

Doing Hashtags: Identifying Hashtags' Role in the Rhetorical Tool Kit

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This dissertation analyzes four genres of hashtags—socio-political, seasonal, daily-use, and non-trending—and identifies the rhetorical tools present in each tag, especially those tools separate from linking or connection. Guided by the question “what do hashtags do?” this project explores the rhetorical agency hashtags have rather than focusing on what people do with hashtags. Starting with socio-political hashtags, the project explores how #MeToo functions to create community through its style and its timing. Though the tag functions to create community, it also functions to create exclusion. Next, the project explores seasonal hashtags and their relationship to *chrónos*, or time as an element of movement, and its relationship to ritual. Also related to *chrónos*, daily hashtags are explored as related to memory. Finally, non-trending hashtags, though difficult to find, are identified as an important rhetorical tool that offers parody, context-creation, and style-marking as three key rhetorical functions. Taken together, these four genres of hashtags offer an expanded vision of the hashtag as a rhetorical tool, nuancing how digital rhetoricians study and understand hashtags as communicative features of social media.

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Preface

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1.0 Introduction: Doing Hashtags

The year 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic forced the world to get creative with how they connect with other people. As offices and classrooms moved online and restaurants, bars, and other meeting places shut down, social media played a major role in how people communicated. Whether it was learning a new TikTok dance or posting quarantine sourdough bread attempts to Instagram and Twitter, people found ways to connect despite being separated. One of the ways people encouraged connection was through a variety of hashtags like #Quarantine, #AloneTogether, and #StayHomeStaySafe, which offered signs of solidarity that everyone was in this crisis together. These hashtags offer obvious benefits because of their connective potential, *but* connection shouldn't be seen as the only value a hashtag has. Rather, hashtags do many tasks and are important communicative tools, especially as social media take up an increasing amount of our communication avenues. At their most basic level, hashtags are social media tools used to connect people posting about the same subject. To create a hashtag, a user simply places the # symbol at the forefront of a word or phrase with all spaces removed. Many people choose to capitalize the first letter of each new word in a hashtag to increase readability, though it is not necessary as hashtags are not case-sensitive, meaning that #pumpkinspicelatte and #PumpkinSpiceLatte will still link together; one is just more legible. A hashtag can be added to any tweet or post on a variety of media including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as a method of tagging the post and indexing it with other content using the same tag.

Hashtags are easily created by users for personal pleasure, but more often than not are part of a larger trend or “viral” campaign. Just as there are a variety of reasons to use social media,

there are a variety of reasons to use a hashtag. Four major categories of hashtags include socio-political hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, seasonal hashtags like #PumpkinSpice and #ShamrockShake, daily hashtags like #Blessed and #Transformation Tuesday, and one-off hashtags or hashtags that are non-trending or unique to a user—these tags are generally created for the user’s own pleasure rather than to be part of a particular movement. Acknowledging the variety of hashtags available for users to read, create, and circulate is critical for social media literacy—both in terms of how to read social media and how to use social media. Socially and politically, hashtags have the power to bring visibility to a variety of issues. Further, as politicians become savvier with social media and utilize it for a variety of purposes from campaigning to hosting town hall meetings, hashtags play an integral part in political strategy. In 2016 and 2020, campaign slogans from both the Left and the Right like #ImWithHer, #BuildBackBetter, and #MakeAmericaGreatAgain peppered tweets, Facebook posts, and Tumblr pages demonstrating support for a political candidate or condemning campaigns of political opponents. While these tags were primarily used to support either Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, or Donald Trump respectively, hashtags can be used by anyone with Twitter access, regardless of political affiliation, including in ways counter to the initial intended use of a tag. Additionally, hashtags that respond to other hashtags, such as the #AllLivesMatter response to #BlackLivesMatter, can be used to downplay the issues, like racism, raised by specific campaigns. Choosing to use or not to use a hashtag can be read as a political or social stance, impacting how the text accompanying a hashtag is received by viewers.

Beyond being politically and socially significant, hashtags have a practical purpose in their ability to catalogue and categorize tweets and posts. Twitter users can click on a hashtag and see all public tweets that also use the hashtag. This allows people to see a broader conversation beyond

their own Twitter feed and make connections with other people regarding a variety of subjects. Further, these tweets can be accessed through Twitter's archive long after they were originally tweeted through the platform's search feature, allowing people to return to conversations or engage with conversations they may have missed. Maintaining tweet archives via hashtags allows Twitter users to assist in the curation of cultural conversation at an individual level. Hashtags insert users into a cultural conversation and illuminate voices that may go unheard otherwise, cultivating connections that may not have been previously possible.

Much of the existing scholarship focuses primarily on how hashtags are used as a method of activism, particularly feminist activism, but there is less work about how hashtags circulate and are participated with by virtue of their design and their rhetorical purpose. What is it about hashtags that encourage circulation and participation in ways that other methods of tagging do not? *What do hashtags do?* Similar to how WJT Mitchell argues that pictures *want* something, this project seeks to examine how hashtags differ from each other not only in content but in participation and circulation through examination of hashtags as rhetorical agents. Hashtags serve a variety of rhetorical functions beyond linking, indexing, and archiving. Specifically, hashtags offer different senses of time, both *kairos* and *chrónos*, depending on what type of tag is being used. Likewise, tags that do not trend offer ways to look at two critical rhetorical canons—style and memory. If we solely focus on hashtag's linking functions without paying attention to their other values, we unnecessarily limit a hashtag's rhetorical functions. Timing impacts circulation, not just because of increased visibility, but because hashtags structure when an author uses a specific tag. Hashtags are not passive; rather they act in rhetorical manners specific to each tag.

This project seeks to theorize hashtags' role as a rhetorical tool with special attention paid to circulation through the timing functions of hashtags. By asking "what do hashtags do?" rather

than “what do people do with hashtags,” the hashtag gains new meaning and expands its value as a rhetorical tool. The following chapters focus on four different categories of hashtags—socio-political, seasonal, daily, and non-trending—and examine how particular hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, #PumpkinSpiceLatte, and #TransformationTuesday are circulated. Looking at socio-political hashtags illustrates how hashtags respond to critical communicative moments—such as the publicity surrounding Harvey Weinstein’s sexual harassment accusations or the killing of Black people by police in 2020. Such hashtags often disappear once their communicative moment has seemed to pass. In contrast, exploring seasonal and daily hashtags illustrates how social media can and has adopted its own regular, on-going schedules, which play a role in the circulation and visibility of certain hashtags. Far from a chaotic, free-for-all of random tweets, certain hashtags follow their own scheduled logic. I devote a separate chapter to hashtags that do not trend in an effort to unpack the rhetoricity behind hashtags that do not offer the same obvious rhetorical functions of linking, archiving, or scheduling. Examining hashtags that do not trend and, therefore, create an index of *one* making them difficult to recall via standard search features, provides an important understanding of the ontology of hashtags as well as the rhetorical significance behind a hashtag’s ability—or inability—to circulate.

1.1 Literature

1.1.1 Hashtags

Scholarly treatments of hashtags largely focus on specific tags and how effective those tags are. The question of effectiveness is an important one, particularly in response to naysayers who do not believe in the potential of hashtags to affect change. In 2014 and 2015 *Feminist Media Studies* published two special issues regarding hashtags and their use, particularly as tools for social movements. Mark Orbe (2015) and Catherine L. Langford and Montene Speight (2015) focus specifically on the race-based social media movements #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. Miranda Ganzer (2014) and Kirsti K. Cole (2015) focus on “trolling” or the use of hashtags or other responses for the sake of gaining a reaction or bringing negative attention to a post. Samantha C. Thrift (2014), Carrie Rentschler (2015), Ryan Bowles Eagle (2015), and Eleanor Tiplady Higgs (2015) all focus on a variety of hashtags such as #SafetyTipsForWomen, #YesAllWomen, and #JusticeForLiz that explore the feminist potential behind hashtags, especially in response to sexism or misogyny. These essays spotlight specific tags and movements as spaces for critical discourse surrounding racism and sexism, in addition to highlighting potential issues like sarcastic or negative responses to posts via trolling. Even though this project is interested in the circulation of hashtags rather than the socio-political ramifications of specific hashtag movements or the effectiveness of hashtags as activism more broadly, these pieces provide insight into how the hashtag tool is utilized on social media.

Mark Orbe focuses on #AllLivesMatter and the perpetuation of post-racial discourse. For Orbe, although #AllLivesMatter is well-intended and espouses the worthy ideology of caring for all regardless of race, gender, or creed, the tag ultimately falls into the same trap as “color-blind”

discourse, erasing important differences in experiences between races (97). Further, Orbe argues that rather than dividing, racialized tags like #BlackLivesMatter serve to build connections and further accomplish goals relating to social justice—specifically when the tag allows for better exploration and interrogation of matters of injustice (98). Similarly, Catherine L. Langford and Montene Speight note that #BlackLivesMatter focuses on “the significances of Black lives” rather than “negative stereotypes of Black individuals” (86). By focusing on the individual rather than the group, #BlackLivesMatter seeks to change discourse surrounding the Black community and the injustices faced in multiple facets of Black lives. These studies indicate the important role hashtags play in challenging dominate discourses and messages regarding issues like race and the injustices faced by people of color in general, but Black folks specifically in the case of #BlackLivesMatter.

In addition to explorations of race-based tags like #BlackLivesMatter, scholars focus on feminist tags that highlight issues woman encounter on a daily basis. Samantha C. Thrift interrogates #YesAllWomen as a memetic event, asserting that those who use the tag make everyday instances of sexism worthy of documentation and discussion (1091). Because of the wide reach and circulation of #YesAllWomen, the tag creates more connections and provides new modes of “feminist critique and collectivity” (1092). In addition to creating new feminist connections, hashtags have the ability to use humor and satire to critique practices antithetical to feminist causes. Carrie Rentschler’s essay regarding #SafetyTipsForLadies focuses on tweets using this tag to call out rape prevention tips that place the blame on the victim rather than the rapist. Users of the tag utilize exaggeration and other forms of visual description to satirize victim-blaming rape prevention tips (354). The use of hashtags to subvert traditional dialogues surrounding real issues, like rape, gives social media users control over how they voice their

frustration with how a topic is handled. Further, these tags, while humorous, reposition the conversation, and the responsibility, onto potential rapists (354). Both #YesAllWomen and #SafetyTipsForLadies call people on social media to take control over conversations that affect their lives. Rather than allowing one narrative to circulate, these hashtags introduce new perspectives into the cultural milieu for further discussion.

Beyond work focusing on successful, socio-politically inclined hashtags, Kirsti Cole and Miranda Ganzer explore when hashtags are used in ways that go against the intent of social justice tags or, in other words, when hashtags are used to “troll.” Ganzer explores a situation in which users of the website 4chan posed as feminists of color and used tags such as #WhitesCantBeRaped and #EndFathersDay in an effort to undermine feminist efforts, but ended up finding feminist support (1098-1099). Even though the tags were ultimately meant to be anti-feminist, some feminists took the hashtags as valid perspectives rather than hyperbole or vitriol and appropriated and circulated them as a representation of their feminist beliefs. Because of this, it can be argued that the trolls were successful in damaging feminist reputations as the tags were rejected once people found out about their anti-feminist origins (1099). A main takeaway is that because of the speed with which hashtags circulate, the power of the hashtags changes dramatically (1099-1100). Because the poster has some semblance of anonymity, it is difficult to discern who is posting tags, affecting what the message is, how it is received, and how it is recirculated by other users. Kirsti Cole also addresses the issues of violent tweets used by trolls and how these tweets reinforce disciplinary rhetoric. While women are using hashtags in ways that assert feminist messages and give voice to marginalized voices, when trolls use humor such as attaching “lol” or “laugh out loud” to a threat of violence, it reinforces that violence against women is something to be made light of rather than taken seriously (357). These instances of textualized violence indicate that

even though women can freely post to Twitter and use tools like hashtags to spread feminist messages, the same platforms permit disciplinary rhetoric to spread just as easily. In both Ganzer and Cole's pieces, it is clear that while hashtags can be used to circulate important messages, systems of violence and silencing tactics can circulate just as easily.

1.1.2 Circulation

As demonstrated above, much of the scholarly literature regarding hashtags focuses on hashtags' effectiveness as activism and whether engaging in such activities count as activism. Often, the success of a hashtag movement is gaged by how widely the tag is circulated and how long the tag circulates. Keeping circulation in mind, I am interested in how hashtags engage time and structure their own use. In order to understand circulation as a digital rhetorical phenomenon, I do not limit the literature on which I draw to how circulation is explored within rhetoric, but put this literature in conversation with circulation literature coming from information studies and media studies scholars.

In recent years, circulation has seen renewed interest from rhetoricians, especially as the ability for information to be disseminated has increased through various forms of digital and networked media. In addition to the work produced by individual scholars on circulation focusing on a variety of texts, not just digital texts, circulation has found itself the subject of special issues of journals such as *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*. A formative piece regarding circulation is Lester Olson's exploration of a pre-revolutionary war image and its multiple re-circulations in the colonies. Olson's work distinguishes between circulation as a broad dissemination of a text and re-circulation as a method of repurposing a text in moments of controversy (3). Further, Olson argues that re-circulation is an "active response to one or another of the earlier versions" (3). If

re-circulation is active, then when hashtags are retweeted or reused, rather than serving as a passive means of participation, tagging becomes active labor on the part of the poster.

Other scholars taking up circulation include Lee and LiPuma (2002), Catherine Chaput (2010), Henry Jenkins et. al (2013), Laurie Gries (2013), Eric Jenkins (2014), and others. This collection of scholarship spans a wide range of applications including rhetorical, media-focused, and technical explorations of circulation. This grouping of literature allows me to explore how circulation has been taken up separately in a variety of fields so that I can explore circulation through multiple lenses. Lee and LiPuma encourage their readers to rethink circulation as a cultural phenomenon and as a way of creating meaning rather than simply transmitting meaning (192). Putting Lee and LiPuma into conversation with Henry Jenkins et al. and their exploration of “spreadable media” illuminates how users of networked media can use social networks and connections to create media that can then be spread through a variety of networks and demonstrating how one might create meaning through circulation. This connection has implications for hashtags and how the action of retweeting or using a hashtag in an original post does or does not create a new message. Even though the hashtag remains the same, the content of the tweet changes as does the context of the tag. And, as Olson argues, by reusing the same tweet, though the tag stays the same, the new context of the hashtag actively changes the meaning, further demonstrating the non-passivity of hashtags.

Regarding the rhetoricity of hashtags, Laurie Gries offers that "according to a new materialist approach, an image's rhetorical meaning is determined by the unpredictable consequences that emerge in its various occasions of use"(338). Because a hashtag's circulation cannot be controlled, the rhetorical message is dependent on how the tag is taken up. Despite the authorial intentions of the original poster, a hashtag has multiple authors and its meaning changes

each time a new author appropriates the tag. Though it is possible that many authors have the same or similar intentions, not everyone who uses a hashtag will necessarily have the same goals, affecting the message and meaning behind each campaign and further supporting that the same tweet creates new meaning each time it is re-circulated. Much like Olson's argument that each replication of an image creates new meaning, Gries articulates the capacity for change embedded within each tag's circulatory history.

Chaput questions the "situatedness" of rhetoric and suggests that "affective energies maintaining contemporary life do not adhere to the boundedness of rhetorical situations; rather they move across gaps from situation to situation, acting as "the invisible glue that holds the whole world together"" (19). Affective energy and its effect on the rhetoricity of a message as it "moves across gaps" (Chaput 19) can be extended to explorations of hashtags, particularly those hashtags that are part of larger socio-political movement. Movements such as #MeToo inevitably indicate some sort of affective association, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election—one of the most contentious presidential elections in recent memory. For Chaput, tying affect into studies of rhetoric allows for more audiences and connections to be accounted for rhetorically than if scholars remain beholden to Bitzer's rhetorical situation (19). Again, hashtags have a variety of audiences and each has a different experience of the tag ranging from support to indifference to disapproval. Keeping these multiple audiences in mind while exploring the rhetorical circulation of hashtags provides many perspectives through which to determine and analyze the message sent.

Eric Jenkins similarly takes up affect in his study of the rhetorical circulation of memes on the internet. Rather than focusing on text and context, Jenkins engages with the affect created through a shared encounter of a meme (442). To fully engage with the message capacity of a meme, it is critical to understand how others are experiencing the meme together. Similarly, when

thinking about hashtags meant to group people together as supporters or opponents of movements, products, or consumer products, exploring the affectivity of a tag provides information about the message, nuancing the rhetorical significance beyond what a text/context analysis of circulation might provide.

1.1.3 Archiving and Indexing

As information circulates via Twitter and various hashtags, it is simultaneously preserved in Twitter's server, searchable by the original poster and other users of the platform. Searching for a hashtag through Twitter's search engine provides researchers with a list of all publicly posted tags containing the tag in question. Though the interface is not particularly user friendly—one must scroll through what could amount to hundreds of thousands, if not more, tweets without a convenient way to bookmark tweets of interest—it is possible to access and explore a wide range of tweets and gain a sense of the dialogue created through the use of particular hashtags. Further, because the interface does not permit easy searching, tags with longevity like #TransformationTuesday and #PumpkinSpice can evolve over time to imply different meanings because it is not easy to put all of the tags in conversation with each other over the full span of a tag's existence. In other words, the further a tag is from its inception, the greater the potential for shifts in meaning and intention. Keeping this in mind, it is critical to understand how hashtags perform an indexical and archival function through their creation and circulation. Scholars such as Jonathan Foster et al. (2013), Ronald Day (2014), Sahana Udupa (2016), and Patricia Kay Galloway (2017) in fields such as information studies and communication explore how archiving and indexing function in digital and networked spaces.

Archiving has long been left to expert archivists who often have degrees in library sciences, information studies, or another closely related field but the accessibility of social media platforms and other digital media are shifting this expectation. For Jonathan Foster, because of the expanse of digital technology and the opportunity for information collection, archiving is no longer only for experts—lay people with access to the internet through a range of devices have a hand in creating and curating what moments are remembered and stored through social media and digital platforms (774). That non-experts have a hand in writing history changes how moments in time are remembered—rather than having solely the winner’s perspective of history, it is now possible to account for a multitude of voices. Hashtags are a useful tool to aid in the process of history creation because they can be customized for each cultural event and, even more specific than that, each perspective one may take on an issue. Rather than confining all tweets regarding the recent presidential elections to #PresidentialElection2016 or #PresidentialElection2020, twitter users took sides using #ImWithHer, #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, or #FeelTheBern, #StillFeelingTheBern, and #BidenHarris among others. Because of the specificity of these tags, it is possible to refine searches for tweets based on what campaign and whose supporters one would like to reference. Further, because every twitter user can use whatever hashtag they would like, within specific tags it is possible to access multiple perspectives. Just because someone uses #MakeAmericaGreatAgain does not mean they support Trump’s campaign.

Sahana Udupa echoes Foster in his assertion that digital archiving is no longer left to the experts. According to Udupa, online archiving is the "assembling of facts, figures, and treatises as an ideological exercise by the net-savvy ‘nonexperts’"(213). Udupa takes the point a bit further, asserting that archiving is not *just* about memory and remembering, but rather is more usefully explored as an inherently political gesture (213). Not only do archives provide some way of

remembering past events, but they also provide insight into the dominant political ideology of the time—that which is deemed most important or reflective of popular opinion is preserved while other perspectives are lost. As Ron Day asserts, “technical algorithms dialectically work with sociocultural horizons to form historically specific, dynamic indexes of normative social and cultural spaces” (72). Digital or online archiving allows for all political, social, and cultural perspectives to be retained. Hashtags and the decision regarding which hashtags to use in a post is political as it gives longevity to fleeting moments—if a tag does not “go viral” or spread widely, that moment stands to be forgotten. That said, though hashtags may be ephemeral to an extent because the kairotic moment of use passes, the tag may still use *chrónos* or time as a characteristic of movement to its benefit. Where the difficulty lies is how to recall non-trending tags created to commemorate a moment in time. Though the tag is technically preserved, it is not easily accessible, again demonstrating the importance of dominant cultural/political/social status.

In addition to considering how indexes and archives form perceptions of history and the self through the content preserved, it is fruitful to consider and preserve the medium through which the content was created. Patricia Kay Galloway asserts the importance of exploring “how and why the digital environment is constructed and how its constraints may shape the affordances of the digital objects created within it” (7). In other words, because technology evolves, to have a well-rounded understanding of digital artifacts, researchers must give due diligence to the component parts of a digital platform at the time of content creation. A Twitter post recalled from the first months of operation will not have hashtags because the function was not introduced until April 2007, nearly one year after Twitter’s launch. Understanding what a platform’s infrastructure was at the time of content preservation allows for researchers to ask questions regarding reception and circulation. Without the hashtagging function, Twitter would be a different space in terms of

creating a socio-political or advertising campaign. Further, because upgrading and restructuring of platforms is rarely, if never, optional for users (P. Galloway 12), finding ways to document the digital environment—infrastructure, algorithms, application program interface (API)—prevents loss of context for content, allowing richer analysis and recall of previously posted material.

Certainly, more can be said regarding indexing and archiving scholarship, but the scholars cited above provide two major points of preservation—history and digital environments—through which an exploration of hashtags can grow. Taking these authors together in combination with other scholars regarding circulation provides a way in which to consider how archival and indexical structures impact circulation and vice versa.

1.1.4 Kairos and Chrónos

Circulation, when it comes to hashtag campaigns, is often thought about in terms of tweeting the right tag at the right time so it becomes viral. Thinking of timing as an opportune moment offers an opportunity to look at hashtag use through the lens of *kairos*. James Kinneavy defines *kairos* as “the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something” (80). Thomas Rickert argues *kairos* is inextricably connected to the environmental context in which a moment occurs (77). Between these two definitions, we can gather that *kairos* must occur at the right time and part of assessing what is right or opportune is through consideration of environmental contexts. For hashtag use, this could be considering what cultural factors will influence how a message is viewed. It could also mean carefully choosing what words are used and when a hashtag is tweeted. Carolyn Miller and Manuel Castells also emphasize the importance of context when responding to a situation. For these scholars, *kairos* tends to function as a flash pot—a kairotic response is one that capitalizes on the specifics of a moment before the

moment has passed. #MeToo works so well because it was used at the right time, by the right person, at the right point following the Harvey Weinstein case. J.E Smith offers the concept of *kairic* time, which is when something happens at the appropriate moment, but could not happen at just any time and may not recur (4). #MeToo happens to recur, but in the moments after the initial flood of #MeToo, there was no guarantee that it would stick around as a popular tag, demonstrating its *kairic* nature.

When visibility is the greatest goal, virality is important. However, not all uses of a hashtag, even a well-known hashtag, “go viral;” some benefit from a different sense of time. Smith separates *kairos*, or qualitative time, from *chrónos*, or quantitative time. *Chrónos* “is an attribute of motion or change” (Aristotle 219b1-2 paraphrased in Harry 1). Smith also defines *chrónos* as “a grid upon which events can be plotted for the purpose of historical writing and interpretation” (3). Daily and seasonal hashtags like #TBT and #PumpkinSpice offer opportunity to explore this conceptualization of time and interrogate how time becomes a key characteristic of hashtags as rhetorical tools, especially when a hashtag does not go viral. Even though #TBT trends each Thursday and some tweets using the tag might go viral, the vast majority of #ThrowBackThursday instances never see extensive visibility in that moment. Yet, inherent in the hashtag is a component of time that encourages the cycling and reuse of a tag. The style of hashtag determines what sense of time is called upon. A tag like #MeToo or other socio-political tags benefit from being created at the right moment to create a digital presence for a larger social justice issue. Tags like #PumpkinSpiceLatte or #TransformationTuesday and other tags that are seasonal- or daily-use tags offer a scheduled or cycled perspective of time. Rather than treating them separately, John R. Gallagher argues for a marrying of *kairos* and *chrónos*, introducing ‘machine time,’ which accounts for the “measure and duration of the time as well as the quality of time” (525). So even

as tags like #TBT or #PumpkinSpice seem to display *chrónos* and #MeToo displays *kairos*, machine time would suggest that both examples benefit from considering when the tags are used and how well they are used. That said, *chrónos* especially has been dismissed as a rhetorical tool as argued by scholars like Debra Hawhee who offers that *kairos* is about force making it rhetoric's timing (66); but *chrónos* has rhetorical offerings as well, especially as we consider the usefulness of hashtags as tools. Being predictable by virtue of being quantifiable offers insight into what messages might come along in the future, which, arguably is useful for *kairotic* purposes as it offers insight into what factors may influence a future audience.

1.2 Method and Chapter Overview

1.2.1 Collection and Analysis Methods

My primary method of hashtag sampling consisted of tags retrieved using TAGs, a Google hashtag mining spreadsheet application that pulls tweets from the previous seven days. Using TAGs, I randomly sampled tweets culled using specific hashtags like #MeToo, #TransformationTuesday and variants like #TFT, and #PumpkinSpice. For my chapter on non-trending hashtags, I used search terms like #A and #I in order to pull up tweets. When I found a tag that looked like it might be non-trending, I used Twitter's advanced search feature to see if a search for the tag resulted in any hits other than the one pulled into TAGs. I also set an autosave feature, which pulls tweets using specific hashtags every hour and archives them in a spreadsheet for as many days or months as necessary. I let my sheets run everyday for several months to ensure I had a wide variety of tweets to analyze.

In addition to TAGs, I also used Google Trends to trace moments of increased and decreased use of hashtags to gain a sense of the consistency with which different styles of tags are operationalized. Paying attention to patterning of use and how usage differs between socio-political tags, everyday use tags, and seasonal tags provided me a more specific sense of how timing factors into each tags' utility. This played a critical role in separating out what kind of time, *Kairos* or *Chrónos*, is favored by each style of tag. Google Trends also offered a way to connect increased use of hashtags with national and global events. For instance, #MeToo went viral initially in October 2017 but recently saw increased usage in July 2021 in the aftermath of Bill Cosby being released from jail when his conviction for sexual assault was overturned. Especially for socio-political tags, tracing these kinds of patterns allows for a deeper understanding of tag longevity even if seasons of use are unpredictable.

Once the data was collected, I used a close reading method to analyze the rhetorical utility of the tweet. Rather than focusing on quantifiable numbers through distant reading, this project focused on the qualitative aspects of the hashtags. Quantitative data can tell us important information about how often a tag is being used but does not allow much room for analysis of how hashtags are functional and rhetorical beyond tracing connections made through usage. Hashtag use is personal to the individual and benefits from being analyzed with that level of closeness in order to establish what hashtags as communicative tools do on their own as rhetorical agents.

1.2.2 Chapter Overview

Chapter two focuses on socio-political hashtags, specifically #MeToo. In 2017, the *New York Times* circulated an article exposing Harvey Weinstein as a serial sexual predator. In the wake of this article, Alyssa Milano encouraged women to share their experiences with sexual

assault using the hashtag #MeToo. I explore how the tag's short and concise design as well as the fact that it is specific encouraged participation. I also explore how the affectiveness of the tag impacted its ability to circulate when other tags, like #YesAllWomen, failed to maintain momentum. While it was a hugely successful campaign and was labeled a "movement" and a "moment," #MeToo was also criticized because it placed undue burden on survivors to share their stories and often ignored minority experiences with sexual assault, especially BIPOC and Trans survivors. Using tweets excavated through TAGs and popular press coverage of #MeToo, I examine how the hashtag created expanded room for circulation through affective ties offered to survivors while also offering a critique of the tag as exclusionary, despite seemingly offering space for all stories.

