“Consent Is F#$@king Required”: Hashtag Feminism Surrounding Sexual Consent in a Culture of Postfeminist Contradictions

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Abstract
Hashtag feminism exists in a time of postfeminist contradictions marked by the simultaneous existence of popular feminism and popular misogyny. In one such contradiction, popular feminism has led women to expect the successful negotiation of sexual consent, while popular misogyny permits the circulation of traditional sexual scripts that disregard the necessity of consent. In this study, we analyze messages conveyed through digitized narratives of sexual consent posted on Tumblr, a social media site that is popular among feminist activists, to identify the ways that users construct meaning around the dissonance between expectations for consent and the inequalities that inhibit its negotiation. We specifically explore whether hashtag feminism navigates postfeminist contradictions in a way that simultaneously calls out misogyny and calls on feminism. We find that the Tumblr posts in our sample did both, albeit in a manner that failed to offer tangible solutions to the problem at hand. Calls on feminism were largely limited to tagging feminist allies and recirculating existing feminist campaigns. Thus, we argue that the hashtag ultimately became a handoff to a larger feminist abstraction. Future research should explore conditions under which activists link tangible issues, actors, and agendas to an otherwise abstract popular feminism.

Keywords
hashtag feminism, postfeminist contradiction, sexual consent, misogyny

If the second wave of feminism was about politicizing the personal, then contemporary feminism is about making the invisible visible. According to Banet-Weiser (2018), the most prominent form of contemporary feminism is circulated through popular and commercial media in an “economy of visibility . . . where its sheer accessibility—through shared images, ‘likes’, clicks, followers, retweets, and so on—is a key component of its popularity” (p. 10). What Banet-Weiser calls “popular feminism” competes for visibility against a normative “popular misogyny” that entails the systematic devaluing of women. In fact, popular feminism is about “making what is hidden, routinized, and normalized about popular misogyny more public, displayed, and explicit” (p. 37). This is perhaps best exemplified by hashtag feminism, or the appropriation of social media hashtags to call attention to feminist causes (Clark-Parsons, 2021).

Although hashtag feminism has arguably promoted the visibility of feminist issues (e.g., #MeToo has drawn attention to sexual assault), some scholars have argued that its emphasis on individual identities and personal narratives can be apolitical in nature (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ghadery, 2019). In fact, Banet-Weiser argues that in an economy of visibility, popular feminism does not challenge the structures of gender inequality; rather, “visual representation becomes the beginning and the end of political action” (p. 23). Others have argued that the coexistence of popular feminism and popular misogyny creates “postfeminist contradictions” that “both enable possibilities and impose constraints for hashtag feminism” (Linabary et al., 2020, p. 1841). In other words, hashtag feminism may empower individuals who share their personal narratives while minimizing the structural causes of feminist issues. The present study explores whether hashtag feminism can navigate postfeminist contradictions in a way that simultaneously calls out popular misogyny and calls on popular feminism. Specifically, in this study, we analyze digitized

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narratives about sexual consent posted to Tumblr as a case study for understanding the ways that hashtag feminism may (or may not) hold both individuals and larger structural forces responsible for gender inequality. To do so, it is important to situate both hashtag feminism and sexual consent within a broader culture of postfeminist contradictions.

**Hashtag Feminism and Sexual Consent in a Culture of Postfeminist Contradictions**

Hashtag feminism has arguably been instrumental in drawing attention to feminist issues. For example, feminist activists have used hashtags such as #MeToo to call out instances of sexual assault as well as the cultural norms that promote tolerance of such violence (Loney-Howes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Rentschler, 2014). Yet, there is contention regarding the political nature of hashtag feminism. Some scholars argue that hashtags such as #MeToo place too much emphasis on the “me” by assigning responsibility for change to individuals who share their digitized narratives of sexual violence, whereas others argue that hashtag feminism demonstrates the scope of sexual assault to those who were previously unaware or unconcerned (Ghadery, 2019). However, these perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive of one another.

There is some empirical evidence that #MeToo has had an impact on cultural awareness of sexual assault. One longitudinal analysis of Google search trends indicated #MeToo sparked information seeking on sexual assault and sexual harassment, and this trend was sustained beyond peaks associated with public accusations against high-profile figures (Kaufman et al., 2021). Findings from another longitudinal study revealed that dismissal of sexual assault allegations (i.e., expressing the belief that the increasing number of reports of sexual assault are due to false allegations or that women make allegations to harm men) decreased among both women and men after the popularization of #MeToo (Szekerès et al., 2020).

Yet, despite raising awareness about sexual assault, hashtag feminism can reinforce the assumption that individual victims are responsible for enacting change. In 2018, the now-defunct feminist blog babe.net ran a widely viewed story conveying the account of a woman identified by the pseudonym “Grace” who went on a date with actor Aziz Ansari and claimed he repeatedly made unwanted sexual contact with her. A qualitative analysis of New York Times online readers’ reactions to Grace’s story indicated that contemporary gender expectations have shifted “such that women are not only allowed to be assertive, they are expected to be so” (Worthington, 2020, p. 54). Ultimately, readers asserted that Grace had a personal responsibility to clearly voice her opposition to Ansari’s advances. The study author noted that such an argument relays the assumption that “feminist advocacy has made sufficient progress eradicating gender inequity that women can now engage fearlessly with men, a viewpoint that some would see as enabling male predation by promoting an expectation for female responsibility” (p. 55).

