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The red lipstick movement: exploring #vermelhoembelem and feminist hashtag movements in the context of the rise of far-right populism in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

During the 2021 Portuguese presidential election campaign, far-right candidate André Ventura insulted the feminine presentation of left-wing candidate Marisa Matias, linking her use of red lipstick to a perceived lack of professionalism and implied sexualization. The Portuguese public reacted to this insult by launching the feminist hashtag movement—#VermelhoEmBelem (translated as #RedInBelem), which quickly became one of the few national feminist hashtag movements to reach widespread visibility, receiving national and transnational support. This article offers a critical analysis of the #VermelhoEmBelem movement, grounded on a direct unstructured observation of the cross-platform hashtag—mainly across Twitter and Instagram—complemented by an analysis of news articles about the movement. By focusing on #VermelhoEmBelem, this article explores the relationship between feminist action, gendered discourses, and far-right populist politics. It foregrounds how gendered insults can generate a wave of feminist solidarity and anti-fascist sentiments, which was reified through online self-representations of people of various genders with their lips painted red. Yet, it highlights how hashtag movements can encompass significant tensions—mobilising both widespread support and sexist backlash, carrying the potential for symbolic and consciousness-raising impact, while having limited impact on the results of the Portuguese elections the movement derived from.

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Introduction

During the 2021 Portuguese presidential elections, André Ventura—leader of the far-right populist party *Chega*—publicly insulted the left-wing candidate Marisa Matias, deriding her use of red lipstick, an overtly feminine make-up, as improper and a sign of lack of professionalism. The insult drove a massive reaction from Portuguese audiences who responded to this political gendered attack by creating the hashtag movement #VermelhoEmBelem (#RedInBelem).

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This movement consisted of a wave of selfies of people of various genders in red lipstick. As will be explored in the article, the character of *#VermelhoEmBelem* quickly evolved, reflecting the fast temporalities of social media movements: starting as a national solidarity movement towards a female political candidate, gaining transnational visibility, growing into a broad expression of feminist and anti-fascist sentiments, to becoming co-opted both by opposing users and by broader commercial or apolitical uses—all these different facets co-existed within the hashtag.

From a national perspective, *#VermelhoEmBelem* holds significant importance, as it became one of the first feminist hashtag movements created in Portugal to reach widespread visibility and garner both national and transnational support. In part, this was due to its emergence during a presidential campaign—a context of great media visibility. Yet, this movement draws on a history (both national and international) of online feminist mobilisations and *hashtag activism*—using hashtags to spread content related to social justice and mobilise cumulative action (Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles 2020). In the last decades, some expressions of online activism garnered national support, such as 8 M or SlutWalk (Carla Cerqueira 2021). However, widespread adherence to hashtag movements, like *#MeToo*, has been limited in Portugal (Júlia Garraio, Sofia José Santos, Inês Amaral, and Alexandre de Sousa 2020). *#MeToo* was widely covered by traditional media, but its national impacts have been diffuse—helping to raise awareness and engagement with feminist movements, but it did not produce mass mobilisations nor noticeable waves of public accusations, as was seen in the US. While Portuguese women have posted, shared, and liked content on the hashtag, the extent of that engagement was undetermined (Ana Prata 2021, 41–43).

In this context, *#VermelhoEmBelem* emerges as an exemplary case study to explore the tensions present in many social media expressions of feminist protest. In addition to its media visibility, the adherence to *#VermelhoEmBelem* by both celebrities and “common” users allow us to explore practices of *everyday feminism* (Urszula Pruchniewska 2019)—looking at feminist engagements that go beyond the realm of the explicitly political and organised social movements, thus encompassing practices of resistance within everyday social media uses, which can have liminal, yet not easily measurable, political impacts. As the article explores, this can be linked to practices of selfie activism (Adi Kuntsman 2017)—which mobilise the use of self-representations to call attention to social issues—as well as to the memetic logics that underlie social media (Alessandro Caliandro and Guido Anselmi 2021)—following a shared prompt while still allowing for individual creativity. However, as will be addressed in later sections, dynamics of hashtag hijacking can also emerge, with users who oppose the movement using the same hashtag to strategically attempt to shift its meaning (Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles 2015). The hashtag can also be adopted by actors who are not politically motivated, subjected to popular trends and commercial interests which contribute to diluting its political meaning.

Adopting *#VermelhoEmBelem* as its case study, this research explores the dynamics encompassed in this hashtag movement, questioning how feminist hashtag movements can emerge in response (and resistance) to gendered insults grounded in far-right populist rhetorics. In this way, this research aims to explore the relationship between online feminist action, gendered discourses, and far-right populist politics (Alessia Donà 2020). This article reflects upon the strategies used by users engaging with feminist activism and

those employed by both populist parties and their followers. The analysis thus aims to foreground the tensions that can exist within hashtags that are multifaceted and changing in character, being used by different people for different purposes.

