#MMIW: Twitter's Role in the Fight for Indigenous 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 been a prime hub of activism and awareness campaigns for the last decade. Hashtags, a feature popularized by Twitter and now ubiquitous in social media, allow users to anchor their tweets to a particular topic, thereby linking their message with the larger, global conversation. 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 tragically overlooked crisis: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

MMIW or Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, is an awareness campaign about the startlingly high rate at which Native women are lost and the corresponding lack of media or government attention. The statistics are jarring: Native women are murdered at 10x higher rates than other ethnicities, 84% of Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime, murder is the third-leading cause of death for American Indian/Alaskan Native women, and of the 5,712 cases of Murdered or Missing Indigeneous Women and Girls in 2016, a scant 116 were logged in the DoJ database (mmiw; Echo-Hawk 2018). This epidemic is taking innocent lives and tearing apart fragile native communities. Fortunately, through the efforts of activists, the crisis is slowly garnering attention. The hashtag #MMIW, the official acronym used by activists as shorthand, provides a glimpse into the ways that people, both native and non-native, communicate 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, a primary automated filter meant to eliminate retweets left behind a mere 281 tweets. This was then followed by a secondary manual filter to eliminate tweets with little to no content besides hashtags, leaving behind a final sum of 130 tweets.

For each tweet, TAGS provided information on the text of the tweet, the time at which the tweet was created, the number 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.
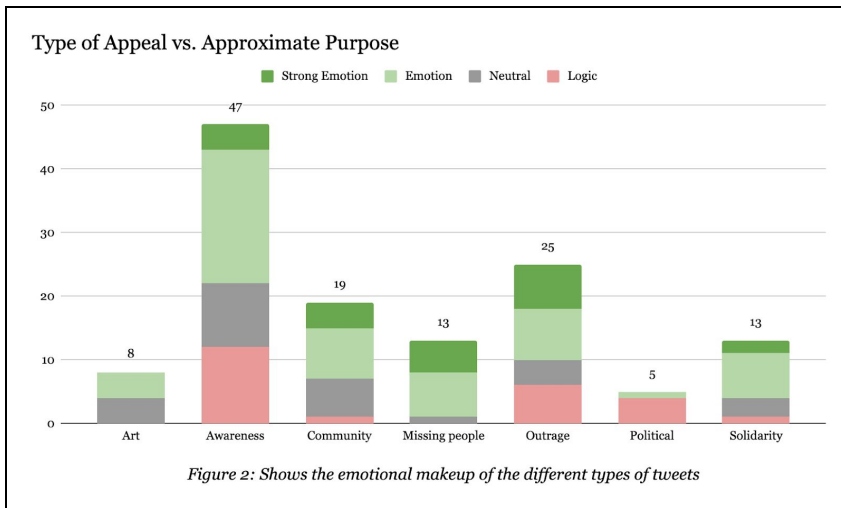
One of the primary tools of analysis was the categorization based on approximate purpose. The tweets fell into 7 categories: Community, Awareness, Missing People, Solidarity, Art, Outrage, and Politics. A good portion of tweets provided information about missing women, some with only factual information but many with emotional pleas. Messages expressing sympathy were categorized as either Community (originating from Native spheres targeted at Native people) or as Solidarity (originating from Non-native allies or Native men). Other tweets were primarily

