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Women Tweet on Violence: From #YesAllWomen to #MeToo

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Abstract

From the earliest feminist press to Twitter, women have used technology to create and sustain narratives that demand attention and redress for gendered violence. Herein we argue that the #MeToo boom was made possible by the digital labor, consciousness-raising, and alternative storytelling created through the #YesAllWomen, #SurvivorPrivilege, #WhyIStayed, and #TheEmptyChair hashtag networks. Each of these hashtags highlight women's experiences with interpersonal and institutionally-enabled violence and each was precipitated by high-profile news events. Alongside an examination of Twitter networks, we consider the social and cultural conditions that made each hashtag significant at particular moments, examining the ideological and political work members of these hashtag networks perform. We find that feminist hashtags have been successful in creating an easy-to-digest shorthand that challenges and changes mainstream narratives about violence and victimhood.

Introduction

In legal, cultural, and mediated discourse, gendered violence has largely been represented and responded to as an individual problem for both perpetrators and victims. This (mis)understanding has worked along axes of gender, race, class, and sexual hierarchies to silence and normalize violence in a variety of contexts (Lafree 1989; Moorti 2001; Richie 2017; Durazo 2016; Meyers 1996). Women who survive

violence are often questioned on sartorial and locational decisions while men are rarely held accountable for their violent behavior or are understood as individual bad actors. Intimate partner violence is often labeled a ‘private issue,’ while law enforcement officials sometimes perpetuate harm on those already victimized, women who fight back are often imprisoned, queer and trans people are rarely considered legitimate victims, and critiques of the cultural values that disable effective interventions are obscured. In the Digital Age, these phenomena are reproduced online, where women are often targeted by violent practices like trolling, doxxing, and swatting, which moves online violence into the offline world (Poland 2016; Manne 2017).

Simultaneously, women’s rights activists have long centered critiques of the systemic and everyday normalcy that connects misogyny and violence. From the temperance movement to the ‘sex wars’ of the early 1990s, women have developed alternative communication channels and self-created and sustained projects — for example, self-published periodicals, alternative music festivals, and ‘special-interest’ advocacy organizations. Like media before, the web has also been repurposed as a space for critique. For survivors of violence, the internet has enabled networks of solidarity beyond geographical boundaries and consciousness-raising without physical risk. These networks have responded to and spurred offline efforts that include policy interventions, the formation of activist organizations and events, and some of the most visible political and cultural debates about gender in our times. Further the public nature of the web and technological infrastructures that enable virality have introduced new possibilities for feminist infiltration of the public sphere and the centering of women most at the margins. Before the popularization of Twitter, for example, a photoblog called **Hollaback** (<https://www.ihollaback.org/>) ! became a space for people who experienced street harassment to share photos of their assailants online. The anonymous website expanded to include social media accounts with tens of millions of followers and offline chapters in different cities and countries.

Our research focuses on the networks and narratives that formed around hashtags on Twitter from 2014-2018, where a growing number of people, connected by hashtags and shared experiences that inspire their deployment, amplify messages central to feminist critiques of violence. These networks offer cathartic release, build solidarity, and make consequential demands on a still violently patriarchal society.

#YesAllWomen: The Building Blocks of Hashtag Solidarity

On May 23, 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger, stabbed his three roommates to death before embarking on a shooting spree near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara that left three more dead and fourteen injured. Rodger exchanged gunfire with police before fatally shooting himself in the head. His manifesto and YouTube videos, which cited a desire to retaliate against women who would not date him, disdain for immigrants, and disgust for white women who date men of color, was circulated by many news outlets. A copy of his last video remains on YouTube today with nearly a million views and has served as dangerous inspiration for online ‘men’s rights’ and ‘incel’ movements that the Southern Poverty Law Center recently added to their list of hate groups (Southern Poverty Law Center 2018).

Rodger’s violence sparked a national debate about men’s entitlement and violent behavior towards women. Writers at popular outlets like Slate and Salon, for example, wrote about Rodger’s violence as the consequence of the social pressure men are taught to exert over women (Hess and Keating 2014; Lisa Hickey 2014; Hess 2014). On these sites, and in response to social media posts and discussions, male readers and commentators quickly argued that not all men feel or behave this way. Using the hashtag #NotAllMen created by Twitter user @sassycrass a year earlier, feminists in turn mocked the recurrent practice of individual men distancing themselves from misogynistic violence by insisting that they are exceptions. On May 24, 2014, user @gildedspine, started the hashtag #YesAllWomen to re-center women’s shared experiences of sexism and misogyny. Within four days, #YesAllWomen had been tweeted more than a million times.

At its peak, #YesAllWomen appeared in over 60,000 tweets an hour. The oldest and largest of the hashtags we examine in this article, #YesAllWomen trended in late May, 2014, following the discovery of Rodger’s manifesto. During our observation window (May 23, 2014 – June 30, 2015) the hashtag was tweeted by over one million distinct accounts connected by almost 5 million retweets and mentions. Our data include a 10% random sample of tweets contacting #YesAllWomen gathered from a Twitter decahose stream (Enterprise API) between May 23, 2014 and June 30, 2015. These data included 101,822 unique users connected by 457,824 retweet and mention links. In the network visualization (below), users are represented as nodes connected by directed retweet and mention links. Due to the size of the network, the visualization is limited to users

who were retweeted and/or mentioned 20+ times in the data collection period. The hashtag trended quickly, with one-quarter of the tweets we observed appearing in the first day, and nearly two-thirds within the first week. #YesAllWomen remained popular for another two weeks, an unusually long duration compared with others discussed below.