Following a feminist media studies perspective, this paper offers a holistic analysis of the *#VermelhoEmBelem* movement. Adopting a virtual ethnographic approach (Robert V. Kozinets 2010), we queried for *#VermelhoEmBelem*, observing the resulting hashtag feeds *in-situ*, within Twitter and Instagram, through a direct unstructured observation (Lisa M. Given 2008). These observations were conducted between January and March 2021, but the analysis extended diachronically, reaching the first posts shared on the hashtag on January 14. The analysis started with an attentive scrolling through the hashtag feeds, to get an overview of the discourses and representations shared, accompanied by the creation of analytical memos with emerging interpretations. This was complemented by an analysis of website articles and online newspaper stories that discussed *#VermelhoEmBelem*, which provided useful contextual information, allowing us to make sense of the broader reception of the movement.

This article interweaves theory, results, and interpretations throughout its different sections. Following the current introduction, the article will briefly contextualise the growth of the far-right in Portugal. It will then introduce the gendered insult that triggered the *#VermelhoEmBelem* movement. The following section expands on the multiple forms of engagement of users with the hashtag. It then explores the gendered backlash received by the movement, as well as the ways in which it became co-opted and commercialised. Finally, it concludes by reflecting on the afterlife and perceived impact of the movement, as well as of feminist hashtag movements more broadly.

The rise of far-right populism in Portugal

Portugal's political landscape has suffered tremendous changes since the 2008 financial collapse of international markets. As threats of national bankruptcy loomed over countries like Portugal, Spain, and Greece, policies of austerity were imposed by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In this context, social democratic parties were often seen as incapable of properly responding to citizens' needs (e.g., John Langmore 2017), which opened space for right-wing populist parties who proposed themselves as an alternative. However, for years Portugal appeared to remain one of the few countries in Europe with little far-right populist expression (Nora Langenbacher 2011). This has changed since 2019, with the introduction of far-right party¹ *Chega*—which can be translated as “Enough!”. While there were other Portuguese far-right parties prior to the rise of *Chega*, these failed to amass significant numbers of voters, in part due to their close authoritarian resemblances to the dictatorship of *Estado Novo* which, having lasted until 1974, still looms close in Portuguese political consciousness (José Mourão da Costa 2011).

The 2019 legislative elections marked a significant shift in Portuguese democracy, with *Chega* earning 1,49% of the votes—a small percentage of the overall votes, but which enabled them to earn a parliamentary seat (Jorge M. Fernandes and Pedro C. Magalhães 2020). This was the first time since the fall of the dictatorship that a far-right politician reached a *de facto* power position. This position has allowed *Chega* to gain political legitimacy (Ricardo Cabral Fernandes and Filipe Teles 2021) and for its party leader and

MP André Ventura to become a regular presence in Portuguese media. Ventura's public figure and online presence, with over 61 thousand followers on Twitter (at the time of writing), facilitated *Chega's* ability to gain national attention and traction (Riccardo Marchi 2020). Since then, *Chega* has continued to grow—having reached over 11% of votes in the 2021 Presidential Elections, and increasing its parliamentary representation to 12 seats in the 2022 legislative election (João A. Santos 2022). As such, 2019 marked Portugal's turn towards the same trend of rising far-right populism felt in Europe.

Chega shares many ideas with other far-right parties, both in Portugal and abroad—including a focus on national identity and anti-immigration (Langenbacher 2011), and the use of a rhetoric that seeks to divide between “the people” and the “corrupt elites” (Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Moreover, populist parties often adopt an anti-feminist positioning, reframing feminist efforts towards gender equality as a form of “gender ideology.” In their 2020 political program,² *Chega* frames “gender ideology” as a threat to “traditional” values and to western civilization itself. Populist far-right parties can then position themselves as “anti-gender ideology,” using this rhetoric as a way to indirectly oppose gender equality policies and to reaffirm traditional gender imaginaries (Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo 2021). Within these contexts, sexist ideas can flourish among *Chega* party members—like the claim that women do not belong in politics (DN 2016). These views are reflected in the gendered insults of Ventura that gave rise to #*VermelhoEmBelem*—which dismiss female candidates like Marisa Matias based on criticisms of their feminine presentation. These positions reiterate the idea that “the politician” is masculine by default (Kirsten Hvenegård-Lassen 2013, 158), as will be explored later. In the case of *Chega*, this anti-feminist stance is often openly claimed by its members, including by female politicians (Catarina Guerreiro and Henrique Magalhães Claudino 2022). As such, gendered populist narratives can lead to regulatory threats to women's sexual and reproductive rights or agency (Julie Mostov 2021).

