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Hashtag Counterpublics: #LifeinLeggings as Feminist Disruption to Mainstream Public Media Discourses

By Alicia Haynes

Abstract

This essay explores the disruptive impact that the hashtag #LifeinLeggings, founded by the Caribbean Alliance against Gender-Based Violence, had upon mainstream media, highlighting its role in reshaping public discourse from feminist counterpublics. It examines how women, through the sharing and documentation of their stories, unsettle mass media spaces to initiate crucial conversations about their mundane experiences with sexism and misogyny. Through a critical technocultural discourse analysis, I interrogate the disparities in discourse and representation of the movement in online newspapers at the start of the movement. The article contrasts the silence of local media in Barbados, with more detailed reporting found in regional and international outlets, highlighting the varied recognition of women’s issues. Finally, the essay emphasizes the transnational reach and unifying power of digital activism, illustrating its effectiveness in mobilizing women’s voices across geopolitical borders and advancing feminist agendas.

Keywords: Public sphere, Caribbean feminism, Feminist activism, Digital media, Women, Gender-based violence, Hashtags, #LifeinLeggings

Introduction: Igniting Discourse from Counterspaces

Digital platforms have emerged as central spaces for feminist grassroot activism and organizing. In particular, the manipulation of social media conventions, such as the hashtag, has marked a major shift in Caribbean feminism, where issues of violence against women become visible through the increased participation of a broader cross-section of women. Caribbean cyber-feminists have utilized hashtags and their capacity to spark generative conversations that center violence against women, street harassment, and rape culture in Caribbean society, such as in the case of #LifeinLeggings. Although initiated in Barbados by the Caribbean Alliance against Gender-Based Violence, #LifeinLeggings carried momentum across the globe, signaling the power of the hashtag as a vital tool in transferring discursive content across spaces. With the emergence of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatters, online and offline public spaces began to witness the virality of hashtag culture as a trend, to elicit public attention and curate discourse on current phenomena worldwide. This rise in a woke climate of activists shows a level of organizing to alleviate the disparities and marginalization of vulnerable groups while maintaining visibility through curated media and in mainstream coverage (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2017; Clark-Parsons 2021).

Against this backdrop, Caribbean feminists, inclusive of non-normative identities, ignited an ad hoc but organic social media movement and moment marked by the uprisning of women’s collective voices about their quotidian experiences with sexism and rape culture in the geopolitical Caribbean. I refer to the #LifeinLeggings movement as a moment given its short sweep of social media before transferring its online activism into a largely offline space. I also consider the longstanding genealogies of Caribbean feminist activism that created a culture of networking, grassroots organizing, mobilizing, and responding to any current social issues around gender, violence, and sexuality from grassroot counterspaces (Andaiye 2002;
Barriteau 2003). Feminist communities such as CatchAFyah Caribbean Feminist Network, Walking Into Walls, Red Thread and Womantra along with individual feminists activists have been doing the work of visibility and responding to the culture of violence online (Haynes 2016). Viewing #LifeinLeggings within this longstanding history of Caribbean cyberfeminisms, we see the exponential reach and radical possibilities of feminist political mobilization online. Feminists engaged a youthful demographic of women that enabled the power of the hashtag across public spaces, offline spaces, and transnational borders within hours. #LifeinLeggings’ significance lies in its ability to capture a wider bandwidth of local, regional, and international media through women’s own creation of media and discourses from an online counterspace (Haynes 2016). I frame my discussion around Bailey’s (2022) and Friedman’s (2017) research that recognizes the hashtag as a feminist tool of intervention that curates counterpublic safe spaces for women, queer, and vulnerable communities while contending with normative discourses on gender. Through the #LifeinLeggings movement, I argue that a counterpublic is defined by a curated networked community safe space that supports the collective voices of women and the power of their diverse stories to operate as a collective politics that speaks to and against patriarchal systems at work. However, I depart from Bailey with the claim that the focus on a digital tool, that is the hashtag, is insufficient to capture the dimensions that are reflected in the realities of Caribbean women’s experiences. I discuss hashtag activism as constructed counterpublic spaces where activists make personal stories political through a politics of visibility, attend to cultural underpinnings and historical antecedents that impact women’s experiences, and merge the individual with collective identity politics that dismantles systems of injustice.

The digital practices of women under the umbrella #LifeinLeggings are indicative of a mapping of feminist political organizations online that captures various subsets of participating women. In my analysis, I rely on the filtering of discourse through mainstream newspapers with an online presence, and I point to the absences, contradictions, and inclusions as key to understanding the underlying impact of women’s collective voices. I explore how women negotiate social media spaces as publics—mainstream and counterpublic—and how they magnify their voices to contest oppression through a manipulation of digital artifacts from their counterspace. According to Haynes and Navarro (2020, 2), recent regional events emphasize “the necessity of a feminist politics grounded in an intersectional analysis of vulnerability.” Grounding #LifeinLeggings in women’s experiential knowledge, therefore, demonstrates an opportunity for myriad forms of feminist praxis to operate online. This praxis unfolds through the act of speaking that resonates with a large demographic of women and forms a critique of societal normative values. This praxis further raises gender consciousness, incubates women from violence by using the hashtag as an expressly safe space, and organizes networks of solidarity that foreground women’s voices and issues. Issues of violence against women draw a heightened level of feminist engagement (Robinson 2000). #LifeinLeggings undergirds the malleability of social media technology and devices and the varied purposes for which they are used for political aims, collective solidarity, and large scale visibility. The facilitation of discursive practices allows for the dissemination of information but also highlights shifting and oppositional attitudes that are featured online. However, the ephemerality of content on digital platforms problematizes how feminist praxis takes precedence, maintains relevance, and transcends time-space dynamics. I consider #LifeinLeggings as demonstrating the power of women’s voices operating from a hashtag counterpublic and how the media shapes women’s dissident voices, given their longstanding ideological contention with the public sphere. I argue for the importance of feminist politics and the surge of women’s voices in raising political consciousness, but I also acknowledge that the public space is not always conducive to hearing or supporting women’s issues due to the maintenance of normative values that shroud women’s issues in secrecy (O’Callaghan 2011). The contradictions of the public sphere reside in the
bolstering of values of respectability that have had a long shelf-life in determining women’s relationship with and negotiation of public spaces (Roper and Wint 2020; Edmondson 2003). As such, #LifeinLeggings is significant in its representation of women whose mediated practices and leveraging of media online are manifold regardless of social expectations (Brodber and Hodge 1982; Peterson 2022).