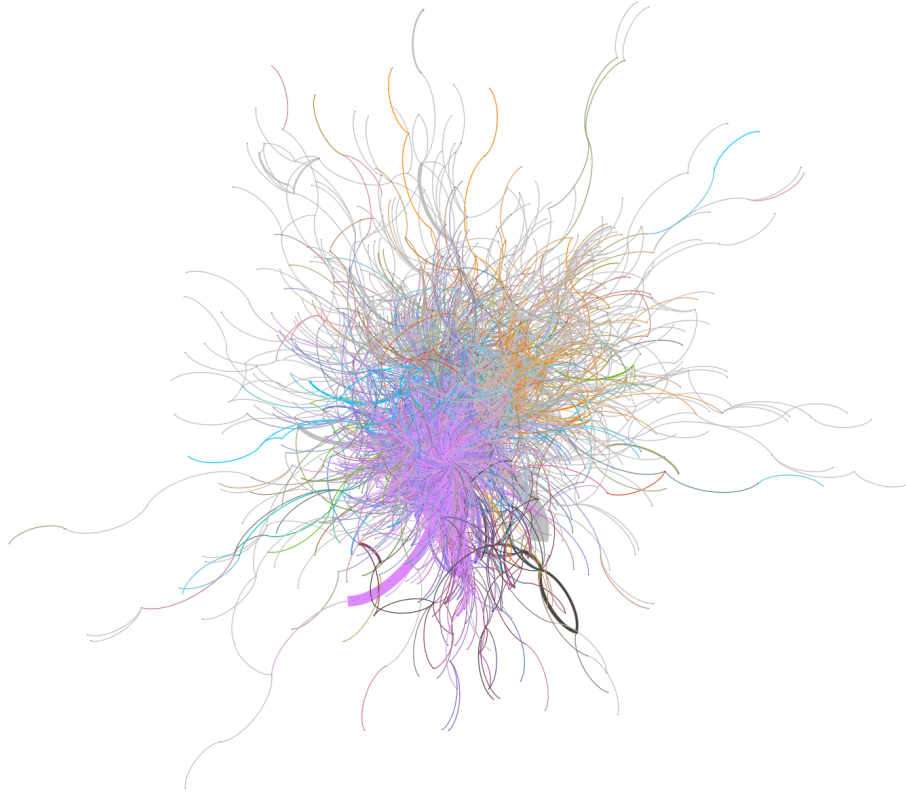


Figure 1. Graph illustrating #YesAllWomen network. Nodes are individual Twitter users, links are retweet and mention connections, colors illustrate sub-sets of users who interact with one another more often than with others in the network; note the dense pink cluster where #YesAllWomen originated. The graph was generated using Gephi (0.9.2) using the Yifan Hu Proportional force-directed graph layout algorithm (Hu, 2005).

Though most popular in the US and UK, people geolocated all over the world used the hashtag. #YesAllWomen often appeared alongside its instigating hashtag, #NotAllMen, as well as associated political and cultural hashtags, such as #feminism and #WarOnWomen, a phrase popularized by US Senators Nancy Pelosi and Barbara Boxer to highlight anti-woman policy efforts like those of U.S. Republicans to defund Planned Parenthood. Thus, #YesAllWomen and its co-occurring hashtags connected specific and local political dynamics to global experiences of patriarchal hegemony, rape culture, and misogyny.

The #YesAllWomen network became a space for women to candidly discuss experiences with sexism and find solidarity in others' tweets. As author Soraya Chemaly tweeted, '#notallmen practice violence against women but #YesAllWomen live with the threat of male violence. Every. Single. Day. All over the world.' By illustrating the everyday nature of patriarchal and misogynistic thinking, #YesAllWomen documented the impact of gendered violence, demanded that defensive men sit and listen, and created rhetorical kinship among women. The popularity of #YesAllWomen illustrates how early logics of activist slogans and feminist discourse documented by scholars like Beins (2010) have moved online, and effectively so. Further, just as activist utterances of solidarity have long worked as a form of interpellation in which collective ideological identities are built, so too, we suggest, does this process work in online networks (Althusser 1972; Butler 1993).

As Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) detailed, the hashtag #YesAllWomen worked ideologically to (1) to reprioritize the public's focus from narratives that downplay the prevalence of men committing violence (*vis a vis* the reactionary #NotAllMen hashtag) to narratives acknowledging the frequency of women's experiences with violence, (2) to illustrate the connection between everyday sexism and violence, and (3) to legitimize the concept of rape culture. While many early tweets in the network framed Rodger's gun violence as an example of the consequences of misogynistic culture, the network became much broader, with few of the most popular tweets overall mentioning the shooting. Members of the network used the tag to connect issues of gender inequality across economics, healthcare, criminal justice, and business to misogynistic violence and used illustrative language to show how the prevalence of all kinds of sexism normalizes violence against women.

Other popular tweets in the network offered, 'Because when a guy kills six people because he's a virgin and women reject him, he's met with sympathy. #YesAllWomen' and '#YesAllWomen are taught safety tips to prevent rape but not all men are taught about consent.'^[1] #YesAllWomen was covered extensively in traditional media outlets, with cable news segments and front page reporting in prominent print publications like *Time*, *People*, NPR, and MSNBC. The success of this hashtag can be measured in both its popularity and the other hashtags and online debates it spurred. In addition to responding to #NotAllMen narratives, #YesAllWomen spurred #YesAllWhiteWomen – a hashtag that called for important intra-community debate about the erasure of women of color in feminist histories and within the most popularized tweets using the hashtag itself. Together, the users in the #YesAllWomen network provided a cultural

intervention that refused to accept the violence perpetrated by Rodgers as an aberration, instead connecting it to the ways misogyny is normalized and even celebrated in American culture.

