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Hashtag Feminism

Sharing Stories with #BeenRapedNeverReported

On October 26, 2014, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio personality Jian Ghomeshi was abruptly fired from his role as host of the popular morning show *Q*, a position that had propelled Ghomeshi to stardom in the Canadian arts and culture scene and burgeoning fame in the US media market. Mainstream media reported that Ghomeshi had been accused of sexual violence, including an incident where a woman was left bruised and with a cracked rib. An investigative report by the *Toronto Star,* published on October 26, 2014, described how three young women had alleged that Ghomeshi had physically attacked them on dates without consent, with a fourth ex-CBC employee alleging that Ghomeshi had sexually harassed her at work (Donovan and Brown 2014). Within a week of Ghomeshi's firing, an additional four women and one man came forward offering up their own detailed stories of Ghomeshi's violent behavior toward them, accusations that generated widespread discussion in the Canadian news media about sexual violence, consent, and toxic masculinity.[1]

While the Ghomeshi story made visible the often-concealed problem of sexual violence, it also unleashed sexist assumptions about victims of sexual violence, including the troubling notion that "real" victims always report their assaults to police. Indeed, this idea was used by some, such as the *National Post*'s Christie Blatchford, to discredit Ghomeshi's accusers, none of whom had previously reported their assaults to police (Blatchford 2014). Frustrated by these public attacks on the women who had come forward, *Toronto Star* reporter Antonia Zerbisias created the Twitter hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported with her friend Sue Montgomery, a justice reporter at the *Montreal Gazette*. Both women used the hashtag to share their own stories of sexual assault and why they did not report them to the authorities (see Figure 6.1). The hashtag began to trend, and within 24 hours it had been used nearly 8 million times by people from all over the world (Gallant 2014), becoming a "feminist meme event"

Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture. Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller, Oxford University Press (2019). DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190697846.003.0006

Figure 6.1 Original tweet from Antonia Zerbisias. Author screenshot.

(Thrift 2014) that did not just reference the Ghomeshi allegations, but came to symbolize the prevalence and persistence of rape culture both within Canada and globally.

In this chapter we focus on the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag as a case study that illuminates how Twitter and "hashtag feminism" (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2014) create new lived possibilities for feminist identification, experience, organizing, and resistance. Mobilizing the concept of "affective solidarity" (Hemmings 2012) we pay particular attention to the experiences around girls' and women's use of the hashtag, including why they decided to share their own story of sexual violence via Twitter, how they felt doing so, and what responses they received from friends, families, and strangers. We argue that these experiences demonstrate the ways in which Twitter hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported can generate affective relations that are both personally healing and that can move participants to engage in social change initiatives, including starting an online support group for survivors, as one of our participants did. In this sense, we position #BeenRapedNeverReported as valuable as a tool for personal healing and consciousness-raising *and* for its ability to produce other forms of progressive social change.

We draw on two types of data here. First, we discursively analyze a group of purposefully selected tweets from the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag posted within the first week in which the hashtag was active. This analysis allows us to illuminate key themes identified from our interview data and provide a snapshot of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. We then explore data from semi-structured interviews with seven Canadian and American women who used the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag in the immediate aftermath of the Ghomeshi allegations. These interviews help us to understand the experiences of women who use social media to challenge rape culture, information we cannot ascertain from their tweets alone.

After a general call for interview subjects using the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported failed to yield results, we contacted potential

participants directly via our project Twitter account. Direct messages were sent to people who were randomly selected based upon their use of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag to share an experience of sexual violence. Therefore, people who used the hashtag to express support but not to share a story, or organizations who used the hashtag to connect to a wider conversation about sexual violence, were not included. Out of the approximately 50 direct messages we sent, we received responses from and were able to arrange interviews with seven women. This experience points to the difficulty for researchers to get "behind" the hashtag to learn about the experiences of those who participate in particular hashtags. The sensitive nature of our topic, coupled with fear of trolling and a lack of trust when contacted by an unknown person on the internet, likely informed many women's hesitancy to speak to us. Indeed, several women asked questions about our project before agreeing to be interviewed, and we attempted to be as transparent as possible with our research aims.

Thus, given our small data set, this chapter is not meant to be representative of all hashtag users or all posts, but instead, gives in-depth insights into the uses of Twitter hashtags, specifically shedding light on a limited number of people whose motivations and experiences can tell us something about the ways in which the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag functions as both a discursive and affective intervention into dominant public discourse about rape culture and sexual violence.

In this sense, this chapter differs from the analysis of #BeenRapedNever Reported found in chapter 3, which is based upon the use of an algorithm to randomly select tweets for analysis. We understand this as a productive difference that makes apparent the ways in which our chosen research methods shaped the data collected—a reality that often goes unacknowledged. While the data we obtained from our algorithm was useful in getting a more "macro" feel of the hashtag, without interview data and a purposefully selected group of tweets we would miss a key part of the #BeenRapedNeverReported story—that girls and women did in fact use the hashtag to share personal stories of sexual violence, and that this sharing was deeply meaningful with both personal and public implications.

