#SisterIdobelieveyou: Performative hashtags against patriarchal justice in Spain

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Justicia es algo más que una sentencia,
es algo tan sagrado como el viento,
es fuerza para el débil, es conciencia,
es pan para aliviar el sufrimiento.

Violar es mucho más que usar violencia,
violar es destruir un sentimiento,
llevar a una mujer a la impotencia,
cortar sus alas blancas y su aliento.

Maldita la justicia si es injusta,
maltrecha libertad cuando la hieres
y pegas con la ley como una fusta.

No somos superhéroes con poderes,
hermanas, novias, madres...sí, me asusta
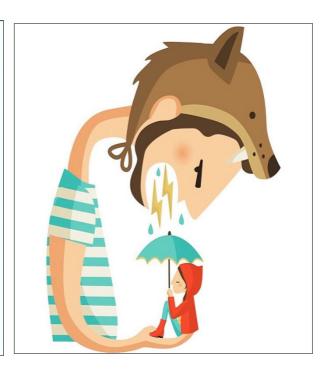el miedo atroz de todas las mujeres.

Luis Ramiro

Figure 1. Poetic hashtags that include poems and illustrations that show how aesthetics and connection/communion were used to frame the hashtag #SisterIdobelieveyou.

Figure 2. Visual digital artefacts created and spread by Twitter users associated to the Hashtag #PatriarchalJustice. They all include references to a shameful and unjust justice in reference to sexual violence and the "Wolf pack" case.

#SisterIdobelieveyou: Performative hashtags against patriarchal justice in Spain

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In recent years, anti-rape culture and anti-rape communication have taken new forms (Rentschler 2014), including the diverse use of tweets and hashtags (Mendes et al. 2019), prompting so-called *hashtag feminism* (Horeck 2014). In this article, we examine digital and analogue discussions propelled by a notorious case of gang-rape in Spain in 2016, which became known as "La Manada"/The Wolf Pack" (hereafter TWP). Hundreds of thousands of Spanish women took to the streets in protest during the three years of the case and their chants also flooded social media. This article is the result of a *hashtag ethnography* (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) of the hashtag *#SisterIdobelieveyou*. We argue that the synchronized performative action of "believing" undertaken by thousands of Twitter users, along with mass demonstrations on the streets, had a triple effect: it gave rise to a "virtual" community of sisterhood, challenged prevalent rape culture and gender stereotypes in Spanish society, and provided social media users with a new framework to conceive of and express themselves about sexual violence.

Keywords: cyber-activism; rape culture; hashtag ethnography; hashtag feminism; "wolf pack"; Spain

LaManada rapes us, #PatriarchalJustice challenges us, #WeWomenTogether respond. Let's go to the streets to shout that #ItWasRapeNotAbuse #WeAreYourWolfPack #SisterIdobelieveyou

(Tweet, Spain, June 2018)

Introduction: the "Wolf Pack" case as a catalyst for online and offline rage against rape culture in contemporary Spain

On the morning of 7th July 2016, during Pamplona's Festival of San Fermin (Spain), five young men took an intoxicated 18 year old woman into the lobby of a building and gang-raped her. While some of the men were assaulting her, two of the offenders filmed it with their mobile phones. After the assault, they started to brag about the event on their various WhatsApp groups, sharing videos and snapshots of the attack. The case became known as "The Wolf Pack" (TWP) rape case, because it was the nickname the five assailants

gave themselves in a WhatsApp group, they used to report on their partying, sexual harassment of women and other delinquent behaviour.

The court process received ample media coverage and triggered sharp criticism from many social actors in Spain including judges, political parties, and intellectuals, which ultimately led to a wider discussion and revision of the legal proceedings for rape and sexual abuse in Spain (Alicia Gil and José Núñez 2018, 7–8). In April 2018, the five assailants were found guilty of the lesser crime of sexual abuse – implying that their gang-rape was not an act of violence – and sentenced to nine years in prison, although Spain's public prosecutor argued for a 25 year sentence. Although the sentence was in line with current legislation, nationwide street and online protests took place immediately after it was made public. Thousands of people showed their support for the victim and their rage against what they considered "patriarchal justice," flooding the streets with banners, placards and chants, and digital spaces with hashtags such as *#SisterIdobelieveyou, #WeAreYourPack, #NoMeansNo, and #PatriarchalJustice*.