The #YesAllWomen network and the others we examine herein are part of what has come to be known as ‘Feminist Twitter’ (Freelon et al. 2018). Feminist Twitter is diverse, influenced heavily — like the hashtags we examine herein — by women of color. It existed in various forms long before #YesAllWomen thanks to women and feminist allies online organically building subaltern publics through common concerns. As Susana Loza (2014) and Jackson and colleagues (2018) have previously noted, not all feminist hashtags reach, or are intended for, a general audience; women of color, queer, and trans women in particular have built rather insular — at least at first — hashtag communities and debates. Yet the public nature of Twitter means that these subaltern conversations can and do become the focus of public observation and comment, sometimes being appropriated or misrepresented along the way. #YesAllWomen appears to have opened the floodgates of this publicness of feminist hashtag activism — the length of time between the high-profile trending of feminist tags lessened remarkably around the same time in 2014 — while traditional media outlets began frequently running profiles on feminist Twitter debates and figures.

#SurvivorPrivilege: Documenting Lasting Consequences

On June 6, 2014, conservative commentator George Will wrote in an op-ed for *The Washington Post* that the way university administrators respond to sexual violence on campus, ‘make[s] victimhood a coveted status that confers privileges,’ and makes ‘victims proliferate’ (Will 2014). Will’s piece is clearly out of touch with data that shows sexual assault is not only underreported on college campuses but that survivors face lasting, damaging consequences as a result of often poorly implemented university student conduct policies (Moylan 2017; Stotzer and MacCartney 2016). In response, campus anti-rape activist Wagatwe Wanjunki tweeted, ‘The #SurvivorPrivilege of being too scared to leave my dorm room for fear of running into my perp.’ Wanjunki went on to detail other lasting consequences of her assault: ‘Where’s my survivor privilege? Was expelled & have \$10,000s of private student loans used to attend school that didn’t care I was raped.’ In a follow-up *Huffington Post* interview, Wanjunki discussed how her grades began to slip as a result of the assault. Rather than offer assistance, Tufts

University encouraged her to leave. It took her ten years to earn her bachelor's degree given the resulting financial burden (Kingkade 2014).

#SurvivorPrivilege trended less than a month after #YesAllWomen. The hashtag first appeared on June 9, 2014 and remained popular for several days, eventually appearing in over 20,000 tweets. Tweets continued occasionally in the weeks that followed, although nearly 87% were posted in the first week, and virtually no tweets containing the hashtag appeared after July 1, 2014. Our data include 1822 tweets sent by 268 unique users connected by 775 retweet and mention links. Though this is the smallest of the networks we examine here, many high-profile and central members of feminist Twitter contributed to this hashtag along with Wanjuki, including feminist commentators Zerlina Maxwell and Katie Klabusich. Feminist publications and digital media outlets also shared and spread the hashtag including *Mic* (formerly *PolicyMic*) and *Feministing*. *Mic*, for example, interviewed Wanjuki and featured the tweets of other Twitter users who shared horrific and lasting examples of their so-called #SurvivorPrivilege in action.

