

A Review of the Impact Social Media has made on the #MMIW Movement

Bringing Awareness to Underreported Violence Against Indigenous Women

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A Case Study by Justine Stewart

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University

Introduction to Digital Communication

Professor Emily Kulkus

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Introduction

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement (MMIW) started gaining traction around 2015 in Canada where grassroots efforts got the attention of government leaders, law enforcement, and the public through organized marches, local meetings, press conferences, and perhaps most importantly by taking to social media.

“It has been the #MMIW hashtag in social media, begun by Sheila North Wilson, former Grand Chief of Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak Inc., that helped propel local and regional activism to a transnational scale” (Smith-Morris, 2020, p. 3).

The goal is to stop the silence and end the epidemic by telling the stories of indigenous women who have been murdered, gone missing, or suffered violence.

The U.S. Department of Justice found that American Indian women face murder rates that are more than 10 times the national average. Homicide is the third leading cause of death among 10-24 years of age and the fifth leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Native women between 25 and 34 years of age (MMIWG2S, 2021, p. 1).

The truth is that the numbers are probably much higher as cases are often under-reported. Social media has become extremely useful to the Indigenous women and men who have embraced digital technology and become creators of content to bring attention to the movement and get others involved. This case study will offer insight into the different ways social media has helped the MMIW movement.

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Literature Review

One of the driving forces behind the Missing Murdered Indigenous Women movement has been the use of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok along with hashtags such as #MMIW, #MMIWG, #nomorestolensisters, and #NotInvisible. Through social media platforms people can share the stories of missing Indigenous women. They can create conversation and spread awareness using hashtags. Hashtags make it easy for users to follow topics that are important to them and connect with others who feel the same.

“#MMIW tweets can generate several hundred thousand impressions every 4 hours. Most of these tweets use the hashtag to call attention to their own missing loved one, to blanket local and regional networks with time sensitive information; to share information about police and FBI response to families’ requests for help; or to respond to both specific MMIW cases and general MMIW education and awareness campaigns” (Smith-Morris, 2020, p. 3).

The great thing about social media is the ability to include photos and videos. Arguably, one of the most powerful images of the MMIW movement is the red handprint. It can often be seen painted across a man or woman’s mouth as a symbol of solidarity and reminder of the voices of Indigenous women being silenced.

In 2019 a photographer captured a powerful and haunting photo of a track athlete in Washington State. A young Native American woman showed up to compete with a red hand painted over her mouth and the letters MMIW painted down one of her legs. He said it was something he would never forget. (Reneau, 2019.)

“I wasn’t there to shoot images of her, but I knew I needed to. To capture this moment and the statement she was making, and the possible risk she was taking” (Reneau, 2019, p. 3).

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The photographer shared the photo on Facebook and Instagram where it received thousands of likes, shares, was seen on local news outlets, and in magazines in print and online across the country. This young woman showed up with a mission to spread awareness about MMIW. Before the digital world and use of social media her message may have only been seen by those who were at the event. Instead, she became a virtual crusader of the MMIW movement and inspired others to join a cause they may have previously known nothing about.

Throughout my research I have found that it is Indigenous youth behind most of the social media campaigns. It is evident that young people show up when it comes time to make a statement.

“Together we have worked on a social media awareness project where we had native women, men, children, and allies pose with a sign that had an impactful message. These photos have been circulated via social media” (Isaacs, Young, 2019, p. 2).

These young people are the faces and voices behind most of the social media justice campaigns, mass prayer vigils, awareness walks, and individual efforts. They understand how digital technology can be used to bring the MMIW movement to the forefront.

“We understand the power and privilege of higher education and we utilize our platforms as students and experiences as tribal community members to bring awareness and help contribute to change” (Isaacs, Young, 2019, p. 2).

It is hard to continue to ignore something that is gaining attention across the country. Indigenous groups behind the #MMIW movement say their pleas to the media and police have gone ignored for decades. Their use of social media platforms has made the movement hard to discount. There are countless social media accounts across a variety of platforms that are

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focused on finding missing Indigenous women or solving their murders.

One user on TikTok has created many videos to bring awareness to #MMIW.

“In the short video, MiKayla O’Field of Tulsa, Okla. Is seen with paint around her eyes and her hand over her mouth as indigenous music plays in the background. O’Field removes her hand to reveal a red handprint on her face. She then sings “remember me” in harmony with the music.” (Forgie, Ryan, 2020).

This TikTok user is just another example of how young Indigenous women are refusing to be ignored through digital technology and platforms that allow them to reach an audience so large it is essentially undefined in totals.

