


#ILookLikeASurgeon: stance and engagement on Twitter/X for identity construction and community building

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Abstract: The hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon, introduced in August 2015, is still being used to highlight diversity in surgery, challenge stereotypes and fight discrimination. Adopting a multimodal approach, this study analyzes a corpus of 150 posts in Twitter (now called X) with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon, in order to explore the role played by stance and engagement devices in (collective) identity construction and community building. The analysis reveals that a variety of stance and engagement resources are used to project a more inclusive identity of medical professionals (especially surgeons), build solidarity and create a sense of community. Stance and engagement are expressed in these posts by linguistic resources (e.g. personal pronouns, directives), but also by other resources afforded by the digital medium (e.g. images, emoji, hashtags). The images posted by female surgeon, in particular, play a crucial role in constructing identity and community. The study shows how the semiotic resources analyzed are orchestrated strategically in these posts to challenge gender stereotypes in surgery and fight gender bias.

Keywords: hashtag feminism; stance and engagement; multimodality; identity

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1. Introduction

In August 2015, Dr Heather Logghe, a general surgery resident, wrote a tweet with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon to challenge the prevalent male stereotype associated with being a surgeon. She was inspired by the hashtag #ILookLikeAnEngineer, coined by a female software developer that, upon featuring in one of her firm's advertisements, received online comments that she did not look like an engineer. Both hashtags seek to promote diversity, foster equality and increase the visibility of women in traditionally male-dominated fields. The hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon went viral and is still being used frequently by female surgeons around the globe to express their support for the movement, challenge stereotypes and fight discrimination. A hashtag with a similar purpose is #NYerORCoverChallenge. On April 3 2017, *The New Yorker* magazine published a cover by French artist Malika Favre, which portrayed four female surgeons looking down over an operating table. Surgeon Dr Susan Pitt posed with three other female surgeons to replicate the cover, shared it on social media, and encouraged fellow female surgeons to follow suit using the hashtag #NYerORCoverChallenge.

Numerous hashtags have been coined to raise awareness towards gender inequity and celebrate diversity, not only within surgery but across STEM disciplines, e.g. #distractinglysexy, #HerTimeIsNow, #Thatothershirt. All these hashtags can be considered a form of 'hashtag feminism' defined by Clark (2016: 1) as a type of feminist discursive activism "that unfolds through Twitter hashtags" and that "has become a powerful tactic for fighting gender inequities around the world". In addition to increasing the visibility of social causes, hashtags contribute to the formation of ad hoc communities, whose members (i.e. participants using the hashtag) share common values and ideologies (Zappavigna, 2012).

Research on feminist hashtag activism has employed several approaches to explore how hashtags are used to denounce sexism and challenge patriarchal discourses. Kim (2017), for instance, used content

analysis to identify emerging themes in the hashtag #iamafeminist in South Korea. Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer (2017) combined content analysis and critical discourse analysis to identify the discursive strategies that participants in the hashtag #YesAllWomen used to create a collective identity and share their critique of male violence. Morikawa (2019) also examined the use of language by women participating in #YesAllWomen and found that they used more stereotypically masculine language (e.g. more profanity and fewer politeness markers) compared to other posts. Chilwa and Ifukor (2015) applied the appraisal framework and (critical) discourse analysis to study affective stance (i.e. the expression of feelings and attitudes) in the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, revealing the frequent use of emotional language in this campaign to reflect feelings and moods and express ideological evaluation of persons and governments. Palomino-Manjón (2020) employed corpus-assisted discourse analysis and appraisal theory to examine evaluation in Twitter/X posts containing the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport. Her study reveals how participants in the hashtag used it to bond around shared experiences and denounce patriarchal ideologies. All these studies have shown that hashtag feminism plays a pivotal role in constructing a collective identity and building solidarity. Furthermore, they have highlighted that these hashtags function as tools for public protest and resistance, feminist mobilization and countering dominant patriarchal discourses.

Most studies of hashtag feminism have focused mainly on language. Although stance-taking and identity performance in online discourse may be carried out through various semiotic resources (e.g. written and spoken text, images, emoji, hashtags) (Barton and Lee, 2013; Marino, 2023; Matley, 2018), little attention has been paid to how non-linguistic resources contribute to meaning making in hashtag feminism. An exception is Brantner et al.'s (2020) analysis of the photographic self-representations posted by women in the Twitter/X hashtag #distractinglysexy and the text accompanying these images. Their study revealed that the interplay of image and text in these posts serves to parody stereotypes regarding women in the sciences and to protest against sexism in academia. The current study seeks to contribute to filling the gap in the analysis of non-linguistic resources in hashtag feminism, by adopting a multimodal approach to examine stance and engagement in posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon. Specifically, this study aims at answering the following research question: What is the role of stance and engagement markers (both linguistic and non-linguistic) in identity construction and community building in the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon?