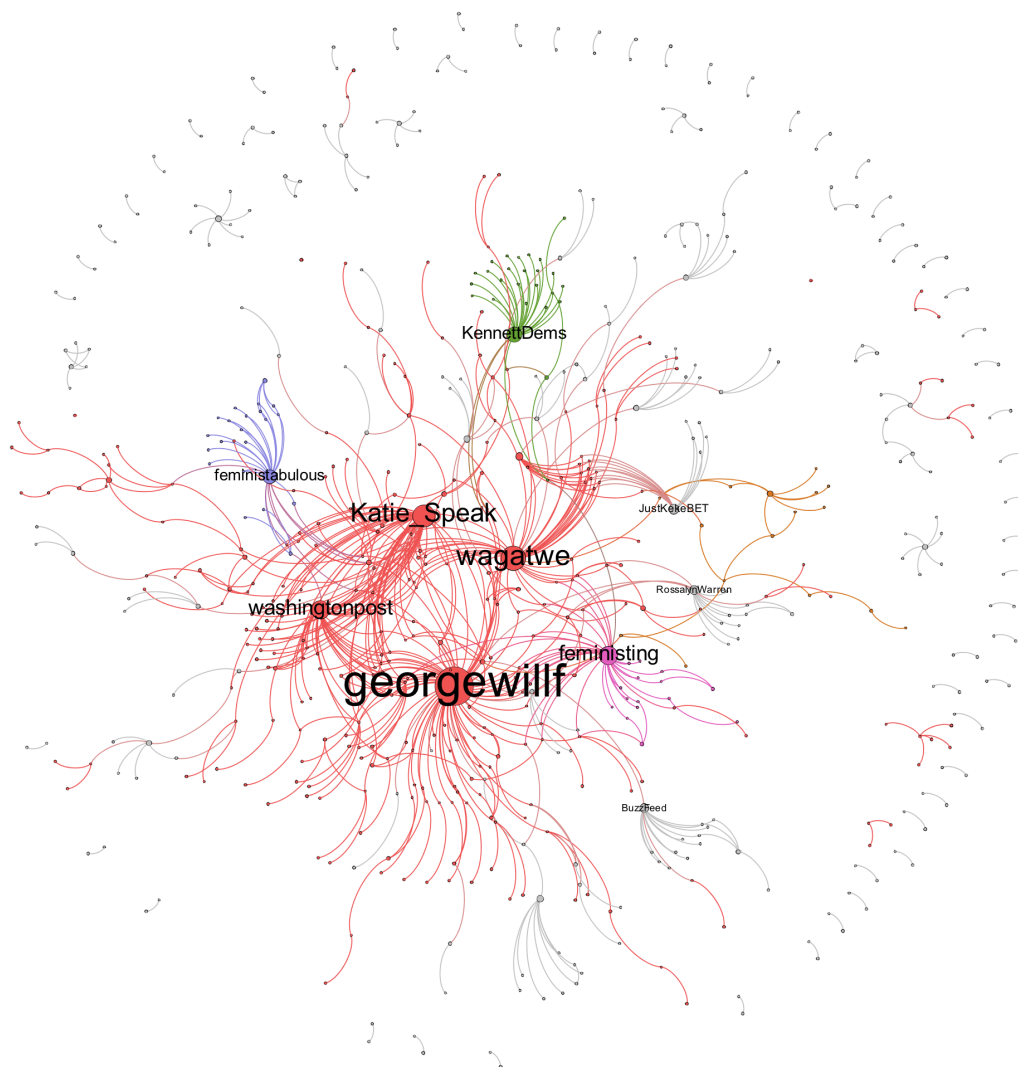


Figure 2. Graph illustrating #SurvivorPrivilege network. Nodes are individual Twitter users, links are retweet and mention connections, colors illustrate sub-sets of users who interact with one another more often than with others in the network, 10 most retweeted/mentioned nodes are labeled.

The hashtag was predominantly anchored by four accounts: George Will (@georgewill) and *The Washington Post* (@washingtonpost), author and source of the original article who were frequently mentioned in tweeted critiques, and Wagatwe Wanjuki (@wagatwe) and Katie Klabusich (@Katie_Speak) whose initial tweets critiquing Will were retweeted hundreds of times. Although Will's Twitter handle appeared most frequently in the #SurvivorPrivilege network (through mentions) he did not engage directly with the hashtag or resulting network. Indeed, the most popular co-occurring hashtags, #Rape, #RapeCulture, and #FireGeorgeWill, illustrate that the prevailing conversation in the network decisively pushed against Will's message.

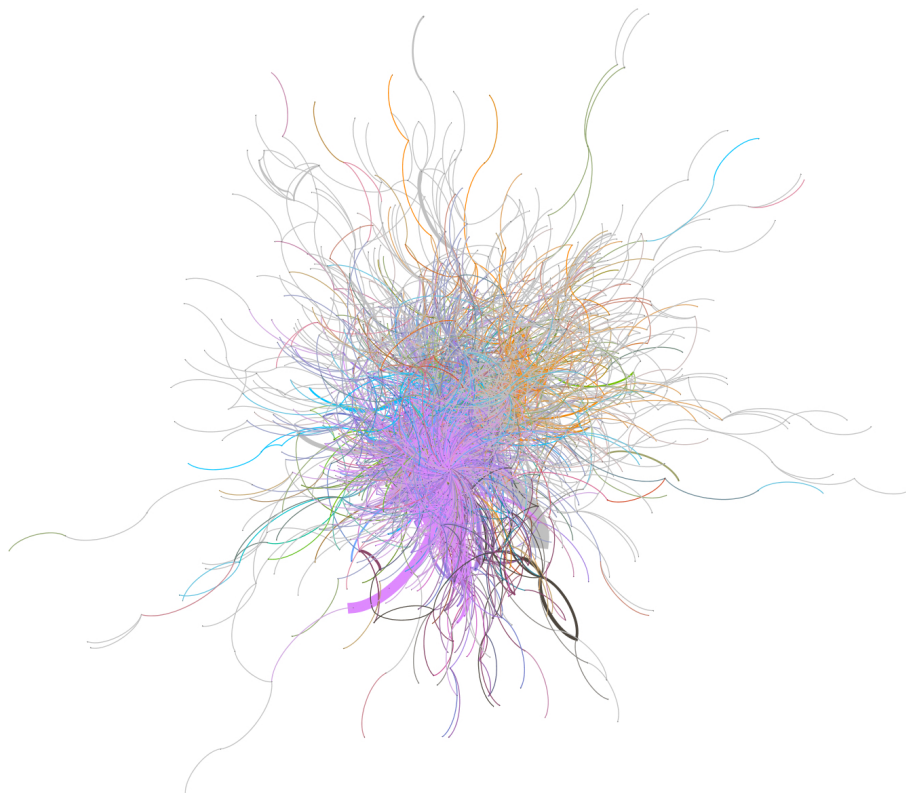


Figure 2. Graph illustrating #SurvivorPrivilege network. Nodes are individual Twitter users, links are retweet and mention connections, colors illustrate sub-sets of users who interact with one another more often than with others in the network, 10 most retweeted/mentioned nodes are labeled.

#SurvivorPrivilege is an example of the thoughtful media criticism that arises from feminist counterpublics. This media criticism specifically critiqued rape-apology and victim-blaming narratives that construct survivors, and specifically women survivors, as diabolical schemers who reap social reward for accusing men of predatory behaviors. Together, #SurvivorPrivilege tweets focused on (1) the lasting negative consequences women experience long after surviving victimization, and (2) critique of high-profile and mainstream narratives that work to victim blame or cast women as untrustworthy.

