



From individual affectedness to collective identity: Personal testimony campaigns on social media and the logic of collection

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been much debate about the consequences of the internet and social media for activism and social movements. According to Lance W Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, digital activism involves a logic of ‘connective action’, in which collective action and collective identity lose importance. To assess the validity of this theory, I focus on personal testimony campaigns that have by now become a familiar digital tactic, especially in online mobilisations around issues of gender and sexuality. Drawing on discourse analysis of some of the most prominent examples, from #MeToo to #GirlsLikeUs, I argue that more than a logic of connection, what is at stake here is a ‘logic of collection’, involved in gathering personal testimonies as specimens of various grievances people are affected by (sexual harassment, discrimination, etc.). Aggregating personal testimonies around shared hashtags provides a means to construct and/or transform the collective identity of the groups involved in order to raise their self-awareness and place them in a better position to engage in collective action. These practices thus suggest the need to overcome the opposition between personal and collective identity inherent in the theory of ‘connective action’, and refocus research on the forms of online identification that connect these two levels.

Keywords

Collective identity, connective action, individualisation, personal testimony, social media

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Introduction

The last decade has seen a rapid development of forms of digital activism and campaigning of the most disparate kinds: from protest movements using Facebook, Twitter and TikTok in order to mobilise supporters, to instant messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal used as semi-public organisational channels. Scholars have long debated how the rise of these practices has been accompanied by a shift in the organisational and symbolic logic of politics and protest (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Dolata and Schrape, 2016; Dumitrica and Felt, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2018). One of the dominant narratives in this context has been the idea that digital politics is increasingly at odds with modernist understandings of political action, with their emphasis on strong organisation and collective identity.

An example of these views is the influential concept of ‘connective action’ by Alexandra Segerberg and Lance W Bennett (2012, 2013). According to this thesis, many contemporary social movements are no longer engaging in ‘collective action’, with the implication of strong collectiveness the expression carries. Rather, they are shifting to a more mercurial, diffuse, multi-issue and open-ended logic which focuses on temporary connections bringing together individual users around fleeting mobilisations. For Bennett and Segerberg, this transformation of the logic of protest makes the modernist paradigm of analysing protest movements less relevant. Based on this perspective, the need for strong organisation, traditionally emphasised by the American tradition of resource mobilisation theory, informed by Mancur Olson’s (1971) theory of collective action, is less relevant for understanding contemporary social movements. But the same applies also to the importance of collective identity, of a sense of ‘we’ as the basis for mobilisation, particularly underlined by the European tradition of social movement theory (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Melucci, 1991; Touraine, 1988).

Although it is true that some tendencies of the Internet and social media reflect and facilitate growing individualisation, my contention is that this view that collective identity is losing importance is misplaced. In fact, many digital activism practices focus precisely on processes of identity-building (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015). An example is provided by personal testimony campaigns that have become a recognisable ‘genre’ in digital campaigning. They can be defined as crowd-sourced symbolic mobilisations, in which Internet users who are affected by a given social ill (e.g. sexual harassment, racial discrimination and economic hardship) are invited to recount their own experience, with the aim of raising awareness and eliciting political responses. Personal testimony campaigns use a variety of social media platforms, but Twitter and Instagram are particularly popular venues. They are usually associated with a hashtag, hence they are sometimes alternatively described as ‘hashtag campaigns’ (Jackson et al., 2020; Yang, 2016). Individual contributions can come in the form of texts, images, selfies or videos, which add to those sent by other Internet users, in a ‘collective story-telling’ that often carries strong emotional overtones of indignation, compassion and collective pride.

Examples of such personal testimony campaigns include the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment starting in 2017 and other feminist campaigns such as #ShoutYourAbortion and #ILookLikeAnEngineer; campaigns for trans rights such as #GirlsLikeUs and #WorkingWhileTrans; against violence such as #IfIDieInASchoolShooting and on

socio-economic inequality such as #VentYourRent and #RaiseTheWage. More generally, many social media-driven mobilisations that are not reducible to this genre contain an element of personal testimony. Scholarship has already explored different aspects of hashtag campaigns (Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; Yang, 2016). However, to date, not enough attention has been dedicated to examining personal testimony campaigns as a distinctive genre and to developing a theory of the identity processes that underpin them.

To address these questions, in this article I develop a qualitative discourse analysis of personal testimony campaigns on Twitter, drawing on some of the most well-known cases. I focus on two main aspects: (1) the way these efforts are framed by activists and influencers in the initial posts; and (2) the content of the contributions of the ‘crowd’ of Internet users. I highlight that the logic of these campaigns is at odds with the idea of a trade-off between personal and collective identity inherent in the theory of connective action. Rather these practices can be best understood as ‘identity work’ (Watson, 2008) involved in gathering personal experiences as the basis for the construction of collective identities. I refer to the rationale behind these practices as a ‘logic of collection’ or ‘*collecting* action’, because their purpose is not so much ‘connecting’ people in a common network – as implied by the notion of connective action – but rather ‘collecting’ them, gathering behind a collective banner all the otherwise dispersed Internet users who are part of the same social group and are affected by common grievances.

