

**#NOTALLMEN, #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS & #YESALLWOMEN:
THREE MONTHS OF GENDER DISCUSSION IN THE AGE OF TWITTER**

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ABSTRACT

Twitter is an Internet-based communication technology that enables users to distribute short messages, known as tweets, of 140 characters or less. Twitter uses symbols to give more meaning to aspects of its tweets. The # symbol, also known as “hashtag”, enables users to share meaningful words or phrases through tweets and retweets. In the Spring of 2014, several hashtagged phrases related to gender discussions swept around the world. This case study analysis of events details the reasons for and results of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Twitter, Gender, Hashtag, Sexism, Misogyny, Elliot Rodger, Boko Haram

INTRODUCTION

Life in the Twenty First Century has intertwined physical existence with virtual. Social media has evolved to the point where it sometimes surpasses the physical experiences and identity and takes on a meaning of its own, beyond the physical or sometimes elevating the physical to a higher plane. Over the past decade, the introduction of the first smartphone, the iPhone in 2007 [15], has provided a platform for mobile applications or apps, which have facilitated a number of communication options. Twitter, just one version of social media apps, has evolved through the years to surpass its initial concept of 140-character communication capability [5, 31]. Various tools such as the use of the hashtag (#) have been developed to channel discussions for interested Twitter users. Over time, the hashtag has become one of the more powerful tools of Twitter and its use has even surpassed Twitter alone, jumping over to Facebook and other social media. This paper will examine the use of social media in its use as a mechanism for gender discussion and gender dialogue.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology, which was used was that of Case Study analysis. Yin [36] described two criteria for using this method of study. First, a case study methodology is useful in order to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, and secondly, a case study copes with a technically distinctive situation where there are many more variables of interest than data points as well as multiple sources of evidence [36]. Yin [36] defines three principles of data collection: use multiple sources of evidence, create a study database, and maintain a chain of evidence [36]. Yin [36] described several analytical strategies which could be used to analyze collected data. This study created a descriptive framework for organization and analysis from a number of collected news topic sources. This strategy is useful when a lot of data has been collected without having settled on an initial set of research questions or propositions [36]. Yin's [36] example of the organizational model of the Middletown sociological study could be considered relevant and therefore was adapted for this study. The Middletown study was an examination and analysis of data from a selected American town so that a description of a “typical” American town in the 1920's could be derived. The study developed this description by collecting as much information as possible from a variety of sources (i.e., newspapers, tax records, town hall meeting notes, interviews, etc.). Once collected, the information was broken down into descriptive markers to anonymize and build a holistic view of the material, which would form the story of a “typical” American town [36]. That methodology was mimicked in this study to collect data, break down that information into like categories, and create a descriptive timeline that could be analyzed for trends.

The collection of data for this study was part of a process, which had been in place for over five years; initially begun as part of Dissertation research. Data was collected from a variety of secondary sources using a variety of means. Google alerts were set up to collect articles using key words such as: hackers, hactivists, Twitter, Anonymous, 4chan, hashtag, etc. Each day, Google sent alerts to my personal email address when key words appeared in daily searches. Each week I opened and reviewed those emails for applicability. Those alerts which

had news articles, which were found to be of possible use in academic research were compiled on a semi-annual list of related topics. This list provided the core of source material and helped establish a timeline. Additionally, other informative sources were collected, such as: books on the subject, academic papers, Twitter accounts, news articles, magazine articles as well as broadcast media and YouTube videos. All material was then reviewed for applicability to the descriptive markers and compiled into a timeline, which formed the narrative for the results. The descriptive markers which were used in this study were: #NotAllMen, #BringBackOurGirls, and #YesAllWomen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Twitter as Social Commentary

Twitter is an Internet-based communication technology, launched in 2006, that facilitates users to distribute short messages, known as tweets, of 140 characters or less on the World Wide Web or through smartphone technology [5, 31]. “Twitter relies on articulated social connections to establish “sender-audience” relationships” [31]. Unlike social media such as Facebook, where a connection between two users must be mutually accepted, Twitter users can follow another user (unless the account is made private). In order to address or reply to a particular user, the @-sign followed by the user name is used. Twitter facilitates the creation and maintenance of relations between users and text through the use of the hashtag symbol (#) and a short phrase or word. Hashtags are not moderated, so any user can create any topic of interest for others to follow and share. The use of hashtags was first suggested by Chris Messina in 2007 to facilitate “improving contextualization, content filtering and exploratory serendipity within Twitter” [22]. Since their introduction, hashtags “have also undergone mission creep, and now do all sorts of interesting things” [25]. They have been used as conversation prompts, to crowdsource ideas or resources and to present an often sarcastic or parenthetical commentary on a tweet [9]. Retweeting is used to share a specific tweet with one’s followers presenting an affirmation of the original tweet as well as support for the concept. As Boyd, Golder, and Lotan [3] suggest, retweeting does more than spread the original tweet to a wider audience, it invites people to take part in a conversation on a particular topic.