For example, one user tweeted: ‘#SurvivorPrivilege is actually finding solace in absolutely awful, triggering tweets because I know I’m not alone.’ Another wrote: ‘#SurvivorPrivilege was seeing my rapist every morning in the dining hall casually pouring himself cereal after he threatened to kill me.’ Klabusich tweeted, ‘The @washingtonpost column wasn’t just a “difference of opinion.” @georgewillf is contributing violent rhetoric and harm. #survivorprivilege,’ and feminist outlet *Feministing* shared their coverage of the story with the headline, ‘#SurvivorPrivilege shows George Will just how fun it is to be a rape survivor.’

Together the hashtag made the demand that women survivors be heard and that the severity of consequences faced by victims of violence be acknowledged.

#WhyIStayed: Expanding Victimhood

Three months later #WhyIStayed became an opportunity for survivors of intimate partner violence to share their stories. Following the September 8, 2014 release of surveillance video showing Baltimore Ravens football player Ray Rice's violent attack of his fiancé Janay Palmer in a casino elevator, many news media outlets engaged in egregious displays of victim-blaming. The same day, Fox News' "Fox & Friends" hosts argued that Palmer set a bad example to other women by following through on the marriage and staying with Rice throughout prior legal trouble. On air, reporter Brian Kilmeade quipped that Palmer should have 'taken the stairs' to avoid Rice (Boyle 2014). In a discussion of this news clip with fellow survivors on Twitter, Beverly Gooden wrote, 'I stayed because I thought it would get better. It never got any better. #WhyIStayed.' The same day, Gooden took to her blog to elaborate on why she created the hashtag. She **wrote** (<http://www.beverlygooden.com/hear/whyistayed>) :

For over a year, I was physically abused by my ex-husband. When TMZ released the video of Ray Rice punching, dragging, and spitting on his wife this morning, the internet exploded with questions about her. Why didn't she leave? Why did she marry him? Why did she stay? I can't speak for Janay Rice, but I can speak for Beverly Gooden. Why did I stay? Check out some of my reasons. Leaving was a process, not an event. And sometimes it takes awhile to navigate through the process. I believe in storytelling. I believe in the power of shared experience. I believe that we find strength in community. That is why I created this hashtag. I hope those tweeting using #WhyIStayed find a voice, find love, find compassion, and find hope.

Gooden's tweet and others' use of the hashtag were amplified as #WhyIStayed appeared over 100,000 times beginning on September 8, 2014. Our data include more than 13,000 of these tweets, 85% of which were posted in the week following Gooden's September 8 message. Like #SurvivorPrivilege, #WhyIStayed was relatively short lived with almost no new tweets appearing after a month had elapsed, suggesting that feminist hashtags that explicitly complicate tropes of victimhood stay popular only as long as the specific high-profile cases to which they are attached. The #WhyIStayed tweets were sent by 8,952 users connected by 8,663 retweets and featured messages about Rice and Palmer, domestic violence, and escaping forms of abuse that are far too often considered 'private.' The network centered on creator Gooden (@bevtgooden), who was retweeted

and mentioned twice as often as the next most popular users. While #WhyIStayed is one of the smaller networks examined here, it is nonetheless diverse including high-profile male writers like Daniel José Older and Judd Legum who used the hashtag in a form of allyship to share and highlight women's experiences, celebrities like actress Reagan Gomez-Preston (@ReaganGomez), influential members of feminist Twitter (e.g. Soraya Chemaly and Dana Bolger), advocacy organizations highlighting resources for domestic violence victims (e.g. @NOMOREorg and @KnowYourIX), and ordinary women sharing their own stories of abuse and survival.

In #WhyIStayed tweets, two primary narratives emerged that (1) countered popular victim-blaming narratives, and (2) highlighted toxic relational behaviors and warning signs as a form of public education. Thus, #WhyIStayed, like others here, responded to the cultural prevalence of victim-blaming narratives and the work such narratives do to obscure women's lived experiences. Women using the hashtag told chilling stories of men threatening to kill themselves if they left, men sleeping in front of barricaded doors to prevent their escape, and descriptions of tearful pleas and apologies from abusers that arrived alongside a barrage of manipulative blaming. Further, the hashtag offered community around experiences of violence that might otherwise lead to isolation and shame.

In the case of the emotional and psychological violence that accompanies physical abuse, the #WhyIStayed hashtag illustrated that victim-blaming narratives extend and model this interpersonal violence. As @feministabulous tweeted, 'It's not one day he hits you. It's everyday he works to make you smaller,' and @juddlegum shared the following infographic with his over 250,000 followers:

 **Judd Legum** ✓
@JuddLegum

Follow

#WhyIStayed infographic (via @marialiacalvo)

