

Unravelling the Threads of Digital Feminist Activism: A Critical Review of #WhyIStayed

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Abstract

This review article delves into the nuanced realm of digital feminist activism, focusing on two seminal journal articles that dissect the complexities of hashtag feminism within the digital landscape. Specifically, the examination centres on the #WhyIStayed hashtag, a poignant response to a domestic violence incident involving an NFL player and his girlfriend in 2014. The articles under scrutiny are “Hope in a Hashtag: the Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed” by Clark (2016) and “Feminist Activism in Digital Space: Postfeminist Contradictions in #WhyIStayed” by Jasmine R. Linabary, Danielle J. Corple, and Cheryl Cooky (2019).

Clark’s exploration unfolds as a case study, framing #WhyIStayed as a form of “social drama” within the broader context of feminist movements. Employing a qualitative analysis of tweets related to the Ray Rice controversy, Clark examines the evolution of hashtag feminism, emphasizing its potential as a compelling storytelling mechanism. The analysis draws on a theoretical framework inspired by McFarland’s model of collective action, providing a structured lens to understand the dramatic elements inherent in hashtag activism. While Clark’s work enriches our understanding of hashtag feminism, the argument could benefit from more concrete examples illustrating the lasting impact of successful hashtags on sociopolitical change.

In contrast, Linabary, Corple, and Cooky’s article adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing 51,577 unique tweets and semi-structured interviews to unravel the postfeminist contradictions within #WhyIStayed. Their analysis exposes the tensions and complexities arising from individual tweets, offering insights into the liberating or oppressive nature of the discourse. The study identifies three core themes—Contradictions of Voice, Multivocality, and Visibility—providing a nuanced understanding of the contradictions inherent in hashtag feminism. The authors critically engage with the potential depoliticization of feminist activism in the digital realm, highlighting the need for a reimagining of feminist strategies within contemporary political landscapes.

Both articles position themselves within the expanding field of Digital Humanities, an interdisciplinary domain leveraging digital tools, techniques, and methodologies to analyze, interpret, and explore the vast corpus of humanistic data available on social networking sites, particularly Twitter, profoundly influencing everyday life. The focus on English texts within the Twitter platform is paramount in both studies. One of the articles goes an extra mile, substituting a few words to maintain the anonymity of the user, showcasing ethical considerations in digital research. Both articles rigorously analyze the content of these 140-character messages, employing thematic analysis to draw conclusions and map emerging themes and categories.

Moreover, the articles under review actively explore new media messages and the novel meanings that emerge in digital society when associated with a specific hashtag movement. This analysis becomes a conduit for connecting the virtual to the real socio-political landscape, unraveling hidden narrative forms within small media messages. The larger narrative forms that surface when these media messages are

analyzed in tandem during a given span of time reveal the dynamic interplay between the virtual and the tangible realms. The comparative analysis accentuates the shared focus on hashtag feminism while revealing differences in methodology, sample size, and analytical techniques. Both articles underscore the dynamic nature of digital media and feminist discourse over time, emphasizing the evolving landscape of online activism within the interdisciplinary framework of Digital Humanities. While Clark's work calls for more nuanced research into the broader implications of online speech, Linabary, Corple, and Cooky advocate for a critical engagement with postfeminist contradictions to reshape feminist activism in the current political moment.

In conclusion, these articles contribute significantly to our understanding of hashtag feminism and digital feminist activism, offering valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of online spaces. This review provides a comprehensive exploration of each article, highlighting their contributions, limitations, and the evolving nature of digital activism within the interdisciplinary field of Digital Humanities. The examination of #WhyIStayed serves as a timely and relevant case study, sparking continued dialogue and critical engagement in the ever-evolving landscape of digital feminist activism.

Keywords: Hashtag, Digital Feminist Activism/Hashtag Feminism, Twitter, Postfeminist Contradictions, Narrative Forms, Online Activism

Introduction

“Hashtag activism happens when large numbers of postings appear on social media under a common hashtagged word, phrase or sentence with a social or political claim. The temporal unfolding of these mutually connected postings in networked spaces gives them a narrative form and agency (Goubin, 2016)”. This review article delves into the intricacies of two pivotal journal articles that engage with hashtag feminism or feminist activism in the realm of digital spaces. With Twitter as their site, they follow a case study approach to broaden the research available on the usage of personal experiences by users, especially in cases where the activism is not backed by any organization or funding body. The case undertaken for these articles is the #WhyIStayed, a hashtag that started in response of the leakage of a domestic violence footage of an NFL Player and his then girlfriend in September 2014. The hashtag was not in response of the act of domestic violence when it was first reported, but a reaction to the leaked video. Like any other activist movement, #WhyIStayed also had its share of antagonistic views from a number of Twitter users.