The traditional gender imaginaries espoused by *Chega* also draw back on the ideology of the Portuguese dictatorship, reflecting its catholic and conservative tradition. The dictatorship's core values of “God, Homeland and Family” were reproduced in *Chega's* political campaign, in the slight variation of “God, Homeland, Family, and Work” (Agência Lusa 2021a). Although the dictatorship ended in 1974, its values remained impactful on Portuguese culture in regard to gender roles. Under the dictatorship, women were not allowed to vote or own property, being financially dependent on their husbands, and constrained to the social roles of daughter, wife, and mother (Maria Tavares 2008). The dictatorship also carries a history of disciplining women's appearances, as a form of social control, providing social guidelines that pressure women into the performance of “proper” feminine appearance and behaviour (Inês Duarte de Freitas 2021). Red lipstick, for instance, was presented in state youth magazines as explicitly unadvised to women, framed as not being suitable for “honourable women,” and associated with vice and sex work (de Freitas 2021). Since the fall of the dictatorship, important gender equality policies have been implemented and women enjoy growing liberties in aspects such as appearances. However, this has not necessarily been accompanied by generalised cultural change—there is still a noticeable degree of gendered traditionalism, and societal resistance and scepticism towards feminism (Rita B. Simões and Maria João Silveirinha 2019, 2).

In addition to this conservative and anti-feminist background, *Chega* and its party leader André Ventura also adopt a populist “politically incorrect” rhetorical style (Kantola and Lombardo 2021, 567), which often peddle in deep-seated misogyny. This populist far-right rhetoric transgresses mainstream politics through an exaggerated and vilifying usage of verbal communication, as exemplified in the US context, by Donald Trump’s speech attacking opposing candidate Hillary Clinton, nicknaming her “Crooked Hillary” (which gained traction on Twitter as #CrookedHillary) to call out Clinton’s lack of transparency and lobbying interests (Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris 2016). As will be seen, a similar “politically incorrect” style also underlies insults which triggered the #*VermelhoEmBelem* movement.

These examples highlight the connections far-right populism, gender, and misogyny (e.g., Donà 2020; Kantola and Lombardo 2021; Mostov 2021), reflecting the added gendered harassment to which female politicians are often subjected, which can often act as a barrier to female political participation (Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín 2019), as this article explores in the case of #*VermelhoEmBelem*.

#*VermelhoEmBelem* as a reactionary feminist response

On January 13 2021, during one of *Chega*’s rally dinners for the presidential campaign, André Ventura directed a gendered insult at the left-wing candidate of *Bloco de Esquerda* (BE), Marisa Matias, calling her out on her supposed lack of professionalism due to her usage of red lipstick during the presidential campaign. In the footage released by the media, Ventura says:

I don’t want to say anything that I might regret tomorrow, but [she] is not very well in terms of *pauses* of, well, in terms of her image and performance. You know, with her lips flushing red *gestures as if he was putting on lipstick*, as if this is something to be played around *controls laughter*.
(SIC Notícias 2021)

Ventura’s speech attempts to undermine Marisa Matia’s legitimacy as a candidate to an important political position. This insult reflects hypermasculinity and traditionalist gendered values common in populist discourses (Mostov 2021), mirroring the aforementioned trend of gendered attacks on female politicians (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2019). In Portugal, former female politicians in positions of power have been subjected to less overt forms of sexism—for example, comments, not necessarily insulting, about their appearance or personal lives (Carla Martins 2013). However, André Ventura and his party, with its hypermasculinist rhetorical style, have brought sexism to the foreground—from repeated comments from party members stating that women do not belong in politics (DN 2016), to Ventura defending that tax-payers’ money should not be spent on “trivial things” like abortion services (Visão 2019), to his comments on female celebrities and their “excessive” exhibitions of their bodies, saying that “to be feminist is not to be a whore” (SOL 2019), among other controversial comments.

Nonetheless, the political masculinities (Marion Löffler, Russell Luyt and Kathleen Starck 2020) assumed by populist parties are often not analysed from a legislative perspective. In the case of *Chega* and the 2021 presidential elections, we witness the party’s conservative views being used against female runners as discrediting strategies,

framing them as improper and unfit to run the country, and even implying sexual connotations towards their appearance.

However, as *#VermelhoEmBelem* illustrates, this sexist position is often met with a vocal resistance that demonstrates the public unacceptability of such gendered attacks and an effort to uphold democratic rights in the face of populist hypermasculinist discourses.

#VermelhoEmBelem, translated to *#RedinBelem*, makes a reference both to the colour of Marisa Matias' lipstick, which figured heavily in Ventura's insult, and to Belém, where the palace of the President of the Portuguese Republic is located. The hashtag relies on a double-entendre, simultaneously alluding at an effort of voting Marisa Matias and her red lipstick into Belém and the President role, as well as the political colours of her party—as red is the colour of *Bloco de Esquerda*, in line with many socialist and communist parties around Europe.