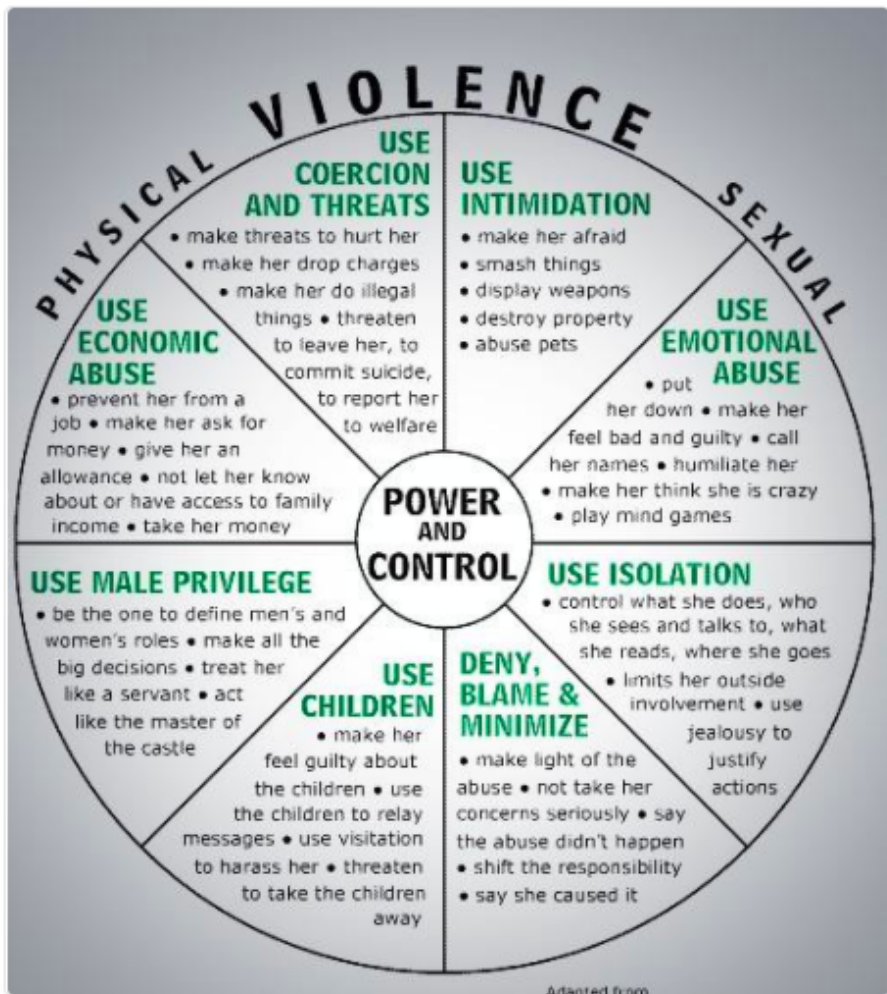


Figure 3. Judd Legum signal boosts infographic on abuse, power, and control in relation to #WhyIStayed

Safe Horizon, one of the nation's oldest domestic abuse hotlines, used the hashtag to share statistics on the startling rate of homelessness among women and families fleeing abuse. Think Progress, the news site run by the Center for American Progress Action Fund, shared statistics related to the frequent murder of women of color trying to flee domestic violence. This adoption of the hashtag by advocacy organizations and media is significant because it illustrates that these organizations follow and respond to discourses organically produced by ordinary citizens.



Figure 4. Safe Horizon and Think Progress tweet advocacy data on abuse

Together #WhyIStayed demanded a public hearing of survivors of intimate partner violence and worked discursively through storytelling and data sharing to expand definitions of legitimate victimhood that have long excluded women who experience abuse in the private sphere.

By September 10th, even Fox News' changed its tune, as their Social Buzz **segment** (<http://video.foxnews.com/v/3777983474001/>) included an on-air reading of several tweets with the hashtag. Other major news outlets including NPR, **CNN** (<http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/09/living/rice-video-why-i-stayed/index.html>), and **USA Today** (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/09/10/why-i-stayed-hashtag-twitter-ray-rice/15385027/>) covered the hashtag and featured survivors of intimate partner violence telling their own stories. In late October 2014, The NFL, Ray Rice's employer, tried to capitalize on the success of hashtag activism by using #NoMore in an ad campaign featuring league players offering messages about ending domestic abuse. That month feminist scholar and activist Beth Richie was recruited by the NFL to assist in coordinating an effort to address intimate partner violence within the league.

#TheEmptyChair: The Scale of Things

#TheEmptyChair serves as a remarkable example of hashtag creation by a male feminist ally. On July 27, 2015 *New York Magazine* ran a cover story that featured an image of 35 of the women who had come forward to detail abuse and assault at the hands of Bill Cosby. The powerful image showed each woman sitting in the same chair

looking out from the cover of the magazine. One empty chair at the end of the last row of women was used to ‘signif[y] the 11 other women who have accused Cosby of assault, but weren’t photographed for the magazine. But it also represents the countless other women who have been sexually assaulted but have been unable or unwilling to come forward’ (Cerone and Fader 2015). The cover was so compelling *New York Magazine’s* website crashed as an overwhelming number of people accessed and shared it.

Activist Bree Newsome and other Twitter users noted the visual power of the empty chair and comedian and journalist Elon James White started the hashtag #TheEmptyChair by sharing the cover image with only the hashtag and the hashtag #BillCosby. At the time of our writing this tweet only has 321 retweets and 168 likes — but what White did next garnered far more attention. After receiving a direct message from a rape survivor that read, ‘I can’t share my empty chair story bc I signed an NDA. needed the money more than justice, and he knew it.’ White agreed to share the tweet anonymously. His public tweet of this direct message launched a wave of others leading White to open his Twitter inbox so that anyone could message him privately with the understanding that he would post their story anonymously using his own Twitter handle.

