

Hashtag activism: Analysing linking discourse markers in #ArewaMeToo conversations on X platform

Aktivisme tagar: Menganalisis penanda wacana penghubung dalam percakapan #ArewaMeToo di platform X

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Abstract

Hashtag activism has emerged as a powerful tool for online advocacy, enabling marginalized individuals to gain visibility and foster collective action. In the absence of physical cues, users rely on linguistic elements to express engagement and support through linking discourse markers. Therefore, the subject of this study focuses on how connecting discourse markers are used in the #ArewaMeToo online conversation to express stance and inclusivity, on sexual violence. The study also explores how discourse markers function as substitutes for physical conversational cues in online activism. The study was conducted in 2024 using a qualitative method. Data were purposively selected from #ArewaMeToo conversations on X platform in Nigeria and grouped through discourse analysis. The database was collected from 300 tweets, with 63 tweets selected for analysis and reproduced in this study as representative examples. The findings of the study revealed that the discourse markers employed in the #ArewaMeToo movement such as cohesive devices, punctuation and capitalization have emerged as crucial tools for conveying engagement, support, emotional intensity and reinforcing advocacy. The study concludes that linking discourse markers substitute for vocal differences and serve as linguistic resources that signal solidarity, emotion, and resistance in the fight against sexual violence.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; discourse markers; hashtag activism; sexual violence

Abstrak

Aktivisme tagar telah muncul sebagai alat yang ampuh untuk advokasi daring, yang memungkinkan individu yang terpinggirkan untuk mendapatkan visibilitas dan mendorong tindakan kolektif. Dengan tidak adanya isyarat fisik, pengguna mengandalkan elemen linguistik untuk mengekspresikan keterlibatan dan dukungan melalui penanda wacana yang menghubungkan. Oleh karena itu, pokok bahasan penelitian ini difokuskan pada bagaimana penanda wacana penghubung digunakan dalam percakapan daring #ArewaMeToo untuk mengekspresikan sikap dan inklusivitas terhadap kekerasan seksual. Penelitian ini juga mengeksplorasi bagaimana penanda wacana berfungsi sebagai pengganti isyarat percakapan fisik dalam aktivisme daring. Penelitian ini dilakukan pada tahun 2024 dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif. Data dipilih secara sengaja dari percakapan #ArewaMeToo pada platform X di Nigeria dan dikelompokkan melalui analisis wacana. Basis data dikumpulkan dari 300 tweet, dengan 63 tweet dipilih untuk dianalisis dan direproduksi dalam penelitian ini sebagai contoh representatif. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa penanda wacana yang digunakan dalam gerakan #ArewaMeToo seperti perangkat kohesif, tanda baca, dan kapitalisasi telah muncul sebagai alat penting untuk menyampaikan keterlibatan, dukungan, intensitas emosional, dan memperkuat advokasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penanda wacana yang penghubung menggantikan perbedaan vokal dan berfungsi sebagai sumber daya linguistik yang menandakan solidaritas, emosi, dan perlawanan dalam perang melawan kekerasan seksual.

Kata kunci: analisis wacana kritis; penanda wacana; aktivisme tagar; kekerasan seksual

Introduction

Gender-based digital activism has emerged as a powerful tool for challenging societal norms and amplifying marginalized voices (Ezeaka & Bartholomew 2025). In this context, social media platforms have become a vital platform where survivors of gender-based violence can share their experiences, seek

solidarity, and demand accountability. This digital public discourse fosters collective resistance against patriarchal and cultural oppression (Aminu 2024). However, in the absence of physical interaction, participants in online activism must rely on textual strategies to convey emotions, solidarity, and resistance. Without nonverbal cues like tone, gestures, and facial expressions, linguistic devices such as linking discourse markers play a critical role in maintaining conversational flow and expressing stance in these digital spaces.

This dynamic was observed in February 2019 when Khadijah Adamu, a pharmacist in Kano, northern Nigeria, decided that after two years, it was time to inform her X followers about a horrifying case of physical assault, describing accusations that an ex-boyfriend nearly killed her. Recounting her experience, she explained how her partner frequently abused her and threatened to murder her. Khadijah's testimony was very bold; she was instantly scrutinized as a woman from northern Nigeria because of the society's profound patriarchy and religious norms that did not acknowledge her sovereignty over her own body. Fakhriyyah Hashim, a Nigerian entrepreneur and development worker, saw Khadijah's tweet and engaged with empathy, using the hashtag #ArewaMeToo to give a voice to Khadijah's harrowing experience of torture and rape.

Northern Nigeria is referred to as Arewa, it is predominantly a Muslim population and a stringent society where sex and sexuality issues are hardly discussed openly (Malefakis 2022). Using the hashtag #ArewaMeToo, young women and men from the north began sharing their experiences of sexual assault on the X platform. The hashtag served as a focal point for those who shared similar experiences to come together and establish a common ground. It facilitated the personification of these experiences and portrayed them as a struggle. Since its inception, the #ArewaMeToo campaign brought about a chain reaction that sprouted in other states in Nigeria (Nasir & Shamim 2024). Therefore, this study aims to analyse how linking discourse markers are employed in ArewaMeToo online conversations to express stance, inclusivity as well as air opinions on the subject. The study also explores how discourse markers function as substitutes for physical conversational cues in online activism.