Chapter three offers an exploration of seasonal tags and how they function rhetorically through predictability of use. Here, I focus on #PumpkinSpiceLatte and other adjacent tags like #PSL and #PumpkinSpice using *chrónos* to demonstrate the importance of predictability and scheduling to maintaining cultural conversations. #PumpkinSpiceLatte circulates each fall from August through December based on the release of Starbucks' popular autumn drink, the Pumpkin Spice Latte. When the drink is released in August, there is often a debate over how early is too early to release the beverage and transition from summer to fall. There is an additional debate on whether the drink is even good. Despite this conversation recurring each year, the tag continues to circulate each fall, demonstrating the strength of a seasonally circulating tag. Even though seasonal tag use is dependent on the time of year, the ebb and flow of the calendar allows hashtags to maintain their novelty by restricting use to a certain period. As the tag reappears each season, the context surrounding the hashtag changes, which then changes how the hashtag is used. These hashtags, unlike tags that either circulate based on an inciting social or political event or tags that

are cycled through weekly, use their dormant state to regain interest, renewing and reinvigorating interest as the season returns.

Chapter four focuses on daily hashtags. Hashtags can be used for personal reasons beyond political or corporate messages to express pleasure, nostalgia, desire, or any other myriad of emotions. #TransformationTuesday, #ThrowBackThursday, #WomanCrushWednesday, #ManCrushMonday, #FlashBackFriday, #SundayFunday, and others are used to illuminate some aspect of the tweeter's life, be it a personal transformation, a memory from their past, or their infatuation or attraction to someone, be it a loved one, friend or celebrity. Daily hashtags contextualize the content of the tweet and direct an audience on how to read the message. By offering #TBT, the reader now knows to consider the tweet as a memory rather than something that has recently occurred or is presently occurring. Regardless of content, daily tags all indicate when a tag should be used. The hashtag does the scheduling for the social media user. There is a ritual suggested within the design of the hashtag instructing people to post specific content on specific days. Memories shared or announcements made on a schedule dictated by hashtags create a different message and a different context for a tweet, which changes further as the message circulates with a hashtag. Not only is the use of these tags rhetorically significant, but the way in which people curate their content through a prescribed schedule provides insight into how hashtags structure the lived experiences of users outside of traditional archiving and scheduling devices like calendars, diaries, and planners. Because of the frequency of potential use, daily tags maintain an up-tempo recirculation pattern that colors them with a sense of banality. Even though they are predictable, they risk being *too predictable*.

Chapter four explores what a hashtag can offer beyond circulatory ability. Non-trending hashtags, or hashtags that are not meant to circulate virally, if at all, pose unique challenges to

rhetorical circulation and the indexical nature of hashtags. Hashtags used for the sake of using a hashtag without contributing to an on-going hashtag movement or moment provide an opportunity to investigate how a hashtag functions and question what a hashtag does. Here, the archiving function of the hashtag can be interrogated through the non-participation of the one-off hashtag. Though a “jamming” or intentional misuse of a hashtag may be intended to exist outside of the realm of typical social media use, hashtags, regardless of length or capitalization and as long as the words are not punctuated or spaced out, will be archived for the rest of Twitter to find, even if it is difficult to do so. Using TAGs, I searched for hashtags using broad search parameters like “#A” in order to find tags that did not have many or any other uses. I also take an example from my own use of hashtags in order to explore the utility of the hashtag as a context-creator. Rather than serving as an archival tool, non-trending hashtags take on a punctuational and stylistic quality, referencing what tweets tend to look like, yet simultaneously changing the hashtag function.

Table 1 Four genres of hashtags, their relationship to rhetorical time, and their primary rhetorical functions.

Style of Hashtag	Time-Orientation	Rhetorical Functions
Socio-Political	<i>Kairos</i>	Connection, Community-Building, Virality
Seasonal	<i>Chrónos</i>	Ritual
Daily Use	<i>Chrónos</i>	Memory
Non-Trending	Dependent/Vague	Parody, Context, Style

Table 1 displays my argument in its most basic form. The four genres of hashtags I interrogate in this project all have a relationship with rhetorical time and function rhetorically in different ways. Though the tags are all formulated in the same way, each tag offers a different action to the reader primarily based on its relationship with time. Non-trending hashtags do not

always have a clear favoring of either *kairos* or *chrónos*, but both can be beneficial to understanding non-trending tags. A non-trending tag ostensibly suggests that *kairos* was not achieved as the tag did not trend, hinting that the timing of the tag was not opportune. However, if the goal of the tag was parody, context, or style, then our understanding of *kairos* needs to change to evaluate the other ways in which the tag's timing was opportune. Further, this dissertation offers context, parody, and style as primary rhetorical functions of non-trending tags, but that isn't to say that there aren't other functions of a non-trending tag. Rather, these functions stand out as three of the most obvious. With these categories of hashtags in mind, I theorize the value of hashtags as communicative tools and rhetorical agents. Hashtags offer myriad ways to engage with social media and function beyond their most obvious uses. By recognizing the complexity of hashtags, digital rhetoricians have the opportunity to consider how what hashtags do impacts the messages that authors send. As social media continues to encourage constant contact, consideration of how hashtags regulate time provides space to explore how hashtags can change the prevailing sense of social media time zones.

2.0 The #MeToo Movement: *Kairos* and Capturing a Moment of Feeling

On October 15, 2017, in the wake of the *New York Times* article exposing Harvey Weinstein as a serial sexual assaulter, Alyssa Milano tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a response to this tweet.” Milano responded to her own tweet with “me too” and noted that her friend suggested that if everyone who has experienced sexual harassment used “me too,” there could be a better sense of the magnitude of the problem of sexual harassment. From here, the hashtag #MeToo went viral and came to define a cultural moment in which testimony and witnessing brought the proliferation of sexual assault into clearer view. #MeToo became synonymous with a social movement and a clear example of what I am calling a socio-political hashtag. Other examples of sociopolitical hashtags include #BlackLivesMatter, #YesAllWomen, #LoveWins, #GivingTuesday, and #IceBucketChallenge. These tags address a variety of social issues including LGBTQIA+ rights, racial justice, sexual assault, and medical research needs, among others. The above tags specifically are featured in a piece by Tanya Sichynsky for the *Washington Post* as examples of the hashtags that “changed the way we talk about social issues.” The tags provided a means through which awareness and news could spread. Tags like #IceBucketChallenge and #GivingTuesday encourage users to donate money for medical or charitable reasons respectively. These two tags asked for users to take action and provide monetary support for a cause, while other tags like #BlackLivesMatter, #YesAllWomen, and #LoveWins encourage people, especially politicians, to support policy that strengthens the U.S.’s commitment to human rights while also encouraging conversations amongst users to interrogate their own role in making the U.S. a more just place. Though these tags were popular in their moment of initial use, many of them, excepting #BlackLivesMatter, have faded from public use in

subsequent years and months. Though these hashtags went viral initially, according to Google Trends, their circulation tends to come in spikes followed by severe drop offs in interest, demonstrating their seasonality of circulation; it is only in response to cultural events that these tags are revived and recirculated. Milano's tweet cast #MeToo into public consciousness and circulated more successfully than other movements advocating for awareness of sexual assault. This chapter focuses on hashtags used to raise awareness for social and political issues, primarily interrogating #MeToo and its overwhelming success provoking conversation regarding sexual assault where other similar hashtags like #YesAllWomen failed to maintain significant circulatory visibility on social media. Hashtag design impacts hashtag function. Well-functioning hashtags create a space where connections can be made between people, but also function to maintain visibility without relying on users consistently using the tag. Though #MeToo may not be tweeted with the same velocity as it was in the immediate aftermath of the *New York Times* Harvey Weinstein article, it maintains its use as a way to categorize and organize stories regarding sexual assault. Known as the Me Too moment or Me Too movement depending on one's source, what was once a hashtag now serves as a means through which news stations and publications can mark their headlines as relating to news of sexual assault, violence, misconduct, or harassment.

In the wake of Weinstein's accusations and indictments on charges of rape and sexual assault, many people have engaged with the #MeToo campaign. Personal posts, retweets, favorites, likes, and news media headlines helped the tag spread across social media platforms and create dialogue regarding the prevalence of sexual violence. Although Milano is credited with the first tweet using the tag, Tarana Burke created the Me Too organization in 2006 as a resource for women and girls of color who found themselves survivors of sexual assault ("Vision"). Though Burke's organization existed first, it has benefitted from Milano's use of the phrase as a response

to the public discussion of Weinstein's misdeeds ("Vision"). Through increased visibility from the hashtag campaign, Me Too has increased its reach from a local campaign and grassroots effort to a national and global campaign, allowing for richer, more widespread examination of attitudes toward sexual assault ("Vision"). Immediately following the Harvey Weinstein piece through the fall of 2018, many major names in various career fields were held accountable for their past actions. Though Hollywood names tended to be the most recognizable and visible offenders with people like Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K., and Aziz Ansari being accused of various kinds of sexual misconduct, other areas, such as the culinary, political, and academic fields, had their own moments of reckoning with their own complicity in cultures of sexual harassment.

#MeToo and "Me Too" had its largest spike since its peak in October 2017 (Google Trends), in light of the Kavanaugh Senate hearing regarding Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's accusation of attempted rape against Brett Kavanaugh. While the hearing and the conversation surrounding Kavanaugh's fitness to be confirmed to the Supreme Court prompted new hashtags like #WhyIDidntReport and #BelieveSurvivors, #MeToo remained a popular, more prominent choice for use in tweets before, during, and in the aftermath of the hearing. On October 4, 2018, as Republican swing votes for Kavanaugh's confirmation, Jeff Flake of Arizona and Susan Collins of Maine, indicated they were both satisfied with the investigation and would be willing to confirm Kavanaugh, Twitter users expressed their dissatisfaction. Twitter user @jacob4kids noted "With a combined 23 sexual assault allegations made against @realDonaldTrump and Brett Kavanaugh not to mention the GOP supporting the pedophile Roy Moore I think it's fair to say the Republican party does not care about rape victims or women at all. #MeToo." Though the hearing and the subsequent FBI investigation into Dr. Ford's allegations and testimony against Kavanaugh came nearly a year to the date after the *NYT*'s piece about the Weinstein allegations, the willingness of

the Republican senators to confirm Kavanaugh demonstrates how, despite moments of victory for #MeToo, many people in positions of power are rejecting or ignoring the #MeToo movement. Regardless of this setback, many are still devoted to the #MeToo Cause. Alyssa Milano in an interview with MSNBC stated that “I’m saying that women, young people, have had it difficult for generations and generations and generations, and we will not be silenced any longer...We are considered less than, and we cannot stand for it anymore.” Here, Milano reinforces the power of #MeToo and its goal. Even though the Kavanaugh hearings and Trump’s general flippancy regarding sexual assault are discouraging, Milano emphasizes the importance of maintaining a #MeToo mindset, suggesting that the movement’s strength will continue to grow. In the same interview Milano uses the phrase “the #MeToo Generation” suggesting that #MeToo, more than a social media movement, is now structuring and defining a generation of people. Those growing up in the #MeToo generation are creating a new standard of behavior for people of all genders and will be defined by how those in power react to instances of sexual assault. Milano’s continued support of the tag a year after her initial tweet demonstrates the ability of #MeToo to maintain its power as a circulatory tool for a social movement.

Despite #MeToo’s use as a virtual organization tool for social media publications, #MeToo and its various forms “stick” (Ahmed) in a way that previous hashtag movements have not. Using #MeToo and its variants, this chapter explores questions of rhetorical circulation of social movements on Twitter and how decorum or appropriateness impacts circulation and is influenced by the design and function of a hashtag. Hashtags as digital tools help archive and link thoughts together into a larger dialogue. How do both linked and non-linked hashtags influence how each message circulates? In a sea of hashtags, many of which advocate for similar causes, what is it

about #MeToo that has enabled its greater visibility? How does the structure of the hashtag, both cosmetically and infrastructurally, influence its ability to maintain its circulatory momentum?

In this chapter, I interrogate how timing and hashtag design impact how people participate with #MeToo and how affective communities are created through this tag. I explore the #MeToo Moment via close textual analysis of selected tweets using the #MeToo tag, collected through Twitter's advanced search feature. While I will retain the original text of each tweet, I remove the handles, or user names, of tweets authored by private citizens to show solidarity and respect to those impacted by sexual violence. Because these tweets were collected through publicly available search features, removing the user name is a best practice for qualitative digital research when there is no anticipated risk to the author of the text (Townsend and Wallace). News media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, and *Rolling Stone* offer a way to trace how '#MeToo' moved from the specific constraints of a Twitter post into a larger conversation via mainstream media coverage. In the case of #MeToo, the borders of Twitter are porous and provide opportunity for a far-reaching cultural moment. Through these texts, I will examine how affective publics are created, maintained, and, importantly, restricted, within the #MeToo Moment through the tool of the hashtag. As much as #MeToo generated conversation and community, it is worthwhile to engage in a close examination of how #MeToo inadvertently discourages connection. Failing to consider how #MeToo creates certain kinds of barriers as it brings down others, misses an opportunity to critically explore what kinds of communities benefit from larger-scale social media-based social activism. I begin by providing a cultural contextualization of #MeToo. Next, I consider hashtags and feminist digital activism in light of theories about affect, publicness, intimacy, and attention through the lens of timing. Afterward, I conduct close textual analyses of tweets and news articles utilizing #MeToo to explore how each evokes a sense of

community, especially as it calls on the individual to comment on personal experiences, and then I address how #MeToo prevents survivors from identifying with #MeToo. #MeToo's efficacy to extend beyond a simple hashtag campaign speaks to its power as a community-through-shared-individual-experiences creator. Though #MeToo is far from a perfect unifier, the tag marks a time in which conversation moved fluidly between social media and larger contexts, demonstrating the power of a well-crafted response to external cultural stimuli. Making a hashtag campaign stick is not a simple matter of timing, but also a matter of creating a symbol that is remarkable in its ability to grab the attention of the individual. #MeToo's timing, design—both platform-specific and grammatical—and its ability to attract the attention of the individual are key components of the movement's success and limitations.

2.1 A Cultural Contextualization of #MeToo

#MeToo peaked in interest in October 2017. Although #MeToo declined in popularity after the height of the Weinstein story, it still circulates enough to regularly register on Google Trends, a website that measures and records news topics as they appear in internet searches. Importantly, and as I explain above, the concept of using the phrase “me too” as a rhetorical tool for survivors did not start with Milano's tweet using the tag, but with Tarana Burke's Me Too¹ campaign. Founded in 2006, the Me Too Movement was created to “help survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing” (“Vision”). Burke, a Black activist and current Senior Director of Girls for Gender Equity

¹ “Me Too” refers to Burke's specific organization. #MeToo refers to Milano's tweet and the ensuing discourse.

in Brooklyn, wanted to create a space in which people who had experienced sexual assault could unite and share their stories (Biography.com). Because survivors are unlikely to seek out resources for education and healing, Burke's Me Too Movement focused on taking resources to survivors.

According to the Me Too Movement's Vision statement, the movement benefited from the popularity of #MeToo, in that "in less than six months, because of the viral #metoo hashtag, a vital conversation about sexual violence has been thrust into the national dialogue." Despite the success of the hashtag at bringing attention to Burke's organization, Burke noted that it is critical that people remember the sentiments of #MeToo are not limited to a hashtag; Me Too is a movement, not a moment ("Meet Tarana Burke"). Further, Burke posited that the reason people did not know who she was or about her organization was because people only care about sexual assault survivors when something major happens and permeates public consciousness through the news. Burke reiterates that the problem is that people only care when an issue is emblazoned across media platforms and seems to directly impact their own life in a spectacular way. Burke's Me Too Movement did not evolve out of national crisis—specifically, one impacting white, wealthy survivors—so public consciousness did not recognize the organization. The lack of acknowledgement of Burke's organization prior to Milano's tweet indicates the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics of who matters in the #MeToo moment.

Issues of timing, attention, and appropriateness are central to the rise and fall of #MeToo. Burke did not use "Me Too" as a hashtag; still the phrase was meant to unify persons who experienced sexual violence, much like #MeToo functioned. The wide-spread crediting of #MeToo to Milano, rather than Burke, suggests that #MeToo and its sentiment are attention-worthy because of Milano's status as a white actress reacting in the wake of a story revealing the experiences of other actresses. Because of the cultural event surrounding Milano's initial tweet, it

is important to explore how the appropriateness of a *response* and the appropriateness of a *respondent* impacts community-building. Because Me Too and #MeToo sought to unify a group through their experiences outside of mainstream discourse, it is useful to consider the ways #MeToo creates affective publics, or spaces that merge “emotion, drama, opinion, and news in a manner [separate] from the conventional deliberative logic and [align] with the softer structure of affective worlds” (Papacharissi 117). In thinking about the creation and formation of affective publics through #MeToo some questions to consider include: What makes a moment like the Weinstein revelations more prone to attention than other instances where the same response would be appropriate and, indeed, necessary? Additionally, how does #MeToo work to maintain visibility in news and social media? Other campaigns like #YesAllWomen target those with similar experiences, however, #MeToo is more visible and receives more attention. The differences in usage by each campaign’s intended audience demand consideration of the cultural moment in which #MeToo was employed and how visibility is impacted by society’s expectation of *who* and *when* someone should be taken seriously as a conversation-starter.

When used strategically, hashtags capitalize on cultural moments and serve as categorization tools to organize a person’s thoughts as they share them. Tags like #MeToo, crafted on Twitter—a platform specifically intended for short, easily digestible content—create and maintain a conversation regarding issues important to society at a specific moment within their culture. #MeToo’s ability to capture the attention of a generalized audience for long enough to gain movement status on a platform built for fleeting thoughts demonstrates the extraordinary efficacy of the #MeToo tag. The connections created through these tags are contingent on the appropriateness and structure of a given hashtag. Cultural events shape responses to hashtag campaigns and the structure of the tag, indicating that the subject and audience of a tag impact

how and who engages with a cultural moment. Despite other campaigns' attempts to bring awareness to sexual violence, none of those movements received the same kind of attention from social media users and the larger public. Abby Ohlheiser of the *Washington Post* posited that #MeToo succeeded more than other campaigns like #YesAllWomen, #SurvivorPrivilege, and #WhatWereYouWearing because celebrities did not come out as *just* advocates of the movement, but as survivors. Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* suggested that one of the major differences between the Weinstein accusations and accusations against other powerful men like Bill Clinton, Donald Trump, Clarence Thomas, and Bill O'Reilly, is that the survivors speaking out against Weinstein were more famous than the accused, making it difficult for non-believers to accuse these survivors of seeking fame or money from the publicity of the allegations. Because celebrity survivors were not seeking financial gain or fame, would-be skeptics might have been more willing to accept the stories of survivors as appropriate. It is not just that celebrities supported #MeToo, it's that they made themselves visible as survivors, empowering other survivors who occupy less visible socio-political statuses to make their experiences known as part of a larger conversation.

2.2 Feminist Digital Media Activism and Hashtags

As the internet continues to develop as a space for people to connect with one another across distance, the conversation about its use as a space for feminist resistance has been, and remains, robust. Hashtags have proven to be sites for feminist interrogations of activism. In one edited volume on girls and digital media Helena Louise Dare-Edwards explored how “fangirls” use emotion on Tumblr. Dare-Edwards argued that rather than eschewing emotion for fear of being stereotyped as irrational, fangirls within Tumblr communities reappropriate the stereotype

for their own purposes, building connections and community (119-120). Dare-Edwards also suggested that language can connect a person to an online identity and “mimic, through language, and embodied...performance” (123). Dare-Edwards emphasized that words are used to facilitate a sense of community in spaces where the body is absent. It is useful to consider #MeToo in this frame. It is not just that #MeToo indicates that a post details experiences of sexual assault. #MeToo also indicates the presence of individuals’ body where one might be absent in other similar hashtags. Because #MeToo is self-reflexive—gesturing grammatically towards the poster—there is more clearly a vulnerable physical body referenced by the hashtag. Relatedly, Jessalyn Keller explored the hashtag #CropTopDay and its implementation to challenge sexist dress code policies in Toronto, Canada. Keller noted that #CropTopDay functioned as a “mimetic device,” (167) with people beyond the original high school using it to show solidarity with students by linking it to personal experiences and historical acts of feminist activism, including the 1970 Miss World competition in London (169).

These scholars along with Rentschler, and Ganzer and Cole as referenced in the introduction demonstrate how hashtags have been used for the specific purpose of feminist activism and illuminate how #MeToo functions as a community-building, yet divisive hashtag. Especially keeping in mind Ganzer and Cole’s observations that hashtags can be reappropriated to circulate messages counter to the original goal of the hashtag, #MeToo benefits from increased scrutiny regarding its potential for exclusion of non-white, non-cis, disabled bodies. Additionally, Rentschler’s critique of how #SafetyTipsForLadies places the burden of addressing sexual assault on victims rather than addressing the perpetrators of sexual assault, #MeToo walks a fine line between being a supportive group for survivors and one that places undue pressure on survivors to do the emotional labor of sharing their stories. Moving forward, the connective, community-

building properties of hashtags need to be reconciled with how those communities function in counter-productive, potentially exclusive manners.

2.3 Affective Publics, Participation, Attention, and Decorum

#MeToo and its utilization creates a web of discourse, organizing those who participate and circulating the stories of survivors. It is critical to examine how #MeToo and the #MeToo Moment add to political participation, particularly how the tag employs emotions. Hashtags create connection and, through this connection, #MeToo creates an affective public. For Papacharissi, the emotional connection and the downplaying of rational deliberation found in hashtags provides users with a unique experience to connect in ways not typical for most sources of civic engagement. To further demonstrate this point, Papacharissi argues that “as affect mini-worlds, [hashtags] invite a publicness that is politically sensitized yet generally dismissive of normatively defined political consciousness” (116). Hashtags and people who use hashtags may be attuned to what is considered politically appropriate, but find normative expressions of politics lacking in the necessary teeth to promote change. By seeing all aspects of the human experience, especially affective components, as a way to participate in civic engagement, hashtags have the ability to reach larger audiences who may feel more inclined to engage when they feel directly summoned by a discussion. Nathan Rambukkana suggests that hashtags are a “technic² (which is to say, both a technique and technology) of the social, and in their performativity are events that map together and encompass not just the tag itself but the network of human and nonhuman actors that come

² See Lewis Mumford’s *Technics and Civilization* for another exploration of technics.

together” (5). A hashtag is dependent on multiple factors including “tags, technologies, taggers, conversations, and press coverage” (5). Using #MeToo as an example, it is easy to see the impact these factors have on the tag, its circulation, and its ability to create connections. Despite the excess of information available across internet platforms, “hashtags are singular moments that coalesce into something new: threads of meaning that work to weave new abstractions into the world” (Rambukkana 32). Hashtags create connection *and* they create new ways of creating meaning for and of society, building new foundations from which public deliberation can flow. If *techne* refers to not just technology, but also art or skill, then a *technic* can be used to help fine tune a skill. Hashtags, as *technics*, need to be used, not just commonly, but skillfully, artfully. Affective uses of a hashtag improve the artfulness of the tool. Learning how to engage a tag with the emotions of another in a way that encourages participation rather than discouraging engagement provides a stronger tool than a hashtag created without consideration for how it may be received.

By engaging in communication and deliberation that privileges emotional rather than rational connection, those who have experienced marginalization can shape and reform their understanding of their identity separately from the public sphere’s hegemonic interpretation. However, this is not always the result. Joshua Meyrowitz notes that “electronic media merge formerly distinct public spheres, blur the dividing line between public and private behaviors...resulting [in a] diffusion of group identities...and a flattening of hierarchies” (8). If hierarchies are seemingly eliminated through electronic media and group identities begin to shift, then who constitutes a public and community is more expansive and invitational. As such, Papacharissi suggests that spaces like Twitter and tools like hashtags create spaces where “emotion and feeling define modalities of belonging that are articulated as strangers connect and attach to

each other” (117). Because most users of #MeToo are strangers to one another, it is the emotional commonalities that bond them together to create a space where deeper connections can be made. These affective ties are important ways to spread information, to bring attention to an issue, and to encourage participation with topics not frequently or adequately explored in conventional news sources or spaces of public deliberation. #MeToo and the #MeToo Moment provide a space in which people can express their encounter with sexual assault in a way that *communicates much* while *saying little*. People can articulate their stories in detail, but it is not necessary to do so when utilizing the tag; one may simply tweet “#MeToo” to become an active participant in the space the hashtag creates. Thus, #MeToo creates a space for those who feel apprehensive about sharing intimate details about their experiences with sexual violence to connect to those who can relate to their experiences. A #MeToo posted on Twitter instantly adds one’s voice to the conversation regarding sexual violence, while adding a layer of protection through anonymity.

Regarding affective publics, participation and attention are critical components to consider when exploring the relative success of various hashtags. If people did not feel compelled and comfortable using or otherwise engaging with #MeToo, then it is unlikely that the movement would have been as successful as it was in the months following the Weinstein article. Damien Pfister and Richard Lanham provide useful ways to think about how attention encourages participation and how participation is dependent on the perceived cultural appropriateness of messages. Damien Pfister’s concepts of “flooding the zone” and “ambient intimacy” describe how people can bring attention to subjects that are ignored in mainstream media. “Flooding the zone” encourages individuals to fill blogs and message boards with stories ignored by mainstream media. Flooding the zone is a useful concept for considering how hashtags circulate and reinforce ideologies. Many hashtags, like #MeToo, attempt to increase visibility as a method of change-

making. #MeToo, and Milano's tweet specifically, is an explicit call to flood the zone, and the call was met with resounding support from survivors across social media platforms looking for ways to make the frequency of sexual violence visible in a moment of societal need. #MeToo inspired survivors to come forth and share their own #MeToo tweets, stories, and moments, flooding newsfeeds and timelines of social media users across the country. Through this act of flooding the zone, survivors were empowered to share their stories. This forced the news media to maintain focus on the Weinstein story, paving the way for more abusers to be exposed. While there may be some altruistic reasons to shine a spotlight on social media campaigns, it is also true that mainstream media needs viewers. Because of the attention paid on social media to campaigns like #MeToo, it behooves the 24-hour news cycle to focus their attention there as well. Just like an individual vying for the attention of the masses on social media, news networks and journalists need the attention of the populous in order to maintain or gain ratings. Howard Rosenberg and Charles S. Feldman offer that "the timing seems right at present for citizen journalists, given that newscasters largely underperform and traditional newspapers continue to slash jobs—creating gaps in coverage—amid declining circulation and advertising" (91). If Twitter is viewed as citizen journalism, then the larger media and press can use it as a story-mining platform to better encourage viewer/readership. This allow allows Twitter users to push stories into the attention of mainstream media outlets.