White’s tweets prompted the rapid proliferation of #TheEmptyChair, resulting in over 40,000 tweets total. Our data include 4,275 tweets generated by 3,192 users connected by 3,551 retweets and mentions. Among the hashtags examined in this chapter, #TheEmptyChair was the shortest-lived, with nearly all of the tweets (91%) posted in three days following the July 27 *New York Magazine* story. The network was also disproportionately driven by a single user — almost 20% of all the tweets were authored by White or were retweets of his messages. White was retweeted more than three times as often as the next most-retweeted user. But notably, the tweets he shared, and which proliferated the network, were not generally in his voice, rather he used his platform, which includes 70,000+ followers, and the hashtag #TheEmptyChair to amplify the voices of hundreds of survivors who were too afraid to use their own handles. White’s activism and the anonymous tweets he shared spurred other Twitter users to directly shared their stories on the hashtag.

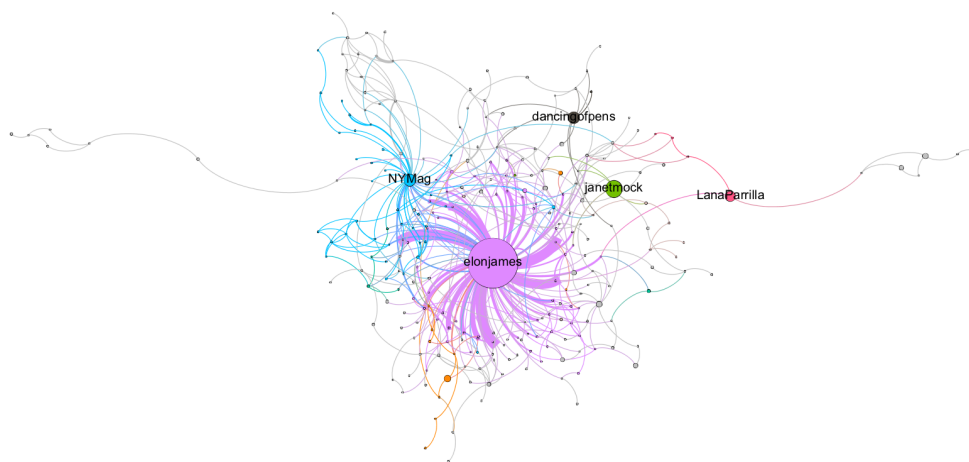


Figure 5. Graph illustrating #TheEmptyChair network. Nodes are individual Twitter users, links are retweet and mention connections, colors illustrate sub-sets of users who interact with one another more often than with others in the network, 5 most retweeted/mentioned nodes are labeled.

#TheEmptyChair worked primarily to show the scale of sexual violence and the scale at which survivors are silenced. It did this through two types of discourse, that which (1) affirmed belief in survivors and the value of women’s experience regardless of when (or if) they come forward, and (2) called attention to the often-invisible scope of the problem. This discourse again served as a correction to mainstream narratives that victim-blame by suggesting that women’s accounts of assaults, in this case due to time lags on reporting or anonymity, are unreliable. The stories attached to the hashtag offered important nuance illustrating that given how survivors are treated by media, the legal system, and the people affiliated with those who perpetrate violence against them, it is wholly understandable that they fear retribution and revictimization in the public sphere. White astutely noted in the midst of other’s stories he was sharing, ‘What’s fucking with me most is how many women, hell, how many women I KNOW sit in #TheEmptyChair because of how we treat rape victims.’

That countless women trusted White to share their stories anonymously despite knowing their identities shows the close kinship in the network, and the important work men can do as allies on issues related to violence against women. White, notably, had built a reputation as an ally in progressive political circles as host of “This Week in Blackness,” a multimedia platform including a blog and web-series through which he regularly highlighted the voices and work of Black women. White carefully removed identifying information from screenshots of the messages he received, choosing to let

these anonymous women speak for themselves without adding commentary to their stories.



Figure 6: A sample of #TheEmptyChair tweets shared by Elon James White

Like #WhyIStayed, #TheEmptyChair reflected a noticeable diversity of users both part of and outside of what is generally considered feminist Twitter. Journalist Jamil Smith also served as an ally in the network tweeting, ‘Do not wait for a man to speak to believe women who are already talking. Nothing to add. #TheEmptyChair.’ Trans activist Janet Mock, creator of the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs, tweeted, ‘#TheEmptyChair signals the women who couldn’t come forward mostly b/c we, as a culture, wouldn’t believe them.’ Journalist Emily Hauser shared her own reporting on the prevalence of rape culture, noting, ‘Men have always known that you don’t have to be beloved or famous to get away with rape... #TheEmptyChair.’ Writer and actress Pia Glenn offered simply, ‘It could be so many of us sitting in #TheEmptyChair.’

On April 26, 2018, almost three years after the *New York Magazine* cover story that iconized the image of the empty chair, Cosby was found guilty of three counts of indecent assault — a scratch on the surface of the overall accusations he has faced, but an important moment for women fearful that justice might never come. His conviction reenergized the hashtag #TheEmptyChair and prompted White to reflect on the experience. He tweeted that reading those 2015 tweets from women survivors, ‘destroyed my soul.’ He also added that, ‘Even with #metoo happening there are so many women still in #TheEmptyChair. Folks out here worrying about the men’s lives supposedly ruined while ignoring all the women who still can’t come forward because of how society still blames them for their own assault.’

#MeToo: The Tipping Point of Visibility

White's nod to the connection between #MeToo and #TheEmptyChair is important because it shows that these hashtags create a discernible genealogy that have important cultural resonances. #MeToo is also unique because it was an activist campaign before it was a hashtag. Sexual assault activist Tarana Burke started Me Too in 2007 through her non-profit Just Be Inc. to provide women and girls the opportunity to connect with other survivors and access the support they need. However, her work was almost erased with the adoption of #MeToo in hashtag form by actress Alyssa Milano.

