

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From the Streets to the Screen to Nowhere: Las Morras and the Fragility of Networked Digital Activism

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Drawing on a case study of Mexico City-based feminist media producers Las Morras, this article addresses both the potentialities of digital media activism for raising awareness about gender-based harassment and its limits for facilitating social/political transformations. Las Morras drew international attention in 2016 when they released a series of YouTube videos of group members with hidden GoPro cameras repeatedly confronting male cat-callers and casual harassers. Incorporating a qualitative content analysis of the responses to YouTube videos and comments taken from Las Morras' Twitter and Facebook accounts (before deletion) with in-depth interviews with founding members, we argue that Las Morras offers a powerful illustration of the paradoxical role of networked digital media as activist tool. On the one hand, it rapidly circulated a powerful critique of misogyny. On the other hand, the negative attention it received (including doxing, trolling of the site, and personal threats directed at members) led to the eventual demise of the group.

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**Keywords:** tactical media; social media activism; feminist activism; trolling and online incivility; internet culture

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## Introduction

Beginning with the innovative utilisation of the Internet in the 1994 Zapatista insurgency (Cleaver, 1998), the affordances of digital communications technologies for social movement activism has been a central concern for theorists and practitioners. Intensifying in the period between the 2009 so-called 'Twitter Revolution' in Iran and the explosive rise of digitally organised protest movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring protests in 2010–11, the ability of digitally networked technologies to build networks of solidarity and support became increasingly documented and discussed as a new and potentially revolutionary tactic (e.g. Castells, 2012). In the period succeeding these digitized movements (roughly the early 2010s), a sort of romanticism around the affordances of networked technologies developed. This romanticism is perhaps most clearly expressed in the National Endowment

for Democracy's coinage of the term 'liberation technology' to describe any networked technology that could 'liberate' citizens from political, economic, gender-based, and other forms of oppression (Diamond and Plattner, 2014). This lofty estimation of digital technologies (particularly SNSs like Twitter and Facebook) *precipitously fell* between 2014 and 2016 as SNSs began to be perceived as platforms for increasingly uncivil engagement between users, including 'trolling' and 'flaming' (Rentschler, 2015); as elusive forums for conspiracy theorists, rightwing activists, or other fringe political actors (Nagle, 2017); or as spaces for disseminating 'fake news' intended to either draw readers to advertising/sponsored content or proliferate false information (Chen, 2017). With the notable exceptions of the hashtag-based movements around #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, the emancipatory proclamations of early commentators gave way to an increasingly dystopic view of networked communication technologies. The digital activists of our current moment are no longer indigenous social movements or anti-authoritarian protestors but right-wing extremists, conspiracy theorists, or agents of foreign powers.

This piece will analyse both the utopian and dystopic potentialities of *networked digital activism* – a term employed instead of the more common 'social media activism' due to the capacious way it incorporates multiple forms of engagement (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015). More specifically, it will draw on a case study of the Mexico City-based feminist media collective Las Morras in order to address both the role of networked digital activism for raising awareness about gender-based harassment and its limits for facilitating longer-term social/political transformations. Naming itself after a pejorative word for young women considered un-cosmopolitan or 'backwards', Las Morras drew international attention in 2016 when they released a YouTube video of group members with hidden GoPro cameras repeatedly confronting male cat-callers and casual harassers on the Paseo de la Reforma, one of the busiest thoroughfares within the central area of the city. Their objective, as explained to CNNenEspañol, was to digitally circulate confrontations with male harassers as strategies for other women to follow when facing similar situations (Patiño, 2016). The video, titled 'Las Morras Enfrentan a Sus Acosadores' ['Las Morras Confront Their Accosters'] went viral after its release on 21 May 2016. Within two weeks, the video garnered 1.4 million YouTube views and led to interviews with 21 media outlets. The popularity of the groups' videos led the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Mexico to collaborate with them on Vive Segura ['Live Safe'], a phone application for recording and reporting cases of harassment to law enforcement. (Pérez-Coutarde, 2016) Despite initial interest and support, in the months following the first video Las Morras experienced extensive online harassment on social media accounts to a point in 2017 where the group deleted them all. As a project native to social media, the shuttering of group accounts ostensibly ended Las Morras.

Incorporating a qualitative content analysis of the responses to YouTube videos and comments taken from Las Morras' Twitter and Facebook accounts (before deletion) with in-depth interviews with three of the group's four founding members, we argue that Las Morras offers a powerful illustration of the paradoxical role of networked digital media as activist tool. On the one hand, the technology's networking abilities produced a powerful impact within Mexico that echoes Carrie Rentschler's declaration that feminist social media activism offers an 'instantaneous assault on the cultural support beams of everyday misogyny' (Rentschler, 2015, 356). Conversely, our analysis also argues that both the group's 'death' due to online pressure points to what Mark Carrigan (2016) and Zeynep Tufekci (2017) call the inherent 'fragility' of digitally networked activism. From this perspective, the strength of technology to enact social change is enabled or limited by a process of capacity building that fosters support networks in both online and offline spaces. Our analysis draws on the case of Las Morras

to first present a conceptual interrogation of the difficulties of sustaining activist projects borne or incubated digitally as well as an opening in the move described by Dubravka and Davis (2018), Mason-Deese (2018), Rodino-Colocino (2019) and others to utilise digital media as part of a larger repertoire of solidarity-building tactics within social movement campaigns fighting rape culture, everyday misogyny, gender-based violence, and other systemic issues related to structural power differentials.

