Feminist Knitting: How Stitching Together a Visual Statement for the 2017 Women's March

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"Women are going to form a chain, a greater sisterhood than the world has ever known."
— Nellie McClung, 1916

Abstract

After a divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election, a large segment of the population took to social media to express their frustrations and to find solace in the unity created by the Pussyhat Project™ and the 2017 Women's March. This content analysis examines how Facebook users framed the social movement. Findings indicate that the platform allowed a directed viewpoint to catch momentum. True to fourth wave feminism, the social movement received widespread media coverage and the pink hats became an iconic visual symbol of the Women's March that helped empower participants and raised awareness about various social injustices.

Keywords

2017 Women's March, Pussyhat Project, Donald Trump, feminist fourth wave, Facebook representation, social media advocacy

Introduction

Like many iconic movements, the Pussyhat Project™ started with a good idea. Participants knitted hats and joined in the historic 2017 Women's March to help raise awareness on issues such as immigration reform, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inequalities and other social causes. The worldwide demonstration was held the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump on January 21, 2017. Co-founders Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman (along with pattern creator Kat Coyle) shared the following purpose of the Pussyhat Project™ movement in the *Pussyhat Project Manifesto* (2016):

"We love the clever wordplay of "pussyhat" and "pussycat," but yes, "pussy" is also a derogatory

term for female genitalia. We chose this loaded word for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment. In this day and age, if we have pussies, we are assigned the gender of "woman." Women, whether transgender or cisgender, are mistreated in this society. In order to get fair treatment, the answer is not to deny our femaleness and femininity, the answer is to demand fair treatment. A woman's body is her own. We are honoring this truth and standing up for our rights."

Social media, craftivism (craft-related activism) and online sharing across social media platforms played key roles in the success of the Pussyhat Project™, which offered a means for national participation in the 2017 Women's March on Washington, a worldwide protest held on January 21, 2017 to advocate for legislation and policies regarding human rights and other issues. More than a million women attended the historical event while others helped further the cause by hand-crafting pink hats to create a bright visual statement advocating for women's rights. Demonstrating the popularity of this manner of participating in the Women's March, craft stores began running out of pink yarn weeks before the march (Shamus, 2017).

Groups of women gathered throughout the months of November and December in 2016 to produce hats for the marchers in Washington. With each stitch, women were figuratively knitted together to stand united and to be heard loud and clear. The wave of pink hats adorned with tiny ears covered much of Washington, D.C. and spilled out into the world: A judge in Texas wore a pussy hat while on the bench; the movement's icon graced the cover of the February 8, 2017 issue of

TIME Magazine; and even Lego figures were festooned with little pink hats.

The 2017 Women's March, with the help of social media, turned into a global event, with millions of women joining in protest and solidarity. Some media outlets estimated that more than five million people took part in global gatherings with approximately one million pussy hats turning Washington, D.C. into a sea of pink (Zweiman, 2017). Costumes as a visual political statement are not a new phenomenon. The 2017 Women's March echoed another march more than a century earlier, in 1913, which happened after the election of Woodrow Wilson, an event where women wore hats and marched in support of women's suffrage (Boissoneault, 2017):

On March 3, 1913, one day before the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson, more than 5,000 women descended on Washington to fight for the vote. Some came on foot, some on horseback, some in wagons. There were costumes and placards and about half-a-million spectators lined the streets. Among the marchers were journalist Nellie Bly, activist Helen Keller and actress Margaret Vale—who was also the niece of the incoming president (who was by no means an ally of the suffrage movement; he once said women who spoke in public gave him a "chilled, scandalized feeling"). Despite being heckled and harassed by the crowd, the march was enormously memorable; six years later Congress passed the 19th Amendment, extending the franchise to women nationwide.

Central to feminism is the view that the condition of women is open to change. "At its heart is the belief that women's voices should be heard – that they should represent themselves, put forward their own view of the world and achieve autonomy in their lives" (Hannam, 2007, p.

