

# HASHTAGS IN ONLINE MEANING MAKING AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION – THE PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES OF HASHTAGS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND OTHER ACTIVISM

*Helga D. Ísfold Sigurðardóttir*

## Abstract

This chapter presents how hashtags encourage or support online meaning making and political participation in Norway and Iceland, based on the findings of a survey on hashtag activism against gender discrimination that was conducted on social media in late summer 2019. How do hashtags encourage or support online meaning making and political participation? The chapter focuses primarily on the written responses to one question, addressing the advantages of the use of hashtags for those purposes. 287 individuals responded to this question. Their responses revealed 3 positively biased, interconnected main categories, *community*, *public awareness* and *individual engagement*, as well as other themes that cut across these categories, such as the simplicity of hashtags. Based on examples from the respondents and inspired by actor network theory, this chapter presents hashtags as powerful meaning making tools and amplifiers of agency, playing a key role in engaging and bringing together individuals, raising awareness and creating communities across cultures.

## Introduction

This article explores the views of social media users in Norway and Iceland regarding hashtag activism related to gender discrimination and women's rights. Hashtag activism is a central factor in online meaning making and political participation today. Iceland and Norway have shared the two top positions in the Global Gender Gap Report (2018) from the World Economic Forum for the past few years, followed by two other Nordic countries. Iceland currently ranks as the country with the highest levels of gender parity, based on economic participation and opportunities, education, health and survival, and political participation – closely followed by Norway (Nikel, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2018). The two countries are situated in North-Western Europe. Today the population of Norway is 5,384,392 (World Population Review, 2019), whereas Iceland's population is only 356,991 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2019). The countries share a great deal of cultural heritage and history, as Icelanders are largely descendants of people who emigrated from Norway about 1,000 years ago (ScienceNordic Staff, 2018). The article thus presents the data from the two countries as one assembled database rather than attempting comparisons.

As an internet phenomenon, hashtags are only 12 years old, with the first one appearing in 2007 (Doctor, 2013). Their use for online activism is even younger. Because it is such a young invention, hashtag activism as a whole has not yet been the focus of substantial research, although quite a bit has been written about movements and effects in relation to specific hashtags. Given how fast hashtag activism is gathering momentum, I find it important to provide an insight into the views of social media users who, in various ways, are in the midst of this development, in Norway and Iceland. Although this article is based on a survey that addresses particular hashtags, the focus is not on the hashtags themselves but the general advantages of hashtags in activism, as perceived by social media users. The article aims to explore and analyse the perceived nature, advantages, and meaning making power of hashtags when used as a tool for political activism from the point of view of social media users in Iceland and Norway. How do hashtags encourage or support online meaning making and political participation? The

text is primarily based on the written answers to one survey question: "What, in your opinion, is the biggest advantage of using hashtags in the fight against gender discrimination or other activism?". Of the total 399 respondents, 287 replied to this question.

## A brief history of recent, relevant hashtag activism and research

A hashtag is a way of organizing statements and contents, it is a keyword or a phrase preceded by the "pound" or "hash" symbol (#), placed within a post or a discussion on social media, to highlight a topic and facilitate search for it (Bernard, 2019; Marks, 2018). An online text, such as an opinion, testimony or any other message that is posted with a hashtag can thus be easily searched for on the vast internet by applying the hashtag in an online search.

Hashtags go hand in hand with social media and are often used for marketing purposes to create momentum around a commodity or a cause (Marks, 2018). Activists and social advocates are also concerned with finding ways to generate exposure and create a discourse, and the internet and social media are powerful platforms for spreading information (Stache, 2014; Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019). The breadth of social media makes it an appealing forum for reaching a wide audience. By creating a common identifier for fellow activists, hashtags further improve the expansive reach of social media by enabling tracking of multiple uses of a phrase (Stache, 2014). Social movement organizations can expand the social discourse around a cause that they want to highlight by encouraging the users of social media to speak out and share their experiences using hashtags (Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019). Hashtags can thus have a wide range of roles: they can "help form communities, collect publics, incite protest, [and] inform policies", to name a few (Rambukkana, 2015, p. 10).

"Activism is action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine"(Martin, 2007, p. 19). Activism has played a key role in many of the social movements we have seen in recent decades, from promoting environmental awareness to opposing

racism, to name a few (Martin, 2017). Similarly, hashtag activism has been defined as "the act of fighting for or supporting a cause with the use of hashtags as the primary channel to raise awareness of an issue and encourage debate via social media" (Tomblinson and Wolf, 2017, p. 15). Hashtag activism has become "a widely recognized artifact of digital culture" (Clark, 2015, p. 214), as well as an important contributor to democratic processes, calling for a recognition of the value of political influences from the margins (Jackson, 2016). At the same time, users may perceive the hashtags that they come across as representative of the relevant debate as a whole, while the truth is that social media algorithms are not designed to provide that kind of neutral overview (Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Carah, 2014).

