Chapter 18

Can Hashtags Promote Body Acceptance?
A Content Analysis Study of Cyber–Feminism on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Th chapter presents an empirical study on a Brazilian cyber-activism movement on Instagram associated with the hashtag #CorpoLivre (#FreeBody in Portuguese). This movement, which was established in 2018, has published more than 3,000 posts and has over 400,000 followers, disseminates anti-fatphobia and real body discourses, and promotes a positive relationship between women and their bodies beyond traditional beauty standards. The study analyses the posts made by the feminist movement on Instagram in December 2022, with a sample size of 101 posts. The study adopted the framework developed by Khurana and Knight for the analysis, which enables the classification of the sample posts in terms of message appeal, orientation, engagement, popularity, and image characteristics. This framework was used to examine the relationship between content characteristics and engagement. Additionally, the study includes a content analysis of the posts' comments, specifically evaluating the valence (positive, negative, or neutral) to assess the effectiveness of the characteristics of the posts.

INTRODUCTION

The recent decades have seen a significant transformation in the way citizens access information, communicate, and interact with one another, owing to the revolution in information and communication

technologies. This trend of digitalization has had a profound impact on all aspects of society, including business, peer interaction, and activist movements. Social networking sites (SNS) have emerged as a crucial tool for the articulation of feminist movements in the current era. These sites are widely used by a large segment of the population, facilitate social interaction, and are therefore considered fundamental for activist mobilization (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016). Activist groups use SNS to organize, engage in debate, articulate their causes, and plan actions.

Despite social media frequently facing criticism for promoting violence against women through means such as bullying and perpetuating unrealistic female stereotypes, they can also serve as a platform for informing, motivating, and empowering women. For instance, although digital platforms commonly exhibit fatphobia, feminist individuals and groups generate and distribute content to endorse authentic depictions of women and campaign for body positivity. However, the significance of social media as a tool for cyber-feminism remains under-researched. While there is a growing body of literature concerning fatphobia, there exists a scarcity of research that explores the ways in which social media can be utilized for educating society and empowering women. To address this gap, this chapter aims to answer the following research question: What are the characteristics of social media content that effectively promote body acceptance?

This chapter presents an empirical study on a Brazilian cyber-activism movement on Instagram associated with the hashtag #CorpoLivre (#FreeBody in Portuguese). This movement, which was established in 2018, has published more than 3,000 posts and has over 400,000 followers. It disseminates anti-fatphobia and real body discourses, and promotes a positive relationship between women and their bodies beyond traditional beauty standards. The study analyses the posts made by the feminist movement on Instagram in December 2022, with a sample size of 92 posts. The study adopted the framework developed by Khurana and Knight (2021) for the analysis, which enables the classification of the sample posts in terms of message appeal, orientation, engagement, popularity, and image characteristics. This framework was used to examine the relationship between content characteristics and engagement. Additionally, the study includes a content analysis of the posts' comments, specifically evaluating the valence (positive, negative, or neutral) to further assess the effectiveness of the characteristics of the posts.

This chapter makes several contributions to the field. Firstly, it helps to understand feminist cyber-activism on Instagram in relation to body acceptance, aesthetic body pressure, and fatphobia. Secondly, it provides valuable insights on a popular hashtag in Brazil. Thirdly, it identifies strategies recommended for cyber-activism. And overall, it gives a contribution to women in their ongoing efforts to combat aesthetic violence and foster self-esteem by providing indications on the means to develop positive social consciousness.

The following section presents the literature review that formed the basis of the empirical study also included in these pages.

Cyberfeminism on Social Media

Since the emergence of social networking sites (SNS), feminists have been working to diversify their messages and generate new discussions (Wang & Driscoll, 2019) while occupying digital spaces as a form of power. Of all the available channels, social platforms have been at the forefront of public dialogues promoting awareness and change (Baker & Ryalls, 2016; PettyJohn et al., 2018). Activists combat sexism, patriarchy, and other forms of domination, and stimulate male behavior change (Hardaker

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