

## Communication Through Hashtags in Social Movements: A Systematic Literature Review

**Kharisma Natalia<sup>1</sup>, Sylvana Virginia Agustya<sup>1</sup>, Irwansyah<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Indonesia, Jawa Barat, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: Kharisma Natalia

Email: [kharisma.natalia21@ui.ac.id](mailto:kharisma.natalia21@ui.ac.id)



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### Abstract

*The hashtag #MeToo was launched by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to create "empowerment through empathy," expressed on Twitter in response to various allegations of sexual harassment. The use of hashtags in social movements is an approach to initiate connecting actions. This research aimed to examine the development and interconnectedness of communication through hashtags in social movements. The methodology employed was a literature review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines across sixty selected journals. The findings of this study indicate that hashtags have become a significant means of communication in various social movements, discussing a wide range of topics and fields. The research from 60 selected journals emphasizes the crucial role of hashtags in modern social movements, enabling communication and expression on social media platforms. Hashtags empower support, protests, and discussions on various social issues, exemplified by trends like #MeTooIncest, encouraging survivors to share traumatic experiences. The study recognizes the internet's dual role in criminology, serving as a space for crimes and supportive communities for victims. Notably, the research highlights decentralized information dissemination, centralized data collection, and hashtag activism's global influence. Despite their limitations, social media platforms facilitate critical conversations and social actions. Ultimately, hashtag activism legitimizes social media, underscoring its vital role in contemporary social movements.*

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## Introduction

The #MeToo movement was launched by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, aiming to create "empowerment through empathy" (Just Be Inc. 2013) for young women of color who have experienced sexual violence (Clark, 2021). Actor Alyssa Milano used the phrase on her Twitter account in October 2017 in response to multiple allegations of sexual harassment against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Kaufman et al., 2021). In 24 hours, 53,000 people tweeted comments and shared personal experiences of sexual violence. Over a decade later, those two simple words ("#MeToo") spread like wildfire on social media.

Twitter hashtags are a new tagging format that associates user-generated hashtags with a specific event or context using the prefix # (Chang, 2010). With hashtags, sorting and unifying online resources across websites is possible. Some hashtag directory portals collect existing hashtags by organizing them in different ways. Additionally, developments in Twitter archiving now reflect the need for users to save certain portions of Twitter messages.

In January 2011, Instagram added hashtags, and starting April 27, 2015, users could use emojis as hashtags (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016). Hashtags are tags or words starting with '#' that indicate an image's content, allowing users to search for the image and increasing visibility.

Photo owners sometimes want to associate the image with emotion; in this case, they use emojis and pictograms related to emotions.

Hashtags are not entirely new to the web; users started using IRC (Internet Relay Chat) to categorize items into groups. Chris Messina, a designer, was the first to use the hashtag on contemporary social media, especially on Twitter. He asked his followers how they felt about using the pound sign for group conversations. Thus, the essential role of hashtags has traditionally been to organize knowledge, facilitate access, and enable retrieval of information.

Social movements in the postwar period were primarily considered disruptive forces; even "liberals" like L. Coser<sup>1</sup> readily admit that conflict can serve social integration (Touraine, 1985). In contrast, after the 60s, social movements became identified with counterculture, the search for "alternative" forms of social and cultural life. In the early 1980s, the subject lost ground. It is relatively easy to see that many analyses of "social movements" limit themselves to one type of conflict, generally because it is dominant in a particular society. In many Third World countries, it is challenging to analyze class conflicts in which anti-imperialist struggles, neo-communitarian movements, and the formation of a "state bourgeoisie" are the more visible forces. In contrast, many Western observers only discovered "social movements" in the sixties. They were primarily preoccupied with understanding how social integration could be restored by reform or a neoconservative wave.

Hashtag activism is an effort to simultaneously draw attention to a cause and obscure essential aspects of that cause, such as historical background or socio-political content (Dadas, 2017). A hashtag is considered activism to fight for awareness of a topic or issue that gives rise to debate on social media (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017).