Navigating the Hashtag Landscape

Before we discuss the experiences of hashtag participants, it is necessary to provide an overview of the landscape of the hashtag. Here we provide examples of the kinds of tweets that populated the hashtag, as well as highlighting key discursive interventions that emerged, including the need to consider rape culture intersectionally, the prevalence of assault by intimate partners, and

the importance of contextualizing rape culture within wider systems of power inequalities and oppression. We are positioning these discursive interventions as an example of "discursive activism," which according to Frances Shaw (2012a, 42) is "speech or texts that seek to challenge opposing discourses by exposing power relations within these discourses, denaturalizing what appears natural, and demonstrating the flawed assumptions and situatedness of mainstream social discourse." We have chosen examples that challenge popular rape myths (as we describe in the Introduction), disrupting them through discursive intervention. Thus, we have purposefully selected the following examples to highlight these discursive interventions, not because they were the *most* prevalent or the *only* discourses present, but because we believe that they're significant in what they're discursively accomplishing. Thus, the following analysis draws from traditions of feminist media studies' use of discursive textual analysis (Gill 2007) and is not meant to provide an overall representative sample of the hashtag.

Over the past several years there has been important debate within feminist communities around the politics of inclusivity and intersectionality within online feminist communities (see Thelandersson 2014; Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014; Daniels 2016; Keller 2012). While we are unable to thoroughly unpack these debates here, many of these conversations have focused on whether social media platforms such as Twitter can facilitate meaningful feminist dialogue where difference and diversity is taken into account. While we obviously cannot provide a definitive answer to this here, we can point to the ways in which feminist intersectional critique was mobilized in the early days of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. Much of this mobilization came from participants themselves, who pointed out how their intersectional identities worked to prevent them from reporting their assault. One poster writes, "Black women rarely report rape because this nation has been taught that we are UnRapeable #BeenRapedNeverReported," a tweet that was shared 117 times and "liked" 141 times. In 15 words this Twitter user draws a clear connection between racist discursive constructions about black women's sexuality (Collins 2005), the history of racism in the US/Canada (it is unclear what nation she is referring to), and contemporary rape culture, and in doing so points out the distinctiveness about black women's experience with rape.

Indigenous women too drew attention to the specificities of violence toward Indigenous women in Canada. For example, one woman tweets, "Many #Indigenous women have #BeenRapedNeverReported as we're more likely to be raped again by the cops. #Colonialism #Racism #MMIW." This tweet highlights the ways in which, similar to black women, Indigenous women are hesitant to report their assault, due to the lengthy history of oppression by Canadian institutions, including the police and the courts. Another reads,

"Settler colonialism equals state violence against indigenous women #MMIW #BeenRapedNeverReported." Both tweets locate their critiques within the violence of colonialism as a context for the ongoing violence against Indigenous girls and women, signified by the #MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) hashtag, which we will discuss in more depth later in this section.

Other users highlighted sexual and gender identities, particularly trans identities, as reasons that they didn't report their assaults. For example, one tweet reads, "I still worry about how many other trans women he's preyed upon because I didn't report. #BeenRapedNeverReported." Another user tweets, "Being trans, I felt I'd have my gender picked apart. I didn't want to deal w explaining & defending my identity then. #BeenRapedNeverReported." And another simply reads, "#BeenRapedNeverReported because im [*sic*] trans." These Twitter users consider their own experience of assault within an intersectional framework, and in doing so, discursively intervene in a dominant rape myth that portrays cis-gendered women as normative victims (Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997). Drawing attention to one's trans identity then becomes an important strategy to problematize the hegemonic focus on cis-gendered victims and to acknowledge the high numbers of trans people who are victims of sexual violence, which is reported at approximately 50 percent in the United States (Forge 2012).

Another important theme that emerged in the hashtag was users specifically challenging rape myths around the identity of the perpetrator. Indeed, a significant number of tweets revealed being raped by a boyfriend or husband. For example, one tweet reads, "I was 17. He was my 1st boyfriend, and he almost killed me. I'll never forget . . . #BeenRapedNeverReported." Another one reads: "He pushed me on the couch and said: 'you can't say no, you're my girlfriend.' I cried all that night. Many after. #BeenRapedNeverReported," a tweet that received 87 retweets and 121 "likes." And another user tweeted, "My husband raped me. Many times. 'No' was never an option, even if I begged or cried. Last time, he tore my vagina #BeenRapedNeverReported." And finally: "#BeenRapedNeverReported I went to church leader, only to be told that a husband can't rape his wife. @LDSchurch: you were horrible to me." Indeed, the number of tweets that described being raped by a boyfriend or husband are shocking—even to those who are familiar with sexual violence statistics; and this is why the intervention made by these tweets is so critical. By sharing stories of sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner, women are not only problematizing rape myths with regard to who a rapist is, but demonstrating how domestic relationships are often situated within the broader confines of rape culture where women's voices are silenced, or their experiences ignored.