This act of collection has a strong quantitative and mass element, geared at showing ‘unity’ and ‘strength in numbers’ (Tilly, 2006b). In fact, the success of these campaigns is very much measured on the *number* of contributions they attract, which is taken as an indication of the magnitude of the problem raised by activists. Furthermore, while each of the stories they collect is unique, what matters to their public mobilisation is the way their coming together highlights the *repetition* of similar conditions and situations; and this in turn serves to signal the structural, rather than merely personal, character of the problem raised, thus providing a rationale for social and political responses.

To develop this discussion, I begin by surveying the literature on social movements, digital activism and collective identity. I contrast the traditional emphasis on the strategic importance of collective identity, with views according to which collective identity has become less relevant. I argue that, rather than pitting individual and collective identity against one another, we should explore the processes that connect the two levels. After a brief discussion of methods, I examine some examples of crowd-sourced personal testimony campaigns, from #MeToo to #GirlsLikeUs. Specifically, I analyse, on the one hand, their framing by influencers and activists acting as their initiators and, on the other hand, the way users contribute to the conversation. I conclude with some notes on the broader significance of these practices for an understanding of digital campaigning and the relationship between individuals and social groups in a digital society.

Collective identity in digital activism

In recent years, scholars have paid attention to new digital campaigning practices, and, in particular, to ‘hashtagged campaigns’, which constitute the broader phenomenon under which personal testimony campaigns fall. Sarah J Jackson et al. (2020: 3) highlight in their book *#HashtagActivism* that ‘this practice has led to the creation of networks that

offer cathartic release and solidarity among those sharing stories of victimization and survival while making unignorable the political and cultural demands of a still violently patriarchal society'. As Guobin Yang (2016: 15) observes, in these mobilisations 'personal stories are linked to broader social issues and shared with the public through the use of the hashtag, giving hashtag activism a communal and collective character'. In analysing online feminist campaigns Kaitlynn Mendes et al. (2018) similarly argue that 'feminist consciousness among hashtag participants [. . .] allows them to understand sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem'. These interactions can have important consequences for individual participants as exemplified by the case where 'one of our interviewees told us that she began to identify as a feminist only after sharing her story of sexual assault on social media' (Mendes et al., 2018).

The obvious way to approach these practices is through the lens of collective identity, a notion that has had much importance in the study of social movements. The theory of collective action by Mancur Olson (1971), which is Bennett's and Segerberg's most immediate target, did not consider the question of identity, as it proceeded from an economic and rationalist approach, which overlooked psychological and cultural phenomena. Olson's work explored the difficulties faced by individuals trying to secure a certain public good, for example, health, education or clean air. He highlighted that a major problem for organisations is the fact that most public goods are 'inclusive' (p. 38), meaning that they can be enjoyed irrespective of one's contribution to the collective effort involved in securing them. This 'free rider problem' meant that, in order to mobilise their members, organisations have to use 'selective incentives' either through coercion or positive inducements (p. 133).

Discussions of collective identity became prominent since the 1970s, especially in Europe, to capture the meaning of 'new movements', from feminism to environmentalism (Melucci, 1991; Touraine, 1988), and more generally to devote attention to the cultural and symbolic aspect of collective action that strategic approaches had failed to capture. As Alberto Melucci (1991: 63) has argued, building on the work of Pizzorno, collective identity theory aimed precisely at overcoming the methodological individualism inherent in Olson's theory, acknowledging that '[i]nterests and mobilization can be coupled only if one refers to the concept of collective identity – that is, if theory provides an understanding of the "we" through which people recognize themselves'. Thus, the notion of collective identity has provided social movement scholars with a useful concept to make sense of the way in which various mobilisations translate shared conditions and grievances into a common sense of purpose. Taylor and Whittier (1992: 172) have described collective identity as 'the shared definition of a group that derive from members' common interests, and solidarity'. Similarly, Della Porta and Diani (2006: 94) have proposed that '[c]ollective action cannot occur in the absence of a "we" characterised by common traits and specific solidarity'.