Hashtags attach unifying phrases that allow marginalized individuals to join discursive protests via social media (Yang, 2016). Milano's tweet is an example of "hashtag activism," in which individuals call out sexual violence (as was the goal of Burke's original movement) in a very public way. The phrase "#MeToo" went viral, as did details of cases of celebrity sexual violence and harassment (Xiong et al., 2019). Other hashtag activism campaigns, such as #bringourgirlsback, #equalityforall, and #blacklivesmatter, illustrate how high social media engagement and participation across traditional and geographic boundaries have enabled various grassroots organizations to leverage (global) campaigns for their benefit.

A growing literature on hashtag activism has revealed that hashtags function as organizing instruments or ideological weapons to spread ideas and create conversations that connect somewhat fragmented individuals with online communities by facilitating internet resources within digital platforms (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Human activities with machines, especially with computing devices, are not limited to programming, computing, gaming, or typing. Now, in the era of social networks, our identities and daily activities have penetrated cyberspace.

This research aims to analyze how communication using hashtags drives social movements by contextualizing hashtag activism on social media. To answer this question, a literature review of published journal articles accompanied by hashtags was conducted to explore how social movements achieve their communication goals through hashtag activism.

## Methods

A literature review, or a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), is an effort to identify, review, and synthesize all available research relevant to a particular research question, topic area, or phenomenon of interest (van Dinter et al., 2021). The goal is to obtain clear, reasonable, and unbiased information about the research topic. Systematic literature review methodology has well-defined methodological steps or protocols (Hamad & Salim, 2014).

This systematic review report uses the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) reporting guidelines for meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials, which have been updated to address several conceptual and practical advances in the science of systematic reviews. Several approaches have been developed to conduct systematic reviews on broader questions. Conducting a systematic review is a highly beneficial exercise in any research project to gain a firm overview of the relevant body of literature (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020).

Methodological steps, search strategies, and research questions are defined explicitly so other researchers can reproduce the same protocol. Systematic reviews require much greater effort than traditional reviews, and currently, most of the activity is performed manually. Automating the SLR process will eliminate most, if not all, of the human effort and time used to do it. A systematic literature review (SLR) consists of several activities. These activities can be grouped into three stages: planning the review, conducting the review, and reporting the review.

Stage 1: Research Questions. The RQ is organized into four areas: (a) Conceptual framework to analyze the relationships between keywords identified in the literature (RQ1); (b) Journal characteristics to identify themes, geographical location, journal quartile level, and research methodology used (RQ2-RQ7). Next, research findings (RQ8) and research developments (RQ9), where the specified RQ is made based on the reference conditions of the selected article. The questions created cover research topics and research limitations. Details of the research questions can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Scope, Questions, and Initial Coding Criteria

Scope of Question	Research question	Criteria
Conceptual framework	RQ1. What is the concept of hashtags in social movements like in literature?	Initial definitions and development of definitions
Journal characteristics	RQ2. How are journals distributed according to their position in the <i>database</i> ?	Quartiles (Q level) of journals in the Scimago <i>database</i>
	RQ3. What is the distribution of journal publication years?	Journal publication year
	RQ4. What is the geographical distribution of journals?	The country where the journal research was conducted
	RQ5. What research methods are used in journals?	Scientific methods used in journals
	RQ6. What are the topics of journal articles according to category?	Journal categorization according to the Scopus <i>database</i>
	RQ7. What areas of research are discussed in journal articles?	The research field that is discussed in the journal article
Research Findings	RQ8. What findings were obtained regarding communication through hashtags in social movements?	Findings in journals
Research developments	RQ9. What research limitations can be identified in the journal as a reference for further research?	Potential for research development

Stage 2: Eligibility criteria and sources of information. Eleven articles in English were found that contained the concepts of "social movement" and "hashtag" in each title, abstract, and keywords in published journals. Stage 3: Search strategy. Database searches on the Scopus.com page were used to select article references. The keywords "social movements" and "hashtags" were used in each database. The time range for searching articles and journal categories is not limited.

