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A Bloody Success: Mapping the success of #LahuKaLagaan through network analysis

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I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work.

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Abstract

A Bloody Success: Mapping the success of #LahuKaLagaan through network analysis - Nazma Kazani

This thesis investigates the narrative agency and connective action of hashtag campaigns by focusing on one hashtag that went viral in India in 2017. A year after the launch of the #LahuKaLagaan ('tax on blood') campaign, the 12 per cent goods and services tax (GST) levied on sanitary pads was cancelled. This thesis maps the success of hashtag activism across three main axes: its narrative form, networked action among activists and the discourse surrounding the hashtag in the first 100 in its retweets. Time and again, hashtag activism is deemed as feel-good slacktivism with minimal effect. This study opposes the above notion and argues that hashtag activism can contribute to the success of a movement.

Keywords: hashtag activism, narrative agency, connective action, Twitter, #LahuKaLagaan

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Abbreviations

GST - Goods & services tax

NGO - Non-government organisation

1. Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has an extensive history of authoritarian rule governing a weak civil society. Even before the struggle for independence, people in the region explored multiple ways of social activism to bring forth legal and political change. Notions of civil disobedience, peaceful protest and hunger strikes that defined the freedom struggle resonated with activists in the subcontinent and across the globe.[1] In the years after independence, activists have fought for change for causes ranging from religious identity, ethnicity, and human rights to environmental protection. State repression and communal violence gave rise to activist cultures long before the advent of social media, whereby activists have organised small-scale demonstrations and big rallies to call for social justice and political freedom.

As a region constantly in a state of political flux, India has witnessed a plethora of newsworthy discourse on citizen-based social activism. Subsequently, the increasing use of new media gave an impetus to digital activism, giving protests and citizen movements new methods and dimensions. The spread of internet connectivity and burgeoning smartphone sales meant that marginalised populations had new platforms for sharing their voices. They brought to light issues like sexual assault and corruption scandals.

Social media, in particular, has found a crucial position in modern-day advocacy and campaigning. Since the Arab Spring, civic groups and (NGOs) non-government organisations have harnessed the agency of platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Reddit to raise awareness and engage with society and political leaders. With time, social media integration has become essential to the modus operandi of any campaign for change. Increasing innovation and seminal cases of online protest have brought renewed consideration to the power of digital activism in the formation of public discourse. While much of the research on digital activism has been focused on its connective character (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and the question of leadership in these movements, not many have inspected the narrative agency of activism. This study will investigate the role of narrative agency and connective action in creating a successful hashtag movement.

Time and again, hashtag activism is deemed as feel-good slacktivism with minimal effect. This study opposes the above notion and argues that hashtag activism can contribute to the success movement. #LahuKaLagaan was one such campaign that was a success.

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[1] Renowned activists like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela have adapted theories of protest from Mahatma Gandhi.

This thesis studies the intersections of media, community and narrative form of the hashtag campaign that raises its voice against established authority. It argues that success lies in the narrative agency of the movement and maps the hashtag's behaviour using a mixed methods approach to highlight its crucial role in this movement. I focus on one hashtag, in particular, #LahuKaLagaan (meaning 'tax on blood'), which protested the levy of (GST) Goods & Services Tax on menstrual hygiene products in India. This hashtag campaign received substantial coverage in Indian mainstream media after it went viral. Under heavy criticism, the government cancelled the tax a year after the start of the campaign.

1.1. Background

Launched by the NGO, She Says, #LahuKaLagaan first appeared on Twitter on 18th April 2017 to protest against the government's imposition of a 14% tax on sanitary napkins and other menstrual hygiene products. The government classified them as a luxury commodity that illicit a digital activism campaign by She Says. Over and above the call for tax exemption, She Says sought to include menstrual hygiene products under the Essential Commodities Act and also requested that vending machines containing sanitary napkins and tampons be installed in public spaces.

#LahuKaLagaan was not the first attempt at calling attention to this systemic issue. In late 2016, prior to the announcement of the new GST policy, She Says filed an online petition with the #DontTaxMyPeriod requesting the finance ministry to make menstrual hygiene products tax-free. However, this campaign failed to gain momentum. The NGO reviewed their strategy and launched #LahuKaLagaan with new earnest in the following year. The campaign garnered support and attention from different avenues of society. Actors, musicians, and stand-up comedians took to Twitter to urge then Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, to consider their appeal for tax-free pads and better sanitation facilities in rural areas.

Following the initial outcry from the campaign, the committee dropped the tax from 14% to 12% (Sawanti 2017). By choosing to keep on the tax, the all-male GST committee implied that disposable menstrual products were not a necessity since other alternatives were available. The campaign continued online as well as offline. Fifteen months after the start of the campaign, in July 2018, the tax was abolished.

Indian publications like The Times Of India, *Hindustan Times, Daily News & Analysis* and *The Economic Times* followed the campaign for many weeks after its initial launch. (Chhavi Bhatia 2017; Nikita Saxena 2017; Sawanti 2017). International news agencies like *The Guardian*, NPR, *The Huffington Post and The New York Times* gave credit to the campaign for its work. (Esha Chhabra

2017; Vidhi Doshi 2017). Trisha Shetty, the CEO of She Says became a regular feature in split-screen news debates and continued to spread awareness about period poverty and other women's issues.

1.2. Research Questions

This movement was a success online as well as offline. Often dismissed as slacktivism, hashtag movements are not always celebrated for the contribution to change in the offline world. Therefore it is important to closely study movements that bring about change to provide particulars to future organisers of similar endeavours. While there have been studies that chart the success of hashtag movements, most of them involve speaking with organisers. Besides, very few of them come from the South Asia. Due to the complex and diverse cultural forces at play in this region, movements coming from this region have to adopt strategies that would be resonant with the heterogenous audience.

To explore the same, the guiding research question of this essay will attempt to unpack the following:

To what extent do narrative agency and connective action contribute to the success of #LahuKaLagaan?

The thesis will answer the main research question by exploring the following subsidiary questions

- How does #LahuKaLagaan compare to its predecessor #DontTaxMyPeriod?

- What characteristics define the organisational structure of the networked protest of #LahuKaLagaan?

- What are the overarching themes in the online discourse of this movement?

This thesis will be divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 presents a literature review of three broad themes - hashtag activism, narrative agency and connective action. Chapter 3 will touch upon data collection, and sampling techniques and explain the methodologies employed to analyse retweeting networks and hashtag content. By performing a comparison between two campaigns organised by She Says, chapter 4 will bring to the fore the affordances of narrative agency for #LahuKaLagaan. Chapter 5 will answer the second subsidiary question by conducting a network analysis and identifying the opinion leaders of the movement. Chapter 6 will discuss the broad themes in the networked discourse of this movement. Finally, chapter 7 will sow together

the inferences and finding from the thesis to assess whether or not the research question was answered.

Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter will discuss studies that are related and relevant to the subject under investigation. It brings forth a summary and an evaluation of the material per the research questions at hand. The objective of this literature review is to grapple with the notions and evidence in existing scholarship to aid the approach of this thesis and its epistemology and highlight that it is presenting and contributing to the broader field of study. According to Levy and Ellis, a useful literature review should:

> a) methodologically analyze and synthesize quality literature, b) provide a firm foundation to a research topic, c) provide a firm foundation to the selection of research methodology, and d) demonstrate that the proposed research contributes something new to the overall body of knowledge or advances the research field's knowledge-base. (Yair and Ellis 2006, 182)

To assess the relevant literature systematically, this chapter has been divided into three sections. Section 2.1. will evaluate the existing literature on hashtag activism worldwide and in India. Section 2.2. will discuss the frameworks that will support the investigation and argument of this thesis. Section 2.3. will touch upon the significance and potential contribution of this study.