Feminism is political activism that aims to combat discrimination and fight for gender equality (Jackson et al., 1996; Swirsky et al., 2016). Swirsky et al. (2016) further found that feminism represents "action, education, and the breaking of traditional norms" (p. 458). Like other hashtag activism, feminist hashtag activism is ignited by contemporary events and discourses. Feminist hashtag activist conversations can play an important role in knowledge production about the topics they concern. Such conversations are sometimes taken up by mainstream media and can even lead to further action (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge, 2014; Rentschler, 2017).

There has certainly been no shortage of memorable hashtag campaigns in recent years. To provide a brief insight into some of the powerful hashtags that have been applied in the fight against gender discrimination and to provide context, hashtags that have been the subject of recent research will be introduced, followed by a few of the most prominent ones in Norway and Iceland, in chronological order. Starting with one of the better-known global feminist activism hashtag campaigns, the hashtag #EverydaySexism was first coined in 2012. It addresses instances of sexism experienced in everyday life (Eagle, 2015; Kangere, Kemitare and Michau, 2017). In 2014, UN Women launched the #HeForShe campaign, aiming to end gender inequality by calling on men as allies (Keyes-Bevan, 2016; Subašić et al., 2018; Watson, 2014). The #whyistayed campaign in the USA in late 2014 aimed to raise awareness of the complex nature of domestic violence (Clark, 2016).

The year 2015 was an important one for hashtags in the western Nordic countries. In March, young Icelandic feminists adapted the international #freethenipple hashtag with vigour, aiming to "draw attention to the double standards directed against the female body and the sexualization of the breast" (Rúðólfsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir, 2018). A few weeks later, Norway experienced the #jegharopplevd ("I have experienced") hashtag movement. Within a single week, thousands of Norwegian women (and a few men) had taken part, sharing their experiences of unwanted sexual attention and harassment (Bruun, 2017; Eidsvik, 2015; Thjømøe and Johnsen, 2015). In May, Icelandic women revolted under the hashtags #konurtala and #þöggun ("women speak" and "silenced") where they told tales of sexual abuse and assault and called for changes in the justice system (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015; Fontaine, 2015). These two hashtags were first used in a large closed Facebook group for women called Beauty Tips!, and the following wave of hashtags is therefore commonly referred to in Icelandic media as "The Beauty Tips revolution" (Jóhannsdóttir and Friðriksson, 2015; Ingvarsdóttir, 2015). In 2017, the #höfumhátt ("let's make noise") movement focused on the victims of sexual offenders and child abusers and a local legal practice that allows offences to be erased from perpetrators records. Icelanders used the hashtag to express their outrage when it became known that the prime minister's father had helped pardon and restore the civil rights of a paedophile offender (Johnson, 2017; Kvenréttindafélag Íslands, 2017; Marinósdóttir and Erlingsdóttir, 2017). Shortly afterwards, actress Alyssa Milano dusted off a decades-old phrase that was originally created by activist Tarana Burke: #MeToo (Chan, 2017; Gilbert, 2017; Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019). The 2017 version of the #MeToo movement started with actresses in Hollywood speaking out about sexual violence and abuse in the film industry but was soon backed by women in different industries and sectors all over the world, including women in several workforce sectors in Norway and Iceland. While #MeToo is by far the largest and most publicly acknowledged hashtag movement to this day, and still going strong, the story does not end there. In 2019, at least three powerful feminist hashtags were trending in Norway (See table 1) in addition to existing ones, and a similar development can be seen in Iceland. Hashtag activism is thus

alive and well, with new hashtags being coined continuously and old hashtags being brought back to life.

When looking at hashtag activism, actor-network theory (ANT) is a well-suited tool for acquiring perspective. Social science and humanist scholarship have traditionally viewed agency as something reserved for humans exclusively. ANT, on the other hand, acknowledges the agency of non-human agents (Giddings, 2007; Latour, 2003; Sørensen, 2004). Its main focus is on how networks of human and non-human actants are assembled, retained, and dissolved, and what these actor-networks achieve. When investigating hashtags and hashtag activism, this view provides an entirely different approach from traditional ideas on the author of a message as the sole actor. If we follow the tenets of ANT, hashtags can be viewed as an object that must be considered to have some agency. An actor-network including a hashtag would consist of authors, a hashtag, digital artefacts (like computers, mobile phones, tablets), social media platforms, social media users (contributors, readers) and so on. Rambukkana (2015) applies an ANT approach to hashtags, asking "Are they communities, publics, discourses, discursive formations, dispositifs, something else?" (p. 2) and concludes that hashtag actor networks can be any of these. As several of the respondents in the survey on which this article is based referred to hashtags as seemingly having their own agency, aspects of ANT may offer a useful perspective to reflect on their views and experiences.

## Method

The most plausible way to get data on a phenomenon, the existence of which depends entirely on social media, is to reach out to social media users, through social media itself. Likewise, when the topic is related to gender discrimination, women are an obvious target group. This article is based on data from an online survey.

The survey was posted in three languages, Icelandic, Norwegian Bokmål, and Norwegian Nynorsk. All translations from Norwegian and Icelandic to English in this article, were carried out by the author, with help from friends and colleagues.