The two articles reviewed are “Hope in a Hashtag: the Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed” by Rosemary Clark and “Feminist Activism in Digital Space: Postfeminist Contradictions in #WhyIStayed” by Jasmine R. Linabary, Danielle J Corple and Cheryl Cooky . These articles were published at different times in the history of digital media-2016 and 2019, respectively. They look at the same digital event in slightly dissimilar ways; where one looks into hope within a hashtag, the other engages with the postfeminist contradictions, each of which is taken as a consequence when feminist activism situates itself in the virtual world as its site. The point worth mentioning here is that these virtual interactions and discourses are an effect of and can affect ‘the daily’ that exists outside these virtual spaces.

This review paper engages with each article individually before delving into a comparative analysis of the two. The aim is to extract and examine the primary arguments presented by the respective authors, facilitating a thorough and critical analysis of their perspectives.

Delving Deep into Clark's Hope in a Hashtag

In the article “Hope in a Hashtag”: the Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed” (2016), Rosemary Clark, through a case study of #WhyIStayed, a hashtag that emerged in response to a 2014 NFL domestic violence controversy, expands on the existing research on hashtag feminism. She examines the progression of feminist hashtags into powerful protests. In doing so, she posits the ‘possibilities’ and ‘limitations’ of the existing research. In her article, Clark (2016) views hashtag feminism as yet another augmentation of the feminist movements and engages with it as an “extension of the (feminist) movement's historically rooted discursive tactics”. The paper analyses 2,522 randomly

selected tweets about the ‘Ray Rice Controversy’, published using the hashtags #WhyIStayed, #WhyILeft, and #WhenILeft between September 8 and September 30, 2014. The selection was made under the Annenberg Twitter Project at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication. Data was also gathered from news articles about the controversy and the hashtag protest to place the demonstration in the larger context of the topic. By taking #WhyIStayed as a case study, she makes a case for hashtag feminism to be a ‘form of social drama’ that employs all the elements of an engrossing narrative or, in Clark’s words, ‘compelling storytelling’.

Clark begins her article by looking at some seminal works that have commented on the power of hashtags that foster the creation of alternative channels of information dissipation. She expands on a well-cited body of work to use the case study to better examine the characteristics and importance of hashtag feminism by focusing on the social dynamics underlying hashtag feminism, an aspect that continues to be understudied.

Clark has in her essay devotes an entire section to the ‘rise of hashtag feminism’ by referring to some previous hashtags such as #EverydaySexism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #RapeCultureIsWhen. One of the instances she cites to discuss contemporary American feminism is of the controversy that broke when the authors of a 2013 research titled “#FemFuture: The Online Revolution”, asked readers to debate online feminism in the Twittersphere using the hashtag #FemFuture. She discusses that instead of employing the discursive tactics of earlier feminists, such as consciousness-raising circles, speak-outs, and alternative press publications (Clark 2014), contemporary activism often occurs exclusively on ‘social media platforms’. Her article also elucidates that digital media have overtaken feminist movement organisations as they offer a public platform and a large audience without requiring membership in an official league, caucus, or organisation. Within the feminist movement, organisations no longer govern communication; communication itself—from blog entries to Twitter hashtags—has taken on a significant organisational role.

She thus questions the political significance and meaning of a collective action that emerges from a digitally mediated conversation in the absence of organised leadership. Whereas experts have started delving into the cultural and political aspects of the movement, what she further elucidates is how the dynamics of a feminist hashtag can be read and explained and the steps that a feminist hashtag should follow to become a highly prominent protest. Furthermore, how does ‘discursive activism’ metamorphose into ‘collective action’ by transcending ‘isolated personal expressions’? She borrows from David A Snow, Louis A. Zurcher, and Robert Peters (1981), Turner (1982), Daniel A. McFarland (2004), Bennet and Segerberg (2013) to enumerate “the three stages of McFarland’s Turner-inspired model for analysing the dramatic qualities of collective action—breach, crisis, and reintegration—(which) parallel the plot elements of beginning, middle, and end. This model is particularly well suited for studying online feminism, whose discursive tactics often call on participants to collectively build narratives of resistance.” (Clark, 2016).

