

Speaking ‘Unspeakable Things:’ Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture

Acknowledgments:

To add after peer review.

Abstract:

This paper examines the ways in which girls and women are using digital media platforms to challenge the rape culture they experience in their everyday lives, including street harassment, sexual assault, and the policing of one’s body and clothing in school settings. Focusing on three international case studies, including the anti-street harassment site Hollaback!, the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported, and interviews with teenage Twitter activists, the paper asks: *What* experiences of harassment, misogyny and rape culture are girls and women responding to? *How* are girls and women using digital media technologies to document experiences of sexual violence, harassment, and sexism? And, *why* are girls and women choosing to mobilize digital media technologies in such a way? Employing a unique approach including ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, content analysis, discursive textual analysis, and affect theories, we detail a range of ways women and girls are using social media platforms to speak about, and thus make visible, experiences of rape culture. Additionally, we argue that this digital mediation enables new connections previously unavailable to girls and women, allowing them to redraw the boundaries between themselves and others.

Keywords:

Feminism; activism; affect; Twitter; rape culture

Introduction

In her 2014 book *Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies, and Revolution* feminist journalist Laurie Penny writes about those ‘unspeakable things’ that have long escaped mention within popular media cultures: sexual violence, male privilege, the wreck of neoliberalism – especially on girls and women. Yet Penny is only one of more visible faces speaking about such issues: over the past few years girls and women have been increasingly engaged with feminist critique and activism, often using digital media technologies and platforms to speak out against misogyny, rape culture, and everyday sexism.

In this paper we explore and analyze these digital practices, drawing on data from a larger study, ‘Documenting Digital Feminist Activism’.ⁱ The project aims to map the ways in which girls and women are exposing and challenging various forms of misogyny using digital media technologies, including social media platforms, mobile technologies and location-based media across six international case studies. Here, we focus on data from three of our case studies: (1) Posts to the online anti-street harassment website Hollaback!; (2) Experiences of using the Twitter hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported; and (3) Teen feminists’ use of social media platforms to challenge rape culture in and around schools. These case studies were selected because they fill a particular gap in knowledge about the variety of activist practices, routines, and experiences of feminists who use social media to challenge sexism, misogyny and rape culture.

Although there is a growing body of research interested in digital feminist activism (Horeck, 2014; Puente, 2011; Rentschler, 2014; Thrift, 2014) much of it does not attend to the lived experiences of girls and women engaging in social media posts about rape culture. Thus, we are particularly keen to explore the affective experiences of

girls and women posting and consuming this type of social media, thereby asking: *What* experiences of harassment, misogyny and rape culture are girls and women responding to? *How* are girls and women using digital media technologies to document experiences of sexual violence, harassment, and sexism? And, *why* are girls and women choosing to mobilize digital media technologies in such a way?

Our data analysis is guided by discursive textual analysis, as well as theorizations of affect (Hemmings, 2012; Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Papacharissi, 2015; Hillis, Paasonen & Petit, 2015) in order to explore the forms of digital connectivity and sharing enabled through speaking about rape culture via digital platforms. Using this framework our paper not only uncovers how women and girls are using social media platforms to speak about, and thus make visible, experiences of rape culture, but we also outline the ways that this digital mediation enables new connections previously unavailable to girls and women, allowing them to redraw the boundaries between themselves and others. We further detail our methods and theoretical perspective following the literature review below.

Literature Review: Popular Feminisms and Misogyny in Media Cultures

In this brief literature review, we contextualize our project within a moment of both feminist resurgence and challenge; one where the opportunities afforded by digital technologies are recognized (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Hands, 2011; Harlow, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lim, 2012, 2013; Penney & Dadas, 2013), yet not necessarily fully understood by scholars. Below then, we address how scholarship on popular feminisms and popular misogyny (including what we describe as ‘rape culture’)

and the use of digital technologies to affect social change, shape the context for our inquiry into girls' and women's use of digital technologies to expose and challenge rape culture and misogyny.

Our study is situated within a fascinating cultural moment whereby both feminism and misogyny are increasingly visible, in near constant circulation within popular media cultures. Yet alongside images of American pop singer Beyoncé dancing in front of an illuminated screen reading 'FEMINIST' (Valenti, 2014), global SlutWalks making headlines (Mendes, 2015), and teenage girls becoming feminist activists online and in their schools (Keller, 2015; Keller & Ringrose, 2015; Retallack, Ringrose & Lawrence, 2016), overt sexism appears to have become simultaneously visible across online and offline spaces. Indeed, misogyny and the abuse of women is interwoven through websites like Reddit (Massanari, 2015), informs incidents of trolling directed towards female video game critics and developers (Wu 2014), and has plagued women who advocate for public visibility, such as the death and rape threats received by British journalist Caroline Criado-Perez as a result of her 2013 campaign to have female representation on English money (Smith-Spark 2013).

