HOW A CONNECTIVE ACTION IS DISRUPTED IN RESTRICTIVE CONTEXTS? THE CASE OF DISMANTLING #RAPE ON PERSIAN TWITTER

Hossein Kermani
University of Vienna

Niloofar Hooman
McMaster University

Introduction

Having reduced the cost of political activism, social media has provided room for ordinary citizens to engage in politics, build networks, spread information, and resist oppressive regulation (Howard and Hussain, 2013; Margetts et al., 2016). In particular, feminist activists and other ordinary women were keen to find the discursive power of Twitter hashtags in shaping movements to raise their voice against gender inequality and sexual harassment (Clark, 2016). The phenomenon which is referred to as hashtag feminism in scholarly literature is rooted in the idea of hashtag activism; a discursive practice by which minor and peripheral groups use Twitter to challenge any form of systematic violence and inequality (Linabary et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, hashtag activism could encounter many challenges in non-democratic societies which is less probable in Western democracies. The state and other forces probably try to suppress online protests, including hashtag activism, to prevent them from threatening the dominant discourses. The hashtag feminism literature has relatively failed to investigate this extent as most researches have focused on discursive power of hashtags in changing injustice relations and criticizing social and cultural inequalities (Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; Xiong et al., 2019). As a result, the mechanisms of dismantling feminist hashtags, as a significant limitation of this new phenomenon, have not yet been studied to a satisfying level. It is of more significant to study such strategies in restrictive contexts since interrupting women digital practices could deprive them from the merely only space to share their uncensored experiences of rape and harassment.

This study sheds light on such disruptive processes by investigating how and by who a connective action in the Iranian Twittersphere (revolving around #rape[1], i.e., Iranian #MeToo) was derailed.

Method

Our empirical analyses focus on a dataset of 249292 tweets (containing the #rape hashtag or keyword in Farsi) gathered during the #rape movement from August 6, 2020 to October 6, 2020. Three years after embarking #MeToo in United States, Iranian users joined the global wave of fighting gender and sexual violence by articulating #rape as a connective action. #rape was emerged as one of the first examples of hashtag activism on Persian Twitter which aimed to challenge socio-cultural gender and sexual inequalities and structures.

Having collected data, we removed duplications, and non-Farsi tweets (e.g., Arabic tweets as the writing of rape (*Tajavoz*) is identical in Persian and Arabic). Then, we extracted the top 20 most retweeted tweets per day (1200 tweets total). Retweet (RT) is considered as a sign of acceptance and publicity in social media (Nahon et al., 2013). Thus, the most retweeted tweets probably provide us with the most popular messages on Twitter (Bruns and Stieglitz, 2013; Jungherr, 2015). Following the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we thematically and iteratively coded the most RT tweets to identify themes that reflect mechanisms through which users' generic meaning-making is disrupted.

Results

Our findings showed that the tweets which directly tried to disrupt the movement rarely raised to prominence. Therefore, we identified such mechanisms based on the most RT tweets, those mainly criticized the disruptive practices. It also shows that disruptive tweets gained less attention than building tweets. Therefore, #rape was not disrupted significantly, and active users in developing it were more successful than who wanted to dismantle this hashtag activism.

We identified several tactics which have been documented by previous researches: Circulating coordinated hashtags and disinformation, Disseminating fake stories, Mainstream media's support of rapers, Attacking activists (including hate speech and trolling). Two context-specific mechanisms have also been emerged: Threatening victims in real world, and Reporting/revealing anonymous accounts.

Furthermore, findings revealed that the state and pro-regime users were not the only forces in dismantling the movement. Anti-regime groups and figures also attempted to make disruptions. From a different perspective than pro-regime users, anti-regime camps (such as monarchists and Mojahedin-e-Khalgh) circulated coordinated hashtags to derail the flow of #rape tweets, arguing that this movement is a distraction to their attempts in destabilizing the regime.

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[1] In Farsi: تجاوز

Furthermore, active users in #rape were under attacked and criticized by some intellectuals and anti-regime figures. There were many names of members of so-called Iran's intellectual community among predators. That is probably the reason such figures try to discredit activists by challenging their honesty and reliability. This finding also showed that the rape culture is not just entrenched by the state. People who are politically against the regime also underpin the misogyny and anti-women norms.

Conclusion

This paper sheds more light on the ways by which a feminist hashtag was disrupted in non-democratic societies. While several practices which have been employed to disrupt #rape have been well documented in previous studies, new strategies were also emerged which are more contingent to Iranian contexts. In other words, our findings show that disruptive practices are more or less same in different contexts. However, the differences lie in the context-specific strategies have been taken to interrupt hashtag movements.

We argue that digital repression literature in authoritarian regimes, particularly in feminist movements, should extend its horizon to other forces than pro-regime users. Opposition camps could be worked with the state to dismantle women movements in raising their voice against rape culture due to their mutual interests. In other words, rape culture is supported by dominant discourses, but intellectuals also reinforce it due to their personal benefits and power.

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