

## Empowering or Silencing: The #MeToo Campaign in Retrospect

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# Empowering or Silencing: The #MeToo Campaign in Retrospect

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## Abstract

In 2017 the hashtag #MeToo went viral. Whilst the #hashtag campaign's awareness-raising success is compelling, there is also evidence of both active and passive silencing taking place within specific contexts. Thematic analysis of #MeToo tweets shared between October 2017 and November 2019 showed that although privileged voices are still often heard first and loudest at the same time there can also be silencing on multiple levels from multiple sources. Over time, within the #MeToo Twitter campaign there were organic and organised backlashes as well as surveillance practices and platform algorithms that may have restricted participation. Examples included dismissal of those sharing their experiences, tone policing, victim blaming, claims of false accusations and trolling. These tactics led to the silencing and subsequent symbolic annihilation of both the individuals and issues being raised. This research explores the narrative presented by Twitter algorithms in relation to the #MeToo campaign and highlights how politicisation subsequently derailed the movement.

## Introduction

“Future research might explore the development of the #MeToo movement, as one notable example of the role that both the 2016 campaign and Harvey Weinstein allegations had in helping spark and promote women's narratives of sexual assault and harassment online and what role, if any, symbolic annihilation plays on social media platforms” (Schneider and Hannem, 2019: 755). Users of Twitter represent a heterogeneous group and can help connect people, enabling activists to reach out and connect with others across geographical borders (Lopez et al., 2019), where marginalised groups have the capacity to join forces with others. Twitter can be a place where powerful voices gather to raise issues and to challenge social injustices through the use of hashtags but equally it can be a place where trolling and cyberbullying also limit such participation.

## Background

Social Media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, SnapChat, Reddit, TikTok and Twitter, are expected to be used by around 50% of the world's population by 2025 (Statista, 2020) and whilst these platforms are constantly changing, social media is “an integral element of everyday life” (Dantas et al., 2022: 3). Twitter is a free micro blogging site, where messages

were limited, originally to 140 characters and then in November 2017 increased to 280 characters. It is a one-to-many system, demanding no reciprocal relationships (Colleoni et al., 2014) and users are not required to register with real names. This means that those who desire to can remain anonymous. Users can curate their feed by choosing (along with the algorithms) whom they follow and therefore what messages they are exposed to (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2015). During the time of this research (2017-2019) Twitter had approximately 330 Million monthly active users (Statista, 2022) which had risen to 368 million active monthly users by 2023 (Woodward, 2023). In 2021 around 15% of US adults regularly visited Twitter for their news (Mitchell et al., 2021) and it was increasingly common for Tweets themselves to be used as part of new stories, blogs and other social media platforms, although there has now been a slight decrease with Elon Musk's takeover (Hutchinson, 2023).

A hashtag is the hash (#) symbol that tags a specific topic which can then allow grouping and organising of tweets in the cluttered Twittersphere. It enables Twitter users to find topics they are interested in and to follow other likeminded Twitter users. By adding one or more relevant words preceded by a # a Tweet can be easily found via a # search, for example #gardening #hacks #politics. Campaigns have seized on hashtags as a way to direct users to a particular message, issue or product. Hashtags (#) were first used on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in 1988 and were implemented on Twitter in 2007 (Lips, 2018). Over time this filing system has been more and more creatively employed, forming sentences and adding meaning or humour to the tweet as well as grouping them. Hashtags are now seen across many other social media platforms and the wider Internet. Examples include #TwoThingsThatdontMix, #MomQuotes and #LessAmbitiousMovies.

While marketing companies have made clever use of hashtags to sell products (Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; McChesney, 2015), charities, activists and political groups have increasingly recognised the opportunities for reaching wider audiences. Subsequently, *hashtag activism*, a term coined in 2011 by a writer in the *Guardian* (Augenbraun, 2011) became a valid tool in the arsenal of those seeking change. The #MeToo was first used by Tarana Burke long before the hashtag went viral after Alyssa Milano used the hashtag in response to sexual harassment allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Kaufman et al., 2021).