**Women’s Ambivalent Relationship to Public Spaces**

Hashtag activism must be located within the contextualized histories of the Caribbean and the transnational geopolitical locations from which women generate, circulate, and maintain cultural practices through a negotiation of technology. Feminist activists have long used accessible technological tools to make women’s plight visible while simultaneously determining their material relationship with them (Wijewardene and Samuel 2015). While Wijewardene and Samuel (2015) considers the many factors that impact feminist organization beyond the human actor, I maintain that it is necessary to understand how technology and digital media are shaped through women’s mediated and immersive practices as a reflection of their representational identities and disruption of hegemonic discourses (Peterson 2022; Friedman 2017). Given the established practices of Caribbean feminists who speak to their experiences and rupture social systems, it is imperative to consider their tactical use of social media as mutually constitutive in negotiating their experiences online (Friedman 2017). However, I consider the complications that manifest on digital platforms given commercial interests and the imposition of male privilege and sexism that are embedded in algorithms, mainstream media pages and user-generated data such as comments or posts (Noble 2018; Zuboff 2019). Although virtual spaces adhere to some aspects of lived reality, consideration should be given to the disjunction in platform orientation and function due to the capitalist frames through which social media sites are operated (Noble 2018; Zuboff 2019). Nevertheless, the facilitation of communication and formation of social groups online have allowed women with similar goals, experiences, and interests to wield digital conventions beyond national boundaries and into publics with a global reach. Concomitantly, I recognize the ways in which Caribbean culture as a distinct space becomes co-opted to fit the features of an online audience. Marwick (2013) conveys that social media is entangled in daily life and relies on the features of mundane interactions. Best (2008) also observes that the negotiated language practices of Caribbean women demarcate the digital as a strategic space for understanding the Caribbean context and the discursive practices of users online. As such, digital technologies and social media platforms operate as imagined socio-political and socio-cultural landscapes that allow for mediated social practices to be organized. I, however, take this understanding of how women use space as indicative of their ambivalent relation to the public sphere.

The concept of the public in the Caribbean is contested due to volatile histories of slavery and indentureship that have had longstanding ideological impacts on social mobility and status for different groups of women (Edmondson 2003). In an ethnically diverse Caribbean, challenging social media publics is a necessity given the type of cultural values that become constituted and take precedence online. Caribbean mainstream broadcast media has historically influenced social ideologies and expectations that reinforce a hegemonic ordering through discourse. Women, often the primary object of discourse, were accorded values of propriety and respectability with associated implications for their race, class, and gender (Brodber and Hodge 1982). Though public space has been marked by an eschewing of Blackness and associated negative connotations, women negotiated their public presence to varying degrees. Their antagonistic relationship to the public underscores a performative complicity with the norm, resistance to hegemonic views of femininity in the media, and an exercise of agency through work, community formation, and performative acts despite agency being masculinized through media (Edmondson 2003; Brodber and Hodge 1982; Ulysse 2008).
In mediated online spaces, women who operate from counterpublic spaces are seen as oppositional because new media coverage is largely shaped by institutionalized politics (Fraser 1990). Social media movements and the media are in a paradoxical relationship that is hinged on activists leveraging controversial and dramatic activities to gain attention that qualifies as news value (Smith et al. 2001). Given that broadcast supports mainstream ideologies, media houses are largely selective in the content they feature and the angle from which events are shown (Smith et al. 2001). Issues being foregrounded by a movement can often be overshadowed by the presumed contention of protestors who, from the lens of broadcast media, are disrupting the order of public space. Dissenting voices that surface in the mainstream public are not unusual, and the validity of these voices is not solely hinged on traction gained through broadcast media. Feminist media practices demonstrate a collective articulation and interpretation of social phenomena through which women devise new strategies to garner public attention (Young 1997). Viewing the act of speaking as productive new media and taking into account its effects on those witnessing and listening, scholars emphasize a feminist politics of visibility as a performative politics with the potential to disrupt dominant discourses and model alternate ways of being (Clark-Parsons 2021; Brodber and Hodge 1982; Rentschler 2014; Tait 2011). As such, women deconstruct hegemonic discourses that largely determine their mundane realities to instead construct their own interpretive paradigms to respond to social injustices. Fraser (1990) emphasizes the production of a counter-discourse through practices of visibility by subaltern US feminists in the late 1990s. They used creative print media and outlets such as journals, films, and books to conceptualize and describe their realities. Through writing and speaking to their experience, feminists interrogated their exclusion from public spaces of participation and broadcasted new frameworks of meaning.