The hashtag sought to counter Ventura's associations between femininity, the use of red lipstick and the assumption of lack of professionalism. It aimed to reclaim the wearing of red lipstick as a representation of feminine strength, also signalling a recognition of the legitimacy of new political actors in Portuguese politics, namely female politicians with overtly feminine gender presentations, thus mobilising a counter-rhetoric to *Chega's* key gendered political standpoints.

While Ventura's insults were uttered in the relatively closed setting of a party rally dinner, these comments were made public by traditional news media, early on January 14. While some outlets foregrounded the gendered insult to Matias' lipstick, many framed it as just another insult among others directed at all main presidential candidates, including towards elected president Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. The hashtag *#VermelhoEmBelem* emerged soon after these insults were publicly known—on the evening of January 14. This hashtag highlighted and commented on the sexist nature of Ventura's comments. The earliest propellers of the hashtag were people associated with Marisa Matias' party, and *#VermelhoEmBelem* even became strategically incorporated in Matias' presidential campaign, as will be explored later. As the movement started to gain traction on social media, an increasing number of stories and think-pieces appeared on traditional media. This, in turn, increased the public awareness about the movement, potentiating its growth—in an example of how these media ecologies can mutually reinforce each other.

Mobilised by party members and by *Bloco de Esquerda's* official Twitter account, these early posts were an attempt to raise attention against *Chega's* misogynistic comments and to propel Matias' political campaign, showcasing a deliberate effort to put the hashtag among the trending topics in Portugal. This effort proved successful, as by early morning of the January 15, the hashtag was already trending on Twitter and was soon picked up by various political and public figures, and reported on several mainstream news media, such RTP1 and TVI.

These efforts can be linked to practices of algorithmic activism (e.g., Emiliano Treré 2018; Zeynep Tufekci 2013), which recognise the centrality of social media visibility metrics for the reach and credibility of contemporary political messages. As such, social media posts and audiences' attention are strategically mobilised in order to trigger algorithmic promotion and reach trending status. This visibility exists within a wider media ecology, being reliant on the attention of mainstream media to disseminate the movement outside social media, and also to offer a sense of legitimacy to these hashtag movements (Tufekci 2013, 856).

Attesting to the connective and communicative character of hashtags (Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess 2015; Zizi Papacharissi 2016), soon after *#VermelhoEmBelem* developed as a *hashtag public*, created in reaction to Ventura's speech and shared by countless social media users, both "common" users and celebrities—with selfies of people with red lipstick being shared under the umbrella of the hashtag. Although Twitter does not provide a total count of all posts and reposts in *#VermelhoEmBelem*, screenshots shared by users show that the hashtag made it to the platform's trending lists, counting with approximately 19.000 tweets on January 15. Similarly, our own observations on Instagram showed that by January 22 the platform counted with over 18.925 posts, plus countless InstaStories. This movement also had some expression on platforms like Facebook and TikTok, although its analysis is outside the scope of this article.

The hashtag had a wide reach in popularity. Among the most visible moments of the hashtag was the tweet of Ana Gomes, the other female presidential candidate in the run, which reached over 638 thousand views, 35 thousand likes, and 8 thousand retweets, being frequently cited in mainstream news coverage of the movement. Alongside politicians, various Portuguese celebrities and influencers also took a prominent stand against these insults, such as comedian Bruno Nogueira, musician Agir, and several TV personalities like Teresa Guilherme. The hashtag was also able to mobilise transnational support, chiefly in contexts that shared a sense of geographical or linguistic proximity, such as Spain or Brazil. A range of international personalities shared posts on the topic, from the Spanish minister of equality Irene Montero to musician Chico Buarque in Brazil.

This celebrity adherence leads many traditional media outlets to frame *#VermelhoEmBelem* as a "celebrity movement," despite wide adherence by "common" users. While it is likely that feminist organisations also engaged with the movement, this was not evident in our ethnographic observations, and thus the analysis of their role in *#VermelhoEmBelem* is outside the scope of the present research.

***#VermelhoEmBelem* beyond party politics**

From the moment BE politicians and party followers started responding to Ventura's comments with selfies wearing red lipstick, several users started reposting and mimicking these representations. In an example of everyday feminist practices which enmesh the personal and the political on social media (Pruchniewska 2019), the hashtag was dominated by photographic and video self-representations of people of various genders in red lipstick, shared both on their feed or through Stories. At times, these images showed a clear engagement with institutional politics, being accompanied by written texts criticising *Chega* and its sexist rhetorics or texts reiterating the importance of female representation in politics, by direct calls for political engagement, urging people to vote in the upcoming elections, or by reflections emphasising the importance of political mobilisation against the growth of the Portuguese far-right. These calls for political mobilisation were often accompanied by photos taken in voting booths, always including references to red lipstick or to the symbolic use of red clothing items. These anti-far-right calls found transnational support, as some users from abroad drew comparisons to other European countries which are facing similar democratic crises.