The portability of digital technology and ease of use has also created a world where people can produce powerful documentaries that can be shared on a variety of platforms. One documentary that is particularly powerful is called “Say Her Name.” The 30-minute film investigates the high number of murders and disappearances of Native American women in Big Horn County, Mt. This place is known as the epicenter of the MMIW crisis. The film reveals a troubling epidemic of violence, murder, and sex trafficking of indigenous women that are often written off by local law enforcement. The film premiered on YouTube May 5th, 2021. The timing was significant as May 5th is “National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls” (Say Her Name, 2021).

The people behind the #MMIW movement have become citizen journalists with digital technology at their fingertips and the digital platforms and social networking to share it and therefore, reach audiences that were once beyond reach.

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Analysis and Observation

Social media is working. It has created a world where everyone can get involved. Initially by linking people passionate about the movement together and eventually getting deserved attention from lawmakers and law enforcement. It is arguable that without the use of social media this once completely silent epidemic would still be just that.

One of the greatest examples of how social media and the digital world is working for the movement happened in 2016. That is when the U.S. Senate signed a resolution on April 29th, 2016, that designated May 5th as “National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls.” Also, April 29th through May 5th is “National Week of Action” for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. During this Time those involved with the #MMIW movement are encouraged wear red and post photos and videos to social media using the hashtags #NationalDayofAwareness, #MMIW, and #MMIWG.

With the use of social media, you can do more than share messaging, photos, videos, and hashtags. You can also create an interactive digital experience. On May 5th, 2021, the Native Women Running website hosted a MMIW virtual event. According to the page, over 2,500 people took part in the event and helped raise over \$23,000 for MMIW USA. (Verna Volker, Navajo. Schilling, 2021)

“I wanted everybody to be a part of this movement, and whatever circumstance you are in your life, whether you’re extremely busy or a mama of four, and you can’t get you; you can be a part of this movement” (Verna Volker, Navajo. Schilling, 2021).

It is social media movements like this and the momentum they create which have grabbed the attention of society, law enforcement, and lawmakers. After years of advocacy and social

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media campaigns Federal Legislation like the Savanna's Act (S. 1942) and the Not Invisible Act (H.R. 2438) were signed into law. S. 1942 requires the Department of Justice to update the online data entry format for federal databases relevant to cases of missing and murdered Indians to include a new data field for users to input the victim's tribal enrollment information or affiliation. H.R. 2438 is a bill that will increase governmental coordination and combat violent crimes within Indian lands and of Indians.

There is still a lot of work to be done. But the power of the digital world is shining for MMIW. It has and will continue to be the driving force for change.

"Social media and the internet have revolutionized the way we communicate and get news across to multiple people on multiple platforms. Using these platforms can help make connections with others who are also working towards change and can help build a community" (Young, 2019, p. 4).

The use of social media and digital technology affecting the victims, families, and communities of missing murdered indigenous women across the country and Canada. It has become a force of good by creating a powerful change in the way a particular culture is seen and heard.

Discussion

This movement is important. It stems from an epidemic of violence that has gone on for generations without most of the world knowing. The digital world has changed that with technology. It has put some form of communication is just about everyone's hands. This technology has given a voice to the voiceless. People, communities, or cultures who are facing challenges now have the option to be noticed, be loud, and be persistent. This is how the MMIW

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is gaining traction, demanding attention, and creating change.

As a former broadcast journalist working in Montana, I was always aware of the MMIW crisis. Montana is a hot spot. We often reported on young Native American women who were missing or murdered. I've seen the faces of the young women whose names I've also read aloud over a live broadcast on billboards off the side of the highway. I knew there was a movement. What I didn't know is just how many people were involved, how far it reached, and how much community involvement it has created.

Before social media it was difficult for families to get the word out to local, and national news media outlets. Instead of making phone calls those involved in the MMIW movement can create a post with a powerful message, infographic, photo, or video and grab the attention of social media users who will then like or share it and perhaps make it go viral. Once a post goes viral its audience is immense. It not only grabs the attention of the public but also national news outlets.

On August 23rd, 2021, NBC aired a story on Dateline. It was called "How social media is changing the conversation about missing, murdered Indigenous women." It discusses how social and racial stereotyping and the evidence of structural and institutional racism are the reasons why Indigenous people had to take matters into their own hands. They are taking to social media to create viral videos using "the red handprint" and Indigenous songs or sharing personal stories about missing and murdered loved ones.

