

## Social Media and the #MeToo Movement

In 2006, the phrase ‘MeToo’ was coined by a civil rights activist named Tarana Burke as a way to raise awareness and provide support for survivors of sexual violence (Modrek & Chakalov, 2019, p.2). Although the movement did exist in certain cultures, it held very little weight across the United States. It was not until eleven years later that it began to gain the traction that Burke had always hoped for. The movement shifted to social media in 2017 when *The New York Times* published an article about a string of sexual harassment allegations made against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Gordon, 2022). In response to the article, one of Weinstein’s most vocal victims tweeted, “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me Too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Khomami, 2019). Within days, millions of people turned to various social media platforms to disclose the harassment and abuse that they faced in their own lives (Khomami, 2019). As a result, the #MeToo movement was born, and took the world by storm. With astronomical outreach in both academic and public news fields, #MeToo became a rallying cry against the imbalance of power that women experience in their day-to-day lives. Despite its US origins, #MeToo had connected individual accounts into a networked entity, showing gendered structures of privilege and sexual violence across cultural, national, and linguistic platforms (Sunden & Paasonen, 2020, p.20). What becomes ambiguous in a watershed moment like the #MeToo movement is how much of an impact, if any, social platforms have had on its overall progression. Therefore, the following research outlines different cultures and their relationships with social platforms in order to answer the following question: What role has social media played in the impact of the #MeToo movement? Because social media has become such a fundamental piece of people’s daily lives, this research seeks to discover whether it has the

potential to work in tandem with wide-spread social issues. Preliminary findings suggest that social media became a catalyst for the #MeToo movement all around the world, however its success rate was dependent on elements of both context and location.

As a result of the movement transpired in the United States, it is important to first examine how it influenced American culture. In its most basic form, the #MeToo hashtag added names, faces and stories to generic statistics in what is, as some argue, the most powerful form of activism for women in recent history (Bowman-Williams et al., 2019, p.372). The movement grew into a campaign that was just as equally global as it was viral, and bled into other social media platforms, national and international news outlets, parliamentary investigations, and overall forms of inquiry revising accusations of sexual misconduct by powerful men (Sunden and Paasonen, 2019, p.19). In America specifically, the movement shook power structures of legality, politics, and society itself. As a result of the movement's success, U.S. Congress introduced a wide range of bills, cunningly named “#MeToo Bills,” in relation to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and gender equity in employment (Bowman-Williams et al., 2019, p.387).

However, in many ways, it was simply just about starting the conversation. A study done on America Twitter users revealed that the platform, as a digital domain, offered a significant avenue for disclosing abuse: Tweeter 71 stated, “I’ve never told anyone except Twitter,” while another, Tweeter 81 said “I was sexually assaulted by a professor while in grad school for nearly a year. I never told anyone until #MeToo” (Alaggia & Wang, 2020, p.4). This helps us understand #MeToo as a significant milestone in digital activism, as well as a theoretical safe space for sharing stories. In a sense, people find it easier to disclose their own experiences

because #MeToo has taken all the risk and fear associated with coming forward out of the equation. It has made the internet a place that people feel not only comfortable but empowered to share stories that were once clustered around a narrative of shame.

In another way, #MeToo has changed the way people talk about, understand, and report sexual harassment. For example, in a 2016 article published by *The Washington Post*, a sexual assault allegation at the University of Stanford spiralled into a narrative of “people [arguing] over whether binge drinking was to blame, or fraternity culture or the entitlement of privilege” (Dwoskin and Syrluga). More recently, articles that report campus sexual assaults say, “schools remain committed to reforming campus culture and educating all students about healthy relationships and anti-violence measures” (Howard, 2018). Comparatively, what has changed here is the language; the element of accountability superseding fault-lines and eliminating the ability to pass off blame. While these narratives have always existed, and still continue to erode justice, what #MeToo has done is redistribute that element of second-place blame to the perpetrators, social settings, and institutions that facilitate it (Sunden and Paasonen, 2020, p.22). Essentially, #MeToo has brought to light the powerful systems in place that dehumanize sexual abuse victims and has begun to tear them down.

As a result of #MeToo sparking legal, political, and social changes in American culture, the movement also started a precedent for widespread outreach in which the discourse around sexual assault and harassment became much of a global conversation. In Europe specifically, the #MeToo movement transpired in unique ways. With the onset of social media, many European countries were able to create their own versions of the #MeToo hashtag, for example #YoTambien in Spanish, #QuellaVolTache in Italian and #BalanceTonPorc in French (Bennett, 2018). At its inception, many European countries had the belief that #MeToo was “just an

American thing” (Carbonaro, 2022). In this sense, it is easy to argue that without social media’s ability to globalize social issues, the movement might have just stayed “an American thing” forever. However, there were several countries in Europe that embraced the movement and used it as a catalyst for change.