Significantly, resistance to sexual violence against women became noticeable with the creation of the #MeToo campaign movement founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke. Burke created the phrase 'me too' to assist and empower women to tackle the problem of sexual violence (Keddie & Wilkinson 2025). Burke became a confidant to many individuals seeking platforms to share their experience of sexual violence after establishing an organization to assist and offer services to young females. Though the campaign intended to aid victims of sexual violence, it expanded and evolved when actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag on X in October 2017 to bring it to the attention of the general public. Participants grew globally across new demographics as the campaign gained steam and the movement became based on both sharing stories of sexual abuse and offering assistance (Afolabi & Shaffi 2024). A large number of women across the globe began to use the hashtag to share personal accounts of sexual violence to show pervasive sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence. While the #MeToo campaign started in the United States, it rapidly expanded throughout the globe, giving rise to similar hashtags like #YoTambién in Spanish, #QuellaVoltaChe in Italian, #BalanceTonPorc in French as well as hashtags championed by men, such as #ItWasMe, #IHave, and #ArewaMeToo.

In the absence of safe spaces within communities and organizations intended to provide a safe refuge for victims of sexual assault, social media, specifically X, has become an alternative for a physical trajectory that protects victims from social backlash, criticism, and condemnation. Victims of sexual assault and their advocates are increasingly using social media to convey their stories, share their experiences, and call out their abusers (Okorie & Olagunju 2025). X appears as a safe place where victims can narrate and share their experiences of sexual assault. X has proven an effective platform in digital activism, especially gender-based advocacy. It has provided a platform where #ArewaMeToo survivors can break cultural silences and challenge patriarchy. Also, its rich textual setting enables the use of linguistic devices like linking discourse markers to express stance and maintain conversation flow. This is why platform X is used in the focus of this study.

Discourse markers are widely recognized as multifunctional language elements that facilitate communication and link a word to its context and/or co-text (Fu et al. 2024). Qi et al. (2022) define discourse marker as a term that is used in communication. Its primary purpose is to structure and organize text in order to guarantee that interactions flow seamlessly. In a similar vein, Schiffrin (1987) identifies a wide range of lexicalized phrases, adverbs, interjections, and conjunctions as examples of discourse markers, stating that discourse markers are not limited to language classes, asserting that paralinguistic elements and nonverbal cues may also serve as discourse markers. This implies that discourse markers serve a purpose equivalent to that of punctuation in written language (Omisakin et al. 2024).

Essentially, discourse markers are used to link discourse elements. Conjunctions, lexical cohesions, and substitutions are examples of cohesive devices that are used to link sentences and make a text understandable (Halliday & Hasan 1976). Cohesion aids in the connection of textual fragments, improving logical expression and comprehension. Most definitions of cohesiveness appear to agree that it conveys the continuity found between one segment of a text and the next; it portrays the discourse's point of contact with what comes before and after it. The continuity aids in the creation of a continuous line of thought in the text and enables the cohesiveness of the text (Guydish et al. 2024).

In online discourse such as digital activism, discourse markers are essential, especially in the context of Computer-Mediated Discourse (Ghafarpour 2022). In computer-mediated communication, discourse markers are primarily employed to support textual coherence as well as concise the language, all of which are difficult to accomplish due to factors like lack of paralinguistic elements. Similarly, Landone (2012) notes that discourse markers are often used in digital activism, where they carry out their fundamental roles like creating and sustaining relationship in an environment devoid of the traditional face to face and verbal cues.

Digital activism, according to Rachimoellah et al. (2024), is the deliberate use of social networking sites and the Internet to create, coordinate, and publicize campaigns for social, political, or economic change. These networking sites have evolved into platforms for expressing open support for social and political concerns, organizing protests both inside and outside of the platforms, becoming a part of a broader movement, creating and changing narratives, as well as influencing public and political agendas (Castillo-Esparcia et al. 2023). Uwalaka & Nwala (2023) note that numerous studies on socio-political protests have shown that social media networks like Facebook and X have proven to be a useful platform in the organisation of demonstrations. Particularly for social change efforts, X's usage of hashtags makes it possible for information to be shared and magnified throughout social media (Ofori-Parku & Moscato 2018).

A 'hashtag' is a term used to describe what a tweet is about. It is a vital phrase or term that enables a tweet to become part of a wider topic on the network and to be readily found by those using the platform, while also influencing the tweet. Platform X, more than any other social media platform, makes the most use of hashtags. Due to the likelihood of marginalized and oppressed individuals being depicted adversely in the media, X, digital activism and other features of social media are especially important in garnering attention to such marginalized individuals. By uniting on social media, marginalized people may rewrite their own stories and have their voices heard.

On X, the usage of a hashtag to educate people and battle a variety of social concerns has become very popular. In the last few years, the following is a collection of prominent digital activism examples through the use of hashtags. #Kony2012, #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls, #EndSars and #SayNoToSocialMediaBill. These online movements are usually focused around a single hashtag or other related hashtags that represent a certain social problem and conveys the fundamental purpose of the movement (Igwebuike et al. 2016).

