UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Politics and International Relations

# Feminist Digital Participation, Activism, and Clicktivism on Twitter

by

**Cat Morgan**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# University of Southampton


## ABSTRACT


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This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by demonstrating why it is important to widen our understanding of contemporary political participation to incorporate digital activism and clicktivism, particularly with regard to access and inclusion of a wider range of voices and opinions outside of those who already have access to mainstream political platforms of communication. Existing debates within political science on alternative forms of political participation are limited by comparing them to traditional politics, organisations and processes and ranking them accordingly as legitimate or illegitimate forms of political participation. What is not considered in these debates is that women, particularly feminists, are marginalised from male-dominated political structures, which delimit participation within the bounds of traditional politics. In this thesis, I evidence the significance of feminist digital activism and clicktivism as a means of lowering the barriers to create an inclusive definition of political participation. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, this thesis draws on debates within literature from three fields: web science, political participation and feminist activism. The intersection of these literatures reveals a new perspective on the contested concept of political participation, the motivations for and impact of, labelling digital activism as a form of contemporary political participation, unconstrained by borders, boundaries and citizenship. Accordingly, Twitter is the object of analysis for this qualitative investigation and the specific characteristics and practices that are unique to this platform merit a study of its own, which is currently missing in the literature. Digital feminist activism is explored as a form of political participation through an ethnographic study of feminist activists' *use* of Twitter, which demonstrates that instances such as the #MeToo moment in 2017 can raise societal awareness about pertinent issues, which affects political and social change. Drawing concepts from the literature on digital activism, political participation and feminist activism creates the conceptual lens for analysing the empirical data gathered through undertaking a range of semi-structured interviews with feminist activists from Australia, Aoteroa New Zealand, Europe and the United States. The feminist Twitter community was observed as part of the ethnographic study during the year-long interview window, which allowed the researcher to examine feminist activists' communication, action and connection practices. Further, interview respondents were identified and recruited on Twitter during this observation process. Feminist activists are inherently political; the actions they take, who they communicate with and connect to, are practices shaped by Twitter's distinct characteristics, which enable feminist activists to interact and connect with geographically dispersed feminists, broadening access to information, resources, and knowledge. A tweet can challenge and critique a sexist headline when it directly addresses the journalist who penned the article and mentions the mainstream media company that published it: I evidence that it is not merely easy, disposable and inconsequential. I argue that clicktivism is a form of digital activism, which enables an individual to be political and to participate. Further, clicktivist practices, such as using a hashtag to contribute to large-scale action *are* easily replicated, which essentially is what makes this form of digital activism so significant.

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# List of Accompanying Materials

Ethics Application (ERGO/FSHMS/44766) dated 20/07/2018

Ethics Application amendments dated 12/10/2018

Interview Consent Form dated 20/07/2018

Interview Participant Information dated 20/07/2018

# Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Cat Morgan

Title of thesis: Feminist Digital Participation, Activism, and Clicktivism on Twitter

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: Date:

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# Definitions and Abbreviations

**ECHO CHAMBER**

A group of users that choose to 'follow' other users, and may exclude others (Bruns 2019a) based on their ideological alignment (Bastos et al. 2018).

**FEED** or **TIMELINE**

A list of all tweets displayed in real-time: the user's tweets, tweets by the users that they follow, and tweets recommended by Twitter that may be of interest.

**FILTER BUBBLE**

A group of users that choose to 'preferentially communicate with each other' (Bruns 2019a) that may also exclude others.

**HASHTAG**

A hashtag is a # symbol in front of a keyword in the content of a tweet and can define a topic in a tweet. A hashtag is searchable, and collects all tweets using the same hashtag together.

**RETWEET**

A tweet that a user shares, with or without comment, which appears on the user's feed. A retweet is typically used to share information with a user's followers. See also: **TWEET**

**TWEET**

A message composed by a user using up to 280 characters, which will appear on the user's feed, as well as the Twitter.com feed, even if the user's account is locked rather than public.

**TRENDING TOPIC**

A trend is a popular theme or hashtag, determined by an algorithm that ranks the most popular content. Trends can be tailored to the user, based on who the user follows, their interests and geographic location. See also: **VIRAL**

**VIRAL** or **GOING VIRAL**

A tweet that has generated a significant amount of interest, which has been liked or retweeted so many times that it trends or becomes a trending topic.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

Something is happening on Twitter. In 2016, I casually scrolled through my Twitter timeline and watched as #NotOkay began to unfold. Kelly[1] tweeted her outrage about an interview in which US presidential nominee Donald Trump described grabbing women. Kelly asked the women of Twitter to share their narratives about experiencing assault for the first time. Her timeline was flooded with over one million responses in 14 hours, most of which added the hashtag that Kelly started using: #NotOkay. Since then, other high-profile moments have reinforced the idea that something significant is happening on Twitter, such as the #MeToo moment in 2017, but it is more than just a hashtag. The digital community Feminist Twitter first came to my attention when I noticed feminists were frequently connecting to and communicating with other feminists about feminism, women's rights, and political issues. As one of my respondents, Alexia, said of her connections and actions that are taken on Twitter, '*Everything we do is political*'. Another respondent, Sam, said, '*Everything we do is political because feminism is political'*. Feminist activists are using Twitter as a public online space (Herring et al. 2002) to facilitate political action, communication and connection, on a scale that is not easily replicated offline. Exploring how and why feminists use Twitter as a political platform is the core of this thesis, contributing new knowledge to our understanding and categorisation of contemporary political participation.

## Background and Context

As an interdisciplinary thesis, this research draws on concepts within literature from three disciplines: web science, political science and feminist activism. The intersection of this literature creates a unique lens to examine feminist digital activism on Twitter. Web science is a relatively new discipline within computer science, which studies the interplay between the technological and the social (Hendler et al., 2008). Web science is 'inherently interdisciplinary' (Berners-Lee et al. 2006), which by design encourages the researcher to draw on and combine a range of theories, approaches and methods (Halford et al. 2010) to investigate the web. Combining web science with literature on contemporary political participation enables a narrower focus, which looks at digital feminist activism. A culture of connection established by the web, mobile technologies that are 'always-on/always-on-you' (Turkle 2013) and our everyday use of digital networks (Bimber et

[1] Although I collected this data in 2016 it has since been deleted by Kelly, hence why this text is not included in this thesis and she is not identified using her full name or Twitter username. This is in line with Twitter rules and ethical practices in online research require me to confirm whether tweets are still publicly available (at the time of writing) – which is the case for any tweets used in the rest of this thesis.

al. 2015) changed the political landscape. Alternative forms of political participation that are facilitated by digital networks, such as signing and sharing petitions (Dennis 2018) have changed what is perceived as political participation. Evolving understandings of political participation allows this thesis to frame an analysis that considers how political participation can be contextualised through a specific digital network.

Since Twitter launched in 2006, it has become an increasingly popular platform (Burgess and Baym 2020) with over 330 million active users in 2019 (Statista 2020a). Twitter has been used by activists and demonstrators to organise and communicate during large-scale protests, such as the Arab Spring in 2011 (Gerbaudo 2012; Tufekci 2017) and Occupy Wall Street in 2012 (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013; Castells 2015). However, these investigations frame Twitter as a tool that activists use (Castells 2015) rather than as a platform that facilitates activism. Much of the extant literature on digital activism has focused on the shift from offline to online (Van Laer 2010; Earl and Kimport 2011; Knappe and Lang 2014; Baer 2016; Fotopoulou 2016a), often exploring various digital networks simultaneously (Dixon 2014; Halupka 2018; Megarry 2020). The intersection of the literature - feminist activism, web science and political participation – forms the conceptual framework that I use to perform a detailed exploration of digital feminist activism on Twitter as a form of contemporary political participation. The framework reveals a new perspective on the contested nature of political participation and the impact of incorporating digital activism and clicktivism in our understanding of the concept. Furthermore, it enables this thesis to critically analyse what is meant by political 'participation' on Twitter (boyd and Crawford 2012). This qualitative analysis is currently missing from literature on digital activism and digital feminist activism. As an interdisciplinary thesis, this is a unique investigation as the analysis draws on multiple literatures and concepts, bringing them together to identify the significance of feminist digital activism on Twitter.

Twitter has a set of well-established characteristics, hereafter referred to as affordances, which shape how activists practice action, communication and connection. Despite the affordances of a particular digital network changing the conditions for how digital activism is performed, scholars have not paid sufficient and differentiated attention to them (Karpf 2020a). As Vaccari and Valeriani proficiently argue, 'platforms and their affordances matter' (2021, p. 220) as they change the conditions for how politics can be performed. Twitter's hashtag is the exception and is the subject of many investigations, particularly regarding digital feminist activism (Dixon 2014; Losh 2014; Khoja-Moolji 2015; Baer 2016). Recent scholarship has explored high-profile instances of hashtag use, such as the #MeToo moment in 2017 (Boyle 2019; Fileborn and Phillips 2019; Mendes and Ringrose 2019; Salter 2019; Bouvier 2020; Erlingsdóttir 2020). Twitter's distinct affordances merit a detailed study that is currently missing in the literature, specifically one that

identifies *how* and *why* digital feminist activists use Twitter, and what impact digital feminist activism has, or the difference it makes, to real-world politics.

## Research Questions and Method

One of the strengths of taking a qualitative approach, specifically using ethnography as a method, is that it enables me to investigate the phenomena of digital feminist activism in the context of Twitter as a political platform. Various scholars (Hine 2000, 2015; boyd 2008a; boyd and Crawford 2012) argue that descriptive ethnographic research is needed to understand the digital culture. This idea shaped how this research is designed, approached and written. An ethnographic study of feminist Twitter would require a long and immersive engagement to draw out the detail and nuances of how individuals make use of its affordances. Initially, it was not my intention to focus solely on Twitter, but as this thesis continued, it became clear that something significant was taking place on feminist Twitter, which warranted narrowing the focus to this digital community. This thesis develops our knowledge and understanding of contemporary political participation, more specifically, how feminists use Twitter to *do* politics. An overall research question was formulated to build on the literature review and to determine the significance of feminists using Twitter for their activism and clicktivism:

**RQ1.** How does framing digital feminist activism as a form of contemporary political participation change our understanding of the concept?

Three sub-questions were designed to create insights that would build an argument to answer this question:

**RQ2.** How do feminist activists use Twitter to facilitate action, communication, and connection?

**RQ3.** Why do feminist activists use Twitter as a political platform?

**RQ4.** How do feminists describe their activism and clicktivism, and the value it holds for them?

### An Ethnographic Study of the *Use* of a Digital Network

The thesis design uses ethnography as the predominant method, which facilitates the study of an iteration of a feminist digital community in depth. It forms part of my original contribution by combining different ethnographic approaches to study how and why feminists perform their digital activism on Twitter. Using ethnography allows this research to explore digital feminist

activists' political action, communication and connection in detail and explore how those practices are facilitated via the affordances of Twitter. Ethnography is a research method typically associated with anthropology, based on the premise that to understand human behaviour, the researcher needs to witness it (Hogan et al., 2009). Van Maanen laid the foundation for ethnography as a 'practice concerned with the study and representation of culture' (2011, p. 150). Van Maanen's (2011) researcher is a storyteller that weaves together a narrative that makes the culture being studied visible; accordingly, researchers in the field must observe and make notes that shape their understanding of that culture. Similarly, Hine (2015) argues that ethnographers should fully immerse themselves in the setting to understand complex meanings and interactions.

Ethnography is utilised by researchers from various disciplines, such as social sciences, psychology, and computer sciences, to explore human experiences in different societies and cultures (O'Reilly 2012; Murthy 2018). Ethnography enables the researcher to learn about a range of people's perspectives (Hammersley 2006) or a 'diverse range of complex social phenomena' (O'Reilly 2012, p. 1). The ethnographer aims to collect 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973), which allows them to understand the culture they study. For instance, Postill and Pink (2012) use ethnography to examine activist practices using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. They propose that the researcher engages with 'routine, movement and sociality' (2012, p. 123) to understand how activists use social media as a site of their activism. Although Postill and Pink (2012) refer to their study as 'social media ethnography', they, in fact, moved to Barcelona for twelve months to interact with activists, guided by the ethnographic practice of living amongst people they study to further develop their understanding (Hine 2015). It is more accurate to consider their research as an ethnography that combines an online/offline field of study.

A growing corpus of ethnographic approaches situates ethnography in online spaces, although scholars have not agreed on a label or a definition for their methods. For instance, digital ethnography (Underberg and Zorn 2013; Pink et al. 2016; Varis 2016; Murthy 2018); virtual ethnography (Hine 2000, 2008, 2017); netnography (2010, 2015, 2017, 2019) and social media ethnography (Postill and Pink 2012) are some of the terms that scholars use. Digital ethnography centres on communication practices (Varis 2016), whereas virtual ethnography is the study of the Internet as a culture and cultural object shaped by its use (Hine 2000). Netnography is not the same as virtual or digital; it is an approach used to investigate 'online traces', which can be an image, video, or text (Kozinets, 2019). Kozinets (2019) proposes that combining research practices for data collection, analysis, and interpretation means that netnography is a significantly different approach. In comparison, social media ethnography is a relatively new method that considers participatory 'place' with an online/offline context (Postill and Pink 2012). Fundamentally, these

scholars agree that ethnographic methods can be used to study technologically-determined ways to connect, communicate, and socialise with others (O'Reilly 2012).

The way ethnography is conducted has shifted due to the proliferation of digital networks, which have grown in influence and presence for individuals' everyday experiences (Varis 2016). Ethnography enables researchers to immerse themselves in the network's cultural experience and the platform's distinct affordances, which establishes the foundation for understanding the diverse practices of the group being studied (O'Reilly 2012; Postill and Pink 2012; Caliandro 2018; Danley 2021). Rhodes and Corbett refer to this immersion as a 'deep hanging out' (2020, p. 111). Observing users interactions with content (Caliandro 2018) and others in their environment is essential to the researcher's understanding and interpretation process. As Hine (2017, 2000) argues, an advantage of an ethnographic approach is that it enables the researcher to learn through their experiences and explorations. Further, ethnographers can extend their exploration of a digital network by collecting a range of data, including interviews, artefacts (e.g. tweets), and recording field notes about researcher reflections enable them to make sense of interpretations (Eriksson et al. 2012). Van Maanen's perspective on fieldnotes is that they are 'always incomplete' (2011, p. 153) because they are often 'hastily composed' (2011, p. 117) after the fact, sometimes the following day. However, this is not necessarily the case when studying a digital network; researchers can record developing ideas and theories while observing and interacting with others in the digital network (see Appendix B for my fieldnotes of Twitter observation). By interacting with individuals in the digital network being studied, the researcher can establish a rapport that is advantageous for approaching potential interview respondents and conducting interviews.

This research design describes an ethnographic study of the use of a digital network, since none of the terms that scholars have used previously fully describe the phenomenon under examination in this thesis. It is not a new label for a new method, rather, it combines ethnographic approaches and foci of study. The object of analysis in this study is how and why feminists use Twitter for their activism and clicktivism; the communication practices they engage in with other feminists and to reach their audience; the action they take via the affordances of the network, and the political issues they engage with; the significance of the connections they make; and how they describe their digital activism. Given the focus of this thesis, it is no surprise that this research was approached using a feminist lens. Part of my original contribution to knowledge is to use my positionality as a feminist researcher and as an insider in feminist Twitter to analyse and critique existing literature. Women's experiences and voices have been excluded from much of the literature, but feminist researchers have played a crucial role in redressing the balance, giving them the opportunity to speak and be heard (DeVault 1990; Hesse-Biber 2007; Doucet and Mauthner 2008; Kozinets 2015; Oakley 2016; Lumsden 2019). Further, using a feminist lens to

analyse empirical data provides the context for analysing how gender is understood in relation to politics, the distribution of power, and access to a platform (on which to speak).

## Semi-structured Interviews

During the interview recruitment stage, which ran from August 2018 to August 2019, I connected to and communicated with other feminists on Twitter, as this was the site of ethnographic study. I went on Twitter for a short time every day and at regular intervals I tweeted about the research project, asking followers to retweet, replying to others and sometimes @mentioning specific users I would like to interview. I used #feminism and #feminist so that content would be categorised and searchable for those who might be interested. I repeatedly examined how my positionality might impact the process (Buch and Staller 2013); after reflection I updated my bio to state that I was conducting research and actively seeking respondents, this allowed me to ensure that recruitment process was ethical and did not exploit any respondents


*Figure 1 Tweet by Cat Morgan 20/05/19*

Being online in this way, engaging with other feminists about my research project and their political views, was a useful way to get to know feminists in the community and build rapport. Several followers and other users replied to my tweets, offering themselves as respondents and suggesting others whom they thought would be relevant. I mentioned that I wanted to interview feminists about their 'activism' in the early stages of my research, using this as a broad term that would appeal to many indivduals. Several potential respondents were concerned that they were not relevant enough, or were not a big enough feminist name, but I reassured them that I would interview anyone who identified as feminist who used Twitter for politics.

I decided on using semi-structured interviews as a way to understand the complexities of how and why Twitter is used by feminist activists for political action, communication and connection. Conducting interviews allows the ethnographer to explore specific issues and focus on them in detail (Hine 2015). The aim of using semi-structured interviews as a method was to build a

collaborative relationship with respondents (Creswell and Poth 2016) and give them space to find their voice (Reinharz and Chase 2001). Feminist researchers have used semi-structured interviews to enable women to share their experiences, ideas and insights, contributing to the notion that feminist research should be both about and for women (Doucet and Mauthner 2008). The interview format was informal, which was meant to encourage conversation (Kvale, 1996) and draw on Oakley's (1981) argument that there should be a 'non-hierarchical' relationship between myself as the woman conducting interviews and the women being interviewed. Feminist researchers are concerned with the relationship between power and representation and collecting data without exploitation (Buch and Staller 2013; Vanner 2015).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a copy of the transcript was sent to each respondent to review and edit. Allowing transcripts to be edited built trust with the researcher and gave respondents ownership of their narrative. This is a practice that feminist researchers have engaged in when interviewing women about sexual violence (Kelly 1988) and since one interview question asked about the #MeToo moment[2] it was appropriate to engage in this process. The aim was to empower feminists to speak out (Phipps 2020) and share their narratives and experiences. Studying a digital network has raised questions about respondents identity, when as O'Reilly argues, 'there is actually no more anonymity through the internet' (2012, p. 74). This ethnographic study names respondents where consent was given, rather than anonymising them, which is a powerful act not commonly used in research (Lahman et al. 2015). In part, this decision was made because the majority of my respondents use their real names on Twitter, some of whom are public figures, such as politicians; whereas for the other respondents, the act of 'giving voice' to politically marginalised individuals is significant (Braun et al. 2018). Consent was given to use the majority of respondents' real names; two asked to be pseudonymised. Field notes were written after the interview (Van Maanen 2011; Eriksson et al. 2012), recording respondent mannerisms and emotional reactions during the interviews and the researcher's interpretation of the interview in general (see Appendix B for my fieldnotes of Twitter observation).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as an iterative process, which allowed changes to be made during the data collection process (Brinkmann 2013). Interviews were conducted with a flexible approach and conversational tone (Braun and Clarke 2021), which allowed the researcher to ask questions out of sequence (Hesse-Biber 2007) and naturally ask respondents to expand on specific points. During the first few interviews, it became apparent that the average duration of

[2] The #MeToo moment in 2017 begun by actor Alyssa Milano not the movement by activist Tarana Burke.

ninety minutes was too long for most respondents. It was not that interview questions were 'poorly conceived or constructed' (Agee 2009, p. 431); rather, some questions elicited more detailed responses and positive interest. Therefore, interview questions were streamlined, from twenty-one to thirteen, to reflect this 'increased understanding' (Creswell and Poth 2016, p. 52) of the process and narrow the research's focus. By reducing the number of interview questions, it allowed emergent themes to become more evident. Moreover, interview duration was reduced to approximately thirty minutes, which positively affected respondents' limited availability and the number of individuals who could make time to be interviewed.

A series of interview questions was designed to ascertain respondents' general understanding of using Twitter as a political site, specifically feminist activist practices of communication, action, and connection. Background questions were designed to assess when a Twitter account was created and why; what actions are performed via the network's affordances; and how an audience is identified. Other questions examined the value of communicating and taking action on Twitter and evaluated the significance of connecting with other feminist activists. Respondents were asked to reflect on the #MeToo moment and the change this created, if any. A further question was asked about respondents' negative experiences, such as trolling, which was designed to ascertain how 'safe' Twitter is and the potential affect that might have on their activism. As can be seen from the figure below, the highlighted blue questions indicate the streamlined questions that were asked.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | When do you think you started using Twitter? |
| 2 | What made you create these accounts? |
| 3 | Describe your audience |
| 4 | What do you use Twitter platforms for? |
| 5 | Do you have an idea of how many people access your Twitter accounts or website? |
| 6 | Do you use hashtags to highlight certain points or link to campaigns? |
| 7 | Do you follow or identify with any particular online campaigns? |
| 8 | Would you describe anything that you do as political? |
| 9 | Is there any social or political value in using Twitter sites for the kinds of activities that you carry out? |
| 10 | Would you say that your presence on Twitter is empowering to others? |
| 11 | Do women perceive online space as safer than offline? |
| 12 | How important is your online presence to you? |
| 13 | How does online campaigning affect the outside world? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | How much response do you get from politicians, policy makers and the media from your online activity? |
| 14 | How much attention do you give your campaigns on Twitter? |
| 15 | What has been the most successful response to a campaign on Twitter?<br>Has something gone viral? |
| 16 | Who are the main actors that you associate with your online presence?<br>What influence do they have on you? |
| 17 | What are your thoughts about the current climate of Twitter with campaigns like #MeToo? |
| 18 | Have you ever received negative feedback or been trolled?<br>Can you tell me more about this? How has this affected you? |
| 19 | Would you say that you are a feminist?<br>Do you identify as a particular kind of feminism? |
| 20 | What work do you still have left to do, and how will you do this using Twitter? |
| 21 | Is there anybody else you can recommend I speak to for my research? |

*Figure 2* *Semi-structured interview questions*

Qualitative researchers must reflect on the integrity of finding respondents using snowball sampling, which typically begins with acquaintances before contacting strangers (Warren 2011). Twitter was predominantly used to contact potential respondents and potentially access a broad network of users (O'Reilly 2012). The provisional sample size was set as fifty, and the project was promoted regularly on Twitter through a series of tweets and requests that other users retweet. Inclusion criteria specified that respondents must identify as a feminist to qualify for the study; the aim was to use small inclusion criteria so a sample universe is less homogenous (Robinson 2014). Inclusive criteria does not automatically lead to inclusive participation. The aim of using Twitter for snowball sampling was to address and minimise the potential for selection bias. Respondents were asked to refer others, harnessing their connections and reaching outside the researcher's personal network. When time allowed, respondents were asked during the interview or during further communication when the interview transcript was shared with them. Ninety-three individuals and groups were referred, contacted, and given more information about the project and interview process.

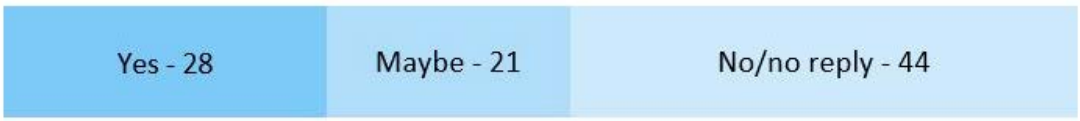


*Figure 3* *Respondent uptake for interviews*

A sample of twenty-eight respondents were interviewed, who are based in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Europe, the UK and the United States. Research on digital networks, politics and activism, tend to focus on a single country as the object of analysis. Throughout the thesis, the aim was to include relevant scholarly voices from these locations to reflect politics and political issues in these locations. Twenty-four women, one trans woman, two non-binary persons and one man were interviewed. It is critical to note that throughout this thesis, I refer to feminists and women interchangeably, which is not intended to exclude any other gender classifications or identities. Rather, it reflects that the majority of respondents are women. Figure 4, below, provides a brief outline of respondents, listing names, interview format, and information from their Twitter biography or bio, collected at the time of interview. An extended outline of respondents' biographies, as per the information recorded on Twitter at the time of interview, can be found in Appendix A.

| Name | Interview | Twitter bio information |
|---|---|---|
| Alexia Pepper de Caires | 121 | Co-founder of *Safe Space*, founding member of *Women's Equality Party* |
| Athena Stevens | Email | Spokesperson for *Women's Equality Party*, playwright and screenwriter |
| Bee Hughes | Skype | Academic, artist, activist, poet |
| Bernadette Moore | Skype | Academic, human, scientist and social justice champion |
| Bianca Fileborn | Skype | Academic, activist, works on street harassment, pornography and violence against women |
| Catherine Mayer | Skype | Co-founder & president of *Women's Equality Party*, writer and journalist |
| Cheryl Morgan | 121 | Radio Presenter, *Women's Equality Party* branch officer, trans activist |
| Erin Shannon | Skype | Academic, works on comparative university responses to sexual violence |
| Finn Mackay | Email | Academic, public speaker and founder of the *London Feminist Network* |
| Fiona Vera-Gray | 121 | Academic, activist, works on street harassment, pornography and violence against women |
| Hannah Manzur | Skype | Gender Policy Advisor and EU Parliamentary Assistant |
| Holly Kearl | Email | Founder of non-profit *Stop Street Harassment*, consultant to the UN and US State Department |
| Jane Gilmore | Email | Writer and freelance journalist |
| Jean Laight | Skype | Member of *Women's Equality Party*, activist, campaigner, retired academic |
| Jess Philips | Skype | Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley, Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence and Safeguarding |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Jon Skeet | Skype | Member of *Women's Equality Party*, activist, campaigner, works in tech sector |
| Julie Zeilinger | Email | Writer & founding editor of *FBomb* an intersectional teen feminist platform |
| Kate Sang | Skype | Academic, former Feminist Studies Association chairperson |
| Lucy Curtis* | 121 | Academic and consultant |
| Molly Dragiewicz | Zoom | Academic, criminologist and anti-domestic violence advocate |
| Rowan Steel* | Skype | Academic, coder, tech sector |
| Sam Smethers | Skype | CEO of the *Fawcett Society*: charity that campaigns for gender equality and women's rights |
| Sarah Hewitt | 121 | Academic, coder, blogger |
| Sian Norris | 121 | Writer, freelance journalist, founder and director of the *Bristol Women's Literature Festiva*l |
| Stacy Hart | 121 | Actor, singer, activist and *Women's Equality Party* Basingstoke Branch Leader |
| Stephanie Boland | Skype | Co-founder of *The Second Source*: working to end harassment in the media, and journalist |
| Sue Black | Skype | Academic, campaigned to save Bletchley Park, home to the code-breakers during WW2 |
| Tulip Siddiq | Email | Labour MP Hampstead & Kilburn and Shadow Minister for Children and Early Years |

*Figure 4 Respondent information*

## Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a recognised method used by qualitative researchers from various disciplines to organise and analyse the interview dataset without losing meaning or context (Braun et al. 2018; Braun and Clark 2021). Using thematic analysis enables the researcher to identify repeated emerging patterns in the data and develop insight and understanding from those themes (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012, 2020, 2021; Ritchie and Lewis 2013; Braun et al. 2018). This thesis uses a reflexive approach to thematic analysis that highlights the researcher's role in coding, analysis and theme identification (Braun and Clark 2021; Braun and Clarke 2021). The researcher's positionality, or lens, impacts the research design, methods and analysis (Brabazon 2021). This means that another researcher may not find the same meaning in the patterns that were identified in the same dataset. Reflexivity is an ethical practice (Pink et al. 2016), which describes an ongoing process of deep and critical self-reflection of 'assumptions and practice' throughout the research project (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 8). The concept of reflexivity enables the researcher to acknowledge their role (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) during the data coding and

analysis process. For instance, the researcher's knowledge of existing literature and theory can determine what is seen in the data and the claims made about it (Braun and Clarke 2012).

The coding process is reliant on the researcher familiarising or immersing themselves in the data (Braun et al. 2018; Braun and Clarke 2021). Taking an inductive approach to code and analyse the data (Braun and Clarke 2012, 2021; Pink et al. 2016; Braun et al. 2018) enabled the content to speak for itself without anticipating what themes would be identified. Transcripts were printed, and multiple close readings of the whole dataset were conducted to gain in-depth insights into the themes present (Braun et al. 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Repeated concepts and themes were highlighted, and codes were recorded initially by hand, then recreated using Microsoft Word. The intention was to organise the data in a way that was both interpretative and analytical while accurately representing the digital feminist community (Buch and Staller 2013). Codes were refined through numerous iterations of this process; some codes expanded in scope, some codes were split into sub-codes, and coding names were refined (Braun and Clarke 2021). A broad thematic map was created (Braun et al. 2018) using MindMap software to visualise the codes, sub-codes and the' connections' between them – to demonstrate 'patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 8) present in the data.

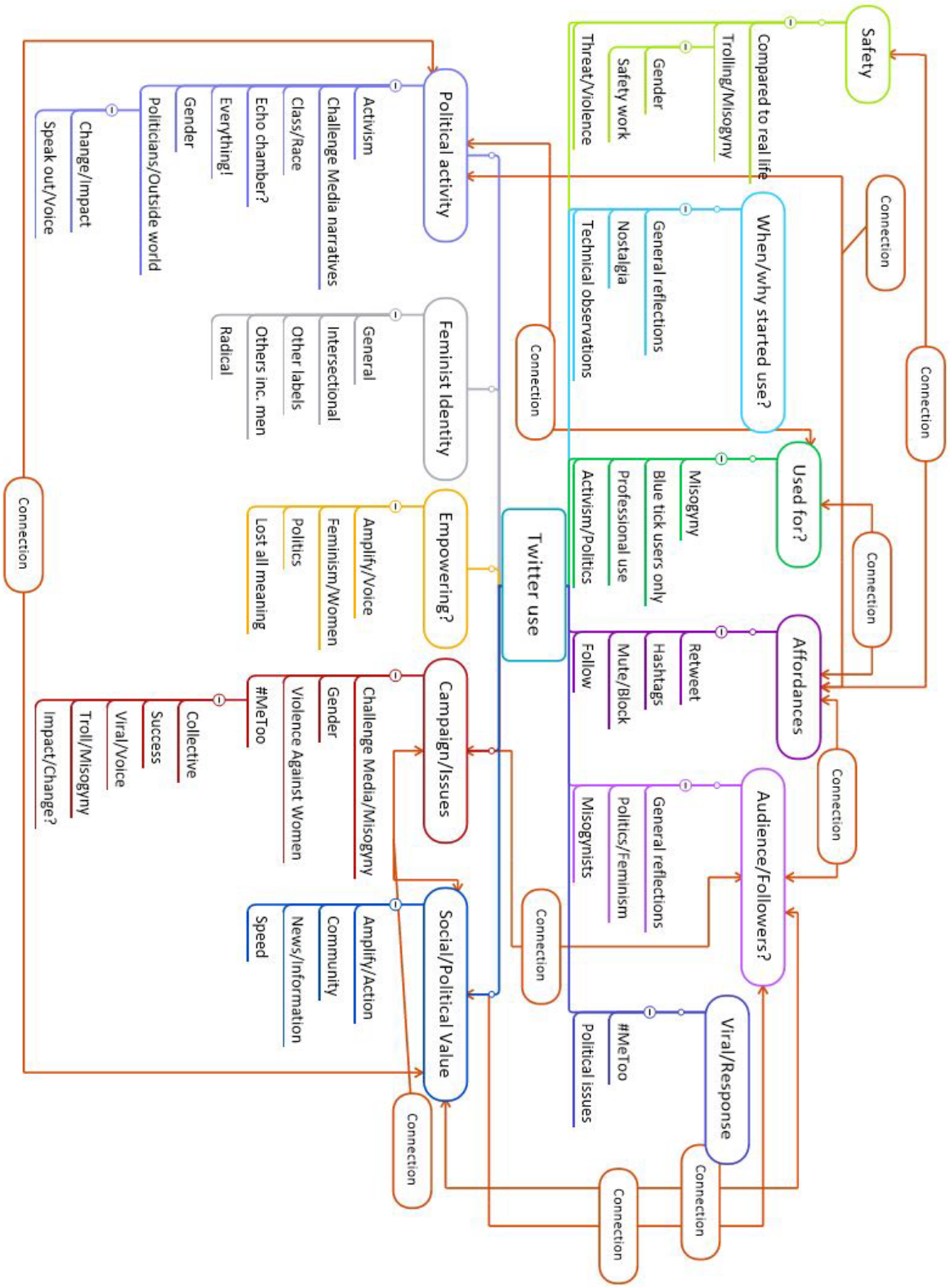


*Figure 5 Broad Thematic Coding Map*

Through this extensive engagement with the dataset during the reflexive thematic analysis process, centrally significant codes were emergent, as my engagement with and interpretation of data became more nuanced and complex. Researcher positionality is a useful resource for conducting reflexive thematic analysis, which, as Braun and Clarke explain, is central to the

creative process (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 8). It means it is important for the researcher to identify their positionality because this will define the way that data is analysed and coded (Terry and Hayfield 2021). Further, establishing a short time for reflection and distance allowed me to review the data with a fresh perspective and insight into the developing themes, refining and naming them – as part of a pattern rather than summarising the main topics. These main themes, or patterns, became the foundation of discussion in my four empirical chapters.

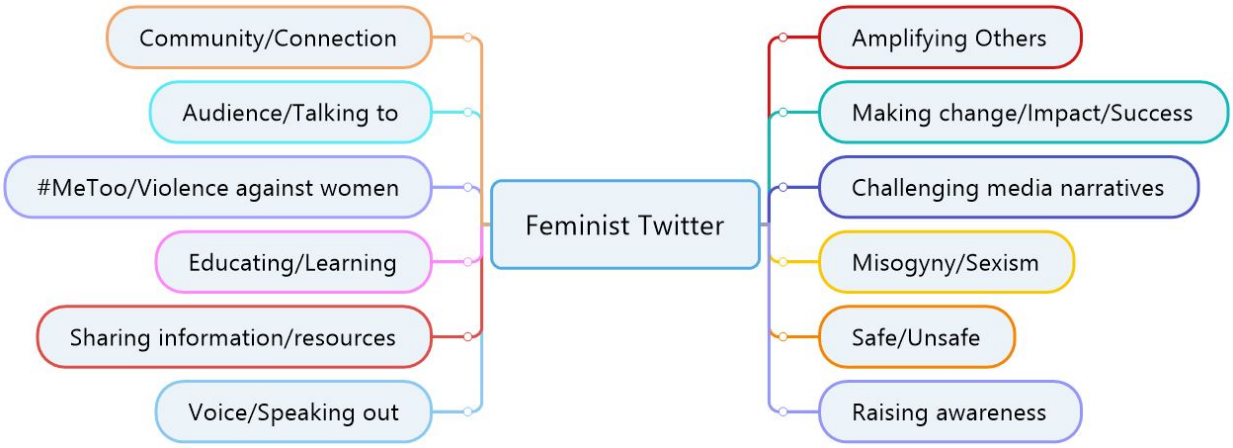


*Figure 6 Main Themes Coding Map*

## Research Limitations

Positionality asks that as a researcher we consider how we have impacted the research. It is an integral part of ethnographic research to reflect on researcher positionality because how data is collected, analysed and interpreted is shaped by my knowledge and experiences (Buch and Staller 2013; Jafar 2018). The notion of positionality is part of the reflexive process, which describes my viewpoint, my relation to it and how this affects the research (Holmes 2020). My identity, views, assumptions and social position influence how this research is conducted throughout the entirety of the project (Vanner 2015). I must recognise that I am an insider –a member of the digital community Feminist Twitter, which is the focus of this study (Naples 2003; Greene 2014; Jacobson and Mustafa 2019; Berkovic et al. 2020) – where I am an active user, observing and interacting with others. There are advantages to approaching research as an insider when the connective culture of the digital network is already known; I could immediately identify some of the individuals in the community and had a detailed understanding of the way that digital feminist activists interacted.

It is critical to acknowledge that my positionality, as a feminist researcher, has influenced the way that individuals have interacted with me (Buch and Staller 2013) on Twitter – (1) facilitating connection and integrity in the project and (2) establishing a collaborative connection between

myself and respondents. There are potential limitations of insider research that could have impacted the research project: (3) during interviews, respondents might not have discussed 'obvious' information or examples, based on the assumption that this is something I was already aware of (Holmes 2020), (4) respondents may have misunderstood my role as a researcher (Berkovic et al. 2020) or had expectations about the type of research that would be produced due to a perception of shared knowledge and experiences (Hayfield and Huxley 2015), (5) I could have neglected or been blind to 'ordinary' experiences that did not fit into my rose-tinted vision of the community (Chavez 2008).

The second potential limitation concerns respondent sample and recruitment. As a feminist with certain political tenets, I did consider how much my feminist identity could negatively impact respondent recruitment for semi-structured interviews. For instance, by observing the political issues that I discuss and the other feminists I connect to, another feminist could have concluded that I did not hold similar political or feminist values. I designed a small inclusion criterion for the interview study aiming to sample a diverse group of feminist activists on Twitter. Potential respondents were asked if they used Twitter for their feminism and identify as a feminist to qualify. Due to my interview criteria, *any* self-identifying feminist could be interviewed – regardless of their gender. Some other feminists with conflicting ideologies refused to be interviewed by me because of this, some vociferously. One way to address the potential for selection bias is snowball sampling, asking respondents to suggest other feminists who might be interested in being interviewed. However, this was not as successful as anticipated – perhaps due to it being the last interview question – or that the first few interviews were longer than some would be willing to commit to. For this reason, the interview questions were streamlined to try to gain a higher number of respondents who would agree to be interviewed.

Twenty-one individuals initially expressed interest in being interviewed for this study who stopped communicating, either before or after receiving project information and the consent form. I was concerned that my being a white feminist, coupled with high-profile instances of white feminists using their political platform to marginalise Black feminists, would have negative implications on this research. For example, the hashtag #MeToo was an existing project and hashtag that was 'appropriated' by white feminists and feminism (Boyle 2019; Loney-Howes and Fileborn 2019; Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020; Jackson et al. 2020). Phipps (2020) argues that privileged white feminists refuse to learn from moments like this, failing to acknowledge that Black women are impacted by male violence more than others (Jackson et al. 2020). Could moments like these have prevented some feminists from agreeing to be interviewed by me – a white middle-class feminist? It was a concern that inclusive participation was not necessarily

achieved despite every effort being made and that this is a limiting factor in terms of the diverse experiences and voices represented in the thesis.

An enduring limitation of feminists' use of digital networks to perform activism is that they are not necessarily inclusive or equal spaces. The digital divide continues to exist to some degree, which includes various forms of inequalities (Halford and Savage 2010), such as limited access to the internet and mobile technologies (Castells et al. 2005), specifically smartphones. Further, there are socio-economic factors (Karpf 2012), the level of education (Lin and Zhang 2020) and digital literacy (Boyle 2019) that limits who can access and participate in digital political participation. While some marginalised individuals can speak out online, some are more privileged, such as academics, politicians and journalists who arguably have more social influence to wield. In other words, social media can be, but is not exclusively, an additional channel for those who already have a voice. Social influence indicates our position in society; it is also about our network, or those who we are connected to – our friends and friends of friends. In theory, the social class we belong to indicates the resources we can access and the power we can draw on, therefore the influence that we might wield. Social class is a group that we are likely to belong to predicated on a combination of economic, social and cultural capital (Savage et al. 2013, 2013). Respondents' social position ranges from middle-class, upper-middle class, or elite, and some have working-class roots. In this case, digital feminist activism performed on Twitter is not equal, and does not include all marginalised voices. Respondents' social position or identity do not affect the findings – or my main argument that feminist activists use Twitter for political participation and that our understanding should be expanded to include digital activism and clicktivism – in this thesis. What may be affected are the political issues and campaigns that respondents engage in and amplify, but this does not contradict my argument nor the thesis itself.

The final limitation of note relates to Twitter itself, and the contextualisation of Twitter, in this current moment (Karpf 2020a). Far too often, researchers assume that *all* digital networks have the same affordances and can create the same affects (Papacharissi 2016). Twitter has platform-specific affordances that determine the conditions for how activism and clicktivism can be performed. As such, this thesis examines the detail and nuance of how feminist activist practices are shaped via distinct affordances. The empirical data, analysis, and conceptual lens cannot easily be applied to other digital networks or the type of activist practices. Instead, this study is context-dependent; it evidences respondents' interpretations and reflections on their use of Twitter as a political platform. This context may apply to a number of individuals and groups who use Twitter for political reasons, specifically other activists who utilise affordances to do so. However, it is worth remembering that the structure, affordances and rules of Twitter are in development;

therefore, the political use of Twitter is specific to the time of the study, which cannot necessarily be applied to research conducted before or after (Karpf 2020a).

## Original Contributions

The original contributions of this thesis are in three spheres: methods and site of study; new understandings of political participation by bringing together three distinct disciplines, the intersection of which reveals a new perspective; how and why it important to understand activism for marginalised individuals through action, communication and connection, and why this matters and what types of practices they undertake, which are specific to that site of activism. The first original contribution that this thesis performs is a qualitative analysis of digital feminist activism, specifically focusing on the use of the digital network Twitter. Ethnographic research is used to identify the nuanced and detailed characteristics of the digital feminist community, what this represents to feminist activists, and why this contributes to the notion of Twitter as a political platform. Further, how feminist activists describe digital activism as successful based on their ability to speak out and take action on Twitter. While there are 'pockets' of ethnographic research from political science (Rhodes 2017), these tend to focus on the formal organisations and processes, such as studying elected political representatives (Rhodes 2017; Boswell et al. 2019; Rhodes and Corbett 2020). In fact, many political science scholars have yet to fully 'embrace ethnography' as a method (Kapiszewski et al. 2015, p. 234) despite some scholars argue in favour of conducting ethnographic research (Fenno 1990; Schatz 2009, 2017; Weeden 2010).

A significant contribution of this thesis is to frame the discussion and analysis of Twitter as a public political platform, which is significant for individuals who are marginalised from hegemonic structures that delimit participation as being performed with the bounds of traditional politics. Throughout the thesis, I problematise the concept of political participation and the way it's framed by extant literature. The main argument of this thesis is that our understanding and categorisation of contemporary political participation should be expanded to include digital activism and clicktivism, which is evidenced throughout the thesis as more than lazy or ineffective. Centring the voices and actions of marginalised individuals—who would otherwise not be heard – contributes new knowledge to the literature, which often fails to include the experiences of *others* – those who are marginalised, excluded or otherwise oppressed. Further, this thesis explores in detail why feminists utilise Twitter as a political platform, which creates a unique overview of digital feminist activism and the conditions for how activism is performed on Twitter.