The last discursive intervention we want to highlight is the ways in which #BeenRapedNeverReported participants used hashtags to draw links between rape culture and other forms of inequality. Elsewhere we have described this

practice as using hashtags as a "narrative device" (Mendes, Keller, and Ringrose forthcoming) to speak to incidents (for example, rape) that are too painful to articulate in one's own words. Here, however, we want to emphasize the ways in which the use of other hashtags in combination with #BeenRapedNeverReported discursively connect the conversation about rape culture with other forms of oppression. For instance, in our discussion earlier about Indigenous women, we pointed out that several tweets used hashtags such as #Colonialism or #MMIW to locate conversations about rape culture within larger historical contexts of colonialism and a history of violence against Indigenous girls and women. In doing so, these tweets problematize incorrect assertions that, for example, blame individual Indigenous women for their victimization. Other tweets made connections between rape culture and the Black Lives Matter movement: "And they wonder why so many have #BeenRapedNeverReported when police murder unarmed young black men without consequence #BlackLivesMatter." In hashtagging #Black Lives Matter here, the writer is discursively connecting these problems, acknowledging unequal power structures that disadvantage BAME communities in the justice system.

Other hashtags such as #RehtaehParsons and #IBelieveLucy were used to connect the stories of #BeenRapedNeverReported with high-profile news stories of girls and women (in this case, Rehtaeh Parsons and Lucy DeCoutere) who were victims of sexual violence. For example, one tweet reads, "You took away her name and then denied her justice! And you wonder why #BeenRapedNeverReported was trending? #RehtaehParsons is her name!!."[2] While many tweets discussed affects such as disgust, empowerment, and anger, several tweets literally hashtagged their emotions, calling attention to the ways in which users *feel* as a strategy to build solidarity among a diversity of Twitter users. One tweet, for instance, reads, "Rinelle Harper, a 16-year-old, raped & left for dead in Winnipeg's Assiniboine River. We're with you. #outrage #BeenRapedNeverReported." Tweets such as this draw together collective feelings in a way that, we argue, allows for the possibility of solidarity. It is this idea we turn to now in the next section as we focus on our participant interviews.

"It Just Made Me Sick to My Stomach": Experiencing the Affective Weight of #BeenRapedNeverReported

While there were significant differences between our interview participants in terms of age, occupations, class statuses, and region, all women spoke at length about the intense emotions they experienced while learning about, following,

and participating in the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. Chantelle, a 40-something accountant from Calgary, Canada, describes her "outrage" upon hearing about the Ghomeshi allegations. An avid Twitter user, she followed the developing story closely and quickly came across the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. She explains, "When I saw it [the hashtag] it just was exactly how I felt . . . like, this is exactly why women don't report—there's so many obstacles and nobody believes you. It just makes me sick to my stomach." Chantelle was "moved by what the hashtag was about" and decided to post about her own experience of being raped when she was 25 (see Figure 6.2), as well as her experience being sexually molested as a young child, posts that garnered many positive messages of support from other hashtag users.

Yet despite the significant support that Chantelle received she recounts those weeks after the Ghomeshi story broke as being very stressful and disruptive to her life:

> 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 very positive, it was very, very difficult for me. There were some nights where I didn't sleep.

Chantelle's comments point to the range of intense emotions that the hashtag cultivated, feelings of being physically ill (specifically mentioning her stomach and gut) and upset, as well as simultaneously feeling supported and that she had a voice that was being heard.

As we have described elsewhere (see Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018), Chantelle's experiences of bodily discomfort around the Ghomeshi story was a significant aspect of her participation in the hashtag, functioning as connective tissue to the other women tweeting. Indeed, the ways in which other women's

Figure 6.2 #BeenRapedNeverReported tweet Author screenshot.

tweets resonated with her provided both comfort and upset in a way that produces what Claire Hemmings (2012) calls "affective solidarity." Hemmings describes affective solidarity as generated through experiences of affective dissonance or discomfort, rather than through identity politics or empathy. Claiming that affective solidarity is necessary for feminist social change, Hemmings privileges affects, including rage, frustration, and/or the desire for connection, as generative for a feminist politics anchored in "the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort" (158). In this sense, dissonant feelings allow for productive connections to form and provide a basis for feminist activism.

This feeling of discomfort can be mapped across many of our participants and other Twitter users' experiences with #BeenRapedNeverReported. Emma, a 19-year-old university student based in Ottawa, Canada, was sexually assaulted by one of her best friends only two weeks before the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag began trending. An avid Twitter user, Emma found the hashtag on her newsfeed, and was quickly drawn into the stories she began to read, while making sense of her own experience:

> I was really moved because I actually found one of my friends, who I don't follow on Twitter, using the hashtag. And I had no idea that she'd been through this. And so, it was quite moving to be able to sit there and say, wow, look at all these people, look at this, and it's still going on. I just found it quite emotional, because I feel like a lot of people had never actually talked about what had happened to them or labelled it a sexual assault. And so, it felt comfortable online, which I think is a new concept, that you have this idea of comfort and solidarity and support.