Affective publics like #MeToo rely on feeling together as a method of unification. "Ambient intimacy," is the creation of a community through commonalities among emotional experiences (Pfister 128). Ambient Intimacy permits #MeToo's audience, which is comprised of those who see the tag, those who seek out the tag, and those who use the tag, to embrace each other's stories and cultivate a sense of closeness through shared emotional experiences of sexual

violence. Because of the emotional ties created through ambient intimacy, people are more likely to connect with content that might otherwise have been unapproachable or illegible because of differing experiences. Ambient intimacy can speak to specific moments in someone's life in a way that connects people from disparate backgrounds through common *feelings* rather than common *occurrences*. Even if someone has not experienced the exact same situation as another, by identifying with feelings, that person can project themselves into the shoes of another through that feeling. That said, someone might feel isolated if their own emotional reaction to a situation is different than how others claim to feel. This may make them question their own experience and to ask whether or not they experienced their own situation correctly. For instance, if someone says that they felt angry or sad, but perhaps not fearful of their #MeToo situation, someone who did feel fearful may worry that they were overreacting, despite both feelings being valid reactions to a situation in which someone was vulnerable. It is important to keep this potential for *disconnection* in mind while considering how hashtags build connections, especially regarding personal narratives. Stefan Iverson identified some functions personal narratives play on social media, including identification, or when people identify with another vicariously through the details of their own experiences. While people may identify with a person through exposure to details of their experience, the storyteller may restructure and form their story based on the social expectations of storytelling. Adjusting one's story to fit societal expectations can help people relate to a story but can hide realities of one's experience in favor of fitting one's story into a cultural understanding of what is well-timed or well-narrated. For instance, survivors whose #MeToo experience happened years ago may not be compelled to share their experience because they feel their time in which to share their story has passed. Yet, because of #MeToo and the outpouring of commiseration, survivors from all stages of life found a path to closure or healing

in sharing their frustrations, anger, sadness, and other emotions through the #MeToo tag. In an article for the *New York Times* in December 2017, Jessica Bennett writes about “the nine,” or nine women who came together from different walks of life to bond over their own #MeToo experiences, primarily to expose the playwright, Israel Horovitz for sexual misconduct. These women have formed a friendship through their hardships and this bond has helped them gain some closure through their solidarity.

Whereas Pfister explores how participation begets attention, Lanham suggests that in an information society where information is abundant and attention scarce, design is key in creating and maintaining attention. Because information is overwhelmingly available, it is difficult to make information visible or useful. Hashtags address the problem of disorganization by providing a way for people to search for the information that they need regarding a hashtag campaign. Twitter’s advanced search feature provides a method for researchers to input what person, group, or hashtag and what date range on which they want to focus. Despite this ability, because of the extraordinary volume of data on twitter, it is easy to overlook certain kinds of information. If a tag is not designed at the right moment, then it can be lost to the sea of information circulating at the same time. It is not enough for a tag to be clever; it also must take advantage of the rhetorical situation. Taking advantage of the rhetorical situation means understanding space and time and working through what information will call to another based on early readings of an emerging situation. Lanham noted that the internet “combines the power of a free market, where individual gain leads to collective benefit, with the cooperative ownership of the cultural conversation” (13). In the wake of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol building, former president Trump’s Twitter account was banned for publishing misinformation and other messages that encouraged rather than discouraged the behavior of the rioters. Twitter decided that Trump’s account was not

an appropriate display of cultural feelings toward the attack and needed to be removed from the larger conversation regarding issues like domestic terrorism, patriotism, and treason among other issues raised by the riots. Tags used at the peak of a cultural event contribute to the cultural understanding of the moment and create an affective public through the general sentiment communicated through the tag. Part of #MeToo's effectiveness includes the framing of celebrities as survivor-participants rather than allied-participants. In a rhetorical moment in which people are prone to looking to celebrities for their opinions on social justice issues, calling on celebrities to share their survivor status amplifies the magnitude of the problem. Celebrities are just like us, after all. Though there are technical elements to a hashtag's design, the designer of the hashtag for the #MeToo Moment is inextricably linked. Milano did not create the concept of #MeToo and the original connection to sexual assault, but it was her design choice of rendering the phrase as a hashtag rather than leaving the phrase as *unlinkable words* that brought attention and encouraged participation with #MeToo as a rhetorical moment.

Timing matters when considering how one responds to new information. If new information is not given at the right moment, then a message can be ignored or actively rejected. Hashtags, especially socio-politically motivated tags like #MeToo, and their effectiveness to create change, are influenced by how an audience perceives the appropriateness of the tag. Decorum has been theorized as "stable social code" (Hariman 152), though Christopher Duerringer argues that decorum goes beyond a social code and functions as an ideology. As such, decorum "structure[s] utterance, distribute[s] individuals into stratified subject positions, and police[s] a range of acceptable topoi and modalities of speech" (Duerringer 83). Decorum works together with opportune timing or *Kairos*, which provides a means through which to interrogate the creation of affective publics through hashtags. According to Carolyn Miller, *kairos* refers to the relationship

between a situation, the discourse surrounding the situation, and the impact discourse has on molding the situation (83). Manuel Castells also notes that, because of the instantaneous nature of information in a networked society, ordered sequencing through time becomes difficult, suggesting that what is given attention is based on the “context and purpose under which any given cultural construct is solicited” (492). Hashtags circulate rapidly and to make sense of the moment, it is critical to examine the cultural context surrounding the hashtag event. Similarly, Thomas Rickert suggests that *kairos* is inextricably connected to the environmental context in which a moment occurs (77). Both Miller, Castells, and Rickert emphasize the importance of the context in which a rhetorical moment occurs. Further, Rickert suggests that it is only once a moment has past when one can recognize what response was *kairotic* (75). Examining a cultural artifact in retrospect provides a method through which one can better understand what about a response to an exigence encouraged participation and attention. Rather than focusing on appropriateness or opportunity as a cultural conversation initially manifests, looking back in hindsight permits a wholistic approach to examining the material and contextual constructs of a moments. Daniel Faltesek argues that a hashtag public must be examined in the moment, otherwise, despite archived tweets, the “rhetorical force of that moment is lost” (85). However, it can be difficult to determine when a moment ends. While some hashtags fade away as quickly as they start, others maintain a grip on a cultural imagination, despite reduced circulation. #MeToo, despite seeing reduced circulation from its peak in October of 2017, remained in the news as of October 2018, especially in light of Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court. Examining tweets in the aftermath of #MeToo’s initial surge provides insight into why the tag saw renewed circulation at crucial moments for over a year. #MeToo distinguishes itself because of its longevity and its use within news media as a marker of a longer moment. #MeToo does not simply exist as a hashtag public,

but is being utilized to identify a cultural shift incited by the *NYT*'s Weinstein article. If a cultural event is shaped by the conversation surrounding the event, then pieces of the conversation, like hashtags, can contribute to public opinion. #MeToo identifies an outcry for serious examination of the public conversation surrounding sexual violence and, through the visibility created by the hashtag, shapes discourse regarding how best to fix the problems identified through engagement with the tag. What is considered appropriate in a cultural moment is emblematic of dominant ideologies of a society, impacting who is given attention and authority. #MeToo did not gain status as an appropriate or worthy reaction to sexual assault until it was tweeted by a white, wealthy woman of high societal standing in response to a story about other wealthy survivors. Part of the response is timing—the tag came in the aftermath of a hard-hitting exposé—the other part is that Milano was deemed an appropriate or *worthy* advocate for the cause. Even though there were outspoken critics of Milano, especially in light of Milano's defense of Joe Biden in the midst of his sexual assault allegations by Tara Reade in 2020 during his presidential campaign, initially, Milano ticked all of the right boxes to be taken seriously as an advocate. Though Burke was eventually credited with first using "Me Too," it is telling of the U. S.'s ideology that a white person was given credit for the idea of a black woman. The miscrediting of Milano over Burke as the creator of "Me Too" demonstrates how the "appropriate timing" of a social media conversation is often determined by larger cultural attitudes and ideologies.

2.4 The #MeToo Affective Public and the Decorum of a Moment

Given the events of the 2016 election and the allegations of rape and other instances of sexual assault against Trump falling on an unresponsive electorate, the explosion of #MeToo in

the aftermath of Weinstein indicated a cultural breaking point, prompting outrage from survivors throughout the country to demand a serious conversation regarding sexual assault. Though Harvey Weinstein's exposure as serial sexual abuser prompted the first use of #MeToo and the subsequent outrage regarding sexual assault, Trump's presidency provided the initial momentum leading to the strength of the #MeToo moment. Amy Siskind, President and co-founder of The New Agenda, a non-partisan women's group seeking to address the issues of sexism and misogyny, tweeted on July 15 "When interviewers ask me: surely Trump must have done something good so far, I answer yes: he is the wind behind #metoo and the most powerful women's movement in decades!" Ashwini Tambe hypothesized that because Trump faced no ramifications for his sexual misconduct, survivors of sexual abuse were triggered, "provoking the fury at the heart of #MeToo" (198). The outrage and frustration expressed in #MeToo posts provided a space in which survivors from disparate parts of the country bonded through shared experiences. Despite the initial flood of posts expressing #MeToo moments, the use of the tag has decreased, spiking every so often. #MeToo and cognate phrases like "The #MeToo Moment" and the "#MeToo Movement" are still used in a variety of news articles to describe moments when industries come to their own reckoning regarding their implicit or explicit complicity in sexual violence. Despite the fact that the hashtag is less utilized on social media through individual users, the power of the initial influx of tweets in October 2017 has cemented #MeToo as a turning point in mainstream media coverage regarding sexual violence. Where other tags failed, #MeToo tapped into the media's need for an appropriate representative to maintain the attention of their audiences. Other tags formed in response to acts of violence or violation, like #YesAllWomen as a response to the Isla Vista killing, while impression-making in the immediate aftermath of an event, did not maintain visibility in the way #MeToo has, especially as a common phrase used not only by social media users, but news media

as well. Searches for “#MeToo” in popular press turn up articles from a variety of platforms including *Rolling Stone*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *NPR*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker*, *Time*, the *BBC*, and the *National Review*. These articles have a date range from October 2017 to November 2020. The *New York Times* has a series entitled “The #MeToo Moment” and includes articles regarding #MeToo and various topics like how to talk to one’s daughter about #MeToo, how to be a good bystander, what #MeToo means for marginalized communities like black survivors and blue-collar survivors, and what should happen now that #MeToo has arrived. These articles attempt to unpack and make sense of the abundance of information now available because of the stunning visibility of #MeToo. The breadth of coverage on the #MeToo Moment has solidified the #MeToo’s staying power, especially within media coverage regarding anything related to sexual violence. Because #MeToo was first tweeted as a response to the Harvey Weinstein investigations, the public could have used the tag solely to discuss information related to Weinstein. However, because the tag resonated with people outside of Hollywood, it became a useful tool for news media to categorize and report coverage of many stories related to sexual violence. The tag is pithy and easy to read, making it an effective journalistic and social media storytelling tool. As noted in Jennifer Reinwald’s exploration of attention created through the circulation of #ALSIceBucketChallenge, when a tag is easy to read and easy to use it is more likely that the hashtag will circulate broadly (190-191). Brevity is a key component for being a successful participant on Twitter. Until November 2017, Twitter users were limited to 140-character posts and remain limited to 280 characters. This limit meant that tweets either needed to be condensed to fit the limit or spread over two or more posts to convey a longer message. Both methods risk fragmenting thoughts and losing meaning. Hashtags, though they function as a hyperlink within the Twitter platform, have each of their letters counted toward the character limit,

making it critical that hashtags are well-designed to send their message without using too many characters. The limit ensures that brevity is structured into one's tweet creation process. According to Paul Zumthor, "brevity is never random but *constitutes a structuring model*" (74). Hashtags as used on Twitter cannot be random in their design because of the impact a hashtag has on the Tweeter's ability to create a coherent post in limited space. Because other platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, do not limit character use, it is common to see longer hashtags or hashtags spelled out in full. For instance, a common tag, #ThrowBackThursday might be published as such on Facebook but abbreviated as #TBT on Twitter to conserve characters. #MeToo has the benefit of only using six characters in full and does not require additional editing to make it a character-efficient tag to use on Twitter.

Structurally, #MeToo is brief. Culturally, #MeToo feels brief. If one looks just at characters or symbols, #MeToo seems objectively brief, yet brevity is not a quantitative designation. Brevity is "culturally conditioned" and must *feel* brief to a culture rather than *looking* brief (Zumthor 75). #YesAllWomen does not seem to be a long phrase. It is only three words and a total of twelve characters, yet, when there is an imposed character limit of 280 or previously 140, #YesAllWomen is double the characters as #MeToo and feels longer to say and read. Visually, #MeToo is easy to take in at a glance; #YesAllWomen requires more effort to read. Subitizing, or the ability to enumerate objects without counting, is optimal in the one to four object range for humans (Zhang et al. 169). Though #MeToo and #YesAllWomen are both technically one object since hashtags do not use spacing or punctuation to create a hyperlink, within the tags, the capital letters and the hashtag or pound symbol function as separators of words. #MeToo only uses three separators while #YesAllWomen uses four. Though both tags are considered within the optimal range of subitizing, the fewer objects one must account for, the easier it is to take in as a whole

object. Though subitizing traditionally refers to counting, it is useful for thinking about how one reads. #MeToo can be read as one word while other tags make more sense when spoken out or read as individual words. If a reader can take in a tweet in one glance, then it makes a tweet feel brief whereas a tag that needs separation of words to make full sense, despite being only a few characters more than another, feels longer and less legible. Importantly, in terms of grammatical structure, “Me, too” is an *anaphoric elliptical clause*, which means that “part of the clause is presupposed from what has gone before” (Halliday 127). This allows for words to be left out but the meaning of the following response/clause retained. When used in a tweet as a response to another post #MeToo functions as an anaphoric ellipsis. The message to which the author is responding spells out the context in which they are saying “me, too” so they don’t have to say “I have also been sexually assaulted.” Using an elliptical phrase saves space and allows people to craft messages without taking up extra characters. When used on its own, #MeToo still functions as an elliptical clause but now it works as an *exophoric ellipsis* meaning “the clause is not presupposing anything from what has gone before, but simply taking advantage of the rhetorical structure of the situation, specifically the role of the speaker and listener” (Halliday 128). #MeToo on its own functions well because of its viral use as an anaphoric ellipsis. In the aftermath of the Weinstein article, so many stories about sexual assault were punctuated with #MeToo so that now, when used on its own, it is easy to make the association between the tag and sexual assault, especially as readers and authors are conditioned to make that connection based on extensive media coverage of the Me Too moment. Again, because #MeToo can be used effectively as an exophoric clause, the clause is now space efficient as a meaning maker. When space is at a premium, as it often is on Twitter, #MeToo permits the author to devote more characters to their story while leaving space to include a hashtag. Longer tags fighting for justice for sexual assault victims like

#YesAllWomen or #WhyIDidntReport take up more character space and prevent the user from adding more detail to their post. Though extreme detail may not be the goal for all tweets regarding one's own experience with sexual assault, the *option* to include more detail provides the author with more agency in how they share their story. Twitter is a limiting platform regarding storytelling and hashtags can help include implicit detail when the character limit is reached, yet it remains important that the infrastructure can be navigated strategically by the author to design a tweet best suited to the story they wish to tell.

Just as brevity of design is important for attention, the author of a message impacts how the message is received. #MeToo has managed to retain visibility on news media and social media platforms by prioritizing survivors' stories, especially from celebrities. It was not until Milano used the phrase that the public began to associate the expression with survivors of sexual violence, demonstrating that, in addition to being designed appropriately, a response must be made by the right person. Sexual violence is serious and *should* be worth discussing *regardless* of who begins the conversation. Yet, persons who lack celebrity status or are marginalized by systemic factors relating to race, gender, class, and/or sexuality, are often ignored or overlooked, in part due to a lack of followers, but also their credibility can be seen as less than a person who is easily identifiable as a public figure. This disregard sometimes prevents meaningful change to the national conversation regarding survivors of sexual violence. Once a well-known figure like Milano identifies as a survivor, the face of what a survivor looks like changes and what is seen as private or public information shifts. Public and private have long been theorized as separate spaces, but technologies like smart phones, tablets, and social media platforms are blurring the boundaries between the two spheres (Bauer and Murray 62). Through this blurring of spheres, what is *appropriately* public knowledge and what is *appropriately* private knowledge shifts,

expanding space for people to share their emotions. Rather than a survivor being a faceless person shamed into privacy, a celebrity's status enables sexual violence to come into the spotlight, leading the way for other people to use social media to share their experiences and bring visibility to their survivor status. Because celebrities are counting themselves among survivors, those impacted by sexual violence are re-centered as worthy of visibility. Just as art can re-center marginalized stories and bodies (Morrissey 290), hashtags serve a similar function. Without celebrities identified as survivors, then, #MeToo, like other similar tags—#BlackLivesMatter for example had early support from Beyonce and Jay Z—would likely not have had the same power to bring visibility to survivors, indicating the cultural bias toward ignoring that which does not involve those who already hold cultural power. Herein lies a paradox: #MeToo creates connections between survivors, but gained visibility through those already more likely to be centered within cultural discourse. Survivors of sexual assault have long been marginalized through those who doubt the validity of their stories or through insufficient sentencing for those who are convicted of sexual violence. The visibility of #MeToo convenes survivors into a networked public.

2.5 Connection through Coming Out as a Survivor

The shift from private to public positions #MeToo as a “coming out” story for survivors who have experienced sexual violence. The coming-out story genre “describes the speaker’s internal experience of recognizing his (sic) gayness and the external experience of revealing that information to others” (Liang qtd. in DiDomenico 609). #MeToo focuses on sexual assault rather than sexuality, nevertheless those who use #MeToo and publish their stories grapple with their own internal experiences with coming to terms with their abuse and sharing it with others. Because

of the visibility afforded to the #MeToo Moment, those who identify with the tag become part of a home or, “a matrix of social relations, personal meanings and emotional attachments” (Gorman-Murray 32). For instance, on October 30, 2017, one twitter user posted “for the women who could never share what happened to them, and for the women who are brave enough to get justice, #MeToo.” Also, on October 30, 2017 another author wrote, “I will like, retweet, repost, share etc. every single #metoo post I see until every voice is heard. Every story is equally as important.” Both of these tweets indicate the importance of the #MeToo movement for the authors. The first example acts as a message of thanks where the second message demonstrates one’s commitment to engaging with the individuals of the movement through social media engagement. Both tweets imply the importance of visibility and the role in bringing people with similar experiences together. Through emotional stories shared with a #MeToo marker, individuals can find attachment to the community created through social media posts, providing the #MeToo Moment with greater staying power. Where movements like #YesAllWomen can feel overly generalized, #MeToo provides its audience with a specificity of cause since the user of the tag is suggesting that they have experienced sexual assault/violence. Because of #MeToo’s specificity, the response to the larger conversation of sexual assault may register as the right conversation at the moment of the Weinstein article’s release. For some reason, at the moment in which Harvey Weinstein’s actions are exposed, more survivors were compelled to share their own #MeToo stories. Despite being separate from the inner workings of Hollywood, many were able to put themselves into the shoes of those sharing their stories of assault, prompting a moment in which sharing to a larger audience was possible. Generalizations like “all”—as in #YesAllWomen—may cause pause amongst consumers of a message. Using #MeToo avoids generalization by referring to one’s self while also growing the number of voices in the conversation, helping illuminate the widespread nature

of sexual assault. In addition to pointing to one's self, #MeToo authors had the opportunity to share extremely detailed, graphic stories of assault, making each account specific in its own details. Even if sexual assault is, unfortunately, generalizable across experience, it is crucial that participants in the conversation avoid speaking in broad terms.

The #MeToo Moment benefits from the focus on individual stories because it provides a method through which survivors can see that they are not alone, particularly amongst their own groups of friends and acquaintances. According to Andrew Gorman-Murray, home and self-identity are intimately related, each providing space for the other to shift definitions as life circumstances change (32). As survivors grappling with the aftermath of their own experiences with sexual assault realize either that they know people who share similar experiences or that their own experience qualifies as sexual violence, the way in which they think about their identities changes. Where a person may not have recognized an interaction as sexual misconduct, they may now feel empowered to label it as such and begin working through their emotions with the help of others who have been in a similar position. To this end—taking advantage of the anaphoric ellipsis of the #MeToo hashtag—one survivor tweeted “7 y/o me thought it was normal. 12 y/o me almost took my life b/c of it. 20 y/o me is finally healing & will never be silenced again #MeToo.” The author demonstrated how sexual assault does not always register as such, yet the effects can impact a person for years. It is unclear if #MeToo is responsible for starting the healing process for this poster; however, the author implied that #MeToo was part of *their* healing process. Furthermore, a person who felt like they had no one to turn to may now find that they have friends and acquaintances who share their experiences, providing a supportive community through which one can process information, heal, and turn their attention toward solving the problem of sexual violence. For example, on July 14, 2018 a Twitter user tweeted “I am PROUD for speaking up

and posting my experience on social media. I received multiple messages from girls who have gone/are going through the same thing and how I have helped them. STAND UP if you are being mentally abused/sexually harassed by someone higher than you. #MeToo.” The power of seeing other survivors’ stories creates channels through which survivors can unite and begin to process how their sense of self has changed because of their public status as a survivor. Because one’s sense of self is shifted through the “outing” of one’s self as a survivor of sexual violence, home and community formed through affective publics repositions survivors’ stories as appropriate responses as a means to achieve a cultural shift regarding sexual violence.

It is important to note that not all groups, particularly survivors of color, embrace “coming out” as a part of their identity-making. E. Patrick Johnson noted that black, gay men in the south resist officially coming out as homosexual to their family and communities because of the social stigma surrounding homosexuality (109). Because of the stigma faced by gay men of color, there is risk in coming out. Trans folk also face unique pressures to conform to a set standard of what it means to be transgender, potentially discouraging some from participating in the ritual of coming out (Garrison 618). Similarly, those in precarious social positions may choose to disengage or not engage with #MeToo, complicating #MeToo’s ability to create connections across life experiences. Not unexpectedly, people of color and trans folks have not felt the same empowerment to use #MeToo as white, cisgender women. On October 27, 2017 one author noted that “Black women have been saying #MeToo since slavery.” On October 22, 2017 another author posted, “So again #MeToo a decade old by a black woman still no talk of victim support still no actual steps of reconciliation to BW.” On October 28, 2017, an author tweeted a link to an article from Them.us entitled “How #MeToo Stands to Marginalize Trans and Gender-Nonconforming People” with the caption “Keeping it real abt #MeToo & sympathy w. white cis women yet not

the same collective sympathy if you're trans." These tweets demonstrate early issues with the #MeToo movement and how it may have only been functioning as a supportive movement for white, cis-gendered women rather than supporting survivors from all communities. Because of the risk of having their experiences doubted or ignored, #MeToo, despite its intention, maintains barriers to entry based on perceived worthiness of one's story as a proper response to #MeToo.

2.6 #MeToo and Sustained Connection

The media's persistent use of #MeToo to describe news stories related to sexual assault indicates the impact of the tag on how news media engage with the current dialogue surrounding sexual assault. Papacharissi noted that the media forms the "sociocultural habitus that we reference in defining ourselves" (31). Social media participants may no longer include #MeToo in their posts, demonstrating that even if a hashtag has longer-term recognizability, its utility for individual use has a limit; but reading the phrase "#MeToo" in the news asks individual readers to consider their own positionality within the greater context of sexual assault and offers a moment for an individual to consider their own identity. Providing a space where people in the online communities can share their feelings regarding sexual violence spaces on social media creates "*soft* structures of feeling that may potentially sustain and mediate the feeling of democracy" (Papacharissi 32). Further, Papacharissi explains that people on Twitter tend to follow and listen to people like themselves meaning that celebrities follow and listen to celebrities (35). Me Too was not created by a celebrity, but the hashtag #MeToo as tweeted by Milano was able to capture the attention of both celebrities and non-celebrities alike, creating a community and connections

that transcend sociopolitical boundaries, creating greater visibility for Burke's platform, yet diluting its importance from advocacy to a social media trend.

Specificity and similarity as implied through #MeToo slow the dissipation of the #MeToo moment. Speaking to the success of #MeToo's ability to unite survivors, Burke tweeted "Women have been speaking up for years about harassment and abuse. #MeToo has just created cover for those who didn't feel safe enough to speak up. The movement didn't *create* the concept of speaking out. It just allowed people to hear us better as a chorus and not a solo." In her tweet, Burke identified an important quality of the #MeToo Moment—that it was not the first attempt or moment when survivors tried to speak out against sexual violence; rather it was the first to create such widespread connections, providing survivors with a sense of safety and a community with which to strengthen their cries for change. To this point, another survivor tweeted "I think the fact that I've been scared to participate in the #MeToo movement up until this point says a lot." Burke suggested that #MeToo provides a veil of safety through which survivors can discuss their experiences with sexual assault, yet, this tweet emphasizes that even with #MeToo, it is a major decision to decide to share one's experience. While the participant engages in the movement by expressing her own hesitations regarding participation, because she ultimately chooses to participate she adds to the visibility of the tag and amplifies that chorus of voices calling for change. Further, Burke's tweet suggests that the exigence has existed for years and it is now that survivors have joined together in unity that changes are being made. The rhetorical situation created through Trump's presidency and the accusations against Weinstein has enabled sexual violence to be addressed as a different kind of rhetorical exigence. For instance, Anita Hill was dismissed when she testified against the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. Hill's accusation of Thomas is worth attention, not only because of the way in which the media

discredited Hill as a woman, but for how race played a role in framing the accusation and subsequent testimony. Both Hill and Thomas are people of color and while the trial paved the way for the “Year of the Woman” in 1992, Hill was berated by news media, stunting meaningful conversation about what it means to report one’s sexual abuse. Jennifer Asenas and Sierra Abram discussed Hill’s experience and how the news media collapses the timeline between her initial testimony and the #MeToo Moment (498). The media were quick to attack Hill’s character in 1991, but wanted to explore her story in light of #MeToo without maintaining connections to Hill’s past (498-499). Without proper attention to the past, successful conversations about sexual harassment cannot occur (499). Hill’s experiences with the media demonstrate how news coverage is selective about what is deemed important and how the media shapes public conversation about sexual assault. A movement or a moment only bonds to cultural memory—at least as driven by mainstream media publicity—if the news considers the representative of the movement an appropriate champion of a cause. Hill was not considered to be an appropriate voice, but Milano captured the positive attention of both social and news media. Sexual abuse is often thought to be a taboo subject and survivors can be reluctant to share their experiences. #MeToo provides a space in which people are encouraged to share details of their abuse. Rather than remaining an inappropriate topic of conversation, #MeToo reframes sexual assault as a necessary dialogue. Further, #MeToo encourages stories from any time period because the premise of the tag is of past encounters of sexual violence. To demonstrate the wide-spread nature of sexual violence, it is necessary to remove the statute of limitations of stories. The problems addressed by #MeToo are not new, #MeToo is simply a new way to package the conversation. That there seems to be no statute of limitations on a #MeToo post—which tend to include events from many different time periods--indicates that the right time to talk about one’s own abuse is whenever that person feels

comfortable enough to use the tag. Because #MeToo gained virality quickly, the phrase was quickly recognizable as relating to sexual violence. As such, survivors who use the phrase, even if they do not detail their own experiences, mark their posts and, by association, their posts contribute to the overall image created through a virtual tapestry of #MeToos. The personal nature of the abuse can make it more difficult for a survivor to disclose their experience, even more so if one is still in a relationship with their abuser (Fletcher 49). #MeToo can provide a first step toward full disclosure of one's experiences and toward the help one might need. Many survivors expressed the desire to say more but could not bring themselves to face the difficulty of providing more detail. For instance, one user tweeted “#metoo I wanna say more but it's hard.” Similarly, another user wrote “not too sure if I'm ready to share my #MeToo story. But just know that sexual assault is real & you never know who it could happen too.” Even without providing full details, the #MeToo tag will mark their person as someone who has suffered traumatizing experiences with sexual violence. Like a graphic image, the #MeToo tag is difficult, if not impossible to “unsee.”