Research Method

The data for this study was analysed and interpreted using a qualitative Critical Discourse Analytic (CDA) approach, focusing specifically on textual analysis to explore how linking discourse markers are utilized to express stance and inclusivity. The database initially consisted of approximately 300 tweets

manually retrieved from the #ArewaMeToo. From this broader dataset, 63 tweets were selected for analysis and reproduced in this study as representative examples. These sampled tweets are annotated randomly from T1 to T100 to reflect the data gathered ('T' represents tweets).

The tweets were selected without regard to gender, age, or location within Nigeria, thereby including discussions from both men, women and individuals from diverse region within the country. These criteria were based on the relevance of the tweets. The tweets that were written in English and Nigerian Pidgin due to accessibility and cultural resonance. The study was conducted in 2024 and focused on tweets from February 2018 to June 2022 which corresponds with the period during which the #ArewaMeToo gained traction in Nigeria. The timeline was selected to capture the initial wave and sustained discussions that followed the emergence of the hashtag. Influential accounts such as @WaasiShaffii, @FakhuusHashim and @BDakolo were specifically monitored because of their pivotal role in amplifying the movement.

Data was analysed and grouped based on the use of discourse markers such as cohesion, capitalization and punctuation marks. These discourse markers also function as substitutes for physical conversational cues typically present in face-to-face interactions, thereby facilitating communication and solidarity within the context of online activism. Through this analysis, it was concluded that such markers play a significant role in enabling communication, expressing solidarity, and sustaining engagement in online activism.

Results and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis of the linking discourse markers identified in the #ArewaMeToo conversations on sexual violence. These linking discourse markers include cohesion, capitalization, abbreviation, and punctuation marks. These linguistic elements are examined based on their linguistic roles as well as how they function as substitutes for vocal differences in the context of online discourse.

Cohesion as a discourse marker in digital activism

Cohesion, a fundamental concept in textual analysis. According to Halliday & Hasan (1976) Cohesion is a 'set of relationships that exist between the elements of a text that contribute to our perception of it as a unitary whole'. This implies that cohesion extends beyond basic comprehension. It enables the reader to understand the intended meaning by identifying insignificant aspects of the text. Halliday & Hassan (1976) note that there are two types of discourse cohesion elements; grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunction are grammatical cohesion factors. Synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, repetition, and equivalence make up lexical coherence.

Reference as a form of cohesion

According to Madugu (2024), reference in grammatical cohesion is a type of lingual unit that refers to other lingual units that come before or after it. There are three different forms of referencing: personal reference, demonstrative reference, and comparison reference. Demonstrative references, which make references to location and time, are the sort of reference that frequently appears in this discourse, as well as a personal reference which makes references to individuals.

Personal reference

In a verbal situation, a personal reference refers to the individuals or things that were mentioned. The tweets below illustrate personal reference as a connective device referencing an antecedent in the sentence.

T28 Walter speaks on how he was raped by #Fatoyinbo while Franca E. said she was also raped by this same pastor. This case should be of #pastorBiodun proving others beyond a reasonable doubt, since many have come out with the same allegation.

T71 If in 2013, pastor Biodun had come clean, acknowledged he had moral failings, offered a public apology to Ese and all other women he might have sexually abused and had taken a break from the pulpit to 'seek help', we would not be having this conversation today.

The use of the personal reference 'he', 'she' and 'she's' in the above tweets can be linked to anaphora since they are all referring to people that have previously been mentioned in the above tweets. In T28, the user uses the personal pronouns 'he' and 'she' to refer to the antecedent in the same sentence. These personal pronouns refer to the category of the persons, male i.e. Walter as the antecedent, and female, i.e., Franca as the antecedent. The role of anaphora in this data gives the sentence a cohesive relation, which exists between 'he' and 'she' as anaphoric expressions of Walter and Franca 'he' refers to Walter, and 'she' refers to Franca. This is used to avoid redundancy and repetition, which serves as a cohesive device in the sentence. The user uses Walter and Franca who are Fatoyinbo's victims as a reference in Fatoyinbo's rape allegation, further urging the pastor to prove his innocence since others have come up with similar allegations, similarly, in T71, the user refers to Pastor Biodun as 'he' expressing that if the pastor had admitted to his 'moral failings' and 'apologized' when the allegation was recent then 'we would not be having this conversation today.

T78 One person writes in Facebook wall that rape is not a crime, its just a surprise sex. And I said IF I kill you its not a crime, its just a surprise death. Do you agree with my answer?

T53 Rape isn't an act of sex, it is an act of violence.

In T78 and T53, the users use 'it' a singular neuter reference as a cohesive device which refers to rape. In T53 the user expresses disgust and sarcasm on a post made on *Facebook* which refers to rape as 'surprise sex', in the users' opinion killing should be a 'surprise death' rather than a 'crime'. Similarly, in T53, 'it' which refers to rape is viewed as an act of violence.