2. Literature review

2.1. Stance and engagement

Stance and engagement are considered by Hyland (2005b: 176) as “two sides of the same coin”, both of them contributing to the interpersonal dimension of discourse. Hyland defines stance as “the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions and commitments” (Hyland, 2005: 176). It comprises three key components: evidentiality (i.e. epistemic stance), affect (i.e. affective stance) and presence (i.e. “the extent to which the writer chooses to project her or himself into a text”). Through stance-taking, speakers/writers express their positions and construct their identity. On the other hand, engagement refers to the rhetorical strategies that writers use to attract the audience's interest, connect with them, and signal solidarity and affiliation to a group/community and its values (Hyland, 2005). A framework for the analysis of interpersonal behavior which encompasses stance and engagement enables the examination of not only writer-oriented features but also reader-oriented features aimed at engaging, persuading and mobilizing the audience. Hyland's (2005) framework has been widely used in the analysis of academic genres. However, as noted by Suau-Jiménez et al. (2021), the model needs to be adapted and extended to analyze interpersonal resources in genres beyond conventional academic ones, particularly in digital genres and social media. These authors argue that stance and engagement may be expressed through markers that are not considered in Hyland's model, such as emoji (see Suau-Jiménez and Ivorra-Pérez, 2023). Additionally, while Hyland discusses stance and engagement as components of interpersonal metadiscourse, which he defines as “self-reflective” and distinct from propositional content, Suau-Jiménez et al. (2021) argue that propositional content also contributes to establishing interpersonal author/reader relations. This is the case, for instance, of attitudinal adjectives that evaluate entities in the real world.

It should also be noted that the boundary between stance and engagement in Hyland's model is fuzzy, and these concepts overlap (Hyland, 2005), as most resources used by the authors to position themselves and convey attitude also help them to create rapport, align themselves with others and build community. Recognizing this overlap, some authors work with a broader concept of stance, which also encompasses alignment (Du Bois, 2007; Georgalou, 2017). Du Bois (2007: 163) defines stance as:

a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimensions of the sociocultural field (my own emphasis)

This definition emphasizes that expressing one's attitude towards an object involves positioning oneself, expressing one's identity and values, and aligning/disaligning with others. The “stance object” (i.e. what is evaluated) can be the propositional content of a message or other texts, but also entities in the real world (outside the world of discourse), the speaker herself, an interlocutor, or other people represented in the discourse (Barton and Lee, 2013; Du Bois, 2007). An important feature of stance-taking, particularly relevant in public online spaces, is that it is not only a linguistic act, but also a public/social act (Barton and Lee, 2013; Du Bois, 2007). When expressing opinions, judgements or attitudes towards an entity, people align with others who share the same values or position (or disalign with others holding different positions). As Martin and

White (2005: 95) claim, expressions of attitude seek to “invite others to endorse and to share with them” these attitudes and to align “the addressee into a community of shared value and belief”.

An essential component of stance and engagement is the communicative means to achieve them, that is, the resources that are drawn upon (Barton and Lee, 2013). In Hyland’s framework stance and engagement are expressed linguistically. For the expression of stance, authors may use hedges, boosters, attitude markers or self-mentions. For the expression of engagement, authors use reader pronouns, directives, personal asides, appeals to shared knowledge and questions. However, research has revealed that interpersonal meaning may also be expressed through non-linguistic resources (Barton and Lee, 2013; Luzón, 2023; Marino, 2023; Suau-Jiménez and Ivorra-Pérez, 2023; Yus, 2019). Barton and Lee (2013), for instance, consider that images posted on Instagram can be used for stance-taking, and Suau-Jiménez and Ivorra-Pérez (2023) examine the use of emoji to express stance on Instagram. Georgalou (2017) uses the term “cross-modal stance taking” to describe how Facebook users convey stance by combining various semiotic modes. Marino (2023) showed that stance-taking can be expressed on TikTok through non-linguistic resources, such as gestures, body posture, camera angle or gaze. In Twitter/X discourse, interpersonal meaning can also be conveyed by means of visual elements (e.g. pictures, gifs, emoji) or Twitter/X-specific features, such as hashtags, likes, or mentions (@username) (Evans, 2016; Luzón, 2023).

2.2. Interpersonal devices for identity creation and community building in social media

Current research on identity conceives it as socially and discursively constructed. Identity is seen as multiple, dynamic and relational (i.e. constructed and negotiated through social interaction) (De Fina et al., 2006). The expression of stance and engagement are key in the process of identity construction and community building (Georgalou, 2017; Hyland, 2005). Research has shown that social media are “stance-rich” (Barton and Lee, 2013: 13) and “engagement-rich” environments, whose affordances enable users to construct (individual and collective) identities, enact social relations, build solidarity and move to action.

Images are a powerful device for stance-taking and self-presentation in social media (Brantner et al., 2020; Luzón, 2018; Matley, 2020). Posting images of one’s achievement online contributes to positive self-presentation (Barton and Lee, 2013; Luzón, 2018; Matley, 2018). In their study of scholarly profiles in academic social networking sites Tsou et al. (2016) showed the significant role of publicly shared personal images in creating professional identities. Luzón (2018) found that visuals in research group blogs, such as pictures of the group members at academic events, provide evidence of their professional activity and expertise. Participants in the feminist protest hashtag #distractinglysexy posted pictures of themselves to negotiate their identities as women scientists and reject gender stereotypes about women in science (Brantner et al., 2020). Other visual devices frequently used in social media to mark a stance, particularly affective stance, are emoji (Georgalou, 2017; Luzón, 2023). They may be used to express attitudes and emotions, and construct relationships with other users (Kreis, 2017; Suau-Jiménez and Yus, 2024; Yus, 2019).

Research on social media has paid particular attention to the role of affective stance-taking, such as the expression of emotions and feelings, in the construction of online identities, the formation of affective publics—“networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi, 2016: 311)—and the enacting of social relations (Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2015; Georgalou, 2017; Matley, 2020; Zappavigna, 2012).