2.1.1. Hashtag activism as a vehicle for citizen activism

Gender-based issues, poverty and climate change form a bulk of contemporary citizen activism. Innovation in technology and digital media has resulted in the use of transmedia for social engagement, specifically via social media, which has changed the mode of public conversation for the better. (Lambert 2008, 49) Once considered a simple way of communication or the instrument for feel-good clicking, social media soon became a crucial tool for networked movements. It represents a genuine opportunity to work towards change by reinterrogating and reframing issues for the public that have been either misrepresented or ignored in the mainstream public sphere.

Digital activism employs social media and technology to mobilise social and political movements via online campaigns. Examples of such campaigns span from widespread social movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street to more targeted and localised advocacy initiatives like the MyKali webzine in Jordan[2] (Mahdeen 2021, 78). Campaigns like these provide a "virtual town square" (Kavanaugh et al. 2009, 279) where concerned people can design a shared meaning of the protest message, exchange everyday experiences of marginalisation and mobilise resources for offline participation. (Goh and Pang 2016, 525) More recently, in the Black Lives Matter protests, social media has been found to advance digital participation and bolster offline behaviour. (Jackson, Bailey and Welles 2020, 99)

Twitter has become the go-to digital platform for citizen activism. Its features allow users to create and disseminate a message to reach relevant institutions and groups for support. (Majchrzak et al. 2013, 39-41) More specifically, Twitter hashtags have played an essential role in supporting counter-narratives, mobilising people, and creating diverse support networks. (Wang, Liu and Gao 2016, 851) This trend of using Twitter hashtags in activist initiatives has been described by the term '*hashtag activism.'[3]* Hashtag activism is a form of digital activism where a host of posts appear on a social media network under the identical hashtag with a specific political or social claim. (Yang 2016, 13) Using the same hashtag, therefore, encourages the creation of a social context where communication between like-minded people is transformed into a networked public. (Xiong et al. 2019, 10)

Individuals and groups can conceive a hashtag (#) surrounding a specific notion and then index and gather public discourse around that topical or cultural thread. This accumulation of voices incited

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[2] MyKali was the first LGBTQ webzine in the Middle East that created media to destigmatise the idea of sex and sexuality. (Mahdeen, 2021 78)

[3] The term "hashtag activism" was first introduced by Eric Augenbraun in his 2011 piece on the Occupy Wall Street movement in *The Guardian*.

by a particular hashtag provides the opportunity to raise awareness. (Zaber et al. 2017, 52) Subsequent engagement in the form of liking, following, retweeting, sharing, and forwarding hold the potential for change. This propensity to mobilise the masses stems from different avenues, which will be discussed in section 2 of this chapter. Before that, the thesis will address some of the criticism towards hashtag activism.

2.1.2. Beyond Slacktivism

Hashtag activism has been critiqued as operating on a superficial level of engagement. Critics of social media activism cite it as 'slacktivism.'

> The term "slacktivism," a combination of the words "slacker" and "activism," has increasingly been used to describe the disconnect between awareness and action through the use of social media. This illustrates a departure from "traditional" conceptualisations of activism, such as during the 1960s, associated with interdependent groups mobilising through tangible resources, including space, to organise protests, rallies, and boycotts."(Glenn 2015, 81)

Critics deem it as relatively passive given that it requires minimal time and effort. One critic cites it as simply "feel-good back patting" through watching or "liking" online commentary on social issues without any action. (Knibbs 2013) They contest that these are acts that are not only ineffective and rarely result in active political participation but also hinder real activism and civic engagement. (Lee and Hsieh 2013, 811) Therefore this form of activism has come to hold a negative connotation due to its low-cost moral balancing characteristic, which people prefer to refrain from real-life actions. (ibid, 811)

However, recent successful movements render a separate reality. The solidarity and turnout of the #OccupyWallSreet movement in 2011, the spread of the #BlackLIvesMatter campaign (more so after the murder of George Floyd in 2020) and the #MeToo campaigns worldwide are proof that such online initiatives bolster and at times give new rigour to movements calling for social and political change.

While some may question how one hashtag can lead to change, others argue that it is impossible to introduce change if one does not understand what the problem is in the first place. At a time when people are spending more time online, specifically on social media, the dissemination of information about social problems on these platforms is critical. Users may not be able to partake in offline activism due to lack of accessibility, social constraints, fear of government oppression,

privacy concerns etc. yet might want to express solidarity regarding a cause. Slactivism provides people, especially in marginalised communities, a 'space' to voice their concerns.

People who took to the streets for a cause over the decades may find it hard to continue fighting hurdles, increase awareness and collect financial resources. Through hashtag activism, they can get their message across social media to connect and get the backing of online supporters, even if it is solely via discourse. While hashtag activism may not supersede conventional protest activities, it supplement them. Thus, providing activists more options.

This thesis argues that hashtag activism exists on a broad spectrum of which slacktivism is definitely an undeniable facet. Slacktivism may result from the bandwagon effect, but even in mindless retweeting and sharing of a specific hashtag lies the power of the network effects.[4] In answering the research questions, this thesis will highlight the affordances of hashtag activism that take root through the connectivity, content and context of the hashtag. Through analysis and discussion, it will also highlight how technology enables one piece of metadata to mobilise support and solidarity around issues that are often marginalised by mainstream media.

2.1.3. Hashtag feminism

There is a great deal of literature on the use of digital media by feminist activists with a host of correlated terms that are relevant to this thesis. Some scholars have cited the term cyberfeminism[5], (Gajjala 2012, 49; Daniels 2009, 102) as a protraction of theories from the last two decades focused mainly on the intersections between women and technology. Some also refer to it as digital feminism (Keller and Ryan 2018; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019). Most importantly for the purview of this thesis, there is hashtag feminism (Clark 2016, 2; Losh 2014, 19) which relates specifically to feminist hashtags that incite national and/or transnational debates. While work on cyberfeminism and digital feminism also discuss hashtags; however, they may also cover broader forms of activist organising, which include online forums, Facebook groups and other forms of digital communities. This section pays specific attention to the breadth of literature on hashtag feminism.

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[4] The term "network effects" (or "network externalities") is a shorthand for the principle that the more people who use a platform, the more useful that platform is to each user. (Tufecki 2017, 135)

[5] Cyberfeminism is neither a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda. Rather, "cyberfeminism" refers to a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanagan and Booth 2002, 12)

During the Arab Spring, hashtag feminism enabled women to have greater geographic mobility, better access to the public sphere as well as an improved social status. (Tazi 2021, 303) This new method and vehicle for protest highlighted an enabled anonymity, privacy, affordance relative accessibility enabling women of all social classes to contribute to the Arab Spring revolutions. (ibid, 303). In Brazil, the viral hashtags #MySecretFriend and #FirstHarrassment led the 2015 to be deemed as "the year of women's spring in Brazil by the local magazine *Época.* (Loureiro 2021, 55) This campaign was noteworthy with regards to not only online but also offline feminist activity in creating a rhetoric around under stereotypes and celebrities in the media during the ousting of President Dilma Rousseff. (ibid, 55) Hence, it can be argued that hashtag feminism has the ability to change the status quo through its messaging specifically in spaces under political flux.

Feminist activism has been taking centre stage in social media for some time now (Altinay, 2014; Antunovic and Linden, 2015; McLean and Maalsen, 2013) and hashtags are a frequent subject of interest as one of the best-known methods for digital activism (Khoja- Moolji, 2015; Portwood-Stacer and Berridge, 2014).

Hashtag feminism has also been studied as a tool for consciousness-raising. (Gleeson 2019) Gleeson studied the #MeToo movement and describes how consciousness-raising activities were adopted by women participating in the campaign in their attempt to raise awareness about sexual abuse in parts of society. (ibid, 2019)

Gleeson's analysis of digital consciousness-raising aided in the analysis of this thesis. It provoked the consideration of how such spaces facilitate education about patriarchal structures of domination while also enabling the sharing of emotions about experiences of marginalisation by government policies.