Demonstrative reference

A demonstrative reference is a reference that uses location and a scale of proximity (Halliday & Hasan 1976). Demonstrative reference is basically a type of verbal, pointing out what is. In the tweets below the user locates the referent and determines what it is by using a scale of proximity.

T91 At age of 25, reliving the memories of when I was sexually assaulted in my teens, triggered my 10 years + battle with obsessive compulsive disorder. Because of this disorder I have been suicidal and have been hospitalized multiple times. This does not mean that the assault never happened.

T2 In Nigeria? In this country where nobody will believe you? Where they will blame you? Where the police will ask for money or sex before logging in your case?

In T91, 'this' serves as a demonstrative reference referring to 'obsessive-compulsive disorder that was triggered as a result of sexual assault. Using 'this' to refer to the disorder, the user shares her suicidal feeling accompanied by occasional hospital visits. T2 uses the pronoun 'this' to allude to Nigeria, which it describes as 'a country where nobody' believes rape victims but instead 'blames' the victims including the police, who are supposed to be 'your friend', would prefer to 'ask for money or sex before logging' any case.

T43 Under 18 housewives: this is a normal thing in the north. These girls are always indoors, when they manage to come out, you won't see their face or any part of their body. The truth is that 99% of them are married off to men without their consent.

T20 To these Northerners (some, mainly the poor and uneducated ones), marriage is a subjugation of a woman to a man (it's not about love). These under 18 girls just endure the psychological effects of the marriage till old age.

In T43 and T20, the use of ‘these’ serves as a demonstrative reference which refers to underage northern girls that are ‘married off to men without their consent’. They are described as ‘under 18 housewives’ who are always indoors and when they are eventually outside, are fully covered up. T20 explains that marriage is seen as a ‘subjugation of the woman’ in the north and these underage girls have to ‘endure the psychological effects of marriage till old age’.

Conjunction as a form of cohesion

Conjunction is a type of grammatical cohesion that connects items in the discourse to others in the form of lingual units of words, clause phrases, sentences, and paragraphs (Gunas & Darong, 2024). Below are examples of conjunctions detected in tweets.

T24 #SayNoToRape and get soapy instead. No allow devil use you. Use your hand. I don talk my own. Bye bye.

T55 Satan (Devil) saw Eve naked and He (Devil) didn’t rape Her (Eve). Say no to rape XXX and stop shouting, it’s the Devil’s work.

T35 She spoke against a statement that is demeaning to her, and this is what she gets in return. You want to have your ways with us and still shut us up, this shouldn’t be it.

T82 Instead of raping a lady and end up in jail.... just go ashewo house and use 1k knack person daughter use 350 buy tin milk What a smart move 😏😏

The preposition ‘and’ functions as a coordinating conjunction. It aids in joining sentences together and maintains the continuity of the utterance. In T24 the user uses ‘and’ to maintain cohesion by advising individuals to ‘say no to rape’ and rather ‘get soapy’ (Soapy is a Nigerian slang which means masturbate), instead of being used by the devil they should ‘use your hand’. Similarly, T55 employs ‘and’ to join two clauses together. The user encourages other users to ‘say no to rape’ by referencing the biblical story of Satan and Eve narrating that the devil did not rape eve despite her nudity. In the same vein, in T82 the user tutor other users on how to avoid ‘ending up in jail’ because of rape. The user encourages the patronage of ‘ashewo house’ (a brothel) with the use of a thousand naira to ‘knack’ (sexual relations), thereafter drink a tin of milk, and to this user, this is a ‘smart move’.

T10 The same Islam some of you are defending here is it not the same the Yoruba’s practice and are very happy and educated, so what kind of Islam is been practiced in the North please I need to be cleared on this.

T14 Where the incident happened is in the north where the penal code is used, so the law deems it fit that she can be married legally.

T11 This is not a strange thing, especially in universities...if a lecturer asks a student for sex, if the student disagrees, she will be failed by the lecturer... at the end of the day, the students will agree so she can get grades, which is bad in our society...

Ogamba & Idowu (2020) assert that ‘so’ is used as a continuative to prevent pauses or breaks and maintain the sentence’s continuity. In the above tweets, the use of ‘so’ acts as a continuative to prevent pauses or disruptions and maintain the flow of thought in each sentence. In T10, ‘so’ is used in questioning the nature of ‘Islam that is practiced in northern’ Nigeria which is completely different from the Islam practiced among the Yorubas’, in T14, ‘so’ is utilized to justify the reason an under aged girl can be legally married in northern Nigeria which is because the penal code of northern Nigeria ‘deems it fit’. In T11, ‘so’ is employed in rationalizing why students agree to have sexual relations with lecturers, which is to obtain ‘grades.’

T22 Maybe you've heard of cases where people are being robbed and they stand there and pee themselves or repeat "Jesus" over and over again. She was 16. A child. What options do you think she thought she had?

T5 Rape penalty should be death sentence or life imprisonment. RT if you stand with me.

T90 She's just a child. The horrors of rape and abuse these kids go through in the name of culture or religion.