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015) has described these practices as indicative of a 'popular misogyny' whereby a broader acceptance of feminism 'stimulates fear, trepidation, and aggression for those who find feminism to be a threat (n.p.).' While this fear of feminism is nothing new (see Faludi, 1992; Orr, 2003), Banet-Weiser advocates for understanding popular misogyny in tandem with popular feminism, a 'call and response connection between them' that feels different in contemporary technologically mediated public discourse. The fact that popular misogyny manifests itself as a

‘normative reaction’ (Banet-Weiser, 2015, n.p.), as ‘boys being boys’ within a ‘lad culture’ reminds us that we need to understand girls’ and women’s public responses to this cultural context. Furthermore, we need to recognize that anyone who challenges popular misogyny puts themselves at risk of becoming the subject of sexist attacks and abuse (see Mendes, 2015; Penny, 2013).

A significant part of this popular misogyny can be characterized as indicative of what has been called ‘rape culture,’ a term coined by feminist activists in the 1970s, which has re-emerged within popular discourse over the past five years. Rape culture can broadly be defined as a socio-cultural context in which an aggressive male sexuality is eroticized and seen as a ‘healthy,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘desired’ part of sexual relations (Herman, 1978). A rape culture is one in which sexual assault is not only seen as *inevitable* in some contexts, but *desirable* and *excusable* as well (Mendes, 2015). This is because women are constructed as *enjoying* being aggressively pursued, and in some cases, *overpowered* by men. Women are also seen as *deserving* or *provoking* rape by failing to perform a chaste femininity, or for sending out signals to men that they are ‘up for it,’ regardless of how much they protest (see Buchwald, Fletcher & Ross, 2005; McNicol, 2012; Valenti, 2007). These so-called ‘signals’ include staying out late at night, drinking alcohol, flirting with men, wearing ‘provocative’ clothing, or being sexually active (see Bonnes, 2013; Meyer, 2010).

According to feminists then, rape culture is manifested in a number of ways. While rape culture inevitably deals with rape and sexual assault, it also constitutes a number of other harmful practices, including rape jokes, sexual harassment, cat-calling, sexualized ‘banter’; the routine policing of women’s bodies, dress, appearance, and code

of conduct; the re-direction of blame from the perpetrator in an assault to the victim; and impunity for perpetrators, despite their conduct or crimes (Mendes, 2015). We thus employ the term ‘rape culture’ to describe a multitude of practices that range in terms of legality, prevalence, and cultural acceptance.

We may understand the re-emergence of the concept of ‘rape culture’ in public discourse as, at least in part, related to the growth of the feminist content online. Several of the girls and women we interviewed for this project described how they became familiar with the term ‘rape culture’ through their participation in the feminist blogosphere, which we can understand as including platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. In this sense, feminist digital content often serves a pedagogical function, where readers are exposed to feminist ideas and critiques they may have not encountered in their daily lives (Keller, 2015).

But aside from education, how else might digital media technologies be used to engage in social and political activism, including feminism? Scholars have been particularly interested in this question over the past decade, suggesting that digital media is being used to organize around political issues (Chattopadhyay, 2011; Juris, 2008; Mendes 2015), build expansive communities of deliberation and action (Gerbaudo, 2012; Lim, 2012), and disseminate information widely throughout both online and offline spaces (Lim, 2012). More specifically, feminist scholarship has mapped how girls and women are creating online cultures of support for victims of sexual assault and violence (Keller, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Puente, 2011; Rentschler, 2014), generating and circulating feminist discourses that counter patriarchal ones (Keller, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Shaw, 2012; Thrift, 2014), and interrupt rape culture through a variety of creative interventions,

such as the mobile phone app ‘Not Your Baby’ (Rentschler, 2014) and the organization and participation in the global SlutWalks (Ringrose & Renold, 2012; Mendes, 2015).

Theoretically informed methodologies

In *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, Sarah Kember and Elizabeth Zylinska (2012, p. xv) suggest life and liveliness is remediated by new media enabling the possibility of generating ‘unprecedented connections and unexpected events’ (Ibid, p. 30). Using this idea as a starting point, we are particularly interested in understanding how digitally mediated activism shapes offline activist practices and experiences in order to problematize simplistic binaries between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ life. Therefore, we aim to understand feminist activist practices as not only indicative of the ways in which digital technologies are increasingly used to document and challenge rape culture, but in which girls’ and women’s everyday lives, including experiences with violence and sexism, are now mediated.

In order to do so we employ what Mary Gray (2009) describes as an ‘in situ’ approach to studying media, whereby the object of study is not solely the media text itself, but ‘the processes and understandings of new media among people within the contexts of their use’ (pp. 126-7). This methodological approach allows us to better map the complex relationships between users’ multiple media engagements and their social and cultural context in order to understand digital media from the perspective of *participants*. In other words, while we have been learning about *how* feminists are using digital media (Rentschler, 2014; Thrift, 2014) – and we aim to contribute to this conversation here – we still know little about *why* girls and women are choosing to

respond to sexism in such ways. We hope to begin to fill this gap in literature in this project by utilizing ethnographic methods in conjunction with various forms of textual analysis to better explore the experiences of people who use digital media to practice feminism.