Although the main focus of this survey is not on specific hashtags, but rather on the users' interpretations of the advantages of hashtags, the first question can be seen as a key question. It lists 13 hashtags and asks which of them the respondents are familiar with (see Table). These hashtags were identified through a simple pre-study, shared with the participants of two prominent Facebook groups concerned with gender-related issues, one in Norway and one in Iceland.

Only one of the 399 respondents claimed not to know any of the 13 listed hashtags, while 41.4% claimed to have used some of the listed hashtags themselves and 76.6% claimed to know someone who had used some of the listed hashtags.

Although gender discrimination was a central topic in the survey, it should be noted that the degree to which some of the Norwegian hashtags can actually be seen as directly tackling gender discrimination can be debated. Three of the hashtags address other issues that concern women in particular, namely the right to safe birth and maternity care close to home, the importance of cervical cancer testing and misguided interference with the lives of physically disabled women (see #bunadsgeriljaen, #sjekkdeg & #villebarehjelpen in Figure 1). In the survey itself, respondents were also offered the opportunity to propose other hashtags, although these will not be addressed in this article. While the responses that this article analyses do not revolve around specific hashtags, but rather the perceived advantages of hashtags in general, the survey's focus on women's issues almost certainly influences the outcome. The following table provides an overview of the hashtags that may have influenced the mindset of the respondents.

Nationality / language	Key year	Hashtag	Direct translation	Meaning / context	Number of Google search results (May 2020)	How many respondents know the hashtag	How many respondents have used the hashtag
Norwegian	2015	#sjekkdeg	'Check yourself'	To encourage women to get tested for cervical cancer and take the subsequent measures to avoid getting the disease (Kreftforeningen, 2019; Mogstad, 2017).	27500	40%	5%
Norwegian	2015	#jegharopplevd	'I have experienced'	To illuminate how common sexual harassment is (Kristiansen, 2015).	4780	19%	4%
Norwegian	2016	#jegtrordeg	'I believe you'	To show solidarity to victims of sexual violence, even if their perpetrators don't get sentenced (Munin, 2016), building on the 'Hemsedal case' and it's survivor, Andrea Voll Voldum (Fossum, 2016).	2200	22%	4%
Norwegian	2018	#morketall	'Hidden figures'	To direct attention to the fact that most rape cases are never reported, and about 80% of those that are reported end up being closed (Om kampanjen, n.d.).	232	9%	2%
Norwegian	2019	#villebarepratelitt	'Just wanted to talk a bit'	To direct attention to unwanted attention and harassment from men, under the friendly disguise of 'just wanting to talk' (Eide & Johannessen, 2019).	3990	32%	3%
Norwegian	2019	#bunadsgeriljaen	'The national costume guerilla'	Used by a movement with the same title (Bunadsgeriljaen) to object to the closure of maternity wards in rural Norway (Dommerud, 2019) and emphasize the importance of safe maternity care close to home for everyone (Bunadsgeriljaen, n.d.).	25400	39%	3%
Norwegian	2019	#villebarehjelp	'Just wanted to help'	Connected to #villebarepratelitt, to specifically direct the attention to how the personal boundaries of handicapped women are violated by seemingly well intended people who 'just want to help' (Øyen, 2019).	919	9%	0.003%
Icelandic	2015	#sexdagsleikinn /#6dagsleikinn	'Everyday sexism'	A direct translation of the #everydaysexism project, that aims to 'catalogue instances of sexism experienced on a day to day basis', initiated by British Laura Bates (Everyday Sexism Project, n.d.).	387/3,730	23%	6%
Icelandic	2015	#konurtala	'Women speak out'	Goes hand in hand with #þöggun. To allow women to speak out about sexual abuse and turning the attention towards the responsibility of the perpetrator rather than the victim as well as the media practice of referring to sexual crimes as 'alleged' to a larger degree than other crimes (Fontaine, 2015; Thorsdóttir, 2019 and Ármannsson, 2015).	2470	30%	7%
Icelandic	2015	#þöggun	'Silencing'	Goes hand in hand with #konurtala. To break the silence surrounding sexual abuse and turning the attention towards the responsibility of the perpetrator rather than the victim as well as the media habit of referring to sexual crimes as 'alleged' to a larger degree than other crimes (Fontaine, 2015; Thorsdóttir, 2019 and Ármannsson, 2015).	3700	37%	9%
Icelandic	2017	#höfumhátt	'Let's make noise'	To protest the practice of 'honour restoration' in the cases of convicted child molesters (Marínósdóttir & Erlingsdóttir, 2017 & Kvenréttindafélag Íslands).	5800	41%	13%
International	2015	#freethenipple	'Free the nipple'	'To protest sexual objectification and double standards' (Tsjeng, 2015) and desexualize female nipples (Hilmarsdóttir, 2015).	3,120,000	78%	12%
International	2017	#MeToo	'Me too'	'The Me Too movement (or #Me Too) is a movement against sexual harassment and assault. #MeToo spread on social media in October 2017, and then it revealed the prevalence and magnitude of problems with sexual harassment and assault, especially in the workplace, including academia and medicine' (Lee, 2018).	163,000,000	99%	32%

