From individual affectedness to collective identity: personal-testimony campaigns on social media and the logic of collection

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen a rapid development of forms of digital activism and campaigning of the most disparate kinds using from protest movements using Facebook fan pages and Twitter in order to mobilise supporters, to YouTube and TikTok becoming hosts to instant messaging apps such as Telegram and Signal being used as semi-public organisational channels (Earl and Kimport, 2011; Dumitrica and Felt, 2020). Scholars have long debated how the rise of these practices has been accompanied by a shift in the organisational and symbolic logic of politics and protest (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Dolata and Schrape, 2016; Author, 2018). One of the dominant narratives in this context has been the idea that digital politics is departing from modernist understandings of political action, and the emphasis on strong organisation and collective identity. Social media platforms have been seen as a means for “organising without organisations” with apps providing an alternative to vertical organisational bureaucracy (Shirky, 2009). Furthermore, digital activism practices are seen as revolving around a logic of networking, while at the same time reducing the need to construct collective identity, with its implications of unity and strong solidarity of group members.

An example of these views is the influential concept of “connective action” by Alexandra Segerberg and Lance W. Bennett (2012, 2013), to express the new logic of protest in the era of social media. According to this thesis, many contemporary social movements are no longer engaging in “collective action”, with the implication of strong collectiveness the expression carries. Rather they are shifting to a more mercurial, diffuse, multi-issue and open-ended logic which focuses on temporary connections bringing together individual users around fleeting ad-hoc mobilisations. According to this interpretation, not only the emphasis on strong organisation issued by strategic theorists as Mancur Olson, but also the importance of collective identity, argued by more culturally-oriented approaches is less important in understanding contemporary protest. The idea of collective identity, as a sense of “we” acting as the basis for collective action, is seen as anachronistic, and out of sync with the network-like nature of social media interactions.
While it is true that some tendencies of the internet and social media reflect and facilitate growing individualisation, my contention is that this view that collective identity is losing importance is misplaced. In fact, many digital activism practices as focused precisely on processes of identity-building (Author, 2015). An example is provided by personal-testimony campaigns that have become a recognisable “genre” in digital campaigning. They can be defined as crowd-sourced symbolic mobilisations, in which internet users who are affected by a given social ill (for example sexual harassment, racial discrimination, economic hardship etc.) are invited to recount their own experience, with the aim of raising awareness of certain social grievances. Personal testimony campaigns use a variety of social media, but Twitter and Instagram are particularly popular platforms. They are usually associated with a hashtag, hence they are sometimes alternatively described as “hashtag campaigns” (Yang, 2016; Jackson, Bailey, Brookes Foucault, 2020). Individual contributions can come in the form of texts, images, selfies, or videos, which add to those sent by other internet users.

In recent years, this template has been used in many online mobilisations as a means to engender collective discussion, awareness, and arouse indignation about a host of social issues. Examples of such personal-testimony campaigns, include the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment starting in 2017 and other feminist campaigns such as #ShoutYourAbortion and #ILookLikeAnEngineer; campaigns for trans rights such as #GirlsLikeUs and #WorkingWhileTrans; against violence such as #IfIDieInASchoolShooting and on socio-economic inequality such as #VentYourRent and #RaiseTheWage. More generally, many social media campaigns that are not reducible to this genre, contain an element of personal testimony. Scholarship has already explored different aspects of hashtag campaigns (Yang, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2018; Jackson, Bailey, Brookes Foucault, 2020). However, to date not enough attention has been dedicated to personal-testimony campaigns as a distinctive genre and the identity processes that underpin them. Do these practices support claims that collective identity has waned and is being replaced by a highly personalised politics? Or are these practices attempts to construct and foster collective identities? And if so, what kind of collective identity do they construct?

To address these questions, in this article I develop a qualitative discourse analysis of personal-testimony campaigns, drawing on some of the most well-known cases of this genre in the US and Europe. I focus on the processes of collective framing in the initial posts by
campaigners and the way they shape the content that is gathered in these collective efforts. I highlight that the logic of these campaigns is at odds with the idea of a trade-off between, personal and collective identity, but are best understood, as a space of “identity work” (Watson, 2008) in which users are invited to identify with collective identities. I argue that, rather than a “logic of connective action”, as that proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), these practices are best described as a “logic of collection” or “collecting action”. The underlying rationale of personal-testimony campaigns is not so much “connecting” people in a common network – as implied by the notion of connective action – but rather “collecting” them, gathering behind a collective banner all those who identify as “affected” or “survivors” vis-à-vis common grievance. What matters in this act of “collection” is not just the individual uniqueness of these stories – however much this is important in communicating authenticity and first-person experience – but also their similarity or “sameness”, the repetition of similar situations. These crowd-sourced campaigns operate by means of addition and accumulation: their success is very much measured on the number of contributions they attract, which is taken as an indication of the magnitude of the problem raised by activists.