Twitter as Meme

Dawkins [8] originated the word “meme” in *The Selfish Gene*. He was attempting to describe a new social dynamic which was evolving, much like the genetic dynamic had evolved. A meme is a shared cultural reference, which spreads from individual to individual by virtue of its significance and its appeal. Memes took off with the advent of the Internet: Rickrolling, Star Wars Kid, Bad Luck Brian, Scumbag Steve, the Overly Obsessive Girlfriend, etc. Twitter not only facilitated some memes spread, but originated many others.

Advertisers have embraced Twitter as a way to quickly post information about their products to followers of their Twitter accounts. They have also embraced the use of hashtag tracking to discover trends and issues related to their products as well. Many commercial hashtag tracking companies will either offer their tracking services or sell software which enables tracking of trends. Often times, if a company’s tweet is clever enough, it will break out of the followers-only status and become a meme. This happened in 2013 during the Super Bowl. When power was lost to a portion of the Superdome during the San Francisco 49ers and Baltimore Ravens football game, advertising firm 360i, whose account included Oreo cookies, leapt into action. A tweet simply titled “Power out? No problem.” [17] was sent out to Oreo’s followers. Included in the tweet was a graphic of an Oreo cookie in a darkened room which stated “You can still dunk in the dark” [17]. The tweet was so popular it was retweeted 10,000 times within one hour.

The Oreo graphic was "designed, captioned and approved within minutes,"... All the decisions were made in real time quickly because marketers and agency members were sitting together at a "mission control" center, or a social-media war room of sorts, at the agency's headquarters... Among those who were there were two brand team members from Oreo, and nearly a dozen creatives, strategists, community managers and social-media listeners [18].

However, not all Twitter attention is wanted. There have been numerous instances where hackers have broken into corporate Twitter accounts and hijacked them for various reasons. In 2013, hackers cracked the Burger King’s System Administrator’s Twitter login and posted that the company had been sold to McDonalds. They changed the

logo to the Golden Arches symbol and defaced the cover page photo to a picture of Fish McBites [2]. In 2015, the Twitter and YouTube accounts for the United States Central Command were hacked and defaced by a hacker claiming to be a member of the Cyber Caliphate of the Islamic State (IS). The Twitter cover page and logo was defaced with an image of a person in full headdress holding up the black flag symbol of the group. The pages were compromised for around 30 minutes [4].

But most recently, Twitter hashtags have become meme by attaching themselves to some ongoing social movement or event. They are not contrived by advertisers nor hackers; they are born from shared emotional response to some national or international tragedy. In less than an hour after gunmen attacked the Paris offices of satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, French Twitter users mourned and supported the murdered journalists and showed defiance to the attackers by tweeting #JeSuisCharlie, #IAMCharlie.

#JeSuis, #IchBin, #IAm—this is now the standard opener for expressions of social media support. We express empathy, outrage, and horror by subsuming ourselves into victims’ identities—#WeAreTrayvonMartin, #ICantBreathe—or stepping into their shoes—#IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #WhyIStayed [13].

Similarly, trying to subvert a Twitter meme can backfire because it lacks the emotional connection of the original. “Counter-efforts like “I am Darren Wilson” or “I Can Breathe” have failed not just because they lack popular support, but because the optics are so inartful—we know that white cops can breathe, because other cops aren’t putting them in chokeholds on the street” [13]. With an understanding and context of how Twitter can function as social commentary as well as popular social memes, we will explore the events of the Spring of 2014 which helped define significant gender commentary.