2.6.1 #MeToo and Evoking Emotion in Men

Throughout the initial #MeToo explosion, it was not uncommon to see many men expressing their disbelief that people they knew and loved were survivors of sexual assault. A Twitter user tweeted “My heart is breaking with every #metoo post I see. Keep loving, friends. Love so fiercely and wholeheartedly. And keep this conversation going.” The author described his heart as breaking, suggesting that this information was new to him, altering how he views his own world. In another tweet, someone writes “Inspired by #metoo and #iwill – thinking about what I do, should do and can do.” This tweet is an example of how the movement caused men to reevaluate their actions and how they can be part of the solution. Another user tweeted “Reading

#MeToo posts on FB and Twitter. Men must do better. I must do better. No degree of it is wrong and our responsibility to #ManUp.” This author called on other men to rethink their own actions and potential role in perpetuating a culture of sexual violence. The emotions men felt—like anger and disbelief—from seeing the people in their lives impacted and inspired by the #MeToo movement encouraged men to engage with the movement. Even if a man does not affectively identify with #MeToo because he has not been a victim of sexual violence, seeing #MeToo posts still creates a sense of “ambient intimacy” and affective connection created through reading other’s stories (Pfister 90). Ambient intimacy refers to strangers, but if the #MeToo posts one encounters are from people well known to the audience, the realization that sexual violence can happen to people close to home can make a reader feel distance from their friend or loved one. This dissonance sparks a desire to know and do more to encourage cultural change. As stories of sexual violence find their place in conversation via #MeToo, those who publish stories are encouraging others to share in their feelings, promoting a sense of unity across differences. The examples recounted above include a call for people to do better regarding how sexual violence is handled. One post called for the conversation to continue, another encouraged self-reflection and introspection regarding one’s individual actions and potential contributions to an inhospitable culture, and a third asked men to recognize their responsibility in helping change the climate of sexual violence. From inspiration to sadness, these tweets identify emotion as a key factor in changing the cultural conversation about sexual violence. Because these authors feel connected to the post, they are invested in being more than a bystander.

2.7 Disconnection through the MeToo Moment and the Pitfalls of Affective Publics

#MeToo created thousands of connections between survivors of sexual assault through the emotional strength of the stories told by survivors, but there are moments where some question the kind of community created through the hashtag—some of which I have already noted above. Various tweets and articles articulate why #MeToo, though veiled as such, is not for everyone and favors those in privileged socio-economic positions. Another Twitter user wrote “Late in the day but I feel like #MeToo should really be #AllOfUs. Love to all the women who’ve spoken out and to those who haven’t felt able. xx.” Here the author questioned the effectiveness and inclusiveness of #MeToo because the specificity might discourage people from speaking out. Because #MeToo encourages the *individual* to declare their belonging in the MeToo affective public, those who wish to belong can feel excluded because they are not willing to publicly post their experience, weakening the connections possible through #MeToo.

Further, one person noted “Remember the high-profile women who disclose #metoo are generally financially secure. Men & women without such support must take care.” The author encouraged others to consider why someone might choose to not participate in #MeToo and that those people are just as worthy of support as someone who comes from a position where they are able to disclose their positionality as a survivor safely. She asked supporters and participants of #MeToo to consider those who still live with their abusers or could face negative responses from their home or work environments, particularly those coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The workplace is a precarious place for sharing one’s experience and could lead to the loss of one’s job, preventing survivors from sharing their stories. In separate tweets one survivor wrote “so one thing you can do is hire women who’ve been sexually harassed and lost their jobs. #metoo” and “When I was sexually harassed and then fired from my job and threatened

by the man, folks wouldn't hire me because of it. #metoo.” These tweets demonstrate the dangers of expressing one's self in a work environment and illustrate the gendered, masculinist nature of work, which suggests that addressing sexual harassment is irrational, and prevents the work place from functioning as intended (Bauer and Murray 62-63). If one risks losing their job by sharing their story, then it is unlikely that those in less stable financial circumstances will participate with #MeToo. Further, a tweet warns that disclosure may not bring the relief participants seek noting, “I do really know what abuse feels like. I have also been led to declare it, in the hope that the act would heal me. It didn't. #metoo.” #MeToo risks exposing vulnerable survivors to their own public of friends and family in search of relief from their trauma only to find they feel *more vulnerable*.

Importantly, trans folk occupy a uniquely precarious space because resources for survivors tend to be gendered in favor of cisgender survivors (Clements). If trans survivors feel that there are no resources for them, then the likelihood of seeking help is lowered. The *Huffington Post* noted that the language of the movement often uses words like “woman” or “femme,” discounting those who do not identify with those pronouns (Mamone). This suggests that it is not enough to have experience of sexual assault, but one must have appropriate pronouns and fit within dominant expectations of identity to be a #MeToo participant. By giving preference to gendered language, #MeToo alienates many who have also experienced sexual assault, deepening the divide between who is and is not invited to the #MeToo public.

2.7.1 #MeToo and Assigning Emotional Labor Responsibilities

While visibility may help people come to terms with their identity, some are of the position that survivors should not have to perform the labor of announcing their status or “coming out.”

Emotional labor specifically can be thought of as the suppression of feelings in order to maintain a certain image for *other people*. (Hochschild 20, emphasis mine). Even if someone does not feel a certain way about an issue, emotional labor asks them to feel the way people expect them to feel. This effort can be exhausting because it requires a person to act for others rather than themselves. #MeToo, ideally, is about an individual, but it seems to ask an individual to perform their suffering for others. Wagatwe Sara Wanjuki, writer for the *Daily Kos* declared, “I won't say "Me, too"... mostly because we shouldn't have to "out" ourselves as survivors...Because it shouldn't be on our shoulders to speak up. It should be the men who are doing the emotional labor to combat gendered violence...” Wanjuki implies that it is inappropriate for survivors to have to fight to be believed through use of a hashtag. Rather, the appropriate response is for those in positions of power to start the process of addressing sexual abuse. After Wanjuki’s post went viral with over 46 million reactions and 27 million shares since its post date, the *Daily Kos* published her response. In the article, Wanjuki clarified that she holds no judgement against those who choose to participate; rather she wanted to encourage people to shift the conversation and onus of creating solutions to sexual assault to those other than survivors. Rather than “leaving the survivors to do the heavy lifting,” Wanjuki wanted everyone to participate in creating a safer world for everyone. Wanjuki’s post and subsequent article trouble the merits of #MeToo. If one takes the perspective that #MeToo places too much burden on survivors to solve a problem, then it is possible to read #MeToo as removing responsibility from those who commit or perpetuate sexual violence.

In addition to relying on survivors to do the work of changing society’s response to sexual assault, #MeToo leaves behind survivors of color. Those who are most believed and whose stories have taken down major names are those named by white survivors. *Boston Globe* columnist Renée Graham wrote about how the only survivors whose accusations against Weinstein were not

believed were those made by survivors of color, Salma Hayek and Lupita Nyong'o. Graham noted that historically, survivors of color are less believed and less listened to than white survivors, making it difficult for people of color to have their #MeToo moment. In 2019, a documentary entitled *Surviving R. Kelly* explored the ongoing allegations of sexual violence by the singer R. Kelly, especially those against underage girls. Leung and Williams (2019) explore how race impacted the claims against Kelly, demonstrating that the #MeToo movement was not as affective for women of color as it was for white women impacted by the Weinstein case. Public reaction to sexual assault claims has long disadvantaged people of color and "women of color in the U.S. have been historically oversexualized and dehumanized in ways that sanctions and enable sexual violence towards them in a manner distinct from the experience of white women" (Mack and McCann 330). If the people seeing consequences for their sexual misconduct are only those accused by white women, then the #MeToo Moment becomes a moment for a limited group of people, fracturing the community element created through networked feelings. Because the concept of #MeToo was created by Burke, a black woman, for the support and advocacy of black girls and survivors who have experienced sexual violence, for survivors of color to feel excluded demonstrates how survivors of color are routinely ignored in conversations regarding sexual violence, weakening the ties possible through #MeToo and subsequent conversations.

2.8 Conclusion

#MeToo provides a tool through which survivors can create connections through their shared experiences of sexual assault and foster conversations and actions to hold those responsible for sexual violence accountable. This chapter explored how that connection is made and why the

hashtag #MeToo is unique from other hashtag campaigns aimed at addressing sexual violence, paying attention to the when and how wording of the tag and the perceived acceptability of celebrity as survivor. Further, I interrogated how the connections and affective publics created through #MeToo are incomplete because of the ways in which #MeToo excludes various groups of people like survivors of color while also placing the onus of conversation making on the survivors of sexual assault rather than on bystanders and perpetrators. While #MeToo is a useful tool for both survivors and news media to express and categorize their experiences and classify news stories, it cannot speak for all survivors of sexual assault. While the sense of community can be helpful, conversations must shift from visibility to prevention—it is not enough to recognize that sexual assault happens frequently; rather we must do better to help survivors heal in the aftermath of their trauma and investigate ways to avoid more instances of assault.

In the years following the publication of the Weinstein piece, #MeToo has continued to face backlash, especially as Alyssa Milano continued to ardently support Joe Biden's bid for president, despite accusations of sexual assault from Tara Reade. Many accused Milano of hypocrisy and took the Democratic Party to task for supporting a candidate that had accusations of sexual violence, despite the Democrats' passionate (and rightful) criticism of Donald Trump's dubious history. Those who supported #MeToo in 2017 were relieved to see Biden elected to the presidency despite the accusations of Tara Reade being quickly dismissed. Despite saying #MeToo, Tara Reade found her claims viewed as baseless in an effort to get anybody who wasn't Donald Trump into the White House. Reade's claims against Biden demonstrate a larger issue with the #MeToo Movement and its ability to matter when it matters but disappear when it is more convenient for its alleged supporters. Even though the hashtag was powerful in 2017, it could not pierce party-politics in 2020, demonstrating the limitations of social justice-oriented hashtags.

#MeToo was snappy, easy to use, and immediately identifiable, but further introspection on who is listened to and believed is necessary as social justice work continues in social media spaces.

3.0 The Season of the Hashtag: Timing, Ritualized Circulation, and Seasonal Hashtags

Hashtags are multifaceted digital tools whose purpose should not be flattened. While the previous chapter deals with #MeToo, a tag that is more obviously culturally important, this chapter will deal with the corporate, seasonal hashtags #Starbucks and #PumpkinSpice and other variants like #PSL or #PumpkinSpiceLatte. While it is easy to dismiss these tags as frivolous or merely consumerist, capitalist, neo-liberal tools for increasing Starbucks' bottom line, hashtags *do* ritualize and manage a cultural sense of time through seasonal movement, making them an essential part of cultural timing. Without a sense of movement through the seasons, day-to-day life can feel static, so hashtags that recirculate based on the seasons offer a way to gauge time beyond simply looking at a calendar. Beyond a calendar, seasonal hashtags offer respite from the doldrums of daily life because they offer a renewed opportunity to re-engage a cultural conversation from year to year with new context offering a transformed vision of the season.

Coffee shops, most notably Starbucks, change their specialty offerings throughout the year to appeal to the seasons and entice customers to come back to try new or beloved offerings. The most obvious of these appeals to seasonality are the release of the Pumpkin Spice Latte in August and the unveiling of the holiday or red cup design in the days following Halloween. Though people consume Starbucks throughout the year, interest in the company as demonstrated through Google trends hits peaks around the aforementioned releases. Indeed, it is during these times that social media circulates images, tweets, and posts using #Starbucks, #PSL, and other tags that refer the reader to the coffee chain, providing increased visibility for the company through advertisement on the part of the poster. Tags such as #PSL, a cognate tag to #Starbucks, provide the user with an embedded gesture toward time and seasonality. #PSL, when employed within the body of a tweet,

indicates that the poster is somehow referring to autumn because a Pumpkin Spice Latte is only available from August through the winter holiday season, generally ending after the first of the year. Despite Starbucks's year-round popularity, the chain manufactures scarcity in terms of the Pumpkin Spice Latte beverage limiting the experience of the #PSL hashtag to the autumnal and early winter months. Using #PSL outside of the designated availability of the drink violates expectations of how the tag is meant to be used. Because #PSL is marked in such a way that determines its moment of use, misuse can cause negative reactions amongst those attuned to mentions of Starbucks on social media. Demonstrative of this is the tweet "STEP ASIDE PUMPKIN SPICE BITCHES...It's peppermint mocha bitch season! #starbucks #peppermintmocha." This tweet, created on November 3, 2018, demonstrates the significance that is placed on relegating types of coffee beverages to their own season. Similarly, at the end of August when the pumpkin spice syrup arrives at Starbucks locations, a common sentiment is that August is too early to be engaging with fall confections. One Twitter user commented on August 30, 2018, "Mood: Biding my time until I think it is appropriate to drink #PSL. (Hint: It's not in August)." Both of these tweets indicate that there is an appropriate time for the consumption of beverages and that someone can indulge in the drink—and the hashtag—too early or too late, implicating the importance of understanding what seasonal expectations exist and what it means to violate those expectations.

This chapter explores how hashtags with time-bias of a cyclical nature circulate in unique ways from other more general kinds of hashtags. Time-bias, as used here, indicates that hashtags related to Starbucks and its products are seasonally specific, meaning that it is the time of year that determines when they can be used. Cyclical hashtags function as time-as-movement tools or tools that benefit from consistent movement rather than focusing on stagnant moments of the past.

Regarding conceptions of time like *kairos*, Thomas Rickert argues that the opportune time can only be understood in the past-tense (77). Yet, cyclical hashtags benefit from understanding the past as a means to anticipate the future, offering an opportunity to understand the role of *chrónos*, or time as a feature of movement. Hashtags are also time-bias as defined by Harold Innis in *The Bias of Communication* in the sense that they can last for longer periods of time despite arguments that hashtags are ephemeral because they are difficult to find once their immediate moment of publication occurs. Further, hashtags occupy a space in which they can be space-biased, another of Innis's ideas, because of their ability to reach many people across a vast amount of space as long as an author has an appropriately large reach or following. What type of hashtag is used will determine what kind of bias—space or time—is a key feature of the tag. While hashtags of a socio-political nature circulate in response to unpredictable national or global events, hashtags, like #PSL, circulate on a fixed time schedule as part of a ritual of seasonality and participation. Though there may be dissent regarding when the appropriate timeframe begins or ends, #PSL functions through predictability and a certain inflexibility of timing.

Seasonal hashtags are both limited and unlimited in their use because of the nature of being seasonally recurring events. A hashtag like #PSL is only useful for approximately four months out of the year, but it is useful *every* year. It is arguable that other types of hashtags, like #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter are cyclical because they appear and reappear with some level of consistency. However, tags based on a socio-political event are far less predictable as to when we will see a spike since they often rely on an inciting event, like the Harvey Weinstein article that helped spur #MeToo postings or the murder of George Floyd that reignited the use of #BlackLivesMatter. Hashtags that change with the season and are tied to some sort of ritual or tradition are more consistent because the seasons come around predictably *and* there is often a

desire to make sure that a ritual is a consistent experience. #PSL as a season benefits from the publicity it receives by being part of Starbucks and its brand experience. Stanley Hainsworth, former creator-in-chief of Starbucks, noted that Starbucks is “[an] experience first and a product second, because no one is going to pick up your product and try it if they don’t want to buy into the experience. This experience comes through the advertising, the retail environment, and the online experience...” (qtd. in Veerasamy). Hainsworth identifies the online experience as part of the Starbuck Experience, suggesting that how someone interacts with Starbucks and its products in the digital sphere impacts how they understand the embodied experience of consuming Starbucks. Relatedly, Greg Dickinson, in a discussion of Starbucks and authenticity, suggests that Starbucks “embed[s] the consumer in a practice of production and consumption and...promotes a series of ritualistic practices...” (10). Starbucks wants its product to be viewed as a ritual and so designs its business model around practices that can be easily turned into ritual because of seasonality. Starbucks has encouraged new rituals as part of the Starbucks Experience, including how people can and *should* use digital media to document their Starbucks consumption. In line with maintaining and creating rituals, in a history of the Starbuck holiday cup, Heidi Peiper states that the holiday cup has become “a ritual for many that’s as beloved as that first sip of Peppermint Mocha.” Here again is the insistence from Starbucks that its product is not only an experience but also a ritual. This recalls older companies’ use of routinization of product use—slogans like Folgers “the best part of waking up is Folgers in your cup” come to mind— within a household to secure brand loyalty. It is not just that people buy into an experience once, but that it is an experience that repeats at specific moments throughout the year. Part of the online experience of Starbucks is the way in which people interact with the brand by posting their experiences to social media.

#Starbucks is often used as a tag in tweets regarding someone's own daily life. Though the tag is sometimes used to mark the specific instance in which a person goes to Starbucks, it is often buried in a tweet regarding someone's ordinary day-to-day rituals. For instance, if a person is posting about taking their child to the doctor or running other errands, they may include #Starbucks to indicate that while they were running errands they also stopped at Starbucks for a drink, insinuating that the purchase is a mundane part of daily ritual, perhaps as the necessary fuel to successfully complete all tasks, rather than a special occasion. In contrast, #PSL is more often tweeted when the drink is the focus of the post. Rather than embedding the tag into their list of tags, authors use #PSL when they are posting to indicate some sort of interaction with the beverage, whether they are showing they have purchased the beverage or, more generally, have an opinion on the beverage and #pumpkinspice season. Though it is easy to overlook the circulation of brand-related hashtags as unnecessary, frivolous, or silly, the ways in which these tags become part of ritual as a separation from practical living adds a level of complexity worthy of exploration. #PumpkinSpice transcends its origin as a Starbucks product and stands in as a symbol of a season that has greater reach beyond the coffee shop. Through the cyclical nature of #Starbucks and #PSL (or #Starbucks and #HolidayCups or #RedCups at Christmas, #Starbucks and #PinkDrink in warmer weather) the users mark themselves as folks who participate in the season and come to understand their way of life through a lens that differentiates itself from their everyday or practical life but maintains a sense of predictability. A Pumpkin Spice Latte is a special break in someone's routine, but is not so unusual that it is unpredictable. As people change their coffee order based on the seasons, the tags used will change as well. #PSL occupies fall, while iced drinks like the "pink drink" or plain iced coffee are featured during warmer months. Someone who uses #PSL is not merely a consumer, but rather a participant in a social moment that allows them to reengage

with others as part of a ritual aided and abetted by the cyclical nature of hashtags. Through the re-use and recirculation of #PSL or its variants a season is built, maintained, and recontextualized each year, providing the tag with longevity.

3.1 #Starbucks and Cyclicity of Hashtags

Timing structures how someone responds to new information. Hashtags offer themselves as tools for Time, or *chrónos*, as defined by Aristotle as, “an attribute of motion or change” (219b1-2 qtd. in Harry 1). The cyclical nature of hashtags make *chrónos* a useful lens through which to explore seasonal hashtags (and other tags like #TBT that will be explored in a later chapter). Though some hashtags fade out of circulation and rarely see renewed interest, others return cyclically based on season. As the year moves forward, the types of tags businesses and people use change, but can return in the next year as the season rolls back around. The cyclical nature of some tags suggests that hashtagging is habituated or ritualized in one’s life, making it easy to re-routinize the action of posting a tag when the opportunity represents itself. #Starbucks sees consistent increased interest in August, November and December (according to Google Trends), in sync with the release of popular seasonal drinks like the Pumpkin Spice Latte, seasonal cups, and drinks aimed at the winter holiday season—typically with a Judeo-Christian theme. While #Starbucks can circulate all year long, it is during these times of year when the tag receives the most attention, especially as it is paired with ancillary tags like #PSL, #PumpkinSpice and #HolidayCups or #RedCups to punctuate the tweet. Keeping the cyclical nature of these tags in mind, *chrónos* can help conceptualize how the tags impact the conception of time on Twitter and social media more broadly. Tags like #Starbucks and #PSL act as a cultural calendar that depends

on these tags re-circulating as the seasons cycle through. Cycling is important as a core function of certain types of hashtags. When a hashtag is not tied to a larger socio-political event, its use is less a matter of capitalizing on the moment at the exact right time, but rather marking the moment as an acknowledgement of movement through a cycle. Though a hashtag and its reception may change as cycles progress, the tag exists in the back of a group's cultural imagination, dormant, rather than ending, offering moments of reflection, or perhaps the conflation of the past with the present.

3.1.1 Ritual and Starbucks

Related to cyclicity is ritual. Christmas as both a non-secular and increasingly secular holiday has ritualistic elements like tree-lighting, carol singing, and reading specific passages from the Bible that cycle through the year. These elements reach their peak in December and remain mostly dormant the rest of the year with Christmas in July celebrations as a small exception. Despite its disappearance into the background, Christmas and its rituals return and re-cycle. Hashtags, particularly as they are used to promote a product or experience that repeats, become a notable part of the circulation of ritual. Eric Rothenbuhler defines ritual as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in the serious life” (ix). Here, the “serious life” refers to the opposite of that which is care-free, recreational or not-serious (Rothenbuhler 12). Rothenbuhler takes this definition from Durkheim who distinguishes between those rituals that are necessary and those that “arose from spontaneous expression, aesthetics, convenience, or habit” (14). Ritual is not that which is convenient, but rather something that serves a larger purpose. Regarding Starbucks, Dickinson offers that

Starbucks “[embeds] the consumer in a practice of production and consumption emphasizing nature and, at the same time, promotes a series of ritualistic practices that embed the consumer into a sort of metaphysics of coffee” (10-11). Dickinson gestures toward the physical interactions a customer engages with when they enter a Starbucks suggesting that something as mundane as how to order becomes ritualized and knowing how and what to order implies something deeper about the experience of ordering coffee. To have an authentic experience at Starbucks is to engage with specific forms of language. Hashtags are now part of this ritualized nature of Starbucks. You cannot go to Starbucks in March and order a Pumpkin Spice Latte because a Pumpkin Spice Latte does not exist as an option outside pumpkin spice season despite people knowing of its past and eventual existence. While someone might not normally think about a Pumpkin Spice Latte, they are prompted to remember it each year as #PSL and #Starbucks trend and position themselves at the top of peoples’ timelines.

Beyond knowing how to order, should a customer engage with a hashtag, it becomes crucial to understand the expectations of use for that specific tag. Rothenbuhler argues that “rituals occur in the subjunctive mood. They are often not about what is, but what could be, might be, or ought to be” (15). Further rituals are to be “viewed as time-outs from the usual constraints of practical affairs, they are occasions for how things could be or evaluating how they ought to be. *This is an important social function, not to be minimized*” (Rothenbuhler 15, emphasis mine). As hashtags become a part of consumption habits, they are incorporated as part of the ritual of neoliberal consumption, providing a multi-faceted commodity for consumption. Starbucks customers who post about their experiences on Twitter consume their beverage physically and offer up the experience to be consumed textually. If ritual is meant to be a break from social or practical constraints, then figuring hashtags’ role in the ritual of coffee consumption provides

opportunity for complicating how we view the role of hashtags. Hashtag use, especially excessive hashtag use, can feel frivolous and unimportant. Why does it matter that on a Tuesday in December, I purchased a peppermint mocha from Starbucks? In the grand scheme of the world, perhaps it doesn't matter. However, hashtag engagement and circulation as ritual provides people with an escape, a break from practical matters and the cyclical nature of the tag makes it a reliable, and expected respite. Even through 2020—the most “unprecedented year” in recent memory because of the Covid-19 pandemic—people were still able to get their Pumpkin Spice Latte and then, reliably, post about it on social media. The cycle of tagging is preserved and the ritual of conspicuous consumption is maintained. Though corporate hashtags may not seem as if they are part of the serious life, but rather an indication of frivolous and conspicuous consumption, because they offer a break from practical life, they offer opportunity to engage in a world that is more carefree, which is especially important when “real life” is full of restrictions. Further, when life becomes repetitive because of expectations of time allocation—work all week, do errands on the weekend—the cyclical nature of a hashtag like #PSL can break up a mundane timeline. And, unlike weekly occurring cyclical hashtags, seasonal hashtags have the opportunity for people renew their enthusiasm for the tag because of the long break between seasons, extending the potential longevity of the seasonal life cycle.

3.1.2 Unpacking #Starbucks and #PSL as a Cycle of Ritual

#Starbucks and its ancillary tags like #PSL and #HolidayCups walk the line between habit and ritual of use based on the rotation of the seasons and reinforced expectations of use. Though it may seem that using #Starbucks or #PSL is “not serious,” participants take the usage of such tags seriously, often indicating when expectations of use are violated. When used out of season,

it is not uncommon to see people calling out the breach in etiquette of use, indicating the strong impact of time on the utility of the hashtag. Performing a ritual out of turn ignores the rotation of the cycle and encourages people to participate in a new season before they are ready. Because #PSL relies on summer turning to fall, those who thrive in hot weather may not wish to expedite the changing of the season. As the movement of the season is rushed, people's sense of time is rushed, disrupting the predictability people may crave in their day-to-day lives. Regarding #PSL, even if the temperature stays warm, the mood of the season shifts when palm trees turn to pumpkins and force a mashup of seasons. Expediting a season change catches people off-guard and disrupts the flow of the social media cycle. Drinking a Pumpkin Spice Latte in late July or early August erases the remainder of summer and advances and expands the reach of fall. Though some may be excited to celebrate fall for an extended period of time, if fall is all of the time, then the seasons no longer matter and there is a weaker sense of movement of time. On August 29, 2020, @McQuadeHR tweeted "Wait, #PumpkinSpice can only return during autumn, 2020 messed up @Starbucks coffee too. Well, I guess we just have to buck up and enjoy the pumpkin spice. :-) #pumpkinspice latte." In another tweet thread on August 13, 2020 journalist Emily Pritchard asked "Too early or just in time for #PumpkinSpiceLatte?! What do you think." Though some people responded that it was never too early for pumpkin spice, others responded differently. For instance, @LightningMarita tweeted, "I always have a hard time letting go Summer in August even though I love Fall and pumpkin spice! I try to wait until we hit September!" @JackSpinetto responded simply, "Too early." @jeffreifarney offered "Yes, Fall has not begun yet!" @ElizabethsMom commented "Love pumpkin anything....but it's too soon." The examples listed above demonstrate how people wish to interact with pumpkin spice during a specific season and not prior to that point in time. Even if someone enjoys pumpkin spice, there is a desire to keep the beverage and the

hashtags contained to the appropriate season. While the movement of the seasons is appreciated, rushing the cycle can be met with disapproval, demonstrating the importance placed on the season and the assigned ritual.

