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# When the Personal Becomes Political: Unpacking the Dynamics of Sexual Violence and Gender Justice Discourses Across Four Social Media Platforms

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## Abstract

We propose a three-pronged framework to study discourses surrounding social media activism initiated by networked counterpublics: *personalized expressions* that share stories and support, *demands for changes* that address systematic problems, and *contentions* between various actors and perspectives. Situating our analysis in discourses related to sexual violence and gender justice activism on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, we use supervised machine learning to quantify three discourses—networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention—and apply time series analysis to model their interrelations. Results show that networked acknowledgment stimulated both calls to action and feminism contention and that calls to action predicted feminism contention across all platforms. These discourses were more sensitive to real-world events on Twitter and Facebook, but more ephemeral and cyclical on Instagram and more persistent and coupled on Reddit. Our findings speak to the opportunities and challenges in social media activism and underscore cross-platform similarities and differences.

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Social media have created direct pathways to online and offline political participation by diffusing information, triggering emotions, fostering social capital, and mobilizing actions (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kwak et al., 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2012). In particular, social media have provided alternative structures and spaces for traditionally marginalized groups, such as women and sexual violence survivors, to project their voices, legitimize their experiences, and challenge mainstream narratives (Jackson et al., 2020). Such communicative practices have been central to networked counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Jackson et al., 2020), where "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

On the one hand, social media allow counterpublics to emerge and connect through affective and latent ties (Papacharissi, 2016) and further enable them to "[challenge] the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests" (Castells, 2015, p. 5). On the other, social media are open to disparate actors, voices, and strategies that respond to social media activism (Mueller et al., 2021; Wonneberger et al., 2021). In that sense, activism discourses initiated by networked counterpublics are often met with contentions from counter forces (Boyle & Rathnayake, 2020), criticisms within supporters (Hsu, 2019; Ghadery, 2019), online hate and harassment (Chetty & Alathur, 2018), and engaged activism propelled by misinformation or disinformation (Freelon et al., 2020). As such, we treat discourses surrounding social media activism, often influencing and influenced by offline events, as multilayered and constituted by different voices and actors and their interactions over time. In particular, we propose a three-pronged framework to study discourses surrounding social media activism initiated by networked counterpublics: *personalized expressions* that share stories and support, *demands for changes* to address systematic problems, and *contentions* between various actors and perspectives.

We empirically examine the corresponding discourses in the context of sexual violence and gender justice activism, focusing on their longitudinal dynamics and their interrelations. Such activism efforts are often accompanied by the use of hashtags like #MeToo, #TimesUp, #WhyIStayed, and #YesAllWomen, which offer "fertile ground" (Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014, p. 519) for survivors of sexual violence to share their stories and build a network of acknowledgment (Suk et al., 2021). Notably, sharing personal narratives of sexually traumatic experiences that cascade across online networks prompts calls for social, cultural, and legal changes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Boyd, 2010; Bucher, 2012). In the meantime, with the low barriers to expression (Benkler, 2006) and pursuit of attention (Banet-Weiser, 2018) in digital spaces, contradictory voices emerge, including criticisms within feminists, challenges against

feminism, and attempts to derail sexual violence and gender justice conversations (e.g., Boyle & Rathnayake, 2020). It remains an open question, however, how the multitude of voices and perspectives co-exist and interact with each other, which is crucial to fully understand the trajectory and impact of digital activism.

While doing so, we recognize that such discourses have taken place on various social media platforms. Despite distinct technological affordances that platforms provide and unique implications they might bring, much of previous research has focused on a single platform (e.g., Twitter), therefore treating social media as a unitary concept and ignoring the vast differences across platforms (Correa & Valenzuela, 2021; Tufekci, 2014). In response to calls for comparative social media studies (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021), this study extends our observations to a cross-platform context to examine the discourse dynamics on different platforms.

Specifically, we collected data on discourses surrounding sexual violence and gender justice activism over more than 3 years (December 2016–April 2020) on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. The posts were classified using supervised machine learning into different discourse strands (i.e., networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention), and their interrelations were examined using time series modeling. In what follows, we review the literature on how the three discourses might be related and how different social media platforms might display different dynamics of the three discourses.

## Counterpublics and Discourse Dynamics in Networked Spaces

Criticizing Habermas' (1991) notion of public sphere, counterpublics theorists articulate how traditionally disenfranchised populations have sought to influence and challenge dominant discourses, foregrounding their experiences and projecting their voices in the mainstream public sphere (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002). In digital spaces, these counterpublics are "networked," configuring their own discursive spaces, constructing collective identities, and broadcasting minority viewpoints to a broader audience.

In the networked communication ecology, communication and interaction on social media are dynamic in nature (Benkler, 2006). Therefore, when interrogating discourses surrounding digitally mediated activism, we should shift our focus from a rigid notion of "publics" – often centered on specific actors or movements – to "publicness" which denotes a continuous "process to make things public" (Kavada & Poell, 2021, p. 193). The visibility of networked counterpublics as well as the contention this visibility attracts, which simultaneously exist in a continuous and interactive context, constitute the dynamic process of "publicness." As such, our framework for understanding the temporal dynamics of discourses surrounding social media activism encompasses the following three components. First, sharing personal experiences and expressing social support have been a central narrative structure to social media activism discourses (Jackson et al., 2020; Linabary et al., 2020; Mwaba et al., 2021). Second, such "co-production and sharing based on personalized expressions" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 16) can transform into demands for social and cultural change,

moving debates from the margins to the mainstream. Third, contentions about issues central to certain activism invariably exist (Freelon et al., 2018). In what follows, we theorize the relationships between such discourses surrounding sexual violence and gender justice activism.