Delving Deep into Linabary, Corple and Cooky’s Postfeminist Contradictions

In *Feminist Activism in Digital Space: Postfeminist Contradictions in #WhyIStayed*, Jasmine R. Linabary, Danielle J Corple and Cheryl Cooky, through a qualitative analysis of 51,577 archived tweets (tweeted between the 8th of September and 1st of December, 2014) and semi-structured interviews with active participants of the hashtag, investigate how #WhyIStayed and/or #WhyILeft used “voice, multivocality, and visibility” to establish a place for feminist activism in response to victim-blaming associated with domestic violence. In doing so, the authors determine tensions within the hashtag event and how these postfeminist contradictions shaped opportunities for feminist activity on the internet. The study’s main findings also comment on the opposing nature of tweets, which may be ‘liberating’ for one person and, at the same time, be oppressive for another.

The authors argue that there aren't many studies that critically examine contradictions and how they affect hashtag feminism. Thus, in order to bridge this void, they analyse how feminism and antifeminism, the doing and undoing (McRobbie, 2008) of feminism, function in #WhyIStayed. They build their theoretical grounding on the works of researchers such as Gill (2007, 2016, 2017), McRobbie (2008), Genz and Brabon (2012) and Banet-Weiser et al. (2019), to name a few, who also question the contradictions within postfeminism. "Despite the promises of hashtag feminism, some scholars question its potential to effect change. The messy interconnections between individualism, digital space, and neo-liberalism raise concerns about the depoliticization of feminist activism, particularly as it materializes online through personalized narratives (Baer, 2016). Although "the personal is political" remains a hallmark of feminist activism, some argue that neoliberalism has turned this mantra on its head (e.g., Mohanty, 2013), redefining the political as solely personal, and thereby stripping the activist power from sharing one's lived experiences of oppression. In this way, some scholars question whether or not the "microrebellions of digital feminism" (Baer, 2016: 18) can truly produce cultural/structural change." (Linabary, Corple, Cooky, 2019). Their study thus looks into the possibilities these 'contradictions' can offer to feminist online activism.

Their qualitative study was divided into two phases, or 'iterative analytic cycles', each of which utilised digital tools to analyse the content of the tweets as well as the semi-structured interviews. The research looks into the entire dataset of 203,434 tweets that it received from the Big Mountain Data for the selected time period. The dataset was then cleaned to avoid the inclusion of any unrelated tweets and the deletion of any duplicate tweets (which resulted from the act of retweeting). The final numerical figure thus obtained was 51,577 tweets.

The research's attempt to investigate and interpret prominent patterns in the dataset was put into action by taking an inductive approach. The cleaned data was fed into the NVivo qualitative analysis programme (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to find the first semantic and latent codes and to identify thematic categories; in addition to the approach above, they also open-coded one-third of their dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three contradictions, namely- Contradictions of Voice, Contradictions of Multivocality and Contradictions of Visibility, were identified as the three core themes in the analysis.

The Comparative Analysis

A notable similarity between the two articles is their shared focus on the common theme of hashtag feminism with Twitter as their site. By taking the example of the specific hashtag #WhyIStayed to understand the multifaceted effects of the discourse around domestic violence. Both adopt a qualitative approach to analyse the tweets by engaging in thematic analysis to identify patterns, themes, and discourses within the collected data. Both articles also draw attention to the fact that the same free reiness of digital space, which allows for the mutual existence of multiple voices and experiences (of domestic violence survivors in this case) along with serving a fertile ground for trolling and co-opting.

In contrast, the first study randomly selected a sample of 2,522 tweets, which is 1% of the entire dataset. It mentions the removal of duplicates (retweets) during the data-cleaning process. It employs a manual, inductive coding approach to identify significant themes, resulting in seven major frame categories.

Alternatively, the second study explicitly outlines the removal of retweets, duplicate tweets, and tweets unrelated to the hashtag during dataset cleaning to arrive at 51,577 unique tweets. It analyses the data using NVivo qualitative analysis software for an interpretive thematic analysis. While the first study supplements Twitter data with information from news stories to provide a broader context for the #WhyIStayed movement, the second complements the Twitter data with semi-structured interviews with eight participants to gain deeper insights into individuals' motivations and experiences related to the hashtag.

Another striking feature of the second study is that it explicitly engages with the affective responses of the (tweets and trolls) on the participants while addressing the ethical concerns related to the sensitive nature of interviewing victims/survivors, avoiding demographic questions to protect participants' privacy (even if it resulted in a not-so-thick description). It also goes at length to describe the authors' engagement at different stages within the methodology and the positive outcomes of these meetings.