2). Chiriţă (2012) adds that women's rights, women's emancipation and women's movements were all used by feminists at different times to help describe their goals and deeds. While the issues have evolved from voter's rights to education to intersectionality, feminist studies continue to highlight how media function ideologically with other social and cultural institutions to reflect, reinforce and mediate existing power relations and ideas about how gender is and should be lived (Gallagher, 1981; hooks, 1992; Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006; Van Zoonen, 1994; Wood, 2005). Such studies concluded that women are often underrepresented or stereotyped by mainstream outlets across media platforms (e.g. Gallagher, 1981; hooks, 1996; Van Zoonen, 1994). However, Rakow (1986) asserts that gender research in communication must evolve beyond the study of gender differences and analyze feminism as an evolving social system created through communication. In other words, scholars should go beyond the use of simple categories to compare communication in men and women.

Building on previous feminist scholarship and addressing a gap in the literature on the use of social media in women's movements, this study examines Facebook posts that emerged before, during and after the 2017 Women's March to determine the depth and breadth of the discussion surrounding the evolution of women's rights in the 21st century. This article is important as it provides an in-depth overview of the 2017 Pussyhat Project™ and historical context of other feminist social movements. Furthermore, it expands the literature on the feminist fourth wave with an analysis of how individuals used social media to create/share and participate in a social movement. Specifically, it explores how social media helped the directed viewpoint of a unified voice to catch momentum during the 2017 Women's March.

Literature Review

To explore the literature on feminist theory and social movements, we looked to two primary streams of knowledge in the literature: 1) gendered identity on social media and 2) digital and community activism. An awareness of narratives social media users might draw upon to frame an issue is important as the manner in which Facebook users depicted the Women's March and Pussyhat Project™ influenced media coverage of the event, audience reception and participation. Using these two key concepts as context, our literature review exploring these topics provides a framework for understanding the present study.

Gendered Identity and Social Media

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical disciplines. It encompasses work done transdisciplinary with an approach that prominently includes women's roles, lives and feminist politics. Gender-schema theory proposes that cultures tend to polarize females and males by organizing social life around mutually exclusive gender roles. Ardener (1975), for instance, proposes that within patriarchal, capitalist societies, women and men tend to form two distinct circles of experience and interpretation - one overlapping the other (cited in Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The masculine circle overshadows the feminine

circle as it converges with the norms of society, providing a masculine signature that subjugates feminine viewpoints. Therefore, women's voices and perspectives are often overlooked or not openly articulated.

A variety of women's studies scholars including Armstrong (2014), Byerly and Ross (2006), Creedon (2003), Everbach (2018) and hooks (1996) have written extensively about the objectification and suppression of women. Early analyses found that media deeply implicated the patterns of discrimination operating against women, invisibility or gender stereotypes (e.g. Gallagher, 1981; Van Zoonen, 1994). Such media coverage often followed the patriarchal paradigm as outlined by Hartmann (1981), who defines the model as a set of materially based social relations that create a solidarity among men of all races and classes "who are united in their shared relationship of dominance over their women" (1981, p. 14-15). Recent scholarship has turned to debating the proper classification for the current phase of feminism, often highlighting it as the feminist fourth wave and/or "postfeminism," a period in which the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s is seen as largely absent or in contradiction to previous periods. "Liberal feminism," on the other hand, is an individualistic form of feminism that focuses on women's ability to maintain their equality through their own actions and choices.

The feminist fourth wave is noted for its value and contribution to a movement marked by a resurgence of interest in feminism in the media and among young women. One example of this trend is the Facebook feminist political affinity group Pantsuit Nation, which emerged as a 2016 Twitter hashtag and Facebook group to rally Hillary Clinton supporters during her 2016 presidential campaign in the United States. Modern feminism combines concern for finances, politics, mental well-being, stability in an overarching vision of change for women, intersectionality and inclusiveness (Cochrane, 2013). Campaigns of the past few years have begun with individuals or small groups that have responded to issues about which they feel strongly. For instance, Phruksachart (2017) highlighted the rise of social media to share political messages and encourage women to unite over various issues.