To develop this discussion, I begin by surveying the literature on social movements, digital activism, and collective identity. I contrast the traditional emphasis on the strategic importance of collective identity, with views according to which collective identity has become less relevant. I argue that, rather than pitting individual against collective, what needs to be discussed is the relationship between individual and collective identity, and the processes of identification that connect the two levels. After a brief discussion of methods, I examine some examples of crowd-sourced personal-testimony campaigns, from #MeToo to #WorkingWhileTrans. I highlight the commonality in the way these campaigns are framed through initial messages providing instructions for prospective participants; the way individual posts contribute to a collective storytelling effort; the common demonstrative purpose of these campaigns and their aim to show strength in numbers. I conclude with some notes on the broader significance of these practices for an understanding of digital campaigning and the relationship between individuals and social groups in a digital society, and implications for future research.
2. Collective identity in digital activism

In recent years scholars have paid attention to new digital campaigning practices, and, in particular, to “hashtagged campaigns”, which constitute the broader phenomenon under which personal testimony campaigns fall. Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles highlight in their book #HashtagActivism that “this practice has led to the creation of networks that offer cathartic release and solidarity among those sharing stories of victimization and survival while making unignorable the political and cultural demands of a still violently patriarchal society” (2020: 3). These mobilisations revolve around connecting personal experience with collective issues. As Guobin Yang observes, “personal stories are linked to broader social issues and shared with the public through the use of the hashtag, giving hashtag activism a communal and collective character” (2016: 15). In analysing online feminist campaigns Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller argue that “feminist consciousness amongst hashtag participants […] allows them to understand sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem” (2018: 238). These interactions can have important consequences for individual participants as highlighted by the case where “one of our interviewees told us that she began to identify as a feminist only after sharing her story of sexual assault on social media” (Ibid.).

The obvious way to approach these practices is through the lens of collective identity, a notion in the study of social movements. The theory of collective action by Mancur Olson (1971), which is Bennett and Segerberg’s most immediate target, did not consider the question of identity, as it proceeded from an economic and individualist approach, which overlooked psychological and cultural phenomena. Olson’s work explored the difficulties faced by individuals trying to secure a certain public good, for example health, education or clean air. He highlighted that a major problem for an organisation was the fact that most public goods were “inclusive” (38) meaning that they could be enjoyed irrespective of one’s contribution to the organisational effort that secured them. This “free rider problem”, meant that to mobilise members organisations had to use “selective incentives” either through coercion or positive inducements (133).

Discussions of collective identity became instead prominent since the 1970s, especially in Europe, to capture the meaning of new movements, from feminism to environmentalism.
(Touraine, 1988; Melucci, 1991), and more generally to devote attention to the cultural and symbolic aspect of collective action. To follow Jacquelien Van Stekelenburg “identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally other people’s understanding of themselves and other” (2013). Similarly, Taylor and Whittier have described collective identity as “the shared definition of a group that derive from members’ common interests, and solidarity” (1992: 172). Similarly, Della Porta and Diani have proposed that “[c]ollective action cannot occur in the absence of a “we” characterised by common traits and specific solidarity” (2006: 94). As Alberto Melucci has argued, building on the work of Pizzorno, collective identity theory allows to overcome the methodological individualism inherent in Olson’s theory: “[i]nterests and mobilization can be coupled only if one refers to the concept of collective identity - that is, if theory provides an understanding of the ‘we’ through which people recognize themselves” (1989: 63).

The theory of collective identity has drawn inspiration from work in social psychology, which has highlighted how all groups, big and small, derive their identity from two sources: on the one hand from recognition of some degree of similarity, or “sameness” among its members and, on the other hand, from difference vis-a-vis an “out-group” (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Scholars such as Bert Klandermans and colleagues have proposed that collective identity depends on the salience of social characteristics on which identity is based, and the social cleavages connected to it (2014). Indeed, social movements often make reference to various “status groups” as defined on the basis of gender, race, class. The collective identity forged in social movements should however be read as “a simple reflection of a group’s structural location, for example, its race and gender. It is an interpretation of that structural location or status” (Whittier, 2017: 380). Hence, the importance of Alberto Melucci’s insistence on the dynamic character of collective identity as “an interactive, shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action produced by several individuals that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals to groups” (Melucci, 1989: 793).