## Internet Trolling

The concept of *internet trolling* and *trolls* came in to use on Usenet in the early 1990's (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017). Internet trolls are out to deliberately ruffle feathers and generally engage in disruptive behaviour (Llewellyn et al., 2019). Trolling, according to Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) involves behaviours designed to illicit a negative response. They are known to be fully prepared to use insults, hyperbole, offensive language and actions to gain attention and goad a response. It can be hard, at first glance, to tell the difference between a troll and an activist as both aim to agitate and challenge the status quo (Forestal, 2017). However, activists are usually looking to shine a light on a particular topic to create discussion, debate and bring about change. Trolls, conversely, are out to silence voices, block open debate and cause harm to others. As Forestal (2017:50) notes: "Trolling is...a specific kind of political activity that is marked by a refusal to participate in the kind of productive ex-change of ideas that marks democratic politics." Trolling is not always political; it can be personal or ideological and applied to groups or individuals. Whatever their motivation, their desire to derail debates means that trolls are essentially bad for democracy (Howard, 2020).

In this chapter we argue that trolling has the potential to be even more problematic during gendered discussions, like that of #MeToo. Kirsti Cole (2012) argues in these cases, trolls are intentionally disciplining women for speaking out against the patriarchal status quo. This, suggests Cole, is an example of Foucault's concept of *Disciplinary Rhetoric* which underpins trolling behaviour and motivations when targeting women and feminists. At times this rhetoric takes on a concerning, more threatening form which "individualizes the woman acting within the digi-feminist network by threatening her body with violence" (Cole, 2015: 356). Trolling is, therefore, not simply verbally insulting women, but enacting a form of symbolic violence (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017) used to silence women's voices online as well as curtailing or eradicating their participation in virtual public spaces.

## Symbolic annihilation

The term symbolic annihilation refers to the inequality and particularly the absences of mediated representations of socially disenfranchised groups of people (Muller, 2018; Gerbner, 1972). This contributes to social disempowerment where the "symbolic absence in the media can erase groups and individuals from public consciousness" (Graber, 2018:386), sending messages that these groups are unvalued. Tuchman (2000) developed this theme to include how women were also trivialised, stereotyped or condemned in their media representations. More recently, Schneider and Hannem (2019:740) have noted that "the

politicization of women's experiences can and should be recognised as a form of symbolic annihilation." This politicization occurs when the narratives are glossed over and questions are raised about "the political motivations of female accusers" in relation to accusations of sexual assault (Schneider and Hannem, 2019:754). This then symbolically annihilates the narratives of sexual assault, where the narratives initially appear and shape the news agendas but then disappear and are trivialised as they are perceived as political point scoring for a politically motivated opposition. Twitter and hashtags also operate in the "context of deeper narratives and ideologies" (Kaufman 1989 cited in Gutsche et al., 2022: 262). Thus, whilst Twitter has been perceived as a place for solidarity and resistance, it can also be a place where there is politicisation, trivialisation and stereotyping that symbolically annihilates many of the women in the #MeToo Twittersphere. Symbolic annihilation can also take the form of gatekeeping to control and undermine discourses on Twitter.

Gatekeeping is described in gatekeeping theory as the "process of culling and crafting" information (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009:1) which can have both positive and negative consequences. Countless mediators are acting as information gatekeepers at a local, national and international scale. They often perform an important role in helping us to make sense of an increasing amount of information bombarding us every day. News agencies, influencers, public relations agencies are all examples of gatekeepers. On social media, however, there has been a rise of informal and often self-appointed gatekeepers such as influencers, bloggers, celebrities, social media algorithms and search tools. These individuals, groups and even technologies have the power to dictate 'acceptable' engagement within a topic depending on several factors that may range from passive or well-meaning to intentionally antagonistic or even harmful. In these scenarios gatekeepers employ tactics such as tone-policing, gaslighting, and paternalism to dictate who is allowed to speak as a form of silencing.