The selfies shared under *#VermelhoEmBelem* emerged as feminist response to the gendered insult directed at Marisa Matias, seeking to dismantle André Ventura's toxic

masculinist rhetoric. But they can also be understood, more broadly, as Fuck-Ventura statements, mobilising an *affective public* (Papacharissi 2016) in an expression of collective anger against the far-right politician, his sexist views, and against his party's broader anti-feminist and anti-democratic agenda. This often took the shape of selfies showing a middle-finger up, sometimes accompanied by insults to Ventura. The use of red lipstick itself was framed by users as a way to "annoy" the far-right—the selfies with red lips shared by people of various genders, including cisgender men, can be understood as a visual defiance of existing gender norms and of the traditional gender roles and narrow views of "proper" femininity defended by far-right parties.

Furthermore, drawing on the symbolism of the colour red in recent Portuguese history—the colour of freedom and of the red carnations that marked the 1974 revolution—*#VermelhoEmBelem* sought to frame femininity as revolutionary, presenting wearing of red lipstick as a way to "fight fascism with style." For many people, the hashtag also became a statement against the rise of populist far-right discourses, with posts espousing anti-fascist references like *#FascismoNuncaMais* (*#FascismNeverAgain*) or *#25deAbril* (*#April25th*)—thus reiterating the connections between far-right populism and gendered dynamics explored earlier.

These practices echo preceding expressions of selfie activism and citizenship (Kuntsman 2017), in which self-representations are combined with political statements and hashtags, often in challenge-like calls that prompt viral circulation. Yet, viral circulation is facilitated precisely because personal engagements with politics are often grounded in low-effort practices, such as sharing a hashtag or images (Josiane Jouët 2018, 151).

Through selfie activism, the body becomes a central site for feminist protest (Hester Baer 2016). While the use of the red lipstick that triggered the insult to Marisa Matias can be considered a normatively feminine makeup look in everyday contexts in Portugal, this look can carry different connotations when adopted by female politicians. Comments on female politicians often foreground their gender presentation, appearances, or personal lives (e.g., Joke D'Heer, Sara De Vuyst and Sarah Van Leuven 2022; Diane Heith 2003; Hvenegård-Lassen 2013). Heith (2003) termed this (fittingly for the present case study) the "lipstick watch," as attention is particularly given to the use of stereotypically feminine gendered attire (e.g., lipstick, brightly coloured clothing, or high-heels). Similar dynamics can also be felt in Portugal, although to a less overt extent (Martins 2013). This focus on appearances can contribute to a sense of trivialization of female politicians, their programme, and their perceived importance (D'Heer, De Vuyst and Van Leuven 2022). "The politician" is often imagined as masculine by default, and comments on feminine presentations, even when not overtly negative, reveal implicit judgements on what counts as "proper performance of politician" (Hvenegård-Lassen 2013, 158). In this context, Marisa Matias' red lipstick can be seen as a breach in these conventions. Furthermore, as she stated in an interview, her makeup choice deliberately evoked previous uses of red lipstick as a protest tool, as done by suffragettes (RR V + 2021).

However, we must note that outside the realm of politics and outside of the narrow bubble of ultra-conservative society, the use of red lipstick is not a widely shunned activity in Portugal. While for some people, for example, cishet men within a sexist cultural context like Portugal, publicly sporting red lipstick can be read as a critical and even subversive act, this is not necessarily the case for all subjects. Detached from the

awareness of the political context that gave rise to *#VermelhoEmBelem*, the hashtag could easily be read as a repository for images of beautiful people wearing lipstick. Created in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, while many people were self-isolating, these selfies were often simple at-home portraits, wearing lipstick in a context where lipstick is usually not called upon. However, the everydayness of red lipstick, especially for women, was emphasised by the choice of some people to re-use older photographs from pre-pandemic contexts, sharing images of moments when red lipstick was just another makeup choice, not an act of protest. These self-representations are thus not inherently political in themselves nor do all photos of people wearing red lipstick carry the same political weight: it depends on who created them, for whom, and for what purpose (Kuntsman 2017, 13). As *#VermelhoEmBelem*'s hashtag public expanded, becoming more distant from its initial political claim, some of the red lipstick selfies started to be framed in neoliberal individualist terms of “wear what you want,” becoming more an effort to engage with a popular hashtag than an overt political statement.

#VermelhoEmBelem thus largely followed a memetic logic, in which a central key idea—that of red lipstick—was repeated and iterated upon, with individual users showcasing their vernacular creativity (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021, 14). In addition to the selfie “challenge,” *#VermelhoEmBelem* further memefied feminist protest through the creation and subsequent viral re-sharing of aesthetically pleasing symbolic representations, such as illustrations of red lip marks, lipstick containers, or red carnations—this was especially noticeable on Instagram, where illustrations (re)circulated in posts and Stories. Yet, this popular embrace of the hashtag should not be taken as an overtly optimistic sign of a vibrant feminist consciousness in Portugal. Hashtags such as *#VermelhoEmBelem* can easily become equated to trends and fashionable causes in popular discourses, and engaging with them can boost cultural capital (Claire Hampton 2015, 10). These trends can become linked to superficial and short-term engagements with activism, often dismissed as *slacktivism* (Cerise L. Glenn 2015). Attention is thus a key resource for feminist movements online (Tufekci 2013), as it ensures visibility to important issues, but the desire for attention can simultaneously lead to the co-option of feminist hashtags and a dilution of their political meanings.

