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The #VegasStrong Rallying Cry: How a Hashtag Came to Define a City's Resilience

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The #VegasStrong Rallying Cry: How a Hashtag Came to Define a City's Resilience

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All errors and omissions are entirely my own.

Miranda Barrie, 2019.

Executive Summary

The mass shooting that occurred in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017, left a place infamous for its neon lights in complete and total darkness. In a city that projects an image of the ideal adult playground, tragedy peels back the facade built by advertising agencies and tourism authorities. The world, perhaps for the first time, was able to see the people behind the image of a sinful strip. During the hours following the horrific events that occurred the night of October 1st, the Las Vegas community came together to grieve, heal, and find a path forward. Using the rallying cry 'Vegas Strong', residents across the valley made clear that the event would serve as a reminder of the strength of the city. This message of resilience was spread across the microblogging platform, Twitter.

This paper will examine the origin of the hashtag '#VegasStrong' on Twitter as well as the rate at which it was shared in the days following the mass shooting. The role of key influencers in the dissemination of the hashtag is explored. Findings from the study suggest that the widespread use of the tag can be attributed in part to several key influencers who shared tweets with '#VegasStrong' from October 2, 2017, until October 7, 2017. Among the top influencers using the hashtag, there is a notable absence of local government agencies and local officials. I argue that these agencies and individual actors can improve their risk and crisis communications strategy through the early adoption and promotion of a single, unifying hashtag.

Literature Review

A battle cry is meant to unite an army and move them towards a shared purpose. A series of differing battle cries would be confusing to a large crowd, leaving troops wondering who to follow and where to go next. Similarly, a hashtag can be used during crisis events by public agencies and officials to rally a community towards action (Williams, Woods, & Staricek, 2017). Research suggests that a community's response to a crisis is heavily influenced by the reaction of local leaders and the media (Boin & 'T Hart, 2007). Using Twitter, it is possible for these key influencers to spread information to wide audiences. Local government agencies and public officials can use social media when attempting to follow best practices in risk and crisis communication (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011).

A 2017 case study examining the Twitter strategy of Boston Mayor Thomas Menino following the Boston Marathon bombing found that leaders can and should incorporate social media into their crisis communication strategies (Williams, Woods, & Staricek, 2017). The authors of the study cite the central role of a single hashtag in promoting a unified hope and vision for the city. Las Vegas is no stranger to powerful catchphrases—the CEO of the advertising firm responsible for 'What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas' noted that, unlike the carefully crafted slogan the city is known for, '#VegasStrong' trended on social media largely due to the support of visitors (Morell, 2018).

Crisis communications remains a burgeoning field as technologies continue to develop that allow government officials to quickly reach large audiences. Local agencies can foster resilience through rhetoric that reduces the offensiveness of a crisis while promoting a positive image (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010; Seeger & Griffin-Padgett, 2010). Individuals and agencies looking to use social media to control the narrative around crisis should consider tailoring their message to include more humanistic communication that focuses on the substantive issues of recovery and regrowth that helps make citizens make sense of tragedy and begin the healing process. (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010).

Methodology

A collection of 14,108,104 tweets was created and curated by Thomas Padilla and Miranda Barrie (University of Nevada, Las Vegas Libraries, 2018). Tweets were collected from September 29, 2017 until October 7, 2017 at 5:00 pm PDT. The collection of over 14 million tweets was created using Twarc, a command-line tool for archiving Twitter data (DocNow, 2017). Before publication, duplicate tweets were removed and the collection was sorted chronologically.

For the purposes of this study, a subset of the data containing all tweets and retweets with the hashtag '#VegasStrong' was created. There were 92,347 tweets containing the hashtag in the subset. The number of original tweets in the subset was significantly less than the total number of tweets containing the hashtag, with

only 16,076 original status updates from users. To find original tweets, all tweets beginning with 'RT' or 'Retweeted' were removed from the subset.

Data analysis was conducted using Tableau, a data visualization software (Tableau, n.d.). The attributes seen in Table 1 were used to create the visualizations (see: *Figures 1-3*). All 'created_at' fields were converted from Universal Coordinated Time (UTC) to Pacific Daylight Time (PDT).

Table 1. Attributes

id_str	Unique identifier of each tweet
created_at	Time the tweet was published (recorded in UTC)
screen_name	Unique handle of each user
retweeted	Indicates whether the Tweet had been retweeted by the user
retweet_count	Number of times the tweet was retweeted
followers_count	Number of followers for each user
full_text	Message of the tweet

