Hashtag Activism: How Twitter Promotes Social Activism

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Introduction:

Since the advent of social media, the symbol "#" formerly known as the number sign or pound sign has come to be more commonly known as a hashtag. Originally used for tagging key words and topics within a post, hashtags have grown in importance. Due to the nature of Twitter's platform with text-based posts and limited character usage, hashtags have become an integral part of Twitter's interface; they can be used to categorize and organize tweets in searches while contributing to the "Trending Topics" page that varies based on location (How to use hashtags, n.d). In more recent years, hashtags have been used to highlight key concerns in the context of various socio-political issues. The activist movements Me Too, advocating against sexual harassment and assault of women and Black Lives Matter, advocating against systemic racism towards African Americans, are examples of those that have strategically used hashtags to raise awareness and promote change in their respective areas of focus. When it comes to social media platforms, such as Twitter, the usage of hashtags enables issues to be prominent in public discourse and causes supporters to actively participate in protests (Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019).

Effectively beginning in Spring of 2018, Donald Trump's "zero-tolerance" immigration policy led to the separation of families at the United States-Mexico border and the implementation of multiple "detainment camps." Children were removed from their families and transferred to various facilities with little-to-no way of reuniting them following their parents' detention (Domonoske & Gonzales, 2018, June 19). The facilities have been in use through 2018 and into the first half of 2019 with no seeming end in sight. Following the publication of an article on ABC News with the title "Doctor compares conditions for unaccompanied children at immigrant holding centers to 'torture facilities,'" a surge of public outcry began as a result of the

reported conditions in the detention centers. Not only did politicians and celebrities speak out on the issue but also many people belonging to the general public began to use the hashtag #closethecamps. In this essay, a collection of tweets with the hashtag #closethecamps will be analyzed to find patterns within public usage of the hashtag in order to investigate aspects of the Twitter conversation and its link with social activism

Methods:

In order to analyze the usage of the specific hashtag, a corpus was developed from a larger sample. Using a website titled "TAGS", a spreadsheet was created that collected the most recent tweets including the hashtag. Upon the first retrieval, approximately 10,000 tweets were collected. I adjusted a setting to update the spreadsheet every hour after the original download; about 24 hours later 28,000 tweets were downloaded onto the spreadsheet. In order to narrow down the tweets into a manageable corpus, I used several filters.

First, using the "text" column, I filtered out each tweet that included the phrase "RT" that indicates a retweet; I only wanted to analyze original tweets. I then used the "user_lang" column to filter out any tweets that were not in English. Because the amount of tweets remained large, I began to filter them by time and date of their creation. I originally started with the date June 25, 2019 and time period 8am to 8pm; I continued to shorten the time period until I reached 227 tweets within the time frame 7pm to 8pm. I used a total of four constraints to consolidate my sample size and corpus of tweets. I chose to keep tweets that had media included in the corpus in order to see how media has been used in this context.

The final step prior to the analysis of the corpus was coding the tweets. Coding consisted of categorizing each individual tweet using four categories: the "action" of the tweet, the rationale or rhetorical strategies used, whether or not the tweet included media, and the topic of

the tweet. When looking at the "action" of each tweet, the question "What is the tweet doing"

was asked in order to facilitate the process. I identified six actions including some that

encompass more than one action: agreeing/RT, commenting (reacting, questioning, replying),

informing (raising awareness), supporting (advocating), criticizing, and suggesting solutions.

Some actions are combined into one main category, as indicated by the parenthesis.

Not every tweet included a rationale or rhetorical strategies, as they were not all creating

arguments or evidence, but many included various forms of media such as "quoted tweets" (a

form of retweeting that allows the user to comment on the original), pictures, graphics, and

linked articles. As for the topics of the tweets, I either indicated that the tweet was solely about

the camps or if it included focus on other subject matter such as Trump or Congress. Using the

corpus and coding, I created three separate graphs that illustrate the action of the tweets, media,

and topics. Bar graphs were used for indicating the action and topic while a pie graph more

appropriately displayed the percentage of tweets containing media versus not.

Data Analysis:

In Figure 1, the data collected from the first category, the "action" of the tweet, can be

seen. The X axis is the code/action while
the Y axis measures the number of tweets. I
included a category for "MISC," or
miscellaneous, to account for tweets
unrelated to the subject matter. The
category with the most tweets was

Figure 1

What is the tweet doing?