## Networked Acknowledgment and Calls to Action

In the context of sexual violence and gender justice, the narratives of networked counterpublics center on women's personal experiences and everyday sexism (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016), spurred and sustained by affective connections (Papacharissi, 2016) and a sense of bonding and solidarity (Weldon, 2006). In that sense, expressing or sharing personal experiences is a form of acknowledgment, defined as "a communicative act that speaks to our personal vulnerability and our strength as a community" (Suk et al., 2021, p. 5). Acknowledgment involves an act of admitting, endorsing, and taking notice of someone or something (Inwood, 1992). On social media, acknowledging others' experiences can create a "network" of acknowledgment, which allows a range of actors to share, testify, and witness traumatic experiences (Suk et al., 2021).

Networked acknowledgment can motivate people to call upon each other to articulate cultural, social, and legal demands to address sexual violence and gender injustice. Sharing oppressive experiences promotes a socially acceptable environment for disclosing personal stories, a process that constructs shared narratives (Manikonda et al., 2018; Mwaba et al., 2021). Spreading quickly through weak-tie networks, personal storytelling on social media not only raises public awareness of the situation but also enhances the collective capacity to organize personalized voices, coordinate actions, and change social norms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Mwaba et al., 2021). Through this process, networked acknowledgment on digital spaces has the potential to congeal into actions for broader social change.

More importantly, the affective elements within networked acknowledgment can be an important driver of calls to action. Acknowledgment posts recognize and echo other people's sufferings and vulnerabilities and contain a wide range of emotions like sadness, sympathy, trust, and love (Nau et al., 2022; Suk et al., 2021). Though some emotional expressions might be short-lived (Margolin & Liao, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019), they in general encode and disseminate social information (Van Kleef et al., 2010), trigger emotional contagion (Kramer et al., 2014), and prompt action (Margolin & Liao, 2018). Swept up in the affective flow of sharing, recognition, and support, participants form affective ties with each other and gain a sense of solidarity (i.e., a feeling of closeness or "common fate" with others), empathy (i.e., being able to relate to others' sufferings), and catharsis (i.e., emotional release) (Fileborn, 2017; Papacharissi, 2016; Rodino-Colocino, 2018). Those are key motivators of calls to action to address underlying problems because they organize what would otherwise remain personal experiences and individual emotions (Stewart & Schultze, 2019). For example, the immediate affective response to mass shootings on social media in the form of "thoughts and prayers" can spark calls to tighten gun access and prevent future

tragedies (Zhang et al., 2022). Bennett and Segerberg (2013) note that such affective connections between individuals can greatly lower the cost of participation.

Existing research shows support for this relationship: On Twitter, networked acknowledgment during the 5 months in the wake of the #MeToo influenced the intensity of calls to action, such as demanding investigations of perpetrators and changing abusive cultures in #MosqueMetoo, #ChurchToo, #MeTooMilitary, and #MeTooCongress (Suk et al., 2021). With longitudinal data over 3 years, we extend this line of inquiry by hypothesizing that social media posts on networked acknowledgment—disclosing one's own experiences, recognizing others' sufferings, and showing support and solidarity—positively predict calls to action posts (H1).

## Networked Acknowledgment and Feminism Contention

While the collective articulation of oppressive experiences initiated by counterpublics and the social support they receive might predict calls to action efforts, such heightened visibility on social media can also trigger contentious discourses as a response. As Freelon et al. (2018) note, "social movements are not alone in social media: other parties interested in the same topic almost always emerge to wield their own power alongside, against, or orthogonally with respect to the movement" (p. 991), suggesting that discourses surrounding activism efforts inherently feature multivocality and contradiction.

The public accessibility and searchability affordances of social media have greatly lowered participation barriers (Boyd, 2010), making social media an open and contested space (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Jane, 2017). In addition, social media operate in an attention economy where engagement metrics such as views, likes, and shares become the dominant currency and highly sought-after assets (Zhang et al., 2018). Personalized expressions surrounding sexual violence and emotional reactions to them are influenced by such social media logic (Banet-Weiser, 2018). As a result, the narratives of individual testimonies and experiences are often simplified and commodified, and contradictory voices can arise to challenge and co-opt those narratives for attention and power. This resembles what Brunner (2017) calls the wild public network with a dynamic flow of information and relationship across platforms, suggesting that networked acknowledgment can give rise to multifaceted contentious reactions (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020).

Scholars have argued that visibility of sexual violence discourses can lead to feminist backlash and popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dejmanee et al., 2020) as well as co-optation by strategically hijacking hashtags or agendas to invade others' conversations (Bode et al., 2015). At the same time, rejections of feminism and anti-feminism are actively challenged on social media (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018). Additionally, the hypervisibility of personalized expressions, especially often surrounding experiences of certain privileged women and celebrities, has led to reactions criticizing social media's lack of capacity to address the structural complexity of sexual violence by excluding experiences of women of color (Hsu, 2019). Such a cacophony of voices is related to the manifestation of postfeminist contradictions in

digital spaces (Linabary et al., 2020). As Gill (2016, 2017) puts it, we witness a cultural phenomenon that features a complicated, paradoxical relationship between feminism and anti-feminism where feminism is both endorsed and attacked.