Findings

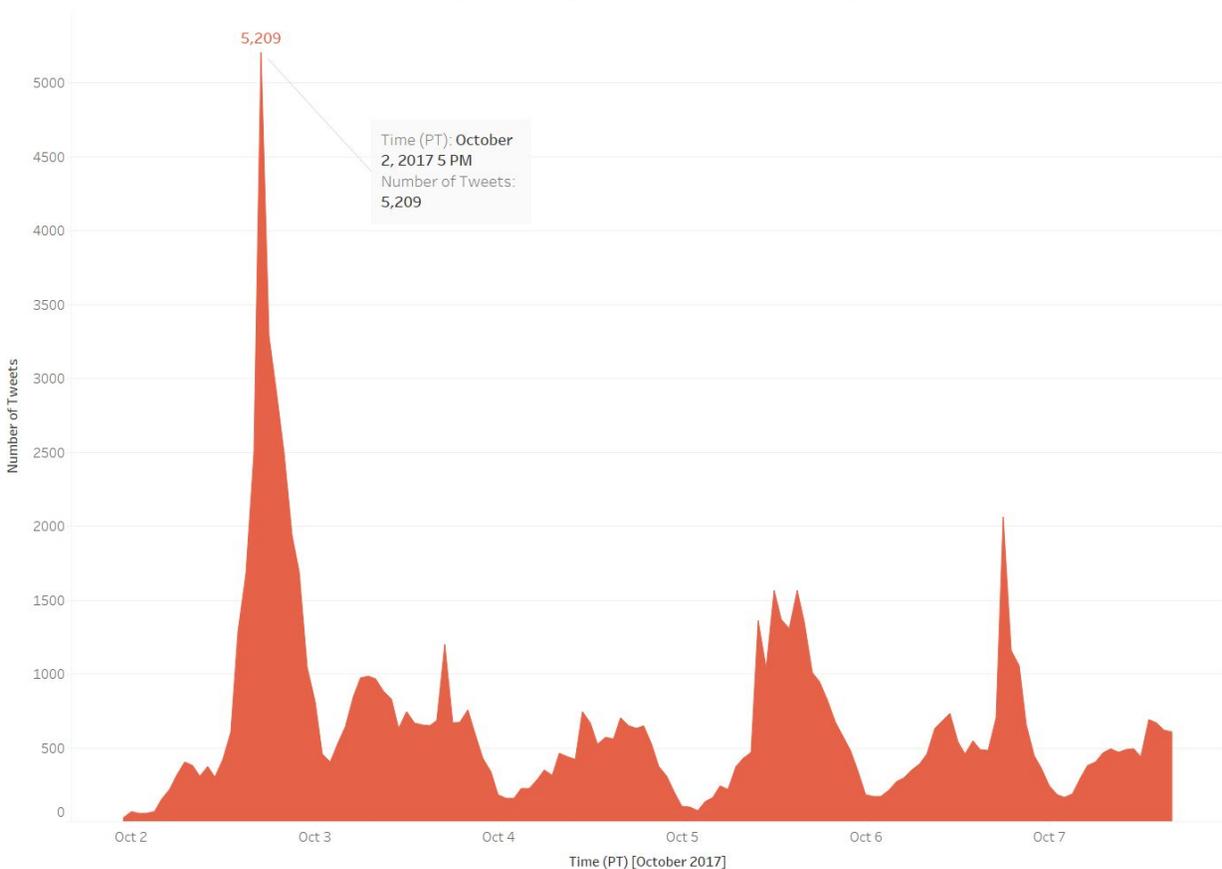
The hashtag '#VegasStrong' was tweeted and retweeted a total of 92,347 times over a six-day period following the shooting. The first occurrence of the tag appeared at 11:10 pm PDT, just one hour and five minutes after the first two shots were fired (Pearce, 2018). The tweet, expressing condolences for the victims, was sent approximately twenty minutes before police officers were able to enter the hotel room of the shooter.

“

I cannot believe what is happening in Las Vegas. It is awful, bring the shooter to justice. Sending strength and praying for the victims! #VegasStrong”

The hashtag did not experience immediate virality, with the largest incidence of tweets and retweets containing the hashtag occurring the day following the night of the shooting. The usage of the tag peaked from 5 to 6 pm on October 2nd, with 5,209 original tweets and retweets sent during that time frame. The tag saw a sharp decline in usage following the initial spike, with only one other one-hour period seeing over 2,000 tweets and retweets.

Figure 1. #VegasStrong tweet breakdown by hour



The sharp rise in the number of tweets on October 2nd can largely be attributed to a tweet from the official account of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), a media and entertainment company. The tweet expressed solidarity with the city of Las Vegas the day after the shooting occurred. WWE's message was retweeted over 6,000 times by Twitter users.

“ We stand with Las Vegas. #VegasStrong”

Figure 2 displays tweets with over 1,000 retweets. Out of the 16,076 original tweets within the dataset, there were only 16 that received 1,000 or more retweets. The account held by former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama was the most retweeted tweet, with over 7,000 users sharing her message on the platform. Two of the top 16 most retweeted tweets with the hashtag '#VegasStrong' were sent by the WWE account, with a combined total of over 7,000 original tweets and retweets. The official account of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority had a combined total of over 2,000 retweets on their tweets containing the hashtag '#VegasStrong'.