The 2017 Women's March illustrates evolving social systems and a call to action encouraging the participation of women across the nation. The use of social media preceding the January 2017 Women's March mobilized women for a real plan of action and activism, blending with other voices in the framework of the internet. Collectively, while three women simply wanted to allow others to help create a visual context to the Women's March, millions have somehow engaged in the conversation. Reclamation was a primary goal of the 2017 Women's March and the Pussyhat Project™. Reclamation of the word "pussy" has a threefold significance to Zweiman:

The word pussy is symbolic for three reasons: 1) Cats (animals) made a connection to the pattern designer, Kat (Coyle). 2) It responded directly to the "Access Hollywood" hot mic incident where Trump talked about grabbing women by their pussies. 3) The use of "pussy" in name-calling, denigrates an individual because the societal norms consider feminine characteristics as weaknesses, dismissing such individuals as inferior. Reclaiming the word "pussy" was

important to our ability to stand up as women for women. The continued, positive use of the term, within the context of the craft project, framed the term "pussy" in a feminist space.

The term "pussy" is considered a derogatory descriptor of the female anatomy and of weak or undesirable individuals. The color pink was also suitable for reclamation as it has been used to symbolize weakness. Pussyhat Project™ organizers state in their manifesto: "Pink is represented as a very female color representing caring, compassion, and love—all qualities that have been derided as weaknesses but are reclaimed by the project as strengths" (Zweiman, 2016). Women wearing pink clothing embody a powerful statement of an unapologetic attitude that is positively feminine and unapologetically a stand for women's rights (2016). Koller (2008) asserts that there is a tendency to reclaim pink and redefine it as the color of women who regard themselves as having achieved equality in social and economic terms and are therefore embracing pink as a marker of their femininity and equality. Koller further argues that pink is used to "communicate fun and independence, financial and professional power without conforming to masculine norms, as well as femininity and self-confidence" (Koller, 2008).

Digital Activism

Traditionally, media have operated simultaneously as gatekeepers and news creators. However, social media networks or user-generated content sites have created an avenue by which the public can post messages reaching large audiences (Curnutt, 2012). This proliferation of user-generated content is equated with a form of citizen or participatory journalism (Goode, 2009). The definition of citizen journalism includes "practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events" (Goode, 2009). The internet—as a platform and vehicle for voice in marginalized communities—has become one of the most powerful ways to bypass mainstream media. Scholars of protests/activism have turned their attention to how citizens use social media to build solidarity for various causes (Miladi, 2011; Harlow, 2013; Al-Rawi, 2014; Cabalin, 2014). Cabalin (2014) considered the relationship between new social media and youth political actions during the 2011 Chilean student movement. His content and textual analysis of Facebook's page of the Student Federation of the University of Chile (FECH) in 2011 revealed that the group utilized Facebook mainly as a call to action and to highlight the achievements of the movement. They also used Facebook to identify their opponents.

Adding to this literature on activism, we analyzed how social media played a role in the success of the Pussyhat Project™. Following the election of Donald Trump, people gathered in yarn shops, living rooms, coffee shops and other welcoming spaces to create hats. Online social networks, such as Ravelry, increased the reach of these social interactions far beyond the boundaries of originators' hometowns. Many have dubbed these united efforts as an illustration of "craftivism", a form of activism that incorporates forms of anti-capitalism, environmentalism, solidarity and feminism, that is centered on practices of crafting or making a product—in this case—a pink hat. Craftivism also reflects earlier times

during which women knitted together in circles as a form of socialization and problem-solving. Bratich and Brush (2011) note craftivism includes the mainstream forms found in *Martha Stewart Living* as well as the more explicitly activist (or *craftivist*) versions such as Cast O, Anarchist Knitting Circle, MicroRevolt, Anarchist Knitting Mob, Revolutionary Knitting Circle, and Craftivism. The two researchers add that a whole range of cultural forms exist including virtual knitting circles and crafting blogs as well as the association with feminist magazines.

As mentioned previously, the Pussyhat Project™ is not the first time crafts have been used in a social movement. From the French Revolution to the underground railroad, fiber arts have been a part of activism. One recent illustration of craftivism was the NAMES Project which honored people who died of AIDS with individual quilt squares created in their memories. The quilt project is now more than 111 miles long and weighs more than 54 tons. Yarnbombing (a type of graffiti using knitted or crocheted items) was one particularly visible example of craftivism. New York crochet artist Olek covered a homeless women's shelter in India in brightly colored crocheted squares to draw attention to the plight of the homeless women living in the shelter. Other projects like Knit the Bridge in Pittsburgh aim to bring together diverse facets of the community to beautify common space.