As discussed, social media can provide not only a space for personalized expressions and their collectivization but also an opportunity for battles and debates. Therefore, we hypothesize that the high visibility of networked acknowledgment posts, despite their organizing potential, can positively predict feminism contention posts (H2).

## Calls to Action and Feminism Contention

While greater visibility of lived experiences of sexual violence survivors is expected to invite both calls to action and feminism contention, as we have thus far theorized, the relationship between calls to action and feminism contention is less clear. This is because related literature largely focuses on the pathways leading to online and offline political participation (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012) and the factors that scale up social media activism discourses (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). We seek to address this research gap by exploring the relationship between calls to action and feminism contention.

On the one hand, it is possible that feminism contention might give rise to more calls to action. For people passionately advocating for social and structural changes to combat sexual violence, their passionate expression of opinions about feminism within their congenial social networks on social media (Barberá, 2020; Cinelli et al., 2021) can strengthen their attitudes and values, thus intensifying their tendency to participate in subsequent calls to action (Pingree, 2007). When exposed to counter-attitudinal information and viewpoints on social media, opinionated people can develop stronger or even more extreme views over time (Bail et al., 2018). This means that as gender-justice-minded users engage in heated debates with others, they can develop more assertive views and become more likely to defend their cause and participate in activism (Mutz, 2006). This tendency manifests itself as calls to action on social media.

On the other hand, the reverse can also be true: Calls to action stoke feminism contention. Although the demands for social change scale up quickly across social networks on social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), there is often a lack of a coherent vision for the social, cultural, and legal goals that should be achieved (Couldry, 2012). As such, more critical voices can quickly outpace and outnumber the initial burst in calls to action, resulting in increased levels of feminism contention. Also, the heightened visibility of calls to action can invite contentions from different perspectives due to lower barriers to expression and attention economy in a similar fashion to networked acknowledgment attracting feminism contention. In addition, given the highly politicized and polarized nature of the networked communication context, the relationship between calls to action and feminism contention can be understood in light of the political asymmetry. In the context of sexual violence and gender justice activism, calls to action to address such issues are presumably more likely to align with liberal causes that demand changes in workplace practices, legislation, and culture (Mason,

2018). Evidence shows that conservatives are more likely to react to liberals than the other way around (Zhang et al., 2022), suggesting that conservatives, participating in this contention, might push back against liberals' calls to action and intensify feminism contention. Given the competing arguments, we propose a question: What is the relationship between calls to action and feminism contention (RQ1)?

## Social Media Activism Discourses across Different Platforms

Notably, social media activism discourses are not limited to a single social media platform. For example, recent evidence shows that #MeToo discourses spread across various platforms (see Quan-Haase et al., 2021 for a review). Therefore, a cross-platform comparative approach (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2021; Özkula et al., 2022) is integral for a comprehensive understanding of the interrelations between networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention.

Social media platforms offer different technological affordances and foster different norms of expression, delimiting the dynamics of user engagement and information flows (Bossetta, 2018; Jaidka et al., 2019; Yarchi et al., 2021). Technological affordances work together to determine the platform's features, such as visibility (ease of accessing information), persistence (permanence or semi-permanence of information), editability (ability to modify content), and association (connections between users and content) (Boyd, 2010; Jaidka et al., 2019). Previous research has categorized social media platforms based on the nature of connections (profile-based vs. content-based) and the level of customization (broadcast vs. customized) into self-media (e.g., Twitter), relationship-based platforms (e.g., Facebook), creative outlets (e.g., Instagram), and collaboration platforms (e.g., Reddit) (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Twitter, for example, allows individuals to broadcast their messages to and receive feedback from a large audience, generating bridging social capital (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). In contrast, Facebook is more likely to boost bonding social capital because users regularly self-disclose to their strong ties (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). As a photo and video sharing platform, Instagram features creative content curation (e.g., Casaló et al., 2021). Reddit allows users to form like-minded communities in subreddits based on shared interests (Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas, 2020).

These social media affordances can play a role in users' political discussion and activism engagement. Activists strategically choose platforms to disseminate their messages, depending on platform features, such as anonymity, peer support, privacy, and imagined audience (Keller, 2019). For example, Twitter is a suitable space for seeking out like-minded others, searching for relevant posts using hashtags, and engaging in attitude-reinforcing conversations (Keller, 2019), which likely promoted the emergence of #MeToo and other relevant hashtag activism. In contrast, users are more likely to self-censor their progressive feminist expressions on Facebook to avoid judgment from closer family-friend networks (Keller, 2019). Instagram's photo and video sharing feature has highlighted visual narratives in social activism, while it is greatly subject to commercialization attempts (Afnan et al., 2019). For Reddit, its community structure and discussion board features facilitate the outpourings of

traumatic personal encounters and networking centered around the #MeToo hashtag (Manikonda et al., 2018), but it may also serve as a camp for misogynistic voices (Massanari, 2017).