The aim of this article is to examine emerging hashtag feminism (Tanya Horeck 2014) and social media users' practices against sexual violence and rape culture in contemporary Spain, situating them within international scholarly debate held by feminist media scholars (Sonia Nuñez-Puente et al. 2017; Rentschler 2014; Kaitlynn Mendes et al. 2019; Jesalynn Keller 2015; Laura Rapp et al. 2010; Jill Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser 2019). We chose to work with *#SisterIdobelieveyou* because it seemed to have been used to establish trust in the victim, to express social saturation regarding victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence in Spain (Sonia Núñez-Puente and Diana Fernández-Romero 2018, 389Furthermore, we observed how the hashtag behaviour associated to *#SisterIdobelieveyou* encouraged a collective sense of support, empathy (Emma Turley and Jenny Fisher 2018, 129), and sorority among social media users (i.e. beyond feminist

activists), making a traditionally niche feminist cause accessible to wider audiences (Ruan Bowles Eagle 2015). . Throughout the paper we argue that the synchronized massive performative action of believing undertaken by thousands of users and activists challenged rape culture and gender stereotypes underpinning Spanish society and at the same time provided the digital public with a new framework to conceive of and think about sexual violence. We provide account of how the sustained engagement of users made believing becoming a process, and how this fostered a sophistication – theoretically and ideologically - of synchronized massive actions. Furthermore, we maintain that the performative force of *#SisterIdobelieveyou and #Idobelieveyousister*, accomplishes something fundamental, namely breaking the silence around sexual violence. This thing done with words (Butler 1997a, 25), i.e. hashtags, is in fact a subversion of the heteropatriarchal victim-blaming regime, which ultimately resulted in actual legal change in Spain.

Feminist cyber-activism against sexual violence: state of affairs

Second wave feminism brought about activism against sexual violence and rape culture, such as the pioneering *Speak Out on Rape* events organised by the New York Radical Feminists group (Lisa Cuklanz 2000). Since then, activist initiatives have multiplied, been amplified, and created a global outcry against sexual violence that has transformed forms of mobilisation and organizational structures of social movements (Jeffrey Juris 2012, 260; Bart Cammaerts 2015). From the French movement *Ni putes ni soumises* (neither whores nor submissive), to the viral Chilean feminist anthem *El violador en tu camino* (*A rapist in your path)*, including *#BringbackOurGirls, #MeToo* online communication tools have proven to be "very useful in disrupting hegemonic understandings of violence against women and for transforming the way historically marginalized groups are treated in their communities and by the criminal justice system"

(Rapp et al. 2010, 256).

Parallel to the widespread development of hashtag feminism (Tanya Horeck 2014), feminist media scholars have greatly advanced understandings of these novel forms of action, including mapping of changes in collective mobilisation techniques (Amparo Lasén and Iñaki Martínez de Albeniz 2008), observation of digital cultures of support among women (Sarah Thrift 2014; Rapp et al. 2010), exploration of the role of ICTs in feminist and queer activism (Aristea Fotopoulou 2017; Igor Sádaba and Alejandro Barranquero 2019), analysis of feminist counter discourses against rape (Rentschler 2014; Frances Shaw 2012), and the significance of ethical witnessing (Gámez-Fuentes et al. 2016; Núñez-Puente et al. 2019; Núñez-Puente and Fernández-Romero 2017).

The TWP rape case and related cyber protests have been the subject of recent scholarly activity in Spain (Mondragon Idoiaga et al. 2019; Ainara Larrondo et al. 2019; Nuñez-Puente and Fernández-Romero 2019; José-Manuel Robles et al. 2019). While the work of our peers has contributed to understandings of the potential links between digital, political, and social activity/action, our work aims to fill a gap identified by Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose in 2015, when they demonstrated that feminist scholarship lacked in-depth understanding of practices, routines and experiences of feminist activists using social media to challenge sexism, misogyny, and rape culture (2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). We argue that hashtagging behaviour has become part of this repertoire and that it propels the emergence of communities of users clustered around strong *affective solidarities* (Clare Hemmings 2012). These affective solidarities respond to local and contextual meanings and have the potential to transcend the screen and transform socio-political life through performative actions, an argument we will develop in the following pages.

Brief methodological note

Twitter is one of the most relevant social media platforms for protests in general (Christian Christensen 2011; Joel Penney and Caroline Dadas 2012; Raquel Recuero et al. 2015), and feminist media activism (Keller 2015) in particular. While we acknowledge the value of hashtag feminism (Horeck 2014) as a way of mapping current transformations in feminist activism, our aim is to inquire the performative potential of hashtags to alter socio-political life. In following the hashtag ethnography approach (Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa 2015), we intend to transcend the limits of customary quantitative analysis (metrics, tracking, engagement) to understand entanglements of (social) practices and sociabilities underlying the use of hashtags. By considering, analysing, and contextualising the range of use of a concrete hashtag, which effectively becomes a field-site, we aim to gain deep insights into what have become rather complex and polysemic communicative practices.