This thesis provides new insights into how the distinct affordances of a digital network change the conditions for how activism is performed (Karpf 2020a), indeed, how and why digital feminist activists use Twitter's affordances for various activist practices. It makes a qualitative analysis of the affordances that are utilised for activism, beyond the hashtag, which is currently the subject of much of the literature (Dixon 2014; Pachal 2014; Thrift 2014; Rosewarne 2017; Gieseler 2019; Gleeson and Turner 2019; Mendes et al. 2019; Jackson et al. 2020; McNabb 2021). In fact, some scholars have labelled digital feminist activism as 'hashtag feminism', which has contributed to a narrow understanding of what feminist activism is, specifically *how* and *why* feminists use Twitter as a political platform (Dixon 2014; Losh 2014; Khoja-Moolji 2015; Baer 2016; Fotopoulou 2016a; Megarry 2020). What is clear from this research is that digital feminist activists utilise Twitter to *be* political and to *do* politics – platform specific and affordance-based research contributes new knowledge exploring how Twitter's affordances lower the barriers of political participation for marginalised individuals. Further, as an interdisciplinary thesis, it builds on literature that examines digital cultural experiences and practices (Hine 2000, 2017; boyd 2008a; boyd and Crawford 2012; O'Reilly 2012; Caliandro 2018; Danley 2021), specifically those performed by activists (Postill and Pink 2012).

## Organisation of Thesis

*Chapter 2 – Literature Review: Redefining Political Participation*

This chapter draws together existing scholarly debates about the conceptualisation and categorisation of political participation, of which there is no consensus about the definition, or forms of participation that should be included. I explore alternative forms of participation, such as digital activism, and how this proliferation of individuals clicking to sign an online petition has reshaped our understanding of what political participation is, indeed, how this concept can be contextualised through the digital networks. Our everyday use of Twitter has contributed to a shift in how individuals engage with political issues and causes in a more personal and flexible way (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). In this context, it is important that we expand our understanding of contemporary political participation and the diverse forms that have emerged due to the blurring of online and offline space – where there is less separation between the personal and the political. I argue that digital activism and clicktivism, facilitated by the distinct affordances of a specific digital network, should be recognised as contemporary forms of political participation. Extant literature is explored that examines feminist activists use of the web, and digital networks; specifically, developments in feminist activism is the focal point of discussion (see: Mendes et al. 2019, Jackson et al. 2020 and Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019). I outline the use of relevant literature from web science, political science and feminist activism in order to construct a

conceptual lens through which we can examine the effect of digital feminist activism and clicktivism in the rest of this thesis.

*Chapter Three – Feminists Performing Clicktivism: Why Tweeting, Retweeting and Going Viral Matter*

I conduct a detailed investigation into *why* and *how* feminist activists use Twitter to perform individual acts of resistance, using a range of practices via distinct affordances that direct their action and communication. This exploration firmly establishes the diverse clicktivist and activist practices that respondents engage in as political participation, which lays the foundation for my argument that clicktivism is a form of digital activism that enables feminists to be political, take action, and communicate about politics with others. Insights are developed from the ethnographic investigation and analysis, which uses a reflective approach to evidence feminist activists' perceptions of their activist practices – identifying that respondents use Twitter to speak out about politics issues, feminism and women's rights. Further, I explore respondents' amplification of the voices of others, who have less access to a political platform, and disseminating information to educate others, and begin discussion about politics and political issues. Challenging sexist and misogynist practices in mainstream media and advocating for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy is a central concern to contemporary feminism and feminist activists. Further, I argue that a core practice of contemporary feminism is to challenge against individuals and practices that it disagrees with – because feminism is inherently political.

*Chapter Four – Digital Feminist Resistance: Interpretating #MeToo and Concepts of Success*

This chapter utilises the #MeToo moment in 2017 as a vehicle to explore digital feminist activists, how feminist activists perceive their political participation and the value it holds for them. It builds on discussion from the previous chapter to demonstrate the diverse reasons why and how feminist activists utilise a political action, a hashtag, to underscore the significance of a specific conversation. I draw on qualitative data to evidence respondents' reflections on the effect of #MeToo and the connection to the notion of achieving 'success' and creating change are explored in detail, which forms part of my original contribution. The discussion of the #MeToo moment characterises my interpretation of the phrase 'the personal is political' in this thesis, which demonstrates the significance of women accessing and using Twitter to speak out about the prevalence of sexual violence against women. The facility for women to speak to a worldwide audience about a typically marginalised issue (Boyle 2019; Gieseler 2019) is relevant in the context of this thesis. The concept of how political participation is traditionally defined is discussed and applied to the #MeToo moment to argue that it is one of the most powerful examples of a hashtag used to give voice to those who are typically marginalised from traditional

structures of power (Papacharissi 2010; Carpentier 2012; Dahlgren 2012, 2013; Zerilli 2015; van Deth 2016).

*Chapter Five – The Significance of Digital Communities, and Talking to an Audience*

Part of the cultural process on Twitter is to find and connect with others who may have a shared interests or political tenets, such as feminism. Drawing on the previous chapter which developed our understanding of what political participation is for feminists, this chapter examines the impact of digital communities on activist and clicktivist practices. Is it possible that a connected collective speaks to similar others rather than reaching beyond geographical and political boundaries? The notion of a digital feminist community is explored in detail, specifically what this represents to respondents and the significance of finding and communicating with other feminist activists. Twitter affords the opportunity to learn about feminism and political issues, share information and ideas (Himelboim et al. 2013) with the followers that are known or potentially reach new audiences (Mendes 2015; Jackson et al. 2020). Through an exploration of empirical data these issues will be considered, in relation to feminist activist practices of sharing information, resources and experiences, to consider whether homophilous digital communities benefit marginalised others (Bruns 2019b).

*Chapter Six – Leveraging Affordances to Navigate the Twittersphere and Perform Activism*

Digital feminist activists experience of Twitter is political: it can be a safe or relatively safe space, depending on whether respondents had experienced digital hate. Feminist activists can connect to, and communicate with, similar others, in their digital communities. Conversely, they may be targeted by misogynistic and anti-feminist digital hate, which can alter their perception and use of Twitter as a political platform. How does digital hate change how they use Twitter to engage in political action and communication? Drawing on rich empirical data, I evidence that gendered inequalities embedded in the digital network determine whether Twitter is a 'safe' space for feminist activism. I identify that there is a difference in privilege and social or political power, which affects how impactful digital hate is for respondents' use of the digital network for their political participation. Feminist activists leveraged use of affordances against digital hate, such as mute, block and report, are analysed to demonstrate how this enables them to continue taking action and communicating about politics.

*Chapter Seven – Conclusions and Contributions*

In this concluding chapter analysis and discussion from empirical chapters is drawn together to demonstrate the impact of expanding the concept of political participation on wider debates from web science, political participation, and feminist activism. I use the unique conceptual lens that

this intersecting literature has created to contextualise why feminist digital activism and clicktivism are part of contemporary political participation; activist practices that are facilitated by Twitter's affordances; the significance of using Twitter as a political platform to take action and communicate in public, and feminist interpretations of the value of their activism, which to some extent is tied to traditional political notions of success. Finally, I reflect on future directions for research based on this project.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review: Redefining Political Participation

## Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the conceptual foundations of my research by analysing debates within literature from three fields related to my research questions: web science, political science, and feminism. I will demonstrate how these fields, and particular debates within them, intersect with my research design outlined in chapter 1. This chapter introduces the focus of my discussion: political participation, digital activism, feminist activist use of a public online space (Herring et al. 2002) and clicktivism. These points of intersection in the literature lay the foundation for my argument in the subsequent chapters of this thesis; that is, I argue that feminist activists utilise Twitter as a political platform to practice their political action, communication and connection. Further, I argue that for feminist activists, clicktivism *is* activism, which should be recognised as a form of contemporary political participation, contrary to the position taken in much of the existing scholarship. We need a more nuanced understanding of digital activism, incorporating how it is practiced and by who – and how it is facilitated – by the platform it is performed on. I will evidence the significance of digital activism for feminist activists who are marginalised from or denied access to political platforms elsewhere (Gieseler 2019). Moreover, that the implications of clicktivism being categorised as a form of political participation is demonstrated by digital feminist activism itself.

First, I will discuss political participation, alternative forms of participation, and the rise of digital activism. I examine what political participation is and how it has been defined and conceptualised by other scholars (Akram, 2019; Bennett and Segerberg, 2013, 2012; Chadwick et al., 2015; Chadwick and Dennis, 2017; Halupka, 2014; Verba et al.; 1978; Vromen, 2017). Indeed, I demonstrate why it is important that our understanding of contemporary participation is determined by the digital context it is performed in, which frames the discussion in this chapter on various forms of digital activism that have emerged due to the blurring of online and offline space. There is no consensus on the naming conventions, or on the conceptualisation of digital activism, with scholars from various disciplines introducing different concepts and definitions (Earl and Kimport 2011; Bang and Halupka 2019), some of which are more extensive than others (Bimber et al. 2015; Dennis 2018). Drawing together these concepts of political participation and digital activism, I argue that our understanding needs to incorporate the relationship between a

specific digital network and how the affordances determine the diverse communication, action and connective activist practices that can be performed.

The proliferation of clicktivism has instigated scholars to take note and evaluate how these once lazy-seeming activities became one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary political participation (Earl and Kimport 2011; Halupka 2014, 2018; Vromen 2017; Dennis 2018; Akram 2019; Karpf 2020b, 2020a). I evaluate and critique the negative assumptions that have long been associated with clicktivism (2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Gladwell 2010), which are largely concerned that it will replace traditional forms of political participation. I examine literature by scholars who are more cognisant of the influence that information and communication technologies have over evolving forms of political participation, recognising that clicktivism enables individuals to engage with politics (Earl and Kimport 2011; Halupka 2014, 2018; Chadwick and Dennis 2017; Vromen 2017; Dennis 2018; Akram 2019; Karpf 2020b, 2020a). Central to this thesis is the argument that digital activism and clicktivism are forms of contemporary political participation. The significance of clicktivism to political participation is evidenced through the political action, communication and connection that digital feminist activists perform on Twitter.

Feminist researchers have long argued that traditional political structures and organisations typically marginalise women (Zerilli 2015; Cameron 2018; Bouvier 2020), whereas Twitter enables them to access space to participate and to speak out about pertinent issues. Digital feminist activists utilise Twitter as a counter-public (Fraser 1990) creating counter-narratives as a form of resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary discourse. Moreover, feminist activists draw on a contemporary interpretation of the phrase 'the personal is political' (Schuster 2017) to position instances of digital activism, such as sharing a personal narrative about the prevalence of sexual violence against women. I analyse literature that evaluates digital feminist activism on Twitter, focusing on how activists take action, communicate and connect with other feminists, framing this discussion in the context of Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) connective action, and I argue that digital feminist activists perform connective action both individually and collectively. Finally, I draw this literature together in the concluding section to show the conceptual lens that I am using to analyse the empirical material in the thesis and why this is an important framework to understand the particular importance of reimagining political participation to include digital activism and clicktivism.

## Delineating Political Participation

Political participation is a contested concept with various definitions and contexts of use, which as Carpentier (2015) notes, is the cause of much ambiguity. Alternative forms of political

participation that are performed online, such as blogging (Bimber et al. 2015), virtual sit-ins (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010) and signing petitions (Dennis 2018), are increasingly included in empirical research on political participation. Some online activities reproduce traditional forms of participation (Vromen 2017), but new forms of participation that are facilitated by digital networks are changing how and what we consider to be 'political' (Theocharis and van Deth 2018). I will examine how political participation is conceptualised and defined by scholars to give insight into the commonalities and differences, indeed, the challenge of classifying contemporary political participation. I will outline why our understanding of political participation should incorporate specific practices of digital feminist activism – and how this is facilitated – by the platform it is performed on. It is common practice in political science literature to refer to 'citizens' and 'citizenship' (Bang 2005) to distinguish membership of a defined space such as a state or country, who can participate in the system of government. However, the literature reviewed in this chapter focuses on delineating digital political participation, where individuals are not bounded by their citizenship in their online practices. Digital activist practices are determined by what they do online, rather than where in the world they are. Therefore, I use the terms individuals or users for the rest of this thesis, unless citing others' work.

It is imperative to recognise that there has been a rise of discontent (Stoker 2006) and cynicism (Boswell and Corbett 2015) with formal politics and political institutions. The mediatisation of political participation has contributed significantly to this, frequently depicting politicians as bickering, dishonest, and untrustworthy (Clarke et al. 2018). But discontent is more profound than that; there has been a steady decline of interest and engagement with formal politics for several decades (Hay 2007). Political behaviours in Western democracies are changing, as is the way that people engage in politics (Akram 2019). Recognising this shift away from formal political actions, such as voting in an election or being an active member of a political party, Akram (2019); Bennett and Segerberg (2013, 2012); Chadwick and Dennis (2017); Theocharis (2015) and van Deth (2014, 2016) challenge outdated theoretical frameworks of political participation. These scholars offer different understandings of political participation in the context of developing information and communication technologies. This demonstrates that political participation is an evolving concept. I will examine how political participation is traditionally defined before exploring more recent conceptualisations, highlighting scholars' inclusion of contemporary or alternative participatory acts.

Political participation has been defined as 'those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take' (Verba et al. 1978, p. 46). This definition is limited by the scholars' focus on formal political institutions, processes, and outcomes. As Couldry proficiently argues, 'too many accounts

of politics concentrate on institutions and neglect the level of individuals…crucial to understanding whether people have *reasons* to act politically' (2012, p. 125, emphasis in original). Instead of focusing on this circumscribed approach to what we think of as 'doing politics', more recent scholarship (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013) has theorised a less formal politics, which focuses on individuals' engagement with personal political issues and forms of 'ad-hoc politics' (Bang 2005). Developments in technology, particularly the internet, broadened access to political knowledge (Chadwick 2012) and afforded a public space for political discourse (Papacharissi 2002, 2010). The internet enabled individuals to create and interact in online communities (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995; Couldry 2012), adapt their communication practices (Chadwick 2017), and participate outside of traditional political structures (Buchstein 1997).

Web 2.0 technologies[3] introduced a new element to our online experience, establishing a culture of connection, interaction and sociality (van Dijck 2013), which created a further shift in the political landscape. Digital networks such as Facebook, Twitter LinkedIn and Google+ enabled a culture of connection with others, and quantifiable connectivity – where our list of 'followers' or 'friends' is publicly visible (Ellison and boyd 2013; van Dijck 2013). We connect to other users based on their content, interactions, or other connections (Ballsun-Stanton and Carruthers 2010). By following another user, we effectively subscribe to all their content, including retweets, likes, and tweets about a specific political issue or topic, which may be of interest to us or not. Our connections direct the flow of information and communication (Himelboim et al. 2017; Batorski and Grzywińska 2018) which can expose us to news, resources, and diverse opinions and ideas. Individuals' everyday use of digital networks (Bimber et al. 2015) extends the space available to communicate (Chadwick et al. 2015) take action (Vromen, 2017), expand social connections and form communities (Burgess and Baym 2020). The digital network Twitter is both a connective and communicative space where individuals can engage in discussion, and shape political opinion (Dahlgren 2013). A recent example of this is the 'UK Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (2021)', which is a controversial piece of proposed legislation that aims to restrict the right to protest. Engaging in discussion on Twitter about this can develop knowledge about the formal legislating processes – how many processes of amendment a Bill might go through – before becoming law. It also offers an opportunity to discuss the rights and freedoms that we may want to defend, having never previously been aware of them. Individuals who are already interested in politics will go online to take action and engage in 'everyday political talk' (Vromen et al. 2015); in this sense, the use of digital networks 'reinforce[s] existing patterns of political participation'

[3] In 2004, apps, websites and digital networks such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and YouTube became more social and participatory for users – who could create, edit and upload their own content.

(Papacharissi 2010, p. 159). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) identify this as 'connective action': a form of contemporary political participation in itself where there is a significant shift to a more personal and flexible association with 'causes, ideas, and political organisations' (2013, p. 5).

Connective action can be a single action, such as clicking on a link to sign an online petition for a campaign (Bennett and Segerberg 2013); these individual actions performed via the affordances of digital networks can enable a broad political discussion that extends beyond a single click. Papacharissi explains that connective action allows individuals to 'feel their way into their own place in politics' (2014, p. 131); from this perspective, political participation is both digitally enabled and personalised. In connective action logic, political participation does not have to take place in formal political organisation (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), or indeed, immediately create or contribute to quantifiable social or political change (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Couldry 2015a; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021). What is significant is that political participation is taking place online – driven by the opportunity for individuals to get involved through political discussion, to find and engage with information, or express an opinion about the *need* for political change. As Boulianne posits, for individuals to have the ability to share and discuss their political opinions online is 'revolutionary' (2019, p. 50). This thesis proceeds with this more nuanced understanding of contemporary political participation facilitated by digital networks. With this understanding, I will now examine and critique those scholars who challenge outdated concepts and explore alternate forms of political participation, demonstrating the effect that various digital actions can create and arguing that digital activism is a legitimate form of political participation.

Examining the effect of digital networks on how individuals engage with politics, advances, to some degree, our understanding of contemporary political participation. It requires that we examine seemingly non-political actions or communication that individuals engage in as a form of personalised political participation. Akram's study analyses alternative forms of political participation, which she sees as taking place 'on the borders and in the spaces between formal and informal' (2019, p. 4), recognising a shift in how we engage in politics. She explains that a broader understanding is needed to examine the role and value of new and informal activities, such as 'protesting, commercial boycotting and a proliferation of online political engagement' (2019, p. 6). Akram sees her work as contributing to more critical literature (Bang 2011; Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Xenos et al. 2014; Vromen et al. 2015), which identifies that digital technologies affect how people engage with politics. Drawing on Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action, Akram explains that individuals focus more on personalised political projects than joining political parties. This is important because Akram perceives that individuals are more interested in political issues and ideas than traditional political structures and organisations. Akram argues that rather than political action being 'efficacious' and able to create

'tangible impact', there is value in internal thought processes (2019, p. 74). Akram's approach moves away from validating only observable actions; through an analysis of in-depth interviews, she argues that 'action can be political if it leads to a development in thought or to a political awakening' (2019, p. 135). Further, Akram discusses the relationship between political and social actions, identifying the value in unconventional or individualistic activities, such as a community organised art project (2019, p. 133). Akram concludes that the evolution of political participation is due to the blurred boundaries between the political and personal; individuals do not distinguish between 'participating to feel engaged and participating for specific causes' (2019, p. 75).

Changing perceptions of political participation allows us to consider how this concept can be contextualised through digital networks. Theocharis (2015) draws on recent empirical research to explore various conceptualisations and definitions of 'digitally networked' political participation, aiming to update van Deth's (2014) framework that identifies and measures various forms of participation. van Deth's (2014) framework focuses on a set of eight questions that determine whether an action can be considered a form of political participation. The idea is that we continue down the list of questions and only stop should the action not meet the requirements. If we stop before the eighth question, then according to both van Deth and Theocharis, this is not a form of political participation. The first four questions draw on common definitions of political participation (van Deth 2014, pp. 354–356):

1. *Do we deal with behaviour?*
2. *Is the activity voluntary?*
3. *Is the activity done by citizens?*
4. *Is the activity located in the sphere of government/state/politics?*

It is worth taking a moment to ascertain how van Deth perceives political participation, as this will impact his framework and how he differentiates different forms of action. van Deth (2016) loosely defines participation as activities that 'affect' politics, which he purposefully leaves open to interpretation or classification. This is important because it allows us to identify a range of participatory acts facilitated by digital networks, which otherwise might not be considered political. The last four questions (van Deth 2014) aim to include personalised acts of engagement as outlined by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), and the intentions of the individual, which is incredibly difficult to determine:

5. *Is the activity targeted at the sphere of government/state/politics?*
6. *Is the activity aimed at solving collective or community problems?*
7. *Is the activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?*
8. *Is the political activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?*

The context and framing of the fifth question is problematic as it limits the focus to traditional arena-based forms of participation. Despite van Deth's supposition that there is now an 'infinite list' of participatory activities, he argues that blogging, for example, is a 'non-political activity used for political purposes' (2016). In contrast, Bimber et al. (2015) contend that blogging and signing petitions are part of expanding participation forms facilitated by digital media. Instead of identifying petition signing as a non-political action, Margetts et al. argue it is 'one of the more popular political activities, leading the field for participatory acts outside voting' (2016, p. 76).

Theocharis (2015) argues that his aim in updating van Deth's framework is to add a layer of context to resolve issues about an individual's intentions. Further, he argues that his modification will 'identify political acts which political participants themselves often do not (want to) recognise or label as political' (Theocharis 2015, p. 11). However, he does not posit a set of questions in the same form as van Deth's (2014) framework. Instead, he asserts, 'one can quickly gather an impression as to whether a seemingly purely expressive act is part of a wider political mobilisation and is thus intended as raising awareness about a certain issue' (Theocharis 2015, p. 10). van Deth's (2014, 2016) discussion is limited by the narrow perception of political participation that determines how his framework can be applied, whereas Theocharis ascribes a level of awareness to various forms of digital political participation, but it is problematic to attempt to identify and measure whether an isolated tweet has political intention behind it. There is a diverse range of effects of our 'digital self-expression' (Dennis 2018); similarly, a range of potential intentions, which I argue is challenging to ascertain in isolation, particularly without fixed parameters. It is problematic to conceptualise a new understanding of contemporary forms of political participation as a generalised notion. We must pay sufficient attention to the digital network on which it takes place, and the affordances that shape the action and communication that can be performed. Twitter is used for many reasons and it is where many interests converge; it is part social, political, cultural, entertainment, news, and information network.

In their study, Chadwick and Dennis (2017) investigate how digital networks are reshaping political participation, specifically Facebook and Twitter. The object of their analysis is 38 Degrees, a UK-based non-profit online campaigning organisation, assessing how activity on digital networks feeds directly into media coverage of 38 Degrees campaigns, which conveys campaign momentum (2017, p. 43). 38 Degrees was created in 2009 by a group of activists who wanted to do something different (38 Degrees 2021a). 38 Degrees campaigns are chosen and directed by their members using activities, such as signing and sharing a petition, emailing it to others, tweeting and posting about it on Facebook. These actions are facilitated by affordances, particularly likes, shares and retweets, generate interest and raise awareness, allowing 38 Degrees leadership to 'capitalise on the reach, influence and legitimacy of professional media'

(2017, p. 48). Chadwick's concept of 'hybridity' (2007, 2012, 2017; 2015) is central to the analysis, which focuses on the blurring of distinctions between new and old media (Chadwick 2012), allowing citizens to watch a television show while discussing it on Twitter (Chadwick 2017). This experience enables an individual to shift 'backwards and forwards along a continuum from passive consumption to active production' (2017, p. 66). Hybridity affords a 'powerful way of thinking about politics and society' (2017, p. 10), which allows us to perceive how interconnected individuals' actions are with digital networks and mainstream media (Chadwick 2017). Chadwick and Dennis (2017) identify that digital networks afford new opportunities for 38 Degrees membership to speak out and share a political message but are partially dependent on mainstream media to legitimise their political action. Further, Chadwick and Dennis (2017) identify the significance of a campaigning organisation driven by 2 million members (38 Degrees 2021b), effectively engaging in personalised politics on a wide scale. This analysis is important because it demonstrates citizens participating via digital networks, driven by personalised interest in politics, who focus on political issues that are important to them individually (Chadwick and Dennis 2017).

The rise of a more personal association with political causes and issues is often discussed (Norris 2002, 2009; Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013; Bimber et al. 2015) with reference to how digital networks have reshaped how we take political action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013; Chadwick and Dennis 2017; Vromen 2017). Rather than focus on a single instance of digital activism or specific organisation, this thesis proceeds by exploring feminist activists' use of the digital network Twitter. Further, in the context of the theories advanced by previous scholars' examination of political participation, I examine the literature on feminist digital activism and the political action forms they take. Digital activists use digital networks, such as Twitter, as a public space (Papacharissi 2010, 2014; boyd 2011) and as a site for activism. How is activism traditionally understood, and how has our use of digital networks expanded the concept? Digital activism does not replace offline activism; some political organisations, such as GetUp and 38 Degrees, utilise a mixture of offline and online action and communication. However, directly communicating with membership and deciding on a response to an unfolding political event can only be achieved through digital networks and digital activism.

## Digital Activism: An Alternate Form of Political Participation

Digital activism is changing what we understand as political participation significantly. Developing technologies affect how we engage with politics (Karpf 2012); as the web and digital networks

become more pervasive, so too are the opportunities for activists to 'communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate' (Garrett, 2006, p. 202). Digital activists can connect with geographically distant others and share strategies (Hurwitz 2017), grievances (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) or their political message (Castells 2009). Scholars who have explored digital activism use different terminologies for the same, or similar, type of digital politics: information activism (Halupka 2016); clicktivism (Halupka 2018); digital micro-activism (Dennis 2018); digital mobilisation (Vromen 2017); e-tactics (Earl and Kimport 2011) and e-participation (Bimber et al. 2015). I frame the discussion of digital activism as an emerging form of political participation with Norris' (2002, 2009) theories, supported by analysis of two in-depth examinations of digital activism; (Vromen's (2017) study of Australian campaigning organisation GetUp, and Dennis' (2018) investigation of UK-based activist group 38 Degrees, which evidences their implementation of digital action and communication. Both scholars draw on Chadwick's (2007) notion of hybridity and apply it to political participation.

An activist is an individual who is engaged with personal political issues or campaigns, who may take action individually or as part of a group or be a member of a politically orientated organisation. Activism includes conventional forms like petitioning; confrontational acts such as marches and strikes; violent acts that use force against a person or property, such as riots; and cultural forms of protest such as literature, art, film (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004) or graffiti knitting[4] (Close 2018). Digital networks are changing the conditions of what politics is (Couldry 2015a) and how forms of digital activism can be conceptualised; how people engage in communication and action is expanding along with developing technologies. An increase in the availability of communication technologies, particularly the proliferation of smartphones, the web, and apps, blur the boundaries between offline and online (Karpf 2012). As such, digital networks like Twitter are part of our personal, social and professional lives (Dahlgren 2013), rendering the distinction between online and offline null and void. Digital activism can encompass a blended model of offline and online participation. Examples include signing an e-petition (Karpf 2012), sharing information about a strike or march via an email mailing list (Zeilinger 2012) or messaging app, such as WhatsApp discussing sexual harassment on campus (Mendes et al. 2019), and a hashtag campaign via a digital network (Serisier 2018; Jackson et al. 2020; Loney-Howes 2020). Simultaneously, digital activism is a way of questioning, challenging and resisting the dominant structures that determine traditional politics, and exclude other voices, which is important for this thesis.

[4] Performance art, also known as yarn bombing, where knitters cover trees, public statues, bollards, and lampposts with colourful knitting or crocheted yarn to reclaim space or draw attention to an issue.

The digital network Twitter is a public space but is not, as Papacharissi (2002) argues, a public sphere. The concept of Habermas's (1991) public sphere has been reignited by the proliferation of digital networks (Mendes 2015; Fraser 2017; Kruse et al. 2018; Salter 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019; Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020; Loney-Howes 2020). Habermas defines the public sphere as a place for 'private people come together as a public' (1991, p. 27) where anyone can discuss socio-political issues of concern. For Habermas, a public sphere can be a coffeehouse, newspaper, or other public place, where people can freely debate and reach a consensus (Dahlberg 2004). It is an ideal of open communication, which has been subject to critique by feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1990, 2017). Fraser (1990) argues that due to unequal power structures that are part of public discourse, many individuals, such as women, would be excluded. These ideal structures are displaced when women form their own counter-public space to create a counter-narrative, as a form of resistance that challenges dominant norms (Guest 2016; Willis 2020). Digital networks enable users to deliberate, express opinions and ideas (Papacharissi 2010, 2014; boyd 2011), and interaction and communication are associated with the ideals of the public sphere (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). However, due to digital inequalities there are many who are left out of political discussion: the so-called digital divide (Norris 2001). Further, there are limitations to engaging in political discussion on digital networks that are privately owned companies, which algorithmically promotes 'popular' topics (Hands, 2011; Murthy, 2012; Salter, 2017; Weller et al., 2014). Digital networks afford public space but do not operate as one and so are not a public sphere in the Habermasian sense.

Prior research into alternate forms of activism aims to identify the potential effect of ICTs (2002, 2009). Norris frames her discussion about diverse forms of activism by first contextualising it through traditional interpretations of political participation. Norris (2002) examines, at length, various forms of traditional political participation, such as voting in an election, and the decline of turnout in several Western democracies and argues that this context allows us to understand the implications for changing forms of activism and political expression. Although Norris builds on the work of Barnes and Kaase (1979) by analysing political activism, she argues that the distinction between traditional and 'protest' forms is no longer needed. Norris gives an overview of diverse forms of activism used for political expression, arguing that activism has expanded to include, for example, 'internet networking [and] street protests' (2002, p. 191). She posits whether forms of activism have evolved due to the inclusion of lifestyle politics, where the difference between social and political is blurred. In her analysis of the role of the internet, Norris predicts that it will be a new platform for 'direct-action' politics (2002, p. 208). She argues that the internet allows diverse organisations to perform many actions, such as 'networking with related associations and organisations' and sending emails to elected representatives (2002, p. 208). While Norris aims to

investigate the effect of ICTs on activism, the exploration in this book is minimal though, given the timing and framing of her studies, this is expected rather than an oversight on Norris' part. She is hypothesising about the potential effect rather than analysing the effect itself. Further, Norris may not have been aware that there were already examples of digital activism in digital communities in the early 1990s (see Rheingold, 1993). Norris does advance an argument, at a relatively early time in the literature, that activism is evolving, and specifically that ICTs facilitate an alternative avenue of engagement (2002, p. 4).

In her discussion of the challenges and opportunities of political activism, Norris (2009) argues that cause-oriented activism is similar to that of 'consumer' or 'lifestyle' politics, where the social blurs into political. The examples she gives of cause-oriented actions are: 'boycotting goods made by companies using sweatshop labour and purchasing cosmetic products which avoid the use of animal testing' (2009, p. 640). Norris asserts that these forms of activism aim to change the law or influence specific policies but does not elucidate further beyond this brief remark. Ultimately, Norris' comparative analysis of activism is contextualised by a much richer discussion on traditional political participation, which limits her exploration of developing forms of activism. It is assumed that activists focus on the outcome rather than the action itself, which is a limited perception of activism. Inherent in this assumption is the notion that individuals seek to achieve a common outcome. Oliver and Marwell (1992) argue that activists are more committed to broad ideas than a specific end goal, whereas Lilleker (2015) identifies that many forms of activism have no purpose. As Bimber et al. (2012) argue, some activists are more interested in the process of their activism rather than focusing on a particular outcome. These insights are important in the context of this thesis, particularly when we examine how respondents have framed their understanding of activism and the notion of what success constitutes in relation to their use of feminist Twitter. I argue that individuals who contribute to a political conversation to broaden awareness *is* a form of activism itself. There remains considerable opportunity to analyse diverse forms of political activism, without conducting comparative research that focuses on traditional political participation.

Australian activist group GetUp is a hybrid organisation created in 2005 that develops digital strategies for campaigns on various issues, such as the environment, human rights, and democracy. Vromen (2017) performed a ten year analysis of GetUp, which uses various digital networks to campaign, organise, and communicate; identifying that the complex layers of communication that GetUp use for their campaigns are quicker and easier online. Vromen links the flexibility of the digital network with the ease of mobilising members, who GetUp perceive as 'digital citizens' (2017, p. 77). She records their use of various sites; their website, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which are used to interact with members. Digital interaction allows GetUp

to construct a quick response to emerging political situations and make an easy decision about which campaign to engage with. Vromen perceives their use of instant opinion polls is a quick and effective way to gain collective opinion, rather than traditional methods, such as by telephone or letter. Other online actions GetUp perform include asking members to donate money for particular issues, events and causes (2017, p. 81); offline actions include organising vigils, protests and high-profile stunts (2017, p. 107). These actions enabled GetUp to distinguish themselves from more 'traditional' political groups, establishing themselves as a hybrid campaigning organisation.

Vromen (2017) explains that GetUp uses a combination of online and offline activities that serve different purposes; online speaks to involving members through small actions, creating awareness, and signing petitions; offline is about creating 'bold action' that gains the interest of potential members and of mainstream media (GetUp! 2021). Vromen draws on Chadwick's (2007) concept of 'organisational hybridity' to argue that GetUp is non-traditional and cannot be classified in the same way. Further, she argues that GetUp is a hybrid political organisation that utilises a blend of online and offline actions and various digital networks to share their message. It is one of Australia's most significant campaign organisations (Vromen 2017) that engages with politics and their membership both online and offline. Vromen evaluates the notion of 'success' that is often levelled at online campaigning organisations, arguing that it is 'often subjective and difficult as targets will rarely attribute change to activists' actions, and it takes time to judge consequences of campaigns' (2017, p. 109). Evaluating success is a complicated process that GetUp has developed; where they previously measured success by 'outcomes (political change)' or outputs ('measuring mobilisation and attention received'), to 'strategic impact' (2017, p. 229). This shift suggests that GetUp take into account other variables that facilitate political change beyond traditional political structures, such as 'changing societal ideas, norms and discourses' (2017, p. 38). The notion of 'success' and how GetUp's frame it challenges restricted ideas about what is and what is not activism.

A further example of a hybrid political organisation is the activist group 38 Degrees, which was examined by Dennis (2018), who analysed the effect that individuals everyday use of digital networks has on political engagement. 38 Degrees is an organisation that is led by the will of the activist membership, rather than by a formal leadership that directs without feedback. There is a leadership team that uses digital networks to quickly and effectively 'listen' to their members, enabling them to plan when to take action and contribute to the development of the organisation. In this sense, the political power is not monopolised by specific leaders, rather 38 Degrees engage their members in political decision-making. Dennis argues that 38 Degrees 'support engagement repertoires that blend offline and online tactics' (2018, p. 186), identifying

that their use of digital networks creates 'new opportunities for cognitive engagement and political mobilisation' (2018, p. 186). Dennis situates the discussion through his theoretical lens of 'the continuum of participation' to understand why citizens engage in 'new modes of social and political self-expression' (2018, p. 10). He argues that the continuum of participation is designed to ascertain what happens 'before collective, or connective, action' (2018, p. 185), explaining that participation is a process rather than an outcome, where individuals utilise digital networks for self-expression, as part of their everyday political action. Dennis concludes his analysis by identifying that 'Twitter create[s] new opportunities for cognitive engagement, discursive participation, and political mobilisation' (2018, p. 186).

Using digital networks has become an everyday practice for some (Hinton and Hjorth 2013; van Dijck and Poell 2015), specifically exchanging political ideas and contributing to political discussion (Himelboim et al. 2013). Digital networks, such as Twitter, blur the boundaries between online and offline, between social and political. We can contact and challenge our politicians directly (Bimber 2017) watch political events, and share information in real-time (Gieseler 2019); this demonstrates that individuals are interested in more informal, personalised and 'ad-hoc politics' (Bang 2005). The forms of political participation, indeed digital activism, are evolving to include 'liking' a tweet and contributing to a hashtag conversation on sexual violence (Mendes and Ringrose 2019; Loney-Howes 2020). These forms of digital activism are often labelled as 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' to undermine this type of political participation or endorse an outdated critique that reinforces who has access to the political arena. Clicktivism is a form of digital activism that enables an individual to create awareness of and gain support for an issue (Madison and Klang 2020), but it also does much more than this. Hence, we need to challenge the out of date, yet often repeated criticisms that have undermined our acceptance of this form of political participation for over a decade.

## Interpretations of Clicktivism

Clicktivism is one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary political participation, which includes communicating with politicians (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014); signing a petition (Karpf 2012); following election results in real-time (Rogers 2014); and changing a profile picture in support of a cause (Dennis 2018). It is hard to dismiss clicktivism as an insignificant political activity because, as Akram argues, 'so many people are acting in this way [and] are doing it together' (2019, p. 24), and it is 'the most prominent form of political expression in the world' (Halupka 2018, p. 131). However, while society has 'embraced' clicktivism, it is not recognised as a 'legitimate' form of political participation in the literature because it does not fit our understanding of 'conventional' forms of political action (Halupka 2018). Clicktivism is

predominantly understood to involve the click of a mouse, or button, such as 'liking' or retweeting a petition. Clicktivism is an online only form of digital activism performed via the affordances of digital networks. For example, on Twitter, clicktivists can exchange information and express opinions about breaking news events using the tweet and @mention affordances. Other users might like and retweet part of a hashtagged conversation, potentially amplifying that information to a broader audience than the original conversation. In this context, clicktivism is a form of political participation performed via the affordances of a digital network. Critiques of clicktivism dismiss these as low-risk, easy, or shallow forms of participation. Typically, when clicktivism is analysed, Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) are referenced as the principal proponents that advance a negative critique of this form of digital activism (Bimber et al. 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Cabrera et al. 2017; Dennis 2018; Halupka 2018; Mendes and Ringrose 2019; Schradie 2019; Karpf 2020b). Gladwell and Morozov frame their arguments in defence of traditional forms of political participation; their concern is that digital activism is replacing 'real' activism (Karpf 2010), thereby undermining the systemic change it can create (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

The proliferation of digital networks (Ellison and boyd 2013) generated a wave of technological optimism (Loader and Mercea 2011) about the potential effect on politics for some. Proponents of cyberspace recognised that digital networks create space for political discourse and the possible increase of political participation (Papacharissi 2002). Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2009a, 2011a, 2012) argue in opposition to these theories which they frame as a cyber-utopia. Their critiques are the most commonly referenced in literature on clicktivism, but they do not explore the potential importance of digital activism in any detail. Instead, they discuss clicktivism as a distraction (Morozov 2009a) that spell the end of traditional forms of activism (Karpf 2020b) such as protests on the street. It is worth remembering that their evaluations reference a time and space before prominent digital protests: Arab Spring in 2011, also referred to as the 'Uprisings' in Tahir Square (Tufekci 2017); and 2012 Occupy Wall Street demonstration in New York (Castells 2015). However, their accounts of clicktivism are still regularly cited as opposition to scholars who argue that digital networks create new possibilities for political engagement (Garrett 2006; Bennett et al. 2008; boyd 2008b; Castells 2009; Norris 2009; Karpf 2010; Papacharissi 2010; Earl and Kimport 2011).

Gladwell's (2010) article is a piece of journalism in the *New Yorker*, which has no analysis or empirical evidence and, in fact, contains no reference to clicktivism. It is not a piece of peer reviewed research. He argues that an effect of digital networks is to lower activists' motivation to 'make a real sacrifice', although he does not expand on what this represents (Gladwell 2010). He draws on examples that support his conviction that traditional activism is more effective than

digital. However, Gladwell's reasoning is flawed in how he juxtaposes, for example, the Civil rights movement in 1960s America as evidence that 'real' activism can happen 'without email, texting, Facebook, or Twitter' (2010). He expands on his example to identify the limitations of Twitter; Martin Luther King Jr would be unable to tweet from a jail cell in Birmingham. If we suspend reality momentarily to theorise that if Martin Luther King Jr had a Twitter account, with a worldwide following of 200 million, a campaign manager could tweet on his behalf – and inspire those to continue to protest. Rather than focusing on instances of 'real revolution' of the past, Gladwell could have hypothesised about the significance of real-time communication for activists and how this could help to disseminate information during protests. Returning to his article, Gladwell outlines that his concern with using Facebook for activism is that it is designed for friendship – clearly set in a time before Cambridge Analytica.[5] The crux of his argument is that digital networks 'are built around weak ties…but weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism' (Gladwell 2010). He hypothesises that without thick social ties or connections with others, there is no central organisation, no clear leader to make decisions and strategise. Ultimately, Gladwell argues that without organisation, no real social change can be made (2010). As a final point, let us remember that this article is referred to in critiques of the forms and substance of digital activism, specifically clicktivism, without analysing any examples of digital activism.

Digital campaigns labelled as representative of 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' are considered a lesser form of activism (Cochrane 2013). Slacktivism, also referred to as 'armchair activism', is often described as a lacking effort or a 'lazy' form of digital activism (Morozov 2011a). In much of his academic and blogging work, Morozov (2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) refers negatively to slacktivism. He argues that it is a 'dangerous' form of activism that makes activists feel 'important' but produces little political impact (Morozov 2011a). Again, here is the notion of 'success' being a defining factor as to what really counts as 'political'. He frames his discussion of slacktivism as an activity that distracts from the offline political action that activists could be taking. However, his *Net Delusion* books (2011a, 2012) barely contribute to this discussion, with a thin analysis of digital activism and more 'anecdotes and speculation' than empirical evidence (Karpf 2010). Despite this, Morozov is unwavering in voicing his opposition to the notion of 'cyber-utopia'. His central concern with digital activism is that these 'passive' acts compromise legitimate forms of offline activism (Morozov 2011b). He focuses on misconceptions about digital activists; arguing that they merely 'click yes' to joining a political group's Facebook page 'without even blinking' as a way of feeling useful and important (Morozov 2009a). By recounting and reinforcing the notion

[5] Cambridge Analytica was a data analytics company that collected and used Facebook users personal data to 'predict and influence' voters choices (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018).

that clicktivism is lazy, dangerous and 'politically ineffective' (Cabrera et al. 2017), Morozov (2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) limits our understanding (Couldry 2012) of digital activism, and the social and political change it can make.

In contrast, several scholars recognise that clicktivism can be 'powerful' (Dennis 2018) and should be recognised as a legitimate form of political participation (Earl and Kimport 2011; Halupka 2014, 2018; Vromen 2017; Dennis 2018; Akram 2019; Karpf 2020b, 2020a). Clicktivism enables individuals to be political (Halupka 2018), communicate about politics, take political action, and engage with their communities (Karpf 2012). Halupka defines clicktivism as a 'non-committal online political response, which is easily replicated and requires no specialised knowledge' (2018, p. 132). Clicktivism *is* easily replicated, which is essentially the significance of this form of digital activism. It enables individuals to 'speak out, share opinions, and spread news' (Dennis 2018, p. 41) by taking 'low-effort' acts, such as 'liking, commenting, and sharing' (Dennis 2018, p. 116), to respond to emerging political issues and important events (Bruns and Burgess 2011). Karpf argues that concerns about clicktivism feel dated; 'it is hard to claim in the midst of record-setting political demonstrations that citizens are too content to 'like', tweet, and sign e-petitions' (2020b, p. 124). Here, Karpf refers to the Women's March and anti-Trump mobilisation in March 2017, which millions of people took part in worldwide (Weber et al. 2018). Thousands of tweets and retweets were sent during the march, sharing messages of resistance and inclusion with those participating online (Silva and Syed 2019). Rosewarne (2019) explains that the march acted as a catalyst, building a sense of injustice and unrest, which manifested in the #MeToo movement later that year. #MeToo was a collective of narratives that 'swept across' digital networks (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020), making the prevalence of sexual violence evident to the world. These individual actions, such as using a hashtag, can contribute to large-scale action like #MeToo, meaning that connective and collective action may happen simultaneously (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Akram argues that we should take 'new and alternative forms of engagement' seriously (2019, p. 4). Clicktivism is a form of digital activism that enables individuals to participate; it is far from being the lazy or self-important form of digital activism that has been characterised in much of the existing scholarship. I argue that our understanding of digital activism should expand to include clicktivism as a powerful form of political participation.