The evidence above points to different discourse dynamics depending on platform characteristics. Given the distinct affordances and challenges associated with different platforms, we propose the following research question: How do the relationships between networked acknowledgment posts, calls to action posts, and feminism contention posts vary across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit (RQ2)?

## Methods

### Data

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit data were collected using Synthesio (www.synthesio.com), which is a social listening platform that collects online conversations across various sources. Synthesio allows us to collect Twitter data from Twitter Decahose Stream, public-facing (non-regional) content from Facebook and Instagram, and Reddit data from Firehose. We collected discourses surrounding sexual violence and gender justice, including the major hashtag #MeToo, relevant keywords, and viral hashtags prior to #MeToo, over a 3-year time span (December 1, 2016–April 31, 2020).[1] Given the focus of the study, we retained English content only, resulting in a total number of 26,965,357 social media posts (Twitter 14,894,578, Facebook 1,803,220, Instagram 2,186,127, and Reddit 8,081,432).

### Supervised Machine Learning

We used supervised machine learning to classify social media posts into key categories. Two trained undergraduate students coded the following variables after reaching a satisfactory level of intercoder reliability: (1) networked acknowledgment, (2) calls to action, and (3) feminism contention (see Supplemental Appendix I for the detailed codebook and intercoder reliability scores). This process yielded 11,000 randomly-sampled social media posts tagged with human-coded labels.

We used the 11,000 human-coded dataset to build a machine learning classifier for each discourse. As part of text pre-processing, we first employed commonly used techniques such as removing URL, RT, @, extra space, and non-ASCII words and characters. Then we used BERT (Devlin et al., 2018), one of the widely established transformer-based language models, in the binary classification of the category (i.e., whether the post is classified into the category or not). After training, testing, and evaluating classifiers for each discourse category, we applied the classifiers to label each post in the entire dataset (see Supplemental Appendix I for a detailed machine learning procedure). The performance of our final variables is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Supervised Machine Learning Results for Three Discourses.

|                           | Accuracy | F1   | AUC  | Precision | Recall |
|---------------------------|----------|------|------|-----------|--------|
| Networked acknowledgment  | 0.78     | 0.78 | 0.86 | 0.78      | 0.78   |
| Calls to action           | 0.79     | 0.80 | 0.89 | 0.76      | 0.85   |
| Feminism contention       | 0.85     | 0.86 | 0.93 | 0.84      | 0.87   |

*Note.* Accuracy indicates the overall accuracy of the model performance. Precision indicates how many of the classified observations are truly relevant. Recall signifies how many of the relevant cases are correctly classified. F1 is a harmonic mean of both precision and recall. AUC shows how much the model is capable of distinguishing between classes. All values range from 0 to 1.

### Time Series Modeling

Based on the supervised machine learning results, we computed the daily number of posts under each discourse for each platform. For missing data in the variables, we applied data imputation techniques, including linear interpolation (for 1-, 2-, 3-, or 4-day gaps) and forecasting (for gaps longer than 4 days). Given the longitudinal nature of our data, we applied Vector Autoregression (VAR) to model the endogenous relationships between the discourses within each social media platform. In a VAR model, each dependent variable is a function of its own previous lags and the lags of other endogenous variables, making it appropriate for investigating relationships between time series variables in social science inquiries (e.g., Barberá et al., 2019). To run a VAR model, we must ensure that all endogenous variables are stationary; Augmented Dickey–Fuller unit root tests confirmed the stationarity of our variables (see Barberá et al., 2019). When estimating VARs, we determined the number of lags—which in our case is the number of days—using the Bayesian information criterion (BIC). With the VAR results, we performed Impulse Response Functions (IRFs) to simulate how one standard deviation increase in the impulse variable can influence the response variable (a "shock" in X producing a "response" in Y) by showing the statistical significance, magnitude, and duration of the impact (Swanson & Granger, 1997). Since the ordering of the endogenous variables in the VAR model can affect the IRF results (Swanson & Granger, 1997), we ordered the discourse variables as networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention. We put networked acknowledgment first because it is arguably the most immediate reaction to sexual harassment and assault accusations. As the VAR results are difficult to interpret, we rely on the IRF results to interpret the relationship between the endogenous variables.[2]

## Results

### Temporal Dynamics of Each Discourse

Before presenting the IRF results, we first provide a description of each type of social media posts. As Table 2 illustrates, the distribution of the three discourse variables

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Three Discourses Averaged Across Days in Four Platforms.