The corpus was collected by retrieving tweets and hashtags associated with *#SisterIdobelieveyou* over a one-week period from 21st to 29th June 2018, which was the most active period of the online and offline protests (Idoiaga et al. 2019). The empirical database that we obtained was composed of 6,595 tweets and retweets and included information about the gender and location of users, numbers of followers, the hashtags associated with the messages and whether they were sent from smartphones or from personal computers. In pragmatic terms, we managed and processed data using QAS Atlas Ti, employing inductive and deductive coding throughout. The results that we present here are part of a larger research project, which includes other research techniques, including socio-hermeneutic visual analysis of all images related to the

#SisterIdobelieveyou hashtag between 2017 and 2020[1] and in-depth interviews with anti-

rape activists.

We started the analytical process by re-constructing the *hashtag landscape*

(Jeffrey Carpenter et al. 2018) of *#SisterIdobelieveyou*, doing quantitative analysis that

involved a thematic categorisation of the most frequently used co-current hashtags (101).

A review of the top of these co-current hashtags (see Appendix 1) revealed a heavy use

of referential (#thewolfpack) and/or redundant (#Ibelieveyou) modes. After unifying

hashtags by similarity in families, we realised that the Twitter conversation was

articulated around two poles: cultures of support, and struggle against patriarchal justice.

Thus, we focused our analysis on (1) identifying social practices associated with the use

of hashtagging as anti-rape communication (Rentschler 2014); (2) online framing of TWP

case (Rapp et al. 2010); and (3) performative force/performativity of

#SisterIdobelieveyou (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) regarding belonging and believing.

Furthermore, the following *sensitising concepts* (Herbert Blumer 1954) supported the

analysis[2] throughout: *ethical witnessing* (Gámez and Núñez 2013; Gámez-Fuentes et al.

2016; Núñez-Puente et al. 2019)*, response-ability* (Rentschler 2014)*, pedagogical*

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[1] *Digital visual artefacts* (McGarry et al. 2019) as the visual repertoire of protest have a major

impact on the creation and modification of frames to conceive of and understand sexual violence.

However, the results of this analysis will be published in another piece of work (García-Mingo,

forthcoming).

[2]Note that in this article we only partially develop the analysis that emerged from applying all

these sensitising concepts, because it exceeds by far the length and aim of a scientific

communication of this sort.

function of Twitter (Mendes et al. 2018; Keller 2015), and *increased feminist consciousness* (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018), in that they outline key current processes and practices in (online) feminist activism.

Results and discussion: Anti-rape communication for change and the rise of *response-ability*.

Even though social media may appear as a disembodied and disaffected public arena (e.g., the debate about virtue signalling, Marc Orlitzky [2017]), a closer and contextual inspection of hashtagging behaviours suggests that "social media are privileged spaces in which to foreground the particular ways in which racialized bodies are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, surveyed, and positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence" (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 9). Bonilla and Rosa made this observation with regards to the *#Ferguson*[3] case and *#BlackLivesMatter* movement, and we understand that the same observation applies to *#SisterIdobelieveyou* as it also highlights systemic and state-sanctioned violence, albeit regarding gender. The hashtagging behaviour associated with *#SisterIdobelieveyou* served as a catalyst for organization of street protests (Magdalena Klin 2020), response-ability actions (Rentschler 2014) and provided a new space and framework to normalize anti-rape communication (Idoiaga et al. 2019).

In the following pages we argue that *#SisterIdobelieveyou* also works at a performative level, as it has succeeded in creating an affective community of users who, in believing an archetypal rape victim, defy the most basic predicament of rape culture.

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[3] Note that although, methodologically, we follow Bonilla and Rose, our analysis didn't include racialization. At the same time, Bonilla and Rose's idea of *performativity of hashtags* is central to our understanding of the #SisterIdobelieveyou movement, as we consider hashtagging behaviour as a resistance practice in an oppressed social group.

The Spanish state acknowledged and addressed this defiance via the draft bill, Ley Orgánica de Garantía de la Libertad Sexual, which "will mean the integral protection of the right to sexual freedom everyone has, as well as the eradication of all sexual violence, thereby acknowledging that this impacts women in a disproportionate manner" (Ministerio de la Presidencia, 3rd March 2020). It is thus clear that, regarding rape culture in Spain, social media offers the possibility to "hold accountable the purveyors of its practices and ways of thinking when mainstream news media, police, and school authorities do not" (Rentschler 2014, 65).