Stage 4: Study selection process. The search began by entering "social movements" and "hashtags" and returned references to 203 articles. Next, the article search was made more specific by adding English language limitations and limitations on articles in the form of published journals, which yielded 60 articles. At this stage, 143 articles did not match the title, abstract, and keywords. The flow of the selection process for this systematic literature review can be seen in Diagram 1.

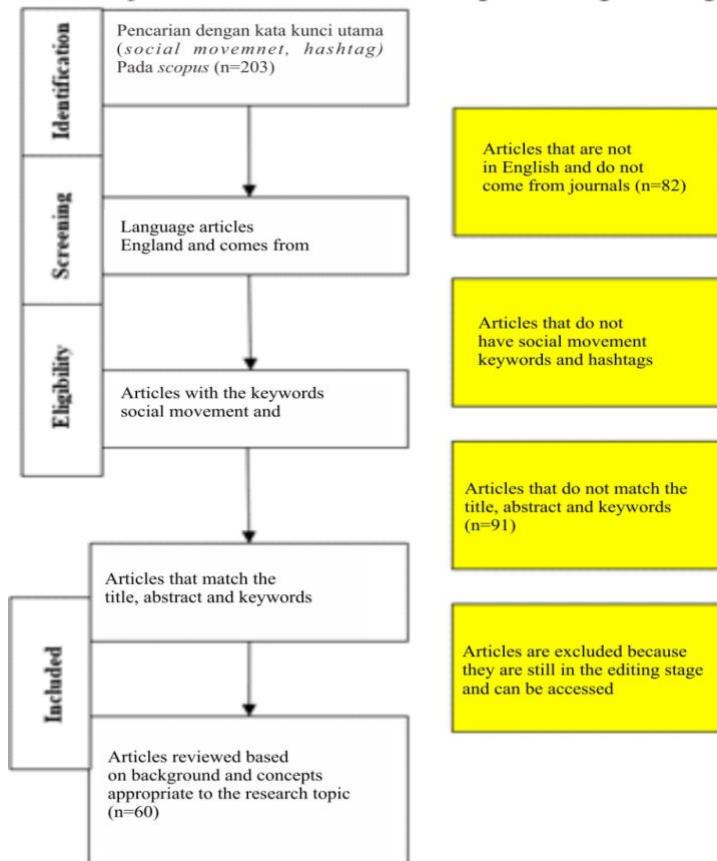


Figure 1. Flowchart of the systematic literature review selection process

At the final selection stage, of the 60 articles, after being reviewed based on the background and concepts appropriate to the research topic, 60 articles met the criteria.

## Results and Discussion

This study used a literature review method with well-defined methodological steps or protocols to investigate the proposed research question.

### QR1. What is the definition of the hashtag concept in social movements used in journal articles?

In several articles, hashtags are defined as keywords as a tool to articulate messages and penetrate messages in shared spaces, namely on social media. A hashtag calls for the public to collaborate as a form of social responsibility in the face of oppression, discrimination, and state violence. When a hashtag is launched on selected social media, the message's author can have a small community or many followers to achieve his goal. Hashtag campaigns are accessible to a broader digital audience, immediate, and easy to track. This then encourages collective identity, a sense of support, and empathy.

Hashtag activism can be a tool for grouping an issue or focus, attracting media interest to publish to the public. Another function, hashtags, can be a filter for users to select and sort the topics they want to follow. Several studies have been conducted showing that hashtags are a means of creating awareness and discussion, spreading ideas, and connecting individuals with communities.

