#MMIW: Twitter's Role in the Fight for Indigeneous Women's Lives

Shaurik Deshpande

PID: 730437752

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Introduction:

In the fight for social justice, Twitter has long been a nexus of activism and awareness campaigns. Hashtags, a feature now ubiquitous in social media popularized by Twitter, allow users to anchor their tweets to a particular topic, thereby linking their message with the larger, global conversation surrounding that topic. This feature presents the opportunity to investigate the unique collection of tweets that surround a particular issue. Considering the role of Twitter in modern discourse, the social media platform proved a valuable medium through which to analyze the conversation around a shamefully overlooked crisis: Missing and Murdered Indigeneous Women. The hashtag #MMIW, the official acronym used by activists as shorthand, provided a glimpse into the ways that people, both native and non-native, communicated their feelings about the horrifying reality that Indian women in the United States and Canada face. Using analytic coding and qualitative emotional analysis, tweets that used the #MMIW hashtag were examined and categorized to reveal insights about Twitter users' thoughts on the matter.

Methods:

Initial data aggregation was performed by the Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (or TAGS), collecting all tweets which contained the hashtag #MMIW from Friday June 19th at 9 am to Thursday June 25th at 2pm, yielding exactly 4,278 tweets. From this initial body of tweets, a primary automated filter was applied in order to eliminate retweets which left behind a mere 281 tweets. This was then followed by a secondary manual filter to eliminate effective retweets, defined as tweets with little to no content besides hashtags which left behind 130 tweets.

For each tweet, the TAGS algorithm provided information on the text of the tweet, the time at which the tweet was created, the number of users whom the user follows and is followed

by, and the user's location. Additionally, data on users' approximate age group, gender, and Native status, as well as the approximate purpose of the tweet, type of appeal, and content of linked materials were compiled manually.

One of the primary tools of analysis was the categorization based on approximate purpose. The tweets fell into 7 categories: Community, Awareness, Missing People, Solidarity, Art, Outrage/Anger, and Politics. A good portion of tweets provided information about missing women, some with only factual information but many with emotional pleas. Messages expressing sympathy were categorized as either Community if they originated from Native spheres targeted at Native people or as Solidarity if they originated from Non-native allies or even Native men in

some instances seeking to show support for the affected population. Other tweets were primarily expressing anger at the lack of awareness or response, still others used the hashtag as a platform with which to promote a political message. Additionally, a small but significant segment of tweets were dedicated to art.
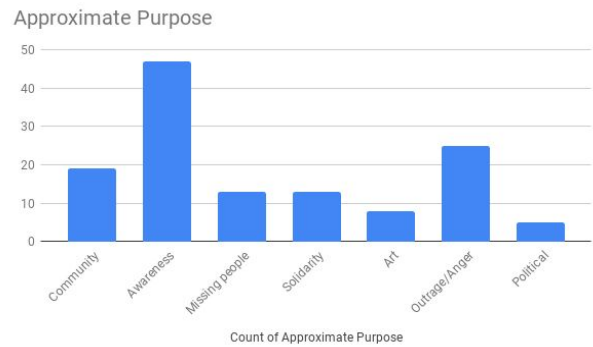
Another mode of analysis examined the type of appeal based on emotion vs. logic. This
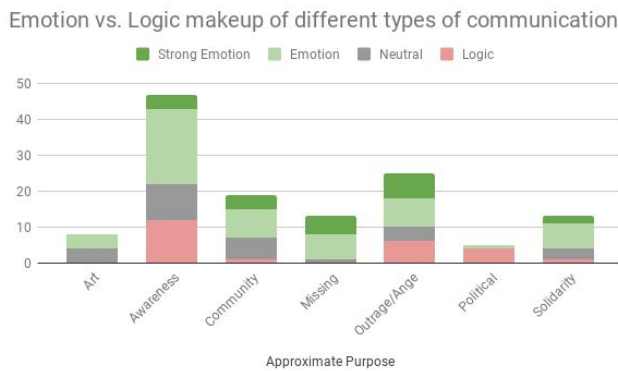
was jointly visualized with the approximate purpose of the tweet, providing information on the emotionality of each type of tweet. While there was a clear range of emotionality, the 'logical' tweets that cited

facts and statistics still contained an emotionally potent message. It is interesting to note that the types of tweets with the highest portion of 'Strong Emotion' are Outrage/Anger and "Missing People" respectively.