#Cuentalo (*#tellyourstory*)

Social indignation regarding the TWP case was at its highest in spring 2018, following the first sentence, which understood the gang-rape as not constitutive of act of violence. This coincided with the start of the #MeToo, which was translated into *#Cuentalo* by a Spanish journalistto invite social media users to share their personal testimonies about sexual abuse. 7,900 people and 3 million tweets to date are the collective response to this invitation of sharing personal testimonies about sexual abuse online/on Twitter. The example below demonstrates the performative force of tweets and hashtags ("talking empowers us"), the existence/cultivation of a(n) (online) space for testimony and empathy (Rentschler, 2014, 66), and the emergence of shared online framing relating to rape culture (two TWP case-specific hashtags – #Idobelieveyousister and #wearethewolfpack – appear alongside two more generic hashtags regarding sexual violence). We argue that *#Cuentalo* added another layer of indignation and shared rage to *#SisterIdobelieveyou.* @paulaboneti Hopefully it will serve to make us talk, so that we can stop being silent forever. Our silence only protects our attackers. It protects

all the assailants. Talking empowers us. #IdobelieveyouSister#metoo #tellyourstory

#wearethewolfpack

In the struggle against patriarchal justice, *#Cuentalo* provided users with an opportunity to create a shared framing : sexual violence was structural and targeted towards women. In a first instance, this framings materialised in two leitmotivs; rapists are free and do not forget their faces,used to promote feminist response-ability and thus "interrupt rape culture" (Rentschler 2014) collectively through testimony, advice giving and peer support (ibid. 68)

As noted, numerous marches, demonstrations, and other street actions took place throughout Spain in response to the TWP rape case. Hashtagging behaviour demonstrates that users were looking for and collectively creating a new repertoire of feminist activist actions – more specifically, response-ability actions that could surpass the testimony, the advice giving, and the provision of support, and thereby propel social change. As participants in these protests, we were struck by the actions that social media users and marchers were undertaking to accuse, repudiate, and harass the TWP. Thus, we revised our data set to systematize potential response-ability actions within our hashtag landscape (see Appendix, Figure 1).

Then, we looked for types of activist actions, corresponding communication strategies, and artefacts proposed by users to accuse, repudiate, and harass assailants. We systematized the response-ability actions proposed by Twitter users against the TWP, considering the type of activist action, the communication strategy, and the use of digital artefacts that users proposed (see table 1 in appendix). And following Recuero et. al. (2015), we categorized the functions of hashtags during street protest (see table 2 in appendix), and were surprised to find numerous poetic and phatic hashtags used to construct a very particular collective framing for *#SisterIdobelieveyou* actions. The

examples below illustrate this well.

Figure 1. Poetic hashtags that show how aesthetics and connection/communion were used to frame the hashtag *#SisterIdobelieveyou*.

1. **Negotiating a shared understanding online and transforming public debate on rape culture**

   The TWP case lasted 1,080 days, but the feminist activism it propelled continues. Twitter did, and still does, provide a space to negotiate meanings of sexual violence, to disseminate counter-narratives, and to organize action. Users/protesters engaged in debate, discussion, and deliberation, thereby achieving a shared understanding of the problem (Rapp et al. 2010), which provided a solid base to challenge hegemonic frames of representation of gender-based violence (Núñez-Puente et al. 2019; Núñez-Puente et al. 2019b; Idoiaga et al. 2019). Thus, we believe that *#SisterIdobelieveyou* was successfully employed to articulate a action and change public opinion, as mainstream media echoed the engagements and debates that were flooding Twitter. Idoiaga et al. (2019), also concluded that: "discourse on Twitter regarding the 'Wolf Pack' case has developed in Spain a digital space in which to participate in public debates on rape culture in general but also specifically on certain topics that until now had been worked in feminist environments but less at a social level, such as, for example, sexual harassment, rape myths, lad culture or toxic masculinity" (Idoiaga et al. 2019, 12). ***#JusticiaPatriarcal* (*#PatriarchalJustice*)**

The book "Digital Feminist Activism" (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2019) demonstrated that Twitter, and feminist digital content, fulfil a pedagogical role, as there

is the potential for readers to be exposed to feminist ideas and critiques they may not otherwise encounter in their day-to-day. As far as the TWP rape case is concerned, we argue that Twitter functioned as a pedagogical platform where a plethora of concepts, ideas, and debates that were new for many of the users (e.g., sexual abuse *vs* aggression, sexist institutions, consent) were vividly discussed and debated. Arguably, the most salient example of this pedagogical function is the use, definition, and problematization of *#JusticiaPatriarcal (#PatriarchalJustice)*.