Table 1: The hashtags in the survey

The survey was shared on social media in Norway and in Iceland, more precisely Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as Instagram and Snapchat. On Facebook, the survey was shared in groups and on pages directed mainly at women, although not all of them were exclusively for women, nor were they all concerned with activism against gender discrimination. The stated subjects of discussion in the groups included everything from "sharing positivity and constructive inputs" (Góða systir <3, n.d.) and "giving women a more prominent role in conversations about economics"(DN Kvinner, n.d.) to "organizing further activism as a result of the beauty tips revolution"(Aktívismi gegn Nauðgunarmenningu, n.d.). Nine groups/pages were Norwegian and 13 were Icelandic. Several colleagues and acquaintances, as well as other respondents, also shared the survey with their own contacts on social media.

The survey consisted of a total of 48 questions, including background questions. However, the path through the survey was largely decided by how respondents answered the first question and other key questions, and not every respondent was asked every question. For example, a person who expressed little or no familiarity with hashtags early on would get very few follow-up questions. On average, each respondent might therefore have been presented with about 20–25 questions.

The background questions addressed age, gender, and geographical location. Respondents living in Iceland were asked in which region they lived and those who lived in Norway which county. Respondents living elsewhere were asked on which continent they lived, and those living in Europe were asked in which European country they lived.

The total number of respondents to the survey was 399, of which 205 responded to the Icelandic version and 194 to the Norwegian versions. A few resided in other countries. As expected, women constituted the majority of the respondents at 93.4%. The most prominent differences between the two countries concerned age groups and response rates through Instagram. The largest age group in the Icelandic survey was "20 years old or younger", with 33.2% of respondents; in the Norwegian surveys, only 2.6% of respondents were 20 years or younger. This age bias seems to correspond to the fact that the survey was shared on a popular Instagram account directed at young people in Iceland. Of the Icelandic "20 years old or younger" respondents, 91% said they

had come across the link to the survey on Instagram. In total, 38.6% of the Icelandic participants came across the survey on Instagram, whereas only one of the Norwegian participants found it there. Furthermore, about 50% of the Icelandic respondents had used at least one of the hashtags, whereas only about 25% of the Norwegian respondents had used any of them.

The survey was posted in three languages: Norwegian Bokmål, Norwegian Nynorsk, and Icelandic. In this article, I focus on the written answers to the open-ended question "What, in your opinion, is the biggest advantage of using hashtags in the fight against gender discrimination or other activism?" together with references to a few background questions that may shed light on the conditions and contexts of the written answers. It is worth mentioning that roughly two thirds of the Icelandic population live in the capital region (also referred to here as the Reykjavík area). In this survey, 70.8% of the Icelandic respondents said they resided in the capital area, thus approximating the actual demographics.

The data from the survey were exported from Questback (the survey tool) to an Excel spreadsheet. Replies to the open-ended question were analysed and colour coded in Excel, and emerging categories were then further explored in terms of themes.

The pre-study represents an obvious weakness of this study. While it did identify many of the best recognized hashtags in the participating countries, its scope was too limited to provide a satisfying, representative overview. Responses to open-ended questions in the survey revealed a few additional hashtags that could have been regarded as equally influential as the ones selected in the pre-study.

Furthermore, the recruitment of respondents through social media presents its own set of threats to the validity of the survey. The title of the survey was "Hashtags against Gender Discrimination" and the target group was women and other social media users familiar with hashtags in relation to gender discrimination issues. Thus, although the survey was, in most cases, accompanied by a short, encouraging text explaining that it was for everyone and that knowledge of hashtags was not a precondition, we can safely assume that a large proportion of the respondents were people who were already interested in the topic before they chose to answer. The respondents are therefore not representative of Icelanders

and Norwegians in general, but rather of users of social media who already were concerned with gender equality issues. Furthermore, the question that this article is primarily based on is somewhat leading as it specifically asks people to identify advantages of hashtags, rather than a more neutral aspect, such as their general nature or function. This can be expected to lead to a positivity bias, whereby hashtags are presented in a predominantly positive light.

## Findings

Two hundred and eighty-seven participants, of whom 44% claimed to have used some of the listed hashtags themselves, replied to the open-ended question "What, in your opinion, is the biggest advantage of using hashtags in the fight against gender discrimination or other activism?". Their written answers revealed three main categories which were strongly interconnected – so much so that separating them was sometimes impossible. Because many of the answers were long and elaborate, they often included more than one of these categories and were accordingly counted more than once. Moreover, each of the categories also came with its own set of themes or subcategories.