Additionally, a chart was created to examine the relationship between age group and purpose of tweet. This chart also has the added benefit of showing the level of engagement in the hashtag by age group, as well as the purpose of tweets from
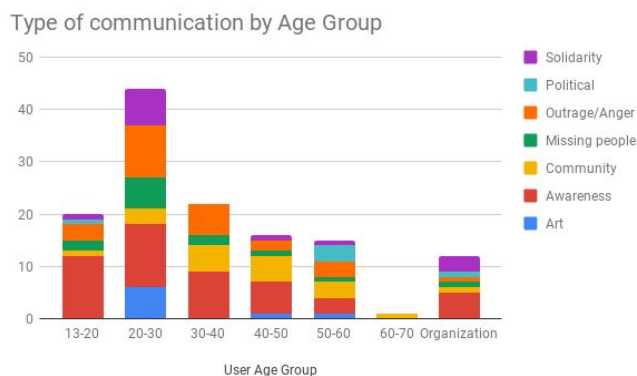
tweets that originated from Organizations rather than individual users. The distribution by age shows right skew with significant activity by Organizations. Since older tweeters tended to be Natives, there were far less tweets in Solidarity and far more in building Community, while younger tweeters were far more likely to be non-natives bringing awareness and showing support for the Native community. Additionally, the spike in Political tweets in the 50-60 age group came from politicians who were tweeting with the hashtag to promote their campaigns or make political statements.

Discussion:

The MMIW crisis is a testament to the tragic legacy of historic oppression. In their article on Decolonial Feminist Resistance to Gendered Violence, Professors Ashley Noel Mack and Tiara Na'puti posit that "gendered violence is historically and presently a colonial tool that wields power over and against Indigenous peoples", and that the growing movement among Native people to organize and spread awareness through social media is "a practice of survivance and decolonial feminist theory building." (Mack and Na'Puti 2019) When looking at the

community built around the #MMIW hashtag, it becomes imminently clear that there is a shared trauma of an ever-present history of horrific sexual violence. In a week's worth of tweets, I encountered the details of 10 different recent/active cases of missing and murdered women and young girls: Shania Martell, Katelyn Kelley, Kay Hudson, Aubrey Dameron, Nia Cordell, Chas Casimel, Kiara Manuelito, Eugenia and Sandra Martinez-Juarez, and Valerie Mae Foster. For Indigeneous people, this is simply an issue they cannot ignore. In a tweet by user @BlueCedarAngel, she links to a news article filled with public outrage over a high-profile murder of a white woman stating succinctly, "These words are never used to describe an Aboriginal Woman killed." @BlueCedarAngel is among the demographic most at-risk, a 13-20 year old Native woman. The sentiment espoused by this twitter user, indignation, lends credence to a theory proposed by Kaitlyn Watson in a study of how grassroots organizations have transformed the MMIW movement, that the use of social media "to raise awareness about missing and murdered Indigenous women is interrelated with the lack of and biased reporting of stories about Indigenous women." (Watson 2018) Users like @BlueCedarAngel, frustrated with mainstream ignorance of their daily struggle, take to Twitter and Instagram to spread awareness. In a similar academic study of twitter activity on the #MMIW hashtag conducted when the hashtag began to rise in prominence, researchers found that the power of social media to move beyond the constrictions of traditional media "has been used as an opportunity by Indigenous peoples and is fast becoming the norm for portraying Indigenous perspectives and issues quickly." (Moeke-Pickering 2018) As a platform, social media provides Indigeneous people with a chance to rectify stereotypes, bring awareness to Native issues, and create a safe place of community for themselves. This pattern of Natives reclaiming agency and taking action despite a

lack of definitive action from mainstream outlets has even manifested itself beyond the reach of social media. In reporting for the University of Central Oklahoma newspaper "The Vista", Jeff Elkins and Haley Humphrey found that despite local, state, and federal government promises to address the issue, the lack of real change has only further instilled distrust of government promises among Native communities. Therefore, as "The Vista" reports, "some Oklahoma tribes have been creating their own initiatives to ensure each MMIW case is adequately and effectively taken care of by the tribe of which they are a member" (Elkins 2020). These examples of Indigeneous people taking action to secure a better future inspire hope that the MMIW awareness campaign will gain traction and help end what the Canadian government has labelled a genocide (CBC News 2019). Evidence that the hashtag has grown beyond being solely a place of community-building and searching for missing people may be found in the fact that 40% of tweeters in this study's sample set were Non-native.

Conclusion:

It is important to recognize that there is an element of bias that is inherent in manual coding and filtering. Despite that, this data yielded useful information on the status of the MMIW movement and its future, much of it hopeful for the growth of awareness and potential for change in the future. There is a ways to go before this crisis gets the media attention it deserves, but until then, the Twitter community at #MMIW will keep building community, spreading awareness, expressing their outrage and sharing art until justice is served and the yoke of colonial oppression is lifted.

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