The theory of collective identity has drawn inspiration from work in social psychology. This has highlighted how all groups, big and small, derive their identity from two sources: on the one hand from recognition of some degree of similarity, or 'sameness' among its members and, on the other hand, from difference vis-a-vis an 'out-group' (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Collective identity depends on the salience of various social characteristics and cleavages (Klandermans, 2014). Social movements often make

reference to various 'status groups' as defined on the basis of gender, race and class. However, the collective identity forged in social movements should not be read as 'a simple reflection of a group's structural location, for example, its race and gender', rather '[i]t is an interpretation of that structural location or status' (Whittier, 2017: 380).

Examining feminist movements, Nancy Whittier (2017: 377) has highlighted how they involve practices of 'consciousness raising' which entail 'reinterpreting one's individual experiences, seeing them as shaped by social forces and identifying as part of a group with shared experiences'. She views these practices as part of a 'visibility politics' seen in 'the disclosure of silenced or politicized identities (rape survivor, queer, person with AIDS, person who has had an abortion) in daily life or in public events such as speak outs' (p. 383). These processes have an evident affective dimension and often involve transforming the emotions people associate with their group's identity, typically moving from a sense of shame to a sense of pride (Britt and Heise, 2000; Gould, 2009). Such processes of construction and transformation of collective identity have sometimes been described as 'identity work', a term which also comprises those practices through which individuals performatively adopt and publicly declare their collective identities (Ahuja et al., 2019; Reger et al., 2008). One example is what Hunt and Benford (1994: 96) describe as 'identity talk' as seen in associational declarations which support the 'alignment of personal and collective identities'. They are now found in different online social movements, from feminist groups (Gleason, 2018; Whittier, 2017) to campaigns on disability (Bora et al., 2018).

While in many social movements identity-building can be a goal in its own right (Whittier, 2017), scholars have also shown its strategic importance. Collective identity is an important device for mobilisation, which makes it possible to overcome some psychological obstacles to participation (Klandermans, 2002). This strategic importance of collective identity is evident in the work of US social historian Charles Tilly (1978: 62) and his notion of 'catnet', namely, 'a network within a category' or 'a set of individuals comprising both a category and a network'. According to Tilly, network ties are not a sufficient condition for mobilisation. Rather they need to be accompanied by the presence of a collective self. Connected to this is what Tilly (2006b) calls WUNC (the acronym of Worth, Unity, Numbers, Commitment): social movements constantly try to show how big and dedicated is the group they try to represent through collective performances. The highly influential framing theory has similarly acknowledged the importance of identity in the construction of collective action frames (Benford and Snow, 2000).

In recent years, some scholars have however made the case that digital media make collective identity anachronistic. Most notable is the argument put forward by political scientists Lance W Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) in their theory of 'connective action'. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 750) contemporary forms of action 'are typically far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action *without the requirement of collective identity framing* or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities' (emphasis mine). In this context, the emphasis on 'some degree of strong collective identity that establishes common bonds among participants' has 'become more marginal in thinking about the organization of connective action' (p. 763). They contrast modern forms of protest in which action centres on 'issues defined in terms of ideology

or *group identities such as race, gender, religion or ethnicity*' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 56, emphasis mine), with 'late modern' and 'individuated societies' in which we find 'personalized forms of contention that involve multiple causes and are engaged through personal life-styles' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). While Bennett and Segerberg acknowledge that identity-focused approaches in social movement studies are different from Olson's theory, they nonetheless find in them traces of the same 'modernist logic of collective action' (p. 181).

Bennett and Segerberg's (2013: 174) assertion of a fading away of collective identity is informed by the view of a 'shift from group-based to individualised societies' as represented in the sociological theory of individualisation (Beck, 2002) and 'networked individualism' (Wellman, 2001). This operates with a view of networks and groups as competitive social logics, and of a networked society as one which lessens the importance of groups and group identity. This interpretation chides with the work by other scholars such social movement theorist Kevin McDonald (2015) who has argued that identity does not capture the logic online mobilisations such as Indymedia and Anonymous and that we need to turn to other categories such as experience (p. 980). The view of a fading away of collective identity seems, however, to be contradicted by the online practices of many contemporary movements, whose social media activism by and large revolves precisely around the construction of collective identities (Ackland and O'Neil, 2011; Treré, 2015). Furthermore, recent research has pointed to the fact that the personalised action frames described by Segerberg are not necessarily in contradiction with collective identity-building (Alfonzo, 2021; Lim, 2013; Monterde et al., 2015).

Rather than approaching personal and collective identity as opposed, we should look at them as 'orthogonal' (Capozza et al., 2000: 62). As Gamson (1992: 56) has highlighted, participating in social movements and adhering to collective identities offer individuals an 'enlargement of personal identity'. Conversely, personalised forms of participation, or what Paul Lichterman (1996) calls 'personalism', are not necessarily opposed to collective identity but can be conducive to it. Following this line of thinking, in this article, I approach crowd-sourced personal testimony campaigns as practices of 'identity work' (Reger et al., 2008), by means of which dispersed individuals are brought together behind the same banner. To explore this process, we shall focus on the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1). How are personal testimony campaigns launched and how are their collective identities framed by initiators?