The Pumpkin Spice Latte polarizes social media users with **people either loving it or hating it**. The disagreement around the use of the tag and the appropriate start of the season is part of the ritual of using #PSL or #PumpkinSpiceLatte. Just as arguments may arise each year about which Thanksgiving side is better—mashed potatoes or stuffing/dressing—debates about the appropriate time for fall beverages recur each year at the beginning of the #PSL season. For example, on September 1, 2018 @dwdudley27 tweeted “No!! I am boycotting #Starbucks #PSL’s. Way too early!...” Another user tweeted “I always feel personally attacked when people hate on Pumpkin Spice Lattes #psl #PumpkinSpiceLatte.” On September 5, 2018 @caustr01 opined “I hate pumpkin spice...there I said it #Starbucks #PumpkinSpiceLatte.” Even those excited about the release of the product subtly recognize the disconnect between the desired season of the drink and the reality of the climate at the time of the initial release. To this point, one Twitter user posted on August 30, 2018, “It may be in the mid-80’s [sic] today and humid, but that’s not stopping me from ordering a @Starbucks Pumpkin Spice Latte! #PSL #FavoriteLatte.” Another commented, “Am I excited that @Starbucks decided to release the #PSL BEFORE Labor Day and while some of us are experiencing record setting heat? No. Did I buy one anyway? Of course. #pumpkinspice.” Both of these tweets indicate that Pumpkin Spice Lattes and heat do not complement one another, but because they are available, they will partake of the seasonal drink and engage with the hashtag #PSL. Inherent in these tweets is a sense of compulsion to engage with the hashtag despite tension between the release of the beverage and the reality of the context of the season in which Pumpkin Spice Lattes are released. Additionally, ordering the drink “outside of its season” can create a

sense that someone is resisting conformity by doing what they enjoy rather than what is considered seasonally or culturally appropriate. Even though they are still engaging in consumer culture, by ignoring the socially imposed timeframe for enjoyment of a set of flavors, a user of #PSL can feel like they have control over their consumption patterns. Despite record high temperatures across the United States at the end of August 2018, people bought into the circulation of #PSL as part of the Starbucks Autumn Experience and perpetuated the ritual of posting their photos of their Pumpkin Spice Latte on Twitter accompanied by the #PSL tag. Though Halloween is not until October 31st, Starbucks and #PSL determine when the social media shift from summer to fall occurs through the release of a pumpkin flavored beverage. Because of the popularity of the Pumpkin Spice Latte, Starbucks has a financial incentive to start the season as early as possible to encourage as many people to buy the beverage as many times as possible before the end of the season. Importantly, regardless of whether someone is drinking Starbucks when they use #PSL, the tag also helps commodify the season of fall and roots the tag in neoliberal consumption. Even if someone purposefully avoids purchasing Starbucks products, because the Pumpkin Spice Latte is so connected to the company, any use of a tag that refers to pumpkin spice, whether positively or negatively, is beneficial to Starbucks and reinforces its grip on the coffee economy and pumpkin spice specifically. Following the adage that “any press is good press” the recurring debates regarding the appropriate beginning of pumpkin spice season benefit Starbucks fiscally while making the consumers feel connected to the company through the ritualized, cyclical debate about when fall does or does not begin.

For #PSL, there seem to be multiple styles of message an author may engage. An author may enjoy #PSL, dislike #PSL, or like #PSL but not when the season starts too early. In this situation, it is tempting to try to figure out the intentions of the author; however, for seasonal

hashtags, it may not be prudent to focus on intent. When considering intentions of an author of a tweet that uses #pumpkinspice or any of its variants, it's important to recognize that as a tag is recirculated, the goal of the tag changes for each author. Laurie Gries argues that "an image's rhetorical meaning is determined by the unpredictable consequences that emerge in its various occasions of use"(338). If we extend this to hashtags, it means that each iteration of the tag has a different meaning for each author and each reader will interpret the tag differently. For #pumpkinspice, one thing that remains consistent despite varying intentions is the seasonality of the hashtag. The hashtag controls its use through the specificity of the conversation it prompts. The consequences of using #PSL may be unpredictable, but its season of use remains fairly routine. As a tool, the hashtag benefits from use regardless of authorial intent. Without consistent use, the season of the tag is shortened and eventually the tag will be discontinued.

Regardless of what side one takes on the pumpkin spice debate, engaging with the tags reinforces their seasonality through ritual. On October 12, 2018 @NewYorkCliche tweeted "Starbucks considered it #PSL season in August. The smell of artificial sweetness has wafted betwixt the 2 Starbucks on every NYC block since. When the smell becomes too overwhelming, what's a city gal to do? Go apple picking. Duh." In this tweet, the author's use of the word "overwhelming" to describe the smell, and, implicitly, the experience of PSL season, suggests that the rushing of the seasonal change created by Starbucks is a burden from which one must escape. The author uses another seasonal fruit, the apple, offering a different timeline for the season, one that is shorter and protects the novelty of the season. The author further indicates that the length of PSL season is too long, emphasizing that the drink was released in August. According to Wolin and Bennett, rituals can be broken into celebrations, traditions, or patterned family interactions. Though Wolin and Bennett are specifically speaking to family ritual, it is useful to think about

these categorizations in relation to hashtags. For the author of this post and others who feel that #PSL and the release of the drink occurs too early in the year risks making the ritual of fall more mundane. Starbucks can sell Pumpkin Spice Lattes as long as they have the syrup, which is easily remade and repurchased meaning that the season can recur and the hashtag can continue as long as the company and its customers remain interested. Apples can only be picked when they are in season. Once the apple trees have been removed of their fruit, the season is over. Regardless of whether or not a reader is supposed to believe that this person went apple picking, the act of apple picking offers a competing sense of seasonality—where apple-picking season is abbreviated by natural factors, #pumpkinspice season is artificially extended.

Twitter users who do not wish to participate in Pumpkin Spice season by purchasing the drink, do so by using the hashtag #PSL to mock those who do. Despite their rejection of the Pumpkin Spice Latte, the linking function of a hashtag puts their tweet into conversations with others who are a part the #Starbucks #PSL community, perpetuating the ritualistic circulation of the tag during the months of August, September, October, and November. Those who engage through critique, mocking, or parody add to the season's ritual by introducing the cyclical debate regarding how good the drink is or how early is too early to consume Pumpkin Spice Lattes. By engaging with quintessential autumnal activities, like apple picking, and posting them to Twitter using the same #PSL tag, the author cited above both seemingly mocks Starbucks while also engaging in the season she is mocking. This is further demonstrated in a prior tweet by the author on 25 Sept. 2014 declaring "I always order a #PSL this time of year, I sip and I remember I don't really like them! #NewYorkCliche FAIL! #ChaiLatteInsteadPlease." Even though the author does not enjoy Pumpkin Spice Lattes, she has repeatedly engaged with the tag over the course of at least four years, demonstrating her renewed engagement with the ritual each year, despite having an

unfavorable opinion of the season's namesake. #PSL and #PumpkinSpiceLatte, regardless of how many people do not enjoy the beverage, has become a yearly part of the United States' cultural landscape. People who mock or criticize the season are an important part of this. The tensions between enjoying a Pumpkin Spice Latte and enjoying the mockery of the PSL on a cultural level make the release of the beverage a moment of reaction, increasing attention to what could be another mundane part of life. The tags function as a way to increase connections through and between those who love pumpkin spice and those who love to hate pumpkin spice, amplifying the affective register of both the product and the hashtag. Even though the argument persists regarding how early is too early for pumpkin spice, the season eventually ends meaning that the debate eventually fades into the background until the next season comes around and renews peoples' passion for the seasonal debate. If Pumpkin Spice Lattes were available all year, then the hashtag would not evoke such ire or love. Eventually, the tag would fade into the background as a mere descriptor. Importantly, because the hashtag operates on a timeline tied to the seasons, the potential for revived interest exists despite its relative invisibility for most of the year.

3.2 Ritual Humor, Cyclical Branding, and Seasonal Hashtags

If ritual is to be part of "serious life" as suggested by Durkheim, then seasonal hashtags that impact others' and one's own self-perspective or self-brand must be considered seriously. Hashtagging is enjoyable, but that does not mean that it is not part of a larger, important process of self-identification. As Rothenbuhler notes, "there is often celebration associated with ritual, but rituals are not only for fun. Even the fun and frivolity have serious functions: funerals end with meals, political conventions include balloons and silly hats, Carnival leads to

Lent...Though its gratifications may be important, the meaning of a ritual is not exhausted by them” (12). By partaking in the ritual of using #Starbucks or #PSL, individual twitter users can enjoy the process and have fun thinking of how to build the image they want others to see. While it’s true that there are rituals that carry more weight regarding the seriousness of the occasion—#Starbucks does not carry the same cultural weight as a presidential election or funeral service—one’s everyday interactions impact how one is able to be in the world. Hashtags brand the user, influencing how others experience an author through their social media posts.

Self-branding and self-identification are enmeshed in self-preservation. For Goffman, “it is in the best interest of a person to control how others treat them, which can be achieved by influencing the situation through his own self-expression” (2-3). Depending on one’s social circles, how one chooses to engage with hashtags offers varying degrees of risk. Even though tweets such as, “I always feel personally attacked when people hate on Pumpkin Spice Lattes #psl #PumpkinSpiceLatte.” And “I hate pumpkin spice...there I said it #Starbucks #PumpkinSpiceLatte.,” can be interpreted as joking or light-hearted, the authors felt compelled to post their feelings about the drink. The first example explicitly states that they feel personally attacked by PSL hatred. Being “personally attacked” has become a cultural devise used when people see too much of themselves in a post that is meant to mock, satirize, or parody some aspect of life. The device is often used for comedic effect, yet there is an implicit level of discomfort in the assertion. Particularly since the “personally attacked” gestures back on one’s sense of self. To use #PSL in a positive way is to open one’s self on a yearly basis to a personal attack, critique, or criticism of one’s life pleasures.

In the second tweet, the use of the ellipses between “I hate pumpkin spice” and “there I said it” indicates hesitation. While pauses can be used for emphasis, the pause of the ellipses here suggests that the twitter user wishes to indicate their struggle with revealing the information that they do not enjoy a popular cultural phenomenon. Rather than simply stating in the declarative that they hate pumpkin spice, the author adds “there I said it” to emphasize the accomplishment of voicing their opinion. The apparent hesitation or suggestion of struggle could be for comedic effect, but highlights the difficulty one may face when offering information that changes their engagement with the ritual of hashtagging and their own self-brand. Because #PSL is a seasonal tag, each reuse of the tag, whether for parody, critique, or sincerity of use, reinforces how an author engages with the pumpkin spice season—specifically, the humorous nature of some of the posts that use #PSL that make each season feel welcome. Even though jokes get recycled and the same conversations repeat about why it is or isn’t too early to be drinking Pumpkin Spice Lattes, because the debate is relatively light-hearted, the renewed debate is in itself a pleasurable ritual. Further, as seasonal hashtags come back around and recirculate they are an active response to previous seasons of the tags, echoing Lester Olson’s argument that when an image recirculates, it is an active response to an earlier version (3). Part of the humor built, especially in a tag like “I hate pumpkin spice...there I said it” is that it builds off of the conversation from the previous season. Knowing that the debate regarding Pumpkin Spice Lattes can be polarizing, someone might decide to voice their opinion more hesitantly, tapping into epistemic or behavioral caution. This kind of caution is opposed to committed active beliefs where there is no hesitation to act on a belief (Hurley et al. 110). This tension is important for humor because it can cause moments for ruptured expectations. Returning to the “I hate pumpkin spice” example, this should be a fairly active committed belief, but the ellipses shows caution in posting the opinion. The caution as an

exaggeration of the seriousness of pumpkin spice season adds to the humor of the debate, which prolongs #PSL's ability to continue on as a season. Just like television shows might rely on the same kinds of humor in each episode, when done in a generally enjoyable format, the same series can continue for a decade or more. Even as tastes change and Starbucks releases other fall drinks, the season is still marked by #pumpkinspice in part because of the humor of the debate surrounding the topic, encouraging renewed recirculation each year.

Important within recirculation is the recontextualization of a hashtag. Returning to Olson, because the context changes, the meaning behind the object that is circulating changes. Applied to #PSL, each season is a renewed opportunity to create meaning. Even though the debate around pumpkin spice season starting too early/not early enough may continue, other cultural aspects may contribute to new ways in which the tag recirculates. In 2020, lifestyle blogs, like themarysue.com offered think pieces imploring people to back off of the pumpkin spice debates and just let people enjoy drinking Pumpkin Spice Lattes in peace. Part of the push to end the debate and let people enjoy their pumpkin spice regardless of the month or season was because of the stress that the Covid-19 pandemic had placed on people in 2020. In a year where so many sacrificed so much to help stem the spread of the deadly coronavirus, some argued that rather than berating people for their choice in coffee flavor, it would be compassionate to let people live in whatever way they were able to do so safely. Though the debate still occurred and there were plenty of people loving and hating on pumpkin spice flavored things, the hashtag had a new context. Now, engaging with the hashtag is colored by the lens of enjoyment in a pandemic. This raised questions regarding what is enjoyable and what can be enjoyable when so many restrictions have been placed on society. Here, the debate over #PSL season, and its potential for humor, shifted. Where it was once acceptable and amusing to debate over the merits of enjoying pumpkin spice, now it is tinged

with the idea of a lack of compassion—that it is unacceptable to critique what someone finds enjoyable in a year where other traditions and rituals—birthdays, weddings, holidays, graduations—were cancelled. In a pandemic landscape, a ritual as benign and frivolous as enjoying a Pumpkin Spice Latte and using the #pumpkinspice tag on Twitter is a less risky ritual than a birthday party and can bring a sense of fulfilment, a sense of normalcy, especially if the tag is something that an author had already engaged with pre-pandemic. In April 2020, the *Washington Post* published an article detailing Lydia Chen’s experience being locked down in Wuhan, China and the post-lockdown changes. Most notably, Chen describes the joy of being able to eat street food again even as other restrictions remained in place. Similarly, even as restrictions remained in place that limited how many people could eat inside of a restaurant or how alcohol could be served, Pumpkin Spice Lattes predictably returned, tasted as people remembered, and reignited the same debate on Twitter, marked by its hashtag. The season is made special because of the predictability of the ritual in a moment when everything is “unprecedented.” Returning to the notion that rituals are part of “serious life,” the pandemic has proven the importance of simple pleasures like engaging in #PumpkinSpice season as a way to maintain quality of life despite the major disruptions to day-to-day routines. Further, if time is related to movement, when movement is restricted or when it feels as if time cannot move because of pandemic restrictions, the movement of the seasons as marked by hashtag use can make the time that has passed feel less oppressive. Even if general day-to-day life feels stuck, hashtags like #pumpkinspice serve as a reminder that the world is moving forward.

As we navigate pandemic life, entering year two, seasonal hashtags like #PSL stand to change again. With the rise in vaccinations and a predicted return to a more recognizable “normal” by fall 2021, the new #pumpkinspice will have new context and its recirculation will be different

from 2020. Calls to let people enjoy whatever they enjoy may not be as present because of the increased sense that the danger and stress of Covid has passed. Even as participation changes based on context, the ritual of recirculation of #PSL or #pumpkinspice will continue predictably in 2021.

3.3 Beyond #PSL: Seasonal Hashtags as Cyclical, Cultural Milestones

Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated how #PSL functions as a seasonal hashtag that encourages recirculation through predictability. #PSL and other related tags return each year in a slightly different context predicated on previous seasons of the tag and the current state of affairs when the tag reemerges toward the end of August. While I focused on #PSL, other tags like #ShamrockShake, referencing the green, vaguely minty milkshake released by McDonald's each spring functions similarly. It recurs at a specific time of year, references a product by a major corporation, and offers people a way to engage in the cycle of the cultural seasons. Many people tweet to express their enjoyment, others use the tag to express disappointment, still others use the tag to question the flavor of the shake. On March 16, 2021 @heathertomfan94 tweeted "I always enjoy the #ShamrockShake from @McDonalds. Although I wish it was a permanent item, I always look forward to it every year." This example demonstrates the cycle of the #ShamrockShake. Even though the person wishes they could get it every day and have it as part of their daily life, they consider it part of the yearly cycle of traditions they enjoy. Even though March marks the beginning of spring, it is also #ShamrockShake season, adding a different element to define the time than just the meteorological or astronomical definition of the season. Similarly, the tag #StateFair comes to define summer and early fall in the United States because those months are

when many states hold their state fair. Even though it is summer, #StateFair represents a more specific event that cycles through every year to mark a change in time. Importantly, though seasonal hashtags are often tied to a product or larger company, as demonstrated with my example of #PSL, the season often becomes about more than just the specific product. #PSL offers a larger discussion of what it means to be seasonal and what it means for time to move forward through the recurring debate on what month is the appropriate month to release fall-inspired beverages. The 2020 #PSL season offered room for conversations about what it means to let people enjoy the things that bring them pleasure, even if it differs from others' opinions. Seasonal tags bring more than a specific event or product; they bring a mood that is communicated through the tag and as the year shifts, so does the mood.

Seasonal hashtags structure how a person keeps track of the year. Even if a person does not use all of the seasonal tags or any of the ones I've mentioned in this chapter, chances are that there is some event that marks movement as part of a cycle in which the tag sees increased and decreased engagement. The power in these tags is that they recur predictably and do not rely as heavily on inciting events as socio-political hashtags do. These tags benefit from being seasonally cyclical rather than weekly cyclical or daily cyclical. Seasonal hashtags see increased scarcity of use during their hibernation, which prevents them from becoming overly mundane. Just as Christmas or Halloween may wear out their welcome if they are celebrated all year, seasonal hashtags function best as rituals when they remain designated to their specific schedule and serve as cultural milestones to mark the movement of the year.

4.0 Tweeting on Time: Days-of-the-Week Tags and Scheduled Memories

#MotivationMonday, #TransformationTuesday, #WaybackWednesday, #ThrowBackThursday, #FlashBackFriday, #SmallBusinessSaturday, and #SundayFunday, besides being alliterative, all specify the day of the week they should be used on one's social media accounts. Following the argument premised on "hashtags do..." the hashtags listed above *ask* that social media users participate with the tag and create tag-specific content on a rotating, weekly schedule of use. Though these tags function similarly to the previous chapter's exploration of #PSL and #Starbucks in that they are cyclical in nature, the tags rotate through use more quickly and without seasonality. Tuesday comes every week, one hopes, and so there is always forthcoming opportunity to use #TransformationTuesday. If someone misses a Tuesday, they do not have to wait a month, six months, or a full year to publish their transformation tweet. Of the days-of-the-week tags listed above, three are explicitly related to sharing memories and the act of remembering, while one implicitly suggests memory as an act. Though there are other day-specific tags, this chapter will focus primarily on those that evoke memory and remembrance, specifically #TransformationTuesday and #ThrowBackThursday. #TransformationTuesday is a tag used by people who wish to make a comparison between a previous moment in their life and the present. Usually these tags refer to weight loss or muscle gain as achieved through diet and exercise. I've personally used the hashtag to refer to my journey from a non-runner to a half-marathoner to a marathoner over the course of the last five years. In the use of the #TransformationTuesday, people are suggesting that they have changed in some significant, usually visible way. Though the poster wants to highlight their change in the present moment, the post is made more significant through

the comparison to the past. Beyond consideration of what the author wants to do by using the tag, I am interested in what the hashtag does as a scheduler and timekeeper for content.

The other case study for this chapter, #ThrowBackThursday, here after #TBT, does not have the same ties to the present as #TransformationTuesday, but rather asks people to remember a time from the past. The timeframes for #ThrowBackThursday can range from a few days to many years in the past, but the point is always to remember a time past rather than update on a current moment or hypothesize about the future. Many tweets using #TBT refer to one's personal history remembering a trip or some other significant life moment, but tweets using the tag can also refer to larger historic moments. For instance, on June 6, 2019, @weauterK posted "Throwback to the time I visited the Beaches of D-Day. Thank you for our freedom. #dday #normandy #france #war #memories #freedom #america #flag #throwbackthursday #tbt #canon #soliders #memorial #crosses." In this post, the author is both remembering a time where he was personally at the beaches in Normandy, but also paying special tribute to the memory of D-Day on the 75th anniversary of the event. In 280 characters or fewer, a person using #TBT can tell their personal history while also making explicit connections to national and world history that is now searchable and viewable by those who engage with the #TBT tag. When people choose to interact with a memory of a person or event, it becomes more enmeshed in the public memory and creates connections between the event or person and those who interact with the tweet (Marwick and Ellison 382). However, just because someone interacts with a memory through a tag does not mean that participation is equal among different users; rather this participation is striated through "technical privilege" (Marwick and Ellison 398). That is, visibility and remembrance is not guaranteed, but rather benefits those who most closely align with participant norms, which in the case of hashtags, are spelled out by the hashtags themselves.

Though one can use Twitter to remember without using a hashtag, the inclusion of a hashtag in conjunction with a specified weekday gives social media use structure rather than leaving a person to their own devices of creating content. Routine circulation of #ThrowBackThursday or #TransformationTuesday illustrates the tags' function as a timekeeper. Not only is this a predictable method of content curation; it is also a predictable method of remembrance through controlled release of memories. #TransformationTuesday imposes change on the author on the hashtag's schedule. Regardless of the individual's intentions, when a post is marked with #TransformationTuesday, change is read into the post via the tag. #ThrowbackThursday may find more use for the recording of memory, however, because a "throwback" could be from the Wednesday prior or from years ago. As a result, this tag has fewer boundaries for use. Everything can be a "throwback," so the specification of Thursday structures content in a way to (seemingly) avoid randomness and create some semblance of order of information in an overly saturated web of information. The ways in which the tags present memory not only make them more searchable and structurable through the use of the tagging function, but curate content by applying the specific lenses of "transformation" or "throwback." Each descriptor tints the way a reader interprets a tweet regardless of the original intent. This chapter explores how #TransformationTuesday and #ThrowBackThursday schedule memory and rely on cyclical understandings of time. It is not just a memory's circulation that is important, but rather that they are circulated on a repetitive schedule. #TransformationTuesday and #ThrowBackThursday enable memories to be linked, relinked, ritualized, and recovered with relative ease. Hashtags with days-of-the-week specifications present people with information necessary to wade through the cluttered information dump of a Twitter feed while providing people with an easily followable prescription for how to read content presented via Twitter.

Regardless of how visible or invisible content on Twitter is, the organization of the content through daily ritual posting is an important tool for navigating and interpreting Twitter. Where some tags like #MeToo or others meant to stimulate and amplify social change, or #Starbucks or others meant to sell a product, depend on visibility and, in a best-case scenario, virality, every day-use tags do not necessarily exist for the sole purpose of visibility. Rather, the scheduled nature of the tag structures one's posts and creates a mechanism for the recollection of memory.

4.1 Searchability as a Necessary Component of Digital Remembering

Searchability is key to remembering on Twitter because of the obscuring nature of the Twitter timeline. Because the timeline will post suggested tweets a user may have missed since their last login followed by a chronological ordering of tweets, unless a user is consistently checking their timeline, it is likely that many, if not most, tweets will go unread. The hashtag and the scheduled nature of the tag provides search parameters to make content more easily viewable. If someone wants to follow up on a friend who is training for a marathon and it happens to be a Friday, someone can still search #TransformationTuesday to return results related to those interests, permitting users to search by content rather than username. If information is to be visible, it must be available, disseminatable, and accessible. Just because information exists, does not mean it is visible (Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi 124). Because the internet is so expansive, if someone's data is not searchable, then it is not visible and data is not visible unless someone knows how to find that data (Stohl, Stohl, and Leonardi 129). Similarly, a memory, though it may exist on a Twitter timeline, may not be easily remembered without tools to help recall the memory. The ritual of scheduled hashtags triggers recollection of memories. Hashtags and day-specific hashtags

help manage the opacity potential of Twitter. It may seem artificial to regulate memory to a specific day of the week, but if the goal is to be remembered, then the organizing function of a hashtag provides a method through which there is *potential* to make content available, distributable, and accessible. Though any given Twitter user's goal may not be to make their memories go viral or to remain visible for scores of viewers, the ritual of posting the tag on a particular day makes it easier for a person to recall their memories. A person can search their own timeline for their various "throwbacks" or "transformations." Further, scheduled hashtags provide a way for people to take time to reflect on a moment. Each week, there can be at least one day where a person shares a moment from their past with themselves and anyone who might see the post on social media. Rather than snapping a picture and quickly tweeting it or tweeting any fleeting thought, using days-of-the-week tags like #TBT and #TFT make a person be purposeful in their content creation. This type of organization can be especially useful for people who do not have a brand to promote or a celebrity status to maintain. Even though celebrities and more well-known accounts can use these tags to organize their content distribution to bring attention to their new project or image, ordinary people can filter their everyday actions through the lenses of a "throwback" or a "transformation" to give purpose to their posting.

With the access to a seemingly endless supply of content twenty-four hours a day, finding some way to categorize content is a critical part of how someone values their own information production. Marquard Smith notes that "value does not lie in searching for things in order to solve a problem, investigate, or change the world, rather value is in the susceptibility to be searchable and distributable" (382). Hashtags provide value because they make content searchable, especially when that hashtag is part of a larger campaign like #TBT or #TFT rather than a one-off, self-created, non-viral tag. Further, searchability and the ability to index memory through hashtags

makes all of someone's posts searchable rather than new posts burying the old posts permanently. A hashtag history impacts what social self is presented to potential audiences on social media. As Ronald Day notes, "subjects are represented as 'about' not only their 'knowledge states' but also about their documentary histories" (61). In other words, a person's image is not just about what they post in the present moment, but one's self is built by one's information past. People are built by their memories. If hashtags build memories, hashtags build people. Even if someone is not looking to be defined by a hashtag, by using the tag as a memory creator, the tag becomes open for interpretation, which can then be read onto the author. Day also notes that "selves are turned into scholarly persons, and increasingly, are commoditized along lines of past production and recognition" (62). Though Day is referring to the ways in which academics are judged using impact factors, the concept of an impact factor is easily extended to discussions of social media and the myriad ways in which people judge their influence. "Likes," "followers," "retweets," and other interactions with which people engage across social media platforms determine how visible they are on Twitter. Even if someone is not trying to go viral, using aspects of Twitter, like hashtags, especially those that are consistently used by many people and not just viral for a quick cultural moment, give content the potential to stand out amongst other posted content. For public-facing profiles on Twitter, the amount of "likes," "retweets," and hashtags an account receives/uses decreases the likelihood of the tag being overlooked by Twitter's algorithm that sorts content for people to see. Using "likes" and "retweets," Twitter's algorithm can mark a post as an important tweet and suggest it to other users through the "in case you missed it" feature of the timeline. Similarly, if someone frequently looks at #TFT posts, the timeline is more likely to suggest more of those posts in the future. Further still, people can choose to follow specific tags ensuring that they see a selection of content utilizing the tag in their feed. Day notes that as content becomes

viral, algorithms often demonstrate the politics and psychology of the mainstream and prevent “radical” content from gaining visibility (65). As such, content that may be seen as more radical can benefit from using a tag that is viewed as more mundane or in line with the current cultural mindset. Everyday tags, especially ones like #TFT or #TBT can be leveraged to gain a better position on Twitter’s algorithmic timeline. For instance, on Monday 10/12/2020, I clicked on #MotivationMonday, which was trending that day. I selected to sort the tags by “Latest” and found the following tweet “labneh, chicken liver pâté, fig butter, sourdough bread - all homemade – a beautiful vacqueras and wonderful company #reconnect #food #privatechef #MotivationMonday” (@Bosschaert_L). I do not have any connections with this person and the author only has 324 followers. The tweet had no likes or retweets and, yet, I was still able to find the post because they used #MotivationMonday, allowing the content to show up in the “Latest” setting of a trending tag. Prior to 2015, content on Twitter was sorted reverse-chronologically, but now the platform uses a new sorting algorithm that can bury content not deemed important, decreasing opportunity for visibility and increasing the opacity of the content available to Twitter users. A well-known, recurring hashtag offers opportunity for visibility on a home feed. Supporting this, marketing blogs and social media manager sites have tutorials regarding how to use #ThrowBackThursday as a way to boost engagement and increase visibility for people trying to build their own personal brand. For instance, Tony Tran, writing for Hootsuite, a social media platform manager used for marketing purposes, posted on their blog space that brands that use a hashtag see a 50% increase in engagement when compared to posts without tags. Tran also notes that by using hashtags, content creators ensure that their content shows up in the timelines of people who follow the #TBT tag. This then opens up the content to a new audience. Popular days-of-the-week tags can help make it easier for people to come across that tweet. Information tweeted publicly on Twitter has

the *potential* to be searchable; however, it is naïve to assume that a hashtag is enough to ensure that content is viewed, especially when content is personalized. The hashtag simply provides the opportunity for searchability while offering a suggested schedule of use.