In T22 'or' is used as an alternative for how different individuals react when they are in shock such as repeating the Holy name 'Jesus' as their faith permits. In T5 the use of 'or' is employed as an alternative for 'death sentence' which is 'life imprisonment.' This user believes that the punishment for rape should be 'death sentence' or 'life imprisonment and therefore request other users to retweet if they are in support of this opinion. In T90, the user utilizes 'or' as a linking device to alternate the word 'culture' and 'religion'. This user expresses sadness for children who are raped and abused because their culture or religion permits it.

T27 I stopped going to church for almost a decade because of a pastor after getting assaulted by a very close family pastor.

T50 Don't ruin your name all because of knacks.

T93 So you think a man can't rape his wife because she is his wife? sadly, it is not a crime in Nigeria, but oga when a man forces a woman without her consent, it is rape!!

T61 How on earth can a man rape his own daughter to death because she stole '200'? God where are you?

In T61 the word 'because' acts as a subordinate conjunction. It links the two phrases together and aids the user in elaborating the reason a father raped his daughter which is due to the claim that she stole 200 naira. In T27 'because' is employed to explain the user's lack of motivation to attend church events which is because of an assault by a very close family pastor. In T50, the user employs 'because' as a cohesive device stating to other users the reason, they should not ruin their name as a result of 'knacks' (knacks is a Nigerian slang which refers to sexual relations, in this context it means rape). In T93 'because' is utilized in clarifying the reason why a husband may rape his spouse. The user creates enlightenment by revealing that without consent from the woman, inclusive being the wife constitutes as rape.

Repetition as a form of cohesion

Repetition is the repetition of a linguistic unit, such as a sound, syllable, word, or sentence component, in a situation where it is suitable to do so (Omar & Gumar 2022). The repetition highlighted in this study includes the repetition of the same item. Below are examples of repetition discovered in the tweets.

T37 We believe her! We believe the woman before her, we believe women!

This user employs a parallel structure 'we believe' as a cohesive device to express genuine support for any woman who shares her experience of rape. The phrase 'we believe' is used thrice by the user, which is a one-to-one repetition of the same idea to emphasize the message and also amplify its emotional impact. In digital activism, where physical cues are absent, such lexical repetition serves as a textual substitute for vocal emphasis, mirroring the effect of chanting in physical protests. This repetitive structure builds intensity, compelling readers to internalize the message and emotionally engage with the cause.

In addition, 'we believe' functions as a powerful discursive strategy for constructing collective identity and fostering empathic engagement within the #MeToo and #ArewaMeToo movements. The user employs the first-person plural pronouns (we), to align with a broader community of supporters, symbolizing unity and shared values. The collective use of 'we' reinforces inclusivity to a movement that stands in

solidarity with survivors of gender-based violence. Furthermore, “we believe” strengthens intertextual solidarity with the global #MeToo campaign since #BelieveWomen was one of the hashtags used in the wider #MeToo discourse. Thus, ‘we believe’ functions as more than just a supportive statement, it becomes a performative act of solidarity, an assertion of collective identity, and a linguistic bridge connecting local activism to the global fight against gender-based violence.

T67 This has become so so normal that even some students offer themselves to lecturers. I’ve seen that happen a whole lot of times.

T18 The crude and wicked form of a culture (Almajiris, child marriage) which many have shrouded employing Islam as a cloak in the north of Nig. is starting to reveal itself. Slowly slowly the veil will be lifted off, dissenting voices. The world is changing.

In T18 and T67, the users employ the repetition of ‘slowly slowly’ and ‘so so,’ which is a type of reduplication used for emphasis in some languages, particularly Nigerian languages. In T18, ‘slowly-slowly’ is used to stress the fact that the ‘crude’ and ‘wicked’ culture in the north is eventually revealing itself though the process may be slow. In T67, ‘so so’ is used to create emphasis on the way sexual relations between students and lecturers have been regularized.

T3 Pastors do the most!! And guess what? Most people worship them not even God. Most people believe my pastor said, my pastor said!

In T3, ‘my pastor said’ is employed as a cohesive device to lay emphasis on the degree to which individuals believe in their pastors. In this context, the phrase is used as a quotation, indirectly quoting ‘people.’

Hyponymy as a form of cohesion

Hyponymy, according to Hoshan (2020), is the semantic category which refers to the lexical relations between words. It is a word or phrase whose meaning is included in the meaning of another word. T33 reflects hyponymy found in the data.

T33 I really hate that victims have to answer this question of ‘if it happened, why didn’t you report it?’ In this country, Nigeria? where nobody will believe you? where they will blame you? Where the police will ask for money or sex before logging in your case?

In T33 the user uses ‘country’ to refer to Nigeria expressing anger toward the way in which the country treats rape victims who are often ‘blamed’ and victimized by the police before ‘logging in a case.’ The reference to ‘this country, Nigeria’ is a critique of the social and political structures that systematically fail survivors of gender-based violence. The term ‘country’ is not a neutral geographical label; rather, it embodies a metonymic representation of institutional apathy, corrupt practices, and deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes.