RESEARCH RESULTS

#NotAllMen

The origins of the phrase “Not all men” are not precisely clear. The phrase had long been used in discussion forums and blogs as a way for men to counter female negative perceptions and arguments. As early as July 2013, blogger “elledavee” wrote on the website Bitchtopia “I know. Not all men are rapists. Not all men abuse their significant others. Not all men actively oppress women. I get it. Moving on” [37]. However, in late March 2014, the use of the phrase, in conjunction with a cultural icon suddenly entering the argument, went viral. On March 26, @a_girl_irl tweeted the image of the Kool-Aid man breaking through a wall in order to deliver the “Not All Men” retort [37].

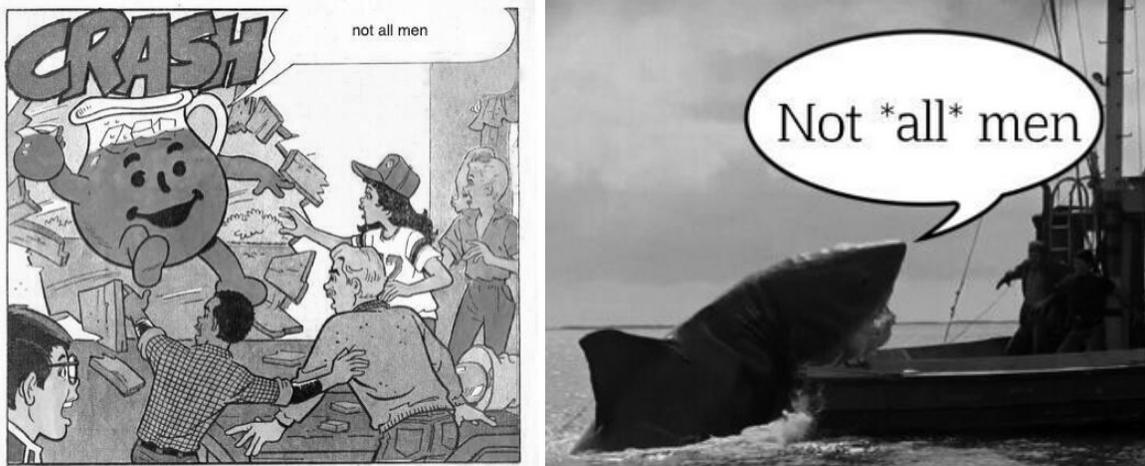


Figure 1. “Not All Men” Memes

What followed were photos taken from popular films with the “Not all men” speech bubble attached: the shark from *Jaws* swimming onto the deck of the ship *Orca*, the alien from the movie *Alien* bursting out of the man’s torso [29, 37]. On April 10th, cartoonist Matt Lubchansky created a comic titled “Save Me” where when a “Man Signal” not unlike the “Bat Signal” appeared in the night sky, a man changed in a telephone booth to become “Not All-Man” and would burst into the room where disparaging comments about me were occurring [37]. Lubchansky later speculated on the origin of the phrase and graphics.

I don’t recall a very specific instance [as to where the phrase arose from] so much as it was sort of everywhere, very suddenly!.. But instead of this being something with a single unit of origin, i [sic] think this phrase is unique among this kind of stuff because it was actually coming from the mouths of these dopes. Like some dummy would for REAL be coming at people talking about racial or gender equality stuff, waving their arms and saying ‘UM ACTUALLY NOT ME!’ [37]

The meme graphics continued their use and new ones developed and this helped prompt the use of #NotAllMen in subsequent Twitter discussions and on feminist blogs [7].

#BringBackOurGirls

On April 15, 2014, armed militants from the group Boko Haram, which in the Hausa language means “Western education is a sin,” arrived at the Government Girls Secondary School dormitory in the Northeastern Nigerian village of Chibok at night dressed in Nigerian military uniforms and kidnapped over 200 girls who had gathered at the school to take their final exams [1, 26]. The girls, aged 15 to 18, both Christian and Muslim, were taken away in trucks by the militants. While 50 were able to escape, 276 were not [19]. The school was burned to the ground and while parents tried to pursue the armed kidnappers with bows and arrows, eventually they had to turn back. The day after the abduction, the Nigerian military claimed that it had rescued nearly all of the girls. The next day, the military retracted its claim; it had not rescued any of them. The Nigerian government claimed that only just over a hundred girls were missing. Parents and school officials countered that the government’s number was less than half of the truth. While some girls were able to escape in the initial confusion or by running away or while fetching water, the trickle dwindled down to nothing all the while the Nigerian military and government did nothing to free them [26].