Though audience may not be at the forefront of someone's mind when using a hashtag, the tag can nonetheless help an unintentional audience make sense of a post through added context, allowing for better communication. A study regarding the psychological reasons why people may post selfies found that one motivation is to communicate with friends for social interaction (Sung et al. 263). Days-of-the-week hashtags now act as a schedule to facilitate this interaction. Returning to *chrónos*, days-of-the-week tags offer an option for movement of content, but on a smaller cycle than the seasons. Much like someone may choose to keep an activity planner to keep track of their engagements, both professional and personal, maintaining a social media profile that uses scheduled hashtags helps people plan their content for the convenience of others—and themselves. The hashtag structures what one can expect to see on social media from day to day. For instance, on the personal Instagram page I use to document my running hobby, on Mondays, I can expect to see posts using the hashtags #MotivationMonday, #MedalMonday, or #NeverMissAMonday. Even if I don't engage with those tags myself every Monday or at all, I can expect to see posts related to what motivates people to keep running, posts that show a medal they earned in a race, or posts that remind people that working out on a Monday will help set a good tone for the rest of the week. These tags communicate different goals of the posts and can help people interpret the aim of a post more easily. Further, the specific days of the tag make people rethink when they post what content. In my own experience, I've run a race on a Sunday, but waited until Monday to post a picture of the medal I earned so I could use #MedalMonday. The next day, on #TransformationTuesday, I might post before and after pictures of when I started

training for the race and after I finished, or a pre-race/post-race selfie with the tag #TransformationTuesday. By using these tags, users more clearly state the communication goal of the post to their audience, whomever that may be. The hashtag acts as a clarifier.

An obvious utility of a hashtag is its ability to connect a post to others using the same hashtag, creating a networked landscape of conversation. However, what might be more useful, especially if one's goal is to use social media as a memory tool, is that a recurring, scheduled hashtag like #TFT or #TBT creates a specific narrative regarding a segment of one's memories. Though #TFT can refer to a variety of transformations one may undergo in one's life and may not only refer to physical transformations, like weight loss, that are common subjects of the tag, if one uses #TFT more than once on Twitter, they can trace the transformation narrative they've created for themselves and how that narrative has evolved. Hashtags don't just connect people to other conversations, hashtags connect people to their own past. The connections made using hashtags create individualized stories. Ruth Page notes that "hashtags are a form of mediated tellability which derives from, but is now in part independent of, their affordances as a search term" (120). Here, Page is discussing tellability via Twitter in relationship to shared television practices or when people use Twitter to share their experiences with others regarding a specific television program; however, hashtags can help with tellability as it relates to how a person narrates their own personal social media content as well. Hashtags used to tweet about television share a scheduled nature with tags like #TFT or #TBT. Often, tags used to share stories related to television are relegated to certain days-of-the-week based on the broadcasting schedule for a show. Similarly, #TBT and #TFT are set up to be used on Tuesday or Thursday. These days-of-the-week designations structure how and when people post specific content, guiding their daily narrative in specific directions. The hashtags are directives for content creation. Returning to Tran's tutorial for using

#TBT, he insists that the tag *must* be used on Thursday. Obviously, the tag can be formulated on any day of the week, but because the tag specifies a day, it makes most sense to use it on that day. That said, there is an argument to be made that if someone were to use #TBT on Wednesday, they might have a better chance of being seen because those who follow the tag would be seeing it a day early as an individual post rather than potentially lumped in with other #TBT posts on Thursday. Regardless, the specificity of day requires that the person choosing to use the tag consider the implications of following or breaking the schedule asked for by the tag. Additionally, Page notes that “the searchability of hashtags renders them inherently interpersonal; they mark an item as searchable and emphasized for a particular audience” (127). I argue that hashtags are not just interpersonal, but are *intrapersonal* communication tools. Page stresses the visibility of hashtags because of the ways in which they “increase [a tweet’s] context of publication,” making it operate as a “form of ‘sharing as distribution’” (Page 127). However, even though the connections created by using hashtags help to interject in a specific conversation, it is still unlikely that a tweet will be seen by many people beyond one’s own followers. Rather, searchability as a tool for intrapersonal communication is a more immediately useful way to understand what it means for someone to participate in scheduled tweets. Though there is always an imagined audience, the author of a tweet using a hashtag is always a present audience. As much as a tag has the *potential* to talk to others, one’s own posts always speak to one’s own identity. They are a window into one’s own self at a particular point in time and the linking function makes it easier for someone to recall their past—at least as expressed on twitter.

4.2 Scheduling Memories

Posting to social media is easily recognizable as a key self-memory tool. According to Day “through the Internet we come to experience not only others, but *types* of our own individual selves, as objects of our contemplation as never before in history” (64). Here Day expresses how people can display various versions of their self and reflect on each version in a way that other forms of media have not made possible. It is not just that one experiences other people, but that one experiences other versions of themselves and must deal with how to navigate and present those selves to others. In other words, once someone gains visibility via social media, that person needs to understand what version of their persona is visible. Though social media is critiqued for blurring the lines between front stage and back stage areas³ as defined by Goffman in 1959, there are available tools to help social media users manage their content creation, circulation, and visibility to better navigate the various versions of their selves. The use of hashtags that specify weekdays, functions as a tool to organize how and when one posts content specific to the image they are trying to curate. The Self is made up of many facets. Using tags to catalogue one’s self helps a person take inventory of individual parts of their life, demonstrating a self-serving use rather than an others-serving use of tags. Rather than leaving posts to random whims, scheduled hashtags take the guesswork out of what someone should post on what day. Though it may seem silly that someone would need an explicit schedule or structure for posting content to various social media platforms, if people use multiple platforms, the ways in which they engage with those platforms can vary based on their audience. Having a schedule permits a person to avoid audience confusion

³ See Sherry Turkle (2011), Gardner and Davis (2013) for some such critiques and analyses of front region/back region blurring.

and context-collapse, or the moment in which differing audiences in one's life no longer have distinct separations or boundaries (Marwick and Ellison 379). For people worried about context collapse, hashtags add predictability to posts so that users do not accidentally post something harmful to the image they wish to project on any given platform. When a person uses social media to post content, they are creating an image of themselves that ideally represents the person they imagine themselves—or want others to imagine themselves—to be. The tags help people manage their performance and save face so that others do not question their performance, which, according to Goffman, could cause embarrassment (134). People make visible desired content by posting to a public platform and then make it searchable through days-of-the-week tags. The tags ask that the post be read through a specific lens of understanding.

#TransformationTuesday and #ThrowBackThursday are memory-signaling hashtags. #TransformationTuesday calls attention to the ways in which someone has changed over the course of time. As I mention above, this tag is often related to weight loss or muscle gain and often includes a split screen photo from a time past and the present moment for comparison, though it can also relate to mental or spiritual growth. For example, @addzerall posted a split image of herself with a bottle of champagne at a party next to a photo of her with a bottle of champagne wearing her graduation regalia with the caption “How it started: How it Ended: #freshmanvssenior #transformationtuesday #gonoles.” Another post includes three images of a woman becoming increasingly more toned from one image to the next with the caption “2020 been doing a lot. Me too. Better nutrition, daily running, and consistent prayer and Bible study. No let up! #TGBTG #TransformationTuesday” (@DJOBanion). The former tag offers an example of a personal transformation through education while the latter focuses on physical changes through the images shared, but also notes how the author has changed spiritually through daily Bible study. Though

the tag highlights how a person is in the present moment, it functions most effectively by recalling and remembering a past point—or tweet—in one’s life. #ThrowBackThursday is more explicitly about memory as it is used to recall either personal memories or world-historical memories. For example, a music group posted a photo with the caption “Today’s #throwbackThursday goes back to our last performance the days before COVID-19. Check out this pic of the debut performance of the Phil Firetog Trio & Co.! #firetog #musicianlife #firetogtrio #acoustic #singersongwriter #longisland #longislandmusic #trio #originalmusic” (@philfiretogtrio). Both of these tags provide a user a way to structure their memories. For those seeking to maintain an active social media account, constantly coming up with new content can be challenging, but these tags provide a way to separate out different kinds of memories from one another and offering guidance on when to post a memory. Marwick and Ellison, in their discussion of visibility on Facebook memorial pages, offer the concept of the “warranting principle,” which states that third parties have a greater impact on how one is remembered (379). Further, Smith notes that searchability and distributability are *vulnerabilities* (393 emphasis original). Taken together, Marwick and Ellison and Smith crystalize the concern with making memories public. As the audience of content grows, there is more room for misinterpreting the intent or desired effect of posted content. Hashtags are a tool to combat misinterpretation of memories. By marking posts as either #TransformationTuesday or #ThrowBackThursday, the author provides an explicit set of instructions on how to read the post. For example, Twitter user @PeterParkerCat posted a picture on February 18, 2021 of a cat whose paw is caught in someone’s hair with the caption “#ThrowbackThursday to Mini Me ambushing Mum on this day 2 years ago. Have a great day furriends.” Without the tag, one might think this happened on February 18, 2021 rather than two years ago. While this is a relatively benign example, it demonstrates the ability to instruct readers

to see this post as a memory rather than a “live” update. A more pressing example comes from St. Georges University’s Twitter. On January 28, 2021, the school posted an image of veterinary students at their White Coat Ceremony in 2014. The students are close together and without masks. Given the state of the world during a pandemic era, the accompanying caption plays a significant role: “#ThrowbackThursday: SVM White Coat Ceremony, Spring 2014. While we are unable to share this experience in Grenada this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are excited to virtually celebrate the beginning of our students’ journeys towards becoming veterinarians!” If someone were to just look at the image, it might seem like a group of medical professionals ignoring pandemic precautions of mask-wearing and social distancing since there would be no indication that the photo was not taken today. However, because the school starts the post with #ThrowbackThursday, the reader knows almost instantly that this photo is from a time pre-pandemic. Especially given that public figures and entities have been scrutinized and criticized for their handling or, perhaps more accurately, mishandling of Covid precautions, it is important that St. George’s University make it clear that they are taking pandemic recommendations seriously. Even though the picture is captioned with a date of spring 2014, foregrounding the text with a hashtag makes it clear from the outset that the post is meant to be a memory. The #ThrowBackThursday tag is important for understanding the timing of a post. As these tags enmeshed themselves into the daily lexicon of social media consumers, they evolved alongside a set of assumptions regarding the tag’s use. The savvy user of these tags takes these assumptions into account when creating a post to help manage the interpretation of the post.

Hashtags account for changes over time. When another person can search your social media history, tools like #TFT and #TBT mark which posts were memories and which posts were not. The scheduled nature of these tags allows for self-reflection prior to posting. A social media

user using days-of-the-week tags has that opportunity to think about what they want to post for #TransformationTuesday or #ThrowbackThursday. Rather than randomly posting content, scheduled tags encourage users to curate their post. Thomas et al. note that time-delayed electronic communication like FutureMe, a social media website that posts content on a delayed schedule rather than as the user finishes typing the message, allows for people to take time to think about what they post and the consequences of posting that specific message (54). Because the posts are typed and then released on a delayed schedule, a user is preparing for their future self-presentation. Tags that are predictable because of their scheduled nature demonstrate how hashtags shape content regardless of authorial intention, even as they encourage an author think about and reflect upon their media use.

4.2.1 Days-of-the-Week Hashtags as Time Keepers and Schedulers of Memories

Days-of-the-week tags keep content on track and determine the pace at which specific styles of posts should recur. On August 13, 2019 Twitter user @wilber_68Menjivar tweeted “I am the only problem I will ever have and I am the only solution. #TrustTheProcess #weightlosstransformation #TransformationTuesday.” Included with this tweet were several comparison photos to demonstrate the weight loss achieved by the author. The tweet does a lot of work explaining exactly what kind of journey the author has been on and what transformations have taken place. If tags like #TFT provide instructions for how to read the post, then why include the caption? Or perhaps more importantly, what does the tag #TFT do if the content of the tweet provides specific details? The tag becomes a metronome of time. Just as a metronome sets a tempo, so too does using a scheduled hashtag. #TFT does not need to be used every week, but

the first use sets the metronome in motion, regardless of when the tag will be used again to bookend the time period of transformation. Because transformation implies comparison, using #TFT asks the question “comparison to what?” or “transformation from what?” Relating back to *chrónos*, the tag provides the author with a sense of time as movement, specifically transformation. Now, should the author use this tag again in the future, the link will be back to this post, offering an opportunity to see not only that time has passed but also to observe how time has moved forward through reflection on the past and past instances of transformation. The hashtag as metronome might be fast-paced and used week to week or it could be slower, used once without a real sense of when it will be used again. But the tag marks a point of time that can be returned to in future posts via the link created through repeated hashtag use. The author of the above example is under the influence of a scheduled hashtag. There was no reason to save this post for a Tuesday, especially since he had not used it before or seemingly since this post. Yet, because of the style of post created, the author was compelled to agree to the scheduled nature of the tag and use #TFT, putting into effect the time-keeping feature of the tag. Should the author decide to share another transformation post in the future and use #TFT, now there will be a previous post to reinforce the transformation over time.

Hashtags as schedulers and time-keepers are separate, but related functions that are important tools for content creation. One key difference is in predictability. As a scheduler, a weekly schedule built into tags like #TBT and #TFT makes it easy to anticipate what kinds of tags might appear in a timeline on a day-to-day basis. This schedule can function for both author and audience. As a time-keeper, the tempo of a hashtag can be less predictable from person to person. Just because a tag is used one week, does not mean it will be used the next week or the next. But when the tag is reused, the link back to the last use of the tag gives a sense of tempo, of how fast

someone is engaging and reengaging with a tag. If an author uses #TFT one week, that person's audience may expect to see it again at some point; yet, because transformation takes time, there is no set schedule of when the #TFT will be. As each Tuesday rolls around, there is always the potentiality for a new transformation, but no guarantee of who or what transformation will be shared. The scheduling function of the tag tells someone when to look for or use the tag, the tempo-setting function creates a sense of anticipation.

An important feature of scheduled hashtags for the author of a tweet is that the hashtags link back to each time the tag has been used by a specific author, showing how often someone is using the tag. The ability to link back gives a visual illustration of the tempo of the author's hashtag use. This is valuable for audiences as well. If someone uses #TFT every week, then it is a fair bet to expect that there will be new #TFT content the next week. However, if someone has only used #TFT once or twice, then even though Tuesday will come back around, there is less certainty over what content will be offered on that day, if anything. On a platform that has endless options for content, being predictable as a weekly occurrence is beneficial if content is to be seen. However, predictability has its own problems, including decreased participation and visibility due to over-expectability. If something is too predictable, then there is potential for it to become banal and uninteresting for the author and the audience.

4.3 Banality and Burnout as Roadblocks to Scheduled Participation

If banality is akin to taken-for-grantedness and invisibility as suggested by Szulc, then calling a hashtag banal implies that a hashtag is suited for invisibility rather than visibility. Given this definition, it is arguable that all hashtags could be considered banal, since many people's posts

never “go viral.” However, scheduled hashtags risk banality because of the routine of their use. When something is routine, it is less likely to attract attention. A hashtag used on a scheduled basis is expected by a social media audience and blends in with the flurry of other posts using the same tag. #ThrowBackThursday is used by a variety of people for a variety of reasons including individuals sharing personal memories, organizations sharing the history of the organization or an individual sharing a historical moment among others. Unlike #TransformationTuesday, #ThrowBackThursday does not necessarily offer direct comparisons, but rather highlights specific moments in the past. For example, on June 6, 2019 @CuratedbyPamela tweeted, “In Germany with my grandmother and great grandmother. #Europe in less than two weeks, can’t wait ✈️ #tbt #family #throwbackthursday #germangirl.” This tweet offers a memory from the past to express their excitement about an event in the future, but uses the image in the tweet to focus attention on the past memory. Rather than waiting two weeks to post a comparison photo of the previous year’s trip, the author chose to use the picture to reminisce. However, even with the use of #ThrowBackThursday and #tbt, the tweet only received one like, despite having 830 followers. Even though 830 followers do not afford a ton of visibility, one might expect to have more interaction than one like. Bo Han notes that one of the functions of social media is to foster feelings of satisfaction and joy and if those expectations are not met, then it is likely that a person will experience feelings of burnout and disengagement (123). Though satisfaction and joy are not necessarily only met through receiving “likes” or retweets, these are factors that have the potential to positively or negatively impact how one feels about their social media experience. If someone expects their posts to be met with a specific amount of engagement and those expectations are not met, then even positive feelings can turn to ambivalent or ambiguous feelings that could discourage further engagement with their own social media use and the content of others. Further, unlike

#TransformationTuesday where an individual might not have a transformation to post each week, a person could create a #ThrowBackThursday post each week, creating a greater sense of pressure to maintain a regular posting schedule. The metronome function of a hashtag ticks more rapidly because the cycle returns faster. A fast-paced hashtag metronome places more pressure on content creators to release content on schedule. If a person feels too much pressure to please an audience, then they may no longer feel joy in posting, but rather dread having to come up with their next clever post. In this way hashtags simultaneously encourage and discourage use. Unlike a seasonal hashtag like #PSL that is only used for a few months out of year, creating anticipation of use, days-of-the-week tags can be used every week, making the potential tempo of the cycle much faster and less enjoyable. What was once a fun pastime can become a chore.

It is not enough that people know where to look to find information; they must care enough to begin the search in the first place. If a tag is overused, then it risks becoming uninteresting. If a tag is uninteresting, then it is less likely it will be sought out, decreasing the visibility of the tag. #ThrowBackThursday risks overuse and over-repetition, making it more likely to become opaque. Just like the ticking of a metronome can fade into white noise, becoming easily avoidable, the constant cycling of days-of-the-week tags can fade them into the background of Twitter feeds. Sharing on social media mostly consists of sharing memories or making memories. Realistically, many posts are “throwback” posts even if they do not carry the tag. The encouragement of routinized posting of memories as part of #ThrowBackThursday may discourage audience participation because of social media burnout or “a state of mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion a person experiences in response to and excessive and prolonged stress” (Han 122). Related to social media usage, Liu and Ma note that excessive social media use leads to social media burnout and as people become addicted to posting their own content, they may become less

inclined to looking at the content of others (7). If people do not wish to engage with the content of others because they feel exhausted or anxious because of the bombardment of content encouraged through days-of-the-week hashtags, then someone's visibility will not be achieved and their content will merely remain searchable. Despite the individualized content of posts using #ThrowBackThursday, the repetitious nature across social media networks can make the content feel depersonalized. Unlike corporate hashtags like #Starbucks, which already carry an expectation of depersonalization because of their tie to a larger, faceless entity, tags like #TBT can start out with a great sense of personalization but lose their luster after consistent sharing. If a person is inclined to self-disclose information on a daily basis, the information received can feel less and less specialized. But if a person is more reserved, when information is revealed, the revelation can feel like a big deal. The same can be true with hashtags. Rather than standing out as an individual, the tag gets lumped with all other tags because of the consistent overuse of tags rather than the careful selection of what tag to use and when. According to Han, depersonalization is "the degree to which the user measures the emotional gap between her and social media" (123). Relatedly, Liu and Ma suggest that envy is a reason for social media burnout. If a person is not receiving the kind of the interaction they expect to have and are envious of the kinds of posts others are making with tags like #ThrowBackThursday, then rather than engaging, people may intentionally block #TBT posts and avoid looking at posts that evoke those feelings. Even if #ThrowBackThursday is meant to be a personal, positive post, if it creates feelings of dissatisfaction in others, then participation and visibility are likely to decrease.

Even though #ThrowBackThursday is meant to feel special because it is distinguished through the hashtag and designated to a specific day of the week, because there is nothing stopping someone from using the tag on a day other than Thursday, the tag can lose its specificity. For

instance, @TinyIsLove tweeted on September 13, 2019, a Friday, “#ThrowBackThursday our gotcha days! 11/21/18 for me and 10/22/18 for Gunner. Best days ever!” This tweet also includes two images of bull dogs from the days they were adopted. This tweet, though it uses #ThrowBackThursday, was posted on a Friday depending on what time zone in which one lives. Even though there are other tags that function similarly to #ThrowBackThursday specific to other days-of-the-week, like #FlashBackFriday, #ThrowBackThursday is the most recognizable for sharing memories. As such, its use beyond its scheduled day of the week can make the tag banal. If overuse and burnout is possible when the tag is used on a Thursday, then use of the tag on days-of-the-week other than Thursday increases risk of overexposure, making it more likely that people overlook or ignore posts using the tag. Though the tag is meant to be part of a conversation, use of the tag, especially on days other than Thursday, functions more as a stand-alone post, invisible amongst other similar posts. When posted outside of the schedule, the tag loses its meaning as a metronomic device—the tempo is thrown of balance.

4.4 Implications for Hashtags as Time-keeping Tools

Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated how hashtags *do* context and time-keeping. While tags are often theorized as being used for connection with others, the ways time is used as part of content-creation poses benefits and challenges. Importantly, tags that specify a day of the week make it so that an author using this type of tag schedules their content creation and offers a way to make the content predictable and searchable. Recognizing what hashtags *do* beyond the simple connection of conversations opens up larger discussions of what a hashtag wants to do, rather than what the author wants the hashtag to do. While a post containing #TBT or #TFT will

be connected to others using the same tag, the way the tag functions might be that it adds context or is serving as a time-keeper or is functioning as white noise—taking up space but without increased visibility.

Assumptions of visibility and connectivity pigeonhole research regarding hashtags into conversations about motives, but focusing on what the *hashtag does or wants*, moves research away from authorial intent and into a conversation of what a hashtag as a rhetorical tool can achieve, broadening its potential uses, increasing its importance as a fixture of Twitter. While some tags, like those with a socio-political angle, like #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter, certainly want visibility, there are other reasons to use tags beyond simply gaining an audience. Scheduling, context management, and time-keeping are demonstrated through the use of #TFT and #TBT. Moving forward, thinking about the goals beyond connectivity and considering what a hashtag wants to do beyond becoming visible can offer moments to establish a hashtag as a multipurpose rather than a single-use communicative tool.

5.0 What do Non-trending Hashtags Do? Alternative Uses for Hashtags beyond Visibility

When one thinks about a hashtag, the first thought might go to a well-known tag like #MeToo, #ThrowBackThursday, #BlackLivesMatter, or #Starbucks. But while there are many well-known tags, many of which have been subject to scholarly analysis, there are many more tags that do not trend or go viral. These tags are one-off tags that challenge what a hashtag is meant to do. Though a hashtag is often explained as having a practical indexing function or providing the ability to enter into conversations with others who use the same tag, social media users can turn any text into a hashtag regardless of its trendiness, creating a hidden catalogue of tags that never trend and are, essentially, unsearchable. For example, drawing from my own catalogue of tweets, on April 8, 2013, I tweeted, “Yes!! Do it! #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy.” Looking back on this tweet nearly eight years later, I have no real understanding of what I was talking about. The best I can guess is that I was encouraging someone to watch the A&E series *Bates Motel*, but there is no other context beside my hashtag and there are no other publicly tweeted uses of #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy for me to reference to make sense of the tweet. Further, I did not remember that I had tweeted this until I scrolled through my history looking for my own examples of non-trending tags. Had I not found it, I would never have known to search for it and it would continue to exist in obscurity. Even now, the tag is not searchable because of its specificity to the moment in which it was tweeted and it is unlikely that anyone will search for this tag. This type of use offers an opportunity to interrogate alternative uses for hashtags.

#batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy and other tags that are used for individualized purposes necessarily function beyond the easily identifiable uses of hashtags like networking conversations and making content searchable. Why bother to create a link when the link goes to nowhere? What

is gained rhetorically by including hashtags that do not exist as part of a larger, organizational, networked structure in a tweet? What are the limits of a hashtag, especially in relation to its virality? This chapter seeks to explore what a hashtag can and cannot do as a method of further defining the rhetorical purpose of hashtags, specifically regarding searchability and visibility. Exploring the rhetorical function of a non-trending hashtag poses many challenges, including how to find such hashtags. In fact, using “#” as a search term on Twitter’s search API and on the TAGs Google application returns error messages. However, the difficulty faced in finding non-trending hashtags is a clear example of the ways in which hashtags mis-function or are used in ways counter to their intended purpose. Understanding what happens when a hashtag is asked to operate in a way other than offering a networked connection or a tool for searchability provides a new way in which rhetoricians and scholars can better interrogate how searchability and visibility function in well-known or trending hashtag campaigns.

The hashtag feature, though not initially a part of Twitter’s interface, easily incorporated itself into the language of Twitter. Part of the appeal of the hashtag is that it is easy to use and requires no real understanding of coding or computer syntax beyond being able to place a “#” in front of a message and eliminating spaces and punctuation between the words within the message (Messina n. p.). The ease with which people can create their own, unique hashtags suggests that there are likely more one-off hashtags than hashtags that trend. If this is the case, then it is critical to understand what it means to create a hashtag that likely will not gain (inter)national attention and does not enter into a larger network of tweets using the same hashtag, but rather is *possibly* viewed by one’s followers—though Twitter’s move away from chronological timelines to an algorithmic timeline makes that less likely—and then lost to the Twitter void. Even though a tweet using a well-recognized hashtag may not go viral in its own right, it is still part of a larger web of

messages related to each other. A tweet using a hashtag that is hard to read or overly specific functions separately, commenting more on the context of the tweet rather than the larger context of the message within Twitter's milieu. In other words, an overly specific, overly complex hashtag serves more as a reference to itself than it adds to larger discussions. Non-trending tags function differently from trending or common tags, beyond offering visibility and connection. Non-trending hashtags direct us how to read a message through added context—both in verbal and visual cues—and ask us to consider the benefits and drawbacks of increased noise.

5.1 Functions of Non-trending Hashtags

5.1.1 Hashtags as Context

Returning to my example of #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy and introducing a new example of #secondslateribustedmyass, non-trending hashtags offer an opportunity for thinking about the context of hashtags as well as how hashtags themselves function as context providers. As I mentioned above, even though I do not remember the specifics in which I tweeted that message or created that tag, I do know that the show *Bates Motel* was a significant part of that message. The other example, #secondslateribustedmyass, was part of the tweet: “About today. WEEEEEE TRAMPOLINE FLIPS! #supermeng #fatums #fliparoo #skyzone #fun #sundayfunday #xman #secondslateribustedmyass #notbad #noob #gymnastics #gymnasticsfail #funwithgravity #gaysontrampolines.” This tweet includes two other non-trending tags, #fliparoo and #gaysontrampolines. The tags included in this tweet provide a narration of what the author did that day at a trampoline park. The audience, whomever that may be, can reasonably gather that

the author had fun at a trampoline park even if they fell down. An important aspect of using Twitter as a networking or connectivity tool is to make sure that a post is legible for the intended audience. Because tweets simplify and collapse contexts, users have to account for what an imagined audience realistically knows to ensure that they understand a given tweet (Scott 11). If an audience cannot interpret a tweet, then the likelihood that people will engage decreases. Hashtags add context and can be used to help audiences interpret messages (Scott 13). If hashtags are meant to add context as a means to aid in tweet interpretation for an imagined audience, then it is necessary that the tag contains enough information to send the intended message. However, as much as sufficient context is important, the character limit on Twitter makes a concise tag necessary. Further, a tag that is too long is cumbersome to use. #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy and #secondslateribustedmyass offer sufficient context but are not easy to use. In fact, I decided it was easier to copy and paste both tags rather than retype them because of how long they take to write in full. Though the audience can determine that the tags are about *Bates Motel* and a day at the trampoline park respectively, part of that certainty comes from too much information. The tags, rather than offering a short slogan, provide the reader with clunky sentences. Even if a tag would be considered short if formulated as a prose sentence—“*Bates Motel* is delightfully creepy” is only five words—hashtags on Twitter have a better chance of being used if they consist of fewer characters. Even though Twitter recently increased the character limit from 140 to 280, the average character count fell from 34 to 33, demonstrating the desire to keep posts to a minimum (Perez n. p.). #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy has 31 characters, making the tag alone nearly the length of an average tweet. In the same tweet as #secondslateribustedmyass, which is 25 characters on its own, were various other hashtags taking up 165 out of 204 characters. Most of the tweet’s character limit was used by hashtags, several of which only link back to the same tweet rather than extending

out to other conversations. Other tags that are successful fall well below this character count. #MeToo, #Blessed, #PSL, and some longer tags like #BlackLivesMatter or #ThrowBackThursday are nearly half—or fewer—of the characters of my example. It is not just that a tag needs to provide context. It is necessary that it do so in such a way that limits character counts to maintain the overall goal of keeping a tweet short. While there are other factors like how well one is connected, whether or not one's account is public, and the timing of a tag that will determine if a new hashtag will trend, the character count, the ability to infer context and meaning, and the ease with which one can type the tag impact how well it will function as part of the larger Twitter lexicon.