Counter-publics are the antithesis to mainstream publics that call attention to entrenched gender norms that constrain daily life. Though the notion of the public is ideologically ambiguous in meaning, it determines the construction of the social world through a social ordering of relations, imagined audiences, and formalized structures (Warner 2002). Public spheres are sites of discursive production and dissemination, integral to the affairs of peoples’ lived reality. In the online space, Habermas’s (1991) public is evident in the formation of public opinion and discourses that are framed by the production and circulation of information through mainstream channels for public consumption and engagement. Though accessible by virtue of being in an open, public setting, the discourses, cultural ideals, and representations that dominate are marked by an imposition of polarities of difference that simultaneously privilege one group while disenfranchising other groups whose interests are neglected (Noble 2018; Zuboff 2019; Wajcman 2010). Noticeable here is the exclusivity and hegemonic ordering of this public. In so doing, it reproduces marginalization of women and their various intersections with race, class, culture, and geopolitical locations, among other identities. Nevertheless, feminists in the Caribbean continue to create safe spaces through the hashtag and other digital conventions within online cultures that reflect its grassroots origins, and they use these digital spaces to critique systems of oppression that remain a part of cultural memory. With a focus on Latin American feminist counterpublics, Friedman (2017) conveys that these spaces are reminiscent of characteristics of physical and virtual locations through which the marginalized develop their identities, form alliances, and agitate for transformational change. In so doing, women organize online to disrupt cultural values that continue to bolster and naturalize rape culture due to unequal power relations between men and women (Barratt 2018; Rentschler 2014).

Hashtag feminism is bifurcated by the representational potential of visibility that refashions how women respond to social injustices (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2017; Barriteau 2017; Friedman 2017; Peterson 2022), and an economy of visibility that is a means to an end given the minimal impact of hashtag activism on systemic inequalities (Banet-Weiser...
While the material effects of online activism are yet to be determined, digital activism has shifted from online to offline spaces to be more sensitive to harmful cultural practices. Feminist countersites are key to understanding the corresponding relationship between societal norms and digital cultures even with its accompanying limitations. Other scholars view digital tools as necessary for the survival of marginal groups, not only in the need for connection and validation of sexual identities but also concerning the survival of offline discriminatory experiences (Bailey 2015). Linabary, Corple, and Cooky (2019) and Bailey (2022) emphasize that hashtag activism helps to construct counter-discourse through the sharing of personal experiences in a collective space. Conventions such as hashtags, posts, tweets, and live streams, among others, serve as a digital archive of counter-discourses that respond to misrepresentations or absences of vulnerable people from mainstream media platforms (Merrill, Keightley, and Daphi 2020). Curated social media publics become digital assets for safekeeping to raise awareness and make visible the daily struggles and tragedies that often go undocumented. Witnessing, curation of community, connection, and documentation are key political components of feminist counterspaces.

While Friedman (2017) conveys that all persons in social spaces should adopt similar social values, newspaper posts and comment sections show that the general public prefers to disassociate from feminism as destructive to the patriarchal order. Furthermore, Barratt (2018, 13) delineates the “precarious” nature of gender justice because of the inherent biases embedded in the technological software and in the unwavering misogyny that operates as online surveillance. Despite these paradoxes, counterpaces address prevailing sexism across the Caribbean by amplifying women’s transnational reach and impact on the types of public discourses that emanate through mainstream media. Feminist counter-discourses persist despite increased visible backlash, but the extent of its reach is left to be seen due to the ways communities collide with online tools that are always changing, becoming obsolete, transferring ownership, and altering the rules of engagement (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2017; Zuboff 2019). Though feminists have been molding technologies through their expressly political engagement, uncertainty looms regarding the success of cyberfeminism in achieving tangible social change (Barriteau 2017). However, moving beyond this polarizing logic regarding digital feminism allows for an interrogation of women’s negotiation of the possibilities of social media and their curation of spaces and mediated practices.

Caribbean Counterspaces

Conceptually, the notion of the public sphere is complex and is framed as activity and participation in dialogue on social issues that are associated with a masculine and bourgeois point of view, thereby reinforcing the gender hierarchy (Habermas and Burger 1991; Baym and boyd 2012). Scholars have delineated what makes a space counter to the public and the ideologies that may collide and conflict in these counterspaces or counterpublics. In this article, I argue that a Caribbean feminist counterpublic is defined by a repudiation of normative values, rearticulation of personal narratives that form a collective response to wider public issues, and the embodiment of cultural elements in the curation of a communal identity (Squires 2002; Bailey 2022; Quinn 2021). Counterspaces can be found throughout much of Caribbean culture. Dissident groups form counterpublics that are a direct rejection of normative values. Peripheral physical spaces like the dancehall are places of subversion and community that transcend the limitations of geopolitical space and material realities (Stanley Niaah 2008). Furthermore, with shifting social uses of technologies among younger generations, Krista Thompson (2015) underscores the importance of visual media in young people’s self-representation and integration into dancehall subcultures. Peripheral modes of existence allow disenfranchised people to curate their imagined versions of community, identity, inclusion, and connection into concrete worlds. In this essay, I will explore how counterspace runs parallel and oppositional
to mainstream space in an unending dynamic, as I investigate the complexity and possibilities of microcosmic digital spaces.