## Methods

The data analysed in this research was gathered directly from Twitter via the platform's native search engine (2017-2019). Ethical approval was obtained for the research despite tweets being considered as belonging to the public domain (see Twitter's Privacy Policy). Due to the sensitivity of this topic, ethical approval was gained for this research with the following criteria: Tweets could only be included if they had a minimum of 800 likes. Tweets were also required to be anonymised in order to satisfy ethical approval and recording keeping has replaced names with numbers. Tweets from accounts with under 5000 followers were excluded. Tweets that

fitted these criteria were captured between 15<sup>th</sup> October-30<sup>th</sup>October 2017; 1<sup>st</sup> November 2017-30<sup>th</sup> October 2018; 1<sup>st</sup> November 2018 - 31<sup>st</sup> October 2019.

The results of this search were then sorted by ‘top tweets’ (according to Twitter) and duplicates, retweets or tweets containing images and only news articles were removed. This resulted in a total of 249 tweets in total, spanning the first week of the #MeToo campaign in October 2017 (75 tweets), and the following two years of 2018 (88 tweets) and 2019 (86 tweets). The Tweets were transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet and the text separated from the user data for thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis has been widely used to examine “underlying assumptions, conceptualisations, and ideologies” (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017:3352) in qualitative and quantitative research, allowing for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79). The analysis followed guidance set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) where the data was read and re-read to assess repeated patterns that related to the research aims (Byrne, 2022). The six steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87) were followed from becoming familiar with the data, generating codes, searching for themes and reviewing themes. The Twitter messages were analysed with an inductive and reflexive approach which enabled exploration of explicit and latent themes found in the text. Employing thematic analysis enabled an exploration of the key themes and conversation flow both linguistically and contextually. The result was a broad set of over-arching themes and more detailed sub-themes and topics, which enabled a greater understanding of the Twitter debates around #MeToo during 2017-2019. It was then possible to view these themes and sub-themes in conjunction with and in the context of events taking place beyond Twitter, for example election campaigns, legal cases, business decisions, general debate.

Table 1: Symbolic Annihilation

|                              | 2017   |             | 2018   |             | 2019   |             |
|------------------------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------------|
| <b>Symbolic Annihilation</b> | Tweets | % of Tweets | Tweets | % of Tweets | Tweets | % of Tweets |
| ALL                          | 2      | 2.7         | 17     | 19.3        | 25     | 25.2        |
| Silenced                     |        |             |        |             |        |             |
| Victim blaming               | 0      | 0           | 2      | 2.3         | 4      | 4.7         |
| Gatekeeping                  | 2      | 2.7         | 15     | 17          | 21     | 24.4        |

Symbolic annihilation in the form of gatekeeping and silencing language can be seen increasing across the three years of data. In the initial week of #MeToo in 2017 we see examples of this in two tweets. It manifests as a hesitancy or nervousness to share #MeToo for fear of judgement or recrimination as one tweet (32, 2017) noted: “It's taken me 13 years to say #MeToo. He is still protected by 'family members' in Brazil. They've told lies to papers to try to silence me.”

By the one-year anniversary of the initial tweet the number of messages that silenced others were much more commonplace. For example, one tweet (60, 2018) noted: “Some jerk you met on a date or some creep in the office who tried to get too close, doesn't qualify as sexual harassment. Unless the person didn't back off when you said NO, please don't trivialise what women are going through with sexual predators esp at work.”

In addition to silencing there was also evidence of systemic victim blaming, which has a silencing effect but also a discrediting impact. Within the 2018 and 2019 date there is a notable increase in clear and unambiguous victim-blaming tweets. Victim-blaming holds the survivor fully or partially responsible for the incident, for example the way they dressed, their behaviour prior to the incident (sometimes months previously), alcohol consumption, even delays in reporting the assault as highlighted by this tweet (9, 2018): “If you have willingly put up with a man's sexually abusive behaviour to suit your career, you are also a part of the problem. #MeToo.”