Clicktivism is a form of contemporary political participation that is embraced by 'many people' (Akram 2019), allowing them to be political, take political action, and communicate about politics with others. In connective action logic, individuals take single actions via the affordances of digital networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). These instances of liking, tweeting, hashtagging and retweeting are forms of clicktivism that allow individuals to 'feel their way into their own place in politics' (Papacharissi 2014, p. 131). A single act of clicktivism can be powerful or pointless in the

same way as any other political action (Karpf 2020b). A hashtag can enable a broad political discussion beyond a single click or contribute to large-scale action where connective and collective action combine (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Critiques of clicktivism (Morozov 2009a, 2011a, 2012; Gladwell 2010) are overly concerned with defending traditional forms of activism rather than exploring the potential significance it could have. Scholars argue that Twitter is a site of political discourse (Chadwick et al. 2015) and activism (Dahlgren 2013) but have not applied this to consider how feminist activists communicate and take action, beyond isolated instances of hashtag activism. For digital feminist activism, clicktivism affords the opportunity to engage with their communities (Karpf 2012), take action outside of the formal political arena, and potentially effect legal or social change. In this sense, using Twitter is connected to the idea of a feminist collective where women can speak out and share ideas and causes of interest (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Clicktivism affords feminists immediate political actions they can take, the ability to form connections with other feminists and raise awareness about important issues.

## Digital Feminist Activism in the Twittersphere

Contemporary feminism is defined by the use of Web 2.0 (Cochrane 2013; Fotopoulou 2016a; Hurwitz 2017), such as blogs (Baumgardner 2011; Keller 2012; Schuster 2013) and digital networks (Mendes 2015; Mendes et al. 2019; Jackson et al. 2020). Feminist activist practices evolved with technological developments, using bulletin boards (Earl and Kimport 2011) and email campaigns (Hurwitz 2017), shifting from offline activism to online. Digital feminist activists find space on Twitter to create connections that represent a worldwide collective, react to political issues in real-time (Cochrane 2013), and create counter-narratives as a form of feminist resistance to dominant and exclusionary discourse (Rentschler 2015; Jackson et al. 2020; Loney-Howes 2020). In this sense, feminist activism is digitally enabled, and a form of consciousness-raising practiced through the affordances of the digital network. Drawing on the feminist scholar, bell hooks (2015), who argues that: 'Feminists are made, not born. Like all political positions, one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action' (2015, p. 7), I explore the choices and actions that digital feminists make to perform their activism on Twitter, and how the phrase ‘the personal is political’ guides their activism (Reger 2017).

Research is focussing more on Twitter, which may well be guided by practicality as data can be accessed via their Application Programming Interfaces (API) (Tornes and Trujillo 2021) or an academic research track that gives access to a data archive (Twitter Developer 2021). Impactful moments and instances of digital activism, such as #MeToo, are the object of study of existing research on digital feminist activism (Boyle 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019; Gieseler 2019; Jackson et al. 2020). However, while #MeToo is an incredibly significant moment for raising

awareness about pervasive sexual violence against women, these scholarly investigations do not examine other choices that feminists have made and actions they have performed on Twitter. Specifically, Baer (2016), Dixon (2014), Fotopoulou (2016a), Khoja-Moolji (2015), and Losh (2014) limit their focus by analysing feminists use of just one Twitter affordance, labelling digital feminist activism as 'hashtag feminism'. In many ways, this has contributed to a narrow understanding of feminist activism that has not engaged with *why* and *how* feminists use Twitter beyond the hashtag. For example, Twitter enables communication and connection, with geographically dispersed others, who share information, ideas and experiences. Forming connections with many other feminists is similar to forming a community or collective. It creates a sense of shared support and solidarity, through political interests and tenets.

## The Personal is Political: Speaking Out and Creating a Counter-Narrative

During the 1960s, feminists were focused on gendered issues; attaining legal access to abortion, refocusing phallocentric pornography to include women's sexual desires and challenging women's oppressive domestic roles and responsibilities (Friedan 1963). It was then that feminists declared 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1969), using the phrase extensively to drive their politics and issues into societal awareness. Historically, the personal is political was used as the 'broader motivation' for consciousness-raising groups (Gleeson and Turner 2019) and 'speak outs' where women shared their experiences and listened to others (Boyle 2019). Through women raising their 'voice', feminists perceived that commonalities of their oppressions were connected to structures of power (Ahmed 2004). The *personal is political* is a concept open to interpretation that has been used by feminists in different contexts (Whittier 1995; Heberle 2015; Chamberlain 2017; Schuster 2017; Linabary and Batti 2019). Since the 1990s feminists began to question and reinterpret Hanisch's rallying cry, using it to mean that various 'everyday' practices are political (Schuster 2017). It involves the 'politicisation of everyday life…and link[s] everyday experiences to larger social injustices' (Crossley 2017, p. 127). One practice is the sharing of personal narratives, which connects with the way that 'the personal is political' was used by earlier feminists to publicly share private experiences (Linabary and Batti 2019). It is not possible to understand the political without looking at what lies at the core of these feminist practices: the personal, accordingly, this is the lens through which the personal is political on Twitter has been examined in this thesis.

Feminists use Twitter to create Fraser's (1990) alternative communication of counter-narratives that challenge dominant (Guest 2016) and exclusionary discourse (Willis 2020). Using Twitter's

affordances enables feminist activists to direct information flow and amplify content that might not otherwise 'gain traction' (Stromer-Galley 2014). For example, feminist activists speak out about typically underrepresented issues (Papacharissi 2010) to disclose highly personal experiences of sexual violence, which become a 'collective' narrative when aggregated by a hashtag (Serisier 2018). This creates a counter-narrative that targets an issue without the associated fear and discomfort of formal reporting processes (Serisier 2018; Loney-Howes 2020). In this context, the *political* is also *personal;* it is an act of vulnerability performed for self-validation (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). These collective narratives that are broadly amplified (Papacharissi 2016) via digital networks are capable of generating greater awareness around issues that would not necessarily be applied to individual narratives. The prevalence of feminists utilising Twitter to speak out is demonstrative of expanding forms of contemporary political participation. Twitter creates the conditions for personal narratives to have political force by identifying and amplifying those testimonies that have the potential to effect change.

For many users, contributing to political conversations is part of their everyday activity (Himelboim et al. 2013; Beyer 2014). Dahlgren argues that political meaning emerges 'in and through talk', which can be the 'meandering messiness of everyday conversation' that becomes significant (2013, p. 46). For example, a user may share that she had an abortion (Baumgardner 2011) when she retweets a magazine article that features a celebrity sharing the same experience. By taking this action, she contributes to a counter-narrative (Ender 2019) about the prevalence of these acts, refusing to be labelled with the shame frequently applied to this choice, as an articulation of resistance (Carty 2015). As such, her action moves from one to many (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020), which is represented by 'the personal is political', a first-person narrative that has created political impact and brought societal awareness about an issue. Megarry (2020) argues that feminists used a similar technique to challenge sexual harassment during the 1970s, the difference being the immediacy and scale of the potential audience they can now reach through Twitter. It is also the notion of speaking out, or voice, connected to the collective (Dahlgren 2013; Couldry 2015a). By taking connective action collectively, feminists can draw on their shared knowledge (Sweetman 2013) and information, enabling the focus of that action to be *heard* (Crawford 2011, my emphasis).

Papacharissi draws a connection with sharing a personal narrative in a public space, arguing that it has the 'potential of a political act' (2015, p. 112). Feminists sharing narratives bear out Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) concept 'connective action' where individuals engage with personal issues and find commonality in those shared with others. This form of political participation plays a distinctive role because it is often performed in 'densely interwoven networks' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, p. 42) or collectives. Digital feminists are not necessarily members of a political

organisation, such as 38 degrees, signing up to a mission statement and performing actions designed and organised through a leadership team. Instead, they are taking individual actions by reacting to political issues as they unfold, by speaking out, which contributes to broader political discourse (Dahlgren 2013). Shared narratives can be targeted by digital hate where the aim is to undermine (Willis 2020), disrupt (Stromer-Galley and Wichowsky 2011), or cause distress (Heffernan 2018). Digital hate, also referred to as trolling, is a deep-rooted online practice that has become a fixture in digital networks. Anti-feminist and misogynistic harassment and abuse is frequently levelled at feminist activists who discuss political issues, particularly those who question and challenge gendered inequalities (Ging and Siapera 2019; Linabary and Batti 2019). The feminist collective responds by speaking out, offering emotional support for the target, providing solidarity, and sometimes responding or 'shouting back' (Turley and Fischer 2018). That is the feminist Twitter collective that rises.

The idea of a collective network represents a 'long-standing' (Fotopoulou 2016a) association with feminist consciousness-raising (Mendes et al. 2019), meaning the acts of speaking out and listening to others personal narratives (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020). Digital networks can be conceptualised as a form of consciousness-raising involving thousands of women in a single conversation (Cochrane 2013). Sweetman argues that feminist solidarity 'strengthens the power of women' to take action collectively by drawing on combined 'skills, knowledge and resources' (2013, p. 219). As such, feminist activists can take action collectively that they would not necessarily be able to do as individuals.

## A Connected Feminist Collective

For contemporary feminists, the use of information and mobile communication technologies have been essential (Castells 2015) for finding and interacting with others who share interests or political ideologies (Bouvier 2020). Twitter has become increasingly important as a public online space (Herring et al. 2002) where users express political opinions (Fuchs 2008; Papacharissi 2014; Vromen 2017) and contribute to political conversation as part of their everyday activity (Himelboim et al. 2013; Beyer 2014). By design, Twitter enables feminists to speak out, discuss ideas, and form communities with others who represent a personal audience. For example, feminist activists can use the @mention affordance to speak directly to others in their community, or audience (Bruns and Moe 2014; Himelboim et al. 2017) about a pertinent issue or topic. Twitter enables communication and connection with other feminists, creating a collective of feminists on a worldwide scale, which has not been possible 'in the long history of the fight for gender equality' (Leavy and Harris 2018). Papacharissi (2014) argues that a sense of solidarity to a feminist collective may, in fact, be imagined to have emerged at the 'the intersection of people,

technology, and practice' (boyd 2011, p. 39). Being part of a feminist collective connects individuals to a wealth of knowledge and experiences (Cochrane 2013; Papacharissi 2014) through the shared 'feminist' identity. Within feminist Twitter individuals can ask questions, discuss politics with like-minded others, and validate others' experiences.

Feminist activist practices are shaped by the digital site that they are performed on, which affords a space to communicate and take action that is also a counter-public. Twitter affords a nuanced approach to consciousness-raising for feminists. It gives access to feminist politics that dominated discussions in the past while simultaneously enabling connections between feminists who are geographically dispersed (Crossley 2015), which is significant in terms of access to experience and knowledge. Dahlgren (2013) draws a connection between different digital networks and the practices that an activist can perform. He identifies that digital networks afford the *possibility* to participate and that potential social change can be generated. By design, Twitter communities form around user interests, based on their content or connections, which expands the conditions for communication, meaning that users participate in shaping their ideas and opinions. Simultaneously, feminist Twitter is a site of activism where individuals can raise awareness about, for example, sexual violence, by amplifying the voices of others, and offer support to individuals who share their personal narratives. Engaging with others through sharing information and experiences affords digital feminist activists to reproduce collective experiences that have previously only been enabled by real-life meet-ups. Simultaneously, feminists who act as a collective are also a non-hierarchical network with no defined leaders but can draw on the power and influence of many others. The impact of an action is determined by the number of individuals that decide to participate in collective action, such as contributing to a particular hashtag, issue and audience (Gleeson and Turner 2019).

Activists can be a part of existing communication threads (Gieseler 2019); however, digital political participation and activism may be constrained by cultural, ideological, or geographical issues. Twitter enables a connected feminist collective to take action and communicate, for example, to identify shared grievances (Garrett 2006). What happens when those grievances are not shared by everyone in a connected collective? Twitter affords the opportunity to discuss and examine complex feminist politics and ideologies, particularly those that incite disagreement. It is easy to forget that digital networks of feminists are diverse, despite a narrow representation of feminism and feminist issues in mainstream media (Jackson et al. 2020). One issue that generates polarising opinions between feminist activists is an ongoing debate on the dichotomy between 'woman' as a biologically determined 'sex' and the notion that gender is a social construct (Thompson 2001). Not all feminists are united by the need to challenge this notion, while others utilise Twitter to advance an anti-trans ideology (Pearce et al., 2020). Twitter facilitates a unique

public platform for political debate, where feminists attempt to work through these conflicting ideologies, occasionally succeeding or agreeing to disagree.

Twitter has become an increasingly important space for feminists to use as a counter-public space, creating counter-narratives as a form of resistance to dominant and exclusionary discourse. Individual political actions can contribute to a large-scale collective action, that can be disseminated and amplified (Papacharissi 2016). Shared narratives that draw on the concept *the personal is political* are capable of generating awareness and reach (Salter 2019) due to the personal experiences, which become part of a collective of outrage and anger (Mendes and Ringrose 2019). The collective voice of feminist activists is being amplified on Twitter, which raises important questions about who is listening and whether the aim is to reach a broad audience or a specific community? There is the potential for a shared narrative to gain traction, reach diverse audiences and move into public debate. Speaking out is an intertwined personal and political process, which is part of the complexity of digital feminism that must be understood through the digital networks they are performed on (Mendes et al. 2019).

## Conclusion: Formation of a Conceptual Lens

Interdisciplinary research that draws on literature from three disciplines has resulted in the need to design a *conceptual lens,* used throughout the discussion in this chapter, which underpins the analysis and interpretation of empirical data in the rest of this thesis (see Figure 7). The conceptual lens identifies the key concepts and theories explored in this chapter – political participation is drawn together with digital activism and clicktivism – through feminist activism on Twitter. Applying the digital context of where activism is performed is relevant to expanding our understanding of contemporary political participation and categorising diverse forms of participation (RQ1). The first layer of my conceptual lens allows us to consider the significance of the digital network, which reshapes how and what we consider to be both 'political' and 'participatory' acts. Developing information and communication challenge outdated understandings that delimit political participation as taking place within the bounds of the arena (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 2013; Karpf 2012; van Deth 2014, 2016; Theocharis 2015; Chadwick and Dennis 2017; Akram 2019). Further, individuals who are already interested in politics, political issues and causes to some extent can take action online to ascertain where they, and their views, fit within politics (Papacharissi 2014). Those who were uninterested have the ability to become involved through the 'greater space' that digital networks afford (Boulianne 2019, p. 41). Individuals can express their disagreement with a political representative on a specific issue or show their support for a campaign or political event (Vaccari and Valeriani 2021) as a way into politics and political participation.

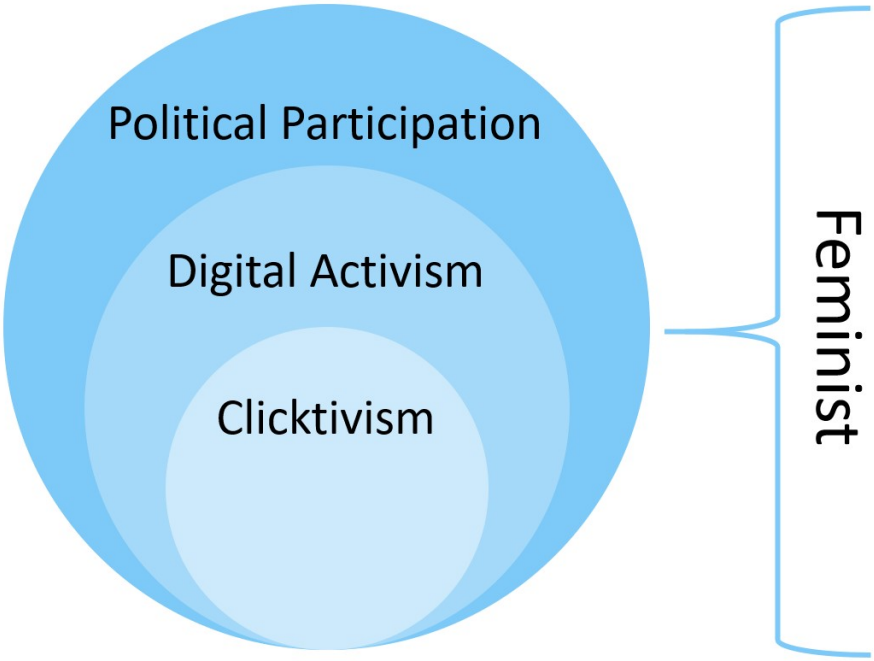


*Figure 7* *Conceptual Lens*

Applying the second layer of my conceptual lens affords the examination of digital activism, specifically of digital activists, for whom Twitter is a public space (Papacharissi 2010, 2014; boyd 2011) that blurs the separation between online and offline – it has become a critical platform for them to express opinions, share information, and take individual or collective action (Bimber 2017) (RQ3). Further, applying the *feminist* element to digital activism and activists enables the acknowledgement of those who have been historically denied access to formal politics and political platforms elsewhere (Gieseler 2019), having the ability to 'communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate' (Garrett, 2006, p. 202) is significant. It qualifies us to deliberate on how digital networks are changing, how we conceptualise political participation and what we understand as activism. The third layer of my conceptual lens grounds clicktivism as a form of digital activism that affords feminist activists the opportunity to be political; specifically, to take action, communicate with and connect to other feminists who are geographically dispersed. Despite the rise in clicktivism, and the number of people taking action in this way (Akram 2019), it is not taken as seriously as other forms of digital activism. Negative accusations of ease, laziness, distraction or self-aggrandisement are often associated with clicktivism (2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Gladwell 2010), yet these criticisms are outdated and unsupported by research (Karpf 2020b). Clicktivism does not fit our understanding of traditional politics or even digital politics. Yet, it is one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary political participation (Halupka 2018) and should be recognised as such.

The conceptual lens expands our understanding of what political participation is, how and where it is performed and by whom. There are no hard boundaries between the three layers, rather there is a relationship between them where they blur into each other, and each layer reinforces the conceptualisation and categorisation of the other. Clicktivism is a form of digital activism that is only performed via the affordances of a digital network. The relationship between clicktivism and digital activism is rooted in activists' digital performance of political action, communication or connection. Digital activism includes forms of political action, connection and communication that are grounded on traditional forms of activism, which are performed in diverse ways across diverse digital platforms. For example, if an activist signs an e-petition, this is a form of digital activism, which can also be shared on Twitter using a campaign hashtag or @mentioning others who might sign it, this is a form clicktivism. Simultaneously, these are both forms of the broadest layer political participation, which for digital feminist activists is designed to question, challenge and resist hegemonic exclusionary practices. By using my conceptual lens to guide the analysis of digital feminist activism in this thesis I argue that instances of political action, communication or connection can belong to one or more overlapping and blurred layer.

Combining the additional element of *feminist* to digital activism and clicktivism, we can conclude that digital feminist activists use Twitter as an online counter-public space (Fraser 1990) to facilitate their action and communication – as a space to speak out (RQ2 & RQ3). Digital feminist activists draw on the concept *the personal is political* to take both individual and 'connective' action (2012, 2013), frequently situated in the practice of shared narratives. These single actions can be utilised collectively by contributing to a wide-scale action, such as adding a personal narrative to a #hashtag conversation about the prevalence of violence against women. Further, digital feminist activists have the opportunity to take action by leveraging the hashtag affordance, which is capable of generating interest from not only other activists but other users who are more likely to read a 'popular' or trending tweet. As such, digital feminist activists are participating in the dissemination of a counter-narrative that has the potential of being spread far and wide by mainstream media and is capable of affecting change through creating societal awareness about an important political issue. If a conversation draws significant attention on Twitter and in public discourse, it is then deemed a 'success' – however, feminist activists using Twitter as a digital public space to speak out is a significant success itself (RQ4).

The following chapter is the first of four that comprises my analysis of empirical data utilising the conceptual lens; specifically, it is an exploration of semi-structured interviews, examining how and why digital feminist activists use Twitter as a political platform, indeed the range of digital activist and clicktivist practices that are shaped by the affordances of the platform. This chapter draws on all three layers of the conceptual lens; initially framed as how respondents describe political

participation, but drills down into how Twitter enables specific activist and clicktivist practices they engage in. For instance, the diverse political actions and communication that respondents take, such as how they utilise tweeting, retweeting, and why having a tweet 'go viral' holds significance for them. These practices are critical to advancing our understanding of contemporary political participation, hence why this chapter is the foreground of my empirical chapters, as it establishes the significance of the digital context for the remainder of this thesis, and indeed, my overall argument. The chapter examines the political issues, events and campaigns at the centre of political action and communication, which are situated within the discussion to determine feminist activists use of Twitter as a political platform. This chapter firmly establishes the significance of clicktivist and activist practices, but it also outlines clicktivism and activism as forms of contemporary political participation. I draw emergent themes from the chapter to argue that digital activism, specifically clicktivism, effectively lowers the barriers of political participation by enabling feminist activists to take action, communicate and connect.

# Chapter 3 Feminists Performing Clicktivism: Why Tweeting, Retweeting and Going Viral Matter

## Introduction

This chapter examines how respondents *discern* their use of Twitter for political participation through the mechanisms of action and communication. Clicktivism is a form of contemporary political participation that has only just begun to be applied to specific practices and digital networks. Clicktivism *should* be considered a form of contemporary political participation through the medium of digital activism, which is a core argument in my thesis. Currently, clicktivism is not included in the existing definitions and conceptualisations of political participation, which has been contested by many scholars (Couldry 2012; Karpf 2012; van Deth 2014, 2016; Carpentier 2015; Theocharis 2015; Vromen 2017; Akram 2019). Extant literature on political participation concentrates on traditional processes and institutions (Papacharissi 2010; Carpentier 2012; Dahlgren 2012, 2013; Zerilli 2015) and on those individuals who already have access and the ability to use them. This fails to consider the position of others who are marginalised and without access to these channels. Feminist clicktivism is repeated resistance that is produced and reproduced; it is about the choices feminists make and the actions they take (hooks 2015) via Twitter's architecture. Feminists shape their activist practices via the affordances of the digital network that it is performed on, which enables them to *amplify*, *disseminate*, *challenge* and *advocate*. I analyse these broad themes that developed from my reading of empirical data as part of my original contribution to knowledge, which focuses on how and why feminists perform clicktivism as a means of lowering the barriers that restrict their political participation.

At the core of contemporary feminism is a dedication to expose and critique that which it disagrees with (Milford Morse and Anderson 2020). It is characterised by feminists' use of Twitter to amplify others; share information to educate and create discussion; challenge sexism and misogyny, and advocate for reproductive rights. Clicktivism enables feminists to be political, take action, and communicate about politics with others. How affordances are used to communicate has been broadly considered by some scholars who investigate the developing architecture of Twitter (Ballsun-Stanton and Carruthers 2010; Murthy 2018) or focus on the conversational aspects of the platform (boyd 2011). As Papacharissi argues, 'we assume that social media use will have the same results for all types of movements or publics—it does not' (2016, p. 312). Twitter has distinct affordances that determine the conditions for *how* activism is performed on the network, which is directed through communication and action. Feminists shape their clicktivist

practices via the digital network that it is performed on via specific affordances, such as retweeting and @mentioning tweeting. Clicktivism is a form of digital activism, which, for feminist activists, is inherently political, which is demonstrated through the action they take and the communication they engage in. There are no abstract degrees of clicktivism where one form of action or communication is more significant than the other because the impact of using a hashtag, liking, or retweeting varies depending on the content, the context of the political moment and the audience. For example, we can disseminate information to raise awareness that may reach a diverse audience, some of whom were previously unaware of a political issue or amplify the voices of others by liking and retweeting, generating interest across the Twittersphere. What is so significant about clicktivism is the use of specific affordances to take political action and communicate, both as an individual or by contributing to a collective. Clicktivism is not within the bounds of formal politics or political structures; instead, it is contextualised through a specific digital network. However, it is worth remembering that there is a connection between offline and online activism; an individual may @mention a political representative to raise awareness about an issue, knowing that they might see their tweet but not expecting them to answer.

| **Practice** | **Affordance** | **Description** |
|---|---|---|
| *Communication* | Tweet<br>Reply<br>Quote Tweet | Expressing an idea or opinion; address another user directly; or add a comment to another user's tweet |
| *Action* | Retweet<br>Like<br>Mention<br>Hashtag | Share another user's tweet; like a tweet; refer to another user indirectly; categorise a conversation |

*Figure 8 Twitter Clicktivist Practices*

Activist and clicktivist practices have been the subject of many investigations, however, many scholars implement a conceptual shortcut by conducting research that combines digital networks and views them as one 'social media' entity, extrapolating that specific patterns and behaviours apply to *all* (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Chen, Pain, and Barner 2018; Halupka 2018; Bang and Halupka 2019; Mendes et al. 2019; Megarry 2020). While Chen et al. (2018), Megarry (2020). Mendes et al. (2019) investigate instances of feminist activism using various digital networks, but they do so without discussing how these digital networks differ from each other and how that affects the way that these networks are used. For instance, in her evaluation of feminists use of digital networks for activism, Megarry (2020) makes no distinction between their practices on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, despite these networks having

different affordances and modes of connection. Similarly, Halupka's (2018) understanding of clicktivism seemingly conflates all digital networks in his investigation, which is theoretical and does not perform a deep empirical examination of any network. Conversely, Jackson et al. (2020) apply superior socio-technical understanding in discussing how Black feminist networks' form around political hashtags on Twitter. Their research contributes a rich analysis to the study of digital feminist activism but is limited by their exclusive focus on feminists' use of hashtags. This chapter will contribute new knowledge by analysing empirical data that evidence respondents' motivations for using Twitter for their activism; identify *how* Twitter's distinct affordances are used to facilitate their feminist activism broadly, and strategically to support a specific action (Karpf 2020a).

Contemporary feminist activism can be characterised by individual acts of resistance, using a range of clicktivist practices, which are not necessarily part of collective action (Kelly 2015). There may not be a specific political focus or overarching goal, as it is defined and performed by the individual. For that reason, the phrase 'the personal is political' illustrates a different interpretation (Schuster 2017), which indicates that individual feminist practices are political when engaging in communication and action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) identify this as 'connective action', where individuals have a more personal and flexible association with 'causes, ideas, and political organisations' (2013, p. 5). I draw on this concept to analyse empirical data and conduct a detailed investigation about *how* and *why* feminists use Twitter specifically, and examine how the various affordances fit into their understanding of broader action and communication tactics that they take. I discuss how respondents frame their reasons for performing that particular action or communication. This chapter takes a reflective approach, which is framed by the notion that individual feminist activists use clicktivism to participate in politics. While it does not conform to the traditional understanding of political participation in the literature, it contributes to my overall argument that clicktivism is a form of digital activism capable of generating significant affect, which I will evidence throughout this chapter.

## How and Why Feminist Activists Use Twitter to Take Action and Communicate

Clicktivism is a form of digital activism that utilises the affordances of the network and can facilitate the dissemination of communication and amplify certain actions. Simultaneously, clicktivism is a way of pushing back against the dominant power structures that determine traditional politics and limit participation within the bounds of formal organisations and processes. However, respondents have taken an intersectional approach to feminism, in that their

activism is focused on social justice and the oppression of others. The notion of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to describe the complex and intersecting categories; gender, race and class and forms of oppression such as sexism, racism and classism that Black women may experience simultaneously. Respondents are marginalised, to some degree, by their gender and their activism in amplifying others; sharing information to educate and create discussion; challenging sexism and misogyny, and advocating for reproductive rights. Feminist activists frequently use Twitter affordances as leverage, affecting how substantially their reactions to emerging political issues (Bruns and Burgess 2011) are amplified by mainstream media (Cochrane 2013). Furthermore, *how* individual feminists use Twitter may appear unremarkable, but feminist activists use of Twitter advances ideas, opinions and information that cannot necessarily be demonstrated elsewhere. Clicktivist practices can include 'disruptive tactics' (Karpf 2020a), making an action, such as purposefully @mentioning a mainstream media journalist who has authored a controversial article, hard to ignore. Halupka argues that individuals use clicktivism to show a 'general interest' in politics, making it both 'disposable and impulsive' (2014, p. 119). He defines clicktivism as an 'impulsive and non-committal online political response, which is easily replicated and requires no specialised knowledge' (Halupka 2018, p. 132). It is problematic that Halupka conceptualises clicktivism in these terms, evoking the idea that it is casual, inconsistent, or slapdash. Clicktivism often transpires due to a visceral personal reaction to a political issue, which can develop into broader action and communication via Twitter but does not have to, to be considered legitimate. These intersecting notions will form the basis of my argument in the rest of this chapter, in which I argue that feminist activists utilise Twitter for many different actions and communications, and for a multitude of reasons.

Manifest in the empirical data here, feminist activists are concerned with political issues and the culture of connective community on Twitter, where they share other feminists' ideas and opinions, perhaps as frequently as their own. Evans and Chamberlain argue that the 'unifying purpose of feminism is a combination of intellectual commitment and political action' (2015, p. 398). For instance, Sam talks about how she uses Twitter and how all of her actions and communication are political, specifically about feminism and women's rights:

> *'Everything we do is political because feminism is political. Women's rights are political; what's happening in terms of public policy, in terms of government decision-making, it's all political. I would say that 99% of my tweets are political.'*

At the time of our interview, Sam was the CEO of the *Fawcett Society*, a UK-based charity that campaigns for gender equality and women's rights (The Fawcett Society 2021). Sam talks about how she uses Twitter but also talks about how Fawcett use Twitter. Much of the content from her

personal account is liking and retweeting Fawcett's tweets, highlighting that Sam, the CEO of Fawcett, is not easily separated from Sam, the individual. Twitter is significant for Fawcett in many ways; it affords an immediacy to debate pertinent political issues, recruit new members and share relevant information with all members. Fawcett is an example of a hybrid political organisation that utilises a combination of online and offline tactics, comparable to the non-profit campaigning organisations 38 Degrees and GetUp discussed in chapter 2 that Dennis (2018) and Vromen (2017) investigate, respectively. Conversely, Fawcett does not use opinion polls to consult with their membership about campaigns they want to engage with ('GetUp', Vromen 2017) or enable them to decide when they will take action ('38 Degrees', Dennis 2018). Sam talks about 'everything' being political 'because feminism is political', and that women's rights are not equal to men's and that this is represented in the content of her 'political' tweets. This evokes a widespread understanding of feminism, guided by the notion that women 'occupy a subordinate position in society' (Cameron 2018, p. 9). Sam also shares many petitions, asking others to sign them and get involved in the current debate over a political issue or public policy. Signing a petition is one of the more well-known forms of clicktivism (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Karpf 2016), raising awareness and drawing attention to the 'decision-makers' that Sam indirectly refers to.

Applying van Deth's (2014) framework, explored in Chapter 2, to Sam's actions and communication, we traverse the first four questions before we must stop because the 'activity' is online:

1. *Do we deal with behaviour?*
2. *Is the activity voluntary?*
3. *Is the activity done by citizens?*
4. *Is the activity located in the sphere of government/state/politics?*

Although some of Sam's tweets and @mentions directly engage politicians, her activity is performed on Twitter rather than located *in* a formal political hierarchy or structure. van Deth argues that blogging is a 'non-political activity used for political purposes' (2016); we can posit that he would draw a similar conclusion to tweeting and retweeting. Suppose we continue through the framework to all eight questions. In that case, Sam's activity *does* seem to allow us to traverse the rest of the framework, which would recognise her actions as a form of political participation:

5. *Is the activity targeted at the sphere of government/state/politics?*
6. *Is the activity aimed at solving collective or community problems?*
7. *Is the activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?*
8. *Is the political activity used to express political aims and intentions of participants?*

It is problematic that van Deth (2014, 2016) does not perceive digital communication and action as forms of political participation, which Colleoni et al. argue has 'achieved particular relevance as a medium of political communication' (2014, p. 319). Signing an online petition is a form of traditional participation (Vromen 2017), which is often disparaged as slacktivism or clicktivism by those who focus on the speed or convenience often associated with the act of retweeting them (Morozov 2009a; Howard 2014; Kristofferson et al. 2014; Cabrera et al. 2017), as though these are legitimate criteria to judge whether something qualifies as an act of political participation due to how easily it can be replicated. Political participation does not have to be slow and inconvenient to qualify as such.

'Alternative' forms of individual political participation *are* a quick way to take action, express an opinion (Papacharissi 2014; Vromen 2017) or contribute to a conversation about politics as an everyday activity (Himelboim et al. 2013; Beyer 2014). This speaks to the idea of clicking a button to retweet, which is reminiscent of Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) 'connective action' and Earl and Kimport's discussion of 'e-tactics' that 'can take less than a minute' (2011, p. 9). Alexia speaks about the 'really quick' action that she can take online, which could be a new way to define clicktivism:

> *'[It] is a way of coming down to a much more human level and being able to say: 'Here's a really quick action you could take.'*

Her response is about the simplicity and speed of performing actions via the digital network and hints at the idea that these alternative actions are more accessible for some. Alexia talks about an example where many of her friends have recently become new mothers and are online being *'really reactive'*, often late at night. They scroll through Twitter and retweet other feminists' content, engaging in debate, which may be the only action they can currently take. The flexibility afforded by the digital network, and the immediacy of clicktivism, means that they can communicate and take action when convenient (Earl and Kimport 2011). In this sense, clicktivism is expanding how we understand the concept of political participation. It allows us to recognise how flexible clicktivism is, particularly for women who have 'fewer resources of time' (Norris et al. 2004, p. 33) or less control over the time they do have (Schradie 2019). Further, Alexia's friends can debate in a public online space (Herring et al., 2002), giving them access to politics itself. Traditional views of political participation frequently exclude a certain demographic, such as new mothers, who cannot commit the time to work on a campaign for a political party or organisation (Bimber et al. 2015).

The widespread use of digital networks for engaging in clicktivism may purposefully try to gain access to mainstream media coverage, which would disseminate communication with a broader

audience (Poell and van Dijck 2015). In this sense, digital networks facilitate political participation for individuals. Cheryl speaks about many individual feminists communicating about political issues and the effect that this might create when this is repeated:

> *'The more of us there are, saying our own small things, in our own small way, the more the message percolates around the world and eventually has an impact.'*

Here we can see the idea that these 'small personal actions' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, p. 6) are similar to a tap dripping into a bucket that eventually fills to overflowing. Cheryl's repetition of 'more' represents the number of feminists taking individual connective action, which may gain the attention of mainstream media platforms, which broadcast information worldwide. However, repetitive actions do not necessarily create a substantial impact; rather, digital networks encourage our expectations that we can create impact, due to the immediacy, speed and ease of disseminating information (Papacharissi 2016). Simultaneously, it is worth asking how *impact* is identified or measured. Chadwick (2017) argues that our individual actions on digital networks are connected with mainstream media. For instance, 38 Degrees directs their members to engage online so that the group can 'capitalise' on the attention they gain from mainstream media (Chadwick and Dennis 2017), which spreads their message or campaign further. Connective action can develop from a personal reaction to a political issue (Papacharissi 2014), which speaks to Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) personal and flexible association. Clicktivism can create and contribute to a 'message', which circulates on Twitter, generating more clicks, retweets and likes. But, this does not mean that the 'message' Cheryl talks about will enter the awareness of 'official' politicians or impact politics (Phipps 2020). Drawing on van Deth's framework, we *might* stop when we reach the fourth question because the activity is not performed in the 'sphere of government/state/politics' (2014, p. 354). However, this is not necessarily the case, as political organisations, representatives, and institutions have Twitter accounts, enabling users to @mention them with a direct question. Further, it is possible to elicit a response, which means that this activity *is* performed in the 'sphere of government/state/politics', subsequently allowing us to traverse the rest of the framework and recognise Cheryl's actions are a form of political participation. van Deth's framework should account for clicktivism, and the diverse affordances of digital networks.

Patriarchal political structures reinforce the idea that men hold positions of power over women (Cameron 2018), making decisions that directly influence women's everyday existence. Twitter is utilised by feminist activists to perform resistance in the form of clicktivism, which enables the exposure and critique of 'traditional' political participation to the exclusion of theirs via digital networks. What is so significant about clicktivism is that it can be incredibly powerful when

undertaken by many individuals. Part of this power is located in the use of specific affordances, which disseminates and amplifies the content of others, who may be unknown to one another (Bimber et al. 2012). Further, Twitter can be used as an information and education network through the tweet content that individuals produce, which can gain the attention of mainstream media platforms. Many individuals engage in clicktivism, to the point that Akram (2019) argues it can no longer be ignored as an insignificant political activity. McCosker (2015) explains that clicktivism is dependent on amplification and the digital network it is produced on. This further illustrates the significance of a specific digital network, how it is used and how affordances can be leveraged (Earl and Kimport 2011), which, as Cheryl suggests, affects how a political 'message' is amplified in order to generate impact.

## Amplifying the Voices of Others

By design, Twitter's affordances enable amplification and the dissemination of information (boyd 2011). As a source of connection, community and activism, feminist Twitter expands the concept of clicktivism to amplify the voices of others who might not be heard otherwise, for example, to advance a particular cause (McCafferty 2011). The term 'intersectionality' has become widely used by some contemporary feminists to represent a thoughtful approach to feminist activism, which requires an understanding of the power dynamics within and outside of the movement. Although intersectionality was not initially defined as such, it has become synonymous with understanding and challenging inequalities based on gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class. There is a demand that we 'make space for those who are marginalised' (Cochrane, 2013, p. 930) within feminism. In this context, clicktivism enables digital feminists the opportunity to include 'a range of diverse voices' (Mendes et al. 2019, p. 104), disseminating their ideas, experiences and communication to others. While Twitter affords the opportunity to amplify the voices and views of others, some are excluded from using the digital network due to a 'knowledge gap' (Fotopoulou 2016a, p. 995). Further, some feminists do not see themselves represented by the feminist activists on Twitter who speak out or the political issues they raise. Our use of digital networks affords 'micro-donations' of time and effort to a political discussion (Margetts et al. 2016), disseminating information about a newsworthy event (Dennis 2018), or political messages 'that might not otherwise gain traction' (Stromer-Galley 2014, p. 145).

Central to the notion of political participation is the defining component of power (Carpentier 2012). Individuals are included or excluded based on power distribution in society, which marginalises or *others* those who do not have access to formal hierarchies to legitimate their personal action and communication. Feminist activists utilise clicktivist practices to navigate and

circumvent complex power structures as an act of resistance – as a way of (re)claiming power. For instance, Tulip talks about the significance of using Twitter for those who are marginalised, with no other platform to speak about their experiences:

> *'[Twitter] provides marginalised voices with a means of speaking out against the injustices that they face. It doesn't level the playing field, but it amplifies voices that would otherwise be shut out.'*

As an official political representative, Tulip has the facility to publicly speak out on many political issues and on behalf of her constituents. Still, she perceives the value of using Twitter to communicate as a means of engaging in political discourse that challenges injustice or oppression. It enables a platform for those who are silenced to amplify theirs or others' political message. Although her comment concerns speaking out and amplifying marginalised voices, Tulip mentions that this does not 'level the playing field'. It is unclear whether she means that there are individuals with less time and effort to commit to engaging in political resistance, that some voices are amplified more than others on digital networks (Serisier 2018), or that there are those without access to digital technologies who remain 'shut out'. Schradie (2019) argues that digital activism offers advantages for some, but not for everyone; there are those individuals who remain unable or unwilling to enter digital space. Digital networks, specifically Twitter, are increasingly where political debate occurs; it is 'where ideas, opinions, and policies are shaped' (Schradie 2019, p. 10). Jackson et al. posit that Twitter has low 'financial barriers to entry' and that with relatively limited technological knowledge, individuals can engage in political participation without 'traditional sources of power' (2020, p. 22). In this sense, individuals create their own political power through their use of digital networks and clicktivist practices, which Tulip says they would otherwise be shut out from.

Clicktivism enables feminists to create their own communicative content, where each tweet is different; it can be used to express an idea, contribute to a wider discussion, or respond to a particular newsworthy event. This shows the flexibility and power of clicktivism to be utilised and interpreted by individual feminist activists. Fiona takes a moment to reflect before talking about how she views herself as a political activist, and specifically that 'everything' she does on Twitter is political. She speaks about the types of action and communication that she and other feminists perform; amplifying others to highlight significant contributions (Bennett et al. 2014) and communicating in such a way as to 'make a statement':

> *'Everything is political. In the circles that we're in–everyone's actions on there are political. You're making a statement in what you're trying to do, what you're trying to say, and the voices that you're amplifying.'*

When Fiona says that 'everything is political', she echoes Sam's comment – but goes beyond it when she says that her actions, communication, and connections on Twitter are equally political and important. She shows a deeper understanding of how and why she uses Twitter. Moreover, she mentions a further activist practice; connection, which relates to her action and communication. Twitter affords the opportunity to engage with others, through her connections or, as Fiona refers to them, 'circles', which represents her digital communities (Karpf 2012). Fiona has various circles because she has many interests; one relates to feminism and politics; another is academic connections, some of which overlap with feminism; one that is New Zealand focused, and so on. Interestingly, when Fiona talks of 'everyone' in our circles, she is explicitly talking about feminists, like herself, who deliberately use Twitter as a political site. Even though Fiona has other interests and circles, there is an overlying politicisation in the 'actions' they take, which demonstrates that 'everyone' in her circles is dedicated to feminism and politics. Further, it shows that their clicktivist practices are far from being 'non-committal' to a cause or a statement of 'general interest' in politics (Halupka 2014, 2018).