Consciousness-raising groups serve a multitude of purposes from the recognition of injustice, communal support, building an understanding of feminist theory and providing impetus for political mobilisation. The work of such groups has the potential to produce political slogans which are used to organise and stimulate marches and reach audiences online as well as offline. (Weber et al. 2018, 2292)

The studies discussed in this subsection shed light on the affordances and limitations of networked protests in feminist activism, drawing on research from different parts of the world. The next section touches upon India in order to contextualise research about hashtags and feminism in India.

2.1.4. Hashtag activism in India

Previous studies on hashtag feminism in India have highlighted that most effective social campaigns must have offline activities to be relevant and effective. (Chadha and Harlow 2015, 682) They also highlight that feminist hashtag campaigns in digitally young countries such as India need the attention of mainstream media to garner wider support. (Guha 2014, 155) Research also points out that Twitter coverage in India generally exhibits the opinions of young, urban and technologically savvy users thereby mirroring the issues of the same group of people (Lost 2014, 13) thereby overlooking the voice and needs of the oppressed women in the country's hinterland (Fadnis 2017, 1113). For example, the pictures and posts associated with the #whyloiter (Jha 2018, 71) show urban women with the means and resources to move around the metro cities like Mumbai. Meanwhile, #SafecityIndia campaign only covered the stories of women in Mumbai, Delhi and Goa. (Pain 2020, 3142) These examples highlight the nuances of digital activism in India, where even though internet usage is slowly growing in rural India due to low-cost data prices, the stories and voices of rural women are still missing.

Although there are only a handful of studies on hashtag activism in India, they do help point out what areas require focus. This thesis agrees with Fadnis (2017), that there are few campaigns that consider the issues of the wider population of women in India. With that in mind, this study analyses the online campaign of #LahuKaLagaan that speaks to the issues of all women and people who menstruate in the country. While the movement may have started by urban users, the voices and experiences of rural people were amplified by means of this movement.

2.2.1. Connective action

This study will analyse #LahuKaLagaan campaign through the framework of connective action. This framework studies individuals' digital actions and their impact in the context of a digital social movement. (Bennett and Segerber 2012, 748) The framework of connective action argues that geographically distributed Internet users participate in digital activism through self-motivation and personalized actions about contentious issues without the need for the intermediation of traditional and formal brick-and-mortar organisations. (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 748). It suggests

> that participation becomes self-motivating as personally expressive content is
>
> shared with, and recognized by, others who, in turn, repeat these networked

> sharing activities. When these interpersonal networks are enabled by
> technology platforms of various designs that coordinate and scale the networks,
> the resulting actions can resemble collective action, yet without the same role
> played by formal organizations or transforming social identifications. (Bennett
> and Segerberg 2012, 752).

This framework helps understand how a movement is being organised and coordinated through indirect communication to facilitate engagement and public opinion. (Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014, 232) Within this framework, scholarly research has addressed how counter-publics use social networks to obtain legitimacy through raising awareness. (Chan 2018, 561; Wang and Chu 2017, 393) As a feature of connective action, hashtag activism does not have to be a trigger for revolutions (Fuchs 2012, 780) but rather contribute to movements to autonomous and creative participants (ibid, 780).

It has been argued that counter publics form network connections through retweeting.[6] (Lotan et al. 2011, 1399). It has been suggested that this trend 'a conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context.' (Boyd et al. 2010,1).

In the study of tweets surrounding #g20report, most tweets were retweets. (Poell and Borra 2012, 695). Similarly, in a study on the uprising in Egypt, it was observed that activists used retweeting as a network strategy to process new information and filter messages to supporters of the movement. (Starbird and Palen 2012) The analysis of a retweeting network helps identify the most shared content and the opinion leaders of the movement that rise to challenge existing narratives. (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles 2020)

2.2.2. Narrative agency

Time and again, scholars of social movements have pointed out the power of narratives. (Polletta 2006; Serbian 2010) but the study of narrative agency vis-à-vis digital activism has received less

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[6] Retweeting happens where an original tweet is shared by a user to their followers. Because of the uptick in this trend, Twitter added the feature to allowing users to retweet easily with one click. Retweeting can include annotation or comment to the original post. It is also very easy to identify a retweet on Twitter by looking for 'RT @' followed by a username. Retweeting signifies that the original tweet contains important information.

attention. Contrary to the earlier forms of digital activism like the signing of online petitions, forums and denial-of-service actions, hashtag activism has a distinctly narrative nature.

Digital activism on social media inhabits different narrative forms depending on the platform of use. Digital protests would take place on bulletin boards or news groups which enabled the sharing of longer and more detailed narratives. While these methods had the ability to incite the fervour of protest, the number of voices participating would be significantly lower compared to Twitter due to a lack of accessibility, awareness and connectivity among activists and the masses.

Hashtag activism facilitates connectivity on Twitter. It makes it easier for users on Twitter to search, link and interact with one another through a hashtagged term (#hiv, #climatechange) and share stories and opinions. However, these are hashtags that are used every day and do not carry the carefully crafted narratives of episodic hashtags which are characterised by their 'liveness' around a specific event or news story. (#BlackLivesMatter, #BringBackOurGirls, #HijabIsMyRight) (Zulli 2020, 204) The most impactful instances of hashtag activism, in contrast to routine and everyday hashtags, have a discernible narrative form which highlights a conflict succinctly in two or often three words. (Clark 2016, 9) Users contribute to the co-creation of narratives by adding their voices, opinions, emotions and experiences to this temporal framework. With regards to influential hashtag campaigns, it is common to see complete syntactical structures #JeSuisCharlie #BringBackOurGirls #IStandWithAhmed #OscarsSoWhite etc. They can contain a verb or imply a strong sense of action demanding or petitioning for change. They express refusal, opposition and the need for action. In all the above ways, activist and campaign hashtags imply 'a kind of ritual conflict whose most distinguishing form is confrontation.' (Cathcart 1978, 234)

The narrative feature of hashtag activism does not end at its syntactical orientation. It also covers generic conventions and rhetorical devices used in posts. An episode of hashtag activism could span anything between days, weeks and months depending on the narrative and its reach. In this process, these rhetorical devices activate the attention of users and readers, thereby aiding them in understanding how this symbolic act can be framed. (Campbell 2005, 7) The temporal development of this process of people exchanging ideas creates a larger narrative. (Yang 2016, 15) This study will tackle the research questions at hand by investigating #LahuKaLagaan through the lens of narrative agency as online by Karlyn Campbell (2005). While #LahuKaLagaan may not imply an obvious action it highlights the unjust nature of GST and provides rhetoric of political commentary.

2.3 Significance of the study

Existing literature surrounding hashtag activism tends to focus on the leaders of the movement or the content of the tweets associated with the hashtags. Not many studies have combined the two to present complex conclusions based on quantitative and qualitative analysis. This thesis adopts a mixed methods approach to provide results from a network perspective. It will also conduct a thematic analysis of the discourse to see what parallels can be drawn between both sets of results. In carrying out this study, we delve deeper into the primary data to identify the players underlying the emergence of connective action bolstered by the use of the social media platform, Twitter. The combined evaluation of users and narratives aids in unpacking how a digital social campaign takes shape, mobilises solidarity among users and provides legitimacy to its creators.

In its investigation of narrative agency in the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, Yang questions whether hashtag activism will take different forms in different languages. This thesis will attempt to answer that question through its interrogation of the context, actors involved and obviously the content related to the #LahuKaLagaan. This study will also shed light on the seminal nodes or factors that contribute to the success of hashtag campaigns. With political unrest and feminist movements on the rise, activism stands to increase to highlight are bound to increase and set a precedent for movements to come. Therefore, studies like this one become crucial to carry out. mean that marginalised people will struggle to find space to

Besides with the future of Twitter hanging in the balance, such movements may soon become a part of history and will need to be studied in order to tackle the next phase of digital activism.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used to gather and analyse the tweets related to the hashtag #LahuKaLagaan. This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section explains why a mixed-method approach was adopted. The second section provides details about data collection and pre-processing of tweets associated with the hashtag under study. Finally, sections three and four discuss the reasoning behind the choice of network analysis and thematic analysis respectively.