For this paper our ethnographic methods included close observation of the original Hollaback! website and the #BeenRapedNeverReported Twitter feed. We contacted potential interviewees through their contact information available on the website (Hollaback!) and twitter handles (#BeenRapedNeverReported). Personal interviews between 30-60 minutes were conducted with interested participants, including twelve international Hollaback! organizers, and seven women who had used the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. We employed a different sampling strategy in our third case study, teen feminist Twitter networks. Drawing upon the Twitter followers of our research assistant, an avid self-defined fourth wave feminist with nearly 3,000 followers, we issued a single tweet to her stream requesting survey participants. Forty-eight participants completed the survey, which asked about their feminism practices online, and we were able to do follow-up interviews with twenty-two of these Twitter feminists. This strategy allowed us to ‘find’ moments of feminist activism within the Twittersverse, examples which may have gone undetected by solely focusing on an analysis of hashtags, for instance. In this paper, we focus on the teenage responses (ages 14-19) from this sample, as teen feminism (Ringrose & Renold, 2012) and particularly teen feminists’ uses of social media platforms in the context of school has been under-researched in academic literature on digital activism (for exception see Retallack et al., 2016).ⁱⁱ

Following from this ‘in situ’ approach anchored in ethnographic methods, we also aim to contribute to the use of a more diverse set of theoretical tools to investigate digital culture. Thus, we draw on an emerging body of work that uses theories of affect to examine digital life in ways that moves beyond the media texts to explore social media practices and publics (boyd, 2014; Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015; Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). In her recent book *Affective Publics* Zizi Papacharissi (2015) argues, ‘Affect is inherently political. It provides a way of understanding humans as collective and emotional, as well as individual and rational, by presenting these states as confluent rather than opposite’ (p. 16). Drawing on a wide range of affect theories, Papacharissi suggests that affect is particularly useful to understand politics within digital cultures, as ‘it does not conform to the structures we symbolically internalize as political,’ such as conventional modes of protest activism or governmental politics (p.19).

Being attuned to affect also encourages us to better understand relationality through a vocabulary that accounts for movement and potential (Cho, 2015), a lens that is particularly useful for our interest in digital connections, solidarities, and social change. Scholars have developed affect theory to consider the flows of affect in and through the social media networks, as extending the bodily capacities (Clough, 2009) through new forms of connectivity and relationality (Blackman & Venn, 2010). Research has begun to touch upon the issue of affect in relation to gender and sexual cultures in social media networks as joining up individuals through complex ‘affective assemblages’ where complex affective states not only circulate but can become intensified or dissipate emotional states (see for instance Ringrose & Coleman, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2014). Through the acts of posting and sharing on various sites and platforms different forms of

community feelings of collectivity and sharing can be forged, generating new digitally mediated ‘affective intensities’ through what has been termed ‘hashtag feminism’ (Khoja-Moolji, 2015).

We want to delve deeper into affective processes involved in the mediation of feminism, and turn to Claire Hemmings’ concept of ‘affective solidarity’ (2012) to explore how digital connections and mediation between girls and women may enable new forms of solidarity. Hemmings (2012) theorizes affective solidarity as necessary for feminist social change, produced through experiences of affective dissonance, rather than identity politics or empathy. In this sense, she suggests that a range of affects, including rage, frustration, and/or the desire for connection as generative for a collective feminist politics rooted in “the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort” (p. 158). While Hemmings does not discuss digital media specifically, we believe that the attention to experience emphasized within the concept of affective solidarity is particularly useful to explore the multiple potentialities for feminist change within our case studies, to which we now turn.

Speaking Back: Hollaback! and the Documentation of Rape Culture

In 2005, while riding on a subway, New Yorker Thao Nguyen snapped a photo of a man masturbating while sitting across from her. After taking the photo to the police and being ignored, Nguyen uploaded it onto the popular photosharing site Flickr to warn the public and publicly shame the perpetrator. Not long after, the *New York Daily News* got wind of the photo and published it on their front page. Inspired by Nguyen’s efforts to challenge this sort of behavior, a group of seven residents started a blog called Hollaback! Which,

according to founder and Executive Director Emily May, invited members of the public to share stories of ‘street harassment’ – or the harassment of people in public spaces.

After being frustrated by their lack of success in dealing with harassers, Hollaback! May detailed the ways that at that time, creating a blog where people could share stories of their own harassment ‘felt like breakthrough,’ and an opportunity to move the conversation from an individual one to a ‘bigger, more global conversation.’ The purpose of the blog was not simply to document harassment, but to understand how it works, ‘ignite public conversations, and to develop innovative strategies to ensure equal access to public spaces (Hollaback! 2015). May also detailed the ways that the original founders were ‘entranced’ with the idea that ‘technology might be a solution to street harassment.’ But at the same time, May admitted that the move to start a blog ‘wasn’t so much about how do we strategically use technology, it was really just about having exhausted everything else and seeing very little hope in all the other solutions.’