Emma describes her "emotional" experience reading the hashtag, moving her to contribute her own story, in which she publicly identified herself. She reflects on this experience: "I was a little bit nervous because it was the first time I was attaching my name to it [the assault]. And so, there was a sense of ownership of the event that I had to come to terms with . . . it's such a public platform where anyone can find it, and so I was nervous of any repercussions that might come up posting it. But at the same time, I was excited and comforted by the atmosphere, and so I was really moved to contribute."

Ally, a 29-year-old roofer who lives in rural Ohio, also describes a mix of emotions upon reading the hashtag:

> I was nervous. I was excited. I was kind of worried because I know people who have my Twitter information, that might not have known [about the assault] and definitely do now. . . . I looked through [the hashtag] quite a bit before even posting my own. I'm sitting here, and

> I was looking at all these reasons [women didn't report] and it made me feel a lot less alone about everything, because I didn't report.

Similar to Chantelle, both Emma and Ally's confrontation with the hashtag was marked by discordant emotions of nervousness, inspiration, and excitement that ultimately gave them both the motivation to share the story of the assault.

Likewise, Brit, a 39-year-old American living in the Greater Toronto Area, describes her intense investment in the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag upon seeing it trending: "And I was just reading people's tweets, just reading them and reading them. And after a while, just seeing all these common themes, I was just very sad." Brit's emotional response to reading the hashtag encouraged her to tweet about her own experiences with sexual violence, which included being raped on two occasions—when she was 19 by an acquaintance and then again in her early 30s by her (then) husband and his friend. Brit describes how her tweets seemed to open a floodgate among her friends on Twitter, many of whom began to share their own stories of sexual violence.

Yet Brit did not take the decision to post about her own experiences lightly. While she confidently posted about her rape when she was 19, her tweet about her marital rape was significantly more stressful because Brit recognized that while public discourse about rape has changed significantly over the past decades, marital rape remains somewhat taboo. Brit recounts, "I was a little apprehensive posting it, but I thought it through and I decided that it's still as important for people to know. . . . I did almost delete it the next day, I felt a little bit nervous. But I left it. . . . I guess I had a little anxiety about the marital one." Brit's comments point to the ways in which many women carefully reflected on the hashtag; contributions were often not made without a consideration of possible consequences and significant emotional investment, including a fear not of public attention, but of a *lack of* attention.

Lauren, a 30-year-old Toronto-based woman and three-time sexual assault survivor describes how her biggest anxiety around sharing her story online was that "nobody would notice and [people would just] dismiss it." In Lauren's case, quite the opposite happened, and as we discuss later in this chapter, Lauren's decision to launch a website where survivors of sexual assault could share their stories, inspired by #BeenRapedNeverReported, gained her significant media attention as well as an outpouring of support from family, friends, and strangers. Likewise, Ally, speaks emphatically about how she wasn't sure anyone would respond to her tweets about being raped when she was a 9-year-old. She recounts the "overwhelming awesome response" the night that she posted her tweet:

> 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 [laugh]. 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 . . . 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 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 favorites and comments, and I was just, like, oh my gosh, what is going on here? (see Figure 6.3)

Ally's comments hint at the surprise and relief she felt having received such support from other unknown Twitter users. This support in the form of likes, retweets, direct messages, and replies carries a powerful affective charge that, as Jennifer Pybus (2015) argues, is central to the workings of social media.

Yet, beyond the economic value that the affective power of social media generates for companies such as Facebook and Twitter, Pybus suggests that social value is also imperative to consider. She writes,

> When a user places something into the archive, he or she is uploading an object that has social, and hence affective, value. The object in question has the potential to affect as it moves between the user and the larger network of friends who come into contact with whatever has

Figure 6.3 #BeenRapedNeverReported tweet. Author screenshot.

> been uploaded. Thus affect accumulates, sediments, and provides additional cultural significance to that which gets circulated. (240)

Drawing together Hemmings' (2012) concept of affective solidarity with Pybus' arguments, our analysis points to the possibilities that social media hold for not just activism, but specifically feminist activism around rape culture. Indeed, it is the accumulation of affect via the sheer number of personal stories (highlighted in many of our participants' comments) that makes this hashtag effective in creating both affective solidarity among participants and attracting mainstream media attention.

Indeed, mainstream Canadian media was quick to report on the success of the hashtag due to its relationship to the Ghomeshi story (for example, see Dunn 2014; Postmedia News 2014; Teotonio 2014). Yet while this public attention allowed many more people to participate in the hashtag, it also opened up the hashtag to anti-feminist trolls. Mélanie, a 42-year-old Francophone woman living in Montreal, used the hashtag to speak about her experience being raped by her boyfriend. She says:

> I didn't see the trolls until after the regular media picked up on the hashtag, so people were aware of it. [Prior to this] it was just this amazing gathering of women who had a voice and who were supportive of each other. It was just a really powerful, positive thing at the very beginning. But as the weeks or the days went further, then I saw more trolls and then I went on attack.