3.1 Mixed method analysis of #LahuKaLagaan

On close and careful examination of the purpose of the thesis, it was concluded that a mixed-method approach would effectively answer the research questions. Mixed method research allows 'the use of multiple world views or paradigms rather than the typical association of certain paradigms for quantitative researchers and others for qualitative researchers.' (Loraine D and Kamalodeen 2020, 50) Additionally, its integration of qualitative and qualitative allows the researcher the flexibility to use cultural knowledge and contexts. (ibid. 50) Time and again, during this course, it has been discussed that quantitative methods (like models, software and algorithmic computations) have flaws and warrant a critical eye. Therefore, this thesis combines a careful and critical approach to the quantitive methods of investigation to arrive at coherent and well-rounded conclusions that present evidence with an analytical eye.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods can be arduous and time-consuming, but I argue that their strengths and benefits outweigh the limitations. Existing literature is replete with mixed methods studies that use a variety of designs in different contexts. A mixed method approach allows the transition from qualitative to quantitative or vice versa. This flexibility is desirable for understanding complex issues like the topic under study. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that brought about the success of #LahuKaLagaan, qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to scrape, clean, analyse and visualise the data, which will be discussed in the following sections.

3.2. Data collection and sampling

A total of 14,228 tweets containing the #LahuKaLagaan between the period 17 April 2017 to 31 July 2017 were exported into a Google Sheet[7] from Twitter's API.[8] This period covers roughly the first 100 days since the launch of the hashtag campaign. This corpus of tweets served as the primary data for this thesis. Attributes exported the text of the tweet, user ids, hashtags mentioned in the text of the tweet, date and time stamps, like counts, quote counts, retweet counts and miscellaneous bits of back-end information.

While tweets containing other hashtags like #PeriodPoverty, #MenstruationMatters, #IRespectHer, and #SmashShame were included in the corpus, the scope and purpose of the study required enabled the research to focus on one hashtag. Unfortunately, because Hindu characters were not recognisable by the analysis tool, the tweets containing Hindi characters had to be overlooked. Nonetheless, given that the focus was on retweeting practices and the network created, the process and analysis were not hindered to a great degree. It is also important to note that a number of tweets that were written out phonetically in English or Hinglish were retained in the corpus.

3.3. Retweeting network methodology

The methodology followed to create the retweeting network was based on one created to study the #Cryto (Pipis, 2022) The experiment by Pipis sought to find out the influencers within the retweeting network and to identify how the conversation was being swayed with reference to cryptocurrencies. (ibid, 2022) It identified the top information drivers by finding out the in-degree and out-degree centrality in R.(ibid, 2022) 'R is a system for statistical computation and graphics. It provides, among other things, a programming language, high-level graphics, interfaces to other languages and debugging facilities. This manual details and defines the R language.' (Team 2000, 1)

Of the nearly 14,000 tweets that mentioned #LahuKaLagaan, approximately 10600 were retweets. These were filtered into a new data frame keeping and only two attributes were retained namely

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[7] This sheet can be accessed via the following link added in the appendix.

[8] Designed for scholarly research, the Academic Research access to the Twitter API enabled the student to export tweets from Twitter's Developer Dashboard using available tutorials.

the username (the person who shared the retweet), and the tweet text (which contains the name of the person they retweeted). Now, these tweets were cleaned and stored in an edge list with two columns called rTweeted and Tweeted. Here, rTweeted would be the source of the tweet or the 'drivers' and Tweeted would be the person tagged or the person who generated the original tweets or the 'generators.'

The thesis sought to find out the highest information generators and drivers in order to understand who the opinion leaders of the movement may be. The results and analysis for this will be shared in chapter five.

In order to visualise the network, the nodes and edges list was also imported into Gephi to get a better sense of the primary data collected.

3.4. Thematic analysis

This study set out to understand the major themes in the discourse surrounding the #LahuKaLagaan campaign on Twitter. The term "discourse" here does merely signify a reflection of reality but a constructive paradigm that guides seeing, thinking and overall experience of the social world. (Gill, 2000) Given the structure of communication on the social media site, the data can be said to constitute a networked discourse that social expressions of grappling, defining and negotiating ways of thinking and feeling. It is also important to remember that the idea of networked discourse on Twitter does not limit itself to minimal expression of a few characters. Communicative processes are also structured around the exchange of media content. (Bruns and Moe 2014). Therefore, this study will undertake the evaluation of media content should it be deemed necessary.

In Braun and Clarke's framework for thematic analysis, data collection, cleaning and analysis follow a six-step procedure. (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77-101)

> (1) familiarising yourself with data via (re-)reading tweets; (2) generating initial codes to identify certain features of the data; (3) searching for themes by collating codes within specific themes; (4) reviewing themes to understand coherence both between and within themes; (5) defining and naming themes, including the examination of overall narrative; and finally (6) constructing the body of the report by reviewing the extracts. (Ural, 1090)

Thus, the thematic analysis serves to answer the third subsidiary research question of this study in two ways. Firstly, this method is used to analyse texts by identifying themes and patterns in large datasets. (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77) It is also widely used in Twitter research (Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Downing, 2019; Downing & Dron, 2020; Eriksson, 2016; Papacharissi & De Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Payne, 2018). One of the most distinct affordances of this method is its potential to "summarize key features of a large body of data, and/or offer a 'thick description' of the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 97). As Twitter data comes with large volumes of attributes, using thematic makes the data set more intelligible.

Secondly, a thematic analysis aids in the investigation of the networked discourse. Once overarching themes are identified, the question of how Twitter can be seen as an effective medium for the dissemination of themes can be studied. (Ural, 1090) Hence, the quantifiable character of themes (in particular measured metrics like likes, tweets, and retweets) sheds light on the direction of networked discourse.

Chapter 4 - #DontTaxMyPeriod vs #LahuKaLagaan

#LahuKaLagaan is the most extensive woman-led Twitter campaign to demand policy change in India (Sawanti 2017). It garnered significant support from activists, politicians, and even students, who came together to request a cancellation of GST on sanitary napkins. (Gupta and Trehan 2021, 291) After its launch, the #LahuKaLagaan campaign received media coverage from around the globe and the support of several celebrities online. Under heavy criticism, India's GST Council agreed to shelve the tax imposed on menstrual hygiene products. This campaign is also cited as being the catalyst for starting a conversation around the destigmatisation of menstrual hygiene and challenging the perception of menstrual hygiene products as luxury goods. (ibid, 291)

While this campaign was successful in its objectives, it was not the first time social activists have used hashtag activism on Twitter to bring about policy changes. She Says India created a hashtag campaign in similar earnest in November 2016. Using the #DontTaxMyPeriod, the NGO collaborated with the international organisation Global Citizen. Users were urged to sign an online petition to protest against the introduction of GST on menstrual hygiene products. While it gained some media coverage with the founder of She Says receiving a byline in a leading newspaper, the initiative did not gather much momentum. Further research found that #DontTaxMyPeriod had less than 12 uses on Twitter in India.[9] Comparatively, #LahuKaLagaan was trending on the day of its launch and received excellent traction for the first week after its release as seen in figure 1.