Intertextuality has also been explored as a resource for stance-taking. Stance-takers can rely on others’ words to express their opinions and attitudes. Gruber (2017) shows how retweets, both commented (i.e. those where the poster comments on the retweeted message) and uncommented, are used for the expression of stance. In uncommented retweets, the poster shares the stance expressed in the original post, endorsing it. In commented retweets, the poster usually evaluates the content of the retweeted text. Retweeting can also be considered a form of engagement, as it signals the poster’s interest for the original post. Georgalou (2017) points out that the embedding and sharing of music links also serve for stance-taking, as choosing and uploading a song reflects the user’s moods and tastes and contributes to alignment/disalignment with other users.

Hashtags are also a resource for stance-taking and community creation. In addition to their experiential function (e.g. indicate the topic of a post), hashtags also have an interpersonal function (Zappavigna, 2015). They are evaluative meta-comments employed to express stance and construct relationships (Giaxoglou, 2018). Adding a hashtag helps to create ambient affiliation with other posters who use it and to align around shared values. Kreis (2017: 500) describes hashtags as “ideological resources (...) used to indicate identity, beliefs and group membership”. Hashtags contribute to the creation of ad hoc communities. They “weave together connected and unconnected narratives”, shaping them into a shared story that facilitates the formation of affective publics (Giaxoglou, 2018). Furthermore, since hashtags are hyperlinks that make content searchable, they increase the visibility of the posts that contain them. De Cock and Pizarro-Pedraza (2018) highlight that they contribute to enhancing the visibility, and thus raising awareness, of a cause on Twitter/X, while also displaying one’s affiliation and commitment to that cause. This is particularly evident in hashtag feminism, where hashtags like #YesAllWomen or #distractinglysexy serve to unite women around shared experiences, thereby fostering a collective identity (Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Brantner et al., 2020).

In summary, previous research highlights the key role of stance and engagement in constructing online identities and communities, emphasizing the need to consider multimodal resources, such as emoji, images or hashtags, beyond traditional linguistic elements. Accordingly, the current study adopts this multimodal approach to analyze stance and engagement in the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon.

3. Corpus and method

3.1. Data

The data for the study consists of 150 posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon written by women. I selected all the posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon which were posted between 6 May 2023 and 15 June 2023 (the date of data collection), excluding the few posts that were not written by women, but by men or organizations. The reason for choosing only hashtags by female posters is that the study seeks to explore how women use the hashtag to create their own collective identity and to denounce gender discrimination. The corpus was limited to 150 posts to make it manageable for a detailed multimodal analysis, following the suggestion by Page et al. (2014). This number is in agreement with other studies of posts that analyze several semiotic features (e.g. Kreis (2017), who used a sample of 100 posts). The posts making up the corpus were publicly available, and were collected manually and saved as PDF documents to be analyzed with Atlas.ti.

Regarding research ethics, the study follows the guidelines by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) which establish that “online observation should only take place when and where users ‘reasonably expect to be observed by strangers’” (p. 13) and the guidelines by the Association of Internet Researchers which establish that “the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc” (Ess et al., 2002, p. 5). These posts are public, have the easily searchable hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon, and are clearly intended to be seen and shared. Therefore, informed consent before collecting the data was not obtained. Nevertheless, in order to ensure anonymity, all the personal details (e.g. the profile pictures, the names of the posters) in the figures have been blurred.

3.2. Method

Since these posts are intrinsically multimodal (i.e. they use a variety of semiotic resources to make meaning), a multimodal approach was deemed appropriate. As defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), multimodality refers to the interplay of different modes of communication (e.g. writing, image, speech) in a text to produce meaning. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) asserts that language is just one part of an ensemble of modes for making meaning (Bezemer and Kress, 2008; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Each mode in the ensemble interacts with the other modes and they all contribute to the meaning of the ensemble and to achieving specific rhetorical purposes. Therefore, when studying the posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon, it is important to analyze not only language, but also any other semiotic resources present in the posts (e.g. visuals, emoji).

As a first step, prior to multimodal discourse analysis, a content analysis of the posts was conducted in order to identify the content of these posts and determine their purpose. Using Atlas.ti, a software for qualitative analysis of the data, all the posts were coded in terms of their purpose. This was an exploratory analysis, intended to provide context for the multimodal analysis and interpretation of the expressions of stance and engagement in these posts.

The second step consisted in identifying and coding the various resources used for stance-taking and engagement in the corpus using Atlas.ti. A selection of 50 posts was first coded to identify these resources. I drew on previous research of stance and engagement in social media (e.g. Georgalou, 2017; Luzón, 2023). However, although there is a wide range of discursive devices that may serve as stance and engagement markers, I selected for analysis the most frequent elements, as deriving from the analysis of the 50-post sample. These were: images, pronouns, hashtags, emoji, directives, and retweeting and embedding. These resources were then studied in context to determine their function.