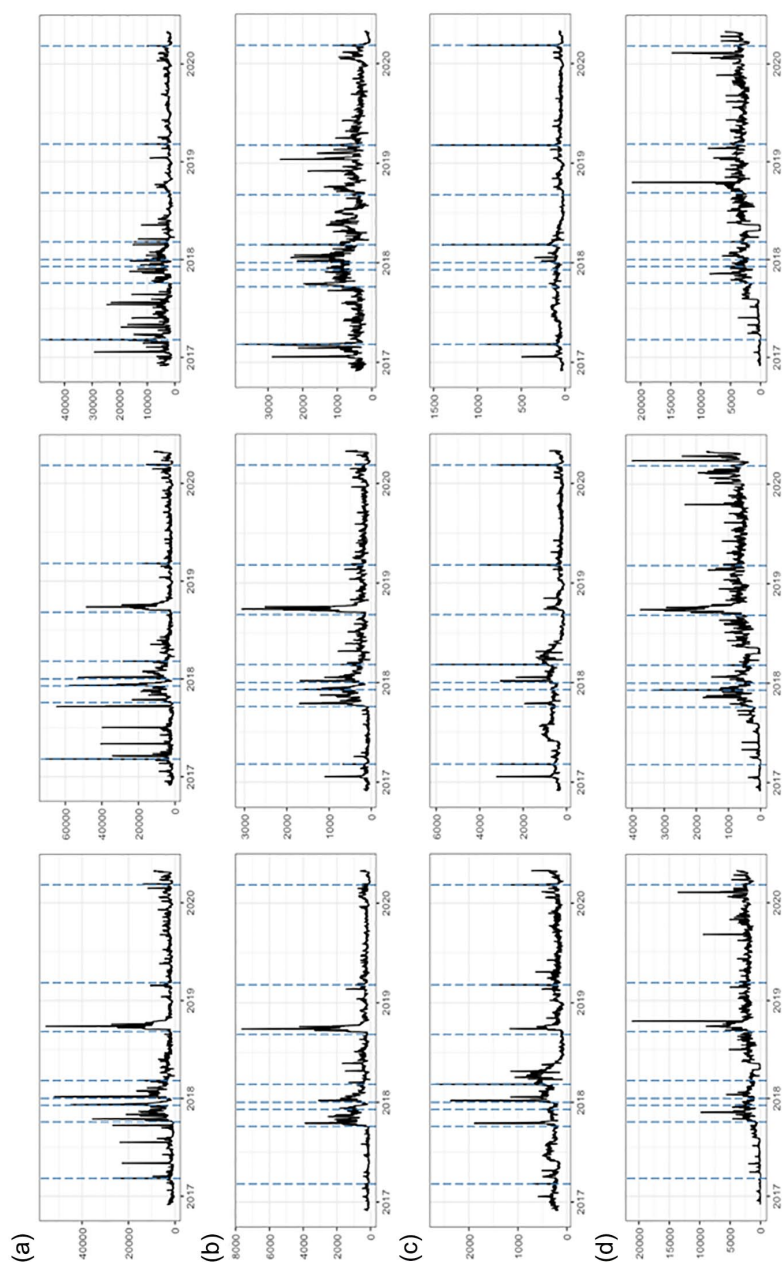| Platform | No. total posts | Networked acknowledgment | | Calls to action | | Feminism contention | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean/SD | Min/max | Mean/SD | Min/max | Mean/SD | Min/max |
| Twitter | 14,894,578 | 0.299/0.458 | 0.017/0.776 | 0.384/0.486 | 0.073/0.945 | 0.274/0.446 | 0.024/0.850 |
| Facebook | 1,803,220 | 0.283/0.45 | 0.047/0.59 | 0.166/0.372 | 0.048/0.367 | 0/367/0.482 | 6.06/86.89 |
| Instagram | 2,186,127 | 0.154/0.361 | 0.057/0.55 | 0.264/0.441 | 0.144/0.633 | 0.041/0.199 | 0.94/23.54 |
| Reddit | 8,081,432 | 0.273/0.446 | 0/1 | 0.085/0.279 | 0/0.4 | 0.407/0.491 | 0/1 |

*Note.* For each discourse variable, values indicate the daily mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum proportions of posts classified as each discourse. Classification of each discourse is independent. A table with raw counts is available in Supplemental Appendix I.

varied across four social media platforms. Networked acknowledgment posts accounted for 27% to 30% *on daily average of all posts* on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, and only 15% on Instagram. On Twitter and Instagram, calls to action posts had the largest share (38.44% and 26.45%, respectively), while for Facebook and Reddit, feminism contention posts came out on top (36.73% and 40.67%, respectively).