Methodology

While there is no single feminist method of study, feminist communication researchers generally incorporate and transform different methodologies to study trends, stereotypes and mass media representations (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). One common thread in feminist-informed methods is the placement of gender and gender-related concerns at the center of analysis, highlighting notions of power in different ways. For this study, researchers compiled a sample of public Facebook posts published between November 7, 2016 and January 31, 2017. The sample was collected using the term "pussy hat." The initial sample included 734 posts which were downloaded and pasted into a Word document for review. Of these 734 posts, 26 were eliminated due to a lack of relevance and/or human error for a discard rate of less than 3.5%. The final sample included 708 Facebook posts.

Following a comprehensive review of the feminist, protest literature, we coded each Facebook post for overall theme as defined in Table 1, with our final analysis including frequencies and percentages for each category.

Table 1
Operational definitions for the themes
Craftivism: creating and sharing hats
Call to Action: join the movement/knit for the movement/participate in the Women's March
wearing hats

Activism: attending or attended march
Commerce: the sale of yarn, crochet and/or other materials
Generational bonding: Facebook users of all ages featured participating in the movement with family members.
Digital sisterhood: images of the online community created by the Pussyhat Project™
Pussy hat Design: hands knitting crocheting
Inclusion of males

Intercoder reliability was calculated using percent agreement (Tables 2 and 3). Intercoder reliability for the initial round of coding was 75% for tone and 30% for themes. However, the researchers refined the coding instrument to achieve a higher level of agreement and the final percentages were 81% for tone and 71% for themes, demonstrating an overall improvement in agreement.

Table 2		
Intercoder Reliability for Tone		
Positive	18	14
Neutral	4	2
Negative	1	1
Percent agreement: 61 out of 75=81%		

Table 3		
Intercoder Reliability for Themes		
Call to action: join the movement/knit for the movement/participate in the Women's March	34.47%	81
Craftivism: creating/sharing hats	18.30%	43
Wearing or displaying hats	14.04%	33
Digital sisterhood: online community	0.00%	0
Generational bonding	0.43%	1
Inclusion of male(s)	0.00%	0
Hands knitting or crocheting	0.85%	2
Yarn/knitting/crocheting materials	3.40%	8
Commerce: selling yarn/crochet/knitting materials	6.81%	16
Media reference	15.32%	36
Other (list)	1.28%	3

Findings and Discussion

Tone of Facebook Posts

76% of the public Facebook posts sampled directly displayed or expressed a positive feeling toward the Pussyhat Project™. This overall positive tone reflects the intentional approach to the project according to co-founder Jayna Zweiman: "It was a positive project. It gave people voices and helped people recognize there isn't just one way to be an activist." (personal communication, March 28, 2017) Many of the posters agreed, using such terms as "positive, kind, inspiration, love," throughout the social media channel.

Table 4

Tone of Facebook posts

Tone	%	Frequency
Positive	76.07%	531
Neutral	19.34%	135
Negative	4.58%	32
Total	100%	698

One reason for this widely held positivity may have been its expression as a call to action, as crafters were invited to create pink hats to produce a visual feminist statement during the 2017 Women's March in Washington, D.C. Fiber art crafters could actively participate in the gathering even if they were unable to physically attend. Their work could serve as a stand-in for them and join with many others to make a statement. This movement, propelled through social media, helped the Pussyhat Project™ create and share an estimated one million hats for the march, all within a 60-day time frame.

Themes of Facebook posts

A variety of themes emerged from the analysis of the literature. Our content analysis indicates themes evolved over the period of the study. Frequencies and percent for the themes were: wearing hats 83 (11.72%); activism 64 (9.04%); yarn/knitting/crocheting materials 45 (6.36%); commerce: selling yarn/crochet/other materials 25 (3.53%); generational bonding 18 (2.54%); digital sisterhood/online community 17 (2.40%); inclusion of male(s) 17 (2.40%); hands knitting crocheting 16 (2.26%).