Gendered backlash and hashtag co-opting

From its early stages, *#VermelhoEmBelem* was directly incorporated by Marisa Matias' campaign—the hashtag was incorporated in her campaign Twitter posts and it featured heavily in her virtual rally on January 18, with many of her supporters donning red lipstick. Opponents to *#VermelhoEmBelem* were quick to dismiss the movement as an opportunistic tactic to advance Matias' presidential campaign. These accusations of “political marketing” were voiced both by Ventura supporters and by conservative political pundits on traditional media, who framed the movement as an “unexpected help” to Matias' campaign (Inês André Figueiredo 2021). These accusations not only ignored the underlying issues and sexist insults that lead to the emergence of *#VermelhoEmBelem* but also ignored the wide public support for the hashtag, which went beyond party and even national borders.

Despite its concrete political origins, the movement soon became framed as being beyond party politics, becoming a rallying cry against the far-right candidate (with

parallels with the anti-Bolsonaro or anti-Trump hashtags #EleNao and #NotMyPresident, respectively). Yet meanings of hashtags are changeable, open to redefinition and re-appropriation (Papacharissi 2016, 308). As such, for some people, the hashtag became completely depoliticized, adding caveats to their posts stating “I’m non-partisan” or even emphasizing that “this is not a political statement.” Such statements illustrate a hesitancy in overtly engaging with politics or feminism, reducing instead their use of #VermelhoEmBelem to vague sentiments of female freedom that mirror contemporary postfeminist sensibilities—which conciliate a generic tone of feminist celebration with a focus on questions of individual empowerment and personal choice that disregard wider notions of systemic inequality (Rosalind Gill 2016). The political potential of #VermelhoEmBelem thus becomes tempered, limited to an expression of positive affect.

However, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) noted, popular expressions of feminism are often followed by backlash and expressions of popular misogyny, aimed at silencing feminism through fear and shaming. #VermelhoEmBelem was no exception. Although the hashtag was mostly populated by supportive posts, hateful posts co-opting the hashtag were also noticeable, particularly on Twitter. This backlash, however, remained mostly invisible in mainstream coverage of the movement.

Strategies to derail the debates of #VermelhoEmBelem were varied. Many backlash posts failed to see the misogyny that elicited Ventura’s comments as a problem that actively needs to be addressed (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2019, 745). This reflects the normalisation of sexism in Portugal, where gendered harassment is often dismissed as a minor inconvenience, at best, or even just the way things are (Simões and Silveirinha 2019, 5). These posts stated that sexist insults were a non-issue and that people should instead be concerned with “real” problems, such as domestic violence or the COVID-19 crisis—a position that has been espoused by Ventura himself. As such, participation in #VermelhoEmBelem was dismissed as just another internet trend, the vapid concerns of “social justice warriors,” creating a false dichotomy between “Twitter interests” and the concerns of “the real country.” These dismissals were often linked to the idea of slacktivism (Glenn 2015), framing participation in the hashtag as a one-time expression of performative activism, something that demands minimal political participation, rather than a long-term commitment to social change.

There were also more overt efforts to appropriate and hijack the hashtag, shifting the originally intended narrative. While tactics of hashtag appropriation can be used as a form of media activism (Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles 2015), #VermelhoEmBelem exemplifies how similar tactics can be employed to disrupt feminist hashtag movements and share hate. One of the most visible forms of hashtag hijacking was the use of insulting memes. Reiterating the populist sexist views and traditional understandings of gender that underlie the insult uttered by Ventura, these efforts often relied on gendered insults, either conflating the movement as an expression of female vanity “in disguise,” or, conversely, deriding the appearances of the women who participated in #VermelhoEmBelem. Relying on pejorative associations between feminism and unattractiveness (Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess 2018), these posts shared memes comparing these women to clowns, pigs in lipstick, or female Gremlins. Echoing the objectifying tone subjacent to Ventura’s inciting insult, there were also posts attempting to sexualise the movement, by sharing visual references to women performing oral sex on

men, blow-up dolls with red lips, or even photographs of vulvas with its labia painted red. These insults thus reiterate practices of gendered e-bile (Emma Jane 2014, 533).