Research Question 2 (RQ2). How do Internet users contribute to the discussion and to what extent are they aligned with the initial frames?

Research Question 3 (RQ3). How are social media affordances used as means for bringing together people sharing similar grievances?

Methods

This article is a theory-oriented discussion of the organisational logic of digital activism, drawing on examples from recent social movements. Its methodological standpoint is that of exploratory case study research (Yin, 2018), using discourse analysis, to identify

common patterns in the way these campaigns and their messages are framed (Johnstone, 2017). For purposes of case selection, I followed a ‘purposive sampling’ approach (Emmel, 2013; Etikan et al., 2016). This is a selective form of sampling where researchers have discretion in choosing cases that share common characteristics. It befits studies in which the main purpose is a theoretical one, as is the case with the present research. For purposes of case selection, I proceeded in two stages. First, I engaged in an exploratory analysis, drawing on literature, Internet searches and posting queries on campaigners’ and activists’ mailing lists. This initial passage yielded a total of 23 cases. For these examples, I downloaded all tweets using the Twitter Academic API and Twarc2 software¹ to search and archive historical tweets. I then proceeded to narrow down the list to seven cases that were deemed the most impactful ones, as measured by the total number of tweets on the hashtag (excluding retweets). The selected cases were #MeToo, #ShoutYourAbortion, #YesAllWomen, #GirlsLikeUs, #IfIDieInASchoolShooting, #RaiseTheWage and #VentYourRent. For each of these cases, I compiled a ‘small data’ corpus (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017) comprising the top 50 tweets per hashtag and a further random selection of 50 tweets. To analyse this data, I used the NVivo software. I started by coding the text for basic themes and I then organised these themes into larger categories, progressively identifying common patterns across the different case studies.

The sharing of personal experience as collective identity-building

To analyse crowd-sourced personal testimony campaigns, we shall begin by introducing some of the most significant ones before identifying a number of common features shared by them, with particular respect to the way they are framed by initiators and Internet users participate in them.

To date the most famous and successful personal testimony campaign is #MeToo. The hashtag was originally coined in 2006 by civil rights activist Tarana Burke. But its social media explosion took place after it was relaunched on 15 October 2017 by actress Alyssa Milano. The hashtag went viral after the exposure of sexual abuse by Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein, leading other celebrities to disclose their experience of sexual harassment and violence, to be soon joined by many ordinary people. In the first year, it grossed a total of 19 million tweets and it has since led to spinoff movements and organisations such as Time’s Up, a charity raising money to support victims of sexual abuse and harassment.

#MeToo drew on a number of similar campaigns that had already developed in previous years. One of the most important among them was #YesAllWomen launched in the aftermath of the May 2014 Isla Vista killings in California where 22-year-old Elliot Rodger, animated by misogynistic motives, had killed six people. Within few days of its launch the hashtag had already been used over a million times and it was widely reported on news media, with also politicians like Nancy Pelosi tweeting it. A further example is #ShoutYourAbortion launched in October 2015 to discuss the stigma faced by women who have had an abortion. In a few months, it totalled 150,000 Twitter posts (Lewin, 2015) sparking a national conversation about abortion rights, and the need to overcome draconian restrictions on abortion in many US states.

Two other personal testimony campaigns that pre-dated #MeToo were concerned with changing stereotypes about women's appearance: #ILookLikeAnEngineer and #DressLikeAWoman. The first was launched in August 2015, by software developer Isis Anchalee (formerly Isis Wenger), after a social media backlash against a recruitment ad which featured her, with some Internet users suggesting she was not an engineer but a model. By the following year, the hashtag was used 250,000 times (Anchalee, 2016). #DressLikeAWoman instead emerged in response to claims according to which Donald Trump had asked White House female staffers to 'dress like a woman'. Thousands of women used the hashtag to post pictures of themselves wearing all kind of clothing: in particular, those traditionally associated with masculine roles. Another issue that has been channelled through personal testimony campaigns is that of transsexual people's rights. One of the most famous examples is the #GirlsLikeUs campaign, originally launched in 2012 by trans activist Janet Mock, and which has continued over many years on both Instagram and Twitter. The campaign attracted over 150,000 tweets, in the months ensuing the initial call, with users recounting the experience of being a trans woman and the discrimination trans people face.