4. Results and Discussion

The content analysis has revealed that female surgeons incorporate the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon in posts with several non-mutually exclusive purposes: (i) asserting that women are indeed surgeons; (ii) sharing their experiences, personal life and feelings; (iii) networking with others, particularly other fellow women; (iv) showcasing their own and other female surgeons' accomplishments and expertise; (v) bringing issues of gender and inequality to the attention of others. Some posts mostly aim to visually represent women as surgeons, emphasizing the presence of female surgeons in the field. For instance, in Figure (1) the poster resorts to the Tell Me Without Telling Me social game (“Tell me you're a surgeon without telling me you're a surgeon... My junk drawer #Ilooklikeasurgeon #iamasurgeon”) to post a picture of her “surgeon tools” and thus assert that she is a surgeon. Other posts serve to show that the posters have succeeded in becoming surgeons (sometimes overcoming others' expectations), or to highlight their and other women's expertise and recognition in their respective fields. Additionally, posts on Twitter/X are frequently used to share feelings, experiences of discrimination and challenges faced, and to disclose aspects of their personal life, thus contributing to increased awareness of diversity within the surgical profession. Other posts serve to publicly denounce gender inequality in the profession and to encourage women to take action. Therefore, the content analysis reveals that these posts serve a feminist agenda, by challenging gendered stereotypes and advocating for inclusivity and equality in the medical profession.

In order to achieve these goals, posters orchestrate several semiotic resources which are discussed below.

Figure 1. Post incorporating a picture of working tools for identity construction



4.1. Images

Table 1 presents the different types of images that are used in these posts for self-presentation and identity construction. Although this is not a quantitative study, in this case the number of occurrences of each type of images is given to show the prominence of some of them. It should be noted that a single image can belong to more than one category (e.g. women at work and selfies).

Table 1. Types of images for identity construction in the #ILookLikeASurgeon hashtag

Image Type	Number
Women at academic events	31
Women at work	20
Achievements	16
Female surgeons in non-academic activities	15
Selfies	15
Women with family	13
Portrait pictures of female surgeons	6
Female surgeons in non-professional clothes	6
Own version of the NYerORCoverChallenge	3
Instruments related to the discipline	3
Other	8

The most common types of pictures posted by female surgeons are pictures serving to underscore their expertise, authority, and professional identity, thereby promoting the visibility of women as expert surgeons. These include images of themselves and other women participating in academic events, such as delivering talks or posing alongside fellow participants, typically other women, at conferences. Additionally, they frequently share pictures taken in their working environments (i.e. hospitals) to assert their presence and belonging in these spaces. In the “women at work” pictures, women tend to pose in front of the camera informally (and very often playfully), typically dressed in scrubs (see Figure 2). They also tend to appear with colleagues, predominantly other women, which helps to create a collective identity, and to show that women are common in the profession. In most of these pictures, the women look at the viewer directly, smiling, which results in a “demand” image that

engages the audience (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Notably, many women in these pictures make the victory sign, presumably to symbolize their success in becoming surgeons. There are also many pictures of women providing evidence of and celebrating their achievements. These are often pictures that show that they have obtained their degrees, e.g. pictures at their graduation ceremonies, with the graduation attire, alone or with their family, supervisors, or other female professionals, accompanied by a text that also expresses achievement (e.g. “I did it”). Selfies are also prevalent, taken either alone or with peers, taken at work, conferences, or during social gatherings. As in the posts of the #distractinglysexy hashtag, these selfies create social proximity, because they “bring the viewer very close to the depicted person in terms of the physical distance created between them” (Brantner et al., 2020: 10). As in the “women at work” pictures, the depicted women in selfies often gaze directly at the viewer, enhancing the sense of closeness and connection.

Figure 2. Pictures of women at work



Some pictures are particularly useful to claim diversity and to challenge the stereotypical portrayals of surgeons. This is the case of pictures featuring female surgeons with their families, emphasizing this aspect of their identity. Among these, there are a high number of pictures of themselves with their children, but also with other family members (e.g. parents), or of their children alone. These pictures present an inclusive image of surgeons that recognizes motherhood as compatible with a career in surgery and aligns with hashtag feminism movements advocating for diversity and gender equality. Pictures depicting female doctors in everyday clothes, or with casual looks, aim to convey the message that “clothes do not make the man”. For instance, in one of the posts, the user posts a selfie where she wears colorful flowery trousers, and writes: “These @ LuckyandYak trousers make me so happy, and definitely still #ILookLikeaSurgeon”. Pictures of female doctors engaging in non-academic activities, such as sports or dancing at conference dinners, demonstrate their multifaceted lives beyond their professional roles. Posting pictures of their work tools or objects that provide evidence of their professional status is another way to construct their identity (See Figure 1). Finally, reproducing the iconic New Yorker cover, as was initially done when the hashtag #NYerORCoverChallenge was launched, is another way of stating affinity and solidarity with this movement.

4.2. Personal pronouns and possessive adjectives

Pronouns play an important role as devices for identity construction and community building in these posts. The first-person pronoun “I”, used by the posters to talk about who they are, their feelings, and their shared experiences, helps to establish a personal connection with the audience. It frequently occurs with verbs and adjectives expressing feelings and beliefs (“I feel”, “I think”, “I want”, “I am proud”, “I am angry”) (see example 1 below), with the verbs “to be” and “to have” to present important facets of their identity (e.g. “I’m a surgeon”, “I have a son”) (see example 2), and with other verbs, sometimes in the passive voice, to talk about experiences in their working environment (e.g. “I was called Princess”) (example 3). Sharing similar experiences is a common practice in hashtag feminism (see Barker-Plummer and Barker-Plummer, 2017; Palomino-Manjón, 2020). The possessive adjective “my” occurs with nouns referring to aspects the writer wants to be related to (“my job”, “my son”, “my junk drawer”).