Melanie's comments highlight the problem of mainstream media attention for feminist hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported. While on the one hand, mainstream media provides much needed publicity for issues such as sexual violence, it also opens the hashtag to those hostile to feminist politics.

As we have explored in our Introduction, there is an emergent body of scholarship documenting gender trolling and digitally mediated misogyny (see Citron 2014; Jane 2014b, 2016; Phillips 2015), so it is not our intention to redescribe this phenomenon in-depth here. Rather we point specifically here to how trolling can disrupt the affective solidarity of a hashtag, discouraging participation and ultimately even forcing people to abandon it. However, most of our participants did not encounter trolling in response to their participation in the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag and were encouraged by the amount of support they received online, as detailed earlier.

One notable exception is Lauren, who encountered a significant amount of trolling and hateful comments after she was the subject of a *National Post* story about two months after the Ghomeshi story broke. Lauren describes how

hundreds of negative comments were posted about her in the comments section of the story, many accusing her of lying about being raped three times, blaming her for the rapes, accusing her of being an alcoholic, and suggesting that she must come from a single-mother home. While her friends and family suggested she ignore the comments, she explains that "I couldn't just ignore them, they were so hurtful. I was shocked at how much they impacted me really." Lauren responded by blogging about the incident on the website she had recently launched for survivors, quoting several of the trolling comments and contextualizing them in order to showcase their ridiculousness. She writes:

> "CEOmike" was very active on the comments today. Call me crazy (he did) but I'm a little skeptical that he's a CEO. He took victim blaming to another level by blaming my family too:
>
> I would bet, dollars to donuts, this woman is from a single parent family living almost exclusively with her mother, who brought a series of boyfriends home, some who stayed for varying amounts of time. What this is here is really an example of the breakdown of families for the safe and secure upbringing of children as whole people. [Quoted comment]
>
> If I'd have bet this guy a donut that we'd maxed out on ridiculous for the day, I'd be out a donut. Just when I thought we were there—he takes it a step further and blames the fact that people in Canada have TOO MUCH ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION. He also calls me "highly articulate", (thanks, dude, you should really try it):
>
> Did this women not have parents that would have made the effort to make sure their 16 year old daughter was not going to underage drinking party?
>
> Again she decides to get so drunk she has to sleep it off in a place not her own, expecting others to look after her safety.
>
> And the third she thinks she is drugged, but instead of trying to get herself out of there, asks someone else to look after her.
>
> And why did she not report these assaults? Because she could not manipulate the police and the law. This woman is a complete narcissist manipulating others around her and now the media. She is now trying to manipulate the law.
>
> The problem with Canada is higher education is now so freely available, affected people are highly articulate. [Quoted comment]
>
> I'd like to thank the commenters on today's post for supporting the When You're Ready Project by providing current, relevant examples of the reasons why this Project is necessary. If it weren't for people like you, I'd probably shut my feminist mouth and go back to blaming

> myself. But you folks have inspired me to keep fighting. Take a bow, trolls.

We may understand Lauren's response as a form of creatively "talking back" (Keller 2012; Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018) to her trolls. Yet, she explains in our interview that she only felt the strength to engage trolling comments in such a way because of the amount of support she'd received in the weeks since sharing her story of sexual violence.

Mélanie, 42, from Montreal has also experienced some less than favorable responses from her participation in the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. Since the Ghomeshi story broke, she has been very active on Twitter, sharing her experience being raped by a boyfriend in 2013, and even using the hashtag #BeenRapedByMyBoyfriend in addition to the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. However, rather than trolls, Mélanie has been most concerned by the response she's received from her employer who has not been supportive of her tweets. She explains, "On Twitter I was tweeting about rape and the legal procedure with my ex and everything, and my employer actually asked me not to say that I was working for them. I have no support from my employer at all. . . . My social media activities [might] have an impact on my career, I'll probably lose my job." Despite this fear, Mélanie says she continues to tweet about her experience as she says she "wants to help others and at the same time I'm being helped." Indeed, Mélanie claims that speaking out on social media has been the one thing helping her to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When we contacted Mélanie to follow up with her a year later, we find that she no longer is on Twitter, a marked change from her active Twitter presence in our initial interview. She tells us that she closed down her account because her ex-boyfriend/rapist has threatened her with legal action, and that her lawyer has advised her to cease speaking out about her rape and PTSD on social media. This silencing of assault survivors is worrying and suggests that speaking out on social media could carry legal risks that have yet to be explored by feminist media scholars.

Lauren and Mélanie's experiences seem to not be representative of the majority of users of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. Nonetheless, their experiences highlight the fragility of feminist hashtags, which are embedded within a larger (often misogynistic) culture, and the ways that women can be influenced to withdraw from public debate (Salter 2013). Indeed, as the two most publicly outspoken women we interviewed, their experiences also suggest that while speaking out about rape culture on social media may be publicly accepted (and even celebrated), women who are *too* outspoken, or in the words of Sarah Ahmed (2017), are too "willful," may indeed be the subject of trolling, harassment, employment discipline, and even legal challenges.