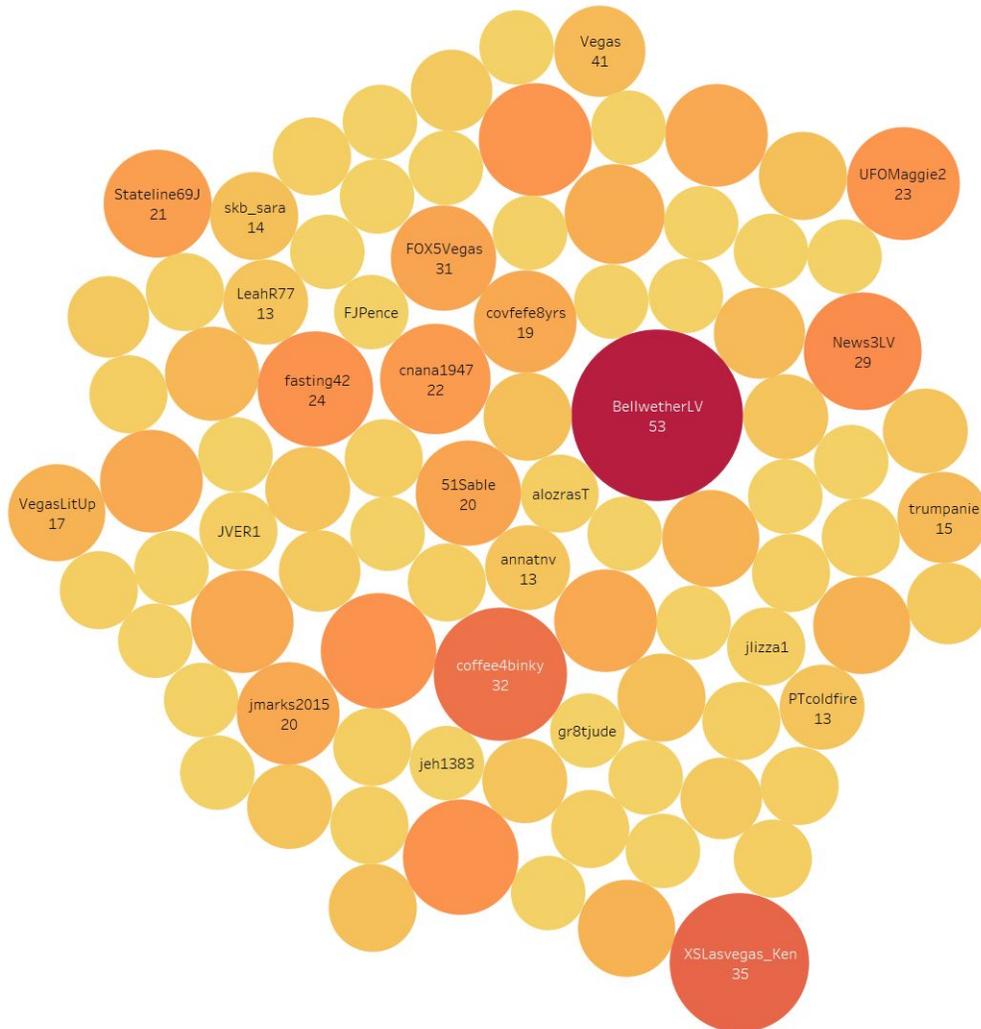
Figure 2. Tweets with over 1000 retweets



The users in the dataset with the most tweets containing the hashtag are seen in Figure 3. Two of Las Vegas' most prominent news outlets tweet or retweet the hashtag over 20 times in the 7-day collection period. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority had the second-highest rate, with over 40 uses of the tag in

their content. It is important to note that some of the highlighted accounts have been suspended, suggesting bot activity within the dataset (Twitter, n.d.; Chu, Gianvecchio, Wang, & Jajodia, 2012).

Figure 2. Users with the most tweets or retweets containing #VegasStrong



Conclusions

The hashtag '#VegasStrong' on Twitter quickly became the rallying cry for the Las Vegas community during a time of crisis. This study attempts to discover the origin of tag and the rate at which it was shared in the days following the mass shooting that occurred in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017. The results of the analysis show that the first tweet in the collection to include the hashtag was sent twenty minutes before the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police entered the hotel room of the shooter (Pearce, 2018).

The findings of the study suggest that the widespread use of the tag can be attributed in part to several key influencers who shared tweets with '#VegasStrong' from October 2, 2017 until October 7, 2017. Local government agencies and public officials were absent from the list of the most retweeted tweets.

As the public increasingly turns to social media to find community, local agencies and officials should engage their constituencies online during times of crisis. Local authorities in Nevada can improve their risk and crisis communications strategy through the **amplification of a single hashtag in the case of a terrorist event.**

Through the use of a unifying hashtag, a resilient vision for the future of the city can reach citizens in times of deep uncertainty and doubt.

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