- (1) Given recent events, I feel I want to link this. #ilooklikeasurgeon
- (2) a. [Name], give me a call. I’ve been married since Med school and have a son who is my everything. I’m also a surgeon who is thriving in her career.
b. I’m a mum, a wife – and an orthopedic surgeon
- (3) a. I was called “Princess” in the hall at my hospital recently. I’m a Harvard-trained MD, MPH, reconstructive surgeon, co-director of #SpinaBifida program atChildrenNatI. Demoted with a single word.
b. I became a mum in Med school, & many people told me I shouldn’t do it.

The third person pronoun “she” is also used to refer to the poster, in conjunction with “I”, to establish a juxtaposition between others’ perceptions and biases and the actual reality of the poster (see example 4). This contrast helps to challenge stereotypes and prejudices, highlighting the individual’s true identity and experiences.

- (4) "What a waste, she'll never go, she's got kids" – the words I overhead from a consultant the day I was awarded this #fellowship. Well this one's for you Mr Average. #Illoklikeasurgeon #twitterortho #medtwitter #cscambodia

The use of inclusive “we” to refer to the posters and the readers is very frequent in these posts (20 occurrences). Bouvier and Machin (2021) note that the pronouns “we”/ “us” help to create affective communities and to convey a sense of identification and affinity. In these posts, “we” is often utilized to express collective knowledge and emotions among female doctors and to encourage action (“we need”) (see example 5). As in other social media, it helps to create “a sense of collective mobilization” and in combination with “them”/ “others” it “can be used to create a sense of imagined collective interest and also as a shared enemy” (Bouvier and Machin, 2021: 318), encouraging peers to take action against gender-based discrimination, and reinforcing the solidarity and activism characteristic of hashtag feminism (see Palomino-Manjón, 2020).

- (5) a. We know the problem, now let’s fix the culture of surgery.
 b. We need to share our stories.
 c. I have been her fan for many years (...) What a joy to have her in Mexico. It inspires us to continue looking for spaces for women surgeons.
 d. When one wins, we all win.

The second-person pronoun is the clearest indication that the writer is attempting to engage the audience. “You” has three uses in these posts. It may refer to the poster herself, particularly when denouncing others’ misperceptions (e.g. 6). This use is similar to the use of “she” for self-reference. “You” may also be employed to refer to other women, address them directly, as a way of creating solidarity, and encourage them to act (e.g. 7a and 7b), sometimes also opposing “you” and “they” (e.g. 7b). In example (7a) the directive (“we need you to”) and the hashtag #DeedsNotWords reinforce the persuasive effect. Finally, “you” is also used to directly confront others and call out sexist behaviors. In example (8) we find a simulated conversation, where “you” is used to address individuals (in this case @9NewsAUS) with sexist attitudes. The text is accompanied by two screenshots of the news program representing two surgeons, one male and one female, showing that only the male surgeon has been titled “Prof.”. The simulated conversation is a technique employed in other posts (see Bouvier and Machin, 2021) to create affective connectivity by expressing a confident confrontation, in this case with people with sexist behaviors.

- (6) And the perpetual “Do you want to have kids? Do you realise it is challenging for a surgeon?” is too long.
 (7) a. Just completed the survey very honestly (...) We need you all to make sure your voices are captured and we will ensure they are heard and acted upon. #DeedsNotWords #ILookLikeASurgeon
 b. Don’t let them discourage you. Look for role models and female mentors. I’m a mum, a wife and an orthopedic surgeon.
 (8) The availability of intraoperative radiotherapy is wonderful news for patients in Brisbane, but can you please not untile women surgeons @9NewsAUS? It perpetuates #GenderBias. Here, I fixed it for you. #ILookLikeASurgeon

4.3. Hashtags

The hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon serves as a guide to the interpretation of the posts, indicating that they are intended to express affiliation and/or solidarity. This hashtag co-occurs with many other hashtags that may perform simultaneously an experiential function and an interpersonal function (i.e. expressing stance and building relations with others). These clusters of hashtags enable the creation of a network that brings together connected narratives (see Giaxoglou, 2018) and position the values related to the feminist hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon in relation to the values represented in the other hashtags. At the same time, they increase the visibility of the posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon.

Table 2. Presents the different types of hashtags in the sample of posts with examples.

Table 2. Types of hashtags co-occurring with #ILookLikeASurgeon

Type of hashtag	Examples
Women are surgeons/doctors hashtags	#lamasurgeon #womeninsurgery #surgeryiswhy #WomenInMedicine #womeninthoracicsurgery, #womeninneurosurgery, #womensurgeons #womenInArthoplastic #womenInOrtho #isasurgeon
Specialty hashtags	#scoliosisawarenessmonth, #obgyn, #bonedoc, #jobairdortho, #eyeballsurgery, #gynaecology

Type of hashtag	Examples
Conference hashtags	#AOT23, #ASCRS23
Hashtags conveying personal identifying features	#doctormom #ilooklikeamon, #momandsurgeon, #CoronaMamas, #SurgParenting, #MomofAnEngineer, #painter #leadership, #agingmindset, #strongwomen
(Integrated) hashtags describing their lives	back at #work post #matleave I'm co-director of #SpinaBifida program #impostersyndrome still hits me #StudentLife, #resident, #intern
Hashtags related to diversity and inclusion	#diversityandinclusion, #equity, #neurodiversity, #pride, #LGBTQ, #BlackTwitter, #BlackGirlmagic, #ImmigrantsmakeAmericaGreat, #latinasinmedicine
Sexism-denouncing hashtags	#gendergap, #genderbias, #sexism
Other activism/ social movement hashtags/slogans	#SoMe4Surgery, #ittakesavillage, #MeToo, #metooinmedicine, #heforshe, #bendbutnotbreak, #liftasyouclimb, #DeedsNotWords, #youcantbewhatyoucantsee, #nevergiveup, #WorkHardDreamBig, #workhardplayhard #womenneedatribe
Attitudinal hashtags	#stillsmiling, #shoutout, #Thankyouforherguidance, #MomWeDidIt, #Mondayvibes
Other	#dream, #crochet, #yoga, #Godisgood, #Babies