(Re-)Presence-ing Feminism: Affective Solidarity and Social Change

Based on our earlier discussion, it is clear that feminist hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported produce an affective solidarity among participants that brings about a shift from "an individual experience to a collective feminist capacity" (Hemmings 2012, 150). Yet, how does affective solidarity function as a basis for feminist social change? Or, as one user tweets, "#BeenRapedNeverReported is moving, devastating, & real. I wonder if the candor of these difficult conversations changes the way things are." What might these changes look like? In this section, we continue to apply Hemmings' (2012) theoretical work to our empirical data to gain insight into what affective solidarity may look like within digital culture. We focus on how affective solidarity motivated many of our interview participants to take action on sexual violence, sometimes leading them to feminism and new feminist identities. Feminism, we argue, becomes "(re-)presenc-ed" through this process, opening up important possibilities for a feminist future.

The website When You're Ready (whenyoureready.org) owes its existence, in part, to the success of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. Founded by Lauren, whom we introduced in the previous section, the website was created as a space where women could share their stories of sexual violence in a narrative beyond 140 characters. Lauren did not have a Twitter account when the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag was trending, yet was deeply inspired by reading the stories that women were sharing. She wanted to contribute and set up the website, which she used to detail her experiences of sexual violence for the first time, sending the website link to friends and family, as well as posting the link to her personal Facebook page. With the Ghomeshi story still attracting significant media attention, the When You're Ready website received hundreds of hits and some mainstream media attention (see Boesveld 2015), assuaging Lauren's fears that "nobody would care about the issue."

Similar to the significant support received by our other participants, Lauren was overwhelmed by the response she received from family, friends, and strangers. But most striking to Lauren was the number of women she knew who also revealed they had been assaulted: "More than half of the people I actually reached out to that were women said that, that had happened to them before as well. And I didn't expect that. It was staggering. Some sent emails, some phone calls, some, just, like texts. It was an overwhelming number of people saying that they had been raped as well." This realization prompted Lauren to acknowledge that many women did not have a safe space to share their stories of sexual violence, and that a digital space such as When You're Ready could fill this void.

Within the first couple of weeks of being live, Lauren received close to 20 submitted stories from women about their assaults, including one from a 70-something woman who was assaulted in 1956. Lauren also enlisted regular bloggers to help run the site, which she envisioned as a collective project, rather than something she herself had ownership over. Close to three years (as of this writing) after the website was launched, When You're Ready continues to be an important resource for survivors of sexual violence, and boasts a regular blogging team of six women, including Lauren. Indeed, When You're Ready establishes the political potential of feminist hashtags in that they can produce solidarities that germinate other political projects, such as Lauren's website, which has not only demonstrated staying power beyond the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag, but invites women to challenge rape culture through their personal stories of violence and healing.

While Lauren's initiative received mainstream media attention and leaves a tangible legacy, other participants described how the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag prompted them to take other forms of action. Brit, for example, tells us how sharing her story on Twitter motivated her to speak out more about sexual violence and rape culture. She recently spoke to a group of fourth and fifth grade girls about gender roles and consent. She credits her participation in the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag as helping her to build confidence to speak out more against rape culture. She reflects, "Being able to be more public and offer that public support to others by sharing my story and saying, 'hey, you know, no, you're not crazy'—I think the more I do it, the more I'm willing to do it." Indeed, it was speaking out online using the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag that prompted Emma to report her rape. She says,

> For me, [sharing my story with the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag] was kind of the strength to say I can report this. And so, it gave me the option and the power to actually go through to campus security. . . . I'm not sure if it was because I finally put my name to it [the assault] or because I had seen so many other stories. There was a solidarity with it where I felt comfortable and ready to.

Emma's comments are significant, as they specifically articulate the affective solidarity that was generated via the sharing of stories using the hashtag. Emma was moved to action because of the solidarity she felt with other girls and women, and this is no small thing.

Interestingly, none of the women we spoke to were engaged in feminist activism prior to their participation in the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag. But similar to participants we discuss in chapters 3, 4, and 5, several women specifically discussed how the hashtag worked as an educational tool for them to

learn about feminist politics and terms such as "rape culture." This is significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that Twitter as a platform with the affordances of hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported have the potential to transverse digital feminist enclaves and into mainstream digital spaces. Second, it suggests that scholars need to consider the "outcomes" of hashtag activism broadly, including the ways in which Twitter hashtags might function pedagogically.

Lauren was one of the women who credits the hashtag as introducing her to the concept of "rape culture," a term that several of the participants only learned about through their exploration of the hashtag. Lauren says:

> I hadn't really heard the word before. Obviously, it's [rape culture] been prevalent in my entire life, but it is only probably online in the last few months [that I understood what rape culture is]. It was when the Jian Ghomeshi story became really prominent in the news, and the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag started.