Feminist counterpublics predated the internet and used tools available such as diaries, gatherings, oral traditions, written stories, and the creation of feminist organizations. Furthermore, many radical feminist offshoots can be traced to Caribbean organizations like Red Thread (1986), which were not an attached arm of a political party or place of worship as were many early feminist organizations that colluded with mainstream publics in order to be included (Andaiye 2002). Instead, these radical counterspaces centered on improved living and economic conditions for women in Guyana (Andaiye 2002). Moreover, online counterspaces are marked by networking, foregrounding of women’s issues, and responding to the culture of heterosexism and violence (Haynes 2016, Barratt 2018). According to Haynes (2016, 3) online practices of Caribbean feminists through the curation of community groups and the manipulation of platform conventions illustrates a heterogeneity and polyvocality that is simultaneously “regional, national, and global, or transnational and diasporic.” While Haynes does a mapping of cyberfeminism, I employ her work to draw attention to how feminist political intervention and action rupture mainstream, institutionalized spaces by prioritizing women’s interests. Feminist counterpublics therefore hold many possibilities for resistance, community, and discourse.

Though these counter-groups are both contradictory and adjacent to mainstream ideas of publics, the circulation of discourses within and across these feminist spaces simultaneously creates new discourses, while also foregrounding and appropriating the politics of mainstream publics located in public opinion and social values. These counterspaces are thus marked by complexity and hybridity. As I explore feminist counterspace as appropriated through the hashtag, I take into account that counterpublics in Caribbean history have emerged in diverse formats with overlapping communities who align due to common interests while articulating exclusions from the mainstream public sphere. While the emergence of counterpublics is tied to its contestation of oppression due to systemic injustices or dominant knowledge circulated in public spheres, a counterpublic is constituted by the material and cultural experiences of its participants (Squires 2002).

**A Critical Technocultural Discourse**

For this research I draw on Brock’s (2020) Critical Technocultural Discourse (CTDA) to chart the pathways through which women represent themselves and the broader social contexts within which they operate. Brock’s approach underlines ideological influences reflected within user-generated practices, embedded in the technological design and within the discourses that surface from users of technology. In so doing, I foreground the significance of the hashtag as symbolic practice while investigating the broader social context of online broadcast media’s coverage of #LifeinLeggings. CTDA gives flexibility in evaluating a broad range of digital artifacts, practices, and integrated discussions that emerge even if disparate. CTDA allows for a broad selection of the standpoints of underrepresented groups. Though the hashtag thread is still available on Facebook and other platforms, I tread cautiously regarding the sensitive stories of sexual violence and rape, as a way to safeguard women’s stories and identities that are not for consumption. Rather, I take up the collective impact of the movement and the lack of initial reporting by local newspapers, their eventual coverage of the movement, and its relevance subsequent to international broadcast media coverage. I employ textual and discourse analysis to capture the impact of the movement and the absences and contradictions in how these women have been featured.

Given that Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) conceptually counters the “epistemological drawbacks” of normative approaches, I problematize and interpret the layers of women occupying space in online publics (Brock 2020, 9). This analysis is based on
the traction gained online and in broadcast media transnationally within hours. I explore the context within which these women engage and negotiate constraints or silences online and as part of their geopolitical positioning in the Caribbean. Counterpublic are explored as a pathway for women to represent themselves and make meaning of their experiences through the use of technology. The research uncovers the ideologies that operate online through discourses and practices. An analysis of discourse practices subsumed within the use of the hashtag convention gives insight into how women disrupt power dynamics and are impacted by the preservation of normative values. This research examines discourse used in the news as a measure of the public’s response. Discourse is historically undergirded by and maintained by hegemonic relations of power. Therefore, how discourses are produced from a counterspace and across mainstream publics is significant to understanding the cultural meanings that underpin the discourses produced by women. The data analyzed for this research was collected from online news sources, along with Facebook where #LifeinLeggings conversations dominated. The local news articles I prioritize are from Nation News and Barbados Today, which lacked coverage in the early stages of the movement, and LoopNews Barbados which featured detailed coverage of the event throughout. The regional and international features are from Starbroek, BCC, and Global Voices respectively. All articles have a publication date that ranged between November 25, 2016 to December 11, 2016, at the height of the movement. Variance in the dates is determined by how news sources prioritized the movement based on local silencing or as a part of an international climate of hashtag trends. Additionally, the sources selected have a social media presence allowing for varied perspectives to surface in the comment sections within the curated mainstream public space. I selected news reports to offer a wide sample of public opinion, especially since the new reports are differentiated in their reporting of the significance and associated disruptions of the #LifeinLeggings online protest. I also reviewed comment sections on the social media platforms of some news outlets to broaden the political dimensions and implications of the hashtag counterspace and public perception.