#### **QR2. What is the distribution of the quartile rankings of selected journal articles?**

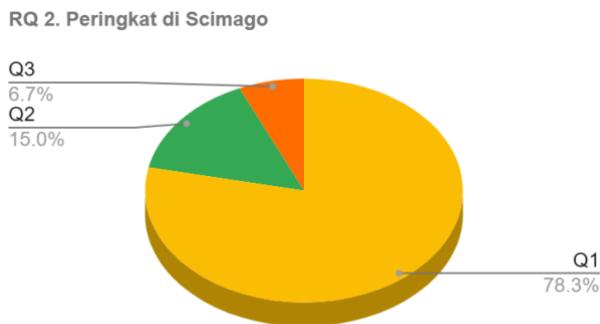


Figure 2. Distribution of Quartile Ranks of Selected Journal Articles

The distribution of journal articles based on ranking position in Scimago was as follows: Quartile 1 (Q1) was dominant for more than half of the journal articles, followed by the distribution in quartile 2 (Q2). Meanwhile, in the last position, journal articles are ranked in quartile 3 (Q3). In the 60 selected journal articles, there were no journals that had not been identified or not assigned to Scimago.

#### **QR3. What is the distribution of publication years of selected journal articles in the database?**

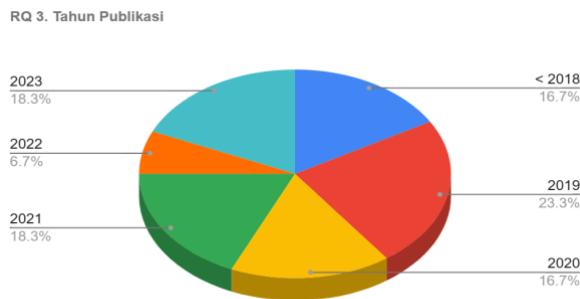


Figure 3. Distribution of Publication Years of Selected Journal Articles

The articles with the most years of publication were published in 2019, followed by several in 2023 and 2021. In 2020, many articles were similar to those of journal articles published in 2018 and below. The journal articles with the most minor proportion published are those published in 2022.

#### **QR4. What is the geographic distribution of the selected journal articles in the database?**

As can be seen in the chart above, the geographical location of the research locations is spread across several continents, such as the American continent, the European continent, and the Asian continent. According to the list, most studies do not include the location where the research was held. Followed by the United States, which is quite the focus of the country

studied. Two studies combine more than two countries as locations where research samples were taken.



Figure 4. Geographical Distribution of Research Locations

#### QR5. What research methodology was used in the selected studies?

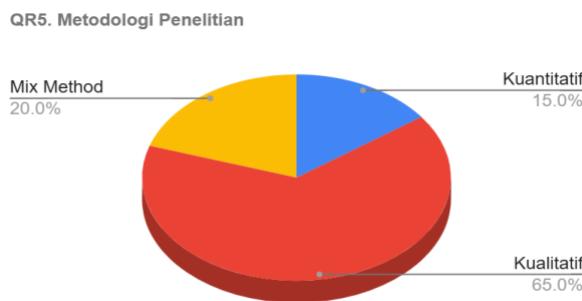


Figure 5. Research Methodology

The research methodology most widely applied in the selected studies is qualitative, followed by mixed-method methodology. Meanwhile, as seen in the chart above, quantitative research occupies the lowest position among the selected articles.

#### QR6. How is the distribution of social media types in the selected journal articles?

Most journal articles focused on research on Twitter, followed by Instagram. Several other social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Google Trends exist. Several studies take samples from more than 2 (two) types of social media. Meanwhile, the proportion of "Others" are journal articles that do not specify their research on one type of social media.