Despite having experienced the effects of rape culture throughout her life, Lauren had not connected her own experiences with sexual violence to wider issues of gender equality until she learned about rape culture online: "I started thinking about how prevalent it [rape culture] is and how much I didn't realize it before. . . . I never connected it with me. I started thinking about what it meant in my life."

Similarly, Mélanie reports, "I learned a lot of new words on Twitter and new concepts. Basically, I got a lot of education on Twitter about anything that has to do with PTSD, rape, rape culture, I find my information out there actually." Mélanie discusses how she previously associated sexual violence with *other* geographic locations, rather than Canada:

> I heard more stories about women being raped in Africa, and I was really devastated for them. But I didn't think about the rape culture in Canada or other developed [*sic*] countries. So before this year [when #BeenRapedNeverReported trended] and before I was raped, I was not thinking about rape culture [in Canada] at all.

Mélanie's comments reveal a certain amount of privilege as a white woman living in Canada. Indeed, many Indigenous Canadian women, for example, would likely not disassociate sexual violence from the Canadian context, given the disproportionate amount of (sexual) violence in which Indigenous women are the victim (Kassam 2016). Yet, Mélanie's comments are not an anomaly. Chantelle discusses how she first became familiar with the term "rape culture" through media reports about India, not immediately linking it to her own experience as

a Canadian woman who has survived sexual assault. In this sense, a hashtag such as #BeenRapedNeverReported pushes back against postfeminist and colonial ideas that "other" women in "developing" countries are victims of violence and in need of supposedly liberated (white) Western women to come to their aid (Scharff 2012; McRobbie 2009).

As we discussed in chapter 5, several of our participants also spoke about mobilizing the hashtag, as well as other social media platforms such as Facebook, to consciously educate others. Emma discusses how she finds social media platforms "extremely helpful to challenge rape culture and sexual assault." She maintains:

> It's so open, anyone can read it, anyone can see it, and it's just there. So, someone who wasn't necessarily involved in that conversation can read it and say, 'huh, maybe I am contributing to rape culture, or maybe I do identify as a feminist, if that's what that means.'

Emma cites an incident where a friend realized that she (the friend) was a feminist upon witnessing an online conversation between Emma and Emma's anti-feminist cousin. Indeed, this type of hashtag pedagogy is a significant way that Emma feels she can enact social change as a young activist (see Keller 2015).

Perhaps most important though, #BeenRapedNeverReported and the affective solidarity it generated made *feminism a possibility* in the lives of our participants, as well as other hashtag users. Lauren, for instance, suggests that it was her experience with the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag that inspired her to identify as a feminist. As we previously describe (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018), Lauren had only identified as a feminist for three weeks when we interviewed her in January 2015, in part because prior to #BeenRapedNeverReported she "thought feminism was an outdated concept." She continues, "It didn't occur to me that what I was experiencing could change, I suppose." Lauren is clearly excited about her newfound feminist awakening, smiling as we eat lunch in a South London pub. Here, Lauren comes into a feminist identity when she experiences an affective shift that allowed her to not only see the disconnect between her own ontology and epistemology (Hemmings 2012) but understand that disconnect as both unfair and changeable.

In this sense, we are suggesting that feminism has not only "come into being" for women such as Lauren through sharing her story of sexual violence online, but is made (re-)presence-ed (Couldry 2012) within mainstream media culture. Here, we are theorizing (re-)presence-ing as more than merely a visibility of feminism, but an urgent affect or feeling about feminism's necessity that is generated and circulated via feminist hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported.

Affective solidarity, in this sense, can be understood as an important part of this (re-)presence-ing, providing the feelings of dissonance and connection that makes (re-)presence-ing possible. The concept of (re-)presence-ing feminism challenges postfeminist sensibilities that permeate media culture and suggest feminism's pastness (McRobbie 2009). Instead, the (re-)presence-ing of feminism makes a demand for feminism in the here and now.

While we agree with scholars such as Susana Loza (2014), who describe how feminist hashtags function to make previously invisible issues visible, we also agree with arguments such as that recently made by Samantha Thrift (2014), who suggests that the concept of visibility does not capture the complexities of feminist hashtags. While Thrift argues for understanding hashtags such as #YesAllWomen as a "feminist meme event," we are interested in how feminism functions as something that is not only made visible and eventful through tweeting, but something that is *felt*—as we described in relation to Lauren earlier. It is this feeling that is central to the (re-)presence-ing of feminism we are theorizing here. For example, one Twitter user tweets, "So many of my women's posts tell me about #BeenRapedNeverReported stories of overwhelmingly #VAW (violence against women) I love #feminism going viral. Action needed." Another user tweets: "#BeenRapedNeverReported gave me #closure and #peace at 68. Thank you for that #Feminism." These tweets are powerful in that they connect the affective solidarity of #BeenRapedNeverReported stories to *feminism*, calling attention to the hashtag as specifically feminist.