The Critical Analysis

In her essay, Rosemary Clark critically analyses hashtag feminism, using the case study of #WhyIStayed to argue that it functions as a form of social drama resembling compelling storytelling. The central thesis posits that the efficacy of hashtag feminism in driving sociopolitical change hinges upon the intricate interplay between dramatic actors and their audiences. The delineation of a three-stage process—initiating with a breaching event, escalating to a crisis marked by contested social meanings, and culminating in a reintegration period—provides a structured framework for understanding the unfolding dynamics of hashtag activism. While the narrative approach enriches the analysis, offering a tangible example of #WhyIStayed, the argument could benefit more from more specific instances to vividly illustrate the three-stage process and the enduring impact of successful feminist hashtags. Moreover, the assertion that these hashtags result in material offline change lacks concrete evidence or illustrative examples, presenting a potential weakness in the causal link between online activism and tangible societal shifts. The call for future research, urging scholars to perform discourse analyses alongside ethnographically informed interviews, demonstrates a forward-looking perspective. However, the essay could further strengthen its analysis by delving into the potential limitations and challenges associated with hashtag feminism, acknowledging the complexities and potential pitfalls of relying solely on digital platforms for sociopolitical activism. Overall, the essay provides a valuable contribution to the discourse on hashtag feminism, offering insights into its political nature and prompting a call for more nuanced research into the broader implications of online speech on sociopolitical landscapes.

In the case of the second article, in the concluding passage, the authors advocate for a re-evaluation and reimagining of feminist activism within the contemporary political landscape. The call to critically engage with postfeminist contradiction reflects an awareness of the complexities inherent in disentangling feminism from antifeminism, emphasizing the importance of understanding both the potential impacts and limitations of feminist hashtag activism. The acknowledgement of the persistent issue of domestic violence within the NFL and broader culture introduces a real-world context, complicating the assessment of the long-term impact of hashtag activism. They do this in order to look into the idea of how postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2016) both permits possibilities and imposes restrictions for hashtag feminist activity. The recognition of the evolving nature of social media cultures and technologies highlights the need for scholars to consider the dynamic contexts of online social movements. The passage raises pertinent questions about the transformational possibilities of hashtag feminism, its long-term effects on broader social change, and the critical engagement with postfeminist contradiction for reimagining feminist activism in the current political moment. However, the authors could enhance their argument by providing more concrete examples or specific instances that illustrate the challenges and possibilities they allude to. Additionally, the call for large-scale analysis and the acknowledgement of the limitations of such an undertaking demonstrate a realistic understanding of the complexity of studying online social movements. Overall, the passage prompts crucial questions for future research and encourages scholars to explore the multifaceted dynamics of hashtag feminism concerning broader social and political contexts.

The Conclusion

Hashtags as also echoed by the articles above have a tendency to create ripples, trends and rhythms. This tendency to peak at a particular moment is momentary which later wanes off or becomes dormant until recalled. By avoiding the quantitative route, the studies engage with the discourses within the activism.

In conclusion, the examination of Rosemary Clark's "Hope in a Hashtag: the Discursive Activism of #WhyIStayed" and Jasmine R. Linabary, Danielle J. Corple, and Cheryl Cooky's "Feminist Activism in Digital Space: Post Feminist Contradictions in #WhyIStayed" provide a comprehensive understanding of hashtag feminism and feminist activism within the digital realm, particularly in the context of the #WhyIStayed controversy of 2014. Synthesising the findings, both articles share the common goal of understanding the discourse around domestic violence through Twitter data. They differ in sample size, data sources, analysis techniques, and the incorporation of interviews, showcasing the diversity of approaches in social media research.

Navigating through each article individually, the richness of insights brought forth by the authors, sheds light on the intricacies of digital activism, the usage of personal experiences, and the broader implications of feminist discourse in online spaces.

The comparative analysis presented in this paper attempted to distil the primary arguments from each article, fostering a critical examination of their respective viewpoints by addressing the articles in the order of their publication. It underscores the evolving nature of digital media and feminist discourse over time.

By navigating the complexities of hashtag feminism, these articles serve as valuable resources for fostering continued dialogue and critical engagement in the ever-evolving landscape of digital activism. This review has provided a comprehensive and critical exploration of the articles, their contributions, and limitations.

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