The idea that women have achieved a level of power that allows them to clearly and effectively oppose unwanted sexual contact is problematic in that it ignores gender inequality as a barrier to the effective negotiation of sexual consent. In fact, research indicates that young adults coming of age in a #MeToo era place a great deal of importance on sexual consent, yet the pervasiveness of a heteronormative traditional sexual script that privileges male sexual agency over female sexual agency prohibits its successful negotiation (Graf & Johnson, 2021; Hirsch et al., 2019; Jozkowski et al., 2017; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

The dissonance between expectations and experiences surrounding sexual consent is arguably a product of the contemporary coexistence of popular feminism and popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). According to Banet-Weiser, both feminism and misogyny are popular in the contemporary moment in that they each (1) are expressed on multiple media platforms, (2) attract like-minded individuals, and (3) manifest in a terrain of struggle with competing demands for power (p. 2). Yet, popular feminism and popular misogyny exhibit some important differences. Each focuses on a discourse of injury, but popular feminism focuses on injuries of sexism, whereas popular misogyny focuses on injuries of feminism. In this sense, popular feminism is active and popular misogyny is reactive. As Banet-Weiser argues, “the contemporary networked visibility of popular feminism, available across multiple media platforms, has stimulated a reaction, mobilizing misogyny to compete for visibility within these same mediated networks” (p. 4).

Although both thrive in an economy of visibility, popular feminism utilizes a more individualized, and less structural, lens than popular misogyny. Specifically, in an economy of visibility, injuries of sexism are believed to be self-inflicted and to result from individual deficits; thus, women can ostensibly overcome these injuries through individual-level empowerment (e.g., achieving personal visibility and confidence). In fact, as Banet-Weiser (2018) asserts, those popular feminisms that achieve visibility do not challenge structures of inequalities, are nonthreatening, and rely on a singular gender identity that is devoid of an intersectional lens (e.g., White, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual). As a result, injuries that result from “racism, transphobia, homophobia, and so on—are rendered less visible” (p. 89). Ultimately, the most visible forms of popular feminism are the most apolitical.

In comparison, popular misogyny “is not only expressed in an economy of visibility but is also reified into institutions and structures” as evident by long-standing injuries such as the sexual harassment of women (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 32). The deep historical roots and prominence of misogyny bestow
privileges of normativity and invisibility. If gender inequalities that disadvantage women are invisible, then any gains for women are perceived as injuries to men. In fact, popular misogyny uses a “funhouse mirror” to create the illusion that it is men who are injured by inequality and structural disparities. Essentially, popular misogyny is an “ongoing recuperative project” that claims “masculinity, and more generally, patriarchy, are under threat” such that “popular misogyny is often expressed as a need to take something ‘back’—such as patriarchy—from the greedy hands of women and feminists” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 35). Thus, according to popular misogyny, women’s demands that sexual encounters be consensual constitute an injury to men that demands reparations. As Banet-Weiser argues:

In an era of popular feminism, the insistence that rape culture exists at all is an affront to men. The logic here is that women are sexual subjects—and their sexual subjectivity automatically results in the emasculation of men. If women are sexually desiring subjects, then, according to this logic, rape culture cannot exist as women are always in control of consent. (p. 56, emphases in original)

Gender Inequality as a Barrier to the Negotiation of Sexual Consent

Sexual consent can be defined as “freely given verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness” to engage in sexual activity (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999, p. 259). Findings from a recent survey of American adults revealed that younger adults (aged 18–40 years) place significantly greater importance on sexual consent than middle-aged adults or older adults (Graf & Johnson, 2021). This suggests that young people tend to expect some form of consent negotiation in their sexual interactions. However, the existing research also suggests that many of these young adults spent their adolescent years immersed in institutions that failed to instruct them on the negotiation of sexual consent. To illustrate, only a small minority of U.S. states have adopted health education standards that explicitly mention sexual consent (Willis et al., 2019), and research suggests this void is unlikely to be filled at home. A recent study using a large national sample of American adolescents found that 69% of responding teens reported their mothers never talked to them about sexual consent and 81% reported their fathers never talked to them about consent (Padilla-Walker et al., 2020). Young people who look to popular media for sex education may get no more instruction than what is offered by their schools and parents. A content analysis of popular mainstream films from 2013 revealed that consent was more commonly conveyed through implicit nonverbal rather than explicit verbal communication (Jozkowski et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2020). Thus, by the time American adolescents reach young adulthood, they seem to have a dearth of formal tools for negotiating a process that they deem to be important. This may lead them to rely on established sexual scripts.