These tweets are moving because they explicitly draw attention to feminism's presence through the use of a hashtag (#Feminism), as well as what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) calls "virality of affect" (27), or the spread of affects across multiple digital platforms. But what is the political potential of the (re-)presence-ing of feminism through digital practices such as #BeenRapedNeverReported? Indeed, much of the writing on postfeminism, as we've outlined in our introductory chapter, has focused on the ways in which gender politics have become depoliticized through a privileging of individualized selfhood that aligns with neoliberal imperatives, including consumer citizenship, competitive self-branding, and makeover culture.

Other scholarship, such as Catherine Rottenberg's (2014) concept of "neoliberal feminism" is also premised on the idea that popular contemporary feminism has incorporated what she calls the "husk of liberalism" into its politics, generating a "new feminist subject" that is self-managing, entrepreneurial, and invested in self- transformation. This body of scholarship on postfeminism and iterations of popular feminism reinscribes a perceived tension between the individual, empowered neoliberal subject and the collective politics of social

movements such as feminism. This tension has anchored many conversations about gendered subjectivities, feminist politics, and social change in contemporary media cultures, including digital media culture. To wit: Natalie Fenton and Veronica Barassi (2011) argue that "self-centered media production practices, which are promoted by social media, represent a challenge to the construction and dissemination of political messages that are born out of the efforts and negotiations of a collective" (181).

Thus, it seems as though much of our theorizing as feminist digital media scholars has been impeded by this perceived tension between the individualized postfeminist subject and the collectively oriented feminist subject. Therefore, we ask: How does a hashtag held together by affective solidarity such as #BeenRapedNeverReported and the (re-)presence-ing of feminism it carries encourage us to think beyond the binary of the individual/collective? In order to consider this question we turn to Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) recent writing on affective publics in which she 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" (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" (19).

In other words, an attention to affect may help us to better analyze how "hashtag feminism" is experienced. For example, the presence of a collective is felt through individual stories that acquire affective weight through both their words and their sheer numbers, something that was alluded to by many of our study participants. Nayomi, an American college student who wrote about her rape on Lauren's website, tells us that it was hearing others' stories that moved her to share her own of being raped two years ago: "In terms of rhetoric, [these stories] create an emotional response and it's something that I think everyone cares about, whereas statistics it's sort of more logical." She continues, "I think the more people who post their stories, the better, because just in numbers, each story by itself is powerful and then I think if there are a lot of stories together, that will be even more powerful." Nayomi's comments point to the significance of stories in the (re-)presence-ing of feminism, and that these stories hold potential to blur the individual and the collective in ways that Papacharissi (2015) claims may "disrupt dominant narratives and evoke the casual, everyday political" (99). In many ways this idea echoes feminism's long-standing commitment to the "personal as political" while being reframed through the digital platforms that inform our current media culture.

Conclusions: Stories as Affective Currency

The analysis discussed in this chapter points to the ways in which personal stories work as affective currency along hashtags such as #BeenRapedNeverReported, encouraging other women to contribute and drawing together diverse girls and women with an affective solidarity (Hemmings 2012) based on experiences of sexual violence. Indeed, our participants highlight the importance of personal stories in their reflections on the hashtag. Ally contends, "People are not going to get involved with something unless it becomes personal. You have to put it in a way to reach them personally." A few hours after our interview, Ally tweets us, saying: "@AHRCdigitalfems Thank you SO MUCH for not making me feel like a statistic." This point was articulated by several other participants we interviewed and suggests the need to reconsider not only how we talk about sexual assault publicly, but how sexual assault "data" affects differently when mediated via stories.

This case study also illuminates how #BeenRapedNeverReported generates a feeling of *needing feminism now*, what we theorize as a "(re-)presence-ing" that pushes up against postfeminist sensibilities (Gill 2007b) in which feminism is constructed as unnecessary and outdated. In this sense, participation in a hashtag such as #BeenRapedNeverReported may serve as an entry point for engagement with feminist politics and other progressive social change initiatives. We've already seen this with Lauren, who became a public advocate for survivors of sexual violence after being inspired by the stories she read on #BeenRapedNeverReported. More recently, Lauren has also started organizing with other women in media and technology sectors to create online resources for survivors who want to make their own websites and engage in other forms of mediated activism. Women are coming together around digital feminist activism in ways that suggest a renewed feminist energy that is vibrant, insistent, and powerful.

Yet these stories, like Lauren's, are difficult to access as researchers. Social media platforms such as Twitter generate so much data that it can be a challenge to get "behind" the hashtag in order to understand the motivations, challenges, and rewards for participating in digital social justice initiatives. Nonetheless, we contend that this case study points to the importance of doing so. In this instance, we were able to learn about women's experiences with #BeenRapedNeverReported, including the complicated feelings around sharing their stories, the support they received, and the ways in which this support affected them. While these types of experiences are often overlooked by social media researchers, they provide invaluable insight into the ways in which social media mediates our daily lives and lived experiences.