---

[9] A search for tweets with the #DontTaxMyPeriod from the Twitter API show came up with a dozen tweets. This can be seen in the Google Sheet linked n the appendix
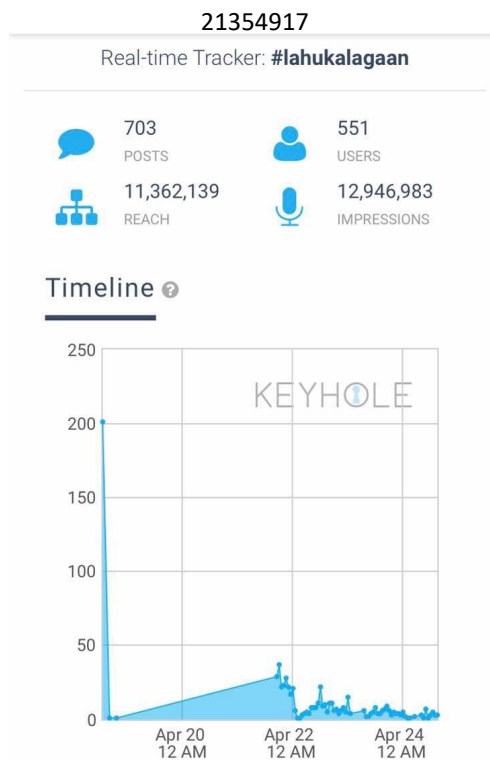
fig. 1 internal metrics shared by She Says
India on Twitter

This section will study the changes made to the later campaign to pinpoint the potential features that led to its widespread success. It will do this by examining the affordances of the second campaign vis-à-vis context and content. The sections in the chapter are viewed under the framework of narrative agency associated with hashtag activism as discussed in the literature review.

4.1. Polylingual languaging

It can be argued that #LahuKaLagaan had more cultural resonance than #DontTaxMyPeriod. Literally meaning 'tax on blood,' the phrase comes from Hindi, the third most spoken language in the world and the most commonly spoken language in India. Originating in Hindi but written out phonetically in English, this string strikes a balance between two languages and can be categorised into what has come to be known as Hinglish.

> It's India's self-confident voice rising above the subservience that was once expressed
> in an English way … 'Hinglish' is all about the ascendant and emergent force that is
> modern India. If language reflects national identity, the speed at which 'Hinglish' is
> being adopted sends out very loud cultural and economic signals to the rest of the
> world. (Khanna, 2010)

It has been suggested that Hinglish is not just the language of the urban youth, but also the dialect of a new and confident India where skills and the right outlook can overcome social and caste differences. (Kothari and Snell 2011, 193) Since it has been regarded as '*both* the informal language of the globalised Indian middle class *and* the aspirational language of the upwardly-mobile vernacular lower-middle, middle, and working classes who are asking for more,' it is no surprise that it was adopted for the relaunch of the hashtag campaign by She Says India in hopes that it would have a better reach with a broader audience that did not speak English.

Hashtag use in multiple languages is a complex phenomenon involving a graded scale that can include simple borrowing to entire code-switching in shared hashtag entities (Poell and Darmoni, 2012, 54-59), much like the case under study. Scholars have studied this trend of using hashtags in different languages for symbolic value in sub-diverse societies and transnational social networks. This phenomenon is known as polylingual languaging or polylanguaging.

With hashtags, polylanguaging can include alternation between two languages that separate the body of the post from the hashtag space. Example 1 shows the case of an English-language micro post, where the hashtag, embedded in the suffix position is in Hinglish. In example 2, the micro post is articulated in Hindi and the hashtag is in Hinglish.

> Example 1: Yet, we put Sanitary Napkins under the same bracket as Cars &Tobacco.
> Luxury my ass. Sex is a choice - Periods are NOT. #LahukaLagaan #Part2
> Example 2: केंद्र सरकार ने जीएसटी में सेनिटरी नैपकिन को माना लग्सरी आइटम।
> Remove #lahukalagaan

In both examples, the hashtag #LahuKaLagaan operates as a topical entity that connects the tweet with an external notion. (Yang et al. 2012, 262) By creating a Hinglish hashtag instead of translating it into English (#TaxOnBlood), She Says perceives its audience as the ever-evolving and enterprising population of India and aligns itself and the campaign to the vernacular of the people. Choosing this dialect, in this case, can be seen as a strategic choice, which does not consider caste, class, or gender. Instead, it targets a more significant subset of society that identifies with this notion. Employing these elements of style - in this example, the choice of language shows the indexing of a language code. (Giaxoglou 2018, 17) Choices of different languages that enable discourse and indexical functions could be described as examples of polylanguaging as 'linguistic bricolage' (Hebdige 1979, 102) whereby Hinglish is constructed as the voice of solidarity and identification with people affected by the tax. The above also explains the linguistic choices of celebrities and political leaders (e.g. the Chief Minister of Kerala whose first language is

Malayalam) who included #LahuKaLagaan in their tweets, where the choice of language reinforces a display of support and solidarity.

4.2. Transmedia adaptation

This section will highlight the cultural and historical resonance of the word lagaan (meaning tax) for the people of India. It will argue that the creators of the new hashtag coined it by employing what can be referred to as transmedia adaptation. Jenkins explains

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of fiction
>
> get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of
>
> creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes
>
> it own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins 2011)

According to Jenkins, transmedia adaptation 'takes the same story from one medium and retells it in another.' (Jenkins 2011) The masses in India associate the word lagaan with a blockbuster film with the same name that came out in 2001. *Lagaan,* the film, marked a turning point in Indian cinema, with the feature making its way to the Best Foreign Language Film category at 74th Academy Awards. It became the third Indian film to be nominated in the category after *Mother India* (1957) and *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). Set in 1893, the film follows a group of farmers who are challenged by a British Indian Army officer to a game of cricket as a wager to avoid paying the taxes owed to their collectors. The film highlights the struggles incurred by farmers in pre-independent India under an unjust social and political landscape. While the film was not based on actual events, it gives a peak into the life of the average man under colonial rule who was forced to pay feudal fees and taxes to the unjust rulers regardless of drought and rough conditions. Protesting against unfair taxes was a common trend during the independence struggle in India. A historic protest was centred around Mahatma Gandhi's protest against the Salt Tax in 1930. His Dandi March or Salt March of 385 kilometres saw hundreds of followers join his non-violent protest against the tax on an essential commodity.

The introduction of #LahuKaLagaan harks back to this historical and cultural narrative. It draws a parallel between the hashtag campaign and that march led by 'Father Of The Nation.'[10]

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[10] Mahatma Gandhi is commonly referred to as the 'The Father Of The Nation' across the Indian subcontinent for his contribution to the freedom struggle and the establishment of the republic of India.

Using an instantly recognisable narrative cue to convey long-standing exploitation and marginalisation allows Twitter users to engage directly in a shared language with a mainstream audience who saw the film but may not know much about the social change campaign.

Thus, the malleable nature of this narrative enabled multiple users to take hashtags and create content, posts and video on the topic. Activist-tagged content was created and shared, not just on Twitter but on other social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook. This is what Lina Srivastava calls transmedia activism. According to her, it involves 'creating social impact by using storytelling by several decentralised authors who share assets, create content for distribution across multiple forms of media to raise awareness and influence action.' (Srivastava, 2009)

While #DontTaxMyPeriod did not gain much popularity in India, it was adopted by activists in Ghana for a similar cause. #LahuKaLagaan gives us a rich example of how meaningfulness might inspire political action. It enabled a small group of activists to harness the narrative agency of one word in providing a platform for a social issue that affects millions of people in their country.

The next chapter will discuss how the hashtag enabled connective expression and action. It will bring out the users that responded to the new narrative form and uncover who the opinion leaders were in the first 100 days of the movement.

Chapter 5. Connective action and media sharing

As mentioned earlier, existing literature on hashtag activism often focuses on either people(i.e activists) or content (i.e. topics and hashtags). Not many studies have examined both activists and content together. This thesis attempts to add to the narrow corpus of literature that combines the qualitative and quantitative methods of studying hashtag activism. (Xu, 2020; Wang and Zhou 2021) In answering the second research question, this chapter will bring forth the results from running a network analysis and provide observations on the organisational structure and leadership of the movement.