### ***The History of Las Morras***

Las Morras was formed in early 2016 by Marisol Armenta, Mireya González, Sunny Galeana, and Melissa Amezcua. All four were journalists working as a multimedia team for a major newspaper in Mexico City. After being replaced by an all-male team, the group had the idea to create a media production project tackling the issues women deal with on a daily basis in Mexico: 'We came up with the idea to create a medium in which we could publish a lot of stories and in which people will identify with us. As middle-class Mexican women, we are living situations that are very real and it's not just what's on TV, like makeup, fashion, and that sort of things; these are stories that are very real' (M. Armenta, personal communication, 9 October 2016). When interviewed by the media studies blog *Etcetera*, the group claims that it picked the name 'Las Morras' precisely because of the cultural and political connotations of the term: 'The word *morra* in Mexico is slang for young girl, but in some regions the word has pejorative implications: When we decided to produce the video, we were trying to define "who we are." We asked ourselves if we were a collective, a video channel, etc. We decided we are just some *morras* [girls] from Mexico City, nothing more, who decided to get together to make videos about the things we care about, things that afflict us, outrage us, or excite us. Also, we googled [*sic.*] the meaning of the word *morras* and we found only negative results, which got us more excited about the name' ('Cuatro morras mexicanas', 2016).

The group's first and by far most popular video, 'Las Morras Enfrentan a Sus Acosadores', was released on 6 May, 2016. The video was explicitly inspired by the earlier American viral video '10 Hours of Walking Through New York City as a Woman', posted in October 2014 to over 40 million views (Mulato, 2016). The video begins with a title card that reads: 'We are four *morras* living in Mexico City. Like many we are harassed every day on the street, they yell at us, and insult us. We wanted to go out and ask our harassers what is it that they have to say to us.' The video shows the four of them dressed in black skirts and t-shirts. One of the group members had a hidden Go-Pro camera that recorded the interactions of half of the group with strangers on the street. Las Morras walk through the streets of downtown and Paseo de la Reforma. The video was recorded in two weeks and was edited in one. It shows that as group members walk men both shout and mumble compliments. Audible comments include 'I'll marry you', 'Can we walk with you?', 'That's a pretty thong', 'Are you going to a funeral?', among others. *Las morras* replied directly to the man catcalling: 'Excuse me, do you have something to say to me,' and 'if you don't know me, don't talk to me.' Many of the men when confronted apologised for their comments or attempted to change what they had said in the first place. A second title card states a man was following them when they stopped at a store. When they exited the store, the man was masturbating in front of them. The video shows him in the act outside the store, where more people are walking by. Las Morras did not confront everyone who harassed them. In some instances, it is clear the presence of male passers-by and street vendors is overwhelming, so they ignore them and keep walking. A final title card indicates they had been walking through the city for days recording their harassers. The text indicates they discover that as they suspected, harassers have nothing to say, and ask men to save their comments about their appearance and avoid talking to them.

In a similar fashion to reactions to the unexpected popularity of many videos, hashtags, or other spreadable media that become massively diffused (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013), the video's enormous viewership took its creators by surprise. When Las Morras created their YouTube channel and uploaded the first video, they were not expecting to have a lot of attention. In an interview with the BBC, group members claim that they figured only family and friends would watch and potentially comment on the video (Paullier, 2016). Instead, it surged in popularity as it was shared and distributed via a variety of social media. Within the first few days the video soared to over 750,000 views, reaching one million views by the end of May. As the video grew in popularity, it solicited thousands of comments on YouTube, multiple interviews with mainstream media outlets within Mexico and beyond (ranging from domestic outlets like *Excelsior* and *El Debate* to the BBC, and even (arguably) inspired a new smartphone application developed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights. It also inspired a groundswell of backlash from angry viewers and trolls. This backlash would eventually lead to a sustained trolling attack on the group's Facebook and Twitter as well as doxing (defined as 'when a person's anonymous online persona is linked with their real-world identity and address' [Bancroft and Reid, 2017, 499]). Eventually, the pressure against Las Morras both as a media production collective and as individuals led to the folding of the project.

This piece analyses both the ways the video provided a tactical weapon for combating everyday misogyny and building solidarity and how its online-only nature created a sense of fragility or precarity that left Las Morras vulnerable to trolling and abuse.

