on the platforms where hashtag feminism is taking place. Another critique of hashtag feminism is that participants also do not take into consideration those who may have access to the Internet but lack the digital literacy to navigate platforms such as Twitter, which are constantly changing (Latina and Docherty, 2014, p. 1104).

Framing & Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda setting theory says, "The media are persuasive in focusing public attention on specific events, issues, and persons in determining the importance people attach to public matters" (Shaw, 2010, p. 96). In other words, the media determine what topics are relevant and should be talked about in the public. This theory highlights the media's role in determining what the public should be informed about and occurs as a cumulative effect; that is, the more a topic gains publicity, the more it is repeated in the news. Repetition of a topic is one way the media chooses which topics to show the public, and its effects are "more significant when an issue being covered lasts over a greater time interval, while others maintain that the greatest levels of influence occur when information has recently been assigned priority by the media" (Arguette, 2017, p. 39). In addition, agenda-setting is seen by some as "beneficial to the individual and society [because] it fulfills a need of the citizens to orientate themselves properly toward their environment…" (Shaw, 2010, p. 102).

Framing theory is also relevant when talking about social movements that emerge from different forms of new media. Framing theory is "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue to reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong, 2007, p. 104). This means that the media has the potential to shape and influence the way the public perceives and forms opinions about a certain issue. The way the media frames an issue "can have a marked impact on one's overall opinion" (Chong, 2007 p.106). In addition, framing theory also involves "the interaction between individuals' prior knowledge and predispositions" and offers the public "alternative ways of defining issues, endogenous to the political and social world" (DeVreese, 2005, p. 53).

This is important to consider because the common usage of the Internet and new media platforms allows communication "in almost real time" (Arguete, 2017, p. 39). It reflects the rise of citizen journalism through platforms like Twitter, where "citizen media [have] the ability of impacting the news agenda and of disseminating information traffic while challenging the mass media's centralized role as news deciders" (Arguete, 2017, p. 51). This suggests that there is a two-way relationship where the media decide what the public should see, and that the public also determines what is relevant as well. This concept is reflected on digital platforms like Twitter, where "users do not require a media stimulus to discuss issues which are meddled in everyday life" because the content is user generated. Agenda-setting and framing theories, as are displayed on Twitter and other weblogs, can then be seen as "a reflection of the public agenda" (Aruguete, 2017, p. 43).

Research Questions

The literature shows that there has been a significant conversation about the impact new media platforms like Twitter have in social change movements. It points out how certain social issues like sexual assault, gender equity, and women's empowerment are framed by social media and how they, in turn, reflect the opinions of the public on these specific issues.

As part of what some feminist media scholars would categorize as hashtag feminism, #MeToo and #TimesUp also reflect how Twitter can be used to advocate for gender equity. What the literature does not show is how these social movements address issues that are pertinent to the lives of women of color. In regards to the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement specifically, this paper will attempt to address this gap in the literature by examining how both movements address issues of sexual harassment and abuse specifically among people of color. It will do so by answering the following questions:

RQ1: How do both the #MeToo and #TimesUp campaign talk about women of color in relation to issues of sexual abuse and harassment?

RQ2: What salient themes emerge from the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement?

RQ3: Are communities of color talked about on days (such as International Women's Day and Equal Pay Day) that are supposed to be about all women? How are these larger movements being related to (or not) to #MeToo and #TimesUp?

III. Methods

This study uses a qualitative content analysis, which can be defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). Tweets were gathered that contained the #MeToo or #TimesUp hashtags, then analyzed for emergent themes, and for the type of narrative that formed around both of these movements, in particular, in relation to women of color.

The top tweets that contained "#MeToo" and "#TimesUp" were analyzed for one particular day: International Women´s Day. The tweets featured on the "Top Tweets" page on Twitter are those tweets that "catch the attention of other users" and are identified as "the tweets with the highest velocity beyond expectations" (McGee, 2010). In total, 132 tweets were collected. This date (March 8, 2018) was also four days after the Oscar Awards Ceremony, where actresses Ashley Judd, Salma Hayek, and Annabella Sciorra – all of whom made significant contributions to the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement– came together and made a speech about the importance of spreading awareness about the sexual assault and abuse faced, primarily by women, in the United States and around the world.

Of the 132 tweets, #MeToo was mentioned 78 times, while #TimesUp was mentioned 72 times, and the hashtags were often used in conjunction with each other. Tweets were coded into different categories such as: politics, media, or stories of sexual assault. A thematic analysis then was conducted that observed how the narrative surrounding women of color was constructed. In particular, hashtags such as #WOCAffirmation, and #intersectionality, were examined to see if they were used in addition to the hashtags #MeToo and #TimesUp.