Ten years later, and operating in 92 cities and 32 countries (Hollaback! 2015), Hollaback! continues to grow and develop new ways of documenting street harassment. So, in answering our first research question, *what* experiences of harassment, misogyny and rape culture are girls and women responding to, we utilize content analysis and discursive textual analysis to unpack the types of harassment, misogyny, sexism and abuse posters share via the Hollaback blog. As a popular method, particularly amongst feminist media scholars (see Mendes 2011, 2015; van Zoonen 1994), content analysis is often employed to analyze large amounts of data, its meanings, symbolic qualities, and content (Deacon, Pickering & Golding, 1999). We used content analysis to locate and measure the types and location of harassment, victims and perpetrators of harassment,

and victims' response to it, via simple frequency analysis. As a largely descriptive tool however, content analysis it is incapable of analyzing or interpreting the meanings of posts. As a result, it was used in combination with discursive textual analysis, which seeks to identify and reveal emergent themes and/or discourses (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). For example, to what extent do these posts simply recount experiences of misogyny, or *challenge* and *analyse* them? To what extent if feminist language employed when sharing their experiences? And what affects do experiences with street harassment and misogyny have on their everyday lives?

A random sample of 159 posts was taken from January, April and August from the main Hollaback! website between 2006-2015. In each post, we coded for up to three possible types of harassment and examined discourses present in each post, particularly around the affective impact of harassment. In total, 'street harassment' or general 'cat-calling' including wolf-whistling, comments such as 'hey baby' or attempts to strike up conversations with victims, were the most prevalent, and were recorded in 47 percent of all posts.

Posts included a wide range of behaviours, including routine practices such as 'lip smacking,' 'kissy noises,' (wolf) whistling, and horn honking. However, as the posters detailed, these behaviors were frequently combined with comments about their appearance, or sexualized 'banter' about what the perpetrator would like to do to them. As one anonymous poster wrote:

Walking down THE STREET I LIVE ON only to have a man say to me in passing ‘Hey blonde, can I smell your pussy?’ Not okay, not appropriate, and I’m not going to let it intimidate me.

Although street harassment and the often highly sexualized comments which accompanied it, was certainly the most prevalent type of experiences recorded, a range of other practices were documented including witnessing obscene gestures, such as men rubbing or exposing themselves in public spaces – sometimes within confined quarters (24 percent of all posts), being followed, blocked or cornered (20 percent of all posts), or being leered at (15 percent). In fact, in most cases, posters documented a combination of the above, as seen in the following post:

I was getting a tram back home during rush hour and felt something touching me from behind. I turned to see a man looking me straight in the eye and decided to move away from him. Moments later I feel it happening again but now the tram was so cramped I couldn’t move away. I turned my head and the same man had followed me and was groping me again. I didn’t know what to do as he smirked at me when I began to panic.

Here, the poster notes the ways she was both groped and followed, and pointed out the ways her assailant was seemingly amused from her ‘panicked’ response, and presumably the knowledge that there was little she would or could do. Although not discussed in detail in the literature review, scholars have paid attention to the role of entitlement in

rape culture – where men not only feel they have a right to access women’s bodies, but feel confident they can access them without fear of consequence of their actions (Mendes, 2015). Here, the man in this post was not deterred by the victim’s moving away, but instead followed her and continued to grope her despite being aware his actions were unwanted. This behavior is symptomatic of a rape culture.

Although the woman in the above post remained silent and tried to resolve the situation by quietly moving away, a number of other posters documented the ways they stood up to their harassers, or turned down their attempts to engage them in conversation/flirtation, only to then to experience a torrent of verbal abuse in response (9 percent). As the poster Jen noted:

One day I was walking home from my friend’s apartment building along 31st street...It was the middle of the day so the street was almost empty except for a largish (5+) group of younger teens sitting outside an apartment building...I put on my sunglasses and walked past them, avoiding eye contact.

Well to my surprise I almost made it past them without any trouble when I heard that sound that will make the hairs on most women’s arms stand on end. The kissy noise...I should have just kept walking, but I had had it...So I turned around and said, ‘are you f*cking serious? How old are you?’ To which the larger of the group said ‘Old enough to f*ck you like a grown man.’ At this point one of his friends says, ‘Girl I am gonna f*ck you with some chopsticks.’ I’m half Chinese, and was

appalled that this brat had added racism onto the growing pile of sexual harassment. Various other insults followed, ‘skinny bitch,’ ‘dumb c*nt,’ etc.’

This points to the intersecting play of privileges (whiteness and masculinity) used to sexualize and racialize/ethnicize the victim in this incidence of street harassment, which left Jen ‘appalled’. We can see a range of affects prominent in the posts discussed ranging from shock, disgust, fear, panic and anger, and strategies are employed such as saying ‘I’m not going to let it intimidate me’ or calling the teen-aged aggressors ‘brats’ to infantilize them, amongst others. What we are unable to determine, however, from simply viewing these online posts from anonymous posters is how the experience of using social media to make visible and *speak back* to the experience makes the poster feel. What is the impact of making the post, of sharing the experience to a wider public and getting feedback? In order to consider these questions we turn to interview data that allows us to address some of the complexity of negotiating experiences of engaging with rape culture through social media, in particular the highly inter-active social media platform Twitter.