Examining feminist movements Nancy Whittier has highlighted how they involved practices of “consciousness raising” which entailed “reinterpreting one’s individual experiences, seeing them as shaped by social forces and identifying as part of a group with shared experiences” (2017: 377). This is part of a “visibility politics” seen in “the disclosure of silenced
or politicized identities (rape survivor, queer, person with AIDS, person who has had an abortion) in daily life or in public events such as speak outs” (383). These practices involved “bearing witness” to the injustices that affect a given social group, in which a sense of common affectedness – as express by references to the term “survivor”. They reflect what Gamson describes as “injustice frames” in which common identity is found in the sense of being affected by the same issues (2013). But equally important is the transformation of group identity, which has highlighted by Gamson is “both the basis for oppression and the basis for political power” (1995: 391). Further, the aim is to transform the emotional associations, from a sense of shame to a sense of pride (Britte and Heise, 2000, Gould, 2009).

While some of these practices are a goal in their own right, scholars have also shown their strategic importance. Collective identity is an important device for mobilisation, which makes it possible to overcome some of the dilemmas of collective action and obstacles to participation (Klandermans, 2002). This strategic importance of collective identity is evident in the work of US social historian Charles Tilly and his notion of “catnet” namely “a network within a category” or “a set of individuals comprising both a category and a network” (Tilly, 1978: 62). According to Tilly, network ties are not a sufficient condition for mobilisation. Rather they need to be accompanied by the presence of a categorical sense of collective self. Connected to this is what Tilly calls WUNC displays (the acronym of Worth, Unity, Numbers, Commitment): social movements constantly try to show how big and dedicated is the group they try to represent through collective performances (2006b). Framing theory has also acknowledged the importance of a collective sense of self in the construction of collective action frames (Benford and Snow, 2000). In so doing, the notion of collective identity has been used by more strategic approaches to overcome the excessive individualism of Olson’s formulation of the theory of “collective action”, to account for the importance of a sense of common group solidarity in mobilising people.

In recent years, a number of scholars have however made the case that social media driven social movements make collective identity anachronistic. Most notable is the argument put forward by political scientists W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg in their theory of “connective action” (2012). According to Bennett and Segerberg contemporary forms of action “are typically far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational
resources required to respond effectively to opportunities” (2012: 750, emphasis mine). In this context, the emphasis on “some degree of strong collective identity that establishes common bonds among participants” has “become more marginal in thinking about the organization of connective action” (763). They contrast modern forms of protest in which action centers on “issues defined in terms of ideology or group identities such as race, gender, religion or ethnicity” (2013: 56, emphasis mine), with “late modern” and “individuated societies” in which we find “personalized forms of contention that involve multiple causes and are engaged through personal life-styles” (Ibid.). While Bennett and Segerberg acknowledge that identity-focused approaches in social movement studies are different from Olson’s theory of collective action they find in them traces of the same “modernist logic of collective action” (181).

Bennett and Segerberg’s assertion of a fading away of the importance of collective identity is informed by the view of a “shift from group-based to individualized societies” (2013: 174), that draws inspiration from the sociological theory of individualisation (Beck, 2002) and “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2001). It operates with a view of networks and groups as two alternative social morphologies, and of a networked society as one that leads to individuation while lessening the importance of groups and group identity. This interpretation chides with the work by other scholars such as social movement theorist Kevin McDonald who has argued that identity does not capture the logic of online mobilisations such as Indymedia and Anonymous (2015), and that we need instead to (980). The view of a fading away of the importance of collective identity seems, however, to be contradicted by the online practices of many contemporary movements, whose social media activism by and large revolves precisely around the construction of collective identities (Ackland and O’Neil, 2011; Treré, 2015). Further, recent research has pointed to the fact that personalized action frames described by Segerberg are not necessarily in contradiction with collective identity (Lim, 2013; Monterde et al., 2015; Alfonzo, 2021). Rather than approaching personal and collective identity as opposed we should look at them as “orthogonal” (Capozza, Voci, Licciardello, 2000: 62). As Gamson has highlighted participating in social movements and adhering to collective identities offers an “enlargement of personal identity” (1992: 56). Conversely, personalised forms of participation, or what Paul Lichterman has described as “personalism”, are not opposed to involvement in community and connected forms of collective identity, but can be conducive to it (1996).
Following this line of thinking, in this article I approach crowd-sourced personal-testimony campaigns “identity work”, namely a process of active construction of identity, that takes place in different groups (Watson, 2008; Reger, Myers, and Einwohner, 2008). Identity work have been documented in different online social movements, from feminist campaigns (Gleason, 2018), to activists campaigning on issues of disability (Bora, Levi, and Brady, 2018). It indicates processes by means of which individuals performatively identify in, or subscribe to, collective identities by adopting shared symbols, and recognising themselves in a sense of “we” (McInnes and Corlett, 2012; Brown, 2017; Ahuja, Heizmann, and Clegg, 2019). One example is what Hunt and Benford describe as “identity talk” which is seen in associational declaration which support the “alignment of personal and collective identities” (1994: 496). Specifically, I am interested in the forms of identity work that are involved in “collecting” or “gathering” individuals behind the same banner. To explore this process we shall focus on the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: What kind of identity processes do personal-testimony campaigns on social media networks construct? What is the stated or implicit purpose of these campaigns and their identity-building effort?
- **RQ2**: What is the relationship between personal and collective identity they display? How are individuals agglomerated under a common identity?
- **RQ3**: How are social media affordances, such as hashtags and algorithms, used for purposes of identity aggregation?