Rhetorically, the context of a moment impacts what messages are sent in response. Bitzer notes that the rhetorical situation is determined by the exigence or problem. A hashtag is a response to a cultural, rhetorical moment. The cultural context impacts the function of the hashtag. In previous chapters, I discussed in detail the difference between a socio-political hashtag, a corporate hashtag, and a daily-schedule hashtag, but it is important to note that each of these genres impact how a tag circulates. Without a clear intervention within a hashtag genre, it is difficult for a tag to gain momentum. Tags that are part of a larger phenomenon are able to use the cultural cache of the rhetorical moment to circulate more successfully. Tags that speak more specifically to an *individual* do not respond as effectively to a rhetorical moment. #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy speaks to a cultural artifact, a television show, but only indicates my opinion of it and does not use the larger conversation regarding that show to leverage its ability to trend. During the run of the show, the commonly used hashtag #BatesMotel, put tweets using the tag into the same twitter archive, but my tag, though it includes the word pairing “Bates Motel”

within its text, is not read as related to the cultural conversation and exists in its own, obscure world.

Similarly, #Normero—a portmanteau of Norma and Romero, two characters who have a romantic relationship plotline in *Bates Motel*—was still being tweeted in 2019, two years past its series finale. Fans of the show and of that relationship are able to use the tag in tweets regarding the pairing because of its specificity. Because it directly relates to two characters and their relationship within the series, it does more to help add context to the tweet, making it more relevant than #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy. #Normero is a specific tag that requires an understanding of the show’s plot in order to fully interpret the tweet, but those who know the show are able to interpret the portmanteau and understand the implied context of using the tag without having to spell out something as specific as #ilovenormaandromerosrelationship. This sample tag eliminates much ambiguity, but it does not have the same capacity for quick interpretation. When considering context as a critical component to responding to a rhetorical situation, the way in which the context is presented impacts the efficacy of the messaging. A portmanteau as a way to represent a couple uses the symbolism of merging names as a succinct representation of a relationship. #Normero is easily readable, requiring little time to distinguish the components of the message and part of a larger genre of content—whether it is styled as a hashtag or as prose—of romantic couples’ name mashups. A longer tag cannot be read instantly and requires more effort to determine the message and the context, potentially encouraging a reader to overlook the tag entirely.

The examples above serve as heuristics for exploring how specificity of context impacts how a message is received and then circulated. If a message is too vague, then it makes sense that it will be hard to interpret and decrease the likelihood of users participating in its use. However, if a message is too specific, then it may be more difficult for a person to interact with the tag, both

using the tag in their own tweets and taking the time to read the tag to do the interpretive work suggested by its inclusion. Though #Normero is a specific tag, because it can be easily separated into its component parts—Norma and Romero—it maintains a useful level of specificity. Reading #batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy takes work to distinguish the words and, at the point where it contains thirty-one characters, it may as well be its own sentence rather than a hashtag. Scott notes that an author of a tweet will have to account for what the audience realistically knows while crafting a message that can be interpreted appropriately (11). However, if a person is too specific, then all of the work is removed from the message and there is no reason to engage significantly. A tweet and a hashtag have the opportunity to function enthymematically to great effect, but if too much of a premise is given, then the tweet or tag overwhelms the reader and loses its rhetorical power. #Normero functions as a special nod to the audience that can make them feel special. It is a message that says, “I know that not everyone will understand this message, but the people I want to engage with will get it.” A tag that spells out exactly what the author is thinking for the audience does not allow for interpretation, eliminating that wink or the inside joke for the audience. Because of a hashtag’s linking feature and its ability to put people into conversation with one another, a hashtag that someone creates to specifically express their opinion undermines the community aspect of the hashtag. When thinking about the components of a tweet, the message represents the personal opinion of the person who tweets it, while the hashtag(s) represent the connection to the community through links. If a hashtag expresses one’s *specific* opinions or thoughts and mimics what could be said in the body of tweet, then the tag is not for community connection or conversation, but for the poster’s own personal satisfaction. When this is the case, a hashtag must function at a separate, contextual level beyond the obvious archiving or linking function of more commonly used hashtags.

5.1.2 Hashtags as Style and Parody

Though a one-off tag can help add context, it also functions at a stylistic level. Even though a non-trending hashtag only exists as an individual entity, resisting its linking function, there is still purpose behind the use of a dead-end tag. Visually, a phrase that is preceded by the # turns blue, distinguishing the tag from the rest of the non-hyperlinked text. The change in text color makes it easier to see the tag as one scrolls through someone's twitter feed. When scrolling through Twitter, blocks of text without a hashtag blur together and make it harder for the tweet to stand out and make someone stop and read the text in full, potentially keeping a person from participating through retweeting or liking the post. If someone tweeting a message uses a hashtag in the body of the text, someone else might be prompted to stop because of the difference in text color. The hyperlink, regardless of where it leads, makes the post more visible so long as it stays in one's newsfeed. According to Jimit Bagadiya from SocialPilot, the average time people spend on Twitter per day is only 2.7 minutes. If people spend less than three minutes on Twitter, then authors of posts need to make their tweets stand out in some fashion, especially since Twitter's timeline algorithm foregrounds predicted tweets and then lists the remainder in chronological order. If someone is scrolling quickly to get through new content, the flash of blue can help pull attention to a tweet. Richard Lanham notes that in an attention economy, people must pay attention to how they create attention and suggests that style is an important consideration for content creation. A hashtag is a stylistic tool that can help create attention through its visible differentiations between standard text and hyperlinked text. Writing a tweet exclusively in standard text makes it hard to differentiate information and sets up content to be overlooked as one scrolls through their feed. Even if the tag is not meant to add to an existing conversation, using the

tag gives the tweet the opportunity to be visible, even if the person using the tag is doing so for their own amusement.

One-off hashtags play a role in maintaining and subverting the stylistic expectations of Twitter. When one scrolls through Twitter, there is an expectation that one will see standard text mixed with hyperlinked text and, at times, a photo. If a person uses a hashtag that they have created rather than using a tag that is already part of the lexicon, stylistically, the post will fit into what is expected of a Twitter post. However, when one looks more closely at these kinds of posts, one will recognize that the tag, though visually compliant with a hashtag, does not provide more than a visual marker of belonging. Because the tag will not link to a larger conversation, the tag functions in ways that privilege aesthetics and, in some cases, parody. For the purposes of this discussion, parody is “an imitation that distorts a target text, author, or genre” (Trivigno 30). Hashtags that trend tend to follow specific kinds of patterning and design features. Tags tend to be short, easy to read, and utilize capitalization to separate words in lieu of spaces. Non-trending tags ignore many, if not all of these features. Returning to my own Twitter feed, I found the tag [#benefitsofonlyonepanelist](#) referencing a panel at the 2013 PCA/ACA conference in Washington, DC in which only one panelist showed up to present their paper. The tag is hard to read, does not utilize capitalization to separate words and takes up 26 of the 140 characters allowed at the time. This tag uses the hashtag properly as it establishes the hyperlink, but it does not connect to any other tags. Rather, this tag is meant to mimic what a hashtag is *supposed* to do. It adds context. Because I included it, years later I can reasonably assume that there was only one panelist present, but, it does not add to any other conversation. Many conferences include hashtags to use as a way to document live reactions to scholarship and encourage conversation across panels to link scholars together. For instance, at the National Communication Association Convention in 2019, attendees

were encouraged to use #NCA19 while scholars specifically interested in technical/digital/networked rhetorics were encouraged to use #digitalNCA. #NCA19 was an “official” tag supported by NCA’s organizers for the whole conference to use while #digitalNCA spoke to a specific sector of those scholars in attendance. Both were created and supported by a larger network of people in order to organize larger, ongoing conversations. Further, these tags provided an opportunity for those who could not attend the conference to engage in discussions with scholars in their area of specialty. #benefitsofonlyonepanelist was written in the moment and was not aimed at connection, but rather providing commentary on my specific situation. The hashtag added nothing to the post other than matching stylistic expectations. The comment could have been included as regular text, but rather utilizes the hashtag style to mimic other tweets that utilize more common tags. This tag fits in but does not connect.

#Benefitsofonlyonepanelist mimics the style of a hashtag, but otherwise maintains a seriousness to match the content of the tweet. Other hashtags like, #PigsIAdmire and #GiveBoarsAChance do not relate to any larger conversation, follow the expected style of a hashtag, and have an inherent humor to them. They are light-hearted and positive in tone. #GiveBoarsAChance borrows its form from the Lennon-McCartney song “Give Peace A Chance,” an anti-war song written at the height of the Vietnam War (Norman 608). #GiveBoarsAChance takes a famous phrase, modifies it, and makes it a hashtag as a way to mimic both the text of the song and the form of a hashtag. Given the added context of “give peace a chance,” one might speculate that the author is suggesting that boars are misunderstood or underappreciated and should be respected as animals. However, the text of the tweet, “Today I very nearly came close to using my favorite hashtag again: #PigsIAdmire. I opted for #GiveBoarsAChance instead.” This tweet does not provide any context for the tag other than that it beat out #PigsIAdmire as the appropriate

tag for the author. There is no indication of the situation in which one might use either hashtag. The reader can only glean that the author likes pigs and, at least once before on social media, used #PigsIAdmire. If one follows the links provided by the hashtags, one is directed back to the same tweet. These tags exist on Twitter as their own entities, only to be found if one knows to look for them. They spoof what a hashtag is supposed to do by adopting the style of a tag, but do not create links to outside networks of social media users. By calling #PigsIAdmire their “favorite hashtag” one can conclude that these hashtags bring enjoyment to the author. Terry Eagleton suggests that the long-running understanding of humor is that “humour springs from a gratifying sense of the frailty, obtuseness or absurdity of one’s fellow beings” (36). #PigsIAdmire and #GiveBoarsAChance provide humor by mimicking the style of the hashtag and pointing out the potentiality for absurdity of a hashtag, especially when someone uses a tag that they create on their own rather than using prefabricated tags or tags that are (inter)nationally known. Henry Bergson’s theory of humor suggests that humor is intended to humiliate. Expanding on that notion, Eagleton suggests that “we laugh at people and things that become mindlessly automated, obsessive, stuck in a groove, unable to adapt themselves to their circumstances” (41). One potential use of a hashtag that does not trend may be to mock people who use as many tags as their character limit allows regardless of content. The desire to become Twitter Famous can seem pointless or silly to some. In an article for the *Guardian* 2016, Danny Yadron notes the confusion many people face on how to use Twitter, why hashtags are necessary, and, importantly, how to get followers. If people struggle to understand how and why one should use Twitter, then a frustrated person may choose to use tags that do not trend to voice their frustration in a way that taps humor through mimicry. In the article, Yadron cites the tag #twitterishardforsomepeople. When I searched that tag on Twitter, only seven unique tweets used the hashtag. While seven is more than one use of the tweet,

the tag does not function well as a conversation connector, but rather emphasizes through demonstration that it is not easy to be unique and visible on Twitter as a non-famous person. It is not enough to know how to form a hashtag; if one wants to use a tag to reach others, they must know how to leverage their followers and other tools, such as more well-known tags to amplify their own presence. Whether their frustration is with their lack of ability to be visible or with the excessive use of hashtags on other peoples' accounts, creating a hashtag outside of the index of well-known tags has the potential to create humor for the person using the tag and perhaps their followers.

In order to spread, a hashtag has to capture the imagination of other people, not just the person who originally tweets the tag. Tony D. Sampson notes that “what spreads is said to occur in a representational space of collective contamination in which individual persons who become part of a crowd tend toward thinking in the same mental images (real and imagined)” (61). If a hashtag is to spread, then it must find its way into a collective imagination willing to perpetuate the image conjured by the tag. #twitterishardforsomepeople points to a common frustration that the site is not intuitive or too much work for the amount of information available, but the phrasing of the tag is not as manageable as #twitterishard, which returns many more results through the standard search function on Twitter's interface. Rather than specifying for whom Twitter is hard by eliminating the phrase “for some people,” #twitterishard expresses a general sentiment that is easily recalled by people feeling frustration at the platform. Without the ability to be easily recalled or incorporated into one's Twitter lexicon, a tag, though funny or relevant to a cultural moment, will not be easily visible to the larger Twitter universe.

5.2 If Not for Visibility, then Why Use a Hashtag?

Non-trending hashtags provide critical insight into how one understands those hashtags that trend and are more visible and easily searchable. Despite the ways in which non-trending hashtags fail to function as indexical tools that connect people to others within a larger cultural conversation, the ways in which non-trending tags act stylistically demonstrate how hashtags create visibility and how they operate as their own unique authorial tool. The majority of people who tweet will never go viral and it is difficult to predict what or when an ordinary person's tweet will get picked up and spread across social media. The *Wall Street Journal* has called going viral "an elusive art" (O'Neil). Original content needs to be published at the right time using the exact right phrasing for people to retweet and adopt the tags used. Regarding visibility and hashtags, if one wants to engage in networked connections through Twitter, using a tag that already exists as a known tag for a particular purpose (e.g. #metoo, #ThrowBackThursday, #Starbucks) will be more effective than trying to create a new tag. Twitter does not often reward the reinvention of the wheel. That said, non-trending hashtags serve other purposes that should not be overlooked.

When discussing visibility, searchability, and whether or not a tag is either of those, what is lost is the possibility that a person does not want or care for their content to spread or to be visible to mass audiences. Examining hashtags as having functions beyond connectivity through examinations of style and parody, illustrates how tags can exist in their own right. Using a hashtag as a visual cue or to simply mimic the style of what is expected of a tweet allows people to engage as a Twitter citizen without necessarily caring about whether or not others see their post or search their tag long after the tweet has faded off of a user's own timeline and the timeline of their followers. Similarly, using hashtags as context allows for a user to better recall what they were talking about should they take a scroll down memory lane. In my earlier example of

#batesmotelisdelightfullycreepy, even though I may not remember the exact conversation to which I was reacting, I do remember the feeling of enjoyment I received from that show and I understand that I was trying to convey that message to others. Even if the tag is overly specific, it functions as a way to bring in more context without wasting characters on spaces between the words. Though the thought does not *need* to be a hashtag, it nonetheless serves a variety of purposes be it as a tool for parody or as additional context.

Using a hashtag that does not trend may also suggest an uncertainty regarding someone's social media literacy. Knowing that hashtags are used on social media is one level of literacy. Being able to use an already popular tag is another level of literacy. Understanding that hashtags are used to archive conversations and connect people who are interested in similar topics represents yet another layer of literacy. Being able to recognize the previous three types of literacy and purposefully jam—or “counter the bombardment of consumption-oriented messages in mass media”—hashtag is a skillful, sophisticated level of media literacy (Handelmen and Kozinets). Purposefully using a hashtag in the “wrong” way, by making it too long, changing the phrasing slightly to deviate from the already-accepted, already-popular, tag, or by being overly specific, can subvert what is expected from a hashtag. However, because authorial intention is difficult, if not impossible to glean from a text, it becomes difficult to determine whether or not someone is deliberately creating commentary on the social-consumerist practice of hashtagging *or* if they are trying to fit within the cultural parameters and are simply unaware of how to use the tool effectively. The person who uses non-trending tags may be either hyper-literate or less-literate regarding social media strategies; however, in both cases, by virtue of using social media, users are engaging in the culture created by Twitter to send and receive messages, regardless of how well they are able to navigate the intricacies and implications of using hashtags. In this case, it is

better for the tag to do the talking and let it speak for itself. Authorial intention does not matter. Once created, a hashtag takes on a life of its own.

Knowing that authorial intentions are easily lost or misunderstood can help someone rethink how and when to use a hashtag. Engagement can be one way to determine how a hashtag is being received. On Twitter, engagement can be most easily determined by “liking,” “retweeting,” or the number of times the tag has been used by other people. These methods of engagement provide clear moments in which someone has reached another person, but visibility is more difficult to determine. Ostensibly, one’s number of followers can help estimate the reach of a tag, but it is not a guarantee that everyone who follows an account will check their feed each day, losing the opportunity to see a tweet on the home feed. Even though Twitter can suggest posts that a user may have missed since last signing on, those tweets tend to be ones that have received active engagements such as retweets and likes. Rather, someone would have to seek out a specific author’s profile to see any tweets they may have missed since the last time they checked their Twitter. Because there is no way to accurately determine how many people have seen one’s tweet, if one is trying to take a stand against hashtags by subverting their form, it becomes difficult to determine what impact the tweet or hashtag has had on one’s viewers. For instance, if the goal is to create commentary on how hashtags are a consumerist mode of communication and serve the purposes of larger, capitalist institutions rather than the needs of the people using the tags, then one must grapple with tension between being visible and being complicit in that which one wants to critique. Using a parody tag that ends up being a one-off can resist being complicit in Twitter’s larger structure, but also lacks the visibility to send a strong message. Consider this, if one wants to critique a business for unethical labor practices, it would be impractical to purchase the product in order to destroy it as a method of critique because the business still gets the profit. A boycott

might be more effective because it brings visibility to the cause without giving profit to the business. However, the issue with a boycott is the same as not using a hashtag—it can be difficult to know there is a boycott without advertising it in some fashion. Not eating Chick-Fil-A doesn't do much if you are the only person who knows you aren't eating it. Not using a hashtag because you are protesting Twitter without telling anybody, does not make a boycott, it just means that you are not occupying space on Twitter. A non-trending tag as parody, however, takes up space in newsfeeds and takes up space in the days of those who do happen to see it. Even if the tweet does not see much engagement, the existence of the parody demonstrates a rupture in expectation of use.

If it is difficult to determine who sees tweets without likes or retweets, one must consider other benefits of tweeting into the Twitter void knowing that tweets are not necessarily going to be seen. Importantly, even if one's tweet is never seen or one's tag never re-circulated, non-trending hashtags take up space. Taking up space can be a powerful tool for activists who wish to disrupt ordinary life. In taking up space, one opens the channels for new creations of what can be reproduced in day-to-day living (Halvorsen 403). Though it seems that Twitter or other social media channels have endless space, every tweet sent takes up space in Twitter's infrastructure, with storage accounting for 45% of Twitter's "infrastructure footprint" (Hashemi). Even with Twitter's ever-expanding footprint, tweets that are seen by few, if any people, can still create opportunities for rupture. By using Twitter in a way that takes up space, but does not necessarily seek to be seen, the author is using Twitter in a way that differs from the expressed goal of Twitter:

The mission we serve as Twitter, Inc. is to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers. Our business and revenue will always follow that mission in ways that improve—and do not detract from—a free and global conversation.

Though the statement initially suggests that Twitter wants to encourage sharing of information, without direct reference to creating connections, the statement ends with “a free and global conversation,” suggesting that Twitter is meant to foster a connected, expansive network of conversations. Using a tag that does not conform to standard hashtag expectations, like being an appropriate length or avoiding being overly specific, may never serve the purpose of creating connection, especially if it is not used in conjunction with a more well-known hashtag. In this way, non-trending hashtags take up space on Twitter’s infrastructure, leaving less room for tweets that meet Twitter’s expectations of conversation. Returning to the question of what it means to use a hashtag, even as parody, to critique a hashtag and whether or not the critique is effective if it does not see engagement, the act of taking up space on Twitter’s infrastructure and making the catalogue/index/archive denser and more difficult to navigate is offers hashtags a role to challenge the machine.

5.2.1 An Index of One—Tweeting into the Multitude and its Impact on History and Memory

When one thinks of an archive, one might think first of the Library of Congress, the National Archives, or other archives contained within university libraries. However, because of the storage and memory capacity of the internet and the ability to access the internet through technologies like smart phones, the ability to archive and curate information is now in the hands of ordinary people (Foster 774). The benefits of ordinary people creating content and curating what is counted as history are many, including the preservation of marginalized experiences. Rather than having one History, the internet provides space for many *histories*, suggesting that what is history changes based on perspective. A culture cannot have a full understanding of history

if only one perspective is recounted. Though the major events of the world like war, famine, the installation of a new government, and, recently, a global pandemic, are important to record, small moments, like #covfefe can also nestle their way into the fabric of our culture. These small, fleeting moments preserve a cultural mindset in a way that textbook history cannot. Hashtags permit people to file away their thoughts and reactions to specific cultural moments, adding to the archive of information available to create an image of history.

When people use a pre-existing hashtag, they add to a story; however, a one-off hashtag also insists on its place in history. If we archive and index information for ease of recall of important information, then when we use archiving technology for information that others have not already deemed as worthy of being remembered. As mentioned above, taking up space can be a radical act, and when a tag stands on its own, it is implied that the author believes in the value of their thought so much so that it deserves to stand as a hyperlink rather than as standard text. Ronald Day notes that a good index “references important terms within a book’s content and in doing so not only give the term meaning in terms of the book’s content, by they also help to position that book within a larger discursive field” (7). If a good index puts specialized content in connection with a greater context, then a one-off hashtag cannot be a good index in a practical sense. That said, there is something noteworthy about treating one’s own content as deserving of its own hyperlink. In her discussion of the gender dynamics of self-promotion, Christina Scharff notes that if one is to be a product, one must actively promote themselves (100-101). Hashtags, even those that do not trend, serve to promote the person who uses them. If someone uses a hashtag that has no other uses, implicitly, they are saying that their tag should be indexed because their hashtags are important. As content is distributed on the internet, it becomes useable for many

purposes, especially if one's account for any social media platform is public or otherwise lacks privacy settings that would restrict access.

To illustrate this point, Delta Airlines encourages patrons to tag their travel photos with #SkyMilesLife so people can see that Delta was a part of their travel. However, if one reads the fine print at the bottom of Delta's website it notes that any use of #SkyMilesLife gives them the right to "a royalty-free, world-wide, perpetual, non-exclusive license to publicly display, distribute, reproduce and create derivative works of the submissions, in whole or in part, in any media now existing or later developed for any purpose, including, but not limited to, advertising and promotion on Delta websites, commercial products and any other Delta channels..."⁴ This detail regarding what it means to use Delta's hashtag is difficult to find, tucked away in tiny print at the bottom of the website or in nearly invisible print at the bottom of the posters that line the walkway from the terminal to the plane. Hashtags, even if they are meant for one's own enjoyment, can become part of the content of another. If Delta were to repost someone's tweet using #SkyMilesLife that also included a hashtag that was a personal creation of the author, because of the increased visibility, the tag has the potential to become an index larger than one. It is the potentiality that is important. When considering what should be stored as history, a holistic approach, one that considers all sides, not just the victors or the majority view of history enriches a person or culture's understanding of the world. Social media creates space for more voices, even those that perhaps whisper through a non-trending tag rather than scream with a more widely used one. Day notes that "social computing expands the quantitative functions and the social values of such systems beyond academic and scholarly institutions and gives greater weight...to sociological

⁴ This is legal. According to the American Bar Association, a hashtag can be trademarked if it "functions as an identifier of the source of the applicant's goods or services" as detailed in the Lanham Act. Because #SkyMilesLife directly engages a product from Delta, the tag can be trademarked by the company.

and psychological values functioning in the social networks of the documentary items” (60). In other words, what we post to social media has importance beyond an academic function. What we post impacts our social and psychological environments. In what Andrew Hoskins calls the “connective turn” in media, people get to respond and participate in creating memory rather than leaving memory making up to those who write the news (86). We create our world for others to see. Critically, “documentation...is an historical and social technique that performs the relatively “live” indexical positioning of subjects” (Day 60). So, even if a hashtag does not trend, it still operates as a way to offer a record of what a person’s world looked like at a specific moment in time. Even if the tag is not deemed worthy of repetition by other people, the tag creates its own archival niche on Twitter.

Despite the benefits of hashtags creating their own hyperlinks and becoming permanent, hashtags create noise (see Reinwald 2017), making it more difficult to sift through the information available, especially as algorithms foreground those hashtags which trend. Though many hashtags can trend at once, the algorithms will prioritize tweets based on user-based information for an individual’s timeline. Hoskins calls this abundance of information ‘the multitude’ noting that “the multitude forges a non-sociable social or a sharing without sharing precisely because its digitally connected memory is both humanly and algorithmically archived, mixing up and blurring the conscious and the unconscious, the discriminant and the indiscriminant” (87). Hashtags that do not trend muddy this multitude even more because they take up space and add to the cacophony of information to sift through as people choose to what they do or do not pay attention. Though tags can help with precision of message and archive, if tags are not being used in a targeted way, but rather in such a way that prioritizes self-expression over expression for the sake of others, then the archive grows bigger, the index becomes more crowded, and the system becomes unwieldy

despite the existing tools for connection and sorting. Further, though Hoskins argues that “The multitude appears as stronger than previous collectivities as it is afforded carte blanche to keep the ‘conversation’ going: there is literally no ending” (89), non-trending hashtags become lost in the multitude, effectively stopping their memorial abilities. Yes, it is possible to uncover these tweets, but for the average user who, according to Kit Smith of Brandwatch.org, has 707 followers, or the 391 million accounts with no followers at all, it is unlikely that the content contained within those accounts will be revisited beyond its initial publication. At the point where content is going out into the Twittersphere without much chance of being recovered, the noise grows louder and more frequent until it makes it impossible to navigate. As much as hashtags want to enhance conversation, overabundance hinders connectivity and ability to be rediscovered, which is neither good nor bad inherently, but rather a latent quality of a hashtag. Making noise is a valid function of a hashtag, and just as W.J.T Mitchell suggests that pictures want to be asked for themselves what they want (82), so to do hashtags, whether this means being discoverable or being lost to the multitude, each individual hashtag functions on its own.

Without a doubt, the potentiality to be rediscovered is important; however, the likelihood of average users creating content that is widely viewed is low, challenging the notion that Everyperson is a history-maker and that the gatekeepers have been removed (Hoskins 89). In addition to memory being part of a multitude, memory can be multidirectional. Michael Rothberg defines multidirectional memory as “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross referencing, and borrowing, as productive and non-privative (3). It is not that we need to compete for memorial space, but rather that everything works together to create memories across other bits of information (Rothberg 3). If we think of memory as going in many directions and that it functions as a collective to create many memories, then regardless of who contributes to the cacophony of

information on the internet, all of it has immediate value as a way to build history and memory. This further supports the notion that gatekeepers have been removed from what we consider history. Even if a hashtag is only used once on someone's account that only has a couple hundred or fewer followers, because it exists on a public platform and can be cross-referenced with other pieces of memory, the hashtag has the *potentiality* to become part of social memory, especially if the one-off tag is used in conjunction with other more popular tags. Even as noise, a tag can help create memory or history because of its function of creating a moment in which it was difficult to navigate through the information being offered. Regardless of if the individual tag is remembered, it still adds to the overall picture of social media, much like an individual photo adds to a photo mosaic—even if you can't find your picture in the mosaic, you know it's there and part of the greater picture. Just because a tag can't be found, doesn't mean it doesn't exist as part of a larger picture.