The three main categories were:

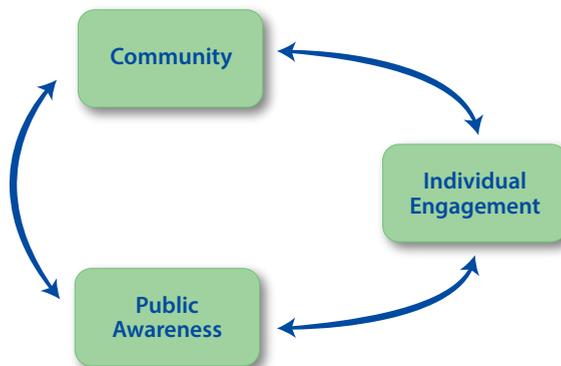


Figure 1: Three categories

The first category, *community*, emerged the most often, or in 163 answers. It refers to the notion that hashtags help unify a variety of people across countries and continents and even create a fellowship or a network of like-minded individuals. It also emphasizes hashtags' wide range of effect, their accessibility and how easy they are for anyone to use, as well as their ability to provide an overview of the issue in question and a snapshot of the diversity of expressions and experiences they represent.

The second one, *public awareness*, appeared 157 times and refers to how hashtag messages affect society. In this category, the hashtag is often presented as a meaning making agent on its own, able to inform, influence, educate and raise awareness. It is praised for presenting a message that is easy to understand via social media, traditional media, public discourse and so on, and many of these answers claim that it has the power to change and even revolutionize society.

The third one, *individual engagement*, appeared in 84 written answers. It places agency in the hands of individuals, be it the recipients of the hashtag's message or the creators of hashtag-related content. It specifies the effects of the hashtag on the individual. For some this may simply mean an insight into an issue they knew nothing about, while for others it can mean reassurance that they are not alone, validation of their personal experiences or an impetus for personal engagement for the cause. All three categories praise the simplicity and low threshold usability of hashtags, each from a different angle. The following sections will provide more detailed examples for each category and cast light on the perceived advantages of hashtags as a tool in activism against gender discrimination.

## Community

Many comments addressed how easy it is for a hashtag to reach people. "It spreads quickly, so that anyone who does not live under a rock will know about it", wrote a woman from Troms, Norway, thereby summarizing the essence of many of the comments. Thirteen of the Norwegian responses included the word "spread"(N. "spre") in the context of describing how easy or effective it is to spread a message with the aid of

a hashtag, and several other answers referred to the same phenomenon using other words. This notion was often further tied to a broad international reach, as in this comment from a woman from Trøndelag county, Norway: "Hashtags become international, unite the world". Regarding the effectiveness of hashtags, a woman from Akershus, Norway, wrote, ""hashtags are" effective means to gather stories and share experiences across social classes and country borders". Thus, the power of social media to directly connect citizens, without the intervention or intermediation of news media or any other formal institutions, is a clear emphasis in the community category.

One of the most common type of answers to the question about the advantages of hashtags was that a hashtag makes it easy for a layperson to get an overview of a large topic. Hashtags were also seen as a potential common denominator. "It makes it possible to gather together various messages into one place and give the struggle a name or a symbol", wrote a young woman from the Reykjavík area in Iceland. Another woman from the same area wrote, "It unites activists under one umbrella and simplifies searches on the topic". Some respondents also emphasized a networking function; fellowship formation and the creation of a community. A woman from Oslo, Norway, put it this way:

You gather the stories. Individual stories get tied together. It creates a community, which might not have been created otherwise. One can create a community outside the traditional media, organizations and so on. It also normalizes the stories because they are gathered and, together, they become stronger.

A young woman from the Reykjavík area in Iceland addressed the unifying quality of hashtags in this way: "Those who use the hashtag can show that they are all on the same team and not just each in their own corner, fighting their individual battles".

Many also mentioned that hashtags were "simple to use", and "good for mass mobilization", as a woman from Nordland, Norway phrased it. The notions of simplicity, mass mobilization and the ability to easily spread messages are all present in an answer from a respondent of unidentified gender from Hedmark, Norway who wrote that hashtags "gather lots of people and experiences around a simple formulation that

can be rapidly spread". As an example of a category-crossing answer, a woman from Nordland, Norway, wrote that a hashtag "puts things on the agenda and makes the scope [of the issue] visible". With its emphasis on scope, her answer resonates with the contents of the community category, but the idea of visibility also situates her response in a second category, which will be discussed next, namely public awareness.

## Public Awareness

This category refers to the outward effects of a hashtag, its influence on society and the changes it may lead to. The prominence of agency in this category, where the respondents allot considerable agency to hashtags, prompted the ANT approach of this article. "Good hashtags underline a point of view/attitude and invite others to participate", wrote a woman from Akershus, Norway. A man from the Reykjavik area in Iceland wrote,

Hashtags connect the conversations and show how large they are in volume. That way the conversation doesn't come across as just one angry person anymore but a large actual problem that many people are dealing with.

Some described hashtags more in terms of a tool than an agent. "[A hashtag] can be a powerful tool to raise awareness of a cause. It can also help to organize and keep track of a certain cause", wrote a woman residing in Denmark. At the same time, a small number of respondents were sceptical regarding the advantages of hashtags, and a man from Hordaland, Norway, seemed particularly concerned with making it clear that he did not see hashtags as agents on their own:

Hashtags actually have very little significance. They are rather used as something that people can gather under or support. But a single hashtag on its own can't organize people. People can organize themselves around the hashtag.