In connective action logic, activists can use a digital network specifically to communicate with a 'broader public' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 742). On Twitter, feminists can utilise clicktivist practices that focus on action, such as retweeting another user's tweet; liking a tweet; @mentioning another user indirectly; and categorising a conversation with a hashtag. In this sense, feminist activists can amplify content (Bennett et al. 2014) that has significance, which may reach diverse audiences. For instance, Fiona talks about the value of amplifying others and sharing their political messages on a scale that cannot be easily replicated offline:

> *'There is value in being able to amplify other people's messages, people who don't necessarily have access to mainstream media platforms. It allows access to a range [of voices] that we have never had access to before.'*

The ability to strategically amplify political content is valued, more so for those without the ability to do so elsewhere. Fiona perceives value in the content worth sharing, which can break personal networks' boundaries to reach broad audiences (Xiong et al. 2019). Dahlgren argues that digital networks afford the opportunity to communicate with 'large segments of the world's population' (2013, p. 37). Fiona speaks about the 'value' for feminist activists to access audiences on a scale that they would not be able to in offline political participation. Fotopoulou argues that digital networks are 'inherently social and participatory' (2016b, p. 991), which means that clicktivist practices can be used to discuss political issues and exchange ideas with other feminists.

Clicktivism enables feminist activists to share and amplify the voices of other feminists who have a political message or statement to make. In this context, retweeting and commenting on others

tweets to amplify is a clicktivist practice that can be 'easily replicated' (Halupka 2018). Amplifying others political statements is not just about reaching potentially broader audiences than they might have access to in mainstream media or offline; it is also about engaging with them (boyd et al. 2010). Twitter enables feminists to participate in numerous political discussions, talking with others they might not ordinarily have access to while amplifying marginalised voices seeking to educate others about the injustices they are experiencing. Digital feminist activists share information to educate and engage with others about feminism, and feminist politics, which Mendes et al. (2019) explain, is a 'crucial' practice that builds an understanding of what it is to be a contemporary feminist.

## Disseminating Information to Educate and Instigate Conversation

Twitter is significant for feminists as a site to learn and share information with others, both in their personal network and outside it (boyd et al. 2010). Indeed, the way that feminists communicate through the use of clicktivist practices is facilitating a feminist 'global information exchange' (Wajcman 2004, p. 3). Disseminating information to educate others about feminism is nothing new; there is a long history of women learning about feminism from feminist groups and literature (hooks 2015). Educating and raising awareness has also been part of feminist consciousness-raising practices, which, when performed online, enables ongoing intersectional conversations (Cochrane 2013; Baer 2016; Guillard 2016). Communication practices, such as tweeting, involves creating content that can be educational, spark conversation, or both. In this sense, feminist Twitter is a source of information dissemination and political debate. Using clicktivist practices to disseminate educational information is a way of drawing attention to feminism and feminist issues, which is a method of raising awareness long-associated with feminist activism (Schuster 2017). Clicktivism is not typically associated with traditional politics (Halupka 2018), but many respondents are members of political parties and involved in both local and national organisations of those parties. Further, they directly engage with formal political institutions or are political representatives themselves. Approximately 80% of world leaders have a Twitter account (mySociety 2014), as do political parties and institutions, such as the Australian House of Representatives. Twitter is increasingly used by political representatives to promote themselves and their political message (van Dijck 2013), 'reciprocally' engage with others (Tromble 2016) and gain a sense of emergent political trends. Further, many political representatives utilise clicktivist practices to disseminate 'serious information' (Blick 2021, p. 286), such as their voting record, which evidences their efficacy to the electorate. These examples

are the antithesis of Halupka's argument that clicktivism 'rarely engages the political arena' (2018, p. 136).

The increasing use of digital networks enables individuals to take action and share communication with an 'unprecedented speed and ease' (Housley et al. 2018, p. 1), enabling our ability to access vast amounts of information, communication and interaction in real-time (Dahlgren 2013). In a digital network, users can connect, learn from each other and discuss different perspectives (Papacharissi 2016). Stacy talks about the approach she takes when tweeting in her official role as the Basingstoke branch leader for the Women's Equality Party:

> *'We tweet articles of interest [from] the digest by the central office. We study those, and it's partly about our learning, and it's partly about letting the world know. So, we'll tweet and talk about those.'*

The Women's Equality Party is a UK-based feminist political party that, since 2015, has spoken out on many gender equality issues (Women's Equality Party 2021). Stacy educates herself and others in the local branch about the party's political issues and campaigns before tweeting from the Basingstoke branch account. We can see that for Stacy, her role is as much about educating herself and the others in the local branch as it is tweeting to educate others. When she tweets about current political issues, it is to 'let the world know', which opens the potential to engage in conversation about political and social issues. This echoes Cheryl's comment that many voices contribute to communication or action until its message is heard worldwide. As a form of clicktivism, tweeting is not necessarily impulsive (Halupka 2018). In fact, Stacy's example is far more deliberate; it is well-organised and involves not just Stacy's but other members of the branch giving their time to learn about political issues and discuss them before tweeting about them. Stacy must self-educate and disseminate this information about feminist politics and gender equality issues, demonstrating that some clicktivism needs 'specialised knowledge' (Halupka 2018).

Signing and retweeting a petition is perhaps one of the more common forms of clicktivism. It is also one of the most maligned forms of activism and is often referred to as 'low-risk' (Rotman et al. 2011). However, signing and sharing a petition is an essential activist tool (Karpf 2016) that amplifies an issue, promotes a campaign, which can reach others outside of an immediate network (Jackson 2018b). For example, Stacy compares the efficacy of two approaches; the first is in her own shoes, as an activist, actor, and mother:

> *'I do a lot of armchair activism. Petition signing, petition retweeting, etc., and there are arguments as to whether that's effective or not.'*

Here we can see that Stacy is questioning the value of the actions she takes, referring to them as 'armchair' activism, which is a derisive term associated with slacktivism and critiques that argue digital actions are 'ineffective' (Cabrera et al. 2017). It is a term often used because digital activism and specifically clicktivism are considered less valid than offline action, framed by patriarchal understandings of whose voice should be heard (Willis 2020). Although Stacy expresses some doubt, she still performs these clicktivist practices 'a lot', showing that *she* places value in these actions. An online petition can generate significant interest on Twitter via organisations like UK-based *38 Degrees*. A single signature can contribute to thousands of others and have 'significant gravitas' (Dennis 2018, p. 44); it is also a convenient way for an individual to express a 'political viewpoint' (Vromen 2017, p. 52). Digital networks have made it easier for activists to gain support and share a political message about a cause (Carty 2015), which has contributed to a greater awareness of social and political issues (Madison and Klang 2020).

The rise of clicktivism has caused concern for many, not least from political representatives who are 'suspicious' of it and organisations who use it like the non-profit organisation 38 Degrees (Howard 2014). A critique often levelled at clicktivism or slacktivism is that it does not create real change, but as former executive officer of 38 Degrees, David Babbs argues, that is 'dangerously elitist – as if you have to earn your stripes as an activist' (Howard 2014). It is an elitist perception that traditional forms of political participation are the only valid forms available, which also fails to consider the position of those *others* who are marginalised and do not have access to these channels. Jess is one respondent that speaks of her concern about clicktivism, how it is perceived and her fear that it is becoming the only form of action that individuals take:

> *'I worry that clicktivism makes people totally like: 'Well, I signed this petition. And it's like, you did, that's not a beginning, middle and end.'*

Her understanding of digital political participation is framed by her role as an elected political representative, contributing to her understanding of how change is made through formal legislation and policy. Jess' comment seems to echo Karpf (2010), who argues that signing a petition is the *beginning* of the process to access and affect decision-makers. This thesis takes the opposite stance. For some, taking part in an online conversation or signing an online petition is *a significant form of activism*. That act may add to a broader conversation, such as #MeToo, which extends beyond the network and the original click (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), but – and this is important in the context of this thesis – it does not have to in order to be valid. For feminist activists, it may be that clicking on a link in response to an issue *is* how they engage in political participation outside of casting a vote every few years; it is how they take action and communicate via the platform available to them. The inclination to dismiss 'alternative' forms of

political participation is connected to the 'lazy' and 'passive' assumptions that have been associated with clicktivism for far too long (2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Gladwell 2010). Instead of viewing clicktivism as competition, or a replacement of traditional forms of political participation, we should identify the *many* forms available to use, both online and offline and the connection between them.

Retweeting can be a political act by those who want their voice to be heard on a particular issue (boyd et al. 2010). It is part of Twitter culture to tweet a petition and ask our followers to sign and retweet it to their followers as a method of disseminating the message or information. Some users might retweet to gain recognition of their involvement with a campaign hoping that another user will reciprocate in the future (boyd et al. 2010) or may do so freely. Retweeting is also one way to create a broad conversation where others are more likely to read the content because many users retweet in a short space of time, more so if it goes 'viral' (boyd et al. 2010; Kwak et al. 2010). Papacharissi (2015) argues that retweeting enables the 'spreadability' of information to a potentially broad audience (boyd et al. 2010). While Halavais (2014) and Jackson et al. (2020) argue that a user shows that they agree or show support for a tweet's content, this is not necessarily the case. Many users have the phrase 'retweets are not endorsements' in their bio; therefore, retweeting may simply indicate information dissemination (Barberá et al. 2015) or encourage a critical response (Bruns and Highfield 2016). Disseminating political petitions or information is not synonymous with agreeing with it. Some retweeting activity is sarcastic or uses humour to respond to instances of gendered cyberhate that have targeted feminist activists (Jane 2020). It is increasingly evident that clicktivism is not necessarily low-risk (Rotman et al. 2011), there are safety issues associated with tweeting about feminist issues and women's rights, which have not been considered by scholars who have either not experienced it, or who may not focus on this area of study.

What is clear is that Twitter's retweet affordance corresponds with a widespread perception of the network as a mode of information dissemination (Kwak et al. 2010; Papacharissi 2015; Drueke and Zobl 2016). This is a nuanced perspective that could be interpreted in a number of different ways. We disseminate because we want to kick up a fuss – to challenge a particular individual about the sexist wording of a statement or their denial that there is significance in women's experiences of cyberhate, for example. Clicktivism takes place when we have a personalised reaction to a political issue or instance, which can contribute to a broader action or political participation. The power of clicktivism is in its use as a form of feminist resistance.

## Challenging Sexist and Misogynistic Media Practices

Digital feminist activists are engaging in discourse that 'shouts back' (Turley and Fischer 2018) and draws awareness to the routine sexist and misogynist practices in mainstream media. The culture of challenging advertising, television, literature, and media replete with sexist and misogynistic thinking is a well-established method used by feminists in the 1990s (Munro 2013). Tweeting about a particular newspaper article and @mentioning the journalist, editor or company, generates a space for political discussion about the inappropriate language or imagery used. By drawing attention to an example of sexist and misogynistic reporting, feminist activists are first saying that this is an issue that needs resolving, and second is advancing an opinion that challenges a dominant patriarchal practice (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020; Phipps 2020). In this sense, feminists are engaging in powerful iterations of clicktivism that promotes the need for social and political change. This is indicative of the potential that digital networks have for feminists to expose and challenge systemic sexism and misogyny in mainstream media practices, which objectify and sexualise women.

Jane started the *Fixed It* project in 2015 when she first tweeted the 'fix' of a media headline that contained sexist and victim-blaming language (Gilmore 2019). At the time, a woman had been murdered by her ex-boyfriend, but the headline focused on a small detail in the case, rather than the woman at the centre of it: 'Townsville police say selfie could have led to alleged stabbing murder'. Explaining why this language is problematic, Jane says: 'the words they use…the type of details that might be emphasised or omitted – influences how we think of it' (Gilmore 2019, p. 11). The way that mainstream media frames instances of violence against women guide societal awareness, so if this contains narrow or inaccurate information (Blevins 2018), this affects how we gauge the seriousness of the issue. Below is an example of one of the fixed tweets that Jane posts:


*Figure 9 Tweet by Jane Gilmore 20/04/18*

Jane screenshots or photographs the inappropriate newspaper or magazine headline, crossing out sensationalist or victim-blaming language using a red pen and tweets it. The use of the red pen is thought-provoking; it is reminiscent of a teacher grading students' work, striking out the incorrect content and offering a rewritten, more accurate version. Typically, the headlines that Jane fixes refer to an instance of sexual violence without naming the woman at the centre of the case. Her Twitter network includes other prominent feminists, such as Australian writer Clementine Ford, who like, retweet, and comment on the tweet, as an act of solidarity (Fotopoulou 2016a), creating additional opportunities to discuss and improve awareness of this as a political and social issue.

Despite Jane's @mention here of the media company headquarters, she does not necessarily want to 'strike up a conversation' with them (Bruns and Moe 2014). Her tweet is about holding the media company to account by directly @mentioning them; Jane is exposing their everyday sexism to public scrutiny by fixing one of their articles for the sexist language and framing of male violence against women. It implicates those who have some level of responsibility in how these articles are framed. The team or employee that manage the media company's Twitter account will receive a notification when they are @mentioned by Jane, or her followers, which may mean that her fix will resonate and be disseminated within the company hierarchy. Further by directly @mentioning the editor, journalist or main company account draws attention to the issue, which means that others can see how women are discussed in the media. Jane talks about how other Twitter users have responded to her 'fixes':

> *'I find [it] most gratifying when people say they'd not noticed the prevalence of headlines that blame victims and excuse perpetrators, but now they see it all the time.'*

Here we can see that Jane's activism is about creating awareness about the ongoing media framing of sexual violence against women. The mention of 'people' – not just feminists in a closed circle - indicates that many individuals have commented about how her 'fixes' have changed how they view media headlines, noticing this issue more frequently. Jane speaks about individuals being suddenly aware of the dichotomy between how the victim/perpetrator are blamed/excused, which speaks to raising awareness with her *fixes*.

In this context, as an act of clicktivism, Jane's fixes are deliberate and not easily replicated; her tweets are a personalised reaction to a political issue (Papacharissi 2014). It could be simulated offline by cutting out the newspaper headline, fixing it, and posting it to an editor - but that would have very different connotations. It would not be challenging a media company in a public space, where others can learn from it, comment on it, and drive the conversation forward. Jane has learnt from the years she has been performing her fixes, adding the #FixedIt hashtag, which was not something she had thought to include earlier (Gilmore 2019). Including a hashtag has made her activism easier to find through searches (Gannes 2010), potentially increasing the visibility of the issue being discussed (Bruns and Burgess 2011). Some media companies are taking notice of the @mentions and #FixedIt hashtag and amend the wording of a headline or language used in an article (Gilmore 2019), evidencing that clicktivism can create social and political change.

Some tweets that challenge a particular newspaper article can generate far more interest than others. In this case, Sian wrote a tweet that responded to an emerging article about a man playing the piano in a public space in a 'creepy' attempt to rekindle a relationship that had ended (Bristol Post 2017). A dominant narrative that mainstream media perpetuate romanticises or glorifies men's misogynistic behaviour towards women. As a journalist, Sian has a unique perspective and identified the problematic way the story was reported. In this sense, Sian's response transformed the article into a political issue (Bruns and Burgess 2011) through her critique of a local newspaper, targeting the language being used, and specifically naming the problematic behaviour:

> *'I did a tweet about this guy that was playing a piano 24-7 in Bristol, saying that it wasn't romantic and that women had a right to leave men and shouldn't be pressured into being in a relationship with him.'*

She goes straight to the heart of the issue, in her tweet and in her comment here. Sian makes no equivocations in her framing of the issue and the misogynistic language that the newspaper uses, which she refers to as 'stalker behaviour'. Interestingly, Sian does not @mention the newspaper directly; like Jane, she was not seeking a response from them. Sian was not the only individual to tweet about the problematic nature and entitlement that this piano player's behaviour indicated.

Juno Dawson, a UK-based writer, was one of many women to add her voice to the cacophony that called out his 'red flag' behaviour on Twitter (iNews 2017). Similarly, Sian's tweet directly addresses men and mainstream media as a whole, demanding that their misogynistic practices stop:


*Figure 10 Tweet by Sian Norris 09/09/17*

Sian @quote tweeted the article, which allows a user to retweet and comment without directly addressing the newspaper. She did not add the hashtag #dedication that the newspaper uses, separating herself from this inappropriate language. Sian's tweet generated substantial interest in a short space of time, spreading across the network 'like a virus' (Stromer-Galley 2014). A Twitter algorithm is designed to recognise and promote content that other users engage with through action, such as retweeting or liking, communicating with a user via @quote tweet, or @replying to their tweet. By design, Twitter furthers interest in 'viral content dissemination' (Poell and van Dijck 2015, p. 531) by adding popular content to a list of 'trending topics'. A list of the top ten trending topics is listed on a user's homepage, which signals to the Twittersphere that a particular tweet is relevant or interesting, amplifying it further (Murthy 2018).

When Sian tweeted, she was not using Twitter as a megaphone or trying to reach an audience beyond her identifiable followers, who would typically be the object of discourse. Sian identifies that her audience is primarily other activists, journalists, feminists and writers and tweeted knowing how her action and communication would be received by them (Papacharissi 2014; Himelboim et al. 2017; Gleeson and Turner 2019). However, Sian's account is public, like the majority of Twitter accounts (Marwick and boyd 2010), which means that there are no restrictions to her audience. She talks about the 'difficult' experience of the tweet going viral and how other users outside of her identified audience 'flooded' the account with @mentions:

> *'That went viral and got shared 100,000 times. That was really difficult because that is the problem with Twitter; you forget that it is a public space. When your tweet goes*

> *viral, you feel that it's gotten out of control, and your mentions are completely flooded.'*

Sian comments that it is easy to forget that Twitter is a public online space where other users are listening, who can and do engage with viral and trending content. Twitter blurs the separation between our online and offline lives, where expressing a politically oriented opinion can instigate an unwelcome response from others. Sian's tweet generated some discussion about the inappropriate framing of the article, but the majority of users questioned whether her challenge to men and mainstream media was acceptable. Beyer argues that there are 'heated discussions about political topics' in every online social space (2014, p. 127), but this was less indicative of a discussion; instead, it was more about users with more power and privilege wanting to exert it. Sian directly challenges misogynistic practices and behaviours; many of the @replies I observed were highly antagonistic and argued the point. Some users, typically men, told Sian that she was being 'alarmist' and said she needed to 'calm down'.

While Twitter is a site of political discourse (Chadwick et al. 2015) and activism (Dahlgren 2013) it is also a 'contested space for articulations of feminist protest' (Drueke and Zobl 2016, p. 35). Like any other public space, women consistently negotiate their experiences of Twitter as a space where they can perform their clicktivist practices. Sian discusses how she took control of her Twitter account and her personal space, limiting the sudden influx of comments and @mentions from other users:

> *'You can turn off the notification from people you don't know, and I've had to do that because there were about 50 notifications a minute; it was crazy.'*

This flood of comments is an instance of clicktivism, where action and communication are utilised to target another user. Sian's voice was amplified by others who liked and retweeted her challenge to both men and the media. However, this amplification has the potential to be subjected to latent abuse. There are power dynamics at play when users outside of Sian's follower network target her tweet with harassment and abuse, to silence her (Linabary and Batti 2019). The number of responses that Sian received were 'crazy', so much so that she limited the notifications she could see but did not stop others from seeing or commenting on her tweet. This allowed Sian to regain a sense of control. In the context of feminists using Twitter to challenge the normalisation of misogynistic behaviours and the sexualisation of women, Sian contributed to a counter-narrative that challenged the dominant patriarchal perspective. Sian wrote her tweet in the same year but just before #MeToo; her criticism serves as a precursor to that moment, where a single instance of misogynistic behaviour was challenged by a woman. Her tweet cannot necessarily be 'easily replicated' as it responds to a specific moment with her personal opinion

(Halupka 2018). Further, Sian's tweet demonstrates her 'specialised knowledge' of journalism and mainstream media, specifically the dominant normalisation and romanticism of male violence against women. This evidences that *some* clicktivists use their knowledge to challenge practices and behaviours that others may not.

Feminist activists perform individual acts of resistance using a range of clicktivist practices to expose and critique sexist and misogynistic media to draw attention to these pervasive practices. Clicktivism enables feminist activists to be political, take action, and communicate about political issues they are individually interested in challenging, such as the continued minimisation and misreporting of male violence against women. Challenging instances of sexism and misogyny is indicative of a more modern interpretation of the feminist phrase 'the personal is political' (Schuster 2017), using Twitter affordances as leverage to affect how their activism is amplified by mainstream media (Cochrane 2013). Specifically, using 'disruptive tactics' (Karpf 2020a) enables feminist activists to draw attention to that which it disagrees with and advocate for change to be made. Feminist activists continue to use Twitter to ask political questions, connecting the personal and the political (Savigny 2020) about the cultural and societal structures that permit gendered inequalities to continue to affect women disproportionately.

## Advocating for Reproductive Rights

Reproductive rights and bodily autonomy has long been of central concern for feminism and for feminist activists who challenge the idea that men hold positions of power over women and their bodies (Cameron 2018). It is both a political and social issue where a male-dominated hierarchy determines the right to control women's choices and reproductive rights through legislation. Feminist activists use Twitter as a political platform to share their personal experiences and reactions as a method of advocating for political and social change. Various forms of clicktivism, such as tweeting, retweeting, and using a hashtag can disseminate content to many others that 'quickly spread[s] in the network' (Colleoni et al. 2014, p. 319). A tweet by a celebrity or politician that advocates for a potentially controversial issue, such as women's reproductive rights, may unintentionally or by design, draw attention and coverage by mainstream media, which disseminates the message to a boundless audience (Fenton and Barassi 2011; Poell and van Dijck 2015; Schradie 2019). In this sense, clicktivist practices enable individual actions and communication and political participation on an extensive scale.

Women representatives in the political arena experience a culture and environment where they are expected to justify their interest in 'feminised' political issues (Lovedunski 2005), such as childcare, reproductive rights and domestic violence. This extends to their personal experience of

political issues, such as paid maternity leave (Elgot 2021; Elgot and Topping 2021), and in the case of Tulip Siddiq, delaying her scheduled caesarean childbirth to vote for/against a bill in the House of Parliament (Selby 2019; Time Magazine 2019). Traditional voting rules in Parliament prevented Tulip from using a proxy vote to cast her decision in former Prime Minister Theresa May's controversial Brexit deal, which was defeated. Her request to vote by proxy, which had not then been formally established by Parliament, evidences an application of power, where women, and specifically pregnant women, were not considered in the current system, even on the grounds of health. Tulip talks about one of her tweets that addressed having to make a health-related, but political, decision, which went viral:

> *'My tweet explaining why I had postponed a C-Section to vote on a crucial Brexit vote went viral.'*

As a Labour party member, Tulip uses her Twitter account to discuss personal issues, converse with constituents and other politicians, and explain her decision-making process. As she explains, she wanted to be present in the Houses of Parliament to register her vote on a suggested Brexit deal that former UK Prime Minister Theresa May presented. She says in her tweet below that she does not trust the established system to allow her to vote by proxy. One of the reasons the tweet went viral is that it was heavily reported by mainstream media to undermine Theresa May (Selby 2019) during a vote about Brexit at a critical juncture (May 2019). Another reason is that a woman, not to mention a politician, was forced into a position where she delayed a surgical procedure, potentially endangering her life, to perform part of her job. As can be seen from her tweet, Tulip received expressions of sympathy and support from many other users:


*Figure 11 Tweet by Tulip Siddiq 15/01/19*

In this case, the drafted Brexit deal was defeated, but the conversation about women's bodily autonomy and reproductive health opened up in society and in Parliament because of Tulip's viral tweet. On Twitter, Tulip has a voice and is listened to when she shares her personal reasons for delaying her surgery, which leant into other women's experiences of oppression. By tweeting about her experience, Tulip advocates for change to an 'archaic' voting system (Cohen 2019) and draws attention to a sexist workplace culture, which frequently excludes women's voices (Savigny

2020). As a political representative, she was required to be physically present in the House of Commons to cast a vote, a process that was established by and for men (Childs and Challender 2019). Tulip refers to the 'pairing' system in her tweet, where two representatives from opposite sides of an issue agree not to attend a particular vote, effectively cancelling each other out. Her tweet was a catalyst for change (Fleming 2020) and less than one week later, the outdated 'pairing' system was replaced with a proxy voting system, allowing new parents to nominate another member of Parliament to vote for them. Tulip is a public figure with a certain amount of power and decision-making capabilities yet still must navigate the power structures that dominate formal government. A single communicative act of clicktivism can be powerful or pointless in the same way as any other political action (Karpf 2020b), but Tulip raised a phenomenal amount of support for her advocacy work, which drew attention to the outdated sexist structures in formal government. While she has access to the formal arena, Tulip still needed to advocate for change via Twitter because her access is conditional and subverted by patriarchal rules and cultural norms. In this sense, Tulip utilised Twitter as an advocacy and information dissemination platform to share her experience far and wide, which drew attention to the patriarchal power that restricts women in a similar position.

Control over women's bodies and reproductive rights frequently centres on the legal right to safe abortion. Following the case of Savita Halappanavar in the Republic of Ireland in 2012, who died of sepsis after being denied an abortion on religious grounds (Bacik 2018), feminist activists flooded Twitter to demand that women have more control over their bodies (Savigny 2020). This drew societal awareness to a danger that all women face when legislation mandates that the foetus is above the woman's life (Fischer 2020). In 2018, the *Together for Yes* campaign group advocated for change in legislation and abortion rights in the Republic of Ireland. Feminist activists demanded a referendum on the right for women to have safe access to abortion through the campaign called *Repeal the Eighth* centred on the Irish constitution, which prohibited abortion. Amnesty International argues that 'since 1983, this clause has made abortion illegal in nearly all circumstances, denying women basic bodily autonomy and violating their human rights' (2020). Feminist activists used the hashtags #RepealTheEighth to draw awareness of the moment's significance and open up the conversation on this political issue. Amnesty International UK (2020) suggested that the below images should be shared to show support for safe abortion, specifically for the *Repeal the Eighth* campaign, and possible wording for tweets:

- 'Change is possible. I/We stand with women in Ireland. #ItsTime #Repealthe8th'.
- 'I/We stand in solidarity with girls and women in Ireland for their right to choose #ItsTime #Repealthe8th'.
- 'Women's bodies, women's rights #Ireland #ItsTime #Repealthe8th'.


*Figure 12 'I stand with women in Ireland', Amnesty International UK, 2019*


*Figure 13 'Vote yes', Amnesty International UK, 2019*

Pro-choice campaigners used the hashtags #ItsTime and #Repealthe8th in combination with #HomeToVote and #VoteYes, to draw awareness to and record the thousands of individuals that travelled home from as far as Australia and Tokyo to vote in favour of this legislation. Campaign images were designed to be impactful with bold choices of colour and simple slogans used to convey the message. Some advocated for abortion rights while they boarded a 13-hour flight home, and some funded travel for others who would have been unable to vote for the referendum on abortion (Baker and Belam 2018). Many women shared their personal reasons for coming home to vote as a method of advocating for change to legislation. These hashtags were so

heavily utilised that they were 'trending' three days preceding the referendum vote (Cooper 2018).

As a form of clicktivist action, these hashtags were purposefully used to gain access to mainstream media coverage, which disseminated these narratives in support of *Repeal the Eighth* to a broad audience (Poell and van Dijck 2015). Far from being closed conversations with a small circle of activists, it propelled the campaign on Twitter into viral status, which was further reported on by mainstream media coverage (Baker and Belam 2018; Cooper 2018; Pierson 2018). Jon talks about how *Repeal the Eighth* made use of Twitter, which is how he discovered the campaign:

> *'There have been campaigns that have clearly caught the public imagination. The Repeal the Eighth campaign I mostly heard about online but then followed up in terms of news sites, typically Irish news sites. I don't know how much I would have heard about Repeal the Eighth if it didn't have a social media presence. I think I would have heard on the day of the victory, but I might not have been aware before then.'*

Jon connects the public interest in the campaign, which he refers to as catching 'public imagination', as significant. This shows the value for campaigns in successfully generating interest and gaining support (Madison and Klang 2020) from the public for such a crucial vote on abortion rights. The *Together for Yes* campaign group implemented a tech-savvy strategy, which directly engaged with the public, who were instrumental in shaping and disseminating the campaign (Chadwick et al. 2015). In fact, that is how Jon discovered the *Repeal the Eighth* campaign because of the 'presence' it had online, which he otherwise might have discovered after the fact. Jon's comment shows that although he became aware of the *Repeal the Eighth* campaign via a digital network, he committed to learning more about it. His statement reflects Stacy's, where they both take the time to educate themselves about a political issue. Significantly, Jon refers to the 'day of victory', reflecting the 'landslide' of votes that supported changes to a 'near-total ban' on abortion (McDonald et al. 2018). The *Repeal the Eighth* campaign effectively utilised clicktivist practices to gain support and momentum for an amendment to the legislation, enabling women more control over their bodies and reproductive rights.

Instances of clicktivist action or communication can enable a broad political discussion about women's reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, which can spread across the network (Colleoni et al. 2014). Utilising Twitter as an information and dissemination platform is a method of sharing personal experiences to advocate for change. A single tweet, like that by Tulip Siddiq, has the potential to draw significant attention to a social or political issue from the Twittersphere and mainstream media. Clicktivist practices afford the *possibility* for individuals to participate

(Dahlgren 2013), such as using the hashtag #HomeToVote, which contributes to many others sharing their commitment to travel home. Clicktivism is far from being 'non-committal' or a 'pronouncement of general interest' that it has been characterised (Halupka 2014, 2018); instead, clicktivism affords feminist activists the opportunity to take action outside of the formal political arena, a space which few have access to or the power to influence.

# Conclusion

Clicktivism is a form of digital activism that enables feminists to be political, take action, and communicate about politics with others. It is performed via the affordances of a digital network, which have different affects (Papacharissi 2016) for various individual practices. Feminist activists utilise clicktivism to push back against traditional politics' dominant male-dominated structures, which typically limit how we understand and characterise what is considered 'valid' or 'legitimate' political participation. Rather than always having a specific political focus or overarching goal, clicktivism is defined and performed by individuals. Drawing on the feminist phrase 'the personal is political' demonstrates a contemporary interpretation (Schuster 2017), where amplifying the voice of others or disseminating information is a political act. Utilising Twitter affordances as leverage, feminist activists advance ideas, opinions, and information not necessarily available elsewhere. Contemporary feminist activists perform individual acts of resistance, using a range of clicktivist practices, which do not necessarily contribute to collective action (Kelly 2015). Respondents identify their reasons for using Twitter for political participation broadly, specifically the clicktivist practices they use to strategically support a specific action (Karpf 2020a).

We can see from the exploration of qualitative data that some respondents use Twitter to discuss, disseminate and amplify content about feminism and politics, perceiving all the communication and action on Twitter as political because feminism is political. Feminist activists shape their clicktivist action and communication via Twitter's affordances, enabling them to *amplify the voices of others*, who, for example, do not have as large a political platform or are marginalised. *Disseminating* information to educate others about feminism and political uses is a practice with a long history (hooks 2015), which is now being performed digitally to raise awareness and as part of feminist consciousness-raising practices. This has no less legitimacy as a political act online than it does offline. *Challenging* sexist and misogynist practices in mainstream media is a core practice of contemporary feminism, to expose and critique that it disagrees with (Milford Morse and Anderson 2020). Other respondents highlight the contribution that specific affordances make, such as @mentions and hashtags they have utilised to draw attention to problematic language that romanticises stalker-like behaviour or fails to directly report on an instance of violence against women. These examples are powerful iterations of clicktivism that feminist activists utilise

to promote the need for social and political change. *Advocating* for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy is a central concern to feminist activists (Cameron 2018), particularly when women's lives are subject to intense public scrutiny or endangered. If anything, these clicktivist practices evidence a deeply personal commitment to feminism, women's rights, and politics, some of which do, in fact, require specialised knowledge to educate others. It alleviates criticisms and lazy assumptions often applied to clicktivism, instead evidencing the replicability of clicktivist practices *is* significant and can be utilised to great affect. Convenience and reproducibility are not failures or de-legitimising aspects of clicktivism, instead, they are part of the strength of online activism; clicktivism *should* be considered a form of contemporary political participation through the medium of digital activism.

The next chapter examines how respondents reflect on using Twitter for activism, their insights about its affect, using the vehicle of the #MeToo moment as a focal point. It draws on the first and second layer of my conceptual lens to evidence the diverse interpretations of using a hashtag, an action, to underscore the significance of political communication. This chapter builds on the previous discussion, which demonstrated diverse reasons why and how feminist activists use Twitter for political participation. This chapter has a more specific focus on the countless women used the #MeToo hashtag in 2017 to speak out about their personal experiences of sexual violence, drawing worldwide attention to the prevalence of the issue. I frame my analysis of #MeToo as an instance of expanding forms of contemporary political participation, which does not necessarily aim to create formal political or quantifiable change. I explore the notion of digital activism achieving 'success' and societal change, which emerged as important issues for respondents who had varied interpretations and expectations. Further, I argue that how feminist activists perform and define their own resistance practices is in the context of being marginalised, with less access to traditional political institutions and representatives, where *alternative* forms of success are valuable.

# Chapter 4 Digital Feminist Resistance: Interpreting #MeToo and Concepts of Success

## Introduction

This chapter considers the #MeToo[6] moment, using it as vehicle to interrogate what digital activism, and therefore political participation, *is* for feminist activists. The #MeToo hashtag characterises the approach taken to the phrase 'the personal is political' in this thesis and demonstrates the significance of the feminist voice, consciousness-raising and the connection between how feminists perceive their digital activism and the notion of 'success'. Drawing on an analysis of empirical data, I examine how respondents view #MeToo, its affect, and their understanding of using Twitter for activism. Broad themes emerge from the data: contemplating the meaning of *success* in feminist digital activism; the interplay *of justice* as *success*; and the importance of finding *space* to speak out. I demonstrate that feminist activists use Twitter to highlight typically marginalised issues (Papacharissi 2016) by collating and publishing evidence (Salter 2013). In this case, digital feminists utilised Twitter as a megaphone (Gieseler 2019) to create a counter-narrative response to mainstream media coverage that downplayed allegations of sexual assault and harassment made against Harvey Weinstein. I will frame my analysis in the context of Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) connective action, and I argue that digital feminist activists contributed to the #MeToo moment as a form of collective connective action.

The impact that #MeToo had on feminist activists and activism has become a focus for feminist and media scholars (Boyle 2019, 2020; Mendes and Ringrose 2019; Rosewarne 2019; Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020; Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020; Phipps 2020). Boyle argues that #MeToo created 'open-access' feminism, which brought others to the conversation (2019, p. 30). However, while she makes an excellent point, her investigation does not consider how #MeToo has changed feminist activists' perceptions of digital feminist activism. Rather than framing the analysis with the lens of traditional activism that aims to achieve specific goals, I explore how respondents frame the impact of #MeToo, and their different understandings of achieving 'success' and creating social change. What is 'success' or 'real change' when applied to a broad online conversation and how does this interact with respondents' notion of political participation? The

[6] I differentiate the discussion between the #MeToo moment of 2017, which was a high-profile instance of digital feminist activism, and activist Tarana Burke's political Me Too movement founded in 2006. Burke's movement was unintentionally co-opted by Milano – and as a white feminist with a certain amount of privilege I do not want to contribute further to this confusion/conflation.

notion of success should include variables outside of traditional politics, such as being able to 'chang[e] societal ideas, norms and discourses' (Vromen 2017, p. 38). In her discussion of #MeToo, Phipps (2020) argues that success can be when a conversation gains the 'spotlight' or the 'currency' of the network on which it is shared, such as retweets and likes. Another example considers the success of #MeToo as bringing together women to both challenge the prevalence of sexual violence and speak publicly about it (Brynjarsdóttir 2020). In many ways, #MeToo is the template of a 'powerful' hashtag (Karpf 2020b) that digital feminist activism aspires to (Rosewarne 2019). Part of my original contribution to knowledge is to demonstrate that #MeToo allows us to understand how effective digital activism can create awareness that inspires political and legal change (Bouvier 2020). Specifically, it enables feminist activists to realise the importance of using Twitter as a public online space to speak out, which is a significant success itself – and is evidenced in the rest of this chapter.

It is important to consider how digital feminist activists perceive their activism, and the connection that respondents made to different concepts of success, to challenge the idea that an instance of activism *must* create something quantifiable for it to be deemed a 'success'. I will investigate this notion, not just from theoretical discussions but through an empirical investigation that traces the journey of a digital feminist activist moment, framed by respondents' interpretations of #MeToo, rather than #MeToo itself. The empirical data includes an exploration of semi-structured interviews performed in 2019, and a small selection of tweets are used to complement this data. My analysis of this data allows us to ascertain how the #MeToo moment is evaluated by feminist activists, broadly in the context of digital activism and specifically in terms of how feminists utilise digital networks to facilitate *personal* and *political* activism. It affords an in-depth analysis of how respondents reflected on #MeToo, and the effect it created. Applying the interdisciplinary conceptual lens discussed in chapter 2, which draws together literature from web science, feminist studies, and political science, provides a unique understanding of #MeToo. The intersection of feminism, the digital network and activism create nuanced insights into how digital feminist activists find space on Twitter to speak out, explores perceptions of how this can contribute to social and political change, and opens the discussion about whether achieving 'success' is a necessary condition of defining digital activism as a legitimate expression of political participation. The concept of political participation, and how it has traditionally been defined, is designed for individuals who *already* have access to structures of power (Papacharissi 2010; Carpentier 2012; Dahlgren 2012, 2013; Zerilli 2015; van Deth 2016). Therefore, 'success' is framed in relation to access and the ability to change the traditional patriarchal structures of power, which only a certain demographic have (Phillips 1998; Celis et al. 2013; Akram 2019). What is not considered is how these concepts and definitions exclude the voices and actions of *others*; who

are marginalised, excluded or otherwise oppressed. Arguably, respondents like Jess Phillips, a political representative, and Sian Norris, a freelance journalist, may be less oppressed and more 'successful' in achieving social change because they have access to formal political institutions and are likely to be listened to by decision-makers than others. Many respondents struggled to understand the value of their digital activism, because of the dissonance between their experiences of offline activism, online space, and their understanding of *doing* activism. In this context, I argue that our understanding of 'successful' digital activism should include feminist conscious-raising, speaking out, and shared narratives.

First, I will discuss how respondents frame their interpretations of #MeToo, reflecting on how this moment has impacted digital activist culture, specifically feminist activism, and what their thoughts were about #MeToo at the time. I will explore the themes that emerged from my data, which will show respondents' various understandings of success and how this is framed by their understanding and experience of traditional political participation; how *alternative* success or change can be achieved; and the significance of finding space on Twitter to break the silence about political and social issues, such as sexual violence, and justice-seeking as a form of success. This contributes to my overall argument that digital feminist activism is a form of political participation and that #MeToo is evidence of this.

## Looking Back at #MeToo: Framing Digital Activism Through a Traditional Perspective

Respondents were asked to reflect on the importance of the #MeToo moment and the culture of using Twitter to speak out. Their backgrounds and experiences of politics and activism guided their understanding of #MeToo. Some spoke about what it means to them. Some consider the broad awareness about sexual violence it created, and many thought about how 'successful' it has been. Success was a term that respondents used relating to the 'affect' that #MeToo had and the 'real change' it had created (if any). Some respondents were guided by their more traditional understanding of politics and political participation, rooted in their identity as politicians, where success is defined as government policy or legal change. Others were more open to the idea that #MeToo broke the silence on a topic that some had considered taboo (Gieseler 2019). Digital feminist activism is defined by moments like #MeToo when women react to injustice and speak out to challenge it. Ahmed identifies a moment termed a 'feminist snap' that demands that others 'wake up to what is already happening' (2017, p. 208). When applying the 'feminist snap' to #MeToo, it is a moment of acknowledgement and reckoning about sexual violence (Fileborn and Phillips 2019), which may account for the sudden flood of women's testimony on Twitter. This

'snap' moment allows us collectively to stop, identify the patterns of behaviour that inflict damage on us, and realise that  change is possible (Ahmed 2017). The #MeToo moment did not happen in a vacuum; it was a way of women standing up to say enough is enough. In this case, Milano's snap was her tweet about the 'magnitude' of sexual violence directed against women, which she sent to 'get the focus off these horrible men and to put the focus back on the victims and survivors' (Sayej 2017).


*Figure 14 Tweet by Alyssa Milano 15/10/17*

When Milano tweeted that she wanted women to 'give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem', her aim was to open society's eyes to something that women have known about for many years. The replies and retweets flooded Twitter, and as the conversation gained momentum, users started to use the hashtag #MeToo. Over 1.7 million tweets participated in the narrative worldwide, over ten days and across eighty-five countries, using translated variations of the hashtag. For example, Spain and Latin America used #YoTambien (MeToo); France #BalanceTonPorc (Name Your Pig); Italy #QuellaVoltaChe (That Time); and China #RiceBunny on social media Weibo (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019; Gieseler 2019; Phipps 2020). Other celebrities liked, replied or retweeted Milano, which added to the amplification of her tweet. Mainstream media 'obsession' with #MeToo was, to some degree, driven by the celebrities that came forward to share their experiences as part of the broader conversation (Rottenberg 2019), which contributed to the rapid dissemination and media coverage (Turley and Fischer 2018). The #MeToo moment was heavily reported on, debated and discussed in various media, such as podcasts, radio, and television. (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020). This indicates the

significance and reach that #MeToo had, and continues to have, focusing on the power of women speaking out (De Benedictis et al. 2019). It suggests that 'success' can be conceptualised by the extent that mainstream media amplifies the moment of activism, potentially to a wider audience.

What emerged in many respondents' comments about #MeToo was the sheer scale of the conversation (Loney-Howes 2020), which Sian identifies as an emotional outpouring of women's voices. A collection of women's narratives are at the centre of the #MeToo moment, as a form of digital consciousness-raising, where countless women spoke out and listened to others experiences (Boyle 2019; Mendes et al. 2019; Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020). Individually, women added their voice to a powerful collective (Gieseler 2019; Brynjarsdóttir 2020), which created a counter-narrative about the prevalence of sexual violence. Was the significance of this moment identifiable to respondents when #MeToo began on Twitter? How do they describe #MeToo as a moment in isolation, the effect that it has had, and what difference has it made to them? Sian reflects on her perception of #MeToo as a catalyst and wonders whether it could inspire further discussion on a similar scale:

> *'It was intense at the time. You felt really shaken and a bit unstable: what's going to happen next? It was refusing to be shut up - this howling pain.'*

Interestingly, Sian identifies how she felt 'shaken' in the moment when women were breaking their silence and describing #MeToo as 'intense'. When she says it was 'refusing to shut up', she is speaking about women's contributions to the #MeToo conversation that continued for days (Mendes and Ringrose 2019) and was a trending topic on Twitter (Slawson 2017). Sian describes the content of a collective of women's experiences as 'this howling pain', indicating an outpouring of trauma, emotion and rage (Phipps 2020). This offers a counterpoint to the perspective advanced by other scholars that engaging in digital political activities or clicktivism is 'easy' (Halupka 2014), 'low-risk' or 'low cost' (Rotman et al. 2011). Many women shared their narratives; others simply tweeted 'MeToo', and some liked, retweeted or commented (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020). The sheer scale of the voices that were, as Sian says, 'refusing to shut up' added credibility to individual narratives, which could not be replicated offline. It gave significance to every tweet or hashtag used, which would not typically apply, and created an overall narrative that could not be ignored (Serisier 2018).