Count of Approximate Purpose

Figure 1: Models the distribution of the different tweet types
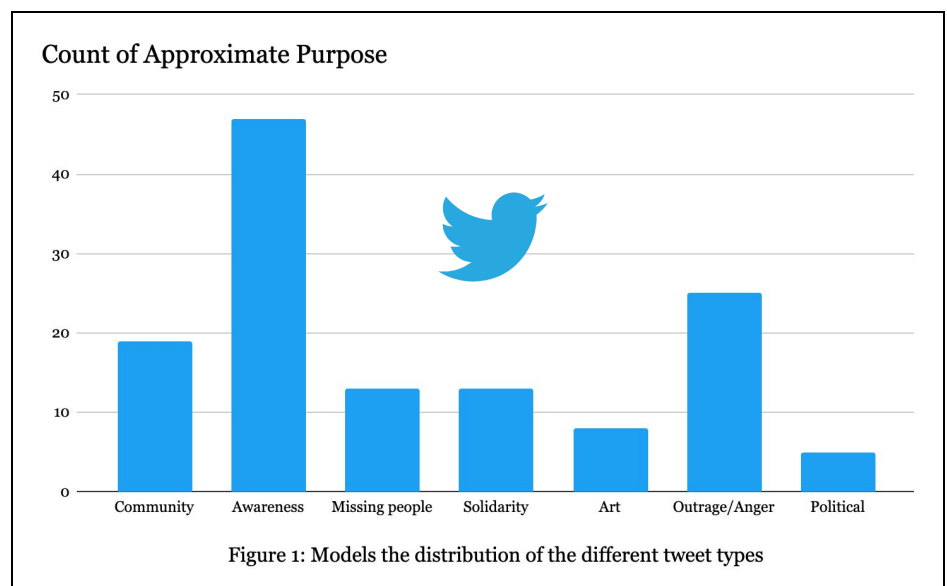
expressing anger at the lack of awareness or response. Still others used the hashtag as a platform from which to promote a political message. Additionally, a small but significant segment of tweets were dedicated to artwork.

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

Figure 2: Shows the emotional makeup of the different types of tweets

highest portion of 'Strong Emotion' are "Outrage" 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 number of individual tweeters over and under 30

Figure 3: Displays the type of communication used by each age group
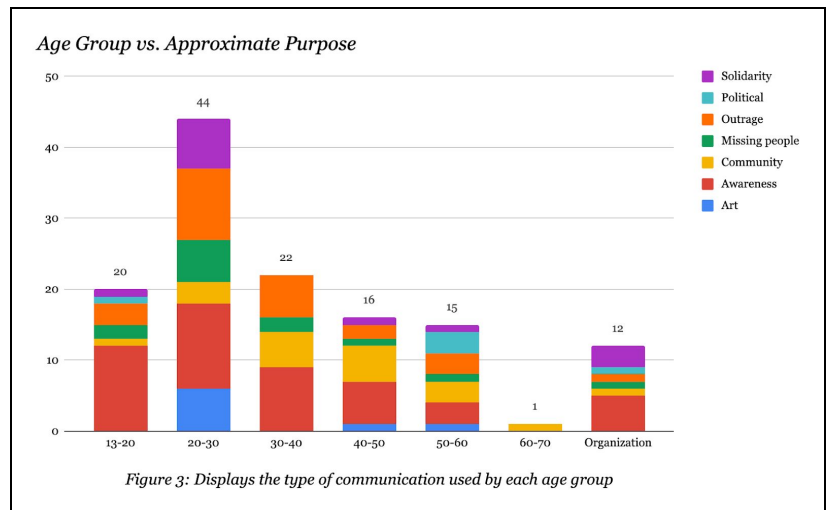
are roughly the same, with the most active group being 20-30 year olds, accompanied by significant activity from Organizations. Since older tweeters tended to be Natives, there were far less tweets in Solidarity and far more in building Community, while younger tweeters were far more likely to be non-natives 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 Indigenous people, this issue simply cannot be ignored. 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. Her expression of 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 Indigenous 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). Such examples of Indigenous people taking action to secure a better future inspire hope for the MMIW awareness campaign.

Conclusion:

It is important to recognize that there is an element of bias that is inherent in manual coding and filtering. Human bias is endemic to research based on interpretation of qualitative material. Despite that, this data yielded insightful information on the status of the MMIW movement and its future. There is still much work left to be done before this crisis gets the attention it deserves. An investigation by graduate student Sophia Deihl on the racialized biases present in social media found that "Both #mmiw and #notinvisible [had] such small numbers of Tweets that compared with the high number of #metoo Tweets they seem[ed] almost invisible. Their numbers are not in proportion to the US population and especially not to the sexual violence rates" (Diehl 2019). But there is still reason to hope. Evidence that the hashtag has grown beyond being solely a place of community-building and searching for missing people can be found in this study itself. Active and engaged young people made up over half of the tweeting population and a whole 40% of tweeters in the sample set were Non-native. In the last two years, both the United States and Canada have opened national investigations into the crisis, and the Black Lives Matter movement has helped shed light on instances of misjustice against minorities everywhere. Yes, there is a long road ahead for the MMIW campaign. But until then, the Twitter circle 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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