Figure 1 displays the temporal patterns of posts in each discourse by each platform. On Twitter, major peaks generally coincided with high-profile events, including the Harvey Weinstein allegation (October 2017), Silence Breakers as Time Magazine's "Person of the Year" (December 2017), the launch of #TimesUp (January 2018), and the Kavanaugh hearings (September 2018). To be specific, networked acknowledgment posts spiked when #MeToo became viral in late 2017 and during the Kavanaugh hearings in September 2018, but rapidly waned from late 2018. However, calls to action posts and feminism contention posts peaked around International Women's Day in March 2017, when Trump's tweets about it ignited heated political discussion along the party lines. After that, calls to action posts spiked surrounding the major #MeToo events, while feminism contention posts subsided after the viral hashtag #MeToo.
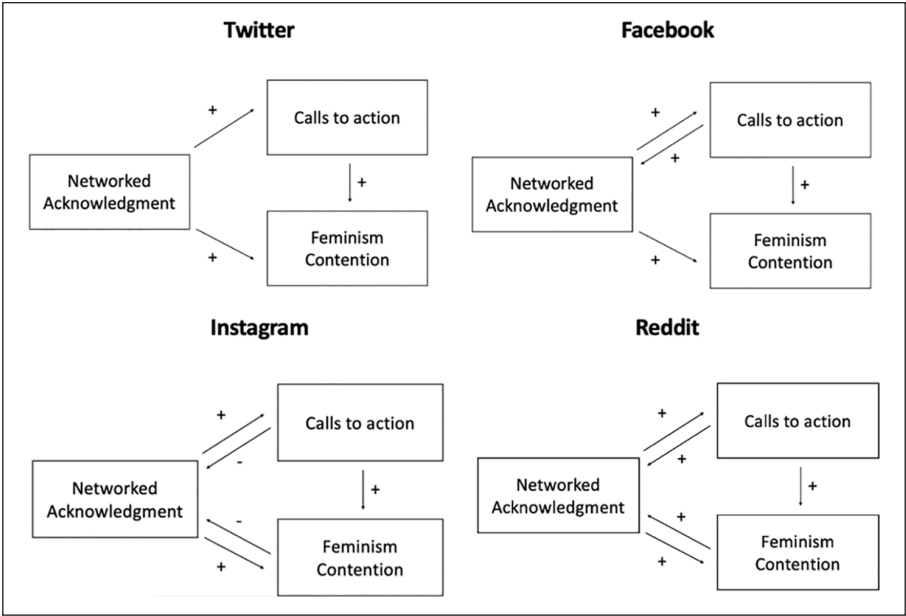
On Facebook, networked acknowledgment and calls to action posts generally displayed similar temporal patterns, with repeated spikes during the #MeToo movement and the most prominent peak around the Kavanaugh hearings. Feminism contention discourse showed more fluctuations over the 3 years, with dramatic surges surrounding the Women's March and International Women's Day in 2017 as well as after the viral hashtag #MeToo.

Instagram showed ephemeral patterns. Calls to action posts and feminism contention posts peaked around International Women's Day every year. Reddit was a stark contrast to Instagram in that the three types of discourses on Reddit showed sustained activity after the onset of #MeToo. Reddit revealed the most intensity surrounding political events, such as the Kavanaugh hearings and the accusation against Biden during the 2020 US election season, suggesting the political relevance of the discourse dynamics.

**Figure 1.** Daily counts of three discourses (networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention) across platforms: (a) Twitter, (b) Facebook, (c) Instagram, and (d) Reddit.

*Note.* Vertical dashed blue lines indicate major accusations and external events. March 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020: International Women's Day. October 2017: Harvey Weinstein allegation. December 2017: Silence Breakers as Time Magazine's "Person of the Year." January 2018: Launch of #TimesUp. September 2018: Kavanaugh hearings.

**Figure 2.** Relationships between networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention within Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit.
*Note.* For IRF plots, see Supplemental Appendix III.

Auto-correlation function (ACF) plots further illuminate that the three discourse types show distinct underlying temporal processes across four platforms (i.e., the extent to which 1 day's volume is correlated with the previous days, see Supplemental Appendix II). In general, we see evidence of moderate to strong autocorrelations, suggesting that once a certain discourse type emerged, it tended to continue rising, though the duration varied across platforms. On Twitter, networked acknowledgment and calls to action were the least sustained, with day1's activity correlated with up to the activity 44 days and 34 days later, respectively. In contrast, these discourse types on Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit persisted for a longer period. Interestingly, feminism contention had a different pattern. It was the most transient on Instagram while much more persistent (i.e., higher autocorrelations over a longer period in the system) on Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit.

## Interrelations Between Discourses across Platforms

We hypothesize that networked acknowledgment posts are positively related to the intensity of calls to action posts (H1) and feminism contention posts (H2). As shown in Figure 2, simulations suggest that networked acknowledgment posts precede both calls to action posts and feminism contention posts, supporting both H1 and H2. To be specific, on Twitter, one standard deviation (*SD*) increase in

networked acknowledgment posts on day 0 would predict an increase of 3,143 calls to action posts on day 1, with such effect lasting for longer than 6 days. Networked acknowledgment posts would also positively predict feminism contention posts on Twitter, with one *SD* increase in networked acknowledgment posts associated with an increase of about 562 posts about feminism contention on day 1, an effect lasting for at least 6 days.

Consistent patterns can be observed on other platforms. On Facebook, one *SD* increase in networked acknowledgment posts would be associated with 117 calls to action posts and 69 feminism contention posts on day 1. One *SD* increase in networked acknowledgment posts on Instagram would also be associated with 230 calls to action posts and 45 feminism contention posts on day 1. On Reddit, one *SD* increase in networked acknowledgment posts would increase calls to action posts by 137 and feminism contention posts by 829 on day 1. All these effects can last for over 6 days. While these patterns corroborate H1 and H2, it is worth noting that except for Reddit, the magnitude of influence of networked acknowledgment posts is greater on calls to action posts than on feminism contention posts. For Reddit, networked acknowledgment posts would be associated with a greater number of posts on feminism contention than those on calls to action, suggesting that sharing of experiences and solidarity on this platform can spark more contentious discussions on feminism than calls for advancing gender justice and equality.