Participatory Counter-discourse that Responds to Mainstream Normative Values

This section examines how women’s visible protest against rape culture within the feminist counterspace #LifeinLeggings influences wider public attitudes toward women’s issues. I first account for #LifeinLeggings as a safe space due to women’s tactical use of the social media hashtag and the ways in which they form community and speak against rampant violence and sexism in the Caribbean. It is imperative to understand how women have mediated the frames of digital platforms online to collectively visibilize their experience. In 2016, the hashtag which started among friends inclusive of non-normative gender identities, gained traction across social media within hours across eleven Caribbean countries, South America, Haiti, and into the Caribbean diaspora within Western and South Asia countries (Sanatan 2017; LoopNews 2016). The #LifeinLeggings movement produced safe spaces for women in the Caribbean and across international borders to share their stories of negotiating cultural experiences impacted by rape culture and sexism. Feminist articulation of oppressive experiences due to sexual violence interrogates the inequalities inherent in social norms which are upheld by silences and respectability politics surrounding women’s sexuality and relational dynamics (O’Callaghan 2011). The youthful demographic of women organizing online under #LifeinLeggings disrupted cultural values that continue to bolster and naturalize rape culture due to unequal power dynamics between men and women (Rentschler 2014). Simply resharing the hashtag on Facebook, along with a personal story or message of solidarity, was akin to protesting in the streets with placards as one story turned into multiple collective stories. This politics of visibility reinforces the personal as political through tactical collective action (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2017; Young 1997). The feminist hashtag created a platform for women in the Caribbean and its diaspora to publish and archive their stories under the hashtag.
while demanding recognition of the daily violence they experience. Noting Jackson, Bailey, and Welles’ (2017) configuration of safe spaces as community-oriented, I consider the extent to which #LifeinLeggings has given women the opportunity to assemble for a larger purpose, feel comfortable sharing personal stories, and catalyze the forging of bonds and networks across geopolitical spaces, contributing to community-building. As social media feeds became populated with survivor stories, the hashtag encouraged the participation of other women to speak about and against their experiences across public spaces (Tait 2011). #LifeinLeggings relied on the participation of digital users, especially women who shared their experiences across the diaspora, along with allies and organizations.

The strategic use of hashtags empowers women to share their personal narratives in their cultural languages, creating a media platform that is free from the biases commonly found in mainstream media. Women utilized linguistic variations such as creole, dialects, and trending social media phrases to effectively communicate and highlight their stories. Their reflection of norms goes beyond mere replication. It represents a form of contestation, resistance, and appropriation of cultural identities and experiences that are mutable. It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the characteristic features of technology and the practices of people that surface as a critique or reflection of social norms (Baym and boyd 2012). Participation within the counterspace facilitated the sharing of a collective identity and politics that acknowledges intersections of difference impacting women differently across geopolitical locations (Bailey 2015; Linabary, Corple, and Cooky 2019). These diverse but unified narratives hold transformative potential across public platforms. Despite the ephemerality of #LifeinLeggings, at its height it offered networking and supportive spaces that operated under a feminist ethics of care. The extent to which feminist allies and organizations may have addressed the specific needs of women is unknown because these efforts were not publicized in a social media space. Consequently, any further interventions made by this feminist organization remain uncertain from this distant public view. Nevertheless, access to the movement through social media platforms offers a bird’s eye view of its impact through the leveraging of the hashtag across the Caribbean and its diaspora.

The symbolic significance of #LifeinLegging lies in the pun of its name to dispel the assumptions that women’s garb has a direct correlation to the sexual advances, harassment, and violence they experience. The nuanced reference to leggings (body-fitting tights) brought focus to the experience of women as victims of gender-based violence. It questioned the rhetoric of shame that insinuated the lack of propriety of the women and queer people at the forefront of the movement. #LifeinLeggings perpetuated a visual representation of feminist meaning-making by centering women’s bodies and experiential knowledge as a site of resistance. This may be due to the ever-shifting dynamics of social media that require its users to adapt and familiarize themselves quickly with emergent and shifting trends (Ochieng'-Springer and Francis 2020; Quinn 2021; Miller et al. 2016). The hashtag’s importance as a counterspace is reflected in how it reconfigures the digital landscape within existing practices of Caribbean feminist protests. While the material effects of online activism are yet to be explored, I maintain that #LifeinLeggings functioned as a moment because it had little capacity to fully cater to women in tangible ways in offline settings (Barritteau 2017). Social media conventions such as the hashtag play a crucial role in the subversive political practices of women, allowing them to curate counterspaces, enhance visibility, initiate conversations, drive protests, and build alliances.

**Problematizing Mainstream Public Discourse: Silencing of Hashtag Counterspaces**

Disrupting mainstream discourse through women’s discursive practices online is evident in the traction activist movements gain from features in the news. Relying on the visibility of hashtag trends as a tool of protest revealed significant vulnerabilities and risks for
women, whose identities are easily identifiable within smaller Caribbean societies. It can be argued that women’s tactical use of social media through the hashtag counterspace disrupted mainstream conversations given the immediate rise of backlash through countermovements such as #LifeinBoxers and #EggPlantEntries that sought to preserve patriarchal constructs of gender. While these conflicting hashtags created a distraction from the aims of the original movement, they speak to the culture of violence and sexism that operates online (Barratt 2018). Not surprisingly, the wielding of #LifeinLeggings rippled through mainstream public discourse and proved to be disruptive.