Most of what we know about sexual consent and sexual scripts is based on samples of college students. From their open-ended survey administered to a sample of heterosexual college students, Jozkowski et al. (2014) found that men and women define sexual consent similarly, most frequently as two people being willing to have sex with each other and/or as an agreement to have sex. However, heterosexual college students appear to have less accurate understandings of consent than their sexual minority peers do (e.g., they are less likely to understand consent as an ongoing/continual negotiation and/or recognize the right to withdraw consent) (Mennicke et al., 2020). This discrepancy may be due to the tendency of heterosexual college students to understand consent within the confines of heteronormative traditional sexual scripts (Hirsch et al., 2019; Jozkowski et al., 2017; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). As Hirsch et al. (2019) concluded from their ethnographic study of sexual consent negotiation among heterosexual college students, this privileging of male sexual desire and agency can lead men to feel entitled to sex and lead women to feel they do not have the right to deny men access to their bodies. This can ultimately lead men to read women’s lack of resistance as consent (Hirsch et al., 2019). In fact, findings from one vignette experiment indicated that men generally perceive sexual scenarios as more consensual than women do (Humphreys, 2007).

Such presumed entitlement to women’s bodies is perhaps best exemplified by young men’s fears of false allegations of sexual assault. Many of the young men in Hirsch et al.’s (2019) ethnographic work feared that the gap between their personal consent practices and institutional/legal definitions of consent may result in false accusations of sexual assault. In addition, the authors of one recent qualitative study argued that participants’ understandings of consent reinforced men’s power and entitlement to sex, as men who actively sought consent from women did so with the explicit purpose of avoiding presumably false accusations of sexual assault (Metz et al., 2021).

Hashtag Feminism in a Culture of Postfeminist Contradictions

Social media sites can provide a valuable space for feminist consciousness-building around issues of gender inequality, such as barriers to the negotiation of sexual consent. Hashtag feminism, or digital feminist activism that appropriates metadata tags to draw attention to a cause, allows users to “politicize the personal—a longstanding goal of feminist
movements in the United States—by making it *visible*” (Clark-Parsons, 2021, p. 2, emphasis in original). In fact, Clark (2014) argues that hashtag feminism’s “narrative logic—its ability to produce and connect individual stories—fuels its political growth” (p. 789).

Perhaps best exemplified by the proliferation of #MeToo, hashtag feminism has called out instances of sexual assault as well as the cultural norms that promote tolerance of such violence (Loney-Howes, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019; Mendes et al., 2018; Rentschler, 2014). These acts of hashtag feminism create “a space for women and girls to share their own experiences and, through doing so, challenge ‘commonsense’ understandings of this abuse and promote gendered solidarity” (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015). From their interviews with young feminist digital activists, Mendes et al. (2018) found that, despite becoming targets of attacks from other users, participants believed social media sites were a safe and easy place to communicate feminist views with like-minded audiences that are broader than what would be permitted by their offline social networks.

The ways in which social media platforms make it easier to share ideas with a wide audience is a product of “platform vernacular.” Gibbs et al. (2015) introduced the concept of platform vernacular to explain the way that communication styles and practices emerge and solidify within social media sites. They defined platform vernaculars as “shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users” and they argued that “each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a . . . genre of communication” (p. 257). These genres are shaped by affinities that are built into the hardware and software of platforms, which delimit some modes of communication while prioritizing others.

By analyzing Instagram posts tagged with #funeral, Gibbs et al. demonstrated the ways in which social media allows users to move away from formal rituals of grief and toward more informal, personalized practices that reach a wider social network. The affordances of Instagram, which is largely deployed on mobile devices, enable social media to be integrated into common activities and rituals, such as when users employ a hashtag to share individual or group selfies of themselves in mourning with a larger digital social network.

Applying the concept of platform vernacular to hashtag feminism, Mendes et al. (2019) demonstrated how the affordances and restrictions of Twitter and Tumblr shape the ways that users post digitized narratives of sexual violence. Whether sharing personal stories or calling out a larger rape culture, the digitized narratives that users posted were both constructed and interpreted within the parameters of platform vernaculars. For example, through the Tumblr campaign, Who Needs Feminism, the repetitive use of selfies that include handmade signs calling out rape culture allows audiences to read the campaign as a meme, illustrating the profound scope of sexual assault. Similarly, the use of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag on Twitter allows users to succinctly link their posts to a larger digitized narrative without having to directly divulge personal details of victimization. To illustrate, in one example from Mendes et al.’s (2019) analysis, a user posted “I was five years old the first time. Set me up for years of silence/shame, drug addiction, mental illness. #BeenRapedNeverReported” (p. 1302). Here, the hashtag serves as a placeholder, allowing audiences to interpret the post as indicating the user was sexually assaulted without the user exceeding character limits or divulging sensitive details.

Yet, the narrative nature of hashtag feminism is not without its limitations. Hashtag feminism can be empowering to those individuals who post stories detailing the ways that gender inequality has affected their lives (Linabary et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). However, it can also be characterized by postfeminist contradictions, or “the co-existence of mutually constituting dynamics that simultaneously both enable and constrain feminist activism and its larger meanings and impacts” (Linabary et al., 2020, p. 1842). In their analysis of #WhyIStayed tweets, in which users voice the complex reasons for remaining in abusive relationships, Linabary et al. (2020) demonstrated that this form of hashtag feminism is simultaneously liberating by allowing a diverse group of survivors to share their stories and marginalizing by minimizing the visibility of violence as a systemic social problem. In fact, the authors concluded that their findings “call into question the hashtag’s potential to instigate change within institutions or structures” (p. 1842). Thus, the present study extends the work of Linabary et al. by analyzing messages conveyed through digitized narratives of sexual consent on Tumblr to explore whether hashtag feminism navigates postfeminist contradictions in a way that simultaneously calls out misogyny and calls on feminism to promote the equitable negotiation of sexual consent. That is, while Linabary et al. examined the ways that hashtag feminism can both empower individuals and minimize feminist issues, our study specifically examines the ways that hashtag feminism grapples with both popular feminism and popular misogyny in a culture of postfeminist contradictions.