RQ1 concerns the relationship between calls to action posts and feminism contention posts. Consistently across the platforms, our results show that calls to action posts would positively predict feminism contention posts but the reverse does not hold. On Twitter, one *SD* increase in calls to action posts would be related to an increase of 777 feminism contention posts on day 1 and 394 such posts on day 2, but an increase in feminism contention posts would not predict calls to action posts. Similarly, on Facebook, one *SD* increase in calls to action posts would predict feminism contention posts (an 86-post increase on day 1), whereas feminism contention posts could have a small dampening effect on calls to action posts (a 12-post decrease on day 2). On Instagram, one *SD* increase in calls to action posts would also positively predict an increase of 42 posts on feminism contention on day 1, an effect lasting about 6 days. As on Facebook, feminism contention posts have a suppressing effect on calls to action posts on Instagram, with one *SD* increase in feminism contention posts associated with a drop of 68 posts on calls to action, an effect lasting about 6 days. On Reddit, one *SD* increase in calls to action posts would positively predict an increase of 102 posts on feminism contention posts on day 1, a continued and lasting effect spanning more than 6 days. But feminism contention posts would not significantly predict calls to action posts.

Also, we propose to investigate how relationships between the three discourse types vary across platforms (RQ2). In general, we see consistent hypothesized relationships across the four platforms: networked acknowledgment posts positively predict calls to action and feminism contention posts; and calls to action posts positively predict feminism contention posts, not vice versa. We also observe interesting patterns unique to each platform. On Facebook, calls to action posts would positively predict

network acknowledgment posts, suggesting a reinforcing relationship between the two, but in a delayed manner where an increase in networked acknowledgment posts would start on day 2 after an increase in calls to action posts. On Instagram, while networked acknowledgment posts would positively predict a higher intensity of calls to action posts and feminism contention posts, it would also negatively respond to calls to action posts and feminism contention posts; one *SD* increase in calls to action posts would predict a decrease in about 25 networked acknowledgment posts from day 2 and contention would predict a decrease in 27 networked acknowledgment posts from day 2. The opposite is true for Reddit: both calls to action and feminism contention posts would positively predict networked acknowledgment posts, with one *SD* increase in calls to action and feminism contention posts associated with an increase of 185 posts (from day 2) and 65 posts (from day 3) respectively on networked acknowledgment, suggesting a mutually reinforcing relationship across the three types of posts.

## Discussion

In this study, we treat discourses surrounding social media activism as multilayered and constituted by different voices and actors and their interactions over time, which together shape activism trajectory and effectiveness. To examine the temporal dynamics of the different discourses, we propose a three-pronged framework: *personalized expressions* that share personal stories and support, *demands for changes* that address systematic problems, and *contentions* between various actors and perspectives. Using the case of sexual violence and gender justice activism on social media, we model the relationships between three distinct discourses—networked acknowledgment, calls to action, and feminism contention—over time on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. We demonstrate that these discourses have distinct temporal dynamics on the four platforms, with discourses on Twitter and Facebook more concentrated around various events, discourses on Instagram more ephemeral and cyclical, and discourses on Reddit more self-sustaining. We further show how social sharing and affirmation of personal narratives can prompt calls to action and intensify contention surrounding feminism across all four social media spaces, yet the distinct features and affordances of the four platforms foster flows in other directions. As a result, the trajectory of social media activism can be unpredictable because of the divergent actors, impulses, and discourses that relate to each other differently across different platforms.

In particular, we show that networked acknowledgment posts are positively related to both calls to action and feminism contention posts, though the magnitude of the relationship differs across platforms. Our findings reveal how social media spaces have provided both opportunities and challenges for social media activism initiated by counterpublics. Consistent with previous studies, shared narratives and solidarity provide an impetus for collective efforts and catalyze demands for social, cultural, and legal changes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Suk et al., 2021). However, such narratives and personal expressions can also invite more contentious debates about feminism,

including counter forces from both feminists and anti-feminists and challenges against them.

Disclosing personal stories and traumatic experiences is considered an important effort to raise consciousness about the prevalence of gender violence, therefore stimulating broader discussions on structural inequalities. Our findings show that the development of the personal into the political, however, is not always salutary, especially in the online networked sphere. Operating through a mechanism of visibility and attention (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018) and facing low participation barriers (Boyd, 2010), the heightened visibility of sexual violence survivors' voices can give rise to continued contention and marginalization. The mutual presence of seemingly contradictory paths from networked acknowledgment to action and contention brings a critical question to scholars and activists about the implications of social media platforms for advancing social justice.

In addition to the networked visibility of personalized expressions, we show that calls to action voices are positively related to and precede the intensity of feminism contention (not vice versa), suggesting that attempts to mobilize social, cultural, and legal changes can ultimately result in heightened contradictions. Visible contention and salient disagreement on social media may invigorate counteractions and reinforce one's support for their side, but a sustained state of contention, as evidenced by our data, might undermine the momentum of calls to action. In light of the highly polarized nature of digital activism in the contemporary communication ecology (Freelon et al., 2020), voices calling for countering injustice and violence can result in more ideologically driven conflicts, which deserves future scholarly attention.