A second round of 31 tweets was collected on April 10, 2018, which is recognized as Equal Pay Day. This day was almost exactly one month after the first round of data collection and was also chosen intentionally because of the focus of the gender pay gap that is recognized as a significant women's issue ("The gender pay gap by the numbers," 2018).

IV. Findings

From an analysis of 132 tweets from International Women's Day (March 8, 2018), and 31 tweets from Equal Pay Day (April 10, 2018), there are several interesting findings that emerge. A quantitative summary is presented first, followed by an interpretation of the qualitative results.

International Women's Day

From tweets that were collected on International Women's Day, 27 (20.5 percent) out of the 132 specifically referenced in some way –whether through words or pictures– women of color and tied this reference back to either the #MeToo or the #TimesUp movements. A total of eight tweets used only words to reference women of color. Posts under this category included, but were not limited to, words like "intersectionality" or included hashtags such as #diversity or #WomenofColor (Figure 1). A total of 20 tweets used only pictures or some symbol that included women of color.
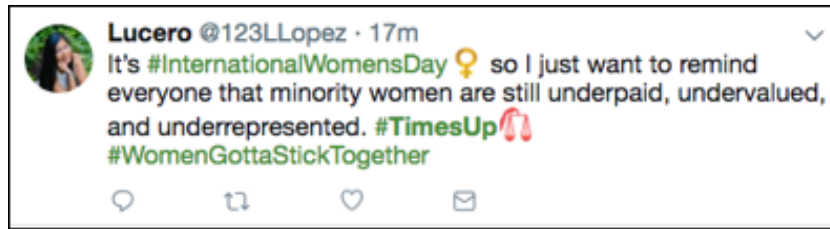
Figure 1.

Out of the 132 tweets, 39 (30 percent) were a response to issues related to sexual assault or violence in the media that tied these events to the larger #MeToo or #TimesUp movements through hashtags. Some examples of tweets that fell under this category referenced actor Terry Crews (*Figure 2*) and the news surrounding his sexual assault experience, and tweets that linked to articles that explored how the #MeToo movement works in Korea (*Figure 3*).

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Also, 26 tweets (20 percent) out of the 132 tweets specifically mentioned women's experiences with sexual assault, abuse, or harassment, but only one tweet out of those 26 mentioned this experience specifically in relation to women of color. Thirty-one (23.5%) out of the 132 tweets that were analyzed were in some way related to the politics, the policies, or the laws that surrounded the issue of women's rights in court in relation to issues of sexual harassment and abuse. Some of these tweets also referenced political figures and their ties to this issue (*Figure 4*).

Figure 4.

Equal Pay Day

For this section, tweets were searched that had the hashtag #EqualPayDay along with at least one of #MeToo, #TimesUp, #Diversity, #Intersectionality, or #Inclusivity. This means that this research only collected tweets about #EqualPayDay that actually included some aspect of intersectionality or of the social movements under study (#MeToo and #TimesUp).

Of the 31 tweets collected about #EqualPayDay following the procedure described above, 25 tweets (81 percent) mentioned women of color in some capacity, 6 tweets (19 percent) mentioned the #TimesUp movement, and 13 tweets (42 percent) mentioned the #MeToo movement (*Figure 5*). Of these same tweets, only 12 related this day to both women of color and the larger #MeToo and #TimesUp movement. Although the results show there were high mentions of women of color, this is because only a very small sample size (31 out of more than 7,000 top tweets with #EqualPayDay from April 10) was intentionally collected to see what kind of conversation emerged concerning people of color on this particular day.
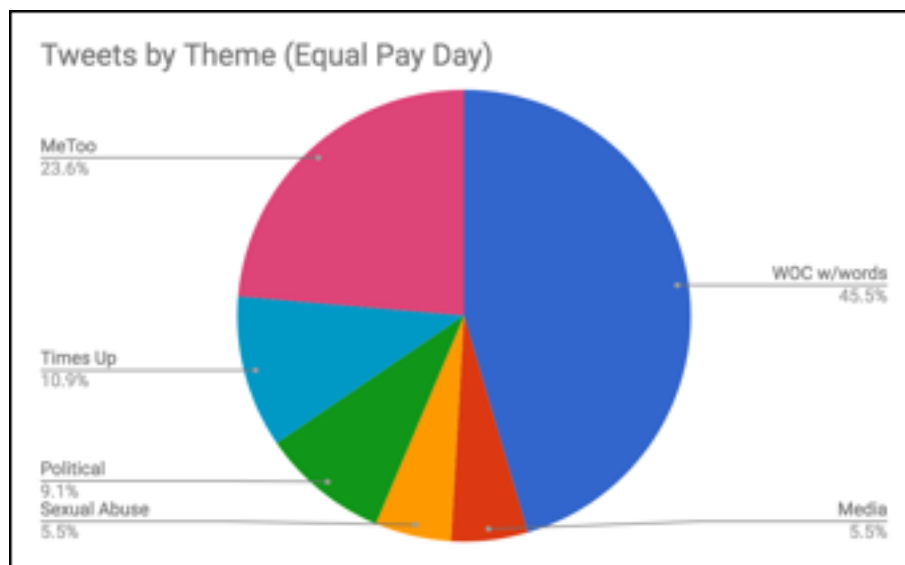

Figure 5.