While particularly associated with gender and sexuality issues, personal testimony campaigns have also been deployed in reference to other issues such as racism and violence. The 2018 campaign #IfIDieInASchoolShooting launched by 18-year-old Andrew Schneidawind urged other concerned students to recount what they would leave behind if they were killed in a shooting. The hashtag went viral and in 3 days it grossed 50,000 tweets, with Schneidawind soon interviewed by prominent news media such as *The Washington Post*. A personal testimony element is also found in protest movements such as Black Lives Matter. While used for more general purposes such as promoting days of protest or denouncing institutional racism, the #BlackLivesMatters and #BLM hashtags were also specifically used to collect personal testimonies of people directly affected by racism and police violence (Ransby, 2018).

Economic issues have been comparatively less represented in personal testimony campaigns. Besides the Tumblr campaign #WeArethe99percent launched at the time of the Occupy Wall Street movement to gather the stories of working-class and impoverished middle-class people, in recent years campaigns such as #RaiseTheWage and #VentYourRent have offered a means for people facing economic hardship to air their grievances and gather around collective identities. An example is #RaiseTheWage, a Twitter campaign launched in January 2021, by the National Employment Law Project, which collected stories of workers affected by low wages. The #VentYourRent campaign, launched in April 2016 in London before the mayoral elections, focused instead on the plight of renters facing high housing costs. But how do these campaigns emerge in the first place? And how is the collective identity they put forward framed by their initiators?

Initiating the conversation and framing the collective

Virtually all personal testimony campaigns have a recognisable starting point: the initial tweet that launched the hashtag and the 'initiator' responsible for coining it. Except for two cases, in all the examples analysed in this article, these initiators were individual

activists and campaigners rather than organisations. The process of initiation is fundamental in setting the ground for the ensuing conversation: it establishes a number of basic ‘rules’ that frame people’s ensuing participation in the conversation. These are often implicit in the very hashtag, and the way it specifies the theme and the social group it appeals to; sometimes more explicit instructions are included, explaining what kind of contribution users are expected to make; while, in other cases still, this is done through a sample tweet. These various operations correspond to what Benford and Snow (2000) describe as ‘collective action frames’: they set out some simple guidelines which allow the contribution of thousands of users to develop coherently.

This framing effort was evident in the initial #MeToo tweet by Milano: ‘If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote “Me too” as their status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem’. This message already contained a clear identity reference, addressing ‘all women’ who had suffered sexual harassment and assault. This collective identity frame was reinforced by the invitation to utilise the expression ‘Me too’ as a common identifier, and the stated intention to ‘give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem’. In few words Milano defined explicitly the purpose and spirit of the campaign, with important consequences for its development.

Similar is the case of the #ShoutYourAbortion campaign of October 2015. It was initially started by graduate student Amelia Bonow with a message on Facebook reading ‘having an abortion made me happy in a totally unqualified way. Why shouldn’t I be happy that I wasn’t forced to become a mother? #ShoutYourAbortion’. In this case, the collective identity frame of the conversation is implicit in the very hashtag. Women who had an abortion are invited to ‘shout’, to voice loudly in public an experience that due to the stigma associated with it is often discussed only in intimate circles, in a way that is reminiscent to acts of ‘coming out’ or ‘speaking out’ popularised by women and LGBT movements (Whittier, 2017). This explicit invitation to air one’s views is seen in other hashtags such #VentYourRent, which expresses a similar intention of ‘disclosing’ or ‘speaking out’ pent-up frustrations. This attempt to make public issues that have long been silenced is implicit in many other campaigns, such as the #GirlsLikeUs campaign. Initiator Janet Mock described it as a ‘social media visibility movement’,² arguing that the idea was to give ‘many trans women a space to easily and collectively broadcast our lives in a very visible way’.

In some cases, the success in the launch of a personal testimony campaign owes much to the pre-existing influence and following of online influencers. This is the case with figures such as Alyssa Milano and Janet Mock, who already had tens of thousands of followers when they launched these campaigns. But in other circumstances, these online mobilisations are initiated by people with no prior public profile. This is the case of Schneidawind the initiator of the #IfIDieInASchoolShooting campaign who at the time was a high school student. The initial tweet read ‘I’m gonna try and get a hashtag trending called #IfIDieInASchoolShooting. If you wanna join, feel free. #IfIDieInASchoolShooting I will never be able to finish my animated TV series, I’ll never be able to see my sister again, and I will have to become a martyr #NeverAgain’. The frame of campaign, already evident in the hashtag, was further illustrated by a sample tweet, giving prospective users a clear sense of how they were expected to contribute.

Thus, for how much these online mobilisations are often quite artisanal in character, and often owe their emergence to the initiative of individuals rather than organisations, contrary to the theory of ‘connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013), they have a strong ‘collective identity frame’ (Benford and Snow, 2000). They clearly specify the social group contributions are awaited from (women, trans women, renters or high school students), and they are quite prescriptive about the kind of content these people are expected to generate, setting out a series of rules and a common template participants are asked to follow.