### 3. Methods

This article is a theory-oriented discussion of the organisational logic of digital activism, drawing on examples from recent social movements. Its methodological standpoint is that of exploratory case study analysis (Yin, 2018), using discourse analysis, to identify common patterns in the way these campaigns and their messages were framed (Johnstone, 2017). For purposes of case selection, I followed a “purposive sampling” approach (Emmel, 2013; Etikan, Musa, AlKassim, 2016). This is a selective form of sampling where researchers have a discretion in choosing cases that share common characteristics. It befits studies which the main purpose is a theoretical one, as is the case with the present research. For purposes of case selection, I proceeded in two
stages. First, I engaged in an exploratory analysis, drawing on literature, internet searches (using Google News and Google Trends) and posting queries on campaigners and activist lists. This initial passage yielded a total of 23 cases. For these examples, I downloaded all tweets using Twitter Academic API and the Twarc2 software\(^1\) which allows to search for historical tweets. I then proceeded to narrow down the list to 7 cases that were deemed the most relevant in terms of their impact as measured in terms of the total number of tweets on the hashtag (excluding retweets). The selected cases were #MeToo, #ShoutYourAbortion, #YesAllWomen, #GirlsLikeUs, #IfIDieInASchoolShooting, #RaiseTheWage and #VentYourRent. For each of these cases I compiled a “small data” corpus (Latzko-Toth, Bonneau and Millette, 2017) comprising the top 50 tweets per hashtag and a further random selection of 50 tweets. To analyse this data, I used the NVivo software. I started by coding the text for basic themes then organising them into larger categories.

4. The sharing of personal experience as collective identity-building

Crowd-sourced personal-testimony campaigns cover very different topics and contents. But they tend to follow a different template. This is well illustrated by what, to date, has been the most famous of these campaigns: #MeToo. The hashtag was originally used by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006. But its social media explosion happened after it was relaunched on October 15, 2017 by actress Alyssa Milano. The hashtag went viral after the exposure of sexual abuse by Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein. In the following days and weeks the online movement made the news headlines all over the world exposing major cases of harassment and sexual violence in the entertainment industry and beyond, with parallel mobilisations developing in many other countries including China. In the first year it grossed a

\(^1\) https://twarc-project.readthedocs.io/en/latest/twarc2_en_us/
total of 19 million tweets in the first year of the movement (Brown, 2018), and it has since led to spinoff organisations such as Time’s Up a charity raising money to support victims of sexual abuse and harassment.

In this online campaign we find a series of general features that we shall retrieve in many other personal testimony campaigns on women’s rights and other issues: 1) a well-defined collective identity frame connecting an ascriptive social group with certain grievances, 2) the role of individual posts as contributions to an expanding collective story; 3) the demonstrative purpose and quantitative focus of this collective effort revolving around showing strength in numbers.

First, the campaign, far from being radically open-ended, made quite clear at the outset the group of people it wanted to mobilise, identifying it with women, and more specifically with those who had suffered sexual harassment. This was evident in the instructions of the initial tweet by Milano: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as their status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” The collective identity frame here is evident in the very label “all the women who have been sexually harassed and assaulted”. In the conversation, women often referred to their experience of harassment as “survivors”, a term which condenses the sense of affectedness by the problem, and the lasting scars it leaves on people. This is framed by the very hashtag and the adverb “too” which highlights a commonality between an individual intervention and what other people have already said. A clear distinction was made between those directly belonging to this category sometimes framed as survivors and various “allies”, including men standing in solidarity.