V. Discussion

Findings from this study suggest a scarcity in the description, portrayal, representation and inclusion of women of color in both the #MeToo and the #TimesUp movements. From the first round of data, which was collected on International Women's Day, there were not many tweets that specifically mentioned women of color from either movement. This suggests that women of color and their specific experiences with sexual abuse and harassment are not being discussed in these campaigns in a substantial way. This aligns with previous findings and reports from various news sources that say that the #MeToo movement "hasn't represented [women of color's] stories" (Prois & Moreno, 2018).

When women of color are mentioned in some capacity, it is sometimes through the use of hashtags such as #intersectionality, but even more so in their use of images and symbols that feature popular figures and women of color (for example, see Figure 6). While, according to the Center for American Progress, women of color are about one-third of all women in the United States, they are mentioned in less than one-third of the tweets related to these movements (Kerby, 2012). While mentioning "women," in a tweet about #MeToo or #TimesUp does not necessarily exclude women of color, at the same time it does not reflect the particular circumstances and challenges that women of color face regarding sexual assault or salary disparities, to name a few of the problems that impact women more often than men, and women of color more often than white women, as previously described in the literature review.

Figure 6.

The lack of conversation surrounding women of color also was reflected in the second round of data collection from Equal Pay Day. Although it has been shown that women make less money than men, even in similar jobs, women of color make significantly less than white women, as some of the tweets collected did demonstrate (*Figure 7*). In general though, there is scant talk about women of color receiving equal pay in tweets, regardless of whether or not they were tied to the broader #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.
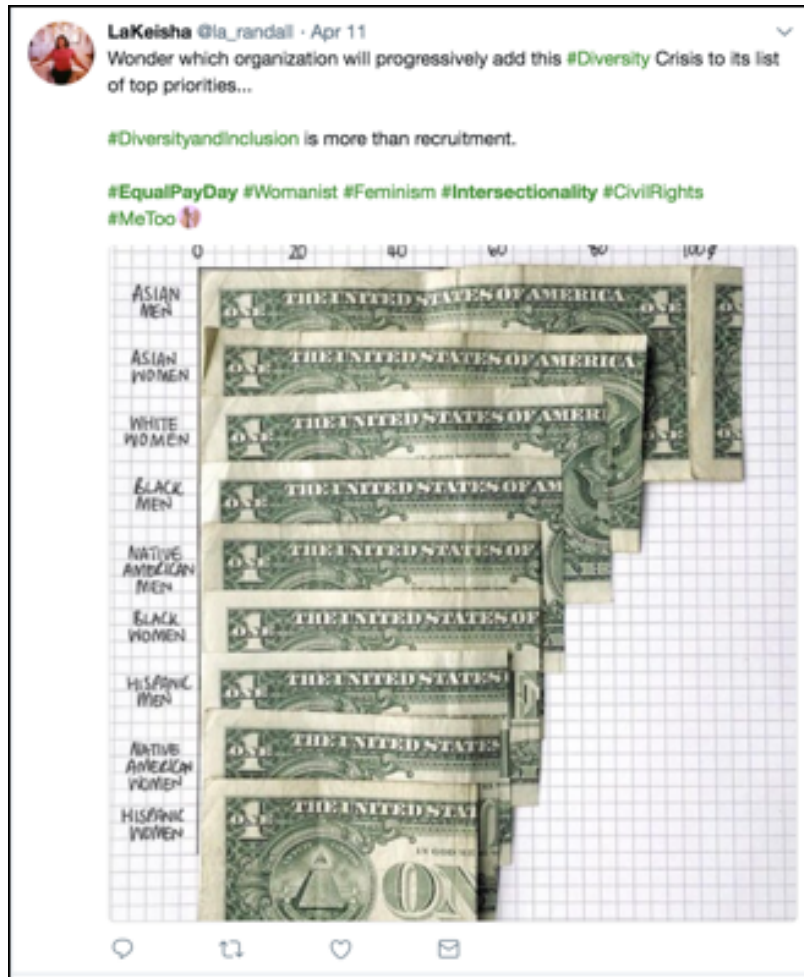
Figure 7.

Some salient themes in the tweets included a push toward policy changes, and demands from women for equal rights. Messages that advocated for gender equity and equal representation in government were predominant in the tweets that were collected on both International Women's Day and Equal Pay Day. There were also a number of tweets expressing frustration over the Trump administration. While several tweets referenced their disdain for the president, other tweets coming from a more conservative angle disregarded and had a negative view of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.