#PatriarchalJustice was the second most co-occurring hashtag, just after the referential hashtag *#thewolfpack*. Within the entire Twitter conversation, patriarchal justice appeared in 25.5% of the tweets (see appendices). It is thus fair to say that *#Patriarchaljustice* was the "meaning-aggregator hashtag"[4] most widely employed by Twitter users. *#Patriarchaljustice* was used to highlight that the perpetrators of the TWP rape case were freed from jail while waiting for a new trial. This process of raising awareness was highly affective too, with users showing their feelings (rage, anger, frustration, shame)[5]..

Users' feelings included indignation, shame, fear, mistrust, incomprehension, contempt, and abandonment. Their characterisation of the Spanish legal system included adjectives such as: absent, unfair, useless, and "shitty" (see examples below):

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[4] When we say "meaning-aggregator hashtag", we mean a hashtag that attracts many messages, meaning that it becomes thicker as meaning is aggregated to the hashtag. This sort of hashtag requires more interpretive analysis, as it is more polysemic than other hashtags and has more layers that simple hashtags, such as referential hashtags that frame the conversation in time and place.

[5] This insight was gain after carrying out a qualitative analysis of messages related to the hashtags *#PatriarchalJustice*, *#Justice*, and *#WolfPackFreedJusticeUndone*, and words such as *patriarchal justice*, *courts*, *judges*, *institutions*, *sentence*, *jail*, and *bail*.

@Carolalon1: We cannot stand it anymore that this #JusticiaPatriarcal is on the side of who mistreats, abuses, or rapes us. There is an institutional, labour and media machismo that questions the testimony of the victims and has excessive understanding with the guilty#SisterIdobelieveyou

@rgonte: The justice of this country is a shame. #SisterIdobelieveyou #shittyjustice

Visual material was also employed to highlight the shameful and unjust justice system in Spain with regards to sexual violence and the TWP rape case. On many occasions, these visual critiques included mainstream representations of justice (e.g. the blindfolded Roman goddess Iustitia). Authorship of most of these illustrations was anonymous (or at least decontextualised), and they were shared along with expressions of disgust, irony, and word games. Some examples are below:

Figure 2. Visual digital artefacts created and spread by Twitter users associated with the hashtag *#PatriarchalJustice*.

Feelings fuelled the discussion, andeventually social media users engaged in complex debates that, until this moment, had taken place almost exclusively in expert or activist circles. This collective reflection about justice focused on three issues: the culture of impunity, a patriarchal justice system and the connection between patriarchal justice and institutional male chauvinism. The discussion of a culture of impunity included statements about the complicity between rapists and judges (e.g. One thing is to be raped by a pack of bastards ... and another to be raped by the system through a retrograde sentence #IdobelieveyouSister#WolfPack#WeAreTheWolfPack), the assertion that sexual violence is "cheap" for assailants, and the idea that judges are dangerous for

women (e.g. There are judges in this country who are an insult and a danger to women #SisterIdobelieveyou#TheyTouchOneTheyTouchUsAll)..

Twitter users also identified concrete ways in which they conceived justice being patriarchal, stating that justice: is by men and for men, does not represent women, and that in fact, justice wants women silent and obedient. Users characterised judges as misogynistic, primitive, conservative, and lacking adequate training. Furthermore, some observed a connection between patriarchal justice and institutional male chauvinism, noting the existence of institutional male chauvinism and that the system is failing because it does not include women. In general terms, users were inclined to show their desire for transformation of the justice system, which afterwards translated into a technical matter that jumped into the political arena. This desire for transformation was based on an idea that was repeatedly used: when will there be justice for us (women)?

2.   The performativity of a hashtag: belonging and believing.

The insights gained through our analysis demonstrate that, when it comes to rape culture and sexual violence, hashtags are not mere expressions of subjectivity or community-building but are *performative* actions. In stating this, we stress that hashtagging and all correlated social actions extend out of the online world and have an "immediate" impact on public debate about rape culture and patriarchal justice in Spain. We thus contend that, in the TWP rape case,[6] the performative force of a hashtag and hashtagging-related actions are related to two processes: belonging and believing. The analysed hashtagging actions gave rise to a virtual sisterhood, which in turn propelled a sense of belonging to a

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[6] This argument can apply to other relevant cases, such as *#BlackLivesMatter*. The action of publicly stating that Black Lives Matter simultaneously highlights the existence of systemic racism and defies a regime of hierarchisation of the value of lives.

community. The subsequent communal act of believing the victim put at stake the whole rape culture regime in Spain.