Offering testimonies and counting oneself in

As it should be obvious, for online mobilisations that are ‘crowd-sourced’, the success of personal testimony campaigns depends on the response of ‘the crowd’. For all the careful work of framing issued by their initiators, the direction taken by the conversation remains highly unpredictable and prone to failure. Yet, analysing the tweets posted under the hashtags of the personal testimony campaigns analysed in this article, the general impression is one of a choral and thematically coherent conversation.

A significant portion of tweets within these hashtagged conversations are precisely personal testimonies of a certain grievance, and these also tend to be the posts that are most retweeted. The second most frequent kind of content are replies to these personal testimony tweets, expressing solidarity or reporting similar experiences. Within these conversations one also finds attempts by political opponents and counter-movements to interfere with the discussion, sometimes using sarcastic hashtags (such as #YesAllCats in response to #YesAllWomen); but mostly these are drowned in the far larger number of posts abiding by the initiators’ framing.

In the #MeToo campaign, the most famous contributions came from celebrities, whose testimonies were widely reported on the news media. But under the hashtag, one could also find thousands of stories by ordinary people reporting their experience of sexual violence and harassment as seen in posts reading ‘I was sexually assaulted, sought help through my companys [sic] mental health crisis line and was fired the next day’, or ‘I didn’t speak up when I was raped at 16 years old . . . by 2 guys that I knew. When the truth came out, lots of people tried to put the blame on me. What is wrong with our country?’ The stories were often extremely personal and intimate, many of them were probably unknown even to closest friends and relatives, before being disclosed online. The content of the 2015 #ShoutYourAbortion campaign was similar as represented by the tweet displayed in Image 1, which briefly relates, ‘I was 20, in school and my bc failed, I did not want a child. It was the right choice and I’ve never regretted it. #shoutyourabortion’.

This personal and emotional quality of people’s contributions is also visible in campaigns on other issues such as #RaiseTheWage in which people often referred to their personal experience. One post read, ‘I’ll never forget the 8 months of my life that I was working 100-120 hours a week. Getting absolutely nothing for sleep and all that ended when I passed out driving and crashed into a ditch. People literally kill themselves trying to get by in this economy. #RaiseTheWage’. Another one (Image 2) reported, ‘When I graduated in high school in 2000, the minimum wage in PA was \$5.15. I wore a pager



Image 1. Tweet from the #ShoutYourAbortion campaign.

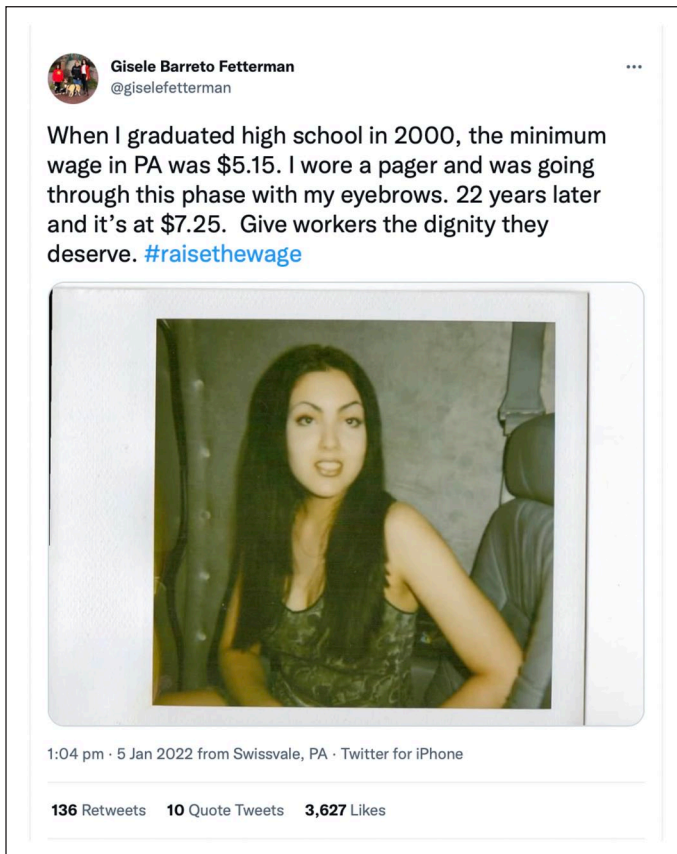


Image 2. Tweet from the #RaiseTheWage campaign.

and I was going through this phase with my eyebrows. 22 years later and it's at \$7.25. Give workers the dignity they deserve'.