Furthermore, the two main local newspapers in Barbados, with an online and offline presence, attenuated the movement through formal silencing, refusing to feature the movement as a collective uprising of women. Mass media reporting usually offers a level of legitimacy to social movements and protests. As such, this denial of a broader platform by mainstream public media reads as an attempt to undermine the claims of women. Still, there was a noticeable surge in general allyship among women and feminist organizations on a transnational level through women’s counterspace media, which garnered widespread traction and emphasized the hashtag’s political impact. However, the media as disseminator of information and normative discourse reinforces the culture of silencing of women’s experiences as survivors of violence. During this initial period, the media’s reticence and skepticism are evident in its reluctance to cover the movement. Women’s counter-discourse operates as opposing ideologies and alternate narratives to what dominates in mainstream media. Although #LifeinLeggings became a viral moment and gained considerable international media attention, local media’s initial silencing delegitimized women’s experiences. Notably, #LifeinLeggings circulated across platforms on November 25, 2016. Neither of the two major newspapers, Nation News nor Barbados Today, featured the movement on the mainstream online platforms or in print media for more than a week. Based on a search for media coverage on their Facebook page at the onset of the movement, there is an absence of links tied to #LifeinLeggings. Via the Nation News website, the headline “#LifeinLeggings Brings Sexual Abuse into the Open” from December 4 (Nation News 2016) is clickable. This misleading headline promises to delve into the dimensions of the movement, yet the article provides little information other than reinforcing class and power markers of difference. Though the headline appears on the Nation News’ main site, there is no viable link that can be located on Facebook, as all other articles regarding the movement are dated March 2017. While this may indicate the transient nature of online content, it also highlights the failure to validate women’s experiences by refraining from circulating the movement through a widely used social media public space.

While the aforementioned headline seemed supportive of the movement, the article focused more on a former politician’s support of the movement which outweighed the dynamics and features of the younger women involved:

Once embattled politician Dr. Maria Agard has described the movement hosted by “De State a’ Tings” under journalist Denyce Blackman as a phenomenal venture. While giving her take on #LifeinLeggings, Agard told Nation Online she understood completely where the women were coming from having had to face her own monsters of domestic abuse. (Nation News 2016)

In effect, the abuses women face become overshadowed through a representative politics subsumed within the figure of the former minister. While newspaper headlines are ideologically powerful to manage reader’s perceptions and interpretation through discourse, there is an incongruity in the subsequent content that operates as a “dramatic reversal” of power-relations, where high ranking officials take precedence and occupy a frontal position (Teo 2020). Further, the omission of the inclusive space that the hashtag counterspace has
curated for non-normative identities further reinforces the marginalization and silencing at the core of women’s protestations. The emphasis on the former minister and journalist overlooks the contributions of numerous other women leading the movement, including organizers and the collective voices of women. The narrow focus of the article prioritizes formal political and institutionalized support rendered to women. This selective attention illustrates the perceived insubstantiality of women speaking about their experience and shifting discourse in public spaces. Given that this reporting was done approximately a week later, the choice of language to describe the movement as a “phenomenal venture” is cursory and does not capture the complexities at play. Moreover, the opening of the article prioritizes men’s experiences as a form of vulnerability brought about by the movement by inverting women’s rallying cries as orchestrated scolding: “HERALDED AS BETTER than any talk therapy, the #LifeinLeggings movement is being viewed as a saving grace. Some men have been admonished for not allowing women to have their time to air their grievances and experiences” (Nation News 2016).

In so doing, this biased reporting diminishes the significant impact of women whose quotidian lives are impacted by various levels of violence. Patronizing reporting is established through the reference to “talk therapy” that negates the seriousness that undergirds their experiences. The words and phrases “some men,” “admonished,” “not allowing,” and “their time” subtly marginalize women by reinforcing men’s dominant position. This approach operates as a form of victim blaming that diminishes women’s voice and insinuates that the validity of these experiences is contingent upon men’s approval. Overall, the statement undermines women by minimizing their experiences, perpetuating dependence on external validation, attributing blame for their own silencing, and reinforcing power imbalances. It fails to recognize the agency and resilience of women in addressing issues of harassment and violence, instead portraying them as passive recipients in need of affirmation and support. Mainstream public discourse operates through a distancing from minority perspectives, by employing discursive strategies that shift blame onto victims for the socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural circumstances (Teo 2000). This reinforces power dynamics in a top-down approach by ignoring the collective participation of women who powerfully narrated their experiences, to instead focus on high ranking professionals’ support and perspectives about social media virality.

Furthermore, Barbados Today also trivialized the movement by declining to share authored coverage by the movement itself. Instead, this media house demonstrated insouciance and detachment by opting to reshare a post by a self-professed male ally on their page. Operating through this frame prioritizes the perspectives and reactions of men regardless of their stance on the movement while ignoring women’s voices. While some may argue that this approach offers some form of legitimacy to the movement by inviting men to explain the significance of the movement, it undermines the tactical strategies and digital counterspace from which these women operationalized the movement. As one Facebook commenter indicated in the newspaper’s reshare post:

#LifeinLeggings: two amazing women spark an inclusive regional movement that breaks the silence on rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, gender-based violence and rape culture and gives voice to thousands of women who continue to flood online spaces with stories. A core team of young women mobilize in less than a week to create the organizational structure to make this movement move. And the only thing Barbados Today shares is a man’s video reaction! #LifeinLeggings indeed. Stupse. (Facebook commenter, Barbados Today, December 3, 2016)
The male commentator was treated by the newspaper as a reliable source of knowledge on #LifeinLeggings and authority on women’s experiences, despite women’s rallying cries against sexism. As such, this underreporting of #LifeinLeggings and distant maneuvering on the part of the media in the first few days evidences the silencing of women’s sexuality and experiences. Visibility acts as a protest tactic. However, women inevitably carry the load of responsibility for reckoning with their experiences. This erasure operates as an institutionalized form of violence against women that is rampant in Caribbean societies that reinforce masculinist values and polarized power relations (Deshong and Haynes 2016). It reinforces that the mainstream media is a public that acts as a disseminator of hegemonic values. News is organized by relevance and importance. Ideologies of gender and its multiple intersections are embedded within the structure of news reports that preserve disparities between public knowledge and counter-discourse. As such, ruptures to the norm from a feminist counterspace have been largely ignored or undervalued as evident in these two mainstream online Barbadian newspapers. Impartial and indirect reporting is the norm for news articles, where reporting peripheral dynamics takes precedence over the main event of the report (A. Haynes 2019). The reliance on sources of information who are in positions of power, while excluding the perspectives of those already marginalized, illustrates a tactical gatekeeping that deepens inequalities and constructs an established world view (Teo 2000). Media coverage enhances the perceived legitimacy of social movements in public spaces but operationalizes silence by denying activists a more mainstream platform to voice their claims.