Speaking Together: Exploring #BeenRapedNeverReported

On October 30, 2014, the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag began to trend on Twitter, resulting in thousands of personal experiences of sexual violence flooding the feeds of the popular social media platform. Using the hashtag, girls and women (as well as a small number of men) used the requisite 140 characters to share why they didn’t report to the police incidents of rape, sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence they had

experienced. While the tweets were diverse, they all carried the common theme that it remained professionally, emotionally, and even physically costly to report sexual violence to authorities, disrupting the prevalent myth that unreported assaults are illegitimate. Within a week, #BeenRapedNeverReported was used over 40,000 times and received extensive coverage by global commercial media outlets, suggesting that the hashtag carried a cultural currency that could not be ignored. In this section we use the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported to consider our third question: *why* are girls and women choosing to use digital media platforms to confront and challenge rape culture? We argue that social platforms such as Twitter provide an opportunity for girls and women to share experiences of sexual assault in ways previously not possible.

The #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag was first used on October 30th, 2014 by *Toronto Star* reporter Antonia Zerbisias, who was soon joined by her friend and colleague from the *Montreal Gazette*, Sue Montgomery. In the wake of the detailed allegations of sexual violence by popular CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi, published in the *Toronto Star* on October 27th, Zerbisias and Montgomery both shared their own stories of being raped but never reporting it alongside the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported. The tweets were a direct response to the public questioning of Ghomeshi's victim's reliability by many who suggested that if the women were really were assaulted they would have come forward sooner to press charges. Zerbisias and Montgomery's tweets intervened in this public discourse, showing that there are many legitimate and often-unacknowledged reasons why girls and women do not share their assaults with family and friends or report their assaults to police. The journalists were soon joined by thousands of women (and some men) who tweeted their own reasons for not reporting sexual violence; the hashtag

trended on Twitter for several days and to date has been used over 8 million times.

The analysis in this section is based upon personal interviews with seven women who used this Twitter hashtag in late October and early November 2014, as well as a discursive textual analysis of the hashtag over its first two weeks through the lens of affect. We want to acknowledge the difficulty we had recruiting participants to interview about their use of the hashtag. Many girls and women we contacted via Twitter did not want to speak about why had used the hashtag and were cautious in their digital interactions with us. This hesitancy to speak – even anonymously – to researchers points to the deeply emotional and even affective nature of this practice, and suggests that using Twitter is different – and perhaps a safer way to share experiences of sexual assault. It is this difference that begins to get at our question of why girls and women are using Twitter to speak about sexual violence rather than other digital media platforms or practices.

Firstly, participants spoke enthusiastically about the sense of community, solidarity, and support produced through the hashtag. While this finding echoes previous studies of feminist digital activism (Rentschler, 2014) and the ‘connective structure of the [Twitter] stream’ (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 82), we are interested in the ways in which participants themselves understand and articulate the *qualities* of these connections. And perhaps most importantly, what do these connections *do*? Emma, a 19-year-old Canadian university student had followed #BeenRapedNeverReported for several days before contributing her own story, and says she felt ‘excited and comforted by the atmosphere’ and so was ‘moved to contribute.’ Her use of the word ‘moved’ suggests an affective bodily experience that was also felt by other participants who described sharing their

stories of sexual assault as an almost involuntary response to feelings of ‘disgust,’ ‘outrage’ and even being ‘sick to [one’s] stomach’ produced by the Ghomeshi allegations.

If the women were initially moved to contribute to the hashtag, these affects were intensified for many of the participants after sharing their own stories. In other words, becoming *contributors* to the hashtag allowed them to more deeply access the affective connectivities being produced and circulated, and made participants experience them in different ways. Participants were affected by *speaking together* about their experiences. For example, Ally, a 30-year-old Midwesterner who tweeted about being raped when she was nine, says,

I got an overwhelming awesome response the night I posted... There was one, I don't remember the name of the woman who responded, but all she said was, ‘we stand with you, friend.’ And that one made me cry. I'll admit it, that one made me cry. And then there was one that told me I was incredibly strong and brave for doing what I did. And I don't know, there was a bunch...there was six or seven comments like that. Which, for me, was overwhelming because I didn't really think that anyone would say these things, you know, it was just I was helping the hashtag understand, I guess, because that's what it was created for, to help understand why things weren't being reported. And I didn't really expect any response at all. And next thing you know, I got likes and favourites and comments, and I was just, like, oh, my gosh, what is going on here.

Other contributors also reflected on these ‘overwhelming’ feelings of solidarity with hashtag contributors as leaking into their daily lives away from the computer screen. Chantelle, a forty-something professional from Calgary describes her experience tweeting under the hashtag as a complex mix of feelings that defy a positive/negative binary:

The whole process, you know, I said how it was very positive, but it was absolutely gut-wrenching. It was very emotional and it was very upsetting to me, this whole thing, being a part of that hashtag, reading other women's little tweets, 140-character tweets. One resonated, right, and it was really...it was really a tough couple of weeks. Even though it was positive, it was very, very difficult for me. There were some nights where I didn't sleep.