Findings indicate that the posts mainly focused on the crafting of hats, the finding of patterns, supplies and joining the effort while the movement was building momentum. Leading up to the Women's March, there was increased focus on the event, including posts involving travel planning and in-person participation. Another component to note was the increasing media coverage of the project. A pussy hat adorned the February 8, 2017 cover of *TIME Magazine* and received mentions in many local and national media outlets. Whoopi Goldberg and other members of the television show The View wore the hats on set.

From the craftivism perspective, many posts indicated a community of knitters working together to create the one million hats needed for the marchers. Noting the diversity of the individuals who participated in the movement, organizers encouraged women to include notes regarding any topic they wished with the hats that they knitted and sent to Washington D.C. A wide age-range of people were directly involved in the creation of these hats. One mortician told the project founders that an 80-year-old woman had left final instructions with her daughter that she wished to be cremated while wearing her pussy hat. The fact that a diverse age-range of people participated led to the mention of a "digital sisterhood" as well as "generational bonding." One post read, "My grandmother might not be able to march, but she raises her fist and wears a pussy hat like a champ! Go Nana!!!" Another post read, "Yay! Mom's #pussyhat arrived in time! Complete with Kindred Post "Smash the Patriarchy" pin! Mom is my earliest social justice role model <3 <3 <3."

Race and sexual orientation are other key indications of diversity. African Americans (primarily women) made up 3% of the individuals in photos in our sample. Asian Americans made up 5% of the sample. Other groups were split, with Anglos making up the largest percentage of participants. Many of the photos included several people in racially diverse groups. A woman of color featured as Rosie the Riveter was a prominent illustration highlighted during this period under analysis. The February 6, 2017 issue of The New Yorker featured the image. Members of the LGBTQ+ community also took part. Special rainbow-colored hats and headbands adorned with ears were fashioned for women of the LGBTQ+ community. Images of these alternatives to pink hats were shared using the Facebook platform.

The active participation of knitters and marchers allowed for fiber-based activism in contrast to social media campaigns which are exclusively online.

This online form of activism is called "slacktivism" and it is defined as actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause but regarded as requiring little time or involvement (Glenn, 2015). The fact that so many hats were created in such a short timespan showed how knitters joined together and motivated each other. "There is an incredible community that got built. Knitters are amazing! They are compassionate, caring, giving and creative. And they make stuff for people!" (Zweiman, 2017).

Media references and links made up 128 (18%) of the samples. While several were media outlets promoting stories on their Facebook pages, the majority were posts shared by members of the movement who shared media coverage of the movement and the hats with their Facebook followers and friends.

Table 5

Themes of Facebook Posts

Theme	%	Count
Craftivism	21.19%	150
Call to Action	20.48%	145
Other	18.08%	128
Wearing hats	11.72%	83
Activism	9.04%	64
Knitting and crocheting materials	6.36%	45
Commerce	3.53%	25
Generational bonding	2.54%	18
Digital sisterhood	2.40%	17
Inclusion of male(s)	2.40%	17
Hands knitting crocheting/holding final hat	2.26%	16
Total	100%	708

Craftivism accounted for 150 (21%) of the samples. Knitters, crocheters and sewers discussed the act of creating and how many hats they had made or intended to make. Photographs of this theme most often featured someone wearing a hat or a hat in the process of being created. Many reported learning a new craft to create a hat. This theme also included Facebook posts that discussed the sharing of hats.

Worth noting was the large number of posts that included a reference to commerce. While the majority of the pussy hats were knitted by individuals and sent to Washington D.C. to be worn during the march, individuals also sold pink pussy hats via Facebook, using outlets such as Etsy and Amazon. Owners of craft shops discussed the shortages they faced in trying to stock pink yarn in their stores.

Another large portion of the sample (145, 20.5%) was a call to action, offering various ways to get involved. Posts invited Facebook users to join the movement by sharing content on social media platforms encouraging the attendance of the march and the knitting of hats for those individuals who would be in attendance at the march. Facebook posts also noted the date of the march and additional ways to participate, such as the virtual march by wearing and posting a photo in a pussy hat. One surprising find was that generational bonding made up 2.5% of the sample. Facebook posts featuring generational bonding included grandparents, aunts, uncles and children of all ages wearing or creating hats. The theme highlighted social activism being shared across generations. Examples include an image of a son wearing the pussy hat that he requested. Photos of grandmothers, mothers and daughters wearing their pink hats were also commonplace. The most widely shared illustration, which features a group of empowered and unified women filling the streets of Washington, D.C. donning pink hats and protest signs, was created by the group as part of their manifesto. People learned from this illustration about the intent and mission of the project. The relatively simple graphic seemingly struck a

nerve with knitters and activists as it was reproduced in nearly 12% of the sample.