#*Sister*. Belonging

The idea of a *global sisterhood*, based on the idea that a shared oppression and common victimisation can be translated into a community of interest and collective activism couched in the rhetoric of kinship and family bonds (Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí 2001) was part of the wider liberal feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s.[7] In the Hispanic context, *Sororidad* was proposed and discussed by Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde, who is imported it from English-speaking academia in the 1990s. However, sororidad remained a minority concept in the Hispanic and local Spanish contexts until recently. The term itself was only included in the dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish in 2018. Sororidad was known and used by feminist scholars and feminist activists but was little known to wider publics until the 8th of March feminist marches of 2017 and 2018, and the TWP rape case (Sara Molpeceres and Laura Filardo-Llamas 2020, 74). To deconstruct how sisterhood

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[7] The narrative of sisterhood was intended to create a sentiment of proximity and familiarity amongst women to unite them against the enemy they all shared – patriarchy. However, the term has been met with some criticism (Farnush Ghadery 2019, 265). For our case study, we follow Jenny Gunarsson Payne, who proposed that sisterhood serves to build a sense of commonality, solidarity and shared purpose, but provides no fixed meaning, functioning as an "empty signifier" (2012, 189). The author compels us to investigate through systematic empirical analyses the various ways in which the signifier of sisterhood has come to function in different feminist contexts. We therefore decided to create the analytical category of sisterhood and to revise how it has emerged and evolved in our hashtag landscape.

was used within our *online crowd*, we coded the messages that were hashtagged with *#youarenotalone #wearenotalone #wearethewolfpack*, and *#sisterhood* and that included keywords such as *sister, sisterhood, together, unity, all of us*, and *not alone*. After coding, we concluded that the virtual sisterhood emerged because of the co-occurrence of two phenomena: an *affective unification* of users and the emergence of a rhetoric of *sisterhood*.

Online crowds have been defined as "an affective unification and relative synchronization of a public in relation to a specific online site" (Stage 2013, 211). This affective process is also observed in *mediated crowds* (Lasén and Martinez 2008, 155), and we argue that it is also a key feature of the social movement that we are describing. Claire Hemmings has explored the concept of affective solidarity to understand *feminism politics* (2012) in online activism, and hashtag feminism scholars have highlighted new forms of solidarity (Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose 2018) and novel cultures of support (Rentchsler 2014). Affective solidarity draws on a broader range of affects to build "a way of focusing on modes of engagement that start from the affective dissonance that feminist politics necessarily begins from" (Hemming 2012, 148).

Our analysis of emotions shown by users revealed that sadness, strength, hope, empathy, admiration, sorority, and gratitude were expressed, and that they served as a basis to weave an affective community, i.e. an *affective unification* of TWP engaged Twitter users. We also observed the emergence of a *rhetoric of sisterhood*, visible through the use of concrete terms connoting kinship and common struggle (e.g. *sister, sisterhood*, and of *companion*), the employment of grammatical strategies such as the pronoun *We* instead of *I* in enunciations (in its female form in Spanish, *nosotras*), as well as through metaphors of unity ("being only one body" in *they touch one, they touch us all, we will never leave you alone, We are the wolf pack*). After creating a virtual sisterhood

(#wearenotalone; #wearethewolfpack) and establishing a relationship with the victim (*#youarenotalone*)*,* the movement acquired a political dimension based on reciprocal recognition and support between women. We were able to observe how the community started sharing *affective processes and becoming a mental unity* (Carsten Stage 2013, 212) through empathy, trust, and a *culture of support* (Rentschsler 2014), allowing women to resist sexual violence.The intense use of hashtags about belonging and sisterhood evidences how the process of affective unification that took place in Twitter (see Appendix 2) responds to ethical witnessing (Núñez-Puente and Fernández 2017, Núñez-Puente and Fernández-Romero 2019; Nuñez-Puente et al. 2019; Gámez and Núñez-Puente 2013; Gámez-Fuentes et al. 2016).

#YoSiTeCreo **(*#IDoBelieveYou*). Believing.**

The theoretical proposal of ethical witnessing was useful to determine how networks of solidarity were built around a victim who became, at the same time, an active agent of political discourse and an archetypal victim of sexual violence. We examined how Twitter users established a connection with the victim of TWP (who we considered to be at the centre of the affective unification), by analysing a unique media artefact that resulted in an in-depth conversation on Twitter around its own key hashtag: *#lettervictim.* This hashtag emerged spontaneously when the victim of TWP sent an open letter to a famous TV entertainment morning show in Spain.[8] In the letter, she called on other victims of sexual violence to report the crimes and thanked all the people who had demonstrated against the decisions made by the courts in previous days. In our analysis,

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[8] The full letter can be viewed here: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/28/wolf-pack-rape-victim-writes-public-letter-three-year-ordeal/.

we studied the interaction between the victim and Twitter users, following the reactions of users to the letter.