### ***Tactical media interventions and the production of networked solidarity***

The following sections develop the theoretical apparatus for understanding both the success of Las Morras in confronting harassers and building solidarity against everyday misogyny in 2016 as well as the difficulties with harassment and lack of support networks that ended the project/dissolved the group in 2018. Our central assertion is that as a digital media intervention Las Morras served to both challenge to the habitual normalization of 'everyday misogyny' within Mexico City and to create a space for young women to reflect upon their own experiences with street harassment. To better understand how the project functioned as a form of mediated intervention our discussion draws upon two powerful approaches to activist media production and dissemination: the creation of 'tactical media', a form of communicative act built around the disruption of experiences in everyday life and the leveraging of the networking functionalities of SNSs like Twitter for the rapid dissemination and scaling up of support for political statements (often colloquially labelled 'hashtag activism'). By combining tactical media's ability to disrupt the typical time-space configuration of downtown Mexico City with social media's ability to quickly circulate the video and accommodate reactions by individuals, the video rocketed issues related to everyday gendered violence to centre stage within the Mexican media-landscape in the summer of 2016.

Unlike #MeToo and other forms of social media activism constructed around short messages linked together through hash-tagging, the nature of Las Morras as a YouTube-situated video based on documenting confrontations with male harassers qualifies the project as a form of what Raley (2010), Richardson (2012) and others label 'tactical media'. Derived from the work of French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau, the Situationist Movement, and the Cinema Verité filmmaking approach, tactical media interventions are created to instigate the process of defamiliarization within audiences (Richardson, 2012, p. 3) Defamiliarization occurs when the tactical media producer creates a provocative situation that rattles or jars spectators by providing them with an experience that breaks with perceived commonsense behaviours or customs. As Rita Raley succinctly puts it, the intertwined goals of tactical media are 'provoke and reveal, defamiliarize and critique' (Raley, 2010, p. 7). Writing explicitly about

street protests (in this case during the movement against the invasion of Iraq in 2003), performance scholar Stephen Hartnett uses the term 'startling communication' to refer to the 'use of art forms to rock viewers or listeners into a new frame of understanding' (Hartnett, 2007, p. 214). As a formal strategy, tactical media production is built on first breaking down expectations of normalcy and then building new expectations that are less governed by societal bias. As tools for disrupting daily life, tactical media interventions can provide important interventions in the way individuals conceptualise public space. Writing on the spatial aspects of wide-scale protest movements, Gerbaudo (2012) has argued that public confrontations between protestors (everyday citizens with little power) and the police (repressive forces of the state with high levels of power in the situation) effectively reconfigure the way everyday citizens and marginalised populations traverse the space of the city. By showing others that it is possible to stand up to harassers, Las Morras harness the ability of digital media to make marginalised communities feel secure as they traverse the streets.

The impact of Las Morras as a tactical media intervention would never have reached the audiences it did without amplification via social media. As such it is important to note the similarities in distribution between the video project and other types of networked digital activism. A growing number of scholars and activists working in feminist and racial justice movements have recognised the new possibilities opened up by networked social media for building solidarity among marginalised groups and for raising mass attention through amplifying individual voices via networks like Twitter. Perhaps the most concise explication of this theory comes from Jackson's discussion of the role of social media in the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly around African-American women whose voices have been historically marginalised: 'Hashtags arising from a Black feminist politics take advantage of this architecture to perform the two basic functions of counter-public discourse: reflect the experiences and needs of a marginalised community and call on mainstream politics to listen and respond' (Jackson, 2016, 377). Many recent studies on the role of 'hashtag activism' come to similar conclusions. A central element of the 'call on mainstream politics to listen and respond' comes through the aggregative nature of hashtagging via platforms like Twitter. As the #MeToo moment has shown, every hashtag represents another opportunity to experience solidarity while pushing for accountability (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2019). Though it does not fit the commonly used definition of 'hashtag activism' in the sense that it does not rely exclusively on the mechanism of the hashtag for diffusion (instead being shared and re-shared through YouTube's algorithmic process, Facebook and Twitter users re-posting, and mainstream media coverage/re-airing), Las Morras' videos (particularly the first one) were distributed through social media.

Read through the theoretical frameworks of hashtag activism and tactical media, Las Morras can be seen as a widely diffused confrontation with misogyny. It draws on a relatively similar networking process as the first and from the latter an intense and disquieting embodiment that pushed the project from a call for solidarity into a potential tactical template for fighting back against harassment. By creating a visual spectacle around confrontation and utilising digital networks for circulation, Las Morras created a media event that was both a negation (in the sense of confronting everyday misogyny) and affirmation (in the sense of creating communities of solidarity through YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and other SNSs). The two tactics reinforce and strengthen each other. The effectiveness of this synergy between tactical media and hashtag activism as a tool for fighting oppression mirrors the ways in which Marwan Kraidy describes the hybrid strategy of 'creative insurgency' of activists during the Egyptian protests of 2011. During these protests activists created videos where they engaged in spectacular and often taboo practices (including nudity, profanity, and the burning in effigy of Mubarak and other officials) to attract attention to their cause. Kraidy argues that while SNSs

played a powerful role in distribution, the videos would not have spread to the degree they did without the 'profane' performances (Kraidy, 2017, 116–35 *passim*). In a similar fashion, Las Morras' widely circulated video would not have had the same impact without its confrontational elements. A combination of tactical performance and social media networks fuelled the social impact of the video as it circulated from YouTube to other social media to mainstream media coverage.