This trend of relying on insults to femininity was also extended to attempts to call masculinities into question, often through the use of homophobic insults (Jane 2014, 533). These insulting posts largely targeted the men who participated in the movement and shared photos of themselves with their lips painted in solidarity. Yet, it is important to note that these homophobic insults were also coming from self-proclaimed progressive users who decried the apparent “feminisation” of the anti-fascist movement. Homophobic undertones were also noticeable in posts that chose to poke fun at André Ventura by implying his repressed homosexuality, stating that “he must be closeted,” and sharing photographs of Ventura superimposed with red lipstick. These posts thus reflect widely conservative visions of normative gender that still dominate Portuguese society at large, being espoused not only by far-right leaning people but also by the seemingly progressive people who adhered to *#VermelhoEmBelem*.

There were also clearly politically motivated attempts at hijacking *#VermelhoEmBelem*. On the same evening *#VermelhoEmBelem* was launched, *Chega* shared a tweet promoting Ventura’s campaign accompanied by the hashtag. Later, in both tweets and statements to mainstream media, Ventura tried to appropriate key symbols and buzzwords of the hashtag movement, claiming that instead of painting their lips red in solidarity with Marisa Matias, Portuguese people should paint their lips black in mourning for the state of the nation (Agência Lusa 2021b). These statements echo the deflection tactics used by many of his supporters online, and there were even lacklustre attempts of creating a counter-hashtag *#MovimentoDosLbiosNegro*, translated as black lips movement, which failed to get any traction.

However, hashtag co-option was not always necessarily politically motivated and strategically engaged with political actors from opposing fields. Rather, most examples could be deemed as more “neutral” practices of hashtag co-option, such as commercial appropriation. As was seen above, the popularity of the hashtag and its trending character allowed for a quick detachment from its originally intended meaning (Bruns and Burgess 2015), becoming suitable for more commercialised uses. Although *#VermelhoEmBelem* was rather circumscribed in its temporal span, later posts and self-representations on the hashtag were often shared with no further political commentary. The hashtag gained traction as a sort of internet challenge and it was not always clear whether the people engaging with the hashtag, both in Portugal and abroad, were aware of its origins as a political and feminist statement. *#VermelhoEmBelem* was quickly adopted by celebrities and Insta-famous accounts, both by those who frequently engage with feminist politics and by many who rarely speak on such topics. This indiscriminate celebrity adoption contributed to diluting the hashtag’s political meaning, often reducing it to vague feel-good messages about freedom to wear makeup. This was further solidified by the direct commercial appropriation by brands that included the hashtag in posts seeking to sell cosmetics. This commercialisation of the hashtag was particularly noteworthy on Instagram, reflecting the commercial ecology of the platform (Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin 2020). In these contexts, red lipstick loses its symbolic connection to any political claims, rather being read as a reinforcement of normative

(albeit not puritan) ideals of femininity. The hashtag thus easily became co-opted by posts sharing makeup looks or outfits of the day, being used alongside popular or engagement-seeking hashtags, such as #behappy or #instagood. The extent of this co-option thus raises questions about the efficacy of hashtag activism in the face of neoliberal appropriation that swiftly tempers its political claims and reinscribes them in easily commodifiable forms (Baer 2016, 18–19).

Final considerations: Interrogating the afterlife and socio-political impact of #vermelhoembelem

During the 2 weeks leading to the presidential elections, both the social media landscape and the mainstream coverage of #VermelhoEmBelem reflected a sense of overwhelming support for Marisa Matias and feminist mobilization. However, it soon became evident that this online buzz was not reflected in the election results. Despite accusations of #VermelhoEmBelem as a stroke of political marketing, voting polls both prior and after the movement consistently positioned Marisa Matias as an unlikely winner and likely to come behind Ventura in the electoral results (Rafael Barbosa 2021)—something that the final voting counts confirmed. Marisa Matias ended up with slightly under 4% of the total votes, a downgrade from her 10% results in the last presidential elections. On the other hand, despite the widespread response against his sexist populist comments, André Ventura reached 11,9% of the total votes—a seven-fold increase from the results of the 2019 legislative elections that secured his seat in the Portuguese Parliament. The discrepancy between the popularity of the hashtag and these results makes clear that online solidarity does not necessarily align with voting intentions, and its impact is rather more nuanced.

The affective wave of feminist solidarity and hope that marked #VermelhoEmBelem came crashing down with the disappointing election results. The language of social media platforms itself, with its “trends” and “trending topics,” seems to imply a short-lived temporality, which privileges short bursts of intense activity. This was recognised by the participants of #VermelhoEmBelem themselves, who on January 16, just one day after the emergence of the movement, already questioned whether they were still on time to share their photographs. Social media activism is thus marked by accelerated cycles of intense, yet intermittent, political motivation (Jouët 2018, 140). Like much of our media cycle, this is linked to online viral cycles of outrage followed by forgetting (Banet-Weiser 2018, 142–143), hopefulness followed by disillusion.