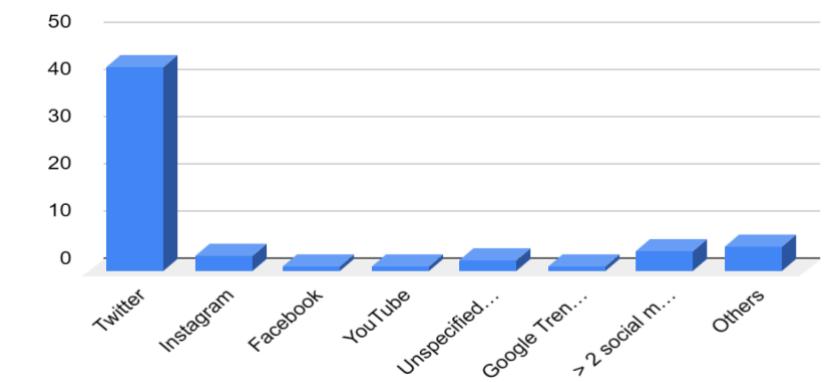


Figure 6. Distribution of Social Media Types

## QR7. What areas of research are discussed in journal articles?

Table 2. Selected Journal Article Research Fields

Research Field	Amount in Journal
Hashtag activism	12
Feminism	9
Racism	9
Health	7
Sexual harassment crime	5
Hashtag activism; Political	2
Crime of sexual abuse of children	2
Political	2
Religion, justice	1
Digital feminist activism	1
Economy	1
Hospitality (tourism)	1
Public relations	1
Justice	1
Crime of sexual harassment; NGOs	1
Crime, femicide	1
Health (Psychiatry)	1
Behavior	1
Climate change	1
Politics, Religion	1
Total	60

The research areas discussed are related to hashtags in social movements taken from selected journals, most of which are related to hashtag activism, such as the #MeToo movement, #BlackLiveMatter, and #JusticeForBreonnaTaylor. This indicates that the existence of hashtags helps communication from a group to move towards the goals they want to achieve. Following previous research, a hashtag can describe how a struggle occurs and can be the main channel for increasing societal awareness regarding an issue (Tombleson & Wolf, 2017).

The many problems that arise and require movement are echoed through hashtags, shown by the dominant emergence of journals discussing feminism and racism, followed by health and sexual harassment crimes. Each of these is a widely discussed topic, so a hashtag can be an alternative communication in the digital world to voice what is currently hot in society.

The rest shows the diversity of topics that can be discussed in communication through hashtags, such as politics, religion, justice, economics, and public relations. It can also be seen that within a hashtag, there can be discussions on two topics that are related to each other, thus making the existing discussion richer in information, for example, discussions about hashtag activism, which is linked to politics, discussions between religion and justice, and the relationship between religion and political. So, hashtags become a bridge created by a group to make it easier for them to get information.

## **QR8. What findings were obtained regarding communication through hashtags in social movements?**

From 60 selected journals, it was found that hashtags are currently a way of communication in social movements. Hashtags are a facility for expressing support for something, protesting against certain parties, and the role of social media as a forum. This is evident from the emergence of the online trend #MeTooIncest, which appears to have been a facilitator for disclosing experiences of child sexual abuse, which is consistent with previous findings that disclosure is activated by discussions about abuse (Alaggia et al., 2019). From a criminological perspective, the internet is a productive space for committing crimes and building communities that support victims who disclose traumatic experiences such as child sexual abuse. Then, the topic of "Hair for Freedom" imitates the actions of previous hashtag feminists, such as #MeToo, commodifying protest and spreading the involvement of celebrities, most of them white and Western women, as discussed in another context by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017).

Decentralized information sharing and centralized information aggregation can facilitate collective agenda formation. The findings show that activists who campaign on specific hashtags take the initiative to coordinate their actions to build a collective narrative and mobilize more supporters on social media. Hashtags have the potential to combine and aggregate various micro-messages, giving them an umbrella-like structure.

Research also finds that digital social movement patterns differ from traditional social movements. Social movements in the digital era are characterized by movement without boundaries and across social structures, in contrast to traditional social movements, which are mainly carried out within the same social structure actors conditions before creating a borderless public space. Using hashtags as content on Twitter is currently very widely used, with the hope that the hashtags posted will become a national and world hot topic.