These responses reveal intensities that are often not captured in quantitative data on digital activism (Lewis et al., 2014) and suggest the affective solidarity generated by hashtag such as #BeenRapedNeverReported is *multi-faceted*, *thick*, and *encompassing* in a way that, for example, prevented Chantelle from being able to sleep. Yet, Chantelle's experiences of discomfort and unease were crucial to her participation, as she says, ‘being a part of that hashtag,’ functioning as connective tissue to the other women using the hashtag.

But beyond merely arguing that these affects are *present* within digital rape culture activism, functioning in part as a reason why the women we spoke to wanted to contribute their stories, we also want to suggest that the affective solidarities produced through hashtags like #BeenRapedNeverReported are *doing something* politically. This line of thought builds on the extensive work by scholars in theorizing the political

functions of affect (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Tzankova, 2015). Emma describes #BeenRapedNeverReported as a ‘warm, comforting atmosphere’ in opposition to the ‘very cold, very statistically-based new stories’ where public acknowledgment of sexual assault often occurs. Her use of temperatures is again affect-laden and hints at the way in which hashtags like #BeenRapedNeverReported are affecting in ways that news stories are often not. In fact, Emma credits the solidarity and support she found tweeting with the hashtag as giving her the ‘strength’ and ‘power’ to report her rape to her campus security.

Speaking together through #BeenRapedNeverReported may also generate wider feminist consciousness amongst participants. We were surprised by the high number of participants in this case study (as well as others) that began identifying as feminist through their online engagement. For example, Susan, a Toronto-based woman in her early thirties was raped on three separate occasions since her teenage years and had never confided her assaults with anyone. When the Ghomeshi news broke and the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag began trending, Susan was inspired to share her story. She set up a simple website where she wrote about her assaults and opened a personal Twitter account so she could use the hashtag to connect her stories with the thousands of others that were being shared on Twitter. Within several days Susan had received several thousand hits on her website and countless notes of support from family, friends and strangers. She tells us that, ‘More than half of the people I initially reached out to that were women said that that had happened to them before as well and I didn’t expect that... the overwhelming number of people saying that they had been raped as well.’

When we ask Susan if, and how long she has identified as a feminist she says, ‘I’ve been a feminist for three weeks!! While I always thought gender equality was important I just thought that feminism was an outdated concept. It didn’t occur to me that what I was experiencing could be changed I suppose...’ Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2004), it is possible to see Susan’s ‘wonder’ for her newfound feminist identity as an affective relation able to generate movement and evident in her tone of voice, her smile, and her body language as we sat having lunch at a pub in South London. In this sense, we may understand feminist voice to develop through the affective solidarity fostered by digital platforms such as Twitter. These connectivities were not only evident amongst #BeenRapedNeverReported users, but as we will see below, were also particularly formative for teen feminists on Twitter.

Speaking Urgently: Mapping Teen Twitter Feminism

As we collected our data, we were struck by the high number of teenage feminists who were using social media to challenge rape culture in their daily lives, including sexism in and around their schools. Teens described how social media allowed them to connect with other likeminded girls across geographic space and isolated locations,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as participate in activist practices that are more accessible to them as young people than traditional activism, such as protests or volunteer work (see also Keller, 2015). Similar to some of the adults described in the previous section, teens often acknowledged social media, specifically Twitter and Tumblr as key to actually ‘discovering’ feminism, gaining a feminist consciousness, and making feminist contacts online (see also Press, 2015).

Teen respondents outlined a multitude of experiences that they described as rape culture, including street harassment, rape ‘jokes’ and the policing of their clothing by school administrators, parents, and peers. In particular, girls were angered by a seemingly accepted and often unquestioned sexism surrounding school dress codes, one of the most important manifestations of rape culture in the institutional culture of schooling which has recently emerged as a significant issue internationally (Pomerantz & Raby, 2015). Our UK teenage participants discussed issues like the policing of their uniform skirts, which included instances of girls being lined-up, their dress evaluated by teachers, and sent home if their dress was deemed inappropriate. These girls said social media, particularly Twitter was central in documenting these issues at school in an immediate way that speaks to the urgency of these posts. For example, Kelly (16, London) tell us, ‘So it’s like, say if something sexist happened within school we can tweet about it and make people aware of it straightaway...’

Like #BeenRapedNeverReported, hashtags fostered connectivity between teenage girls tweeting about dress codes. For example, girls critiqued the sexist logic imbued in the measurement of skirt lengths by retweeting an image showing lines drawn up a woman’s leg with levels of propriety, using the popular hashtag #INeedFeminismBecause (Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

This connectivity also makes possible an affective solidarity between girls online, but we know less about is how this impacted their relationships in and around school as we continue to explore.