***The fragility of digital networks: Difficulties of capacity-building when shifting from online to offline activism***

The strength of Las Morras as a case study for understanding the complexities of digital activism arises from the group's trajectory for the project. From 2016 to 2018, the group experienced a meteoric rise, an aggressive challenge, and eventual dispersion. When launched, the site had a virtually immediate impact evidenced by high numbers of views and comments on YouTube, followers on SNSs like Twitter and Facebook, and media appearances/interviews of group members. However, events occurring in the aftermath of the YouTube video posting and subsequent explosion of interest first in by social media users then legacy media illustrate a problematic (or even dystopic) potential of networked technologies. The swell of public interest was accompanied by a sizeable number of trolls fighting aggressively and ruthlessly against what Angela Nagle has called 'the online economy of virtue' (Nagle, 2017, p. 70). Being confined to the digital made it easier for flaming and coordinated attacks to hamstring the group's Las Morras' activism. When met with online antagonism (that eventually blurred into the real world with the doxing of all of the women), the project imploded.

Drawing on recent debates about the online vs. offline elements of digitally enabled protest movements, we argue that implosion of Las Morras is facilitated by a characteristic 'fragility' of digital activist movements that lack real world support networks. This debate over the strength of digital activism to fuel large-scale political transformations first came to the Anglophone context in a caustic 2010 *New Yorker* piece by journalist/celebrity intellectual Malcolm Gladwell. Specifically, Gladwell attacks technologist Clay Shirky's notion that having the technological capacity to collaborate through new technologies like Twitter would revolutionise the way people work together. Drawing on the Greensboro Woolworth's Sit-In during the Civil Rights Movement, Gladwell argues that networked digital activism is fundamentally incapable of sustaining a social movement enough to enact wide-scale transformations (Gladwell, 2010). His condemnation of 'weak-tie digital networks' created through social media echoes an earlier argument by political theorist Jodi Dean: 'The splintering and collapse of the left constitutes a political trauma. Technology fetishism responds to this trauma ... For many, new media left them feel as if they were making a contribution, let them deny the larger lack of left solidarity even as their very individualised linking and clicking attests to the new political conditions' (Dean, 2009, 35–6). This position situates the rise of digital networked activism within the failure of the organised left to generate political counter-power in the wake of the collapse of both the Soviet political project and solidarity networks between activists in the Global North and Global South.

While Dean's damning prognosis has been echoed by Morozov (2012) and denigrators who label it clicktivism or slacktivism, Karpf (2012) and others argue that digital engagement provides more of a supplemental function to existent advocacy tactics. Theoretically informed by the social shaping of technology (SSOT) approach, Mark Carrigan captures this diachronic shift in a way that emphasises key socio-political differences within the technological affordances of 'old' versus 'new' media. His central contention is that social movements that are 'born' online do not contain the same level of 'collective reflexivity' historically present in large-scale social movements: 'The logistical challenges posed by assembly using earlier communications'

technologies led inevitably to the development of organisational [*sic.*] capacities which supported the development of *collective reflexivity*: the emergence of a shared project in relation to which individual commitment motivated sustained action'(Carrigan, 2016, 208). In their absence, the 'we' experienced by participations will, if it exists at all, be entirely or predominately symbolic and thus ill equipped to respond to changing circumstances or sustain the movement in the face of challenges' (*ibid.*). Communications in the pre-networked world focused on 'logistical challenges' related to information-sharing and organisation. Due to the limited affordances of communications technologies at this time in-person individual interactions were significantly more common. As such these pre-digital networked protest movements produced high levels of symbolic shared identity and sense of purpose. While some examples of activist distribution networks certainly predate digital technology (e.g. Mislán, 2014), in most cases communications technologies facilitated activism instead of serving as the terrain of activism. Affordances embedded in new communications technologies allow these digital spaces to serve as sites of engagement. However, as Carrigan acknowledges and other researchers like Hopke (2015) expand on in detail, the break between pre-digital and digital is not clean. As such, activist use of platforms like Twitter does not obviate but instead complements other types of communicative practice in the process of creating advocacy campaigns (Hopke, 2015, 2).