Many hashtags serve to assert the role of women in medicine/surgery (i.e. “women are surgeons/doctors hashtags”), sometimes specifying their own specialty (i.e. “medicine specialty hashtags”) or the conferences in which they participate. Other hashtags convey personal identifying features, with a predominance of hashtags that emphasize motherhood (e.g. #momandsurgeon). The recurring theme of motherhood in the posts—through hashtags like #momandsurgeon, pictures and text (see example 4)—highlights a central issue in feminist discourse. It challenges the gendered expectation that women must choose between a professional career in demanding fields like surgery and family life, and depicts women as individuals who can successfully balance both. Hashtags conveying aspects of their professional identity and personal identity may occur together (e.g. #jobairdortho and #ilooklikeamom), demonstrating the multifaceted and complex nature of their identity. This is illustrated by example (9), which is part of a post that also displays several pictures of the female surgeon with her son and of the son alone, contributing together with the hashtag and the first person pronoun to projecting this part of her identity.

- (9) It's official I have a first grader! I don't even remember having a kindergarten graduation like this!
#orthomom #ILookLikeASurgeon

Various types of hashtags are employed to raise awareness towards discrimination and bias, including those related to gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (e.g., #LGBTQ, #BlackTwitter, #latinasinmedicine), and to create a sense of supportive community and solidarity. Many posts incorporate other activism hashtags, to express solidarity and affinity with other social movement fighting against discrimination. Some of these hashtags are mottos taken from other social movements, serving as intertextual references to these movements. For instance, the motto “Deed not Words” was used by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in their campaign of civil disobedience for women's suffrage in the UK, led by Emmeline Pankhurst. Similarly, the motto “Lifting As We Climb” was coined by the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) to refer to the effort to climb above the stereotypes about African Americans (particularly African American women). Many of these hashtags function as supporting and empowering messages for female doctors (e.g. #nevergiveup #bendbutnotbreak), providing encouragement and resilience in the face of challenges and discrimination. The co-occurrence of the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon with others like #DeedsNotWords, or #LiftingAsWeClimb reflects core tenets of hashtag feminism, by encouraging solidarity and action against gender inequalities in the medical field.









Integrated hashtags (i.e. those that are embedded in the grammatical structure of the post) have a highlighting function, helping to identify the keywords in the post, identifying concepts that are important for the community. In example (10a), the hashtag marks “babies” and “Residency” as keywords, and the focus of the post. Other hashtags also serve to express aspects of their identity, as can be seen in example (10c) (#yoga, #worklifebalance), which is part of a post which also displays pictures of the poster with other female surgeons enjoying a yoga session.

- (10) a. Dr. Nicole Sparks talking about having #babies in #Residency: ““People will throw their opinions at you and tell you what to do with your uterus. But you do whatever works for YOU.”
b. #ImposterSyndrome still hits me. Esp when you realise how much you have yet to learn.
c. Perfect weather for outdoor yoga w/beautiful women in ortho that benefitted an animal sanctuary. Thankful to take time for me, a partner, residents, Med studs & friends. #stretch #orthopedicsurgeons #ladypods #futuresurgeons #ilooklikeasurgeon #yoga #WorkLifeBalance #teambuilding

4.4. Emoji

Emoji are also a prominent feature in the posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon. Table 3 presents the types of emoji in the corpus.

Table 3. Types of emoji in the #ILookLikeASurgeon corpus

Types of emoji	Examples
Emoji expressing love, approval and positive attitude	
Emoji expressing strength	
Female-related emoji	
Diversity emoji	
Attention-getting emoji	
Health-related emoji	
Celebration emoji	
Other	

The emoji in these posts differ from those found in academic posts (see Luzón, 2023) and are more similar to those favored by activist Twitter/X posters. This is the case of two emoji that occur very frequently in these posts: the raised-fist emoji, often associated with political resistance in activist posts, or the flexed biceps emoji, symbolizing strength and determination (see Alfano et al., 2022) (see example 11). These emoji help to signal in-group membership and to encourage other members of the community to continue reclaiming their status as surgeons. Their use emphasizes the feminist tone of these posts, positioning them as acts of resistance against both gender discrimination and the invisibility of women in surgery. Other frequently used emoji, also found in activist posts, are those related to LGBTQ issues and diversity, such as the rainbow emoji, the LGBTQ flag emoji, or a series of doctor emoji depicting individuals with various skin tones. Other emoji have a clear community building function, such as the celebration emoji or the emoji expressing love, approval and positive attitude. This category includes face emoji, but also the folded hands emoji (used to express thanks or request), the clapping hands emoji (to express approval) and the heart emoji—sometimes the blue heart emoji, associated with support for the Democratic party (see Alfano et al., 2022). Other emoji used to signal affiliation and community building are health-related emoji (e.g. a face with a mask) and female-related emoji (e.g., the female sign emoji, the female doctor emoji, the high heel shoe emoji, or the lipstick emoji). Example (11) illustrates how several semiotic resources (e.g. inclusive “we”, emoji, hashtags) are orchestrated to convey the meaning of resistance and strength.