Additionally, we probe distinct patterns of discourses surrounding sexual violence and gender justice, by extending our analysis to four platforms, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. Unlike other platforms, Twitter saw an evidently unidirectional flow from networked acknowledgment to other discourse variables, that is, calls to action and feminism contention. Given that Twitter affords the ability for users to organize and direct conversations using hashtags, it is likely that Twitter users were able to selectively curate and filter out discourses, maximizing the organizing and politicization potential, as evidenced by popular hashtags like #MeToo which started on Twitter. On the contrary, Reddit shows reinforcing patterns of discourses, possibly due to its affordance to create like-minded communities and aggregate content based on shared interests. Given that it is an interest-based discursive platform, Reddit offers a conducive space for heated political debates (Soliman et al., 2019). Our investigation suggests that Twitter enables individuals to stimulate conversations by sharing their stories while Reddit allows them to continue the momentum by not only sharing experiences but also engaging in political debates, especially during major political events. Consistent with prior evidence that Reddit is a platform with little content moderation and heightened online hate (Farrell et al., 2019), our findings also show that contention surrounding feminism mostly concentrates on Reddit. While Instagram may allow more thematic coverage of issues or events (Hitlin & Holcomb, 2015), the short-lived nature of Instagram posts shows the limited impact of such discourses surrounding gender justice and sexual violence on Instagram. That networked acknowledgment not

only predicts calls to action and feminism contention but also is negatively predicted by them can also be related to the event-driven discourse dynamics on Instagram, especially when it comes to organizing efforts and political debates.

While we focus on the interrelations between discourses, it is important to note that collective patterns of user behaviors on social media are influenced by the shared awareness of external events (Margolin & Liao, 2018; Lin et al., 2014), and such social media activity can in turn influence offline events (Enjolras et al., 2013). Individual responses, including emotional expressions (Margolin & Liao, 2018) and information sharing behaviors (Lin et al., 2014) can respond heterogeneously to real-world occurrences. By contrast, the current study focuses on the use of social media as sites where activism efforts originate, build up, and are countered and debated. It asks how the use of social media for collective grievances, action, and contention speaks to the general mechanism of how activism discourses self-organize, sustain, and respond.

In that sense, this article centers around how different streams of discourses exist and interact in a continuous and interactive process of constituting "publicness" (Kavada & Poell, 2021). Social media's unique affordances allow messages to become visible to many others when accompanied with thousands of endorsements (e.g., thumbs up, likes), amplified by elite accounts and news media coverage, and driven by social or community networks and recommendation algorithms, therefore facilitating the interaction and responsiveness between discourses. Our study further explores the mechanisms of different platform settings, demonstrating a generalized pattern while revealing unique characteristics.

Existing studies show that even when controlling for real-world events, the relationship between networked acknowledgment and activism is significant (Suk et al., 2021) in #MeToo on Twitter, and the same applies for the interrelations between Twitter discourses and news media coverage in the case of mass shootings (Zhang et al., 2022). Additionally, we performed supplementary time series analyses based on a subset of the entire time frame (from October 2017 to April 2020), using the available event data (list of major accusations and external events) that our research team compiled. We included the list of events as exogenous variables. The results are generally consistent with the main findings, supporting our hypotheses (see Supplemental Appendix IV for details).

This study has several limitations. First, we focused on public-facing discourses across four platforms. It is likely that there are differences between messages that users choose to post in a private setting and those that users post publicly. However, we relied on publicly available content that is arguably more consequential for public visibility and political outcomes. Second, our social media data retrieval process relied on previous literature and reports related to the topic and study timeframe. While we followed approaches documented by previous studies, a systematic computer-assisted approach (e.g., King et al., 2017) would help provide a more comprehensive list of keywords for social media data collection, considering the emergence of lexical variations over time. Third, our supervised machine learning method relied on texts. Social media posts including non-textual components like images and videos can deliver more nuanced meanings and narratives than texts. In particular, as a video and photo

sharing platform, Instagram posts likely include more information in visuals than texts. Future studies should incorporate various components of social media messages to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of social justice, activism, and political discourses.

## Conclusion

Using the three-pronged framework of personalized expressions, demands for changes, and contentions, this study demonstrates the complicated nature of using social media to project marginalized voices and advance social justice. The affective aspect of social media where emotions can easily catch on makes it possible for networked counterpublics to instantly animate the public with personal story sharing. However, given the open and polarized properties of social media, it is also likely that people shore up their existing views to counter their opponents' arguments without engaging in constructive conversations. Such contentious discourses might cripple our collective capacity to ultimately accomplish collective goals. The distinct features of social media platforms add another layer of complication. We hope that future studies can build on the current study to document interactions between discourses surrounding social media activism in a multi-platform context.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1.   We used the following list of keywords and hashtags: "#MeToo," "#TimesUp," "sexual assault*," "sexually assault*," "sexual harass*," "sexually harass*," "sexual

molest*," "sexually molest*," "sexual misconduct," "sexual abuse," "sexually abus*," "sexual violence," "feminism," "feminist*," "#EverydaySexism," "#ToTheGirls," "#WhyIStayed," "#YesAllWomen," "#HeForShe," "#EffYourBeautyStandards," "#Fem2," "#WhatWereYouWearing," "#Safetytipsforladies," "#NotOkay," "#BelieveWomen," "#BelieveSurvivors," "#WhyIDidntReport," "#WomensReality," "#nastywoman," "#youoksis." We constructed the list following previous studies and research reports related to the topic (e.g., Clark, 2016; Ghosh et al., 2022; Linabary et al., 2020; Suk et al., 2021; Thrift, 2014).

2. To protect the confidentiality of users who posted their messages, data were de-identified and anonymized during the entire analysis process, including hand-coding, supervised machine learning, and time series modeling, therefore access to individual information was not possible. In addition, we only report data at the aggregate level in the manuscript.

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