In explicitly naming Nigeria, the user situates their grievance within a national context, indicting not only law enforcement but also the broader societal culture that normalizes victim-blaming and silences survivors. The rhetorical questions ‘where nobody will believe you? where they will blame you?’ highlight the social stigma attached to reporting sexual violence. These phrases reflect how patriarchal ideologies intersect with institutional corruption (e.g., the police demanding money or sex) to create systemic barriers for victims seeking justice. From an intersectionality perspective, this post reflects how gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural identity intersect to deepen the vulnerability of survivors. In the Nigerian context, survivors often face multiple layers of marginalization such as women in a patriarchal society, as economically disadvantaged individuals who cannot bribe the police, and sometimes as members of ethnic or religious minorities subjected to additional scrutiny.

The user, therefore, speaks to how power dynamics operate at the crossroads of gender, class, and institutional corruption, compounding the obstacles faced by victims. Interestingly, while these lexical choices reinforce certain negative stereotypes (e.g., police corruption, societal indifference), they also serve to expand the discourse of inclusivity by amplifying marginalized voices. Through voicing this collective frustration in a public digital space, the user invites broader participation in the conversation, creating solidarity among those who have experienced or witnessed similar injustices. This discursive strategy reframes the stereotype as a call for accountability and systemic reform

Synonymy as a form of cohesion

Synonyms are nearly identical words whose meanings are similar and can be used to refer to the same thing (T22, T47). A cohesive connection is produced when a collection of synonyms or nearly synonyms is employed in a sentence as shown below:

T22 For the men that continue to see protest as an avenue for assault/harassment, you are only exhibiting behaviors of those we are collectively fighting against! Protect our women.

T47 One thing we need to scrape out as Fulani/Hausa Northerners.

In T22 and T47 'assault' is the synonym of 'harassment' while 'Fulani' is the synonym for 'Hausa', this is because assault and harassment share similar meanings while Fulani is inextricably linked to Hausa culture (Fulani's speak Hausa and are commonly referred to as Hausas). In T22 and T47, the choice of synonym by the user reflects deep social and political themes surrounding gender-based violence and ethnic identity within northern Nigeria. In T22, 'assault' and 'harassment' are strategically paired to emphasize the pervasive nature of gendered violence during protests, portraying these acts as systemic behaviors rooted in patriarchal power structures. This highlights how various forms of abuse whether physical (assault) or verbal/psychological (harassment) are interlinked expressions of misogyny. Similarly, in T47, 'Fulani' and 'Hausa' are invoked as cultural identifiers, reflecting the ethnic intersectionality in northern Nigeria. While distinct, these groups are often homogenized due to shared language and cultural practices.

The reference to northerners challenges this simplification, drawing attention to the internal cultural dynamics that perpetuate gender inequality. However, this conflation also risks reinforcing ethnic stereotypes that associate patriarchal oppression exclusively with Fulani/Hausa identities. Nevertheless, addressing these issues within their specific cultural context, the user fosters accountability, encouraging self-reflection and inclusivity within the #ArewaMeToo movement. Thus, the synonyms used not only call out oppressive behaviors but also expand the conversation to include diverse identities in the collective fight against gender-based violence.

Capitalization as a discourse marker in digital activism

Capital letters might come in the middle of a sentence to indicate the precise objective of the writer. It may also be utilized as a technique to capture the interest of the reader because the reader assumes the capitalized words are more important than those not capitalized as well as to emphasize certain elements in the sentence. Examples from the data below illustrate capitalization.

T30 STOP BLAMING WOMEN FOR THE WAY THEY WEAR THEIR CLOTHES.
IT WILL NEVER BE THE WOMAN'S FAULT

T34 As long as we do not blame robbery attack victims and accident victims, we cannot blame rape victims. BLAMING A RAPE VICTIM MUST BE CRIMINALIZED!!!!

T73 Rather than blame the survivor, call out the RAPIST! We need to feel safe at all times in the society we live in.

In the above tweets, capital letters are employed to emphasize the need to stop blaming rape victims. In T30, the user used capital letters to educate people that the way a woman dresses will never be the cause of rape; similarly T34 emphasizes that ‘blaming a rape victim must be criminalized’ while T73 encourages individuals to ‘call out the rapist’ rather ‘than blame the survivor.’ This is due to the fact that, in Nigeria, victims are frequently held accountable, especially when they come out about their rape experiences. Nwusulor & Onwubiko (2021) note that in Nigeria victim-blaming is a trend.

T12 REAL MEN DON’T RAPE!!!!

T15 I STAND AGAINST RAPE!!!

T17 Bro Code 101: NEVER EVER RAPE!!

T12 emphasizes that ‘real men don’t rape,’ T15 affirms genuine support ‘against rape’ and T17 implores the men by employing the ‘brotherhood code 101’ which stipulates ‘never ever rape.’

T52 she says NO because she meant it. CONSENT is key.

T4 NO MEANS NO. STOP THE RAPE, STOP THE ASSAULT. DON’T CAUSE UNNECESSARY TRAUMA FOR ANYONE, PLEASE.

T8 She said No! He said No! No means no consent. NO means No!!