It is easy to look back at #MeToo now and immediately identify the significance of the scale of the conversation and the reach that it had in disseminating women's experiences of sexual violence to many different countries and mainstream media platforms. At the time, it was less clear how impactful a hashtag conversation could be and how far it would reach, specifically when viewed in

isolation of a single digital network where the conversation started. Sam perceives this difficulty of being able to fully understand the impact of #MeToo, in the moment:

> *'You don't see the impact, or you're not really aware of the impact at the time. Because it's a very 'in the moment' experience in social media.'*

She suggests that by design, Twitter constantly refreshes the timeline, and information is continually updating. The impact of #MeToo can only be identified once the dust is settled; the conversational scale can be fully understood after the moment. boyd (2008b) posits that the 'beauty' of digital networks allows us to review these moments after they have occurred. Karpf argues that 'a hashtag can be powerful or pointless', which speaks to how frequently they are used, particularly for political conversations and instances of activism (2020b, p. 130). Twitter affords a potentially boundless audience that can be reached through our content, but although we may have access to public online spaces that enable us to speak out, this does not mean that we will be heard (Karpf 2012). Sam perceives this dichotomy in using digital networks to have political and activist conversations, referring to them as momentary, which evokes the ephemeral nature of Twitter. Her characterisation of #MeToo is rooted in the belief that this is not necessarily what she considers 'real' activism. Sam's opinion is illustrated through Papacharissi, who explains that digital networks 'amplify our expectations' by spreading a conversation quickly, which is not indicative of political or social change (2016, p. 321). Instead, Papacharissi argues, we should follow up online activism with 'political, legislative, systemic change' (2016, p. 321). However, this notion is tied to exclusionary understandings of activism and political participation, which assumes we can access formal political structures and influence representatives and that success (defined as tangible change at formal political levels) is a constituent part of activism.

Digital networks have changed the conditions of politics (Couldry 2015a), political participation (Carpentier 2011; Dahlgren 2013), and how activism can be conceptualised. Digital activists utilise affordances to perform individual connective action that does not necessarily focus on a goal or outcome; instead, the action itself is of central importance. Some 'impact' can be measured by the number of likes, retweets and @mentions, which facilitates a 'spotlight' to shine on a specific political issue (Phipps 2020). Bianca considers how the spotlight has directed our attention to #MeToo, the scale and impact of the conversation about sexual violence:

> *'It was clearly influential; it is literally the biggest activist movement that we've seen in recent history around sexual violence. Social media can play an incredibly important role in generating social and political discussion.'*

Bianca immediately talks about the impact and significance of #MeToo, connecting the moment to the subsequent movement that has since emerged (Gill and Orgad 2018). Loney-Howes (2019) identifies that the #MeToo movement was created following the collective repository of women's experiences. Bianca speaks about the #MeToo moment, which spawned the movement, and the influence of the political conversation that broadened awareness about sexual violence. She obliquely refers to digital networks role in advancing feminist counter-narratives; Twitter enables the amplification and dissemination of important political issues, which can be an ongoing conversation that articulates resistance (Carty 2015). The influence, impact or power of #MeToo that many respondents spoke about is represented here in Bianca's comment, which evidences the social and political focus on sexual violence and the scale of discussion generated.

When women began to use the #MeToo hashtag, it drew together their individual narratives, creating a 'collective' narrative (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Milano had not asked that women share their personal experiences, or use a hashtag, merely to tweet 'Me Too'. Hashtags can be created by any user as a quick way to make the conversation more accessible to a broad audience (Bruns and Highfield 2016). Using a hashtag creates an immediately identifiable collective to draw strength from; Gleeson and Turner explain that when women added their voice to #MeToo, they were 'participating in political discourse' by joining with many other survivors (2019, p. 60). In this sense, by adding the hashtag #MeToo to a tweet, individual women were not acting in isolation but with numerous others, potentially making the experience less traumatic. Carpentier (2011) and Dahlgren (2013) identify the significance of *voice* as a form of political participation, which adheres to van Deth's (2016) loose definition as activities that affect politics. Dahlberg (2011) argues that digital networks facilitate typically excluded voices to form counter-narratives and connect with other excluded voices. Sian obliquely refers to hashtags as creating a counter-narrative, a connected conversation that indicates a broader conversation is being had:

> *'Hashtags give you a sense that there is something bigger happening, that there is an event, rather than just being a series of random tweets. #MeToo [was] really powerful and is a symbol between women of solidarity and care.'*

Here we can see that Sian perceives hashtags as 'powerful' for the #MeToo moment; and that their use forms a collection of narratives, which indicates a broader conversation taking place. Sian refers to the awareness that this moment created, where 'a series of random tweets' represents a 'viral roar', which was heard across the world (Gieseler 2019). Many instances of digital feminist activism have been referred to exclusively as 'hashtag' activism as a denigration; (Bowles Eagle 2015; Baer 2016; Megarry 2017, 2020; Chen, Pain, and Barner 2018; Jackson 2018a; Gieseler 2019), Megarry asserts hashtag activism is an 'impoverished' form of activism (2017),

which has not created solidarity between women (2020). Conversely, Papacharissi (2002) argues that solidarity produces political and social change. #MeToo is not the first hashtag conversation to address sexual violence; it is a distinct example that pushed back against exclusionary media coverage and discourse (Willis 2020). Hitherto the prevailing discourse fails to identify the significance of countless women drawing on *the personal is political* to take individual 'connective' action (2012, 2013). Sian frames the significance of the #MeToo moment as 'symbolic' of the connection 'between' women. She talks about the idea of solidarity in the context that women were given emotional and psychological support from others online (Jackson et al., 2020). This sense of solidarity was felt by many women who contributed to the collective #MeToo narrative (Salter 2019). We can, therefore, view #MeToo as evidence of a digitally facilitated broad political conversation, which countless women participated in.

There is a rawness to some respondents' comments that speaks to how they felt in the moment and the solidarity for the women who spoke out. Looking back at #MeToo allows us to see how we watched it unfold and place it in the context of the discussion it provoked, which, as Sam identifies, is not easily done in the moment. Dahlgren (2013) argues that digital networks afford the *possibility* to participate, and that through participation, social change can be made. #MeToo brought societal awareness to the issue of sexual violence against women and opened a discussion about the structural changes that were needed going forward (Chen, Pain, and Barner 2018; Bouvier 2020). Bianca perceives this social and political discussion as an incredibly important effect that #MeToo generated. However, many respondents questioned what change had really been achieved? As Rosewarne argues, 'if the effectiveness of #MeToo is measured purely through use of the hashtag, through media mentions and through public awareness of the problem, then its success is indisputable' (2019, p. 177). While Rosewarne makes an excellent point about mainstream media amplification, this chapter is concerned with how digital feminist activists reflect on the impact of #MeToo and how their understanding of political participation and activism influences their perceptions of 'success'.

## Achieving 'Success' and Creating Social Change

Querying the meaning of 'success' is often a way to undermine activism and activist campaigns, reinforcing limited concepts of what is and is not activism. This is guided by the idea of achieving a particular goal (Bimber et al. 2012), which - even if they are successful - is 'rarely attribute[d] to activists' (Vromen 2017, p. 109). The #MeToo hashtag embodies a modern interpretation of the feminist phrase 'the personal is political' and the practice of sharing personal narratives, which, in this case, are about women's experiences of sexual violence that simultaneously demand social change. Many respondents thought that #MeToo had an impact but questioned what 'real' social

change has been made. Respondents led me to the question, what is meant by success, and how is it defined by digital feminist activists? How 'success' is perceived is framed by respondents' understanding of politics and how social change is made, affecting how #MeToo and digital activism are understood. Some respondents connect the notion of change to traditional political change: legislative, policy, and legal reform. Other respondents perceive the conversation as contributing to a societal shift in awareness about sexual violence to be equally as successful as policy change. In this chapter, rather than framing #MeToo as 'achieving success' by producing 'tangible and visible' results (Akram 2019), I draw on Papacharissi, who argues that 'revolutions may spark instantaneously, but their impact is not instant; it unfolds over time' (2016, p. 321). The notion that change can be a slow process, or indeed symbolic, is applied to my analysis of empirical data to demonstrate that respondents have different ideas about what 'success' and change means.

For many activists, achieving 'real' change can be a slow process that develops as the hashtag, or campaign, gains momentum. One of the indicators of success is that #MeToo 'generated substantive and sustained' coverage by mainstream media (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019, p. 4). It was also successful in being recognised by, for example, *Time Magazine*, when the 'Silence Breakers' were categorised as the 'person of the year' in 2017 (Jackson 2018a). Further, this indicates that #MeToo was successful in drawing attention from mainstream media and society long after the hashtag began. Holly expresses her concern that a hashtag is ephemeral and unable to create long-term impact, but also reveals that because of #MeToo, she has changed her opinion:

> *'I was sceptical at first that [#MeToo] would be a hashtag that comes and goes and not have a lasting impact, but there have been a lot of concrete outcomes.'*

Holly's uncertainty relates to hashtag moments being fleeting; they can form quickly, be used and shared prolifically while that moment lasts (Bruns and Highfield 2016). When women started to use the hashtag #MeToo, it affected how broadly the collective of narratives would be amplified (Earl and Kimport 2011). The hashtag gave the conversation more reach and increased the likelihood that it would be disseminated through the Twitter network and go viral (Stromer-Galley 2014). Some users are savvy about utilising Twitter affordances and understand that hashtags demonstrate politics or protest (Jackson et al. 2020). Some activists use hashtags in the knowledge that they are creating and contributing to a political moment, which can be widely disseminated by mainstream media, and archived as a collection to be picked apart and analysed. Holly talks about the many outcomes that #MeToo has created and that they are concrete and permanent. For example, it generated discussion about sexual violence and accountability; tech

company Microsoft updated sexual harassment policies because of #MeToo (Paquette 2017). Individuals have also been more likely to question inappropriate behaviours in social circles (Mendes and Ringrose 2019).

If we apply the traditional notion of an activist trying to achieve a particular goal (Oliver and Marwell 1992) to #MeToo, Milano's original request was realised when countless women said 'Me Too' to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment, abuse and assault. Milano's 'goal' was not aimed at changing legislation or policy, instead, it was 'more expressive: to give voice to a group' of women (Dahlgren 2012). In this context, by *publicly* discussing *personal* narratives, women participated in a wider social commentary. The 'great success' of #MeToo, as Jane sees it, is that it enabled a 'collective' of women to speak out:

> *'#MeToo [was] the collective voice of women overcoming the structural silencing of women's voices was a great success.'*

Here we can see that Jane's understanding of success is twofold; first, it is the women who participated in connective action, by 'contributing' to the conversation (Gleeson and Turner 2019); second, women pushed against the dominant patriarchal structures that had silenced them. Jane's comments are echoed by Brynjarsdóttir, who identifies that the success of #MeToo were the numerous women who were united in 'breaking the long silence surrounding the culture of sexual violence' (2020, p. 109). It evidences Fraser's (1990) notion of counter-narratives that challenge exclusionary discourse (Willis 2020) by speaking up about issues that are typically marginalised or ignored. The #MeToo counter-narrative challenged the lack of awareness about women's experiences of sexual violence. Because we live in a patriarchal society, male violence often goes unnoticed (Boyle 2019), and women are less likely to be heard or believed, when speaking about it.

#MeToo challenged ideas about sexual violence. For example, the scale of the issue was previously unknown to many men, specifically the behaviours that are 'acceptable or unacceptable' (Flood 2019, p. 287). It was instrumental in creating a shift in 'awareness' (Chen, Pain, and Barner 2018; Mendes et al. 2019; Bouvier 2020; Erlingsdóttir 2020), which specifically affected the 'men that we know', who were seemingly unaware of that sexual violence was so prevalent. Stacy talks about the 'blinkered' men in her social circle becoming aware of women's experiences:

> *'#MeToo was a huge thing because it gives urgency to something that people know is wrong. I think it had huge political [and] social implications. It gave most of the decent, yet privileged and blinkered, men I know a real fucking eye-opener.'*

Stacy discusses who was affected by #MeToo, not just women but the men who seemed oblivious that women experience sexual violence *on that scale*, which speaks to the sense of urgency she mentions here. When Stacy talks about #MeToo, her use of 'huge' is repetitive, about the moment and the implications, indicating not just the numerous experiences that women shared through their personal narratives, but the effect that it had on men. It created a wider awareness and acknowledgement of the issue, which is the success that Stacy identifies in the #MeToo moment. The men in her social circle were no longer 'blinkered'. Flood argues that 'men's understandings of men's violence against women are consistently poorer than women's' (2019, p. 287). An Australian journalist, Benjamin Law, tweeted using the hashtag #HowIWillChange, to draw men further into the conversation, to commit to changing their attitudes and behaviours towards women:


*Figure 15 Tweet by Benjamin Law 16/10/2017*

Thousands of men responded to Law's tweet, reflecting on their own 'problematic behaviours', expressing a commitment to educating others and engage in prevention work (PettyJohn et al. 2018). In this context, #MeToo has become a part of social and political discourse that is being used to provoke conversation about ending sexual violence (Rosewarne 2019). Significantly, creating societal awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual violence, specifically amongst men, has translated into a success, which speaks directly to the intentions behind Milano's tweet.

The power of #MeToo is that it created societal and political awareness of the need to change existing social and cultural structures that enabled the normalisation of inappropriate behaviours, sexual harassment and abuse. It generated a conversation about what needed to change, who could contribute to that (Flood 2019; Erlingsdóttir 2020), and transformed a moment into a

movement. Julie talks of #MeToo as a moment that generated hope for affecting 'actual' change, which she frames as one of its successes:

> *'Witnessing #MeToo was one of the most hopeful experiences I've had in a while in believing in the power of social media to make actual change.'*

She talks about other forms of success, one of which is the 'power' that using digital networks has for women. The 'power' that Julie 'believes' in is directed by countless women using Twitter to speak out, having previously been silenced or marginalised (Bouvier 2020). Julie talks about 'witnessing' #MeToo, which speaks to watching the Twitter feed in real-time, as more and more women began to 'add their voices to the growing roar' (Gieseler 2019, p. 2), and the full scale of the moment that emerged. A further success of #MeToo relates to the 'power' of the digital network; Twitter facilitated the amplification of the conversation (boyd 2008b) to a wide-ranging audience. Although Julie does not give a specific example of the changes that have been made, these can be evidenced in the 'changing societal ideas, norms and discourses' (Vromen 2017, p. 38).

Many respondents talk about 'success', but do not necessarily consider *how* this can be applied to real life. Is raising awareness enough? A concern that is often levelled at connective action is the inability to achieve real social and political change (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), such as influencing policy discussion and formation, or law reform (Norris 2009). Digital communication and action do not necessarily seek to influence government departments or agendas; it may attempt to impact society by creating awareness about a political issue (Norris 2002). Catherine suggests that #MeToo was an expression of the need for change in society, rather than it being change itself:

> *'#MeToo has been incredibly important as a vehicle for telling stories, to the point where there is this enormous reservoir of stories that are just pouring out. It's being mistaken for change, as opposed to an expression for the need for change. That is the danger of the online world, it's where we talk about what's wrong, but it's not where the solutions are.'*

Catherine recognises the importance of #MeToo, and Twitter, to facilitate women sharing an 'enormous reservoir of stories'. Although she recognised the importance of the conversation, she does not believe that it will lead to real change. Her comment brings to mind criticisms about clicktivism and whether it can create actual change (Gladwell 2010; White 2010; Morozov 2011a; Cabrera et al. 2017). We could interpret #MeToo as an instance of 'clicktivism', as defined by Halupka (2018); users engaged with a tweet, which involved clicking a button (Halupka 2014),

there is no specialised knowledge required to tweet the comment 'Me Too'. However, some survivors carefully curated their tweet for days before sending them (Mendes and Ringrose 2019). Sharing a personal narrative about sexual violence is a *definitive* act. Further, individuals need not be an expert on sexual violence to participate in speaking out, using the evidence of their experience (Linabary and Batti 2019) rather than quoting statistics of criminal justice prosecutions. By contributing to #MeToo, women indicated their understanding that it was, and still is, a relevant political issue (Gleeson and Turner 2019). Catherine's perception of #MeToo is framed by her understanding of politics, activism and the process of making change. The conversation is of less significance in comparison to the change that can be created following it. She is the co-founder and member of the Women's Equality Party in the UK and heavily involved in the national organisation and campaign decision-making. Her comment seems to draw on Papacharissi (2016), who argues that digital networks amplify our expectations of creating change and that political, legislative and systemic change need to be implemented afterwards. Catherine perceives #MeToo as 'an expression for the need for change', which suggests that she views it through the lens of *already* having a political voice and platform in the real world.

Creating the opportunity for change, and highlighting the importance of a political issue, is not insignificant (Papacharissi and Trevey 2018). Yet, similarly to Catherine, Jess talks about the importance of using the #MeToo collective conversation as a starting point for taking action, not action itself, of making change, not change itself:

> *'I worry that the #MeToo movement makes people feel like something's happened, but – the mechanism for change is much more complicated. It will make you feel heard, and that's really, really important. But galvanising that into action and change?'*

Here we can see that Jess' idea of #MeToo being successful in achieving change is guided by her understanding, and status, within the formal political structures of government. While Jess seems to 'embody something different' in politics; she is incredibly outspoken and upfront about her beliefs (Wood 2019). This does not seem to extend to how she perceives the significance of digital activism, which relates to her belief that it should be part of, or the start of, a broader strategy for creating social change. Jess acknowledges the importance of speaking out and being *heard* (Boyle 2019). However, her main concern is that the collective of women's voices is seen as change, when she believes it needs to be 'galvanised' first into action, and then change. Jess does not see #MeToo as either action or change itself, therefore it is not a success.

The #MeToo moment successfully generated a 'sense of the magnitude of the problem' (Milano 2017) that women experience. The 'magnitude' was the countless women who had been silent (Bouvier 2020; Brynjarsdóttir 2020) speaking out about sexual violence, which continued for

weeks (Phipps 2020). This is further evidenced in the initial 'months of intensive media reporting' (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019) and the substantial mainstream media coverage (Paquette 2017; Sayej 2017; Slawson 2017; North 2019; Hewlett 2020; Stauffer 2020; McNabb 2021) and scholarly analysis that continues (Gill and Orgad 2018; Mendes et al. 2018, 2019; Boyle 2019, 2020; Flood 2019; Gieseler 2019; Mendes and Ringrose 2019; Salter 2019; Bouvier 2020; Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2020). Change is a concept that is interpreted differently by many respondents, framed by their experiences of offline activism and frequently applied to an instance of digital activism to determine whether it is 'successful' or not. However, #MeToo is one of the most powerful examples of a hashtag used to give voice to *others* who are typically marginalised. Women utilise the digital network Twitter as a space of resistance, which is significant when they are denied access to political platforms elsewhere.

## Finding a Digital Space to Speak Out

A form of 'success' for those who are typically excluded is finding the space to speak out about typically underrepresented issues (Papacharissi 2010), such as women's experiences of sexual violence (Gieseler 2019). Twitter has facilitated women's creation of counter-narratives, which are used to challenge 'dominant discourses' (Dahlberg 2011, p. 861). In this sense, women have found a space that recognises the significance of their political voice (Couldry 2012). Feminists have utilised consciousness-raising practices to share experiences and listen to others since the 1960s (Loney-Howes 2019), evidenced by individual narratives that form a collective – to 'increase awareness and incite action' (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020, p. 167). Finding the space to discuss political issues, combined with the facility to disseminate information, enhances societal awareness (Madison and Klang 2020). This indicates the significance of digital networks as spaces to speak out, discuss, and expand our understanding of politics and specific political issues. While women have been speaking out for some time about male sexual violence, the difference that #MeToo made was that they were 'widely *heard*' (Boyle 2019, original emphasis). This section examines respondents understanding of the significance of women finding space to speak out (De Benedictis et al. 2019) about typically marginalised issues (Papacharissi 2016). I will demonstrate that respondents discuss the positive aspects of women using Twitter to speak out, identifying that this level of political participation and creation of a counter-narrative is not easily replicated offline.

The #MeToo moment took place at the intersection of gender, technology and power, demonstrating the strength of feminist activists' voice (Dahlberg 2011) when raised as one. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 2013) describe this as a transformation of 'collective action' to 'connective action', digitally enabled by the network. In connective action logic, individuals taking

action or sharing ideas in a public space becomes an 'act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation' (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, p. 752). The individual women that contributed to #MeToo were, according to Bennett and Segerberg, performing a 'small personal action' (2013, p. 6), in that a tweet was 140 characters at the time, which resulted in a connective action network. The connective aspect was the aggregation of women's experiences of sexual violence under the hashtag #MeToo, which opened up the conversation around the world; people could no longer deny the prevalence of sexual violence against women. Carpentier argues that the 'defining element of participation is *power'* (2012, p. 170, my emphasis), and this power can be evidenced in the number of women that shared their personal narratives. Some hashtag conversations and campaigns can be fleeting, with an initial surge of interest but then disappear into the ether (Loney-Howes 2020); others are prolific in the moment and remain part of society political consciousness for some time. #MeToo is the latter; it represents a collectively produced narrative of sexual violence (Serisier 2018), which was propelled into mainstream media and societal discourse. Further it reinforces the notion of a digital network practicing feminist consciousness-raising, where women speak out, are listened to and have their experiences recognised (Gieseler 2019), which is highly personal and political.

By saying 'MeToo' or adding the hashtag #MeToo to their tweet, individual women were *taking* action. They were participating in a political conversation They were participating in a political conversation that might have happened offline, the difference being that online, they could join with millions of other women to collate and publish evidence (Salter 2013) of their experiences. In this sense, the #MeToo hashtag was used to practice feminist consciousness-raising (Serisier 2018), where women could speak out, and others would listen. Sian talks about the similarity between #MeToo and whisper networks, where women openly talk to other women about experiencing sexual violence:

> *'#MeToo started because of Twitter; people using that hashtag to discuss sexual harassment. Those whisper networks would have existed offline. Women would have gone home from work and said: 'This happened today'. Those stories are out there now, and they're not just whispered to your friends. They're written down.'*

Here we can see that Sian sees the connection to digital networks as a space for women to speak out and that the use of hashtag #MeToo is significant evidence of their discussion about sexual violence. Sian believes that women would still find the space to talk about sexual violence with their friends in offline spaces. Whisper networks have been used by women as a safe space to share their knowledge, warn others and offer support to those known to interact with notorious sexual harassers (Cresswell and Hsu 2017). Haire et al. (2019) argue that women's whisper

networks are used by women to keep each other informed and safe. However, a key difference between whisper networks and #MeToo is that, as Sian says, the conversation is still there as a record of women's experiences; it can be searched, read and analysed. It is worth remembering that traditional (offline) activism is less likely to generate this level of impact about sexual harassment and assault nor gain as much coverage from mainstream media platforms. Boyle (2019) argues that #MeToo is 'indivisible' from the digital networks and mainstream media platforms that circulated the story. Twitter users shared, liked and commented on the media coverage from newspapers, magazines, podcasts, and television outlets (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre 2020), which added to the popularity, or success, of the moment.

Sian reflects on the sheer number of women's voices that contributed to #MeToo, the scale of which is almost 'unimaginable' (Lazard 2020). Sian is one of the few respondents to talk directly about Weinstein being the cause for the #MeToo conversation. She states that the number of women's narratives were amplified on Twitter:

> *'Having so many in one space, this amplification meant that Weinstein couldn't [be] ignored anymore.'*

Sian talks about there being 'many' voices, which refers to both individuals connective action (2012, 2013) and the collective narrative formed by millions of women tweeting. Moreover, here is the notion of the collective finding space on Twitter when there was no other space open to them. The 'amplification' that Sian refers to is represented by the voices of women, which was over twelve million #MeToo tweets in the first twenty-four hours (Mendes et al. 2018), and the 'amplification' or retweeting of their narratives, which as boyd et al. argue 'can be a political act' (2010, p. 8). A distinctive feature of finding space to speak out, is amplifying the voice of others, which as Couldry (2010) argues, is linked to people having the ability to give an account of the world they experience. Amplifying others' political content can promote an alternative viewpoint and educate a broad audience (Carter Olsen 2016), which may then raise social awareness about women's experiences of sexual violence, which changed the scale of the conversation. As Sian comments, it meant that the accusations against Weinstein, and many others like him, could not be ignored 'anymore'. The addition of 'anymore' implies that this was an issue that many were already aware of (Boyle 2019). The weight of millions of women's narratives evidencing the pervasiveness of their experiences could no longer be denied.

Twitter enables individuals to discuss and react to events in real-time, contributing to broader political discourse (Dahlgren 2013) about specific political and social issues. #MeToo is an example of a counter-narrative that emerged through individual connective action, which challenged the notion that sexual violence towards women is 'rare' or 'random' (Loney-Howes and Fileborn

2019). Molly draws a connection between survivors finding space to speak out on Twitter and locating themselves as part of a broad conversation:

> *'I think that that's really powerful [that] lots of survivors speak out. It's really hard to dismiss them and their numbers. [Twitter] is quite different than traditional media - it does provide a space for survivors [sic] to speak up and say: you're talking about me.'*

She sees the success of #MeToo in the number of survivors who *could* participate in speaking out on Twitter and contributing to the collective narrative. Molly identifies that, for survivors, having the ability to recognise their experience as pervasive rather than an isolated or individual issue is powerful. In this sense, survivors who could speak out could draw on a collective of solidarity, which validated their experience (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Molly draws a comparison between Twitter and mainstream media as a space for survivors to speak out, saying that they are 'quite different'. Mainstream media representations of gender and sexual violence tend to be narrow or inaccurate (Blevins 2018), reinforcing the notion of 'false' allegations (Flood 2019) or arguing that #MeToo had gone 'too far' (Fileborn and Phillips 2019; Flood 2019). These 'traditional' media spaces that are inherently patriarchal do not provide survivors with a space to speak out and be heard, rather they try to silence and deny. Whereas digital networks have no obvious moderators or gatekeepers; survivors can tweet with relative freedom (within the bounds of the rules).

Twitter is well-known as a platform for political discourse (Chadwick et al. 2015), which affords the space to participate (Gill and Orgad 2018). Through their participation in sharing personal narratives using the hashtag #MeToo, survivors experiences were acknowledged and heard by others (Boyle 2019). But what happens when participating in a hashtag about sexual violence re-traumatises women who re-live their experiences (Serisier 2018; Loney-Howes 2020)? Erin brings a nuanced perspective about women having to have these conversations, over and over again:

> *'I've seen a lot of women say; yes, it's important to have these conversations, but why do we always have to re-open our wounds to get that recognition that this is an important thing? It is absolutely, unspeakably powerful to see a set of stories and see that you're not alone.'*

Erin refers to the women she observed who have questioned why they 'always' have to re-live their experiences to gain 'recognition', which is not about being heard; instead, it is about the significance of the political issue. She acknowledges that it is 'unspeakably powerful' for survivors to see that collection of similar stories and experiences. Again here is the idea that women can locate themselves and their experiences with others as a form of success; they are no longer

alone but part of a collective moment and can locate solidarity with others (Mendes et al. 2019). Erin mentions power because she identifies that some women feel powerless, without a platform to speak about sexual violence. In some ways, survivors might regain a sense of power by contributing to a powerful counter-narrative (Ender 2019) or being listened to through feminist consciousness-raising (Serisier 2018) via the #MeToo hashtag. If, as Carpentier (2012) argues, the key to participation is power, then women use Twitter in a complex combination of contributing to a counter-narrative as resistance, which enables them to reclaim their power and locate 'a collective sense of support and empathy' from others (Turley and Fischer 2018, p. 129).

The significance of women's voices being *heard* by other survivors of sexual violence (Boyle 2019), and a worldwide audience, should not be underestimated. The #MeToo moment facilitated a societal awareness of women's experiences with sexual violence, which had not reported on in the mainstream media on that scale before (Jackson et al. 2020). In this sense, speaking out about a *personal* experience of sexual violence in a *public* online space (Herring et al. 2002) epitomises the feminist phrase 'the personal is political'. Respondents identified the importance of women finding space to speak out (De Benedictis et al. 2019), to contribute with others to the creation of a broad counter-narrative that challenged dominant discourse about women's lived experiences. Twitter is used by women for many reasons, and it is where many practices converge; it is participation, solidarity, collective, and self-validation. Finding recognition from others in their similar experiences and being heard by them is, in a sense, a form of justice that cannot be achieved elsewhere. By speaking out collectively, women draw on shared knowledge (Sweetman 2013) and experience, enabling the focus of their action to be *heard* (Crawford 2011, my emphasis).

## Seeking Justice and Legal Reform

Survivors of sexual violence are defining how they practice digital resistance through their use of Twitter as a space to seek justice, which they have not found in the criminal justice system (Fileborn 2016). Prior to #MeToo, women had used various hashtags to disclose experiences of gendered violence, to challenge the justice and legal structures that denied the veracity of their experience. For example, in 2014, women used #YesAllWomen to evidence the widespread sexism, misogyny and violence that was regularly experienced. The hashtag began after a mass shooting incident in Isla Vista, California when Elliot Rodger shot six and injured fourteen people before committing suicide. Rodger used his manifesto and YouTube videos to blame the women who had rejected him for his violent actions (Valenti 2014). Feminist critiques used digital networks to draw the connections between the shooting, misogyny and gendered violence (Serisier 2018). Feminist author and journalist Laurie Penny (2014) characterised the incident as a

'massacre' and an example of 'misogynist extremism'. Men started using the hashtag #NotAllMen to 'articulate a defensive rebuttal' (Thrift 2014, p. 1091), arguing that it was an isolated example, not representative of all men or that not all men feel the same way about women as Rodger. Over one million women used the hashtag #YesAllWomen in the first twenty-four hours (Serisier 2018), demanding that 'defensive men sit and listen, and created rhetorical kinship among women' (Jackson et al. 2020, p. 6). #YesAllWomen created the cultural conditions on Twitter for women to seek-justice, and recognition of their experiences.

The #MeToo moment enabled millions of women's to control the content of their narrative (Loney-Howes 2020); to find solidarity with others (Dahlberg 2011); and gain recognition about their experiences (Boyle 2019). Digital justice-seeking is not a means of seeking revenge against a perpetrator (Salter 2013), rather it is a way of speaking out to advocate for political and social change as a form of justice. Twitter facilitated a collective narrative of women's experiences of sexual violence, which 'reverberated through our cultural and political landscape' (Fileborn et al. 2019). In this sense, #MeToo facilitated a shift in societal and political awareness about sexual violence (Phipps 2020) and evidenced a discussion by many individuals with many others (Flood 2019). Further, #MeToo created a focal point for many to demand that legal reform and structural changes be made. Respondents drew a connection between social and political awareness that affects 'real' change in formal policy or legal reforms. In this section, I draw on Loney-Howes, who argues that 'real change [sic] is dependent on shifts in social values about gender and sexuality, rather than a reliance on the criminal justice system' (2019, p. 153). The notion that seeking justice is connected with creating awareness about sexual violence, rather than making legal or policy change, is applied to my analysis of empirical data to demonstrate that respondents have different ideas about the effect that #MeToo has had.

Various legal and policy reforms have contributed to broader conversations about consent, sexual harassment, and legal support for women to pursue legal cases in the workplace. Progress has been made in Australia and Sweden (Mendes and Ringrose 2019), in France and Spain (Loney-Howes 2019), in Iceland (Erlingsdóttir 2020), and in the US (Gill and Orgad 2018; Phipps 2020), where Harvey Weinstein was convicted after over 70 women testified against him and is currently incarcerated. In terms of creating cultural change, Mendes & Ringrose (2019) argue that the public is more willing to listen to survivors, perhaps due to the sheer number of narratives shared under #MeToo. Finn speaks about #MeToo as a powerful act for the women it enabled to speak out, framing the collective narrative as having the power to create an effect that could be widespread:

> *'#MeToo was a great success in amplifying women's voice, amplifying the voices of survivors and these voices being seen as powerful and being responded to as having power and influence. To see it as a powerful act and potentially a legally powerful act with repercussions for those criminals who chose to perpetrate such acts of violence, all of that was very promising.'*

Here we can see that for Finn, the 'promise' and 'great success' of #MeToo was the amplification of women's and other survivors' voices. By using the hashtag, specifically, women were able to direct and amplify information that might not otherwise have gained 'traction' (Stromer-Galley 2014). In this sense, #MeToo educated a broad audience (Carter Olsen 2016) about women's lived experiences, drawing societal awareness in a way that has not been achieved before (Papacharissi 2014). The 'power' that Finn identifies in women's voices was the awareness that they created about sexual violence and the injustices that survivors of sexual violence experience (Jackson 2018a). The success criteria that Finn alludes to is the potential for 'repercussions' in the real world, such as 'criminals' being held accountable (Gill and Orgad 2018). Finn is not just thinking about women's voices, but who is responsible for causing that violence. Those women who contributed to #MeToo did not necessarily aim to create 'power and influence'; instead, as Finn says, they were viewed as acting with this intention.

The awareness that was created was not explicitly directed towards men, it was towards global society, which regardless of women speaking out for decades prior to #MeToo (Boyle 2019), seemed unaware that sexual violence should be seen as more than a 'women's issue' (PettyJohn et al. 2018). #MeToo asked men to recognise that sexual violence was predominantly caused by men and to 'reflect on and change their own behaviour' (Flood 2019, p. 285). Phipps (2020, my emphasis) explains that *all* men were put on the spot to reflect on their own behaviours and others they associated with. If we apply #MeToo to van Deth's (2014) framework we have to stop at question 3 (*Is the activity done by citizens?*) and deliberate whether #MeToo is performed by citizens within a specific country, and thus within a single political and legal structure where justice can be sought, rather than by individuals from different countries spread across the world. While van Deth (2016) states that many understandings include a reference to a specific goal or aim to influence a government policy, it is not the case with #MeToo. As Jackson et al. argue, 'each hashtag, from #YesAllWomen to #MeToo, did different work…responding to particular news stories and events' (2020, p. 27). In this case, the event was the public accusations levelled at Harvey Weinstein and his attempts to silence the women accusing him (Boyle 2019).

Regardless of the awareness that #MeToo created in society, Sam talks about the importance of legal reform, believing that this needs to be made before we can achieve behavioural and cultural change:

> *'Even if we do make a legislative change or policy change, there then needs to be a massive follow through to achieve a culture change. Leaving a change in isolation on a statute book, a policy paper, or even a policy document in a workplace isn't going to result in behaviour change and in culture change: it's connected.'*

Sam's understanding of creating change is framed by her understanding of formal politics and activism as achieving a specific goal. She connects legislation, policy, culture, an employer, and statute, with culture and behaviour, seeing these as contributing to a 'massive follow through' before 'change' can be recognised. Sam mentions leaving change in isolation, which speak to #MeToo as the first step rather than the change itself, much like Catherine's response earlier. Sam frames the #MeToo moment, and the success of moments like it, through her experience of formal political hierarchies. She is one of the few respondents to speak about how 'real' change might be achieved, rather than speculating broadly about it, and believes that there are many layers to traverse before change can be achieved and a 'real' difference to occur. While #MeToo has been instrumental in shaping societal and political awareness (Erlingsdóttir 2020), this is not enough for Sam, who needs more than an *expression* of the need for change; she wants the change itself to be actioned in law, policy or statute.

Much like the lens that we use to view #MeToo with, justice-seeking can be understood and interpreted differently by different people. For survivors of sexual violence, it is a way of controlling how personal experiences are told (Loney-Howes 2020), finding solidarity with others (Dahlberg 2011), and advocating for political and social change. However, this does not mean that the millions of women who contributed to #MeToo *directly* demanded that 'real' structural change or legal reform be made. The change that Milano wanted to create was social and cultural awareness, which has been achieved in a phenomenal way. Mendes and Ringrose (2019) identify that change can be more personal and hard to measure, such as women discussing the issue with family or being more outspoken when inappropriate behaviours are witnessed. Similarly, Finn discusses the power of women's voices and amplifying their narratives about sexual violence, perceiving this as successful. Conversely, Sam measures success in the form of 'tangible and visible' results (Akram 2019) and understands political change as legislative, policy, or legal reform. These conflicting ideas evidence that the lens through which respondents view #MeToo is critical to different concepts of 'success', and that the difference it has made to digital feminist activists is guided by that understanding.

# Conclusion

The power of feminist Twitter is that it enables women to define how women practice digital resistance, for example, by utilising a hashtag in the knowledge that this may create a broad conversation that others may contribute to. In doing so, women perform digital activism by engaging with political and social issues in a public online space. #MeToo enabled millions of women to speak out, which many respondents spoke of as a significant moment, which ended the silence about the extent of women's experiences of sexual violence. The prevalence of women utilising Twitter as a space to speak out is demonstrative of expanding forms of contemporary political participation, which does not necessarily require 'real' social change to be made for it to be deemed a success. Framing the analysis of achieving 'success' and creating 'change' through the notion that change is a slow process (Papacharissi 2016), and creating societal awareness is one form of achieving change (Vromen 2017). What has emerged through my analysis of respondents reflections on #MeToo is that there are diverse, often opposing, ideas about the relationship between 'success' or 'change' and what that means for defining digital activism as political participation. Respondents ascribed varying degrees of importance to digital activism, guided by the knowledge and experience of traditional activism. Some applied the notion that #MeToo should have achieved a specific goal by making policy, legislative, or structural change. This idea assumes that we have equal access to formal political structures or the opportunity to influence representatives and is an exclusionary way to frame activism and political participation.

Respondents spoke at length about #MeToo as a powerful moment for women, survivors, and them as digital feminist activists. Many identified the significance and strength of collective voice (Dahlberg 2011) when facilitated by feminist consciousness-raising practices. It is significant that Twitter affords the space to speak out and recognise a similarity in others' experiences and that others listen to narratives and validate their experiences. How we conceptualise success should be expanded to include the voices and actions of *others*; who are marginalised, excluded or otherwise oppressed. Furthermore, for women, who are less likely to have access to a political or public platform, it is incredibly significant that Twitter is a site for creating counter-narratives that challenge exclusionary discourse (Willis 2020). For example, women control how they communicate their narrative (Loney-Howes 2020), which, when speaking out about sexual violence, is a form of success that is not easily achieved in the criminal justice system. Twitter has revolutionised how political participation (Carpentier 2011; Dahlgren 2013) and activism can be conceptualised. Many respondents were open to *alternative* forms of success and change; some discussed the notion that these traditional notions did not apply to digital activism. Specifically, it

enabled many respondents to realise the importance of women coming together to use Twitter as a space to speak out about political issues.

In the next chapter, I move from discussing respondents' views of an impactful moment of feminist resistance to inform our understanding of political participation for feminists, to discuss digital communities and how this impacts activist communication practices. Spanning all three layers and one element of my conceptual lens, this chapter reflects my experience of using Twitter as a platform, which I started using as a social platform before it became more political. The feminist connections that I made were deliberate in an expanding my feminist community, and were made after I had begun to take action and communicate about politics, feminism and feminist activism. Our digital community represents the users that follow us based on similar interests or like-mindedness, who essentially want to listen to us. By design, Twitter facilitates connection and communication, which I demonstrate is used by feminist activists to speak directly to an identified audience, or potentially reach a wider audience. But who is following Twitter feminists? Are feminists forming digital communities with other feminists and merely talking to each other; does this indicate the presence of an echo chamber? Feminist Twitter is particularly pertinent for creating a sense of solidarity, where feminist activists share ideas and information, gain recognition, and receive support. This reinforces the idea of a digital feminist community that comes together to engage in activism, which informs our understanding of how and why feminists use Twitter for this purpose.

# Chapter 5 The Significance of Digital Communities, and Talking to an Audience

## Introduction

This chapter explores the premise of a feminist digital community, using it as a lens to analyse the significance of connecting to, and communicating with, other feminist activists. Digital communities emerge when users interact and engage in extended communication (Rheingold 1993) or form connections around a 'thematic affinity' (Bruns et al. 2014, p. 119), such as an interest in a specific issue or topic (Fuchs 2008), ranging from political, technical, social, or to entertainment (Wellman and Gulia 1999). On Twitter, we connect with or *follow* users based on their content, interactions, or other connections (Ballsun-Stanton and Carruthers 2010). Following practices are driven by homophily (Papacharissi 2016), meaning we are more likely to connect to those similar to us (McPherson et al. 2001). The phenomenon of homophily is frequently applied to digital communities (Bruns, 2019a; Colleoni et al., 2014; Kwak et al., 2010; Papacharissi, 2014), where our connections direct the flow of information and communication (Himelboim et al. 2017; Batorski and Grzywińska 2018). In this sense, forming a community on Twitter is particularly pertinent for feminist activists, in that, it enables solidarity, which at its core is about sharing ideas and information, and educating others (Carter Olsen 2016). This affords marginalised individuals to talk with and learn from each other (Serisier 2018) irrespective of physical constraints or geographic boundaries, which is significant for feminist activists and activism. This chapter will engage with the broad themes of the thesis by exploring respondents' activist practices of forming connections with others (van Dijck 2013) and consider whether homophily circumscribes access to political information and alternate views (Bruns 2017), which is key to advancing our understanding of digital activism and political participation.