Owing to the idiosyncrasy of personal circumstances, each story posted in these conversations is unique. Yet, browsing through the posts of all these campaigns, what is remarkable is also the similarity in the situations and in the denunciations made by users. Seeing different personal experiences of the same grievance appearing in a long list under the same hashtag conveys an impression of repetition, which is rhetorically coherent with the purpose of these campaigns. Ultimately, as expressed in the last words of Alyssa Milano's initial #MeToo tweet, the idea is precisely to show the 'magnitude of the problem'. The very use of the #MeToo marker reflects a desire not only 'to be heard' but also to be 'counted in'.

It is significant that within these conversations, both initiators and ordinary Internet users often quoted social media metrics such as the number of people tweeting and retweeting using a certain hashtag as proof of the urgency of the issue and as a means to encourage further people to 'speak out', 'share your story' and 'spread awareness' (to use terms found in many #MeToo and #YesAllWomen tweets). While the internal dynamics of these conversations partly resemble the 'peer production' activities retrieved by Bennett et al. (2014) in Internet crowds, these are far from being just 'self-motivated' or 'personalised activities': they have a very strong collective identity frame and reflect a clear alignment of participants' contribution with the often rather prescriptive instructions set out by initiators.

Collecting the personal

As we have seen over the course of our analysis, personal testimony campaigns tend to follow a similar template with (1) a general frame introduced by campaign initiator(s) through some explicit instructions, a sample post, or the implicit indication contained in the hashtag; (2) a 'crowd' of users flooding in recounting their personal story and commenting on other people's posts. These campaigns can be best understood as based on a 'logic of collection', or as 'collecting action' rather than 'connective action', because they revolve precisely around collecting *as many* people who have experienced a certain grievance *as possible*, in the same place and behind the same hashtag, so as to display the 'prevalence' or 'magnitude' of a given problem, and how deeply felt it is within a certain community.

What we see in these practices is a peculiar articulation between the personal and the collective, in which personal *experiences* become the basis for a 'collective storytelling' and the construction and transformation of collective identity, in a bottom-up process in which 'the collective' is forged by 'collecting the personal'. On the one hand, as the very name 'personal testimony campaigns' highlights, the content of these online mobilisations is highly intimate. The resonance they have achieved owes to the vividness of personal accounts. On the other hand, however, what matters from the campaign's standpoint is their similarity to other cases under the same set and the same hashtag, the way they act as *specimens* of a collective issue, as concrete *examples* of the specific issue at stake. When browsing through the posts of these campaigns one is struck by the repetition of similar situations and conditions and the way this repetition

serves rhetorically to demonstrate the structural or institutional, and not merely incidental, character of the social problem in question. In this 'Discussion' section, we shall elaborate on some of these findings focusing on two key issues: the continuing importance of collective identity in digital activism; the quantitative element of these identity-building efforts, with their focus on strength in numbers; and the role of social media affordances in fostering it.

First, the working of campaigns such as #MeToo, #ShoutYourAbortion and #GirlsLikeUs seems to contradict descriptions of digital activism as bereft of collective identity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013). Personal testimony campaigns are crowd-sourced efforts, hence open to people's contribution and subject to their creative intervention. Yet, these online mobilisations adopt very clear collective identity frames (Benford and Snow, 2000), which make reference to a specific social group as defined in terms of status (gender/sexuality, race, class). This is significant for the purpose of our discussion, given that status groups are precisely part of those deemed to be less important in times of 'connective action' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013: 56). This group identity is quite bounded rather than open-ended. Furthermore, it is defined not on the basis of mere group membership, but of an experiential sense of 'affectedness', as seen in the use of terms such as 'survivors' used in campaigns such as #MeToo, or in references to potential vulnerability as in the case of #IfIDiedInASchoolShooting. The collective identity mobilised by campaigners is sometimes explicitly thematised in the hashtags (#YesAllWomen, #ShoutYourAbortion, #VentYourRent) or expressed in the instructions and examples given in the initial posts. Here, 'projecting ideational meaning onto connective signifiers' (Papacharissi, 2015: 73) is not incidental, but intentional and by design. Yet, in turn, the identity that is constructed in these conversations is not a fixed or completely pre-ordained one. Tapping into the interactive features of social media provides the means to make identity-building a dynamic endeavour, constantly fed by the contributions issued by participants.

These practices are reminiscent of processes of 'coming out' such as of LGBT people declaring publicly their sexuality or 'speak outs' by women suffering sexual violence or harassment (Whittier, 2017). Similarly, to these practices, personal testimony campaigns involve an act of public 'confession', in which revealing personal experiences becomes at the same time an expression of affiliation to a collective identity (Jackson et al., 2018). Compared to pre-digital practices of 'speaking out' or 'coming out', that often happened in smaller groups and semi-public contexts, offering one's personal testimony online is perhaps an even more public gesture, given that it involves posting one's story on an open digital platform where everyone can read it. This tension between the intimate character of personal stories and circumstances and the fact that they are aired so publicly is perhaps also what makes these campaigns so contagious and viral.