- (11) Hope to quadruple the number of women surgeons @WIDVS2024. Together We Are Stronger 🙌 #womenempoweringwomen #womenempowerment #womensurgeons #bendbutnotbreak #womenneedatribe #ilooklikeasurgeon

4.5. Directives

Hyland (2005) distinguishes three types of directives: textual acts, which direct the reader to another part of the text or to another text; cognitive acts, which guide readers' understanding and reasoning; and physical acts, which direct readers to perform specific actions in the real world. Most directives in these posts are physical acts, with three functions: (i) urging women to contribute something to the community or to take specific actions, thereby encouraging participation and engagement (e.g. 12); (ii) offering advice and making recommendations to members of the community, either in general (e.g. 13a and 13b) or in response to specific posts (e.g. 13c); (iii) calling out gender-biased behaviors and asking people to change them (e.g. 14). In general, directives seek to challenge societal prejudices and promote equality within the community, thus contributing to the goals of hashtag feminism.

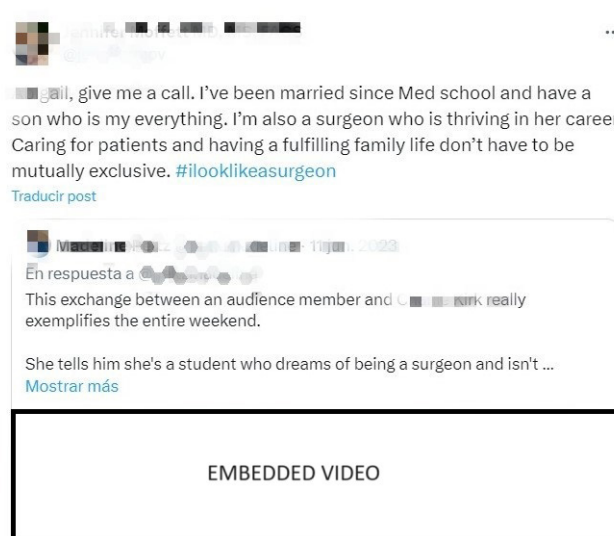
- (12) a. A reminder, folks: please complete the @RCSnews. Surgical Workforce Census, make sure you're counted!
 b. Let's spread the word and support Dr. Awan's important talk on gender-affirming care and inclusive transgender health!
- (13) a. To all female medical students who love surgery: think about becoming a urologist!

- b. Check out this important paper to learn more about seeking mentors!
 - c. Don't let them discourage you. Look for role models and female mentors.
- (14)
- a. Please stop telling me I'm too nice to be a surgeon. The world needs more nice surgeons.
 - b. In reply to @9NewsQueensland. The untitling of a woman surgeon is not a good look. Dr. Tam deserves the use of her professional title. Please correct! #Ilooklikeasurgeon.

4.6. Embedding and retweeting

Intertextuality through direct quotations of others' words in the text of the post, retweeting or embedding of previous texts, is a frequent resource to express stance. Female doctors very often retweet or embed other texts to endorse the stance expressed in those texts. Retweeting and embedding help to amplify previous messages and the values and ideas in those texts are shared and supported.

Figure 3. Retweeting to express stance



In Figure (3) above a female surgeon retweets a post to endorse the stance of the original poster and challenge the values and ideas expressed in the embedded video. The video depicts an exchange between a keynote speaker at a medical conference and a female medical student in the audience. When she seeks advice on balancing her career with settling down (marriage and starting a family), he responds that she will have to choose. The initial poster embeds the video to refute this opinion and the retweeting user endorses this rebuttal and provides evidence that the keynote speaker's advice is biased and does not accurately represent the experiences of female surgeons.

A common practice in these posts is to embed excerpts of texts, which are presented as the posters' own opinion. Twitter/X facilitates the recirculation and recontextualization of these elements. In Figure (4) the poster retweets a post embedding a text that presents the grievance of a female surgeon, thus helping to spread this experience and endorsing it.