Zeynep Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017) offers a sustained attempt to apply a capacity-building approach to digital activism in a variety of contexts. In her narrative, protest movements are often conceptualised in terms of success or failure. Occupy Wall Street failed to the degree it didn't leave any lasting changes. The Arab Spring failed because it didn't produce a democratic transition in any nation with wide scale protests. Tufekci argues that it instead of engaging in this Manichean discussion of winning and losing it is more productive to analyse the specific characteristics of the protest or insurrection. Adapting Amartya Sen's concept of 'capacity', Tufekci addresses three specific forms: narrative capacity, disruptive capacity, and institutional capacity. Narrative capacity refers to the 'movement's ability to "frame a story on its own terms"' (2017, p. 192); Disruptive capacity refers to 'whether it can interrupt the regular operations of a system of authority' (*ibid.*); Institutional capacity is directly linked to 'the ability to force changes in institutions by mobilizing outsider and insider strategies' (2017, 193). Though it would not be conceptually accurate to call Las Morras a social movement, Tufekci's capacities provide a powerful tool for analysis. The project's 'narrative' and (even more so) 'disruptive' capacities are high. However, the lack of offline engagement (whether it be institutional collaboration with human rights organizations or engagement with feminist activist groups or solidarity networks in Mexico City or beyond) left the project in a position where any sizable online threat could effectively destroy the project and create personal safety issues for group members – which is exactly what happened in 2018.

### **Research Questions**

Our two central research questions reflect the Janus-faced predicament of Las Morras as precariously situated between disruptive/empowering and fragile/ephemeral. The first question speaks to the project's achievements in capturing and spreading a confrontational approach to dealing with harassment through 'Las Morras Enfrentan a Sus Acosadores'. The second research question analyses the resistance to the video after its posting and circulation.

**Research Question 01:** *As practitioners of networked tactical media, how did Las Morras attempt to both subvert the discourse of gendered violence in order to create a space for fostering solidarity?*

**Research Question 02:** *As practitioners of networked tactical media, how did Las Morras struggle due to a lack of offline institutional capacity?*

### **Research approach**

Our analysis integrates a qualitative textual analysis of both the comments on 'Las Morras Enfrentan a Sus Acosadores' and Las Morras Facebook page with a series of interviews conducted with three group members in 2016 and interviews published with group members in other media outlets. The component sections of our analysis are organised according to the research questions. In each section, we will discuss when appropriate data from YouTube, Facebook, or interviews.

As fitting for a YouTube-generated project, our central object of analysis is the feedback produced in reaction to the video. In order to investigate the different ideas and sentiments expressed in the reactions to their most controversial video, we performed a qualitative content analysis of the comments left on the original YouTube video posted by Las Morras. The video was posted on the group's YouTube channel, *Morras*, which as of March 2019 had 8,060 subscribers; 'Las Morras Enfrentan a Sus Acosadores' had 1,628,482 views, 11,000 likes, and 5,300 dislikes. Drawing upon a grounded theory approach, we collected the first 200 comments left on the video page when sorting from 'Most Relevant' by YouTube. This method allows for concepts and ideas to arise naturally without any preconceived theories (Abramson, Keefe & Chou, 2015). The process involved copying the users' comments onto an Excel spreadsheet and looking for repeated and common themes and concepts and classifying them accordingly. After looking at the first 200 comments for themes, we reached theoretical saturation, as we were not able to find any new data to build on the identified categories or for new categories and themes to emerge (Given, 2016; Birks and Mills 2015). Across the YouTube comments under analysis, we identify two categories of comments: solidarity and trolling/critique. Under the solidarity category we tracked six sub-categories: 1) Support for the group and the cause, and 2) Sharing experience of harassment. Under trolling and harassment, we identified a few central tropes: 3) 'They're not even pretty, harassers have bad taste'; 4) 'Your dress is the problem'; 5) 'It's not misogyny; it's education and class'; and 6) 'Denial of any wrongdoing on the part of men'.

While YouTube comments make up a substantial portion of our research sample, our analysis also includes Facebook posts published at the time that Las Morras removed their Facebook and Twitter accounts. Specifically, we will analyse the strategies adopted by trolls to drown out topical discussion of issues raised by the group on its Facebook page. Between November 2016 and February 2017, we conducted a series of interviews with three of the four members of Las Morras via Skype and telephone. While cognisant of potential perspectives lost by only interviewing 3 members, we designed our questions to address the group's work as a whole; as such members agreed to speak only about areas that applied to the group and for each interview citation we only used 'Las Morras' to honour the spirit of individuals speaking on behalf of the group's position. These interviews were chunked, coded, and analysed in light of the framework laid out in our two research questions. We supplement these with interviews conducted in Mexican and international press.

### **Discussion 01: Las Morras' critique of everyday misogyny and the fostering of solidarity**

Following Research Question 1's focus on how the video acts as a tactical intervention to critique misogyny and begin to build solidarity, this section draws extensively on YouTube comments to trace support for or solidarity with Las Morras' activism as encapsulated in the film.