As early as 2018, 2.3% tweets laid the blame for the assault with the survivor, rising to just under 4.7% in 2019 (Table 1). This form of silencing and policing curtails discussion and debate around the issues highlighted by #MeToo (Cravens and Whiting, 2015; Mendes et al., 2018; Kunst et al., 2019). As one tweet (44, 2018) noted: "we have overcorrected as a society & a man is guilty until proven innocent." This tweet encapsulates how the debates are sidetracked and derailed.

Table 2: The Politics of #MeToo

|             | 2017        | 2018        | 2019        |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| ALL         | 5 mentions  | 78 mentions | 46 mentions |
|             | % Of Tweets | % Of Tweets | % Of Tweets |
| Republicans | 3           | 10          | 6           |
| Trump       | 1           | 9           | 8           |
| Democrats   | 0.0         | 12.5        | 16.3        |

|                         |     |     |     |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| The Clintons            | 0   | 9   |     |
| #TexasDebate            | 0.0 | 2.3 | 0.0 |
| Stormy Daniels          | 0.0 | 2.3 | 1.2 |
| Blasey-Ford & Kavanaugh | 0   | 41  | 9   |
| Democratic Figures      | 0   | 7   | 12  |

In the data for 2017 political topics were mentioned just 5 times, whereas in 2018 it was mentioned 78 times and 46 times in 2019. This increase in political discussion on the #MeToo hashtag coincided with key political events; In September 2018 the lead up to the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court and allegations of assault by Dr Christine Blasey Ford. In 2019 the lead up to the 2020 US elections fuelled much of the political #MeToo tweets, such as the following tweet: "Any person who cannot admit that the #metoo movement has fully deteriorated into a political weapon is either a liar or a coward." (Twitter, 54, 2018).

## Discussion

During the first few weeks of the #MeToo movement in October 2017 the Tweets and posts that flooded social media received a largely positive response from traditional media (De Benedictis et al., 2019). However, even within this seemingly safe space some were still hesitant to share their stories. These concerns imply a fear of broader negative societal attitude towards survivors of sexual harassment and assault permeating both online and offline cultures.

### **Politics and symbolic annihilation:**

The #MeToo movement has been significant in its impact on the discussion around and acceptability of sexual harassment and assault. The mass outpouring of experiences prompted by Alyssa Milano's 2017 tweet has demonstrated the pandemic proportions of the problem and this has both directly and indirectly led to numerous policy changes, behavioural adjustments and court cases (Breuninger, 2018, Carmon, 2019, Government Equalities Office, 2019, Stone and Vogelstein, 2019, The Fawcett Society, 2018). There is little debate that the #MeToo movement on Twitter, and beyond, provided a space for individuals to speak out about their experiences in a way and on a scale never seen before (Williamson et al., 2020). Opinions have been divided as to whether social media helps or hinders social

movements (Kidd and McIntosh, 2016) and our data similarly highlights cause for caution, if not concern. Whilst Twitter may provide an avenue for individuals to find their “voice through the medium of social media after long periods of silence and being silenced” (Alaggia and Wang, 2019:8), our findings suggest that there is a backlash to these voices and a continuation of silencing trying to be imposed alongside a derailing of the movement.

We argue that this politicisation of the #MeToo Twitter movement amounts to a hijacking of the topic, resulting in a form of symbolic annihilation. As Tuchman (1978) asserted, “women’s issues” including sexual harassment and assault are often dismissed and overlooked by the traditional media who set the agenda for wider public debate (Schneider and Hannem, 2019). The politicisation of the #MeToo debate on Twitter effectively twists the discussion from one of revelation, concern for survivors and a search for resolution seen in 2017, to one of debate over what counts as a problem, motivations and potential impact on the accused. Indeed, the focus shifts from the experience of the survivor to that of the accused, minimising and diminishing the women who are speaking out - silencing and removing them from the debate. This is a deft sleight of hand, shifting the focus from the issue of widespread abuse of power and endemic sexual harassment to a debate about the rights or wrongs of raising the topic and suggesting that individuals who do raise their voices are doing so for political gains (which by implication then lessens the perceived validity of such voices). Alongside the implications of politicisation, trolling, gatekeeping and gaslighting threaten to quash these voices. This may lead to others who might speak to curb what they write on Twitter through internalised self-surveillance (Foucault 1979). In these instances, an internalised gaze directs potential contributors to consider the cost of Tweeting #MeToo which reinforces symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 2000) and limits the potential and trivialises the movement.