**Data and Method**

**Sample**

Data for the present study come from digitized narratives posted to Tumblr. We chose this specific site for a couple important reasons. First, the fact that Tumblr deemphasizes personal profiles and allows users to post under pseudonyms, rather than their legal names, has made the platform a safe space for feminist and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus other identities not captured by
LGBTQ+ activism (Bronstein, 2020; Haimson et al., 2021; Renninger, 2015). In fact, one participant in a recent study of young women’s digital feminism described Tumblr’s privacy affordances as a “proper black hole” for feminist activism in that users can post content anonymously without fear of being attacked because “nobody knows who anybody is” (Keller, 2019, p. 8). Second, considering that Tumblr allows users to post in multimedia formats (e.g., photo, text, quote audio, video, chat, and link), permits hashtags, and places no character limits on posts, its platform vernacular extends more affordances to users than many other social media sites (Chang et al., 2014). Thus, this extensive platform vernacular permits the analysis of a wide array of digitized narratives on sexual consent.

It is important to note that, in December 2018, Tumblr initiated a “porn ban” and removed all content deemed “Not Safe for Work” (NSFW) from its site. As Pilipets and Paasonen (2020) demonstrate through their analysis of user posts contesting the flagging and removal of “false positives,” the algorithm that Tumblr used to search for NSFW content identified a wide range of material as sexually explicit, including skin-toned content that resembled “unacceptable” body parts. In practice, this ban resulted in the removal of a range of sexual content and may have censored the feminist and LGBTQ+ communities who had created safe spaces on Tumblr (Bronstein, 2020; Tiidenberg, 2019). Thus, the Tumblr content that we analyzed in our study is limited in that it excludes posts that were removed for being deemed sexually explicit. Yet, despite this limitation, we believe the affordances of Tumblr that made it a safe space for feminist and LGBTQ+ activism offer the richest source of data for examining hashtag feminism surrounding sexual consent.

We obtained our sample in October 2020 by using Tumblr’s application programming interface (API) to identify all undeleted posts that were tagged with “consent” and appeared between 2010 and 2020. We sought to identify themes in digitized narratives that were the most popular with digital audiences. Thus, we sorted posts by their number of notes (i.e., an aggregate total of likes, reblogs, and comments). At the time of data collection, notes to the posts in our sampling frame ranged from 0 to 548,182. We focused our analysis on the top 100 posts, as this is the approximate point where the number of notes demonstrated a substantial drop (from approximately 550,000 to 5,000) and preliminary coding indicated we had reached a point of data saturation.

It is important to note that, as social media research becomes increasingly popular, academic debates about ethical considerations of collecting data from social media sites have raised issues concerning confidentiality and participant consent (see Golder et al., 2017 for a review). In consideration of these debates, we followed guidance offered by Moreno et al. (2013) regarding the ethical conduct of social media research. According to Moreno et al.’s guidelines, our study constitutes observational research (i.e., we collected Tumblr posts without interacting with participants) that does not involve human subjects (i.e., data were unidentifiable and publicly available). This designation tempers concerns surrounding confidentiality and participant consent. However, to ensure that posts could not be easily traced to any specific Tumblr account, we chose to omit user names from our analysis, and we paraphrased content that divulged personal stories of a sensitive nature.

Data Coding

Data coding followed the grounded theory methods outlined by Charmaz (2014). This entailed (1) identifying initial codes through an analysis of Tumblr posts and then (2) synthesizing these initial codes into focused codes by identifying larger themes that groups of salient initial codes collectively revealed. We followed this process for both textual and visual material. For the latter, we followed Konecki’s (2011) guidance on the application of grounded theory to the coding of visual data, which involved describing the image in textual form and then applying the open and focused coding process to those textual descriptions.

Each of the three authors compiled a list of initial codes independently of one another and then collaborated as a group to synthesize the salient initial codes into focused codes. We then compiled the final collection of codes into a codebook, with each initial code classified under its corresponding focused code. The second and third authors used the codebook to independently code each Tumblr post for the presence of each focused code, resolving all disagreements through discussion and consensus.

Results

The final sample consisted of 100 posts that appeared between 2013 and 2020, with the mean age of posts at the time of data collection being 56.97 months (SD=24.92). The number of notes for each post ranged from 5,126 to 548,182 (M=52,316.02; SD=82,301.74). Posts were presented in a range of formats including photo (62%), text (21%), quote (8%), gif (5%), video (2%), and link (2%). Posts were classified under the following focused codes/themes, which were not mutually exclusive of one another: clarifying consent, popularizing consent, interrogating traditional sexual scripts, consolidating campaigns, and proposing progress without praxis. We discuss these themes as they call out popular misogyny or call on popular feminism.