Historically, networked protests and movements are characterised by decentralised organisation, leaderlessness and bottom-up participation, following the framework of digitally enabled connective action (Anduiza, Cristancho and Sabucedo 2013; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2015). These characteristics have been lauded for their affordances (e.g., Caraway 2016, 907; Zeng 2020, 172), but some have noted the limitations imposed by decentralisation (Tufekci 2017, 111). Other scholars have questioned the sense in which a networked protest is leaderless. While traditionally, a networked protest may not have central leaders who take responsibility for designing movement strategies, providing action opportunities, articulating movement frames, and negotiating with those in power, certain individuals are comparatively influential in shaping movement dynamics (Tufekci 2017, 53). These individuals or collectives include those individuals who coordinate particular protests, express emergent discourses, suggest solutions, and so on. Castells argues that leadership has become shared, informal and possibly unstable. (Castells 2012 110-114). Therefore, instead of focusing on the notion of leaderlessness, it is worth examining the characteristics of informal and diffused leadership in networked social movements.

Launched by the organisation She Says India, it is hard to characterise the #LahuKaLagaan movement as solely led by the NGO. This section will discuss how the movement garnered support and virality via independent posts and media sharing shared by actors outside of the political and social development arena. It will also find seek to find out what connections can be drawn between the users of the hashtags.

Of the nearly 14228 tweets that were collected with the #LahuKaLagaan, 10600 were retweets. Retweeting is structuring action that enables 'thought leaders to crowdsource to prominence' (Papacharissi 2016, 314) in particular when tweets are archived by hashtags, and

heavily retweeted or favourited. Therefore in order to identify the opinion leaders, this thesis undertook an analysis of the retweeting network of the corpus of tweets created.

Based on the methodology discussed in Chapter 3, the top ten information generators were brought out using in-degree centrality. These can be referred to in figure 2. The ten information generators are those users who retweeted the most amount of tweets. It is no surprise that the account of She Says was participating in retweeting. With 216 retweets, @SheSaysIndia was the highest information driver in the dataset. Their retweets show the need to broaden and maximise their reach. They also closely covered the campaign using the retweet feature to bookmark and highlight the milestones achieved by the movement. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

```
##      SheSaysIndia      AmiFromIndia     TrishaBShetty     soniaghuman krutikapursnani
##               216               188               116             106              70
##        mir_daniz priyankaslondhe           ParSh_Dil        vijayvrat      KumarNishka
##                44                34                34              32              32
```

fig. 2 the top ten information drivers or the accounts that retweeted the most.

The top ten information drivers are shown in figure 4. It is a cumulation of the number of times each account's tweet was retweeted. While again we see the account of @SheSaysIndia as the highest information generator in the corpus. It is interesting to note that 4 stand-up comedians feature in this list. @knowkenny, @kaneezsurka, @stupidusmaximus and @KananGill or the second, third, fourth, and fifth highest information generators respectively together account for information generation than the organiser of the #LahuKaLagaan.

```
##      @SheSaysIndia       @knowkenny      @kaneezsurka @stupidusmaximus
##               2370              890              662             566
##      @VishalDadlani       @KananGill   @aditiraohydari         @CMOKerala
##                500              368              360             354
##      @anshulakapoor    @TrishaBShetty
##                328              314
```

fig. 3 the top ten information generators or the accounts that were retweeted the most.

retweet_count	tweet_text
366	RT @kaneezsurka: Hey @arunjaitley please remove taxes from sanitary napkins. Thanks for having our backs. #LahuKaLagaan @SheSaysIndia
308	RT @stupidusmaximus: Hi @arunjaitley. 80% of women who don't use sanitary pads do so because of cost. Please abolish the tax on pads. #LahuKaLagaan
281	RT @knowkenny: 80% of women don't use sanitary napkins due to high cost! Please @arunjaitley remove the tax on sanitary napkins.@SheSaysIndia #LahuKaLagaan
264	RT @SheSaysIndia: Time to do away with the tax on Sanitary Napkins. Mr @arunjaitley, Sanitary Napkins must be affordable & accessible. #LahuKaLagaan
229	RT @knowkenny: 27% of the WORLDS cervical cancer deaths occur in India. Please @arunjaitley remove tax on sanitary napkins. @SheSaysIndia #LahuKaLagaan
222	RT @aditiraohydari: Morning @arunjaitley ðŸ™‹ðŸ» sanitary napkins are a necessity not a luxury &more women should be able to afford them minus #LahuKaLagaan
208	RT @CMOKerala: Menstrual hygiene is every womenâ€™s right. 12% #GST on sanitary napkins amounts to an injustice. Tax-free status necessary. #LahuKaLagaan
207	RT @KananGill: Friends, sanitary napkins should be free under GST, plz tweet to @arunjaitley and make ur voice heard #LahuKaLagaan @SheSaysIndia #LahuKaLagaan
141	RT @VishalDadlani: Dear @arunjaitley ji. Please abolish the tax on sanitary napkins, for the health of India's female population! #LahuKaLagaan
128	RT @SheSaysIndia: Expenses incurred by a woman on sanitary napkins. They are taxed up to 14.5% depending on states! No to #LahuKaLagaan! @SheSaysIndia
116	RT @ShenazTreasury: Dear @arunjaitley Sanitary Napkins are not luxury, they are necessity. @arunjaitley @SheSaysIndia #LahuKaLagaan
116	RT @SheSaysIndia: Our collective voice for no more #LahuKaLagaan has been heard. Tax exemption for menstrual products under GST has been proposed! Thank you!
92	RT @SheSaysIndia: Legal representations have been sent to govt officials on behalf of women at large. These are few of our demands #LahuKaLagaan
92	RT @anshulakapoor: .@arunjaitley pls make sanitary napkins tax-free under GST - they should be classified as an essential item & not a luxury! #LahuKaLagaan
89	RT @ExLolaKutty: Dear @arunjaitley, Our lives are taxing enough without having to be taxed for sanitary napkins. #LahuKaLagaan @SheSaysIndia
84	RT @SheSaysIndia: Condoms are rightfully tax-free. Why are sanitary napkins still taxed? #LahuKaLagaan
83	RT @SheSaysIndia: India has adopted the #GlobalGoals & we're holding our govt. representatives accountable for sanitation + health. @arunjaitley
76	RT @VishalDadlani: #LahuKaLagaan Dear @arunjaitley ji, please abolish the tax on sanitary napkins, for the sake of the health of India's female population.
70	RT @NPRGoatsandSoda: Indian men & women are calling for an end to a 12-15% tax on sanitary pads in a viral campaign called #LahuKaLagaan
65	RT @PriyaSometimes: Hi @arunjaitley why are beedis tax free but there is #LahuKalagaan on sanitary pads?Jigar maa badi aag hai,literally speaking @SheSaysIndia

fig. 4 top 20 most retweeted tweets

Figure 4. shows a list of the twenty most retweeted tweets. While it could be worthwhile to analyse the content of each tweet to discern its 'virality', this exercise will be undertaken in a later chapter whereby I will conduct a thematic analysis of the top 300 most retweeted tweets and outline their overarching themes in order to provide clarity on the discourse within them.

It is no surprise that the top ten information generators are also the users with the most amount of retweets to their credit. Most of these users are celebrities and have a large following on the social media platform. The viral behaviour of their tweets could therefore be a testimony to their popularity with the masses.

It is also interesting to note that nearly half of the top 20 most retweeted tweets had media attached to them. Including media (photos, videos, GIFs etc.) in a tweet increases its' visibility by the internal Twitter algorithm. With the wave of image and media-first platforms gaining popularity, text-first platforms like Twitter also seem to be tailoring their algorithms and

recommendation systems to ensure tweets with visual content are more visible. The feedback loop of users consuming visual content combined with the recommendation system pushing up tweets with visual content together makes it so that these tweets rack up more views.

The tweet with the highest number of retweets belonged to @kaneezsurka, a stand-up comedian. "Hey @arunjaitley please remove taxes from sanitary napkins. Thanks for having our backs. #LahuKaLagaan @SheSaysIndia." In this tweet, she addresses the then Finance Minister of India, Mr Arun Jaitley requesting him to remove taxes from sanitary napkins and tags the NGO that started this hashtag campaign and uses the hashtag. The tweet is also accompanied by a video where she says the following.