On feminist Twitter, activists can speak directly to their followers or audience (Bruns and Moe 2014; Himelboim et al. 2017), seek validation for their ideas (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), ask questions and learn from others (Fotopoulou 2016a). Digital network users typically have an idea of who their followers are and how many they have (Schmidt 2014), which I argue represents an *identified* audience, rather than an *invisible* audience (boyd 2008b, p. 242). If an audience is not immediately identifiable, a user can easily search for that information (Papacharissi 2014) on their profile. Does the notion of audience represent a specific activist community? Are activists utilising Twitter to educate diverse audiences, or is it perhaps, both? Who we speak to on digital networks, and who is listening, has been the subject of many scholarly investigations (Crawford 2009, 2011;

boyd et al. 2010; Marwick and boyd 2010; Karpf 2016). However, much of the literatures focuses the discussion on the scale of the available audience (Papacharissi 2014) and the potential for activists to reach wide audiences (boyd 2008b; Fotopoulou 2016b). Moreover, theories about audience are either broad examinations across digital networks (boyd 2008b; boyd et al. 2010; Ellison and boyd 2013), or focus on one network but the object of analysis holds a privileged position in society, such as celebrities (Marwick and boyd 2011), or politicians (Crawford 2009, 2011). The extant literature has not considered how marginalisation could affect the notion of digital communities, talking to an audience on a digital network, or indeed, who is listening? There are important implications for how digital communities expose feminist activists to a selection of information and communication, which, in turn, helps us place the empirical data and the insights we gain from that data in a particular context. I will frame my analysis in the context that homophilous digital communities can be 'beneficial' for those who are marginalised (Bruns 2019b, p. 5). The previous two chapters have established the diverse activist and clicktivist practices that respondents engage in; however, it is often overlooked how forming a digital community with others can contribute directly to political participation. The actions we take, and the communication we engage in can be directed by the connections we form with others. In this context, I argue that connecting to other feminists and forming a feminist community on Twitter is conducive to feminist activists' political participation, which I will evidence throughout this chapter.

Twitter is a connective network where we can follow other users with similar political interests and ideologies (Bouvier 2020), which is often recorded as part of a user's bio (Colleoni et al. 2014). We connect to, or follow, other users for various reasons. Twitter is a 'networked communication platform' (Ellison and boyd 2013) that enables content sharing via the connections a user makes. These connections direct the flow of information to other users, who may or may not be interested that an activist has signed and shared an online petition. Our connections to others on Twitter can be both 'weak' and 'strong' (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Weaker connections could be colleagues or strangers (Marwick and boyd 2010), celebrities (Marwick and boyd 2011), politicians (Crawford 2011), or institutions (Bruns and Highfield 2013). Conversely, stronger connections are more likely to be individuals we know offline or other users with whom we have built a relationship over time (Ellis et al. 2005) based on regular interaction (Bimber et al. 2012). Essentially, when we follow another user, or another user follows us, it is because they want to listen to what we have to say (Ballsun-Stanton and Carruthers 2010; Crawford 2011). Feminists shape their activist practices via the digital network that it is performed on, enabling them to utilise the *follow* affordance to *connect* with others, forming a feminist Twitter community (see Figure 16).

| Practice | Affordance | Description |
|---|---|---|
| *Connection* | Follow | Forming connections with other users for varied reasons, which can be a shared or similar interest |

*Figure 16 Twitter Activist Practices*

Some of these connections may be with geographically dispersed feminists (Crossley, 2015), which reproduces and reinforces the notion of a worldwide feminist collective. This is significant in terms of fostering a sense of community (Papacharissi 2014), accessing knowledge, experiences, and resources (Cochrane 2013; Papacharissi 2014), and motivating political participation (Ellis et al. 2005). In the context of activists using Twitter as a public platform, who the identified audience is and who else is listening is relevant because of the effect of a potential echo chamber limiting exposure to political information, opinions, and ideas. An audience based on shared interests, or made up of those who are similar to ourselves, arguably has the potential of representing an 'echo chamber', which is evident when a 'group of participants choose to preferentially connect with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders' (Bruns 2017, p. 3). An echo chamber can be framed positively, for those who are typically marginalised to find power in numbers. Twitter affords the possibility to directly address an identified audience, or reach a boundless audience (Marwick 2021). Unless a Twitter account is set to private, any other user can listen to activists conversations as a way of engaging with, or 'consuming' political information (Dennis 2018).

My analysis of empirical data allows us to ascertain how significant the digital community is for feminist activists, broadly in the context of engaging in activism and specifically connecting with other feminists who are similar to them. If connections are formed around similar political interests and issues, does that mean that feminists predominantly engage with other feminists, and importantly, other feminists just like them? It affords an in-depth analysis of how the feminist Twitter community feeds into the activism that respondents perform; I analyse the themes of *solidarity*, *sharing information* and *receiving recognition* from other feminists that emerged from empirical data. Using this as a starting point, I examine respondents' perceptions of who their audience is, which in the context of my research asked: *who do you want to talk to?* Further, I investigate whether respondents want to reach others with their activism or talk to others more like themselves. I discuss whether it matters if feminist activists are only talking and listening to other feminists and how this transforms our understanding of digital activism and political participation.

# Feminist Connections: Solidarity, Similarity, and Information Sharing Practices

There is a culture of connection on Twitter that directs users to connect to and share information with other users (van Dijck 2013). Community is a powerful term for the connections that we make in a digital network by clicking the follow button on Twitter. For feminists, the term *community* is loaded with connotations, such as sociality (Postill and Pink 2012), support (Jackson et al. 2020; Sobieraj 2020), belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi 2014). A key factor in the significance of the digital community for feminist activists is the inclination of individuals to participate by sharing resources, knowledge and insights voluntarily, without expectation of reciprocation (Rheingold 1993; Wasko et al. 2004; Ellis et al. 2005). We can draw a parallel here between the feminist Twitter community and Rheingold's (1993) experience of online communities in the 1990s, where users engaged in similar sharing practices. Feminist activist practices of connection and content sharing reinforce the notion of community associated with the 'early years' of Twitter (van Dijck 2013) when the digital network was more friendly and fun (Burgess and Baym 2020). On Twitter, the act of connecting to another user signifies interest (van Dijck 2013) and wanting to hear more from them (Kwak et al. 2010). However, it is worth remembering that Twitter uses an algorithm that makes personalised recommendations for users to follow (Bruns 2019b) based on tweet activity, location, or the type of users previously followed (Twitter 2021a). In this sense, Twitter directs users to form personalised connections (Poell and van Dijck 2018), which could potentially expand the feminist digital community by suggesting others who were previously unknown. This is important for marginalised individuals who want to connect to like-minded others, which for the feminist Twitter community, is grounded in the shared identity as a feminist with similar political tenets.

Manifest in the empirical data here, feminist activists are concerned with connecting with like-minded feminists on Twitter, the notion of community or the feminist collective, and sharing practices with others. Spender (1996) argues that women identify the potential of extending their community through the internet, which is at the 'intersection of people, technology, and practice' (boyd 2011, p. 39). There are far-reaching implications for feminists to talk to and learn from each other (Serisier 2018) on Twitter. Stacy talks about feminists coming together, which is significant, both for her and for others:

> *'I think that both politically and socially [Twitter] is giving us space to coalesce and to find each other.'*

When Stacy mentions having 'space', this immediately reminds us that women do not have the same opportunities elsewhere but can access a wider space on Twitter. On Twitter, we can 'find each other' by simply searching for others we already know offline or think we want to know, or by using particular words like 'feminist' or 'Women + Equality'. However, we might not always find others we want to connect to. In some ways, the idea of 'feminists' as a homophilous community is rather challenging, because there are some major differences between feminist ideas, values and political issues. This disrupts the idea, to some extent, that homophily leads to limited exposure of other ideas, opinions, and information. We can form a digital community with other feminists who have similar, or different ideas, in the same way as following politicians from different, potentially oppositional parties, and from different countries. Twitter enables us to connect with others for various reasons, which may be social, political, cultural, entertainment, news, or informational. For example, in her leadership role for the Basingstoke branch of the Women's Equality Party (WEP), Stacy shares informative content about political issues and campaigns designed to educate and engage in discussion with others. She also talks about her latest acting roles, which are often connected in some way to feminism, but aren't always. Both personally and in her WEP role, Stacy's connections afford her followers participation and interaction with other feminists (Fotopoulou 2016a). Moreover, Stacy is a mother, an actor, and activist who is aware of time constraints, so when she talks about having 'space' she could also be talking about the capacity of digital networks to connect users without 'same-place, same-time' limitations (Faraj and Johnson 2011, p. 1464). She can choose when to engage with others on Twitter, at a time that suits her, which is not restricted by time or geographic location.

Being connected to others, grounded by the notion of a shared, or collective, 'feminist' identity, enables an underlying sense of belonging, meaning, and recognition essential to digital communities. It is a community in the sense that we belong to the Twittersphere, with other users who understand the connection culture. Moreover, the concept of community is reinforced when we connect to and communicate with others who use a language that we are familiar with (Dixon 2014) and have similar political opinions, values and viewpoints (Dahlberg 2001; Batorski and Grzywińska 2018). At the same time, communities on Twitter are personal because of the algorithms that personalise and recommends others to follow. Further, we follow and talk to an identified audience of users who follow us. Kate talks about the significance of finding a 'sense' of community, which she speculates could be 'the point' of Twitter:

> *'Maybe the point of Twitter is to find your people. They give people a sense of solidarity, a sense that they're not alone and a sense of community.'*

Kate talks about the notion of connecting to 'my people', which indicates that there are others she classifies as just like her. For her, it is about preferentially connecting to and finding affinity from 'like-minded' others (van Dijck 2013; Dixon 2014). It speaks to Twitter enabling a collective understanding and sharing between feminists, which feeds into the notion of this digital community as a powerful collective. Those in the feminist Twitter community are capable of coming together to communicate (Chadwick et al. 2015), take action, and collectively contribute to impactful moments, such as #MeToo (Mendes and Ringrose 2019). When Kate talks about the significance of connecting to other feminists on Twitter, she clarifies that it is a means of knowing that we are 'not alone'. Her comment here reflects the idea that we were previously isolated and unable to find other feminists (that we want to talk to) offline as easily. The sense of 'solidarity' that we feel is when we identify those *similar* others online, who we feel belong in our community. Kate could also mean that feminists are excluded from traditional forms of political participation (Dahlberg 2011; Helberger 2019), hence utilising Twitter to connect, communicate and take action is important, individually and as a collective that can come together and act as one.

Twitter is a 'networked communication platform' (Ellison and boyd 2013) that enables us to share with and via the connections we make. Sharing knowledge and information with other feminists in our community develops and strengthens our connections (van Dijck 2013). By making information and knowledge available, we facilitate communication, interaction and political participation (Dahlgren 2013) amongst our connections. These sharing practices generate and strengthen our community connections (Rogers 2014) who direct the flow of information on Twitter (Bruns and Moe 2014). This is pertinent to the way that digital feminist activists access and share new information (Postill and Pink 2012) within the community. Catherine talks about how feminists make use of Twitter in general, rather than specifically for herself:

> *'Twitter is a really important place for feminists, to meet and to form networks, to get information.'*

Here we can see that Catherine identifies the importance of Twitter *for* feminists as a space to find and 'form networks' or connect with other feminists to gain access to information. She comments that Twitter is an important 'place', which evokes a tangibility. Before digital networks, feminist networks were formed in bookstores (Megarry 2020), front rooms, meeting halls, and protest marches (Fotopoulou 2016a). The connections with other feminists may have been more local than national, or indeed, worldwide. There may have been restrictions for joining a group or attending a meeting based on class, race or gender (Phipps 2016), limiting how information can be accessed and by whom. Conversely, Twitter facilitates our access to information (Burgess and

Baym 2020), which is a vast resource for feminists beyond our existing knowledge base. Information dissemination is directed by affordances, such as retweeting (boyd and Ellison 2007; Kwak et al. 2010). Hashtags enables us to access political moments in real-time, such as protests in the street (Karpf 2016), find and connect with others who share an interest in the same event. Moreover, our sense of community can generate reciprocity, where we will like and retweet content from our connections because we 'know' them (Wasko and Faraj 2000; Ellis et al. 2005). This information diffusion can fuel political engagement and participation (Wajcman 2004; Karpf 2012) and facilitates the expansion of community simultaneously.

In feminist Twitter, there is a sense of belonging to a community that is established by activist practices of connection, reinforced by the communication and action, such as sharing resources. These practices drive feminist political participation, where ideas can be extensively discussed, evaluated and new solutions gained (Ellis et al. 2005). We can engage directly with a single tweet, or have prolonged conversations with like-minded feminists, who we 'identify with' (McCosker 2015). By the same token, Sarah speaks about being a part of a digital community, and specifically why this is useful:

> *'Being part of a community, without necessarily being face-to-face literally with people, is really useful. We do want to feel like we're part of a community and that our opinions are valued. You can have a long discussion over hours and days, and that feels really good.'*

The theme of belonging is central to Sarah's understanding and experience of a digital community. She draws a comparison with her offline experiences, where she would need to be 'face-to-face' and in the same space to perceive that connection and feel a sense of belonging in the same way. Sarah talks about the importance of being validated by others in the community when sharing her opinions; it is that sense of recognition that is a defining feature of a feminist community (Mendes and Ringrose 2019). When she talks about having a 'long discussion', we can see the idea of accessibility in protracted conversations that she can dip in and out of online, something that could not be easily achieved offline. This ongoing, or drawn out, form of communication is at the core of digital communities, in that, Twitter facilitates 'a long discussion' asynchronously or in real-time. These discussions create the foundation of establishing connections with others, reinforcing the idea that we are part of a community. Moreover, Sarah talks about her opinions being valued by her connections, which speaks to others confirming her voice (van Dijck 2013). Sarah is being heard, and for her, this has incredible value.

Our weaker connections can share communication from the users they follow, exposing us to different users and sources of information (Valenzuela et al. 2018). It affords the opportunity to

participate in conversations we may not ordinarily see and connect to others who may be of interest. In this sense, those in and beyond our digital community 'encourage greater by-product learning about politics' (Chadwick 2012, p. 52). We have the opportunity to participate in discussions with geographically dispersed users, some of whom will hold different, potentially conflicting, views and opinions (Duggan and Smith 2016). For example, Erin has a positive take on the different connection and communicative opportunities that Twitter enables:

> *'Twitter is great for connecting with people who you may or may not be able to actually meet in person. You get to see a lot of different perspectives online.'*

Erin echoes Sarah's point about connecting with others outside of those that we know in the real world, who we may only ever know on Twitter. Interestingly, Erin's comment shows how this digital community affords a feminist counter-public to connect similar voices *and* access a diverse range of ideas, information, and perspectives from other parts of the world. Chadwick (2009, 2012) argues that digital networks facilitate users' access to political information and 'alternative perspectives' as part of their everyday use (Dennis 2018). It is worth remembering that the majority Twitter accounts are public (boyd et al. 2010); thus, users can communicate and interact with both like-minded and diverse others (Stromer-Galley and Wichowsky 2011). There is a duality at play here, we can build communities of similar others, while simultaneously broadcasting information to a wider audience. For example, if a user we follow retweets a news article, we can read comments from other users and interact with them even if we do not 'know' them. This could offer interesting perspectives and diverse opinions from many others outside of our community.

Twitter represents an 'earth-wide network of connections' (Haraway 1988, p. 580) that enables feminists to share 'situated knowledge' – how we see the world based on our experiences – with others. In this context, Twitter increases the possibility of learning from others in an unparalleled way. We have the opportunity to access news, resources, experiences and knowledge, from perspectives that we 'would not otherwise be exposed to' (Dennis 2018, p. 105). Julie talks about how 'useful' Twitter is for her to be able to access expert opinions in order to expand her knowledge:

> *'I've found it useful to connect with like-minded people, and to educate myself about various issues by following experts on the topic.'*

One of the uses that Julie mentions it connecting with 'like-minded' others, those who share similar interests in politics and political issues is still present in her comment. It is of paramount significance that Julie can access information via her connections to educate herself on 'various

issues'. What makes the digital feminist communities political is that we can share information, educate, and learn from others without being bounded by real-world constraints. For example, Twitter enables opportunities for communication and connections with feminists based in China[7], to see what they are talking about, learn about the issues that are important, and support them by raising awareness. We can contribute to a discussion with feminists from different countries, backgrounds, and cultures, who we would not necessarily be able to engage with. On Twitter, there is an immediacy in clicking the follow button to expand our connections, and access different political ideas and opinions (Duggan and Smith 2016). Interestingly, Julie talks about 'following experts' to learn about many issues or be an expert on a particular topic, which is the other 'use' that she identifies for Twitter. These experts may not be like-minded and share a similar interest in political issues. Julie may be more likely to connect with experts with whom she has a common interest or other connection. Her comment evokes an argument made by Rheingold: 'if you need specific information or an expert opinion or a pointer to a resource, a virtual community is like a living encyclopaedia' (1993, p. 51). As such, Julie can connect with like-minded, different, and expert users on Twitter, enabling her to educate herself and potentially others on topics that might not be available offline.

Feminist Twitter is part connective, similarity, and informational network. It is a community where feminists can access support from others (Jackson et al. 2020) and learn about feminist politics (Fotopoulou 2016a). We may have different motivations that shape our digital communities, such as finding solidarity with others (Bouvier 2020; Sobieraj 2020). There is also the potential to reach, interact and connect with an infinite number of other feminists on Twitter, which Bernadette says is significant:

> *'Twitter gives you access to every other person who is similar to you or accepting of you in the whole world.'*

Bernadette talks about the *possibility* of finding many similar others. Her comment seems to draw on McPherson et al., who argue that 'similarity breeds connection' (2001, p. 415). By design, Twitter facilitates connections with others, it is a space where feminists can find 'every other person', extending their community (Spender 1996) beyond users that they know offline. For Bernadette, it is about creating a digital community infused by a sense of solidarity; a form of togetherness which stands together through the shared experience of marginalisation. Her description is reminiscent of Fraser's (1990) notion of a counter-public, which extends the space

[7] For example, an account I follow is @FeministChina – which tweets about feminist issues, such as social media platform Weibo censoring or deleting accounts by known feminists.

to form connections and create meaningful communities with other feminists. When Bernadette talks about acceptance, she indicates that it is more than superficial similarity; it is about a deeper connection with others who share political values, beliefs, and a feminist identity. It signals togetherness, rather than agreement. Simultaneously, it can be a delicate line to tread; we may find other feminists on Twitter who may not share the same values as we do, but whom we follow because we want to hear from them. Twitter constantly permeates the notion of an echo chamber, or filter bubble, through the use of affordances, our timelines, and trending topics – therefore, we can view content that does not necessarily support our idea of 'feminism', or a 'feminist' identity. The commonality between users is feminism, rather than a certain type of feminism, which is publicly 'accessible and observable' by others (Papacharissi 2002, p. 10).

Twitter's connective culture enables us to form a digital community with others (van Dijck 2013), guided by the notion of homophily or similarity. We are drawn to like-minded others (Karlsen et al. 2017), for support and validation (Jackson et al. 2020; Sobieraj 2020) with whom we develop a sense of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi 2014). It is significant that feminist activists engage in information sharing practices with their digital connections, representing a worldwide feminist collective, irrespective of geographical or physical constraints. Feminist practices are shaped by Twitter, which facilitates users sharing opinions, information, and learning, with members of the community who may not have access to this elsewhere; therefore, the ability to interact and participate with other feminists on Twitter has immense value. Rather than activists trying to reach a broad audience, they aim to talk with and listen to like-minded others, or a mixture of both. When based on shared affinities or interests, our audience has the potential of representing an 'echo chamber', where ideas are confirmed and reproduced, but this is not necessarily the case on Twitter. However, a concern emerged from many respondents' that having a predominantly feminist followers/followees could restrict the information they access, and who could listen to them, which is significant when women do not have equal access to political platforms elsewhere.

## Echo Chamber or Audience: Are Feminists (Only) Talking and Listening to Each Other?

Twitter affords the potential for users to reach a wide (Fotopoulou 2016b; Vromen 2017; Linabary and Batti 2019), or new audience (Mendes 2015; Jackson et al. 2020), while simultaneously enabling them to speak directly to their community (Marwick and boyd 2010; Mendes 2015). A specific individual, community or conversation may be the object of political discussion, which can be achieved using the @mention or # hashtag affordance (Burgess and Baym 2020). These Twitter activist practices may be guided by the sensitivity of the information being disseminated, or if we

want to hear a particular individual's perspective (Helberger 2019). Our use of Twitter can be driven by the need to connect to like-minded others, engaging in communication and listening practices with our connections (Papacharissi 2016). It is suggested that connecting with others similar to us creates an echo chamber (McPherson et al. 2001; boyd 2008b), a notion that was first posited by Sunstein (2001, 2009, 2018) who expresses a concern that the internet reinforces existing political views through users selective engagement with content. The theory is that our connections direct the flow of communication and information, confirming and reinforcing views a user is already familiar with (Dubois and Blank 2018). Echo chambers are frequently conflated with filter bubbles that enable skewed access to political information and discussion, such as the Brexit Referendum (Bastos et al. 2018; Bruns 2019b). However, our connections can be both diverse and like-minded, who share a range of information, opinions and talk with various others (Stromer-Galley and Wichowsky, 2011) and while users engage in discussion in their communities, there is free-flowing commentary from others outside of their interests. Political action, communication and connection on Twitter are essentially boundless.

Empirical data highlights a concern for the potential effect of an echo chamber or an overlapping echo chamber and filter bubble and the limitations this could have on their connection and communication (Bruns 2019b) to some degree. Echo chambers can empower and enable activists to find marginalised others who are similarly interested in politics, who then take action or communicate on a specific political issue together. Feminist activists can speak to a diverse audience, one with like-minded others, or both, which raises the question – do they want to reach others or talk to users like themselves? I analyse respondents' understandings of who their audience is, examining the concept of 'reach' in detail, and discuss the implications of whether a digital community has an echo chamber's properties as defined by Bruns (2017, 2019b). Finding commonality with others is what Ogden describes as gravitating towards communities based on 'interests and shared affinities' (1994, p. 724). This idea of users gathering around connections and mutual interests, is also identified by Bruns et al., who argue that communities of interest do not 'act as sealed echo chambers' (2014, p. 122). Further, users can be part of more than one community and ongoing conversation, some of which are widespread and may overlap (Bruns et al. 2014). Therefore, information diffusion and communication take place in, and across, communities on Twitter. Sian comments about the different 'bubbles' or communities of shared interest that she is aware of:

> *'I find Twitter really interesting because [its] about being in a bubble, and you are in a bubble. There is One Direction Twitter or Petitions Twitter, Politics Twitter and Books Twitter. The kind of conversation you're having would be alien to another group.*

*Politically you would feel a lot more isolated, which is almost the flipside to the bubble accusation.'*

Here, Sian talks about the various communities that a user might be in on Twitter, some of which may have connections (followers/followees) or conversations that overlap with each other. Some communities may form around a general interest, such as Politics Twitter, which overlaps to some degree with Petitions Twitter. They may also be more niche, such as forming around an interest in a specific author within Book Twitter. As Sian mentions, other users would not understand the sometimes-obscure subjects that are discussed in these bubbles. It is worth remembering that we use Twitter for various reasons, communicate across various topics, and talk to multiple others, some of whom we share commonality with (Marwick 2021). These interest 'bubbles' do not exist in isolation, there is a 'context collapse' where they are visible to the rest of Twitter (Marwick and boyd 2010, 2011), and other users can interact with a conversation, whether they are interested in it or not.

If Sian were affected by an echo chamber, as Bruns (2017) defines it, she would only *connect* to similar others, which would be the basis of forming an interest community. In theory, Sian would then be isolated from other users and communities, and from the possibility of hearing 'outside views' (Bruns 2017, p. 3). Bruns (2017, 2019b) distinguishes that an echo chamber is about *connection*, which are facilitated by the digital network's affordances, such as following others on Twitter. In contrast, a filter bubble is about users' communication practices, which on Twitter is performed via tweet, retweet, mention and like affordances. If we apply the notion of a filter bubble to Sian's idea of Political Twitter, which Bruns (2017) identifies is a group that chooses to *communicate* only with each other, where similar views and information circulate, Sian is less likely to interact with or view information, ideas, and opinions outside of the community. If an echo chamber and a filter bubble overlap, then 'users who *only* follow each other also choose *only* to communicate with each other' (Bruns 2019b, p. 4). However, the connections we form with other users on Twitter are, as Sian says, from different 'bubbles' of interest. We may even think of a celebrity, author, or politician as part of our digital community or 'bubble', even though our connection to them is weak (Granovetter 1973, 1983) compared to an individual we regularly interact with (Bimber et al. 2012). We may engage in the 'bubbles' that Sian talks about, but there is also free-flowing communication with others outside these interests. Therefore, Sian is not necessarily isolated from other political opinions as she supposes.

Individuals who have an interest in or are actively involved in politics may follow others who are similarly engaged or active (boyd 2008b). They may also follow others with alternative perspectives or be followed by others with conflicting political ideologies and opinions. As Dubois

and Blank argue, 'the higher a person's level of political interest the less likely they are to be in an echo chamber' (2018, p. 735). There is value in engaging with others who have diverse political ideas, interests, and opinions. The practice of following other users who we have *some* interest in, such as a politician, activist, or journalist, are functionally the same in our Twitter audience, they do not necessarily have more relevance. For example, Sian has a diverse mix of other users who follow her for a multitude of reasons:

> *'I've got mostly feminists, with the odd MRA thrown in, for pleasure. I think my audience is definitely feminist, left-wing politics, and those are the kind of conversations I have with the people that follow me, and I follow back.'*

Here we see the idea of similarity with Sian's audience, most of whom are feminists, some of which Sian follows. Although Sian talks about the users who follow her and who she 'follows back', she does not refer to the early practice where other users expected reciprocal follower/followee practices (Ellison and boyd 2013). She identifies that most of her audience follow her based on her communication and interaction with them or others, typically about politics and feminism. Here Sian makes an important point; she expects other users to connect to and communicate with her *because* they have similar interests. It indicates that Sian is invested in the idea that she follow others who are like-minded or with whom she shares a common interest (Burgess and Baym 2020). Conversely, when Sian talks about being followed by the 'odd' Men's Rights Activists (MRA), this demonstrates that some users with politically polarised views follow her. They may follow Sian to expose themselves to a different opinion (Batorski and Grzywińska 2018) or new information outside of their typical knowledge base (Stromer-Galley 2006, p. 200). Or they may be following Sian, as MRAs have previously done so on Twitter, specifically to challenge her feminist opinions and ideas (Jane 2016a; MacKenzie 2019; Mendes et al. 2019).

Hannah, who has only used Twitter for a few years, could immediately identify exactly how many followers she has in her audience. Some of whom she believes follow her because they are feminists and interested in feminism. She has clearly put a lot of thought into why a user might follow her, and similarly to Sian, she expresses a concern that having common interests or shared affinities could limit her, or their, access to information:

> *'I've tried quite hard to build up followers, but it's just been a couple of months. I think I'm on 135, so not too many. I think it's mostly other feminists or people highlighting their interests related to feminism, some academics, and some politicians. I won't hear that much from people outside of that bubble. I think that that is one of the problems with the whole follower/following system is that you end up just replicating the views of those around you, and you don't really branch out too much.'*

Hannah is actively trying to increase the number of followers she has, in the sense that this number imbues some sort of value to her voice. This could relate to the notion of popularity, influence (van Dijck 2013), or status, which represents the followers interested in what she has to say (Ballsun-Stanton and Carruthers 2010). The number of followers is displayed on our homepage, and a higher number of followers could indicate that they have more interests, or connections, in common (Rogers 2014). It could also indicate that a user like Hannah is actively trying to build their following. As of writing this, Hannah now has over to 1600 followers, which is 500 more than this time last year, so there seems to be an increasing number of other users who are interested in the topics that she discusses, and in general, with what she has to say. In some ways, her comment about increasing her followers indicates that she has a singular interest reflected by the other users that she follows, and follow her, who only talk about one subject – feminism. Further, this indicates that unlike Sian, Hannah does not tweet about her other interests, or indeed, interact with users who have diverse interests. Hannah questions whether she could be limited by the similarity in her 'bubble'; however, if a marginalised individual can access content and information from marginalised others on Twitter, this can be 'beneficial' rather than a limitation (Bruns 2019b). For example, if Hannah views a retweet from a user she follows, then functionally, she has access to a broad range of content and discussion (Smith et al. 2015) outside of her bubble. Furthermore, when Hannah comments that she is not able to 'branch out', she seems to describe the overlap between a filter bubble and an echo chamber (Bruns 2019b), and yet, neither of these concepts apply. She preferentially connects with other users that she wants to hear from and shares similar political interests but has not excluded others. Rather than connecting and communicating *only* with her network, Hannah is still capable of viewing information and content from others; even though it seems limited, it is not.

Our digital audience may be listening to us, but they do not have to *follow* us to contribute to a conversation or interact with content, such as liking or retweeting. We follow or connect to other users because we want to hear what they have to say and receive *all* of their content (Kwak et al. 2010). We frequently talk and listen to other users regardless of whether we follow them, some of whom hold incredibly different or entirely opposite views (Karlsen et al. 2017), and others who are like-minded, who may reflect or echo a similar opinion, interest or ideology. Of course, this interaction can create connections with other users who were previously relative strangers (boyd and Ellison 2007; Ballsun-Stanton and Carruthers 2010). Bianca talks about being in an echo chamber, where feminists are predominantly talking to other feminists, and how this has value to find others who think in such a similar way:

> *'A lot of the time, I think it's a bit of an echo chamber, where I'm only talking to people who I largely agree with, which has value. It's definitely been helpful to connect with and find mutual support with other people and with people who think similarly.'*

Bianca expresses a concern that she is in an echo chamber, where she predominantly talks to an audience of like-minded others. This immediately suggested the notion of community or a feminist collective on a worldwide scale, which, as Bianca says, has allowed her to find 'mutual support' from others. The value that she talks about is not necessarily about connecting to and communicating with similar others but validating or echoing her thoughts and opinions (van Dijck 2013; Mendes 2015; Karlsen et al. 2017). Here we can see the value or benefit that a homophilous digital community (Bruns 2019b) has for Bianca; she can interact with and gain support from others who share interests or political ideologies (Bouvier 2020). Bianca's comment does highlight a concern that she is only talking to others who agree with her, rather than reaching wider audiences. This is not necessarily the case on Twitter, where the flow of communication, information and opinions is not as affected as Bianca supposes. On Twitter, users, are not 'locked' into a thematic conversation or community, and there is a broad variation of information being shared on our timelines. However, the value of engaging in digital communities with like-minded others is not as problematic as some respondents believe it to be. A repeated concern is that talking to similar others about political views and issues limits digital activism, which has implications for the impact an individual is trying to create, such as raising societal awareness. Simultaneously, we do not necessarily know the audiences that we engage with beyond those that we identify, or indeed, who else is listening to us speak on Twitter. Dennis identifies that 'listeners' use digital networks to 'consume political information' (2018, p. 186). In this sense, we may directly impact an individual's learning experience, and shape their political ideas, opinions and ideologies (Dennis 2018), whether we know they are listening or not.

The function(s) that Twitter serves may differ for many individuals, some of whom use the digital network as a social and conversational circle, rather than as an educational platform, where the aim is to reach, and so impact, a diverse audience about a specific political issue. An individual may aim to reach mainstream media platforms with their tweets, which then report on the political issue under discussion, arguably reaching a wider audience entirely (Fotopoulou 2016b). For instance, Catherine talks about the potential 'reach' we have on Twitter to engage with a wider audience, beyond our 'obvious' followers, some of whom are more diverse than other users, who predominantly have other feminists following them:

> *'Some of us only reach beyond the obvious audiences than others. I am reaching a lot of people who absolutely don't identify as feminists. I have a lot of men following me, but men who are following me for feminism. '*

> *'It's a real problem for activism; if you're trying to reach out, you're probably not doing so as effectively as you want to, and you're probably just reaching the same group over again. There are people out there who can really transcend that, but they're very few and far between.'*

What is significant about Catherine's understanding of her audience on Twitter, and her digital activism, is that it is unlike that of many respondents who wanted to hear from and talk to other feminists exclusively. Catherine is incredibly savvy about her apparent feminist audience, and endeavours to reach others beyond that, so that she can gain interest in her activism from others. She uses her account for her professional journalism and writing, and in her capacity as a founder of WEP to educate and reach an expansive audience about the party in general, or a particular political issue or campaign. Her comment implies that men follow her specifically to learn more about feminist ideas and feminism in general. Catherine demonstrates her understanding of using Twitter for feminist activism, which is broader and more nuanced than many respondents who want to feel supported or have their opinions echoed back to them.

Catherine talks about trying to 'reach out' to a broader audience with her activism and identifies problems with trying to do so on Twitter. She identifies that this is a critical issue for digital activists; that the same people are listening when she (and others) communicate about pertinent topics. Catherine believes that rather than disseminating information as broadly as possible, she is limited by who is in her digital community. Her comment is reminiscent of the notion that Twitter can act as a megaphone (Murthy 2018) for some but argues that in her case, it does not. From Catherine's perspective, there is less functionality to reach beyond the immediate community if she communicates about a marginalised topic or to a marginalised community (Papacharissi 2014). She mentions that there are individuals who can 'transcend' that boundary. However, it is unclear who she might mean; it could well be that a celebrity/high-profile feminist activist can speak to many audiences at once and have a wide range of followers.

Reaching a potentially wide audience on Twitter is driven by a combination of affordances and our connections who engage with our content. These connections shape how information flows through engagement practices (Himelboim et al. 2017). For example, by retweeting, a user can amplify (Bennett et al. 2014) and disseminate pertinent information to their direct audience (Barberá et al. 2015). In theory, when a tweet is liked and retweeted, the more amplified impact it has, the 'trendier' it becomes (van Dijck 2013). Twitter algorithmically promotes content that gains the most attention (Burgess and Baym 2020). Liking and retweeting are forms of engagement with either the user, the content, or both. It disseminates the tweet to anyone who

is 'listening' (Crawford 2009, 2011). A user might retweet for various reasons, one of which may be to critique rather than endorse (as can be seen from the satirical figure below):

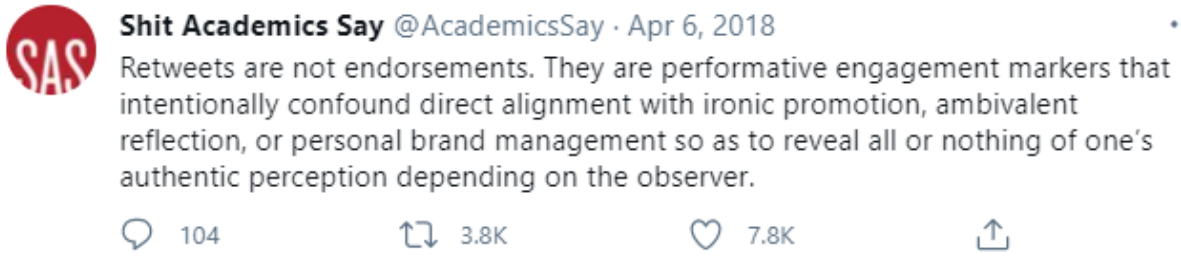


*Figure 17 Tweet by Shit Academics Say 06/04/18*

Further, many users have the disclaimer 'retweets are not endorsements' as part of their bio, which could indicate that they want to remain neutral if, for example, they are a journalist (Hultner 2013). When the connections we identify as part of our community retweet and like our content, it can create the illusion of agreement. Jess expresses her concern that her interactions are with users who agree with her and that this disrupts political discussion and wider debate:

> *'It doesn't help political debate at all because if you can only like and retweet and interact with people who are exactly in agreement with you.'*

As a political representative, Jess engages in debate about current issues, government policies, and legal reform in the House of Commons and, to some extent, on Twitter. Jess may be trying to stimulate political debate or disseminate her opinions without involving mainstream media platforms (van Dijck 2013). Jess considers the majority of her audience to be *'people who are interested in politics and feminism'*, this suggests the idea of an overlapping echo chamber and filter bubble, where the tendency is to communicate and interact with our connections. Jess assumes that other users engage with her because they agree with what she has to say, rather than considering the multitude of other reasons for retweeting. While some users retweet to show their support for an issue (Jackson et al. 2020) others may do so to provoke a 'critical' response (Bruns and Highfield 2016), to generate conflict (Ortiz 2020), or to document problematic or abusive content (Jane 2020). Twitter is, in some ways, an imperfect communication platform for Jess to engage in political debate. For example, users can read a thread[8] out of sequence because it appears as a 'truncated' bundle on their timeline, which they need to open to read the tweets in reverse chronological order (Twitter 2021b). A user may reply to a tweet within the thread, not realising that a question has already been answered, or ascribe

[8] A series of connected tweets by the same user.

emotion to a comment that a user did not necessarily impute. Those users in Jess' audience may not be interested in contributing to a potentially lengthy political debate, where there is no guarantee that their perspective will be listened to.

Examining how individuals connect to and communicate with their digital community and audience advances, to some degree, our understanding of contemporary political participation. We gravitate towards users with whom we share interests or political ideologies (Ogden 1994; Bruns et al. 2014; Bouvier 2020). For marginalised individuals, it is 'beneficial' to connect to other feminist activists (Bruns 2019b), who direct the information and communication that we view on our feed (Himelboim et al. 2017; Batorski and Grzywińska 2018). In this sense, forming a digital feminist community is of particular significance for shaping political opinions (Dahlgren 2013), validating ideas (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), and resolving issues (Wasko and Faraj 2000; Ellis et al. 2005; Stromer-Galley 2006). Feminist activists can speak to similar audiences, aim to reach a new audience (Mendes 2015; Jackson et al. 2020), or both. In part, this evidences the significance of *why* feminists use Twitter for their activism. The concerns that some respondents discuss over the possible implications of an echo chamber, or overlapping filter bubble, on communication and connection is misplaced in the context of this study.

# Conclusion

Feminist activist practices of preferentially *following* other users is guided by the phenomenon of homophily (McPherson et al. 2001), meaning that we connect to other users with whom we share an interest or similar political ideologies. It is of particular significance that marginalised individuals are forming communities at the intersection of 'people, technology, and practice' (boyd 2011, p. 39) because feminist activists can reach an identified, boundless audience, or both. Feminists' use of Twitter for connection and communication has been significant as a space to ask questions, learn about feminist politics (Fotopoulou 2016a) and share information with other feminists irrespective of geographic boundaries. Many respondents identified the importance of connecting to other feminists who they could talk to about activism and who validated their political tenets or opinions. The sense of community and belonging that many respondents commented on reinforced the importance of being able to find many others with whom they shared a common interest. In this sense, feminist Twitter is no different from offline political participation – joining a political party and attending a party conference is also an echo chamber and filter bubble of sorts – it does not invalidate homophilous digital communities as political participation. Part of my original contribution to knowledge is to show that rather than circumscribing their access to political information and communication, the homophilous

community extended the knowledge, experiences, and resources that feminist activists have access to, facilitating their contemporary political participation.

Digital activists use Twitter as a megaphone (Murthy 2018), live-tweeting their responses as the police violently break up a vigil on Clapham Common for murdered Sarah Everard (Wolfe-Robinson 2021) while watching the news coverage via YouTube, potentially reaching new audiences (Mendes 2015; Jackson et al. 2020). They can also address a specific audience comprised of similar others (Papacharissi 2014; Himelboim et al. 2017) who are their *identified* audience. We can see from the exploration of qualitative data that some respondents attempt to reach beyond those who identify as feminists, intentionally trying to engage others with their communication and action. Others are aware that their audience is diverse and continue to perform their activism in the knowledge that they and others may be listening (Crawford 2009, 2011). The users we follow determine the flow of information and communication (Himelboim et al. 2017; Batorski and Grzywińska 2018), which via the retweet and like affordances, can expose us to various perspectives and experiences. Moreover, Twitter affords the opportunity to access news, resources, experiences and knowledge, from perspectives that we 'would not otherwise be exposed to' (Dennis 2018, p. 105). While some respondents expressed a concern that they were predominantly talking to users who were similar to them and the effect on their activism, there is no demonstrable evidence to show that they exclude others from *connecting* to or *communicating* with them. Further, similarity does not necessarily circumscribe our access to political information or alternate views (Bruns 2017). Instead, connecting to and communicating with other feminists can be 'beneficial' (Bruns 2019b) in terms of accessing many other voices, opinions and experiences, which is unparalleled in offline communities.

While this chapter has focused on the significance of a digital feminist community, specifically connecting to, and communicating with, similar others, the next chapter will look at respondents' negative experiences of Twitter as feminist activists. Respondents reactions to their experiences, and that of those who form part of their digital community, are inherently political – because it directly relates to their perception and use of Twitter as a political platform. My analysis will examine how feminist activists perceive Twitter as a space to perform their activism, where in doing so, they may be targeted by digital hate. Many respondents have experienced misogynistic and anti-feminist digital hate, some have received death threats, but every respondent could give an example of another feminist who has been targeted. What is the effect of digital hate on their use of Twitter to engage in activism? Does it limit who has conversations, the type of communities they form with whom or the feminist issues they discuss? I will identify a dichotomy in respondents' experiences of Twitter, with some who perceive it as a safe(r) space than the real-world and those whose perceptions are grounded in their experiences of digital hate viewing it as

an unsafe space. Further, I analyse feminist activists' use of particular affordances enable them to continue to take action and communicate about politics and significantly to (re)claim their space.

# Chapter 6 Leveraging Affordances to Navigate the Twittersphere and Perform Activism

## Introduction

This chapter analyses how feminist activists perceive Twitter as a political space where they may be targeted by digital hate for discussing feminism: how does this affect them and how they perform their activism and engage in political participation? On Twitter, feminist activists can be targeted by digital hate for mentioning feminist tenets in their bio or for discussing certain subjects, such as gendered inequalities (Citron 2014; Mendes 2015; Powell and Henry 2017; Chen, Pain, and Zhang 2018; Sobieraj 2018, 2020; Ging and Siapera 2019; Linabary and Batti 2019; Mendes et al. 2019). Since Gamergate[9] in 2014, a particularly toxic type of anti-feminist digital hate has become more prevalent on Twitter (Ging and Siapera 2019), blurring into misogynistic harassment and abuse that functions to 'dominate, silence and/or erase marginalised voices' (Linabary and Batti 2019, p. 253). The impact of digital hate is evident when feminists are temporarily silenced, or permanently 'quit' Twitter (West 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018). Existing patterns of power in society are replicated and reinforced in online spaces (Travers 2003; Carty 2015), evidenced by the misogynistic 'struggle' to control political discourse (Sobieraj 2020), which makes feminists' digital activism on Twitter political. If, as Carpentier argues, 'the defining element of participation is power' (2012, p. 170), when feminists are subject to digital hate on Twitter, their ability to take action and communicate is contested. Utilising the block, mute and report affordances enable feminist activists to continue their political use of Twitter. As such, blocking a troll who would otherwise target and seek to silence them is evidence of clicktivism, a form of digital activism, performed via the affordances of Twitter. Furthermore, this is a form of the political participation, which, in this instance, digital feminist activists use to challenge and resist hegemonic exclusionary practices. In this context, Twitter is an online political space where embedded societal power dynamics are in play.