Supportive Media Features of Feminist Counterspaces

Though there was a limited uptick in coverage of the movement within mainstream local Barbadian newspapers with an online presence, the only newspaper that took up the movement to circulate it in the mainstream was an exclusively online newspaper, Loop News Barbados. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully delineate if this online newspaper operates as alternative or mainstream media, given its solely online platform and prioritizing of news from the perspectives of ordinary people. However, Loop News claims to be a reliable news source for current affairs, boasting to be the number one news app in the Caribbean. Loop News pushed content from the inception of #LifeinLeggings with a total of six comprehensive articles within the first week. Many commenters thanked them for being the first local and regional news agency to highlight #LifeinLeggings. The curated social media captions include: “Are You Following the Conversations? #LifeinLeggings” (November 26, 2016), “Barbadian Women Have Been Using the Hashtag #LifeinLeggings to Share Their Personal Experiences of Street Harassment, as Well as Sexual and Other Forms of Abuse” (November 29, 2016), “Do You Think that More Needs to Come About or Be Done as a Result of this Hashtag? What Do You Suggest as The Next Step?” (December 3, 2016). Taking digital conventions of social media into account, these captions speak to a tactical use of the digital trends to foreground the social positioning of women. Through this online mainstream public platform, there is a notable shift in how counter-discourse is reported and framed. Loop News adopts a youthful tone that is in sync with social media trends of capturing attention and inviting engagement through catchy captions. Here, the media reflects and shapes the “creation of public discourse and understanding” by encouraging further engagement through the concise framing of the event that orients the reader in a predetermined direction (McCurdy 2012; Teo 2000). This format is important in light of social media feeds that are structured for momentary absorption of information through conditioned scrolling (Noble 2018; Zuboff 2019). The captions allow for the flow of information from counterspaces and across social media publics, to both wider audiences and to smaller private audiences (Miller et al. 2016; Squires 2002). Given Loop News’ manipulation of platform algorithms, the majority of the posts on #LifeinLeggings attracted significant user engagement.
More importantly, Loop’s first Facebook post on #LifeinLeggings, on November 26, 2016, reflected 163 reshares and 65 comments. This does not account for reshares of the article from other private pages, only personal profiles with public access. However, I also consider the restrictions that accompany these platforms. According to Bruns and Burgess (2015), algorithms govern what data is visible in newsfeeds, and in the case of social media platforms this is organized by relevance. While retrieving these shares in February 2024, I recognize that the ephemeral nature of social media means the available metrics may not accurately reflect the attention or engagement that Loop News, as a mainstream online paper, garnered for the #LifeinLeggings movement in November 2016. However, comments like “My God, Barbadian women despise their men” and “Dress decent, not like hoes, and you will get respect” underscore how media representations of counter-discourse can be misinterpreted and distorted across different public spaces. It also speaks to the multiple perspectives and reactions that will emerge through public discourse, further perpetuating ideological forms of violence against women (Barratt 2018). Conversely, other comment section reflections on this newspaper social media page underscore the value of counter-discourse to public discourse and understanding: “This hashtag is cathartic…I’m seeing so many people talk about their experiences for the first time, even if anonymously. This is a beautiful thing. #LifeinLeggings” (Facebook commenter, Nov 26, 2016).

According to McCurdy (2012), the creation of public discourse and understanding are mutually constitutive and coherent. The hashtag counterspace afforded a shield to share stories in a safe space that collectively demonstrates the power to disrupt and visibilize women through their own narratives. Women therefore shape the media through their political action by amassing support across multiple public spaces. The multiple publications from Loop News meticulously document the impetus and political underpinnings of the movement, featuring stories from women and illustrating the impact of sexism on their lived reality. Loop also highlights commentary from leaders of the movement and support from influential individuals across the Caribbean diaspora. More importantly, they emphasize the reckoning that the counterspace brings to the forefront:

Many of the accounts are disturbing and heart-wrenching as these young women, most of who are in their 20s and 30s, recount almost daily experiences of disrespectful, threatening and abusive behaviour in both public and private spaces at the hands of male strangers, friends, classmates, colleagues and family members, starting from a young age. Their stories have sparked a range of reactions—with many in disbelief and disgust at the frequency of the experiences as well as the shocking nature of the abuse. (Loop News 2016)

This bottom-up approach prioritizes women’s experiential knowledge with reporting that visibilizes their collective contestation of sexism online. Furthermore, they offer both an aerial and personalized view of the movement’s disruption to society by showcasing women’s narratives and highlighting the potential for behavioral change among men who witnessed these firsthand accounts unfolding online. Accordingly, this process of witnessing is dependent on the effect of confrontation and response (Oliver 2001). However, this dynamic remains in an unresolved tension, complicated by normative values and historical antecedents that impact perception and acceptance (Oliver 2001). Nevertheless, the digital activism of women disrupts news media online, by shifting conversations in ways that foreground them as subject and credible narrator of their experiences. I account for counterspaces as disruptive here through this leveraging of online mainstream media. Articles circulated by Loop News Barbados underscore the intersectional dynamics that undergird women’s realities and the shaping of
national responses through their tactical mode of discursive contestation of heteronormativity through the hashtag counterspace (Crenshaw 1991).