> I'm in a bad mood today, not because I have my period but because the government of India taxes sanitary napkins. It's unfair because periods are biological, it's not a choice us women are making, it happens naturally and there's nothing we can do to stop it.
>
> Also, putting taxes on sanitary napkins makes it even more unaffordable for a lot of women out there and they have to resort to other unhygienic methods of dealing with their period. So Arun Jaitley if you're watching this video, please can you make sanitary napkins a tax-free commodity in this country.

Another similar post by @ShehnazTreasury included a video that comically likened a sanitary napkin to a luxury. This was among many videos and images that were repeatedly shared by users and activists. Video content among these posts highlighted the injustices of period poverty. They showed how women in rural India are forced to use unhygienic alternatives like cloth, wood shavings etc. due to a lack of access to affordable menstrual hygiene products.
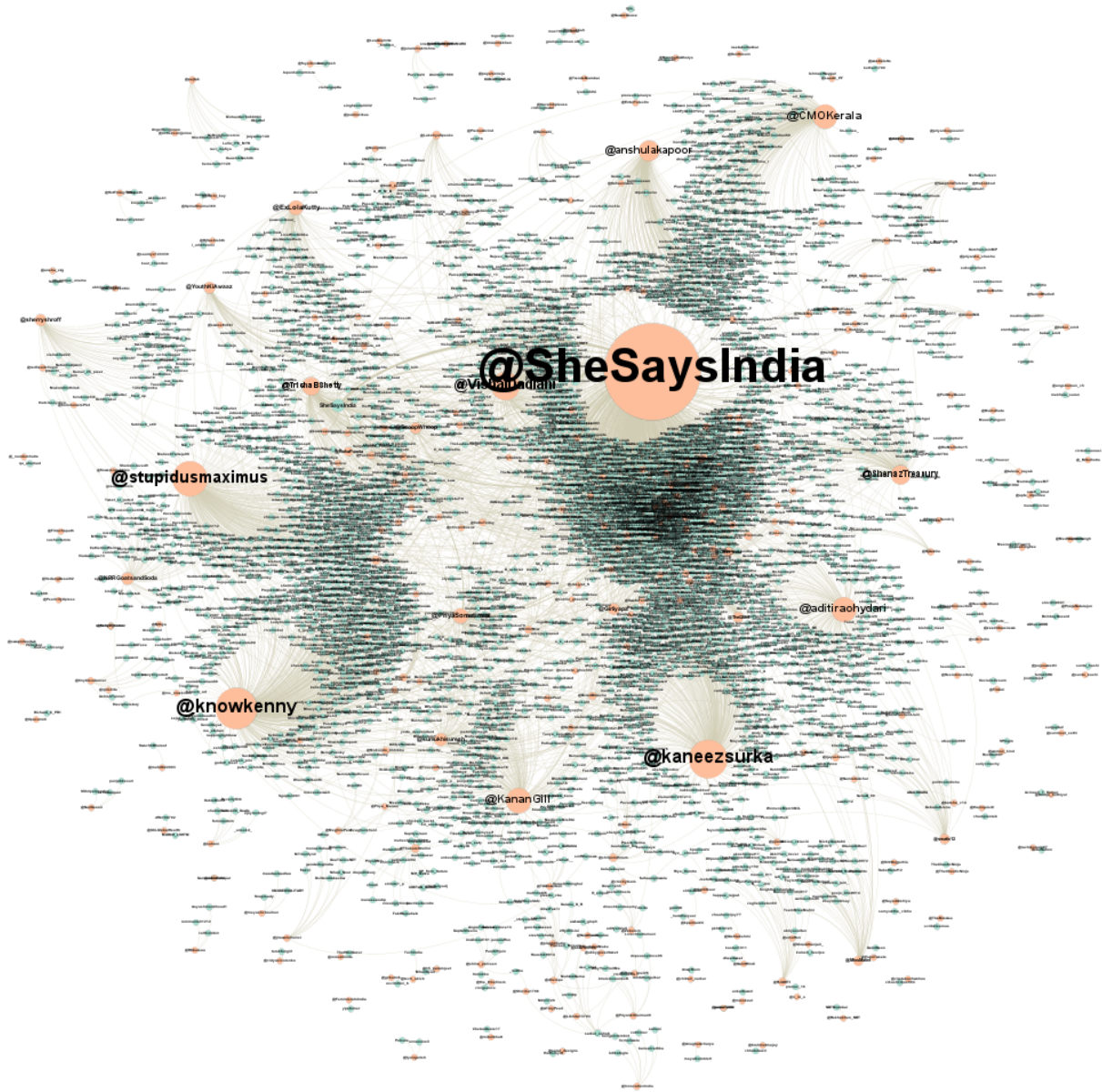
fig. 5 - Gephi visualisation of retweeting network

Therefore, an analysis of the tweets including #LahuKaLagaan after the first 100 days of its launch shows us that while She Says India was definitely a major driver and generator of conversation and awareness, a number of users outside of the development sphere engaged in sharing their thoughts through tweets and media. Information generators were thus looked at as opinion leaders and it was found that a number of them were comedians. Castells argues that 'recent social movements are often leaderless as activists engage in coordination and interaction without formal decision-making processes, challenging the mainstream media's storytelling which tends to portray the faces of collective action.' (Castells 2012) The content creation and popularity of the media shared by stand up comedians and celebrities can be viewed through this lens.

While narrative and connections between users are important, it is important to point out the power of Twitter (as a platform) in providing the technology and space to facilitate this process. While other social media platforms have adopted the convention of the hashtag, the connectivity and user interface of Twitter in displaying hashtagged content continue to lead the way.
Thus, it can be said that while support and interest are driven by users and the power of the narrative form, they need the backing of strong technology and the support of the algorithm that shares the content they create.

Chapter 6. Slactivism aids activism

In roughly the first 100 days since the launch of the #LahuKaLagaan campaign, there were close to 14,228 tweets shared which included the hashtag. Since the hashtag itself shows clear criticism of the GST levied on menstrual hygiene products, the majority of the most retweeted tweets are unequivocally critical of the tax.[11] Having already analysed activists' engagement behaviour and the context of the movement, this thesis has put forward reasons for the success of the movement based on the mechanisms of narrative agency and connective action. This section will classify the broad themes in the content of the top 300 most retweeted tweets and identify what patterns emerged in their discourse. A Google Sheet was created that contains the division of themes with examples of tweets underneath.[12]

A number of studies have used thematic analysis to get a holistic sense of the discourse of tweets in hashtag movements. (Xiong, Cho and Boatwright 2019; Ural 2021) Drawing on thematic analysis, this chapter identifies four patterns. The themes identified here are not necessarily mutually exclusive as there are instances where one bleeds into the other. The four themes identified included: Solidarity via an online petition, providing facts and addressing taboos, campaign coverage and extending conversation beyond period poverty. The tweets that did not fit in any of these themes were categorised as miscellaneous.

6.1. Solidarity via an online petition

The main objective of this hashtag campaign was to convince the Indian government to revoke the GST levied on sanitary napkins and other menstrual hygiene products. As seen in examples 1 and 2 She Says India urged its followers to reach out to the authorities and retweet their messages.

> Example 1 : RT if you think #LahuKaLagaan should be abolished & sanitary napkins should
> be tax-free. Menstruation isn't a choice
> Example 2: Let's come together and urge @arunjaitley to remove the #LahuKaLagaan on
> sanitary napkins. Thank you for spreading the word! @BuzzFeedIndia-- SheSays India

---

[11] However there are some exceptions of misinformation and disagreement.