Hashtagging and tweeting around the *#lettervictim* created an opportunity for ethical witnessing, as users reacted to the letter, leading to a new testifier–witness relationship based on trust, empathy, admiration, and acknowledgment[9]. Twitter users often showed reciprocal emotions, such as empathy and gratitude, promoting an image of the survivor far from that of the archetypal victim that we normally find within the *injurability frame* (Núñez-Puente et al. 2019). Indeed, we found that users characterised the victim as, for example, *sister, idol, powerful, victim, survivor, brave*, but the most persistent depiction was victim–survivor–brave.

Two radical changes, which were to be very transformational in the future, occurred within this process of interaction with the letter. First, the users, through the voice of the victim, pointed to the ideological basis of the struggle against rape culture. Second, they stated their commitment to participation in future political action through the idea of the war to come (*#ThisIsWar*) against a clear enemy (*#PatriarchalJustice* and *#Patriarchy*). At the same time, offline, thousands of protesters marched in many Spanish cities under the slogan "I do believe you" to support the victim, stressing the need to validate rape victims' testimonies. Both offline and online protesters, creating a *hybrid crowd* (Lasén and Martínez de Albéniz 2008), felt that the scrutiny and doubt of the victim's account during the judicial process and her subjection to public trial in the mass media were obvious results of rape culture.

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[9] We have completed in-depth analytical work in this area, but we do not develop it here to remain concise.

We argue that the synchronized massive performative action of *believing* exceeded the mere act of shouting in the streets or hashtagging and included a wider and longer process of learning and interaction in the Twitter user community. For us, *believing* was not an action but rather a process that included learning and negotiating the meaning of the events on Twitter (Mendes et al. 2019), as well as committing to social practices associated with hashtagging such as giving testimony or engaging in *response-ability* actions (Rentchsler 2014), thereby defying rape culture on Twitter through a discussion that became theoretically and ideologically more in-depth when users started to discuss "rape culture", "institutional misogyny" or "patriarchal justice". In short, *believing* as process challenged rape culture and gender stereotypes underpinning Spanish society, and provided the digital public with a new framework to conceive of and think about sexual violence.

We state that the performative act of understanding is the basic notion of *doing things with words* – how we produce effects and do things with language (Butler 1997a, 25). To understand what Twitter users were actually *doing* when they used hashtags related to believing, such as *#IbelieveyouSister* and *#Ibelieveyou*, we analysed all the messages related to the keywords *victim*, *victimisation, blame, victim-blaming*, *silence, denounce, evidence, believe, witness, testimony*, and *support,* including the tweets set out here:

> I think that believing is our DUTY now. You are not alone. I have lived through that sort of attacks. This is a movement of rejection to the judicial sentences. You are a HEROINE, do not doubt it #Idobelieveyousister

> The silver-line: this is the reason why it is important to believe and treat the victims with respect and that does not contravene the presumption of innocence #Idobelieveyousister

We believe that the *performative force* of *I believe you* or *We believe you* – i.e. *#SisterIdobelieveyou, #Idobelieveyousister* – goes beyond securing multitudinous support for a concrete victim of rape, in that in uttering/tweeting it, one breaks the silence around sexual violence. This subverts the heteropatriarchal victim-blaming regime by explicitly supporting the victim, acknowledges the revictimizing processes that rape victims must endure, opens a debate about ethical witnessing with regard to sexual violence, and demands specific law changes.

When the *#SisterIdobelieveyou* movement invited us to "not question" the victims of sexual violence, they proposed that their testimony should be accepted as truthful without further ado, thus pointing to the revictimizing process as overdue when the judicial process is gender biased. For the first time, social media users, who had never been part of the niche debate involving *gender justice*, categorised justice as patriarchal and judges as misogynistic, creating virtual and then offline spaces to discuss the differences between assault and abuse (*#noesabusoesviolacion*) and instigate a public debate about how consent should be regulated in the Spanish Penal Code (*#noisno*).

Conclusion

The social momentum of indignation after the court sentence in the TWC case created the perfect social atmosphere for thousands of users to speak out about their personal experiences, turning their personal issues and feelings into collective political processes, aggregating different political motivations into large social movements, and creating what have been called feminist techno-cultural networks (Rentschler 2014, 67).

Using the tools of mobile and social media, social media users, some of whom had never previously engaged in activism or considered themselves feminist, increasingly engaged in communicative actions that challenged sexism and, beyond this, started to speak about

rape culture and consider Spanish justice as *#PatriarchalJustice*. For many Twitter users, taking part in these activities was like engaging in a protest or a street march, in the sense that it offered an experience of commitment, community and collective effervescence in "real time" (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 7). This happened because the online protest reached intense levels of affective unification, helping to create a united community that, after a pedagogical process and intensive expression of personal views about events and online deliberation (Penny and Dadas 2014), acquired a political dimension based on the rhetoric of sisterhood. Reflection, connectivity, and solidarity were thereby transformed into a feminist consciousness, enabling the understanding of "all sorts of violence against women as a structural rather than personal problem" (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller 2018, 238).