#### **YouTube theme 1: Support for the group and the cause**

When addressing the YouTube comments, we found that around 10% of the comments appeared to come from female users and stated support for the group and the video. Many of them explicitly thanked Las Morras for putting themselves at risk by talking back to their



harassers. These types of comments expressed sympathy for harassed women, and the inability to peacefully walk the streets of the city. For example, 'Victoria' wrote: 'How brave you girls, thank you for putting yourself at risk like that. I've been harassed a lot too, and it's horrible, one cannot walk the streets in peace. I think we all have been through it. It's not fair that this behaviour is still seen as 'normal'. Regardless of the way we dress, we still deserve respect and that's it'. This comment reflects a sentiment that young women were impressed and emboldened by Las Morras' intervention.

In a similar vein, many commenters came to the defence of Las Morras' tactics, fighting back against comments that blamed the group for the way they are dressed and from those calling them 'feminazis'. Comments within this category also touch on the culture of catcalling and how it should not be justified to catcall a woman based on her choice of clothing. 'Jennifer' writes: 'I was not expecting to read so many people trashing them, implying that they are in 'impoverished sectors, dressed like prostitutes.' (...) I always wear big sweatshirts because if I use tight clothes I will get all types of comments and even receive unwarranted touching in public. What they did was to expose what happens every day. That doesn't make them feminazis... Us [*sic.*] women know what it's like to deal with that on a daily basis. It is disgusting to have to live in fear of using [*sic.*] a skirt or even showing your elbows.' This rich statement serves to reinforce our claim that the video represents a powerful form of tactical media. It first recognises the reason for the intervention: to document the incessant harassment of women on the streets of Mexico City. It then places the spectator in the position of Las Morras and Las Morras in the position of the spectator: they are all facing a shared problem, everyday misogyny. Finally (and most importantly), it valorizes the intervention as irreducible to a fringe belief in the inferiority of men (i.e. the view of 'feminazis') but instead as a justified response to assault. Read closely, both of these comments show the roots of a shared collective consciousness being generated.

#### YouTube theme 2: Sharing experiences of confronting abuse

Self-identified female commenters presenting their experiences of harassment provided another example of the sense of shared experience among women produced in reaction to the video. These comments were particularly interesting because they were often story-like replies and told the users' own experience of talking back to harassers and their tactics for confrontation. 'Lucia' shares: 'One time a man wolf-whistle [*sic.*] at me, he was with friends and I was with my mom. She ignored him. I yelled at him 'Coward, what are you looking at?' and all of his friends started laughing at him looking at how a little girl put him in his place'. 'Dana' offers yet another example of young women discussing how they fought back against everyday harassment: 'I took my jacket off and one 'jerk' whispered something obscene. I quickly yelled 'What?' The dude kept walking. 'Oh no, now you face me "asshole".' 'Who me?' 'Yes, repeat what you just said to me.' 'No, I didn't say anything.' 'Oh, so now you're a pussy' ... Once you confront them, they lose all their courage ... I find it ridiculous when people say to us 'what if he is good-looking and you like him?' Well no!!! What they want is to feel that they can walk all over me.' Sharing an experience of confronting harassers similar to the one captured in the video, 'Dana' reinforces the notion that women have the ability to cut through gender stereotypes directed towards both women and men (i.e. harassment by an attractive man constitutes an acceptable form of flirting). In light of these and similar reflections by female viewers, the video could be seen as providing a space not just for empowerment in the sense of providing tactics for women in similar situations. It also provides a platform for reflecting on the previously undocumented ways that women in Mexico and beyond have already been empowering themselves to confront male harassers. By producing and posting the video, Las Morras gave a platform for other women to share their experiences with combating everyday misogyny. If only for a brief instance, this shared experience of fighting

back presents the seeds of building a longer sense of solidarity against street harassment and everyday misogyny. However, as our discussion of Research Question 2 will illustrate, this expression of solidarity was dwarfed by negative responses.

### ***Discussion 2: The Fragility of Las Morras***

Though a number of the responses to the YouTube video illustrate the solidarity-building potential of its documentation of the confrontation of harassers, the majority of the responses consisted of derogatory remarks or attacks. The following sections will address these statements in more detail. The first section will continue our analysis of the video's YouTube feedback (this time focusing on assaultive commentary), the second section will document and analyse harassment experienced on the group's Facebook page, and the final section will build on in-depth interviews to better understand how these critiques, threats, and attacks facilitated the end of Las Morras.

#### **Negative YouTube feedback: 'The women of Las Morras are too ugly to harass'**

By 'negative' feedback, we are referring to messages that either attacked the physical appearance of Las Morras or blamed their treatment by men on the video on suggestive clothing and behaviour. While they acknowledge the bad behaviour on the part of male onlookers, the second set of 'negative' comments attempts to rationalise this behaviour based on the men's background. Claiming that misogyny is not the root of the problem, these comments present lack of cultural capital as the root cause of these 'ignorant' actions.