Calling Out Popular Misogyny

Clarifying Consent. Nearly every post in the sample attempted to clarify the concept of sexual consent, frequently in very concrete terms. These posts came across as more pointed than literal definitions of consent; rather, they read as declarations, demands, and/or demonstrations of the parameters of consent. Many posts provided illustrations of what consent is.
or what it should be. For example, one user lauded cats’ exertion of physical boundaries (e.g., only allowing people to pet them when they want to be petted and withdrawing consent to be petted at any moment) by stating, “Everyone should aspire to a cat’s understanding of healthy relationships.” Another took a bolder approach by showcasing a picture with the mantra “consent is sexy” in which the word “sexy” was crossed out and replaced with the words “fucking required.” Almost equally as common were posts that clarified what consent is not. These included statements indicating that intoxicated sex cannot be consensual sex, coercion is not consent, silence is not consent, and being in a relationship is not consent. Demonstrating the latter, one user explained “An established relationship doesn’t establish permanent permission for sex and it drives me bugshit crazy that people seem to think it does.”

Other posts emphasized refusal by circulating the refrain “no means no” in one fashion or another. In one such example, a user posted a comic that depicts a father showing his son his “sweet moves” by respecting the child’s mother’s boundaries. The father tells the boy, “the move is called ‘listening and respecting’” and “ladies love it.” In another example, a user combines the “no means no,” subtheme with clarifications of what consent is and what it is not by displaying a photo of a pink graffiti-clad wall proclaiming “‘No’ does not mean ‘convince me.’” Underneath the photo appears a lengthy definition of consent, stating that consent is freely given, informed, enthusiastic, and something you can take back. The post concludes with the admonishment, “When people think about consent, ‘no means no’ often comes to mind. But saying ‘yes’ is really important, too. A straight-up ‘yes!’ means that no one has to guess or assume anything, and you’ll know they’re really into it.”

Users also invoked analogies likening sexual consent to other forms of consent. Some of these paralleled sexual consent with consent to activities where less is at stake (e.g., only allowing people to pet their cats’ heads and withdrawing consent when they want to do so at any moment). However, most emphasized the need for consent before engaging in any physical contact, with the assumption that this sets the groundwork for respecting sexual boundaries. A number of these included posts that targeted parents, urging them to demand that extended family members respect the physical boundaries of their children. One such example is the recirculation of an ad created by The Girl Scouts that includes a photo of a girl with a bewildered look on her face and a caption that reads, “The Girl Scouts wants to remind you that your daughter doesn’t owe anyone a hug, even during the holidays.” In a similar example, a user posted a photo of a Planned Parenthood ad titled “It’s ok to say no to hugs.” This ad proclaimed to audiences, “Heading to a gathering this Thanksgiving? Here are three ways to teach children (and adults!) about consent + bodily autonomy.” Another post blended critiques of sexual and racial fetishization by displaying a series of photos of young African American women on what appears to be a college campus all holding the same handwritten sign that read, “Don’t touch my hair.” These photos were followed by a caption that stated, “Black women are not animals. We are not exhibits. Our bodies do not exist for your entertainment or your curiosity. Our bodies are worthy of autonomy and respect.”

In an apparent attempt to attribute responsibility for their consent grievances, users identified consent as a men’s problem, meaning it is men who need to clarify their understandings of consent. This was often conveyed through musings that men would “get it” if certain conditions were met. These posts typically adopted a flippant tone, such as a photo of a Tweet that proclaimed, “I bet a lot of guys who don’t think that rape is a big deal were super upset when that U2 album was put on their phone without consent.” Others were facetious yet sober by positing that straight men would understand the importance of consent if their boundaries and bodies were policed and/or violated the way that women’s bodies often are. One post that is apropos of the 2020 COVID pandemic contained a photo of a Tweet musing, “it is truly wild to watch the Anti-mask backlash escalate and realize that conservative white men are totally unfamiliar with the concept of having their bodies policed by institutions.” The Tweet continued:

you mean someone’s just going to TELL me what to WEAR?????? and how to ACT???? In PUBLIC????? and if I don’t they’ll tell me the bad thing that happened to me is MY FAULT????? how is this LEGAL??????” like lol bless your heart.

Others used sexually explicit imagery to convey their point. For example, one user posted a photo of a Tweet that stated “If you ever tried to put your finger up a straight guy’s ass during sex, you’ll know that they actually understand ongoing consent, withdrawal of consent, and sexual boundaries very well. They act confused when it’s our bodies.”

Still, another example of this subtheme relied on men’s presumed homophobia to make this point, such as when a user posted a photo of a Twitter exchange that stated “Ask hetero men about Gay men hitting on them and they’ll be able to dig into every nook and cranny of how consent works. lol.”