On April 23rd at the opening ceremony for a UNESCO event honoring the Nigerian city of Port Harcourt as the 2014 World Book Capital City, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, the Vice President of the World Bank for Africa urged the crowd to “Bring back our girls!” A Nigerian lawyer in the crowd, Ibrahim M. Abdullahi, was the first to tweet the plea #BringBackOurGirls [16]. #BringBackOurGirls was tweeted and retweeted; celebrities tweeted photos of themselves with the tweet.



Figure 2. Celebrities Supporting #BringBackOurGirls

On April 30th, activists called for a Million Women March, in the capital Abuja in protest to the government's lack of action and apathy in trying to locate and rescue the girls. That same day, the leader of Boko Haram announced that he was selling the girls to Islamist fighters and affirmed that in his religion, slavery was allowed. [11] The kidnapping was finally mentioned for the first time on American nightly news on May 1st, more than two weeks after the girls were taken [1]. After weeks of silence, on May 5th, Nigerian President Goodluck Johnathan finally addressed the kidnapping on live TV saying, "Wherever these girls are, we'll get them out" [33]. As the phrase swept the world, still nothing happened in Nigeria. To all the world, it appeared as if the Nigerian government felt the girls' lives and futures weren't worth the cost of going against Boko Haram; girls lives were worthless.

#YesAllWoman

Around 9:30 PM, on May 23, 2014, a young male drove up to a University of California Santa Barbara sorority house and killed two women who were walking outside [12, 27]. As it would later be pieced together, before that, he had stabbed three men in his apartment. After he left the sorority, he killed another man who was entering a nearby convenience store. In the course of the attacks, he wounded 13 more people [12]. The gunman was in two gun battles with deputies during the rampage in the beachside community of Isla Vista before crashing his black BMW into a parked car. Deputies found him dead with a gunshot wound to the head, but it wasn't immediately clear whether he was killed by gunfire or if he committed suicide [27]. The identity of the gunman was quickly made known. His name was Elliot Rodger, a twenty-two-year-old man, who in the weeks leading up to the rampage, had posted a series of angry, threatening YouTube videos along with a 137 page autobiographical "manifesto," where he declaring his hatred of all women for the rejection he claimed they dealt him throughout his life [35].



Figure 3. A Screenshot from Elliot Rodger's Retribution YouTube Video

In his manifesto, he wrote that he "wanted to abolish sex, thereby equalizing men and ridding society of women's manipulative and bestial natures, and to lock women in concentration camps so they would die out. His idea was to imprison a few select women in a lab, where they would be artificially inseminated to propagate the species" [35]. The videos, which were readily available to the public, showed an angry misogynistic man sitting in his car filming his tirade and plotting the rampage.

I am the perfect guy, but yet, you [women] throw yourselves at all these obnoxious men, instead of me the supreme gentleman. I will punish all of you for it [points at the screen then laughs]... On the day of retribution, I am going to enter the hottest sorority house on UCSB and I will slaughter every single spoiled, stuck-up blonde slut I see inside there... All of you sexually active men, I hate you, I hate all of you. I can't wait to give you exactly what you deserve, utter annihilation [laughs] [23].

The viciousness and randomness of the victims in the attacks touched a nerve in one woman who just hours after the rampage, created the #YesAllWomen tweet. “It appeared to be started by @gildedspine, who wrote, ‘I’m going to be tweeting under the #YesAllWomen hashtag. Let’s discuss what ‘not all men’ might do but woman must fear’” [24]. In less than three days, #YesAllWomen generated over 500,000 tweets [6]. The tweets were so powerful and so telling, they cut to the core of the female perspective in today’s male-dominated culture. A small sample of supportive tweets included:

- “No, #NotAllMen are violent against women, but #YesAllWomen have to navigate a world where those who are look the same as those who aren’t” [28].
- ““UNFAIR! NOT ALL MEN!” Imagine a bowl of M&Ms. 10% of them are poisoned. Go ahead. Eat a handful. Not all M&Ms are poison. #YesAllWomen” [28].
- “Because every single woman I know has a story about a man feeling entitled to access to her body. Every. Single. One. #YesAllWomen” [24].
- “We joke about traveling to the bathroom in groups, but since we could walk, we’ve known that safety is in numbers. #YesAllWomen’ [24].
- “Because we’re prudes when we don’t sleep with you and whores when we do. #YesAllWomen” [24].
- “#yesallwomen because ‘friendzone’ is apparently a term that is worthy of murder because if a guy is nice to you he should get what he wants” [14].
- “Men’s greatest fear is that women will laugh at them, while women’s greatest fear is that men will kill them. -Margaret Atwood #YesAllWomen” [24].
- “My husband didn’t ‘get it’ until he spent half an hour on the feed. Then he looked ashen. “I had no idea”. #YesAllWomen” [28].
- “The #yesallwomen hashtag is filled with hard, true, sad and angry things. I can empathise & try to understand & know I never entirely will” [28].
- “Started reading the #YesAllWomen tweets b/c I’ve got a daughter, but now I see I should be reading them b/c I’ve got two sons” [28].