The responses in the public awareness category emphasized that agents or not, hashtags have the potential to influence the public discourse. In this category traditional media was often cited as playing an important role in how a hashtag spreads: "It ends up in the papers and creates discussions", wrote a woman from Trøndelag, Norway. Likewise, and to an even greater extent, social media played a central role in this category and was often assigned considerable agency as well, as this answer shows: "Social media has acquired major authority and provides a great opportunity for individuals to communicate, as opposed to how it was earlier". Moreover, the hashtag's visibility was identified as an advantage – resulting in several answers that applied to both the community category and the public awareness category. This response from a woman in the Reykjavík area in Iceland can be seen as an example of this:

Visibility is the main advantage. Most people use the internet and you can hardly use the largest platforms without taking notice of the discussions. The discussions come to you. Many people out there won't be bothered to go and look up testimonies, but they will read them if they pop up in their news feed.

Several of the respondents praised the hashtag's role in informing and even educating the public. "It supports discussions and education", wrote another woman from the Reykjavík area in Iceland. Yet another woman from the same area explained that hashtags have the power "to help people (perhaps young people in particular) learn what they can and cannot do, that saying no is allowed, that getting consent is crucial and so on", thus presenting the hashtag not only as an agent, but also as a helpful teacher. Young people were often identified as a group that might benefit particularly from the use of hashtags because they were considered adept social media users. "The SoMe generation speaks this language; it is a good instrument to reach more young people", wrote a woman from Troms county, Norway.

As in the first category, the simplicity of hashtags and the low threshold for understanding and using them were brought to light by a handful of respondents. "It is easy to get to the core of a message with a hashtag", wrote a woman from the West Fjords in Iceland. "A simple way to show a point of view. Easily recognizable", wrote a woman from

Oslo, Norway. It does not take much time to add a hashtag, either, or as one respondent of unidentified gender put it, "Using it is simple and quick". Not everyone, however, found hashtags that simple. "I don't fully understand [them], but I just hope that they attract attention and that is why I have tried to use them", said one woman from the Reykjavík area in Iceland.

Several respondents believed that using hashtags to raise awareness could contribute to meaning making and lead to actual changes in society. For example, one woman from Oslo wrote,

As #MeToo has shown, it has put the spotlight on totally unacceptable behaviour in society, so it has been very useful. I think there is a much higher threshold for sexual harassment now, and a lower threshold for speaking up about it, and that is incredibly good, and high time when you look back and see what has been going on.

The written answers of two women from the Reykjavik area in Iceland exemplify this further: "It is a small step for an individual, all you have to do is write something on social media, which you use daily anyway, but the effect on society is significant", wrote one. "This causes extremely fast social transformations that can lay the ground for a whole revolution of social change and awareness-raising" wrote the other.

Still, a few respondents were unconvinced about hashtags, including a woman from Trøndelag, Norway, who wrote that she felt that #MeToo had unfortunately been "misused" and "ridiculed". Some addressed the shortcomings of hashtags, such as a woman from Vest-Agder who wrote, "The downside is that the hashtags do not take privileges into account. My experience is that white cis feminists often forget their own privileges". A woman from Oslo provided one of the most in-depth written responses, which addresses a variety of the themes encompassed in the public awareness category.

The main benefit of using hashtags in activism is that it can highlight issues that have otherwise gone unnoticed, raise people's awareness, and open up thought-provoking discussions around the topic. Some, like #MeToo, have led to major community

debates and pushed for changes in the community. Others, however, like #villebærehjelpe, have not had the same reach and hardly led to any significant societal changes, but have been useful to those of us who are interested in the problem (personally I have felt that this hashtag is one of those that have been the greatest eye-opener and which I have learned the most from, perhaps because it was a topic I was not so familiar with before, due to my own privileges). I think, therefore, that even small hashtags that do not affect the general social discourse can be enlightening and educational for individuals who are not themselves affected by the problem the hashtag addresses, while at the same time allowing those affected to air their thoughts on the problem with others who have experienced the same and feel less alone as a result. They probably also make it easier for those affected by the problem to put it into words and to realize when what they have experienced is not ok.

In addition to addressing public awareness and activism, towards the end of her response, she shifts her focus to how hashtags affect individuals. This leads us right into the third category, individual engagement.

## Individual engagement

In this category the agency is somewhat transferred from the hashtag itself to individuals, focusing on the recipient of the hashtag's message. Perhaps the most common theme was the emotional effect that hashtag campaigns had had on survivors of harassment, abuse, and other discrimination. This was expressed by both those who identified as survivors and others. In short, the notion was that the hashtag movements validated their experiences and gave them a feeling of support and consolation. "It can be a help and comfort [to know] that one is not alone and that it is possible to get help", said a woman from Buskerud, Norway. A woman from the capital region in Iceland expressed much the same notion, adding that such identification might lead to the realization that "many are willing to listen to you". In light of the topic of this book, the contents of this category reveal how hashtags can get citizens involved,

both in terms of creating an arena for anyone who wants to participate in the social or political discourse and at the same time validating their experiences, being a source of empowerment and facilitating personal engagement. It furthermore underscores how hashtags can help bring the voices and agency of individuals to the foreground.