These bursts of activity of hashtag publics are well suited to produce highly visible disruptions to dominant political narratives (Papacharissi 2016). Case studies like #VermelhoEmBelem highlight how hashtag movements can adopt practices of algorithmic activism (e.g., Treré 2018; Tufekci 2013) to strategically and effectively create affective publics, and to raise visibility towards often-ignored issues in both social and traditional media. These strategies can thus reach and mobilise wider publics who are primed for civic engagement.

As was seen throughout the article, #VermelhoEmBelem was adopted by both “common” users and celebrities, in a notable example of a hashtag movement emerging in response to national feminist discussions. It highlights how feminist resistance can emerge in response to the growth of the far-right in Portugal and across the globe, taking

a stance against its gendered discourse that dismisses feminism and female political participation. Taking shape through social media practices and selfie taking, *#VermelhoEmBelem* thus exemplifies practices of everyday feminism (Pruchniewska 2019) that foreground small acts of political engagement and that recognise the affective nature of online acts of protest (Papacharissi 2016). Furthermore, these posts also take a stance against the narrowly defined traditional gender roles defended by far-right parties like *Chega*, expressing defiance through self-representation and showcasing a defence of normatively feminine styles as “proper” for political life.

While we approached *#VermelhoEmBelem* through a feminist lens, the adoption of the hashtag as a statement against populist and far-right discourses also highlights the necessity of analysing gender from a political standpoint, and vice-versa—especially in light of the growth of populist far-right and anti-gender discourses in Portugal. Rallying against the boogeyman of “gender ideology,” far-right populism brings forward discourses that threaten the recent feminist advances made in Portugal and in Europe—starting from gendered insults that call into question the legitimacy of women in political roles, and expanding to threats on issues like reproductive rights or marriage equality. Movements like *#VermelhoEmBelem* showcase that far-right challenges to gender equality do not go unnoticed. *#VermelhoEmBelem* emerges as an example of resistance and an expression of societal discontent to these gendered insults. Future research can explore the potential sustained impacts of highly visible challenges to gendered insults, like *#VermelhoEmBelem*, analysing whether these movements help to shape, discipline, or limit sexist statements targeting female politicians and their appearances in other campaigns and elections.

However, in isolation, these online efforts do not necessarily lead to sustained collective action, organising, or to the establishment of activist communities. Hashtag affective publics are often grounded in individual connective action, rather than collective action (Papacharissi 2016, 314). The participation in *#VermelhoEmBelem*, largely taking the form of sharing personal photographs, thus relies on individual alignments with feminism. When accompanied by offline political action, this often took the shape of individual trips to voting stations. As such, when devoid of broader mobilisation strategies, online activism “does not present a guaranteed avenue to impact” (Papacharissi 2016, 311). This points to the importance of sustained collective mobilisation, as often organised by feminist organisations and collectives, thus highlighting the need to conciliate highly visible online movements with longer term actions (e.g., Aristeia Fotopoulou 2016). The hashtag publics created by movements like *#VermelhoEmBelem* can thus be a starting point for sharing information online, lobby for social and policy changes, share public petitions, raise funds, in activist efforts that merge online and offline experiences and connect civil society with the realm of institutional politics (Jouët 2018, 147).

As Portuguese feminists ourselves, the experience of following the 2021 elections and *#VermelhoEmBelem* was accompanied by complex and at times contradictory feelings towards the movement. The amplified visibility of feminist movements online often leads to an amplification of our expectations (Papacharissi 2016, 321). It was tempting to see this as a much-needed moment of feminist awakening, one that would lead to deep nationwide debates about the multiple systemic oppressions that are still rampant in Portugal yet recurrently ignored. However, recognising the dynamics of political protest and co-optation addressed above, the gendered backlash received by the movement, the short-lived temporalities of hashtag campaigns, as well as their largely symbolic, rather

than electoral, impact, helps to temper this hopefulness and highlights the need to critically complicate notions of “effectiveness” in social media hashtag movements.

Despite the hopeful moment created *#VermelhoEmBelem*, it is utopian to expect that a hashtag movement could, in isolation, lead to immediate and dramatic change in election results. This can often be felt as a disappointment. However, the power of such hashtag movements should be understood as liminal and their impact symbolic. Papacharissi (2016) offers us a critical, yet cautiously optimistic, framework to think about the long-term potential of social media to enable social change. The momentary visibility that movements like *#VermelhoEmBelem* bring to social and feminist issues creates an affective public sustained by shared feelings of solidarity. These hashtags open a space for a collective imagining of what a future might be and create an awareness that can sustain future collective mobilisations. The explosive temporality of hashtag movements does not match the gradual and slow-paced rhythm of social change (Papacharissi 2016, 321). But there is hope that all these online conversations may accumulate over time, creating social and cultural scaffolding for a sustained feminist cultural change.

Notes

1. We have refrained from labelling *Chega* within the political frames of extreme-right and radical-right (Cas Mudde 2019), as there are different understandings of current far-right discourses.
2. For further information, please refer to *Chega's* website and political agenda (2020).

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