Similar issues emerged from North American teenagers, where wearing ‘street clothes’ rather than uniforms, has led to comprehensive dress codes in many schools and sparked activism amongst students. In 2014, over 100 Florida students staged a mass walk out over the use of a brightly colored ‘shame suit’ to publicly humiliate supposed dress code violators – most often girls who wear a skirt above the knee (Carroll, 2014). Drawing on the immediacy and coverage that social media affords, the students created the hashtag, #iammorethanadistracton with additional hashtags including: #dresscodes, #sexualisation, #everydaysexism, and #croptopday, which are often used in clusters to signal the range of issues at play.

Sofia, 14, from Florida, attends a high school close to where the ‘shame suit’ demonstrations occurred. As Sofia told us ‘it was on the national news ... a nearby high school down the street where my mom went to... they put this girl in a shame suit... what happened was the girl posted it online.’ The incident and the girl’s response seemed to galvanise Sofia, who then also began tweeting about the dress codes at her school and about her experiences with rape culture, including: ‘sick and tired of catcalling at this school’ and ‘whistling at me isn’t a compliment it’s degrading.’ She also actively re-tweeted posts from girls in other schools who protested dress gender bias against girls, and noted the failure to sanction boys in dress codes through tweets such as: ‘don’t say dress codes are for professionalism unless you are prepared to ban sweatshirts and t-shirts too.’

Social media provided Sofia an important channel for raising her own awareness and connecting with teens outside school, but challenging the dress codes inside the school proved much more difficult. For instance, while taking part in a UN sponsored 'Girl Up' group at her school which advocated and fund-raised for 'girls in less developed countries,' Sofia detailed the ways in which initiatives to challenge cultural practices in her own school (such as dress codes) were quickly shut down by the school administration.

In contrast to Sofia's experience, some teens had established solidarities or supports in school, partly through digital media like Twitter through which they actively challenged school practices. Jamie, 17, from Ohio for instance regularly tweeted her principal, about 'sexism at school'. She said 'I try to tweet a lot of stuff about what's going (on)... I try to post when I see misogynistic things happening and call them out, pretty much.' Jamie often uses social media to challenge instances of 'rape culture' around the school, such as tweeting about being cat called while walking to school. Like most of the teens we interviewed, Jamie understands her school dress code as emblematic of rape culture:

[T]hat's something that I brought up with my principal as well. Because we have a really super strict dress code. Rape culture to me is definitely something that says that men are entitled to women, and that it's women's job to protect themselves, as opposed to teaching men to not do certain things, such as catcalling, rape, assaults, those kinds of things.

Jamie describes how her principal called a girl-only assembly to discuss dress code expectations and that this meeting became fodder for further activism amongst the girls online. Significantly, Jamie and her friends live tweeted about the discussion *during* the assembly, using the immediacy that social media platforms like Twitter provide to speak urgently, in order to garner instant attention and conversation. Jamie Tweeted ‘I don’t want to try have to not look at a woman’s cleavage when I’m trying to talk to her. Actual quote’. She then Tweeted ‘translation: Boys can’t control themselves and it’s the fault of girls.’ Jamie’s friend Theresa also tweeted ‘We pay for this school and yr going to FORCE us to LEAVE because you think our FULLY COVERED legs aren’t suitable for a school environment?’

The series of 'back-channel' tweets and the resulting conversation shows the creative use of Twitter by teens inside of school to disrupt institutionalised sexism through the immediacy of Twitter. This is methodologically significant in that they are not using a recognizable hashtag, which would make it easy to detect this activism in the twitter network. Instead, we can only see this type of activism through of entry point of the social media user, rather than the media text itself. Moreover, the teens are not simply connecting with strangers online or joining into a ‘trending’ hashtag, they are speaking to their pre-existng Twitter contacts, many of whom are in their known peer group at school. While this finding supports much existing scholarship on young people's digital media use (boyd, 2014), it also highlights the need to better understand how politics and activism may be practiced within these networks that cross physical and virtual space.

We can see this blurring of private/public space in the ways in which material school artefacts are also incorporated into the girls' twitter streams. After the assembly

discussed above, Jamie and her friends tweeted about a humorous anonymous drawing that appeared afterwards in the corridor (Figure 2):

It was like a drawing of a boy and it had one of him in normal boy attire, like, fitted t-shirt and basketball shirts. And it was pointing at problem areas where it was skin tight shirt, could see his abs, could make me really want to kiss him. Next it had him inside a fridge, keeps him cool, keeps him fresh, why don't boys wear fridges. But it had like little feminist blurb...It's funny and it's also like a really important issue. And I loved that poster!

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

In this example we witness the complex affective relationalities at school – the resistance to the girl-only meeting on dress code during the assembly, expressed both in person and through tweets, and later finding the humorous drawing urging boys to wear fridges to be less ‘hot’ to girls, which Jamie photographs and posts to the larger Twitterverse. In this case the audience appears to be her school friends, because the explanation is minimal – ‘protect this sign at all costs.’ Whilst the post is not retweeted, it is favourited seven times, indicative that an inside school audience appreciates the post. Significantly, again, these teens are not simply re-tweeting rape culture posts, they are creatively documenting and speaking urgently about the experiences and resistances happening live at school.