The topics of this category often resonated strongly with those of the first category, community, because the focus on the individual and the realization that one is not alone were often closely related to the networking theme of that category, as well as the themes of fellowship and mass mobilization. "When many people tell and share their stories, those who stand in the middle of it become a little less alone. At the same time, you stand stronger when you stand together in the fight against discrimination", wrote a woman from Hordaland, Norway. A woman from Oslo, Norway, listed the following advantages in her category-crossing response:

Others can more easily find the posts and various profiles that address the same topics; you can also follow hashtags rather than just profiles on Instagram and that way gain a greater insight, both for the sake of knowledge and for the sake of inspiration. To see that there are many of us who care about these things and support each other [helps us] fight harder and not give up.

In a comment that can be seen as a reflection of all three categories, a woman from Rogaland county, Norway, noted that hashtags make it possible "to reach a wide group of people in a short amount of time, to strengthen and unify isolated incidents and show how deeply rooted problems can be".

A woman from the Icelandic capital region wrote that one of the hashtag campaigns had represented a chance to "finally reveal" what had happened to her, and several others noted that a campaign might encourage survivors to start sharing their stories. A number of respondents also said that using a hashtag was both easy and an easy way to contribute to the cause. At the same time, a woman from West Iceland expressed doubts about the effectiveness of this kind of campaign. "It really does not do much. If you are going to fight for something, just do that then. Don't just use a hashtag and then say, 'I contributed'».

A handful of respondents also found that the hashtags elicited a sense of affirmation or empowerment by confirming that others shared their passion for social improvements. As this woman from the capital region in Iceland describes, "It is good to know that one is not alone in having been through such things or in fighting for a better society". Similarly, a woman from Nordland, Norway, wrote that the simple fact that "others" had also experienced "lame stuff" made it easier "to set boundaries and to report". Some also experienced a change in attitude: "MeToo was an eye opener for me and made it evident to me how much I go about laughing and brushing things off because I don't want to come across as a disgruntled bitch", wrote a woman from Hordaland, Norway.

Less than 3% of the total number of respondents were over the age of 60. The following written response from a woman in that age group from Nordland, Norway, is, as such a noteworthy contribution to the discussion, possibly reflecting on a change in social values:

Experiences that I find unpleasant and feel ashamed of are made visible, and it is not I who should feel ashamed. The person who has put me in such a situation should know it and be the one to feel ashamed.

She was not alone in directing her attention towards perpetrators. A focus on men and their responsibility as either potential allies or perpetrators was a reoccurring theme. A woman from Rogaland wrote,

Men and boys realize that these things happen and that women experience them as threatening and unpleasant. For some of them this means an "Aha! moment" regarding their own behaviour that they can then change.

Still others praised hashtags as a source of information for people who "do not know very much" and can thus use the hashtags to "educate themselves", as a woman from the capital region in Iceland put it. Another woman from the same area wrote that she felt that the hashtag campaigns had helped her to understand the cause better. "If there are not too many of them, they work well for a person like me who is not really a big activist and doesn't use hashtags at all – I understand

the struggle better and support it, as long as [the hashtags are] clearly formulated".

Finally, a woman from Trøndelag, Norway, put several of the themes from all the categories into the context of meaning making and political participation:

[A hashtag] creates extra attention around a topic. Collects efforts. Makes it evident. I think it may turn out to be supportive for an individual who has their own experience/story, to see that others have theirs. It creates a strong voice that in turn influences politics.

## Discussion/Conclusion

This chapter sets out to explore how hashtags encourage or support online meaning making and political participation, primarily based on the analysis of written responses to one survey question: "What is, in your opinion, the biggest advantage of using hashtags in the fight against gender discrimination or other activism?" As expected, given the way the question was formulated, the answers for the most part revolved around the positive aspects of hashtags.

The respondents saw the advantages of hashtags reflected in community, public awareness, and individual engagement. One of the primary characterizing strengths of a hashtag, represented in all three categories, is its simplicity. At first sight, it is no more than a word or a short catch phrase, preceded by a simple symbol. It is easy to write, easy to spread, easy to recognize, and does not require much time either. Anyone can use it – and everyone knows what it is, "unless they live under a rock", as one of the Norwegian respondents so eloquently put it.

The three categories all reflect a general faith in the power of hashtags as a tool, or even an agent, for meaning making and social change, a means of opening the door for participation in the social discourse. The scope of the individual engagement category is specific and somewhat narrow, centring around how hashtag movements may affect individuals, for example by providing personal consolation and validation to victims of sexual abuse. The public awareness category presented a

wider scope, including society as a whole. It addresses informing and educating society about gender discrimination, with the aid of a hashtag. The responses that represented the community category are concerned with the global scale, connecting people across countries and continents, and creating a worldwide movement advocating social and political reform. Yet, in all three categories, the simplicity of hashtags is emphasized. Anyone can use them, be it a survivor of sexual abuse, who feels empowered to share their story, the average social media user who comes across it on their daily newsfeed and educates themselves<sup>1</sup> about a topic they knew nothing about before, or the lone activist empowered by discovering thousands of likeminded individuals all over the world through one simple hashtag.