The lack of attention to global issues and a narrow focus on women's issues in the United States are other themes that emerged from the tweets. From the tweets that were collected on International Women's Day, there were only a few that focused on women who live internationally (which may have also contributed to the lack of representation of women who are not white). Many of the tweets collected from this day seemed to lack attention to global women's issues, and remained focused on the plight of women in the United States, where the life conditions and the struggles might not resemble the ones of women in other parts of the world. However, there were a few tweets that were in different languages and talked about how the #MeToo movement was taking shape in Korea and Spain.
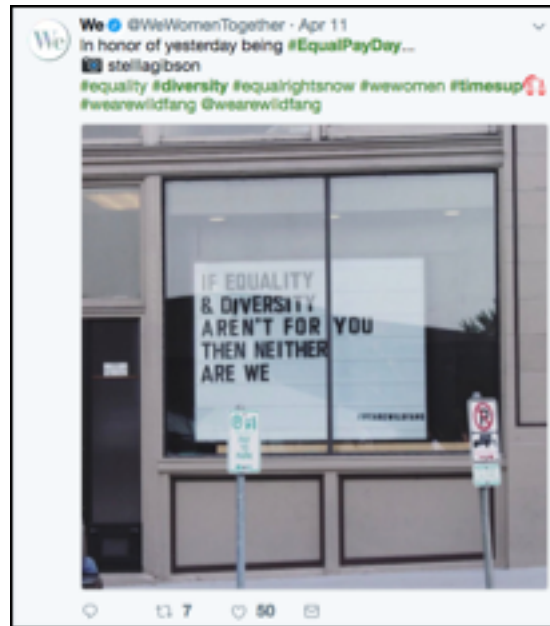
Figure 8.

From the few times women of color were mentioned in the tweets that were collected on both International Women's Day and Equal Pay Day, communities of color were not a substantial part of the conversation/narrative, even though these conversations were taking place on the days that were supposed to be about the equality of all women.

As previously discussed, women of color intentionally strived to insert themselves into the conversation as a way of reminding white women that women of color exist and that their struggles are as real as the ones that are part of the dominant narrative (Figure 8). Some of the tweets that were intentional about mentioning women of color also took the time to recognize the accomplishments of women of color (Figure 9); however, these were relatively few in number.

Additionally, the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements used International Women's Day and Equal Pay Day as opportunities to continue the conversation concerning sexual assault and harassment against women. This helped to keep the movements relevant and gain traction but also connected them to the larger push for gender equity.

Figure 9.

V. Conclusion

The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements serve as opportunities for all women to enter the conversation about issues regarding women's rights and the struggles they face with sexual abuse and harassment on a daily basis. While this may be the case, this study brings into question who exactly these equal rights are being advocated for, and whose story is being told. Are they rights for all women or just for white women?

This study suggests there needs to be a more intentional inclusion of women of color in the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements if they really want to advocate for equal rights for everyone. This inclusion needs to be one where women of color are specifically recognized and are not actively reminding the dominant audience that they exist. The lack of conversation surrounding women of color on these two days, which are supposed to be about all women, is a missed opportunity to be inclusive of not only women of color, but also of global issues that affect women in other parts of the world. The online sharing of advocacy efforts like the ones of #MeToo and #TimesUp demonstrates the power that social media –specifically Twitter– has in facilitating and highlighting women's experiences. While conversations are not as inclusive as they could be, Twitter offers a platform to women of color to have their voices heard and gives them a chance to share their story to contribute to a narrative that affects women all over.

As with any research project, this study has some limitations. One is the small sample size might not be representative of the larger #MeToo and #TimesUp movements as a whole. Another limitation in this study is the potential existence of some level of bias in the coding process. What the researcher may have thought that counted as representative of women of color may not be exactly the same as what another coder would have focused on when analyzing the tweets. Textual elements are more straightforward when coding however, because the coding procedure notes particular hashtags and terms, such as #WOC, "women of color," or "intersectional," and it is likely that any coder would have noticed those elements, regardless of who the coder was.

Additionally, the tweets were collected on days where people were most likely to be thinking about women's issues, which can skew the frequency and depth of the content that was produced on these days, and this content might not reflect the conversations surrounding the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements on normal days.

This limitation, nonetheless, opens a potential avenue for further research: To analyze the portrayal of women of color over a larger time period (for instance, several months instead of specific commemorative days), and to make sure that no special circumstances or out-of-the-ordinary events happen during those months. Another idea for future research could go the opposite way: To analyze the portrayals during a special moment for women, such as the Women's March or around the time of some other event of this nature, to understand the positions and perspectives of the most invested activists on these topics.

Acknowledgments

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