In T52 and T8, the words ‘no’ and ‘consent’ are highlighted; however, in T4, the user employs capitalization throughout the tweet in order to draw attention to it and implore other users to ‘stop rape, assault, and unnecessary trauma for anybody.’ Trauma is caused as a result of rape or sexual violence.

Abbreviation as a discourse marker in digital activism

Abbreviations are also included in online jargon, because they indicate diverse linguistic patterns among various internet communication. The rationale for utilizing abbreviations, according to Viono et al. (2023), is due to the restricted character space in social media and chat groups. In the example of an acronym, several abbreviations was employed by users such as, NECO (T41), COZA (21) and PTSD (T13).

T41 WHEN?; This happened 8-9 years ago...

WHERE: Holy Cross parish house where I was left in the care of my uncle Fr. Christian...

I lived in the boys’ quarters with my brother then. Wanted to write NECO exams.

WHY (didn’t you report): I was afraid who will fight for me then.

The user is narrating how she was raped 8-9 years ago in a church with her uncle as her guardian. This incident occurred while studying for her NECO (National Examination Council, which is an examination body in Nigeria that administers senior secondary certificate examination) but chose not to report the incident at the time out of fear. According to Eyang et al. (2020), following a rape, the most common reactions are despair and fear. Thus speaking out about the incident might thus be harmful to rape victims, since they may be exposed to more trauma at the hands of the very individuals who should be helping them. As a result, negative responses might work as a silencing mechanism (Okunlola et al. 2020).

T42 I see many irrational people who doesn’t know #pastorBiodun saying he cannot do such with his antecedent, and the time of the event, it is absolute what he can do. I am from Illorin, and i know very well how he started #COZA as a club then in (sabo oke).

The user begins by expressing contempt for people who believe the pastor is innocent. Based on pastor Biodun’s background which includes prior rape allegations from former members of the church, the user claims to know what he is capable of doing. The user is convinced the pastor is capable of such allegations because he is aware of how the pastor founded his ministry COZA (Commonwealth Zion Assembly), which originally started as a club. Apparently, both the user and the pastor are from Illorin (the capital of the state Kwara).

T13 I don't want to read about sexual assault or molestation. It gives me PTSD. May Almighty Allah heal all of us. To all sexual molesters and rapists, in this month of Ramadan, May Almighty Allah punish you all.

According to Friedberg et al. (2023), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of symptoms that appears after being exposed to certain triggering experiences, such as rape and sexual violence. Rape victims typically develop psychological and emotional symptoms of PTSD (Gesinde 2020). The user who has experienced sexual violence claims that she would prefer not to engage in posts on sexual violence and molestation, as it triggers PTSD; this is because reading such posts causes flashbacks, thereby bringing back memories of the incident. Additionally, as it is the month of Ramadan, the user prays for healing for rape victims and asks Allah to punish the perpetrators of rape and sexual violence.

T5 Rape penalty should be death sentence or life imprisonment. RT if you stand with me.

This user believes that the penalty for rape should be death sentence or life imprisonment and therefore urges those in support to retweet (RT) the post. The popularity of a tweet is commonly quantified in terms of the retweet number, being the number of times a tweet is being retweeted in the Twittersphere and offers a breakdown of how many people were reached. The more retweets a tweet receives, the more likely it is to go viral (Nesi et al. 2018). The user used the acronym, requesting people to retweet the post to enable it to go viral.

In the discourse of #ArewaMeToo, abbreviations and acronyms function not only as linguistic shortcuts but also as powerful discourse markers that reflect key social dynamics of digital activism. Acronyms like COZA and PTSD accelerate message diffusion by enabling shareability across digital platforms constrained by character limits. Their usage indexes in-group knowledge, fostering community and solidarity among survivors and supporters who understand these terms, while simultaneously constructing a boundary that may exclude or challenge outsiders unfamiliar with the activist lexicon. This linguistic exclusivity both protects the integrity of the movement and signals belonging, turning abbreviations into tools of identity performance, resistance, and affective alignment in a stigmatized socio-cultural context.

Punctuation mark as a discourse marker in digital activism

In #ArewaMeToo digital activism, punctuation marks like '!!!' and '...' function as powerful discourse markers that transcend aesthetic choice. They signal moments where conventional language fails to capture the intensity of trauma, functioning as embodied expressions of pain, urgency, or emotions. These marks act as affective amplifiers (Busch 2021) communicating outrage, disbelief, or silenced suffering in ways that words alone cannot. In this context, punctuation becomes a semiotic tool of resistance and solidarity, enabling survivors to channel unspeakable experiences into a shared digital space where emotion is both felt and seen.

Multiple exclamation marks (!!!)

The multiple uses of exclamation marks (!!!) is the new trend in communication either to show stress or lay emphasis on a statement. On X, users are creatively using the exclamation marks as they please, mostly to express their emotions as seen below.

T48 people will say 'why didn't she scream!?!' 'She was enjoying it!!!' Research shows that 70% of rape victims are paralyzed by fear during the act!!!

T74 If you find yourself in a situation like that, bite, kick, scream, stab, shoot, kill!!! Because society won't give you justice you deserve, don't let any man get away with rape! Only you can protect yourself.