Second, the campaign articulated personal and collective identity, framing personal testimonies as a contributions to the construction of a group identity, aimed shedding the stereotypes and stigmas attribute to that group and showing its worth and dignity. The campaign gathered thousands of testimonies of women all over the world recounting their experience of sexual harassment and violence, often unknown even to their closest friends and relatives. While being unique and extremely intimate, these stories were framed as manifestations of a common problem. This was implied by the very expression “Me too” and connecting hashtag acting as a common identifier, suggesting one’s personal adherence to the collective mobilised. Here the adverb “too” also communicates that each individual post is an addition to what other people have already said. The individual contributions were coherent to this framework. The most
retweeted posts using the hashtag #MeToo were personal-testimonies of women denouncing sexual harassment. Personal testimonies take the form of a “coming out”, a public confession and denunciation of what one had experienced; a practice that has a long tradition in feminist and LGBT movements (Whittier, 2012). This coming out is not just “personal”, it involves a subscription to a collective identity, which contributes in expanding it.

Third, the general purpose of the campaign was demonstrative, highlighting the sheer number of people affected by this issue, with the ultimate end of giving the issue visibility and calling for solutions. This was explicit in the last words of Alyssa Milano’s initial tweet: to show the “magnitude of the problem”. Further, key influencers in the campaign often highlighted the number of contributions it had gathered, and the degree of its “virality” to prove its urgency; and this was also reported by the news media. The point of collecting contributions was confirming the “hypothesis” launched by the campaign; namely, the fact that, the issue being raised was quantitatively significant, a problem that affected many people and hence one that due to its magnitude called for political action. In this context, using the hashtag #MeToo was akin to counting oneself in, adding one’s story (as implicit in the “too” in “Me too”) to an expanding set of cases, as a means to demonstrate “strength in numbers” (Tilly, 2006b: 291).

Image 1: Tweet from the #ShoutYourAbortion campaign

I was 20, in school and my bc failed. I did not want a child. It was the right choice and I've never regretted it. #shoutyourabortion

11:28 am · 21 Sep 2015 · Twitter for iPhone

8 Retweets 40 Likes
These features are found, with some variation, across many other personal-testimony campaigns. Besides MeToo women rights have been thematised in many other campaigns such as #ShoutYourAbortion and #ILookLikeAnEngineer. The #YesAllWomen campaign was launched in the aftermath of the 2014 Isla Vista killings in California where a killer animated by misogynistic motives killed 6 people. The hashtag launched by Twitter account @gildedspine to express how sexual harassment and discrimination are problems that affect all women. This was in response to internet users who, commenting on the massacre, said that “not all men” were like the killer. The hashtag collected thousands of personal testimonies of women recounting episodes in which they had suffered sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence, with the aim of highlighting the extent of the problem. One of the most retweeted posts read “In college, we’d regularly find girls who had been roofie’d and left passed out in the parking lot next to our dorm. REGULARLY. #YesAllWomen”. Within few days since being launched the hashtag had already been used over a million times and it was widely reported on news media, with also politicians like Nancy Pelosi using it.

Similar in logic is the #ShoutYourAbortion hashtag campaign launched in October 2015, by graduate student Amelia Bonow. She posted the following message on Facebook: “having an abortion made me happy in a totally unqualified way. Why shouldn’t I be happy that I wasn’t forced to become a mother? #ShoutYourAbortion”. After being retweeted by Lindy West, an activist with a large Twitter following, the post soon went viral leading to hundreds of women sharing their experience of abortion, detailing the stigma they had to face. In few months it totalled 150,000 Twitter posts (Lewin, 2015), with thousands of women recounting their experience. The campaign sparked a national conversation about abortion rights, and the need to overcome draconian restrictions on abortion in many US states and change the way people approach the issue. The opening message contains a clear instruction framing successive posts. Participants were invited to “shout”, to say loudly in public an experience that due to the stigma associated to it is often discussed only in private and intimate circles. This act of “shouting” suggests a crossing of the barrier between private and public, between the intimate and the political, that again comes close to the practice of “coming out” or “speaking out” popularised by women and LGBT movements.
Hashtagged campaigns such as #ILookLikeAnEngineer and #DressLikeAWoman have also displayed a strong personal-testimony element. The first was launched in August 2015, by software developer Isis Anchalee (formerly Isis Wenger), after a social media backlash against a recruitment ad which featured her, with internet users suggesting she was not an engineer. By the following year the hashtag was used 250,000 times (Anchalee, 2016), with thousands of women in the engineering industry and beyond taking pictures of themselves and detailing their condition. The #DressLikeAWoman hashtag Was instead sparked by as claims surfaced that Donald Trump had asked White House female staffers to “dress like a woman”. In the space of few days thousands of women intervened posting pictures of themselves wearing all kind of clothing – in particular, those traditionally associated with masculine roles. Some feminist personal-testimony campaigns such as #FastTailedGirls have focused on the problems faced by black women, and in particular street harassment and stigma. Launched in 2014 Twitter account called Feminista Jones called on black women to recount the forms of sexual harassment they were suffering.