On October 15, 2017 Milano responded to the growing discourse about sexual violence in Hollywood initially sparked by actresses coming forward about producer Harvey Weinstein's serial predatory behavior. Milano tweeted 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.' Milano's tweet, as we write, has over 50,000 likes. The difference in magnitude between Elon James White's initial call to acknowledge #TheEmptyChair and Milano's reintroduction of #MeToo is explained in part by the evolution of hashtags as a successful vehicle for movement building in addition to the significantly larger number of followers Milano and other celebrities who picked up and legitimized #MeToo share.

Further, the gender and racial politics of these hashtags and the communities from which they sprung tells another part of the story. Notably, Black women were speaking up about Cosby's sexual violence for decades, but their voices were not heard. It was not until another Black male comedian, Hannibal Buress, called Cosby a rapist during a 2014 stand-up show that many in the mainstream discovered the story. Women noted at the time that stories about Cosby's behavior were frequently shared by them without similar mainstream controversy or interest. Thus, Elon James White's 2015 act of solidarity with #TheEmptyChair is all the more powerful as it exposes the reality first laid bare by the response to Buress -that Black men who were seen as Cosby's in-group and who carried the benefits of credentialed masculinity were able to propel the conversation forward in ways that women previously could not. Similarly, Alyssa Milano, a wealthy, famous, white woman was able to garner a level of attention for #MeToo that none of the other hashtags examined here enjoyed. Yet, there is no doubt that without these prior hashtags the conversation that empowered even women in the most privileged positions to reveal acts of violence perpetrated against them would not have been as easily received.

The primary frame of #MeToo is one of solidarity and an insistence that stories about the personal are systemic and political. In their #MeToo stories, women are speaking to mainstream media, to patriarchal establishments, and directly to one another as a form of community building that works to alleviate the risk and fear associated with coming forward that #TheEmptyChair so eloquently illustrated. Like #YesAllWomen, much more scholarly and media attention has been paid to #MeToo than the other hashtags we examine here, in large part because of the high profile status of the celebrities connected to it, but we argue that the #MeToo boom was made possible by its predecessors and the digital labor, consciousness-raising, alternative storytelling, and organizing done by #YesAllWomen, #SurvivorPrivilege, #WhyIStayed, #TheEmptyChair and other hashtags and conversations about gendered violence pushed into visibility on Twitter.

Both #TheEmptyChair and #MeToo illustrate the power of cross-identity solidarities as Elon James White continues to use his platform to share the voices of women survivors and Milano quickly sought to align with Burke in orchestrating the next moves for #MeToo. Following an immense amount of press around #MeToo thanks to the high-profile identities of many who responded to Milano's call, Burke and other women of color activists partnered with Hollywood actresses and started a new campaign using the hashtag #TimesUp, putting men and other perpetrators on notice that time is up on the silence shrouding their abusive behaviors. At the January 2018 75th Annual Golden Globe Awards, A-list actresses invited Burke and fellow women's rights activists to the red carpet, where they donned all black and spoke out about the need for significant changes in not only the entertainment industry but among all industries in which women are sexually exploited under the guise of naturalized labor conditions. Since the hashtagification of #MeToo, Harvey Weinstein has been removed from his organization and has been **charged** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-people-harvey-weinstein/hollywood-mogul-weinstein-pleads-not-guilty-to-rape-charges-idUSKCN1J115J>) with multiple counts of rape and sexual misconduct in the Manhattan Supreme Court.

Conclusion: The Personal Hashtag is Political

As we have shown here, feminist hashtags have been successful in creating an easy-to-digest shorthand that speaks to complex concerns. Each hashtag we examine, #YesAllWomen, #SurvivorPrivilege, #TheEmptyChair, #WhyIStayed, and #MeToo, can be understood as part of a larger cultural intervention which responded as needed to high-profile news stories and events, allowing the counter-narratives of the feminist

public sphere to infiltrate the mainstream public sphere. This illustrates the adaptability of digital feminism as it enacts traditions of feminist storytelling. Together these hashtags provide a source of discursive and collective energy that catalyzes both on and offline movement work, leading to powerful cultural repercussions and yes, change.

Further, these hashtags embody the feminist demand that ‘the personal is political,’ and illustrate how storytelling on Twitter raises consciousness, creates solidarity, and promulgates new cultural narratives. The widely observed ‘#MeToo moment’ is not so much a moment but a loud chorus of voices that has, for years, been using Twitter and other social networks to tell women’s stories about violence in a way that challenges the simplistic frames relied on by mainstream media and politicians. In these networks women tell their own stories, women are believed, male and celebrity allies helped to elevate ordinary women’s voices, and women — experts in their own lives — offer nuance to all too often oversimplified and inaccurately reported issues of violence and victimhood.

Finally, we find it significant that the most high-profile and resonant feminist hashtags of the last six years, including those examined here, were started by or inspired by the online and offline labor of women of color. This speaks quite profoundly to the history of Black and third-world feminisms in offering creative, inclusive, and succinct critiques of and solutions to gendered violence and speaks to the ways women of color have found new opportunities to speak truth to power in the digital age.

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Authors Note

We have only named users throughout this article who meet two criteria: (1) have public Twitter accounts, and (2) can be classified as public figures or have opted to speak with journalists about their experiences using their real names. In other cases, user’s handles have been removed to protect them from unnecessary scrutiny. [[1]]

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Footnotes (returns to text)

1.

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