Coverage of the #LifeinLeggings counter-discursive praxis was not only featured to varying degrees within Barbados but also gained the attention of regional and international mainstream media. Similar to Loop News’ coverage of the movement, other forms of broadcast media explored the various dimensions of the hashtag as a community safe space for women to share stories and mobilize collectively online. The manipulation of media is crucial to the power of the hashtag as a digital tool, possessing features that enable content to go viral within hours across borders. #LifeinLeggings gained momentum through mainstream media such as the BBC which has a large scale subscription base. Of significance is the two-hour radio feature #LifeinLeggings: Caribbean Women Taking Power Back by Kevin Philemon and Primrose Granville (2016), that gave extensive coverage of the movement and included interviews with the main activists. Though only the title and summary of the podcast remain available, the recording is now inaccessible due to the shifting and ephemeral dynamics of online digital media.

*Global Voices* is another online newspaper that reports on international human rights issues from the perspective of the marginalized. This online platform features a wide cross-section of comments under the hashtag and discusses the #LifeinLeggings movement in detail. Furthermore, *Global Voices* shared a diverse array of perspectives from activists, social media users engaged in the movement, women who shared their experiences, high-ranking officials who highlighted the movement’s significance, and men who reevaluated the norms they have upheld, illustrating the momentum of #LifeinLeggings across various spaces. They also present a panoramic view of the conversations sparked across other social media publics such as Twitter (X), demonstrating an in-depth view of how this counterpublic has functioned and sparked conversations:

#LifeinLeggings is utterly soul-crushing to just read. There have been points when I had to stop because I could not stomach anymore. (Mendes-Franco 2016)

As the testimonies poured out, a sisterhood was being formed—so many women could identify with the experiences; had been through something similar themselves. (Mendes-Franco 2016)

The interwoven storytelling presented by this international online news media demonstrates that rape culture has persisted for an extensive period, and the counterspace provided an opportunity for society as a whole to confront the ramifications of these injustices affecting girls and women in Caribbean society. The ability of hashtag feminism lies in the production and interconnection of individual narratives online which propels its political growth (Clark-Parsons 2021). The *Global Voices* article has prominently featured how women have told their stories, showcasing the scourge of sexual violence prevalent in Caribbean societies and women’s adaptive strategies to navigate mundane life while feeling unsafe. Moreover, the contribution of feminist counter discourse through this media feature was reshared to the regional newspaper based in Guyana, *Starbroek News*, highlighting how discursive practices of women filter through multiple streams of public media.

The widespread coverage of the hashtag in regional and international media not only exposes women’s experiences but also their emancipation from silence and shame through the assertion and ownership of their narratives. This movement allowed them to seek solace and strength by sharing experiences with other women who have undergone similar challenges. It can be inferred that comprehensive coverage of the various dimensions of the movement by international media stems from its social distance from the localized dynamics affecting the
geopolitical Caribbean. This distance allows for a broader perspective and deeper exploration of the movement’s complexities. In contrast, the underreporting in local Barbadian newspapers presents the movement more as a law-and-order issue rather than addressing its principal concerns. Nevertheless, the response of silencing signals the destabilizing force of counterpublic spaces (McCurdy 2012).

Symbolic Significance of the Hashtag Counterspace

The hashtag #LifeinLeggings operates as an expressly feminist counterspace that channels the discursive practices and stories of women. This feminist symbolic use of hashtags creates an alternate space, which I deem to be counterpublic, that clashes with mainstream values and discourse but cannot be ignored. My analysis in this essay delves into how this hashtag counterspace infiltrates mass media spaces to spark public discourse on issues of sexism and misogyny that affect women. Despite the persistent silences surrounding violence against women, #LifeinLeggings has operationalized women’s often invisible status through the collective documentation and archiving of their experiences online, thereby mediating their experiences into public view across spaces. Although their actions are often met with backlash due to longstanding ideologies that objectify and marginalize women in the public sphere, #LifeInLeggings has enabled women to respond to daily attacks and offer mutual support through networking in a communal space.

Women’s experiential epistemic logic emanating from this hashtag space demonstrates a feminist praxis of care and a confrontation of sexism that foregrounds their ongoing efforts to take up space in public. This illustrates that feminist political action and mobilization can gain traction through self-created media across a wider cross-section of publics. Although the main two media houses where the hashtag originated in Barbados choose a conservative stance, a local online newspaper, along with regional and international press, have effectively captured the complex dynamics at play, thereby amplifying the voices of Caribbean women. These features illustrate the global relevance of this feminist counterspace. The mainstream media is an important conduit for the dissemination of information, and selected absences in media reporting in some outlets emphasizes the collective role of these women as a “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2023). Although transformational change remains the goal of feminist activism, women’s cataclysmic disruption to mainstream discourse marks an important step in feminist genealogies of mobilization. As such, #LifeinLeggings signifies an ongoing evolution in feminist grassroots organization, highlighting the critical role of digital platforms in fostering solidarity, visibility, and transformative action within Caribbean societies and across geopolitical borders.

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