To better understand the collective identity logic of these personal-testimony campaigns it is instructive to contrast them with online mobilisations such as #HeForShe and #AllMenCan which follow a similar framework, where the primary target is not women undergoing sexual violence and harassment, but rather male “allies” called to express their solidarity. The #HeForShe campaign was launched in June 2014 and supported by the United Nations, and by celebrities such as actress Emma Watson, and was met with tens of thousands of tweets in support or against. Partly similar is the #AllMenCan campaign launched by UK charities in the aftermath of the killing of Sarah Everard, in which female users expressed their views about how men could contribute to fighting against sexual harassment, with male users expressing how they were trying to go about this. What is at play here is a rather different kind of identity work from that seen in the previously discussed campaigns. This involves not collecting experiences of survivors but rather calling on men to adopt a different vision of masculinity from the traditional patriarchal one.
Women’s rights campaigns have been by far the most popular issue thematised by crowd-sourced personal testimony campaigns. But another issue that has more recently been channelled through this means has been the right of transsexual people. One of the most famous examples is the #GirlsLikeUs campaign, originally launched in 2012 by trans activist Janet Mock, and which has continued over many years on both Instagram and Twitter. The campaign attracted over 150,000 tweets, in the months ensuing the initial call, with contributions recounting the experience of being a trans woman and episodes of discrimination faced by trans people. It
aimed at “organizing a community through identity construction” (Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles, 2018). Janet Mock has described as a “social media visibility movement”², the idea was to give “many trans women a space to easily and collectively broadcast our lives in a very visible way”. She has highlighted that the phrase aimed at overcoming stereotypes about womanhood and girlhood, collecting stories of many people who identified as women or more specifically girls without being identified as such at birth. Over the years thousands of users posted pictures showing themselves before and after transition, often accompanied by hashtags celebrating trans identity such as #transisbeautiful and #transvisibility. Other hashtags have been used for similar purposes such the #WorkingWhileTrans campaign launched by the Trans Safety Network in November 2021 designed to highlight the discrimination of trans people in the workplace. As with previously described women’s rights’ campaigns, we find again a similar pattern: an initial frame being issued with the hashtag as a common identity signal summing up the purpose of the movement; a stream of people using it to recount their personal stories and thematise their common grievances; and finally the purpose of getting public visibility for the issue at stake.

Gender and sexuality issues have been by far the most popular among crowd-sourced personal-testimony campaigns, and we shall elaborate on why this may be the case. However, this tactic has also been deployed in reference to other issues such as racism and violence. One example is is the 2018 campaign #IfIDieInASchoolShooting, which was launched by Andrew Schneidawind, an 18-year-old student at the University of Mary Washington to urge other fearful students to express what they would leave behind if they were killed in a mass shooting. The context was the aftermath of a school shooting at a Texas high school which had happened just two days before. The initial tweet read “I’m gonna try and get a hashtag trending called #IfIDieInASchoolShooting. If you wanna join, feel free. #IfIDieInASchoolShooting I will never be able to finish my animated TV series, I'll never be able to see my sister again, and I will have to become a martyr #NeverAgain”. While at the time he had few followers the hashtag went viral and in three days it had already grossed 50,000 tweets, with Schneidawind soon interviewed by prominent news media such as The Washington Post. The type of collective identity articulated here is one expressing a grievance of fear that affect many high school students in a country known for the frequency of such incidents and again the purpose is giving visibility to the issue at stake. A personal-testimony element is also found in far broader

² https://twitter.com/janetmock/status/422754848073719808
movement and connected hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter. While used for more general purposes such as promoting days of protest or denouncing institutional racism, the BLM hashtag was also specifically used to collect personal testimonies of people directly affected by racism and police violence (Ransby, 2018). Phrases like “tell your story” and “break the silence” were often used in the movement’s communications to facilitate the gathering of personal testimonies.