[12] These can be accessed via the link added to the end in the appendix or by clicking here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/10MfMoaLPZnDJCenYHW9RixZ_NOv0EAqnk3cAOAHP0ds/edit?usp=sharing

Therefore, the biggest proportion of retweets in this corpus comprised content that mirrored individual petition signatures.The content of tweets in this theme communicate a call to those in positions of power (mainly the Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley) to remove this tax. Each individual retweet or share operates like an entry to the online petition with a person's user name could be verified as a signature. One could argue that sharing retweets is a slacktivist approach to activism, but signing a petition does not necessarily deter activists from participating in future petitions. (Lee and Hsieh 2013, 818) A study conducted in 2013 found 'no evidence that performing one form of slacktivism (i.e., signing online petitions) will undermine a subsequent civic activity (i.e., donating to a charity).' (ibid, 818) On the contrary it was observed that slactivism had the potential to increase likelihood of participation in subsequent collective action. (ibid, 818) This can be observed in the second theme of the content analysed.

Holding those in authority accountable for the

6.2. Facts, figures and lived realities

The second theme in the corpus of roughly 300 tweets was characterised by the sharing of facts, figures and data associated with this issue. Statistics are commonly used in activist media to bring attention to a call to action. When it comes to social issues, statistics have been observed as being the third most frequently used device by activists online. (Zoch et al. 2008, 354) The reliance on statistics to share important data concerning period poverty in India is visible in the examples of tweets on this theme (which can be viewed from the linked file in the appendix). With a combined total of 589 retweets, the second and third highest retweeted tweets contain the stark statistic that highlights '80% of women who don't use sanitary pads do so because of cost.' (Goyal 2016, 18) Sharing ground facts and figures are not tools of mere shock and awe, they reflect the lived realities and experiences of millions of young girls and women around the country. For example, one user shares that women are forced to "use rags, sand, ash & wood shavings" due to the lack of funds to buy modern hygiene products.

> @arunjaitley How can you tax 88% of Indian women for using napkins when they rather use rags, sand, ash & wood shavings - @UpmaSharma369

6.3. Beyond the tax

Beyond GST on certain items, the conversation around this hashtag gave a platform to raise awareness about a range of gender issues. This theme saw conversation centre around women's reproductive health, de-stigmatising the topic of menstruation and calling out instances of patriarchal conditioning in society. Some tweets even pointed out the sexism of the government by comparing condoms: made tax-free and sanitary napkins: labelled as a luxury.

> Condoms are rightfully tax-free. Why are Sanitary Napkins still taxed? @arunjaitley
> #LahukaLagaan - @OoWomaniya

Another comparison saw three other users question why accessories and traditional make-up items were considered more essential than sanitary napkins.

> Instead, we get tax-free sindoor and bangles because that seems to be higher on the
> list of priorities for the GST Council. #LahuKaLagaan - @SheSaysIndia
>
> 12% GST on sanitary napkins 0% GST on bangles Wah Jaitley wah #LahukaLagaan -
> @PriyaSometimes
>
> If Kumkum, Bindi, Alta and Sindur are tax free then why not sanitary napkins?
> Shringaar ka Adhikaar lekin #LahuKaLagaan - @PriyaSometimes:

A number of tweets touched upon the sexism in society. By sharing their opinions and thoughts, they attempted to de-stigmatise the conversation around menstruation.

> RT @ManjitGill: Let's talk #periods #religion vs #Culture expose those #myths #stigma
> #SmashShame #mhm2017 #LahuKaLagaan
> #hindu #sikh #muslim
> Nothing about us without us.Nt having enough female representation leads to budgets tht arnt
> gender sensitive& SNs being taxed #LahuKaLagaan
> RT @binti_period: @VishalDadlani we perpetuate the secrecy of #menstruation from a young age by
> using blue liquid instead of red. #LahukaLagaan
> RT @AmiFromIndia: #SanitaryPads : Essential for all women, makes all patriarchal men
> uncomfortable is heavily taxed by the Indian government #LahuKaLagaan

It is evident from the above tweets that period poverty is a systemic issue. There are a number of socio-cultural forces at play that disallow women from accessing basic commodities. While the price of these products is key, the tweets in this theme highlight that the work of activism around

this issue may not end even if the tax is abolished. Therefore this theme sees the extension of discourse from simply menstrual health in India to women's rights in general.

6.4. Campaign Coverage

As seen in chapter five, the Twitter account from She Says was the highest generator of information around the hashtag under study. Its content came up in creating awareness, discussing issues beyond period poverty as well as showing solidarity to its supporters. But a major part of its content included marking the milestones and nodes of the campaign. Through retweeting news coverage of the campaign, the account attempts to legitimise its role in the activist movement.

> RT @TOIEntertain: Celebrities support #LahukaLagaan. Join campaign to make #sanitarynapkins tax-free! @aditiraohydari @MallikaDua @KananGil @ShenazTreasury
>
> RT @SheSaysIndia: Our collective voice for no more #LahuKaLagaan has been heard. Tax exemption for menstrual products under GST has been proposed! Thank you!
>
> RT @SheSaysIndia: Legal representations have been sent to govt officials on behalf of women at large. These are few of our demands #LahuKaLagaan

Miscellaneous

As mentioned earlier, some tweets fell under more than one theme while some were particular outliers. As is common with any news event these days, there were some tweets that were not necessarily in opposition to the cause but seemed to spread misinformation.

> RT @anshu_stg: Ppl :@arunjaitley Stop taxing sanitary Pad, Rthr ask PATANJALI to mk 1
> DESI,SAUNDARYA & BABA previlege IMPLIES GST automatically #LahuKaLagaan

The above tweet shows a supporter of an Indian brand Patanjali advertising for the brand with claim that it is local and will not have the GST applied to it. Capturing misinformation within the tweets of a hashtag movement could be an interesting exercise but was not within the scope of this thesis.

The literature on digital activism perceives slacktivism as its main challenge with a lack of engagement and low motivation to contribute to a movement. (George and Leidner, 2019). It is difficult to suggest that simply retweeting may be characterised as participation and engagement in a social movement. Therefore, it was important to interrogate the content of tweets and the kind of content being shared in them. The overall results from the last two chapters show that independent content creators were voicing their concerns in a self-organised manner. They used satire, comedy and entertaining narratives to make their voice heard. This chapter also showed us that there was an extension of the discourse beyond the levy of tax on menstrual products. Users expressed their opposition to sexist and patriarchal trends in society and created awareness around multiple social issues including women's health among others.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand whether or not narrative agency and connective action could be pin-pointed as the reasons for the success of the hashtag campaign #LahuKaLagaan. It provided a comprehensive overview of the actions, content, coverage and events surrounding the movement in the first 100 days after the launch of the hashtag. A comparison between the unsuccessful and successful hashtags revealed the importance of and power of the narrative form. It also highlighted the ability of the Indian masses from various classes to connect to a polylanguaged mode of hashtag activism. It was observed that careful selection in the phrase and language of hashtags has the ability to hark back to a history of subjugation by those in positions of power. The unified themes in the expressions from different retweets from the retweeting network suggest that independent activists were successful in bringing about connective action through the employment of hashtags and creating humorous content. This movement is a testimony to the power of Twitter as a platform for activism and newsworthy content. From the study of the viral content (tweets, videos) it was observed that after a point it was the entertainment industry and not the NGO that was driving traction to the hashtag.

It is interesting to note that people (men, women and young students) and not just those affected came forward in support of this movement. A common thread between the analysis of chapter four, five and six was the resonance of Indian media. Be it the lasting resonance of the film *Lagaan* or the videos created by Indian female stand-up comic, Twitter users in India responded positively to transmedia associations and adaptations highlighting the influential role of the media industry in India.

Critics may continue to criticise hashtag activism as slactivism. However, this study is a testament to the notion that hashtag activism allows for people to connect, amplify and expand the conversation on issues and in the case of hashtag #LahuKaLagaan illicit political and legal changes as well.

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Appendix

List of figures

Glossary

Sindur - traditional red-dye for make-up

Bindi - ornamental forehead accessory

LahuKaLagaan - tax on blood

Miscellaneous

Link to tweet corpus - https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/
10MfMoaLPZnDJCenYHW9RixZ_NOv0EAqnk3cAOAHP0ds/edit?usp=sharing