In T48 and T74, the users employ multiple exclamations expressing disgust and anticipation as they air their opinions on how victims should respond to rape. T48 maintains that most rape victims are paralyzed by fear during the act hence the reason they do not scream as opposed to the belief that victims do not scream perhaps because they are enjoying the rape. T74 believes that in such a situation the victim should “bite, kick, scream, stab, shoot and kill’ in self-defense because the Nigerian society will not give the victim the justice deserved.

T66 Nigerian women are phenomenal and I’m proud of them!!. They organized Yaba market march, Abuja police raid march, COZA protest march this year alone. I’m so proud! Online activism to offline protests. Angry twitter feminists aii!!!

The user uses repeated exclamation signs and the written sound ‘aii!!!’ to express excitement as Nigerian women have organized different protests both online and offline in regard to different events.

T92 I will never support rape!!. Rapist should be killed by suffering!!

T99 The only acceptable figure for either physical or sexual violence is ZERO!!

The excessive use of the exclamation mark by the user is to express pain toward rape. The user believes that rapists should be killed by suffering. In T99, the user believes that the only figure to quantify rape should be zero as that is where the emphasis is.

Multiple periods (...)

Multiple periods or ellipsis often refer to the purposeful deletion of a word, phrase, or clause from a sentence. This implies that the deleted words have already been addressed earlier, thus further reference is not important. On X, users sometimes employ multiple periods or ellipses for different intentions, placing them anywhere in a tweet for varied reasons. This will be shown and explained below:

T98 It all started with the Cosby rape allegations...then a #metoo trend started... Now we have a #IstandwithBusola campaign going on...Why do you think, victims of sexual abuse come out late to reveal their ordeal...???

T51 Rape crime is now getting more worse ...pls make some strict law and take action strictly against rapists...otherwise this thing will never stop 🙄

T59 If he beats you the first time and he claims it’s a mistake but you know its not a mistake, my dear sister RUN... He will surely do it again leave story.

The users employed multiple periods to give a pause before another statement related to the statement before. They all perform the same function which is to give pauses as though the user was thinking before adding another statement. On CMC, especially on X, there are no rules regarding the number of periods that should be employed by the user. Regardless of the number of periods, the functions of multiple periods used by users are the same and are used as pauses, breaks, or connecting sentences. When used as a pause, it could imply that the writer is thinking and has something more to say.

The findings of this study reveal that digital communication within hashtag activism, such as #ArewaMeToo, employs linguistic resources to perform functions traditionally carried out through non-verbal cues in physical interactions. Drawing on discourse analysis, particularly Fairclough (2003), the study demonstrates how cohesive devices, punctuation, and capitalization function as grammatical elements as well as discursive tools that construct meaning, convey emotion, and express solidarity in online environments. The use of cohesion (such as conjunctions and reference markers) reflects narrative continuity and shared understanding among users which aligns with Ufot & Japhet (2025). Capitalization and punctuation, viewed as paralinguistic features in written texts, substitute for vocal stress, tone, and body language which signals urgency, outrage, or support. These linguistic resources help participants negotiate stance and identity in the absence of physical presence.

Conclusion

This study examined the patterns of textual analysis that reveal cohesion in conversations on sexual violence in the Nigerian Twittersphere. Based on the findings, users adapt to technological limits while still conveying their message. Users utilize linking discourse markers such as reference, conjunction, repetition, capitalization, abbreviation, and punctuation marks to compensate for nonverbal indicators such as gestures, tone, and the pitch of the voice, humor, and facial expressions. Irregular capitalization and punctuation are used for tone and volume of speech.

The findings revealed that references are mostly used to refer to persons or items named earlier to illustrate cohesion in the Twittersphere. Conjunction illustrated how phrases, sentences, or clauses are linked to one another to illustrate cohesion. Lexical cohesion was mostly employed in the form of repetition to lay emphasis as well as the use of capitalization. Furthermore, abbreviations were used to indicate in-group knowledge, foster community and solidarity among survivors and supporters. Lastly, punctuation marks were used as affective amplifiers embodying expressions of pain, urgency, or emotions. In conclusion, linking discourse markers are employed by users on X platform in this study to express stance, support, and inclusivity as well as air opinions on the subject of sexual violence. This study affirms that discourse markers are linguistic resources that shape stance and resistance in digital activism. They help construct a collective voice, enabling marginalized individuals to participate in public discourse and challenge dominant narratives around sexual violence.

This study contributes to digital activism by demonstrating how users creatively manipulate language and digital features to express trauma and solidarity in constrained online spaces. It contributes to critical discourse analysis (CDA) by exposing how nonverbal cues are retextualized through digital semiotics like punctuation and capitalization, revealing deeper power dynamics and resistance in online gendered discourse. This study recommends that future research should examine other dimensions of #ArewaMeToo, movement such as multimodal engagement, sentiment analysis, governance structures, and policy implications. Studies can explore how images, videos, and intertextual references shape discourse solidarity. Such studies will provide insights into the linguistic and social mechanisms that drive digital activism in combating sexual violence.

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