*Image 3: Tweet from the #RaiseTheWage campaign*
Economic issues have been comparatively less represented in personal-testimony campaigns. One early example was the We Are the 99% campaign launched in parallel to the Occupy Wall Street movement with a Tumblr blog gathering the testimonies of different people suffering economic hardship amid the Great Recession. In recent years campaigns as #RaiseTheWage and #VentYourRent have offered a way for people affected by economic issues
to air their grievances and gather around collective identities. #RaiseTheWage is a Twitter campaign launched in January 2021, by the National Employment Law Project shortly after the election of Joe Biden as president, demanding that the minimum wage be raised to $15. The campaign collected stories of workers recounting how stagnation in wages had affected their lives. The #VentYourRent campaign was launched in April 2016 in London before the mayoral elections and focused on the plight of renters in the UK capital. It called on internet users to write a sign detailing their conditions before snapping a picture of themselves holding it. It attracted thousands of tweets and was a trending topic in the UK for two days, with mayoral candidates, including Sadiq Khan, responding to it, and pledging action in support of renters. All in all, we can see that personal-testimony campaigns have become a recognisable genre used across many different issues, but with issues of gender and sexuality having a particular prominence.

5. Collecting the personal

As we have seen over the course of our analysis, crowd-sourced personal-testimony campaigns tend to follow a similar template which a number of criteria: the initial launch of an hashtag which calls for contribution on a story; the streaming in of different testimonies which take the form of a coming out; and, in successful cases, the hashtag going viral with thousands or even millions of tweets and posts adding to the conversation, sometimes leading to news coverage and reactions of politicians. What is common to all these conversations is a logie of collection which aims at collecting, gathering, or aggregating personal and intimate experiences as a means to construct a sense of “we”. In this discussion section we shall elaborate on some of the main findings and their implications focusing on the relationship between individual and collective identity; the focus on strength in numbers and the role of social media affordances in fostering it; the politics of visibility that underpins it and what it tells us about identity in a digital society.

The working of campaigns such as #MeToo, #ShoutYourAbortion and #GirlsLikeUS seem to contradict descriptions of digital activism as bereft of collective identity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). These campaigns adopt very clear collective identity frames, making reference to a specific social group as defined in terms of status (gender/sexuality, race, class); precisely the one that Bennett and Segerberg consider less important in times of “connective action”
Further, contrary to their view of this logic of action, this group identity is quite bounded rather than open-ended, and it is defined on the basis of an experiential sense of “affectedness”. This is expressed by the use of terms such as “survivors” used in campaigns such as #MeToo, or those subject to potential vulnerability as in the case of #IfIDiedInASchoolShooting, and the clear distinction between them and “allies”. This collective identity is sometimes explicitly thematised in the hashtags (#YesAllWomen, #ShoutYourAbortion) or expressed in the instructions or the example given in the initial posts that almost invariably identify the group they want to source contributions from.

While these are by definition crowd-sourced campaigns, hence open to people’s contribution, they are accompanied by a rather prescriptive collective identity framing (Benford and Hunt, 2000) role is played by the influencers and initiators. Here, “projecting ideational meaning onto connective signifiers” (Papacharissi, 2015: 73) is not incidental, but systemic. The initiators of these campaigns act as something akin to social media curators, who are crowd-sourcing the content of their campaign, rather than deciding in detail such content in advance. Yet, in turn the identity that is proposed is not fixed or pre-ordained. Tapping into the interactive features of social media, allows to make identity-building, but dynamic (Melucci, 1989), dependent on the contributions that are issued by participants.

Second, these campaigns can be best understood as a “logic of collection”, or a “collecting action” rather as “connective action”, because their purpose is precisely gathering potentially all those that qualify as members of the affected group. This implies an articulation between the personal and the collective, in which personal experiences become the basis for “collective story-telling”, aimed at constructing a collective identity, in a bottom-up process in which the collective is achieved by “collecting the personal”. On the one hand, as the very name “personal-testimony campaigns” highlights, the content of these campaigns is highly intimate, as the theory of “personalized action frames” would suggest. The resonance they campaigns have achieved owes to the vividness of personal accounts. On the other hand, however, what matters from the campaign’s standpoint is their similarity to other cases under the same set and the same hashtag, the way they act as the specimen of a collective issue, as concrete examples of the specific issue at stake. What is overwhelming when browsing through the posts is the repetition of the same situations and conditions. This is often actively highlighted by campaigners, on the one hand, to highlight the commonality in conditions lived by people pertaining to the same
social group, and on the other hand to demonstrate the structural or institutional, and not merely incidental, character of the problem.