**Popularizing Consent.** Users in our sample popularized consent by circulating third-party narratives, using celebrities or political figures, anime/comics, or movies to make the concept of sexual consent concrete. This theme tended to work in tandem with the clarifying consent theme, as users often highlighted popular culture examples to indicate what consent is and what it is not. A number of these critiqued Robin Thicke’s 2013 song “Blurred Lines,” which features the lyrical refrain “I know you want it” and “I hate these blurred lines.” For example, one user posted a series of photos of Thicke with the tag “Consent has no #BLURREDLINES.”
In one post titled, “Consent, An Easy Visual Guide,” another user posted a picture of two juxtaposed diagrams, one with yes and no clearly delineated and framed with the heading “This is what consent looks like!” and the other with a blurred line between yes and no framed with the heading “This is NOT what consent looks like!” In conclusion, the user commented, “You can still see the line, asshole, so don’t cross it. Fuck you, Robin Thicke.” Donald Trump was also a target of this theme, such as when a user posted a picture of a Tweeted photo depicting Trump pardoning the National Thanksgiving Turkey and quoting him as asking, “Am I allowed to touch it?” framed by a heading that read, “tfw you realize trump respects turkeys more than women.”

A handful of popularizing consent posts were specifically tailored to cosplay communities, which involve fans donning costumes to dress as genre-specific media characters (usually from comics or science fiction). These typically circulated the phrase, “cosplay ≠ consent,” such as in a post that included a series of photos of women in cosplay attire holding signs that contained blunt messages like “Yelling, ‘I’d fuck you!’ Is not a compliment!”

**Interrogating Traditional Sexual Scripts.** In addition to clarifying and popularizing consent, users called out popular misogyny by interrogating traditional sexual scripts, typically by critiquing the assumption that men are active sexual initiators and/or women are passive sexual regulators. For example, one post declared, “Women are having sex out of politeness and that’s got to stop.” Another critiqued the role of men as initiators—and aggressors—with the following hypothetical script:

- **Boys:** if you no [sic] interested then just say that.
- **Women:** I’m not interested.
- **Boys:** let me change that.

Interestingly, this particular post seems to infantilize the men who promulgate this script by calling them “boys,” and juxtaposing them against the “women” whom they are targeting as sexual pursuits. Thus, this user diminished traditional sexual scripts by diminishing those who articulate them.

Some users critiqued rape myths that excuse sexual violence against women by holding women responsible for managing men’s sexual desire. In one such post that mixed the traditional sexual script theme with the clarifying consent theme, one user presented a series of pencil-style drawings depicting scenarios that do not constitute consent. Many of these directly challenged rape myths, such as a drawing of a woman wearing a short dress with high heels under the caption, “What did she expect, going out dressed that way?” A subsequent caption explained that the woman in the picture wanted to have fun dancing with friends and that what a woman wears is a reflection of “personal style, not consent.”

In a particularly noteworthy subtheme, some users critiqued traditional sexual scripts by highlighting generational differences in gender norms. Such posts typically relayed stories of young boys who are able to respect the boundaries of girls and asked why adult men cannot understand a simple concept that children can master. For example, one user described her 8-year-old son’s dismay at Prince Charming for kissing Sleeping Beauty without her consent. As the boy exclaimed, “you can’t just kiss people you have to ask first.” In a more elaborate example, one user posted the following narrative:

> Tonight at Walmart I saw a little boy ask a little girl if he could hug her because he liked her sweater. The girl (these kids looked to be about 5, MAYBE 6) said no, so the boy said “okay. I like your sweater. Bye.” And then ran back to his parents. He said to his Dad “I didn’t hug her because she said no, but I told her I liked her sweater!” And his dad said “Cool buddy!” And they went on with their shopping trip. If a small child understands the “complex” concept of consent, and the meaning of the word “no,” then so should everyone else.

Some posts took this subtheme a step further and elevated gender over age such that young boys were held to adult standards and expected to respect the sexual boundaries of adult women the same way that adult men should. In one exemplary post, a user who is presumably an actress described filming a scene with a 12-year-old boy in which the boy was scripted to quickly kiss the woman on the lips. The user explained that the boy pulled her aside and said, “I want to make sure you’re okay with everything that happens with the kiss. Do you feel okay?” and throughout filming continued to ask, “Was that okay?” The user concluded her narrative by declaring, “He’s 12. Don’t let anyone ever tell you that the male inability to understand consent is innate. It is learned.” Interestingly, this user never questioned how appropriate it is for an adult woman and a 12-year-old boy to kiss on the lips. Instead, she seems to ascribe an adult level of sexual autonomy to a young boy and hold him up as an exemplar for men. This omission is consistent with popular feminism’s inattention to intersectionality. This post relays the assumption that all men (or boys) should actively seek consent from all women without regard to how age may alter gendered power dynamics.

**Calling on Popular Feminism**

**Consolidating Campaigns.** Activists in our sample situated sexual consent under the auspice of other social justice causes, either by identifying common adversaries and allies or by circulating preexisting social marketing campaigns that advocate for consent or related causes. Identifying common adversaries and allies was often accomplished subtly with the use of hashtags that identified popular misogyny sources of consent grievances (e.g., #patriarchy and #men’s rights) as well as groups that hold shared grievances (e.g., #trans, #LGBTQ, #feminism, and #MeToo). In a more elaborate
example, a user posted a photo of disheveled white bed sheets with the pink caption “Consent to sex is not consent to pregnancy” splayed across the wrinkled fabric. The post, which was tagged with both #pro-choice (framed as an ally) and #pro-life (framed as an adversary), stated, “To me, this is one of the most disturbing pro-life arguments: that consent to one particular act equals consent to another.” The accompanying text listed several scenarios that do not equal sexual consent and then concluded, “The argument that consent to sex equals consent to pregnancy is creepy rape apologist nonsense that betrays complete ignorance of what consent is and how it works. Please stop.” In another example, a user identified trans communities as allies, relaying a personal story of forced medical sterilization, in which consent was coerced and required for changing their legal gender identity. Ultimately, these posts seemed to work to broaden the scope of the issue of sexual consent and legitimize grievances by linking them to the causes of other groups that have gained some cultural traction.