Social movements that discuss topics of public interest can generate greater public attention through social media. Two key determinants of growing engagement on social media are necessary to drive that attention. Public-facing content includes elements about Policies or Actions as well as established Groups. Additionally, tweets that included valence sentiment were retweeted more frequently. These elements sparked conversations among the public, continuing essential discussions about race in America. This study shows that the public can and will use social media as a channel for critical social conversations and actions. The consequences for social movements and those seeking to increase engagement with important topics are significant.

Social media cannot provide a complete understanding of a social event. However, it provides a comprehensive view of how specific individuals frame events. The emerging frame suggests that hashtag activism as a catalyst for social movements was embraced as a theme by one of the publications, thereby helping legitimize the role of social media tools such as Twitter.

## **QR9. What research limitations can be identified in the journal as a reference for further research?**

Most journal articles stated that the amount of data and samples they studied was an obstacle to research. This is because differences in the amount of data can influence the analysis results of how influential a hashtag is to the social movement. For example, in the #EmptyThePews movement article, due to the random selection of tweets, the conversational aspect was challenging for researchers to follow thoroughly until the end.

Apart from that, as communication research does not occur face-to-face, the existence of social movements through hashtags often needs to be made aware of being able to analyze non-verbal

communication and the context that occurs among the people who are members of the movement. This is explained as a limitation of research on the #Feminism movement that occurred on Twitter. A broad understanding of feminism shapes the discourse on social media. However, there are difficulties in analyzing and interpreting Twitter data. Where contextual information is limited (for example, when a tweet is a response to a conversation where the contributing party's account is not public), Tweeps may intend the tweet to be ironic, satirical, or sarcastic, or tweets intended to advocate for feminism may be interpreted as patronizing (Lopez et al., 2019).

Another limitation that often occurs is limited research time while social movements through hashtags continue to occur and roll out. For example, in research on the social movement hashtag #HPV, which wanted to examine how people understand the HPV virus to provide a broader picture of the content on Instagram, data was collected at three different points in time. However, this still needs to allow for broad generalizations, as content on social media is constantly changing. This is consistent with the statement that on the Twitter platform, a user's "follower" relationship at a particular point in time cannot be captured.

In the selected journal articles, only a few did not include limitations of their research. For example, migraine advocacy on social media and the Malaysian government's steps to combat COVID-19 through the hashtag #StayAtHome, both journals in the health sector. The existing limitations were not explained, so it is possible that the existing limitations did not significantly influence the research. This is possible because the two journals aim to convey health advocacy through social media and existing hashtags. So, the amount of data and samples available is unrelated to the research results (Basch & MacLean, 2019) ; (Shah et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

In summary, hashtags serve as powerful tools for articulating messages, fostering collaboration, and promoting social responsibility against oppression, discrimination, and state violence. When launched on specific social media platforms, hashtags can achieve their goals without the need for large communities or massive followers. Hashtag campaigns accessible to a wider digital audience are expected to promote collective identity, support, and empathy. The research topics explored various aspects of social movements using hashtags, demonstrating their pivotal role in achieving group objectives. Numerous issues and movements find their voice through hashtags, enriching discussions by intertwining related topics. Hashtags act as bridges, facilitating information retrieval and discussion enhancement for groups. Among the 60 selected journals, hashtags emerge as a significant communication method in social movements, expressing support, protest, and utilizing social media as a platform. However, the impact of hashtag communication on social movements varies, mainly due to data and sample size differences affecting the analysis of hashtags' influence. Additionally, the absence of face-to-face communication in hashtag-driven social movements highlights the importance of understanding non-verbal communication and context within these online interactions. Time constraints and the continuous evolution of social movements pose challenges to research longevity. Lastly, a few selected journal articles lacked explicit research limitations due to their focus on health advocacy through social media and hashtags, making sample size and data availability irrelevant to the study's outcomes.

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