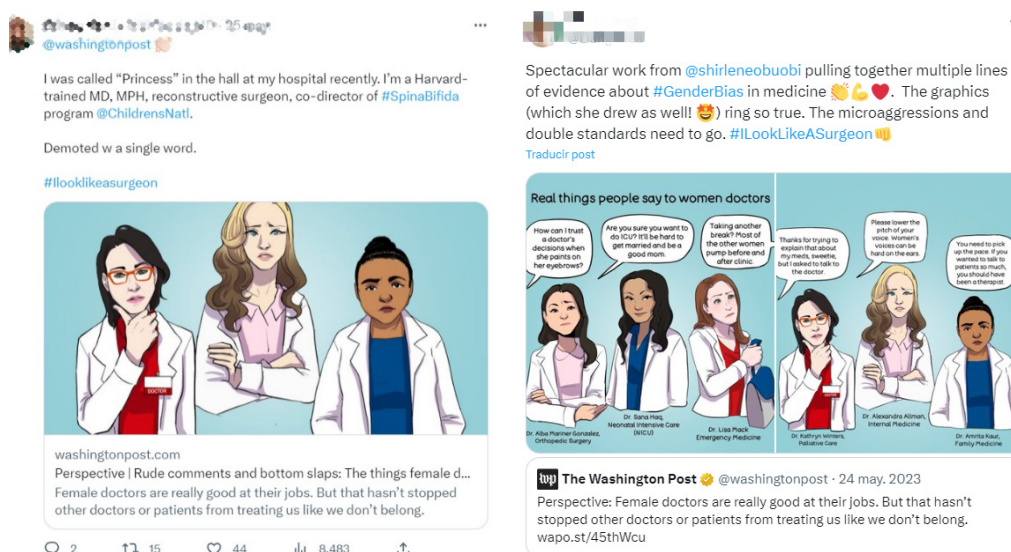
Figure 4. Retweeting to express stance



1.7. Orchestration of semiotic resources to construct identity and build community

In the previous sections various stance and engagement devices have been discussed individually to show their role in identity construction and community building. These resources are orchestrated skillfully in these posts to achieve the purpose of the post and contribute to hashtag feminism by challenging stereotypes. Two examples will be discussed here to illustrate this process of multimodal orchestration (see Figures 5 and 6). In both posts, by incorporating the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon, the posters align themselves with a movement aimed at challenging stereotypes and promoting diversity within the medical field. Both posts embed a quote-card (i.e. a combination of a visual quotation and a written quotation; see Pfurtscheller, 2020) from the same article in the Washington Post, titled “Rude comments and bottom slaps: The things female doctors put up with”. Through this embedding, the posters endorse the stance in this piece of opinion and amplify it, drawing attention to the issue of gender-based micro-aggressions in medical settings. In addition, the visuals enhance the impact of the message, making the data more accessible and compelling. While in Figure 5 the original visuals have been modified, in Figure 6 the poster keeps the bubbles in the original version, thus endorsing also the experiences in these bubbles.

Figure 5 and 6. Orchestration of semiotic resources in a post



In Figure 5, the integrated hashtag (#SpinaBifida) and the personal pronoun (“I’m a...”) help the poster to present her credentials, achievements and expertise, and contrast them with how she was wrongly perceived by others (“I was called ‘Princess’”). The poster highlights the demeaning nature of such language and calls out this sexist behavior (i.e. addressing women in positions of authority with diminutive or condescending words), explaining what it means for a woman (“demoted with a single word”). The clapping hands emoji conveys a positive attitude, contributing also to endorsing the Washington Post’s position on this issue.

In Figure 6, the clapping hands and star-eyed emoji, together with the adjective “spectacular”, add positive evaluation and approval to the message, signaling support for the stance expressed by @shirlenebuobi. The heart emoji conveys affection and solidarity, indicating that the fight against gender discrimination is driven by unity. The flexed biceps and raised fist emoji convey the ideas of strength and resistance. The co-occurrence of the hashtags #GenderBias and #ILookLikeASurgeon connects the post to broader conversations and feminist movements aimed at addressing gender discrimination and promoting diversity in medicine. In addition, their combination with the flexed biceps and raised fist emoji encourages engagement and solidarity from others who share similar experiences or beliefs. The directive “need to go” directly addresses the issue of gender bias and calls for its elimination.

These two posts illustrate how posters using the feminist hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon orchestrate various semiotic resources to shed light on the issue of gender discrimination in medicine, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for greater respect and recognition of women professionals in traditionally male-dominated fields.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to analyze how multimodal resources for the expression of stance and engagement are combined in the feminist hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon to challenge gender bias, foster collective identity, and project diversity in the medical profession, particularly among surgeons. The results support previous studies showing that feminist hashtags serve as platforms for public protest, resistance, feminist mobilization, and countering patriarchal discourse. While hashtag feminism has been often analyzed by focusing on linguistic elements, this article aimed to explore also the role of non-linguistic resources in achieving the rhetorical purposes of the post.

The content analysis of posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon reveals the multifaceted purposes of female surgeons when composing these posts. Through images, personal pronouns, hashtags, emoji, directives, and intertextuality, they assert their presence in the medical profession, share experiences, celebrate achievements, challenge stereotypes, and advocate for gender equality. These resources are instrumental in identity creation and community building in these posts. They enable users to express attitudes, values, and affiliations, while also facilitating rapport and alignment, fostering solidarity and mobilizing collective action.

Personal pronouns contribute to the construction of a multifaceted identity, emphasizing both professional and personal facets, and also to collective identity creation. The use of personal pronouns to share experiences, or the use of inclusive pronouns, serve to reinforce a sense of belonging and solidarity within the community. The juxtaposition between we/I vs them/you also helps to assert their real identity and challenge how they are perceived by others. Directives, sometimes combined with personal pronouns (“we”, “you”), encourage active participation and engagement, fostering a sense of agency among members. Visual elements, including images and emoji, play a crucial role in constructing identity and community in these posts. Images, often combined with personal pronouns, are key devices for self-presentation. In particular, the representation of women surgeons with their children, often accompanied by hashtags like #momand-surgeon, and by narratives of motherhood, promotes a better understanding of the professional identity of female surgeons. Emoji convey attitudes succinctly, adding evaluation and emphasis to the textual content. Intertextuality, through retweets and embedded texts, and shared hashtags contribute to aligning posters with shared values, beliefs, and experiences.

In conclusion, the combination of linguistic and non-linguistic resources in posts with the hashtag #ILookLikeASurgeon enables individuals to construct collective identities, challenge stereotypes, and foster inclusive communities. By leveraging these multimodal semiotic resources, female surgeons can articulate complex and collective narratives, challenge gender stereotypes in surgery, amplify their voices, mobilize collective action, and hopefully effect social change.

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