## Conclusion

The Internet and social media have been hailed as a potential public sphere and a space to give voice to the voiceless. However, this research argues that the #MeToo backlash and associated silencing resulted in the symbolic annihilation and discouragement of individuals from feeling able to stand up publicly to share their experiences. The success of the #MeToo campaign shows that platforms such as Twitter offer a space for activism and debate across geographical barriers. Social media can enable marginalised groups to find their voice, find their supporters and challenge the status quo and bring about real, tangible change. However, this comes at a price, trolling, silencing and gatekeeping work together to push back against

these voices and calls for change. They conspire to politicise debates and in so doing, enervate the speakers and their objections to established systems. Ultimately, this multi-faceted attack, be it intentional backlash or a form of social control, can result in symbolic annihilation of those marginalised groups. In this data the themes around the #MeToo debate on Twitter moved swiftly from one of shocking revelation and calls for change to a politicisation of the issue and a discussion about women's right to claim #MeToo and concern for the impact on the accused.

The success of the #MeToo movement has led to debates around these issues that will continue to have lasting implications for many. However, it has also shone a light on a darker side to our social media that has yet to be properly tackled. Twitter is a microcosm of the social media sphere, and has its own, unique, microclimate when it comes to discussion and debate. The #MeToo movement spread across multiple platforms and the discussion in these other spaces may have told slightly different stories. What we can glean from Twitter is that in its current format it is not a safe space for debate on contentious topics. Within this context, it seems unlikely that women would feel more able to speak out about assault and harassment in today's post #MeToo world, potentially they may in fact be less likely to do so within the social media space.

#### Final thoughts

At first glance, Twitter appears to be a type of public sphere (or spheres) and a space to encourage and engender debate that circumvents traditional barriers. The #MeToo movement within Twitter highlighted hashtag activism in action and promised to foster empowering discussions from rarely heard voices to share experiences and enact political and practical change. Whilst there has been some shifting of attitudes and policies regarding sexual assault and harassment there has also been a growing backlash online and offline. Marginalised people have found a space to speak, but they have also been victims of increasingly aggressive rhetoric, trolling and silencing tactics. It is clear that Twitter is not a safe space for minority voices, it facilitates abusive and silencing behaviour and does little to manage or punish it. The #MeToo discussion rapidly disintegrated into a politicised scrum, where the real issues of the endemic sexual harassment, abuse and assault experienced by women across all walks of life, was superseded by a discussion about the rights and wrongs of sharing this information and the potential impact on male careers. A decade earlier, Tarana Burke created the #MeToo hashtag to raise awareness of the disproportionate number of African American women experiencing sexual harassment and assault. Burke, was herself mentioned only a

handful of times in this data, ignored and ultimately silenced (see Larson, 2019). It is all too easy to underestimate “how aspects of race, gender, technology and testimony” (Larson, 2019:433) impacted these discourses. It seems that even high-profile tweeters are prone to symbolic annihilation through increased trolling, their arguments hijacked, setting a warning example to others through disciplinary rhetoric (Foucault 1979). Six years on, whilst the #MeToo debate is waning on Twitter, the lessons it can teach us are relevant and valid. Twitter is now under the ownership and influence of Elon Musk who may also set the Twitter agenda. For example, it has been reported that in June 2023 Musk declared the word cisgender to be a slur on Twitter (Ray, 2023). If the #MeToo campaign were to happen in the present day, it might be very quickly symbolically annihilated and derailed due to the increased trolling under Musk (Spring, 2023).

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