Digital hate is nothing new; it first appeared in the early days of the internet in the 1980s and 1990s (Jane 2014a), when we communicated via discussion boards, chatrooms, Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and other virtual communities (Turkle 1995; Donath 1998; Herring 1999;

[9] Gamergate was an online harassment campaign that systematically targeted women in the gaming industry, specifically developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, and journalist/games reviewer Anita Sarkeesian. It spread anti-feminist and misogynistic hate across digital networks Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube (Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández 2016).

Herring et al. 2002). Feminist theorists have been at the forefront of interrogating the connections between technology, gender and power dynamics (Wajcman 1991, 2004; Turkle 1995; Spender 1996; van Zoonen 2001, 2002; Travers 2003; Haraway 2006) and how this impacts the phenomenon of digital hate (Herring et al. 2002; Penny 2013; Citron 2014, 2015; Jane 2014a, 2016b, 2017, 2020; Mantilla 2015; Phillips 2015; Vera-Gray 2017). There is no agreed-upon exact concept or definition of digital hate in the extant literature. Different terminologies are used to categorise a broad array of behaviours and practices, making comparisons between studies difficult. For instance, in *Hate Crimes In Cyberspace*, Citron (2014) discusses and interprets instances of online harassment that target women, inferring that this behaviour is connected to systemic sexism. Citron (2014) loosely refers to 'cyber harassment', 'hate speech', 'trolling', 'trolling culture', 'doxing', and 'online sexual harassment', which often overlap and are indeterminate. In this chapter, the term 'digital hate' is used to specifically refer to the rise in anti-feminism and online misogyny, which makes deliberate use of digital networks to 'facilitate and augment hatred against women' (Siapera 2019, p. 32). To further elucidate this term, this chapter will reflect the meaning of 'digital hate' established by Sobieraj, who categorises it as 'freely flung insults, threats, and abuse' (2018, p. 1704), which is useful for the purpose of this chapter to situate different forms of digital hate. The most recognised term 'trolling' is used in this chapter to acknowledge it as deep-rooted digital practice, which Herring et al. (2002) identify as actively seeking to disrupt online feminist spaces. Feminist literature on digital hate demonstrates that the language used to describe and categorise instances of online misogyny is significant: it frames how abusive practices are understood, particularly by respondents who may not identify their experience within that definition. This chapter proceeds with a nuanced understanding of what digital hate is, which frames respondents' action against it as a way of continuing their participation on Twitter.

Feminists access to, and experience of, Twitter is political, particularly since women are already marginalised from traditional political spaces (Mendes et al. 2018). In this chapter, I draw on empirical data to analyse how respondents evaluate their experience of Twitter as a space to perform activism, which emerged as a significant theme. Using this as a starting point, I examine respondents' perceptions of digital hate and the *effect* that being targeted by digital hate has on them. I identify a dichotomy in respondents' experiences of Twitter, some who perceive online space as *safe*, or safer than offline, and those whose insights are grounded in their experience of, for example, receiving a death threat. This experience made Twitter an *unsafe* space to be a feminist – which leads me to question, how do respondents leverage affordances to continue their political use of Twitter? Is their use of affordances itself a further instance of digital activism? Exploring respondents' different experiences of safety on Twitter allows us to evaluate how their

privilege and power can determine whether their political participation is affected, or not. I examine empirical data to demonstrate that respondents take political *action* by leveraging Twitter's affordances to control how they experience that space as feminist activists. This enables them to continue their use of Twitter for digital activism on their own terms, which, I argue, is a form of feminist activism – one that challenges male-dominated structures and trolls who attempt to determine how women experience and use digital networks.

## Respondents Perceptions of Twitter: Safe for Some, But Not for All

Twitter is an online gendered space, which, when framed as such, offers insights into how it is experienced by women, specifically feminists. These online spaces are populated by men who struggle to contain women's presence and participation in political discourse. Twitter is yet another example of a male-dominated space: 70% of users worldwide are men (Statista 2020b). The balance of gendered power in digital networks is complex, and it is built into the technical architecture, rules and moderation (Morgan and Hewitt, in press), which shapes user experience and behaviours (Green 2019). For example, Twitter uses a combination of machine learning and human moderators, predominantly men (Statista 2021), to identify 'potentially' abusive content (Twitter 2020). Moderators review the content of tweets and, based on guidelines, decide whether they are abusive or not. Of course, guidelines can be written with potential biases or blind spots, supported by a corporate policy that may be similarly flawed (Morgan and Hewitt, in press; Noble, 2018). In this sense, Twitter reflects societal gendered power dynamics rather than being an isolated online phenomenon (Beyer 2014). Gender is 'embedded' (Wajcman 2010) in Twitter's design, which rather than challenging existing inequalities, merely reinforces and reproduces them (Sobieraj 2020). This determines how women perceive and experience digital space, which can be experienced as safe, relatively safe, or not at all. There is a dichotomy between those respondents who perceive Twitter as a safe(r) space than the real-world and those who consider it entirely unsafe. This could be based on whether a respondent, or someone they know, has experienced digital hate. We must therefore understand digital hate as a way to control feminists' use of Twitter as a political platform, the cumulative effect of which determines whether a feminist takes action (Boyle 2019) or not. Having said that, feminist activists' use Twitter's block, mute and report affordances are a form of political action, although not all feminist activists utilise this, potentially powerful form of clicktivist control over their audience. For example, in some cases, feminists limit their conversations, the content they discuss (Sobieraj 2020), or as Jane (2017) argues, the feminists they will 'publicly' support.

Twitter facilitates political participation similar to but separate from a public sphere in the Habermasian sense. Fraser (1990) envisions a counter-public space where women could participate in feminist politics and discussion, traditionally marginalised from formal political spaces. The concept of a counter-public affords women an experience of a 'parallel discursive arena' (Fraser 1990, p. 67), where they can challenge and resist not only dominant narratives but digital hate as a whole. One respondent, Sarah, says that what is needed on Twitter are more women online to highlight and overpower hateful users and their behaviours because the trolls cannot target everyone:

> *'We need more women occupying social media because ultimately, the trolls can't get all of them, right? You overwhelm those men, call them out, and then the tide begins to change direction, and that's what we need.*

In Sarah's comment, we can see the notion of power represented by the number of women, 'more women', that she feels are needed on Twitter. Sarah is an academic who is knowledgeable about trolling practices and behaviours, having researched digital hate and misogynistic language (2016). She draws on Jane's (2016b, 2020) notion of 'digilante' tactics, which involves a large group that 'calls out' certain trolls or trolling behaviours. Sarah's phrasing reflects this idea, where many women can 'overwhelm' the men[10] that troll; it is a manifestation of women's power rather than being an act of domination. When Sarah says that we need 'women occupying' online space, it evokes the act of physically occupying a building, which is a way of individuals engaging in 'dissent' (Norris 2009). Conversely, when Sarah talks about 'occupying' an online space, she uses the same language associated with traditional activism, although it would manifest differently. Her comment suggests that the more women there are in online spaces, taking action in the form of challenging or 'calling-out' the trolls, the more likely it is to change the culture of that space. In this context, the function of Sarah's comment is declarative; it is about women demanding an end to unacceptable behaviour or actions and seeing that as the *beginning* of change in the right 'direction'. It is unclear if Sarah means that our experience of the space itself would change - perhaps the more women there are challenging trolling, the safer the space - or whether it is about women wanting to experience Twitter on the same terms as men, where being political does not result in being trolled on the basis of gender.

Twitter facilitates political discourse about issues that are of societal concern, but by way of digital hate practices and behaviours, it reinforces and reproduces inequalities that serve to

[10] Both myself and Sarah are aware that while men are the majority of those targeting women with digital hate, this does not mean that only men troll, nor indeed that men do not experience digital hate.

exclude or silence certain sections of society. There is not necessarily equal access to, or experience of Twitter, by all users. Safety is a relative experience depending on who the individuals are, the spaces they have access to, the amount of privilege they have, and their place in social or political hierarchies of power. The difference in privilege and power affects the broad experience of Twitter and how digital hate is likely to change how it is used for political participation. Jess Phillips is arguably one of the more outspoken UK-based women politicians on Twitter; in an interview, she said, 'if you speak from a feminist perspective, which I very frequently do, you will suffer from a huge amount of trolling' (Rawlinson 2018). Does the anticipation of trolling limit how she used Twitter for communication and political engagement? Jess speaks about how she, as a political representative, manages digital hate, which she refers to as 'backlash':

> *'I don't think women could describe Twitter as safe a space as the real world; I'm definitely safer in the real world. The two limits it has on me…it will silence me because I can't be bothered with the backlash. Sometimes I'll tweet something and then have to turn my phone off because I know it is going to get me a load of shit.'*
>
> *'So, sometimes that changes the way I use it. But the other way it limits me is the way it attacks people who talk to me. So anyone who mentions me in a tweet or interacts with me, or if I retweet something that they've said, they also get it.'*

Interestingly, Jess is one of two respondents who clearly articulates that they feel safer offline than online spaces. She is a politician and perhaps feels 'safer' in the House of Commons and the accompanying security this status offers her. In one sense, Jess is privileged in a way that other respondents are not; Jess is part of a hierarchal political structure where the regulations are clear, observed and reinforced in Parliament, which is unlike her online experiences. Jess confirms that some instances of digital hate have '*silenced*' her – like other respondents – she (temporarily) disengages from Twitter to avoid the '*backlash*'. Southern and Harmer (2019) contend that this deliberate silencing of women politicians reinforces their status as outsiders, although the notion of 'outsider' creates problematic inferences, but the sense here is that digital hate marginalises women politicians further. As a politician, Jess is an archetypal insider who is part of the most influential political body in the country. The impact of digital hate on her ability to participate in political debate on Twitter is not the same as it is for other respondents. Jess has the loudest megaphone available; she has access to mainstream media and Parliament to air her views.

Jess confirms that some instances of digital hate that she has been subjected to has changed how she perceives and uses Twitter; it is unclear whether she is referring to being targeted with over 600 rape threats in one night in 2018 (Rawlinson 2018) or expressing her personal opinion that

may cause her to temporarily disengage. Feminists are targeted with this kind of 'negative attention' by users who aim to silence them (Herring et al., 2002). Hirsh (2018) argues that the use of rape threats, in particular, are the 'ultimate weapon' designed to keep outspoken women in their place. Jess identifies that one of her actions is to turn her mobile phone off, limiting where and when she receives notifications of digital hate. This is not the same as disengaging by temporarily locking her account, which might not be something she can do as a politician; she may have to be available in her role to constituents and others. Instead, Jess deliberately seeks respite from digital hate in the same way as physically leaving a room when a conversation becomes abusive. In this context, her behaviours reflect how she might respond offline to abuse – trying to take control while simultaneously avoiding an 'attack' of abuse. Jess further comments that a limitation of digital hate is the targeting of other users who @mention and interact with her on Twitter, which impacts whether a user wants to interact and who she can directly communicate with (Amnesty International 2018). It demonstrates that another user who interacts with Jess about a political use that may not relate to feminism may be subjected to the same digital hate as Jess is. It might mean that a user limits their activism by not discussing certain issues or talking with well-known individuals like Jess. This effectively silences them, whether temporarily or permanently.

In Fraser's (1990) terms, women who are already marginalised from offline space utilise online space as a counter-public, enabling them to engage in resistance and/or political discourse typically delegitimised and excluded from traditional political participation. Further, women, specifically feminists, are marginalised by mainstream media platforms that perceive them as outside dominant norms (Sobieraj 2020). This impacts how women are listened to when contributing to political discussion and activism (Burgess and Baym 2020). Alexia shows her frustration with the lack of safe spaces open to feminists to discuss politics, which demonstrates that Twitter is often a hostile public space, which women use because they are 'ignored' by mainstream media coverage:

> *'The lack of safety is so clear and so overwhelming at times, and I think we all wrestle with the question, should we really be here? I don't think it's safe online, but we're so compelled to find a way of our analysis coming out because we get so ignored by the mainstream media.'*

Alexia's comment shows she continually struggles with her continued use of Twitter for political discourse and action because of the digital hate that she may well receive. As she goes on to question, what other option is available to feminist activists to communicate and take action on an equivalent scale? She previously spoke about the importance of finding, communicating, and

sharing information with other feminists. But here, Alexia is questioning whether any of us should be using Twitter *at all* to engage with politics because it is not a safe space for feminists (Drueke and Zobl 2016). She feels compelled to use Twitter because there are no other options available that she can control in the same way. Alexia is conflicted by the need to engage in feminist activism and the ramifications that she, and others, may experience when she does so – it is a relative experience dependent on the power structures that women already experience.

Safety is not necessarily something that *all* women experience, whether offline (Jackson et al. 2020) or online (Boyle 2019). Other marginalised characteristics, such as race, age, etc., play a distinct role in how we perceive and experience public space. Like some other respondents, Jean sees a distinction between offline spaces and online, where she has more control over her space and who she interacts with, but where anyone could be listening:

> *'I feel safer in a strange way offline because there is an element of control. I think that's partly to do with my age because most of it has been offline, but actually, online space is not that safe.'*

Like some, Jean created her Twitter account for professional reasons in 2018 and is incredibly aware of social and professional boundaries. As we can see, she feels much safer seeing and knowing who her audience is, rather than the online space where anyone can be listening (Papacharissi 2016) or lurking (boyd 2008b; Papacharissi 2010; Crawford 2011). In this sense, Jean's audience is invisible (boyd 2011), which is perceived negatively. As a (retired) academic, Jean is far more used to having an idea of who she is speaking to, in her perception of audience, and is not used to digital networks' ambiguity where others outside of those she can identify may be listening (Crawford 2009, 2011). Jean has more control over the context of her audience offline rather than online, which is scaled in new ways and is not necessarily as distinct as they once were. Jean is not particularly happy with the idea that unidentified individuals are listening to the content that she creates, which as a member of the Women's Equality Party, may be distinctly political or feminist. At the same time, this does not seem to stop her from posting whatever she wants online; perhaps there is an element of self-censorship that she does not elucidate. It is significant that Jean continues to use Twitter how she wants to because although she expresses a concern about online safety, what she has to say is perhaps more important.

A threat made online is not necessarily restricted to that space. With less separation between offline and online spaces, which overlap and merge, threats of violence can escalate and become a real-world concern. Conversely, a troll could make a threat without intending to act upon it. Cheryl says that although she has received threats, she feels safer in online spaces because there is less of a physical threat:

> *'It's complicated. You can't actually be physically assaulted online; nobody is going to hold you down and rape you online. So from that point of view, online is safer than physical.'*

As Cheryl states, safety is a complicated concept, which many respondents describe as a relative experience. To some, online threats of physical and sexual violence are 'just words', but they also blur the separation between our online and offline spaces. Threats of violence are a widespread misogynistic practice that increasingly targets women in digital networks (Sobieraj 2020) but can also be directed towards friends, family, and colleagues. For example, in 2016, feminist author and activist Jessica Valenti left Twitter when violent threats were made about her five-year-old daughter (Morris 2016). When we are targeted with threats, they cause fear, anxiety and distress, which is 'real, tangible, and embodied' (Jane 2020, p. 1). Although there would be consequences if Cheryl was assaulted, that does not change the impact of an online threat, which can 'spill into offline domains' (Jane 2020, p. 9). Ultimately, these tactics are used by trolls as an attempt to silence an individual (Lumsden and Morgan 2017) and force them to stop participating, whether this is online or offline. Vickery (2018) argues that women who have been threatened online have cancelled offline speaking events, which silences and marginalises them further.

Existing gender inequalities are reproduced in digital networks. Women are the minority of users, and anti-feminist misogynistic trolls seek to control feminists' use of Twitter as a political platform. The cumulative weight of digital hate can silence women temporarily or permanently drive them from the network. It impacts how safe women feel online, and when threats are made against them or those in their lives, it permeates their experience of offline space. Contested space is not reserved to the online sphere. Not all respondents identify a lack of safety with digital networks, and some felt much safer in the real world. This dichotomy is demonstrated by individuals' political position and their ability to communicate about politics elsewhere. When there is less opportunity to take action in traditional political spaces, digital networks facilitate feminist activists with the space to communicate, even if it means they will be trolled for doing so.

## The Impact of Digital Hate on Feminist Activists

The phenomenon of digital hate frequently targets feminists as a means of limiting their presence and participation in digital networks. Across the literature, there is an indication that this affects how feminists use online space and how their perception of safety influences the decision that they make (Herring et al. 2002; Citron 2014; Jane 2014a, 2014b, 2016b, 2017, 2020; Phillips 2015; Lumsden and Morgan 2017; Amnesty International 2018; Ortiz 2020; Sobieraj 2020). Feminist activists make decisions about their level of participation, who they interact with, what can be

said, and about which subject. Digital hate is an extension of the harassment that targets women in offline spaces, which men use as a means of controlling women (Sobieraj 2020). Women moderate their behaviour, limiting their political participation and sometimes their professional interactions to mitigate the possibility of being targeted by digital hate. These practices become habitual; what started off as temporary 'safety work' (Vera-Gray 2018) becomes the standard way to experience Twitter as a feminist activist. The 'safety work' that women perform daily are the additional steps taken to be *less*: less visible, less outspoken, less of a target to be safe in public space (Vera-Gray 2018; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020).

The burden of digital hate should not be written off due to the anxiety, distress, and fear that women experience on a regular basis (2014b, 2016b, 2017). Much like street harassment, digital hate intimidates women by reminding them of the power dynamics in digital space; she is outnumbered, unequal, and unsafe. Fiona talks about being online and experiencing the 'awful' effects of trolling, drawing a comparison to the masculine aggression of street harassment, which includes various actions and communication such as catcalling, prolonged staring, leering, following someone or wolf-whistling (Logan 2015). Fiona talks about trolls demanding her 'attention' to elicit a response regardless of whether this is positive or negative:

> *'[Trolling] is aggressive, in a similar way to street harassment; it becomes really intrusive in an aggressive way – you must pay attention to me, I must have your attention now. They do just seem to want to get your attention. You're not at immediate risk of physical harm, but there is a risk of physical harm because someone can track you down and find you. I guess the thing about online, it's different and awful in that it permeates into your private spaces.'*

Fiona identifies a parallel through the trolls repetitive and intrusive demands for attention, similar to that of the street harasser. Trolls may want to derail a conversation by instigating an argument (Herring et al. 2002). Street harassers are predominantly men who target women's 'feelings, thoughts, behaviours, space, time, energies and bodies' (Wise and Stanley 1987, p. 71). The similarity is palpable: this could be a description of trolling practices and behaviours. Fiona observes that trolling is different to street harassment in that it invades her 'private' space. Interestingly, Fiona characterises Twitter as a private thing that permeates the offline. Twitter acts as a doorway, providing access to her home, her thoughts, and her physical environment. This dichotomy is what makes Twitter fundamentally interesting from the feminist activism perspective - this blurring of online and offline spaces can be incredibly threatening. Twitter is such a part of our political, social and professional lives (Dahlgren 2013) which we check via our smartphones throughout the day, adding to our experience of blurred offline and online space

(Karpf 2012). Jane argues that women deploy certain practices to mitigate digital hate from 'permeating' our private spaces, such as 'setting personal boundaries' by not checking Twitter 'after hours or in bed' (2017, p. 50). These practices enable women to define the conditions in which they use Twitter.[11]

Driven by the severity of digital hate, women change their practices and behaviours, impacting how they experience online and offline spaces. Sarah talks about the issue of digital hate, referring to an incident in 2013 when activist and writer Caroline Criado Perez was targeted by thousands of comments on Twitter after successfully campaigning for the Bank of England to reinstate a woman on the five-pound note. Criado Perez was 'bombarded' (Sobieraj 2020) with '50 abusive tweets an hour for about 12 hours' (Powell and Henry 2017, p. 170), including rape threats (Hattenstone 2013). Sarah says that because of these threats, we need to stay cognisant of the potential for risk and threats in real-life:

> *'Because you're in your personal private space, you can feel safer than you actually are. We know from doxing that actually, you aren't. If somebody really wants to get you, they're going to get you. It doesn't matter where you are. If you're someone like Caroline Criado Perez, you need to be aware if there's a threat that could manifest itself, you need to know.'*

We can see that Sarah is affected by digital hate when another feminist has her 'personal private space' invaded. She mentions doxing, which is the practice of sharing an address or other identifying information, to deliberately incite an aggressor to 'hunt' a target in real-life (Jane 2016b). The term doxing stems from the .docx file format that personal information is typically shared online (Cochrane 2013). Sarah refers to doxing specifically because a troll had tweeted Criado Perez's home address (Hattenstone 2013), which, as Sarah says, 'you need to be aware' of. Criado Perez left her home while police investigated after her space and her life had been threatened. Sarah states that our location, or who we are, has no limiting effect on trolling – 'if somebody really wants to get you, they're going to get you'. There is a real sense of menace felt in Sarah's comments, who is incredibly aware that our experiences of online and offline space is blurred, which can have detrimental ramifications for women. She also shows that the restrictions placed upon Criado Perez by digital hate diminish her and her campaigning work. There appears to be less impact on Sarah, other than her need to stay aware *if* she is threatened.

Digital hate can be far-reaching when trolls target other users who show support for the original target on Twitter or elsewhere. Catherine was one of many journalists who had been showing her

[11] This is not something that I asked about or respondents expanded on, which would be explored in a further study.

support for Caroline Criado Perez, who was then targeted because she had commented on one of Criado Perez's tweets. She talks in detail about receiving a death threat from another Twitter user and the impact it had on her:

> *'When I got my first death threat on Twitter, one of the very first things the police said to me is that I should go off Twitter. I remember trying to explain to them that was like saying to a journalist, stop using the phone or email. I got a threat saying that they were putting a bomb in my house, and because it was such an early instance of this, the police had no idea of how to handle it. But they also took it much more seriously, I think than they would these days, and their response was to get off Twitter and to tell me to move out of my house, which of course I didn't.'*

In describing being the target of a death threat, Catherine indicates that the police did not understand the nature of an online threat or how to deal with them, even though they did respond to the seriousness of the potential risk and violence that could manifest in real-life. The police's advice placed the responsibility firmly with her, suggesting that she change her offline location and online behaviours and practices. This silencing consequence of digital hate seeks to remove the individual from participating online (Lumsden and Morgan 2017). Spender argues that 'women have fewer and fewer choices about whether or not they will participate. For many professional women, staying out of cyberspace is not an option' (1996, p. 200). This is echoed by Catherine when she says that she simply cannot afford to change how she interacts online as a freelance journalist because it would be detrimental to her career. She goes on to say that she thinks she was targeted having interacted with Stella Creasy, an MP who had shown her support for Criado Perez's campaign, who had received rape threats a few days earlier (Batty 2013). Death threats have become a standard form of trolling (Harmer and Lumsden 2019), which show disagreement with user content or disapproval of the user (Vickery and Everbach 2018). If online death threats have become commonplace, this may explain why police enforcement processes were so lacklustre in Catherine's case. However, at the same time, two people were arrested by the Metropolitan Police, having made similarly violent threats to Criado Perez (Hattenstone 2013). This uncertainty leaves women, particularly activists, vulnerable to digital hate without trolls facing repercussions.

Young women are particularly vulnerable to digital hate because they are more likely to be digital natives, for whom mobile technologies are central to their way of life (Castells 2015). There is little to no separation between their online and offline lives, making their experience of digital networks more pronounced than ours. Sam talks about her concern that instances of digital hate could permeate the space for young women and the added layer of personal invasion:

> *'It is a real issue, and for young women in particular who live on their phones, it's so important for them. Abuse that comes through that medium is obviously going to be more significant for them. If someone's hurling online abuse at you, it's the crossover of the real world, and that is the scary thing. Because they are saying they're going to come round to your house and know where you live and they're threatening to rape you, that's a real fear. It doesn't matter that it's on social media: that's real.'*

The concern that Sam shows here is for the young women whose offline lives merge with their online interactions. They have a 'persistent connection' to the internet (Wajcman 2008), a searchable web, and every day use of social networks (Vromen et al. 2015). Young women are particularly vulnerable to 'severe' digital hate (Jane 2020), such as stalking and image-based sexual abuse[12], because they 'spend more time online' and are exposed to sexualised behaviours (Powell et al. 2018; Powell and Henry 2019). There is little difference between the real and the digital world for young women: it is 'permanently entangled and blurry' (boyd 2014, p. 211). Connection, socialisation and communication are crucial to the lives of younger women; the impact of 'abuse' and 'threats' are significant in a broader sense. Their everyday use of digital networks means that it is increasingly difficult to separate themselves from digital hate, and young women are likely to leave the site entirely (Jane 2020).

Our experiences of online space merge and bleed into offline spaces, so when women, specifically feminists, are targeted by digital hate, the cumulative impact can be widespread. Digital hate is more than 'just words', it is fundamentally a powerful tool used to 'dominate, silence and/or erase' (Linabary and Batti 2019, p. 253) women who are political on Twitter. For example, when feminist activists engage in campaigning or political discourse are targeted with rape or death threats, it reminds us that there is a risk to being a feminist in digital networks (Sobieraj 2020). Further, professional reputation and career progression are impacted when public speaking events are cancelled (Cole 2015; Amnesty International 2018; Sobieraj 2020). A misogynistic comment I have experienced and observed being levelled at feminists is 'shut up and make me a sandwich', which seeks to remind us of our place in society (Cameron 2018). Feminists may engage in safety work by changing where and when they check their mobile phone or temporarily lock their Twitter account, reflecting the measures taken by women in offline space. In this sense, feminists' activism is limited by digital hate, but many continue to use Twitter on their own terms, having applied safety measures to make the space as safe as possible.

[12] Image-based sexual abuse, also known as 'revenge pornography' is the sharing of, or threatening to share, sexual images of another person without their consent (Powell et al. 2020).

## Feminists Taking Action: Muting and Blocking as Activism

The proliferation of digital hate and the concurrent anti-feminist and misogynistic overtones has resulted in feminists taking political action by leveraging Twitter's affordances to mitigate its affect, and control the digital space that they perform activism in. So far, there has been no single solution to the prevalence of digital hate and the specific misogynistic targeting of feminists on Twitter. Through repetitive acts of resistance, feminists can block and mute their aggressors, which affords an element of control, and by leveraging affordances in this way, it enables feminist activists to continue their use of Twitter on their own terms. I examine feminists *taking action* by (1) blocking abusive users that have targeted them, which determines who can interact with them; (2) muting a word, phrase or specific user, which essentially removes this content from view; and (3) reporting a user account, or a number of their tweets, for 'abusive behaviour' (Twitter 2021c). I argue that feminist activists are taking these actions *against* instances of digital hate and that this utilisation of Twitter's affordances is an act of activism in and of itself. In this context, digital activism can be understood as a way of taking action via the affordances of the digital network to continue political participation. Simultaneously, it is a way of challenging and resisting the dominant structures that determine how women experience and use digital networks.

| Practice | Affordance | Description |
|---|---|---|
| *Action* | Block<br>Mute<br>Report | Block another user; mute a word, phrase or other user; report another user or their tweets |

*Figure 18 Twitter Activist Practices*

The phrase 'Don't Feed the Trolls' has become ubiquitous advice given to a user who is the target of digital hate, suggesting they should not give the troll any attention (Binns 2012). In theory, in not rising to the bait by responding or arguing back, the troll will leave the target alone. But as Jane argues, this advice has been 'resoundingly ineffective' (2014b, p. 560). Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that it is the targeted user's responsibility to adjust their use of digital space instead of the troll. In this context, Twitter has become a contested space where feminists are trolled for simply being feminists. For instance, women are 'attacked' for sharing personal narratives about experiences of sexism and inequality (Turley and Fischer 2018) and campaigning on women's rights can be 'dangerous' (Willis 2020). How Twitter is used and how affordances are leveraged affects how participatory a feminist activist *is* in political debate. Earlier in our interview, Alexia questions whether feminists should even be using Twitter, which she describes

as a gathering in 'free space' when there is little to no other choice open to feminist activists. She goes on to talk about how others use affordances to narrow the scope of who can talk to them, which allows them to continue to talk about politics:

> *'From what I can see, people who really get into the nasty toxic debates, they have so many blocks and notification settings in place that they're making it work for them.'*

Alexia mentions her observations of others who were part of the 'Gender Recognition Act 2004' (GRA) debate. In 2018, the UK government announced that the GRA would be reformed and opened a consultation to the public. It allows individuals with gender dysphoria to legally change their gender, and one suggestion was to remove the need for a medical certificate that classified how an individual self-identified (Sharpe et al. 2018). The debate about suggested reforms divided feminists between those who support trans rights and those who oppose them (The Guardian 2018a; Pearce et al. 2020a). Alexia tries to cope with the influx of toxicity by sharing her opinion with others with whom she 'felt safe enough' to discuss the issue. Interestingly, Alexia talks about observing feminists known to her rather than her own experiences of voicing her opinion. Her friends continue to engage in 'nasty' and 'toxic' political debates, facilitated by their use of affordances, instead of being silenced or declining to share potentially controversial views (Lilleker 2015). Alexia frames her friends' experiences online via leveraging the block affordance and changing notification settings to separate themselves from the hostility. They are changing account settings so that there are no notifications from users who do not follow them or turn off 'pushed' notifications, which are sent as texts to mobile communication technologies, which are 'always-on/always-on-you' (Turkle 2013). In this sense, leveraging affordances creates a separation between online and offline space so feminists can choose when and where to engage and control who sees their content. Leveraging affordances facilitates the separation of space and enables their continued engagement in debate in a way that 'works' for them.

At times, the difference between interpretations of feminism and political ideologies is stark and polarising. Trans-exclusionary feminists are outspoken on Twitter, constructing narratives that paint trans women as dangerous (Phipps 2020), which marginalises trans women from feminism and womanhood. For instance, Cheryl talks about being the target of digital hate and how and why she leverages block and mute affordances, which for her, have different results:

> *'The block button is my friend. Obviously, as an openly trans person on social media, I will occasionally get harassing tweets, and I block them immediately*

When Cheryl says that a user 'knows' they have been blocked, she references the notification (see Figure 2) that a user sees, leaving them unable to follow, comment or see content from the

blocker, which could happen mid-conversation. Blocking is a fast way to remove a user from interacting or communicating; it is a way to disconnect from unwanted political content (Bruns 2019b). A user does not receive a notification informing them that they have been blocked, but if they visit a profile, they will see the below warning:


*Figure 19 Twitter Notification to Blocked User*

Once another user is blocked, they cannot find, contact or follow the original user (Twitter Safety 2021). There are significant implications for transgender individuals, who are often the target of digital hate by both misogynists and trans-exclusionary feminists (Cochrane 2013). Jane (2017) argues that blocking users is a feminist 'fight' response and a way to 'push-back' against digital misogyny. Cheryl talks about challenging another user for their transphobic remarks, who then directed thousands of 'fan' followers to target Cheryl. She says that although she was targeted with a lot of digital hate: *'it died down very quickly and you get to learn who to avoid'*. It does not take much for a 'celebrity' user with a large following to abuse their power in this situation.

Catherine started using Twitter in 2008, in the early days when it was more of an ambient site (Papacharissi 2014) and users were more likely to engage in 'friendly chatter' with others (Burgess and Baym 2020). Conversation, socialisation and sharing information are deeply rooted practices of behaviour on Twitter. Feminist activist practices of educating themselves and others are also deeply rooted practices in feminism and feminist politics. Mendes et al. (2019) identify that digital feminists will also attempt to engage trolls in conversation to educate them. Catherine mentions that this used to be how she would respond to instances of digital hate:

> *'A long time ago, I worked out that it was quite possible to tell whether people were wanting a genuine conversation or whether they weren't. So, I started to mute trolls, one by one, but then the volume became far too great for me to do that, and it was too dull. I didn't want to spend precious time muting people, so I changed my filter settings so that I only see people I follow. If they're blocked, they know they're blocked. Whereas if you mute them, they are just using their time, and it's diverting them from people who might be hurt by it.'*

Catherine states that she can identify who genuinely want to engage in conversation, indicating that she can also identify who the trolls are, perhaps from certain behaviours. The 'volume' of non-genuine conversations affected Catherine's experience of Twitter, how she spends her 'precious' time and whom she engages with. Time is a commodity, particularly for women (Norris 2002), and trolls specifically attempt to distract and disrupt a conversation (Ortiz 2020). Catherine is tech-savvy and understands how to leverage Twitter's affordances to meet her needs. Although she initially preferred to mute 'one by one', Catherine adjusts her notifications settings (using advanced filters) to successfully implement a broad mute effect. In this sense, Catherine reclaims her space, how she uses it, and who she interacts with, only engaging with users who are known to her. Whereas if Catherine mutes a user, they can still follow and interact with her, but she does not see their content on either her timeline or in notifications. A muted user does not receive a notification about this action. Catherine is shrewdly leveraging affordances by muting them so that the troll wastes their time without hers being impacted. Additionally, by muting a troll rather than blocking them, she sees this as protecting other women from being targeted (Vera-Gray 2018) by 'diverting' the trolls attention to her. Catherine talks in more detail about the trolls whom she has muted but who continue to waste their time targeting her. Other users who she follows can still see and comment in her defence, so Catherine is aware that the trolls are still active:

> *'I can tell that I'm still being trolled because what happens is people who are trying to defend me do follow and get into conversations with the trolls, and then I'll see a one-sided conversation and can tell that somebody is responding to something idiotic and that they're trying to defend me or defend the point. It has absolutely changed the way that I use Twitter. I know they're out there shouting into the void from the one-sided conversations when people I do follow join in, but I am clear that I don't want to see them. I think it's a great use of their energy them shouting into the void.'*

Here we can see that Catherine mentions that trolls are 'shouting into the void', which efficiently wastes their time and energy rather than her own. This comment is reminiscent of Herring et al., who refer to trolls behaviour as 'luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions' (2002, p. 372). Muting the trolls allows them to have a shouting match (Smith et al. 2015) with other users who have come to Catherine's defence, further diverting the troll's energy away from her. Catherine states that trolling has changed how she uses Twitter, but she has, in essence, disengaged from their abuse after muting them. Instead, the trolls continue to shout their abusive comments into the void of the Twittersphere because Catherine is no longer listening.

Politics has often generated heated debate (Theocharis et al. 2020) that can permeate both online and offline existence, particularly when a discussion devolves into a pile-on.[13] Duggan and Smith (2016) argue that most users will try to ignore political arguments and problematic content. What they fail to consider in their study is how *women* are specifically targeted by digital hate, which may contain threats of violence. So, knowing what is being said and identifying where a threat is coming from is part of taking action against digital hate. Sarah mentions a two-step approach, where first we use mute or block affordances to immediately stop the trolling from affecting us, and how we engage with Twitter. Second, we ask another user to view the content of digital hate because they are 'removed' from the personalised targeting, and so that we do not have to engage with it directly:

> *'The best advice is to block, mute or walk away; if necessary, give someone else access to your account and ask them to check occasionally because they are much further removed from you. Then in a few days, download all your tweets and read them that way. But the temptation is always to keep checking, and you check, and you see something else horrible has been written, and you get more upset and anxious.'*

Sarah clarifies her statement; walking away does not mean to stop using Twitter, rather that we should refuse to engage. Her response to digital hate is similar to Catherine's. Sarah already knows from her experiences in early digital communities that she could leave a discussion in a chatroom, which is a way of disengaging and stopping an argument from spiralling out of control. Sarah approaches leveraging affordances from her academic perspective, suggesting that the data can be downloaded and viewed in a safer (offline) environment. Filipovic (2014) argues that the line between 'real' and digital can blur quickly. Reviewing Sarah's comment in this context, it is about knowing where a threat is coming from so it can be avoided or so she can implement safety measures to mitigate potential offline violence. Sarah performs 'safety work' (Vera-Gray 2018) by asking another user to check her account to distance herself from the 'horrible' content. The safety work that women perform in online space is no different than that performed offline. It is about changing behavioural patterns, such as temporarily locking a Twitter account until the trolling dies down 'just in case' it escalates (Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020).

Molly takes a moment to reflect before saying that she remembers Gamergate *'blowing up*' and that it was a *'really horrible'* moment where she chose to disengage because women were being attacked. She talks about Gamergate as a *'particularly threatening'* example of trolling; it is the

[13] A pile-on is an orchestrated attempt to silence a user by encouraging many users to target another with criticism, sarcasm, threats and often irrelevant questions.

most widely referred to instance of online misogyny (Nieborg and Foxman 2018). Although Molly leverages Twitter's affordances to make them work for her, some of the trolling content still filters through to her. She clearly works to limit the trolls' ability to *'attack'* her in a similar way to Gamergate:

> *'I think I've done a mix of reporting and blocking. Yeah, it seems quite effective, although some trolling stuff makes it through to you, but if you are pretty aggressive with the blocking. I do a lot of blocking, and I do some muting.'*

Interestingly, Molly refers here to being 'aggressive' in her resistance work, leveraging the block affordance predominantly to her advantage, with a 'mix' of some muting and reporting. Her actions seem more deliberative and proactive, rather than aggressive – but then, why is there negativity with Molly describing her actions as such? Her aggression is not directed at the troll; in the same way, she is not making threats or insulting a troll. Instead, she chooses to block, mute, and report them. Molly removes them from her interactions, one way or another, but does not interact with them directly. As an academic and activist, she seems almost energised by her ability to control the amount of trolling she is targeted with. She is also the only respondent to state that she reports trolls for their practices and behaviours, which was surprising because I expected that respondents would leverage the report affordance heavily. However, it seems almost an unspoken expectation amongst respondents that reporting is a pointless exercise because Twitter does not take reports of trolling seriously. For example, an *Amnesty International* report about trolling on Twitter found that the company is inconsistent with enforcing its rules, creating a 'level of mistrust and lack of confidence in the reporting process' (Amnesty International 2018). While some attempts are being made to improve moderation and reporting processes (Twitter Investor Relations 2019; Twitter 2021c), Twitter also needs to rebuild users' trust and confidence that digital hate will be addressed more accurately and extensively.

Whisper networks have shared lists amongst friends and colleagues that contain information about known harassers and abusers (Jaffe 2018). These lists are a coping strategy traditionally used to warn others about perpetrators of abuse (Tuerkheimer 2019). Similarly, blocklists circulate amongst users, containing information about known trolls that may be misogynistic or oppressive in another way, such as trans-exclusionary feminists who have previously targeted trans women during online debates about gender (Pearce et al. 2020b, 2020a). These lists can be created and curated by one user, a digital community, or generated using an algorithm (Geiger 2016). Bianca is the only respondent to talk about using a blocklist, which identifies other users who are likely to engage or who have already engaged in digital hate:

> *'We pre-emptively block people who we think are potentially going to be a problem. So you are absolutely doing that safety work online - like blocking people rather than responding to them. There are definitely some people in the feminist community in Melbourne who will share their lists of people who they've blocked and say – these are men who have trolled me or harassed me online. Here's my block list so you can block them.'*

Rather than waiting for a user to target her or a user that she knows, Bianca simply blocks them as a defensive tactic. We could interpret this as an act of 'digilantism', where Bianca enforces her boundaries in digital space. Interestingly, Bianca is not referring to @TERFblocklist; a Twitter account that uses an algorithm to generate and update a list of trans-exclusionary feminists and transphobic users, although it appears to be an active account, has not interacted with other users for some time. The 'lists' that Bianca refers to are created and curated by feminists in her Melbourne community. These lists indicate feminists' organisation and awareness or their specific local surroundings, which can affect them personally and professionally. Functionally, a block list automatically removes accounts, tweets and notifications from any user that has been identified as problematic on that list. When a list is shared by another 'known' user, there is a similarity in terms of the classification of trolling behaviours and practices; another feminist user with similar political tenets is likely to block the same sort of accounts. It reflects individual understandings of what digital hate is and how it should be identified, affecting how it is blocked. It is not necessarily neutral but reflects the curators' experiences and observations of Twitter.

With the rise of anti-feminist and misogynistic digital hate, concurrent feminist resistance efforts are being taken to mitigate the impact of trolling. Feminist activists leverage the block, mute and report affordances, which determines who can interact with them and the content they view, enabling them to continue to use Twitter on their own terms. While their ability to take action and communicate about feminist issues is still contested, these 'digilante' tactics afford an element of control for feminist activists over their digital space and activism. Traditional political spaces are less accessible (Mendes et al. 2018) to feminists asking political questions, taking action, and communicating about politics. Feminist activists take action *against* digital hate, which attempts to determine how they experience and use Twitter, which I argue is digital activism.

# Conclusion

On Twitter, power, politics and participation are determined by the balance of gendered power, reflecting societal dynamics (Beyer 2014) skewed towards men. Digital networks shape how we experience that space through architecture, rules and policies, and algorithms. These determine

who can participate, what they can say and to whom, and how inappropriate behaviours or practices are managed. Existing inequalities embedded in network architecture determine how women perceive Twitter as a space for activism and whether they are 'safe' enough to do so. Women who use Twitter as a political site are targeted by digital hate, which is frequently misogynistic and now specifically anti-feminist. The rise in trolling practices and behaviours is an attempt by men to silence women who are speaking out and being heard in online spaces (Lumsden and Morgan 2017). While the participatory power of Twitter is available to all users, it is a contested space where women question whether they should be there at all. What if they continue to engage in political discourse, which happens to be about a controversial issue? How are other women affected when observing other feminists being targeted and threatened after participating in digital discourse? We can see from the qualitative data that some respondents perceive Twitter as a *safe* space for some but *unsafe* for others. Safety in online space is a relative experience framed by the individuals' position in society, the amount of power they already have and the other spaces they can be political in. Further, whether they have observed or been targeted by digital hate contributes to how 'safe' Twitter is for them to be a feminist or participate.

Feminists participation in and experience of Twitter is political, which I argue is being performed as ongoing activism against digital hate, which attempts to silence them (Cole 2015; Amnesty International 2018; Carter Olsen and LaPoe 2018; Vickery 2018; Linabary and Batti 2019; Sobieraj 2020). The cumulative effect of digital hate determines the action that a feminist is willing to take (Boyle 2019) and whether it is safe to 'publicly' show support for another feminist (Jane 2017). Feminist resistance efforts have leveraged the mute and block affordances so that aggressors cannot interact with them, view their content, or follow them. Using Twitter's affordances in this way enables them to have an element of control over their own digital space. If the 'defining element of participation is power' (Carpentier 2012, p. 170), then leveraging affordances to mitigate digital hate enables feminist activists to reclaim some of their power and take action and engage in political discourse. Feminist activists use 'digilante' tactics to take action *against* digital hate, sometimes blocking troublesome users before they have had the opportunity to target them. Part of my original contribution to knowledge is to broaden our understanding of how significant Twitter is as a site for feminist political participation. However, Twitter remains a contested space, where discussing political issues about feminism or women's rights has increased the likelihood that users will be targeted by trolls (Amnesty International 2018). In this context, digital activism can be understood as a way of taking action via the affordances of the digital network, which challenges the dominant structures that determine how women experience and use digital networks.