Beyond direct attacks on physical appearance (e.g. calling them fat), messages attacking the physical appearance of Las Morras also feigned confusion about why men would bother to harass group members, perceived as too unattractive to harass. Comments in this category did not make mention of race or class. 'Aldo' writes: 'Very politely I would like to inform you that you are ugly. You are only demonstrating that there are men with bad taste, you don't deserve any compliments.' Beyond excoriating the physical appearance of Las Morras, some respondents claimed that they must have paid men in the video to harangue them. 'Fabian': 'They don't fool me. They paid the dudes to make the video, because to be honest they are not that good-looking for them to be catcalling and wolf-whistling the way they show it in the video'. These comments engaged in degrading tropes including fat shaming and attacks on facial appearance and teeth. In short, these comments focused on physical appearance.

Another theme that is commonly referenced in general discussions of harassment is the role of provocative attire in encouraging male attention and catcalling. Comments in this category blamed Las Morras (and young women generally) for their treatment by claiming that their clothing was too provocative and they should have expected that response based on their attire. They believed that they should not dress that provocatively if they do not want people to stare. 'Cynthia' offers a clear example of rationalization based on clothing choice: 'The way I see it, it's not just men who are to blame. We women are guilty too because of the way we dress. If we don't want people to disrespect us, we shouldn't dress provocatively'. 'Oscar' echoes this idea: 'What's the problem with the compliments? Look at what you were wearing, you went out looking for that'.

The third and largest sub-set of comments posited socio-economic status or lack of cultural capital on the part of the harassers or Las Morras as the root problem. A number of posters stated that the group purposely walked through a neighbourhood where men from a low socio-economic background would inevitably harass them. 'Julian' writes: 'Surely they went to Coyoacán or La Roma [upscale neighborhoods] and nobody noticed them, that's why everything was filmed downtown, which is filled with construction workers and lowlifes that would go for any monster.' 'Marco' agrees: 'Great video, you have demonstrated that in the

most ignorant zones of the country people with very little education exist'. A longer post by 'Jonathan' combines a classist critique of harassers with an even harsher classist critique of Las Morras: 'If they knew how to make an experiment, they should've visited different places in Mexico City from different socio-economic strata. Obviously in the upper-class areas they would have been confused with maids, and no one would harass them.' Viewed from the perspective of tactical media, the YouTube responses seem to indicate that when faced with an assault on their deeply held sexist and patriarchal positions, a great deal of the (presumably) male viewers choose to either amplify sexist practices or substitute socio-economic status for misogyny as the video's 'real' target.

#### Las Morras on Facebook: Sustained trolling attacks

This section briefly discusses the aggressively antagonistic response the video prompted on the Facebook page of Las Morras. In the months following the posting of 'Las Morras Enfrentan a Sus Acosadores' the group's number of followers jumped in October 2016, and the group's Facebook page had over 42,000 likes. While the site grew in popularity, it also received vicious criticism in comments like this:

Why can't you accept your role in society? You are a damn furniture [*sic.*], a display figure temporarily decorating the house ... Then you will become the disposable 'bitch' that you really are ... A sexual satisfaction machine, a children factory, a damn maid whose only job is to keep the house clean. You have to finally understand you cannot be at the same level of men. Stupid woman, your menstruation is causing you mental retardation, and that is why you will always be stupid ... Go make me a fucking sandwich already. Eat my dick! (Facebook comment, 6 October 2016).

Direct confrontations were accompanied by intense trolling. In October 2016 Las Morras posted that a group of trolls was trying to take down their page after they posted an invitation for women to participate in a feminist march against femicide (the widespread practice in Mexico of engaging in hate crimes – even to the point of murder – against young women with almost complete immunity). In anticipation to the march, Las Morras had been sharing photos of abusive husbands and boyfriends on Facebook to help with criminal cases. This activism prompted extensive trolling on their site to the point where they had to publish a public post addressing it: 'A group of over 400 trolls is trying to take down our page, after we called for a march against femicides and denounced other cases of domestic violence' (6 October 2016 Las Morras Facebook page). In one interview, group members were not able to explain the reason behind the attack other than users reacting to their activism:

And we did, and two hours later they started attacking us. Also, because we published something about a man who was accused of domestic violence, and so Facebook took down our post. And the trolls started trying to take down our page. Fortunately, they couldn't do it, but now we think that everything we publish is going to be trolled (Morras, personal communication, 9 October 2016).

According to the group, the troll attack lasted approximately three hours. They had about 450 messages in their Facebook inbox and thousands of comments on their Facebook posts. The troll attack consisted of copying and pasting the same messages over and over to flood their page with comments. The comments were often long and nonsensical including lyrics of popular songs, lines from the *Law and Order SVU* television series, passages from *Harry Potter* novels, and the transcript of infomercials. Some of the comments were indeed incredibly

misogynistic in nature and were aimed at provoking a response to reply with more nonsensical comments. According to our interviews, the online incivility began to intensify in late 2016–2017 leading to the folding of the group's social media accounts by 2018.