"commenting" with "criticizing" being the second largest. Aside from "MISC" the action of

suggestion solutions had the least amount of tweets. In Figure 2, a pie graph is used to show
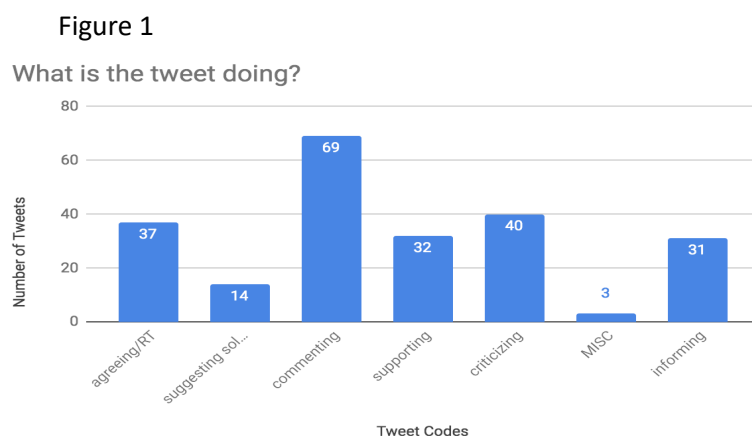
whether or not the tweet contained media. If the tweet did not, I indicated "no" while specifically indicating the type of media if the tweet had it included. If the tweet included a picture, gif, or

Figure 2

Does the tweet contain media?
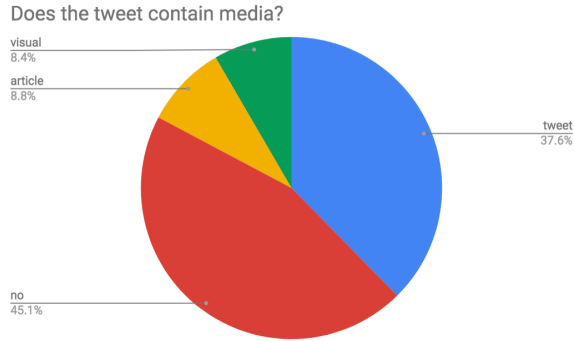
other graphic, I indicated that with the category "visual". By adding all of the media categories, the graph indicates that a majority, 54.4%, of the tweets collected included some form of media. In figure 3, the topics of the tweets can be viewed. A

Figure 3
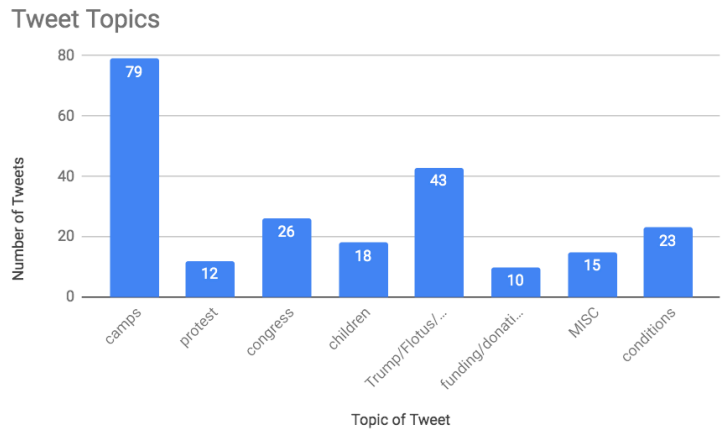
majority of the tweets were solely about the detainment camps, while the next highest topics were Trump/the First Lady and Congress. Many of the topics were related to other aspects of the camps such as the children, conditions of the camps, and funding.

Conclusions:

When analyzing the data collected, it is important to note that the corpus of tweets was filtered to a smaller sample size, with many other tweets using the hashtag not collected. It is also important to acknowledge that the subject of immigration and how to address solutions to the influx of people has been affected by its presentation in the media. The general public often does not have sufficient information about the circumstances or immigration policy details that have evolved in recent years (Merolla, Ramakrishnan, & Haynes, 2013). In regards to the use of the hashtag, the data suggests that the majority of users were using it to comment on the situation, reply to other users, and criticize those involved with the continuance of the camps. Commenting can be seen in a tweet by user @After_Dark_Arts: "@FLOTUS If you want to make the lives of children

better, you can encourage your husband to stop separating families and detaining children in inhumane conditions. #CloseTheCamps and #EndFamilySeparation". The tweet replies to the First Lady while commenting on the separation of families and lack of action by the administration. The least amount of people was suggesting solutions to the issue and informing people about the circumstances. Figure 1 reveals the most about the effectiveness of hashtag activism and how people are using it on Twitter; a minority of users are using the hashtag to do more than make online comments. Figure 3 is also important to acknowledge in that it reveals how people are redirecting the information and emotions towards the events. A tweet by user @Newsosaur30 states ""@SpeakerPelosi You are killing children. Hope you enjoy. #VacateTheChair #QuislingScum #CloseTheCamps #DontLookAway". The topic of the tweet is Nancy Pelosi, or Congress in the Figure 3, and it criticizes her for not acting on the events happening at the camps. Many politicians are actively making commentary on social media like Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez that has prompted various responses by fellow politicians (Alvarez, 2019 June 20). Although a majority are not evoking concrete change, people use the hashtag to relate the issue to other problems, such as the administration, and to voice their opinions about the topic.

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