# Chapter 7 Conclusions and Contributions

## Introduction

Something is happening on Twitter. I scroll through my Twitter feed and immediately identify the feminist activists I follow, amidst other conversations and users, celebrating it being Friday. Many feminists I know are engaged in a heated discussion with others I do not know about restrictions to trans women's healthcare in the UK. Simultaneously, some lament the continuing Covid lockdown they are experiencing in Melbourne and retweet articles about how the Australian government handles the pandemic. Another is a new academic who asks for advice about teaching a module on feminist theory, who then receives information and resources from others. Feminist Twitter is a digital community within the Twittersphere where everything feminist activists do is inherently political; the actions they take, who they communicate with and connect to. Simultaneously, it is a collective of geographically dispersed feminists who validate our ideas, broaden access to information and knowledge, and create a sense of solidarity – which informs our understanding of why feminists use Twitter as a political platform. Digital activism and clicktivism are characterised by feminists' use of affordances to engage in diverse practices that are easily replicated – which is what makes it so significant. For feminist activists, it is a means of pushing back against the hegemonic structures that delimit traditional political participation within the bounds of formal organisations and processes and enables them to participate on their own terms.

## Where Political Participation and Digital Activism Meets Feminism

As an interdisciplinary thesis, this research has drawn on debates and approaches from three disciplines: web science, political science and feminist activism. Drawing on more than one discipline enables this thesis to take a unique approach that has allowed me to explore the contested concept of political participation from a different perspective. It has also helped to frame the motivation for and impact of incorporating digital activism as a form of contemporary political participation – unconstrained by borders, boundaries and citizenship. At the intersection of this literature is the conceptual lens that I have created (see Figure 20) and used to perform a detailed qualitative investigation of digital feminist activism on Twitter, currently missing from existing literature. The conceptual lens underpins my analysis and interpretation of qualitative data. It is an important part of my original contribution to knowledge in all three disciplines, on

theoretical and empirical levels. It is a method of (1) framing the problem of how political participation is currently understood, (2) applying the digital context of where it is performed, how and who by, (3) and expanding the conceptualisation and categorisation to include digital activism and clicktivism, contributing new knowledge literature in more than one field.

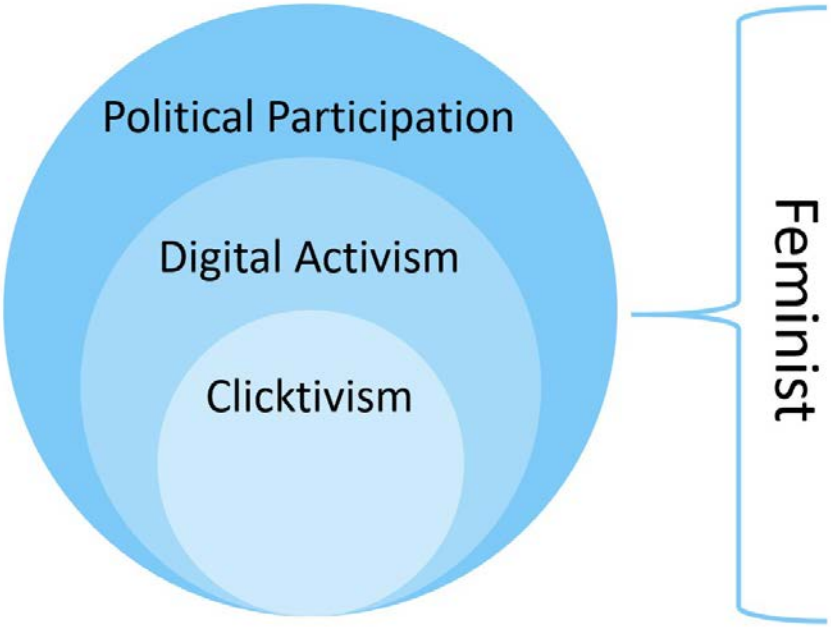


*Figure 20 Conceptual Lens*

This thesis shows the interrelationship between disciplines, while the conceptual lens has enabled me to demonstrate why we need to expand our understanding of contemporary political participation. By applying the context of a specific digital network, and its distinct affordances, I reshape our understanding of 'political' and 'participatory' acts, which in turn addresses the main research question, and is answered throughout this chapter:

**RQ1.** How does framing digital feminist activism as a form of contemporary political participation change our understanding of the concept?

The conceptual lens allows me to demonstrate the contributions this makes to political participation, which are significant. The unique empirical findings challenge existing debates on 'alternative' forms of political participation, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, which compare them to activities targeting decision-makers in male-dominated political institutions (Papacharissi 2010; Carpentier 2012; Dahlgren 2012, 2013; Zerilli 2015). Further, I have shown that the frameworks developed by van Deth (2014, 2016) and Theocharis (2015) categorising what political participation show a disconnect in political science literature between how individuals are engaging in participatory acts – outside of the formal arena – and the way the scholars delimit

and categorise it. Their narrow focus fails to consider the position of marginalised others without access to formal political channels, as I evidence in Chapters 4 and 5 by showing that digital feminist activists utilise Twitter as a megaphone (Murthy 2018) to speak out and raise awareness about important issues. It is high time that political science scholars acknowledge the practical diverse ways for individuals to engage in politics in their theoretical considerations of political participation.

The prevalence of digital feminist activism and clicktivism on Twitter are demonstrative of my reasoning for a more nuanced understanding of political participation, incorporating how it is practiced and by who – and how it is facilitated – by the site it is performed on. It speaks to scholarly debates that have examined the impact of the web on political participation (Norris 2009; van Deth 2014, 2016; Theocharis 2015; Vromen 2017; Dennis 2018; Theocharis and van Deth 2018). In this context, this thesis contributes new knowledge that is crucial to advancing the notion that the digital context of contemporary political participation is relevant to our expanding understanding and categorisation of the concept. As I have demonstrated, digital feminist activists are utilising Twitter as a space for political participation, evidencing the need for an expansion in the conceptualisation of contemporary 'political participation' and the categorisation of the *many* forms available. Applying the digital context to our conceptualisation of political participation allows us to include a range of practices that take place outside of the bounds of traditional politics, such as amplifying the voice of others or content that might not otherwise be disseminated. In expanding our understanding of political participation, we open ourselves up to the impact of developing information and communication technologies on (1) what we consider to be 'political' and (2) how we can use them to 'participate'.

## Performing Activism via Affordances

Feminist activists' use of Twitter is political, which is demonstrated in the diverse activist practices they engage in via affordances, affecting how participatory they can be. Digital feminist activism is rich and complex, extending far beyond the use of the hashtag on Twitter, which extant literature has focused on, creating a narrow understanding of *why* and *how* feminists use Twitter for activism (Dixon 2014; Pachal 2014; Thrift 2014; Rosewarne 2017; Gieseler 2019; Gleeson and Turner 2019; Mendes et al. 2019; Jackson et al. 2020; McNabb 2021). Twitter has a distinct set of affordances that enable feminist activists to (1) navigate the space as a political platform and (2) facilitate their activist practices. This thesis demonstrates the need for interdisciplinary research, particularly where the object of analysis is a digital network or community, to identify the nuanced and detailed practices that are facilitated or utilised. Essentially this is the premise of web science; studying how the technology develops in the context of the social (Halford et al.

2010), which, in this case, explores the interplay between the users of a digital network, how they use affordances, and what they are used for.

Feminists use Twitter for activism and clicktivism to dip into and out of politics when it suits them. Rather than dismissing these 'alternative' forms of political participation as lazy, passive or self-important, as much of it has been characterised (Morozov 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Gladwell 2010), instead, it is demonstrative of contemporary political participation – facilitated by the lower barriers of Twitter's affordances and mobile technologies, which have become part of our political, social and professional lives (Dahlgren 2013) mean that they are 'always-on-you' (Turkle 2013) – which enables feminist activists to quickly engage in activist practices any time, day or night. The flexibility and reproducibility of activist practices via Twitter's affordances enable feminists to take action, communicate and connect when convenient. Activism and political participation should not be defined by what is inconvenient. Further, Twitter facilitates *how* activism can be performed, within the parameters of affordances design, via the *many* different practices it enables as part of the medium of digital activism:

| **Practice** | **Affordance** | **Description** |
|---|---|---|
| *Action* | Retweet<br>Like<br>Mention<br>Hashtag<br>Block<br>Mute<br>Report | Share another user's tweet; like a tweet; refer to another user indirectly; categorise a conversation. Block another user; mute a word, phrase, or other user; report another user or their tweets |
| *Communication* | Tweet<br>Reply<br>Quote Tweet | Expressing an idea or opinion; address another user directly; or add a comment to another user's tweet |
| *Connection* | Follow | Forming connections with other users for varied reasons, which can be a shared or similar interest |

*Figure 21 Twitter Activist Practices*

One of the strengths of Twitter is the diverse range of practices that it affords feminist activists, which, as can be seen in Figure 22, respondents used to create various affects. Significantly, affordances enable control over users' digital space – which, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6, is an act of activism in and of itself. On Twitter, politics and participation are determined by the balance of gendered power, which like societal dynamics (Beyer 2014), are skewed towards men.

While feminist activists use Twitter as a political platform, is it also a contested space, where even stating 'feminist' on a bio increases the likelihood that users will be targeted by digital hate. The fact that digital feminist activists continue to utilise Twitter as a political platform challenges the idea of who can participate – what they can talk about and to whom – which is prescribed through the architecture, rules and politics, and algorithms of that digital space. It may seem that *how* feminist activists use Twitter is unremarkable. Still, it is worth remembering that the savvy leveraging of affordances directly relates to how *participatory* a feminist activist *is*. Part of my contribution to knowledge is the qualitative analysis of the distinct affordances and practices that are unique to Twitter, a detailed study of which is currently missing in the literature. This analytical focus engages with and answers the below research question:

**RQ2.** How do feminist activists use Twitter to facilitate action, communication, and connection?

| | |
|---|---|
| **Action** | ▪ Liking and retweeting to amplify others content, which can indicate that content is interesting or important, and potentially generate attention from others across the Twittersphere<br>▪ @mentioning others to challenge, question or correct sexist and misogynist practices in mainstream media that frame articles on male violence against women inappropriately<br>▪ Adding a new or existing hashtag to a tweet, retweet or quote tweet – which could be part of an existing conversation about sexual violence that is being widely disseminated by a collective, or an individual act<br>▪ Leveraging the block affordance so that an aggressor cannot view their content, interact with or follow them<br>▪ Leveraging the mute affordance to silence content and notifications about a word, phrase or from a specific user<br>▪ Reporting another user after being the target of misogynistic or anti-feminist digital hate |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Communication** | ▪ Tweeting or quote tweeting to share an opinion, idea or a personal experience about feminism, women's rights or political issues, communicating directly to an identifiable audience of followers<br>▪ Tweeting information to educate others, feminist or not, about feminism in general or a specific political issue –such as reproductive rights and women's bodily autonomy<br>▪ Using Twitter as a megaphone, communicating to a (potentially) broad an audience as possible to raise awareness - as part of feminist consciousness-raising practices<br>▪ Replying to other users, feminist or not, who are part of a debate about pertinent political issues or to engage with diverse opinions |
| **Connection** | ▪ Following others based in different countries, cultures and political systems to expand the digital community beyond those feminists who are already known online or offline<br>▪ Following others to share and access diverse knowledge, experiences, ideas, information and opinions<br>▪ Connecting to others via shared affinities and feminist identity to support or validate, which can create a sense of solidarity and belonging |

*Figure 22 Diverse Feminist Activist Practices via Affordances on Twitter*

As bell hooks (2015) argues, feminists are made through their actions and choices. In this context, feminists leveraged use of affordances to navigate and circumvent digital hate, which is designed to silence and force them out of public space, is an act of activism in and of itself. Using either the mute and block affordances in this way, as evidenced in Chapter 6, is a personal choice and a political action, enabling feminists to use Twitter on their own terms. Simultaneously, it is an act of resistance against the misogynistic 'struggle' that seeks to control the content of, and who can engage in, political discourse (Sobieraj 2020). If, as Carpentier (2012) argues, power is central to political participation, then digital feminist activism is a form of resistance – to reclaim their power – against patriarchal structures that determine where politics can be performed and the forms of participation it includes. If anything, digital feminist activism and activist practices establish the importance of the digital context on which it is performed and how this feeds into the expansion of our understanding of contemporary political participation, conceptually and empirically. We cannot view digital activism in isolation or necessarily draw comparisons across digital networks when distinct affordances shape *how* the platform is used – and the political action, communication, and connection it facilitates. Digital feminist activism is political; feminist

activists use of Twitter is political; *everything* that feminist activists do on Twitter is political because feminism is political.

The digital community feminist Twitter is no exception. As evidenced in Chapter 5, there are far-reaching implications for feminist activists to form connections with diverse feminists irrespective of physical constraints or geographic boundaries. It is of particular significance that Twitter's connective culture enables feminist activists to form a digital community with others (van Dijck 2013) guided by the principle of homophily or 'thematic affinity' (Bruns et al. 2014, p. 119). The ability to find and follow diverse other feminists, as discussed in Chapter 5, is particularly significant for marginalised individuals, who can connect with others that we identify as like-minded and part of our group. An echo chamber can empower those within the feminist collective, who are socially and politically marginalised, to find power in numbers. The practice of following other feminists on Twitter determines the flow of information that we view and can interact with, which rather than circumscribing access to political information and alternate views (Bruns 2017), enables broader access to other resources, experiences and knowledge. Connecting to and communicating with other feminists can be beneficial (Bruns 2019b) for exposing us to an array of voices and perspectives (Dennis 2018) that we might not ordinarily be able to access elsewhere. In this sense, feminist Twitter enables solidarity with other feminists and affords marginalised individuals to share information (Carter Olsen 2016) and learn from each other (Serisier 2018), which is synonymous with forming a community or collective.

## Using Twitter as a Public Political Platform

Outside the bounds of traditional politics, digital feminist activists utilise Twitter as a political platform – where they can *be* political and *do* politics. It is significant that this public online space (Herring et al. 2002) is accessible and useable for political participation when they are continually marginalised from traditional political spaces (Mendes et al. 2018). Digital feminist activists utilise Twitter as a counter-public (Fraser 1990) to disseminate counter-narratives that enable them to express themselves and articulate the need for change – which, as demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, should be understood as both 'political' and a form of 'participation'. Diverse forms of political participation facilitated by the digital context exemplify the need to expand our understanding beyond that which does not fit into the 'traditional' notion. Utilising Twitter as a political platform to disseminate information about underrepresented political issues (Papacharissi 2010) is significant for feminist activists, who are typically limited in terms of where and how they can participate. In this context, digital feminist activism challenges the hegemonic structures that determine the bounds of political participation. There are distinct insights that can be drawn from the findings that allow me to answer this research question in this section:

**RQ3.** Why do feminist activists use Twitter as a political platform?

Navigating the Twittersphere allows individuals to 'feel' their way into politics (Papacharissi 2014) and find where they fit by expressing an opinion or engaging in a protracted political debate (Bimber et al. 2015; Vromen 2017). Activist practices are facilitated by the quick and easy use of digital networks, which speaks to Bennett and Segerberg's (2012, 2013) idea of 'connective action' – enabled by the click of a button. For feminist activists, using Twitter as a political platform to advocate for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, a central concern to feminist activists (Cameron 2018), as I evidence in Chapter 3, enables feminist activists to *be* political and *do* politics. Too often, as Couldry (2012) argues, the *reasons* why individuals act on their interest in political issues and causes are often neglected in the literature. Twitter is an online space for digital feminist activists to ask questions, learn about feminist politics and discuss current social and political issues. Twitter's distinct affordances determine the conditions for *how* feminists can engage in politics and participate on the digital network, which is directed through action, communication and connection. It also affords the ability to reach identified, boundless audience, or both, as explored in Chapter 5, which can be important for disseminating information across the Twittersphere. In this context, digital feminist activists use Twitter as a political platform because it is an accessible way of engaging in political action, communication and connection on a scale that cannot be replicated offline – which directly addresses the research question.

Our ubiquitous connection to digital networks have changed the conditions of how we can engage with politics (Karpf 2012; Couldry 2015b; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021) and generated 'greater space' to engage in political participation online (Boulianne 2019, p. 50). An increase in the availability of communication technologies, such as smartphones and wearable devices that enable us to connect to the Twitter app while on the move, have changed *where* we can engage with politics. For digital feminist activists, Twitter is a public space (Papacharissi 2010, 2014; boyd 2011) that has become a critical platform for political participation. Simultaneously, there is a spillover effect between online and offline, which is explored in Chapter 6. Twitter acts as a doorway to our physical environment, homes, work, and thoughts. The dichotomy between Twitter as a public space, which digital feminist activists use to participate – is also a site of contradiction. From a feminist activism perspective, the line between 'real' and digital can blur quickly (Filipovic 2014) when rape or death threats are made or a professional reputation is impacted (Cole 2015; Amnesty International 2018; Sobieraj 2020). Twitter is a space that affords us to challenge the notion that 'online and 'offline can be neatly demarcated from one another. In this sense, the expansion of the concept of political participation is due to the blurred boundaries between offline and online. Digital networks are creating new ways of constructing meaning

through diverse user experiences that perceive it as a political platform, accessible, safe, threatening, and able to provide a window in private space.

## The Success and Value of Digital Activism

Digital activism is changing what we understand as political participation and how we categorise it as valuable or successful. Extant literature on political participation has generated the notion that an instance of activism must create or contribute to quantifiable change for it to be deemed a 'success' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Couldry, 2015; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). Further, it is assumed that activists focus on a particular outcome, such as changing a specific policy or influencing political representatives. Our understanding of 'successful' digital activism should include feminist conscious-raising, speaking out, shared narratives, and expressions of the *need* for political change. For individuals to have the ability to speak out, to share and discuss their opinions about politics is 'revolutionary' (Boulianne 2019, p. 50), which, as I have evidenced in Chapter 4, should be categorised as an alternative form of success.

The significance of using Twitter as a public online space (Herring et al. 2002) to be engaged and participate is not lost on digital feminist activists. There was an internalisation amongst respondents that the idea that success means change and that without that, feminist activists do not perceive their activism or clicktivism to have value. However, by presenting the #MeToo moment as an example of digital feminist activism and exploring this idea with respondents, it allowed them time to reflect on how they perceived the value of this moment and how they described their activism, which corresponds to the below research question:

**RQ4.** How do feminists describe their activism and clicktivism, and the value it holds for them?

The MeToo moment enabled millions of women to speak out, breaking the silence about the extent of women's experiences of sexual violence. If we apply Vromen's notion of success, as explained in Chapters 2 and 4, which argues that success is 'changing societal ideas, norms and discourses' (2017, p. 38), we can frame #MeToo as a successful instance of digital feminist activism. Further, #MeToo contributed to social and political change, which is a slow process, as Papacharissi (2016) argues. The importance of women coming together to share their personal narratives on Twitter raised societal awareness across the world. #MeToo was a collective of women's narratives on Twitter – when no other space was open to them – to speak out that draws on the concept *the personal is political.* Which leads me to question – if they could not find space to speak out about this issue, then where? If this moment had not taken place on Twitter,

would this conversation have been had – in a public space – where millions of women could contribute to such a degree that it could no longer be ignored?

Activist and clicktivist practices can be incredibly powerful when performed both individually and collectively. Feminist activists utilise Twitter's affordances to practice digital resistance, creating counter-narratives to exclusionary discourse (Willis 2020), which are then retweeted and liked to amplify the potential impact of a moment or message. It further demonstrates that digital feminist activists use of Twitter lowers the boundaries of participation, which does not require a quantifiable social change to be made to be deemed a success. What does have value is that digital feminist activists can access and use an online space to speak out, where others recognise the significance of their political voice (Couldry 2012) and are being heard (Lumsden and Morgan 2017) by others across the Twittersphere. It further demonstrates that digital feminist activism is a form of contemporary political participation, which does not require a quantifiable social change to be made to be deemed a success. The expansion of the concept of political participation is needed due to the blurred boundaries between – offline and online and the – political and personal. This is not simply to include participation that is afforded to those who are othered – though this is significant in and of itself – but because the digital context provides new insights into the distinct practices which are enabled which are outside the boundaries of traditional politics.

## Future Directions for Research

There are many possible directions for future research that expand on the work presented in this interdisciplinary thesis. First, researchers from different disciplinary environments – political science, web science and feminism – can use the intersection of this literature to examine different gaps in knowledge through the conceptual lens. There is scope for research from all three disciplines based on the areas of analysis that I have explored in this thesis, or indeed to continue the interdisciplinarity by adapting and develop the conceptual lens, for instance, by replacing the *feminist* object of analysis with other groups and individuals. A further study could investigate other marginalised groups who use Twitter as a political platform, such as Black Lives Matter, a political group that has also risen to prominence via Twitter (Murthy 2018; Jackson et al. 2020; Phipps 2020). A different digital network could be the focus of an investigation, or more than one, so a comparison can be drawn about the political action, communication, and connection it facilitates. Are affordances used in the same way and for the same reasons? Does the use of affordances fall into similar categories as those identified in this study; are practices and priorities different? Is success a criterion for activists who feel that they need to create

tangible change? There is a need for further research that learns about the complex and nuanced ways the digital context enables political practices and builds on our understanding of the forms of contemporary political participation.

From a web science perspective, this thesis has created the groundwork for placing the digital context at the heart of research design, rather than operating from the assumption that all digital network use generates the same type of practices or results (Papacharissi 2016). Further, it demonstrates that affordance-based research is necessary for examining how political action, communication and connection are shaped via the digital network on which they are performed. If nothing else, it illuminates the reasoning behind focusing on one digital network and the specific affordances that it has. These affordances may well have been replicated across different digital networks, but this does not mean that the platform or the affordances can be utilised in the same way or indeed, the digital community found there will have the same solidarity and support found on Twitter. While hashtags have been adopted by Facebook, Instagram and many other digital networks, this is evidence of their popularity of use on Twitter, but they do not have the same effect. For example, Facebook profiles and pages work differently, it is not as easy to disseminate information, there is no single timeline of Facebook-wide content, and users are not exposed to information, opinions and ideas in the same way as they are on Twitter, whereas a retweet on Twitter could reach a broad audience, including individuals that the original users are unaware of and may not be following. On Twitter, the hashtag has evolved to become a symbol for more than just aggregate information. Rather it has evolved to become social, cultural and political, with the capacity to disseminate information during a disaster, make connections during an academic conference, and update protestors on the street in real-time. Indeed, such use of the hashtag is unique to Twitter and differentiates how the social network is used and what the hashtag represents on that platform, from others. Karpf (2020) argues that scholars should not generalise about digital politics, platforms or affordances. Instead, it is important that further studies perform a similar in-depth analysis of a specific digital platform and how affordances are utilised. Comparing platforms and affordances and the effect of digital activism performed there is not the point of this project – while it is easy to do so, we must recognise the differences in the utilisation of digital platforms and activism, rather than the similarities.

A web science researcher could perform quantitative research that analyses the shape of a digital community by collecting Twitter data and creating a social graph. Using social network analysis would enable the researcher to understand the unique structure and to map patterns of connection (Borgatti et al. 2018). This analysis would show the flow of conversation that takes place over time between users (Ellison et al. 2011) and the strength of connections, which can be weaker or stronger (Granovetter 1973, 1983). What is the relationship between stronger

connections and the content we are exposed to, and how does this relate to the network's algorithms that prioritise information dissemination? Further, by collecting and analysing the biographies of users in a digital community, we may be able to ascertain political affiliation or ideologies, which would allow a more detailed understanding of why connections are formed between certain users. Or indeed, the researcher could collect a conversation that has generated substantial interest and has begun to trend. Using content analysis to examine the type of interaction, such as like and retweet, which is likely to have been identified by the algorithm as having interest for the Twittersphere. This could be an interesting piece of research, given that it is based on speculating how Twitter works, which is proprietary knowledge and therefore not currently available.

Political science researchers might combine offline and online politics to investigate which formal political institutes and representatives are at the centre of digital action, communication and connection. Are there expansive conversations with decision-makers about political issues where they are asked to, for example, justify their voting behaviour on a particular issue or debate? How frequently is the digital network used to disseminate a political message, and who is the imagined audience they speak to? Are digital networks used by individuals to hold decision-makers to account over critical debates? It would also be worth examining different political systems within democratic and other political systems. How do the geographical location and political system influence how individuals practice politics online? Is there more accountability in contacting institutions and representatives? How do political representatives respond to users? Further, given that there is a decline in formal politics (Akram 2019) and an increase in cynicism (Boswell and Corbett 2015) with political institutions – does political representatives' transparency on digital networks impact this positively? Indeed, individuals' ability to monitor them may generate a level of trust based on the 'cues, hints, [and] scraps' of their content and conduct online (Valgarðsson et al. 2020, p. 4)?

For researchers who examine feminism, specifically digital feminist activists, this thesis has only touched the surface. There is a wide scope for future research that can be conducted based on the unique empirical findings that have demonstrated how complex practices are via a specific digital context – beyond an analysis of hashtag narratives. This is where my research contributes significantly to the field and has important implications for research that examines digital feminist activism. Moreover, this thesis's interpretation of empirical data does not represent the full scale of semi-structured interview data collected, which is incredibly rich and demonstrates that this thesis is a starting point for research of digital feminist activism. Future research could be developed by returning to this interview dataset and focusing on the marginalisation of others within digital feminist activism. In particular, to what extent does the role of feminist identity and

diverse political tenets impact action, communication and connection? On feminist Twitter, there are communities within communities – how then does feminist identity impact who we connect to and communicate with? Are there feminist communities that crossover each other based on a high-profile individual or a particular ideology? Where are the divisions within digital feminism – how typical is it to follow others that we do not agree with or hold similar feminist tenets? It is worth investigating whether there are different practices based on a scale of feminist ideology – are individuals more likely to block feminists who target others or share rhetoric they disagree with.

Since starting this project, it has become more evident that something is happening on Twitter. We have only just begun to scratch the surface in our consideration of why this is a platform that so many people flock to for politics and political participation.

# Appendix A Respondent Biographies

**Cheryl Morgan**. Joined Twitter in 2008. Cheryl is a radio show presenter for *Women's Outlook*, which celebrates women's stories and successes. According to her Twitter bio, she is a science fiction critic and publisher, a member of the Women's Equality Party (WEP) committee for Bath, and a 'trans history geek'. Cheryl is one of the more active users I see on my feed, regularly tweeting about trans rights, attending science fiction conventions, history podcasts, and the Cricket when it is seasonal.

**Sian Norris**. Joined Twitter in 2009. Sian describes herself on her Twitter bio as a journalist, writer and feminist. She is the founder and director of the Bristol Women's Literature Festival. I already followed Sian for some time and 'knew' her as an outspoken feminist on Twitter. Sian appears on my feed frequently, discussing politics, and articles in the mainstream news, often challenging the use of victim-blaming language and drawing attention to violence against women (VAW).

**Dr Fiona Vera-Gray**. Joined Twitter in 2015. I first met Fiona at the *Feminism in London Conference* in 2015, where she was talking on a panel that discussed street harassment, a research topic I was writing about for my Masters. She stood out to me because she was knowledgeable and passionate about the subject, having written about it for her thesis. Fiona appears on my feed less frequently than she used to, questioning and commenting on media articles that focus on violence against women and girls (VAWG) and on teaching in academia about criminology.

**Alexia Pepper de Caires**. Joined Twitter in 2011. Alexia has been described as a 'whistle-blower' (Phillips, 2018) after speaking publicly about sexual harassment and assault at Save the Children UK from 2012-2015. She has also been described as a 'protestor' (The Guardian 2018b) after confronting the then International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt at the Safeguarding Summit in London 2018 for excluding some women's voices at a conference addressing sexual abuse in the humanitarian and aid sector. Alexia was Co-Leader of the WEP Hackney branch and Co-Founded NGO Safe Space, a platform that gathers testimonies of abuse and assault for charity workers, using the hashtag #AidToo.

**Holly Kearl**. Joined Twitter in 2009. Holly is a writer and activist based in Washington, DC. She is an expert on gender-based violence and the founder of the non-profit organisation *Stop Street Harassment* (and created the Twitter account in 2009 @StopStHarassmnt #stopstreetharassment). Holly has written three books on street harassment, founder of a

website and blog of the same name *Stop Street Harassment*, and is a consultant for organisations the United Nations and the US State Department. She tweets about women's safety initiatives and comments on political media articles, particularly the 2020 US Election.

**Julie Zeilinger**. Joined Twitter in 2011. Julie is an editor, blogger and writer based in New York. She is the founding editor of FBomb @the_fbomb, an intersectional feminist blog and community for teens and young adults, creating the Twitter account in 2009. FBomb is now partnered with the Women's Media Centre @womensmediacntr, a global platform promoting the visibility of women and girls in the media. Julie wrote a book called *A Little F'D Up: Why Feminism is Not a Dirty Word* (2012) about young women becoming feminists. She tweets about politics in the US, retweets and comments on worldwide political issues.

**Professor Sue Black OBE**. Joined Twitter in 2007. Sue is a Professor of Computer Science, known for her Twitter campaign to save Bletchley Park, home to the code-breakers in the Second World War, and the subsequent book she wrote on the subject has its own Twitter account @SavingBletchley. I met her at an event where she was the keynote speaker talking about founding TechUP @TechUPWomen. This training programme empowers women to learn coding skills for careers in technology. Sue is also a member of the WEP and represented them in a bid for London Mayor in 2020 #LondonMayor. She is also a survivor of domestic violence, which she has spoken about many times. Sue tends to tweet about *TechUP*, women's refuges and issues relating to the WEP.

**Athena Stevens**. Joined Twitter in 2008. Athena is a spokesperson for the WEP, a playwright, screenwriter and Associate Artist at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. Cheryl Morgan suggested that I interview Athena because of her activism and advocacy work that focuses on inclusion and accessibility. Athena is the CEO for *Make Your Own Damn Tea*, a blog and initiative providing emotional support and advice for activists. We exchanged direct messages (DM) on Twitter and planned to interview in person at the WEP Conference in 2018. Still, she was too busy, so Athena opted to complete her interview via email.

**Jon Skeet**. Joined Twitter in 2008. I met Jon at the WEP Conference in 2018, which I had attended at Cheryl Morgan's encouragement. He stood out as one of the small group of men in attendance, wearing a pink t-shirt that said 'Code like a girl'. *Code like a Girl* is an organisation that provides training to young women and girls who want to learn how to code and work in the technology sector. Skeet is a software engineer who works for Google and celebrity amongst programmers on the Q&A style website *Stack Overflow*. Jon writes a blog: 'Jon Skeet's Blog: A blog of personal opinions' where he has written about becoming a feminist and his experiences of attending tech events typically dominated by men.

**Dr Jean Laight**. Joined Twitter in 2018. I met Jean at the WEP Conference in 2018 after I stood up and spoke during an open-mic session about my research and asked for interview respondents. She gave me her card, and we chatted briefly on Twitter about the event and arranged the interview via email shortly afterwards. She is a founding member of WEP and stood as a candidate in the North Yorkshire local elections in May 2018. Jean is a writer, an activist and coercive control survivor. She has taken part in marches for 'Reclaim the Night' and 'SlutWalk'. Jean tweets about WEP, campaigning and local political issues. Jean has since retired from Academia.

**Steph Boland**. Joined Twitter in 2008, Steph started a new role since my interview with her for Facebook as a digital content specialist and project manager. At the time of interviewing, she worked as a journalist and head of digital content at politics and culture magazine *Prospect*. She has had her writing published in *The Guardian* and *The New Statesman*. Steph is the Co-founder of *The Second Source*, a group of women journalists working to end harassment in the media. She tweets about politics, culture, journalism and entertainment.

**Rowan Steel**. (pseudonym) Joined Twitter in 2017. I met Rowan at an academic workshop for PhD candidates during our first year of research. We immediately connected and followed each other on Twitter. They are a self-proclaimed geek, coder and front-end developer from Germany. During our interview, Rowan expressed their concern that our discussion may detrimentally affect their academic career, so I created a pseudonym. Steel tweets about technologies, feminism, gaming and current political issues.

**Associate Professor Bernadette Moore**. Joined Twitter in 2011. Bernadette describes herself as a 'human, scientist, feminist and social justice champion' in her bio. She replied to one of my calls for respondents on Twitter after being @ in by Sannia Farooque, a PhD candidate who already followed me. I vividly remember following Bernadette before this, after a Twitter moment when she tweeted about a brief sexist exchange at the University, where a stranger asked her which lab she worked. The individual seemed incapable of understanding that she was the lab and project leader of the Moore Lab. Bernadette tweets about obesity, her research area, politics in Ireland, America and the UK, and gender in academia.

**Hannah Manzur**. Joined Twitter in 2019. Hannah describes herself on her bio as a #FearlessFeminist, and tweets about a whole host of interests such as migration, VAWG, Brexit, gender and politics. Her tweets appear on my feed regularly as she is incredibly active and shares a lot of content. She is a Gender Policy Advisor at the European Parliament based in Belgium. Hannah replied to one of my tweets, asking for interview respondents and offering to participate in my research. Hannah co-authored the report on Women and Brexit that looked at the impact on gender equality in the UK and Mary Honeyball MEP.

**Sam Smethers**. Joined Twitter in 2009. Sam is CEO of the Fawcett Society, a UK-based charity that campaigns for gender equality and women's rights. She regularly tweets about their initiatives and comments on current political and cultural events relevant to women in particular. I already followed her because of her work with Fawcett. I tweeted her early one Saturday morning to ask for an interview, hoping that she would see the tweet, which might get lost if the account were managed for her during the week, and she agreed to be interviewed.

**Dr Sarah Hewitt**. Joined Twitter in 2006 and 2009 (deleted original). I know Sarah in real life because we were based at the same University, and she readily agreed to be interviewed. Sarah is a computer scientist, coder and occasional blogger about education. Sarah has written about misogynistic language on Twitter, investigating instances of trolling and harassment. Sarah tweets about various subjects and appears on my feed throughout the day about education, academia, Brexit, and I frequently see her engaging with others who are often hostile towards her or someone else.

**Catherine Mayer**. Joined Twitter in 2008. I met Catherine at the WEP Conference in 2018, of which she is a Co-Founder and President. She is a writer, journalist and Executive Director of Datum Future, a not-for-profit think tank, which explores opportunities and challenges in the world of data. I tweeted her asking whether she would be available to interview. After Cheryl Morgan tweeted that she knew me and said I was doing important work, Catherine agreed to the interview via Skype. Catherine tweets about WEP campaigns, political and cultural issues, and *Primadonna Festival* – a literary and music festival that promotes work by women.

**Dr Kate Sang**. Joined Twitter in 2009. Kate describes herself on her bio as a 'Feminist Hagraven' (from the online game Skyrim; a cross between a bird and a hag). I already followed Kate because of her association with the Feminist Women's Studies Association (FWSA), of which she was the Chair from 2014-2016. She is a Scottish Government Expert Panel member with a particular focus on equalities. After being @ in a tweet by Bee Hughes, another of my respondents, Kate agreed to be interviewed. Kate tweets about academia, nature, politics, and we share enthusiasm for science fiction based entertainment show like Star Trek.

**Dr Erin Shannon**. Joined Twitter in 2012. I 'knew' Erin as a fellow member of the Women in Academia Support Network (WIASN). After seeing some of her tweets about her research, Project CURSV, I followed her on comparing responses to sexual violence on campus across universities in the United States and England (#TimesUpAcademia). Erin contacted me directly, offering to interview for this project. Erin is from the United States and tweets about the US and UK based politics, academia, current entertainment shows, and feminism.

**Dr Bee Hughes**. Joined Twitter in 2011. Bee is an artist, poet and researcher exploring embodied experiences through themes like menstruation and everyday routines. They describe themselves as socialist and feminist in their bio. We already followed each other, and they replied to one of my calls for respondents copying in Kate Sang, whom they thought would also be interested. I interviewed Bee via Skype. Bee tweets about academia, gender politics, feminism, art and culture. Pronouns: they/them.

**Associate Professor Molly Dragiewicz**. Joined Twitter in 2015. Molly is a researcher from the United States, now based in Australia. She describes herself as a 'criminologist, anti-domestic violence advocate, and feminist' in her bio. We already followed each other, and she replied to one of my calls for respondents. Molly tweets about gender, politics, feminism, and academia.

**Stacy Hart**. Joined Twitter in 2015. Stacy is an actor, singer and WEP branch leader for Basingstoke. We followed each other after Stacy replied to one of my calls for respondents to direct message (DM) and talk about what questions I would ask during the interview. Stacy was keen to be involved, especially after completing a project where she and fellow actor Lindsey Lawman collected women's stories about their boobs and turned them into a play called Juglife. Stacy tweets about cultural and art events, and WEP campaigns, appearing on my feed regularly.

**Dr Lucy Curtis** (pseudonym). Joined Twitter in 2010. Lucy is a researcher and consultant for public health, particularly interested in women and children's health and wellbeing. Lucy is originally from the Middle East and now settled in the UK. She described herself as an intersectional feminist on her Twitter bio but has since removed this description. She contacted me 5 months after the interview and asked that her interview data be pseudonymised, again worried that it would impact her career negatively. She tweets heavily about health, inequality and social justice and features prominently on my timeline throughout the day. Pronouns: they/them.

**Tulip Siddiq**. Joined Twitter in 2012. Tulip is a Labour MP for Hampstead and Kilburn in London and the Shadow Minister for Children and Early Years. I asked for an interview with Tulip's parliamentary office assistant, who suggested emailing later in the year, as she was on maternity leave. Later in the year, she made the time to complete her interview via email. Tulip tweets about the local community and political campaigns

**Jess Phillip**. Joined Twitter in 2009. Jess is a Labour MP for Yardley in Birmingham and the Shadow Minister for Domestic Violence and Safeguarding. I already followed Jess, who appears on my feed prolifically, tweeting about politics, domestic violence issues, and commenting on current events and entertainment. I tweeted her early on Saturday morning to ask for an interview, and

she agreed to an interview via Skype. Jess is known for being outspoken and honest and used the slogan 'Speak Truth. Win Power' in her bid for Leader of the Labour Party in the 2020 leadership election.

**Dr Finn Mackay**. Joined Twitter in 2012. Finn is a researcher, writer, public speaker, activist and founder of the *London Feminist Network*, a women-only campaigning organisation. They also started the second iteration of the *Reclaim the Night*, a women-only march designed to take back the streets after dark as a show of resistance against sexual harassment and assault. I already followed Finn, who appears daily, tweeting about feminism, gender, academia, and politics. Pronouns: they/them.

**Dr Bianca Fileborn**. Joined Twitter in 2011. Bianca is a researcher and activist whose work focuses on gender, sexuality, and violence against women and girls (VAWG), based in Australia. Her bio states that she mostly tweets about cats, although a lot of content is also about research and commenting on political issues. Bianca is one of the first academics I met at the Feminist Women's Studies Association (FWSA) conference in 2014 when we presented work on street harassment. I have followed her on Twitter since then.

**Jane Gilmore**. Joined Twitter in 2009. Jane is a writer, feminist, and journalist based in Australia, according to her bio. Jane created the project *Fixed It,* where she tweets images of news and other media headlines, crossed out and corrected with a red pen. She does this with headlines and articles that use misogynistic and victim-blaming language and uses #FixedIt to make these instances searchable. Her book *#FixedIt* was published in 2019, which addresses the representation of women in the media and gendered violence in Australia. I already followed Jane, who appears on my feed frequently, fixing headlines and misogynistic media reporting.

# Appendix B Twitter Observation Field Notes

**7 August 2018**

Sent a tweet yesterday asking to interview people for the project, using a truckload of hashtags and asking accounts to retweet (#phdchat #phdlife #academictwitter #feminism #campaign #interview). Got a handful of retweets and suggestions from others, but no bites yet. Ooh! Cheryl Morgan replied and said she would be interviewed and tagged a bunch of other feminists, look to be all based in Bristol. In the process of setting up the first interview!

**16 February 2019**

Tweeted some more high-profile feminists directly, those involved in political parties, or CEOs for various charities and companies. Started earlier in the morning to get into their notifications, and as a Saturday maybe they will reply, rather than a team – if they have one. Catherine Mayer, would really like to interview her, so knowledgeable and her content is fierce. Cheryl replies saying that she interviewed with me already and that this is valuable work! Now Catherine has agreed to be interviewed, thank you, Cheryl! Sam Smethers, CEO for Fawcett Society, just replied to and said to email her directly to set it up. Two in one day. I must lie down.

**7 June 2019**

Waiting for a verdict to be reached and announced in Sally Challen's retrial. Looks like a mass of feminists gathered on Twitter to watch together. Usual suspects, mostly feminists who work in criminology and domestic violence. Some feminists I know and follow, others are high profile and outspoken on gender issues (!). Refreshing hashtags #SallyChallen and #CoerciveControl, viewing latest not most popular – update. Some horrific comments on popular results (victim-blaming). Many feminists are talking to each other, retweeting and talking about their hope for Sally. But we have been here before, and it might not happen. Best not get our hopes up. Some women are sharing narratives of their experiences of domestic violence – many of them using the hashtags – and quickly targeted by trolling. Refreshing. Sally Challen's plea of manslaughter was accepted, but no one is sure what this means yet. Announced by a QC and supporters. More information to follow. What a huge relief. I am emotional and feel overwhelmed. Good to see so many feminists feel the same even as we are celebrating this change in law for women.

**22 November 2019**

It is 9am, and the hashtag #GraceMillane is top trending topic on Twitter UK. Waiting for verdict to be announced from Aotearoa New Zealand. I can see feminists who I know and follow who are

based in the UK and others from all over the world. A lot of retweets from them using #GraceMillane to show support for her family. Others commenting on mainstream media articles that have questionable language, typical victim-blaming or slut-shaming. Feminists discussing this and appalled that this is still happening. Most of the people commenting are women, with a small number of men. The outpouring of emotion is staggering and reminiscent of witnessing the #MeToo moment in 2017.

**13 December 2019**

I had planned to write today, but scrolling through my Twitter feed, saw various tweets about the (Gender Recognition Act) GRA and the implications it will have for many people. Shocking stuff being said by some people, including feminists, also targeting trans women. Shitty comments from shitty people. I see lots of worried people about the GRA being repealed and people who will be without resources. Days like this I hate being a feminist and tarred with the same brush as those who exclude every woman, or anyone else, from identifying as feminist and being safe either online or offline. Going offline to do some work, even though some decent people are online, this is too dark.

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