Conclusion

After a divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election, a large segment of the population took to social media to express their frustrations and found solace in the sisterhood created by the Pussyhat Project™. Facebook was used as a tool by individuals who turned to the platform to share ideas, suggestions and crochet patterns. This content analysis looked at the photos and text in Facebook posts before, during and after the 2017 Women's March in Washington, D.C. to assess how users discussed the Pussyhat Project™. People posted photos and text to frame the event mostly in a positive manner. In fact, this study found that this positive attitude translated into a wave of conversations, sharing intimate and touching stories of women's struggles, all while trying to bring together a movement of unity by creating a sea of pink.

The most salient themes characterized the movement as a peaceful craftivism project that united women across the globe to help them find their collective voice. Our study indicates, as a matter of reclaiming the dignity of women, participants in the Pussyhat Project™ first worked to reclaim the intimate word "pussy" to continue moving feminism forward. Next, they chose a symbol—the hat—and the color pink to help foster solidarity and unity. Knitting/crocheting circles and the directive to create hats for others fostered a sense of digital sisterhood that catapulted the project to success.

Communal crafting allowed women to create and find satisfaction and form bonds of sisterhood while also existing in

community. As the project originator of the Pussyhat Project™ puts it, it was just "mind-blowing" that so many hats were hand-crafted in such a short amount of time. The movement that combined old-time crafting with social media gave people, and especially women, the imagination to share the Pussyhat Project™ globally, generating worldwide coverage of this pink fiber phenomenon. Indicating that the hat had become a popular culture symbol, mainstream media coverage included a pussy hat on the cover of *The New Yorker* as well as *TIME Magazine* and a cameo appearance on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. The inclusion of the Pussyhat Movement in media content indicates the movement permeated society. The primary themes found in the Facebook posts coincided with the Pussyhat Project™ manifesto, involving craftivism to help create a visual statement during the Women's March which was indeed successful. "We created a sea of pink at the march. It was mind-blowing!" (Zweiman, 2017). These hats, as a representation of creative crafting and feminism, allowed millions to participate in a variety of fashions.

As with any study there are noted limitations. One is that Facebook does not offer the capability for users to easily search and download previous posts. To find sites in or around a certain timeframe, users must manually scroll through the sites. In addition, Facebook allows mostly private networks, limiting what researchers can discover in posts that are public. However, even with these limitations, this study is valuable because it provides a snapshot of the activism and the Women's Movement in 2017. The majority of Facebook activity is still private and available only to Facebook itself. Even with just the

available public data, researchers face ethical and privacy concerns when deciding what to publish (Olmstead & Barthel, 2015).

This study is a good starting point as it offers an overview of the themes used to depict the Pussyhat Project™. Future studies might build upon these findings as a springboard for investigating a larger sample. Suggestions include addressing the use of social media as private safe spaces within these channels. Review of public comments on posts about pussy hats on neutral sites, like media outlets, may also prove important for further study. Continued research on craftivism can also include a look at displays and collections by the fiber arts community. After the Women's March, many archives requested mementos from the event as well from the Pussyhat Project™. Pussy hats are on display in several museums along with many other feminist movement articles dating back to suffrage.

The Pussyhat Project™ worked in tandem with the Women's March. To this day, Zweiman continues to plan other craftivism actions. Further research, including more study of niche social media sites like Ravelry, which currently has more than 7 million registered users, may produce additional insight into how grassroot efforts take shape, act and take on a life of their own. Three women, two needles and one skein of yarn were the basic pattern needed to launch what became a worldwide movement which sought to create a visual response to an attack on feminism. This study of discussions on Facebook begins to unravel the positive and affirming actions of many who sought to reclaim what had been lost in the presidential election, to affirm one

another and to be seen - a sea of pink and an ocean of supporters around the world, loudly making a visual statement on feminism.

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