Indigenous people are taking the movement even further by creating social media pages dedicated to finding Indigenous women who have gone missing. In a world where social networking allows instant communication you no longer need to rely solely on law enforcement

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to get answers. One example of this is the Facebook page called “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA” which has now become a search and rescue organization. The group actively searches for missing Indigenous women by following up on tips they receive online and by working with law enforcement.

Through my research the most troubling truth is the data discrimination. Many of these missing Indigenous women are written off as runaways. Nobody is searching for them which also means they are not included in a national database of missing people. In the NBC Dateline story that aired in August, Abigaile Echo-Hawk with the Urban Indian Health Institute calls this “data genocide.” An interesting and disturbing term that reflects the incredible need for the MMIW movement. The movement is not only bringing awareness to a problem but also creating its own virtual data of missing and murdered indigenous women that can’t be ignored.

Recommendations and Conclusions

While the MMIW movement is relatively new in the digital world no one can deny the impact it is making. What started off as a grassroots movement has captured the attention of national news, lawmakers who are now creating and drafting legislation to combat the issue, and getting people involved through the digital world.

However, it is not something that pops up every time you are scrolling through your news feed or listening to your favorite podcast. This is where I believe advertising can come in. There are already ways in which the MMIW movement has partnered with designers to create clothing and raise money for the cause. This type of advertising is powerful and shows unity in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people behind the movement. My recommendation would be to spend funds on paid social media ads. While organic advertisements are great there is no

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guarantee you will create a lot of engagement and reach a huge audience. I would recommend more use of native advertising to push the MMIW movement further. While it costs more, native advertising less intrusive to social media users and therefore more effective since it creates a more positive experience.

Boosting conversation and awareness is what the MMIW movement is all about. There has already been immense success using digital technology and social media platforms. Spending more money on online advertising can only enhance the incredible effort that is already underway.

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Appendices

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Appendix A – Facebook pages supporting #MMIW

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA focuses on finding missing Indigenous women. Most of the posts feature photos and information about the missing person.

There are also updates on the cases provided such as “found” or “still missing.”

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Appendix B – #MMIW videos on Instagram

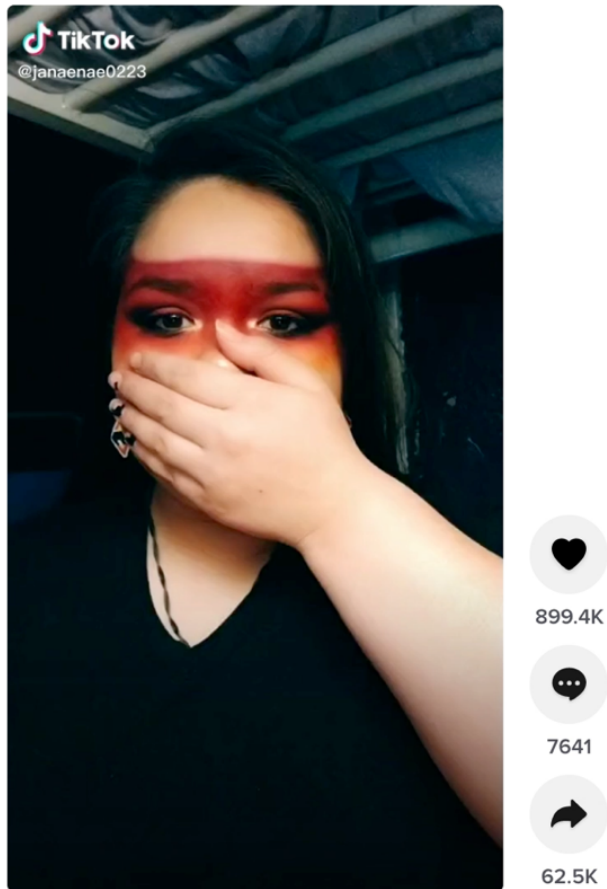
Many young people have taken to social media to create their own #MMIW content. They hope for likes, shares, and engagement.

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janae0223 emotions_notfound · 2020-5-8

if you see this, duet. please spread awareness of the murdered and missing indigenous women. #mmiw #firstnations #native #imstillhere

🎵 son original - Wabinah



Appendix C – #MMIW videos shared on TikTok

TikTok is highly popular among today's social media users. It allows for the creation of short videos that can grab likes and shares.

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Appendix D – Awareness Campaigns and National Days

May 5th is National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls. This photo below shows what people behind the #MMIW movement do to make sure they reach a large audience. It includes what to do on social media.

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Appendix E – The Red Handprint

The Red Handprint has become a powerful visual for the #MMIW movement on social media. The photos below display how it is used to create powerful images shared on social media platforms.