Users also shared (typically reposted) social marketing campaigns that advocate for consent or related causes. These rarely included original content, as typical examples included ads designed by organizations such as The Girl Scouts and Planned Parenthood, although some were from more organic efforts such as the Cosplay ≠ Consent (also known as CONsent) campaign referenced earlier. In one particularly unique example, a user modified the images of a Mystrength.org ad that features pictures of heterosexual couples framed by the caption, “My strength is not for hurting” followed by an explanation of behaviors the man exhibits to ensure his partner does not feel violated. This user inverted the gender roles in pictures such that the woman is displayed in the more powerful position and responds to the framed caption with explanations such as “So when he said no, I said OK” and “So when he was drunk, I BACKED OFF.” This altered campaign seemingly critiques traditional sexual scripts that cast men as sexual initiators, with the implications that men can be the victims of sexual assault and that the sexual scripts that justify women’s victimization are mutable. However, this is not particularly clear, as the user who posted this tells audiences “any interpretation is up to you.”

**Proposing Progress Without Praxis.** The posts in our sample often proposed channels for progress, such as by advocating for changes to policy/law, issuing calls to action (e.g., asking people to be responsible bystanders and speak up when they see something wrong), or promoting consent education. However, advocating for changes to policy/law and issuing calls to action tended to be vague in nature, such as in a previously described post that declared “Consent is fucking required,” which was accompanied by the hashtag “#consent law” or when another user ended a post with the appeal, “please read and spread the word around.” Similarly, one post framed with the heading, “Stop Sexual Assault in Schools,” featured a photo of a flyer outlining what consent is and what it is not along with a caption that asks audiences to join in “empowering activism to make lasting change.” In these posts, users proposed that progress was necessary, but provided little tangible guidance for achieving change. That is, they made generic appeals, telling audiences to do something without telling them exactly what they should do.

Utilizing more concrete terms, some users advocated for education about consent—typically beginning in childhood. For example, one post included a video of a children’s story time where kids are taught about consent to physical touch. The video showed a woman presenting a stuffed octopus to the kids and asking if the octopus can have a hug. The octopus accepts “no” as an answer and gives hugs to children who affirmatively consent. The narrator of the video explains that children who respect physical boundaries in childhood will later respect physical boundaries in dating relationships when they reach adolescence and adulthood. In another example that blended the proposing progress theme with the consolidating campaigns theme, a blog dedicated to supporting “all in harms [sic] way of the Patriarchy and defense of MRAs [men’s rights activists],” simply stated in clear black and white text, “Education about consent can start before education about sex. If we teach our children to respect others, they’ll grow into respectful adults.”

**Discussion**

In this study, we analyzed the messages conveyed through digitized narratives of sexual consent posted on Tumblr to identify the ways that users construct meaning around the dissonance between their individual expectations for sexual consent and the structural gender inequalities that inhibit its negotiation. The digitized narratives in our sample tell us a few things about the way hashtag feminism addresses sexual consent.

First, while calling out popular misogyny, the users in our sample placed themselves in the position of educating social media audiences on sexual consent. Their clarifications of sexual consent suggest the belief that they personally have a solid grasp on the concept but that others need to better understand its parameters. This projected “other” was frequently straight men. That is, when users identified a target of their grievances, they typically did so by speculating what would need to happen for straight men to “get it.” Although their propositions were not particularly constructive (e.g., suggesting that if men’s sexual boundaries were violated, they would understand consent), their clear implication was that consent should be understood as a men’s issue (and not just a women’s issue). Yet, this assumption was largely conveyed through a lens of individual responsibility. Just as #MeToo has been criticized for placing emphasis on the “me” instead of on structural inequality (Ghadery, 2019), the Tumblr users in our sample arguably placed emphasis on the “he” by explicating that individual men need to be better informed on the parameters of sexual consent.

Second, consistent with findings from previous research (Hirsch et al., 2019; Jozkowski et al., 2017; Jozkowski &
Peterson, 2013; Muehlenhard et al., 2016), the content of the digitized narratives in our sample relayed the belief that the free negotiation of sexual consent is encumbered by traditional sexual scripts that cast men as sexual initiators and women as regulators. Although users often called out these scripts and challenged them directly, their tendency to hold men responsible for sexual consent seems to simultaneously reify men’s role as sexual initiators. That is, rather than considering women’s sexual agency by entertaining the notion that women may want to initiate and seek consent for sexual activity, users believed men, as sexual initiators, need to seek consent and respect rejection. Thus, traditional sexual scripts seem to contribute to the problem at hand while also encumbering solutions. In other words, these scripts are so pervasive that users in our sample seem to be unable to think outside the realms of this paradigm or foresee a future where it does not exist.