Sometimes a non-trending tag is unintentional. Spelling mistakes or mis-formulations of a tag can prevent someone from making a specific connection. For instance, #BlackLivesMatter links instantly with other folks who are interested in being part of the larger conversation regarding police brutality toward black people and other injustices black people face. However, someone using #BlackLifeMatters, though ostensibly interested in the same conversations, are not linked together with #BlackLivesMatter. According to Google Trends, over the last five years, #BlackLivesMatter, though peaking in interest in July 2016, has registered interest in some capacity. However, #BlackLifeMatters, does not register as a tag of interest at all over the last five years. If one uses Twitter's advanced search feature to search #BlackLifeMatters, one will find that more than one person has used the tag; however, it is not widely used and it is possible that it is a misspelling of #BlackLivesMatter. It is not that these instances are trying to parody

#BlackLivesMatter or create a new tag that goes viral in its own right. Rather it is a moment in which one misremembers or is unsure of what precisely is the organizing tag regarding a topic. This is an earnest attempt to connect to a larger conversation that lands adjacent to and, therefore, remains unconnected to that conversation. As a result, it is lost to the multitude.

5.2.1.1 Issues with Hashtags as Memory-, Index-, and History-Making

Gatekeeping is a necessary discussion as it comes to recording the distribution of information. Though it is generally considered a good thing that more voices are now able to contribute to history through their individual uses of hashtags to connect their voices to others, I would argue that though there may be more people attempting to round out people's understanding of history, gatekeeping still exists in the sense that those that make the most noise to the most people can serve a gatekeeping function. The median Twitter user has just 387 followers according to the Pew Research Center's report from April 24, 2019. Although these people can add to larger conversations, it is unlikely that any one of their tweets will prompt a national or international trend, leaving the more engaging users, like celebrities, politicians, and other public figures to shape what information is circulated. Though people can engage with others and create a web of history, the tags and types of stories used are often made visible by those with more social power. As I discussed in my chapter about socio-political hashtags, #MeToo as a slogan for granting visibility to victims of sexual assault went viral because of Alyssa Milano despite having been part of a larger organization dedicated to helping Black women and girl survivors of sexual assault created by Tarana Burke in 2006. Though this group had been in existence, it didn't become part of the larger cultural conversation until twelve years later, and even then, many people still did not understand that Alyssa Milano did not create #MeToo. In this situation, though less well-known people were putting information out into the world, it took the vibrato of a celebrity to make the

phrase #MeToo circulate. Though information exists for others to uncover, it is not always true that the voices of less well-connected or marginalized people are no longer blocked by those with more status.

Beyond the inescapable over-attention to celebrities and public figures over content produced by the general public, oversaturation of information makes it difficult to form connections. To this point, Ben Agger notes that “Immersion and diversion occur together; indeed, the greater our investment in ephemera, the more diverted we are from what is really going on” (126). In other words, as we pay attention to fleeting thoughts, like tweets and hashtags and other social media content, the less we understand about the larger narrative. We lose the forest for the trees. Tweets and tags all contribute to a muddying of the larger picture, especially as more popular stories take over timelines. Even though ephemera, both digital and non-digital has been lauded as a productive space for marginalized voices,⁵ when all news, information, or thoughts become digital ephemera, it is difficult to grasp a larger image, especially when the thoughts are disjointed or difficult to trace. One-off hashtags add to this noise and contribute to the burying of information. Do all tweets have the same impact on history and memory? Probably not, but as Alexis Lothian notes, “within burned letters, impossible archives, and unidentifiable, unretrievable web pages, exists possibilities that were never realized but might have changed everything” (552-553). The possibility that a lost one-off tag was connected to a tweet with the potential to reconfigure the course of digital, social memory creates a tension for visibility of information. People are and should be free to post their thoughts, regardless of their perceived ability to influence public history; however, the deluge of information makes it difficult for those voices to be seen, especially if someone is trying to make a stance from an initial starting point of less

⁵ See works by José Muñoz (1996), Alexis Lothian (2012), David Reichard (2012), Jennifer Tyburczy (2014), Rosemary Clark-Parsons (2017), Gemma Killen (2017) for literature on ephemera and digital ephemera.

visibility vis-à-vis fewer followers. The over-saturation of information makes hashtag use challenging. If one uses a one-off tag, the likelihood of being found is low. A hyperlink to nothing makes the link unhelpful. That said, a hashtag that is part of a larger discourse can also be unhelpful because there can be so many tweets that, unless one has a large following, it is unlikely an additional tweet will be picked up by Twitter's timeline algorithm. This leads us back to the issue of gatekeeping, but this time the gatekeeper is the timeline programmer who created the algorithm at Twitter. Though one-off hashtags have utility in creating memory, the utility lies in their potential to let new voices be heard, its potential to "change everything." For many tags, this potential will lay dormant in the vast recesses of the Twitter and the internet at large. Though thoughts may not be explicitly vetted by a gatekeeper, the vastness of the information available and the algorithm will quell those thoughts that do not speak or are not spoken by the loudest voices.

5.3 Moving Forward with Hashtags and their Potentialities

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated the myriad ways one-off hashtags are useful for expression on social media. Parody, style, memory-making, and noise are all ways in which a non-trending tag can serve a purpose beyond the more explicit goal of archiving information from which more popular tags benefit. I also explored how one-off tags can be challenging, especially regarding their contribution to information overload and the ease with which they are lost to larger, more prevalent conversations, often in favor of more popular, public voices. Despite the urge to ignore non-trending tags because they are hard to find, it is critical that digital media and digital

rhetoric scholars consider the role a non-trending tag plays in how discourse is created and information circulated throughout the internet.

The techno-populist idea that the internet is free from bias has long been disputed and hashtag campaigns, especially those tags that focus on specific socio-political issues are often seen as a way to bring in more voices to important conversations regarding issues of inequality across race, gender, sexuality, and disability among others. However, by focusing only on tags that function as one expects a hyperlink to function, we miss the ways in which non-trending tags enrich and challenge how Twitter and other social media pages should, and, importantly, *could* be used. The bulk of this project focuses on hashtags that are well-known, but this project would be incomplete without a discussion of less-visible tags. Further, understanding what a tag can do beyond linking a text to other similar texts nuances our ability to critically examine how hashtag campaigns are succeeding in some ways, but coming up short in others. Non-trending tags are not easily visible, but it is not a guarantee that other tags with millions of uses are any more visible, and, perhaps, it is non-trending tags' invisibility that provide them with more utility than those tags that connect the masses.

6.0 Conclusion

In March 2021, one full year after the Covid-19 epidemic was declared a pandemic and life radically changed from face-to-face interactions to virtual ones, hashtags remain a core part of facilitating communication. As vaccines become more available for people to receive, hashtags such as #CovidVaccine began circulating, allowing a visualization of how many people are getting vaccinated. Indeed, public health officials have encouraged people to post about their vaccinations as a method of encouraging those who are less inclined to do so to get their vaccines. This hashtag offers an immediate use of creating connection and bringing visibility to the vaccine as a public good, but there is more to the tag than the connection it offers. As of March 2021, many states are preparing to open vaccination appointments to all adults who wish to be vaccinated. That #CovidVaccine is trending exactly one year post pandemic declaration offers a unique way to measure time. After a year of uncertainty and adapting to a way of life that limits in-person connection, #CovidVaccine offers a glimpse of a near-future where hugs can be given and received and family traditions can return to normal. Much like crocuses and daffodils are early harbingers of spring, #CovidVaccine signals an upcoming change in lifestyle. Even though it does not give a specific time, the hashtag shows that the vaccine is being distributed more and more, giving hope that the worst of the pandemic will be behind us soon. People were more encouraged to plan a summer vacation; schools and universities are announced returns to in-person learning; couples resumed wedding planning based on the availability and distribution of the vaccine. It is one thing to hear about the vaccine distribution numbers on the news or read about it on the internet, but seeing friends and family post their vaccination appointments to social media makes the timeline towards any previous sense of normalcy feel within reach. #CovidVaccine does not simply

connect people to others who are using the tag, it structures how people are to conceptualize time in the upcoming months. Because of their ability to shape time, through both *kairos* and especially *chrónos*, hashtags serve important rhetorical functions that impact the daily lives of social media users in subtle ways.

Beyond impacting our perception of time, hashtags offer other uses, including for context-creation, parody, style tools, and memory aids. Each of these potential uses asks that social media users look beyond the obvious to ask what the hashtag is doing and why it matters. With the flurry of hashtags someone might encounter on a day-to-day basis and with new tags popping up consistently, recognizing that hashtags are more than an attempt to ‘go viral’ provides both digital rhetoricians and social media users a better sense of how to interpret digital spaces and the conversations encouraged within those spaces.

6.1 What Does Knowing What a Hashtag Does Do for Us?

At its most basic function, a hashtag links conversations together, but capping value at this surface-level understanding fails to account for the work a hashtag does on its own as a rhetorical tool. Throughout this dissertation, I have interrogated different styles of hashtags—both the easily visible and those tags that are challenging to find. Close readings of socio-political, seasonal, daily, and non-trending tags offer unique insights into how hashtags impact our understanding of our digital environment.

By looking at #MeToo, I interrogate what it means to operate kairotically, or opportunely, so that the hashtag lives on beyond its inception. Importantly, I explore how longevity does not necessarily mean inclusivity through the critique of Milano’s status as the creator of #MeToo

despite Tarana Burke's coining of the phrase through her foundation aimed at helping black girls and women handle their own experiences as survivors of sexual abuse. I also examine how the hashtag's specificity both helps and hinders inclusivity. Even though #MeToo does serve an important function of connecting survivors and creating visibility because of its ability to create affective ties, there is work to be done regarding who is viewed as a believable survivor. The tag can create the connection and induce affective responses, but it cannot and does not overcome preexisting inclinations to value some stories over others.

The second chapter moves from *kairos* to *chrónos* and explores how seasonal hashtags benefit from predictability. These tags gain their efficacy from their latency during the 'off-season.' Seasonal hashtags offer movement through the year beyond what the calendar offers. Further, seasonal hashtags act ritualistically and create traditions of use, keeping their predictability from becoming mundane. Rather than occurring and recurring so often that it becomes white noise, these tags become something to look forward to throughout the year. There can be debate regarding when it is appropriate for the season to change, as demonstrated with my example of #PumpkinSpice, which raises questions regarding issues of rushing the cultural seasons. For #PumpkinSpice, regardless of what side someone takes on the debate of when is too early for pumpkin spice, the act of engaging in the season through using hashtag to critique the early release, marks the beginning of the #PSL season, whether the author wants the season to start or not. Importantly, though the tag may recur each year, the context of the tag changes with the cultural landscape. #PumpkinSpice in 2020 was impacted by the pandemic and many implored others to let people enjoy what they want because so much had already been sacrificed. A tag like #StateFair in 2021 will circulate differently as people receive the Covid vaccination and restrictions are lifted. While seasonal tags may specify an event or product, those things are less

important than the mood that comes with the ritual surrounding each hashtag. As these tags recirculate each year, social media users can trace the shift in cultural ideology.

Continuing on with the concept of movement, daily hashtags, much like seasonal ones, circulate on a cycle; but the daily hashtag cycle occurs more quickly than a seasonal tag. Because these tags can occur so frequently—ostensibly once every seven days—they become mundane and don't always function in a way that offers increased visibility or connectivity. Their usefulness must then be evaluated in other ways. Daily hashtags do scheduling, context-creation, and time-keeping. Regardless of how often these tags are used, by virtue of their use by an author, the tag has impacted when and what someone posts to social media. Additionally, because these tags are scheduled, they are predictable and the content is searchable. Even if these tags aren't being used with the intent to be hyper-visible, they offer a way to keep time for an individual. Much like a metronome keeps tempo, daily tags keep tempo for social media posts. The tempo for each tag changes, but as each new #TFT or #TBT or any other daily tag is reused, the author has the opportunity to trace their memories and visualize their pattern of social media authorship.

Finally, hashtags have value when there are no connections to be made at all. Non-trending hashtags are challenging to find, but it is precisely this challenge that makes them so important for rhetorical study. Even tags that trend do not guarantee an author visibility because of how many others use those tags. On the opposite spectrum, though a non-trending tag may not grant visibility, predictability, or searchability, it does offer opportunities for stylistic expression, which may promote critique through parody. These tags also offer opportunity for increased context. By styling a prose sentence as a hashtag, the author eliminates spaces and squeezes more room out of the 280 character limit on twitter. Additionally, using tags that don't add to any conversation takes up storage space on Twitter's servers and creates noise simply by existing as a potentiality on

someone's home feed. This can be both a positive and a negative occurrence depending on the goal of taking up space. If the goal is to critique social media use, then taking up space may be a legitimate way to participate in critique without fully engaging with the intended use of the system. Here, the non-trending tag jams expectations of what a hashtag does, offering a different perspective. However, if a tag is non-trending because of a mistake or a typo rather than an intentional misuse, voices may be lost from important conversations—#BlackLifeMatter and #BlackLivesMatter, for instance, may both wish to speak to the same cause, but they will not connect or be visible in the same way. Even if the goal of all hashtags is not visibility, accidental non-trending hashtags become black holes for potentially valuable information. Continued examination of non-trending hashtags is critical for developing a well-rounded rhetorical theory of hashtags.

6.2 Significance, Implications, and the Future of Hashtag Research and Digital Rhetoric

6.2.1 Significance and Implications

This dissertation has demonstrated the myriad ways that hashtags function beyond linking conversations. Regarding the issue of time and *kairos* versus *chrónos*, the hashtag demonstrates the rhetorical significance of “quantifiable time.” Even though *kairos* is often understood as the more rhetorically powerful of time conceptualizations, *chrónos* can control content-creation. If agency is important, then hashtags that demand to be posted on a specific day, time, or season have agency over their use and authorial control. Additionally, *chrónos* captures a sense of movement, which, as has been demonstrated throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, is important for maintaining

individuals' sense of vitality. Complaints of feeling “stuck” or the sense of exhaustion evident in the exaggeration that March 2020 lasted twelve months demonstrate the need for movement. Though *kairos* importantly encompasses affect and deals with the power affect has on a rhetorical situation, *chrónos* as understood through hashtags demonstrates the importance of movement as demonstrable on social media. Even if the days of the calendar feel stagnated, seasonal and daily hashtags offer evidence of movement as they are used and reused. When everyday feels like Groundhog's Day, any sense of time advancement, even through the use of a hashtag, is powerful.

Beyond their importance for understanding time, hashtags offer a sense of style that is distinctive from other textual forms. Beyond being character efficient on Twitter, the hashtag offers visual cues that the hashtag is meant to be read and understood differently than standard text. The hyperlinked-blue offers a change in color and signals the active nature of the link, even if the tag only links back to itself. The activity embedded in hashtags reshape and redirect how attention should be paid to that bit of text. Much like italics or bolded letter-type emphasize certain words, so too does a hashtag emphasize specific bits of a message, both virtually and when invoked verbally by saying, for example, “hashtagblessed.” That hashtags are used both virtually and *verbally* (#verbally) to demonstrate their power in creating messages that hold meaning beyond their practical functions as links, especially when that practicality is removed when used in non-virtual spaces or, as explored in detail in the project, in virtual spaces, but as non-trending hashtags. Though non-verbal cues like tone of voice, pitch, volume, and rate offer emphasis, adding “hashtag” changes the meaning and asks the audience to interpret the message through online vernacular. The power here is that using online vernacular off-line disregards expectations of daily conversation similar to how people were at first taken aback by the use of “lol,” “c u l8er,” and other examples of SMS language in daily conversation. Online and off-line worlds have been

blurring together more and more each year. 2020 made everything especially hazy because of the need to conduct all business—both social and professional—virtually. As people return to “live” lives, the habits adopted will be difficult to break. The hashtag will remain part of both of those worlds in both form and function. Hashtags *do style* and the style is as important as the function. In recent days, there has been a troubling rise in anti-Asian attacks including a mass-shooting incident in Atlanta, Georgia in which the shooter killed 8 people, including six women of Asian descent. In the wake of these attacks, yard signs with #StopAsianHate materialized in peoples’ front yards. The sign is not virtual—you cannot walk up to the sign, tap the hashtag, and be linked to others in the conversation—but styling the message as a hashtag *directs* people online where they are able to find resources to help the cause, whether it be donating money or simply learning about resources to address Asian discrimination in our country. If the sign were to have used a prose version of the message—Stop Asian Hate—though a declarative statement and a strong message, it would not give directions like a hashtag gives directions. Hashtags, through their style, provide action steps.

Both a renewed understanding of *chrónos* and a sense that style matters as part of function is critical for digital rhetoricians and the continued study of digital spaces. Just as what is said is important, so too is how it is said and when it is said. *Kairos* focuses on the opportune moment, but hashtags use *chrónos* to determine the right moment in a cycle. *Chrónos* isn’t just about a standard calendar or clock, but can also refer to cultural time that is reshaped and remolded through daily and seasonal hashtags. Yes, these tags have quantifiable timelines for use, but they do not reappear as exact duplicates. These hashtags impact *and* are impacted by the rhetorical moment of their recirculation. The reuse of each seasonal or daily tag is a predictable moment to examine the cultural understanding of phenomena at a specific moment in time. Seasonal and daily hashtags

offer the opportunity to look to the future to plan rhetorical responses rather than looking back in hindsight to determine whether or not a response was rhetorically significant.

Throughout each chapter and each new genre of hashtag, the driver of the hashtag changes. Socio-political hashtags are widely used though they typically gain visibility through celebrity participation even if they are initially created by a non-famous person. Seasonal hashtags, especially #PumpkinSpice is driven, in part, by corporate entities in addition to consumers. Everyday use tags and non-trending tags are more individually driven. The creator of the tag matters because it impacts what messages are sent and how they are received. Seeing a celebrity use #MeToo and seeing a friend use #MeToo might both upset a person, but the information that a loved one has experienced sexual assault is more devastating to an individual because it brings sexual assault from something that happens “out in the world” to something that can happen at home. The individualized nature of a global campaign strengthens the campaign’s pathetic appeal. For seasonal hashtags like #PumpkinSpice, knowing that the origin comes from a corporation—Starbucks—emphasizes hashtags’ role in neoliberal consumerism. Even if a person using #PumpkinSpice is not directly referencing Starbucks, Starbucks and Pumpkin Spice Lattes are connected in such a way that the tag unintentionally evokes Starbucks or other products—pumpkin beers, pumpkin spice candles, pumpkin salsa, pumpkin seed tortilla chips among other items—for consumption between the months of August and December. Even though #PumpkinSpice is related to a season and can be separate from consumerism, the ways in which #PumpkinSpice has evolved from a Starbucks product roots the tag in neoliberal consumerism. Understanding a hashtag’s driver—a celebrity, an individual, or a corporation—is necessary when examining tags that are meant for critique. Hashtags can be used in a lighthearted manner--#PumpkinSpice is a strong example of people using a hashtag for pleasure—however, as demonstrated by #MeToo,

tags can be used to launch serious critiques of systems and individuals that perpetuate sexual assault, racism, and other injustices. Understanding who is doing the critiquing via hashtag can help strengthen or weaken a message.

Ostensibly, hashtags can be used to critique Twitter, which raises the question of what does it mean to critique the system in which you are complicit by virtue of use? While it seems contradictory and, indeed, hypocritical or counterproductive to critique Twitter using a tool created by Twitter, because of the platform offered by Twitter, a critique using its own system can still be effective. Currently, there is a national discussion about what it means to be a capitalist country and a democracy. Politicians on the Left like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders are calling for increased taxes on the 1% to redistribute wealth to make the United States a more economically equitable place to live. These are noble intentions and intentions set by those who are complicit in the current capitalist system. In order to make changes that reduce capitalism's role in the U.S. democracy, politicians and activists are forced to navigate the system they critique and finds ways to work with the system to change the system. So too must someone work within social media to change social media. Because of the available audience, critiques launched on social media websites like Twitter do have the ability to have more range. What is important here though is that critiques made within the system that is being critiqued must be self-reflective. Change does not happen if calls for change are passive, so self-aware hashtags used to critique social media navigate their seeming passivity by building in self-reflection.

Finally, this project emphasizes the importance of understanding the mundane and recognizing what role mundane uses of rhetorical tools provide digital rhetoricians. Even though my case study of #MeToo reiterates the importance of hashtags at a socio-political level, the bulk of the project asserts that mundane hashtags like #PumpkinSpice, #TransformationTuesday, and

other hashtags that do not trend on their own are worthy of investigation rather than being written off as silly or frivolous. Social media is for the masses and as digital rhetoricians, it is our duty to understand what the masses are using social media to do. By examining the rhetorical potentialities of mundane hashtags, the conversation regarding hashtags' utility can move away from conversations regarding activism and begin conversations about what kind of communication people engage with on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly cycle. Hashtags do not need a major event to be useful. Hashtags are the Swiss army knives of digital rhetorical tools and have uses beyond the obvious task of connection. Having a better understanding of what hashtags do as mundane rhetorical tools provides insight into what the general social media user, one who does not go viral or is not an influencer, gains from platforms like Twitter and the tools available to them. This project does not write off hashtags like #ThrowBackThursday or #PumpkinSpice and valueless, but rather takes them seriously and builds a better understanding of how people use social media to predict, schedule, and stylize their content-creation patterns. Because these tags are important to those who use them, these tags are important for digital rhetoricians to take seriously as cultural, rhetorical texts.

6.2.2 The Future

My hope is that this project reinvigorates conversations regarding circulation, style, and *chrónos* so that digital rhetoricians move beyond linking, activism, and connection as the worthiest aspects of hashtags to study. The hashtag as a rhetorical tool feels almost overly specific, yet this dissertation only scratches the surface of possible research. As a digital rhetorical project, this dissertation focuses primarily on identifying the myriad features a hashtag offers rhetoricians. An adjacent project to this dissertation would consider how hashtags differ across platforms. This

dissertation focuses solely on Twitter, but I am curious about how hashtag use is different on platforms that are image-based, like Instagram, and image-text based like Facebook. Twitter is predominately text-based, though pictures can be used at times, so exploring how hashtag use changes based on primary mode of expression will offer insight into how people choose to punctuate their content based on platform. Exploring the hashtag across platforms will further detail the different ways a hashtag operates as a rhetorical tool.

Methods offer another way to further the reach and significance of this project for the future of rhetorical hashtag research. This project uses quantified data to do close readings of hashtags, moving forward, a digital-humanistic, distant reading would provide additional insight into how hashtags as rhetorical tools operate on a larger scale. Even though this project prioritized close reading of tweets and hashtags, distant reading would allow for big-picture pattern discovery and sense-making regarding the information webs woven using hashtags. For instance, a distant reading of where hashtags are being used globally would help expand what rhetoricians understand about how hashtags are used outside of Western context. One of the benefits of TAGs as a collection tool is that it pulls tweets in all languages and offers data on where specific hashtags are being used. Even though Twitter is based in the United States, using data to explore its global function provides more information on how rhetorical tools translate from culture to culture. For instance, #MeToo has been used in over 85 countries (Fox and Diehm). Even though #MeToo was created in the United States, it has global resonance and cuts across language barriers. Distant reading would allow an examination of when tags are used in other countries and when those tags are left untranslated. While other countries have their own hashtags, it is evidence of the tag's importance as a communicative, rhetorical tool when it is left untranslated. Exploring how and when hashtags are translated offers insight into how those in other countries wish to communicate

to a potentially global audience. This also allows for questions of benefits and drawbacks of the Western grasp on social media and popular hashtag usage. Just as different countries have different rhetorical traditions, so too do countries have different understandings of how to use new rhetorical tools. A distant reading would help rhetoricians further expand a global understanding of digital rhetoric.

More ambitiously, future work would look more closely at the mechanical processes that make hashtags circulate, like algorithms, coding, and infrastructure. Understanding what hashtags do rhetorically as agents can help explorations of how content circulates because of—or in spite of—algorithms and interfaces that deliberately filter out what is and is not made visible to other users. Future projects would engage in deep examinations of what it means to build an algorithm and how tools, like hashtags, can be used to navigate potentially restrictive settings. Scholars, like Safiya Noble, Jeremy Johnson, and Jessica Reyman among others are already expanding work on algorithms to challenge assumptions that they are unbiased (Noble) and carving out a theory of algorithmic rhetoric. A rhetorical theory of hashtags fits within these conversations, especially as the theory is broadened to include explorations of how algorithms impact the rhetoricity of hashtags and circulatory ability and cyclicity are obstructed by algorithmic bias.

6.3 #MovingForward with Hashtags

Whether a hashtag is well-known or whether a hashtag is a highly-stylized example of prose, hashtags are a critical part of the circulation of information in digital spaces. Though this project focuses solely on how hashtags are used on Twitter, other social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook both utilize hashtags as an intended linking function. Regardless of

platform, digital rhetoricians benefit from examining what a hashtag does beyond the obvious. That people choose to use non-trending hashtags in virtual spaces, and, occasionally, invoke the hashtag in non-virtual spaces, warrants further exploration of what a hashtag does. My conversation specifically related to non-trending hashtags begs a future interrogation of hashtags used in non-virtual spaces. For example, mugs, t-shirts, stickers, framed cross-stitch samples, and other items can be found with phrases like #Blessed, #Woke, and #DadLife adorned on them. In fact, my own Facebook page offers targeted advertisements for a hashtag necklace from Tiffany's. Though it may be easy to write these instances of hashtag use off as frivolous appropriations of digital tools, it is also important to recognize that emblazing a hashtag on a non-digital item suggests that there is cultural value to both the hashtag/pound symbol and phrases that have been turned into hashtags. The hashtag captures an essence that prose or other punctuation does not. Style as a rhetorical function offers an opportunity to reimagine the purpose of a hashtag outside of a non-digital sphere.

Sometime between 2016 and 2018, I started using the hashtag #BAWA meaning “badass woman in academia” with a few of my dearest colleagues as a way to encourage each other and praise other women doing extraordinary work in our field and others. Rarely was #BAWA used as part of a tweet or other social media posting. Rather it was sent via text or written on a sticky note and left on someone's desk, usually following the completion of milestones like comprehensive examination, prospectus, and dissertation defenses, after department or conference presentations, or after receiving a ‘revise and resubmit’ or acceptance for a journal publication. Sometimes it was used as encouragement or praise for accomplishing small tasks like establishing a steady writing schedule. Regardless of how big or small the accomplishment was or is, #BAWA offers a sense of movement through the career trajectory of an academic and does not rely on the

linking factor offered through use on social media. #BAWA is compact and offers an easily translatable message to those who know what it means. Much like #MeToo, it can be decoded in one glance. In this final example, elements of style, context, and time are all evident, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of a hashtag. Hashtags are more than their linking function. Hashtags are varied in their style and purpose. While it is tempting to focus on socio-political hashtags and hashtag activism because of the clear, actionable purpose of the tag, seasonal, social, and non-trending tags require careful consideration because of their ability to mold time, create a schedule, and create context through a style that impacts how they are interpreted by others. Moving forward, rhetorical scholarship needs to continue to interrogate the ongoing role hashtags play as communicative, rhetorical tools, especially as they manifest in mundane aspects of life. Though easy to dismiss as merely a tool for those desperate to gain attention, hashtags have untapped rhetorical potential. There is immense power contained in the unassuming #.

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