These practices are thus reminiscent of processes of “coming out” such as of LGBT people declaring publicly their sexuality or “speak outs” by women suffering sexual violence or harassment (Whittier, 2017). Similarly, to these practices, personal-testimony campaigns involve an act of public confession, in which revealing personal experiences becomes at the same time an affiliation to a collective identity (Ibid.). This highlights the need to overcome views of personal and collective identity as mutually opposed, as implicit in the theory of “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013), and appreciate instead, how the two interact.

Third, as the very use of the phrase “collection” highlights these campaigns have a very evident quantitative element. As with collections of the most different kinds – books, coins, stamps, or artworks – what matters is not only quality but also quantity. As explicitly stated in the “Me Too” campaign, the explicit purpose is to show the “magnitude” of the problem – the quantity of people who have directly experienced it – as a necessary “politics of visibility” (Whittier, 2017) towards taking collective action against. Further, it is significant that both campaigners and media reports on these campaigns constantly emphasised the number of tweets as demonstration of their importance. These campaigns could be approached as “proof of concept” exercises, in which the initiators are animated by a hypothesis (the urgency of a given issue and the wide concern among those affected by it), whose actual validity is demonstrated by the number of people who contribute their personal testimonies. What we find in this context, is thus a reflection of the continuing importance of asserting “strength in numbers” and “unity”, which besides worth and commitment are the component of what Charles Tilly called WUNC (Worth, Unity, Numbers, Commitment) paradigm (2006a, 2006b). While, traditionally social movements demonstrating strength in numbers through by gathering as many people as possible in public street demonstrations, now they can also exploit a variety of social media affordances to this end. An important role is played by “popularity metrics” (such as the number of tweets, retweets, etc) as proof of their strength in numbers and thus relevance for the whole of contemporary society (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Further, hashtags are used as identity and unity signals, allowing, otherwise physically and socially dispersed users, to gather together and “be counted”.
Crowd-sourced personal testimony campaigns thus highlight how, far from waning away collective identity and connected processes are acquiring new shapes in a digital world. It may well be true that as asserted by Wellman and other authors we live in a time of “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2001), in which people’s identity is more eccentric. However, this does not mean that group identities are completely losing their importance. Rather, personal testimony campaigns suggest that affiliation to group identity is not a pre-ordained given but rather the ongoing product of “identity work” that increasingly happens online. While some of these practices are sometimes derided as inconsequential “identity politics” identity work can leave important and lasting marks on people’s experience and self-identity (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2018; Almeida, 2019). Further, as proposed by social psychology literature (Klandermans, 2002, 2014), the construction of a common identity is instrumental to overcome psychological obstacles to mobilisation. Further, to quote Shahin and Ng some of these practices look like “organizationally-enabled connective action in reverse” (2021: 15), with the process of identity-building setting the basis for the construction of new organisations, as it has happened with MeToo and other movements. A question that remains unresolved regards the reason why gender and sexuality issues are so prominent among the issues covered by crowd-sourced personal testimony campaigns. This may owe to the fact that in the present day and age, socio-economic identification, or the shame attached to being in a subordinate economic condition is particularly difficult to shed. But it may also due to the fact that, as we have seen, personal-testimony is by and large a digital adaptation of practices of “coming out” and “speaking out” that are strongly rooted in the history of gender and sexuality movements (Whittier, 2017), and therefore more difficult to translate to other spheres.

This study thus highlights the need to pay attention to identity-building processes taking place in online campaigns and further explore their component mechanisms, such as the role played by various identity markers (from hashtags to memes), and practices of identity subscription and affiliation. Further, it would be important to explore in more depth what are the consequences of these practices on individual and collective identity, and what are the outcomes that stream from them. The campaigns discussed in this article have not been equally successful. Some have contributed to social and political changes, such as the new rules introduced in workplaces to fight sexual harassment and discrimination on the back of the MeToo campaign. Others were instead more a flash in the pan, opinion mobilisations raising awareness about a
problem, but with not much follow-up action or tangible results. Finally, besides being a specific genre personal-testimony has become a common practice in many more general campaigns and the role this play in processes of identity construction and user participation deserves to be look more closely. Far from having lost importance in a world of networked individualism, the construction of collective identities continues to be a central task for online movements, and capturing its manifestations can help us shed light more generally on the forms of social experience in a digital society and the complex interactions between the personal and the collective.

References