Finally, as evidenced by the use of the quote, “consent is fucking required,” which appeared more than once in our sample, users clearly believed that some action needs to be taken to promote both the understanding and the negotiation of consent. However, aside from suggesting that children be educated about consent at an early age, most posts that demanded action failed to suggest clear strategies for achieving progress. Educating young children about consent can be a promising strategy for promoting long-term change, but it does little for young women who do not feel that their sexual desires and boundaries are being respected today. By linking sexual consent to other feminist issues (e.g., reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism), but proposing no strategies for change, posts in our sample presented demands that were rich in theory, but devoid of praxis. This can essentially create a sense of hopelessness. In fact, the posts in our sample reflected the notion that users had given up on men as part of the solution. As mentioned earlier, the posts in our sample relayed the assumption that consent should be cast as a men’s issue but fell short of providing suggestions for how men can take action to solve this problem.

Limitations

Findings from this study should be interpreted within the confines of a few important limitations. First, although Tumblr is known as a safe space for feminist activism (Bronstein, 2020; Haimson et al., 2021; Renninger, 2015), we cannot assume that all material in our sample was posted by users who identify as feminist activists. Second, as previously discussed, Tumblr’s 2018 NSFW policy resulted in the removal of a wide range of content that was deemed sexually explicit, and, thus, our sample is exclusive of any content that may have been flagged and removed by Tumblr’s algorithm.

Finally, our sample consisted of posts that were tagged with the word “consent,” which included both original content and reblogs. However, due to the structural limitations of Tumblr, we did not analyze other users’ reactions to the content in our sample. That is, instead of appending the content of other users’ comments to a particular post, Tumblr provides links to the profiles of users who have commented on a specific post. This made identifying reactions to the posts in our sample very difficult and, thus, we did not include reactions in our analysis. As a result, our analysis does not capture any dialog that may have been generated around the posts in our sample.

Conclusion

Placing these limitations aside, findings from this study may provide some insight into the ways that hashtag feminism navigates a culture of postmodern feminist contradictions. As noted by Banet-Weiser (2018), contemporary culture is marked by the coexistence of popular feminism and popular misogyny. In their analysis of #WhyIStayed posts, Linabary et al. (2020) demonstrate the ways in which this coexistence creates postfeminist contradictions that both enable and constrain hashtag feminism. They suggest that future research should seek to understand how we might “critically engage with(in) postfeminist contradiction in creative ways to reimagine feminist activism in the current political moment” (p. 1844).

In this study, we explored whether hashtag feminism navigates postfeminist contradictions in a way that simultaneously calls out popular misogyny and calls on popular feminism. We found that the Tumblr posts in our sample did both, albeit with a larger emphasis on individuals than on structural inequalities and in a manner that failed to offer tangible solutions to the problem at hand. Specifically, the posts in our sample called out popular misogyny by (1) clarifying consent, (2) highlighting popular culture examples of disregard for sexual consent, and (3) critiquing traditional sexual scripts. However, clarifying and popularizing consent were, respectively, achieved by emphasizing the belief that individual men need to change their understandings and behavior regarding sexual consent and pointing to cases in which individual high-profile men have disregarded consent. Ultimately, these posts conveyed a sense of dismay that individual men will not make the necessary changes to promote the successful negotiation of sexual consent. Posts did point to larger social inequalities by challenging traditional sexual scripts, but they seemed to reflect the view that these scripts are so pervasive that they are essentially immutable. Ultimately, the posts in our sample seemed to indicate an implicit belief that popular misogyny must be challenged, but will continue to thrive for the foreseeable future. Thus, the posts ultimately framed popular feminism as a solution to the problem at hand.

The posts our sample called on popular feminism by (1) consolidating campaigns and (2) proposing progress but without praxis. By tagging common allies (e.g., reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism) and adversaries (e.g., patriarchy and men’s rights activists) as well as recirculating existing campaigns for related causes, the Tumblr
posts in our sample demonstrated that the dissonance between expectations and experiences with sexual consent are a product of a larger system of misogyny. Yet, proposals for progress were marked by a dearth of tangible solutions to this problem. That is, by tagging allies such as LGBTQ+ groups, the hashtag feminist posts in our sample apply a more intersectional lens to digitized narratives than what is typically found in examples of popular feminism (see Banet-Weiser, 2018). However, by tagging allies without proposing solutions, the hashtag seemingly became a hand-off to a larger feminist abstraction that is devoid of tangible actors and agendas. In this sense, popular feminism seems to be reduced to a hashtag itself, in that its main function is to link feminist issues to each other, which falls short of transformational.

It is not clear whether hashtag feminism, as an example of popular feminism that operates within an economy of visibility, is capable of providing a structural analysis of feminist issues. That is, if visibility is the end goal, instead of a means to an end, then hashtag feminism may not be an effective tool for dismantling popular misogyny. However, our findings are based on a sample of comments posted to one social media network regarding one feminist issue. To identify transformational opportunities for hashtag feminism, future research examining a range of feminist issues and platforms should explore the conditions under which hashtag feminism links tangible issues, actors, and agendas to an otherwise abstract popular feminism.

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