These practices suggest that collective identity continues to play an important role in the digital era. It may well be true that, as asserted by Wellman (2001) and other sociologists who have inspired Bennett and Segerberg's theory of connective action, we live in a time of 'networked individualism', in which people's identity is more eccentric and unstable. However, this does not mean that group identities are losing their importance. Rather, personal testimony campaigns suggest that affiliation to group identity, rather than being a pre-established datum, becomes the ongoing product of performative

'identity work' which increasingly happens online. This highlights the need to overcome views of personal and collective identity as mutually opposed and instead appreciate how they can be mutually reinforcing (Gamson, 1992).

Second, as the very use of the phrase 'collection' highlights, these campaigns have a very evident quantitative element. As with collections of the most different kinds – books, coins, stamps, or artworks – what matters is not only quality, and the internal coherence of the set, but also quantity. As explicitly stated in the 'Me Too' campaign, the explicit purpose was to show the 'magnitude' of the problem. Using the hashtag #MeToo was akin to counting oneself in, *adding* one's story (as implicit in the 'too' in 'Me too') to an expanding set of cases, according to a logic of addition and accumulation. These campaigns could thus perhaps be approached as 'proof of concept' exercises, in which the initiators are animated by a hypothesis (the urgency of a given issue and the wide concern among those affected by it), whose validity is demonstrated by the number of people who contribute their personal testimonies. All in all, what we find in this context, is a reflection of the continuing importance of asserting 'strength in numbers' and 'unity', which besides worth and commitment are the component of what Charles Tilly (2006a, 2006b) called WUNC (Worth, Unity, Numbers, Commitment) paradigm.

Third, while, traditionally social movements demonstrated such strength in numbers by gathering as many people as possible in public street demonstrations, now they can also exploit a variety of social media affordances to this end. An important role is played by 'popularity metrics' (such as the number of tweets and retweets) as proof of their strength in numbers and thus relevance for the whole of contemporary society (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). It is significant that both campaigners and journalists reporting on these campaigns often quoted the number of tweets as demonstration of their importance. Another example of social media affordance adopted as a mobilisational device is the case of Twitter hashtags used as markers of identity and symbols of unity allowing otherwise physically and socially dispersed users to gather together and 'be counted'. In this context, social media affordances become central to the 'politics of visibility' (Whittier, 2017) of these online movements.

The campaigns discussed in this article have not been equally successful. Some, such as #MeToo, have already contributed to some social and political changes. Others were instead more of a flash in the pan: opinion mobilisations raising awareness about a problem, but with little follow-up action or tangible results. Regardless of the success of different efforts, it is apparent that identity work can have important and lasting marks on people's experience and self-identity (Almeida, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018). As proposed by social psychology literature (Klandermans, 2002, 2014), the construction of a common identity is instrumental to overcome psychological obstacles to mobilisation. Further, to quote Shahin and Ng (2022: 15) some of these campaigns look like 'organizationally-enabled connective action in reverse', with the process of identity-building setting the basis for the construction of new organisations, as it has happened with #MeToo and other movements.

A question that remains unresolved regards the reason why gender and sexuality issues are so prominent among the issues covered by these campaigns. This may owe to the fact that in the present day and age, socio-economic identifications are weaker than those connected to gender and sexuality and that the sense of shame attached to being in

a subordinate economic condition is particularly difficult to shed. But it may also be due to the fact that, given that personal testimony is by and large a digital adaptation of practices of ‘coming out’ and ‘speaking out’ which are strongly rooted in the history of gender and sexuality movements (Whittier, 2017), they may be more difficult to translate to other spheres.

In conclusion, this research highlights that Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012, 2013) theory of connective action does not neatly capture what is happening in many online mobilisations which do not operate by a ‘logic of connection’ but rather by a ‘logic of collection’. Furthermore, it suggests that collective identity building continues to be an important practice for social movements online, and that we need to overcome the view of personal identity and collective identity as mutually opposed and appreciate instead how they can mutually reinforce.

Future research should pay attention to the many practices through which collective identities are constructed online, the role played by various identity markers (from hashtags to memes), and practices of identity subscription and affiliation in this process, while also exploring the social and political consequences that stream from them. Far from having lost importance in a world of networked individualism, a ‘sense of we’ continues to be a key element of contemporary politics; for how much the construction of this ‘we’ may often have to begin from an ‘experience of me’

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Notes

1. https://twarc-project.readthedocs.io/en/latest/twarc2_en_us/
2. <https://twitter.com/janetmock/status/422754848073719808>

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