Another American participant, Cali, 17, from Pennsylvania specifically noted how critical Twitter was for raising her awareness the issue of school dress codes, saying

‘when I got Twitter and social media, I really began to realise that it was sexism and it wasn't fair.’ Also significant, was Cali reporting that she actually met a group of girls who she described as ‘internet feminist activists’ within her large (over 2000 students) high school *through* Twitter. Cali, alongside the rest of the feminist group, specifically challenged the school administration, for instance protesting ‘colour war challenges’ sports based assemblies where boys could participate shirtless. Cali was indignant that:

As a girl, you have to wear coverage. And the boys can just run around with basically no clothes on and they can wear like bootie shorts. And so I've been tweeting about that because it made me really upset. The girls should be able to wear sports bras or be able to participate in the same way because the boys are.’

Like Jamie, Cali tweeted before and during these assemblies with and in response to her friend group, creating a public record of sexism at school. For instance she tweeted: ‘so excited for tomorrow & the moment i get pissed off because during colour wars dress code doesn't apply to guys but to girls it does [shooting star emoji],’ which had seventeen favourites and three retweets.

Cali also explained that she and her friends felt the need to specifically counteract the lack of education about rape culture in her school, which had implicitly been positioned as ‘unspeakable’ by one of the female teachers, who had opted her entire class out of the one assembly held on rape. Around this time Cali tweeted a series of posts about sexual harassment and rape culture on the hashtag #GrowingUpGirl, including amongst others: ‘#GrowingUpGirl when you have to walk to the car and keep

your car keys in between your fingers to look ready to fight’ and ‘#GrowingUpGirl being harassed in your early teens by creepy older guys when you just want to have fun ((at amusement parks, etc)).’ Thus, we see again, how teen girls use Twitter to broadcast messages and experiences that are neglected or unspoken in the school curriculum, showing the powerful pedagogical function of Twitter for their feminist activism.

Conclusions:

In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks (1989) articulates the ways that speaking can be a radical act: ‘When we dare to speak in a liberatory voice, we threaten even those who may initially claim to want our words. In the act of overcoming our fear of speech, of being seen as threatening, in the process of learning to speak as subjects, we participate in the global struggle to end domination’ (p. 18). This is useful to consider in relation to public debates about the merits of digital media to produce ‘real’ change (Gladwell, 2010).

Taken together the case studies in this paper offer rich examples of some ways in which girls and women are documenting *and* responding to rape culture through various uses of digital media technologies. Using the anti-street harassment website Hollaback!, we mapped both the types of misogyny/sexism/harassment that women frequently encounter as well as their responses to it. In doing so, we have begun to tease out the ways anonymous posts documenting everyday experiences of public street harassment are a critical dimension of resisting rape culture by speaking about oft-silenced experiences and bringing them into public visibility. Whilst we touched briefly on the

affective nature of postings, this case study opened up space to ask questions about what the experience of undertaking these types of public postings might do.

Where websites provide platforms for visibility, social media applications like Twitter have provided opportunities for girls and women to connect, share and find solidarity through tweeting about experiences of rape culture. By considering experiences of posting on the the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag we went beyond the viewing and interpreting of anonymous posts on rape culture, to exploring the lived experience of taking part in a conversation through a hashtag community that enabled what we called ‘warm’ – that is comforting solidarities and connections between strangers via a trending hashtag. Finally we wanted to think about how online connections are not simply limited to online spaces. As a result, we explored how teens responded to the complexity of real, embodied sexism and expressions of rape culture at school through their creative and innovative uses of Twitter. In particular, we demonstrated how social media could enable isolated teens like Sofia to connect with a wider feminist community on Twitter, while also illustrating how this platform enabled communication and affective solidarity within the school community as we saw with Jamie. We finally explored how the platform created the possibility of finding like-minded feminists within school as with Cali. In sum, we showed the potential for social media platforms like Twitter to fold in and out of the material environment at school in order to strengthen teen feminism within and beyond this space.

Overall our discussion contributes to a theorization of mediated ‘liveliness’ and new unprecedented connection discussed by Kember and Zylinska (2012), as applied to feminism. Not only is feminist activism now more visible within media culture (Valenti

2014), but we have demonstrated the affective nature of new forms of sharing, connection and solidarity previously impossible through speaking about experiences of rape culture. What is evident and remains to be explored further is the radical potential of digital culture to reanimate feminist politics online and off.

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ⁱ This project is funded by Britain's Arts and Humanities Research Council.

ⁱⁱ We were able to interview seven teen feminists (aged 14-19) through the original Twitter sample, but also recruited further teen participants through contacts with a feminist group in a London secondary school who operate shared Twitter account. We conducted 6 focus group interviews with 15 of these participants (aged 14-15) at their school. We interviewed 23 teens in total.

ⁱⁱⁱ Participants from Saudia Arabia, Nigeria and isolated regions or small towns in USA and UK said they would be would be otherwise unable to connect to an international and global feminist community if it was not for the online networks enabled via Twitter.