#### The end of Las Morras

The Facebook confrontation portended the shuttering of Las Morras' digital presence. For privacy reasons, the group had decided to keep their identities anonymous. Although their faces are clearly visible in the video, they had kept their real names private. However, after the video went viral, online users found their personal Twitter and Facebook profiles. The group said that social media users sent hateful messages to their personal accounts: 'they found our personal accounts on Twitter and our personal Facebook profiles. They would send us messages calling us fat, ugly, prostitutes, and that sort of stuff' (Las Morras, personal communication, 9 October 2016). In a BBC interview, the group reported receiving photos of men carrying firearms and dismembered women (Paullier, 2016). The threats escalated to the point where they were going to report the harassment to the police: 'Our phones are ringing all day long with notifications of harassment, threats, and they send us pictures of dismembered women. (...) At first we were harassed with comments about our physical appearance, then the death threats followed' ('Cuatro morras mexicanas', 2016). The collective believed that the violent reaction to their video and the personal attacks were a symptom of the social structure in Mexico: 'We exposed the worst of Mexico. The homophobia, the classism ... They call us black, fat, maids, and they are homophobes, misogynists, and sexists. We exposed all of that' ('Amenazan de muerte', 2016). After their identities were exposed, they came to a consensus that they should no longer keep their social media profiles private and instead take a stronger activist stance: 'Before we didn't say our names, but we are no longer afraid of any of this. We tag our names in our Instagram accounts to the Morras account ... I mean we are no longer hiding or trying to go unnoticed.' (Morras, personal communication, October 9, 2016).

When analysing the group's activity on social media in subsequent months this claim did not seem substantiated. Despite mentioning that the comments and threats were not a concern for them, somewhere between September and December 2018 the group closed their Facebook and Twitter accounts. The YouTube account also went inactive as of March 2017: the last video uploaded to the Morras YouTube account was 'Las Morras nos cuentan sus historias de acoso' (Las Morras talk about their harassment stories), which only garnered 6,747 views. From February–May their Twitter page consisted of only two posts and 16 retweets. Seemingly their activity and influence on social media slowly dissipated, as they were not able to produce any more viral videos. The reasons for deleting their traces from social media except for their YouTube page are unclear. It is apparent, however, that their presence diminished. Only one of the members maintains an active public Twitter account. For all intents and purposes, 'Las Morras' no longer exists except in the images and comments from the YouTube videos.

#### **Conclusion: A call to action with nowhere to go**

Our analysis of comments along and interview data registers significantly more support for Research Question 2. The feedback was much more antagonistic, aggressive, and caustic than it was supportive or in solidarity. Furthermore, as a practice native to online environs, trolling as a communicative strategy was much more effective in dismantling Las Morras' work than Las Morras were in capacity building in the fight against harassment, misogyny, and gender-based violence. The fate of Las Morras at the hands of trolls illustrates two things. As the group recognised, the ferocity of trolling can be seen as proof of success as the extreme reactions point to the powerful disruptive capacity of the video. At the same time, trolling also destabilises movement-building through targeted online aggression (as Mendes and

co-authors argue): ‘Trolling can disrupt the affective solidarity of a hashtag, discouraging participation, and ultimately even forcing people to abandon it’ (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2019, 134). As a project fully based in the digital realm of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, Las Morras experienced a serious (and in fact ultimately fatal) weakness to trolling. Las Morras clearly lacked a focus in the sense of providing avenues for continuing to build frameworks to nurture feelings of solidarity into more sustained activist projects.

Looking beyond the individual case, the boom then bust trajectory of Las Morras could be seen as a kind of augury or warning sign for other digitally-sparked instances of anti-misogynistic activism including the highly visible #MeToo ‘movement’ in 2017. Numerous commentaries written in the wake of the initial wave of exposures have struggled with how to translate from identifying perpetrators and activities online to substantially engaging root causes of problems. Michelle Rodino-Colocino argues that the momentum of online exposures of misogyny and violence will fade without an accompanying ‘transformative empathy’ that pushes individuals to ‘self-reflexivity and the potential transformation of one’s own assumptions’ (2018, 97). This process, she argues, cannot be encapsulated in the act of calling out individuals via digital media (as important as the act is). Liz Mason-Deese (2018) is even more cautious, arguing that #MeToo will remain a movement generated against powerful *individual men* unless activists interface with other movements that have been working for years to organise women experiencing harassment, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based marginalisation. Like Tufekci’s work, these arguments highlight the fragility of online activism without connections to off-line/non-digital capacity-building and organizing. Learning from the disappearance of Las Morras, we argue that not heeding these areas will relegate digital interventions with enormous immediate effect to incessantly spark and then fade to obscurity while the insidious power asymmetries they oppose continue more or less undaunted.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to this article.

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