The overwhelming synchronized offline and online action of believing went beyond breaking the silence and deconstructing the regime of victim-blaming. Cyber-activists gave direct support to the victim, who became at the same time an archetypal victim of sexual violence and an active political actor, which helped in the process of deconstructing rape culture from her new category of victim–survivor–brave.

Without neglecting to offer exuberant support to the victim, based on a new social bond in the local context, the movement pioneered a deep change of the legal system that they considered gender biased – what they called *#patriachaljustice*. The motto about believing the victim did not call for blind credibility, as this is not conceivable in a judicial process with all its legal guarantees but subverted a victim-blaming regime that had never been subject to public scrutiny in Spain.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1. Top ten hashtags in messages associated with the main hashtag.

Hashtag	Original hashtag (in Spanish)	Count
#thewolfpack	lamanada	1875
#patriarchaljustice	#justiciapatriarcal	1495
#lthewolfpackoutofjail	#lamanadaandasuelta	672
#youarenotalone	#noestassola	1243
#wearethewolfpack	#lamanadasomosnosotras	1164
#Ibelieveyou	#yositecreo	616
#noisno	#noesno	490
#manadafreedjusticeundone	#manadaliberadajusticiaagotada	428
#itisanotabuseitisrape	#noesabusoesviolacion	352
#feminist	#feminista	203

Appendix 2. Top ten hashtag families considering the percentage of the

conversation

Position	Name of category: Hashtag family	Joint percentage in the whole conversation
1.	I do believe you sister	100%
2.	La Manada out of jail	40.1%
3.	Patriarchal justice	25.5%
4.	We are La Manada	19.7%
5.	You are not alone	18.8%
6.	It is rape, not abuse	13.2%
7.	La Manada free, justice undone	9.5%
8.	Feminism	9.7%
9.	This is war	2.1%
10.	Letter of the victim	1.6%

Appendix 3. Table 2. Hashtag function during protests. Elaborated following the analytical proposal of Recuero et al. 2015.

Hashtag function	Function during protests	Examples
Conative	Offline mobilization street-protest	#todasalacalle (#allwomentothestreets) #ultimahora (#lastminute)
	Canvassing	#estoesunaguerra (#thisiswar) #bastayadejusticiapatriarcal (#stoppatriarchaljustice)
Referential	Reference to issue	#lamanadaenlibertad (#WolfPackisFree) #cartavictima (#lettervictim) #violenciasexual (#sexualviolence)
	Live events	#protesta (#protest) #acampadafeministaSol (#feministcampingSol)
	Localization of related events	#madrid #pamplona
Emotive	Demands	#lamanadaalacarcelya (#wolfPackJailNow) #boicotanunciantesmanada (#BoikotAdvertisersWolfPack)
	Affects	#notenemosmiedotenemosrabia (#wearenotafraidweareangry) #siemprejuntas (#alwaystogether)
Poetic	Expressive using humor and liryc expressions	#lapiara (#theher) #machetealmachote (#machetetothemacho)
	Mobilize different activist repertoire	Photos, artistic pieces, etc. included in the tweets Poems linked to the tweets
Metalingual	Characterize information	Comments on the hashtag #hermanayositecreo Links to tools that analyse hashtags: www.trendsmap.com www.tuitutil.net

Appendix 4. Table and figure related to response-ability actions

Table 1. *Response-ability* actions proposed by Twitter users against the *'wolf pack'*

Figure 1. Composition of digital artefacts created and spread by Twitter users for

Type of activist action	Communication strategy and use of digital artifacts
Follow the assaulters and make them scratches at their homes and neighbourhoods	Users created a map with the exact addresses of the assaulters and spread it
Show the rejection to the assaulters	Users created a poster with a message of rejection that was downloaded and posted in the local business owners of the assaulter's neighbourhoods
Creating self-defense strategies	Users created a poster with the names and faces of the assaulters and invited the users to "paper the city walls" so women would recognize them and keep safe
Show public anger	Users shared the names, personal photos or other artifacts (such as memes or illustrations) to express their anger
Establish a link between the ''Wolf pack'' and the other cases of gang-rape perpetrated in Spain	Users shared photos of other perpetrators and a map with data of other gang-rapes that had happened in Spain in the period 2016-2018
Create public consciousness and provide offline demonstration with a protest repertoire.	Users created posters to use in the demonstrations and shared their personal photos of demonstrations with demonstrators using their

the response-ability actions