In 2022, Spain’s congress passed the “only yes means yes” sexual consent law, meaning that consent could no longer legally be assumed by default or silence (Carbonaro, 2022). Statistics also show that Sweden is the top European country where #MeToo had the broadest impact (Sunden and Paasonen, 2022, p.31). This can be seen in the way that they have changed laws so sex, sexism and abusive male conduct can no longer be tightly knitted into social networks of silence (Sunden and Paasonen, 2022, p.30). For example, in 2016, the Swedish police were accused of covering up a string of sexual assaults committed by a group of young men at a youth festival (EU Observer, 2016). Now, the law no longer protects this perverted culture of silence and secrecy. Not only has #MeToo provided a framework for bringing situations like this to light, but it has also allowed systems to be put in place for accountability and proper justice.

Although #MeToo was successful in some places, it is significant to note that the movement was also virtually non-existent in the countries of Eastern Europe. The research seems to suggest that this is a direct result of Eastern European countries sharing a different history than Western Europe, “one marred by the distortion of feminism by the Soviet era” (Carbonaro, 2022). As a result, it is also easy to assume that these countries do not have a similar relationship to social media either; one that promotes freedom of speech or the right to know like much of the Western world endorses. In this way, we can see how the #MeToo movement is a prime example

of activism lying and spreading on social platforms, and whether it will mobilize beyond it depending on the relationship to those platforms.

When #MeToo evolved into a global movement, it impacted and was transformed by countries around the world. Conversely, it is interesting to see how the movement transpired in certain areas in Asia, where social media is not as widespread or easily accessible as other places. In China specifically, feminists found unique ways around the country's laws on media censorship. Innovative Chinese Twitter users began employing the emojis for bowls of rice (phonetically pronounced 'mi') and a rabbit (phonetically pronounced 'tu') to share their own stories (Jackson et al., 2020, p.28). It is, of course, extremely difficult for the #MeToo movement to take shape in the wake of China's political climate, but simultaneously intriguing to see how Chinese feminists have managed to insert themselves in the narrative regardless. The movement was never able to manifest in mass street protests, as it might have in places like Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom, but there is record of individual victims seeking redress in the safe online spaces of Western countries (Wang et al., 2020). Thus, reinforcing the idea that social media has an unparalleled ability to break down cultural and geological barriers.

In a similar way, Indian women linked themselves to the #MeToo hashtag by sharing their own experiences of sexual abuse but saw little-to-no change. One explicitly states, "Despite the #MeToo and #MeTooIndia movements, many of those accused continue to thrive in their careers, even with proof of their misconduct and harassment" (Guha, 2021, p.1). However, the same article agreed that the #MeToo movement in India has been considered a turning point for the Indian feminist movement for the way it brought the discourse on rape and sexual harassment to the forefront (Guha, 2021, p.4). Essentially, we see the #MeToo movement at a crossroads where social media can only do so much. While it is true that #MeToo derives its power from

embracing the zeitgeist of reinforcing online and offline spaces, a willingness to change is also a requirement for the movement to truly be successful.

The research seems to suggest that while the end goal is always reinforced change, sometimes, visibility is all you can hope for. And visibility is, arguably, what they got. In places like India, the outreach of #MeToo was not nearly as successful as it was in other areas of the world, but it was, in fact, still present. What started as a Twitter hashtag conversation quickly spread to other platforms such as Facebook, where victims and survivors shared their experiences as Facebook statuses and sent direct messages to each other (Guha, 2021, p.24). Sometimes, it is simply about bringing people together; creating a community that recognizes universal experiences and allows survivors to control their own narratives; void of shame, blame or fault-lines.

It is without a doubt that social media proved to be a catalyst to the #MeToo movement. What emerges out of this is the phenomenon that the internet, and its various social media networks, have created a global platform for transnational feminist activism (Guha, 2021, p.2). Because of the way they are structured, a lot of social media platforms mirror traditional elements of any kind of movement. Hashtags, however, make the content of that movement more shareable, broadening both the messages' speed, and its geographic reach. What a bulk of the #MeToo research points to is the idea that an international movement like #MeToo is highly dependent on location, culture, and the media structures of the countries involved. Co-founder of The Women's Room and all-around feminist campaigner Criado-Perez states, "I don't think we [should] underestimate how much of an impact is being made by the way in which women can just speak out about their experiences [...] Until the internet came along, we just weren't having these conversations" (Khomami, 2017). In large, #MeToo gave people a platform and a safe

space where comfortability and accountability were baked into the framework. Even though the movement's success was highly specific to geographic location, something that all countries have in common is that #MeToo's presence on social media changed the way people think and talk about sexual harassment. The world's digital landscape is only changing and expanding; in this, it is important to examine how social platforms can be used as outlets for activism, and further, what it means when people are put in positions of power to shake this delicate framework. In the onset of inspiring change, a movement like #MeToo only grows in vigour and relevance. But how can we protect it? Answers to this question lie in who we allow to run our media systems, social institutions, and places of cultural growth.

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