At the same time, each category presents its own set of hashtag characteristics. As seen in the first category, community, a hashtag makes it possible to spread messages far and wide, reaching a diverse audience, with relatively little effort. Hashtags are also searchable and facilitate an easy overview of a cause, although the overview may not be entirely representative of the debate as a whole, as mentioned previously (Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Carah, 2014). The respondents claimed that hashtags connect citizens, create a sense of community among users, and work well for both networking and mass mobilization, which resonates with the writings of Rambukkana (2015).

Public awareness, as proposed in the second category, presents hashtags as a way to put things on the agenda, show their scope and invite the public to participate and organize themselves, which also resonates with previous writing on the topic (see Stache, 2014; Xiong, Cho & Boatwright, 2019). Both social media and traditional media play a central role in paving the way for the hashtag messages. Hashtags are visible, and thus a good tool for influencing social and public discourse and raise awareness. As such, hashtags are well suited to informing and educating the public, not the least young people, who are adept at using social media and are, therefore, an ideal audience. All this makes hashtags a fitting vehicle for meaning making and social change, and even small hashtags that do not gather significant momentum and are thus unlikely to spark large scale social reforms can also be of value to

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<sup>1</sup> Singular *they* is used here as a nonbinary pronoun, see: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they>

individuals. In spite of this, some respondents did not fully understand the hashtags, and some felt that they could be misinterpreted or fail to take privileges into account.

The contents of the third category focus on the individual and the hashtag's potential to involve and engage citizens on an individual level. This category was also the smallest in terms of number of responses. A central theme was the validation of the feelings and experiences of survivors, consolation, and support and even a long-desired chance to speak out about abuse. In some cases, this was tied directly to networking and a sense of belonging to a community, much like in the community category. Some doubts about the actual effects of using hashtags were expressed, and some found it more important to act than to express a standpoint through a hashtag. A change in attitude and behaviour among survivors, the general public and potential perpetrators, was mentioned to be a result of the hashtag movements. As in the public awareness category, the educational aspects of hashtags were highlighted, focusing on the individual and meaning making.

Reading the responses through the lens of ANT, many of the respondents addressed hashtags as agents. As Rambukkana (2015) concluded, hashtag actor networks can be represented as a variety of embodiments. The notion that hashtags can be agents is the most compelling aspect of ANT to be applied here. As agents, the hashtags were described as everything from powerful social forces to helpful personal teachers. Traditional and social media were also identified as agents, and were identified frequently in the second category, whereas in the third category the agency of the individual was highlighted. Furthermore, it became apparent throughout the categories, that many respondents found that the agency of the hashtag increased individual agency, enabling individuals to do things that they might not have been able to without the aid of the hashtag, such as speak out, reach out to like-minded people, seek support or actively participate in meaning making, participate politically or push for social change. Thus, a new role might be added to hashtag actor networks: an "amplifier"—that is, a network, or even an agent, that amplifies the meaning making and political participation power of another agent (here, the individual).

Attempting to summarize the complex picture that these reflections paint, of how hashtags encourage or support online meaning making

and political participation, one might say that hashtags are universal, unifying, meaning making tools for creating communities across cultures and raising awareness while engaging individuals, validating individual experience and amplifying individual agency. As described by the respondents of this survey, hashtags are ideal vehicles for meaning making. Using a hashtag, and even throwing oneself into a hashtag movement, provides a low threshold opportunity for an individual to participate in meaning making and politics. As seen primarily in the second and third categories, hashtags were often described as either agents of, or tools for, meaning making. The fact that they are easy to search for and likely to "pop up on [a] news feed" when people aren't even looking and, more importantly, "simple to use" opens up doors for even the unlikeliest of people to engage in public meaning making discourses and even influence public politics, as several respondents mentioned.

A common and valid criticism of feminist hashtag activism is that it may not represent sufficient variety in terms of race, physical ability, sexual identity and orientation and so on. This study does not attempt to address this criticism. It does, however, bring to light how hashtags are perceived to affect individuals and society in various ways. A powerful uniting force, a promising revolutionizing social agent and a long-awaited facilitator of individual comfort and support, hashtags are presented by the respondents in this study as a tool with seemingly unlimited potential.

This chapter only reflects on one angle of the complex social phenomenon of hashtag activism. Future research is needed to address critical aspects, using empirical studies of the actual effects of hashtag movements and the extent to which minorities are – or fail to be – included in, order to verify measurable social and political changes.

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**Helga Dis Isfold Sigurdardottir** er førsteamanuensis i spill og opplevelses-teknologi ved Nord universitet. Hun har en doktorgrad i vitenskaps- og teknologistudier fra NTNU. Sigurdardottir har arbeidet med spillbasert læring, online kommunikasjon, mangfold og inkludering i kreative teknologistudier.