While there were some hateful backlash tweets [14] and criticism [32], the supportive tweets succeeded in turning #NotAllMen on its head. “‘Not all men’ is an objection that’s used to dismiss the issue of violence against women and misogyny in society, simply because not all men are like that. Turning that language around with #yesallwomen refocuses the conversation on the fact that all women, at some point, face objectification” [20]. Yes, it is not all men. But it is *a* man [10].

CONCLUSIONS

Over a period of three months, from March to May 2014, the Twitter phrases #NotAllMen, #BringBackOurGirls and #YesAllWomen brought the discussion of gender bias and the worth of women’s lives to the forefront. #NotAllMen was used as a means to stop and argument on any subject where men were behaving badly. It was a weak intellectual tool to deflect and argument, not participate in the conversation. Yes, it was obvious that not all men do all things, but the way in which the phrase was used, to counter any discussion, brought discussions to a stop. Then, when coupled with meme photos of cultural icons such as the shark from Jaws and the Kool-Aid Man, bursting into the argument, helped pass the phrase along even faster.

Then in April, the shock of the kidnapping of so many school age girls in Nigeria and the government’s seemingly inability to not only locate them and to mount a rescue, but its complete lack of acknowledgement of the situation itself, helped to reinforce the opinion around the world that the girls’ lives did not matter. That was the shock and growing outrage which helped make #BringBackOurGirls resonate so loudly and clearly around the world. So many people could not only share in the outrage of the kidnapping but also empathize with the parents who wanted someone, anyone, to do something to bring their children back to them.

But the kidnapping of the Nigerian girls by Boko Haram was not an isolated incident. Women around the world were suffering extreme violence at the hands of men in any number of gruesome and deadly attacks. Back in October 2012, Pakistani teenage girl Malala Yousafzai had been shot in the head and neck by the Taliban for advocating education for girls. [34]. In December 2012, a couple who boarded a bus in New Delhi were beaten with

an iron rod with the woman having been gang-raped while the bus drove around the city; her injuries were so bad that she later die [21]. In August 2013, a 22-year-old female photojournalist, who was interning with an English-language magazine in Mumbai, was gang-raped by five males, one of which was a juvenile, when she had gone to a compound in South Mumbai, with a male colleague on an assignment [30].

All of these events and the building outrage of women's inequality both in culture but in power, burst forth after the May 23rd massacre of random California men and women in the form of #YesAllWomen. Women, and men, now had an ability to share their frustrations, anger, helplessness and concern with a global audience. It was the culmination of events, the worthlessness of Nigerian girls' lives, the frustration of having true and meaningful discussions shut down by a defensive counter, the constant drip of horrific acts of violence against women around the world. All this combined to allow one woman, hours after the California rampage, to provide a means of not only expressing her frustration against a patriarchal society but of sharing with men and women alike, what it means to be a woman in today's society. After the creation of #YesAllWomen, the account which started it, @gildedspine, set her Twitter account to private, and the bio was changed to "I have locked my account for a reason. I do not want any more media attention or credit. Thank you" [14]. Twitter, had set up a means of global communication that allowed each of these phrases, to resonate in their own way, and educate us all to the power of the communication medium.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This research uncovered a number of issues, which are ripe for further investigation and study. First, the use of hashtags in social dialogue continues to be a subject of interest. The topic bears any number of possible avenues of research: gender issues, social commentary, societal change, power dynamics, political discourse, etc. Secondly, the use of Twitter as a medium for change is another avenue for research. Twitter research is not only identified with the specific hashtag marking, but the social medium as a mouth piece for various powerless or powerful groups is an item of further interest. Finally, gender discussions and disputes are an area of research well documented, of which, much background information and research exists. Gender discussions will continue, regardless of the medium of choice. It is incumbent on social researchers to document the various avenues of specific dialogue.

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